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Harvard Men: From Dudes to Rough Riders

Kristin Hoganson

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Harvard president Charles William Eliot struggled to transform his institution from a gentlemen's club to a world-class research university. But despite his democratizing ambitions, Harvard remained a bastion of privilege. To many observers from beyond the confines of Cambridge, Harvard men appeared aristocratic in an age of mass politics, contemplative in an age of action, leisured in an age of enterprise, and overly refined in an age that valued robust masculinity in men. They appeared, in short, to be "dudes." The 1895 *Century Dictionary* defined the "dude" as a "fop or exquisite, characterized by affected refinements of dress, speech, manners and gait."¹ He was educated, professional, and well-to-do; urban, dandified, soft, and elitist. And he was becoming an increasingly marginal figure in the nation's political life--or at least some feared this possibility. In 1896, the *Forum*, a magazine aimed at a rather dudish audience, worried that college men were learning to be critics, not leaders.² Writing in the equally highbrow *Outlook*, settlement house leader Jane Addams blamed the rise of the ward boss on the political inefficacy of educated men.³

And these were just the criticisms of sympathizers. Populist stump speakers such as Mary Elizabeth Lease expressed nothing but contempt for the "silk-hatted dude and the soft-handed son of idleness" who profited from the toil of real men.⁴ Party regulars raged against the civil service reformers who wished to reserve administrative positions

for the well educated by calling them “Miss Nancys,” “eunuchs,” members of a “third sex,” and “dudes.”⁵ All these epithets reflected the belief that educated reformers’ intellectual and moral approach to politics rendered them less manly than the party loyalists who fought for power in the trenches.⁶

This is not to say that Harvard graduates lacked political power. In aggregate, they enjoyed the benefits of great wealth, prestigious family connections, and public prominence. Their privileged social positions make them poor objects of sympathy. Nonetheless, Harvard men did suffer from status anxieties that were very real to them. They faced the challenge of holding on to--not to mention augmenting--their power in an age in which a Harvard education could be seen as a liability as much as an asset. Above all, those who desired political careers had to struggle to establish their credibility in the eyes of a male electorate that valued democratic, practical, and masculine attributes in its leaders. To preserve their political authority, Harvard men had to overcome the “dudish” stereotype and align themselves with more robust ideals of manhood. Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt serve as cases in point.

Lodge, a bookish man from a Boston Brahmin family, was in some respects a quintessential dude during his undergraduate years. He once cavorted in petticoats in a Hasty Pudding show, and his academic record was such that after earning his B.A. from Harvard in 1871 he stayed on to receive a Ph.D. in political science in 1876 and then lingered a few more years teaching American history. But Lodge did not limit himself to artistic and intellectual pursuits. He also spent time sparring in the gymnasium and boating on the Charles.⁷ In later years, when he ran successfully for the Massachusetts

legislature, the House of Representatives, and the Senate, he felt compelled to emphasize these more robust interests in order to cast himself as a man's man, a challenge given his petite stature, delicate muscle tone, plush life style, and bouts of ill health. (Even when Lodge was in his mid-40s, his anxious mother fretted about his upset digestion.⁸)

Invited to speak at an 1896 alumni dinner, Lodge extolled the virtue of rough and tumble sports: "The time given to athletic contests and the injuries incurred on the playing-field are part of the price which the English-speaking race has paid for being world-conquerors." Lodge made it clear that rigorous sports would do more than benefit the race and the nation; they would benefit Harvard as well. "In the future of the United States I want Harvard to be in the forefront," Lodge continued. "I want her to wield the influence and take the part to which her traditions and her past, to which all she is and all she hopes to be, entitle her."⁹ According to Lodge, the means to accomplish that objective lay on the football field, not in the library.

Lodge found a kindred spirit in Theodore Roosevelt, Harvard class of 1880. Roosevelt came from a socially prominent New York City family, and at Harvard he continued to circulate in the most exclusive circles.¹⁰ He did well academically, winning election to Phi Beta Kappa, but like Lodge he also made a point of visiting Hemenway Gymnasium and practicing his sculling. These latter activities helped him present himself as something other than an asthmatic, nearsighted, bookwormish dandy with a high, squeaky voice. This is not to say he escaped ridicule altogether--when he won a seat in the New York Assembly shortly after graduating from college, the press derided him as a dude.¹¹ Nevertheless, along with his ranching experiences in the Dakota

territory, his earlier efforts to build his body helped the youthful Roosevelt counter this negative image.

For Roosevelt, no less than Lodge, rehabilitating the Harvard man entailed supporting collegiate athletics. Even from the White House, Roosevelt followed Harvard teams and lobbied his alma mater in behalf of the football program.¹² Roosevelt valued college sports because he worried about “overcivilization,” meaning the tendency of industrial society to weaken the bourgeois men who benefited most from its comforts. Looking beyond the confines of his class, Roosevelt expressed concerns about the challenges posed by working-class men--especially immigrant and African American men--whose manual labor seemed to be building hardier physiques than those attained by white collar workers in their sedentary office jobs. Seen from within a Darwinian framework, elite men’s apparent softness foretold their inevitable decline. To preserve their class, racial, and even national standing, they must build their bodies. And college sports appeared to be an ideal means of doing so. In advocating body building--or, as he put it, “the strenuous life”--Roosevelt was in keeping with the currents of his time. Whereas Northern middle-class and wealthy men of the mid-nineteenth century had placed a premium on moral earnestness in men, at the turn of the century they placed greater emphasis on a fighting spirit. Right or wrong, what mattered most in assessing a man’s worth was his tenacity.¹³

Roosevelt did not stop with supporting collegiate athletics. In his efforts to foster a more vigorous manhood among wealthy, white men, he exhorted them to embark on strenuous endeavors beyond the playing field. In an 1894 article, “The Manly Virtues

and Practical Politics,” Roosevelt exhorted educated men to enter the “battles of the political world,” to go out into the “rough hurly-burly of the caucus, the primary, and the political meeting.” Roosevelt admitted that it was pleasant to associate merely with cultivated, refined men, but he admonished his peers to mingle on equal terms with coarse men and to develop the “rougher, manlier virtues, and above all the virtue of personal courage, physical as well as moral,” for these “manly virtues” were essential in politics. “We must be vigorous in mind and body, able to hold our own in rough conflict with our fellows, able to suffer punishment without flinching, and, at need, to repay it with full interest.”¹⁴ To succeed in politics, concluded Roosevelt, college men must demonstrate the hardy virtues of the soldier. And what better way to do this than to become soldiers?

In 1895, distraught over the *Crimson*’s refusal to jump on the martial bandwagon during a war scare with Great Britain, Roosevelt wrote Lodge about the need to save Harvard from “degradation.” “The clamor of the peace faction has convinced me that this country needs a war,” he wrote.¹⁵ Harvard needed war most of all. Roosevelt made this point the following year when he wrote Lodge that pacifistic Harvard professors were “rapidly confirming me in the feeling that there ought to be a war.”¹⁶ Upon expressing such sentiments publicly, in a letter to the *Crimson*, he met a mixed response: on the one hand, he reported that twenty to thirty Harvard men had thanked him for having written it; on the other hand, he wrote Lodge that the *Harvard Graduate Magazine* “is now assailing me with the ineffective bitterness proper to beings whose cult is nonvirility.” President Eliot, he continued, had attacked the two of them as

“degenerate sons of Harvard.”¹⁷ Roosevelt reciprocated Eliot’s animosity, blaming him and other “futile sentimentalists” for “producing a flabby, timid type of character, which eats away the great fighting features of our race.”¹⁸ Roosevelt’s deep attachment to Harvard made its dudish reputation--and even worse, its dudish attributes--hard to bear. Pleased and yet frustrated by a militaristic article from the *Yale Alumni Weekly*, Roosevelt confessed to a friend: “I wish I could get some of the Yale spirit into Harvard.”¹⁹

Even in the face of vigorous alumni lobbying, President Eliot lacked Lodge’s and Roosevelt’s commitment to promoting dangerous sports and a military ethos on campus. Valuing the life of the mind more than the feats of the body, he deplored the tendency to regard intercollegiate athletic competitions as indicators of institutional standing. He criticized the football program for teaching the ethics of war and suggested that instruction in dance would actually be more relevant to military service.²⁰ (Not only did this position reflect his academic inclinations; it also helped downplay the significance of Harvard’s long losing streak to the Yale football team.) Yet even Eliot could not stop efforts to beef up Harvard men. During his lengthy tenure as president (1869-1909), a crew coach won an honorary degree and the football coach started receiving a salary larger than that of any faculty member.²¹ In trying to nurture manliness through academic achievement and professionalism, Eliot was swimming against the currents of his time. These currents grew still stronger when the United States went to war in 1898.

The United States entered the Cuban war for independence against Spain near the end of spring term. From the passage of the war resolution on April 25 to the Spanish surrender in Santiago on July 17, the conflict that came to be known in the United States

as the Spanish-American War (thereby negating the Cubans' central role) lasted less than three months. In hindsight, the Spanish-American War appears to have been the opening wedge for U.S. empire in the Caribbean and the Pacific (it led to the passage of a Hawaiian annexation treaty and the acquisition of Guam, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and a base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba), but more than acquisitive ambitions lay behind the widespread enthusiasm for the war. For many Americans, it served as an opportunity to build strenuous character in dandified American men. In particular, bourgeois commentators from the Northeast looked to military service as a chance for dudes to prove themselves as citizens and leaders. They viewed war as an opportunity for elite men to dispel the fears expressed by political scientist Franklin H. Giddings: that "mere intellectual struggles would leave our youth anaemic bookworms, unfit for the serious work of practical politics."²² War, they hoped, could help college men regain a favorable image.

To prove the dude's martial character, his supporters first had to disprove charges that he feared war and shunned military service. Such charges gained credence because of some well-publicized remarks by Charles Eliot Norton, a Harvard humanities professor. Norton, who had been appointed to his position years earlier by his cousin, President Eliot, won national notoriety for his institution after turning aside from his prepared lecture notes to denounce the war with Spain as an "inglorious" conflict. Even worse, judging from the ensuing brouhaha, he said he did not think his students should rush to enlist. The response was vitriolic. One critic found Norton so wanting in virility that it characterized him as "a true type of that fine flower of culture which is worshiped

with extravagant and idolatrous rites in Boston and Cambridge. It is eminently graceful and generally sterile.”²³ Another found it “unseemly” that the sons of “men with blood in their veins” be “instructed in the principles of life by such anaemic educators.”²⁴

The criticisms went beyond Norton to the college that employed him. In an article titled “Disloyalty at Harvard,” the *New York Sun* questioned the value of a Harvard education. “Is that the spirit which American parents desire to have instilled into their sons?” The article went on to condemn Harvard for teaching a “spirit of critical disparagement,” rather than the “impulse of patriotism, so essential in the preservation of the nation and their own manliness.”²⁵ Another newspaper that took great offense at Norton’s remarks connected Harvard’s recent loss to Cornell and Yale in crew to Norton’s unmanly utterances:

A man can’t row with a gelatine back. Neither can eight men, no matter how hard the little coxswain curses nor how dexterously he steers. It takes eight men with piano-wire sinews and cast-iron jaws and fight in every fiber of them to win the race. The clammy, chilly influence of Charles Eliot Norton will not produce iron jaws nor iron backs nor anything else that helps men win races, or go through rush lines, or fight for the flag.

After casting Harvard men as less manly than their Ivy League rivals, thanks to the gelatinous influence of one of their professors, the author offered his own advice to Harvard freshmen: “Stop contemplating the aesthetic beauties and peaceful calm of your Charles Eliot Nortons, get under the influence of your Teddy Roosevelt, shed your aristocratic swaddling clothes and live and train and rough it, like the husky boys from

Cornell.”²⁶ He could have added “or transfer to Brown,” for another clipping in Norton’s papers held up Brown’s president E. Benjamin Andrews--who declared his desire to enlist with his students and “march with them to the front”--as a role model for men such as Norton.²⁷

Norton did have his admirers. A former student, Samuel C. Bennett, rallied to the side of his beloved professor in the height of the storm. Reflecting on his undergraduate experiences twenty years earlier, Bennett remarked: “I learned one thing in that course, and learned it by a study from life--and that is how beautiful a thing it is to be a gentleman.”²⁸ Hannah J. Bailey, head of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union’s Department of Peace and Arbitration wrote to express her gratitude “for the brave stand you have taken against the present war with Spain.” Bailey applauded Norton for understanding the true object of *belles lettres*--refinement.²⁹

Norton’s admiring correspondents, many of them women, held fast to the older, genteel ideals of manhood that were being displaced by the martial ideals of the late nineteenth century. Whereas Norton spoke passionately about aesthetics, the American public seemed more concerned with practicality. Norton was an elderly man (he retired from Harvard at the end of the term) in a time that valorized the robustness of the young. He was unabashedly elitist in an increasingly diverse country, riven by class, ethnic, and racial divisions. He valued the life of the mind in a university that, his cousin’s efforts notwithstanding, was increasingly emphasizing the cultivation of the body. And Norton was an advocate of peace in a time of war. His supporters might wallow in nostalgia about the beauties of gentlemen and the uplifting capacities of *belles lettres*, but

detractors ridiculed him as a symbol of the irrelevance of Harvard men in the contemporary world.

In response to the Norton scandal, even Harvard men with no sympathy for the professor rallied to the defense of their institution and class.³⁰ One alumnus credited Norton with being a fine art historian but then dismissed his worth as “a man of affairs,” saying that the patriotic Harvard men who had served in the Civil War and those who now were serving in the Spanish War should be seen as more representative of the institution.³¹ Besides pointing to the achievements of past generations of Harvard men, the college’s militaristic advocates maintained that the current crop of undergraduates was up to par, that, “captious professors” notwithstanding, Harvard boys were “all right.”³² To support this point, still another Harvard man wrote a letter to his local paper pointing out that, with the encouragement of the faculty, enough students to fill two regiments had volunteered.³³ “As a Harvard man,” wrote an equally militant alumnus to *The New York Times*, “I feel naturally angry that such views should get associated with Harvard, especially at a time when two of her graduates, Secretary Long and Assistant Secretary Roosevelt, are working so hard and with so much ability for the navy, and, incidentally, doing great Honor to Harvard.”³⁴

In their efforts to show that Harvard men were made of sterner stuff than reputed, those who trumpeted their military service often emphasized that they had spurned soft commissions and had enlisted in the ranks. Henry L. Higginson (a Union veteran and fellow of the Harvard Corporation) wrote an exuberant letter to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, reporting that some Harvard students he knew had enlisted as privates:

We of '61 got commissions and these boys go us one better and enlist! . . .

Here I sit in the dude club--sports--loafers--athletes--dandies--raised in cotton wool . . . a little club and 40 men have already gone--11% of the club, which has many old men as well as young--20 seniors of Harvard college and many of the other schools are in the service--chiefly privates.³⁵

On the floor of the Senate, William J. Sewell (R, NJ) applauded the “dude’s” willingness to serve in the ranks:

The darling of the parlor, the athlete at Yale, Harvard, or Princeton, are lined to-day on the picket line before Santiago with the farmer and the mechanic, each equal, each claiming no more right as an American citizen, and each anxious and eager for the fray. It is the most sublime spectacle, I say to the Senate of the United States, that ever has been witnessed that our very best blood, our brightest young men, claim the right of citizenship to the extent that they go to the front line of battle and vie with anybody and everybody, no matter from what rank of society.³⁶

Higginson and Sewell were pleased to believe that, contrary to the stereotype, Ivy League graduates did not shirk the harsh duties of citizenship. Equally gratifying were the reports that college men’s constitutions were as robust as those of the working class. What had fostered this hardy manhood? Athletics. A typically admiring newspaper claimed that the Rough Riders’ “rich society men and students from Harvard College” had “given a superb account of themselves . . . in riding, shooting and agility of movement in general

they show the results of their long experience on the polo field and in college athleticism.”³⁷

If any doubts remained, the public need look only at the Rough Riders, the most touted proof of college men’s fiber. Led by Colonel Leonard Wood (an 1884 Harvard Medical School graduate) with Theodore Roosevelt as second in command, the Rough Riders captured the public’s imagination, thanks to Roosevelt’s publicity skills. He presented his regiment as a model fraternity, in which the privileged college man bonded with the lower-class Western cowboy. In *The Rough Riders*, Roosevelt emphasized the college backgrounds of many of his recruits. “Harvard being my own college, I had such a swarm of applications from it that I could not take one in ten,” he wrote. “What particularly pleased me, not only in the Harvard but the Yale and Princeton men, and, indeed, in these recruits from the older States generally, was that they did not ask for commissions. With hardly an exception they entered upon their duties as troopers in the spirit which they held to the end, merely endeavoring to show that no work could be too hard, too disagreeable, or too dangerous for them to perform.”³⁸ In his farewell remarks to the troops, reprinted by admiring newspapers, he proclaimed: “You are men of widely different pursuits, yet you stand here side by side. You fought shoulder to shoulder. No man asked quarter for himself, and each one went in to show that he was as good as his neighbor.”³⁹ The message was clear: it was not the hardened bronco buster who had proven himself to the watching nation--there was no need for that--but the supposedly effete Ivy League graduate who had shown he was as good--that is, as masculine--as his fellows.

To Roosevelt's immense satisfaction, the U.S. press tended to take him at his word, further popularizing the idea that the rough riding college man had demonstrated his stuff in combat. The *Cleveland Leader* sang the college man's praises in rhyme:

They laughed when we said we were going,
 They scoffed when we answered the call;
 We might do at tennis and rowing,
 But as warriors! O, no--not at all!
 Ah, let them look there in the ditches,
 Blood-stained by the dudes in the van,
 And learn that a chap may have riches
 And still be a man!⁴⁰

If prior to the war, dudes seemed refined to the point of effeminacy, after the war they found it easier to claim manhood.

Richard Harding Davis, a popular novelist and well-known reporter, encapsulated this change of view in his description of a college and club man turned sergeant. "There was not a mule-skinner or cow-puncher in the regiment that did not recognize in him something of himself and something finer and better than himself."⁴¹ Roosevelt was even more partisan in his praise, naming his alma mater as the foremost crucible of manhood. "I think the Harvard boys have averaged the best of all," he wrote his sister from Santiago.⁴² Men such as Davis (who had studied at Johns Hopkins) and Roosevelt believed that military service revealed a class of natural commanders--more likely elite men than not.

The war did more than reshape the dude's public image; it gave dudes some experience in leading men from widely divergent backgrounds. Theodore Roosevelt saw the war as a test of his ability to lead men from different walks of life. Of course, he believed he passed the test with flying colors. "These men would follow me anywhere now," boasted Roosevelt to Lodge.⁴³ After the war, he made the most of his military record when running for office. In his successful campaign for governor of New York, he traveled with six Rough Riders in full uniform and told war stories at whistle stops. He appeared at the 1900 Republican convention in a wide-rimmed hat that evoked his Rough Rider headgear. His supporters joined with him in milking his military record for all it was worth.⁴⁴ To introduce Roosevelt to the convention, Senator Chauncey M. Depew of New York started with the obstacles that Roosevelt had to surmount: he was a child of Fifth Avenue, a child of the clubs, a "child of the exclusiveness of Harvard College." But this child of privilege had overcome his disadvantages, becoming first a cowboy, then a soldier, and finally, a hero. Summing up the transformation, Depew said: "the dude had become a cowboy, the cowboy had become a soldier, the soldier had become a hero."⁴⁵

Roosevelt reaped unparalleled political profits from his military service, but even "dudes" who did not serve regarded the war as an opportunity to bolster their images. This can be seen in the case of Henry Cabot Lodge. He expressed a burning desire to jump into the fray but stayed in the Senate instead, where he expounded on the glories of war and became a leading advocate of taking the Philippines, a former Spanish colony. He posed as a manly fighter, especially in comparison to anti-imperialists and the Filipinos, whom he depicted as comparatively effeminate. And he praised the Rough

Riders, foremost among them his long-time friend Theodore Roosevelt, in terms that made it clear they represented men such as himself. In his history of the war, rushed to press shortly after the end of hostilities, Lodge emphasized that the regiment included graduates of Yale and Harvard. “All have the spirit of adventure strong within them, and they are there in the Cuban chaparral because they seek perils, because they are patriotic, because, as some think, every gentleman owes a debt to his country, and this is the time to pay it.”⁴⁶

If college men in general found themselves more likely to be associated with military prowess than effete after the war, Harvard men benefited particularly from this image transformation. Before the war, Harvard brought to mind the image of effete and unpatriotic Professor Norton. After the war, President William McKinley praised Harvard for its “potent influence in the community and throughout the United States” and applauded its graduates who had served in the military.⁴⁷ Even President Eliot struck a martial tone in his 1898 commencement speech, eliciting prolonged applause from the audience.⁴⁸ Military service regendered Harvard men, transforming them from symbols of effeminacy to symbols of powerful masculinity. This new association with militant manhood helped give them the credibility necessary to lead in the dawning years of the twentieth century.

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