

# WEST POINT HONOR SYSTEM

ITS OBJECTIVES AND PROCEDURES

By

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## THE HONOR SYSTEM AT WEST POINT

The Honor System at West Point is the outgrowth of many years of development and experience. The need for such a system is implicit in the mission of the Military Academy to develop military leaders. These leaders must have strength of character as well as intellectual and physical vigor. Secretary of War Newton D. Baker eloquently phrased the obligation of the Military Academy to develop character in the following words:

"The purpose of West Point, therefore, is not to act as a glorified drill sergeant but to lay the foundation upon which a career in growth of military knowledge can be based and to accompany it by two indispensable additions; first, such a general education as educated men find necessary for intelligent intercourse with one another; and second, the inculcation of a set of virtues, admirable always; but indispensable in a soldier. Men 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 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." Thus, the Honor System has its roots both in ethical considerations and in practical military necessity.

Honor, as it is understood by the Corps of Cadets, is a fundamental attribute of character. Honor is a virtue which implies loyalty and courage, truthfulness and self respect, justice and generosity. Its underlying principle is truth. It is not a complicated system of ethics, but merely "honest

dealing and clean thinking." If a cadet is true in thought, word, and deed, there is no question about his meeting the standards of the Corps. On the other hand, quibbling, evasive statements, or the use of technicalities to conceal guilt are not tolerated at West Point.

The Honor System is effective at West Point because it has the loyal support of the authorities and of the Corps of Cadets. Graduates in retrospect regard it as one of the most important instruments in the shaping of their lives. General Eisenhower wrote to the present Superintendent, "I think that everyone familiar with West Point would instantly agree that the one thing that has set us definitely aside from every other school in the world is the fact that for a great number of years it has not only had an Honor System but that the System here actually worked. This achievement is due to a number of reasons, but two of the most important ones are: first, that the authorities of West Point have consistently refused to take advantage of the Honor System to detect or discover minor violations of regulations; and second, that due to the continuity of the Corps and of the instructional staff we have succeeded early in the cadet's career in instilling in him a respect amounting to veneration for the Honor System. The Honor System as a feature of West Point seems to grow in importance with a graduate as the years secede until finally it becomes something which he is almost reluctant to talk about--it occupies a position in his mind akin to the virtue of his mother or his sister."

Noteworthy is the fact that for its success the Honor System depends more upon the Corps of Cadets than upon the supervision of the officers. Each year the cadets select from among themselves an Honor Committee for the purpose of interpreting the Honor System to the Corps of Cadets, explaining the principles upon which it is based, and bringing honor violations into the open in order to get rid of the guilty by constituted authority. Years ago, this group was a Vigilance Committee operating outside the law although frequently connived at by the authorities. In more recent times, the Honor Committee has been set up as a recognized and respected agency within the Corps of Cadets. Its procedures are codified, and its members are clothed with responsible authority. The work of the Honor Committee includes the indoctrination of the new cadets in the principles of the Honor Code and the transmission of these principles from class to class. It guards against the appearance of practices inconsistent with the Code. It inquires into irregularities of conduct, personal or official, which may have been committed by members of the Corps in violation of the principles of honor. In this latter respect, it acts as a grand jury reporting

possible violations to the Commandant of Cadets. The Committee has no punitive powers, its functions being entirely investigative and advisory. If a cadet is reported to the Commandant by the Committee as possibly guilty of an honor violation, the Commandant then sets in motion all the official machinery to make a careful investigation of the facts. In the course of this investigation, the legal rights of the cadet are protected in accordance with the prescriptions of military law.

Although there are many cadet regulations which are related to the Honor System, the System has never outgrown its simple meaning--that a cadet will neither lie, cheat nor steal. A cadet's spoken or written word must always be acceptable without question. For their part, the authorities are careful not to use the Honor System to prevent the violation of regulations. Only if a cadet indicates by a statement that he has complied or will comply with a particular regulation does the Honor System enter into consideration. When such a statement is made, it must, of course, be true. Sometimes a cadet is required to give a promise to comply with regulations in exchange for a privilege. For example, a cadet taking advantage of a dining privilege is required to sign his departure and return in a book. His signature means that he has taken no undue advantage of the privilege during his absence from barracks. If he is not willing to enter into this promise, he does not receive the privilege. Having once accepted the privilege, he is honor bound to report himself for any violation which he commits while absent from barracks.

In another situation, a cadet's simple word is taken in lieu of a complicated official report. For example, a cadet crossing a sentry post tells the sentry, "All right." "All right" in this case means that he has legitimate business for crossing the post and is not going to take undue advantage of the privilege. The phrase is elsewhere used in a variety of circumstances as an official formula with a specified meaning. For example, "All right" may be used as the oral report of a cadet who has just performed a specific duty, or as an indication that the authorized occupants of a room are present at a given inspection. The system of "All right" is carefully explained to all new cadets so that there can be no mistake about its significance.

It should be apparent from the foregoing explanation that the Honor System is not a means for disciplining the Corps of Cadets. If a cadet wishes to commit an offense against the regulations, he may take that chance. If he is caught, he is punished for a violation of restrictions without the Honor System becoming involved.

Cadets who are found guilty of violations of the Honor Code are either allowed to resign or required to stand trial by court-martial. Cases of trial are comparatively rare, for most erring cadets prefer to leave the Academy quietly. Records of all alleged violations in which the evidence does not warrant trial are kept in a confidential file as long as the cadet remains at the Academy. When he leaves, this file is destroyed.

The Honor System is an essential element in the character molding which goes on at the Military Academy. It is a vital influence in the day-to-day life of every cadet. Instances are constantly occurring which show how much the system means to the Corps. Cadets are constantly reporting themselves for unintentional violations of the Honor System. A cadet may be reported by one of his closest friends for an Honor violation because the men of the Corps feel that the Honor Code is bigger than any individual or any personal friendship. A few years ago a foreign cadet became involved in an honor violation and resigned. Three years later when his former class was approaching graduation at West Point, he returned at his own expense and called upon the Superintendent. He recalled the circumstances of his resignation, explaining that after leaving West Point he had meditated deeply upon his offense. As a form of reparation, he had decided to dedicate himself to the cause of developing in the schools of his own country standards of honor comparable to those at West Point. Becoming an instructor at his own nation's Military Academy, he founded an Honor System like the one he had known as a cadet. He came back to West Point to appear before the Honor Committee once more and to report upon his work abroad. This work, he hoped, would make amends for the offense that he had formerly committed against the standards of honor of West Point.

For all who have had contact with the Honor System at West Point, the influence of this way of life has been marked and lasting, and the devotion of the Corps of Cadets to the Honor System continues to be very real and deeply rooted.