
Document of Note

Professor Dennis Mahan Speaks Out on West Point Chapel Issues, 1850



Suzanne Geissler

Abstract

Dennis Hart Mahan, legendary West Point professor of the pre-Civil War era, was also a devout Christian and active Episcopal layman. In this 1850 letter to the Secretary of War, Mahan explains (1) why the post of West Point chaplain should always go to an Episcopalian, and (2) why chapel attendance should not be mandatory for West Point staff. His explanation indicates that for Mahan the concept of being a "Christian gentleman" was not merely a nominal one.

DENNIS Hart Mahan, legendary professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, is best known today for being the instructor of such U.S. Civil War luminaries as Ulysses Grant, William Sherman, and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Those familiar with the history of West Point as an institution know Mahan as an expert in military engineering, tactics and history whose instruction, textbooks, and constant efforts to improve the curriculum turned the military academy into the nation's top engineering school as well as a respected training school for professional officers.¹ Mahan was also a devout Christian and staunch

1. No biography of Mahan has ever been published. The best full-length study of him is Thomas E. Griess, "Dennis Hart Mahan: West Point Professor and Advocate of Military Professionalism, 1830-1871" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1969). Also useful are Henry L. Abbot, *Memoir of Dennis Hart Mahan* (Washington: Judd & Detweiler, Printers, 1878); Stephen E. Ambrose, "Dennis Hart Mahan," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 2 (November 1963): 30-35; and Russell F. Weigley, "Dennis Hart Mahan" in *Dictionary of American Military Biography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), 714-18.

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Episcopal layman, and as he concerned himself with all aspects of academy life, he devoted particular attention to the West Point chapel. He exemplified the concept of a "Christian gentleman" and he conveyed this to his family, his colleagues, and the cadets in a variety of ways. Lest he be accused of simply adhering to superficial Victorian notions of both gentility and religiosity, it is important to stress the depth of his Christian faith and the seriousness with which he took religious issues.

Dennis Hart Mahan was born 2 April 1802 in New York City. His parents were John and Mary Mahan, recently arrived Irish Catholic immigrants. Dennis was baptized at St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church on 27 April. Shortly thereafter the Mahans moved to Norfolk, Virginia, where, on account of war between Britain and France, the city's shipbuilding industry was thriving. John Mahan, a carpenter by trade, was attracted by the prospect of steady employment and high wages. He did quite well, expanding his business from carpentry to contracting, and dabbling in real estate as well. While never becoming rich or socially prominent, John seems to have been financially comfortable and was able to provide good educations for his sons.²

Shortly after arriving in Norfolk, Mary Mahan died. In 1805 John married a widow, Eleanor McKim. They were married in the Catholic church in Norfolk. Very little is known about John's second wife and she died soon after their wedding.³

John married for the third time in 1814. His bride was again a widow, Esther Moffitt, and the marriage was again performed in the Catholic Church.⁴ It seems almost certain, though, that she was an Episcopalian.⁵ Esther was able to establish a good relationship with her stepson Dennis and she became the maternal figure in his life.

Very little is known of Dennis's childhood. Presumably he was brought up a Roman Catholic, at least until the age of twelve, but we do

2. William D. Puleston, *Mahan: The Life and Work of Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1939), vi, 1-3. Though a biography of Alfred, this book contains much useful information on Dennis. Puleston did extensive research on the Mahan family background and Dennis's early life. He was aided in his research by a Norfolk lawyer, John B. Jenkins. Also see the Puleston-Jenkins correspondence in the Alfred Thayer Mahan Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as ATM Papers, LC).

3. Puleston, *Mahan*, 3.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Alfred's biographer, Charles Taylor, identifies her as a Protestant, and John Henry Hopkins, Jr., biographer of Dennis's brother Milo, identifies her as coming from an "old Virginia family," in which case she would almost certainly have been an Episcopalian. The fact that her son Milo was brought up as an Episcopalian would indicate this as well. Charles Carlisle Taylor, *The Life of Admiral Mahan* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1920), 3; John Henry Hopkins, Jr., ed., *The Collected Works of the Late Milo Mahan, D.D.* (New York: Pott, Young & Co., 1875). 3:iii.

not know if that affiliation was a nominal one or seriously practiced. Alfred Thayer Mahan's biographer, Charles Taylor, states that Dennis was raised as a Protestant subsequent to his father's marriage to Esther. We do know that Dennis early on developed an antipathy for the British and an admiration for the French (a pattern that would be reversed in his son). The sources for this were probably his Irish ancestry and his childhood memories of the War of 1812.⁶

On 24 May 1819, Esther Mahan gave birth to a son Milo, Dennis's only sibling. Despite the seventeen-year age difference, the two brothers remained close all their lives. By this time the family had relocated to Suffolk, Virginia.⁷

It was reported in Mahan family tradition that Dennis originally thought of becoming a doctor and was studying with a Norfolk physician, Robert Archer, though there is no evidence to substantiate this. He did, however, know Dr. Archer and expressed to him his desire to study drawing. Dr. Archer, a U.S. Army veteran, told Dennis that West Point offered excellent instruction in drawing, and Dennis determined to go there. Through the good offices of Dr. Archer and others, Dennis secured an appointment to the military academy from Secretary of War John C. Calhoun.⁸ He entered West Point in July 1820, thus beginning a fifty-one-year association with that institution.

In later years Mahan told his children of his arrival at West Point (at that time accessible only by boat) on 4 July 1820. Being tired and thirsty and seeing a Fourth of July party in progress, he asked a waiter for a glass of water. The waiter replied, "Water! This is the Fourth of July and no one here drinks anything but champagne."⁹ (Obviously, the rigors of plebe year had yet to be introduced.) An appointment to West Point did not guarantee admission. An entrance exam given on the premises still had to be passed. Mahan passed easily and became a member of the Class of 1824.¹⁰

When Mahan arrived at West Point that institution was under the superintendency of Brevet [i.e., Acting] Lieutenant Colonel Sylvanus Thayer of the Corps of Engineers. Thayer is known as "the Father of the Military Academy" not because he was its founder or its first superintendent—he was the fourth superintendent—but because he took over an academy that was loosely run and unsure of its purpose and turned it

6. Puleston, *Mahan*, 4; Taylor, *Mahan*, 3; Alfred Thayer Mahan, *From Sail to Steam: Recollections of Naval Life* (1907; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), x. (Alfred Thayer Mahan is hereafter cited in notes as ATM.)

7. Puleston, *Mahan*, 4–5.

8. *Ibid.*, 4; ATM, *From Sail to Steam*, xi; Griess, "Mahan," 4–5.

9. Jane Leigh Mahan, "Random Memories," *The Pointer*, 15 March 1929, 6.

10. Griess, "Mahan," 93.

into a first-class military and educational institution. He instituted a number of practices and guidelines still in use today, including strict discipline, academic emphasis on mathematics and engineering, and a merit roll in which every cadet is ranked on academics, deportment, and military bearing.¹¹ Mahan thrived under the Thayer regime and found his true calling as a soldier-scholar.

Mahan had an extremely successful four years as a cadet. He ranked first in his class at the end of each of his four years and first overall at graduation. So great was his academic ability that at the beginning of his third class (sophomore) year he was made Acting Assistant Professor of Mathematics with the responsibility of teaching "plebe math" to fourth class cadets. Though still a cadet himself, he was a quasi officer as well and received special privileges, extra pay, and a distinctive uniform. The extra ten dollars a month must have been welcomed since his father died in 1821 and Mahan began assisting his stepmother in providing for Milo's education.¹²

Sometime prior to his graduation, Mahan experienced a religious conversion. We know almost nothing about it except that he began to study the Bible and drew comfort and spiritual sustenance from his new-found faith. In a letter to his stepmother written shortly after his graduation, he told her how he tried to live his life by the Scripture's teachings and urged her to instruct Milo to do the same. Referring to the Bible as "his [i.e., God's] book" he told her to "tell [Milo] above all things to stick to his book. . . . tell him that his brother has done everything for himself by his book, and that he must try and do the same."¹³

The chaplain at West Point during Mahan's entire time there as a cadet was Thomas Picton, a Presbyterian. This puts the lie to the oft-made assumption that West Point chaplains in the nineteenth century were exclusively Episcopalians. They usually were, but not always. Academy chaplains in this period were not Army chaplains but civilian clerics hired by the War Department. It is true that Episcopalians were preferred. Joseph G. Swift, the second superintendent, wanted only Episcopalians in that position, but it was not always possible to entice a suitable candidate to West Point. Presbyterians seem to have been the

11. On Thayer's reforms and innovations, see Griess, "Mahan," 68-114; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 62-105; James L. Morrison, Jr., *"The Best School": West Point, 1833-1866* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986), 3-4, 23-26.

12. Griess, "Mahan," 105-6, 111; for a detailed description of Dennis's cadet years, see 90-114.

13. Dennis Hart Mahan (hereafter cited in notes as DHM) to Esther M. Mahan, 29 June 1824, ATM Papers, LC.

acceptable second choice.¹⁴ We know nothing about Picton's influence, if any, on Mahan, though certainly Mahan would have been very familiar with him. Chapel attendance was made mandatory by Thayer. Mahan also would have encountered him in class since Picton taught geography, history, and ethics.¹⁵

Though Alfred Mahan's most recent biographer, Robert Seager, takes the cynical view and claims that Dennis's "Roman Catholic and Irish roots [had] conveniently withered somewhere along the way"¹⁶—presumably because both the Irish and Roman Catholics were looked down upon in the Protestant America of that day—there is no reason to think that Dennis's conversion was anything but genuine. He professed a strong evangelical Protestant Christian faith his entire adult life. Neither Dennis nor any of the Mahans this author has studied practiced a lukewarm "gentleman's religion" version of Christianity.¹⁷

Upon his graduation Mahan admitted to his stepmother that he was "proud, very proud" of ranking first in his class, thanked her for "the interest you take in my affairs" and expressed his sadness "that my Father could not have lived till now to enjoy my pleasure with me."¹⁸

Mahan was commissioned a brevet second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers (there being more second lieutenants than there were slots for them in companies). Fortunately for him, though, his skill at mathematics and engineering, plus his status as Thayer's number one protégé, ensured that he would receive a prestigious assignment. And so he did. He was appointed Assistant Professor of Mathematics at the military academy, though detailed for a brief summer assignment with the Corps of Engineers in New York City and Baltimore. In September he returned to West Point to begin his teaching duties and later that year the brevet was dropped from his rank and he became a full second lieutenant. Despite the disparity in their ranks, Mahan had now crossed the gulf between cadet and officer and was thus able to develop a closer relationship with his mentor Thayer. He often dined with the superintendent

14. Herman A. Norton, *Struggling for Recognition: The United States Army Chaplaincy, 1791–1865* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Department of the Army, 1977), 24; Morrison, "Best School," 57; Joseph G. Swift, *The Memoirs of General Joseph Gardner Swift* (Worcester, Mass.: F. S. Blanchard & Co., 1890), 219.

15. Norton, *Struggling for Recognition*, 27–29.

16. Robert Seager, II, *Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Man and His Letters* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1977), 2.

17. The author is currently embarked on a study of the religious views of Dennis, Milo, and Alfred Mahan. See, e.g., Suzanne Geissler, "Mahan versus the Pacifists," in Randy Carol Balano and Craig L. Symonds, eds., *New Interpretations in Naval History: Selected Papers from the Fourteenth Naval History Symposium* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 189–99.

18. DHM to Esther M. Mahan, 29 June 1824, ATM Papers, LC.

and played chess with him. In August 1825, Thayer appointed Mahan Assistant Professor of Engineering, a more prestigious and demanding post.¹⁹ Suffering from ill health in the 1825–26 academic year, Mahan requested reassignment to a warmer climate or a leave of absence. Through the intervention of Thayer and Alexander Macomb, Chief of Engineers, Mahan was able to wangle from the Secretary of War, James Barbour, not only a leave of absence but an assignment with pay to visit Europe to study aspects of civil and military engineering that might be useful to the United States Army. Accordingly, Mahan headed for Paris. The one year leave stretched to four, and this hiatus proved crucial to his future both professionally and personally.²⁰

Mahan did little work his first year in France but he boarded with a French family, improved his facility with the language, and made useful contacts. One of the people he met was the elderly Marquis de Lafayette with whom he became close friends. He wrote his cousin Mary Ann Charlton that “Our kind old General has contributed very much to make my trip agreeable by giving and procuring for me numberless letters of introduction to persons of the most distinction in the towns thro’ which I have passed.”²¹ Mahan had already, through Thayer’s influence, developed an admiration for the French military and its educational system. This admiration only increased through firsthand contact.

After travel around France as well as brief visits to England and Italy, Mahan persuaded Thayer and his superiors to extend his leave so that he could enroll in the French Army’s School of Application for Engineers and Artillery at Metz. At this time the French military engineers were considered the best in the world and Mahan convinced Thayer—who probably needed little convincing—that what he learned at Metz would be of direct benefit to West Point and the U.S. Army. Though the normal course of study was two years Mahan was allowed to stay only sixteen months. This time at Metz proved valuable to Mahan. As his biographer Thomas Griess said, “it certainly broadened his professional foundation and brought him into contact with the best minds in [military engineering].”²²

Mahan’s trip to France proved significant for another reason. While there he met and formed a close friendship with Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg, a physician, hymn writer, and younger brother of William Augustus Muhlenberg, an Episcopal priest who had a profound impact on the antebellum Episcopal Church. Mahan and Frederick were the same age and their friendship continued until Frederick’s untimely death in 1837. Mahan was later to name his second son after him. It was through

19. Griess, “Mahan,” 115–18.

20. *Ibid.*, 119–21.

21. DHM to Mary Ann Charlton, 25 June 1827, ATM Papers, LC.

22. Griess, “Mahan,” 129; for a full description of his time at Metz, see 128–32.

Frederick that Mahan was drawn into the orbit of William Muhlenberg, who was to exert a strong influence on two generations of the Mahan family. Mahan most likely had become an Episcopalian by this time, through his stepmother's influence, and this would have been a bond between him and Frederick.²³

Mahan returned to New York in July 1830 and proceeded directly to West Point to resume his teaching duties. Thayer was already grooming him to take over the Engineering Department. That advancement came about sooner than anticipated because of the resignation of the incumbent. Mahan's promotion was not, however, a certainty. Two other candidates, both lieutenants, were also being considered, but Mahan was by far the best qualified because of his study in France; not surprisingly he won the position. Army regulations at that time required that full professors be civilians, so on 1 June 1832 Mahan, still a second lieutenant, resigned his commission and was appointed Professor of Engineering (which also meant being department chairman), a position he was to hold till his death in 1871.²⁴

Romance came to Mahan's life in 1830. Shortly after his return to West Point a group of teenaged schoolgirls, chaperoned by their headmistress, visited the academy to attend a "hop" (dance). The twenty-eight year old Mahan took a liking to fifteen-year-old Mary Helena Okill, daughter of the headmistress. It is not clear whether Mahan was aware prior to their initial meeting that the Okills were friends of the Muhlenberg brothers, but the fact that such was the case contributed to the progress of the courtship, as no doubt did the young lady's Christian piety and devotion to Bible study. Despite a thirteen-year age difference they seemed entirely suited to each other, but Mary Helena's mother, at least initially, thought that Mahan was too old for her daughter. Mahan persevered, however, and perhaps the Muhlenbergs pressed his case. After a nine-year courtship, he and Mary Helena were married in 1839.²⁵

Mahan's career continued to prosper. Indeed, he became, next to Thayer himself, the dominant figure of the nineteenth-century military academy. Of the generation that came after Thayer, Mahan was clearly the premier figure. Mahan's title changed several times in consequence of his teaching a variety of subjects. He ultimately ended as Professor of Civil and Military Engineering and the Science of War. In 1838, though

23. Puleston, *Mahan*, 7; Anne Ayres, *The Life and Work of Augustus Muhlenberg* (New York: T. Whittaker, 1880), 129–30; Alvin W. Skardon, *Church Leader in the Cities: William Augustus Muhlenberg* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 5, 59, 77.

24. Griess, "Mahan," 133–35; George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.*, 2d ed. (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1868), I, 256–57.

25. Puleston, *Mahan*, 11.

only thirty-six, he became the senior member of the faculty, thus giving him the additional title of Dean of the Faculty, a position he held until his death. He published his first book, *A Treatise on Field Fortification* in 1836. Because of the lack of engineering textbooks in English he wrote his own. They included *An Elementary Course of Civil Engineering* (1837), *Summary of the Course of Permanent Fortification* (1850), *An Elementary Course of Military Engineering* (1865), and *Industrial Drawing* (1867). His most important work went by the cumbersome title *An Elementary Treatise on Advanced-Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops, and the Manner of Posting and Handling Them in Presence of an Enemy* (1853); it is better known by the short title *Out-Post*. This book "still ranks as one of the foremost American contributions to the study of war."²⁶ *Out-Post* was in Mahan's own words, a "comprehensive survey of tactics and strategy" not just for professional soldiers alone, but also for the "use of militia and volunteers."²⁷ Its originality, according to William B. Skelton, lay in its adaptation of European tactics to the American situation.²⁸ (Skelton criticizes Mahan for not teaching or writing enough on Indian fighting, but both Griess and Ambrose dispute this and claim that he did deal with the subject adequately.²⁹) In short, Mahan had quickly established himself as America's foremost authority on military engineering and tactics.

He was also an admirer of Napoleon and a keen student of his campaigns. He was the "driving spirit" behind the Napoleon Club, which he and a group of young officers founded at West Point. Interestingly, he was the only civilian professor to belong. Robert E. Lee, when superintendent, and George McClellan had both belonged to the club. Some historians believe that the club had a strong impact on its members who later went on to fight in the Civil War.³⁰

Mahan devoted himself not only to military scholarship but also to the military academy as an institution. James Morrison, historian of the early years of West Point, put it best:

Throughout his long tenure as a professor Mahan used his brilliant intellect and facile pen to add lustre to the military academy to an extent his colleagues never matched. It was Mahan who defended

26. Griess, "Mahan," 147, for a complete listing of DHM's books, see 376-77; Morrison, "The Best School," 49.

27. DHM, *An Elementary Treatise on Advanced-Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops, and the Manner of Posting and Handling Them in Presence of an Enemy* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1847), title page.

28. William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 247.

29. *Ibid.*, 172, 306, 319; Griess, "Mahan," 306-7; Ambrose, "Mahan," 35.

30. Griess, "Mahan," 236, Ambrose, "Mahan," 32; Skelton, *American Profession of Arms*, 247.

West Point in the press, Mahan who acted as confidential advisor to prominent public figures and who exploited those connections to protect what he perceived to be the best interests of the academy, and it was Mahan who published articles in the leading journals of the day. It was also Mahan who by virtue of his seniority, prestige, and force of personality guided the academic board for four decades.³¹

What was Dennis Mahan like in the classroom and how did he interact with cadets? Those cadets who have left us their impressions of Professor Mahan generally mention three things. One was that he always carried an umbrella, no matter what the weather. The second was that he had a chronic nasal infection and his frequently mentioned dictum to use common sense came out as "cobbon sense." Hence the cadets nicknamed him "Old Cobbon Sense."³² The third characteristic he was noted for was his classroom demeanor, which showed no mercy to slackers. "Sloppy thinking and careless attitudes toward duty were anathema to him," was an observation to which many cadet reminiscences attested.³³ Morris Schaff claimed "there never was a colder eye or manner," presumably referring to Mahan's manner of staring at an unprepared cadet.³⁴ Tully McCrea thought Mahan "the most particular, crabbed, exacting man that I ever saw . . . always nervous and cross."³⁵ Even William Tecumseh Sherman, one of the few cadets for whom Mahan had a soft spot, was afraid of him and claimed that even as a general he "still shuddered when he thought of being caught unprepared by Mahan."³⁶ That is not to say, of course, that the cadets did not respect Mahan or appreciate his vast knowledge of military matters. Most were in awe of him, but some managed to appreciate him at an earlier stage than their classmates. John C. Tidball thought, "he was a most thorough and good instructor. His pupils believed in him and thought it impossible that any one could carry more than he knew."³⁷ Even if he was hard on the cadets, "a little captious and irritable . . . his severity was not designed to wound his pupils nor do them any injustice. . . . [He] was ever ready to explain [the lesson's] intricacies, and with his skillful analysis give it

31. Morrison, "The Best School," 47.

32. Ibid., 49, 95; Ambrose, "Mahan," 30; Griess, "Mahan," 173.

33. Morrison, "The Best School," 49.

34. Morris Schaff, *The Spirit of Old West Point, 1858-1862* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), 68.

35. Quoted in Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country*, 102.

36. John F. Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 24; Ambrose, "Mahan," 33.

37. John C. Tidball, "Getting Through West Point," in John C. Tidball Papers, U.S. Military Academy Library, West Point, New York.

a new portraiture.” As a military analyst he was, according to George Cullum, “an accomplished master.”³⁸

Mahan remained a staunch Episcopalian throughout his adult life. His interest in the Christian faith went far beyond the merely nominal. His friendship with the Muhlenbergs continued for many years. Through William Muhlenberg he made the acquaintance of theologian Samuel Seabury, III. In 1831 Seabury sent Mahan the proof sheets of his new book, *The Study of the Classics on Christian Principles*. Mahan thanked him and said that when the book was published he would give a copy to “a young relative of mine” (presumably Milo, then twelve). Mahan also noted that he had no objection to the expurgation of immoral “excrescencies” of certain risqué works “particularly when by such means you hope to advance the great ends of morality and religion.”³⁹ Since Seabury was then teaching at William Muhlenberg’s school, Flushing Institute (where Milo would enter at age fourteen), this book was probably intended for the use of teenaged students. (Milo Mahan would go on to a distinguished career as an Episcopal priest and professor of church history at General Theological Seminary.)

Mahan concerned himself with all aspects of academy life, but a special ongoing concern, particularly once he had a family, was the West Point chapel. Issues regarding the chapel particularly affected him in 1850 and he took his concerns directly to the Secretary of War, Charles M. Conrad. Two issues in particular distressed him. One was that the chaplain was not an Episcopalian. A Presbyterian, William T. Spole, was appointed to the position in 1847. Mahan was unhappy about this but kept his peace for three years. Then, in 1850, an ambiguously worded order was handed down from the War Department which seemed to imply that chapel attendance, which was mandatory for cadets, was now mandatory for officers and staff as well. This prompted Mahan to write a letter to the War Department detailing his objections to having a chaplain of any denomination other than Episcopal and to being told he must attend chapel even if the services were not Episcopal. Mahan’s letter is reproduced in full below.⁴⁰ As the reader can see, Mahan had no objection to mandatory chapel for cadets, and he thought that officers and staff should attend as well to set a good example to the cadets. But he objected strongly to being told that he must attend when the services were not Episcopal. This violated his conscience. The most important

38. George W. Cullum, “Professor D. H. Mahan,” *Army and Navy Journal* 9 (1871): 119–20, quoted in Griess, “Mahan,” 193.

39. DHM to Samuel Seabury, III, 4 May 1831 (photocopy), ATM Papers, Naval War College Library (original at New York Historical Society).

40. DHM to Charles M. Conrad, 26 November 1850 (photocopy), DHM Papers, USMA Library (original in U.S. National Archives).

constituency of chapel attendees, in his view, was neither the cadets nor the active duty officers who were there for only a short rotation, but the permanent staff (mainly professors) who considered the chapel to be their regular parish church to which they brought their families. This group, consisting mostly of Episcopalians, should be given preference in their choice of a chaplain, but if their choice was disregarded and a non-Episcopalian was foisted on them, they should not be forced to attend services. The whole problem could be obviated, of course, by appointing only Episcopalians to the chaplaincy. It is not clear if Mahan received a direct response from Conrad, but the regulation in question was never enforced, and the Presbyterian Sprole—even though he was popular with the cadets—was dismissed in 1856 and replaced by an Episcopalian.⁴¹

Though Mahan did not mention it in his letter, there was a recently established (1850) Episcopal parish in the village of Highland Falls (then called Buttermilk Falls) just outside the academy gate.⁴² Presumably this was where he would now take his family during the remaining years of Presbyterian rule at the West Point chapel.

Mahan's letter (and the statistical addendum to it whose author is unknown) raises the question of why the officer corps of the nineteenth-century U.S. military was dominated by Episcopalians. Various military historians and sociologists, including Morris Janowitz and Peter Karsten, have opined on this subject. Janowitz suggested that the Episcopal Church's "strong emphasis on authority, ceremony, and mission" made it a suitable religion for an officer and a gentleman. Karsten's interpretation was much more negative, both as to the officer corps and the Episcopal Church.⁴³ Interesting as this question is, it seems somehow irrelevant to the views of Dennis Mahan. For one thing, Mahan's argument was not based on any perceived superiority of the Episcopal Church. While he doubtless viewed his denomination as superior, that was not the point of his letter. His argument was based on the majority preference of the permanent staff. Presumably, if the majority had been, say, Methodists, he would have advocated a Methodist chaplain, though, he would have attended elsewhere. In all fairness to Mahan, one also has to credit the sincerity of his Episcopal beliefs and his long history of involvement in Episcopal circles. He was a man of strong faith and

41. Morrison, "The Best School," 57.

42. Information supplied by Wayne Kempton, Archivist of the Diocese of New York.

43. Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1960), 97–101; Peter Karsten, "Ritual and Rank: Religious Affiliation, Father's 'Calling,' and Successful Advancement in the U.S. Officer Corps of the Twentieth Century," *Armed Forces and Society* 9 (1983): 427–40; see also Peter Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern American Navalism* (New York: Free Press, 1972), xiii, 72–75.

strongly held theological views. In this author's opinion, it seems completely out of character for him to have adhered to a religious faith simply for utilitarian reasons such as career or social advancement.

In the letter below, we see a different side to Mahan, the brilliant engineer and classroom martinet. We see Mahan, the serious Christian, for whom church attendance was not just a nominal duty, and a family man who was intensely involved in the spiritual upbringing of his children as he had been previously in that of his brother. (At the time of this writing, Mahan had four children, aged ten, eight, three, and one, the eldest of whom, Alfred, went on to become the great naval historian and strategist). We also see a West Pointer devoted to his "Institution" and intimately concerned with all aspects of its life.

U.S. Military Academy
West Point November 26th 1850

The Honorable C. M. Conrad
Secretary of War
Sir,

The accompanying official copy of a communication to the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy has been furnished me at my request. Not being entirely satisfied that I correctly apprehend the intention and scope of its contents, and as the subject to which it refers is of too delicate and grave a character to be left open to any misapprehension, I have deemed it most proper, under the circumstances, to address myself directly concerning it, and to request your consideration of the following remarks.

The first clause of the paper in question, as I construe it, annuls Par. 127 of the Regulations of the U.S. Military Academy. The second contains an iteration of Art. 2 of the Rules and Articles of War, with an addition specifying the place and service to be attended. The third points out the mode that officers must pursue to avoid acceding to the recommendations in the second.

My action, with respect to Par. 127 of the U.S. Military Academy Regulations, was to conform to its requirements as a matter of conscience, as obeying those set over me in authority [a reference to Matt. 8:9], although regarding it as contrary to the spirit of our Institutions, and when enforced as trenching on the rights guaranteed to every adult citi-

zen. But with respect to Art. 2 of the Rules and Articles of War, although looking upon it as entitled to the most respectful consideration of all to whom it is addressed, I have never supposed that it imposed or was intended to be construed as imposing any legal obligation to conform to the observance recommended, even in a general way, still less in any specific, which might be given to it. Yet the third clause in the communication referred to would seem to imply that the observance recommended in it is to be regarded as legally obligatory, since it prescribes a certain course to be pursued by any officer desirous of not conforming to the recommendation. It is true, that no penalty is specified for any infraction of the implied legal obligation, but this very indefiniteness, as it leaves open a door for arbitrary action by those in authority, presents the whole subject in a form that renders it necessary for all, to whom the communication is addressed, to ascertain precisely the intention and scope of its provisions.

Having stated the difficulties which this paper presents to my apprehension, I must beg to offer a few remarks further, as explanatory of my position on this question of attendance on the present Sunday services at the Chapel of this Institution. A member of the Protestant Episcopal Church, I conscientiously abstain from any form of public worship but that of my own communion at all other places except the Chapel of this Institution. Although pursuing the course when left to voluntary action, I am free to admit that, from my connection with this Institution, I should regard it as a duty to attend generally the present form of Sunday service at the Chapel when the Cadets are obliged to be there, did I feel convinced that such attendance on my part was likely, under the actual state of things here, to prove beneficial to them. That the example of a community attending stately on the services and ordinances of a Christian Communion produces always an impression of the most salutary and lasting character upon youth, few will call in question. Such an example was here presented, at one period, by nearly all the more permanent officers of the Institution with their families, and with I believe the same wholesome result as in other places. This state of things a late Administration deemed it best to break up, when an opportunity arose by a vacancy in the Chaplaincy, by refusing to accede to the all but unanimous recommendation of the Officers of the Institution in favor of a clergyman of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and by appointing to the important [word missing, probably "position" or "post"] of Chaplain one whose religious tenets were different from the great majority of the permanently settled officers. Thus, by not considering that the persons to be most affected by this appointment must feel as anxious a concern in the religious training of their families as any other class of citizens, and would be unwilling to expose them to permanent influences bearing on this which they conscientiously believed were not the best, has a condi-

tion of affairs been brought about here which no one, who rightly appreciates the whole question, can but regret. The spectacle has, for some time back, been presented here, of heads of families separated from their households, on those occasions when there seems a peculiar propriety in their being together, to attend on a form of worship with which they can have but little sympathy, and of a chaplain to the Institution who, from not occupying the pastoral relationship to their families, is deprived of that influence which necessarily attaches to it, and who, to a great extent therefore, must feel himself an alien from their religious if not their social sympathies. There is no disguising it, that this condition of affairs is an evil, and one that it ought to have been foreseen would arise, and continue until either the families then here or their religious views changed. Changes in the first have to some extent taken place, but without any in the last, as the accompanying papers will show.

In presenting these observations I have been actuated by no spirit of sectarianism, or of fault finding. Whilst I have felt myself at liberty to question the wisdom of those who, by their action, brought about this state of things, I do not in any degree impugn their right to have done so. In departing from what seems to me a judicious rule of action—one adopted by a preceding Administration, owing to the untoward results of several preceding appointments—that of giving to this community a voice in the selection for an office which so immediately affects their most important interests, I do not pretend to question their motives. My sole desire is that, by bringing before you all the facts, you may the better be enabled to see the whole subject in all its bearings. As to myself, if thirty years of almost constant connection with this Institution, in which I have seen it under almost every phase or religious and irreligious influences, has enabled me to form a correct opinion in this case, I feel warranted in saying, that my attendance at the Chapel, under present circumstances, is of no more moment, so far as any beneficial effect to be produced on the cadets is concerned, than my presence would have on any other *quasi* military duty in which I took part.

With sentiments of the highest Consideration and Respect

I have the honor to be

Sir

Your Ob^t Serv^t

D:H: Mahan

Prof. of Engineering in the
U.S. Military Academy

Document appended to letter, written in a different hand:

The number of Officers with families connected with the Military Academy in 1847—one of the periods referred to on page 3d—was 19; of this number 16, as nearly can be ascertained, were of the denomination of Protestant Episcopalians, and numbered 24 communicants of that Church. The number of families of the same class now present here is 17; of which 15 are of the Prot. Episcopal denomination, and number 20 communicants.

See Official Registers of the U.S. Mily Acady for 1847 and 1849