



# **To the Point: The United States Military Academy, 1802-1902**

*George Pappas*

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Few institutions have influenced U.S. history as profoundly as the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, which will celebrate its 200th anniversary on March 16, 2002. Born conceptually in Revolutionary War times, the USMA developed alongside the fledgling U.S. government, responded to presidential mandates, and produced dozens of national leaders. Yet the Academy itself receives short shrift from historians, who prefer to study its graduates. In *To the Point: The United States Military Academy, 1802-1903*, George Pappas offers the first fully developed chronicle of the USMA itself, seen through the eyes of the cadets and graduates who attended the Academy during its first hundred years. Colonel Pappas has drawn from hundreds of primary sources not previously available to or consulted by historians: military records, cadet and graduate letters, newspaper clippings, private diaries, scrapbooks, and photo albums. Taking special care to correct preexisting misconceptions, cadet sinkoids, and inaccurately reported facts and occurrences, he has interwoven the personal and the official to create a magnificent historical work. The reader discovers a key feature of the book in its very first section. Here, informed by newly available documents, Pappas describes in unprecedented detail the 27 years preceding the USMA's official beginnings in 1802. The reader learns of the Academy's precursors, the daily life of the early cadets--down to band practice and powdered hair--and the roots of a curriculum. Explained are the pivotal roles of such movers as Henry Burbeck, Jonathan Williams, and Henry Dearborn in effecting the Congressional mandate for the USMA.

Subsequent sections, consistently displaying Colonel Pappas' tireless research, pursue the USMA's controversial first years, the selection and training of faculty members, development of the Academy's scientific and engineering curriculum, cultivation of administrators such as Alden Partridge and Sylvanus Thayer, and the institution's sometimes stormy relationship with the federal government. Moving through the USMA's first century, the book considers internal difficulties, disciplinary measures, and cadet recreation, integrating the USMA story with the Civil War and other historical events. The reader meets many historical figures such as George Washington, Jefferson Davis, Edgar Allan Poe, Davy Crockett, and James Madison--not as focal points but as players in the Academy's history. Pappas also marks the USMA's long-term impact, identifying graduates who performed outstandingly in the War with Mexico, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, as elected officials, as founders of colleges, as builders of railroads, canals, bridges, and roads across the United States. Throughout, readers will find the author's engaging, literate prose as captivating as the story he tells--a style that makes rich use of vignettes, folklore, humor, and the words of ordinary people to bring history to life. Historic maps and numerous photos, many previously unpublished, enhance detailed descriptions of physical settings.

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