

Sylvanus Thayer: A Historical Case Study of His Educational Leadership



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INTRODUCTION

With the current culture of educational leadership at many universities being dominated by competitive business minded practices, where tuition hikes are unending, tenured professors are slashed instead of prized, where professors that don't generate enough grant money but focus instead on their students first are ridiculed, where building Taj Mahal like dorms to coddle students and impress parents, and where Olympic level athletic facilities are commonplace---it might be valuable to take a moment and reflect on how educational leadership that endures could offer remedies for our current state in higher education. The purpose of this article is to provide a case study to highlight the brilliance of an early educational leader in our nation's history in hopes it may inspire this type of leadership approach and vision in higher education now. In this retrospective case study, an examination of Sylvanus Thayer, an educational leader at the United States Military Academy, Dartmouth, and the Thayer Academy is outlined using two modern leadership constructs; Strategic Vision and Servant Leadership Theory. These relatively contemporary models of leadership applied to this historical leader demonstrates that a brand of leadership promoting positive, person centered practices, harmonized with an appropriate strategic vision of the future can result in one of the finest lasting examples of higher education in our country, the United States Military Academy at West Point. The objectives of the chapter will examine Thayer's leadership using Strategic Vision and Servant Leadership as a guide for evaluation.

BACKGROUND

Sylvanus Thayer is a treasured historical figure and educational leader known commonly as the "Father of West Point" and the "Father of Technology in the United States". He served as the fifth Superintendent of the United States Military Academy from 1817 to 1833 with profound impact not only on West Point and its graduates, but on other historic universities. Additionally, his impact on engineering and the legacy he spawned through his graduates' success are impressively noteworthy. The extraordinary feats of many of his graduates that benefitted from his educational system at West Point were vast, and through the Corps of Engineers produced triumphs such as the Panama Canal (graduate Goethels), major railroad networks, critical harbors and the Washington Monument (graduate Casey), as well as many of the prominent military leaders that served in the Mexican War and Civil War.

Although many of his leadership decisions were initially deemed as harsh, stern and unwavering, his "Thayer System and Method" proved the antidote needed to break the complacency and dismal standards rife at the Academy. Thayer's approach proved effective and professionalism increased rapidly under his tenure. Internally, both cadets and faculty, grew to embrace his system. Externally, observers gained tremendous respect for his approach to educating engineers and future military officers. Early critics

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advocated for leniency in his strict measures and these critics kept pushing for the previous nepotism, parochialism, and the status quo; however, Thayer remained steadfast with his vision and the necessary changes needed to develop a disciplined academy of higher learning that demanded excellence in its students. At every stage, Thayer advocated for a system based on merit and performance under strict academic and military standards for the benefit of his students and the military profession they postured to enter.

He also earned their respect by running West Point as a meritocracy, a revolutionary idea in education at the time. Thayer insisted that privileged students should never be accepted over more talented plebeians. He made continuance at the academy conditional on performance. He dismissed cadets who failed academically or breached the academy's rules. And he avoided favoritism of any sort. When his nephew was admitted to the academy, Thayer called him in to his office. "Sir, your relationship to me is known and I am liable to be suspected of partiality to a relative," Thayer informed him, "therefore, I have prepared your resignation, which you are to sign now. If at any time you commit a serious offense, this resignation will be published by the adjutant at evening parade and you will cease to be a member of the Corps of cadets" (Campion, 2004, p.1).

Rapidly, under the leadership and direction of Thayer, West Point gained recognition for its academic excellence. Critics were silenced by the superior performance and the professionalism of "Thayer's sons" (his graduates of West Point during his years) became widely regarded for their capabilities after departure from West Point.

Sylvanus Thayer had brought order, discipline, and scholarship to the Academy. Other colleges sought his advice with regard to curriculum and administration including Harvard College and the University of Virginia. His Academy had instituted the first technological curriculum in the United States. It became the model for later technological institutions including Rensselaer and M.I.T. (Thayer Academy, 2015).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

It's well documented that Sylvanus Thayer was sent to West Point as an agent of change by President Monroe to repair an Academy marred by horrific educational standards and a deplorable culture. His Strategic Vision paired with Servant Leadership as an educational leader achieved a lasting positive impact that continues to have relevance today. An initial examination of his Strategic Vision will provide Thayer's leadership direction as well as context, with a later review of his leadership against the construct of Servant Leadership.

Thayer's Strategic Vision

In 1817 President Monroe ordered Thayer to return to West Point to take over as Superintendent to bring order out of the academy's chaos. Thayer began by weeding out loafers, establishing standards for admission, applying military discipline, creating a student-enforced honor system, and developing a rigorous curriculum centered on engineering. (Campion, 2004, p. 1)

Under Thayer's tutelage, USMA became the first college of engineering for our nation. His leadership to change the Academy into a highly respected academic and military institution earned him recognition

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