

# Developing Trustworthy Commissioned Officers

## Transcending the Honor Codes and Concepts

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*The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army. It is possible to impart instructions and to give commands in such a manner and such a tone of voice so as to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey, while the opposite manner and tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and a desire to disobey. The one mode or the other of dealing with subordinates springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the commander. He who feels the respect which is due to others cannot fail to inspire in them regard for himself; while he who feels, and hence manifests, disrespect toward others, especially his subordinates, cannot fail to inspire hatred against himself.*

—Maj. Gen. John M. Schofield, in an address to the West Point Corps of Cadets, 11 August 1879

*A Cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate anyone who does.*

—The Cadet Honor Code, United States Military Academy

*[Character is] those moral qualities that constitute the nature of a leader and shape his or her decisions and actions.*

—USMA Circular 1-101, Cadet Leader Development System, 2005

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**O**UR NATION'S THREE primary means of providing the armed forces with commissioned officers are the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), officer candidate schools (OCS), and the federal service academies. Each of these sources is duty bound to commission leaders of character, entrusted with leading America's soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and coast guardsmen. The importance of commissioning leaders of character is uncontested, even axiomatic; but what is required and expected of a leader of character can be a source of debate. Our aim is to clarify what it means to be a leader of character and to recommend a holistic approach to developing such leaders in each of our sources of commissioning.

To begin, it is essential to define and understand "character." Next, we must determine a theoretical or empirical method by which character may be developed. Third, each source of commissioning must design and implement tangible activities within the developmental programs. Finally, we must agree on what observable, measurable attributes are expected.

## Character Defined

U.S. Military Academy (USMA) Circular 1-101 defines character as "those moral qualities that constitute the nature of a leader and shape his or her decisions and actions."<sup>1</sup> Dr. Joel J. Kupperman, an accomplished professor, author, and philosopher, writes a similar definition of character: "[Cadet X] demonstrates . . . character if and only if [Cadet X's] pattern of thought and action, especially in relation to matters affecting the happiness of others, is resistant to pressures, temptations, difficulties, and the insistent expectations of others."<sup>2</sup> This definition reveals one's character in across-the-board decisions and actions—not just in the avoidance of lying, cheating, stealing, or tolerating, which most schools' honor codes prohibit. Similarly, Dr. James Rest's four-stage model of moral decision making (moral recognition, moral judgment, moral intention, and moral action) provides support for this perspective with its focus on recognizing that a moral-ethical issue exists (recognition or sensitivity), culminating in a behavior. In this light, our character includes values, virtues, aesthetics, ethics, morals (conscience), identity, and sense of purpose.<sup>3</sup> These qualities shape our decisions and attendant actions. By Kupperman's definition,

these are the intrinsic qualities, generating observable outcomes and revealing our character.

Fundamentally, we expect a leader to be trustworthy. Trust is gained and sustained through the consistent demonstration of character, competence, and commitment. In other words, leaders earn trust when they do their duty well, do it in the right way, do it for the right reasons, and are persevering. Accordingly, a professional member of the armed services must seek to discover the truth, decide what is right, and demonstrate the character, competence, and commitment to act accordingly (a "right" decision must be ethical, efficient, and effective).

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Clearly, this view encompasses much more than not lying, cheating, stealing, or tolerating such acts. However, these are the fundamental proscriptions constituting the tenets of the honor codes or concepts at each federal service academy. They also are essential elements of our professional military ethic, but they are not sufficient. Even when we embrace the spirit of the honor code—reverence for truth (honesty); pursuit of justice (fairness) and compassion; recognition of the sanctity of property; and the commitment to uphold the professional military ethic—there is much more.

## Developing Leaders

It is our thesis that all the commissioning sources should espouse a concept of professional leader development that avoids placing a consequences-based emphasis on an honor code or concept. Importantly, the sources of commissioning should adopt a comprehensive paradigm for developing

character, competence, and commitment in its cadets, midshipmen, and candidates. Despite the pleas of “old grads” of the federal service academies to maintain tradition and the way things were, change is both appropriate and imperative. Over the course of their histories, the service academies have continuously and systematically improved their academic, military, and physical programs; these are widely regarded as first class. In fact, among those who rate universities, the federal service academies are perennially in the top tier across the board. The mandate, reflected in the vision, purpose, and mission of each academy to provide our armed forces with commissioned leaders of character, deserves a careful philosophical review.

By 1891, West Point’s Board of Visitors recognized the imperative of character (moral) development was as important as physical and cognitive development. Of note, they emphasized the development of character in cadets by also addressing the character of the academy’s faculty. The Committee on Discipline and Instruction reported the following to the board:

Of the regulations, we can say that they deserve our profound respect, for they are

the results of nearly a century’s experience. They have constituted the rules of conduct that formed the characters of the great men who have graduated here... [The regulations] are now more nearly perfect than ever before, because they provide for their own improvement. Judicious changes have been made all along their history, whenever experience clearly demonstrated the advantages of modifications... The Cadet is required to consider “duty the noblest word in the language” . . . Hence on the matter of discipline we conclude: That the rules of the school, considered in the abstract—their aims and methods; that the professors and officers now on duty here—their character, scholarship, skill and fidelity; that the results of the regulations as administered—shown in physical, moral and mental development of the Cadet—all deserve the commendation of the Board of Visitors.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, one key point in this passage is that appropriate modifications have been made “all along their history” to improve the way West Point develops cadets. However, it was not until 1947 that Gen.



U.S. Army Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, chief of staff of the Army, meets with cadets at the United States Military Academy during a visit to West Point, N.Y., 13 October 2011. (U.S. Army, Staff Sgt. Teddy Wade)

Maxwell D. Taylor, superintendent at the time, explicitly confirmed that the mission of the U.S. Military Academy is to develop character and the personal attributes essential to an officer.<sup>5</sup> West Point did not officially include character in its mission statement until 1957—ten years later.<sup>6</sup> Today, West Point’s William E. Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic articulates and teaches cadets the Army ethic; at the Air Force Academy this role is fulfilled by the Center for Character and Leadership Development; and at Annapolis the Vice Admiral James Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership supports this mission.

The academies each have formal programs designed to develop trustworthy leaders (see for example USMA Circular 1-101).<sup>7</sup> These programs are designed to educate, train, and inspire cadets and midshipmen to embrace the professional military ethic of their service and the armed forces.

Thus, leader and character development occur within the academic, military, and physical-athletic programs at each academy (including during extra-curricular activities). This developmental concept recognizes that individuals develop simultaneously across and within all domains as they complete the activities inherent within the four-year service academy experience. Similarly, this concept applies in ROTC and OCS, notwithstanding that their programs are of different design and duration.

It is in the successful completion of each commissioning source’s programs whereby cadets, midshipmen, and candidates develop in character, competence, and commitment—becoming trustworthy commissioned officers. In this light, three principles must be reflected in the design of the developmental programs at the academies, in ROTC, and in OCS:

- Character is multidimensional. It is our true nature: values, virtues, ethics, morals (conscience), identity, aesthetics, etc.
- Character, competence, and commitment can and must be developed simultaneously—in the same way and at the same time.
- Officership denotes transformational leadership and values-based decision making (avoiding overemphasis on transactional leadership, consequences, and rules-based decision making).<sup>8</sup>

With this foundation, it is arguable that the meaning of honor at each academy, as defined by

living according to the precepts of an honor code or concept, is inappropriately narrow. Traditionally, violations of honor were the only “failure in character,” for which the standard sanction was expulsion (or separation).<sup>9</sup>

This observation does not suggest that the honor codes or concepts are unnecessary. On the contrary, they are necessary but insufficient. In this light, honor codes or concepts are *minimum* standards of acceptable ethical conduct.

It is not surprising then that many cadets and midshipmen, staff and faculty, and service academy graduates may be comfortable with the view that avoiding an honor violation is *prima facie* evidence

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that one has been honorable. This assumption, though common, is unwarranted and unwise. At USMA, cadets can avoid lying, cheating, stealing, or tolerating and still violate the Army Values.<sup>10</sup> For example, cadets can live by the honor code and—

- Fail to contribute their best efforts to accomplish the mission, an affront to both duty and service.
- Treat others with contempt or injustice, violating respect.
- Inappropriately offer allegiance to friends or teammates, violating professional loyalty to the Constitution.
- Make decisions and take actions that are inconsistent with the Army Ethic and ethos, a failure of integrity.
- Be fearful and fail to do what is right, lacking courage.

Perhaps Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor said it best when he wrote:

The responsibility of West Point to the cadets, however, does not end with their intellectual and physical training. It will be recalled that the mission prescribed by the Department of the Army places the development of character ahead of education in the arts and sciences and in military activities. The conduct of war is a business which calls for more than intellectual and physical attainments. No great soldier ever rose to eminence in the command of American troops who was not primarily a leader of character. It is for this reason that West Point takes the development of character as a formal objective to be pursued by all available means.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, the academy honor codes or concepts do not represent the fullness of the military ethic and the values of each service. Nonetheless, the honor codes and concepts are cardinal elements of each academy's ethos, providing a timeless foundation. Similarly, our society supports the spirit of the code (i.e., as stated earlier and in the definition of honor in the sample code of ethics, figure 1) and regards it as sacrosanct. Living truthfully is a standard and an expectation.

Additionally, the honor systems at each academy are becoming burdened by investigations and legalisms, and cadets and midshipmen know they can "lawyer up." The honor system's investigative focus is on evidence for lying, cheating, stealing, or tolerating. In our armed forces and our society, honor encompasses a broader view. Honor, in the sense of the proscriptive code, does not encompass all that is necessary to be trustworthy—a characteristic that demands much more.<sup>12</sup> For example, a willful disregard for regulations, such as "blowing post," is not seen as a breach of honor (unless one lies about the act).<sup>13</sup> But is such conduct consistent with duty?<sup>14</sup> Or in a similar fashion, a cadet could also be grossly disrespectful to another without violating the honor code. Thus, we propose that each source of commissioning explicitly and formally affirm that decisions and actions that violate any of their services' values are unethical and intolerable. At West Point, the pamphlet governing the honor code and system states:

The disciplinary and honor systems are [separate and] distinct. Regulatory indiscipline may violate one of the seven Army values. Such infractions will be addressed, but not under the honor system . . . However, while a distinction is made between "honor" violations and "regulation" violations, it must be understood that regulation violations may be unethical in their very nature. Deliberate disregard of known and established regulations for personal gain is a clear dereliction of military discipline and a divergence from ethical behavior. For example, the underage consumption of alcohol, while not an honor violation in itself, reflects negatively on the character of the cadet(s) involved because it violates the laws of the United States.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, cadets at West Point may deliberately disregard known standards of ethical conduct and, if discovered, will normally be "slugged."<sup>16</sup> It is this divide between the relative tolerance for certain ethical lapses (e.g., disciplinary violations, lack of respect, etc.) in contrast to the stigma of honor violations that gives the appearance of a false hierarchy among the Army values. A value is a principle or concept that is always important. Therefore, all values within the Army Ethic must be embraced—otherwise the ethic itself lacks integrity.

The fundamental, cardinal characteristic in all relationships is trust, not simply honesty.<sup>17</sup> A competent, committed leader of character is trustworthy. And, in a military context, with its inherent risk of serious injury and death, professional trust is sacrosanct.<sup>18</sup> Developing trust and striving to be trustworthy require a life-long commitment to live by service values. Coastguardsmen must trust that their leaders will do their duty. Soldiers must know that leaders will respect the intrinsic dignity and worth of all. Sailors must know that leaders will display courage in challenging times. Airmen must know that their leaders are men and women who place integrity first. Most importantly, the American people expect more than that our armed forces will not lie, cheat, or steal. The oaths we take on entry to our profession of arms are clear on this matter.

## Defining Expectations

To assess or judge a cadet's, midshipman's, or candidate's character, we must agree on a clearly

defined expectation for what one must do to demonstrate that he or she is trustworthy—it must be more than just a leader who follows the honor code or concept. There is a profound difference between the two. It is our contention that trustworthy military professionals (leaders) will seek

the truth (to aspire to know that which is actually so), to decide what is right, and to demonstrate the character, competence, and commitment to act accordingly.

In this regard, we are recommending that each service academy, ROTC program, and OCS

## Code of Ethics

**Purpose:** To foster trust in all our endeavors, personal and professional, we adopt this code of ethics to guide our decisions and actions, in pursuit of excellence.

**Premise:** Trust is belief in and reliance on the competence, character, and commitment of a person, organization, or institution. Trust is the foundation for successful accomplishment of the Army's mission.

**Goal:** To be trustworthy, we aspire to be leaders of competence, character, and commitment. As such, we seek to discover the truth, decide what is right\*, and demonstrate the competence, character, and commitment to act accordingly.

\*[A "right" decision is efficient, effective, and ethical.]

We pledge to live by our **Values:**

**Integrity:** Decision making and action based on principles.

**Duty:** Contributing one's best effort to accomplish the mission, striving for excellence in all endeavors.

**Honor:** Reverence for the truth (honesty) and justice (fairness), regard for the property of others, and commitment to upholding the Army Professional Ethic.

**Loyalty:** Allegiance to the Constitution of the United States of America.

**Service:** Contribution to the well-being and benefit of others (teamwork).

**Respect:** Recognition of the intrinsic (infinite) dignity and worth of all people.

**Courage:** Commitment to do what is right despite risk, uncertainty, and fear.

**Pledge:** In the conduct of our duty we strive to continuously develop our character, and competence, seeking to develop these attributes to be worthy of trust and to effectively and ethically serve the common defense.

- That which is good is consistent with our sense of virtue, ethics, and morality.
- That which is moral is known to our conscience—to which we pledge to be true.

**Figure 1**  
**Sample code of ethics**

adopt a code of ethics (transcending the limited, proscriptive focus of any honor code and concept). This code of ethics should incorporate, at a minimum, each service's values. Consider this illustration from the Army leadership policy on the Army G-1 website:

Army Values are the baseline, core, and foundation of every soldier. Army Values guide the way soldiers live their lives and perform their duties. They are an inherent part of the Army [Ethic] and [demand] standards of conduct to which all soldiers must adhere. The

moral and ethical tenets of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Army values [duty, honor, loyalty, service, respect, integrity, and courage] characterize the Army profession and culture, and describe the ethical conduct expected of all soldiers.<sup>19</sup>

At USMA, ROTC, and in OCS, an inclusive code of ethics should be based on cadets and candidates embracing and upholding the Army values—as consistently demonstrated in their decisions and actions.

This principle denotes and mandates adopting the Army values as one’s own. Accordingly, one’s decisions and actions will be in accord with one’s values. In this light, an Army code of ethics must include all Army values (see sample code of ethics in figure 1).<sup>20</sup>

This code (adapted to the values of each service) encompasses what it means to be a trustworthy professional in the United States Armed Forces.

Consequently, the standard sanction for violating such a code of ethics within our sources

of commissioning should be development, not separation. Separation should be a consequence of failure to demonstrate satisfactory progress within a developmental program. Over the last decades (1990’s and continuing), West Point has employed highly successful developmental mentorship activities to provide remediation for cadets who committed serious errors in judgment. The mentorship strategies are tailored to the nature of the offense (e.g., honor, respect, regulations, alcohol-drugs, leadership, etc.). Each of these remedial programs requires a cadet to be mentored and to complete several demanding requirements, including study, reflection, service, and assessment. While these programs are specifically designed for those who have serious failings, ideally every future officer should have an opportunity to participate in a developmental practicum.

This concept has been fully supported by the Army’s governing regulation for West Point, Army Regulation (AR) 210-26, and the United States Code, as shown in figure 2. Under this guidance

Supporting Document	Excerpt(s) from Document
AR 210-26, United States Military Academy	<p>“The Superintendent will establish procedures and programs for the intellectual, military, and physical development of cadets as future commissioned officers consistent with the moral and ethical standards of uniformed service in the U.S. Army.”<sup>21</sup></p> <p>“Cadets are required to act as leaders of character. They are not only to abstain from all vicious, immoral, and irregular conduct, but they are also enjoined to conduct themselves upon every occasion with the propriety and decorum characterizing a society of ladies and gentlemen. Cadets who conduct themselves in a manner unbecoming an officer and a lady or gentleman may be separated from the Military Academy and awarded punishments under paragraph 6–4 of this regulation.”<sup>22</sup></p>
Section 3583, Title 10, United States Code	<p>“[Officers] show in themselves a good example of virtue, honor, patriotism, and subordination.”<sup>23</sup></p>

**Figure 2**  
Regulations supporting developmental mentorship

<b>Developmental Concept</b>	
<b>Activity</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Instruction-Study-Reflection.....>>	Knowledge & Understanding
Practicum..... >>	Adherence & Discipline
Assessment.....>>	Confidence & Belief
Experience..... >>	Leadership & Wisdom

1. Instruction, study, and reflection include classroom work, lectures, discussions, reading, role playing, case studies, journaling, and contemplation.
2. Practicum includes activity focused on applying the Code of Ethics (e.g., service-learning, volunteering, leading project teams, etc.), remedial or mentor programs that result from violating the Code of Ethics, social activities with staff and faculty, and extra-curricular activities.
3. Assessment includes formal evaluations in academics, military education and training, and physical and athletic endeavors. An important contributor is the guidance received in the form of coaching, counseling, and mentoring.
4. Experience includes activities such as summer details, internships, intercollegiate competitions, and all duties away from the academies or campuses.

**Figure 3**  
**Developmental concept**

and direction, West Point and all sources of commissioning should adopt a code of ethics and implement a system for adjudication of alleged violations that is administratively and legally sufficient.

A key goal in developing future officers should be to develop their appreciation for and adoption of the code of ethics as their own. Cadets, midshipmen, and candidates must *know it, adhere to it, believe in it, and lead others accordingly*. Kurt Lewin, Albert Bandura, Edgar Schein, and other notables in the field of human development and social psy-

chology write that one is influenced by his and her environment. To endure, the elements that make up an environment must also be considered valid and worthy of continued use. Thus, the code of ethics will become an inherent, cardinal characteristic of the ethic, ethos, and culture of the source of commissioning—part of the environment—if the transformation is logical, inclusive, inspirational, and beneficial to all. The transformation will require source-of-commissioning leadership and the staff and faculty to be champions. If done according to the developmental concept depicted in figure 3,

cadets, midshipmen, and candidates will know, adhere to, believe in, and lead in the process of developing themselves and others to truly be trustworthy future leaders of the armed forces.

In expanding our concept for professional (leader) development to embrace trust, everyone (military and civilian) interacting with those in precommissioning programs becomes responsible for living, teaching, and abiding by a code of ethics. As many have observed about the culture at West Point, “When asked what we do here at West Point, the concept is: ‘We develop character as we develop competence.’”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the staff and faculty at each commissioning source have an obligation to show cadets, midshipmen, and candidates what “right” looks like (decisions and

actions that are ethical, efficient, and effective—consistent with their service’s values). It is important to recall that the West Point Board of Visitors in 1891, referenced earlier in this essay, recognized that the mission of West Point, as with the other academies, is achieved through the scholarship, skill, and fidelity of the staff and faculty who must demonstrate character, competence, and commitment in the process of developing trustworthy cadets, fulfilling the expectations of the American people.

Perhaps the Posvar Commission in 1989 was prescient in its final report: “As an ethical rule, [the honor code] happens to be stated in proscriptive terms, specifically against lying, cheating, stealing, or tolerating those who do. This list has changed, and can change again.”<sup>25</sup> **MR**

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## NOTES

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1. U.S. Military Academy (USMA) Circular 1-101, *Cadet Leader Development System*, 2005.

2. Joel J. Kupperman, *Character* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1995). The term “Cadet X” was placed in the quote to emphasize the context of the argument.

3. James Rest, *Development in Judging Moral Issues* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

4. Report of the Board of Visitors to the United States Military Academy for the year 1891.

5. Maxwell Taylor, *West Point: Its Objectives and Methods* (USMA, 1947).

6. Catalogue of the United States Military Academy, 1957-58.

7. USMA Circular 1-101.

8. This construct provides focus and meaning to graduates from a source of commissioning as commissioned officers in the U.S. military (see for example, the design and content of the capstone course, MX400, Officership, at USMA).

9. Not all cadets or midshipmen who are found to have committed an honor violation are separated from an academy. The superintendent may suspend the separation or take other action, thereby granting discretion. At West Point, Martin R. Hoffman, then secretary of the Army, granted this authority in January 1977.

10. The term “being honorable” in this context refers to abiding by the Cadet Honor Code; it does not refer to the holistic concept of being a trustworthy Army professional as demonstrated by living by the Army values. The values of the U.S. Air Force are integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. The U.S. Navy Core Values are honor, courage, and commitment. The U.S. Coast Guard values are honor, respect, and devotion to duty.

11. Taylor.

12. Note that the nontoleration tenet reflects the military professional’s duty to uphold the Ethic of the Armed Services. However, a cadet may decide to report a violation only through the “fear of consequences” to him or her, rather than for

the intrinsically “right” reason to “stop unethical practices.”

13. The term “blowing post” refers to cadets or midshipmen who leave the academy grounds when they are not authorized to do so.

14. The Borman Commission Report: “The Honor Code must not . . . be exploited as a means of enforcing regulations.”

15. U.S. Corps of Cadets, Pamphlet 623-1, *The Honor Code and System*, 1 February 2007.

16. Slugged is a term referring to receiving punishment tours and demerits for violating the regulations of the Corps of Cadets.

17. Retired Gen. Colin Powell has been quoted as saying, “The essence of all leadership, of all interpersonal activity, is trust.” <<https://www.willowcreek.com/emailhtml/summit07/july.html>> and <<http://www.govleaders.org/quotes.htm>>.

18. Pat Sweeney, “Do Soldiers Re-evaluate Trust in Their Leaders Prior to Combat Operations?” *Military Psychology* 22 (Suppl. 1), S70-S88, 2010.

19. Derived from information on the website of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, U.S. Army, for Leadership Policy, 13 August 2008. Modifications by the authors reflect their recommended changes to the expression and definitions of the Army Values, <<http://www.armyg1.army.mil/HR/leadership/default.asp>>.

20. This sample code revises the current definitions of the Army Values.

21. Army Regulation 210-26, *United States Military Academy* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 26 July 2002).

22. *Ibid.*

23. Section 3583, Title 10, United States Code, Requirement of Exemplary Conduct.

24. Adapted from Lt. Gen. F.L. Hagenbeck, Superintendent’s Letter, “Assembly—West Point Association of Graduates,” July/August 2008.

25. Lewis Sorley, *Honor Bright: History and Origins of the West Point Honor Code and System* (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill Learning Solutions, 2008).