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## Does Measurement Hurt or Help a Sacrosanct System?

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*The purpose of this paper*

~~My~~ purpose is to examine whether the Honor System at West Point would be hurt or helped by making the cadets aware of survey findings of how they stand on toleration of dishonesty.

The Honor Code states, "A cadet will not lie, cheat, or steal nor tolerate those who do." (USMA p. 1). If a cadet is found guilty of dishonesty, he or she is dismissed. Similarly, if a cadet is found guilty of tolerating another cadet's dishonesty, the tolerator is dismissed.

### The Honor System is Sacred

The renown and sanctity of the Honor System depends upon its rigor. Dismissal of cadets who are found guilty of personal dishonesty, or toleration of another's dishonesty, resembles excommunication by a church of its unworthies who are cast out from the in-group of communicants. Remaining members of the in-group are thus confirmed as worthy of continued service. In sum, honor is revered as an all-or-none proposition. The tenet of all-or-none is shared by the United States Air Force Academy's Honor System (USAFA p. 11).

Only about one percent of the cadets may be found guilty and dismissed in a year. As to toleration, over a period of ten years, fewer than one in one thousand cadets was found guilty of toleration alone. (Borman p. 17). The Honor System apparently has accomplished the awesome job of convincing young men and women that non-toleration of others' dishonesty must be put before loyalty to closest friends.

Before West Point, youngsters grow to know that the worst crime in the book is to "rat on a buddy." At West Point, that peer loyalty is further reinforced by close support of classmates in joint tasks. New cadets are taught, however, that the higher loyalty is their responsibility to the Honor Code and its non-toleration clause. The central obligation in the motto of West Point - Duty Honor Country - and each cadet's oath that service to the nation is more important than self or friends is fulfilled by the vast majority of the cadets. In sum, the Honor Code is held to be an absolute and is revered as sacred.

### But Honesty is a Variable, Not an Absolute

Dishonesty may range from signing a false official certificate to the white lie of a cadet flattering his girlfriend, from using notes taken into an examination to using information accidentally heard in a social conversation with a friend who has taken the exam before, from stealing a stereo set to

using a ball point pen in a government office, walking away with it, and later keeping it as an item not worth making a special trip to return it.

Similarly, a cadet's information about another cadet's dishonesty is a variable, not an absolute. Information may range from direct observation, to hearing another cadet's shocked statement that he was flabbergasted when he saw his good friend cheat on an exam, to simply hearing about somebody in the next company having stolen money. Presumably, personal observation is ground for reporting an honor violation. But what to do about circumstantial evidence, or compelling hearsay as cited for example, or persistent rumors of group cheating?

Finally, a cadet's idea of a reportable violation is a variable, not an absolute and thereby toleration may vary. Toleration may range from being an accessory before-the-fact, to counseling the violator but not reporting the violation and thereby becoming an accessory after-the-fact, to tolerating a good friend's theft of a government ball point pen because dismissal is thought to be too gross for such an offense.

### Problems in the Honor System

In the last 31 years, cheating scandals have occurred six times. More than 100 cadets were dismissed in the latest episode. On earlier occasions of group cheating, 19 to 90 cadets were dismissed. Some people say that proves the system works. If a group is found guilty, out everybody goes. While the rigor of handling those brought to dock is impressive, what was the basic cause of the half-dozen large-scale cheating scandals?

During the investigation of the latest episode, both cadets and officers cited views that only a fraction of the cheating that was 'known' was reported. (Borman p. 15-17). An official survey revealed that more than two-thirds of the cadets said that they would not report a good friend for a possible honor violation and more than one-third said they would not report a good friend for a clear-cut violation. (Borman p. 14).

The Government Accounting Office (GAO), citing the Superintendent's Honor Review Committee study that was completed before the latest group cheating was discovered, reported that the non-toleration clause was, "one of the biggest problems for the cadets." The GAO also reported that, "Some cadets feel that friendship is more important than reporting a fellow cadet," and, "Generally, toleration increases as a cadet progresses through his four years." (GAO p. 56).

Finally, because toleration is held to be as serious as personal dishonesty, investigation of an honor violation naturally should look into whether other cadets tolerated the offense. Therefore, the almost total absence of convictions for toleration seems strange.

In sum, the heart of the vulnerability of the Honor System to group cheating may be cadet toleration of the few individual honor violations that occur.

Indeed, the evidence suggests that toleration of toleration was widespread. So far as group cheating is concerned, its growth is associated with the pressure on a cadet to join a violator he has tolerated. Both may be dismissed. There's little difference between being hung as a goose or as a gander.

Three other problems merit brief consideration. The Honor System can be used to enforce regulations. A cadet may be put upon his honor to say if he has shaved instead of the inspector deciding whether the cadet is acceptably whiskerless. Cadets tend to resent many requirements being checked for under the Honor System as an inspector's quick and easy way to insure compliance. The result can be reactions of technical compliance but with clever ways to beat the system.

Another problem is a history of cases of heavy handling of what can be considered trivial or remediable offenses. For example, a cadet wore the coat of an upperclassman to a movie that he was not authorized to attend. He may have accepted the risk of breaking a regulation but was dismissed as a dishonorable person. Another cadet was dismissed after he reported himself for having said he had shaved but he had not shaved. (Borman p.6). Similarly, a cadet was dismissed after reporting himself for stating that he had done ten pull-ups but he done only two. (Borman p. 21).

A fourth and last problem is whether toleration is a matter of personal honor as its inclusion in the Honor Code implies. Or, is non-toleration strictly "an awesome duty" as the official text on the Honor System states in the section on the philosophy of non-toleration? (USMA p. 15). Surprisingly, the official survey of the Corps of Cadets showed that 45% said they wanted toleration removed as an honor violation. (Borman p. 14). Perhaps the Corps' exploration of all of the pros and cons of defining toleration as "dereliction of duty" without any change in the Honor Code would be enlightening.

#### Proposed Use of Survey Findings

In the fall of 1981, I submitted a proposal to the superintendent of West Point, "To increase the effectiveness of the non-toleration policy." If acted on, the proposal could have produced something along the lines of Figure 1. The graph shows the percent of cadets, by class, who are willing to report a good friend for an honor violation. The questions proposed were the same as used in an earlier official survey, "Would you report a good friend for a clear-cut honor violation?" and "Would you report a good friend for a possible honor violation?"

The hypothetical results are consistent with the GAO report that a cadet's inclination to tolerate another cadet's honor violation increases as the cadet progresses through the four years. (See Note on References page)

# HYPOTHETICAL views of non-toleration

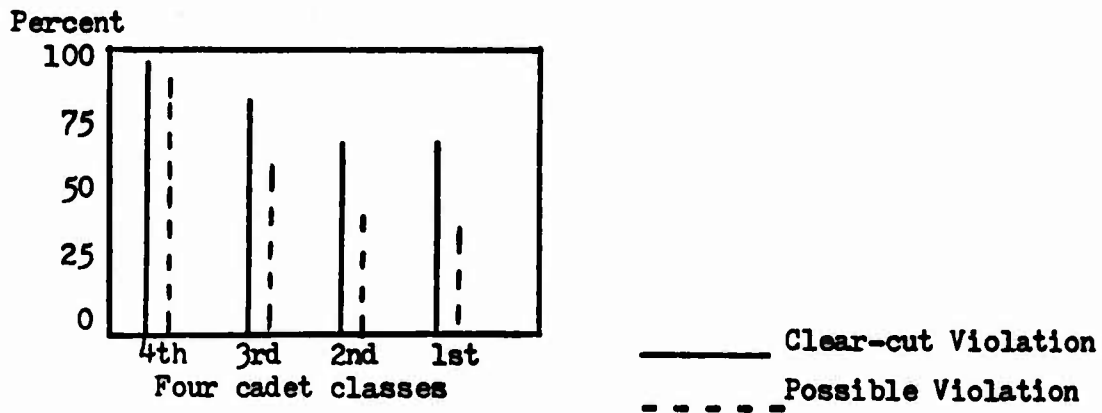


Figure 1. Percent of cadets willing to report<sup>1</sup> a violation<sup>2</sup> by class.

1. "Report" means that, to enhance validity, the alleged violation is checked with the violator, then reported to the Company Honor Representative.

2. An alleged "violation" may be observed or suspected.

# HYPOTHETICAL views of non-toleration

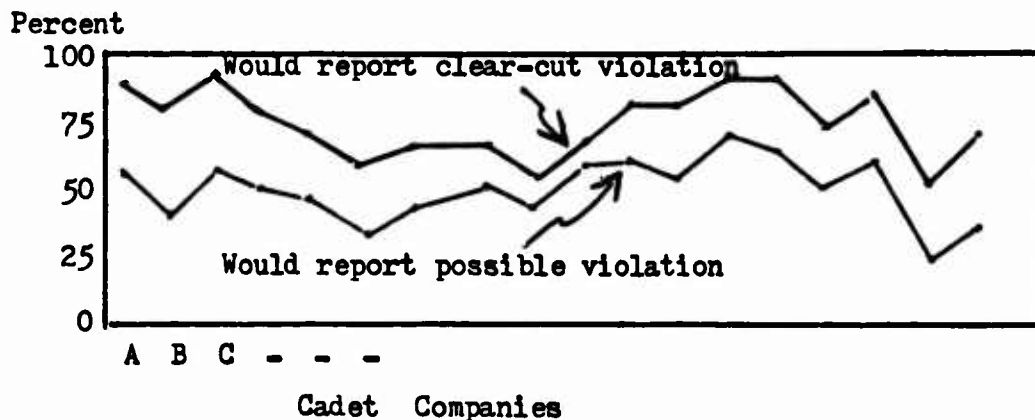


Figure 2. Company differences in percent of cadets willing to report an alleged honor violation.

Company variation may highlight potential trouble. Some companies may need free-for-all airing of questions, preferably in small groups of peers. Edney found that uninhibited discussion among peers to be an effective way for emergence of agreed loyalty to group goals as contrasted with individual competitive interests. (Edney p. 84). Role-playing can be effective in helping cadets to learn how to confront a friend with tact and persistence to validate a suspected violation. That skill requires maturity and can be developed but not by lecture and exhortation. In sum, an overall average plus differences among organizations may point to problems and serve as yardsticks to reflect the effectiveness of remedial actions.

To help see whether the other three problems exist, my proposal included: (1) exit interviews of every cadet dismissed for dishonor, academic deficiency, or other reason, (2) A paper from every cadet once each year on any self-selected strength or limitation of the Honor System, and (3) views of exchange students from the Air Force and Naval Academies because they have familiarity with two honor systems.

#### Would Cadet Knowledge of Research Findings Hurt the Honor System?

A friendly critic of my proposal said that if cadets were to know that the levels of toleration were high, West Point would be taking an enormous risk. The non-tolerating cadets might join the tolerators! Moreover, would not leaks of the findings to the public media produce a scandal of itself? The old grads would see solid evidence that the Corps has gone to hell.

#### Would Cadet Knowledge of Research Findings Help the Honor System?

If alarming levels of toleration were revealed, what better foundation is there than objective estimates of the problem areas? With all their slippages, well conducted surveys can provide estimates superior to subjective impressions of the workings of the system. As to leakage of findings to the public media, the record of the furor over the latest cheating scandal included staunch defenses of West Point's splendid reputation for the Honor System and editorial confidence that the reputation soon again would be earned, as it has been.

Finally, who owns the Honor System? The cadets do. The officers in the academy and the old grads think that they own a part of it because the Honor System has had such a profound influence in their lives. Nevertheless, the cadets know that the Honor System is theirs to nurture and to hold the new cadets to understand, comply with, and revere. On that ground, I think that the odds favor good things happening if the Corps of Cadets were provided findings from research on the workings of the Honor System. As a former superintendent said, in the long run, openness as well as honesty is the best policy.

In conclusion: (1) Available data support the idea that toleration of honor violations is associated with group cheating. (2) Organizational and class differences in willingness not to tolerate honor violations help to identify problems in the system. (3) Honor Committee instructional focus on the complexities of implementing the non-toleration policy, small discussion groups among peers to air questions, and role-playing to develop skills in confronting a suspected violator would help to solve the problems of individual cadet implementation of the non-toleration policy. (4) Exit interviews of dismissed cadets, annual papers from every cadet on self-selected aspects of the Honor System, and views of exchange students would help to describe other possible limitations of the Honor System.

More power to the sacrosanct Honor System at West Point!

## REFERENCES

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Note: With regard to tolerance increasing during a cadet's four years, after a new cadet has carried the non-tolerance torch for a year, perhaps honesty begins to loom as a variable. The harder a cadet finds honesty to be an all-or-none proposition, the more readily he or she, on graduation, may phase into the responsibilities of an officer. Officers operate with less than puritanical correction of others' every lapse from rectitude. Moreover, while serving with integrity, an officer often works in a sea of classified information. The truth is told to those who have an official 'need to know' the truth. In intelligence work, quiet forms of deception are often part of the job. All this does not mean that upperclass cadets may be excused for tolerance nor do cadet and officer need have less regard for the power and the beneficial influence of the Honor System.

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