



Absolutely American: Four Years at West Point

David Lipsky

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Lipsky, a Rolling Stone writer and an award-winning novelist, chronicles daily life at the U.S. Military Academy during the most tumultuous period in its history.

In 1998, West Point made David Lipsky an unprecedented offer: stay at the Academy as long as you like, go wherever you wish, talk to whomever you want, to discover why some of America's most promising young people sacrifice so much to become cadets. Lipsky followed one cadet class into mess halls, barracks, classrooms, bars, and training exercises, from arrival through graduation. By telling their stories, he also examines the Academy as a reflection of our society: Are its principles of equality, patriotism, and honor quaint anachronisms or is it still, as Theodore Roosevelt called it, the most "absolutely American" institution?

During arguably the most eventful four years in West Point's history, Lipsky witnesses the arrival of TVs and phones in dorm rooms, the end of hazing, and innumerable other shifts in policy and practice known collectively as The Changes. He uncovers previously unreported scandals and poignantly evokes the aftermath of September 11, when cadets must prepare to become officers in wartime.

Absolutely American spotlights a remarkable ensemble of characters: a former Eagle Scout who struggles with every facet of the program, from classwork to marching; a foul-mouthed party animal who hates the military and came to West Point to play football; a farm-raised kid who seems to be the perfect soldier, despite his affection for the early work of Georgia O'Keeffe; and an exquisitely turned-out female cadet who aspires to "a career in hair and nails" after the Army. These cadets and their classmates are transformed in fascinating, sometimes astonishing, ways by one of America's most mythologized and least understood challenges. Many of them thrive under the rigorous regimen; others battle endlessly just to survive it. A few give up the fight altogether.

Lipsky's extensive experience covering college students for Rolling Stone helped him gain an exceptional degree of trust and candor from both cadets and administrators. They offer frank insights on drug use, cheating, romance, loyalty, duty, patriotism, and the Army's tortuous search for meaning as new threats loom.

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