

THE RESURGENCE OF

# Military High Schools



**S**he came of age in the 1960s when the cultural elite considered the military oppressive and authoritarian—the jackboot of American imperialism worldwide. Today, Gail Paroda cherishes the nation's armed forces. The military, after all, rescued her son Andy—without firing a single shot. Andy was not plucked from a foreign land. He was languishing in dangerous territory in Hamilton Township, New Jersey, smack in the middle of his local public school. He had bad grades and no positive influences. Before things worsened, Paroda decided to enroll Andy in the all-male Valley Forge Military Academy—one of approximately 35 military high schools nationwide that help whip faltering or under-achieving students into shape. In its advertisements, the Wayne, Pennsylvania school promises to teach students to speak a foreign language: “Yes, sir.”



For Andy Paroda, Valley Forge was a foreign culture. Up at the crack of dawn, he was dressed in the same crisp uniform as everyone else, required to march to class and salute visitors. But Andy's grades improved dramatically from a *D* to a *B* average. Equally important, his mother has said, he acquired a sense of right and wrong.

With the economy booming and public schools often disappointing or even treacherous, a growing number of parents are turning to private military high schools to educate their sons and daughters. The schools, which seemed headed for extinction in the late 1960s and early '70s, have seen enrollments increase steadily in recent years. Many are jammed to capacity and sport long waiting lists, as anxious parents scramble for slots.

"Students are used to saying and doing whatever they please. What we preach here is civility and manners," says David Bouton, headmaster of the Benedictine High School, a military day school in Richmond, Virginia. "You have boys used to outlandish attire, and suddenly everyone is in the same uniform—no one stands out. Suddenly, conformity and uniform are the standards. This comes as a real culture shock, but those are the very same things that cause the bonding."

The schools take great pains to emphasize that they are not reform schools. As Colonel Bob Miller, dean of the Fork Union Military Academy in Virginia says, sounding more like a diplomat than a soldier, "We don't take anyone with a relationship with the law." What military high schools do provide, however, is the discipline that many teenagers need. The schools provide both a refuge from the public schools and an antidote. Instead of peer pressure to have sex or take drugs, the peer pressure at military high schools is to behave. These are lessons the kids learn early. About half the military academies begin in middle school, some even earlier.

These schools are by no means just training grounds for the armed forces. While Gulf War General Norman Schwarzkopf is a Valley Forge graduate, the school also boasts alumni in many other fields, including former New Hampshire Senator Warren Rudman, nine-time Grammy Award-winner Jimmy Sturr, and an author who knows a thing or two about wayward teenagers—J. D. Salinger.

With most of the schools boasting that 95 percent of their graduates go on to two- or four-year colleges (often top ones), military high schools prepare most of their charges for the workplace, not the battlefield. The schools usually have junior ROTC programs—Randolph-Macon Academy students in Woodstock, Virginia, can even earn pilot licenses through the program. But under 5 percent of military high school graduates join the military. "Teaching leadership and teamwork is the real purpose of these schools," Bouton contends, "despite the misconception [that we] play with guns and do war games." A student at LaSalle Military Academy in Oakdale, New York, notes, "They're not teaching us how to kill. They're teaching us discipline and leadership."

Just as Catholic schools appeal to parents who are not Catholic or even religious, military high schools provide an answer to some parents who are not Army people. "They use

a military system to teach kids what they should have learned in public schools," says William Trousdale, an historian who is writing a book on military high schools. "Parents are tired of worrying that [their kid] may be shot or stabbed or talked into stealing."

It was those kind of concerns that led a Philadelphia single mother to enroll her son in Fork Union Military Academy in 1989. Donna George's son, Eddie, would later win a Heisman Trophy, but at the time she enrolled him, his future seemed bleak. Distracted at his public school and habitually lying to her, Eddie was going nowhere fast. George had the solution: Fork Union, which her brother attended ten years earlier. She decided she had to send Eddie there, even though it meant taking out loans to pay his tuition. "Forget about playing football your junior year at public school," George told her son, "you're going to Fork Union, whether you like it or not." He didn't. Eddie cried and appealed to relatives—to no avail.

With its manicured lawns and grand playing fields, the academy looks, at first glance, like a conventional prep school. Come a little closer, however, and it's clear that the place is anything but. Goodbye, Mr. Chips. Hello, Reveille.

From the moment wake-up sounded until the end of the day, Eddie George was busy either marching or studying or taking classes. At first, his recalcitrance continued; as punishment he was forced to help clean a church in front of fellow cadets. But by the time his mother came to visit for parents' weekend, his attitude had changed. Eddie proudly served as part of the school honor guard.

He developed a burning desire to excel and a work ethic that later brought him football stardom at Ohio State University, a Heisman Trophy, and an NFL contract. Fork Union is one of only two high schools in the nation to boast two Heisman winners (the other Vinny Testaverde).

Even with such impressive results, military schools occupy only a tiny niche in the education world. "It's not for everybody. It's for a small number of kids," says Virginia Military Institute superintendent Josiah Bunting. "But it does a pretty good job for kids who lack focus and need discipline." That raises an obvious question: Are these schools living in the past or riding the wave of the future?

Tuition is expensive at all such schools—\$15,000 to \$20,000 a year at the priciest institutions, as low as \$6,500 for in-state residents at the New Mexico Military Institute. But if school vouchers become readily available, cost will be less of a deterrent.

More importantly, as secondary education drowns in foolish educational theories, military high schools operate on a winning formula: Hard work, loyalty, a sense of community and individual purpose, and personal discipline. Some sophisticates deride that philosophy as simplistic, but many parents hail it as a wise "back to basics" approach now sadly lacking from most public schools.

The practices of America's military high schools are not marketing experiments, however. They are deep-rooted traditions at institutions that often date back to nineteenth-century foundings. There were about 750 military academies early in this century, but many closed "after the first World War, when a



Cadet Clay Smith

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wave of isolationist sentiment swept the United States,” according to the historian William Trousdale. More closings followed World War II and Korea. By the late 1950s, about 600 remained.

In the late 1960s and early '70s the schools were hit by a “double whammy” of poor economic conditions and an anti-military atmosphere. Faced with dwindling enrollment, some of the remaining schools decided to admit women in the 1970s to swell their ranks. No such luck. For example, Randolph-Macon first took girls in 1974, yet by 1981 the school's enrollment was a mere 118 students.

But as the economy rebounded in the 1980s and Ronald Reagan helped shift attitudes toward the military, the schools slowly rebounded. Trousdale says most military academies have seen their enrollments rise between 5 and 10 percent over the last few years. (His estimate is consistent with figures provided by schools cited in this article.) For the current academic year, Randolph-Macon admitted 437 students, and rejected more applicants than ever before.

Randolph-Macon's Virginia campus looks plush, but don't let the green lawns fool you. Even the simplest privileges must be earned. Students get only 90 minutes of free time daily. The rest of the day is strictly regimented, from the 6:30 a.m. wake-up call to mandatory study hall in the afternoon to lights out at 10 p.m. This demanding schedule, par for the course at most such schools, is not for everyone. About 15 percent of Valley Forge students, for example, leave before their first year is

over. Other schools report similar attrition rates, with students either dropping out or being dismissed. But many of those who stay clearly thrive, despite their initial skepticism.

Perhaps one of the schools' most effective tools is positive peer pressure. It is quite explicit. Students absorb the school's principles and are loathe to dissent from the majority culture. At military high schools, students quite literally police each other. Turn someone in and you're not known as a snitch but heralded as someone who “sticked.” Upper-classmen may even find themselves taking orders from more accomplished younger students. Prestige cannot be bought; it must be achieved. At Randolph-Macon, for example, student rank is earned through military and academic performance—and displayed with bars on their uniforms. Students must obey and salute those who outrank them.

“The beauty of that,” says Lewis Sorley, executive director of the Association of Military Colleges and Schools of the United States, “is that it gives cadets a responsibility. [They] learn to be responsible for somebody besides themselves, and they learn something about obligations.”

These are not easy lessons. Clay Smith, a junior who came to Randolph-Macon from a public school, says taking orders from younger classmates, “gets kind of rough, but you have to do it.” Smith has experienced several kinds of peer pressure. At his public school he had a big problem with procrastination and could never say no when friends urged him to hang out instead

## A Talk with Military Educator Josiah Bunting, III

*General Josiah Bunting is a man who has both studied and experienced military education at all levels. A Vietnam infantry veteran with two Oxford degrees, he is currently superintendent of his alma mater, the Virginia Military Institute, having previously headed the Lawrenceville School, Hampden-Sydney College (an all-male school), and Briarcliff (an all-women's college). In a recent conversation with TAE associate editor John Meroney, Bunting mulled the status of military schooling today.*

**TAE:** The shooting in Littleton, Colorado, has everyone asking whether one can spot troubled children early on?

**Bunting:** I don't believe one can spot it. And I'm afraid it's going to happen with tragic regularity from here on. We're a country of 270 million people with tens of thousands of schools, and every year you're going to have four or five or ten of these episodes, period. But it isn't as likely in small schools where there's an intimate relationship between teachers and children. In the big suburban high schools, teenagers can get pretty far down the line without anybody spotting it.

**TAE:** The hero of your latest novel, *An Education for Our Time*, is a critic of SATs and other standardized tests. Are you?

**Bunting:** The people I admire are the ones who have a humane, civic wisdom that isn't reliably correlated with academic intelligence. It's that strange little area that subsists on the border of intellect and character. The mission of VMI is the preparation of virtuous, disinterested leaders, and what we're looking for is young people who have the capacity to one day grow wise. I don't see how that is correlated with being Phi Beta Kappa at a famous university filled only with people who

have achieved a 1520 on their SATs. We had a boy who was graduated two years ago from here, and he was our first captain, near the top academically, a brilliant kid. I looked at his SATs one day and they were about 1040. The next eight people underneath him had 1490 or 1530.

**TAE:** Is there a type of student for whom a military education is best?

**Bunting:** Yes. One is the hard-working, dutiful, academically good but not superb kid who somehow feels drawn to the military as a career for a variety of reasons. But there's a second type that's more common. It's a collection of kids who have sort of dawdled around and been lazy. For a whim, or an impulse of delight, they just wash up on this shore. Many do extremely well. They somehow find here an environment that puts them together, and focuses them. Out of that group, some very good military officers emerge.

**TAE:** Do you find the same caliber student at VMI as you did when you were president at Hampden-Sydney College?

**Bunting:** In at least one way: The majority are hard-working kids who haven't done brilliantly in academia. There's also a very large conservative, blue-collar, Catholic, urban constituency here. There are kids from Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and Washington. They come from the Archbishop Malloy, Cardinal O'Reilly high schools. Hampden-Sydney had very little of that. Today VMI is much more of a middle-class, even lower-middle-class school than it was 50 years ago. Also interesting: 135 of the 1,300 cadets here last year were eagle scouts.

**TAE:** In a highly publicized speech before the National Press Club last year, you said that the admission of women to VMI