

# GUESS WHO'S COMING TO VMI?

**Between old-fashioned hazing and 1990s-style sexual harassment, there is only a thin gray line. And that is the matter that weighs heavily in the humid air at the Virginia Military Institute, which, after 150 years of male bonding, reluctantly awaits the arrival next month of twenty-three woman warriors**

By John Sedgwick

**I**t's almost seven o'clock—or 0700, as they say around here—and the Virginia Military Institute's new superintendent (that's president to you), Major General Josiah Bunting III, is waiting by the barracks for the cadets to form up for roll call and then to march off, colors flying, to breakfast. At 57 Si Bunting is lean and tall, about six-four (although many an awestruck cadet thinks him taller still), with short, graying hair and a jut jaw, and he carries himself with the easy authority of someone accustomed to rank. When he salutes the first cadets to straggle out into the early-morning chill, he does so with a snap that Commander in Chief Bill Clinton, for one, will never achieve.

It's poignant to see the aging "super," as he's called, among his fledglings, here in the Shenandoah Valley, by the ancient, storybook-castle barracks and the proud statue of Stonewall Jackson, who taught physics at VMI before he died for the Confederacy. But a deeper significance is imposed by

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN-FRANCIS BOURKE**







A few good women: Among the incoming female cadets will be Brooke Elliott, 18, a graduate of Poquoson (Virginia) High School, where she held the rank of cadet colonel in the Civil Air Patrol. Asked the most difficult part of the VMI program, she responds, "Waiting until August, sir."



history. This will be one of the last times the cadets gather as an all-male institution, secure in their temple of masculinity. Come August 18, by order of the U.S. Supreme Court, women will join their ranks—a significant change for a school that has seen precious little of it since its founding in 1839. Right now the only women one ever sees in the barracks are located inside the cadets' hats, the only truly private space accorded to the young men in this relentlessly public institution. That's where, under clear plastic, they tuck photos of a girlfriend or a Victoria's Secret model or Mom.

As the man leading VMI into the modern, unisex age, Josiah Bunting is in the unenviable position of having—in the extreme view of many graduates—to save his beloved institution by destroying it. But Bunting is a practical man; he will preserve what he can. He was a fiery advocate of VMI's all-male tradition, deploying his often thunderous oratory in favor of keeping things as they were. Once the decision was made, he declared his "savagely disappointment" and made it clear that any women at VMI would have to submit to the same buzz cuts, do the same number of pull-ups (five) and sit-ups (sixty) and endure the same grueling boot-camp regimen as the men. "I believe fully qualified women would themselves feel demeaned by any relaxation in the standards the VMI system imposes on young men," he asserted. In other words, if some women think they're just like men, go ahead and prove it. At the time, newspapers made much of Bunting's defiant attitude. It has not relaxed since.

If Bunting seems at home among the cadets in this antiquated military-style college, it may be because, in an important sense, he is home. He graduated from the school in 1963, after having "dominated the campus as no man has ever dominated an American campus in the last forty or fifty years." That comes from his kid half brother, NBC sports chieftain Dick Ebersol, but there is some truth to it. Bunting was regimental commander of his class and captain of the swim team, and he copped one of the nine Rhodes scholarships ever awarded to VMI graduates. He went into the army but closed the door on a promising military career six years later when he published a novel called *The Lionheads*, which was based on his Vietnam experiences as an intelligence officer tracking "lucrative" targets—i.e., ones thick with Vietcong—along the Mekong River. The book won him acclaim from such literary men as William Styron and *Harper's* editor Lewis Lapham, who became lifelong friends, but earned him the deep enmity of the top brass for its searing portrayal of military ineptitude and amorality in conducting the war. That is why his rank of major general is in the Virginia Militia, per order of the governor of the state, rather than in the U.S. Army.

He exercised his command elsewhere. At 33 he presided over the all-women Briarcliff College and then the all-male Hampden-Sydney College, sixty miles southeast of VMI. (When the poet James Dickey came to visit Bunting, he kept asking, "Where are all the coeds?") At Hampden-Sydney, Bunting built a large enough reputation that he was considered a serious candidate for the Virginia governorship or the U.S. Senate, but he dismissed the speculation. Politics, as currently practiced, was beneath him. "I could never do that," he says now. "Never." He was also approached to

take over larger, more prestigious institutions, such as Tulane University, Vanderbilt University and the College of William and Mary. But in 1987 he confounded virtually everyone by veering off to accept the headmastership of the Lawrenceville School, the F. Scott Fitzgerald-ian high-prep bastion near Princeton, which happened to be going coed when he arrived. He wanted to be at a school where he could make a Mr. Chips-like impact on students' lives, he explained. VMI had been courting him at regular intervals, and when it called again in 1995, Bunting could not refuse. "I always knew he would come back," says Bunting's wife, the former Diana Cunningham.

As 0700 looms, Bunting directs me to stand well back from the gateway or risk being trampled to death by the crush of 1,200 cadets hurrying out into formation. He finds the prospect amusing, and it causes him to ponder the military temperament, particularly what he terms the "wonderfully dry" sense of humor. "What is it that it says on the Claymore land mines?" he asks in his usual Socratic fashion. "'Front toward enemy!'" He chuckles softly. Then the men start pouring out. The upperclassmen simply run pell-mell, but the freshmen, or "rats," display a distinctive, robotic gait—chin down hard to the chest, arms extended plumb vertical—as they forge absolutely straight ahead, with any turn a sharp right angle, in what looks like a sadistic version of ballet. In VMI terms, the rats are "straining"—following strict rules of conduct that make almost every aspect of their barracks life an agony. (It is particularly strange to see these fellows perambulating this way in their bathrobes to the shower.) Bunting hardly seems to notice as they struggle by. Instead he says to listen for the bugler, who will thoughtfully hold the last note of reveille until the last man is in formation. Sure enough, the bugler blows the note for nearly a whole minute. As he does, Bunting seems to breathe in the spectacle: the American and Virginia flags rising up their poles, the ten companies at sharp attention, the misty parade ground. Finally, the last man hurries into place, and the plaintive cry of the bugle disperses into the frosty morning air.

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hen the word came down about the Supreme Court decision in June of 1996, Josiah Bunting was in Canada, giving a speech on the value of all-male education to a conference on boys' schools. After he left the podium, he was handed a note. "Seven to one," it said. "Too bad." It was, of course, painful enough to lose, but to lose so resoundingly—to get only Justice Antonin Scalia's vote—must have been excruciating. (Justice Clarence Thomas recused himself from the case, since he had a son at the school at the time.) When I ask how he took the news, Bunting reaches, as usual, for an analogy. "You remember the O.J. decision?" he replies. The first one, he means. "I happened to be in the lobby of the Omni Richmond hotel when the jury re-





Military intelligence; Major General Josiah Bunting III, VMI's rough-and-tumble superintendent, also teaches a course in Victorian literature. A man who prizes the virtues of the nineteenth century may be just the figure to lead VMI into the jarring politics of the twenty-first.



turned its verdict, and all around me I saw fifty people doing this”—he claps his hands to the sides of his face in utter shock. “That’s about where I was with the decision. I didn’t mean to give the Supreme Court the finger. It was, ‘Oh, my God!’” He brings hands to cheeks again. “All I could think was, This place will be forever changed.” He says these last words very solemnly. I expect a little more, some anger or indignation. Something. But he moves on, pressing into the future. “However, I love this place, and I want to be the preserver of everything that is great about it, come what may. Who knows, VMI may even come out of this as a better institution.” Really? I think I see a slight twinkle in his eye. “I have to be alert to that possibility.”

Now, it is important to understand that VMI is not the Citadel, although the two institutions are often linked in the public mind, and indeed their fates were joined by the Supreme Court decision. Both are southern, military-style colleges that rely on their military nature primarily to firm up the students’ character. In VMI’s case, only 18 per-

cent of graduates now go on to military careers. Because it is state supported (the reason that the issue of coeducation arose in the first place), VMI currently costs Virginia residents only \$9,400 a year, which may be one of the school’s chief attractions. Academically, the Citadel and VMI are the equivalent of state colleges, and both have appealed principally to the sons of the old South who may need a little extra motivation. On this score, the Citadel is the far more rabid of the two. It has such a rich history of hazing that it has inspired a thick literature, ranging from Pat Conroy’s *The Lords of Discipline* to Susan Faludi’s long, lurid *New Yorker* account. It is true that George C. Marshall, the soldier and statesman who is probably VMI’s most distinguished graduate, was cut on the buttocks as a cadet when he was forced to do squats over an unsheathed bayonet. But that was back at the turn of the century, and by most accounts VMI’s viciousness has declined steadily since.



The worst incident I heard about from the recent past involved a cadet having Tabasco forced up his nose.

Bunting explains the difference between the two institutions by looking at the behavior of their home states during the Civil War. Virginia, he notes, entered the war reluctantly, but for South Carolina, home to the Citadel, it was, “Come on, motherfuckers, let’s do it right now!” He means only to contrast the mentality of the two schools, but the analogy works in another way, too, one that was always lurking in the background of my many conversations with VMIers: The Civil War, fought over race, was not entirely unlike this conflict, fought over gender. In both cases, the enemy was headquartered in Washington, D.C., and the Yankees were bent on the extermina-

## In the U.S. Supreme Court, Justice Stephen Breyer made short work of VMI’s chief argument. When told that admitting women would mean the end of the school as it had been, he replied, “So what?”

tion of a certain southern way of life. There are now only three all-male four-year colleges left in the country: Hampden-Sydney, Wabash College and Morehouse College. “This is Sherman all over again,” says Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, the Emory College historian who served as an expert witness for VMI. “That’s the spirit of it.”

As far as some at VMI are concerned, the biggest difference between these two civil wars is that the first one largely created VMI, while this second one is destroying it. As you wander about the Gothic campus, or “post,” you have the feeling that the Civil War concluded only last week, so fully is the school committed to the romantic spirit of that lost cause. Every spring the school conducts an elaborate ceremony to honor the ten cadets who perished in the 1864 battle of New Market, when the entire student body was pressed into action on the Confederate side. Six of the fallen cadets are buried on the edge of the parade ground, and a



huge painting of their last charge hangs over the altar in the chapel. Nevertheless, VMI voluntarily admitted black cadets in 1969, and aside from the black cadets' understandable reluctance to pay homage to the Confederacy, integration has proceeded at VMI largely without incident.

At VMI gender is the far bigger deal. In 1990, when a still anonymous young woman in Virginia complained to the Justice Department after being denied admission to state-supported VMI because she was female, VMI refused to yield. Since then the college has spent well over \$5 million fighting the suit. It has brought in such heavy hitters as former U.S. attorney general Griffen Bell and Harvard's eminent sociologist David Riesman to argue for the school, partly to counter the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women and the American Association of University Women, which had ganged up against it. It even set aside \$5.5 million to create a female version of VMI called the Virginia Women's Institute for Leadership at nearby Mary Baldwin College in an attempt to provide women with a VMI-type experience somewhere other than VMI. Then, after the Supreme Court ruled against the school, VMI's board of trustees came within one vote of taking the school private, at a cost of \$100 million to \$300 million, to escape the edicts of the federal judiciary.

While gender equality might sound to modern ears like a winning proposition, to die-hard VMIs (the only kind there is), gender equality at their school represents nothing but loss—of tradition, of a certain spirit, but especially of that harsh discipline and frankly brutal way of life that the Court came to call the “adversative system,” of which the unusual form of locomotion I saw at reveille was just one small part. In full flower, the “ratline,” as this institutionalized nightmare is called, can be an astonishing thing to see. I was in the mess hall one evening watching the rats eat in their peculiar way, with their butts on the edge of their chairs, their backs straight, their eyes forward and their forks moving straight up from their plates and then over to their mouths as if inspired by some grotesque misreading of Emily Post. Suddenly, there was a flurry of activity at a table by the wall. A rat named Myers had apparently said or done something that bothered his superiors. I couldn't hear what the problem was, the vast hall was so echoey. But in seconds the upperclassmen had a dozen of Myers's fellow rats in front of the building, running madly in place while Myers dashed up and down the steps as his superiors barked at him, “You're doggin' it, Myers. Faster, Myers. Come on, Myers.” Like that, on and on, until the word Myers itself became the worst possible rebuke, which was possibly the intention.

This is the chilly soul of VMI, and it lies at the center of the dispute over coeducation. One might reasonably wonder why anyone, of either gender, would put up with such crap. VMI responds, in fairly refined psychological detail, that such tactics are part of a process of burning off such divisive, testosterone-induced aspects of personality as cockiness and sloth and replacing them with such social virtues as honor and loyalty. “We get them to think of individuality as an inner resource, not a superficial one,” says VMI's acting dean of faculty, Colonel Alan Farrell, a former Green Beret who op-

erated behind enemy lines in Vietnam. At VMI this is called “building up the man.” Of course, not everyone goes for it. Bunting told me about one young lacrosse player named Knoska who had obviously not read the VMI literature very carefully, because two days after he arrived, when he was told by a senior classman to “give him twenty,” meaning push-ups, he told the guy to kiss his ass. Then, when the senior classman replied he was going to “write him up,” meaning punish him with demerits, Knoska told the guy to go fuck himself. Knoska left shortly thereafter, but in that brief time he became, Bunting says, “something of a legend at VMI.”

Once such institutionalized stress is directed at women, the Old Guard believes, it will be interpreted as sexual harassment, and the adversative system will vanish in a puff of lawsuits. This assumption is not entirely frivolous. The Citadel has discovered to its sorrow that women do indeed respond differently to abuse than men. The two women who withdrew last fall complained, not unreasonably, after their sweatshirts were doused with nail-polish remover and were set alight. To be sure, that particular form of abuse, since it was secret and personal, falls under the category of hazing, and like all forms of hazing, it was against the rules of the institution and the laws of South Carolina. Yet men had quietly endured such treatment, and worse, for years. How are the female VMI cadets going to react when they're yelled at so loudly and at such close range that the spit flies into their faces and dribbles down their cheeks or when, broiling in the barracks' hundred-degree heat in August, they are denied permission to turn on a fan?

“The world is caught up now in the feeling that women should not be deprived of anything,” says Bob Patterson, VMI class of '49, who counseled the institute in its case before the Supreme Court. “But our position was that we are not depriving women of anything, because what we are offering, women simply cannot get.” He means that, since women will not tolerate the adversative system unless it is softened up, the school will inevitably be changed by the women's presence. Feminists dubbed this the Catch-22 defense and argued that, before *Brown v. the Board of Education*, all-white schools said the same thing about admitting blacks. Plus, the feminists challenged VMI to show that the adversative method made a significant difference in its graduates' life outcomes, something VMI's lawyers were hard-pressed to prove. In the Supreme Court, Justice Stephen Breyer made short work of the Catch-22. When told that women would mean the end of the school as it had been, he replied, “So what?”

**I**f Bunting had been asked that question, he might have offered up his own life as a case in point. For he was largely shaped, if not actually saved, by VMI. It gave him, he says, focus, self-reliance and discipline, traits he had sorely lacked. Through instinct and breeding, Bunting is something of a dandy even now. He summers in Newport, Rhode Island, where he has his haberdasher, Michael Hayes, import his clothes from Milan. And his splendid house on the post fairly glitters with silver-



framed photographs and crystal chandeliers. He was born into what he calls “a world of faded elegance and high style” on Philadelphia’s Main Line. His father, Josiah Bunting II, owned some real estate in Atlantic City, but he never had to do much beyond listening to Eddy Duchin caress the ivories at the Barclay Hotel, and he didn’t. He drifted away from Si’s mother when Si was 2 years old. The abandoned son eventually went off to boarding school, first to the Hill School and then to the Salisbury School, both of them elite, fabled places like the Lawrenceville School, which he was so drawn to later. He was thrown out of both of them. “Mostly, it was for constant bad behavior,” Bunting says matter-of-factly. “I’d mock people on the faculty. Once I threw a water balloon out the window and hit somebody’s wife. It was nothing really. Just late-1950s pranks. In deep retrospection, I may have [had] ADD [attention-deficit disorder] or something. Unfocused, unreliable—that was me.”

His stepfather, a self-made, Swiss-born lawyer named Charles Ebersol, tried to straighten Si out by confining him to his room for two months and force-feeding the boy works of history and philosophy that he thought would be good for him. Ebersol had also worked out a deal with Salisbury to let Si take his final exams, so he tossed in his schoolbooks too. Si passed the exams easily—brains were never the problem. After graduation he went down to his local recruiter and enlisted in the marines. “That was totally his own choice,” says Dick Ebersol, who was 10 at the time. “But it shocked the hell out of everybody in the family.”

The marines helped give Bunting what he calls “certitude” and led him to VMI to finish the job. “I really loved it here,” he says. “I really did.” Even the ratline? “I didn’t exactly like it, but I was good at it. It was something that came naturally to me.” Bunting turns grandiloquent, as he often does when the conversation becomes personal. “There is something almost chemical in its attraction for a certain kind of kid,” he says. “He thrives.” We are having breakfast in the vast mess hall now, and he looks out at the rats straining all around us. “These rats are thriving. They’re doing fine with it.” What about poor Myers? “It’s harrowing,” he admits, “and it’s particularly harrowing in August and September, when it gets really hot here. It is not malignant, and it is not personal. But it is harrowing.”

The more pressing question isn’t about Myers but about his sister, if he has one. How would a Miss Myers, as such a female cadet would be known, fare in the ratline? One might imagine that the Supreme Court considered that question in some detail before making such a momentous ruling. But the Court dismissed nonphysiological aspects of gender as mere

stereotyping, as if gender distinctions were solely a matter of prejudice. In the Court’s mind, the dominant issue was equal opportunity, and in this, VMI’s history of success in placing its “citizen-soldier” graduates among the Virginia elite in business, law and politics was the most powerful evidence against it. (It didn’t seem to matter that that success has in recent years dwindled to the point that there is only one VMI grad in the Virginia Assembly.) If women, by their nature, aren’t cut out for something as harsh as the VMI ratline, well, that wasn’t the Supreme Court’s problem.

While Bunting has always said that, like a good soldier, he would follow the orders of the Supreme Court, he makes it clear that his heart is with the defenders of the status quo. To have women in the barracks will be, in his words, “a very radical change.” Ever since navy ships were turned into “Love Boats” and female soldiers serving in the Bosnian peacekeeping mission were evacuated for pregnancy at the rate of one every three days, VMI has been all too aware that

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women will bring a new dimension to barracks life. Sex is forbidden there, but it could be hard to stop. As Colonel Farrell put it, “I’m not even going to talk about anything so absurd as abstinence.” With sex comes intrigue of the Joe-likes-Mary-but-Mary-likes-Bob variety, which can severely threaten corps solidarity. “That’s what we’re all afraid of,” Farrell says. “The triangle.” Also lurking in the sexual shadows are the same dark suspicions that the recent spate of sexual-harassment cases in the military have exposed. While men are being forced to pretend that their women colleagues aren’t any different from themselves, they know perfectly well that they are.

As it is, the total openness of barracks life is being curtailed somewhat to accommodate the advent of female cadets. The women are getting their own private shower stalls, and shades will be placed on the windows of the doors that open onto the courtyard. “This is not a small change,” insists Steve Fogleman, head of the VMI Alumni Association and a staunch opponent of all things female coming to his school. “Lack of privacy is key to the experience. Everyone has always been under constant scrutiny from everybody else.” Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has even argued that, if the Supreme Court were to be intellectually consistent in its assertion that some women are just like men, VMI would not have the shades—or the separate showers, for that matter. But Bunting quickly



dismisses that kind of thinking. "That's just not on," he says.

For his part, Bunting says he will miss the charming purity he now sees in young men when they are by themselves: "There is a frankness, an innocence and an unself-consciousness of action and discussion that is compromised by the intrusion of women." In his mind, men are the "simpler mechanism"; he likes to call them "shy traffickers," after a line in a poem by Matthew Arnold. He adds that little of the received wisdom on gender differences squares with his personal experience at Lawrenceville. There the incoming girls were everything that the literature would suggest they were not. "The girls were smart, outspoken, stouthearted, commanding," he says. "And they often dominated classroom discussion. So my own feeling is that those gender differences may frequently be rather dangerously overdrawn."

Bunting's prejudices may be revealed by his most recent (but still unpublished) novel, *All Loves Excelling*, which is about a teenage girl who starves herself to death because of an

sions, freighted with clauses and larded with antique language (he once startled a journalist by deploying the Middle English word *thew* in an interview)—that seem to go on almost as long as this one has. He can look a little out of place in modernity. As he sat at his mahogany desk under an oil painting of Stonewall Jackson in his book-lined office one afternoon, I half expected a production assistant to dash out and remove the remote control he was holding while he played for me the theme of a Rachmaninoff double-piano suite on his Bose Acoustic Wave stereo.

Bunting teaches a class at VMI on Victorian prose, and one morning I attended the session on Thomas Macaulay's history of England. Bunting was in uniform at the head of the long conference table, with no fewer than three ornate Cross pens arrayed in front of him. Around the table, two dozen uniformed cadets were seated. As Bunting described Macaulay in modern-day American terms, transposing his birthplace to a tony American suburb so that the rather sleepy cadets could

get it, he described a man remarkably like himself: wellborn, highly educated, intelligent, practical minded, idealistic, forward-looking and, for all this, a little out of it.

Unlike Macaulay, who made his fortune in India, Bunting married his. Diana Cunningham Bunting is the heiress to a Peruvian mining fortune; they met at an Oxford dinner dance, where a college friend left her in Bunting's care while he went off to an all-night poker game in London. And instead of writing the definitive history of England, Bunting wrote what may be the definitive novel about the Vietnam War. But the most important kinship is spiritual. Like all the great Victorians, Bunting believes passionately that citizens should engage fully in both the public and the



eating disorder. At Lawrenceville, he says, he saw many of the girls respond to parental pressures by embarking on just such a trajectory of self-destruction. In the novel, the girl's course is propelled in part by a male lacrosse player telling her to "get your fat ass out of the way." Bunting doesn't expect any VMI women to become anorexic, if only because the caloric requirements of the school's rigorous lifestyle are so high, but it is clear that he believes young women in a highly pressured environment are poised for a fall.

It is probably unfair to ask Bunting to take a stand on such a thoroughly modern issue as gender differences, for he is not a man of the here and now. He is, as most of his friends point out, a creature out of the nineteenth century—specifically, Victorian England, circa 1850, before the empire started to slip. Even in ordinary conversation, he routinely delivers himself of Gibbonesque sentences—thick with literary allu-

private sides of life. "Si wants to eat that big English breakfast," says his friend David Cantlay, an English teacher at Lawrenceville, "the one that fueled Matthew Arnold through a day of running England's schools or Anthony Trollope running England's post office, then sit down at his desk to do 2,000 words on his novel and then end the day engaged in sparkling conversation at his club." VMI citizen-soldiers are of the type, but about the only famous exemplar of the ideal nationally is New York's scholar-senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Bunting finds the one-sidedness of contemporary American life appalling. "The typical bank president in a midsized American city is struck absolutely dumb when asked to make a speech at the Kiwanis Club," he complains. "The world's oldest political democracy places no premium whatsoever on being able to speak coherently and confidently in public. It's weird, isn't it?"

He traces the decline in American (continued on page 170)



(continued from page 131) public-mindedness to the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, the year Bunting arrived at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. The Kennedy era was a grand Victorian time. "It was a time when you could devote your life to good works and leading things, and inevitably those things would lead to good." Vietnam showed otherwise, and the 1973 oil embargo finished off any lingering vestiges of the can-do spirit. "What came out was a bitter, unhappy, attenuated thing dominated by people like Alan Alda." Bunting can barely contain his scorn. "Suddenly, there was a new kind of man who gave himself up only to his garden. It was the time of 'Small is beautiful; we don't have any resources; we can't do anything in the world; we're all washed up.'" Reaganism was unable to reinflate the old balloon, and now we're left with Bill Clinton, in Bunting's mind the sorri-

est thing of all. "I could never vote for such a man," he says. "He doesn't have any core."

of myself as the Catcher in the Rye," he says. His face turns dreamy as he remembers the book. "'Eat your lovely lamb chop,' Holden's mother says to his sister, Phoebe. Can't you hear her saying that, in her apartment on the eleventh floor of 73rd and Madison? 'Eat your lovely lamb chop.'" His face curls into a smile.

Bunting has never entirely exorcised the demons of self-indulgence, despite the strictures of his VMI years. At Hampden-Sydney, Bunting racked up so many speeding tickets that he lost his license. "It was a problem, but it was an amusing problem, that we had this lead-footed president," says John Brinkley, a classics professor and former Rhodes scholar who ended up as Bunting's driver, delivering him to the marathons he ran religiously every five or six weeks. For all his emphasis on fitness, Bunting paid surprisingly little attention to health. He regularly

ered several inches. And the school is bringing in female exchange students from other colleges to serve as mentors to the female rats. It is emphatically not going to tidy up the nomenclature of the school. At VMI those mentors are called "dykes," owing to their origins as the elders helping the younger cadets fasten the cross-dyke straps on their uniforms, and whatever the word's modern-day implications to women, dykes they will remain.

Soon the "reorientation" campaign will begin. VMI will not reveal which consulting firm it has hired for the job, but according to Verna Ford, a vice president at J. Howard and Associates, one of the leaders in the growing field of "diversity training," the work will probably start with a series of seminars for the leadership and then proceed down through the ranks. The point is to emphasize the benefits that will come from being more inclusive. For a corporation, those gains show up in the bottom line, where less friction means greater efficiency and higher profits. At VMI some benefits might well show up in the classroom, where many professors have already expressed an eagerness to see their classes enlivened by the presence of female cadets. But Ford thinks the main benefit might simply be in the change itself. "After 158 years of doing everything the same way, you might need a change," she exclaims after I fill her in on VMI's history. Ford predicts that there will also be discussions of gender stereotypes and some role-playing of "tense situations" in which, say, someone makes a sexual remark where women are present.

est thing of all. "I could never vote for such a man," he says. "He doesn't have any core."

Strict moralists don't always fare well in a fallen world, however. As president of Hampden-Sydney, Bunting once had to decide a possible honor violation involving an alleged second helping of meat ravioli in the cafeteria. Second helpings of meat dishes were forbidden, but the student swore he thought the ravioli contained cheese only. Worse, the student was a member of the honor board that handled such cases. The situation had bad PR written all over it, but Bunting was determined to take a hard line, come what may, and was dissuaded only when the student's father brought in a lawyer to persuade a couple of trustees to show Bunting the light. Bunting says he does not remember the incident, but he doesn't deny that he may have reacted that way. "I always took possible honor violations very seriously," he says.

But he has a soft spot, too. At Lawrenceville he was amazed to discover how eager the faculty's disciplinary committee was to expel students, and he took it upon himself to be the students' defender, perhaps remembering his own ousters from Hill and Salisbury. "I thought

sneaked Snickers bars and C rations at his desk, and his idea of the perfect meal was a foot-long hot dog, double fries and a pineapple milk shake.

Bunting once pointed out that a crew can row fast only if the boat is balanced and the boat can be balanced only if it goes fast. Bunting may be a nineteenth-century man marooned in the twentieth, a Main Liner in the bosom of the Confederacy, an American patriot clothed as an Anglophile, but there is something about his sheer forward momentum that keeps all the clanking anomalies in order. One friend observes that Bunting doesn't look quite himself in still photographs; he can truly be captured only in motion. So it seems fitting that the institution he heads is proceeding with military dispatch toward an end that it has violently opposed. No fewer than eight committees have been assembled to tackle various aspects of the transition to coeducation, and the school has started to make the thousands of little adjustments needed to facilitate what it is calling "assimilation," since "integration" has too many unfortunate overtones. Two rooms on each floor of the barracks have already been given over for women's showers. The post's lighting will be enhanced to increase the women's sense of safety. All the mirrors will be low-

To its credit, VMI seems to be adopting a position of welcome toward the young women. If anything, it may be trying too hard. I'm not allowed to speak to any of the prospective female cadets on the post, but as I skulk about in the admissions office, I spot one of them with an assistant admissions director. They are making light conversation about her softball team, which won its division. Both have the exaggerated smiles, the eagerness to please, that you usually see in the mating dance of college admissions, but in this case it is clear that the admissions person is the far more ardent wooer. Despite his obvious enthusiasm for the woman's ball-playing skills, he does not mention that VMI will not have enough female softball players to field a decent varsity team. Later, as I watch a couple of cadets chat her up, I am struck by the young woman's shaggy hair, baggy clothes and general fleshiness, which seem the antithesis of the lean and rugged VMI ideal. I have to wonder how she will take the fierce compaction of the ratline.

For all of VMI's determination, the hunt for female recruits is not going well. The school has sent 30,000 direct-mail pieces to potential recruits, talked to



## The Women of VMI

countless college-admissions personnel and, in return, received 1,670 inquiries from women. Still, as of April, the school has received only eighty-eight applications. Because of heavy competition from the service academies for these same recruits, those eighty-eight applications have converted into only twenty-three women willing to put down a deposit to guarantee a place in the class of 2001. The first is Brooke Elliott, an 18-year-old from Poquoson, Virginia, who is planning a career in the Green Berets and has a print of Robert E. Lee in her bedroom. When I ask her the hardest part of going to VMI, she says, "Waiting until August, sir." But there is one other little problem. Despite considerable training, she can still do only three of the five pull-ups required. "But I'm working on it," she says. Jennifer Jolin, a basketball player and track star from Monterey, Virginia, is the daughter of a retired navy man. She decided on VMI after visiting the campus during an open house last fall. "I liked the atmosphere, the honor system, the discipline, the academics," she says. "It's kind of like an adventure." She can't wait to come home at the end of her first year and show off her no-hair haircut and her uniform. She has no doubt that she will survive: "Anybody who wants to go to the


Citadel or VMI had enough—they'll stay no matter what. If I run into the same problem those girls at the Citadel did, then somebody else will be in trouble, but I'm not leaving."

Bunting arrived at Lawrenceville in the spring of 1987, just before the girls did, so it fell to him to preside over the last chapel ceremony of the all-male school. He hadn't planned to say anything special, but he closed the service by noting that this would be the last time the school would gather as an all-male institution. After he said this, he was surprised by the depth of the silence in the congregation. Among his many cultural tastes, Bunting has a special fondness for classical music, and now, as the last season of VMI's long history as an all-male preserve draws to a close, he has in mind the adagietto movement from Mahler's Fifth Symphony. "It has an autumnal feeling," he says. "It's strong, wistful, plaintive and elegiac." These are, of course, his emotions—these plus one other, which, as a matter of principle, he almost never reveals. With me he comes at it sideways, as is his nature, in the course of a disquisition on Edmund Burke, which leads to a lament about the current conservatism that makes no room

for the Burkean values of tradition and continuity amid all its paeans to free enterprise. He declares that, if nothing else, a few colleges have proved their value to the country over the generations simply by virtue of their continued existence. He mentions tiny Catawba College and little-known Sewanee University, and then he adds the Virginia Military Institute to the list. "And you know what?" he says. "They should be left the fuck alone."

But they won't be, and one has to wonder if the Supreme Court is fully aware of the likely consequences. It is one thing to say that women should be treated like men and quite another to make it happen in a place as rich in masculine tradition as VMI. No one expects VMI to go the way of the Citadel or the Aberdeen Proving Ground or any of the other macho military preserves that seem to have been completely undone by the introduction of women. And Bunting is one big reason why. But, count on it, VMI will have its incidents, and they will leave their stain. The forces of progress and enlightenment have delivered women to VMI. The question now is whether the female cadets will gain more from the experience than VMI will lose. ●

John Sedgwick is a GQ writer-at-large.



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