

Interviewer

Today is April the 10th, Monday, April the 10th. Weâ€™re at the Centerâ€™9th.

Lance Betros

April 9th.

Interviewer

Monday, April 9, 2012.

Lance Betros

Youâ€™re just throwing me a curveball already?

Interviewer

At the Center for Oral History at West Point, the studios, and weâ€™re delighted to have Colonel Lance Betros, here with us, to talk this time about his brand-new book, â€œCarved from Graniteâ€”the Story of West Point, the United States Military Academy.â€” Iâ€™m going to ask you to give us a state of the state address here now about the Academyâ€”healthy, unhealthy? Where do we stand with West Point 2012?

Lance Betros

What I say in my book, and Iâ€™ll say it now, is that in general West Pointâ€™s a very healthy institution. Itâ€™s a strong institution thatâ€™s very important for the nation. So, at the outset I want toâ€”I just want to say flatly that Iâ€™mâ€”in writing the book I was never out to do a hatchet job on the Academy, or to, you know, raise false issues. I really put all the issues that I raised in the book in the context of a strong institution.

Interviewer

But people like Tom Ricks, for instance, the Washington Post correspondent, called for West Point to be closed.

Lance Betros

Hmm.

Interviewer

A provocative point of viewâ€”

Lance Betros

Hmm.

Interviewer

But that itâ€™s antiquated, that we should be grooming officers in other ways, and you donâ€™t subscribe to that, I take it.

Lance Betros

Well, I believe we should groom officers in a lot of ways, but West Point is an essential way. And I in no way would subscribe to Tom Ricks's call to disestablish these institutions.

Interviewer

And why? What is it about the Academy itself that is so important to the United States Army, to the country, and to the grooming of officers?

Lance Betros

Well, West Point is important not just because of the thousand or so graduates that it delivers to the Army every year. It's really important because of what it stands for. It's really the "as Colin Powell put it a few years ago when he received the Thayer Award [in 1998], West Point is "the wellspring of the profession." It's where the professional values are debated, are discussed, are internalized in many of those young men and women who will become senior leaders later on.

Lance Betros

So, you know, West Point is where "is kind of the storage place, the place where these values are discussed and actually inculcated. Now, this is not to say that there aren't marvelous officers who are produced from the other commissioning sources" of course there are. It's just that West Point is designed to "designed to impart to the cadets who come here the essence of an education that we think is ideal for young officers.

Interviewer

And people may think that when you say that, you mean tactical standards. You don't.

Lance Betros

Not at all.

Interviewer

It's through your book, what you mean is standards of character and intellect

Lance Betros

Correct.

Interviewer

And leadership. Can you explain what that means?

Lance Betros

Well, you just hit on the thesis of the book, really, and that is that throughout its history, West Point has elevated above all other developmental goals for cadets the development of character and intellect. Those two qualities are what distinguish West Pointers as a group, and what has distinguished West Pointers as a group for as long as the Academy has existed.

Interviewer

They don't teach character at Harvard? They don't teach character at UCLA? People don't get character from their families, from their churches?

Lance Betros

Oh, I think that everybody arrives at their undergraduate institution with character that they've developed somewhere. But at West Point we've designed a curriculum that enables cadets to think deeply about issues of character, and then we give them on almost a daily basis opportunities to refine and hone that character, and to make it stronger over time. Now, character and intellect are difficult to develop. It takes a long time. So West Point is a four-year undergraduate institution in the context of where everything we do here is in the context of building character and intellect.

Lance Betros

And if we go all the way back to Sylvanus Thayer, who was the fourth superintendent, but really the father of the Academy, he created what we're the systems that we use today, the educational systems that we use today. And everything he did was all about character and intellect.

Interviewer

I want to come back to him, but first I want you to tell me why character and intellect are so important to the profession of arms. What is it about this profession that makes us think that we need to build character, first and foremost, when we're grooming officers?

Lance Betros

Well, when I say "character," when I use the term "character," I use it in the sense that officers need to have a high level of personal integrity. In other words, you need to have confidence—if you are a soldier in an officer's unit—you need to have confidence that that officer is trustworthy. And only if you believe that, only if you believe that that officer is telling you the truth and that will not—he will not order you to do things that he wouldn't do himself, and only when you can trust him do you have the bonds of affection and respect that will enable a unit to be effective militarily.

Lance Betros

I mean, imagine if the soldiers don't trust their commander, and then the commander gives them an order to do something that's dangerous. It just won't work. So character is really an essential ingredient in effective leadership, especially in the military.

Interviewer

Which is why, as you discussed—you and I discussed in an earlier interview, the Honor Code is so important. It's not just because we want people to be good people.

Lance Betros

That's right.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s because there are real life-and-death stakes involvedâ€™”

Lance Betros

Precisely.

Interviewer

In the profession of arms.

Lance Betros

Precisely.

Interviewer

Who was Sylvanus Thayer? Tell me his background, how he arrived here, and what he contributed to the Academy.

Lance Betros

Well, he was a graduate of West Point. He went here for a year, graduated in 1808, and that was at the time when West Point really didnâ€™t have a structured four-year program like he created when he became the superintendent.

Interviewer

It was established under the Presidency of Thomas Jefferson [in July 1802], right?

Lance Betros

Correct.

Interviewer

And for more of kind of people in the engineering profession, am I right?

Lance Betros

Well, initially, yeah. The idea was to create first of all a professional class of military officers who could lead an expandable Army in the event of a national emergency. But of course national emergencies are few and far between, at least the military type; so in the in-between times those officers would be trained as engineers, and be able to do the work of the nation in expanding across the continent.

Interviewer

I focus on the engineer part of it because we donâ€™t usually think of President Thomas Jefferson as being a fan of a standing Army.

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

I mean he was quite suspicious of a warrior class, andâ€”

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

So itâ€™s ironic that, of all presidencies, it is Thomas Jeffersonâ€™s that the Academy is born to.

Lance Betros

Right. Well, I should also mention, though, that there may have been an ulterior motive. Of course, Jefferson was concerned about practical scientific knowledge to be able to help the nation. But he was also a Republicanâ€”an early Republican, a Jeffersonian Republicanâ€”and he was concerned about the fact that the officer corps at the time consisted primarily of Federalists. So by creating a Military Academy and opening it up to all classes, but especially the good Republican boys, he could de-Federalize the Army. So historian Theodore Crackel advances this argument, and I think itâ€™s prettyâ€”a pretty convincing argument.

Interviewer

That there was a political motive as well.

Lance Betros

Yes, there was.

Interviewer

He wanted to make sure that the arms didnâ€™t go to the wrong side, or exclusively to one side.

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

What was the Academy like when Thayer was a cadet here, then?

Lance Betros

Well, it was nothing like it is now, thatâ€™s for sure. Very, very smallâ€”I mean it was really just an isolated outpost in a geographically isolated place.

Interviewer

Still in the same place where it is today, though, right?

Lance Betros

Oh yeah, the same place. And there was no four-year structured curriculum. You went to

West Point for as long as you wanted to—“for as long as you felt you needed the whatever math and French that was being taught there.

Interviewer

You didn’t graduate with a degree then? There was no curricular program to follow?

Lance Betros

That’s correct.

Interviewer

You just came here and left?

Lance Betros

That’s right. They instructed in math and French, primarily, and then a little bit of military engineering and so forth, but it was really very little. And then there was also some drill—a lot of military drill that they would do, mostly for physical fitness, and then for the tactical aspects of it too.

Interviewer

When did Thayer come back, then, to become the superintendent of such legend?

Lance Betros

Well, he came back in 1817. Now, prior to that, though, for the two years prior to when he returned to West Point, he had been sent overseas to France, actually, to study the military schools in France. And while he was there he was given a credit account, and said [told] to pick up a lot of books that could come back to West Point and populate the library there. So he did. He went there and purchased about a thousand volumes and brought them back.

Lance Betros

Of course, the vast majority of them were in French, and that’s the reason why cadets were taught French, because otherwise they couldn’t understand the textbooks. So he came back in 1817, and there was some trouble with the previous superintendent [Alden Partridge], but he finally straightened that out. And then for the next 16 years [1817-1833], Sylvanus Thayer went about creating an incredibly powerful educational experience for these young men at the time, just all men.

Interviewer

Who appointed Sylvanus Thayer, then? Whose inspiration was it to make him the new superintendent?

Lance Betros

Well, [James] Madison was the President at the time that he sent Thayer overseas, and very soon it became clear that he was going to return to be the superintendent. So it’s really Madison who had this brainstorm idea.

Interviewer

What was Thayer's dream for the Academy during that period of time when he was in charge here?

Lance Betros

It was to create an institution that would be modeled something like the French schools, the French military schools. But it would be a combination of it—it would be an institution that would combine the tactical elements of officership with the intellectual aspects of officership.

Interviewer

Was this the French model?

Lance Betros

Yes, it was. It was actually—the French actually focused quite a bit on the intellectual dimension of officership, and especially on engineering. So, he liked that. He brought it back and he created a four-year institution—four years—that was very heavy in math, science, and engineering.

Interviewer

How did this compare—I guess [Britain's Royal Military Academy] Sandhurst was up and running at the time, right? I mean—

Lance Betros

It would've been at that time, I believe so, yeah.

Interviewer

I mean how does this compare with other military academies around the world? Was the French model unique, or was it something that had come into vogue and was being followed?

Lance Betros

Well, you know, Thayer used the French system as a model, but he really created something that was unique in the United States, and it was an undergraduate experience that would become comparable to undergraduate experiences at other colleges—colleges at that point; there were no universities yet. But he—and he focused so heavily on math, science, and engineering, whereas in many other parts of the world the officer corps was not really expected to be technical experts at various things.

Lance Betros

They were meant to have character, and they were meant to lead soldiers in combat, and oftentimes these officers came from the aristocracy, or the landed class. But at West Point we were going to take—we were going to reach out and take young men from all across society and bring them here and give them a technical education, and build character.

Interviewer

So it was representative of the American ideal of democracy, essentially.

Lance Betros

Yes, absolutely, absolutely.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lance Betros

And you know what underscored that was the method of selecting cadets. They came—after a little bit of experimentation—they came one cadet from each of the Congressional districts around the country. So, that ensured that you got both parties and you got all geographical areas of the nation represented at West Point.

Interviewer

Was there a feeling in other parts of the world that in the elite military academies that only the landed gentry could produce men of character? And, by contrast, was Thayer essentially saying, “No, here, given our ideal of all men are created equal, we are going to show you that character can come from any human source?”

Lance Betros

Well, that was certainly Thayer’s idea.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lance Betros

And around the world, in the advanced nations of the world, usually the officer corps was heavily represented by the aristocratic element. But that was changing. I mean in 1817 the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had already played out, and France had shown that men of talent did not necessarily have to come from the aristocracy. So this was not a new idea, but certainly, you know, certainly it had been around and had been developed in Europe.

Interviewer

How did Thayer imagine he was going to teach character at his West Point?

Lance Betros

Well, there were some very distinct ways. For one thing, he thought that developing character relied on—that there were two main focus areas, and one, the first one, was on moral rectitude. In other words, you need to be a person of high moral values—we’re talking about integrity, trust, loyalty, obedience—all of those things we would normally associate with high moral character.



Lance Betros

And to do that, there were expectations that you lived the life of a gentleman, and you would subscribe to an unwritten honor code. You know, your integrity was the most important thing. So that was the first part of itâ€”this idea of moral rectitude, integrity being a very important part of that. And then the other part was self-discipline, both mentally and physically.

Lance Betros

Now, the mental part of it, the mental discipline, came through a very structured and rigorous curriculum, and it was relentless. The cadets studied hard every day, and they came to class having read the material the night before. And then, the first thing they do when they come in is they get graded on it the next day, without even the instructor helping them. So it was very much focused on the discipline of you, the student, going out and reading it and coming to class prepared.

Interviewer

And reading it in French, sometimes, too.

Lance Betros

In French, thatâ€™s right, thatâ€™s rightâ€”at least in the early yearsâ€”

Interviewer

Yes.

Lance Betros

Sure. So character, and then self-discipline, both intellectual and also physicalâ€”they lived a Spartan lifestyle, and that was part of it as well.

Interviewer

But this gets at the question thatâ€™sâ€”one of the questions thatâ€™s at the heart of your book. Particularly because it plays out not only in Thayerâ€™s West Point, and not only the nineteenth century, but in the twentieth century and twenty-first century. Can you teach character, or do you need to choose character? In other words, do you need to choose people who come here fully formed as men of characterâ€”

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

And then youâ€™re going to just groom them to take theirâ€”on to the profession of arms? Or do you need to take this raw material and actually infuse it with character in the way that youâ€™

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

Develop young cadets here?

Lance Betros

Well, youâ€™re the assumption was that you cannot teach character. Their assumption was that the young menâ€™re

Interviewer

Youâ€™re born to it, in other words, yeah.

Lance Betros

Youâ€™re born to it, and by the time you get to West Point, or by the time youâ€™re of the mid-teenage years, your character is formed.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

You either have a strong character or not.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

And when you come to West Point, you were offered opportunities to refine the character and to make it better. But, if youâ€™re already flawed, sooner or later that flaw would be, would manifest itself. And if necessary, they would weed you out. So your characterâ€™re again, moral rectitude and the self-discipline, mental and physicalâ€™re if you failed in any of those areas, the Academy leaders had no problem with separatingâ€™re with expelling those cadets. Now, most of them left for academic reasons. But then again, intellectual self-discipline is part of the character-building process.

Interviewer

Thayerâ€™s term ends when and how?

Lance Betros

Well, it ends in 1833. He had issues with President Andrew Jackson.

Interviewer

A kind of falling out, right?

Lance Betros

Oh, they did not like each other at all. Jackson felt that Thayer was an autocrat, and heâ€”in some cases, Jackson would reinstate cadets that Thayer and the Academic Board had expelled for various reasons. And this, of course, infuriated Thayer, and it made his authority untenable at West Point. So finally, by 1833â€”I mean he had been in the job for 16 years, so I guess I can excuse the fact that he wanted to retireâ€”or not retire, but move on at that point.

Interviewer

Is there in the record any pertinent comments from Thayer about Jackson? I would think Jackson is somebody Thayer wouldâ€”could not abide, right?

Lance Betros

Wellâ€”

Interviewer

It depended on what he was doing to him at the Academy here. He seems to represent the very things that Thayer would not have been impressed by.

Lance Betros

Well, Jackson was a man of great passion, and he was mercurial. And Thayer was everything just the opposite, and they just had a different chemistry altogether, and a different attitude toward discipline and character. And Jackson was going toâ€”

Interviewer

Yet Jackson was a man of arms himself, obviouslyâ€”

Lance Betros

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

And felt he hadâ€”this was hisâ€”he was not meddling out of territory here. This was something that he thought he knew better than Thayer, lâ€™m sure.

Lance Betros

Thatâ€™s right. Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

Yeah. And Thayer then goes off to find another career, doesnâ€™t he?

Lance Betros

He does. He stays in the Army for quite a while, and he will continue to be an engineer. And then later onâ€”I mean eventually heâ€™ll retire from the military. And ironically, late in his life, in the 18â€”late â€™50s and early â€™60sâ€”he will makeâ€”or he will actually write to his colleagues back at West Point and remind them that, â€œYes, we created a great system, but it doesâ€”itâ€™s not susceptibleâ€”or itâ€™s susceptible to

improvement. And over time, we need to look at it and make sure that itâ€™s still meeting the needs of the nation and the cadets.â€™

Lance Betros

And I think there was some frustration on his part. The Academy and the system that he and the others on the Academic Board had created was certainly a very good one, but by the time of the Civil War, things were changing. And the nation no longer needed West Pointers to be engineers because there were engineering schools in the country, but the curriculum wasnâ€™t changing. So Thayer realized this, and tried to influence change, but by that time, he was longâ€™had long left the Academy.

Interviewer

But he goes up to Dartmouth, too, doesnâ€™t he, and helps found the Thayer Engineering School there?

Lance Betros

No. What youâ€™re referring to is Alden Partridgeâ€™

Interviewer

Uh-huh.

Lance Betros

Who was Thayerâ€™s predecessor as the superintendent at West Point.

Interviewer

Uh-huh.

Lance Betros

Thayerâ€™oh, Iâ€™m sorry, yeah. Now Iâ€™m getting confused. Iâ€™m sorry. Partridge will found Norwich University, or Norwich College, and they had a falling out, but youâ€™re right. Thayer will found the Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth Collegeâ€™youâ€™re correct.

Interviewer

So his contribution to the academic history of this country is rich, isnâ€™t it?

Lance Betros

Yeah, very much so. Heâ€™s a true American hero, for sure.

Interviewer

I feel like we should leave West Point during the Civil War for another conversation, for another interview.

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

And jump instead to the bulk of what the focus of your book is, which is the Academy in the last hundred years, really going forward from the Centennial in 1902 to the present day.

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

And give me a quick contrast, then, between the West Point of the twentieth century and West Point that Thayer led in the nineteenth century.

Lance Betros

Okay. Well, at the early—in the early twentieth century, the continuities are mostly evident. The academic curriculum still focuses heavily on math, science, and engineering. The cadets still live a very Spartan, isolated, almost monastic lifestyle. There really aren't many things that cadets do away from West Point. They still spend their first two years entirely at West Point with no breaks until finally their junior—as they're rising juniors, they get what's called a furlough, and they get to go home for almost three months.

Lance Betros

So there's—oh, and the military training is still really rudimentary. So there are a lot of continuities, really, at the very early twentieth century. But then almost—I mean the changes come quickly after that, and I think the Spanish-American War has a lot to do with that. And the change in the focus of the U.S. Army from being a constabulary force to one that now has to police an empire. So the recognition that things were changing animates the commandants and the superintendents at West Point to make things different—to start changing the way that we develop cadets.

Interviewer

Change is what you say the theme of the Academy [is] in the 20th century.

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

I'm thinking now of what happens to the Academy as the First World War approaches, and then finally United States' commitment to the First World War.

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

Which you speak of as one of the radical turning points for the Academy. Can you describe

what happens during that time?

Lance Betros

Well, sure. In the intervening years between the Spanish-American War and World War I, there are a lot of changes. The curriculum begins to open up to include not just math, science, and engineering, but the humanities and social sciences. The cadets begin to take trips away from West Point—they're for sports and for academic trips and military training and so forth. But still, it's not—I mean the pace is still very slow. It's still just a backwater. And then World War II comes along, and

Interviewer

World War I.

Lance Betros

I'm sorry, World War I.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

And things have to change then. Department of the [Army]—or the War Department, excuse me, is trying so hard to man the force with qualified officers that it basically strips West Point of the upper three classes and sends them off to war. Turns out the war ended before really that third class was engaged, but it really brought home to Army leaders and Academy leaders the need to update everything.

Lance Betros

Update the curriculum, update military training, the way they train and prepare officers. The turning point was the assignment after the war of Douglas MacArthur as the superintendent [from 1919-1922]—a young, brash, bold, incredibly intelligent officer, who was not afraid to take on the establishment.

Interviewer

Was he the next most important superintendent after Thayer, you think?

Lance Betros

Well—

Interviewer

In terms of—not in terms of their external career, but in terms of their impact upon the Academy. I know [General Robert E.] Lee was here [from 1852-1855] and others with certainly fabulous resumes.

Lance Betros

Sure.

Interviewer

But I mean in terms of the impact on the Academyâ€™s MacArthur the next most important?

Lance Betros

I would say up to that pointâ€™

Interviewer

Yeah, thatâ€™s what I mean.

Lance Betros

Yesâ€™ absolutely yes. I would say if you look at the whole 20th centuryâ€™

Interviewer

There are others, right, yeah.

Lance Betros

There are others, too, who probably rank about the same.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

But certainly up to that point, MacArthur was the most historically significant superintendent.

Interviewer

When does this happen in MacArthurâ€™s career? Heâ€™s prettyâ€™heâ€™s pretty young, right, at this point?

Lance Betros

Oh, heâ€™s very young. As a matter of fact, well, he graduated in 1903, and the personâ€™

Interviewer

So heâ€™s really born to the 20th century, in a sense.

Lance Betros

Yes, very much so. And the military history that he took was taught by a guy named Fiebergerâ€™his last name was Fiebergerâ€™and Fieberger was still on the Academic Board when MacArthur came back as the superintendent. So just imagine the chagrin of the elder statesmen on the Academic Board when this whippersnapper, Douglas MacArthur, comes in, and now heâ€™s the superintendent. Andâ€™

Interviewer

Was he known as a whippersnapper when heâ€™s a cadet? Did he have a reputation even during that time?

Lance Betros

Oh no. MacArthur was the number-one-ranking cadet. He graduated at the top of his class, and he was the First Captain of his class, so thereâ€™s no doubt that he had a stellar career, both as a cadet and as an officer. And they knew that, but therein lies the problem in that they realize that this is a force to be reckoned with, and heâ€™s not going to be a pushover. Heâ€™s not going to be a caretaker superintendent.

Interviewer

Who appoints MacArthur? What is the political situation that makes that possible at the time?

Lance Betros

Well, the President [Woodrow Wilson], ultimately, appoints him, but the Secretary of War and the Chief of Staff of the Army are the ones who recommend, and then the President will appoint.

Interviewer

Was it seen for MacArthur as a stepping stone to what they knew was going to be a grand Army career?

Lance Betros

Well, the Chief of Staff certainly wantedâ€”it was Peyton March during World War Iâ€”was a West Point graduate, and was then leading the War Department effort, from at least the military side of it, during world War I. And he recognizedâ€”well, he recognized that there were many changes that were needed in the academic curriculum and in training in general at West Point. But he was frustrated. The Academic Board was so conservative that they found it difficult to make the changes that were needed to update the curriculum.

Interviewer

Explain for people what the Academic Board was, because itâ€™s critical, I know, to your storyâ€”

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

Of West Point.

Lance Betros

Yeah. Well, theâ€”

Interviewer



It's unusual, too, to West Point, with terms—in terms of the way that colleges and universities function.

Lance Betros

Right. Well, the Academic Board was the representation of shared governance at West Point, and it was created by Sylvanus Thayer. And it worked beautifully during the time that Sylvanus Thayer was there because he and the senior professors, the department heads of all the departments, thought very much alike. But then Thayer left—

Interviewer

But wait now. It's composed of faculty members—how many?

Lance Betros

The heads of departments.

Interviewer

Heads of departments—again, how many are we talking about there?

Lance Betros

Oh, roughly 10 to 12, depending on when we're—what part of the history—

Interviewer

So you say that they think—when they're making decisions about curricular requirements—

Lance Betros

Yes.

Interviewer

Policy decisions for the Academy as well, in terms of behavior?

Lance Betros

That wasn't initially the intent. However, Thayer had very—really a minuscule staff. So when he—he required staff studies, however, so he would lean heavily on the Academic Board. So very quickly, the Academic Board did more than just academics.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

They became involved in policy issues. So—

Interviewer

They were really sort of the governing council then for the Academyâ€”

Lance Betros

Absolutely.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lance Betros

They were without a doubt the most important governing body at West Point. And there was a good thing about the Academic Board in thatâ€”because they all had one voteâ€”even the superintendent only had one vote on that Academic Boardâ€”when they made a decision, it was a collective decision. And even if it was a controversial decision, the superintendent could always say, â€œI did it as a part of the Academic Board, and collectively we came to this decision. You have to respect it.â€ So the Academic Board, in a way, protected the superintendent from outside influence, and it protected him from making, you know, grossly bad decisions.

Interviewer

Did he appoint the members of the Academic Board? Heâ€™d choose departmental heads?

Lance Betros

Yes, he would. Well, that would be a joint decision between the Academy leadership and the Army leadership.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

But those permanent professorships were highly coveted positions, because they could stay their entire career at West Point, and eventually they would rise to the rank of Colonel, which was, at the time, an exalted rank.

Interviewer

Now youâ€™ve showed me thisâ€”the chairs in the room, right, have theâ€”those are the same chairs that the Academic Board sat in.

Lance Betros

Youâ€™re speaking about the Academic Board roomâ€”

Interviewer

Yes.

Lance Betros

In our Headquarters building here at West Point.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lance Betros

The chairs around the tableâ€™s a huge table of oak that sits under what looks like an altar, and there are these 100-pound chairs that are all around it. And that building was created in 1910, or â€™08 or â€™09, somewhere in there, and the tables and chairs were original to the building; so on the back of each of those chairs is like the apostolic succession. It has all the department heads from the present all the way back.

Interviewer

So you canâ€™t sit there without being aware of the weight of history.

Lance Betros

Absolutelyâ€™s all around us.

Interviewer

So the Academic Board is looked upon when MacArthur gets here as something of a conservative and sort of burdensome influenceâ€™stultifying, resistant to change.

Lance Betros

Well, remember I said that in the 1860s, Sylvanus Thayer will look back and will try to influence his colleagues, many of whom are still on the Academic Board, and say, â€œWe really need to change. There are some things that need to change.â€ Well, now fast-forward 40 years, and now weâ€™re into the twentieth century, and still the Academic Board is really notâ€™has not changed very much.

Lance Betros

So men like Peyton March, now the Chief of Staff of the Army, is one of a growing number of critics of West Point. â€œYou guys are behind the times. You need to update the curriculum. You need to, you know, do things differently to accommodate or recognize the fact that weâ€™re not living in the nineteenth century anymore.â€

Lance Betros

Well, thereâ€™s nothing wrong with the math, science, and engineering that they were teaching. I mean they were perfectly good disciplines. But most of the cadets, the large majority of cadets, would never be engineers, and they would never need the level of detail and theory that was being taught in these textbooks. And Iâ€™ve actually doneâ€™Iâ€™ve actually looked through some of those textbooks. I mean Iâ€™ve been through West Point. Iâ€™ve taken all the calculus and all the other high-level math. And I look at some of these books, and the level of detail and the theory that it goes into is mind-boggling, especially if youâ€™re never going to go into the Corps of Engineers or do things of a technical nature.

Interviewer

So the thought was that they were learning things that they didn't need to know, and not learning things that they did need to know.

Lance Betros

Well, first of all, let me just mention that they were learning—the Academic Board explained away what they were doing—they explained away the continuity, the lack of change—by saying that mathematics and the quantitative sciences or disciplines instill mental discipline, which is part of character building. So that mental discipline will give them not only character, but will give them the ability to think through any problem in the future. Now you know, educators disagree on this point—what's the difference between learning a hard science versus learning a rigorous course in history or English or whatever.

Lance Betros

But the assumption on the Academic Board was that quantitative disciplines were best. Now, alternatively, there were others who were looking at what West Point was doing and saying that it's not preparing them for the real world they're going to experience when they leave West Point. And chief among them was Peyton March the Chief of Staff of the Army. And he was very close to MacArthur. They had—Peyton March had known MacArthur as a young boy, had seen him grow up, had kind of mentored him through his Army career, and the MacArthur ends up being the most decorated Army officer—U.S. Army officer—during World War I.

Lance Betros

So March reaches out and gets MacArthur and says, "I want you to go to West Point and straighten it out and rebuild it and make it—create a curriculum that really is beneficial and relevant to what these young officers are going to be facing." Now he was able to do that because during the war—I think I mentioned earlier—the War Department had gutted West Point and made it basically a glorified officer training camp. So after the war they were rebuilding the four-year curriculum, and this is when—this was the opportunity they had to make a lot of changes. And MacArthur pushed hard.

Interviewer

During this time, the class of 1915, the "class the stars fell upon," which is the phrase, which includes Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley—

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

They are there during one of the weaker moments of the Academy's history, it sounds like, then, right? The sort of period around the First World War, where the Academy had been sort of gutted to deal with the urgencies of that war in terms of ramping up—

Lance Betros

Right. Right.

Interviewer

The numbers of officers produced.

Lance Betros

You know, I don't mean to take anything away from the class of 1915. They are—it was a fantastic class. But if you do the math, you realize that if they graduated in 1915, then, you know, five, ten, fifteen, twenty-five years later, World War II is upon us. And in any officer's career, at the 25-year mark, you're about ready to become a general. I mean somewhere between 20 and 25 years. So, chronologically, they were in the right place to leverage the national conflicts that we had. So they gained a lot of experience during World War I, and then those who stayed in had the opportunity of advancing their careers and doing, you know, great things, great contributions during World War II.

Interviewer

So in some respects you're saying it was an accident of history, or chronological accommodation of history.

Lance Betros

Sure.

Interviewer

But nonetheless, what I was focusing on is that it seems as though they were here during a time—despite the fact that they are, you know—I forget what the percentage is that become generals, and certainly some of the most notable generals in American history are in that class. They were not here during a time that one would say is a stellar moment for the Academy.

Lance Betros

Well, True! They were here prior to the great reforms of the MacArthur years. But I still wouldn't sell West Point short. It was still a very important and invaluable experience for those cadets who went through.

Interviewer

So what are the reforms that MacArthur institutes?

Lance Betros

Well, there's—there are a handful that are pretty impressive, and I'll start with athletics. "Every cadet an athlete," MacArthur said. So it's not that cadets had never done intramurals before MacArthur got there, but they weren't mandatory. So there were some cadets who just decided that, you know, they'll nap after class instead of going out and doing physical fitness. Well, MacArthur changed that. He required competitive athletics of every cadet; so that's where we get the words today, "every cadet an athlete."

Interviewer

And he believed athletics were an analog, right, to war.

Lance Betros

He did. He believedâ€”in World War I, he believed that sports developed soldiers very, very well, and instilled in them self-confidence and physical fitness and all those great things. And, those who led sportsâ€”in other words, the NCOs and the officersâ€”use sports in a very good way; so sports were a vehicle to build cohesive units. So for a lot of reasons, sports were really good.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

So that was the first thing. He made mandatory competitive athletics. Another big area is the honor system. Up to this point, certainly there was an unwritten Honor Code, and the cadets enforced it through informal mechanisms such as what we call the â€œVigilance Committee.â€ But as you can imagine, in any informal system like that, itâ€™s almost tribal.

Interviewer

What was the Vigilance Committee?

Lance Betros

It was an informal group of cadets, mostly first classmen, seniors, who would take it upon themselves to investigate alleged violations of the Honor Code, and then recommend to those offenders that they leave West Point.

Interviewer

So was the Honorâ€”had the Honor Code been articulated before this?

Lance Betros

Not in a one-sentence Honor Code that weâ€™re familiar with today. No, thatâ€™

Interviewer

That cameâ€”comes out of the MacArthur years, then.

Lance Betros

It does.

Interviewer

Really.

Lance Betros

Yes, it does.

Interviewer

Who penned that? Who wrote, "A cadet must not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do?"

Lance Betros

Well, I mean those words don't actually appear until a little bit later.

Interviewer

Uh-huh.

Lance Betros

But the essence "I mean all those ideas are in the Honor Code. What MacArthur will do is gather the senior class together" actually, he'll take selective representatives out of the senior class and he will charge them with coming up with a rationalized system for investigating honor offenses and then recommending what's to be done. And also there's an

Interviewer

By "rationalized" you mean a set of procedures that are dependable?

Lance Betros

Yes.

Interviewer

And consistent?

Lance Betros

Precisely. In other words, to move it from being a tribal justice system to being an official justice system that has rules and regulations.

Interviewer

To civilize it, in a sense "yes, yeah.

Lance Betros

And it has protections and other things. So he goes about doing that, and the cadets rise to the challenge and they offer him a program that is, or a system, that works. So he creates the official Honor Committee "the Cadet Honor Committee. It has rules, regulations, and the cadets now will educate the Corps of Cadets on honor. They will investigate violations, and they will recommend to the superintendent punishment for those who are found guilty. Now, it's only a recommendation, and in the meantime, they will recommend to the offender that now is the time to leave, you know, to voluntarily take yourself out of West Point.

Lance Betros

If the offender decided that he didn't want to do that—that he wanted to fight it, because for whatever reason—he could take that case to a Board of Officers. If the Board of Officers convened and sustained the recommendation of the Cadet Honor Committee, then the cadet would be gone. The superintendent would just expel the cadet.

Lance Betros

But there were occasions when the Honor—when the Officer Board got together, and of course they are dealing or they are operating under the Rules of Military Justice. They might find the cadet to be innocent, and then return the cadet to the Corps of Cadets. From the standpoint of the Corps of Cadets, however, the original finding of the Cadet Honor Committee still prevailed, and therefore the cadet would be silenced by his peers.

Interviewer

And silenced meant silenced—they do not—well, you explain what silenced means.

Lance Betros

No social intercourse.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lance Betros

With the exception—with the only exception—being for official duties.

Interviewer

And this would go on for the rest of his time at West Point, right?

Lance Betros

For the rest of his career in the military.

Interviewer

Mm.

Lance Betros

Now, that's according to what was supposed to happen. I'm sure there were exceptions to that, and I'm sure that over time, people warmed up, and so forth. But it's a very—

Interviewer

But there were cadets silenced up until I think the 1970s or so, weren't there?

Lance Betros

Oh yes. The silence continued to be a very important part of the Honor Code, or the honor system, rather, until right up into the early 1970s. And you know, if you're going to have



an honor system that is cadet-based, and you want the cadets really to take charge of that system, there has to be some kind of lever, some kind of enforcing mechanism. And the silence was that mechanism. Now, as you can imagine, a system like that is rife with potential abuses, and that's why in the 1970s, in the early 1970s, after a series of lawsuits and very bad publicity for the Academy, the Corps of Cadets voted to end the silence.

Interviewer

Mm. Alright, what else did MacArthur do?

Lance Betros

Yeah, the other things.

Interviewer

Come back to MacArthur, what other things he

Lance Betros

Sure. MacArthur believed that we were treating cadets like children, and yet we were expecting them to act like adults immediately upon graduation. So MacArthur changed a lot of the rewards and incentive mechanisms at West Point to encourage cadets to act more responsibly, and then hold them accountable for their mistakes—in other words, to treat them like adults while they're cadets. So he did such things as let them carry money in their pockets.

Lance Betros

Up to this point, cadets weren't allowed to carry money, because the idea was that every cadet was going to be equivalent, and if you allowed some cadets—or if you allowed cadets to carry money, then those who came from better backgrounds would have more money than others. Well, MacArthur said, "This is ridiculous. Cadets don't even know how to balance their own checkbook." So he let them carry money. He gave them more privileges, especially the first class. In other ways, too, he tried to treat them like adults, and one of the ways was to improve military training to put them more in charge. And he changed the

Interviewer

In charge of their own training, or is that what you meant?

Lance Betros

Well, both that, and to give them better training.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

So it's really kind of veering over now into military training. Up to this point, summer

training consisted primarily of the cadets on that wide-open field down where they paradeâ€”itâ€™s called The Plainâ€”and they would set up a summer camp. And for three months theyâ€™d be out there, two and a half, three months, doing whatever training you can do on a small post that we have here at West Point.

Lance Betros

And MacArthur got here, and he said, â€œYou know, this is not preparing them for warâ€”the kind of industrialized mass war that weâ€™re going to fight in the future.â€ So the first thing he did was to say, â€œWeâ€™re not going to do the encampment anymore. Instead, weâ€™re going to send the cadets to a real Army base, where theyâ€™re going to interact with enlisted soldiers and get great training.â€ So he sent themâ€”for the two years that he had during the summerâ€”he sent them to Fort Dix, New Jerseyâ€”Camp Dix back then.

Interviewer

How much of this wasâ€”how muchâ€”MacArthurâ€™s come out of his experience in the First World Warâ€”

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

With an Army, American Army, that was notoriously untrained.

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

How much do you think this was his response to what he saw the American Army to be in that conflict?

Lance Betros

Well, he saw all of the same things you just described. He was appalled by the lack of training, by the prolific waste of lives because of the poor training that theyâ€™dâ€”and not just training, but physical fitness as well. So when he got to West Point, thatâ€™s what animated himâ€”was the idea that we need to create officers who can stand up to these challenges. If you read his annual reports, theyâ€™re these lucid, incredibly deep-thinking reports that just stand out from all the rest.

Interviewer

He wrote his own, lâ€™m assuming.

Lance Betros

Well, he had some help. But still, the ideas are his.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

The ideas were his. And they talked about the need for a new kind of leadership that can adapt to the changing circumstances of the world, and he described what those circumstances are. You know, the new industrial warfare, and the likelihood that weâ€™re going to tap our citizenry to fight mass war.

Interviewer

Was there fear, though, among critics of MacArthur at the timeâ€™I assume there mustâ€™ve beenâ€™that if we prepare for war, weâ€™ll go to war?

Lance Betros

Wellâ€™

Interviewer

In other words, that weâ€™re kind of willing ourselves into the conflict, and maybe there was a kind of lust for it that was part of his personality?

Lance Betros

Well, of course, during that era, the first couple of decades of the twentieth centuryâ€™epitomized by Teddy Rooseveltâ€™the idea that there are manly virtues, and war is pretty good, you know, to bring out those manly virtues. But I think by the time that MacArthur takes over as the superintendent, thereâ€™s pretty much an understanding that war is inevitable, and we really need to prepare our cadets, especially our cadets, for the likelihood of wars in the future. And those perceptive military leadersâ€™and civilians, tooâ€™recognized that the outcome of World War I raised the chances of another world war, or some type of war, you know, in the not-too-distant future.

Interviewer

What was MacArthurâ€™s relationship with the Academic Board?

Lance Betros

Well, it was not cordial, but it was professional. He would interrogate the Board. I mean he was on par intellectually with the old graybeards on the Academic Board, and if his adjutant is to be believedâ€™who was in the Board proceedings and wrote memoirs about all thisâ€™then MacArthur would listen to the elder statesmen of the Academic Board.

Lance Betros

But then would just probe with his own questionsâ€™questions that had leadingâ€™or leading questions that would require the Academic Board really to understand that their positions are weak. And so there was a back-and-forth bantering, and of course he had no choice because he only had one vote on the Academic Board. So he had to use the force of intellect to try toâ€™

Interviewer

Of persuasion, you mean.

Lance Betros

“I’m sorry” the force of persuasion”

Interviewer

Mm.

Lance Betros

To get the other”enough votes on the Academic Board to change things.

Interviewer

And did he? Did he make changes using the Academic Board?

Lance Betros

Oh, he did.

Interviewer

Or he sidestepped them?

Lance Betros

He did, and this is perhaps the last major area of reform that MacArthur is responsible for. That is, under MacArthur, the Academic Board proposes”and the War Department accepts”a four-year curriculum that brings the curriculum back to a normal time period. You know, during the war it had been truncated; now it’s back to four years. And in that four-year curriculum, now we have economics, history, geography, politics, and there’s a new department that’s created.

Lance Betros

Eventually it will be called the Department of Social Sciences. Back then, it’s Economics, Government, and History”or something like that. And a scholar from Yale”his name is Lucius Holt”is the head of that department. This is going to be a department that will just grow and flower, and this is where the cadets really learn about the things that will be of great relevance to them as they become our Army officers.

Interviewer

Was the opposition in the Academic Board to the broadening of the curriculum based upon the thought that teaching cadets the gray area of human experience? In other words, the non-quantitative study might weaken their resolve, and might weaken their ability to be strong officers, because you need to see the world in quantitative ways in order to make tough decision in tough situations?

Lance Betros

Well, there's still the belief that the quantitative disciplines are the best way to build mental discipline.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

During the debates in the Academic Board, with MacArthur and the others, MacArthur would like to see a course in psychology be introduced into the core curriculum.

Interviewer

Wow. That's interesting, because it was an infant science at the time, wasn't it?

Lance Betros

Absolutely, but he had just come from war, and he realized the importance of officers understanding the psychological motivations for behavior. But the Academic Board would have none of it: "Psychology is a squishy science. They're a squishy pseudo-science, and how can we really expect the cadets to gain from this subjective"

Interviewer

It would've been wonderful to have sat in and listened to those debates, wouldn't it?

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

And we only know what happened? I mean did MacArthur write any notes about what happened from those arguments with the Academic Board, or was it just this adjutant you referred to before?

Lance Betros

William Ganoë. Ganoë, I think it's pronounced "G-A-N-O-E" who wrote a book, a very flattering portrayal of MacArthur. I mean they were very close. And therefore when one reads this book, one has to be

Interviewer

Keep that in mind.

Lance Betros

Careful about this"

Interviewer

Sure.

Lance Betros

Yeah. But still, even if half of it is trueâ€”

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lance Betros

It gives a very enlighteningâ€”

Interviewer

But itâ€™s such an interesting clash of past and futureâ€”

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

Of sort of one form ofâ€”one philosophy of military training against another one, right? I mean itâ€™s really itâ€™s a real crucible.

Lance Betros

Well, one form of intellectual development over another.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

MacArthur was astute enough to realize that cadets needed preparation on both sides of their brain. You know, in a variety of different ways, and he in no way wouldâ€™ve done away with the math, science, and engineering. He just wantedâ€”

Interviewer

Right.

Lance Betros

A better balance.

Interviewer

Right.

Lance Betros

And I should also say as maybe corrective that there were allies of MacArthur on the Academic Board. I mean there were some who saw it just like MacArthur did, so I donâ€™t

mean to paint all of themâ€”

Interviewer

Well, did it break down generationally? Did it tend to be the younger ones that wereâ€”

Lance Betros

Yeah. Yeah. Or Lucius Holt, for exampleâ€”

Interviewer

Right.

Lance Betros

Was very influential.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

He had been a long-time member of the Board, and he was pushing very hard for the non-quantitative disciplines.

Interviewer

What did the cadets make of MacArthur? Was he an authoritarian superintendent, or was he liked?

Lance Betros

He was generally liked. Certainly anybody who was going to let them go play sports and give them more freedom and that sort of thing. He was popular in that regard, but he was considered aloof. It was his personality. He just didnâ€™t interact easily with other people. So even his admiring biographer, William Ganoe, commented on this, that he justâ€”he didnâ€™t go to the socials. He [was] kind of just stiff and hard to talk to, and you know, today we really have to wonder if the influence of World War Iâ€”or what influence that had on him. You know, was he suffering from any kind of post-traumatic syndrome? We donâ€™t know.

Interviewer

Right, yeah.

Lance Betros

But certainly it mustâ€™ve affected him somehow.

Interviewer

Yeah. How long was he superintendent?

Lance Betros

For three years [from 1919-1922].

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

And when he left, everybody said, "Good riddance."

Interviewer

Mm. Why?

Lance Betros

He was very unpopular with the Academic Board.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

There's also some evidence that he was unpopular with the spouse side of West Point. He was not married, and he sent all the cadets off to Camp Dix to train during the summer. Up to that point, the summer encampment had been half training and then half social life; so he basically did away with all that. There were dances and social events and all sorts of nice things. West Point was a pretty nice place to be around during the summers, and he did away with that.

Lance Betros

So when he finally left, there were people who just wanted to get back to normality, and as soon as he left, his successor moved training back to West Point. That wouldn't last for long, because they realized the limitations of that. But MacArthur gets credit for setting the precedent in a lot of different areas. Some of his reforms stuck. Others didn't. But later on, they would come back and be resurrected.

Interviewer

Who's the next great superintendent at West Point, then, following him?

Lance Betros

Well, there are a lot of very fine men who are superintendent. And I don't think any of them are duds, by any stretch. But if you are really looking for someone who stands out, it's Garrison Davidson [from 1956-1960].

Interviewer

Who arrives after the Second World War, right?



Lance Betros

That's right. He's a 1927 graduate of West Point. He's the number two cadet in his senior year, as a first classman. An engineer officer who's really the first thing he does after graduation is coach the football team, and he played on the intramural, and then also the varsity squad, and he was asked to be the ends coach for the "I think the plebe team, initially, and then he moved up. And by the early 1930s, he was the head coach of the football team and had an illustrious record for about five years. Even today, [he] is one of the most winning coaches in West Point history.

Interviewer

This focus on football, which we today associate as being synonymous with West Point, really began with MacArthur, right?

Lance Betros

Well, football began in 1890 here at West Point, and it was popular from the very beginning. So, MacArthur was a great fan of football—he loved it.

Interviewer

But he ratcheted it up another level with the focus on sports as a cadet obligation, right?

Lance Betros

He loved sports in general, and he made all cadets play competitive sports of some type, but first, in his mind, was football. Football was the top.

Interviewer

And by the time Garrison Davidson becomes the head football coach here, it's a big deal.

Lance Betros

It's a very big deal.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lance Betros

And Douglas MacArthur, by the way, happens to be the Chief of Staff of the Army at that time [from 1930-1935]. And there are some wonderful stories about MacArthur requiring Garrison Davidson to send him, personally, a report after each game, to give him a rundown on what happened and what the forecast is for the future.

Interviewer

The history you write focuses on the changing relationship of the Academic Board with the superintendent—

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

And the decision-making here.

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

To the point where today, you believe itâ€™s become something of a loose formality to put things before the Academic Board, right?

Lance Betros

Well, the Academic Board is impotent today. Itâ€™s gone a long way. You asked about the next great superintendent. Well, Garrison Davidson was still in the mode of shared governance. He was still only one of, you know, however many, 13 or 14 votes, on the Academic Board. So it required him toâ€”all the magnificent changes he made, all the very impressive changes he made came as a result of interaction with the Academic Board, and convincing them of the wisdom of his arguments. And he was very successful.

Lance Betros

But there we had close votes in some cases that benefitted from strong arguments on each side. So in that kind of an environment, you can be pretty sure the resulting decisions are going to be good, because thereâ€™s a lot of interplay, intellectual interplay back and forth. So the decisions that Garrison Davidson is able to accomplish are long-lasting, significant changes, that weâ€™re stillâ€”

Interviewer

Can you tell usâ€”we have other history to go back toâ€”

Lance Betros

Yeah. [Crosstalk]

Interviewer

Between the two wars, but tell me what Garrison Davidson was able to accomplish during his tenure. I know you believe him to be really a very significant force in the history of the Academy.

Lance Betros

He and MacArthurâ€”and one more that weâ€™ll probably talk about in the futureâ€”I would rank as equalsâ€”the top three superintendents of the 20th century, second only to Sylvanus Thayer in the entire history of the Academy. But the things that he got accomplishedâ€”first and foremost, academics. He was a great proponent for broadening the curriculum, downplaying math, science, and engineering more, and then bringing those other non-quantitative disciplines up, and having rigor across the curriculum.

Interviewer

So he essentially extended the reforms that MacArthur had initiated.

Lance Betros

Yes, yes, he was a great believer in the MacArthur view of expanding the curriculum to broaden cadet minds. But more than that, he believed that it was finally time to allow cadets to take electives—to enable them to go a little deeper in the areas that interested them. So in a very tumultuous—deliberations, negotiations in the Academic Board in late, in ’58 and ’59—finally they took the vote in early 1960.

Lance Betros

He was able to get the Academic Board to agree to finally end the prescribed curriculum, the all-prescribed curriculum. Now, in the beginning, cadets only had the choice of one or two electives, but in the 1960s, the wisdom of that decision was so apparent that within a few years cadets were able to take now four, then six; and pretty soon they were taking a number of electives that approximated an academic major.

Interviewer

Well, now, what was the opposition to that based on? Why would you not want to have a cadet have the opportunity to study something in greater depth that really interested him?

Lance Betros

Well, the prescribed curriculum had been refined over 150 years, or roughly 150 years, and there was a strong feeling on the part of Academic Board members that this represented our best guess of what young men—still men at the time—had to master to become great Army officers. So why would we want to dilute that? Why would we? If we think these are so important, why would we want to, you know, substitute part of this great program for something else that the cadet just wants to do because he wants to do it? So—

Interviewer

Was there also, though, a feeling that you needed—cadets needed to be told that—they needed to be told what to study rather than choosing what to study? That part of the rigor of this character development was that there—you needed to be in the program?

Lance Betros

Right. Yeah, there’s a longstanding assumption that goes very deep at West Point—an assumption of paternalism—that cadets are developed best in an environment that we, the Academy leaders, decide for them. And that goes back to the idea of treating cadets like kids. You know, you want to—we know best what’s good for the cadets.

Lance Betros

We know best what they need to be officers. And we’ve structured this program for it, and doggone it, they need to take it. Everybody needs to take every single course, because if they don’t, they’re going to miss some key element. So the idea of paternalism goes really deep at West Point, and it took a lot of effort on the part of Davidson to finally

break the Academic Board of that assumption being in effect all the time.

Interviewer

Have we already seen benefits, by this time? I mean, really, Davidson is there in the mid-â€™50s, soâ€™

Lance Betros

No, the late â€™50sâ€™â€™56 to â€™60.

Interviewer

Lateâ€™okay, so really 30 years had passed since MacArthur was the superintendent there.

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

And one would presume youâ€™d had a whole generation all the way up to senior officer here to see what the progress was of those reforms, in terms ofâ€™

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

Its impact on the Officer Corps. Did they see the effects of MacArthurâ€™s approach toâ€™

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

The curriculum?

Lance Betros

Yeah. I donâ€™t mean to imply that nothing happened from the time of MacArthur to Davidson. The curriculum during those years expanded and improved dramatically. And it was during these years, during the 1920s and â€™30s, that West Point became recognized throughout higher education as being a first-rate academic institution. Now, every cadet had to take every course, and it was a prescribed curriculum, but nonetheless, the quality of instruction and the quality of the education was very high.

Interviewer

But it sounds like it was a reinforcement of what MacArthur had instituted. It wasnâ€™t that there was a shift of doctrine, so to speak.

Lance Betros

It reflected the MacArthur view that cadets needed a balanced curriculum. It was still prescribed, but it was a balance between math, science, and engineering on the one hand, and the humanities and social sciences on the other.

Interviewer

So let me come back to my question earlier, then. So did they see, though, in the quality of the officers they were getting in the Army, and finally in the Second World War, a difference from what they might've been grooming in the decades preceding that?

Lance Betros

Todd, I don't know how to measure that.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

And I don't think they could've measured it, either. But in general, the War Department and—well, from the evidence that I could glean, there seemed to be a high level of confidence that the academic and physical and military program at West Point was doing a good job preparing officers for leadership. And you know, if we just look at the—if we just look at the history of how West Pointers have done in these conflicts, they typically rise to the top—and they did in World War II. So I don't know how to measure it. That's a very hard question.

Interviewer

Well then what about the Academic Board? I mean MacArthur arrives with a sort of stiff, conservative, traditional Board that he fights with.

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

By the time [of] Davidson, is it more now peopled by this generational shift we talked about, so that even though Davidson's having to go through some of the same arguments, he's finding the Board more receptive to change?

Lance Betros

Well, the Board takes as a given that we now have a balanced curriculum, so I mean they've evolved in their thinking, too. And again, Davidson has allies on the Board. There are some who think exactly like Davidson.

Interviewer

Where is Lucius Holt at this point?

Lance Betros

Well, Lucius Holt is long retired by this point, but his successor at this point is going to be well, Herman Beukema is there for a while, and then a guy named Lincoln comes in after that. So those are the Department of Social Science leaders. But then there are others, too, who are like-minded, and they have to be, because for Garrison Davidson to achieve success, he has to persuade at least a majority to come his way.

Lance Betros

Now, the vote of the Academic Board on the issue of the curriculum and electives did not go the way Davidson wanted. I mean he would've wanted a larger number of electives right away. They voted for a smaller number, and he was he viewed that as only a partial victory. But in fact, what he had done was to break the logjam, and it was very quickly after that that we realized the wisdom of all of this.

Interviewer

We've talked about curriculum, and a little bit about policy. We've not talked about admissions. How does the admissions program work from this point early in the 20th century forward through Davidson? Give me a history of that.

Lance Betros

Okay. Well, admissions is primarily a function of Congress. Through the twentieth century, each member of Congress will gradually get more and more nominations to make to West Point, as the size of the Corps expands. But the large majority of cadets who come to West Point get there because they've been nominated by a congressman, and then in some way or other, the congressman will determine how that person will get in. And usually what the congressman will do, will say, "This is my primary nominee."

Lance Betros

As long as that person can pass the entrance exam for West Point, that's the guy who's going to go. And then they'll number their alternates after that, so that if the top guy doesn't make it, then we'll go to the next guy, and if he passes the test, then he gets in, and so forth, all the way down. That's generally how it was done. Now, there was a small number of cadets who were allowed to enter with a different type of nomination, and these were called "competitive" nominations.

Lance Betros

The President had a few. The Secretary of War had a few. It was but a small number, you know, maybe 20 or so. And those nominations were given to primarily soldiers, or the sons of officers, because the officers moved around a lot, so they didn't have an opportunity to cultivate friendships with the members of Congress so there was a way for those folks to get in as well. At any rate, those were the primary ways to get in congressional nominations, and the competitive nominations.

Lance Betros

Why I say competitive is because that small number took a test and West Point would admit the very top person on the test, and they would just go right on down the list with whoever scored the highest, and those people would get in. With the congressional nominees, if a congressman picks somebody who's not very well qualified as the top nominee, and

somehow that person passes the test, that personâ€™s in.

Lance Betros

So, clearly, the Congressional nomination system did not bring to West Point in every case the most qualified people, and that was a big problem. So through the entire history of West Point, superintendents had been trying to find ways to increase the quality of the candidates. Finally, Garrison Davidson comes along, and he is able to convince Congressâ€™or many members of Congressâ€™to let the Admissions Committee at West Point find the top picks within that set of nominees.

Interviewer

Within the set of the competitive nomineesâ€™

Lance Betros

No.

Interviewer

Or the Congressional nominees?

Lance Betros

Give itâ€™any particular congressionalâ€™or any particular member of Congressâ€™has maybe five nominees. Just turn those names over to the Admissions Committee, and let the Admissions Committee decide.

Interviewer

Rank them.

Lance Betros

Rank them, whoâ€™s going to get in, right. And that way, at least weâ€™ll get the best candidate among the five or six that this particular congressman nominates. So Garrison Davidson is able to get a fair percentage of members of Congress to agree to that, and over the next few years, the majority of members of Congress will agree to that. And today, about 85 percent of Congress goes by that system.

Interviewer

So itâ€™s still a voluntary process, though, it sounds like. If the congressman wants to make his own rankings, he can.

Lance Betros

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

But most of them tend today to turn that over to the Admissions Committee.

Lance Betros

Most of them do, that's right.

Interviewer

And don't you know when the superintendent has a few he can nominate on his own.

Lance Betros

That's right.

Interviewer

When did that come about?

Lance Betros

That's relatively recent. I think that was part of the legislation in the early 1960s that expanded the Corps of Cadets from about 2,500 to its current 4,400. And there were a lot of in that legislation, there were a lot more nominations given to the competitive category, so we had that was a big victory for those who wanted to improve the quality of the Corps of Cadets. So in general, Davidson takes a lot of credit for creating these reforms, or pushing these reforms, that leads to a better quality Corps of Cadets.

Interviewer

So essentially the electives and the admissions reforms.

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

Other reforms what else makes Garrison Davidson such a good Superintendent?

Lance Betros

Well, he was really a stickler on good training, and he wanted to ensure that cadets now, he's in the shadow of World War II, right after that he wanted to make sure that cadets were very much prepared for joint warfare and for all the complexities of modern warfare. So one of the things that he pushed was the program that today we call cadet troop-leading training.

Lance Betros

You send out the cadets to real units, to active Army units, and you let them simulate being a second lieutenant for three weeks or a month, and then bring them back. So these cadets get to deal with NCOs and with soldiers. They get real, live missions, and that kind of experience I remember my own was a fabulous experience. Back then, they called it AOT, for Army Orientation Training, and today it's CTLT [Cadet Troop Leader Training]. So that was a big change in training that he put in place.

Interviewer



You said there was one other really important Superintendent in the twentieth century. Who are you thinking of there?

Lance Betros

Dave Palmer, superintendent from 1986 to 1991. Palmer is still alive—a historian, a very good historian, who wrote a book written several books—but one in particular was on the history of West Point during the Revolution, called “The River and the Rock.”

Lance Betros

He’s quite an intellectual, and knows the history of West Point very well; so when he was selected to be the superintendent, he had about eighteen months from the time of notification until the time that he took over, to really study, to reflect on what he wanted to get accomplished. So he came to West Point probably better prepared than any other superintendent, next to Sylvanus Thayer, and was able to get a lot done as a result of it.

Interviewer

What are some of the things he accomplished?

Lance Betros

Well, again, the list is long. But the two things in particular stand out. He was intent on changing the culture of leadership at West Point. Now, up to this point, you know, all the way through the late twentieth century, the idea of attrition was very much part of the Academy’s leader development system.

Interviewer

By that you mean that you weed out those who are not

Lance Betros

Yes.

Interviewer

Really capable of keeping up the standard.

Lance Betros

Remember I said we had this culture—this assumption of paternalism? We create the environment. We create the gauntlet through which the cadet will go through, and if the cadet makes it through, then he has shown the ability to—character and intellect, and will be a great officer. But any misstep along the way, and we’re going to get him out of West Point. So, paternalism and attritionalism are like two sides of the same coin, and it was a rather challenging environment in which to be as a cadet.

Lance Betros

And you’re not really learning the right lessons. If we want West Point, if we want to consider West Point as being a leader development institution, then it’s got to be more

than just an attrition that dictates who makes it through and who doesn't. So Palmer was very sensitive to this, and he leveraged some of the thinking that was evolving over this time on the topic of leader development. But he decided when he got here—he did a study, got the opinions of a lot of people across the Academy, and came up with what is called the Cadet Leader Development System.

Lance Betros

Instead of having just a Fourth Class system in which everybody pounces on the plebes, he now has a system where all four classes have expectations for progressively developing their leadership skills. So when you're a plebe, the mission is to learn follower-ship. When you're a third classman, or a sophomore, now you begin to assume responsibility for one or maybe two cadets—you're a team leader. And then the following year, as a junior, you're a squad leader, and you have maybe ten or twelve cadets that you're responsible for.

Lance Betros

As a first classman, now you're part of the officer corps, you know, the cadet officer corps, and you have major responsibilities. So your responsibilities increase over time, your privileges increase over time, and the accountability for any mistake you make increase over time. Now, this seems so—this seems so wise. I mean why would it take so long for West Point to come up with something like this? Well, West Point is an institution that has a lot of tradition, and it's hard sometimes to make those changes.

Interviewer

Well, it sounds like it goes right back to the question we talked about earlier, which is do you arrive here ready to demonstrate that you're

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

Someone of character, and then get weeded out if you don't, or do you come here capable of learning

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

And then learn.

Lance Betros

Well, that's the sea change that takes place at West Point.

Interviewer

That's Palmer's contribution to it.

Lance Betros

That isâ€”now, Palmer, I would give him most credit for it. Obviouslyâ€”

Interviewer

Heâ€™s building on somethingâ€¦

Lance Betros

Heâ€™s buildingâ€”thatâ€™s exactly right, yeah. And I would say the bigâ€”maybe the catalyst for the change in the leader development culture is the cheating scandal of 1976. Thatâ€™s when West Point goes through an extraordinary amount of self-assessment and external assessment, primarily external. And every corner of the Academy is looked at, and thatâ€™s when we actually have the opportunity to make bold changes in the wayâ€”[Crosstalk]

Interviewer

Well, the cheating scandal, it strikes me, brings this very question to the center stage, right?

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

Which is: are these bad apples that we somehow tolerated, you know, to get here? We choose them wrong? The attrition did not weed them out? Or have we set up a system whereby we did not encourage the development of the right character in order to be able to rely uponâ€”

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

These principles as being front and center?

Lance Betros

Well, I think itâ€™s a little bit of all of those things. And on top of that, I think there were external factors, societal factors that played into the specific thing that happens in 1976 with the honor scandal. But the consensus as we did all these studies afterwards was that we needed to make West Point less ofâ€”we needed to develop cadets less on a model of attrition and more on a model of development.

Interviewer

And this comes from the Borman group as well as from internal assessments?

Lance Betros

Well, there wereâ€”

Interviewer

Frank Borman beingâ€”heading up this study group, right, that happens.

Lance Betros

Right. There were internal studies going on, but the important external studies were the onesâ€”the first one was by Frank Borman and his commission; Borman being a 1950 graduate of West Point and an astronaut, and famous American businessman and all that. Heâ€”his group focused on the Honor Code and the honor system, and then he delivered that report in December of 1976â€”delivered it to the Secretary ofâ€”or I guess the Secretary of Warâ€”the Secretary of the Army.

Lance Betros

The Army then turned around and did a much deeper study, and collectivelyâ€”there were a number of different studies, three different committeesâ€”collectively, it was called the West Point Study Group, and they worked for the first six months of 1977, and delivered their report actually in July of that year. That was the report that just dove deep, and there were 152 recommendations that came out of that, andâ€”

Interviewer

Who led up that groupâ€”who headed up that group?

Lance Betros

There were three general officers, either one- or two-stars, and they together then reported to the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Bernard Rogers. Now, the guy that was given the mission of implementing all of these things had been an advisor to the West Point Study group; and his name was Andrew Goodpaster.

Interviewer

Who had a famous professional life well before this.

Lance Betros

Sure.

Interviewer

Can you describe that briefly?

Lance Betros

Well, retired four-star general, had been the Commander of NATO, had been an advisor to presidents, especially President Eisenhower. He was, as the name impliesâ€”he was just this font of wisdom and virtue, and he truly was a very impressive man. He was the person that West Point needed at this time, according to the senior leaders, to lend stability and to shield the Academy from the attacks that were coming its way as a result of the honor scandal and other issues.

Lance Betros

So, a man of Goodpaster's stature protected West Point. So he took a one-star downgrade, just temporarily, of course, to become the superintendent of West Point. One of the reforms that came out of the West Point Study Group was that henceforth all superintendents would be three-star generals, by default.

Interviewer

And what was the thinking behind that?

Lance Betros

To give the superintendent more authority. The West Point Study Group did a lot of recommendations, but foremost among them was to change the governance structure at West Point. No longer would West Point be under a shared system of governance. From now on, the superintendent would have absolute authority, and the Academic Board would be constrained only to academic matters, meaning well, curricular matters and it would be advisory only. So starting with General Goodpaster, the three-star commanders at West Point have been as if they've had every ounce of authority that any three-star commander would have out in the Army. And they've used it. They've used it very aggressively.

Interviewer

I'm wondering if we should pause here and come back, because I think this is a good point to know when we come back to this subject we're going to talk about the good intentions of that decision led to some unexpected developments that you regret. But I thank you for coming in. We'll pick it up next time.

Lance Betros

Thank you, Todd.

Lance Betros

Thank you.