

## Evidence of Good Character: Living Honorably and Building Trust (Honorable Living White Paper)

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### Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to motivate cultural change. While West Point cadets have many strong character traits, the data shows that toleration is becoming more prevalent, sexual harassment and assault continue, and cadets seek to survive the Honor Code through compliance rather than internalizing the values that motivate Honor Code. We can do better. The hope is that this paper starts a dialogue about aspiring to a life that attains something greater than compliance with the minimum standard established by the Honor Code.

### Introduction

Imagine giving full custody of the most important person in your life to a complete stranger. What would it take for you to trust that stranger with the well being of your mom, dad, brother, sister, or lover? What would you want to know about their beliefs and personal life? What actions, tweets, or FaceBook postings would make you question their ability or willingness to care for your loved one? This is not an imaginary exercise. If you graduate, you will be one of those strangers granted full custody of someone's most important person. Do you measure up to the standards you imagined just moments ago? Would you consider yourself trustworthy?

Honorable living is challenging for a variety of reasons: a clear definition of honorable living is elusive, our human nature is prone to mistakes, and competing loyalties undermine non-toleration. However, these challenges to honorable living can be overcome. For Army officers, they must be overcome if we are going to fulfill the moral obligation we swear the oath of commission. West Point strives to develop leaders of character so the American people can trust us with the resources they provide and responsibility they bestow. But how can we be more effectively inspired to internalize the profession's values and aspire to an honorable life beyond the minimum standard of compliance with the Honor Code?

### What is Living Honorably and Building Trust?

Before we define honorable living, we should define *character*. The word *character* is derived from the Greek word *charakter*, which was the permanent mark placed on a coin that determined the coin's worth. Similarly, a person's character is "marked" by the set of beliefs and values which serve as guideposts for how you behave, decide, and act.<sup>1</sup> At West Point, our mission is for each graduate's character to be "marked" with the values of West Point and the Army Ethic.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that other important values we believe will no longer apply. However, when a personal value

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion about the root of the word character can be found in many sources. The author thought this was the most concise and appropriate. Murphy, Madonna M. *Character Education in America's Blue Ribbon Schools: Best Practices for Meeting the Challenge*. (Lancaster: Technomic Publishing Company, 1998), 5.

<sup>2</sup> ADRP 1 The Army Profession, 14 June 13, p. 1-3, defines the Army Ethic as "the evolving set of laws, values, and beliefs, deeply embedded within the core of the Army culture and practiced by all members of the Army Profession to motivate and guide the appropriate conduct of individual members bound together in common moral purpose."

conflicts with the values required of an Army officer, we have a professional responsibility to behave in a manner consistent with the Army Ethic. To do otherwise compromises our moral obligation as an officer. So when West Point declares that our graduates are leaders of character, we are saying that each graduate embraces the values of West Point and the Army Ethic and will behave in a manner consistent with those values in every situation.

Living honorably, then, is simply living in a manner that is consistent with West Point's values and the Army Ethic.<sup>3</sup> Here is a working definition: *Living honorably is the daily commitment to internalize and uphold the values inherent in West Point's motto 'Duty, Honor, Country' and the Army Ethic; to strive for excellence, and to develop ourselves and others in character, competence, and commitment in service to the Nation as members of the Army Profession now and into the future.*<sup>4</sup> As a general rule, our actions are honorable if they build trust and confidence in us and in the Army. Our actions are not honorable if they create doubt about our ability to act properly without supervision or if they tarnish the Army's and West Point's reputation.

The result of honorable living is trust, which is the bedrock of the Army Profession and our Mission Command doctrine. People trust you because of your actions, not your words or pedigree. Your West Point diploma will not cover dishonorable behavior. Unfortunately, the damage caused by one lapse of character can tarnish a reputation built on years of honorable service. The harsh reality is that once trust is given away, it is difficult to rebuild. But the habits of honorable living we develop at West Point will help us build and maintain our character at all times, whether on or off duty, and in all aspects of our lives.

### **Why are Character and Honorable Living Important?**

Each of us will face moments when we will be required to act morally under duress, persevere under adversity, respond to setbacks, or suppress our own human desire to choose an easier path. Sometimes those moments will occur during combat, but most of them will not. During these moments, we will not suddenly flip a switch that enables us to do the right thing. Instead, our automatic response will reflect the habits of honorable living developed during our West Point experience. If we build habits of living honorably, we will most likely respond appropriately. However, if we fail to develop strong character, fail to set a moral-ethical example, and tolerate substandard performance, we have a greater chance of failing our Soldiers and tarnishing the Army Profession.

Our good character will also strengthen the Army Profession by enabling us to build trust, the "vital organizing principle that establishes the conditions necessary for effective and ethical mission command and a profession that continues to earn the trust of the American people."<sup>5</sup> Trust derived from strong character is not solely helpful for living an admirable life; it is a mission essential requirement. Trust allows the Army to maintain a professional status in American society. Trust enables a mission command philosophy and permits leaders to conduct decentralized operations without constant oversight. In contrast, weak character breeds mistrust, undermines cohesion, and degrades military effectiveness. Even worse, weak character can lead to short cuts, half truths, and moral cowardice that result in mission failure and unnecessary loss of life.

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<sup>3</sup> West Point values are: Duty, Honor, and Country. The values espoused by the Army Ethic are the established Army Values: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage.

<sup>4</sup> An alternate definition: Honorable living is the demonstration and evidence of strong character through proper actions and attitudes that build confidence in your ability to live by the Army Ethic and to fulfill your moral obligation as an officer in the Army Profession.

<sup>5</sup> ADRP 1 The Army Profession, June 2013, p. 2-1.

Most importantly, the trust built through honorable living is a mission imperative. Secretary of War Newton D. Baker succinctly summarized the importance of honor in the Army Profession:

*“Men (Officers) may be inexact or even untruthful in ordinary matters and suffer as a consequence only the disesteem of their associates or the inconvenience of unfavorable litigation, but the inexact or untruthful soldier trifles with the lives of his fellow men (soldiers) and with the honor of his government, and it is therefore no matter of pride but rather a stern disciplinary necessity that makes West Point require of her students a character for trustworthiness that knows no evasions.”<sup>6</sup>*

The trust built through honorable living also brings tangible benefits to each of us, our unit, and our country. Personally, we will enjoy professional autonomy and the respect given to a West Point credential.<sup>7</sup> Our unit will operate more efficiently under the mission command philosophy without the constant oversight required in a unit plagued with mistrust. Finally, the Nation benefits from having an Army that provides security in an honorable way, knowing that each Army professional will fulfill that responsibility without abusing their authority.

### **High Expectations: Why does the Nation expect so much of us?**

Before a person, family, town, or Nation can prosper they must feel safe and secure.<sup>8</sup> The Nation provides the Army—all of us—the resources and authority to KILL on their behalf. Can you name any other profession where the Nation grants a comparable level of trust, responsibility, and authority at the very beginning of a career? Around the globe, West Point graduates are the face of America to people in dire circumstances. These graduates have immense responsibility to ethically accomplish their mission while taking care of people. They make command decisions with limited guidance, minimal oversight, significant consequences, and moral ambiguity. These duties require absolute confidence in our character.

The public’s expectations leave no room for behavior that creates doubt in our ability to fulfill our obligation as a commissioned officer. The American people and our Soldiers expect us to behave honorably and inspirationally all the time. They do not make a distinction between private life and personal life, even if we believe that distinction exists. Quite simply, we are expected to live differently than an average citizen. These expectations and responsibilities require us to forfeit many of our rights and privileges. Service in the Army Profession is a sacrificial calling to an idealistic standard of life that builds the trust necessary for military effectiveness.

### **Honorable Living is a Team Effort**

Our humanity makes honorable living difficult. No one is perfect. However, that reality does not mean we should accept or excuse bad behavior. Striving for honorable living and building strong character is a lifelong endeavor that requires constant vigilance, personal effort, and mutual accountability. We need each other in our pursuit of perfection, even if perfection is beyond our grasp.

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<sup>6</sup> Secretary of War Baker was quoted by MG Maxwell Taylor in a white paper, “West Point Honor System: Its Objectives and Procedures,” access on October 14, 2014 at: <http://www.west-point.org/users/usma1983/40768/docs/taylor.html>.

<sup>7</sup> While this paper emphasizes the benefits of honorable living to your professional life, it should be noted that developing strong character and living honorably are noble ends worth pursuing in their own right. When you choose to live honorably and pursue virtue, you conquer your own shortcomings while becoming a better person. That pursuit is noble regardless of your chosen profession or vocation.

<sup>8</sup> Security is the second most basic need as described by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

How do imperfect people live honorably? First, we must embrace the experience we chose when we became cadets. Early in our cadet experience, we need to adapt our behavior to align with the values and expectations of a West Point graduate. Second, we should rely on the many people around us to help us succeed. Personally, we should be open to correction when we fall short. Likewise, we need to muster the moral courage to respectfully correct improper behavior in others, including our classmates. This correction should not spring from the brutal “gotcha” perspective where one assumes a condescending attitude. Rather it should spring from a heart that understands we are all aspiring to a high standard and we need each other’s help to live honorably.<sup>9</sup>

As a team, we cannot tolerate behavior that contradicts our values and Army Ethic. The Honor Code clearly articulates that lying, cheating, and stealing will not be tolerated. But that is a minimum standard. We also cannot stand by when we see others disrespect or diminish each other in any way. We cannot allow the propagation of sub-culture values that are contrary to our collective values as professionals. We should always strive to respectfully treat each other as valuable teammates on a noble, demanding endeavor. We can harness the goodness of small unit cohesion without undermining our collective purpose. Somehow, we must subordinate personal friendships and loyalties to the responsibilities of our office—even though we constantly reinforce the idea of “cooperate and graduate.”<sup>10</sup> These expectations are exceedingly difficult and we will stumble. But the tasks are easier when we remember our purpose, refuse to put our teammates in a position where they must compromise themselves to cover for us, and have professional empathy that we all make mistakes that need correction more than condemnation. Alone, we set ourselves up for failure. Together, we can achieve honorable living and strong character.

### **Toleration Undermines the Team**

While few of us would resist improving our own behavior, it is much more difficult to correct our colleagues and peers. American culture does not embrace the “snitch.” Those who report other’s shortcomings are often ridiculed and alienated from their social group. Secondly, confronting someone’s failure to do the right thing often conflicts with personal loyalty. None of us want to be “that brutal person” who has a reputation for making numerous corrections in a self-glorifying mission to catch people doing something wrong. Lastly, there may be fear that reporting someone subjects them to a system that is not transparent, fair, or flexible. This is especially troubling if the offense seems minor or inconsequential. All of these reasons make non-toleration difficult, but they are not justification for toleration. We should constantly remind ourselves that we swear an oath to the Constitution of the United States and we should be wary of inverted, personal loyalties that can threaten our ability to fulfill our oath.

Toleration undermines the team and your unit’s ability to accomplish the mission. As a leader, we simply cannot tolerate substandard performance, indiscipline, misconduct, or unethical behavior. Every time one leads by enforcing standards, preventing misconduct, correcting inappropriate behavior, and living honorably, they strengthen their unit’s reflex to act rightly under duress. Conversely, when we tolerate substandard behavior in any area, we erode the habits, discipline, and ethics required for mission accomplishment. Moral behavior, like any other skill, will erode if we don’t routinely practice. Habitual practice of enforcing standards and living honorably will give us the moral courage to reject toleration of substandard performance in spite of

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<sup>9</sup> An effective summary of positive correction can be found in Schofield’s Definition of Discipline (Bugle Notes 1983-1987, p. 235).

<sup>10</sup> The challenge of enforcing standards within a peer group will not end when you graduate from West Point. Practicing peer leadership at West Point, especially in the area of not tolerating substandard behavior, will serve you well when you become a company executive officer working with other lieutenants, a company commander working with other commanders, and a staff officer working with fellow staff officers of the same rank.

the natural feelings of personal loyalty within a cohesive unit. Practicing good habits and rejecting toleration of substandard performance will lead to our unit's success when our moment of truth inevitably arrives. When it comes to developing the habit of non-toleration in any area, there is no tomorrow. Our leadership habits start now.

### **Developing Character Takes Time and Effort**

Developing character is a three part process consisting of moral knowledge (education), moral action (training), and moral feeling (inspiration).<sup>11</sup> Moral knowledge comes with West Point's education program on the Army Ethic and moral-ethical reasoning. However, education is only the first step in the process of internalizing the Army Ethic. During our West Point experience of living under the Honor Code, we must also provide opportunities to apply and reflect upon our education and experience so we can progressively internalize the values held dear by the Army Profession.

Most of the behavioral issues at West Point are not rooted in a lack of moral education. They are rooted in a lack of moral action or moral feeling. Moral action is improved with the practice of exercising our "character muscle" and then providing opportunities for us to reflect on what we learned. Moral feeling is the process of inspiring us to live honorably in spite of adversity. A possible source of inspiration could be a cadet creed written and agreed upon by the Corps of Cadets.<sup>12</sup> Another source of inspiration can be our mentors, teammates, and peers who help us achieve our character goals with mentorship, encouragement, and accountability. For this to work, each of us must make a decision to live honorably. Only when we are willing to "mark" our character with West Point values and the Army Ethic can we shape it into what is required.

### **Conclusion**

The sacrifices required of an Army professional are not easy. Most leaders are not called in the middle of the night because an employee needs help. Most leaders do not find themselves serving 24/7 far from home in dangerous places. Most leaders are not asked to give orders that may result in the death of their employees. But as an Army officer, we must be ready and willing to thrive in all these situations. It is why the American people expect us to live honorably. It is why the words "West Point Graduate" and "Army Officer" garner such respect.

Why does being a West Point graduate resonate with the public? Because the public knows we voluntarily committed to a unique, demanding, and exceptional college experience. While most college students enjoy seemingly unlimited freedoms, we have forgone those freedoms to pursue a noble calling. We give up the chance to wear what we want, party when we want, skip classes, take spontaneous road trips, tailgate, and study whatever we want. We came here expecting something different and more difficult than most college experiences. So even though it is sacrificial and even though it sometimes chafes against our understanding of individual freedom, we also know these sacrifices and habits of honorable living are building our character, competence, and commitment so we can better serve our Soldiers and our Nation in the noble calling of the Army Profession. General Creighton Abrams once said, "While we are guarding the country, we must accept being the guardian of the finest ethics. The country needs it and we must do it." Don't let these days go by without striving to build the daily habit of building our character by striving to do our best and helping your classmates do the same.

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<sup>11</sup> Lickona, Thomas. *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. (New York: Bantam Book), 53-62.

<sup>12</sup> A copy of a proposed cadet creed is included in Appendix A.

## Appendix A

### Cadet Creed

*As a future officer, I am committed to the values of Duty, Honor, and Country and the Army Ethic.*

*I am an aspiring member of the Army Profession,  
dedicated to serve and earn the trust of the American people.*

*It is my duty to maintain the honor of the Corps.*

*I will live above the common level of life,  
and have the courage to choose the harder right over the easier wrong,  
regardless of time or place.*

*I will live with honor and integrity,  
scorn injustice,  
and have the candor to care enough to confront substandard behavior.*

*I will embrace the warrior ethos,  
and pursue excellence in everything I do.*

*I am a future officer and a member of the Long Gray Line*