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The U.S. Military Academy and its Foreign Cadet Program – the Case for Re-Launching the Polish Bid to Attend West Point

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**THE U.S. MILITARY ACADEMY AND ITS FOREIGN
CADET PROGRAM –
THE CASE FOR RE-LAUNCHING THE POLISH BID TO ATTEND
WEST POINT**

Streszczenie:

Akademia Wojskowa w West Point jest najważniejszą uczelnią wojskową w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki Północnej kształtującą od ponad dwóch stuleci kadrę oficerską amerykańskiej armii. Na mocy międzynarodowych porozumień również Polskie Siły Zbrojne mogą kształcić swoich żołnierzy w tej instytucji. Dotychczas mury uczelni opuściło pięciu polskich kadetów. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu wykazanie, że Akademia w West Point nadal spełnia swoje zadanie, a Polska powinna podjąć starania o to, aby wysłać na studia w tej uczelni kolejnych polskich kadetów.

Summary:

The US Military Academy at West Point is the most important military academy in the United States forming, for more than two centuries, the US military officer corps. The Polish Armed Forces can educate their officers in this institution. So far, only five Polish cadets graduated the West Point. This article argues that while the Academy still excels in its mission and continues to offer slots to several countries, Poland should make a decision to apply yet again to send cadets to West Point.

Słowa kluczowe:

Akademia Wojskowa w West Point, Siły Zbrojne RP, polscy kadeci w West Point, bezpieczeństwo

Key words:

West Point Military Academy, Polish Armed Forces, Polish cadets at West Point, security

One of the key institutions which has significantly contributed to the U.S. military apparatus over the course of the nation's history is doubtlessly the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, founded in 1802, and

located 80 km north of New York city.¹ Its graduates played key roles in virtually all wars the U.S. engaged in since the early 19th century, starting with the War of 1812 to the currently U.S.-led coalition against ISIL in the Middle East.

In the early 19th century the Academy grew quickly to become a well recognized educational facility in the U.S., which besides officers, also provided highly qualified engineers for the civilian development of the country. Its curriculum also significantly influenced most of America's engineering schools in the 19th century. It continued to produce top-level leaders throughout its 213-year long history thus far. Those include most notably two American presidents – Ulysses Grant and Dwight Eisenhower. Among its most famous commanders were Generals Robert Lee, William Sherman, Philip Sheridan, John Pershing, Douglas MacArthur, George Patton, Henry Arnold, Omar Bradley, Creighton Abrams, Norman Schwarzkopf, Wesley Clark, David Petraeus, Stanley McChrystal and David Rodriguez to name a few. Looking at the current top U.S. military structures, five generals should be listed as well: Raymond Odierno, Chief of Staff of the Army, Joseph Votel, Special Operations Commander, John Campbell, the NATO's "Resolute Support" Mission commander in Afghanistan, Ben Hodges, Commander of the U.S. Army Forces in Europe, and the most U.S. senior officer, Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

USMA feeds only about one fifth of the U.S. Army officers' supply chain in the recent decades. Since the 1960's the Corps of Cadets has grown to over 4,000 and since then it has fluctuated between that number and today's 4,400. Nowadays, after a very competitive selection process with more than 12 candidates per slot, approximately 1,200 cadets – aged 17 to 23 years – annually enter the Academy with about 1,000 graduating 47 months later. This annual replenishment of officers renders that overall the current Long Gray Line consists of nearly 50,000 living graduates.

The Academy has a clear mission. It is to educate, train, and inspire its cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of duty, honour, country, and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the U.S. Army.² Throughout its history West Point has been and still is a top U.S. liberal arts 4-year college which offers education in 37 majors run by its 13 academic departments. The academic programme grants a Bachelor of Science degree whose standing is on a par with Ivy League colleges, thus being a Tier I academic institution. The undergraduate curriculum balances both physical sciences and engineering with behavioural and social sciences. The rigorous curriculum is underpinned by a thorough military training programme with leader development emphasis.

¹ For a broader discussion about West Point's history, see e.g. T. K. Kowalik, *Działalność Dydaktyczno-Wychowawcza Akademii Sił Lądowych USA w West Point, 1802-2002*, Warszawa 2008.

² *USMA Academic Program (Redbook)*, Class of 2017, Office of the Dean, West Point 2013, p. 13.

The Academy provides a stressful and demanding programme that challenges cadets intellectually, militarily, and physically in an environment that promotes the development of character.³ Through the Corps of Cadets structure, senior cadets are afforded the privilege of leading and training junior members. The military programme is supplemented by a demanding physical fitness development programme with mandatory participation in competitive athletics. Further, cadets may choose from more than 100 extracurricular activities and 25 inter-collegiate sports.⁴ Most importantly, the cadets live according to a unique honour code, which sets the school apart from other similar military schools worldwide. The code is short and simple: “A cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do” and it is these deeply imparted and instilled principles among the Corps of Cadets that make a true difference for those future military leaders. A few years ago the Academy adopted, besides honour, a second core value to be honed by cadets besides honour, namely respect. Through it, the Academy’s philosophy is to eliminate discrimination, and fostering an atmosphere of dignity and worth, in order to ensure a healthy command climate and focus more succinctly on character development.⁵ West Point is the sole college in the nation specifically charged with preparing young Americans for service as officers in the U.S. Army. To that end its singular educational philosophy is defined such that: “graduates must be enlightened military leaders of strong moral courage, whose minds are creative, critical and resourceful.”⁶

West Point’s graduates, who have an initial five-year obligation to remain in the Army, undergo further professional training in specialised fields immediately following graduation and prior to their first duty assignments as second lieutenants. As young officers they attend first a Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) that teaches them further about the Army culture and trains them in basic field skills. Each branch requires its own brand of technical and tactical expertise. Following the BOLC they transition to branch-specialised courses to develop their competence in technical aspects of their selected specialities, which range from Armour, Field Artillery, Infantry, Military Intelligence, Military Police, Medical Service or the Signal Corps – overall 15 branches in the Army.

West Point has regularly enrolled international cadets who are fully assimilated into the Corps of Cadets. While foreign cadets enrolled into the Academy already in 1816, it was not until 1889 that the first international cadet actually graduated from USMA. Since then the overall number of international graduates who underwent the whole 4-year programme has exceeded 440.⁷ Similar to

³ *West Point Admissions Catalog for 2013-2014*, USMA, West Point 2013, www.westpoint.edu/admissions, p. 4 (28.05.2015).

⁴ *West Point Admissions Catalog...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁶ *USMA Academic Program...*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁷ It should be noted that USMA also educates foreign cadets and officers for a shorter period of time. As part of an exchange programme they attend to West Point for the duration of

their American counterparts, international graduates frequently rose to senior ranks. Thus far three of them became presidents in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and the Philippines. Since 2001 the maximum number of cadets from foreign countries permitted to attend the Academy at a given time has grown from 40 to 60, which averages to 15 per class. At the same time no more than three students from a single country can attend the Academy. However, this rule has seen a few exceptions to policy in the past. To attract international recruitment, the U.S. Department of Defense sends out invitations for international competition to USMA, but also to the other two service academies, the US Air Force Academy (USAFA) and US Naval Academy (USNA), via U.S. embassies to as many as 159 countries world-wide. When it comes to international competition and selection, 67 of these countries are considered as priority countries, as seen from a U.S. State Department perspective, including the 27 NATO Allies.⁸ The numbers of invited countries vary from year to year. For example while between 2011 and 2014, the number varied from 157 to 159, 13 years earlier in 2001, it was 131 countries. The international competition is just as rigorous as for U.S. cadets. As a case in point, in 2014 as many as 31 countries nominated a total of 103 candidates (each country can nominate up to six candidates per year). 14 of those were ultimately qualified and offered admission.⁹ For understandable reasons such countries like China, Iran, Russia, or Syria are currently not on the list of invitees.

The admittance of European cadets in particular has increased significantly after the end of the Cold War in 1989 (see chart below). Several countries from former Warsaw Pact countries and Central-Eastern Europe have been sending cadets to West Point. Over time in the last 25 years, additionally candidates entered West Point from former Soviet Union countries such as Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. Further, NATO's current forerunner among the aspirant countries, Montenegro, a former Yugoslav Republic, has also just sent a cadet to West Point this year. Interestingly, Serbia – whose military took a few hundred casualties from NATO bombardments in 1999 – has also applied, won competition, and commenced studies with two cadets in the years 2008 and 2011. Another interesting noteworthy case is a Dutch cadet commencing studies at the Academy in 2015; particularly that more affluent and western European NATO countries have traditionally not applied or attended the Academy in recent decades as seen on the chart.

one semester. Currently, about 30 cadets/lieutenants exchange with West Point every year. Almost all of those are in the first semester from August to December. The exchange takes place with AUT, BRA, CAN, CHL, FRA, DEU, JPN and ESP. Data obtained from West Point Superintendent's Office, 7 Jun 2015.

⁸ *Service Academy Foreign Student Program Class of 2019*, U.S. DOD Memorandum, AMHS 4.0, July 2014, pp. 6.

⁹ *USMA International Cadet Program*, Memorandum for Record, Department of the Army, USMA, West Point, 8.08.2014.

**European West Point Graduates (until 2015) and Enrolled Cadets
(2016-2019)¹⁰**

No.	Country	1802-1989	1990-1999	2000-2009	2010-2019	Sum
1	Albania			1	1	2
2	Azerbaijan				1	1
3	Bulgaria		3	5	3	11
4	Croatia			6		6
5	Czech Rep.		1			1
6	Estonia		1	2		3
7	Finland		1			1
8	France	1				1
9	Georgia				7	7
10	Latvia			1	4	5
11	Lithuania			5	2	7
12	Moldova				1	1
13	Montenegro				1	1
14	Netherlands				1	1
15	Poland		4		1	5
16	Romania			6	6	12
17	Serbia				2	2
18	Slovenia			5	2	7
19	Switzerland	1				1
20	Turkey	1	10	4	1	16
	Sum	3	20	35	33	91

Poland has managed to send cadets to West Point on five occasions from 1992 onwards. It should be noted that Tadeusz Kościuszko, a Polish officer and well educated engineer, who fought for the Independence of America in the Revolutionary War, oversaw the fortifications of the West Point garrison from 1778 to 1780. His works were so successful that the British military never attempted to attack them, and his contribution was so appreciated that he later

¹⁰ Table developed by author based on the *2008 Register of Graduates and Former Cadets*, and most current data obtained from USMA. The countries' graduates/cadets (reflected in the NATO 3-letter code) finished/are to complete studies in the following years: ALB (2008, 2011), AZE (2012), BGR (1997-1999, 2001x2, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2011, 2016, 2018), HRV (2000, 2001x2, 2002, 2006x2), CZE (1997), EST (1999, 2000, 2003), FIN (1996), FRA (1946), GEO (2011-2015, 2018x2), LVA (2002, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2017), LTU (2003, 2005, 2008, 2009x2, 2012, 2015), MLD (2017), MNE (2019), NLD (2019), POL (1996-1999, 2013), ROU (2001x2, 2003, 2005, 2008x2, 2010, 2012-2013, 2015, 2018-2019), SRB (2012, 2015), 2005 (2001-2003, 2005-2006, 2012-2013), CHE (1893), and TUR (1989-1999, 2001-2003, 2006, 2019).

obtained – as the only foreign officer – a sizeable monument in West Point funded by cadets from their pay. His statue is well visible from the plain.

Unfortunately, the programme was abandoned and the last Polish cadet graduated from USMA in 2013. Given the high quality of the programme, but also growing defence ties between the U.S. and Poland in the past several years, new consideration should be given to resume the programme.¹¹ Poland could apply again with current cadets after their completion of the 1st or 2nd year of study from its four military schools (WAT in Warsaw, AMW in Gdynia, WSOWL in Wrocław, and WSOSP in Dęblin) to the three service academies with an ambition and target set to qualify on average 1.5 cadets per year, thus having six cadets at the three U.S. academies at a given time. Such numbers would be easily absorbed by the Polish Armed Forces, and would also give a tremendous incentive for the Polish cadets at the military schools to compete and apply for the three prestigious and top American Service Academies. Furthermore, there is an evident need in the Polish Armed Forces to have more than currently available well educated, completely fluent (English level 4444), and mentally well prepared officers able to assume most demanding positions in highly competitive multinational environments. A thorough four-year programme in a U.S. service academy is a very good tool for such preparation. By comparison, short term professional courses and even 1-year studies at various U.S. colleges and schools should be naturally continued via the International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme, but they do not entirely accomplish the same results as a full 4-year immersion. Both programmes need to be pursued.

Currently, an estimated annual tuition fee at West Point is \$77,000, which means that a complete 4-year program would amount to roughly \$308,000 per cadet.¹² According to Department of Defence policy, high-income countries as defined by the World Bank – currently those having a GDP per capita of over \$12,600 – are not eligible for reimbursement waivers. However, it should be noted that Poland has entered this bracket merely a few years ago and with a GDP per capita of \$13,700, it is not too far over that threshold. It should also be kept in mind that the Secretary of Defense can waive a requirement of tuition reimbursement – either fully or partially with up to 66% of tuition – on a case-by-case basis.¹³ Certainly several factors weigh in such decision-making process. Therefore, arguably Poland could still apply for a tuition waiver, but that could only be decided once a candidate is deemed qualified for the Academy. Nevertheless, it should be considered a long-term strategic investment into

¹¹ For a set of arguments in favour of the programme compare: T. T. Kowalik, R. A. Nowak, *Benefiting from the American Educational Offer at the US Service Academies*, “Zeszyty Naukowe”, Akademia Obrony Narodowej, Nr 2 (51), Warszawa 2003, pp. 217-231.

¹² *Service Academy Foreign...*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹³ Presentation by MAJ Andrew Yang titled *West Point International Program*, dated 2014, retrieved from Internet on 7.07.2015, slide 5.

Polish-U.S. mil-to-mil relations, and in such light the strategic effect would outmatch the educational costs, and therefore Poland should consider returning to this programme. Poland is currently missing a unique opportunity to take advantage of this standing offer, while several other European countries are pursuing this endeavour and growing their interoperability with the U.S. military.

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