

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Antebellum Military Education of Civil War Leaders

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While both the Union and the Confederate armies represented wide cross-sections of their white male populations—with large numbers of African-Americans also entering the Union Army—veterans of the antebellum “Old Army” comprised roughly two-thirds of both sections’ leaders at the grades of major general and above (i.e. division, corps, and army commanders). Within the Old Army, West Point served as its dominant professional and educational institution, with roughly 75 percent of serving Regular Army officers in 1860 having graduated from the academy. Not only did the military academy on the Hudson River serve as the basic professional training for most U.S. Army officers, but its large military library and distinguished faculty made it the focal point of what professional activity existed in the antebellum U.S. Army. Nevertheless, West Point served (and continues to serve) as primarily an institution to train and educate company grade officers, not generals, and we should not overestimate the academy’s influence on how generals chose to conduct major campaigns during the Civil War.

Furthermore, much of the West Point curriculum focused not on military strategy, or even tactics, but on science and engineering. The most important early West Point superintendent, Sylvanus Thayer, modeled the West Point curriculum on the *École Polytechnique* of France, which trained French military engineers, and the Army Corps of Engineers would dominate the West Point faculty until after the Civil War. Indeed, West Point served as the first American college that systematically trained engineers, many of whose graduates (including George B. McClellan) went on to careers in the early American railroad industry. However, even within the American army, critics complained that the West Point curriculum emphasized engineering and scientific subjects at the expense of practical military training. The U.S. Army took this critique into account when it briefly experimented with adding a fifth year to the academic program, which attempted to add more practical military training while preserving the scientific basis of Thayer’s academic program, but there was little serious discussion of reducing the school’s academic focus on engineering. Moreover, the military training West Point cadets received centered on tactical instruction in the three major combat arms—infantry, artillery and cavalry—as opposed to the management of military

formations larger than that of a regiment in a major war—i.e. strategy. Indeed, they only received formal instruction in strategy for eight days of instruction at the end of their time at the academy. In contrast, every West Point graduate received a top-flight engineering education that prepared him for service in the Army Corps of Engineers, even though only the top graduates of the Academy entered that branch of service, and the Corps of Engineers also worked on civil engineering projects for the Federal government.

Nevertheless, the miniscule size of the antebellum military establishment (the U.S. Army numbered a little over 16,000 officers and men at the opening of the Civil War), and a long-standing American indifference to supporting professional military expertise ceded to Regular Army veterans a virtual monopoly on military knowledge at the outbreak of the sectional conflict. Furthermore, the small size of the Old Army created close connections and associations between those officers who would become Civil War generals. That process began for most officers at West Point, whose strict disciplinary and educational regime forced students from diverse circumstances together at a crucial time of their lives in a stressful and challenging environment. West Point represented in many ways an intensified version of the highly bureaucratic and regimented world of the Old Army on active service. At West Point, cadets lived tightly regimented structured lives, with their activities relentlessly quantified through a ranking system that used numerical grades for academic subjects and demerits for violations of the academy's strict discipline. This could affect in major ways their post-West Point careers, because branch selection was connected with class standing at West Point, with the scientific branches of the Old Army (i.e. the Engineers and Ordnance Bureau) receiving the top graduates, and officers of the other line combat arms coming from the remainder of the class.

While the Engineers and Ordnance Bureau officers used their scientific training in their daily duties, officers in the combat arms dealt primarily with Indians and the challenges of command in small frontier garrisons that had little connection to West Point's scientific curriculum. Nevertheless, even on the frontier, regular army officers operated in an intensely bureaucratic culture, driven by the logistical demands of the frontier army, which required a sophisticated bureaucracy to function and Congressionally mandated frugality when it came to taxpayer dollars. Furthermore, the close personal connections created at West Point continued after graduation due to the Old Army's small size and relative isolation from the rest of American society. In a small officer corps where promotion was governed mostly by seniority, Old Army officers acquired their reputations within the service through direct personal experience with their fellow officers and a word-of-mouth grapevine. While Indian fighting on the frontier taught many junior officers how to cope with an unforgiving physical environment and the importance of small-unit initiative, it also left many officers in a stifling routine regulated by Old Army rules, as they waited for senior officers to expire so they could be promoted, because the absence of a retirement system caused older officers to continue in the service long after their prime.

Those officers who had served during the Mexican War, and most especially, Major General Winfield Scott's Vera Cruz campaign to capture Mexico City, had the

benefit of serving during large unit operations against an opposing army, as opposed to the anti-guerilla operations conducted against hostile Indian tribes on the frontier. Scott waged a brilliant campaign, and future Union and Confederate generals such as Robert E. Lee, Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, Ulysses S. (Hiram Ulysses) Grant, and George Brinton McClellan benefited from working under the greatest American field commander between the Revolutionary and Civil War eras. However, outside of the Mexican War, regular army officers had no other opportunities to participate in operations comparable to the large-scale campaigns they led during the Civil War. Even Scott's army in Mexico (roughly 11,000 men) represented only a fraction of the size of a Civil War field army. The small and barely funded Regular Army did not possess educational institutions for training officers to command large formations as a substitute for real-world opportunities, and even during Mexico, the future leaders of the Civil War armies served as either small unit commanders or members of Scott's staff, as opposed to managing large units themselves.

From both West Point and active service in the field, the Regular Army officers who later went on to dominate the high command echelons of both the Union and Confederate armies received a solid foundation in the basic tactics of the three core combat arms of a Civil War army (infantry, artillery, and cavalry), probably more engineering expertise than they usually needed, and a working familiarity with the administrative duties of a company or regiment. If they had experience with staff work, they might have a solid grounding in army logistics, although the sheer scale of Civil War armies compared to previous American military forces would prove a serious challenge to their abilities. This body of knowledge gave West Pointers incalculable advantages as both the Union and the Confederacy searched for military leaders at the beginning of the war. And because of the importance of seniority to both armies' promotion systems, it helped ensure that West Pointers would be in line for promotion to positions as division, corps, and army commanders. Unfortunately, the close antebellum associations of West Point trained officers led them to look with suspicion on even the most competent volunteer officers, who had learned their craft in the field during the early years of the war, and some volunteer generals such as Union Major General John Alexander Logan had a justifiable grievance with West Pointers' somewhat inbred fraternity.

Finally, while some West Pointers proved to be excellent generals, for every Grant or Lee, there was a McClellan or a John Bell Hood. Indeed, McClellan had a sterling record at both West Point and during the early part of his career, including combat service in the Mexican War and a plum appointment as an American military observer to the Crimean War. However, his failures as commander of the Army of the Potomac showed that success within the educational and professional institutions of the antebellum U.S. Army did not guarantee success at the highest levels of military responsibility. As a contrasting example, Grant had been an indifferent cadet at West Point, uninspired for the most part by the Academy's strict regime, and while he compiled an excellent combat record in the Mexican War, he proved unable to adapt to life in the peacetime Old Army. While his greatest opponent, Lee, had a sterling Old Army record that accurately predicted later success, Grant's antebellum record held little hint of his real greatness. Indeed, Grant's early career during the Civil War suffered at

times from widespread knowledge of his pre-war troubles among his fellow officers. Whatever their education background, at higher levels of military responsibility, much still depended on an individual general's native ability, character, and some measure of good fortune.
