

Black Power Cadets
The Reaction to Nixon's Confederate Monument at West Point, 1971-1972

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The heyday of the 1968 and 1969 Black Power demonstrations went largely unnoticed at West Point. The United States Military Academy, the nation's premier college for educating future army officers, saw no protests in those years. In fact, when African American cadets were interviewed in 1969, they were asked if they expected to protest either educational or military policy. To a man, they said no. Yet, two years later, black cadets at West Point organized quickly, protested dramatically, and forced a conservative institution to change. At no other time in the Military Academy's two-hundred year history have cadets protested so vehemently or so effectively. Ironically, the impetus for change came from the very top. The commander-in-chief, President Richard Nixon, sparked the cadets to action.¹

President Richard Nixon's Visit to West Point

On May 27, 1971, on a beautiful late spring day in New York's Hudson Valley, President Nixon visited West Point. His trip marked a low point for the U.S. Army. American participation in the Vietnam War was winding down but drug use and racial tension had reached alarming rates. Nixon came to West Point to deliver a sober message. He declared, "The symptoms of trouble in the army are plain enough, from drug abuse to insubordination." The President asked the graduating seniors of the Class of 1971 to lead a "moral rebirth" of the army.²

After finishing his talk and watching a parade, Nixon joined the Academy's Superintendent (the school's president), Major General William Knowlton, in a white, Lincoln Continental convertible with whitewall tires and 'suicide doors'. Together they drove to Trophy Point; a dramatic vista that looks due north up the Hudson River. Trophy Point is home to West Point's most important memorial, Battle Monument, erected to the Regular Army officers and soldiers

¹ Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 1-12. Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 103-106. Student Survey, 1969, USMA Archives.

² Richard Nixon, "Remarks to the Corps of Cadets at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York," May 29, 1971, The American Presidency Project.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3029&st=&st1=>

who fought and died for the Union during the Civil War. Dedicated in 1897, the monument honors those who “freed a race and welded a nation.”³

Nixon asked why there was no Confederate memorial at West Point. General Knowlton replied that West Point memorialized only those who fought for the United States of America, not those who fought against it. Nixon scoffed and told the Superintendent that West Point needed a Confederate monument.⁴

As he prepared for the 1972 election, Nixon was working on what came to be known as his ‘Southern Strategy.’ A Confederate memorial on West Point would be popular among the white voters of the South and equally unpopular among African Americans. Nixon hoped to drive Blacks out of the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln, and into the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, by subtly embracing the code words of segregation, Nixon would complete the switch. Whites would flock to the Republicans. The G.O.P. would own the ‘Solid South.’

Back at the White House, Nixon sent a letter to Knowlton ordering the superintendent to create a monument to “West Pointers who lost their lives serving on the Southern side.”⁵ To track the Military Academy’s progress, Nixon assigned the project to the Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Brigadier General Alexander M. Haig, a 1947 graduate of West Point. Haig would later serve as White House Chief of Staff and as Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of State. However, in 1971 he was known as the most political of generals; a man who knew how to use power aggressively. Haig told Knowlton the President wanted the monument completed on an “urgent basis,” in time for the Republican Convention the next year.⁶

West Point and Minority Recruitment

Knowlton, presciently, worried about the “black cadets and graduates reaction” to such a blatantly racist monument. West Point was trying to increase the number of minority cadets to overcome the school’s dismal record of African American admissions. Knowlton knew that the negative publicity surrounding a Confederate monument would devastate the Academy’s

³ Charles Larned, “The Battle Monument at West Point,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 12 June, 1897, 594.

⁴ Memorandum to the Gifts Program Officer from Charles D. W. Canham, Assistant to the Superintendent, Subject: Memorial to West Pointers who served the Confederacy, 16 July, 1971. USMA Archives.

⁵ Letter from Richard Nixon to William Knowlton, 1 June, 1971. White House Central Files, Trip 20, West Point, New York, 5/28/1971, Box 56, Nixon Presidential Library.

⁶ Memorandum to the President dated 31 May, 1971 from Brigadier General Alexander Haig. Subject: Follow-up actions resulting from your visit to the US Military Academy, (Stamped “The President has seen”), National Security Files, Subject Files, President’s West Point Speech, Box 377. Nixon Presidential Library.

recruitment efforts.⁷ In 1968, West Point had created the Equal Admissions Office. In 1969, the Academy had admitted forty-four African American cadets, far more than the four admitted in 1967.⁸ By the fall of 1971, 119 black cadets were attending the Military Academy.⁹

Only eight were seniors. Their informal leader was Percy Squire, the highest-ranking black cadet in the corps. Squire, confident and charismatic, came from a strong African American community in Youngstown, Ohio. He understood the need to organize and provided black cadets with a rallying point in 1971. Squire's good friend and fellow leader David Brice came from a starkly dissimilar background - a small rural town in South Carolina. When the local paper published an article about Brice coming to the Military Academy, members of the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on his family's front lawn.¹⁰

Squire was president of the Contemporary Affairs Seminar and Brice was president of Behavioral Sciences Club. While the number of black cadets increased dramatically, the institutional structures to support them did not. The Academy would not allow a club based on race. Consequently, African American cadets targeted those two clubs for a takeover. They showed up en masse and easily outvoted the white cadets, taking control of the clubs and creating a de facto black student union.

With a critical mass of African American cadets, and two clubs that provided an organizational setting, the cadets needed only a spark to react. In this setting, Nixon's Confederate Monument proposal was a blowtorch.¹¹

The Black Cadet Reaction

On October 23, the superintendent asked Squire about the President's proposed Confederate monument. Knowlton described the reaction as 'instant turmoil and chaos.' Squire and Brice convened a meeting of all African American cadets and officers on the night of October 25, 1971. Anger over the Confederate monument created seething resentment that bordered on

⁷ Joel Morgovsky, "One Hundred Years of Blacks among the Grays," Office of Institutional Research, 1971. USMA Archives.

⁸ "Negro Cadets at the Academies Triple," *Washington Post*, 25 August 1967.

⁹ Fred S. Hoffman, "Record Total of Negroes Attend Service Schools," *Washington Post*, July 21, 1965. Four African American Cadets graduated with the class of 1965. West Point had a total of 29 African American cadets that year. James Ferron, "Blacks in The Long Gray Line," *New York Times*, 2 June 1991.

¹⁰ Richard C. U'Ren, *Ivory Fortress: A Psychiatrist Looks at West Point* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1974), 112. Interview with David Brice, July 27, 2012

¹¹ Interview with Percy Squire, August 13, 2010; Interview with David Brice, July 27, 2012.

mutiny. Some cadets argued for resigning en masse; others called for strikes, mass demonstrations, or sit-ins.¹²

After the meeting, the cadets wrote a ‘militant manifesto’ (some called it the ‘black manifesto’). Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the manifesto listed the African American cadets’ thirteen grievances against the Military Academy in the same way that the colonists petitioned George III in 1776.¹³ While cadets identified the issues that populated the manifesto, its primary author was Captain Joseph Ellis, who taught the Black History course. Today, Professor Ellis is a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winning historian at Mount Holyoke College.¹⁴

On November 8th, every African American cadet signed the manifesto and the next day, Squire delivered the six page document to the superintendent. As black Americans they entered West Point with “awe and expectation.” Their goal was to join the army and improve the quality of leadership for the ‘black military man.’ Instead, they found a “long train of abuses and usurpations” and “blatant racism.”¹⁵

Nixon’s Confederate monument proposal was the 13th and final grievance. The cadets charged that Nixon’s proposal, more than any other, “seriously weakened the faith we had in the administration to understand our racial pride.” They argued that Confederate graduates “abrogated their oath.” The cadets noted that when they became officers, they might lead a military unit against a group of African American citizens like the radical Blackstone Nation. If, as officers, they left the army to accept positions of leadership among “rebellious blacks,” they would be punished, even though “emotion, birth and racial ties” attracted them to this cause. If the cadets fought against the US Army, would they be immortalized with a monument? Or, would they be court-martialed and thrown in the stockade?¹⁶

¹² Memorandum to Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army from William Knowlton, Superintendent, United States Military Academy, Subject: Possible Civil War Memorial, 4 November, 1971. USMA Archives.

¹³ Joseph Ellis and Robert Moore, *School for Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 216, 282. Richard C. U’Ren, *Ivory Fortress: A Psychiatrist Looks at West Point* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1974), 118.

¹⁴ Interview with Robert Moore, August 6, 2012. Interview with Frank Slaughter, August 6, 2012.

¹⁵ “Manifesto,” author’s copy.

¹⁶ “Manifesto.” Memorandum to Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army from William Knowlton, Superintendent, United States Military Academy, Subject: Possible Civil War Memorial, 4 November, 1971. USMA Special Collections. Interview with Peter Bailey, July 19, 2012; Interview with David Brice, July 27, 2012; Interview with Arthur Hester, July 24, 2012; Interview with Percy Squire, August 12, 2010.

With the issuance of the manifesto, General Knowlton understood that he and the Academy were in crisis. If the monument process continued, he could face a mutiny. A savvy, intelligent officer who had previously served in diplomatic posts, he acted quickly. Knowlton wrote a letter to the Pentagon detailing the vociferous reaction of the African American cadets and arguing that a Confederate monument would hurt minority-recruiting efforts and cause a publicity nightmare.¹⁷

On December 6, the Pentagon wrote back; the White House asked West Point to “terminate” the project. Nixon’s Confederate Monument at West Point died. A hundred black cadets had defeated the President of the United States.¹⁸

Just in case the Academy’s administration did not heed the manifesto, cadets simultaneously called *Ebony Magazine*, a leading voice of black America. The magazine assigned the story to A. Peter Bailey, one of the founding members of Organization of Afro-American Unity, who later served as one of Malcolm X’s pallbearers. His article, “Getting it Together at ‘The Point’”, served as a reminder that if the Military Academy’s leadership failed to listen to the cadets, more publicity was waiting. In recalling the article, Bailey later said that he was impressed with the cadets’ strategy. “Those were some savvy brothers,” he noted.¹⁹

Part of the cadets’ strategy was to enlist African American officers on post. The cadets convinced 21 of the 22 black West Point officers to sign the manifesto. Spurred to action, the officers created the Black Officers Association of West Point to maintain pressure on the Academy and to mentor the young African American cadets.²⁰ For those unfamiliar with military customs, signing this manifesto might seem like an obvious moral imperative – the ‘right thing’ to do. For career military officers, however, signing a militant manifesto was an act of moral courage that placed their careers in jeopardy.

¹⁷ Memorandum to Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army from William Knowlton, Superintendent, United States Military Academy, Subject: Possible Civil War Memorial, 4 November, 1971. USMA Archives.

¹⁸ Letter to Lieutenant General William Knowlton from Walter T. Kerwin, Jr., December 6, 1971. USMA Archives. Memorandum to President, Association of Graduates from William Knowlton, Superintendent, USMA, Subject: Possible Civil War Memorial, 6 January, 1972. USMA Archives.

¹⁹ A. Peter Bailey, Interview, July 19, 2012.

²⁰ Interview with Arthur Hester, July 24, 2012. Black Officers Association of West Point Contact Roster, undated. Author’s copy.

Grievances

The manifesto's effect did not stop with the demise of the Confederate monument initiative. West Point was a male enclave in 1971. The cadet hostess bused young women in from the surrounding area colleges for hops, as the cadets called dances, but few of those colleges had African American women. Those that did come were unimpressed. One black woman recalled her visit to West Point with horror, "We spent the whole evening square dancing!"

The manifesto generated resources from the Academy to fix the problem. The superintendent provided a bus that Cadet David Brice sent to his uncle, a deacon in Hackensack, New Jersey who filled it with local women and sent it back to West Point. Brice and Squire arranged for use of the Superintendent's yacht. As the boat cruised the Hudson River to the melodious strains of the Chi-Lites, the Delfonics, and Marvin Gaye, black cadets danced, for a night not that much different from college students anywhere in America. For many cadets, that was real progress.²¹

Other grievances addressed broader issues. Memory plays an important role at West Point, home to many monuments recognizing America's military heroes. Yet, no memorial on campus recognized the important role African Americans played in U.S. military history. The cadets demanded that the Academy recognize the 9th and 10th Cavalry, the Buffalo Soldiers, who had served at West Point for over forty years giving equestrian training to cadets. Soon, the old cavalry parade ground was named Buffalo Soldiers Field. More changes came: no more Confederate flags in rooms; no more playing of Dixie by the West Point band.²²

Success bred increasingly bold action; several cadets led an attempt to take over the mess hall that seated the entire 3,500 strong corps of cadets. David Brice planned with African American workers in the kitchen to seize the area after the evening meal and hold it until the black cadet demands were met. Knowlton threatened everyone involved with expulsion. Instead of creating a huge public event, Brigadier General Samuel Walker, the commandant, sympathized with the cadets and talked them out of a long siege by promising to listen favorably to their complaints. Again, the organization and passion of the cadets prevailed.²³

²¹ Peter Bailey, "Getting It Together at 'The Point,'" *Ebony Magazine*, December 1971, Volume XXVII, No. 2, 136-144. Interview, David Brice, July 27, 2012. Ellis and Moore, *School for Soldiers*, 216.

²² "Progress Report on the 9th and 10th Cavalry Memorialization," March 31, 1972, Museum, Historical Memorialization Committee Files, West Point Museum.

²³ Interview, David Brice, July 27, 2012. E-mail, David Brice to the author, July 24, 2012.

“Concert for the Blood”

Cadets searched for ways to use their new found power to help all African Americans. Imbued with leadership and a sense of mission, they strove to show those outside the gates that they were not the instruments of white repression. As one said, “First of all, I am a black man. Then I am a cadet and then I may possibly be an officer.”²⁴

At the time, Sickle Cell Anemia, a scourge of the black community, had captured America’s imagination. *The Washington Post* called it, “the top attention getting disease of 1971.”²⁵ Could the cadets create a fund-raising event to benefit all African Americans? Squire, Brice and a black officer, Major Melvin Bowdin, brought the issue to the superintendent who by early 1972 needed no cajoling. The African American cadets were clearly in a position of power. With the full backing of the Academy, the benefit concert for Sickle Cell Anemia research became a huge event.

“The Concert for the Blood” occurred on May 20, 1971, a week shy of a year from the date Nixon first mentioned the Confederate monument. Percy Squire sold the first ticket, priced at \$5 to the newly promoted Lieutenant General Knowlton. African American cadets who earlier in 1971 had simply tried to have a soul-themed dance planned and executed an outdoor, Woodstock-like concert that featured soul royalty - Stevie Wonder and the Supremes.²⁶

The media predicted 50,000 people for the concert in West Point’s football stadium. A deluge that day brought the total to fewer than 10,000.²⁷ Despite the rain and sea of mud, “The Concert for the Blood” was a thunderous success. One white officer called the concert, “the first socially conscious event ever held at the Academy.”²⁸

Later that month, cadets travelled to Washington, D.C. to visit Howard University, named after a former superintendent at West Point, and gave the Sickle Cell Anemia Research group the

²⁴ Peter Bailey, “Getting It Together at ‘The Point,’” *Ebony Magazine*, December 1971, Volume XXVII, No. 2, 136-144.

²⁵ The Black Athlete Foundation, whose membership included Muhammad Ali, baseball players Willie Stargell and Doc Ellis, basketball star, Connie Hawkins, and football running back Leroy Kelly raised money and awareness for Sickle Cell Anemia. “Athletes; Group Sponsors Sickle Cell Anemia Tests,” *Washington Post*, August, 18, 1971.

²⁶ Picture, *The Pointer View*, April 20, 1972. Interview, David Brice, July 27, 2012. LTG Knowlton subsequently singled out Major Bowdin and Captain Ellis for ‘helping to diffuse black cadet anger.’ Letter from Knowlton to Robert Moore, May 22, 1974, author’s copy.

²⁷ “Town Braces for Saturday, Crowds Could Reach 50,000,” *New of the Highlands*, Highland Falls, New York, May 18, 1972. “Raindrops Dampened Saturday’s Busy Schedule,” *News of the Highland*, May 25, 1972, 1. George Basler, “Downpour Dampens USMA Festivities,” *Newburgh Evening News*, May 20, 1972, 1.

²⁸ U’Ren, *Ivory Fortress*, 119.

first proceeds check. By the final tally, the cadets had raised \$41,000 for Sickle Cell Anemia research.²⁹

The changes initiated by the cadets extended into 1972 as well. The Black History Week celebration became the highlight of the African American social calendar with speakers such as Representative Ron Dellums and Louis Farrakhan. The reorganized and revitalized Race Relations/Equal Opportunity Office gave all cadets eight hours of mandatory race relations training, while faculty and staff trained for sixteen hours.³⁰

Why were the African American cadets able to change the Military Academy's policies so quickly? Leadership made the difference. Percy Squire and the seniors in the class of 1972, supported by black officers, knew how to lead. Well organized with a clear strategy, firm goals, and unity, the black cadets were a formidable force.

How did this story stay out of the press at the time? The cadets and officers did not want to discredit or disparage the Academy. They believed in the importance of having African American officers in the army's elite. They wanted to save the institution, not ruin it. Furthermore, some credit must go to the superintendent and his deputies. General Knowlton understood from an early date that Nixon wanted to use West Point for his own partisan political purposes. When presented with a unified body of African American cadets and faculty, the superintendent quickly acquiesced to cadet demands. Another leader might have handled the situation with less judgment and finesse.

In a letter about these early 1970s events at West Point, Captain Bill England, who signed the manifesto, quoted a seminal passage from *Ebony Magazine's* executive editor, Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Nobody gave black people anything and nobody is going to give them anything, not even the time of day, if pressure is not maintained at the maximum level."³¹ The cadets and officers in 1971 and 1972 used President Nixon's politically cynical ploy at West Point to their advantage. The black cadets did not end racism at West Point or in the army, but they did make a difference.

²⁹ *Assembly: The Magazine of the West Point Association of Graduates*, October 1972.

³⁰ Black Studies Report, September 1971, author's copy. Superintendent's Annual Report, 1973. USMA Archives.

³¹ Letter to Arthur Hester from William England, 11 January 1977, author's copy. Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Old Illusions and the New Souths: Second Reconstruction Gives New Meaning to the Failures and Promises of the Past," *Ebony Magazine*, Vol. XXVI, No.10, Special Issue, August, 1971, 37.