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Is the Air Force Academy Honor Code Dead?

By Doug Goodman and Scott Sturman

Military codes of conduct that prescribe honorable behavior date back thousands of years and are essential for maintaining trust, camaraderie, and discipline within the armed forces. Yet over the past fifty years, cadets at the Air Force Academy have demonstrated a diminishing respect for the Honor Code, which has fallen victim to the moral relativism that blurs the distinction between ethical and unethical behaviors and contributed to a precipitous drop in retention rates and overall military readiness.

The Air Force Academy Honor Code is concise and unambiguous: “We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does.” The oath begins with “We” rather than “I” to signify it is a code of conduct shared among the members of the Cadet Wing. It embodies an intimate trust between fellow cadets that is not based on fear or intimidation but mutual respect. Lying, cheating, stealing, or tolerating breaks this trust, diminishes the achievements of fellow cadets and fosters a climate of disunity. Under real world military conditions, trust is an essential requirement, not a debatable philosophical principle.



Professor Shannon French, a former instructor at USNA, points out in Code of the Warrior that from the time of Homer, warrior codes developed from within the ranks and were based on the Aristotelian precept to embody certain virtues in order to identify oneself as honorable. These codes protect the warrior from moral injury, help maintain their humanity, and set a minimum standard of ethical behavior.

Since its inception in 1955, the Academy has experienced a series of Honor Code scandals, resulting in the adaptation of eight increasingly lenient, legally entangled, and philosophically abstract honor code remediation programs. In 2014 the degradation of the Honor Code led to a full-scale breakdown of morality that involved sexual assault, drug abuse, and cheating. The downward trajectory continued, when in 2020, a cheating scandal involved nearly 250 cadets. Less than 10% were expelled with over 90% enrolled into an unvalidated, compulsory six-month probation program that reinforces the notion that valuing individual loyalties over group honor will be rewarded with leniency.

More than a decade ago Dr. Frederick Malmstrom, USAFA Class of 1964 and an Air Force Academy Visiting Scholar for Honor from 1999-2014, launched a thorough investigation into the deterioration of the Honor Code. Results of his research show that fifty years ago respect for the code ranged from 90- 100% but plunged to 70% for the classes of 2007-2010. If current trends continue, loyalty will displace honor as the cadets' primary driver of behavior by 2022. The research further concluded that the Academy is failing in its primary mission: Cadet motivation to make the Air Force a career fell from over 90% in the 1960s to less than 50% today.

Between 2002 and 2011, senior and freshman cadets were given the Defining Issues Test which ranks moral reasoning. 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 attending the Academy. These surveys show that fourth class cadets enter the Academy as the most honorable class. However, cynicism becomes prevalent when fellow cadets ignore the Honor Code, officers engage in dishonorable behavior, and senior military leaders avoid responsibility for failed leadership.

All three service academies have been beset with honor scandals, and have struggled with the justification and enforcement of the toleration clause. Following the 1965 Air Force Academy cheating scandal, Air Force Chief of Staff General Thomas D. White issued the "White Report." He pointed out that the public does not condone dishonorable conduct within professional occupations and should expect nothing less from military officers. Furthermore, reporting misconduct is a duty necessary to protect the integrity of the institution. 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.

Malmstrom's surveys show that while over 60% of graduates admit violating the toleration code, less than 9% of the reported violations were for toleration. While lying, cheating, and stealing are typically perpetrated for individual gain, toleration is much more prevalent and pernicious. Toleration leads to repeating honor scandals and breeds the perception of unfairness. A value system deemed unfair will eventually lead to wider spread dishonorable behaviors, the breakdown of unit cohesion, and ultimate collapse of the organization.

There is an expectation that cadets are trained to adhere to high standards of honesty and ethical behavior that will carry them through both military and civilian life. These fundamental assumptions were challenged in a nationally televised documentary where the dishonorable actions of a 1994 Air Force Academy graduate cost the lives of hundreds of people. The individual, who served as Boeing's chief technical pilot, suppressed information about critical problems with the MCAS flight control system that led to the 737 Max disasters and led to his indictment for fraud.

In October of this year a statue of brigadier general and triple ace Robin Olds, arguably the most admired Commandant of Cadets in the Academy's history, was dedicated at the Air Warrior Combat Memorial. In his biography *Fighter Pilot* he described his experience with the Air Force Academy Honor Code:

Over my three and a half years at the Academy, I tried to change the honor system both individually and collectively... It was an ultimately hopeless quest. The honor system was treated like a court of law... codified, analyzed, beaten to the ground and weakened my myriad interpretations. If the guys in D.C. and in commands would just let these kids follow their innate instincts as pilots and leaders, the Air Force would be in great shape for the future.

The Honor Code is broken, as well as the Academy's ability to accomplish its primary mission of training career officers of character. The Air Force Academy should heed General Olds' advice and return the administration and enforcement of the Honor Code to the Cadet Wing.

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