

Grateful Memories of a Slow Learner

Epigraphs

“Abe Lincoln once said [16 June 1858], 'If we could first know *where we are*, and *whither we are tending*, we could better judge *what to do*, and *how to do it*.' Lifted from its domestic political context in 1858 into the global political context of the early twenty-first century [circa 2004], **this proposition retains refreshing clarity**. By the late 1980s, as the Cold War was [seemingly] ending, answers were being offered to **Lincoln's timeless questions**, and over the next decade several more followed. Some of them are now widely known by their slogans—'imperial overstretch,' 'the end of history,' 'the obsolescence of war,' 'the democratic peace,' 'the grand chessboard,' 'the clash of civilizations,' and 'globalization.' Others have captured less public attention, remaining relegated to academic circles [*e.g.*, traditional 'political realism' found in Thucydides, Machiavelli, or in the strategist James Burnham]. None, however, has been widely accepted as explaining '*where we are*' or '*whither we are tending*,' to say nothing of addressing the other two questions ['*what to do*' and '*how to do it*']. Each proffered answer provides important insights—some more than others—and all taken together still do **not** suggest even **a core of consensus**.

If that was not clear before the events of 11 September 2001, it certainly was afterward....The larger issues of the place and role of American power in the world,...especially US alliance relations [*e.g.*, with NATO or with Israel], remain confusing.” (Lieutenant General William E. Odom and Robert Dujarric, *America's Inadvertent Empire* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 1—italics in the original; my bold emphasis added)

“After it was attacked on 11 September 2001, American leaders essentially ignored the resolution [“to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty **for the first time**”]....They simultaneously disdained 'multilateralism' and appealed to it for creating a coalition to fight terrorism, **apparently unaware that 'terrorism' cannot be defeated, that it is not an enemy but a tactic—a tactic, moreover, that the United States has widely used [and is not “the choice of tactics itself a part of strategy”]?**.” (Lieutenant General William E. Odom (US Army-Retired) and Robert Dujarric, *America's Inadvertent Empire*, p. 2—my emphasis added)

“Instinctively most Americans know that **the arrogance of power is power's greatest enemy....Our accounting of American power, therefore, is meant to induce reflective modesty in American political discourse so that responsibilities of that power can be properly understood at a confusing time....**Understanding...requires recognizing that the United States has created, **perhaps inadvertently, a new type of empire. It is an empire, but not the traditional kind.**” (W. E. Odom and R. Dujarric, *America's Inadvertent Empire*, pp. 4-5—my emphasis added)

“[It was, however, John Quincy] Adams, who said **in 1821**, on the subject of our fighting to liberate [Christian] Greece from [Moslem] Turkey, the United States 'goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.' If the United States took up all foreign affairs, 'she might become a dictatress of the world. She would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit,' her own soul....President Adams [Our 6th President, 1825-1829] is long since dead [**d. 1848**]. **And we have now been in the empire business since 1898:** We had promised to give the Filipinos their **independence** from Spain. Then we changed our mind, **killing some 200,000 of them in the process of Americanizing them.**” (Gore Vidal, “We Are The Patriots” (*The Nation Magazine*, 2 June 2003—published just after our morally and strategically disastrous invasion of Iraq, as General Odom himself also firmly believed and boldly said so!)

“I am a **lifelong thanatophobe**” (1973).... “**As I now move graciously, I hope,** toward the door marked Exit...” (2006) (These words about death were poignantly expressed at different times and in different places by Gore Vidal, who was born at West Point on 3 October 1925 and was to die in California on 31 July 2012 at eighty-six years of age, while the American empire was in greater trouble, not only with Migrations and with Islam and with the larger **strategy**, as well as the “tactic of terrorism.”)

When a 1954 graduate of the West Point Military Academy consented to read and critique an extended monograph I had written on the strategic imperial phenomenon of Private Military Companies and Security Services (also in the clandestine or covert world), I was fearfully hesitant to let him do so. For, he was a very learned and keen-minded man, and a retired Lieutenant General then also teaching as an Adjunct Visiting Professor at Yale University. Although he was a beloved teacher there, he was also known for his incisive candor and his intimidating trenchancy.

After he had closely read and marked up the then-unpublished essay, he told his secretary to have me call him on the telephone at his private residence in the countryside of Vermont. I did and we had a very good conversation, ranging over many topics of moment, to include the methods and grave

consequences of the British East India Company historically. Suddenly he said: “You have so much packed into this essay — but you're all over the place. You must write a large and disciplined book about this topic.” I told him I would never do that, in part because it was not among my main interests, and, in any case, even if I did make an acceptable book for publication, it would be mightily resisted because my thinking about this topic is too unconventional and too critical of certain predominant (and often squalid) oligarchs.

He then asked me: “What are your main interests? And tell me more about yourself. And why haven't we met before? Except very briefly once.” When I told him that I had graduated from the Military Academy in 1964, ten years after his own Class of 1954, he became even more curious.

After listening to some of my experiences and comments, he again bluntly said: “You have to publish your *Memoirs*.” I told him that I would never do such a thing — but, if I ever did, I would entitle it *Memoirs of a Slow Learner*. He said: “I like that title. In fact, I think I'll now use it myself.” While laughing mirthfully at his own charming bumptiousness, I said: “If you do, I'll come after you like a heat-seeking missile.”

I have never forgotten that lengthy and enriching conversation. Later — it was in June of 2008 — I memorably walked with his son, just the two of us on foot, at his funeral at Arlington Cemetery. We walked all the way and closely behind the horses drawing the limber with the coffin. (His son was in military uniform, an active-duty lieutenant colonel in Army Special Forces then stationed in a unit on the west coast in Washington State.)

Almost ten years earlier, at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, that retired Army Lieutenant General — William Odom — first memorably and vividly came into my life, in person — but only very briefly. It was in 1999, I recall, and he was giving a visiting lecture to the Graduate Students there and I was invited to attend. (For, I too was visiting from the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado where I was at that time still on the Faculty.) After General Odom's excellent and acutely candid presentation, he invited his audience to ask him their questions and to make them as challenging and bold as they would like! After the Graduate Students had posed many good questions, I myself asked one and then even a second question some fifteen minutes later. To my first question General Odom looked sternly down and then more reflectively said: “That's a good question.” To my follow-up second question he more promptly and quite fearsomely said: “I want to speak with you after this talk. You wait for me in the back of the room.”

Stunned by this trenchancy, I thought for sure that I was in trouble! When he later approached me at the rear of the auditorium, he for the first time asked me: “Who are you? And why haven't we met before?” I only then replied: “Sir, I'm nobody. But, it might also be your fault that we have never met before now. I hope you will forgive my portion of dereliction.” (I had smiled and, then, so did he.) I would understandably always remember that first and unexpected meeting. I could already well understand why he was also affectionately known as “Wild Bill Odom.” He was certainly a great man and always “after the truth.” As a 1954 Graduate of West Point from Tennessee, he is, unmistakably, like Robert E. Lee himself from Virginia, an honorable Member of the Long Gray Line. Even Gore Vidal, who is himself so sternly critical of West Point and its malign influence, would likely agree. In 1973, as we shall see, Vidal would publish an essay that he later (in 1977) called “**my attack on nearly two hundred years of American imperialism as symbolized by the US Military Academy at West Point (where my father was an instructor when I was born)**”¹ — but he still would likely make an exception for Bill Odom and his own bold 2004 book, entitled *America's Inadvertent Empire*.² One should gratefully and expectantly acknowledge — and allow for — Gore Vidal's own sincere tributes to such candor and high moral (and intellectual) character inasmuch as Gore Vidal so highly also honored his own exceptional father, Gene Vidal, a West Point Graduate of the Class of 1918 and an especially gifted, versatile athlete while at the Academy and afterwards, also in aeronautics. (Gore Vidal was himself born in the old and quite small West Point Cadet Hospital in 1925, on 3 October.)

But now we should consider more closely what Gore Vidal wrote, almost a half a century later, about the West Point Military Academy, namely in mid-October of 1973 — almost three years before women were first admitted to the Academy (in July of 1976) and some four years after his own father's death (on 20 February 1969) and during our Vietnam War, almost two years before America's acknowledged defeat (30 April 1975, with the North Vietnamese Conquest of Saigon). Although Vidal makes some unfair and unsupported assertions, his observations as a Populist Patriot and as a

- 1 See Gore Vidal's Letter to the Editor of *The New York Review of Books* (in the 14 July 1977 Issue). It was “For the Record” in response to “*West Point and the Third Loyalty*” earlier published in the 18 October 1973 Issue of NYR of Books, pages 21-28. This essay on West Point was also later published in Gore Vidal's 1977 collection of essays, entitled *Matters of Fact and of Fiction: Essays 1973-1976* (New York: Random House, 1977). In June of 2003, **thirty years** after his original essay on *West Point and the Third Loyalty*, Gore Vidal wrote another potently critical essay about our vanishing Republic and spreading Empire, and that piece of acuteness and maturity should also be read in this context. It is entitled “**We Are the Patriots,**” *The Nation* (2 June 2003), appearing shortly after our March 2003 invasion of Iraq.
- 2 Lieutenant General William E. Odom (US Army-Retired) and Robert Dujarric, *America's Inadvertent Empire* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004).

longstanding opponent of the American Imperium will challenge us worthily still. His Leftist orientation is well known, I think, even today; as are his own disordered homoerotic proclivities. Yet, as is fitting, we must preserve a standard of fairness while examining his provocative writing, which also exemplifies for all of us an eloquent instance of lucid English prose, itself an unambiguous aid to clear thinking.

In Chapel Hill, North Carolina in late October of 1973 — but just before our great Scottish teacher of Classical Greek, Douglas Young, suddenly and so unexpectedly died (on 23 October 1973) — Professor David Sider, another one of my cherished Classics professors in Graduate School (and a vividly young teacher of Greek) gave me the just-published 18 October issue of the openly leftist and somewhat ideological *New York Review of Books*. David Sider explicitly pointed out to me an article on pages 21-28 written by Gore Vidal and entitled “West Point and the Third Loyalty.” (David already knew that I had attended West Point and had graduated in June of 1964, shortly before first arriving in Saigon, Vietnam, in early September 1964. He told me that I would likely be disturbed and even shocked by Vidal's article, especially some of its mockery. David himself, only slightly older than I, was ethnically Jewish and from a Leftist background in New York City. And, perhaps surprisingly, we always had good and respectful discussions, also outside of class. I owe so much to him as a teacher, and I think he knew that I cherished him and his learned generosity.)

Therefore, I followed Professor Sider's recommendation and at once went to the Graduate Library to read in private Gore Vidal's thoroughly provocative article. Indeed, I was shaken and shocked. Though still a callow thirty years of age.

Just recently re-reading this Vidal article after some forty-three years, while being now myself almost seventy-four years of age, I understandably have some other perceptions and further forms of understanding. For, I have now experienced more fully what has transpired at West Point itself over the years (since 3 June 1964), as well as in our larger Military Culture and thus in our somewhat centrifugal (and often all-too-expeditionary) American Imperium with its own, sometimes covertly oligarchical, *Arcana Imperii*. (As was so with the British East India Company, historically, starting even in the Sixteenth Century under Queen Elizabeth, and later expanding greatly, not only in India and China.)

On the premise that “contrast clarifies the mind,” even the mind of a “slow learner,” I propose now to consider here more fully in print Gore Vidal's original article on West Point. We shall

then also better be able to understand why Vidal admired the Roman Emperor, Julian the Apostate (ruling as the Emperor 361-363 A.D.); and why Gore Vidal was increasingly critical of modern Israel and its “fifth columns” in America; and why, even as a dedicated Civil Libertarian, he wanted to have population control (as a Neo-Malthusian), and even compulsively so, if finally necessary, even to the point of having State-required-and-enforced sterilizations. That range of thought is a large mission for anyone to criticize, and it could then only be treated somewhat briefly and not deeply enough to satisfy our own sense of honor and desired integrity. Nonetheless, we may help to initiate some further explorations by others and thereby grow a little in wisdom ourselves, even us “slow learners” who have remained grateful, knowing that we have been the beneficiaries of many indispensable gifts, to include our mentors.

Gore Vidal's article, it should be mentioned at the outset, was occasioned by his review of two books: *West Point: America's Power Fraternity* by K. Bruce Galloway and Robert Bowie Johnson, Jr. (himself a West Point Graduate in the Class of 1965); and *Defeated: America's Military Machine* by Stuart H. Loory.

Vidal begins his essay with some hearsay evidence, as well as some more reliable evocative facts, and at once he thereby captures our benevolence, as the teachers of Rhetoric instruct us to do — and without cant:

On the table at which I write [some four years after my father's death, on 20 February 1969] is a small silver mug with a square handle; it is inscribed to *Eugene L. Vidal, Jr., October 3, 1925*—a gift from the West Point football team to its mascot, which that year was not a mule but me. I drank milk from that cup for a good many years and from the look of the rim did a bit of teething on it, too.

I have no early memory of West Point. Apparently I was born in the cadet hospital on a Saturday morning because my mother had decided to stay on the post and to go to a football game....

More than thirty years later I visited General Snyder at his office in the basement of the White House [the officer who in 1925 had delivered him at West Point as a Major, because he was officer of the day, although he was not an obstetrician!]. He recalled my birth....Then the inevitable question, “Why didn't *you* go to the Point?” **A member of a West Point family had chosen not to join the Long Gray Line. Something wrong there.** (p. 21 and following, for seven pages to page 28—italics in the original; my bold emphasis added. See *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 20, Number 16,

18 October 1973, pp. 21-28)³

Gore Vidal then tells us more about his Dad (1895-1969):

At the time of my birth Eugene L. Vidal, *Sr.* was known as Gene Vidal to the world of jocks—and to just about everyone else in the country, for in those days college athletes were like rock stars (Scott Fitzgerald's apostrophe to Princeton's Hobie Baker is plainly tribute to a god). Class of 1918, G.V. was an All-American quarterback; he is still regarded as the best all-around athlete in the history of the Academy, moving with equal ease from track to basketball to football to rugby (learned in one afternoon); a master of every sport except the one invented by Abner Doubleday (West Point 1842). “Baseball is the favorite American sport because it's so slow,” G.V. used to say. “Any idiot can follow it. And just about any idiot can play it.” After graduation he came back to the Point as football coach; he was also the first instructor in aeronautics.

Shortly after I was born [in 1925], G.V. resigned from the army (**he found it boring**) and went into civil aviation. But as with most West Pointers of his generation **the links between him and the Academy proved to be unbreakable**. Although **his disposition was ironic, his style deflationary, his eye for the idiosies of the military sharp**, he took **some pride** in being not only a part of the history of the Point but also **a kind of icon** for those graduates who came to prominence in the Second War. (2—my emphasis added)

Vidal then presents a compact paragraph wherein he makes a whole series of grave charges, sometimes implicit, but often bluntly explicit:

The Eisenhowers, Grovesses, Stratemeyers, Ridgways, and Maxwells [all of them Generals] **created the American empire**; they also gave us **the peacetime draft, a garrison state, and the current military debacle** in Southeast Asia [Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia, especially]. With the best will in the world (and with the blessing of their civilian masters to whom the cold war was good business), these **paladins** have in the quarter century since Hiroshima wasted lives and money while treating with contempt the institutions [?] of the republic. Now the game [sic] is changing—the army, too. Currently the West Pointers are fighting for **a permanent draft** [and soon an **“All-Voluntary Military”**], perhaps, if the proposed Draft fails]. **Otherwise**, they tell us, we will be an **“unrepresentative” (i.e., black) military establishment**. But these same officers never objected to the prewar army, which was redneck and every bit as unrepresentative of the nation—that is to say, every bit as dumb as **the coming black army** because nobody smart (black or white) is going to be an enlisted man in the American army if he can help it. (2—my emphasis added)

3 Henceforth, all reference to the pagination of Gore Vidal's essay will be from the public Reprint of “West Point and the Third Loyalty” which I have recently purchased and electronically received from *The New York Review of Books*. The Reprint is now presented on **fourteen** pages, instead of the original seven or eight pages. Page references to the Reprint Version will be henceforth be placed in parentheses above in the main body of this essay.

Resorting to some unusual words, Vidal describes his father a little more:

Like a number of **high-powered cadets** Gene Vidal was hypergamous [aspiring to, if not quite disposed to, “marry upward” as it were into a higher social stratum or prestigious status]. Yet, as a boy growing up in Madison, South Dakota, he was **not particularly ambitious**, as far as one can tell—which is not much: **he had no memory for the past**, his own or that of the family. He was so vague, in fact, that he was not certain if his middle initial “L.” stood for Louis, or for Luther. It was Luther. At fourteen [in 1939] I settled the confusion by taking my grandfather's name Gore. (2-3—my emphasis added)

When an ambitious Congressman saw Gore Vidal's father playing football at “the University of South Dakota,” he earnestly asked him, “How would you like an appointment to West Point?” (3) “And where, answered my father with his usual charm and inability to dissemble, 'is West Point? And what is there?’” (3—my emphasis added) And, with some revealing light irony, Gore Vidal adds:

He was promptly appointed [to the Academy]; thus ended his dream of becoming a barber because barbers seemed to have a lot of free time.... Certainly G.V.'s father Felix was no model....Felix's father [Eugen Fidel Vidal] had been born in Feldkirch, Austria [in the mountainous region of Vorarlberg], **of Romansch stock, descendants of the Roman legionnaires** who settled in Raetia in the first century). **A hypergamous adventurer...**, Eugen Fidel Vidal married Emma von Traxler Hartmann of Lucerne, Switzerland—an heiress until she married him and got herself disinherited....**I go into all this family history because it has a good deal to do with the kind of men that went to West Point in those days [circa 1914-1920].”** (3)

After this introduction Gore Vidal summarizes his father's and his own family's background (even some of the Roman Catholic elements). And he also suggests some of the characteristics the cadets of those days purportedly had in common — especially the more gifted ones who later made a name for themselves. First we consider his Dad, and then his Dad's fellow cadets, a few of whom, such as Maxwell Taylor, were treated with sarcastic irony:

Athlete. **Lapsed Roman Catholic.** The meager prairie background [in Madison, south Dakota], somewhat confused by a family tradition of exciting wars (the Traxlers and the Hartmanns [from the Catholic Lucerne region] had been professional soldiers for several hundred years). Then [came] West Point **and the companionship of men like himself.** In the class three years ahead of G.V. were [Omar] Bradley and Eisenhower (Ike was known as the “Swedish Jew”—my father as “Tony the Wop”); while in the class of 1918 were Mark Clark, Leslie Groves, and Lucius Clay (who once persuaded me to write a

speech for his friend President Eisenhower on the virtues—if any—of integration [*i.e.*, military integration]: the speech was not delivered). Among those my father taught [as an Instructor of Aeronautics] was **the grand architect of our empire's Sicilian adventure** [*i.e.*, Athens' disastrous Sicilian Expedition, 415-413 B.C., in the Peloponnesian War] **in Southeast Asia, the Alcibiades** [also with Nicias?] **of counterinsurgency**, [General] **Maxwell Taylor**.

These men had a good deal in common **even before** they were put into **the pressure cooker on the Hudson**. Most came from **rural** backgrounds; from **lower-middle-class** families; **certainly** they were **not representative of the country's ruling class**: in this [20th] century **our nobles have not encouraged their sons** to go to West Point. There were also no blacks at the Academy and few, if any, Jews and Roman Catholics. (3-4—my emphasis added)

Gore Vidal, slightly correcting the “dark view of the Academy” expressed in one of the books under review, simply said that “all West Pointers tend to look out for one another”; and he further admitted that he himself once made such “use of privilege” during World War II when, in a difficulty, he promptly “signaled to **the nonexistent but very real West Point Protective Society** [the “WPPA”] in order that he could be transferred from the Infantry to the Air Force (Army Air Corps) and thereby avoid being “butchered on the Rhine” with other “half-trained eighteen-year-olds.” (4) Looking back on this matter thirty years later (1943-1973), Vidal wholeheartedly said:

I do not in the least regret this use of privilege and would do it again; but privilege comes from the Latin words meaning “private law,” and **even in a would-be canting democracy like ours** there **ought** to be only public laws. (4—my emphasis added)

Now, however, we shall glimpse some of Gore Vidal's sophistry and also, regrettably, his additionally unworthy sneering, especially when he discusses the West Point Motto: “Duty, Honor, Country.” On the last page of his article he again mentions “**the Duty, Honor, Country boys**,” as well as “General Butler” (Marine Major General Smedley Butler), the physically and morally courageous author of *War Is a Racket* (1935). Then, while remembering May 1969 and his standing alone with the ashes of his own father, he presents us with his essay's last two sentences:

Although I have always found poignant (yes, even honorable) the loyalty of West Pointers to one another, I could not help thinking **as I walked away from them for the last time** that the harm they have done to this republic and to the world elsewhere **far outweighs their personal excellence, their duty, their honor**. But then **the country** that they never understood **was always last in their affections, and so the first of their loyalties to be betrayed**. (13—my emphasis added)

Thus, we may now better anticipate what we shall come to face justly and, we hope, manfully, when we consider the last portion (on pages 5-13) of Gore Vidal's sobering essay. We shall sincerely try to understand him and to differentiate his many concentrated and often eloquent insights. We now turn fittingly to that last section of his often heart-wrenching as well as insulting essay.

When he resumes his presentation by first mentioning the West Point Motto — “Duty, Honor, Country” — he seems to intend a provocation:

Duty, Honor, Country. That is the motto of West Point. It is **curious** that **no one** until recently [sic] seems to have made much of **the ominous precedence** that makes the nation the **third** loyalty of **our military elite**. Duty comes first. But duty **to what?** (4-5—italics in the original; my bold emphasis added)

Quoting other writers, such as the authors of one of the two books under review, Vidal dubiously offers one reductive answer: duty to “the officer corps.” Citing then “a veteran instructor at the Point,” Vidal only quotes him as quite superficially saying: “In **my** system of **values** [sic] West Point comes first, the Army second, and the country comes third.” (5—my emphasis added) Who would think that this Instructor is, after all his years of teaching, a genuinely deep and wholesomely formative thinker ? He is a pathetic straw man to me, for sure.

Vidal begins his next paragraph with one word and a period: “Honor.” What a transition from his perfunctory treatment of “Duty.” Even the brevity is a mockery, as well as a trifling.

Vidal finds “particularly interesting” Galloway and Johnson's presentation of “the origins of West Point's honor system.” (5) Continuing his implicit, even sneering, irony and depreciative diction, Vidal says:

The Academy's **true** founding father [after its Presidential Founding in 1802 by President Thomas Jefferson?], Sylvanus Thayer, was a **passionate admirer** of [Napoleon] Bonaparte [and also his gifted French Military Engineers?]; he also found good things [unnamed] in the Prussian system [undefined]. Although the United States [in the early 19th Century] **did not seem** to have **much** need for **an officer caste** when he took charge of the Academy in 1817 (**of course** the British had **burned down** Washington [D.C.] a few years earlier [in the War of 1812] **but that sort of thing doesn't happen very often**), Thayer set about **creating a four-year hell** for the young men **sent** to him [involuntarily?] from all over the country. They were kept **constantly** busy; **treated like robots**; given an honor **system** which, **simply put**, **required** them to **spy** on one another, to **police** one another. (5—my emphasis added)

After our savoring of this representative caricature and incongruous set of assertions without

supportive evidence, we should be put on alert for the remainder of Gore Vidal's article. It would make this current essay inordinately long and tedious, if I were to point out or suggest too many more instances of Gore Vidal's deft satire and his recurrently artful hyperboles. But, unlike the spiritually Catholic and tonally generous satires of the poet John Dryden (d.1700), we do not laugh or even warmly smile at Gore Vidal's reductionist, if not inordinately derisive and smirking, ungenerosity.

Moreover, Vidal then even more sharply and gnawingly says about that caricatured West Point "Honor System" of his imagination that:

This sort of system is always diabolic and **usually** effective, particularly in an **environment** ["a four-year hell"] like West Point where,...**"at a tender** age, the West Point Cadet learns that **military rules** [unspecified] are **sacred and** in time **readily** accepts them as **a substitute for integrity.**" (5—my emphasis added)

Supportively continuing his lengthy citation from a military lawyer, "Colonel L.C. West of the Judge Advocate General Corps" (5), Vidal stunningly reports, by way of assertion, as follows:

"As he ["the West Point Cadet"] progresses through his military career, **the [military] rules remain uppermost** in his **code** of honor. In fact [sic], his 'honor' is **entwined** with the rules and **so long as** he **obeys** the rules, **whatever their content,** or **whatever manner of man or fool may have written them,** his honor [sic] is sound." (5—my emphasis added)

So much for Colonel West and his lampoon. But Vidal still chooses to pile on some more, as if that lampoon were revelatory of reality, and also explanatory:

This [depiction by West] **explains** the **ease** with which these **self-regarding** young men whose honor **is, officially,** not to lie, cheat, or steal [nor tolerate those cadets that do!] (or go to the bars [off post] in Highland Falls [illicitly]) **can with such ease cover up a massacre like My Lai** [in Vietnam], or...**falsify** bombing reports, **invent** military victories in order to help one another get decorations and promotions—not to mention **taking bribes** from those large corporations whose manufacture of expensive weaponry **absorbs** so much of the military budget. (5—my emphasis added)

After this swift kind of indictment and contemptuous dismissiveness, Vidal abruptly moves on to the third part of the West Point Motto. Once again, he begins his paragraph and purported assessment with one word and a full-stop period: "Country." (5) He proceeds at once to say:

To the West Pointer **loyalty** to the United States comes **after** loyalty to the Academy **and** to himself [sic]. Over the years **this lack of patriotism** has not gone entirely unnoticed. In fact, ever since the Academy was founded [by

President Thomas Jefferson] there have been critics of **Thayer's military elite and its separateness** from the rest of the country. (5—my emphasis added)

In support of his last point about a “military elite,” Vidal quotes the words of the Academy's third superintendent, Alden Partridge, himself a West Point graduate in the Class of 1806, four years after its 1802 founding. Partridge himself said, as Vidal now directly quotes him with some ellipses, that this early Academy was “monarchial, **corrupt and corrupting...a palpable** violation of the constitution and laws of the country, and its **direct** tendency [is] to **introduce and build up a privileged order** of the **very worst** class — **a military aristocracy** — in the United States.” (5—my emphasis added) As a Civil Libertarian himself, Vidal finds such a “monarchial” and “military aristocracy” entirely reprehensible and irredeemable — even if it were to be more abidingly virtuous. This doctrinal position will be continuously ardently maintained by Gore Vidal, even thirty years later, as will be seen in his essay in *The Nation* (3 June 2003), entitled “We Are The Patriots.”

Adding some force to his own conclusion about West Point as an institution, Vidal now even quotes “the radical Republican Senator B.F. Wade of Ohio” discussing, in 1863, a Congressional Bill concerning the “proposed abolition” of West Point 61 years after its establishment: “I do not believe that there can be found, **on the whole face of the earth...any** institution that has turned out **so many false, ungrateful men** as have **emanated** from this institution.” (6—my emphasis added) Was B.F. Wade perhaps especially thinking of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee? (Would that we knew more about Senator Wade and his other charmingly hyperbolic denunciations.)

Vidal's next paragraph suggests that B.F. Wade's forms of indictment might even be contagious, but, once again, Gore Vidal is now even more unforgiving and astringently ideological, and his own invective is not at all so charming — do we agree? For example:

For more than a century [1863-1973] West Pointers have returned the **compliment** [so ironically showered on them by the likes of B.F. Wade!]: they do **not** like civilians, while **their contempt for politicians** is as **nearly** as perfect as **their ignorance of the institutions** of the country that they are **required** to serve—**after duty, that is; after honor**. Specifically, **my father's generation—the empire builders**—disliked Jews, regarded blacks as low comedy relief, politicians as corrupt, **Filipinos** as sly...**still fresh in everybody's memory** [in my father's generation] **was the slaughter by the American army of three million [sic] Filipinos** at the beginning of the [20th] century: the largest **experiment in genocide** the world was to know **until** Hitler [sic—or, at least until the Anti-Armenian genocidal Turks; and also the other later experiments conducted by Josef Stalin and by Lazar Kaganovich, to

include a deliberately engineered famine in Ukraine!]. **The West Pointers regard only one another with true reverence.** (6—my emphasis added)

Gore Vidal's next several subsequent paragraphs on pages six and seven are especially painful for me to read closely and fittingly to grapple with, for they are pervaded with injustice and excessive derision. Since I myself graduated one year before one of the authors of *West Point*, Robert Bowie Johnson, Jr. (himself of the class of 1965), I could give much additional evidence contrary to the sweeping conclusions reached by both Johnson and Gore. Although I cannot do that supplement now, I ask the reader of Gore Vidal's thirteen-page essay to be very alert and thoroughly skeptical — and to pose two fundamental questions recurrently: “What do you mean?” and “How do you know?” The answers will help the reader keep a just proportion in his own germinating judgments.

With reference to R.B. Johnson's own book, for example, Vidal says:

The authors of *West Point: America's Power Fraternity* [Simon & Schuster, 448 pp.] are particularly interesting when they discuss **what goes on nowadays** in the classrooms at the Academy. One of the authors graduated in 1965 and no doubt writes from personal experience. Since the teachers tend to be graduates [with advanced civilian academic degrees], they **often have no** special knowledge of the subject they teach—nor do they need to have because each day's lesson is prepared for them [by whom?] in “blocs” [not so!]. **But then according to** General [sic—still a permanent Colonel in 1964-1965] **George A. Lincoln** [himself the long-standing head of the openly progressive Social Science Department and an avid promoter of all the “softer social sciences,” tending to bypass the Humanities and History for the spreading “tyranny of the social sciences” like “military sociology”], **the Academy's guru** [not so!] (and recent Nixon appointee [as of when?]): “West Point is an undergraduate scholarship school **without** many scholars **or [without] any great motivation for learning** as far as a material proportion of each class is concerned.” He seems rather pleased by this. Galloway and Johnson are not. They believe that the cadets are taught the ability to think and reason **without really** being able to do so [evidence?].” (6—my emphasis added)

However, later Vidal himself offers some slight affirmations as he modestly revises a little what those two more critical authors have written:

Galloway and Johnson are, I think, **too hard** on the individual **short-comings** of the West Pointers. After all, if we [sic] didn't want them to be the way they are (**militantly anticommunist, antipolitician, antidissenter**) they would be different. **A class** [military elite] **of this sort is made not born. I have known a good many West Pointers** of the **imperial** generation [not those of us of the 1964-1965 generation, however] and found them **of considerable virtue** though **none** had, **I should say**, much **sense** of the civilian world. But then how

could they? **Their education was fifth-rate**; their **lives remote** from everyday cares; **their duty and honor directed not toward the republic but toward one another**. (8—my emphasis added)

Gore Vidal once again winds up his paragraph with a strong denunciation, and it is, I think, an unfair one. Never once does he even mention that West Point is a School for Combatants and for forming them; and, simply put, its primary purpose is to teach the Art of War. The concept and reality of “the Art of War” is very large, and not just concerned with “tactical battles”!

However, Vidal will now offer us some even more deflationary and parodic comments about the cadets themselves and about their motivations for trying to enter the Academy, at least as of late 1973:

Boys who go to West Point today do so for a variety of reasons, **none** having much to do with **learning**. There is the **romantic appeal** of the Long Gray Line. There is the **cozy appeal** of a life in which **all** important decisions [*e.g.*, a cadet will have “no horse, wife, or mustache”?] will be made by others. There is the **attractive lure** of retirement at an early age—not to mention **translation** to the upper echelons of those corporations which do business with the Pentagon. Simply by stepping on an escalator, the West Pointer can have the sense of **duty done**, of **honor upheld**, of **country served**—and self, too. It is **an irresistible package** [*sic*]. Yet an instructor at the Academy recently commented (anonymously), “The cadets at West Point are **fifth-rate** [compared to whom?]” To which the answer **must** be: they are fifth-rate **because** that is what **the system** [unspecified] requires of them. Since they are no different from other American boys their age [17-21 years], their **intellectual torpor** is due to a **system** which requires **loyalty and obedience above all else** [*“Unsere Ehre heisst Treue”*?]—**two qualities that flourish most luxuriantly in the ignorant; most dangerously in the fanatic**. (6-7—my emphasis added)

Then immediately Vidal shows to his satisfaction, it seems, how such products of the Academy are especially useful for the war against communism:

It is no surprise that the **military elite** was **ravished** by the anticommunist line of their **civilian masters**. The Truman-Acheson, Eisenhower-Dulles, Kennedy-Rusk, Nixon-Nixon [*sic*] **war on commies at home and abroad** was **thrilling** to the military. For one thing the **ideals** of socialism are **anathema** to them even though, paradoxically, the West Pointer is **entirely** taken care of by the state from his birth in an army hospital (**if** he is born into a military family) to **taps at government expense** in a federal **boneyard**. Yet the West Pointer takes this **coddling** as **his due** and **does not** believe that steelworkers, say, **ought to enjoy privileges that belong rightfully to the military elite**. Retired officers are **particularly articulate** on this point.... (7—my emphasis added)

Unexpectedly — and refreshingly — Gore Vidal soon takes us back to the late 1930s:

Just before the Second War, I listened several times to Air Force [*i.e.*, Army Air Corps] generals discuss with a humor that soon **turned into obsession** the ease with which the White House could be seized, the Congress sent home, and the nation be kept out of the war that the Jew Franklin D. Rosenfeld was trying to start against Hitler.⁴ Although Hitler was a miserable joker [in this particular military view] (and probably a crypto-Jew) he was doing our work for us by killing commies. I do not think this sort of thinking is by any means dead today [in late 1973]....

The United States has now been a **garrison state** for thirty-two years [1941-1973]....And so **these** [purported] **blessings** [of military power, prowess and security, also in Korea] **continued to shower upon us** until 15 August [1973—the formal cessation of U.S. bombing in Indochina, to include Cambodia]⁵. **Has peace at last come to our restless empire?** (8—my emphasis added)

On his way to speak of “**the military-industrial-West Point complex**” (9) — and of the experience and **slow learning** of the great Marine Major General Smedley Butler himself — Gore Vidal makes a series of more erotic and unworthy comments about cadets and their putative deprivations which — according to some of the authors under review — “makes a lifetime of uneasy relations with women.” (8) Gore Vidal adds: “Life on the Hudson was even more austere in my father's day. But there were occasional mavericks.” (8)

Now Vidal will take a longer view about West Point's once providing engineers to our nation, and then further clarify for us what Smedley Butler (1881-1940), though not a West Pointer, so gradually and gratefully learned. With some sarcasm Gore Vidal slyly, but incompletely, begins:

The military-industrial-West Point complex is **more** than a century old. One of the first **functions** of the Academy [founded in 1802 by an act of President Thomas Jefferson himself] was to supply engineers to the nation [as was first also done by S. Vauban and in Napoleonic France **with its own gifted military engineers**]. West Pointers built the first railroads as well as many roads and dams [and fortifications]. **Working** as engineers **for the early tycoons**, West Pointers were brought into close contact **with the business elite** of the country **and the result has been a long and happy marriage.** (9—my emphasis)

Once again Vidal tendentiously associates — almost equates — the special qualities of West Point cadets and graduates with the larger interests and operations of the American military, as such:

- 4 For a truer and better proportioned account, see the great American diplomatic historian, Charles Callan Tansill's book, *Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy, 1933-1941* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), 690 pages.
- 5 Exactly two years earlier, **on 15 August 1971**, President Nixon made another momentous and very consequential decision: he took the United States off the Gold Standard, and we are still trying to assimilate its consequences fully. Almost a year after his **15 August 1973** bombing-cessation, President Nixon resigned from his office, **8-9 August 1974**.

The military was also used to protect American business interests overseas. On at least one occasion the business [and high-financial] interests tried to get the military to overthrow a president [Franklin D. Roosevelt]. In 1933 the Liberty League [with other corporate industrialists and financiers] secretly approached [then-retired] Major General Smedley Butler [1881-1940] and asked him to help them remove President Roosevelt. Butler turned them down flat. He also launched [first in *Common Sense* magazine in November of 1935] the most devastating attack ever made on American capitalism [including High Finance]. **Of his thirty-three years [and four months; having retired from “active service” only in 1931] in the Marine Corps [“our country’s most agile military force”], he declared** [as it is now quite selectively presented by Vidal]:⁶

“I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street, and for the Bankers. **In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism**....Like all members of the military profession [including West Pointers, not just Marines?], I never had an original thought until I left the service [only four years ago, in 1931]....I helped make Mexico—especially Tampico—safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped to make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in....”

He also lists among his field of operations Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, China (where the Marines protected Standard Oil's interests in 1927). **Butler summed up**, “Looking back on it, I feel that I might have given **Al Capone** a few hints. **The best he could do was operate his racket in three districts. I [“We Marines”] operated on three continents.**” (9—my emphasis added)

Smedley Butler — “the Fighting Quaker from Philadelphia” — also published in 1935 his own trenchant and honest 52-page pamphlet or little book, *War Is a Racket* (1935). It should be read closely, again and again. It is also still intimately applicable today, and is entirely without sophistries and tendentious caricatures of the larger U.S. Military or the Marines, whom General Butler so deeply cherished — and they him!

After some three more pages of his denunciatory caricatures of “the traditional 'West Point mind'” (11) and his other, quite often unsupported and questionable, assertions, Gore Vidal says:

The West Point Elite have not served us [sic] well even though they have **never** disguised the **fact** [sic] that we [sic—“the country”] are number three on their list of priorities [“duty, honor, **country**”]. Yet even when they try to work peacefully for the country, they are often a menace. The Army Corps of Engineers has made such an ecological mess of our rivers and lakes that [leftist Supreme Court] Justice Douglas [William O. Douglas] has termed them

6 See the Socialist Monthly Political Magazine, *Common Sense*, the Issue of November 1935 (Volume 4, Number 11), pp. 8-12. This magazine was published in the United States between 1932 and 1946; and *Common Sense* was itself intentionally named after Thomas Paine's own radical pamphlet, published anonymously on 10 January 1776.

“public enemy number one.”

Not unnaturally, the West Pointers are **most successful** at creating miniature West Points, particularly in Latin America [as of 1973] (though Ethiopia **and several other exotic countries** have been **seeded with Duty, Honor, Country academies**). All around the world West Pointers are **turning out military elites trained to fight not wars but those who would extend democracy [sic] at home**. (11—my emphasis added)

The risks taken and valor shown and the genuine self-sacrifices of at least some West Pointers are never mentioned. The selective and artful unfairness is all too cumulative. Gore Vidal seems never to let up. It is as if he effectively says: “**These are the conclusions on which I base my facts**.” There is the danger here, I think, and perhaps there is even a permanent temptation for him “**to re-arrange his factoids to fit his artifice**.” But Gore Vidal still admires his father, and gratefully.

“**Forgetting [for the moment] the morality of a republic trying to be an empire**,” Gore Vidal then says: “Certainly a large army controlled by the West Point elite will continue [as of 1973], as it has done for nearly a quarter of a century, to **squander** money and **create** wars.” (11—my emphasis added) But, he also has added: “I agree with Davy Crockett and Senator Wade: **an aristocratic military elite is deeply contrary to the idea of this republic and its constitution**.” (11—my emphasis added) Such is one of Gore Vidal's main themes, unmistakably.

Gore Vidal cannot restrain himself from deriding those who are, he claims,

As bemused by military grandeur as any [West Point] plebe, **misty eyed at the thought of the Long Gray Line and by the resonant self-aggrandizing horseshit the late Douglas Mac Arthur** [d. 5 April 1964] used so successfully to peddle [as in his eloquent and memorably poignant “Duty, Honor, Country” Address at West Point, on 12 May 1962, upon reception of the Sylvanus Thayer Award that year. I, too, was present then, seated with Major General Westmoreland, only ten yards away from the General himself at the podium.]

Self-delusion is constant in human affairs. Certainly without self-delusion on the grandest scale we could never have got into our present situation [in this October of 1973]; and West Point has certainly made its contribution [to self-delusion]. **But reality has never been West Point's bag**. (12—my emphasis added)

Returning to what was then transpiring and likely to happen still in Vietnam and larger Southeast Asia in October of 1973 — a decade and more after General Mac Arthur's “Duty, Honor, Country” Address — Gore Vidal says:

In the wake of the defeat of the American military machine [and more!] in Asia and the resulting shocks to our institutions at home, **a good many questions are bound to be asked about what sort of a country we want.** Fatigue and lack of resources have **stopped the long march** from the Atlantic to the borders of China....While according to West Point's [purportedly] current version of what happened in Vietnam, "The war... ended [some seven months after the Tet Attacks] in August of 1968 when sorely battered Communist troops were unable to engage the allied [sic] war machine." **With historians like that who need generals?....**There is mounting evidence that today's soldier will not endure much longer **West Point's traditional oppression....****The same cynical use of men** [by the senior American officers, putatively] is at work in Europe....**The American empire** is not about to lose a single of its cities to save all Europe [from the Soviets and their allies]—much less three hundred thousand fuck-ups (in the eyes of the West Point elite) with their drugs, their brawling, their fragging of officers [who are supposedly] from an alien and hostile class....The first order of business in the United State is the dismantling of the [Empire's] military machine....**Nevertheless** the military budget **must** be cut by two thirds; **and the service academies** [West Point and Annapolis, among them] **phased out.** (11-12—my emphasis)

Hardly grateful, and certainly facile, Vidal seems almost vengeful. Yet, as we have already glimpsed, by the end of his essay he has become much more elegiac. And he even exhibits a sense of a deeper tragedy as well as an unmistakable taste of final futility and sadness amidst the old warriors:

I look **guiltily** at the silver cup [a gift at my 1925 birth up there at West Point, a gift from the West Point football team], and think of the generals who gave it to me [on the day in the May of 1969, after his father had died]. On a bright day in May four years ago [1969] I stood there beside my uncle, General F.L. Vidal (W.P. 1933), at the edge of an Air Force runway near Washington, D.C. **Awkwardly**, my uncle held what looked like a shoebox. "It's *heavy*," he muttered in my ear. **I shuddered.** Like the contents of the box (my father's ashes), **I am a lifelong thanatophobe.** Behind us stood a **dozen** of G.V.'s classmates. Among them the **solemn, pompous, haggard** Leslie Groves—himself to die a few months later; **and the handsome figure of the right wing, General [Albert] Wedemeyer** [d. 17 December 1989].

After the helicopter departed on its mission, **the old generals of the empire commiserated with one another.** **The icon of their generation,** the lovely athlete of half century before, was now **entirely** gone, ashes settling upon the Virginian countryside. The generals **looked dazed**; not so much with grief **as with a sense of hurt at what time does to men, and to their particular innocence.** Although I have **always found poignant (yes, even honorable)** the loyalty of West Pointers to one another, I could not **help thinking as I walked away from them for the last time that the harm they have done** to this republic [or now an oligarchically managed and manifestly **coarsening** mass democracy?] and to the world elsewhere **far outweighs their personal**

excellence [virtue], their duty, their honor. But then the country that they **never understood** was always **last in their affections** [it's hard to love an unlovely thing, too!], and so **the first of their loyalties to be betrayed** [*i.e.*, it was, after all, presumably considered to be only “The Third Loyalty,” no?]. (13 —my emphasis added)

In response to what he believed to be an erroneous and unfair criticism of his original 1973 essay on West Point, Gore Vidal wrote a Letter to the Editor, published on Bastille Day in 1977 and “For the Record”:

For the Record

Gore Vidal

July 14, 1977 Issue [*The New York Review of Books*]

In response to:

West Point and the Third Loyalty from the October 18, 1973 issue

To the Editors:

On April 20, 1977, the *new old New York Times* reviewed a book by me called *Matters of Fact and of Fiction*. The review was reckless. On the assumption that the *new old New York Times* had not abandoned the honorable tradition of printing letters from those who had been wrongly characterized in its pages, I wrote a Letter to the Editor. The Editor chose not to print the Letter. Since the outburst was occasioned by a piece first published in this paper (“West Point and the Third Loyalty,” *NYR*, October 18, 1973), symmetry requires that I now offer *The New York Review* (as a journal of record) the letter that apparently gave offense to those responsible for the “editing” of the *new old New York Times*.

In what looks to be a review of my new collection of essays, your dispenser of book-chat tells us that my attack on nearly two hundred years of American imperialism as symbolized by the US Military Academy at West Point (where my father was an instructor when I was born) is the result of an “unresolved hostility toward his father, further evidence of which, some would argue, is Mr. Vidal’s cheerfully admitted homosexuality.”

This is quintessential *New York Times* reporting. First, it is ill-written, hence ill-edited. Second, it is inaccurate. Third, it is unintelligent in the vulgar Freudian way. There is no evidence of an “unresolved hostility” toward my father in the pages under review or elsewhere in my work. Quite the contrary. I quote from *Two Sisters, a Novel in the form of a Memoir*: “my father was the only man I ever entirely liked....” Nowhere in my writing have I “admitted” (“cheerfully” or dolefully) to homosexuality, or to heterosexuality. Even the

dullest of mental therapists no longer accepts the proposition that cold-father-plus-clinging-mother-equals-fag-offspring.

These demurs to one side, I am grateful to your employee for so beautifully demonstrating in a single sentence so many of the reasons why *The New York Times* is a perennially bad newspaper.

Gore Vidal

Ravello, Italy

The Obituary of Gore Vidal (d. 31 July 2012) in *The New York Times* (1 August 2012) was entitled “Gore Vidal Dies at 86: Prolific, Elegant, Acerbic Writer,” and written by Charles Mc Grath.

It is fitting now to quote selectively from this lengthy, nine-page Obituary (and its later-posted 3 August and 7 August Corrections), since its helps us to understand Gore Vidal a little more.

According to Charles McGrath, “Mr. Vidal said of himself: **'I'm exactly as I appear. There is no lovable person inside. Beneath my cold exterior, once you break the ice, you find cold water.'**” (2—my emphasis added) If those words were not an intentionally ironic, self-deprecating witticism, it is certainly a chilling thing for us to hear, and for him to have thought and said. What Father Francois Rabelais would, indeed, have also called “a terrible thing to think upon”!

Furthermore, says McGrath: “Mr. Vidal...was **a famous feuder**....Mr. Vidal did not suffer fools gladly — a category that for him comprised a vast swath of humanity...and he was not a sentimentalist or a romantic 'Love is not my bag,' he said.” (2—my emphasis added)

About his family, McGrath then discloses:

Mr. Vidal, who once said he has grown up in “**the** [Thyestes-cursed] **House of Atreus** [himself the father of Homer's tragic Agamemnon and Menelaus],” detested his mother, whom he frequently described as a bullying, self-pitying alcoholic. **She and Mr. Vidal's father divorced in 1935** [when young Gore Vidal was but ten years of age], and she married Hugh D. Auchincloss, the stepfather of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis—a connection that Mr. Vidal never tired of bringing up...

His fondest memories were of the years the family spent **at his maternal grandfather's sprawling home in the Rock Creek Park** neighborhood of Washington. **He loved to read to his grandfather**, who was blind, and sometimes accompanied him [Senator Thomas Gore of Oklahoma] onto the Senate floor. Mr. Vidal's lifelong interest in politics began to stir back then, **and from his grandfather, an American Firster, he probably also inherited**

his unwavering isolationist beliefs.⁷

Mr. Vidal attended St. Albans School [an elite school] in Washington, **where he lopped off his Christian names** [“Eugene Louis,” or “Eugene Luther”] and became simply Gore Vidal, which he considered more literary-sounding....After leaving St. Albans in 1939 [at 14], Mr. Vidal spent a year...in New Mexico [at “Los Alamos Ranch School”] before enrolling at [the elite] Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire....Mr. Vidal graduated at 17 [in 1942]....and **enlisted in the Army**, becoming first mate on a freight supply ship in the Aleutian Islands [off of Alaska]. (3-4—my emphasis added)

Gore Vidal's very close and apparently irreplaceable friend, himself also an exceptionally gifted athlete whom he had first met at St. Albans — Jimmie Trimble — died on Iwo Jima [in the February-March 1945 battle]. According to McGrath, Mr. Vidal himself said that “Trimble was his 'ideal brother,' his 'other half,'...the only person with whom he ever felt wholeness. Jimmie's premature death [in war]...seemingly made it impossible for Mr Vidal ever to feel the same way about anyone else.” (3-4) (One understandably thinks here immediately of A.E. Housman's quite pessimistic sequence of sixty-three poems, entitled *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), especially ones like “To an Athlete Dying Young” and others that are touched by death “without the consolations of religion.”)

It would be further-illuminating of some of Gore Vidal's deepest sentiments, if we consider a few pieces of his writing, especially one of his widely admired **historical novels**, about the Roman Emperor, 361-363 A.D, Julian the Apostate:

Mr Vidal...returned to writing novels in the 1960s and published three books in fairly quick succession: [the first one of them being] *Julian* (1964)...*Julian*, which some critics still consider Mr. Vidal's best, was a painstakingly researched historical novel **about the fourth-century Roman emperor who tried to convert Christians back to paganism. (Mr. Vidal himself never had much use for religion, Christianity especially, which he once called “intrinsically funny.”)** (6—my emphasis added)

If one wishes to read an especially fine non-fictional book — learned, eloquent, and reverent — about Julian the Apostate and his times, one should read Abbot Giuseppe Ricciotti's 1960 book,

7 While reviewing Gore Vidal's **second** volume of Memoirs, *Point to Point Navigation: A Memoir* (2006) in *The American Conservative* (20 November 2006), Bill Kauffman especially mentions that “**Herein, as in previous books, Vidal defends the American First Committee and his childhood hero Charles Lindbergh against the slanders of the War Party** [which was relentlessly pushing us into World War II].” (2—my emphasis added) The first volume of Vidal's Memoirs was entitled *Palimpsest: A Memoir* (1995). There appears to have been no third volume of Memoirs. However, one of his greatest achievements, Bill Kauffman adds, “may be **his 'Narratives of Empire,' the septology of historical novels which covers the rise of the American Republic and its tragic, enraging fall (felled, as it happens by the American Empire).**” (2—my emphasis added)

Julian the Apostate.⁸ It will also provide many and manifold, contrasting and illuminating clarifications to Gore Vidal's own historical novel.

Charles Mc Grath provides one other, more or less final, provocation, as he gives us a further glimpse of Gore Vidal's mockery of Christianity:

But Mr. Vidal also persisted in writing books like...*Live From Golgotha: The Gospel According to Gore Vidal* (1992), which were clearly meant as provocations.⁹

Live From Golgotha, for example, **rewrites the Gospels** [recalling also, perhaps, Thomas Jefferson's own selectively censored version of the New Testament which purportedly removed things that were “offensive to human reason,” or at least to his natural reason], **with Saint Paul as a huckster and pederast and Jesus a buffoon**. John Rechy said of it in *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*, “If God exists and Jesus is his son, then Gore Vidal is going to hell.” (6-7—my emphasis added)

Such impurities, such blasphemies, likely also distorted some of Gore Vidal's perceptions and judgments about other things and matters of moment — perhaps even some of those jarring discernments of his about West Point, as such, and about its once traditional Cadet Life; and also about the true Honor and the virtuously heroic Sacrifices of many members of the Officer Corps and their leadership down the years, for which — and to whom — we owe such a great and personal gratitude — even though we may be late learners. And slow learners.

For we have gradually come to learn that **one cannot be truly grateful without humility**. (G.K. Chesterton also once wisely said that “**the test of all happiness is gratitude**” and, moreover, “**without humility, you can't enjoy anything, even pride.**”

CODA

While reading it again for the first time in forty-three years, yet now more slowly savoring Gore Vidal's sweeping and piercing essay on “West Point and The Third Loyalty”—*i.e.*, “The Loyalty to Our Country” — I have come even more reflectively to consider what has so manifoldly transpired in this Nation and at West Point itself during the interval between October 1973 and October 2016.

8 See Giuseppe Ricciotti, *Julian the Apostate: Roman Emperor, 361-363* (Rockford, Illinois: TAN Books and Publisher, Inc, 1999—a reprint of the 1960 original, which was produced by the Bruce Publishing Company of Milwaukee), 275 pages, with the Index.

9 Charles Mc Grath also later says: “Some of his [Gore Vidal's] political positions were similarly quarrelsome and provocative. **Mr. Vidal was an outspoken critic of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians**, and once called Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* [Magazine], and his wife, the journalist Midge Decter, **'Israeli fifth columnists.'**”

For example, when Gore Vidal published his essay, the Vietnam War was still ongoing — the further-provocative late April to late July 1970 “incursion” and campaign into eastern Cambodia (for good reasons) was only some three years earlier; and President Nixon was soon to resign from his office on 9 August 1974, a little over a year later, after his widely disseminated television presentation to the whole Nation the night before (on 8 August). On 15 August 1971, moreover, President Nixon had quite suddenly taken our Nation's currency off the Gold Standard; and, less than three years after Vidal's own essay, it came to pass that women, for the first time, would be admitted to West Point as New Cadets, in the summer of 1976, which was also our widely celebrated Nation's Bicentennial Year.

So much has now changed — and deeply so — since I was a seventeen-year-old New Cadet (first on 5 July 1960) and then a tested, full Cadet until our grateful Graduation on 3 June 1964 as a Second Lieutenant. So soon then, I was also to arrive for the first time in Saigon, Vietnam in early September 1964 (just after the Feast of the Nativity of Mary, on 8 September). When I finally more permanently returned to the United States in January 1971, I did not, in many ways, quite recognize my Country or the Church — especially after the uprooting Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and its increasingly disorienting aftermath (the “Post-Council”); and after the widespread Secular-Political and Cultural Revolutions in 1968 at home and abroad (to include in Japan and China, as well as in France and West Germany).

Except for some brief intervals of military training in strict isolation (such as nine weeks of Ranger School in the cold winter of 1965-1966), I had essentially lived out of the country for almost seven years. I had lived in many remote places overseas during that 1964-1971 interval; and I was then to live again in Europe shortly afterwards (in 1974-1975) for over 17 months, and to travel in the region variously and rather much, as well. But coming home again after such absences and under such conditions, I found that the more abrupt contrasts nevertheless helpfully clarified my mind. Like so many others, including fellow Catholics, I did not experience the many changes gradually and, as it were, by “titration” (drop-by-drop). Such gradualness often enough indeed undermined “the cultural immune system,” also religiously so and about many sacred things.

When I read Gore Vidal's sobering essay again now, I realize how much he has not only inflicted, but also has unfairly omitted — to include the many deeply good things about West Point and our lives as young and admittedly callow Cadets. I know now even better, however, the range and depth of the gratitude I have always had and have again and again deeply cherished. There were so

many true virtues cultivated during those those years 1960-1964, yes, during those more serene years before the various cultural and strategic, political revolutions were to come and to burst out in the open.

The one thing I have often yearned for down the years with my West Point classmates — especially the Catholic ones — is to have continuous and deeply reflective mutual discourse with them about sacred and secular things, about various “matters of moment” — even about ultimate things and purposes. That has essentially never happened. The intellectual culture and the openness to a challenging discourse — for example about our increasingly centrifugal and sprawling American Empire abroad and at home — has not been there. Even after (or while) I taught on various academic and operational levels — for example, at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School, the Joint Military Intelligence College (Graduate School), the Air Force Academy, and the Joint Special Operations University — I have never had such a sustained, disciplined, and cultivated discourse with them — not even when I circulated to them my own invited essays: strategic essays and literary-cultural essays, most of which were rooted in various and contrasting religious cultures and in their history. This has been a sad fact in my life. It has even imparted a certain elegiac tone to things, and rather pervasively so, especially as I look back some fifty-two years since our graduation from West Point and since Gore Vidal wrote his own 1973 elegiac essay forty-three years ago. May we nobly bear up under these purifying poignancies, and may we learn, under Grace, to suffer well. And thus to sacrifice more generously and selflessly for the greater good and higher good, in time and eternity. May we, in our yearned-for integrity, be modestly known “never to have had a false tone” in our discourse and life — in German “*Kein Falscher Ton.*”

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