

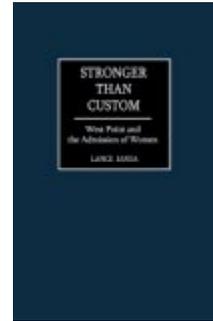
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lance Janda. *Stronger than Custom: West Point and the Admission of Women*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002. xxii + 227 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97113-7.

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## West Point: Still “The Men’s House”?

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In *Stronger than Custom*, Lance Janda writes about the gender integration of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point from the perspective of “an outsider,” that is, a civilian academic—specifically, a military historian (p. xx). Janda seeks to understand and to explain a process of institutional change by embedding the story of West Point’s Class of 1980 within the socio-political context of the time. His title is a rebuttal to the Roman poet Ovid’s claim that nothing is stronger than custom: Janda argues that despite multiple levels of resistance, gender integration has itself become “a part of the habit and tradition of the institution” (p. 184). His message is that customs can and do change, and that at this writing (the twenty-fifth anniversary of women’s entry to USMA) women have become an integral part of the “Long Gray Line” (p. 200). This is an encouraging, but I think a too sanguine, assessment of the degree of change and of “women’s place” at the Point and, by extension, in the armed services more broadly. Evidence to support a less optimistic interpretation of the process of gender integration can be gleaned from published accounts about life inside the academies, recent personnel surveys on sexual harassment, and the current political context in which service-women find themselves and their support organizations, such as DACOWITS, under scrutiny.

Having read several first-person accounts written by some of West Point’s first alumnae, including Carol Barkalow, Donna Peterson, and Lil Pfluke, I wondered

what new insight other “outsiders”/civilian academics might gain from Janda’s history.[1] I learned a great deal from his meticulous archival and ethnographic research. Janda has compiled information from primary documents about the process of institutional preparation for women’s admission as well as from transcripts of exit interviews conducted with women of the Class of 1980. In addition, Janda interviewed USMA faculty as well as thirty-nine men and twenty-seven women who had been cadets from 1976 to 1980, many of whom shared not only their recollections but also personal journals, letters, and photographs. A number of photos are included in the book, and original illustrations drawn by Pamela Lenck Bradford present an engaging picture of what the Class of 1980 encountered. This original research makes *Stronger Than Custom* a valuable contribution to the growing body of scholarship on military gender integration and required reading for anyone with an interest in this topic.

The book opens with a foreword written by U.S. Lt. Col. Donna Alesch Newell, USMA Class of 1980 (pp. xi-xiv). Sections titled “Preface” and “Sources” (pp. xv-xxii) detail support and inspiration for, and methodology of, the project, while the “Introduction” notes the historical and contemporary tensions between forces for social change and institutional resistance, the major theme of the book (pp. xxiii-xxviii). A brief “Prologue” depicts the first day of the new cadets of the class of 1980 (pp. 1-4). Each preliminary section provides the reader with some insight about the purpose for and plan of the book,

but these separate pieces of front matter might have been combined in a comprehensive introductory chapter for ease of reading and to keep “like things” together, such as information on the numbers of cadets entering and graduating with the Class of 1980. This is a minor point, however, that does little to detract from the most valuable contribution of *Stronger Than Custom*, which is its contextualization of the gender integration process. Janda reminds us of what many authors neglect: the larger societal framework in which their story unfolds. He documents both institutional as well as personal acts and attitudes of resistance to women’s entry into the academy.

The first chapter examines the view of leaders inside the military institution who saw the military’s public image as “tarnished” and themselves as increasingly separate from, rather than part of, the larger society during the Vietnam era (p. 11). As the war went on and opposition grew, applications to the military academies declined, and West Point experienced resignations and vacancies, forcing a lowering of admission standards. Here Janda draws our attention to the larger historical context, noting that prior to WWII, public suspicion and disdain of the military was commonplace. Janda also observes that changes within West Point, such as the end of practices of “bracing” in 1969 and compulsory chapel and the punishment of “the Silence” in 1973, exacerbated institutional insiders’ perception of rapid change (pp. 10-14). The publication of several books about changes in the Army as well as Galloway and Johnson’s critical *West Point: America’s Power Fraternity* added to the public scrutiny of the military in general and of the academy in particular.[2] When Congress sent the Equal Rights Amendment to the states for ratification in 1972 and suspended the draft in 1973, military leaders saw the prospect of having gender integration forced upon them by civilian leadership as “a nightmare” (p. 36). In brief, academy leaders and alumni felt their beloved institution was under siege. In chapter 2, Janda examines the historical presence of women at USMA, such as Margaret Corbin, Deborah Sampson, and the Warner sisters, who instructed cadets in spiritual matters, and female family members of male staff and faculty (pp. 30-33). He notes the futuristic images of female cadets predicted by male cadets of the early 1900s as well as the depictions of legendary women warriors found throughout the grounds (pp. 32-34). The bulk of the chapter details both strategies of resistance to and “contingency” preparations for women’s arrival as cadets. Initially, a “separate but equal” proposal (similar to that later adopted by VMI) was presented as an alternative to gender inte-

gration (p. 35). The decision to adopt a “one track” academic standard but different physical standards is noted (pp. 40-41), but the long-term significance of this “double standard” for women’s place in the corps of cadets is not explored. USMA leaders seemed determined to maintain traditional gender boundaries, especially with regard to combat, the “hot topic” Congress avoided in legislating gender integration at the service academies.

Subsequent chapters follow the Class of 1980 from application through graduation. Chapter 3 examines women’s application decisions and the less than warm reception prospective female cadets received on campus. Chapter 4 covers Reception Day, Beast Barracks, and the rest of Plebe Year, noting the “little things” from different haircuts and uniforms to ill-fitting boots and equipment that reminded women cadets that they did not belong. Here Janda also details the stress caused by hazing and misogynist intimidation directed at women plebes (pp. 92-104). As a result, women tried to be invisible, resisting anything that drew attention to their difference, such as makeup instruction and the well-intentioned Corbin seminars (pp. 113-114). Chapter 5 focuses on the experiences of the men of the Class of 1980, noting a polarization between those who were determined to harass women and those who tolerated integration. Chapter 6 details Yearling year, beginning with RECONDO at Camp Buckner in the summer of 1977. Chapter 7 examines senior or “Firstie” year, when the press returned to the Point as the first gender-integrated class prepared for graduation, exacerbating the polarization among the male cadets and the stress of the female cadets (p. 181). The epilogue fast forwards to Reception Day 2000 for the Class of 2004.

Janda’s contextualization is a valuable tool for anyone seeking to understand the process of gender integration at the military academies. I would add three additional contextual factors that merit consideration. First, Janda notes that most believed that the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was imminent and would ultimately have forced gender integration of the academies. I would add that Congressional members clearly wanted to capitalize on the momentum of the women’s at the ballot box, and so felt the need to pre-empt ERA ratification by pushing gender issues elsewhere. Second, members of Congress were anxious to appeal to eighteen- to twenty-year-old voters, newly enfranchised by the 26th Amendment in 1971, and needed to embrace a more progressive politics in order to do so in the post-Vietnam era. Therefore West Point was not the only institution affected by the war, as Janda so care-

fully documents. Third, gender boundaries in the military institution had been shifting since the Armed Forces Integration Act of 1948 gave women a permanent rather than temporary/auxiliary presence in the armed forces. For example, in 1955 the Bolton Amendment (69 SL 579) opened military nursing to men, and in 1971 the marriage bar was lifted by the Air Force and Navy, followed by the Army in 1973. President Johnson had abolished the 2 percent force strength ceiling and rank restrictions for military women in 1967; the numbers and proportion of women in the services subsequently ballooned with the abolition of the draft. In the early 1970s, the Navy began assigning women to sea duty and abolished the separate women's channels of communications. Women achieved the rank of Brigadier General in the Army in 1970 and in the Air Force in 1971, and Admiral in the Navy in 1972. Air Force ROTC was opened to women in 1969, followed by Army and Navy ROTC in 1972; the Coast Guard Academy began accepting women in 1973, so women were becoming officers everywhere except the federal military academies by the time Congress passed the Defense Appropriations Authorization Act of 1976 (PL 94-106).

Janda's account puts integration-resistant West Point men in a somewhat sympathetic light. He argues that while hazing and harassment of women cadets were intense, not all participated (pp. 93-100). While this argument is persuasive *prima facie*, I could not help but think of the "Good Germans" who did not actively participate in or approve of Nazi genocide during WWII but who did nothing to oppose the policies of intimidation and brutality. Of course, many Germans did actively oppose such treatment and risked much in doing so, just as the few young men who vocally opposed or refused to participate in this mistreatment of women cadets at West Point in 1976-1980 risked isolation and rejection by their peers. But here is where Janda's analysis falls short: he does not explain why some young men were willing to support gender integration despite societal, institutional, and interpersonal pressures to resist the violation of this gender boundary. Why were not all men bound by the same need to safeguard the core of masculinity-defining institutions and practices in U.S. society?

Why is Janda's account so sanguine? I think there are at least three reasons. First, the sample is skewed. Janda has done extensive and valuable interviews with women who stayed at USMA and continued their military careers: these are the survivors. Entering the Class of 1980 were 1,519 cadets, 119 of whom were women. Only sixty-two of the women who entered the class graduated; in

other words, only half of the women survived. How does that compare to the retention rates for male cadets in the same year? In subsequent years? Janda interviewed several women "who entered the Academy with the class in 1976 but left prior to graduation," but his account focuses on those who stayed (pp. xxvi, xx). What might we learn from those who left that first class, and from those who continue to leave subsequent classes? How much did a hostile climate, including sexual and gender harassment, figure in their decision to exit the academy?

Second, perhaps many of the women who stayed have coped with the hostile environment by adopting the persona of the "gender-neutral professional," as Cynthia Enloe has framed it: perhaps they learned to ignore the hostility and harassment or to see it as *de rigueur*, as "business-as-usual." I have been surprised to find that most young women in my college classrooms still see behaviors defined by the EEOC as sexual harassment, such as unwanted comments and physical contact, as "just the way things are." That is, the environment of the institution has not changed; women themselves have adapted in order to fit in or have been silenced in order to keep the peace. This seems clear in Amy Efav's recent novel about West Point, *Battle Dress*, in which she depicts the pressures women cadets face and the unwritten code women cadets adopt to survive in what remains a masculinist institution. Efav herself is a 1989 West Point graduate, so her fiction likely reflects the reality of her own experiences. Her novel demonstrates that gender integration has come at a price for women. Women cadets continue to isolate themselves socially from one another and from male cadets to appear "professional" and to avoid scrutiny of their personal lives, and military women as a group continue to be judged by the performance of individual women who "can't hack it." [3]

Third, academy men themselves, bowing to the power of "political correctness," as the institution's stated rules have changed, have learned what to say and what not to say publicly to protect their careers. In this context, gender hostility is driven underground but not eradicated (much, I would argue, as racial hostility has been driven underground but not eradicated). There is a vast difference between "tolerance" (that is, "we have to put up with you being here") and "acceptance" (that is, "we welcome your presence and contribution to the corps of cadets"). So the picture is sanguine because cadets and servicewomen and men are all trying to "talk the talk."

This is not to fault Janda's methodology but rather to point out the continuing politicized context of his

ethnographic research: although those interviewed were promised anonymity, people still inside the institution risk much in telling their stories. This may have had a “chilling effect” on their ability to speak freely, despite reassurances of confidentiality. Janda is sensitive to this, noting that the historian’s work “may have consequences for persons whose reputations, memories, and even careers are bound up in conclusions reached at a comfortable distance from actual events” (p. xx). His subjects were, of course, cognizant of this as well and their stories must necessarily be understood in light of these constraints. We might also interrogate other accounts of women’s first year at West Point to understand the politics of gender integration. Capt. Carol Barkalow published her story ten years after her graduation from the Point, revealing the acts of specialized hazing women cadets endured, which Barkalow labeled as a gendered form of “terrorism” (pp. 25-26). One officer who later chose to exit rather than to adapt to the institution’s gender-hostile environment writes about her experiences first as a cadet and later as an instructor at West Point under the pseudonym “Billie Mitchell.”[4] The time frame covered is late 1980s/early 1990s, yet she describes many incidents of hazing and harassment similar to those detailed by both Barkalow and Janda: time seems to have stood still at USMA. Former USAFA cadet Beth Hillman reports even more graphically on the continuing hostile climate at Colorado Springs in the 1990s, describing WUBA jokes, sex traps, and gang rapes.[5] Recent survey data on sexual harassment and on attitudes towards women in combat as well as the sex extortion scandal at Aberdeen Proving Ground signal that women remain at the margin, not fully part of the military institution.

Janda contends that racial integration of USMA was “easier” than gender integration because “gender is fundamentally different” from race (pp. xxv, 49). But riots during the Vietnam conflict and simmering racial tensions on a number of installations today suggest that race integration is a complicated, lengthy, and incomplete process. I see more similarities than differences between race and gender: both are socially constructed dimensions of difference—that is, society dictates that the differences of color and of sex “make a difference” in terms of rights, reward, place, and power. Military leaders continue to worry about people of color being “over-represented” in the ranks, and the Bush administration has begun a review of women in the armed forces that looks much like former President Reagan’s attempt to “hold the line” on women. And what of women of color? How many women in the Class of 1980 were

women of color, and how were their experiences similar to and different from those of white women? What proportion of each class are students of color, and how do retention rates compare to those for white cadets? Also, Janda notes that Army enlisted women were actively recruited to enter the first co-ed class (p. 45). Which women survived the first class at West Point? The appendix lists women who graduated from USMA in the Class of 1980, but not those who left, and does not provide information on race/ethnicity or prior military service (pp. 201-203). From a social science perspective, I would like to see comparative data on admission, retention, and attrition rates as well as reports of hazing, sexual harassment, and assault then and now, to substantiate Janda’s claim that custom has changed.

#### Notes

[1]. Cpt. Carol Barkalow, with Andrea Raab, *In the Men’s House: An Inside Account of Life in the Army* (New York: Poseidon, 1990; Berkley Publishing Group, 1992); Donna Peterson, *Dress Gray: A Woman at West Point* (Austin, Texas: Eakin Publishing, 1990); and Lillian A. Pfluke, “Too Bad She’s a Girl” in *Gender Camouflage: Women and the U.S. Military*, eds. Francine D’Amico and Laurie Weinstein (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 80-83.

[2]. Lt. Col. Edward King, *The Death of an Army: A Pre-Mortem* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972); Maj. Josiah Bunting, *The Lionheads* (New York: George Braziller, 1972); K. Bruce Galloway and Robert Bowie Johnson, Jr., *West Point: America’s Power Fraternity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973); and Joseph Ellis and Robert Moore, *School for Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[3]. Amy Efaw, *Battle Dress* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2000).

[4]. Billie Mitchell, “The Creation of Army Officers and the Gender Lie: Betty Grable or Frankenstein?” in *It’s Our Military, Too! Women and the U.S. Military*, ed. Judith Hicks Stiehm (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 35-59. See also Missy Cummings, *Hornet’s Nest: The Experiences of One of the Navy’s First Female Fighter Pilots* (San Jose, Calif.: Writer’s Digest, 1999), by a 1988 graduate of USNA at Annapolis.

[5]. Elizabeth Lutes Hillman, “Uniform Identities: Women, Gender, and Images at the United States Service Academies” (M.A. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1994).

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