

CAN THE ACADEMY SURVIVE?

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“We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does”

Upon returning to USAFA for our 30th Class Reunion in 2002, we found locked doors to cadet dormitory rooms. A simple security issue we were told, but gone were the days when a \$100 bill could be left unmolested on one's desk. Later that day in a formal briefing, the Commandant of Cadets informed us that the Honor Code could not be enforced as it was in the 1970s. Doing so would decimate present classes, whose members adhered to a less rigid standard of morality and honor. And now 20 years hence, the Academy is embroiled in yet another scandal with 243 cadets accused of cheating with no resolution in sight.

Academy alumni, who watched the decline in academic standards, military rigor, and ethical expectations over the past several decades, wonder if the Academy can withstand the onslaught of doctrines like Critical Race Theory (CRT) that are incompatible with training future Air Force officers. A new breed of ideological senior officers argues a new ethos better aligns Academy values with evolving cultural realities. Once aligned, what will distinguish the Academy from other institutions involved in academic and military training? If the answer is nothing,” then the value of the Academy's contribution comes into question.

When asked, “What is unique about the Academy experience?” most alumni will offer a variant of the following answer: “It was the most intense, demanding, and yet rewarding four years of my life, combining a prestigious academic curriculum, rigorous 24/7/365 military leadership training, and world-class athletic program. But these advantages paled in comparison to the bonds forged with fellow classmates, who collectively faced and overcame these challenges.” As individuals we would have failed, and only through the strength of others and the shared ethical foundation of the Honor Code were we able to succeed.

Over the past 50 years all three academies have been beset with scandals, and numerous commissions have been tasked to produce recommendations to improve the Honor Code. In the wake of the West Point Electrical Engineering scandal in 1976, former astronaut Frank Borman reported that any cheating scandal would find its beginning in a “toleration” situation. He was right. Most commissions have struggled with the justification and enforcement of the toleration clause. Surveys show that while over 60% of graduates admit violating the toleration code, less than 2% of the adjudicated violations have been for

toleration. In terms of sheer numbers, lying, cheating and stealing are minor compared to rampant, unenforced toleration infractions.

The Honor Code has been the victim of moral relativism, which blurs the line between right and wrong, good and evil, and ethical and unethical behavior. Today, the Code's 14 simple, unambiguous words must now be explained in over 20,000 words in the "Air Force Cadet Wing Honor Code Reference Handbook." Rather than providing clarity to these 14 unambiguous words, the handbook represents a jumble of procedural constructs and newly defined terms that allow for subjective interpretation. The Honor Code as written forces cadets to abide by a shared, simple ethic, but it also constrains the Academy leadership's ability to subjectively interpret and selectively apply it.

An effective combat unit is necessarily self-policing. It cannot knowingly tolerate behaviors of others that endanger the unit. Behavioral psychologists note that toleration is much more insidious in high pressure, high consequence organizations, where honor and integrity are assumed or demanded by all its members. The knowledge that some members gain personal advantage through tolerated, dishonorable behaviors will eventually undermine the individual's belief and support of a system that is perceived to be unfair. The perception of fairness is a basic human instinct and in stressful situations can override higher reasoning functions like honor and integrity. These instincts are directly coupled with innate drives toward either group cooperation and unity or toward division and conflict. A value system deemed unfair will eventually lead to wider spread dishonorable behaviors, the breakdown of unit cohesion, and ultimate collapse of the organization.

More than a decade ago Dr. Frederick Malmstrom, USAFA Class of 1964, and Dr. R. David Mullin launched a thorough investigation into the deterioration of the Honor Code. The findings delivered a grave prognosis - one that the Academy administration sadly did not heed. Fifty years ago respect for the Code ranged from 90-100% but plunged to 70% for the classes of 2007-2010. Between 2002 and 2011, 1st and 4th class cadets were given the Defining Issues Test which ranks moral reasoning on a scale that ranges from "acting purely from self-interest" to "making moral decisions based on shared ideals and principles." An institution tasked with developing leaders of character would be expected to score well above average. Disappointingly, the test found "no significant difference in the highest level of moral reasoning between Academy seniors and seniors at other colleges and universities. One in four members of the Class of 2010 regressed to lower levels of ethical decision making while at the Academy.

Before admission to the Academy, it is likely a large portion of cadets will be exposed to destructive social theories like CRT that are based on power structures, victimization, and unfairness. CRT is rooted in ambiguity and teaches

that America is an inherently and permanently racist society steeped in oppression. Freedom, meritocracy, equality, and justice are instruments of this oppression. The system is unfair, irredeemably flawed, and requires replacement. If the current academic climate prevails at the Academy, these future leaders will be taught by professors who are sympathetic to these theories and reject the Honor Code as an antiquated instrument of dominance and oppression.

The Academy must regain the lost respect for the Honor Code and then use it as unifying framework to resist claims of unfairness asserted by critical race theorists and to build the moral reasoning skills required by leaders of character. Rejuvenating the Honor Code can be a relatively straightforward process. The focus must return to those 14 unambiguous words. All incoming candidates should be admonished that adherence to the Code is the minimum standard required for ensuring fairness and ethical behavior across all aspects of cadet life. Upon acceptance into the Cadet Wing, the new 4th class must understand that they are being inducted into a unique society that holds honor, integrity and unity above all else. These cannot be empty words. Upperclass cadets must be role models for upholding the integrity of the Code and not enablers of corrosive behaviors. Discrimination cannot be condoned within the context of the tenets of the Honor Code and will be considered tantamount to stealing a fellow cadet's right to fair treatment.

Finally, the Academy administration must live up to their oaths and obligations as leaders of character by acknowledging past mistakes and restoring an unambiguous Honor Code. A transition period will be necessary and difficult, but the rewards are great for cadets, the Academy, and our country. Once again Academy graduates will become role models for guiding this country through these most difficult times where leaders of character are so critically needed.