

The Loyalty of West Point's Graduates Debated

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Feature Essay

Civil War Treasures

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The Loyalty of West Point's Graduates Debated

The principle of loyalty – and its unseemly brother, treason – was at the center of the debate about the coming war leading up to and following the firing of the guns at Fort Sumter. As William Blair points out in his 2014 book *With Malice toward Some: Treason and Loyalty in the Civil War Era*,¹ accusations of treason were ubiquitous in northern newspapers during the war, despite the narrow definition of the crime specified by the US Constitution. Blair argues that popular accusations of “treasonous behavior” were wielded indiscriminately during the period, beyond and sometimes in seeming opposition to an American legal tradition that sought to curtail perceived abuses of Britain’s use of “constructive” treason to “punish people who had committed no actual crime beyond expressing disloyalty.”² Faced with war and beset by strife, Americans discarded theory for the more mundane practicalities of determining loyalty of brother, friend, and classmate. Concerns of loyalty were of paramount importance within the military and were perhaps most fraught with regards to the Army’s officer corps educated at West Point. Debates regarding the motivations of generals such as Robert E. Lee might invoke tension between state and national allegiances, but such philosophical abstractions were not foremost in the minds of most of those at West Point, or those who considered whether to trust the institution’s graduates.³ As demonstrated by two items in LSU Libraries’ Special Collections, loyalty was the preoccupation of statisticians and schoolboys alike.

A small item printed in New York in 1862 makes the question plain: Edward Chauncey Marshall queries *Are the West Point Graduates Loyal?* in an eight-page pamphlet that gave “Publicity, with as little comment as possible, to certain statistics which have been prepared by

¹ William Blair, *With Malice toward Some: Treason and Loyalty in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: U of NC Press, 2014).

² Blair, 2. For a longer discussion of the British and American legal definitions of treason see especially Blair’s first chapter, “Treason before the Civil War,” 13-35.

³ For one discussion of Lee’s complicated road from US to Confederate national loyalty, see especially “Conduct must conform to the new order of things: R.E. Lee and the question of loyalty,” in Gary Gallagher, *Becoming Confederates: Paths to a new national loyalty* (Athens, GA: U of GA Press, 2013).

the author with as much painstaking and labor, in reference to the loyalty of the graduates of the Military Academy at West Point.”⁴ Marshall was himself devoted to the Union: he published a history of the Naval Academy in the same year,⁵ and after the War wrote a biography of sorts of General Grant.⁶ In this small text Marshall’s purportedly arithmetical approach betrays a fear about treason within the nation’s oldest military academy. Marshall scrutinizes the Army Register of 1862 and the 203 West Point graduates who “resigned, were dropped, dismissed, or cashiered,” tallying loyalties by state in hopes of determining the allegiances of the Army’s officer corps; he later reaches back to consider the years of 1860 and ’61 as well. Marshall’s work is detailed and factual and he does not shy away from naming those graduates who have renounced the Union, and the pamphlet’s precision demonstrates the North’s need to identify and quantify individual and institutional fidelity to the cause.

Marshall ultimately finds a total of 197 former students who are “disloyal” – defined as having left West Point to with “motives favorable to secession”⁷ – out of 820 considered. Despite nearly a third of West Point graduates being then in rebellion, Marshall concludes that

The proportion of the 621 graduates who remained loyal [...] should give us renewed confidence in this noble nursery of soldiers, which was the child of the Revolution, and was planned and formed by George Washington, Timothy Pickering, Henry Knox, and Alexander Hamilton—the purest and best of the patriot sires of the Republic.⁸

Here lies some of both Marshall’s assurance of West Point’s loyalty as well as his need to find that loyalty, as the pamphlet ends with this enumeration of great and loyal generals to whom West Point is indebted – and beholden. The uncertainty raised by the pamphlet’s statistical findings are eclipsed by this invocation of history. The august names of Washington and Hamilton reassure where numbers might disturb, and a publication whose title poses an ominous question ends with the names of the American Army’s Founding Fathers echoing reassuringly from its final page.

⁴ Edward Chauncey Marshall, *Are the West Point Graduates Loyal?* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1862), 1.

⁵ Edward Chauncey Marshall, *History of the United States Naval academy, with biographical sketches, and the names of all the superintendents, professors and graduates, to which is added a record of some of the earliest votes by Congress, of thanks, medals, and swords to naval officers* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1862).

⁶ Edward Chauncey Marshall, *The ancestry of General Grant, and their contemporaries* (New York: Sheldon, 1869).

⁷ Marshall, *West Point Graduates*, 8.

⁸ Marshall, 8.

One individual's consideration of Marshall's titular question is found in a photograph album of the United States' Military Academy classes of 1857 and 1858 that was originally owned by George Crockett Strong, a Vermont native and later major general in the Union Army.⁹ The album collects forty-two albumen photographs of cadets from the 1857 and '58 classes of West Point pasted onto heavy card stock.¹⁰ As produced, the original album is rather traditional collection of photographs of the owner's classmates, along with two photos of the grounds of West Point.¹¹ Remarkably well preserved, each young man stares stiffly out of the oval print with the posed formality that was the hallmark of the period's rudimentary photographic techniques, as well as many subsequent generations' yearbook photos. What makes this album unique is its personalized consideration of Marshall's question about loyalty. Beyond the more mundane and traditional annotations that accompany each photograph, such as the name of the sitter and whether he was graduated in '57, '58 (or not at all), someone – presumably Strong – goes on to indicate where in the Army the sitter served, as well as whether or not they were, in the neat cursive script of the owner, a “Rebel.”

The sum effect of the album is striking, bringing home how one man negotiated the bonds of friendship even as the War tore the Union asunder. In some cases a photograph's inscriptions are rather perfunctory – “Fish, Oliver H., Florence, Ky., cavalry” reads one¹² – while at other times the script reveals some of the boyishness to which the photographs themselves attest: “Conner, Edward J., Exeter, N.H., infantry, you look indignant Ned.”¹³ And “Ned” indeed looks a bit indignant – or perhaps confused, as if caught between the novelty of having his photograph made and a sudden shyness at finding himself before the lens. Elsewhere the sitter William Sinclair is “Artillery (but every inch a dragoon),”¹⁴ despite clutching a saber as one might hold a grudge. Even in their military dress and clumsy poses, the young men looking out appear not so different from school photos from a later day, equal parts awkward adolescent half-smiles and the mature gazes of grown soldiers.

⁹ George C. Strong Photograph Album, Mss. 1453, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. Also available as a digital collection: George C. Strong Photograph Album, Louisiana Digital Library, Baton Rouge, La. Strong's biographical information is collected on this item's finding aid.

¹⁰ The photographic prints may be salted paper as opposed to albumen, though their well-preserved condition seems to argue for the latter.

¹¹ There is also a single newspaper clipping enclosed within that album regarding the 1891 death of Rear Admiral Christopher Raymond Perry Roger, US Navy (Ret.).

¹² Photograph 16.

¹³ Photograph 12.

¹⁴ Photograph 37.

Thus all the more remarkable are the annotations found throughout the album in a later pen that state simply “Rebel” underneath particular men’s pictures. There are a total of thirteen, over a quarter of those photographs represented. The tag appears scattered randomly throughout, save for at the end: the last five pictures bear the label, and the last four lack individual’s names, including only their service designation and “Rebel.” The cumulative effect of the album and particularly this closing is striking, as the boyish comments regarding the young men pictured slowly disappear, eclipsed by the designation “Rebel” that eventually obliterates even the men’s names. It is as if an exercise of reminiscence begun in idleness became a recollection of first personal betrayal and finally the confrontation a host of nameless men only memorable as potential enemies.

On one hand Strong’s project is the same as Marshall’s – simply tallying up the graduates who are loyal versus treasonous. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Strong’s totals are similar: Marshall calculates an almost seventy-six percent loyalty rate in his “painstaking” statistical analysis, while just under seventy percent of Strong’s classmates stayed true to the Union. On the other hand Strong’s album tracks a profoundly different way of considering loyalty, one focused as much upon the relationships between individuals as between citizen and nation. For Strong, the darkly handsome Paul Quattlebaum is first his classmate from Lexington District, South Carolina, and only later “Infantry, Rebel.” As captured by Strong’s album, these men were rebelling not only against the United States or the institution of West Point but also against the time that the men shared together at that institution, at their common experiences of school and brotherhood.

To say that the Civil War was fought between brothers is unremarkable, but these two pieces dramatize how the seemingly abstract question of treason against the nation devolved upon the individual calculations of personal loyalty. Strong’s album makes the enumeration of Rebels deeply personal in a way quite different than Marshall’s statistical approach. And Strong’s further story shows that these considerations had real and deadly consequences: after being appointed brigadier general in June of 1863, Strong was reassigned to South Carolina and was mortally wounded in the Union’s assault on Battery Wagner.¹⁵ When Strong looked across

¹⁵ Strong was wounded in the second assault on Battery – or Fort – Wagner on July 18th, 1863. This battle is well known for including the 54th Massachusetts, an infantry regiment made up of African American soldiers led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. The 54th’s assault on the Battery is the climax of the 1989 film *Glory*.

the sand toward the Battery in his final battle what he saw were the forbidding numbers of Confederate Army whose disloyalty was tallied so carefully by Marshall, but one can't help but wonder if Strong wasn't also trying see individuals in the masses and pick out the dark eyes of Paul Quattlebaum, his Rebel classmate, across the divide.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Despite Quattlebaum's having hailed from South Carolina, he served first in Texas and later in Alabama, and thus was not present for the assault on Battery Wagner. See Joseph Benjamin Polley, *A Soldier's Letters to Charming Nellie* (U of TN Press: Knoxville, 2008), p. 242, n. 11.