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# Absolutely American: Four Years at West Point

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Dartmouth Conference. In other words, the meetings and briefings that the author recounts, involving many layers of the U.S. government, probably provided multiple points at which Dartmouth insights could enter U.S. policy.

The book's second problem is rather scant recognition that Dartmouth was largely a "closed loop system" on the Russian side, involving "the same, limited number of figures whom the Soviet authorities permitted to have this kind of access to Americans." Undoubtedly, the stalwarts of the cooperation from the Institute of the USA and Canada and other institutes had links into the Soviet policy-making system. Nevertheless, the limitations on who could participate meant that for many years the dialogue lacked access to key areas of expertise, such as arms control, on the Russian side—a fact that Voorhees freely acknowledges.

It is also worth considering whether the benefits of a close and continuing relationship with a few chosen people were, in the end, the dialogue's downfall. In the 1990s, as more and more Russian experts from a variety of institutions became available, they migrated into a plethora of international security and policy forums. Because it was full to capacity, however, the Dartmouth Conference was not always able to accommodate this "new blood." One Russian participant expressed the dilemma well: "We have lost our audience. The government isn't interested, and besides our institutes have lost their influence."

Despite these problems, the Dartmouth process clearly played a vital role in developing communications between the two superpowers during the Cold War. As this book makes clear, the

conference's legacy will abide in the conflict-resolution techniques to which it gave life.

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Lipsky, David. *Absolutely American: Four Years at West Point*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. 336pp. \$25

Steven Covey advises us to start with the end in mind, so here it is. If the reader knows of a young person who aspires to attend a college-level military academy, any one of them, give that person this book to read, cover to cover.

David Lipsky has written an entertaining and sobering book about life as it is lived at the U.S. Military Academy. He did so by living in Highland Falls, New York, for four years and by having unprecedented daily access to the cadet students and their mentors. The book inspires, using a quiet style of observation that captures the poignancy and irony of moments without being judgmental.

Lipsky, a journalist for *Rolling Stone* magazine, periodically chronicles modern college campus life. He admits to having been reluctant to take on the West Point assignment, because he had been brought up not to like the military. Jann Wenner, his publisher and boss, convinced him otherwise.

So, as the author states in the preface, he learned to road-march, live and navigate in the woods, recognize ranks, and absorb other basic military knowledge. Along the way, he experienced an epiphany: "Not only was the Army not the awful thing my father had imagined, it

was the sort of America he always pictured when he explained . . . his best hopes for the country. A place where everyone tried their hardest. A place where people—or at least most people—looked out for each other. A place where people—intelligent, talented people—said honestly that money wasn’t what drove them. A place where people spoke openly about their feelings and about trying to make themselves better.”

The author followed a class at West Point from first (plebe) year through graduation. Lipsky finds that the students there experience elements of campus life not unlike those on civilian campuses: sex, cliques, the Internet, alcohol, and in a very minor way, drugs. He also learns to appreciate the academy’s motto: “Duty, Honor, and Country.” As one student reflects on the experience, he states that “becoming a military officer isn’t just a profession, it’s a calling.” Lipsky illustrates how life at West Point is not easy. The tension and stress between the normal temptations of modern American life and the peculiar structures, strictures, and norms necessary to become a commissioned U.S. Army officer sometimes prove too much.

However, those who persevere make for the most interesting stories. We learn of the “golden boy,” a self-motivated cadet who finds himself unable to chose infantry as a branch and anguishes whether he should “take five and fly” to live with his true love or follow the calling. There is the “sad sack,” who, because he has a terrible time performing physical tasks, is routinely targeted by his tactical officers for separation and yet stubbornly hangs on and

graduates, to the astonishment and admiration of his peers. There is the “reluctant leader,” who only wants to play football but is transformed into a first-rate tactical leader who leads a rag-tag orienteering team to a moral victory.

Not all of Lipsky’s stories are inspirational, however. He also discusses, without judgment, a very real phenomenon in the military—the gap between teaching high standards and values, and practicing them. So objective are Lipsky’s observations that one wonders if he realizes what he’s reporting. The most moving story, and a prime example of high standards and values, is the one of a department head—a combat veteran lieutenant colonel who sets for cadets exceptionally high standards and inspires them to achieve those standards (one cadet preserved the stub of this officer’s cigar in a plastic bag as an icon). When one of the colonel’s subordinate officers produces a highly controversial and politically incorrect report, the colonel takes responsibility for it, protecting his subordinate from an investigation that could end his career. However, for his actions, the colonel was dismissed from the Army because he “failed to exhibit the three Army values: Honor, Respect, and Loyalty.” There is true irony.

Still, this is a small affair in the effort to mold character at West Point. Let the cynicism and skepticism wait for now. This work is a testimony to the eternal hopefulness and idealism of youth. Read it and remember.

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