

Interviewer

Okay, today is Friday, May 11, 2012. We're in the studios of West Point Center for Oral History with Colonel Lance Betros for his third installment of his interview. Hope you're not getting tired of us.

Lance Betros

As long as it's the last one, then it's okay.

Interviewer

I thought for today we could speak about the sort of last 25 years or so, 30 years, since well, time since the cheating scandal of the late 1970s, but also sort of getting a sense of where the Academy stands now and how it has stood in its most recent past. And I guess we could start with the lessons of the cheating scandal. I think we sort of ended there at the last installment.

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

I mean what did we learn? What did the Academy learn from the cheating scandal in 1977?

Lance Betros

1976.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lance Betros

Yeah. I'll answer that, but a couple of things first. In 1976, there were two really cataclysmic events. There was the cheating scandal, and then there was also the admission of women to West Point. So and you know, in some ways, that was the most earth-shaking change in West Point's history, at least demographically. That was the biggest change. So you know, those two things really were catalysts for changes that were already being underway at West Point, but they really sped things up. So what were those changes? You know, what really changed? And it was

Interviewer

Before we get to what changed, you make me think we should at least pause for a second and review the history of the appeal for women to come to the Academy. I mean how far back does that go? When does the first notion that women should come to West Point enter into the popular discussion?

Lance Betros

Well, there have been a lot of calls for that, but the but not seriously, at least not until the 1960s and into the 1970s, when the feminist movement was becoming very

strongâ€”the resurgence of the feminist movement. But theyâ€”really at West Point, nobody really took it seriously. People just felt thatâ€”so remote, that the chances are so remote that something like that would happen, that people would actually allow women to come to West Point, that they really were just pretty smug in their thinking that this just wasnâ€”t going to happen.

Lance Betros

And then, of course, there was a Congressman [Rep. Melvin Price] who put it into a bill, and it got passed, and in 1975, the next thing Academy leaders knew, they really needed to get ready for it. Now, there were some perceptive Academy leaders who could see this coming, and one of them, for example, wasâ€”it was Colonel Jim Anderson, who was the Master of the Sword at the timeâ€”and he was involved in doing experimentation and research on how we would go about changing or adapting to allow women to come to West Point. So, when it actually happened, he was well ahead of the game, and that was one of the reasons why the Academy did relatively well in assimilating women quickly. We allâ€”

Interviewer

What was the opposition like to women coming to the Academy?

Lance Betros

Well, it was a bastion of testosterone here at West Point, you know. It had been male forever, and the military is an institution that treasures its traditions anyway; so, to have women come to the Corps was reallyâ€”it was really quite a change. I remember at one of the paradesâ€”this was just prior to women entering. At one of the parades, there wereâ€”there was a group of women in the stands, and they held up a placard that said, â€œKeep the curves out of the Long Gray Line.â€ So evenâ€”there were even a lot of women who didnâ€”t want this to happen. But it was a tidal wave.

Interviewer

Do you remember what your attitude was as a cadet at the time?

Lance Betros

Oh, I thought it was the end of the world. I was so upset that women were going to come to West Point. I just felt it was wrong, and you know, this is a place where we train combat leaders, and itâ€”the military and what are women doing here? Itâ€”justâ€”itâ€”political correctness. Itâ€”just a bunch of congressmen who areâ€”or Congress, members of Congress, who are trying to push theâ€”this agenda.

Interviewer

Did you fear that itâ€”that women would be a distraction to the kind of discipline necessary for the male cadets here, or was it that you felt that women really had no place serving in an institution for the profession of arms?

Lance Betros

Well, yes to all of those things. Women just didnâ€”t belong in the military. Women didnâ€”t belong at an all-male institution where weâ€”re graduating the elite officers for the Army, and where they all goâ€”where most of them will go combat arms. And it just didnâ€”t seem right. And then, of course, the question ofâ€”on a more intellectual level,

the question of women's fitness for the kind of duty that they would be called upon to do, and their ability to carry, you know, 100-pound rucksacks. And what they would do—rather what they would—the distractions they would cause in the ranks. So there were all those arguments and all those emotions and sentiments that—

Interviewer

Looking back now, what are your—what is your attitude about women at the Academy?

Lance Betros

Oh, it's of course changed dramatically. We've had several decades now to see how it works, and there are problems with it. I mean there are always going to be problems when you put men and women together in an environment like this. But by and large, women have done wonderfully at West Point. They've done wonderfully in the Army.

Lance Betros

And we are an Army that defends a free democracy, and the voice of that democracy is Congress and the president, our elected leaders, and they have told us that—or rather the values of our nation is such that we embrace equal opportunity for everybody. That's what our democracy stands for. So the Army that protects that democracy needs to reflect those values. So we can argue all we want about, you know, how much weight can a woman carry on her back, but we're going to reflect our society, and our society has told us very clearly that men and women are equal and we're going to treat them that way, and therefore we must do that.

Interviewer

So let's come back to where you started the change to the Academy of women suddenly arriving.

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

At the same time the cheating scandal happened, at the same time we're in the turbulent 1970s, the same time [South] Vietnam falls, right—

Lance Betros

Right. Right.

Interviewer

With defeat in Vietnam. It's a pretty tough time for the Academy.

Lance Betros

Yeah, it really is. There were a lot of problems that would've been there anyway. But the—so the problem or the incident of the cheating scandal and the arrival of women, as I said earlier, catalyzed things that were already changing. And the biggest thing, the biggest change that was taking place imperceptibly at the time, was a change in leader culture, a change in the idea that we had to be tough and uncompromising and attritional in the way

that we treated cadets.

Lance Betros

And in place of all that—and I would term that transactional leadership. You know, “You do what I say, the way I say it, and if you don’t, I’m going to hammer you.” I mean it’s very transactional leadership. And that was all—that was gradually put aside, and little by little, the Army was embracing a more developmental style of leadership—one that was based on trust, respect, treating people with dignity, and ensuring that the leader-led relationship was built on respect and trust.

Interviewer

Now, where had—that’s what had made this change happen? Was it the turbulent ‘60s and ‘70s that forced people to rethink this kind of top-down sort of order-driven mentality?

Lance Betros

Well, that’s part of it. I would also credit some very astute leaders of the Army. In particular, Creighton Abrams became the Chief of Staff of the Army in the early ‘70s, and he was concerned about the leader culture of the Army, because he knew what was happening—he knew what had happened to the Army during the Vietnam years, and we couldn’t continue to treat people the way we were treating them. And on top of that, the Army went—well, all of the military—went from being conscription-based to volunteer.

Lance Betros

So again, to apply the kinds of leadership that we were used to on volunteers would be self-defeating. So Creighton Abrams, at the very top, wanted to change the culture of leadership, and he wanted to do that at West Point as well. That’s why Lieutenant General—well, actually Brigadier General at the time—Walter Ulmer was sent to West Point. He was given the mission to help transform the military from a transactional leader style to something that’s more developmental. And when he got here, almost immediately, that’s when the cheating incident occurred.

Interviewer

So he never had his opportunity really to impose that new ethic on the Academy?

Lance Betros

Well, he lost the momentum. I mean he lost the ability to shape it himself. Instead, events shaped him, and he reacted, he responded, I think, in a very principled way to the cheating incident. But he was no longer shaping what was happening—it was just everything was swirling around him. So, as a result of the cheating scandal, there were a couple of very—or actually several—very thorough investigations and studies of what was going on at West Point. There was the Borman Commission, and that was the latter part of 1976.

Lance Betros

And the Borman Commission was very critical of the lax standards in areas of academics, especially, but also in cadet discipline and the commitment of many cadets to an Honor Code at all. I mean discipline was lacking in so many different areas. But the Borman Commission focused primarily on honor. Well, immediately after the Borman Commission—so the first six months of 1977—there was another study, and that was the West Point Study Group. It was actually three different studies all headed by a brigadier

general or a major general, and collectively, it was called the West Point Study Group, and they looked at everything at West Point.

Lance Betros

It was a searching, thorough study thatâ€”I mean the most thorough study that had ever been done. The West Point Study Group had the support of the most senior Army leaders, that being Bernie Rogers, who was the Chief of Staff of the Army at the time, and that meant that what that Study Group came up with in the way of recommendations had a very good chance of being implemented. The Study Group ended up having 156 recommendations in all categories â€”governance, academics, training, honorâ€”all those thingsâ€”and virtually every one of them was implemented, either all or in part.

Interviewer

What were some of them?

Lance Betros

Well, theâ€”I think the most important was in the categoryâ€”were in the category of governance. From all the way in West Point history, all the way leading up to 1976, the Academic Board had been the most powerful and the most influential body, governing body, at West Point, and it was truly a governing body.

Lance Betros

Every member who sat on the Boardâ€”the superintendent, the com[mandant], the dean, all the department heads, and one or two othersâ€”they all had just one vote. So when the superintendent wanted to push an agenda, he had to use the force of intellect and the force of reason to try to convince the others on the Academic Board of what he wanted to do. Starting in 1977, the Department of the Army changed all that, and the Academic Board became advisory only to the superintendent.

Interviewer

Now, we explored some of this in an earlier interviewâ€”

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

But I do want to come back to the reasons why. Why was this change made?

Lance Betros

Well, for many yearsâ€”for many, many years, going all the way back to the early 1800sâ€”outsiders, and of course, superintendents, were frustrated by the inability to get change, to implement change at West Point, whether it was academic or military training or whatever it was. They always had the obstacle of the Academic Board.

Interviewer

Oh, because the Academic Board always preceded them and followed them in a sense, right?

Lance Betros

That's right.

Interviewer

And had more power than they did?"

Lance Betros

That's right.

Interviewer

Because while they would come and go, the Board stayed.

Lance Betros

That's right. So the Academic Board could always wait out the superintendent if there was tension there. So sometimes the conservatism of the Academic Board was a very healthy thing, because whether it's the Secretary of the Army or the Secretary of War, at that time [before September 1947] or the superintendent, maybe they had short-term objectives that they wanted to implement that were not good for the curriculum in general. Well, in that case, the corporate body of the Academic Board could insulate the Academy from bad decisions, and it often did so, or sometimes. But just as it could insulate the Academy from bad initiatives, it could also insulate from things that really needed to happen.

Lance Betros

Curriculum reform, for example, and that was one of the issues that superintendent after superintendent wanted to change, you know, to get it to make it more broad, and to add more than just math, science, and engineering. So for a long time there had been this idea that the superintendent needed more power to push change. Well, finally, the West Point Study Group and the cheating scandal of 1976 gave the opening, and that enabled the Chief of Staff of the Army to force change at the Academy in terms of governance. So that was really I think the biggest outcome of the West Point Study Group. But there were many other things, too.

Interviewer

But you feel that that had that's had a negative impact as well, right?

Lance Betros

I think that the superintendent wields an awful lot of power, and he's a three-star general. Three-star generals are used to wielding a lot of power; so it would be alien to them to think that they shouldn't be wielding that much power. But they're very few three-star generals have led an academic institution before; so when three-star generals come here thinking that they're going to run West Point like they've like they would run a corps, which is a three-star headquarters, sometimes they're not so good outcomes. And they need to have the wisdom and the balance and the historical insight"

Interviewer

A temporizing [tempering] element, right?

Lance Betros

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Interviewer

So give me some examples. Talk about post-77, then, so in the superintendencies that have come since then. Where would you say we have suffered from this new amount of power within the superintendent's grasp?

Lance Betros

Well, let me first say that, by and large, the superintendents do pretty well, because they are committed, intelligent, very eager to do well for the Academy. So I'm not going to say that it's epidemic that they make bad decisions, but they do sometimes, and I think the Academic Board could provide more service to those, to the superintendents. But an example I'm going to come fairly recent as an example and that is going to be always the quest to field winning football teams, always.

Lance Betros

And it seems like one superintendent after another, with a few exceptions. Well, in the early years of the new century—2004-5, right in that time period—there was an initiative to be able to recruit better players for the football team. Because we were going through a long string of winless seasons, or losing seasons, and this new program was called the Alternate Service Option, where really good athletes could go into the professional fields or the professional teams without really serving a commitment [to the U.S. Army after graduating from West Point].

Lance Betros

Now, it wasn't exactly that. What would happen is that, you know, football player X or cadet X would get signed by a professional team. The Army would then assign that now newly-commissioned officer to a recruiting station in the city where the team is playing. So technically, the officer is on active duty and he's doing some kind of recruiting job, but in reality, he's drawing the pay of a professional athlete playing on the team.

Interviewer

And all this was to be able to encourage more promising athletes who may have wanted to have professional careers to think that the service obligation would not be the impediment that it might otherwise be.

Lance Betros

Exactly. It was to be a recruiting agent. So

Interviewer

So was this brought on by the power of a particular superintendent, though? Was there

Lance Betros

Well, Superintendents come with various agendas, and they each one has their pet rock that they pursue. And during that time, the superintendents were very upset about the long-term trend of the football program, which was—it was having losing seasons ever since I

think 1996. So this was almost 10 years into it now. Weâ€™re losing to Navy every year, and for some people, this was just catastrophic. And then for people like me, I shrug my shoulders and say, â€œWho cares,â€ you know?

Interviewer

Now, so weâ€™re talking aboutâ€”who was superintendent, then, when this was passed?

Lance Betros

Well, during the years that Iâ€™m talking about, it wouldâ€™ve been General [William J.] Lennox [Jr.] and General [Franklin L.] Hagenbeck.

Interviewer

And was there a feeling among those on the Academic Board, because the Academic Board still exists, right? Itâ€™s just that itâ€™s notâ€”

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

It doesnâ€™t have the power it once had.

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

That this would never had passed muster with the Academic Board in the previous arrangement?

Lance Betros

The Academic Boardâ€”if there had just been one vote around the table to do something like this, it never wouldâ€™ve passed. There was deep resentment over the Alternate Service Option among the senior members of the faculty, outside of the superintendentâ€™s very tight circle of advisors. And of course, that tight circle of advisors were all like-mindedâ€”it just so happened they were all like-minded. So none of them really could argue with the force of conviction the opposing point of view.

Interviewer

Now, does that mean that Superintendent Hagenbeckâ€”or Superintendent [David Richard] Palmerâ€”was ignorant of the level of dissension within the Academic Board over this, or indifferent, or just refused to take its advice?

Lance Betros

Well, it wouldâ€™ve been Hagenbeck and Lennoxâ€”

Interviewer

Iâ€™m sorryâ€”Lennox.



Lance Betros

You mentioned Palmer, yeah. I don't want to ascribe, you know, malevolent thinking on either one of them. They were trying to do what they thought was the best for the Academy, and I respect that, and I understand. But they just didn't really have the opportunity to discuss it in open forum. I mean they relied on that tight circle. It was the superintendent, the commandant, the dean, and the Director of Intercollegiate Athletics, who were basically in that tight circle, and all of them were very much in the same mindset.

Lance Betros

So if you don't avail yourself the opportunities to meet with a larger group, with the senior professors who are here for a long time and have extensive professional credentials and academic credentials, and they know the Military Academy back and forth—if you don't avail yourself to that, then you're missing something. And I do think that they missed something in that particular instance.

Interviewer

Now, what was the damage to the Academy in the end do you think of that? Do you see that there was real hurt that came from that decision?

Lance Betros

Well, I certainly don't see any gain that came from that decision, and I do see some potential hurt. We, in effect, acted not in accordance with our principles, that every cadet is supposed to serve their country for five years—that we're supposed to bring in only the highest quality candidates, who meet the whole candidate criteria—that we're supposed to treat every cadet equally. All these things are inbred in the military, and yet we're now—we now have a specially treated class of cadet, and that is repugnant, to me.

Interviewer

Yeah, well, it would seem as though, when you look back at the, you know, the principles of the Honor Code, one of the reasons that there's a zero tolerance is because some tolerance leads to a kind of infectious pattern, right?

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

So, I guess the fear here would be that if principles are not relied upon and followed in one of the most basic aspects here, which is the commitment—the service commitment of the cadets post-graduation from here—

Lance Betros

Well—

Interviewer

That can have a damaging impact.

Lance Betros

It does. What you're describing is the genesis of cynicism, and there's a lot of cynicism in the Corps of Cadets—there always has been. But cynicism comes about when we don't do what we say we should do—when we don't act in accordance with our principles. That's when people get cynical, and that deteriorates the ability to run an organization and to have good leadership, so that's inimical to the long-term objectives of the institution and what we're trying to teach the cadets.

Interviewer

So it seems like there was really two errors here. One, the very decision itself, which creates an inequality, right, which is what you described, but also coming back to your larger point, governance—the governance of the institution is not healthy when it doesn't involve more viewpoints introduced into the popular discussion.

Lance Betros

Exactly. If we were a normal military institution or an organization then we could run the organization much like we do in the field Army, where you've got a commander, you've got trusted subordinates, and everything funnels up in a hierarchical way through that pyramidal structure. But we are an academic institution as much as we are a military organization. And academic institutions thrive because of the bottom-up contributions of the members of the faculty, especially the senior faculty that they're long-term professionals and academics. I mean, the Academic Board represents the faculty, and yet the faculty really wasn't having much—or doesn't have much of a say anymore.

Interviewer

Now, in the history, obviously, this dichotomy's always been the case—that you have an academic institution—

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

That's serving a military institution. And the military institution has a different, more hierarchical relationship with power than the academic institution. And for most of the Academy's history, if understood it seems that that distinction was very important to keep. The Academic Board was powerful because that kind of consensus-building needed to happen. Here we have the episode of the cheating scandal in part leading to a shift in the governance that now has an unintended consequence, I guess, is what you'd say, right?

Lance Betros

Yeah. Yeah. The unintended consequence is not to strip away from the Academy the layer of institutional knowledge and support that the Academic Board gave it. So, there's no longer that insulating effect, or that buffering from outside influence and from bad ideas now, so that means it's kind of laid open and it's vulnerable. And most superintendents do just fine, as I said earlier. You know, they do fine because they're great people. But the potential is there to do damage.

Interviewer

Well when too much power resides in one person, youâ€™re beholden to that one person being a good person, right?

Lance Betros

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

Or having the right blend of talents to effectively run an organization like that.

Lance Betros

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

What are some of the other big problems created in theâ€”out of this? You referred to the governance problem.

Lance Betros

Well, itâ€™s related, actuallyâ€”these things were all related. And there has been, over the lastâ€”well, since 1970, actually, thereâ€™s been a decline inâ€”I keep talking about intercollegiate athletics. Itâ€™s going to keep coming up, apparently. But thereâ€™s been a gradual decline in the competitiveness of Army teams since 1970â€”of our intercollegiate teams, our Division I intercollegiate teams. We used to be able to field very competitive teams at a time, in an earlier age, whenâ€”when we were able to bring cadets to West Point who excelled in the classroom and on the field, and there was just no issues there.

Lance Betros

But starting in 1970, we can see the trend of competitiveness goes down, and conversely, the trend to try to fix it, and apply resources to fix it, goes up. So in the last decade, for example, whereas the dean and the commandant and the superintendentâ€™s staff, and the admissions office have all taken hits in their funding, the level of funding for intercollegiate athletics has gone through the roof. And weâ€™re now taking money that is appropriated from Congress and applying it to intercollegiate athletics.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s new?

Lance Betros

Thatâ€™s a very recent event. Now, well, some of that money has been used for a long time, since the 1970s, when the Army Athletic Association can no longer afford, or no longer could generate the money to support a Division I program. But even then, the amount of appropriated dollars that went to the sports program was just very small. It was to pay the salaries of a few active-duty officers who worked on that side. But starting in the early 2000s, that amount went way up, and very quickly.

Lance Betros

And over the last decade or so, it has risen to the point where appropriated dollars are

about 10%—actually a little more than that—of appropriated dollars that come to West Point go to intercollegiate athletics—10% of the budget. So when you think about all the things that we can’t get done—when you think about all the personnel cuts that we make, and all the condition of the classrooms, and you know, the things that just don’t get accomplished, the maintenance that needs to be done around—all those things—we’re talking about a 10 or \$11 million here—goes to play sports. So—

Interviewer

And yet the results are not there, either.

Lance Betros

Well, that’s right. We continue to be just mediocre when it comes, or when you look at the aggregate of intercollegiate athletics.

Interviewer

Now, is this another fault of the too much power residing in the superintendency?

Lance Betros

Well, I don’t want to say that the Academic Board should be worrying about budgetary issues. But when our budgetary issues influence the curriculum, the overall curriculum, academic, military, and all that, then the Academic Board ought to be at least given a voice. But they don’t. They—

Interviewer

Who makes the decision on the budgetary issues, then?

Lance Betros

The superintendent is the sole—is the supreme authority at West Point. He is the one that ultimately makes the decision. Now, he has a staff, and the staff will recommend, but that’s completely outside of the channels of discourse of the Academic Board, which, and you know, and that’s understandable, except where input is needed, so I can understand that. I think really that the point here is that the Superintendents have a lot of power, and the potential for doing harm is there because there are no checks at West Point anymore. There are no checks and balances anymore.

Interviewer

Now, do you see the Academy, then, failing in its larger mission or the larger—the success in its larger mission eroding because of some of these problems that have emerged?

Lance Betros

I think the Military Academy is a magnificent institution that graduates very fine officers, and we can show that by just looking at the record of our graduates in recent decades. They—West Pointers do very well. And I’ll just give you an example. As of the turn of this year—we’re in 2012—I think the last time I checked was in November of 2011—seven of eleven four-star generals were West Point graduates.

Lance Betros

Seven of ten active Army divisions are commanded by West Pointers. Now, so thatâ€™s 70% or somewhere in that vicinity, and those officers, when they were commissioned 30 years ago, represented only about 10% of the officer corps. So they went from 10% to 70% of the senior positions, so thatâ€™s very good. So my point here is that West Point does a good job, and I donâ€™tâ€”and none of my comments are meant to imply otherwise. Can we do better? Yes.

Interviewer

Alright. How? What would the recommendations be? What recommendation would you bring to the table in order toâ€”with what youâ€™ve seen in studying the history of the last 25 or 30 years?

Lance Betros

Well, first of all, I believe that character and intellect are the most important things that we do, so the resources that we expend at West Point ought to be funneled in those areas. Well, I mean not totally in those areas, but we ought to prioritize such that they get the majority of the effort. So academicsâ€”the academic program and the enrichment opportunities that surround the academic program need to be the absolute best we can make them. Thatâ€™s what is goingâ€”I mean thatâ€™s whatâ€™s going to develop those young minds and make them capable to be strategic leaders 25, 30 years down the road.

Lance Betros

So we have a good academic programâ€”we have a superb academic program. So I would want us to continue to emphasize that well into the future. So what can we do to get better? I think a huge area that we can improve in is the admissions program. Who do we bring to West Point? Nothing is more important to the quality of the people we graduate than the quality of the people we bring in. And by and large, we bring in some very fine people, but surprisingly, we also bring in a pretty high number of not-so-high-quality candidates.

Lance Betros

As a matter of fact, if you were to break each entering class into quartiles, I think the top quartile could be competitive in any institution in America. Theyâ€™re that good. And then the middle two quartiles would be comparable to a real solid state school somewhereâ€”you know, thatâ€™s the quality that weâ€™re looking at. But the bottom quartile, itâ€™s rough down there, and we bring in some people who round out what we call â€œclass composition goals.â€ But their overall quality is surprisingly low, and thatâ€™s where I think we could do better.

Lance Betros

These class composition goals are geography, race, ethnicityâ€”what is it?

Lance Betros

Itâ€™s not geography. Itâ€™s race, primarily, and athletics. Itâ€™s those two areas. But we also have a class composition goal for women, but thatâ€™sâ€”we always meet that, and we bring very high-quality women to West Point.

Interviewer

So you think, then, that because of our interest in particular in accenting the

academicâ€™m sorry, the athletics, competitive athleticâ€™ success of the Academy, weâ€™ve accepted some people as cadets who are substandard.

Lance Betros

Yes. Exactly. We put such an emphasis on Division I intercollegiate athletics that we undermine the Corps of Cadets. [And we undermine, therefore, the quality of the officer corps. We could do better if we just got off this idea that for some reason playing at the Division I level and emphasizing sports the way we do is so importantâ€™if we could just get away from that. But thatâ€™s enormously difficult, just based on our history and our traditions.

Interviewer

Well, thereâ€™s a philosophy, right, that sports excellence equates to excellence on the battlefield, and excellence in leading menâ€™that sports areâ€™particularly football, but that all sports are somehow a kind of analog to the real world of combat. Is that part of the explanation for the focus on sports here?

Lance Betros

Well, yes. The short answer is yes. The longer answer is that Douglas MacArthur saw that a century ago. He was a highly decorated combat veteran in World War I, and then immediately came to West Point as the new superintendent in 1919, and he believed strongly that physical prowess, that athletic ability was essential for soldiers in general, and especially for officers. So he was the one that mandated â€œevery cadet an athlete.â€ And I believe that very deeply, too. Ironically, I was recruited to play football at West Point, so I came and I played for a year before I stopped playing.

Lance Betros

But I believe deeply in the importance of athletics and competitive sports as a means of developing physical rigor. It potentially can build character, if youâ€™re coached correctly and you approach it the right way. But I mean there are all sorts of benefits. But that doesnâ€™t mean we have to play Division I sports. We can gain all of those benefits and still not compromise our admissions program. We can certainly do that. And there are many very fine institutions around the country that have gone down that road.

Interviewer

But is it realistic to expect that this institution, when the alumni have so much invested, not only dollars, but in their enthusiasm for the Academy around the excellence of the competitive sports teams here?

Lance Betros

It would be hard. It would be very hard. We have living Heisman Trophy winners, who would not be very happy if we stopped playing Division I football, for example, and thatâ€™s the sport that just takes so much energy and so much commitmentâ€™but the other ones, tooâ€™the other ones, too. We should be playing. We should play at an athletic level that allows us to bring in candidates who do not need to be given special treatment. In other words, if we can field a Division I football team and bring in candidates whose overall credentials are generally the same as their peers in the Corps of Cadets, then I say letâ€™s play Division I footballâ€™thatâ€™s fine.

Lance Betros

But we can't do that, and we know we can't do that. Despite those occasional exceptions—you know, those All-Americans who just—I want my daughters to marry, you know, those kind—but we get a few of those, but they don't—that doesn't change the aggregate trend, and that is that in general, our recruited athletes reside at the bottom of the class. They do poorly at West Point. They don't stay on active duty as long as their classmates do, and they don't rise as high in rank as their classmates do. So why are we doing this? It just doesn't make sense.

Interviewer

So we've pinpointed a problem in the overall governance structure, pinpointed a problem in the exaggerated attention on intercollegiate athletics. We have seen—and I'd like to go on with this story—the adaptation of the approach to learning here to be—I forget how you actually characterized it, but one that's more nurturing rather than one that's more—than simply demanding. How does that experiment, which you sort of alluded to as beginning in the '70s and coming in part out of the ideas of Creighton Abrams and then going forward from the studies of the Academy that came out of the Honor Code scandal—how has that experiment fared?

Lance Betros

Okay. It fared very well. I noted that there are, there were three big issues, three problems. There was governance, admissions, and intercollegiate athletics, since the 1970s. Well, conversely, there are three real—there are three areas that have just done superbly since that time. And the first one is academics, and that—I think we've talked about academics and how rich the academic program is.

Lance Betros

The other one, or another one is in military training, which is superb today—you know, a high level of military training, and the cadets leave here and they get some of the best training they're going to get anywhere. And another area is in this idea of leader development, and changing the climate of leadership so that we now nurture the idea that you treat your subordinates the way you would want to be treated. I mean it's the Golden Rule—and we therefore develop trust and respect, and that's the basis of leadership in the Army of a democracy—in an Army that has volunteer soldiers. So you know, there are some real success stories since 1970, the 1970s, too.

Interviewer

Now, that sounds good, sounds right, but has it been borne out, to be a better way to raise leaders? I mean it would seem to me as though someone could argue the opposite and say, “No, you know, a leader needs to separate himself from his men. He needs to, you know, be showing the importance of rank and hierarchy”—I'm sure the attitudes that were embraced in decades before around West Point. Why is this a superior form of—or what evidence do we have that this is a superior form of teaching leadership?

Lance Betros

Yeah. Well, I wouldn't say that a leader that demonstrates this nurturing kind of attitude is any less—has any less authority or sets lower standards. I mean you can still set a very high level of standards and hold your soldiers accountable to them, but that doesn't mean—

Interviewer

How do we know this is better, though? how do we know this is better, given that we didn't do it for so long here?

Lance Betros

We need only to look at the results of our recent wars, and the performance of our soldiers in extraordinary, extraordinarily difficult circumstances, they have performed superbly.

Interviewer

You feel this is a more professional Army than we were able to build in the past with a different leadership ethic.

Lance Betros

Well, it's absolutely professional. It's volunteer, so everyone joins.

Interviewer

Let me put it this way: of course it's professional, but it's a higher standard of the profession. Let me put it that way.

Lance Betros

In terms of professional excellence, the Armies that we've been fielding for the last 20 years are the best we've ever fielded. They don't need to be mass-conscription Armies. They're very capable. Many of the soldiers that we have now are long-term soldiers who therefore embrace the ethos and are very experienced in their jobs. So, yeah, it's a really good Army, and you cannot treat soldiers like that, like conscripts, and that's where the old style of leadership flourished was in a conscription Army where you have a lot of people who were in the ranks who don't want to be there, and you have to impose strict discipline. It's different in a volunteer Army.

Interviewer

Alright, so we're back to academic excellence, excellence in actual military training—you said there was a third.

Lance Betros

Well, the evolution of the leader culture at West Point, so that was the third one. And then actually maybe I will throw in a fourth one, and that is the conception of honor, and that's really central to the honor scandal in 1976. There was the idea prior to the '70s that you were either honorable or you weren't. And when you commit an honor violation and it's proven, that there's no, you know, no forgiveness. You're out. You're separated. So there was a single sanction, and that was separation for whenever you were found guilty of an honor violation.

Lance Betros

Well, what happens to the cadet who is, you know, the plebe who is out in formation, he rushes out there at the last minute, and the upperclassman comes and says, "Have you shined your shoes today?" And the plebe, knowing that he's going to get in a lot of



trouble, just says, "Yes, sir." And then he goes, "Oh no!" "I didn't shine my shoes. It was last night." So he goes to his squad leader later on and says, "Sir, you know, I didn't shine them today." So he committed—he told a lie, and there were many instances where something as insignificant as that would end up leading to a cadet's separation.

Interviewer

Really?

Lance Betros

Yes. Yes, and even pettier than that.

Interviewer

By separation you mean expulsion.

Lance Betros

Expulsion. There was no opportunity to give discretionary punishment. So the 1951 honor scandal that involved the football team, in that scandal many of these issues came up, but the Academy leaders decided that they weren't going to make major changes in the Honor Code, or the Honor System, rather. And then the '76 scandal came along, and that was even bigger—that was my class, by the way.

Lance Betros

That was my class, the class of '77. And that one was so large that—and the memories of the former one were in everybody's mind—that we had to make changes then. But the best change, or the most important change, was to get away from the idea that people—that people's honor is either on or off. They either have it or they don't. Rather, character is something that people develop over a long period of time.

Lance Betros

And everybody's on a spectrum of character, and people are—there's some amount of perfectibility in character, one would think. Well, that was a relatively new idea, but the honor scandal of 1976 gave it more of a chance, and the Secretary of the Army gave the superintendent the option of using discretion in punishing honor violations. Now, it was only supposed to be in very rare circumstance when he did it, and General Goodpaster used it rarely, but each succeeding superintendent after that used it more and more.

Lance Betros

And they did it because we put in place other procedures to help the violators redeem themselves—to, you know, go through an honor mentorship program, for example, and come out at the other end much better off than they were. Now, the extreme redemptive experience is called the "Honor Mentorship"—I mean the "Army Mentorship Program."

Lance Betros

So this is when a cadet commits an honor violation, gets separated from the Military Academy, and the superintendent tells him, "You have the option of going into the Army

as an enlisted soldier, and if you do well, a year from now, or a year and a half from now, you can reapply for admission.â€ Those cadets who do that go through this enormously purgative experience, and they come back theâ€ I wish every cadet could do something like this. Itâ€™s really amazing, how they come back just changed people. And many of them that go on theâ€

Interviewer

When theyâ€™re in the Army, theyâ€™re just like any other enlisted man, right?

Lance Betros

Just likeâ€ well, yeah, but theyâ€™re put in a program such thatâ€ well, the unit is specially selected, and the commander is specially selected, so that the commanders understand who this soldier is. And the idea is to watch them carefully and to give them opportunities to show that they are developing character. Now, several of the people who have gone into the Army Mentorship Program have gone to combat.

Lance Betros

You know, theyâ€™ve been integrated into their unit, and theyâ€™ many of them perform spectacularly out in the field, and then they go to combat and they do very well there. And then they reapply for admission, and they come back to the Corps of Cadets, and you can imagine how respected they are, and how mature theyâ€™ve become. So character is perfectible, at least partly so, and itâ€™s a good news story that superintendents now have the ability to use discretion in dealing with honor violatorsâ€ so a really good news story.

Interviewer

Are you optimistic about the Academyâ€™s future, in particular when you look at the new kind of engagements weâ€™ve had to take on in the twenty-first century?

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

And the nature of warfareâ€ changing with the arrival of drone warfare and more and more unconventional warfare. Do youâ€ are you optimistic?

Lance Betros

I am, very much. The flip side of the problem of the Academic Board losing power relative to the superintendentâ€ the flip side of that coin is that the department heads have focused more inward within their departments, and theyâ€™ve really taken initiatives that have blossomedâ€ that have allowed the curriculum to blossom in many ways.

Lance Betros

The curriculum in history, for example, in the Department of History, has expanded a lot. Weâ€™ve put together a package of enrichmentsâ€ the Center for Oral History is one of themâ€ and itâ€™s so much richer than it ever was before. So theâ€ really thatâ€™s where the innovation is happening now is within the Departments, the academic departments, at West Point.

Interviewer

Do you think that the kind of innovation that's being adapted, though, is appropriate in particular to the challenge of the twenty-first century, and what do you see on that score?

Lance Betros

Oh, I do. I mean the only—the best way to prepare for all the uncertainty and the chaos that's out there in the world is to develop young minds and give them a broad liberal education that makes their intellect soar. And—so education is the key—education—that's rather intellect and character—I keep going back to that. Intellect and character are the two most important things, and as long as we keep focusing on those two enduring characteristics of the human being, then our country will be in good hands.

Lance Betros

We will continue to produce great officers who will serve the nation, and will adapt themselves however necessary to deal with those uncertainties of the future. My concern is that the problems with governance and admissions and intercollegiate athletics will take our focus away from character and intellect, and that's where we're going to—that's where we could have trouble.

Interviewer

Thank you very much.

Lance Betros.

Yeah. Thank you, Todd.