

Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN
IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—*Cicero*

Of Poe and Lee and other West Points

There is a rich literary tradition at West Point. As alumnus and novelist Lucian Truscott IV says, “You just spend four years doing nothing but writing and figuring electrical engineering problems. The education at West Point is excellent for a writer—a hell of a lot better than the Iowa writers’ school, where they sit around doing a lot of navel-gazing.”

The academy’s most famous dropout was a chronic class-cutter named Edgar Allan Poe, whose “wayward and capricious temper made him at times utterly oblivious or indifferent to the ordinary routine of roll-calls, drills, and guard duties,” a classmate remembered. Poe did not accept hazing with good cheer, as any reader of “The Cask of Amontillado” might guess, and so he was expelled after half a year.

Yet Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer played a role in the cultivation of this proud eccentric’s genius. He encouraged Poe to solicit subscriptions of 75 cents from his fellow cadets to pay for publication of his poems. His classmates, who had enjoyed Poe’s scabrous and scandalous verse upon stern or detested professors, kicked in, and the poet dedicated the volume to the “United States Corps of Cadets.” To the Corps’ disgust, however, Poe’s printed poetry had nothing whatever to do with them or West Point.

The classic West Point pedant was Dennis Hart Mahan, who taught engineering from 1830-1871. “Most of the men who would lead the major units in the Civil War learned the art of war from Mahan,” Stephen Ambrose has written. Mahan was a great pedagogue, if an easy target for sport. He taught “Engineering and the Science of War,” although he never saw a moment’s com-

bat in his life. He always carried an umbrella. The story is told of the graybeard Mahan asking a cadet—a veteran of the War Between the States—how to perform a particular duty. “No, sir! That is all wrong!” thundered Mahan. The cadet explained, “But, professor, that is just as I have performed that duty practically as a soldier many times during my battle service.” To which Mahan responded, “I don’t care what you did or what you saw during the Civil War, you stick to the text!”

The cadet oath begins, “I _____, do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States, and bear true allegiance to the National Government; that I will maintain and defend the sovereignty of the United States, paramount to any and all allegiance, sovereignty, or fealty I may owe to any State or Country whatsoever....”

This vow of loyalty to the nation over the states dates from August 1861, when former Superintendent Robert E. Lee and 295 fellow West Pointers had thrown in with their native South. Agonized Lee, “I have been unable to make up my mind to raise my hand against my native state, my relatives, my children & my home. I have therefore resigned my Commission in the Army & never desire again to draw my sword save in defense of my State.” For choosing Virginia over the Union, Robert E. Lee would be separated from today’s West Point.

The Academy has always been very much a product of its time. There were no black West Point graduates from 1889-1936; blacks were barred from

West Point’s intercollegiate teams until the 1950s.

The University of Nebraska Press has recently reissued *The Colored Cadet at West Point: Autobiography of Lieutenant Henry Ossian Flipper, U.S.A.*, a strange book by a remarkable man. Flipper was the fifth black cadet at West Point but the first to graduate, in 1877. He “exhibited the manners of a Southern military aristocrat,” according to historian Quintard Taylor, Jr. While Flipper endured his share of slights and maledictions of “damned nigger,” in true aristocratic fashion he attributed these discourtesies to white trash: Cadets “uncouth and rough in appearance...much inferior to the average Negro.” The officers and gentlemen of West Point, he said, “have never, so far as I can tell, shown any prejudice at all”—an exoneration at odds with press accounts of Flipper’s cadetship. (The Republican press of the North made him a celebrity.) But then memory is a funny thing.

Army’s hockey and basketball teams play in the Holleder Center, named for Don Holleder (W.P. 1956), a golden boy out of Rochester, New York, who had been pursued by almost every college football powerhouse in the nation. Holleder chose West Point; as a former high school classmate told Rochester newsman Scott Pitoniak, Holleder “was one of those naturals who was good at everything he did. But it was more than just the athletic skills that you noticed. There was a presence about him, a leadership quality. He wanted the onus to be on him.”

An All-American wide receiver at West Point as a junior, Holleder was switched to quarterback as a senior by

Coach Red Blaik. He struggled manfully at his new position, and by the season-ending Navy game he had achieved competency. Coach Blaik told the boys the night before The Game: "Three times this season, I took the long walk across muddy fields to congratulate other coaches on their victories. Tomorrow before 100,000 spectators and 50-million television viewers I want you men to know it would be the longest walk of my coaching career if I cross the field to congratulate the Navy coach."

"Colonel," Holleder promised, "you're not taking that walk tomorrow." And he didn't, as the quarterback led his team to a 14-6 victory.

Donald Holleder served beyond his obligation, turning down an offer from the New York Giants to play pro football.

Major Holleder was sent to Vietnam with the First Infantry Division. In October 1967, he led an effort to rescue troops who had been ambushed by Viet Cong. A retired general who heard the radio exchange recalled that Holleder "started hollering, 'Hey, there's wounded out here. Let's go get 'em. You get a machete. You, Doc, follow me. We've got to get those guys.' Several people said, 'Don't go. There's snipers.' But he didn't pay any attention to them."

"What an officer," said one witness, a medic. "He went on ahead of us—literally running in the point position."

Don Holleder was killed by machine-gun fire while trying to clear a landing spot for medical helicopters. He left a wife and four daughters.

—Bill Kauffman



Donald Holleder

SMITH continued from page 58

attracting candidates for the later academy program. This step would save additional funds.

The savings at the military academies would be significant. Some of their expensive, specialized academic facilities would not be needed. These spaces could be put to different uses, such as housing graduate programs or serving other post-commissioning needs. Existing athletic facilities would still be needed as part of the integral military training program. A reduced or eliminated need for OCS programs would provide additional savings.

Upon commissioning, all officers would have received the same level of military training. This training, given its duration and intensity, would be superior to that now provided by ROTC or OCS programs, and it would have advantages even over what the service academies now provide since the officer candidates would be immersed solely in military subjects for a substantial, unbroken period, instead of being distracted by having the curriculum spread over four years and intermixed with a competing, very difficult academic program.

For all these benefits, adopting the British system would also carry disadvantages:

- Many alumni of the military academies would argue that we would end up with an inferior product, that the current four-year-immersion program at the academies sets a standard that other officers reach only after years of active duty. (On the other hand, I would argue that by returning superior senior officers to the academies as instructors, and perhaps retaining some of the best graduates each year as junior instructors, a high level of accomplishment could be attained.)

- Some good use would have to be found for the unused academic spaces (laboratories especially) currently existing at the military academies.

- The great history and traditions of the current academies

would change. This situation would be unacceptable to many alumni and other members of the public. (But the same transition has already been weathered at the august British institutions of Dartmouth and Sandhurst, without disaster.)

- We now obtain academy students at an early and receptive age when we want to motivate them, influence their values, and imbue them with the military ethos. It may be more difficult to obtain the same results with older students.

- We may need to compete harder to attract talented seniors from good colleges. By the time they are ready to graduate, many of them will have set ideas about heading off to graduate schools or waiting jobs. The available pool of quality candidates might be somewhat diminished.

In any assessment of officer education today, a number of salient realities collide: We are spending a very large amount of money at the military academies today to commission each graduate. At the same time, there is now a large supply of college-educated youths from which officer candidates could be drawn. Non-academy programs have already proved they can produce high-quality leaders for our armed forces. We are in a period of reduced defense budgets that is likely to continue. And the need for funds to modernize our current forces is exceptionally high.

With all this in mind, the British model may make sense. It can be done, would save significant amounts of money, and could produce high-quality officers. It's a drastic change, but should be seriously considered.

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BookTalk

ALL TOO GEEKY

By Jonah Goldberg

All Too Human

By George Stephanopoulos

Little, Brown, 456 pages, \$27.95

When I started *All Too Human*, a certain angst came over me. It was similar to the mild intestinal panic you get when you realize the person sitting next to you on a long plane ride won't shut up. He's got a story to tell, damn it, and tell it he will. But then you realize that the longer it goes on the less you have to hold up your end of the conversation. Your obligation to ask questions, express judgment, even pay attention starts to evaporate like the last bit of scotch in your plastic cup. In fact, your narrator would probably just think any interruption at all is a failure to understand how interesting he is. So recline your chair, don't get too upset, and maybe you can follow along.

At first this is hard to accomplish with George Stephanopoulos's new book. He simply asserts as fact things that would turn heads anywhere, save perhaps at the Democratic National Committee lunch room. For instance, Michael Dukakis lost because he was a victim of low Lee Atwater smears, not, as most post-1988 autopsies revealed, because Dukakis was a liberal techno-nerd peacenik defrosted from an MIT lab where he'd been frozen since 1970.

This book is not about the "issues." It is being marketed as the real view from behind the throne. We do learn some disturbing things about the President, but nothing really new and certainly nothing particularly damaging after Clinton's impeachment examination. Surprise! The president listens to the polls! He is undis-

ciplined! Not only that, but get this: He has a dark side! Zowee!

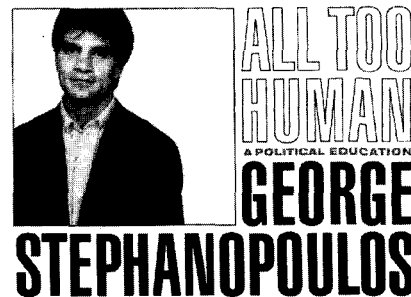
If only we'd known earlier.

That's not to say that Stephanopoulos doesn't have interesting stories to tell, or that he doesn't tell them well. When Clinton's "draft-dodging" letter, with its hateful statements about the military and its comparison of the war to racism, surfaced in 1992, Stephanopoulos tried to figure out how to hang this albatross on the Republicans. But Hillary's response after reading the letter was an exhilarated, "Bill, this is you! I can hear you saying this." Stephanopoulos was crestfallen: "So much for the dirty trick defense."

Occasionally Stephanopoulos lets snippets of Clinton's character shine through. He writes that "mansion fare" for 20 in Little Rock was "pimento cheese-spread sandwiches on white bread with corn chips on the side." While munching on one of these delicacies George tells the boss that he needs "tighter" answers about the Vietnam thing. The President and his wife erupt into a red-faced fury. "Bill's not going to apologize for being against the Vietnam War!" screams Hillary. Bill says he'd rather lose the race than say the war was right. This anecdote provides an enlightening contrast with Clinton's statements to the *Washington Post* about a year later that he "missed" the Cold War because back then we had "an intellectually coherent thing. The American people knew what the rules were."

But this book is not really about Bill Clinton. Stephanopoulos has written a tell-all about himself. Deep down, Clinton is still a mystery to the author. It is Stephanopoulos who is all too human.

If Clinton is the world in Stephanopoulos's cosmology, are we to be concerned



with the orbit of the moon? Is George up? Is he down? Is he in? Is he—don't even think it—out? If he goes back to Little Rock to run the campaign will he lose power? If he doesn't get the office off the Oval Office, will his job change be perceived as a demotion?

George got his first break when an acquaintance of his, an anti-nuclear nut, was shot after threatening to blow up the Washington Monument. George was invited to appear on "Nightline" to defend his friend. "It wasn't my fault Norman got shot," he writes, "but I couldn't escape the fact that his fate was my good fortune." Similar tensions play themselves out in every budget battle, military endeavor, bimbo eruption, and court intrigue described in this book.

Toward the end of *All Too Human*, Stephanopoulos becomes obsessed with the Darth Vader to his Luke Skywalker—the dreaded Dick Morris. To ensure that Clinton is the first Democratic President since Roosevelt to win re-election, Morris makes the President a Republican—betraying everything George stands for. Worse still, George isn't invited to the meetings! So George writes that he entered a pitched and complex battle with his new nemesis. Morris has written that the supposed duel between the two of them was non-existent—Morris' real enemy was Harold Ickes.

By the time Morris comes into the story, George has broken out of his close orbit of the President and seems to be spiraling out of control. He grabs onto Morris to anchor his trajectory and justifies it