

NO CODE, NO ACADEMY

Thank you for this invitation. It is a privilege to be asked to share some of my thoughts and experiences with you and how they may relate to the Honor Code. This occasion is relatively unique among education institutions and I consider it an honor to be here.

Distinguished attendees at the head table, ladies and gentlemen, and a special recognition to the members of the Cadet Honor Committee: I am sure you recognize the immense honor and responsibility your classmates have bestowed upon you by electing you to represent them on the Honor Committee. However meaningful your selection is to you today, which I'm sure is a lot, I think you will find it will become even more meaningful to you in years to come.

When I left USAFA many years ago, as they say, "I didn't even look in the rear view mirror". But after a few years, you feel a little tug that gradually becomes a pull and then you ask yourself, "why am I so eager to return to a place I was never so happy to leave? It looks pretty much the same. Maybe a few new buildings, some new displays, the trees are little bigger in some places. What changed—me or it?" And then you realize, you changed and it, in fact, changed you. And what I am about to say is the reason why.

We are here today to celebrate and to recognize all those who continue to support, in both spirit and deed, a very fundamental precept that lies at the very soul of this campus, these grounds and this institution. And that precept is: The Honor Code, here, at the United States Air Force Academy is in fact, a code of the cadets, by the cadets, and for the cadets. OF THE CADETS, BY THE CADETS AND, FOR THE CADETS. It cannot be any other way. So central is that concept to this institution that I do not consider it the least bit of an overstatement for me to say: No Honor Code, no Air Force Academy. No Code, No Academy. It under lies all that happens here...,the knowledge and credibility you take away, the path you choose to take, and the personal bonds that will last forever.

It will require constant input, advice, and guidance from the cadets and hopefully, along with a sense of history and tradition, from those who continue to share its importance, seen perhaps from a distance, perhaps with a little more experience and wisdom and that is what I see here today and I must say that I do not recall this type of occasion when I was a cadet. So--On behalf of all of the graduates, I would like to express our sincere sense of pride, respect and gratitude for all that you do to honor and perpetuate this absolute cornerstone of this Academy.

The Honor Code must be living and dynamic and it will become more and more a part of your lives as time goes on. By a living code, I mean it must continue to help us grow beyond the basic premises of not lying, cheating, or stealing, by empowering all of us to reach out to achieve that most lofty of all human virtues...to be honorable in all that we do. A living code also implies a constant interaction among those responsible for its oversight, administration, and consistent enforcement once it is determined that it has been broken. Let

me give you two personal examples from my own experience.

Sometime in the fall of my 3rd (3 degree) class year, our squadron honor representatives began to talk about discretion (that is being offered a second chance after having committed a clear honor violation) being instituted as part of The Code in an attempt to decrease the number of cadets-- especially 4th classmen, that were having to leave. The subject had been bandied about for several weeks and many of us had witnessed what we felt to be good people having to leave because of impulsive mistakes. However, we weren't by any means ready for discretion, as it was being presented by the administration, to be applied across all classes, which we interpreted to be tantamount to giving "a slap on the hand and try to do better next time". It was an incredibly heated issue and it reverberated throughout the Wing. As a first semester third classman I was still pretty much in the listening mode but I remember how impressed I was when the subject of honor came up, there was no rank. Usually our squadron meetings were structured such that the squadron commander obviously had the most authority about what was being discussed, but suddenly all cadets shared a deep sense of equal and personal importance and no single opinion carried more weight than any other. So the rank came off and frankly, so did the gloves. The Cadets were pretty much in agreement that discretion was needed but when and how to apply it became the pivotal issue. The, "high noon showdown", as I heard later, came when the Wing Commander, with the Chairman of the Honor Committee at his side, offered the Superintendent his resignation and alluded to the fact that the code would now become the responsibility of the administration,...essentially The Code would no longer be: of the cadets, by the cadets, and for the cadets.

Of course, over the next few months, a policy of discretion was worked out but would only apply to fourth classmen and I can attest to the fact that as an honor representative, during my senior year, discretion was by no means applied indiscriminately even in the case of fourth class violations. It was an example of the cadets standing together and demanding that only they had the authority as to how and when changes to the code would be made. However, it did not mean that the cadets had absolute jurisdiction over all things that might be considered dishonorable because, interestingly enough, by the time I was a senior, it was clear that two of my classmates had been practicing the so-called Monday-Tuesday switch scheme by which one would tell the other what was on the exam to be taken the next day. The evidence was overwhelming and even at the time of the honor hearing, where I was a voting member, one of them essentially confessed, but the vote of the committee came back 7 to 1. Because it wasn't unanimous, they had avoided the technical standard of "an honor violation". However, in view of the evidence, the Superintendent along with our Wing Commander, presented the evidence to the individuals concerned, asked for, and received their resignations barely two to three weeks before graduation.

Thus, one could say that the overall integrity of the Code and the Academy had been protected and the undesirable act of persistent and calculated cheating on the part of two senior cadets had been dealt with. Such issues will occur and always be a challenge to all those involved. However, I caution all of you to avoid the slippery slope of decreasing standards. The closer the standards of the Academy come to those of the general public or, for that matter other under-graduate schools, the less our society will see a need for this institution. No Code, No Academy.

Let me turn to a more positive view of what I mean by a dynamic and living code. Remember, lying, cheating, and stealing don't appear until number 7 or number 8 - depending on whether you use the Protestant, Jewish, or Catholic

versions of the Ten Commandments and practicing them per se will not make you an honorable person. Someone once said there's a big difference between a chronic truth teller and an honorable person. Nevertheless, they do offer us a set of quantitative standards to which we can all anchor ourselves, while continuing to pursue the much higher qualitative goal of being honorable in all that we do. For me, being honorable is always a "work in progress", but adhering to the tenants of the Honor Code is not. So, although we cannot provide a concise quantitative definition of what it means to be honorable, we can define what lying, cheating, and stealing are. They are fairly discrete events and they are usually self evident to anyone who chooses to be the least bit objective about their own behavior.

All other schools that I have attended profess to have an honor code, which usually consists of a brief first day introduction, some required a "signed commitment" and thereafter amounts to little more than saying: "if you get caught you might be expelled". Moreover, these codes usually pertain primarily to plagiarism or other types of academic cheating. (I should add that by far and away most people in the post-graduate schools I've attended take their credibility and integrity seriously). However, here at the United States Air Force Academy we want and seek more than that. Here, an oath is taken, not professed, and higher standards of conduct emerge because these values are emphasized, studied, discussed and indeed celebrated as they are today. How many institutions of higher education are participating in events such as we are here today? Here, we speak not in terms of honor as something to have such as good grades or a diploma, but rather in terms of something to internalize for the sake of shaping one's own character and by which we choose (and it is a choice) to live our lives.

One could even argue that taken to the extreme this is the ultimate goal of any self-improvement program, which is exactly what Ayn Rand, the late 20th century author of Fountainhead and Atlas Shrugged, described when she developed such rare men and women characters who possessed such a high degree of self esteem that they could never commit any act (such as lying, cheating, or stealing) for which they would disrespect themselves, individually. She even called her philosophy "rational selfishness" and, in fact, all of the principal characters in her novels can be characterized (perhaps unrealistically) as impeccably honorable.

Unfortunately, during that same time frame, it was my generation and certainly not yours, that began to promote a culture of: "Just follow your bliss and do what makes you feel good", which has now become a more general philosophy—if you can even call it a philosophy—of so-called "moral relativism". Make no mistake about it; there is no such thing as moral relativism. As a physician, I live in a quantitative world and to my simple minded way of thinking, for something to be relative it must have a reference. Yet the proponents of moral relativism seem to be saying there are no references, there are no standards, there are, in fact, no values, which has predictably led to a culture of narcissistic, self gratification, along with an almost delusional self-importance, that basically requires an end to any sense of personal responsibility. "Moral Relativism" is fundamentally nothing more than a philosophy of moral depravity and will certainly lead, step by step, anyone who chooses to follow it, exactly there.

Self-indulgent narcissism replaced decent behavior while completely ignoring the profound logic of such a great *contemporary*—contemporary of Ayn Rand — author as C. S. Lewis, who points out in his book The Abolition of Man that throughout all civilizations, both past and present, decent behavior has always been respected and is a direct consequence of the very fact that human beings have

intelligence -i.e., we can figure out what affects me will also affect you. C. S. Lewis called this a fundamental law of nature. So why do we have so much trouble living by it naturally? What's the problem? It's a simple equation: Everything we do as individuals affects everyone else. If we expect decent behavior from others, then we should practice it ourselves—especially when it involves other's heritage, family, or faith. It is very simple, but it is not easy - because people of decent behavior do not normally go around trying to convince everyone else to accept their values. Consequently, our society has become the victim of its own goodwill because, we as a society, continue "to tolerate among us those who do."

I've always found it ironic that these two philosophers of human behavior (Ayn Rand versus C.S. Lewis) come to the same conclusion, while differing so much as to what should be our primary motivation. While Ms Rand argues that the "self" must come first, Professor Lewis seems to be saying good will and respect for others should be our primary goal. It's the classic match-up between the "high achiever and the do-gooder" but both philosophies end up concluding that people with honor and integrity are the end game. Evidently, neither "rational selfishness:" nor true "decent behavior" can be achieved without honor. And that does make some sense.

None of this will likely get you a passing grade in Philosophy 101—but for the Honor representatives, I do believe there is a take home message, which is this: Each of you must recognize, be aware of, and come to grips with the fact that the very qualities your classmates saw in you to elect you to represent them on the Honor Committee are the same qualities that you will be in most conflict with when you have to vote at your honor hearings. In your classmates' eyes, you are people of decent behavior and you are not in the habit of passing judgment on others — especially your own classmates. More specifically, your compassion for others must now be tempered by your responsibility to hold them accountable to the Honor Code. Only you can resolve that inherent conflict. All we can ask is that you be aware that it exists, maybe discuss it openly among yourselves, and above all, do not let the Honor Code become the victim of your own goodwill.

I have always found it interesting that those who seem to lead a life of "moral relativism" are the first to scream the loudest when someone else lies, cheats, or steals from them. They are the first to point out that it's "unfair" when their self-indulgent, malignant, narcissistic agenda is challenged. This philosophy has certainly affected me personally inasmuch as my wife and I were trying to raise three daughters in its aftermath. Nothing brings out feelings of good versus evil, what is right and what is wrong, and wanting to do something about it as much as when you truly care about the behavior of the people who are close to you, and that is what we have here today. Graduates, the administration, the active staff, the faculty, the AOC's, and especially, the members of the honor committee care about the behavior and the standards of this institution.

In my day job, as a radiation oncologist, I treat patients with cancer. Sometimes a treatment course will last 5 to 6 weeks of uninterrupted care during which time a wide range of emotions occur—sadness, depression, denial, and even anger all come into play, but the central question is inevitably "Am I going to die?" My job is to be ready for that question and it comes in as many different ways as there are patients but in one way or another it is always asked. At that moment there must be a sense of mutual trust and respect, each of us asking, "has everything been done to fight this disease?" Although I was not a line officer during my military career, I would submit that every military combat commander who must deploy their unit on a high risk mission knowing full well that not all of them will

return safely must have that same level of trust and respect. They must also know that everything has been done to prepare them for that mission. I suspect all professions, whether military fighting the enemy, physicians fighting disease, attorneys fighting injustice or educators fighting ignorance and illiteracy require a similar type of value-based leadership and in that sense we are all, in fact, “warriors”.

Finally, I would like to make one last point but must go in a round about way to do so. As mentioned by Cadet Gage, I attended Harvard University for my advanced training in cancer as a radiation oncologist. Actually, I didn't actually apply to go there but due to a mutual research interest on the part of two department chiefs, I was essentially assigned to go there by an individual who had trained the existing head of the Harvard training program at that time. (So, it isn't just flag rank officers who can pick up the phone in the middle of the night and tell you you're going to be assigned somewhere else the very next day) Prior to that, my perception was, okay, Harvard has a good reputation but there are some who seem to have an inflated opinion of how good they really are. However, once there, the department head, Dr. Samuel Hellman, made it very clear that he expected excellence in all we did and his job was not simply to train ordinary radiation oncologists. He wanted and expected all of us to become chiefs of other departments at other institutions. Essentially, he expected leadership from his graduates and he emphasized that you don't achieve that by wearing the Harvard label stamped on your forehead. Leadership, he would say, is given to you by those who work for you. Frankly, in my opinion, there are only 4 to 5 medical schools that have that attitude toward their graduates, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Stanford, maybe the Mayo Clinic. What I also learned was that most graduates from those programs do in fact expect a higher degree of excellence from themselves individually, and demonstrate leadership by not wearing a label stamped on their foreheads but rather by performing their everyday routine duties of nuts and bolts medical care with a high degree of competence and integrity. I have also learned that our society expects that type of competence and medical leadership from graduates of those institutions. I am sure the same is true of other professional schools that expect excellence from their graduates such as Yale Law School, the Wharton School of Business, MIT/Cal Tech in engineering, etc.

Now I ask the obvious rhetorical question: Which institutions do you think our society and indeed our country look to for excellence in character, leadership and, most importantly, honor? You can count them on less than one hand and the United States Air Force Academy, is certainly one of them.

Although as Americans we are proud to say that we are free to choose—and life is in fact about the choices we make—you, as I, no longer have a choice as to whether or not you will become the future of this institution. The only choice you now have is what you want that future to be. I wish you well and thank you again for allowing me to be a small part of this day.