

Building an American: The United States Army and the Carlisle Indian Industrial School

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Wisdom through History: this mantra compels individual soldiers, as well as the entire army, to examine the past and challenge traditional narratives in order to meet the challenges of today and build the army of the future. For an all-volunteer force exiting one conflict and facing one far greater in scale and complexity, it is now more important than ever to understand how the army has navigated civil-military relations throughout its history. Perhaps nowhere are the ethical challenges of civil-military relations clearer than in the tangled relationship of the United States with the Native American tribes.

In the 1870s, the federal policy towards Indigenous Americans turned from removal and destruction to assimilation and citizen-making. The primary medium for this mission of “Americanization” was the Native American Boarding School. Although not traditionally considered military history, the United States Army made an unmatched impact on the story of the boarding schools: the army designed the schools, funded their beginnings, and sought to define within their walls what it meant to be a good and successful American. The case study of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School provides the army of today an unparalleled and underappreciated perspective of its past as the fingertips of Washington’s foreign policy, as a vehicle for minority social mobility, and as an essentially moralized institution tasked with defining what it is to be an American. The army can also learn much from the failures of Carlisle and the schools built in its image to redefine how it approaches education, access to American civic life, and the ethics of civil-military relations writ large.

The US Army has always been the primary tool for the United States’ policy towards its most immediate neighbors: the Native American tribes to the west. In *American Foreign*

Relations, Walter Hixson asserts that a series of disorganized frontier interactions, typically violent clashes and bloody reprisals over competing land claims, comprised America's "first foreign policy." This "settler colonialism," wherein "settlers drove indigenous populations from the land in order to construct their own ethnic and religious national communities," was followed and secured by the actions of state militia and federal forces.¹ Following 1783, "western expansion and Indian removal was believed to be vital to the security of the new republic," and despite the sympathy of some Americans concerning the frontier brutality, many "advised Indians to remove voluntarily... or face the wrath of the settlers."² Bloody cycles of retribution against Native Americans were the primary formative experiences of the post-Revolution US Army. After the total defeat of American forces by the Shawnee and Miami peoples in the 1791 Battle of the Wabash, which Hixson calls "the worst defeat the army ever suffered in battle with Indians," General Anthony Wayne mobilized "an infantry of 2,200 men backed by 1,500 Kentucky volunteers" in a campaign of revenge.³ The 1794 Battle of Fallen Timbers brought the defeat of the Delaware, Miami, Piankashaw, Shawnee, and Wea peoples, opening Ohio to waves of settlers.⁴ Although driven by settler expansion and acquisitive treaties wherever possible, the US government met resistance with "exterminatory violence" and "indiscriminate warfare" in a continent-spanning "campaign of removing Indians from the American frontier."⁵ The US Army was everywhere involved with this, to include the ethnic cleansing of the Cherokee and other peoples in the infamous Trail of Tears. One Soldier recounted accompanying the Cherokees as "the execution of the most brutal

¹ Walter Hixson, "The First Foreign Policy," in *American Foreign Relations: A New Diplomatic History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 2.

² Hixson, "The First Foreign Policy," 20–21.

³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*

order in the History of American Warfare,” marked by Cherokees “driven at the bayonet point into the stockades.”⁶

The US Army facilitated the broad and overwhelming expansion of American settlers and businesses into Indigenous territories. In his 1996 analysis of US Army combat operations in Texas, Thomas Smith noted that “army combat operations and the destruction of buffalo” as well as “the inexorable tide of Western settlement” across three decades effectively erased the combat power of the Plains tribes, one of the final Indigenous opponents to American expansionism.⁷ Once the United States reached the Pacific and there was nowhere else for the Native Americans to go except for reservations, the question of what to do with the Natives arose once again; except crucially, these peoples were now the wards of the United States government. The army which had battled these tribes now found itself in the first forays of a new field of civil-military relations.

With the shift to reservations, the treatment of Native Americans turned from foreign policy to domestic, and the United States had to find a new answer to the Native American question. Here again, the US Army was the solution. As the United States continued to expand rapidly and occupy Native territory, the western tribes were progressively relegated to smaller, semi-autonomous “reservations” that existed in a liminal space within the United States borders. In *American Foreign Relations*, Hixson called this process “internal colonialism.” Seeing Native Americans as “a pre-modern obstruction to commercial expansion,” the people of the United States generally believed they “had either to be removed from the desired land or face

⁶ Ronald N. Satz, “The Cherokee Trail of Tears: A Sesquicentennial Perspective,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 459.

⁷ Thomas T. Smith, “US Army Combat Operations in the Indian Wars of Texas, 1849-1881,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (April 1996): 529–30.

extermination.”⁸ The US Army was the main actor in forcing Indigenous peoples into controlled reservations.⁹ Informed by his experience in the army and the rising humanitarian reform movement, President Grant announced a “Peace Policy” that in reality “terminated treaty making with Indians, who henceforth would be approached exclusively as a subjugated minority population” warned to comply or face “a sharp and severe war policy.”¹⁰ While missionary elements of the United States had long experimented with “reforming” and “educating” Native Americans, “from 1819 till 1870 the process of civilizing the native was” generally left to private religious groups.¹¹ However, by 1880, “the earlier policies of removal had now reached their logical conclusion in the form of the Indian reservation” and time had run out – as census figures reflected a catastrophically shrinking Native population, “policymakers moved aggressively to assimilate the Indian into the mainstream of American life.”¹² Adams quotes Annie Beecher Scoville, missionary to the Sioux, as describing the Native American school as “the slow match. [Uncle Sam] lights it and goes off whistling, sure that in time it will blow up the old life, and of its shattered pieces he will make good citizens.”¹³ However, these on-reservation schools reported that the daily education had a fleeting influence at best. As told by contemporary sociologist Frank Blackmar in 1892, “the tribal inspiration and the tribal influence” meant that a student would return at the end of each day “to his home in the native tribe, where

⁸ Walter Hixson, “Preserving the Union, Taking the West,” in *American Foreign Relations: A New Diplomatic History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 93.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹¹ Robert L. Brunhouse, “The Founding of the Carlisle Indian School,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 6, no. 2 (April 1939): 72.

¹² David Wallace Adams, “Fundamental Considerations: The Deep Meaning of Native American Schooling, 1880-1900,” *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 1 (February 1988): 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*

he finds himself surrounded with all the influences of the camp life” and his education “is literally thrown away.”¹⁴ The solution to this problem came from an unlikely corner: an army captain, seventy-two Native American prisoners, and a fort in St. Augustine, Florida.

In the US Army, Richard Henry Pratt found inspiration, opportunity, and resources to pursue a radically different idea of inclusion. As the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, Pratt has long been a complicated figure in the history of Native American oppression. He is infamous for his 1892 statement “that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”¹⁵ However, he viewed his crusade for educating and assimilating Native American children as a humanitarian endeavor: his words, terrible as they are, were said at the “National Conference for Charities and Corrections,” and were followed with a call to “cease to teach the Indian that he is less than a man” and to “recognize fully that he is capable in all respects as we are, and that he only needs the opportunities and privileges which we possess to enable him to assert his humanity and manhood.”¹⁶ The historiographical treatment of Pratt has evolved with the times, and an ethical understanding of Carlisle must begin with his complex example.

To clarify an image of a man so central to the story of Native American boarding schools and the United States Army, it is appropriate to take a short look at Pratt’s life and military career. Lomawaima and Ostler’s 2018 article in the *Journal of American Indian Education* sought to develop a more “multidimensional portrait of Pratt,” drawing a personal narrative to contextualize the

¹⁴ F. W. Blackmar, “Indian Education,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 2 (May 1892): 88–89.

¹⁵ Richard Henry Pratt, “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites,” *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction* 19, no. 1 (1892): 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58–59.

founding of Carlisle in his eyes.¹⁷ Born in New York, Pratt struggled to provide for his family as a young tinsmith's apprentice after the sudden death of his father. In 1861, he enlisted in the United States Army and fought in the Civil War, leaving the army as a captain in 1865.¹⁸ Shortly after the war ended, he rejoined the army and served as "a cavalry officer and commander of Indian scouts' on the Western frontier" from 1867 to 1875; Pratt credited this part of his life with "engaging his interest in the two races" – Native American and white – "and guiding his commitment to an inclusive US citizenship."¹⁹ In 1874, Captain Pratt was charged with taking 72 Native Americans "believed to be the ringleaders" of retaliatory violence against treaty violations to imprisonment in Fort Marion at St. Augustine, Florida.²⁰ In Florida, Pratt found the opportunity to put his ideas into practice.

As a result of their capture, incarceration, and eventual training by the US Army, Captain Pratt's seventy-two prisoners became the proof of concept that led to the founding of Carlisle. During their incarceration, Pratt began to experiment with education as a means of "civilization," renting the prisoners "out to work in the various industries about the town" and teaching them English within the fort.²¹ Four months after arrival, Pratt found his program to be such a success that he advanced to military education, organizing "a company to guard the fort," rearming his prisoners, and dismissing the garrison detachment.²² Pratt "lobbied federal authorities to allow him to enroll the prisoners at Hampton Institute in Virginia," administered by General Samuel Chapman

¹⁷ K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Jeffrey Ostler, "Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression," *Journal of American Indian Education* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 82.

¹⁸ Brunhouse, "The Founding of the Carlisle Indian School," 74.

¹⁹ Lomawaima and Ostler, "Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression," 83.

²⁰ Brunhouse, "The Founding of the Carlisle Indian School," 74.

²¹ Brunhouse, 75; Lomawaima and Ostler, "Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression," 83.

²² Brunhouse, "The Founding of the Carlisle Indian School," 75.

Armstrong, but found Hampton's "ladder of races" model, designed to "inculcate in southern Blacks the merits of subservient domestic and field labor for White employers," completely counterproductive to citizenship and inclusion.²³ For "the prejudice on both sides [to] be destroyed," Pratt argued "it was necessary for the Indian to associate and to compete directly with the white man," seeking and earning approval from the Secretary of War and later Congress to begin a new school in the army barracks in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.²⁴ This would be the first off-reservation school for Native American children run by the government, and it was wholly the US Army's in invention, leadership, and funding. Other government non-reservation schools would follow, and "Carlisle was the model on which they were patterned."²⁵ As noted in 1892, the education of Native Americans was "the only national education system that we have outside of the naval and military schools."²⁶ In this way, the Native American boarding schools represented an experiment in civil-military relations, not just by Pratt but by the United States federal government. The Carlisle school was uniquely US Army, both in values and in practice.

Influenced by his army career, Captain Pratt explicitly and implicitly used his boarding schools as a venue to communicate what an American ought to believe and ought to be. Pratt often expressed pain and anger at the idea of an "inherited hierarchy" of races with no possibility for advancement.²⁷ Pratt compared Native Americans to white immigrants: in his original words, "we invite the Germans to come into our country... and the result is immediate success. Why not try it on the Indians? ... Transfer the savage-born infant to the surroundings of civilization, and he will

²³ Lomawaima and Ostler, "Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression," 83.

²⁴ Brunhouse, "The Founding of the Carlisle Indian School," 76.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁶ Blackmar, "Indian Education," 103.

²⁷ Lomawaima and Ostler, "Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression," 85.

grow to possess a civilized language and habit.”²⁸ Although radically against the racial views of some of his contemporaries, Pratt was a lifelong, diehard proponent of the moral and cultural superiority of American civilization to that of Indigenous tribes. His goal, articulated through Carlisle, was to stand “against colonizing Indians, and in favor of individualizing them” – cutting their hair and forcing them into military uniforms and Western clothing to break them of a community-centric culture and create “first-class workmen and workwomen.”²⁹ The dimensions of militaristic patriotism and capitalist work ethic were joined with the concept of property ownership; at Carlisle, Pratt bragged that “what they earn is theirs... they are taught to save,” with many of the students having personal bank accounts.³⁰ Through extreme military discipline, industrial training, and complete control over the students’ modes of dress and communication, Captain Pratt and other boarding school leaders created a high-pressure environment meant to rapidly advance the indigenous children “across ‘the dreary chasm of a thousand years of tedious evolution’” in a single generation.³¹ The influence of the army was as clear in Pratt’s vision as it was in the eventual reality of Carlisle.

The methodology of the Indian School at Carlisle was thoroughly militaristic and set a precedent that all Native American boarding schools would follow. The army was seen then as it is now: a path to virtuous citizenship, combining value education with service to the nation. Discipline was considered “among the first principles of citizenship,” and the army was “an occupation which offers protection on the one hand and restraint on the other” – in sum, a controlled path, “the first and best road to self-government.”³² Through this philosophy, elements of military life

²⁸ Pratt, “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites,” 56.

²⁹ Pratt, 57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

³¹ Adams, “Fundamental Considerations: The Deep Meaning of Native American Schooling, 1880-1900,” 11.

³² Blackmar, “Indian Education,” 105.

diffused broadly throughout the boarding school experience. A system of “uniforms, mass drill, and rigorous discipline” enabled relatively few employees to effectively “control large numbers of students.”³³ The daily regime was frequently sounded off by bells: the Navajo school at Fort Defiance recorded in 1903 that “23 bells began at 6:00 a.m. and ended at 8:00 p.m.”³⁴ Students were organized by “military and school uniforms,” segregated “by gender and age” and under constant and “extraordinary surveillance.”³⁵ The native students were paraded in “patriotic rituals” that often achieved significant publicity, such as President McKinley’s 1901 visit to the Phoenix Indian School, where 700 students “performed a highly disciplined marching routine before lining up in front of the President.” At the sound of a bugle, they chanted: “I give my head and my heart to my country; one country, one language, and one flag.”³⁶ In punishing the students, Carlisle and the schools in its image also employed military lessons. The response to offenses like running away or disobedience ranged from hard labor, having “to work hard on a long tunnel under the mess hall,” sometimes “on a ball and chain;” humiliation, young men being “dressed for weeks in girls’ clothes;” and peer or group punishments, like crawling through “a ‘belt line’ consisting of two rows of students with belts” who whipped the offender.³⁷ Within the walls of Carlisle existed an engineered environment of military discipline. The intended result of such brutality: the pacification of tribes resisting being trapped on reservations, the creation of many thousands of “model Americans” ready for faithful military service

³³ Jon Reyhner, “American Indian Boarding Schools: What Went Wrong? What Is Going Right?,” *Journal of American Indian Education* 57, no. 1 (2018): 66.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Lomawaima and Ostler, “Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression,” 86.

³⁶ Adams, “Fundamental Considerations: The Deep Meaning of Native American Schooling, 1880-1900,” 9.

³⁷ Reyhner, “American Indian Boarding Schools: What Went Wrong? What Is Going Right?,” 66–67.

or private labor, and the sparing of future Native Americans the treatment of the previous centuries.

The students of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School drew lessons from their experiences, which varied as much as their backgrounds, and their accounts serve as judgment for the school. Over the past decade, historians and governments have sought to uncover the realities of the many schools like Carlisle across the United States and Canada. These efforts have frequently uncovered dark findings. In July 2022, the US Army announced “the completion of the fifth round of the Army’s ongoing initiative to excavate the remains of Native American children who died at the school... and repatriate them to their closest living relatives.”³⁸ With this fifth round, “a total of 28 successful repatriations have occurred,” with “over 150 graves” to go – often unmarked and containing the remains of multiple children.³⁹ The disciplinary methods applied to strip the often captive indigenous children of their cultural identity were brutal. Scarcity was rampant. Students often “washed in icy water in an unheated washroom,” lacked food beyond “bread and molasses, coffee, meat and gravy,” and suffered from “starvation diets” and the “shoddiest of shoddy’ clothing.”⁴⁰ However, the reservations from which they were taken were widely “sites of endemic poverty, starvation,” and stricken with “impacts of deadly disease” – sometimes the scant boarding school resources were still an improvement.⁴¹ Various tribes that were historically separated were able to “meet each other, intermarry,

³⁸ Zack Hoopes, “Army Says Seven Sets of Remains from Carlisle Indian School Returned to Families,” News, PennLive, July 8, 2022, <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2022/07/army-says-seven-sets-of-remains-from-carlisle-indian-school-returned-to-families.html>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Reyhner, “American Indian Boarding Schools: What Went Wrong? What Is Going Right?,” 61; Lomawaima and Ostler, “Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression,” 87.

⁴¹ Lomawaima and Ostler, “Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression,” 85.

and develop a multi-tribal identity” that carried back to their homes, finding resilience in solidarity.⁴²

Many graduates found their education to have equipped them to follow a variety of ambitions. Jim Thorpe, the first Native American Olympic gold medalist and All-American football player, attended Carlisle.⁴³ Luther Standing Bear wrote prolifically after graduating to explain native and boarding school experiences to non-native audiences, becoming “a forceful advocate for the value of native cultures in a modern world.”⁴⁴ An eloquent proponent of Native American cultural pluralism and “strong critic of federal Indian policy,” Standing Bear still called Pratt “a man of ‘high principles’” and readily praised him for seeing “the humanity of Indian people.”⁴⁵ Many graduates joined the army, like Lieutenant Long Lance, whose letter home was featured in the New York newspaper “The Sun” in February of 1917. Lance, a graduate of Carlisle, wrote not to his parents or his friends, but to his former teachers: “Kind remembrances and best wishes for the New Year. I’ve just come out of the trenches... manners ‘Made in Germany’ aren’t quite what you and I were taught.” Long Lance was appointed to West Point by President Wilson but did not accept.⁴⁶ That a young indigenous man could go through such abusive education, enter a society that considered him a lower type of human, and receive the honor of an appointment is emblematic of the complexity behind Carlisle. Lieutenant Long Lance’s story, incredible as it is, stands as but one of a long history of exceptional service by Native Americans to a country that wronged them for hundreds of years.

⁴² Reyhner, “American Indian Boarding Schools: What Went Wrong? What Is Going Right?,” 70.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lomawaima and Ostler, “Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression,” 90.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁶ “American Indian Is Fighting for Allies,” *The Sun*, February 12, 1917.

The Carlisle School and similar institutions impacted the students that walked through their doors in ways that have rippled through successive generations. In the face of this complex trauma, Native American tribes have also developed long-standing traditions of honorable service in the Army. To Pratt, Carlisle was a humanitarian intervention to save the Native Americans from inevitable destruction. To many of its students, Carlisle was the next chapter in the loss of their people – this time, a cultural rather than a physical destruction. Today, “poverty pervades many US Indian reservations and Canadian reserves,” resulting in no small part from “the loss of valuable lands and forced removal, now called ethnic cleansing.” Additionally, many graduates of the boarding schools grappled with losing the acceptance of their tribal homes without having truly equal and unfettered access to white society, being forced into a liminal space between identities.⁴⁷ Studies have named this education as contributing to the spectrum of societal challenges facing reservations today, including much higher suicide rates and gang activity than comparable off-reservation populations.⁴⁸ The role of Native Americans in the United States has never been a simple story, and this includes boarding schools; “some students were crushed by the experience, some soldiered through and survived it, and some thrived.”⁴⁹ The pipeline of reservation to Carlisle to the army is also only one element of a longer and complicated story of service.

The Carlisle School as a tie between the US Army and the Native American tribes is contextualized by deployment of Native allies dating back to before the Revolution. MG George Crook attested that in his “campaign against Apaches in Arizona... ‘every successful encounter with the hostiles was due exclusively to the

⁴⁷ Reyhner, “American Indian Boarding Schools: What Went Wrong? What Is Going Right?,” 72.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

exertions of Indian scouts.”⁵⁰ Parallel to the development of Carlisle were attempts to enlist Native Americans as infantrymen, which sought “graduates of the Indian schools, who were fluent in English, as sergeants within the Indian units” for their leadership training and translation abilities.⁵¹ After the height of the boarding schools in the 1890s and early 1900s, Native Americans continued to serve with distinctive valor: those like Lieutenant Long Lance “volunteered for the most perilous missions” in World War I, leading to Native Americans “losing about 5 percent of those who served compared to the 1 percent loss for US troops overall.”⁵² The Navajo code talkers of World War II are famous to this day for their critical role in the war of intelligence. In the Korean War and afterwards, Native Americans have served in “the upper echelons of the Army,” such as Major General Hal Muldrow Jr., a Choctaw.⁵³ Simply put, the story of Native Americans is the story of America, and it is the story of the United States Army. The students that walked through the doors of Carlisle experienced its pain and promise differently, and the Carlisle Indian Industrial School is but one entry in the much longer history of Native Americans serving honorably in the US Army. However, it deserves the same full consideration that other chapters of our country’s military history have received. We may yet stand to benefit from greater attention in this direction, as individuals and as an Army.

To pass final judgment on the ethical nature of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School is far beyond the scope or capacity of this article. However, its story has been shown to be uniquely and thoroughly one of the United States Army. At all points – inspiration, foundation, conduct, and aftermath – the army was heavily involved. The implications of this involvement have

⁵⁰ David McCormick, “A Novel Proposition: Indian Regulars in the US Army in the 1890s,” *Army History* 114 (Winter 2020): 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

flowed through our organizational thought patterns in ways that are hard to fully grasp. Today, the former site of the Carlisle boarding school shares space with the Army War College. Education is a core component of the military mission today, far beyond the halls of West Point and the War College. Counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam and Afghanistan often included education – looking to Carlisle, how might our institutional legacy of “reforming” other cultures affect the values and behaviors we implicitly impress upon civilian populations? Carlisle is one of the deepest roots of military obedience being defined as a publicly educated American civic virtue; its militarization of young students brought out success in some, but certainly not all. ROTC programs accept thousands of cadets every year who have already been prepared for service as teenagers in JROTC. What could Carlisle’s example tell us about the military education in JROTC today? There are no clear answers to these ethical dilemmas. However, it is incumbent upon every army professional to scrutinize the history of our institution in all its complexity, that we may better understand our impact on the world today and create a better world tomorrow. Carlisle and all of the boarding schools that followed its example are integral parts of our army’s history and deserve to be researched and understood as such. For leaders today, there are several potential benefits of further research into the ethics of this complicated institution.

Perhaps nothing in this story illustrates better the potential of an individual Soldier to change the army and the nation than the ultimate force behind the Carlisle School, Richard Henry Pratt.

From a poor tinsmith’s apprentice enlisting in the deadliest conflict of American history to a captain whose complex moral beliefs were propagated across the continent for a century, the force of Pratt’s personality left an impact still felt today, for better and for worse. His school’s story refuses a simple explanation, and reminds us that all in the army must seek relentlessly to be self-critical and ethical leaders of character; who knows how your example will be followed.