

Chapter 1

Two Hundred and Twenty Years of American Military Schools

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the history of American military schools starting with the establishment of the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1802 through the expansion of the concept in purpose and educational level to 2020. The development of the military school model has its hero with Sylvanus Thayer of West Point. The expansion was led by Alden Partridge, Francis H. Smith, and Stephen B. Luce, who helped bring military schools to state higher education, maritime education, and private secondary education. The political, economic, and cultural challenges that faced military schools more than once caused significant numbers of schools to close, the most dramatically during and after the Vietnam War. However, since that time there has occurred a resurgence with advancements made into the field of charter schools, public education, and co-education. The chapter also illustrates examples of prominent political leaders and the military contributions in the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Gulf War.

INTRODUCTION

The history of the military school of the United States now stretches for almost 220 years from 1802 to present. The story has many twists and turns through influences of cultural, economic, and political factors. It started with a single school, the United State Military Academy (West Point) in 1802 and spans no less than 851 schools (Coulter, 2017, p. xix) in operation through the years to today where 95 federal military academies, colleges, universities, junior colleges, private and public secondary schools, and charter schools educate cadets and midshipmen.¹ This chapter explains how a single academy cultivated an educational format that impacted a nation's history well beyond anything reflected in the number of graduates.

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THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

The topic is of importance not because it has ever been a prevalent format of American education but because of the magnitude of the positive impact military school alumni have had on American culture and history. The military format of education has never been a dominating feature in terms of numbers. For example, in 2020 the United States had 31,273,000 colleges students and 16,978,000 high school students (Statista, 2020), with military college-level cadets and midshipmen accounting for 32,545 students, or one-tenth of one percent of the country's college population, and with 23,000 high school students, less than one percent (.135%) of the nation's high school population. The fact that four of forty-five (9%) presidents of the United States have been military school alumni (Trump, Carter, Eisenhower, Grant) is but one telling example of the influence that military schools have had on the country. Justices of the supreme court of the United States is not a profession one expects military school alumni to achieve, and yet six percent of members historically sitting on the bench of the highest court in the land (including most recently Antonio Scalia) have been military school alumni.² The members of the lower house of congress in 2020 include at least 14 military school alumni or 3%.³ These three examples, far from the trappings of the military uniform, place military school alumni at rates of 15 - 47 times greater likelihood of having governmental positions of great responsibility. Those trapping of military leadership will be addressed as part of the history presented in this chapter, but anyone who believes that the military school alumni are limited to success in uniform is mistaken.

Historical examples of the impact of military school alumni in other fields of endeavor are also rather surprising. Businessmen have included James Walton, co-founder of Wal-Mart, Conrad Hilton, founder of Hilton Hotel chain, John Kinsey, America On-Line founder, Charles Philips, past president Oracle Corporation, Frank Borman, past president Eastern Airlines, Robert Woodruff, past president of Coca-Cola, and Marshall Larson, past president of Goodrich. Writers who are military school alumni include the authors of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *Tarzan*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *Forest Gump*, along with Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Heinlein. Likewise, military schools produced at least four Nobel prize winners in the discipline of physics and two Nobel Peace Prize recipients. The five men who walked on the moon are further examples. Perhaps the last place one would think to find military school alumni is within the entertainment industry. However, actors including Cecil B Demille, Marlon Brando, Dan Blocker, Will Rogers, and Dean Martin are all graduates of military schools. Furthermore, contemporary stars such as Owen Wilson, Sylvester Stallone, and the Allman Brothers are all military school alumni (Coulter, 2017, pp. 341-347). This list is as impressive as it is eclectic, showing the broad span of impact that graduates of military schools have had within and upon American society.

THE GENESIS OF THE AMERICAN MILITARY SCHOOL

The genesis of the American military school was the need for a professional officer corps during the Revolutionary War. The Continental Army not only lacked technically trained Engineers and Artillery Officers but in 1776 its leadership was described by a congressional committee as "badly officered" (Webb, 1958, pp. 174-75). On the opposing side, the British had highly trained officers, many of whom were graduates of the technically focused Royal Military Academy at Woolwich (1741) or, to a lesser extent in their naval arm, the Portsmouth Naval Academy (1729). Having been schooled in the fundamentals of warfare and possessing an understanding of its technical aspects that far surpassed the level of the

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