

Past in Review



From Washington to Palmer: The Story of “Leaders of Character”

By **William J. Bahr '69**, Guest Writer

West Point is home to several impactful three-word phrases: think “Duty, Honor, Country”; “Long Gray Line”; and even perhaps “The Corps has.” These iconic, long-standing phrases have become synonymous with the Academy, but few remember or think about how these phrases evolved. Take the phrase “Leaders of Character,” for example. In some respects, it’s a recent expression; in others, its origins predate the Academy. In all respects, it is a phrase that defines what is expected from every graduate who has raised his or her right hand on Graduation Day and has sworn to serve as an officer supporting and defending the Constitution of the United States against all enemies.

As Lieutenant General Dave R. Palmer, Class of 1956, 53rd Superintendent of the United States Military Academy, began his five-year academy stewardship in the summer of 1986, he asked himself and his staff three critical questions regarding West Point: “Why, What, and How?” The “why” was the most important and would be the Academy’s never-changing purpose. The “what” would change with the times to reflect the Academy’s mission, and the “how” would be the programs West Point offered. To answer these questions, Palmer met with some colonels, most notably William Wilson ’63 and Larry Donnithorne ’66, who worked directly with him as special assistants. This group spent many hours working on

new mission and purpose statements for the Academy, which were completed in the spring of 1987.

USMA’s Mission Statement had changed over time as events, the country, and its defense requirements evolved. For example, in an earlier instance, one could hardly say “serve the Army” in years graduates also went into the Air Force. Palmer also believed West Point needed a purpose statement, a reason for being, that was always true regardless of date or evolution. The purpose statement would answer the question, “Why does West Point exist?” On the other hand, the mission statement would answer the question, “What does West Point do at any given

Left: A 1794 portrait (The Constable-Hamilton portrait) of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828). **Right:** A 1990 portrait of LTG Dave R. Palmer '56 by Margaret Holland Sargent.

time to achieve its purpose?” Finally, USMA’s programs or pillars (character education, academics, military education, and physical training) would answer the question, “How does the Academy go about achieving its mission?”

In addition to Palmer and his colonels, numerous other permanent academic leaders and other senior staff concerned with policy and programs, including Brigadier General Peter Boylan Jr. ’61, the 60th Commandant of Cadets, helped create the purpose statement. As simple as the process appears to be, developing a brief expression that carried a message pertinent to the Academy from its creation to the present and into the future was not an easy task. According to Donnithorne, Palmer should get the credit for the exact wording. When all participants gathered in the Superintendent’s Conference Room in Taylor Hall to finally bless the 13 words of the proposed purpose statement—“To provide the nation with leaders of character who serve the common defense”—writ large on the wall before them, Colonel Al Rushton ’59, Director of Admissions, rose and asked, “What on earth took us so long?” He then made manifest the crux of the new purpose statement,

saying: “To provide the nation... *Country*...with leaders of character... *Honor*...who serve the common defense...*Duty*.” At that point, heads nodded in approval!

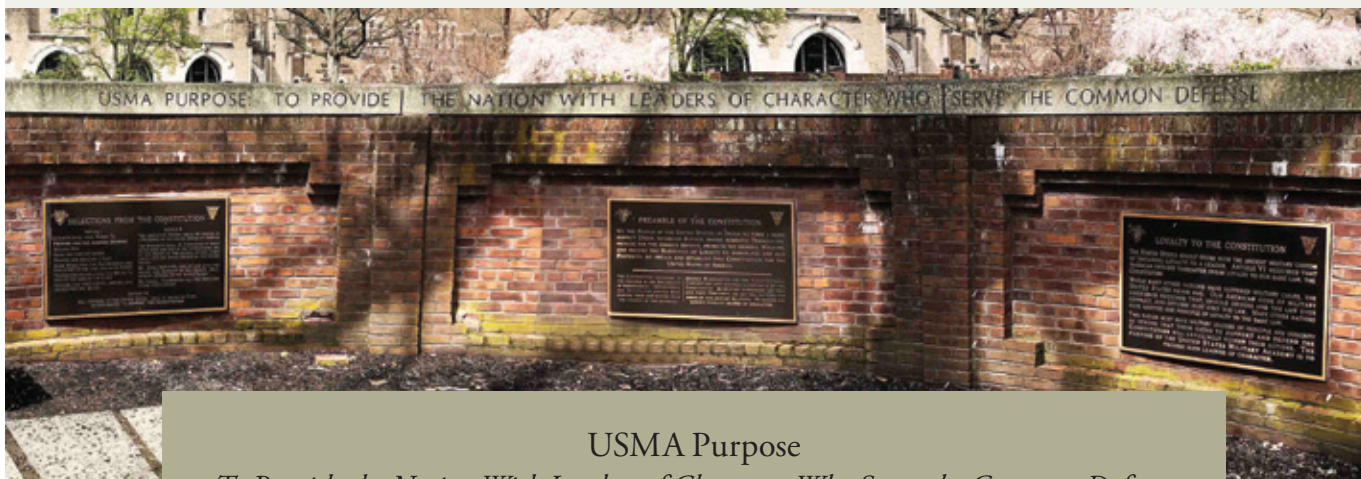
After its sanction by Academy personnel, Palmer invited General John Wickham Jr. ’50, 30th U.S. Army Chief of Staff, to West Point to approve the new USMA Mission Statement shortly before Class of 1987 graduation exercises.

After working on the new mission statement, Donnithorne then moved on to writing USMA’s Strategic Plan, which eventually evolved to Project 2002, the initiative with an all-encompassing look at West Point’s and its graduates’ roles in the 21st century, aiming at the bicentennial year of USMA’s founding. In addition, around 1988, Palmer requested that General Carl Vuono ’57, 31st U.S. Army Chief of Staff, form a committee to study the USMA Honor Code. In 1989, Colonel Harry “Steve” Hammond ’69 joined Palmer’s staff and began contributing to the Cadet Leader Development System (CLDS). CLDS replaced the Fourth-Class System with the nicknamed “Four Class System” and moved training from attrition to development, with each class assigned an increasing role

in efforts at leadership development. In all these cases, Palmer’s goal was defining character leadership, effectively conveying it to cadets, and measuring progress. His constant challenge was, “How do we make things better?”

So why was Palmer’s emphasis upon leaders of character? A premier military historian, Palmer studied George Washington, “the Foundingest Father,” who believed his most important job was staffing his army, and later his government, with “men of character.” Indeed, King George III was said to have called Washington “the greatest character of the age” for resigning his military command after the Revolutionary War. Palmer never had any concern over using the word “character,” which earlier Academy mission statements contained. As for strict definition, the simple assumption was that the Academy, the world’s premier leadership development institution, would try to develop positive leaders, not evil ones.

When Jefferson assumed the power of the presidency, he began to fully realize the necessity of training his future high-level army officers in America, instead of importing them from overseas, as had been done earlier with von Steuben and Kosciuszko, for



USMA Purpose

To Provide the Nation With Leaders of Character Who Serve the Common Defense

Constitution Corner, located at the southeast corner of the Superintendent’s Garden, was the 50th-anniversary gift from the Class of January 1943.



Members of the Class of 2020 reciting the Oath of Office at their graduation ceremony.

example. These new officers would be the cadre to train citizens to become soldiers when needed. And Jefferson would likely need them, as the Whiskey Rebellion (1791-94) and the Quasi-War with France (1798-1800) had proved. Jefferson didn't want these new officers to be "elitist, [potentially] disloyal" Federalist Party members, such as the Society of the Cincinnati was portending. Jefferson was looking for such officers of character when he authorized USMA's founding in the Military Peace Establishment Act of 1802. In the haystack of provisioning and organizational sections, he inserted a clue to West Point's purpose in one section (20 of 29), requiring those at West Point to "take and subscribe the following oath or affirmation, to wit: 'I, A.B. do solemnly swear or affirm (as the case may be) that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the United States of America, and that I will serve them honestly and faithfully against

their enemies or opposers, whomsoever; and that I will observe and obey the orders of the President of the United States, and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to the rules and articles of war.'" With a cadre loyal to the nation, Jefferson might mitigate the Founders' fears of a standing army and the rise of new Caesars. Indeed, as Washington cautioned: "...government...force... like fire...is a dangerous servant and a fearful master." The key to this mitigation, according to Jefferson, is character. Thus it has followed that "character is key for liberty!"—the truth Palmer embedded in West Point's Purpose Statement.

Before Palmer ended his term as Superintendent, he was approached by Lieutenant General Frank Camm '43JAN, leader of his class's 50th-anniversary effort for a gift near the MacArthur Statue. Palmer accepted this gift, which became Constitution

Corner (located at the southeast corner of the newly expanded Supe's Garden), but he stipulated that USMA's new Purpose Statement be carved into the garden wall's granite capstones. The Class of January 1943's 50th-anniversary gift was emplaced in 1991 and dedicated on May 24, 1993, forever highlighting Palmer's purposeful legacy to the Academy.

After retiring from the Army, Palmer continued his work as a historian, including authoring books on General Washington. He also consulted with Mount Vernon as they planned their new museum and education center and was instrumental in selecting its theme, "A Leader of Character."

Lastly, look closely at Palmer's Superintendent portrait hanging high in Washington Hall. It prominently displays a scroll containing USMA's Purpose Statement—*To Provide the Nation With Leaders of Character Who Serve the Common Defense.* ★

William J. Bahr '69, author of George Washington's Liberty Key, is a retired telecommunications executive. He served five years in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, working in Germany, Cambodia, and Korea before graduate school and a commercial telecommunications career. Actively participating in Rotary, VFW, and CHARACTER COUNTS!, he has written several works on strategy, always promoting 13 words: "Where the Hudson takes a hard right [right at Trophy Point], West Point teaches the Harder Right."