

Learning the perspective on West Point during the Civil War

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On April 12, 1861, General P.G.T. Beauregard, West Point class of 1838, now a general in the Confederate Army, ordered his gunners to open fire on Fort Sumter. The Union commander was Major Robert Anderson, an Academy graduate who had been Beauregard's artillery instructor at West Point.

Throughout the Civil War, men who were once classmates found themselves leading opposing armies against their friends and comrades.

As part of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center's Perspectives in Military History lecture series, Dr. Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh, an assistant professor at the U.S. Naval Academy, examined the evolution of the military profession from the War of 1812 to the Civil War during his June 15, lecture, "West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace."

When the Civil War broke out most Americans, on both sides of the conflict, assumed that the war would consist of one gigantic battle with the winner marching on, and capturing the loser's capitol. However, this was not the case, largely due to the presence of West Point trained officers on both sides, who were building and leading an Army made largely up of untrained civilians.

"Both sides had equilibrium of competence," said Hsieh. "They studied the same texts and took the same classes with the same professors. So there would be no clear decisive victor." This meant that the war would be a long, grinding affair with heavy casualties on both sides that would have unforeseen political implications.

During the pre-war period, the average West Point class consisted of 40-50 cadets. This meant that everyone knew the name and reputation of not only their classmates but, of every cadet. This made it very difficult for one commander to obtain an advantage over the other because he knew how his opponent was going to react.

"This equilibrium of competence frequently stymied Civil War generals' efforts to destroy their opponents in climactic battles of annihilation," said Hsieh. "This would have required a marked

superiority in resources or in military ability that did not exist.”

In many ways, the West Point trained Soldiers represented everything that 19th Century America did not want. American martial tradition had glorified the civic and military virtue of the unprofessional citizen-soldier who would take up arms to fight and then quickly return to civilian life. During the pre-war period West Point was committed to training professional Soldiers who would be the backbone of a professional standing army.

This meant that when war broke out the West Point trained Soldiers had one advantage that the citizen-soldier did not have – experience. This experience of not only prior combat, but discipline prevented, in large part, the Civil War descending into guerrilla led insurgencies.

It was this backbone that would shape the conduct of the war, said Hsieh.

While the presence of West Point officers may have increased the length of the war, they also helped heal the country after the war. Grant and Lee set the pattern at Appomattox, that the war was over and America was once again united.

The final Perspectives in Military History lecture for the 2010-11 academic year will be, “Preparing for Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-43.” The lecture is scheduled to take place on July 13 at 7:15 p.m.

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