

An Interview with Dr. Holly Mayer, Professor Emerita at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and 2021 Ewing Visiting Professor at West Point

Interviewed by William Hogan

Dr. Mayer, what has your career as a professor looked like and where has it taken you?

“My career as a professor began when I was on active duty and mulling over options for the short, medium, and long terms. I decided to shift to the Army Reserve and enter the history Ph.D. program at the College of William and Mary, which would allow me to combine a never-ending interest in history, a desire to research and write, and a calling to teach. Reserve duty also worked well with grad school and an academic career, especially when I was able to use my research and teaching skills in military assignments. What I learned over the years certainly informed what I could and did do at the USMA this past year as the visiting Ewing Chair of Military History.”

Do you think there is a difference between how history is taught here at West Point and at other institutions you have taught at?

“The similarities and differences are intriguing and offer a way to evaluate institutional and personal priorities. History is a skill-based as well as content-rich discipline, and I’ve always taught the methods of research, writing, and analysis along with the narratives and sources that make History. How much and how deep, of course, depended on the level of the course and abilities of the students. A continuing issue at all schools, including at West Point, is how to balance skills and content. I have found that here as elsewhere the balance is difficult in the limited time available. We all keep working on it! Content knowledge in History is essential not just as a building block for continuing studies but also to use as context for participating in and decision-making as an active citizen in a republic based on democratic principles. Furthermore, the skills learned and applied in historical endeavors are essential to other fields and work including in the Army: I certainly used them as an intelligence officer.

What I’d like to emphasize is not so much how History is taught here but why it must be taught and why it is worth learning. History, like writing, is a form of code: it serves to communicate with and to understand each other within a culture, between cultures, and beyond the present. We must learn the code to be able to share and use stories to

find connections beyond such basic human ones as birth, food, and death. Doing History also fosters self-discipline (if you properly do the research and writing in a timely manner and plowing through the details like footnotes as well as reveling in interesting stories), self-criticism (evaluating and revising your own work), and the ability to critically evaluate public, professional, and personal events and actions. History promotes self-knowledge as well as shared knowledge.

History is not just storytelling; it is also a matter of creating and always evaluating and revising those stories. A possible analogy might be pulled from the fiction of *Jurassic Park* (yep, applying an old movie). To resurrect dinosaurs, enterprising (demented?) scientists take ancient DNA and fill in the helix holes with that from modern descendants to create new animals that are very like but not exactly the same as those that once roamed the earth. Historians use the evidence of the past, evaluations from other sources, plus their own assumptions (modern “DNA”), to build and present bygone peoples. When the evaluations or assumptions don’t fit or properly animate, historians try and try again. OK, so that may be a clunky analogy—which proves that you shouldn’t argue by analogy.”

As a professor, have you noticed a difference between cadets and students you’ve taught at other institutions?

“I did not see much of a difference between plebes here and freshmen elsewhere. Students in their first year of college generally come from similar high school experiences but with varied levels of preparation and motivation. That shows in the first assignments whether here at the USMA or in civilian schools, but how students progress appears a bit different. USMA requires plebes to attend class and pay attention (well, mental and physical presence are two different things) as an external discipline to help create self-discipline. Civilian schools are not as directive and therefore not all students develop the discipline as quickly. Those incentivized by scholarships and professional goals tend to develop faster, which may be the connection to cadets—and which is definitely seen by the time cadets hit their Cow and Firstie years. Cadets certainly have the incentive to succeed, for graduation guarantees entrance to a profession. Another difference is that a person has to be careful asking seniors at other schools about “what’s next” as they stare down graduation, but that’s not an issue with Firsties who readily talk about BOLC and first assignments. Huzzah!”

As a veteran yourself, why do you think the study of history is important for Army officers and military professionals?

“I’ve mentioned some of the more concrete reasons before, but another big one is that studying history helps you avoid tunnel vision when looking at the present: it provides context. Studying history is also a reminder to be careful when making short-term decisions for they will likely have long-term consequences. But let me get a little more metaphysical here. West Point talks about the “Long Grey Line,” but what about the greater military community? The study of history helps in the questioning, understanding, and formation of identity and community. That includes understanding when, where, how, and why the Army and its members fit into the history of the nation. The military community may be defined horizontally, as it were, in terms of the present members but also vertically or in multiple dimensions in that today’s military community incorporates the past community and will inform the following one and its members—you—are part of that!”

As a final question, what advice would you give to West Point history majors who are about to graduate?

“Keep reading history, don’t stop now just because you don’t have an exam on it. Reading history, visiting historical sites, and attending historical conferences or other events all are part of self-education, which is a life-long challenge and reward. Just think—the longer you live, the more history for you to read and to make.”