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DISPLACED PRIDE: ATTACKING CYNICISM AT THE UNITED
STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

by

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Cynicism is neither a new nor unfamiliar attitudinal expression amongst cadets at the Air Force Academy. While its roots lie with a succinct society of satirists in Ancient Greece, the modern cynic conjures negative connotations amongst superiors and organizations alike. Although the attitude is quickly associated with, and attributed to, negative reflections, few definitions completely agree as to what cynicism actually is. The problems associated with defining cynicism manifest in an inability to curb its effects. Particularly troubling is the expression of derogatory attitudes in young officers attributed to a budding and rampant sense of cynicism. In 2008, the Commandant of the Aerospace Basic Course at Maxwell Air Force Base commented that the displays of unprofessional and troubling attitudes by graduates of the Air Force Academy led him to rank USAFA graduates professionally behind both ROTC and OTS graduates. In a statement that should shock all graduates of the Academy, he cornered a former USAFA administrator with the pointed barb, "DJust what the hell are you producing up there?;- The difficulty in defining cynicism universally also lends to the frustration found in attempting to attack it. Cynicism is a symptom, not a causal agent. Therefore, attempts to attack the attitude, in effect, only apply bandages to the external wound without identifying the source infection. While a great deal of study exists with respect to cynicism in the corporate world, very little research has been conducted within the military hierarchy. Solutions offered in the civilian sector may not directly apply to a rigid chain of command. However, the leadership laboratory structure of the Air Force Academy actually endorses many of the recommendations that corporate researchers have advocated. Primarily, cynicism can be undercut by aggressive methodologies that reinforce effective communication, empower subordinates, and encourage the development and communication skills of officers. Additionally, perspective remains a critically important vehicle for assaulting cynicism as negativity generally arises in the chasm between expectations and perceived realities. Most importantly, cynicism does not exist in an attitudinal vacuum, but resides on a sliding scale with pride, skepticism, sarcasm, and pessimism. These attitudes generally do not coincide with one another, but replace each other with shifting attitudes and perspectives. Therefore, cynicism fills a gap left where pride either should have flourished or diminished as expectations were not reconciled with reality. Finally, then, the existence of cynicism should not create panic amongst officers and administrators, but demonstrate an opportunity to rekindle a displaced pride through effective leadership, mentorship, and communication.

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Preface

I never really understood what cynicism was until I was home on leave as a Fourth Class Cadet in late 1992 when my father described my attitude as such. The change had been so subtle in my own outlook that I never recognized it, but very quickly came to appreciate the creation of such emotions. I also came to appreciate the external influences upon this attitude and became determined to create a useful outlet for it. I learned that artistic expressions of cynicism tended to “purge” my system of welling emotions and provided a forum to laugh at otherwise stressful and potentially harmful attitudes. Purging created a cynicism “well” that was easily replaced by pride; I came to realize that the cynical people were the ones who truly cared. I had significant difficulties overcoming the prejudices of some senior officers with respect to such efforts; some administrators could not understand the inherent pride that inspired and drove a select few of us to craft cynically jaded, and occasionally sharp witted, cartoons aimed at the Academy experience. Years later, I found many operational commanders who encouraged these expressions as yet another way to maintain a finger on the pulse of their organization. My sincere appreciation goes out to everyone who took the time to contribute their thoughts and opinions in the pursuit of bettering our Academy. To my family, for enduring yet another task that kept me away from you on so many occasions, my eternal gratitude and undying love. For Dr. MacCuish, who gave me the guidance and latitude to take this paper wherever we thought it needed to go, and for keeping me grounded, focused, and motivated against a current of nonsense and bureaucracy, my thanks and sincere appreciation. For the cadets and faculty who assisted with this project, I humbly present this work in the hopes that we can all continue to make that institution a source of pride in our lives and careers. There really is a light at the end of the tunnel--it’s not a train, and the journey is definitely worth the ride.

Abstract

Cynicism is neither a new nor unfamiliar attitudinal expression amongst cadets at the Air Force Academy. While its roots lie with a succinct society of satirists in Ancient Greece, the modern cynic conjures negative connotations amongst superiors and organizations alike. Although the attitude is quickly associated with, and attributed to, negative reflections, few definitions completely agree as to what cynicism actually *is*. The problems associated with defining cynicism manifest in an inability to curb its effects. Particularly troubling is the expression of derogatory attitudes in young officers attributed to a budding and rampant sense of cynicism. In 2008, the Commandant of the Aerospace Basic Course at Maxwell Air Force Base commented that the displays of unprofessional and troubling attitudes by graduates of the Air Force Academy led him to rank USAFA graduates professionally behind both ROTC and OTS graduates. In a statement that should shock all graduates of the Academy, he cornered a former USAFA administrator with the pointed barb, “Just what the hell are you producing up there?”

The difficulty in defining cynicism universally also lends to the frustration found in attempting to attack it. Cynicism is a symptom, not a causal agent. Therefore, attempts to attack the attitude, in effect, only apply bandages to the external wound without identifying the source infection. While a great deal of study exists with respect to cynicism in the corporate world, very little research has been conducted within the military hierarchy. Solutions offered in the civilian sector may not directly apply to a rigid chain of command. However, the leadership laboratory structure of the Air Force Academy actually endorses many of the recommendations that corporate researchers have advocated. Primarily, cynicism can be undercut by aggressive methodologies that reinforce effective communication, empower subordinates, and encourage the development and communication skills of officers. Additionally, perspective remains a critically important vehicle for assaulting cynicism as negativity generally arises in the chasm between expectations and perceived realities. Most importantly, cynicism does not exist in an attitudinal vacuum, but resides on a sliding scale with pride, skepticism, sarcasm, and pessimism. These attitudes generally do not coincide with one another, but replace each other with shifting attitudes and perspectives. Therefore, cynicism fills a gap left where pride either should have flourished or diminished as expectations were not reconciled with reality. Finally, then, the existence of cynicism should not create panic amongst officers and administrators, but demonstrate an opportunity to rekindle a displaced pride through effective leadership, mentorship, and communication.

Introduction

The American flag is slowly lowered before the backdrop of the sun sinking behind the Rampart Range, descending for the final time before the Fourth Class cadets finish Recognition activities. In the ranks of the assembled cadet wing, hearts beat with an unconstrained pride in the young men and women who have finally finished the greatest ordeal of their young lives. For a moment, they are undefeatable; immortal in their triumphs and limitless in their potential. But, only for the moment. Three years later, as the remaining members of that class receive their final dismissal and join the ranks of fellow graduates, many will carry with them a debilitating emotion that taints every memory and image of the previous four years. How they view the academy, its purpose, mission, and experience will be affected by the amount of cynicism retained long after the white parade caps are hurled into the air beneath the roar of the passing Thunderbirds.

Preamble and Thesis

Cynicism is not unique to the United States Air Force Academy; as a natural response mechanism, it may affect every human endeavor. The United States' service academies represent a unique fixture in American culture, combining rigorous officer training with accredited undergraduate studies. All cadets and midshipmen are paid government employees, and each volunteered for the rigors of the chosen institution. While cynicism exists at all service academies, this discussion will focus on the circumstances contributing to the development and promotion of cynicism at the Air Force Academy. Specifically, it will address cynicism through non-military models, discuss the perceptions and rationale concerning cynicism's origin and growth in cadets, and provide suggestions for attacking cynicism effectively. This paper

contends that cynicism does not exist as a solitary mindset in-and-of- itself, but rather on a sliding attitudinal scale also encompassing pessimism, sarcasm, and most importantly, *pride*. Cynicism is an intangible emotional expression that exists in the chasm created by the difference between expectation and reality; “fostered by high expectations and subsequent disillusionment.”¹ Cadets do not enter the Academy with inclinations towards cynicism; pride in the establishment and the Academy experience propel young men and women to this institution. Somewhere along that arduous journey, *something* occurs that drives their outlook away from pride, through sarcasm and into cynicism.

Scope and Intent

Published research concerning cynicism, including its causes, effects, and suggested avenues for attack, deals primarily with business models and studies conducted in the private sector. Research conducted within the corporate world must be cautiously applied to military endeavors as the purposes behind such disparate organizations do not necessarily support the indiscriminate application of common suggestions. When propositions for combating cynicism in the business world are discussed with reference to military endeavors, close scrutiny will be applied to avoid recommending inappropriate solutions that undermine military order, discipline, and purpose. This paper assumes that the reader is familiar with the Air Force Academy in structure and purpose, and it is written to supplement and complement the research of Colonel L.C. Coffey of the Air War College on the same subject. It is not intended to be a single source “cure-all” for institutional problems concerning cynicism, nor is it projected to be a series of checklist recommendations for Academy administrators to follow in attacking cynicism. This discussion proposes simple suggestions in the hopes that the discourse on the subject will motivate cadets and officers to grapple with this difficult situation themselves and work together

in advancing the Academy mission. Finally, this paper does not presuppose that the Air Force Academy has not taken steps to combat cynicism, nor does it contend that such attitudes have not already been curtailed by Academy officials. In such instances, this work should serve to reinforce effective policies. At the same time, it does not shy away from the fact that battling cynicism is a constant process and as such must continually be reevaluated for effectiveness and improvement. This line of reasoning simply offers an additional perspective that analyzes the process without being influenced by a proximity to enacted policies.

Cynicism and the Cynic: Definitional Foundations

The roots of cynicism lie in ancient Greece. The Order of the Cynics, begun by Antisthenes, a follower of Socrates, held in their dogma “that even cherished institutions, such as religion and government, were unnatural and unnecessary—worthy only of scorn. Cynics were openly contemptuous of such institutions and were known for using dramatic and obscene displays to draw people into conversations.”² In much the same manner that modern cadets attempt to express their frustrations and cynical tendencies, “humor was the favorite weapon of the Cynics, the privileged and the powerful their favorite target.”³ Defining cynicism itself creates a particular dilemma, and no two sources seem to classify the term in exactly the same manner. The American Heritage Dictionary defines cynicism as “an attitude of scornful or jaded negativity, especially a general distrust of the integrity or professed motives of others; a scornfully or jadedly negative comment or act.”⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary defines a cynic as “one who shows a disposition to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions, and is wont to express this by sneers and sarcasms; a sneering fault-finder.”⁵ Certainly, such definitions surround the term with negative connotations that make it difficult to place cynicism on a common gradient with pride. However, turning to organizational descriptions of

cynicism, the application and effects of external events enters the discussion. In an article for the journal *Academy of Management Review*, James W. Dean, Pamela Brandes, and Ravi Dharwadkar describe cynicism as “an attitude consisting of the futility of change along with negative attributions of change facilitators.”⁶ Within that same article, they cite additional researchers who suggest that “organizational cynicism is a ‘learned belief that fixable problems at work will not be resolved due to factors beyond the individual’s control.’”⁷ By this line of reasoning, a major contributing factor to the creation of cynical thoughts resides within *any* organizational change. Still, simply labeling cynicism as a negative attitude spawned by repeated or unsuccessful change initiatives leaves the reader wanting in the complete description of the term as it relates to this discourse. Cadets tend to focus their definitions on expectations, with one First Class cadet labeling cynicism as a “jaded view of USAFA... stemming from the difference between cadet’s expectations of USAFA with reality.”⁸ Another First Class Cadet described cynicism as “a negative feeling triggered by an experience in something that you originally had high expectations for and were let down.”⁹ As the cadets describe, the difference between expectations and perceived realities creates a significant amount of the negative emotion defining cynicism in the academic sense. Incorporating the influence of organizational change demonstrates the effect that a lack of consistency can play with fostering these same feelings. However, for all of the negative associations compiled into definitions of cynicism, one must return to the core theory that places cynicism on par with pride and understand that cynical tendencies do not spawn immaculately. Additionally, the core contention that argues for pride as a primary motivator and goal must be kept in mind. In an article for the *Academy of Management Executive*, Arnon Reichers, John Wanous, and James Austin address both the realistic implications of cynicism as well as the causes in opining that “people do not deliberately

decide to become cynical, pessimistic, and blaming. Rather, these attitudes result from experience, and are sustained because they serve useful purposes. Cynicism persists because it is selectively validated by the organization's mixed record of successful change, and by other people in the organization who hold and express similar views."¹⁰ Thus, cynicism is understood to originate within significant organizational change and in the chasm between expectations and perceived reality. In addition, it is neither a preconceived nor sought-after emotional response, but one which grows in the absence of more desirable attitudes. With cynicism existing, then, in a learned manner, its positional relevance to other attitudes can be examined.

With respect to attitudinal expressions amongst cadets, graduates, and faculty alike, pride remains the most desirable. Certainly, young men and women embark upon the Academy endeavor with just such an outcome in mind. From the outset, applicants are deluged with descriptions of the monumental tasks they'll confront as cadets. The online catalogue reads impressively, stating: "It takes dedication, sacrifice, and stamina. Organization, time-management, and self-discipline amid mental, ethical and physical demands. The environment is one of structure, rules, and regulations. But the rewards are lifetime friends, honor, personal development, pride, and of course an exciting career."¹¹ Events such as completing Basic Cadet Training (BCT), Recognition, and the accomplishment of significantly challenging military courses throughout the curriculum support such a description and generate indescribable expressions of pride in such feats. Occasionally though, somewhere amongst these milestones, that same pride erodes, caustically forming negative emotions. The driving force behind such shifting emotions remains in the chasm between expectations and reality mentioned earlier. A 2003 West Point graduate described this phenomenon, arguing that:

When you apply to any of the service academies, they set you up with absurdly high expectations. As a high-school kid walking around the post, you can't help

but paint a picture in your mind of a place that is a study in superlatives: the hardest, smartest, most honorable school in the whole country. Tapping into the vision cradled by that high-schooler about to head off to the academy is the first step to understanding the cynicism.¹²

Misapplied, misplaced, or even denied pride leaves an emotional gap that creates an opportunity to cultivate negative attitudes as an individual's viewpoint slides away from the positive. However, pride and cynicism do not exist solely on this sliding attitudinal scale as polar opposites. As reality fails to live up to expectations, the hopeful individual first begins to replace that pride with skepticism. Skepticism, in-and-of-itself, remains fairly non-intrusive attitudinally. "Skeptics doubt the likelihood of success, but are still reasonably hopeful that positive change will occur. It is also distinct from resistance to change, which results from self interest, misunderstanding, and inherent limited tolerance for change. Cynicism about change involves a real loss of faith in the leaders of change and is a response to a history of change attempts that are not entirely or clearly successful."¹³ At this stage, pride is relatively easily reintroduced through a reaffirmation or the reconciliation of expectations with reality. However, the further that an individual slides away from pride, the more confused the attitudes can become. Indeed, leaders looking to sharp-shoot emotions in subordinates often confuse or misdiagnose the expressed manifestations. "Cynicism has been frequently confused with skepticism. If all cynics were skeptics, the confusion might be innocent or trivial, and no real confusion would obtain. They are, however, quite opposite in many respects. Indeed, many cynical remarks are both skeptical and cynical."¹⁴ Critical to this scale remains the fleeting nature of attitudes in falling from pride, through skepticism, and into cynicism. Just as skepticism can be quickly reinvigorated into pride, it can just as easily descend to the expressions of cynicism. However, cynicism does not represent the attitudinal extreme opposite pride. Continuing to expand the chasm between expectation and reality drives cynicism into pessimism.

Comparatively, drawing upon both the contemporary and classical definitions of cynicism, the particularly abrasive nature of pessimism comes into view. “Cynical remarks were barbs in the classic tradition to prod moral reform. Pessimistic remarks rhetorically tend to disincline one to action, not provoke it.”¹⁵ Thus, just as cynicism does not represent the worst attitude a cadet can express, it also contains an inclination towards affecting change and offers hope of progress when viewed in relation to the sliding scale of emotion. With a definitional foundation established, the discussion can analyze the unique situation of perceptions situated between expectation and reality at the Air Force Academy in discerning opportunities to attack cynicism.

Expectations and Perceptions: Cynicism in Practice

The mere mention of cynicism draws an inherently negative connotation amongst officers, cadets, and even society itself. Eleanor M. Sickels describes just such a situation, asserting that:

The cynic sneers at humanity, asserts the nonexistence of generosity, kindness, unselfish devotion, because he has seen through the pretensions of hypocrites and has observed the ungenerous, cruel, and self-seeking power. He sneers at all dreams, all ideals, all hopes for a more secure and kindly future. He believes neither in the value of the individual (even himself) nor in the possibility of decent and stable values in society. He sees evil plainly, but he sees evil only.¹⁶

It is precisely this negative association with cynicism that causes grave concern amongst Academy officials in their efforts to curtail and prevent such attitudes. In his paper for the Air War College, Colonel Coffey paints the portrait of cadet cynicism and declining standards as viewed over many years from the perspective of an officer, instructor, and administrator. This discussion will not attempt to repeat or paraphrase his observations, but analyze the catalysts behind cynicism primarily through the eyes of the cadets themselves, drawing upon corporate research and analysis to validate their concerns.

In expanding upon the causes of cynicism, Dean, Brandes and Dharwadkar offer the assessment that “organizational change and quality improvement efforts particularly seem to engender cynicism.”¹⁷ With respect to their appraisal, the notion of organizational change presents a significant challenge for Academy officials. While the structure of the four year class system and established curriculum would seem to support consistency, reality offers a starkly contrasting view. In their four years at the Academy, cadets will see their immediate supervisors and overall chain of command turnover multiple times. Though Air Officers Commanding (AOCs) maintain a two-year controlled tour of duty, cadets can expect to see at least two or three different commanders during their Academy experience. The Commandant of Cadets, responsible for the military training and curriculum, changes rapidly as well. Over the Academy history, most Commandants have served roughly three years in the position, although the average has decreased to two years over the last 15 years. Superintendants serve slightly longer, averaging three years in position, with the longest term being five years. Deans of the Faculty tend to average six year terms, with tenures of 10 and 12 years being the highest. The current Dean has served for five years.¹⁸ Examining the tenure of faculty highlights the fact that cadets face drastically different approaches and policies through what should be a consistent curriculum over the course of four years. Relating back to our definitional foundations, it must be understood that such changes represent a significant catalyst in the formulation of cynicism simply through constantly shifting administrative approaches to a common mission.

Interviews conducted with cadets highlight two problematic areas that coincide with corporate definitions concerning cynicism. First, they point to the significant differences between their expectations of the Academy experience with what they found in reality. One cadet put it bluntly: “Cynicism stems from the difference between cadet’s expectations of

USAFAs to reality.” When asked to expand upon those expectations, this cadet stated that he “honestly expected that it would be much tougher militarily and was disappointed to see how scared the permanent party are to the press and members outside of the big black gates. It has gotten better since my [first] year but not by much.” However subtle, such remarks also contain a glimpse into the promise held within cynical attitudes. This cadet also opines that “it is the cynics who still care because they want it to be an esteemed military institution—many try and change it for the better.” Finally, he offers profound insight into the power and potential within such an attitude when he states, “I hold onto cynicism because I truly believe that USAFA is a great institution that exposes cadets to experiences that no other place in the world can. I have had some instances where my cynical ‘episodes’ inspire me to be a better role model for the underclassmen because I believe that if I can instill the sense of pride in them that I have then I have done my job.”¹⁹

Ultimately, the battle against cynicism must be fought not against the attitudes themselves, but against the *conditions* that allow perceptions to slide away from pride and into the negative expressions. Cynicism is a symptom, not necessarily a causal agent. “Researchers see cynicism as a result of violations of psychological contracts and describe this cynicism within the realm of attitudes.”²⁰ With an institution that requires intense instruction, mentorship, and guidance in developing officers, the attitudinal divergence of the students away from those instructors must be carefully analyzed and scrutinized when the relationship becomes adversarial. Negative perceptions of leadership should be investigated as “organizational cynics believe that the practices of their organizations betray a lack of such principles as fairness, honesty, and sincerity.”²¹ Inadequately addressing such perceptions, or allowing the underlying conditions to thrive, drives cynicism dangerously closer to pessimism. “Cynics in the workplace

distrust the motives of their leaders and believe that their employers, when presented with the opportunity, will exploit their contribution.”²² Within a leadership laboratory, it must be understood and accepted that when cadets feel powerless or irrelevant in their actions, the Academy has failed in its instructional capacity for creating effective officers. Should the cadets reach this stage of a pessimistic outlook, significant efforts must be exerted to reestablish a sense of pride and purpose in that individual.

Pride in Ownership: Attacking Cynicism

Effectively targeting attitudinal manifestations such as cynicism represents a particularly difficult assignment for any organization. Cynicism, like any emotion or attitude, can be extremely elusive as it leaves few physical demonstrations of its presence. Unless expressed in the presence of commanders, cynical attitudes often appear as phantasms existing beneath the surface of everyday life. Foremost in discussing the existence of cynicism within an organization concerns the negative connotations associated with the term. “Cynicism is not a particularly valued attribute in our culture; referring to someone as a cynic generally is not intended as a compliment.”²³ However, cynicism exists and propagates within an organization with the perceived utility of the attitude within the holder:

For the organization, cynics may provide a necessary check on the temptation to place expediency over principle or the temptation to assume that self-interested or underhanded behavior will go undetected. In their particular manner cynics may act as the voice of conscience for the organization, much as the Cynics did for their culture. Thus, we should see organizational cynicism as neither an unalloyed good nor an unalloyed evil for organizations.²⁴

The first step in attacking cynicism relies upon the validation of the attitude as a human emotion. “Whatever their real or imagined basis, these attitudes are equally valid to the individuals who hold them. Moreover, it would be virtually impossible to distinguish between ‘justified’ and

‘unjustified’ organizational cynicism because so much of what happens in organizations is open to different interpretations. Determining whether cynicism is justified is ultimately a matter of opinion, which would be a very unstable basis for theory.”²⁵

Some commanders and leaders ineffectively target these attitudes through eradication campaigns that seek to eliminate any physical symptoms of cynicism. At the Air Force Academy, cadets produced a monthly satire publication that often contained cynical cartoons and commentary. When administrative officers began heavily censoring the material, a group of Academy graduates started an online website out of the reach of Academy officials. Battle lines formed, pitting perceptions of good order and discipline against expressions of frustration and crude humor against one another. As defenses solidified, few in either camp found it possible to compromise and view the situation from the other’s viewpoint. Ultimately, beneath an external political pressure that pressed the Academy on unrelated topics, the Commandant of Cadets shut down the cadet publication, and online access to the “underground” website was blocked in accordance with standard Air Force web browsing protocols. Cadets found themselves unable to vent their frustrations through the medium originally employed by the Cynics of ancient Greece: *humor*. Corporate America faced a similar dilemma in the early nineties when a frustrated engineer named Scott Adams began his incredibly successful assault on hapless managers and ludicrous policies in the comic strip, *Dilbert*. Employees across the nation immediately identified with his tales, and his cartoons quickly leapt from newspaper pages to the walls of cubicles and offices throughout the business community. While some managers attacked such expressions in fashions similar to that at the Academy, others found the expressions to be invaluable indicators of corporate morale. In an article describing this effect, Marc Gresilsamer contends:

This is a really clean way for employers to find out what people are worrying about—just walk down the hall and look at the cubicles.” The best scenario, says Adams, is if there are some Dilbert cartoons on your walls: That means you have problems, but also that ‘there’s probably good communication and a receptive environment because they’re not forcing you to take them down.’ If the cartoons are so numerous that they resemble wallpaper, this obviously indicates very big problems. The worst-case scenario is if there are no cartoons posted at all: Not only do you have a slew of problems, but employees are afraid to talk about them.²⁶

Still, simply permitting outward expressions of internal emotions only provides a forum for the venting of frustrations without assaulting the source of such feelings.²⁷ Were Academy administrators to reopen access to physical and online publications, there would be neither guarantee nor even assurance that such acts would markedly decrease the production of cynical attitudes. However, as a release mechanism, such a gesture would assist in preventing attitudes from slipping further from cynicism into outright pessimism through the allowance of a purge mechanism. Perhaps this explains why the Cynics of old relied on such mediums, conflicting the apparently polar opposites of frustration with laughter in a positive expulsion of negativity. At the same time, cadets must accept the fact that such venting may not remain completely unchecked, given the current political climate that exists at the Academy and society in general. For most of its existence, the physical publication produced by cadets had to pass through a series of officers who checked and censored inappropriate material. With such a process, there was always a struggle between cadets pushing the limits, and officers defining and maintaining the limits constrained within the label of good order and discipline.

Little, if any, research has been conducted concerning efforts to curtail cynicism within military organizations. Because the demands of military service, coupled with the options afforded a commander, differ greatly from those of the corporate world, an appreciable demand for such studies generally has not existed. With the unique situation at the Air Force Academy,

cynicism has remained a target, albeit an elusive one, for nearly every institutional administration. Given this status and state of research, the question regarding the feasibility of corporate suggestions towards military cynicism arises. As mentioned earlier in this discussion, caution must be exercised when applying civilian solutions to military issues. However, the Academy offers a particularly inviting scenario for just such an application. While USAFA exists first and foremost as a military organization, its primary purposes reside in officer training and the creation of a leadership laboratory from which cadets can practice the qualities that will be expected of them upon graduation and commissioning. Returning to the *Academy of Management Executive* Reichers, Wanuous, and Austin formulate a strategy beneath the title, “Understanding and Managing Cynicism about Organizational Change.” They offer ten tactics that directly confront the “issues of credibility and the relationship between employees and change agents. The suggestions build on some of what is now known about cynicism, credibility, and transformational leadership.”²⁸ The authors make their premise upon the assumption that organizational change creates the greatest degree of cynicism within employees. They apply most of their suggestive efforts towards improving communication flow and enhancing the credibility of the information that flows between executives and employees. Where relevant, the authorial focus on information has been expanded to appropriately include aspects of military hierarchy and command instruction in areas not considered by the original article. While organizational change represents a substantial source for generating cynicism, it is certainly not the only cause. Still, given the constraints of these assumptions, the points offered by Reichers, Wanuous, and Austin embody an effective yardstick by which policies can be referenced in their attempts to curtail or attack cynicism. Foremost in this discussion must remain the fact that these suggestions do not necessarily remedy cynicism itself, but rather seek

to deny the attitudinal kindling that often pushes an emotional posture further from pride towards the dangers of pessimism.

Keep People Involved in Making Decisions that Affect Them

In the corporate world, such a suggestion might appear particularly innovative in its delegation of responsibility and inclusive tendencies. The business model suggests that

People more likely to be cynical about change were those who reported that they lacked meaningful opportunities to participate in decision making, felt uninformed in general about what was going on in the work place, and had supervisors and union representatives they felt were lax about communicating with them, and about getting back to them with answers to questions. These findings lend support to the idea that cynicism may be an attempt to make sense out of disappointing or puzzling events.²⁹

At first glance, the proposition seems to conflict directly with the military culture as involvement is not necessarily a hallmark of a rigid chain of command. However, given the distinctive qualities of the Academy mission discussed earlier, this proposition actually represents a touchstone submission for combating cynicism. In learning to become effective military officers, cadets must be given ample opportunities to *practice* leadership. They must be given the opportunity to create, enact, and learn from their own guidance and policies within the cadet wing. Such a practice must also allow for the possibility of recoverable failures. Cadets *must* experience the consequences of their decisions firsthand. To craft this discussion into an analogy, cadets must be allowed and encouraged to walk the tight rope without a safety harness on their person. The safety net of the leadership laboratory itself exists to catch them, should they fall. Without consequence and immediate feedback, and absent risk per se, the actual ability to learn leadership remains theoretical in an environment that should be stressing the practical. Colonel Coffey, reflecting upon his tenure as a Group AOC, admitted that the Academy can allow cadets a greater degree of autonomy in exercising leadership principles within their

squadrons. The difficulty, he explained, lies within striking an effective balance between the forward progress of the Cadet Wing without allowing for a catastrophic failure when too much latitude is permitted. He admitted too that Academy officials maintained a posture that could be interpreted as micro-managing in the attempt to prevent a leadership practicum from running awry in the hands of relatively inexperienced cadets. Brigadier General Susan Desjardins, Commandant of Cadets from 2006 to 2009 described the difficulty in balancing responsibility within environmental constraints as she suggested “I will never be able to give them enough responsibility. We give them a lot of rope. We give them just enough rope so they don’t hurt themselves.”³⁰ In direct contrast to this approach, a 2003 graduate of the US Military Academy at West Point contrasts the level of cynicism at USAFA with another service academy.

I feel strongly that cadet leadership should be given real authority, even if that gift of authority leads to the possibility of failures. *Especially* if there is the possibility of failure. Everyone that is cynical is haunted by the vision of what they thought the academy was or had the potential to be. But this vision is not dead, and can still be called to life. We need torchbearers, who refuse to throw up their hands in the face of a disappointing reality.³¹

The effect of delegation to, and trust in subordinates creates an immediate reduction in organizational cynicism. A 2006 graduate of the Air Force Academy described just such a situation: “The best leadership example I experienced at the Academy was from my AOC during my firstie year. His style was hands off and he allowed us to run the show, and he acted as a mentor for the squadron leadership. I can’t recall a time when he took away the power from the cadets. If someone screwed up and needed punishment, he’d offer his advice to the [squadron commander] and let him handle it from there.”³² This graduate continues to explain the lasting effects that such a leadership style had upon the squadron in contrast to the initial reception. “His ideas were pretty radical and a lot of AOCs initially laughed at him for how he commanded our squadron. It didn’t help his cause that we were #36 in the wing after the first 9 weeks of my

firstie year. However, things began to change, we started to improve rapidly, and by the end of my firstie year, AOCs from other squadrons were asking him for advice on how to run their squadrons.” He concludes with a capstone comment: “by the start of the following fall semester (after I had graduated), my squadron was #1 in the wing and a lot of the PTB [slang term for Academy officials: literally, the Powers That Be] were taking notes.” Positive and effective organizational change does not occur immediately, and leaders must have the will to weather initial setbacks and relapses before a new direction takes hold. With any change acting as a potential catalyst, leaders must expect an initial increase in cynicism, even with policies that will ultimately prove proper and effective in combating that response. The quality of leader described by the graduate above details exactly the type of officer that the Academy wants and needs in charge of each of their forty cadet squadrons. Appropriately, the next suggestion deals directly with improving the leadership quality of organizations stricken with cynicism.

Enhance Credibility

In light of several scandals that plagued the Academy in the years between 2001 and 2003, the politically-mandated Agenda for Change (AFC) made several significant recommendations for action. Amongst the enacted policies that had immediate effects, the call for an enhanced AOC selection process led to an improvement in the quality of officers returning to the Academy in this vital position.

AOC assignment processes will be enhanced to ensure that selectees are superior officers who achieve commanders’ list status. AOCs will be specially selected and academically prepared to assume the unique duties of leading, mentoring, and training cadets. The Commandant of Cadets is responsible for the final selection of all AOCs.

AOCs will receive one year of graduate education resulting in a Masters Degree in counseling or similar area prior to a 2-year role as AOC. During the year of study, the officer will have formal OJT with a sitting AOC. AOCs will be considered priority status for post USAFA assignments.³³

An AOC has arguably one of the greatest impacts upon a cadet's professional development due to the command exposure from within their individual squadrons. In light of the recommendations made by the AFC, AOC selection moved to the forefront of the Intermediate Developmental Education (IDE) process. The Academy now has the first opportunity to select the new AOC corps from amongst the list of all Majors pursuing IDE slots. The Commandant of Cadets handpicks the AOCs based upon the strength of their service records, ensuring a high caliber officers enter these critical leadership billets. This change has dramatically altered the face of the AOC corps, offering cadets a broad exposure to leaders of diverse Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) backgrounds. However, the leadership abilities and philosophies of the AOCs remain inconsistent throughout the administration.³⁴ To further refine this selection process, Colonel Coffey suggests that the Commandant personally conduct interviews with prospective AOCs in the attempt to gauge and assess leadership principles and philosophy. However, the Academy selection of quality AOCs faces a much more dramatic obstacle in the perception of the job itself from operational perspectives. Simply stated, operational specialties consider the AOC position at the Academy as "career suicide." Instructors at the Air Force Weapons School, upon voicing their request for consideration in an AOC position were dissuaded from the post by commanders opining that many in the Air Force viewed the post as an "easy job that removed an officer too far from operational considerations and limited further promotion and command potential."³⁵ Such concerns are unfounded, however. In a sample of six AOCs in the 11F3B AFSC, four were promoted below the zone to Lieutenant Colonel, and one has already returned to a squadron command position. Until the Academy can overcome the negative associations currently assessed within operational AFSCs, the recruitment of AOCs will be hindered within those fields.

Enhancing credibility also maintains a significant footprint operationally within the execution of the Academy's mission. Credibility itself is bookended by standardization and enforcement. This is a particularly difficult subject to broach in that while standards themselves remain fairly constant, the application and enforcement varies across demographics and administrations. The enforcement of regulations and policies should be constant and expected throughout both the Academy and military service in general. However, in practice, the art and necessity of correcting peers, and occasionally leaders, remains an elusive and uncomfortable art. In the popular culture and slang of the cadet wing, individuals making corrective observations on fellow cadets are referred to as "strivers" and "tools." In an organization that is literally defined by the adherence to standards, regulations, and traditions, the evolution of such cynical attitudes must be analyzed closely. Essentially, the problem manifests through two avenues, example and expectation. With respect to example, it must be understood that *any* instance of non-adherence to or the ignoring of standards by a superior will be reflected then as acceptable by subordinates. In his book *Sharing Success, Owning Failure*, Colonel David Goldfein expands upon this situation in advising leaders to "take ownership of every part of your organization and teach this to subordinate leaders. Once you've walked past trash on the ground, a wall that needs paint, or a broken door, you've just blessed it—and you'll continue to overlook it every day after that—until it gets pointed out by your boss."³⁶ Likewise, the officer or cadet who walks past obvious infractions, or corrects discrepancies while displaying the same violation creates a culture of acceptable negligence and disregard for established protocols. Worse, the attitude is infectious and spreads rapidly. Peer leadership and exemplary corrective actions represent a necessary, albeit difficult, focus area for the Academy to redouble its efforts in officer training. The question was put to Colonel Coffey to identify the appropriate level at which this should be

initially addressed and exemplified. From an exposure perspective, the layman might identify AOCs as the primary point of attack with their increased exposure to cadets and daily life at the Academy. However, Colonel Coffey points out that while such exemplary representation is ultimately the requirement of *every* officer assigned to the Academy, such an institutional focus must come from the senior leadership. With the military mission, the Commandant of Cadets would represent the point from which such a focus could be enacted from a top-down push to permeate the ranks. From this perch, the Commandant must make the point, from a “black-hat” perspective if required, that standardization enforcement is not a *goal*, but a *minimum*—an entry-level baseline that sets 100% compliance and enforcement as a standard of measurement. Is such a standard or expectation unrealistic? While some may scoff at such a proposition, it should be mentioned that when asked to describe the primary purpose of officers assigned to cadet development at the Academy, many cadets stated that they expected superiors to act as examples or mentors in their instruction. Interestingly, a small, but vocal number of cadets carried a very negative opinion of officers assigned to the Academy, labeling their primary duties as micromanaging, punishing, or disciplining cadets.³⁷ Based on such discussions, cadets expect the officers above them to set and abide by the principles expected of their subordinates. Leadership by example remains an effective motivator throughout history, and cadets thirst for such exemplars in the men and women charged with instilling lasting values into these future officers. (Select individual interview responses are collected in Appendix A.)

Credibility must contain consequences. Current AOCs assigned to the Academy describe a particularly alarming phenomenon in the prevailing sense of “entitlement” that prevails amongst cadet attitudes. When allowed to confide anonymously, cadets admit that such a feeling springs from the lack of significant consequences. Specifically, cadets believe that rehabilitation

reigns over disenrollment for most offenses. The lack of a credible threat of reprisal or consequences emboldens those who would push the limits of regulatory guidance and policy while supporting the assumption that acceptance into the Academy somehow assures a cadet of the “right” to graduate. Rehabilitation versus expulsion remains a significant challenge for all military leaders confronted with subordinates who test the limits of authority. The Academy lies at a particularly precarious position as it must balance the natural tendencies of youth battling emotional, psychological, and physical passions alongside the demands of officership and a regimented lifestyle. Still, as discussed earlier, specific lines must be drawn, and consequences adhered to in the support and propagation of credibility. The establishment of consequences falls in line with the current focus of Brigadier General Cox on the hallmarks of discipline, duty, and leadership.³⁸ The acceptance and realization of consequences directly affects the development of responsibility within cadets. Though the charge may be passed down from the Superintendent to “do all you can to get them through,”³⁹ officer and cadet alike must realize and accept the consequences associated with a failure to comply with established guidance, with a credible threat of disenrollment maintained for those who fail to adhere to established standards.

The issue of credibility within the crucible of the Academy’s purported laboratory ultimately comes down to the degree to which cadets should potentially be allowed to fail in their attempts at leadership. As commanders, AOCs often overlook their instructional positions in favor of managerial responsibilities. Cadets thirst for opportunities to affect their own destinies, and several AOCs suggest that the more time and power that can be given back to cadets within the competing demands of the Academy curriculum, the less cynicism will be bred amongst their ranks.⁴⁰ A current AOC explained the situation in relating cadet experiences during the Commandant’s Challenge exercise. During planning events occurring months prior to the actual

evaluation, the officer identified several critical deficiencies in the cadet plan that, left uncorrected, would lead to failure in execution. Rather than correct their mistakes, the commander allowed the cadets to continue in their planning and leadership practice. As expected, the cadets did not identify the oversight and failed at the tasks assigned during the inspection. As the squadron conducted a “lessons learned” review session, the officer traced the specific errors and demonstrated appropriate fixes that would have remedied the situation. At the conclusion of this session, the cadets had a common reaction to the manner in which their commander had served in his capacity as an example throughout the process: “Thank you for letting us fail.”⁴¹ With limited resources and time devoted to officer development, Academy administrators will always struggle with the appropriate and acceptable consequences available to cadets at all levels of their training. Still, the most effective means of teaching accountability comes through the realistic and practical application of responsibility itself.

Keep People Informed

Reichers, Wanuous, and Austin opine that “people need to be fully informed and educated about the necessity for change, the progress and problems associated with ongoing change processes, and the results of change programs. Information minimizes employees’ opportunities to fill in the blanks of missing information, and makes it difficult to conclude that most or all changes have been failures.”⁴² Institutionalized curriculums often contain training events whose purposes cannot be readily discerned at the time of execution. With an imposing series of these events designed to overwhelm and monopolize an individual’s time, cadets often fail to comprehend the objectives of every policy, regulation, and training event placed upon them. While such attitudes have always existed to some degree, these future officers have come of age in a world where information is readily available and limited only by the individual’s

ability or willingness to discern or search for it. Indeed, the evolution of societal norms has outpaced the military's ability to address the change. As one member of the class of 2001 contends, "This generation of 18-30 year olds especially doesn't work for work's sake. We demand satisfaction, fulfillment, enjoyment, and sense of purpose from life. USAFA squashes all those things and demands subjugation. The military doesn't have to operate that way. It's better when people understand their purpose, their role, and feel motivated to contribute to the goal and their team."⁴³ Once again, the Academy must strike a particularly precocious balance between military discipline and efficiency with the instructional outcomes associated with training leaders who will issue such orders in the future. Major Michael Drowley, a current AOC, and USAF Weapons School Risner Trophy recipient, contends that "no matter what the policy, or who implemented it, AOCs have to take the time to explain the logic and purpose behind it."⁴⁴ He describes setting aside weekly meetings with his squadron for just such a purpose and has found that even when cadets disagree with a policy, they tend to support it when they understand the thought process associated with the directives. He emphasized, and warned, that such information sharing sessions required a significant and consistent commitment on the part of the supervisor to maintain effectiveness and relevancy. If cynicism exists in the disparity between perceptions and outcomes, then even apparently irrelevant events and outcomes can deny a cynical foothold through the proper application of information. In Major Drowley's example, he further cautioned that information sharing is not simply accomplished through meetings alone. He explained that effective communication requires distribution across multiple media, including mass meetings, email, and personal interaction. Finally, he instructs that the distributor must be prepared to offer that information through different methods due to the

variations in individual reception; effective communication for some is a message not received by others.

Emphasize and Reward Supervisors for Their Efforts to Communicate

Reichers, Wanuous, and Austin state that “the lack of communication and respect for one’s supervisor was strongly associated with cynical beliefs.”⁴⁵ As discussed previously, the requisite for effective communication between leader and subordinate cannot be overemphasized. However, measuring such communications and effectively rewarding officers for their efforts may not be feasible. However, the suggestion of emphasizing the requirement is entirely achievable and recommended. Major Drowley commented that the requisite course of study in obtaining a Masters in Counseling degree creates ample opportunities for new AOCs to identify their leadership strengths and weaknesses. However, the techniques that some new commanders exercise remain foreign and unfamiliar to others. The Academy would be well served to offer corollary courses of instruction to introduce, reinforce, and standardize these critical techniques throughout the AOC corps. Additional emphasis with the new commanders in a group setting would further cement the unity of effort across the officer ranks and provide an additional layer of uniformity in the example and instruction provided to the cadets.

Enhance Timing, and Minimize Surprises

In their proscribed planned of attack against organizational cynicism, Reichers, Wanuous, and Austin outlined two separate suggestions that have been combined here into one focus area. In their words, employers should enhance the effectiveness of timing, and keep surprises to a minimum. The authors utilize these areas to further extol the effectiveness of information flow within an organization, stating that, in any informational gap, “people begin to fill in their own answers, either independently or through interaction with co-workers, most of them equally

uninformed.”⁴⁶ With respect to minimizing surprises, they contend that “routine notice about what is happening, and especially why it is happening, prevents anyone’s being caught off guard.”⁴⁷ These avenues have been merged to emphasize the need for consistency throughout the Academy experience. As mentioned earlier, consistency should be the hallmark of any institutionalized curriculum and established course of study, thereby marginalizing the effects of surprises or rashly-timed policies. With a constant and recognized mission, the changing of leadership should have little effect on the overall progress and steadfastness of the institution itself. However, this is not the case. Each administration within the pillars of instruction at the Academy brings a unique perspective and approach to accomplishing the mission of producing officers. A popular Dodo cartoon produced in 1994, written over a Dilbert strip, demonstrated cadet sentiment in depicting the “bungee-Comm” sweeping in, making changes as rapidly as possible before being sprung back out on his elastic cord. Much like Presidential administrations, cadets refer to the passing of time by the “era” of Superintendants and Commandants. Consideration should be given to extending the tours of general officers assigned to the academy in much the same way as faculty heads under the Dean are tenured “permanent professors.” Such a dramatic change may dissuade officers wishing to continue career advancement within the Air Force, but would offer a level of consistency in mission not currently afforded by the constant change of critical administrative personnel. Particularly with the Commandant of Cadets, the Academy should weigh the benefits of a tenured and consistent position against the ramifications of slowing the progress of upwardly mobile officers. General Officers serving in this position have generally continued to higher rank and increased responsibility. Of the eight Commandants serving over the last twenty years, two have continued to four-star rank and led Major Commands, three achieved the rank of Lieutenant General and

served an average of 7 years after leaving the Academy, and three remain on active duty.⁴⁸ Stabilizing the position outside the standardized Air Force rotations will affect the advancement of aspiring flag officers and is worthy of a dedicated research proposal in its own right.

Publicize Successful Changes, and Deal with the Past

A popular, albeit slightly sarcastic, saying permeates the cadet wing when describing the Academy's history: *half a century of progress unimpeded by tradition*, a witty reversal of axioms in a similar West Point phrase. While West Point cadets use their adage to describe the predominance of traditions and rights-of-passage over a sense of modern progressiveness, the USAFA sketch laments the *lack* of traditions in a comparatively young organization that appears to constantly reinvent itself. Tradition at the Air Force Academy generally resides in either heritage or the accomplishments of fellow graduates, visibly present in memorials, the Air Gardens, Heritage Trail, and the planned Mall of Heroes. While such items link cadets to graduates through historical references, they do not directly provide a forum for participation outside of reflection. Traditions that cadets can participate in seem fleeting, inconsistent, and reside in sordid tales that begin, "Back in my day..." As a unique example of this situation, Recognition activities have undergone significant changes over the last 15 years. In 1994, the event was renamed Ascension, and traditional activities eliminated from the training. One year later, Recognition returned, only to be eliminated completely for the classes of 2007 and '08, then reintroduced for the class of 2009. Culminating an overwhelmingly difficult first year, such inconsistencies and dramatic alterations to a major event in a cadet's career cracks the very foundation of their perspective and severs a link between that class and other graduates. Certainly, curriculums evolve over time, but cadets come to expect certain experiences that their predecessors identified as unique and central to the shared experience. Repeated efforts to

curtail or expand the Fourth Class year represent other examples of inconsistencies that make it difficult for current cadets to associate their experiences with those found in Academy folklore. This is not to say, however, that *all* tradition is good for tradition's own sake. However, the common ideals and experiences that define the unique experience of the Academy that draws youth to its curriculum over other commissioning sources must be identified, sanctified, and promoted exhaustively. Such successful experiences and policies represent the hallmark of this institution, and should be heralded accordingly.

The Academy must also take conscientious steps to specifically deal with negative incidents in a consistent and effective manner. In 2002, a series of sexual assault incidents at the Academy triggered a scandal, while a significant cheating ring was broken up a few years later. In both incidents, cadets immediately identified discrepancies in the manner by which some cases were handled differently from others. In other areas, cadets reported a lack of familiarity with the circumstances surrounding negative events and perceived an institutional "cover-up" to avoid having to display publicly the "black-eye" associated with such an event.⁴⁹ The severity of such incidents can cause a dramatic shift from sarcasm to pessimism in very short order, particularly with individuals close to such an event. However, given an open forum based on effective communication, such gaps in knowledge should be preventable and ultimately inexcusable. Yet, even amongst such perspectives, communication remains a two-way street, and cadets must be afforded a voice within the construct of the leadership laboratory.

Perspective and Opportunities to Air Feelings

Leaders often carry predisposition to some degree through personal experiences and individual perspectives. At the Academy, leaders have the unique perspective associated with instructing in a defined curriculum that affords them an ability to foresee mistakes and errors in

subordinate actions. As such, actions taken to maintain a steady course often can be perceived as micromanaged instruction. The burden of experience sometimes prevents a superior from viewing a situation from the critical perspective of a student subordinate. The ability to discern this vital facet in cadet development cannot be overemphasized. Developing the ability to recognize and adjust leadership and instructional techniques to account for subordinate perspective must be institutionalized and constantly reevaluated for effectiveness and improvement. Within that very perspective, cadets must be given a voice in their curriculum. Such a voice will run the gamut from simple complaints to viable feedback. Along such a scale, it should be both tolerated and encouraged. At the complaints side of the argument, officers should not feel threatened or uncomfortable by such “grumblings” within the masses. Colonel (ret) Hector Negroni, USAFA class of 1961, explains this phenomenon effectively in instructing:

I am one who has never been bothered by cynicism or complaints by the ‘troops.’ Bitching and moaning is a sign of spirit and a sign of a good military person. I favor ‘grumblers’ over the silence types. That is why I always supported the old paper Dodo and I support its electronic version. As a commander I learned that I needed to know what my ‘troops’ were complaining about and what they were cynical about.⁵⁰

Specifically addressing cynicism, the Academy has an established medium afforded to cadets in the form of their publication, *The Dodo*. Before it was banned in 2006, senior officers remarked that they used the magazine to gauge the effectiveness and manner by which policies were received by the cadet wing.⁵¹ Cadets used the forum as a medium by which to purge negative feelings and emotions when confronted with scandalous situations.⁵² Given the current political climate surrounding an institution still recovering from the shock of multiple scandals earlier in the decade, Academy leaders find little room to permit experimentation with sensitive subjects. At the same time, affording cadets specific, credible, and legitimate authority to police themselves and resurrect a tradition would serve to eliminate more cynicism than the magazine

espouses. Such a publication would require close scrutiny by a board of senior officers, to whom the cadets will likely refer to as “censors” as in years past. To build responsibility amongst cadets while fostering credibility between the ranks, consideration should be given to creating a mutually agreed-upon board, with officers chosen by administrators *and* cadets to preside over the publication. Placing select cadets on such a review board will only enhance the authority of such a board and serve to reinforce the cultivation of appropriate satire.

When cadets comprehend that their suggestions are not only taken seriously, but are implemented as policy, the resultant empowerment will produce a particularly potent pride. A complete and transparent process of continual feedback must exist to demonstrate the effectiveness and implementation of cadet suggestions. For example, during the 2008 Commandant’s Challenge, cadets commented overwhelmingly that ground combat scenarios were negatively impacted by unrealistic weapons allocations and simulations. As a result, officers are attempting to increase the ammunition issuance to each cadet to a level that allows the participant the opportunity to dictate where and how their resources are used during the training. The ramifications of this policy will be cemented by highlighting specific cadet feedback that led to the improved policies and should foster increased and improved feedback.

Conclusion

Cynicism should neither be feared nor lamented as a cancerous entity. Neither, though, can it be embraced or celebrated as a desired emotional expression. Existing on the same scale with pride, sarcasm, and pessimism, cynicism provides an attitudinal barometer that allows leaders to gauge how far from the desired expressions their subordinates have shifted. Such an assessment requires constant and faithful interaction, involvement, and study. As an entity, cynicism itself cannot be attacked directly. However, by understanding its causes and relative

stature alongside other emotions, effective measures can be taken to undercut the effect and propagation of cynicism. The mere existence of cynicism should not cause immediate alarm amongst leaders. In describing the rhetoric of cynicism, George Yoos offers a more optimistic prognosis in opining that “the cynic’s sarcasm may be perceived as a form of moral shock therapy, and if the cynic is engaging in rhetorical therapeutics, then he cannot be in complete despair about his patient, especially if the therapy is free.”⁵³

In some respects, Academy administrators have more room for optimism than panic with established policies that may effectively assist in combating cynicism. Brigadier General Desjardins noticed a significant change in cadet attitudes during her time in command, observing that “today cadets will look you in the eye. They will smile at you. The pride is back.”⁵⁴ Additionally, the USAFA Strategic Vision published as guidance for the Academy through 2013, offers guidance that aligns with the suggestions of this work. Of the seven strategic goals published by the Superintendent, the second looks to strengthen communications and reputation, only behind a focus on leadership and character development.⁵⁵ Such observations and directives represent methodologies that, enacted effectively, should undercut cynicism’s ability to cultivate within cadet perspectives. Strict adherence to these goals through a credible executive process will strengthen pride in the institution. However, it remains critical to recognize that such policies, even as perfectly crafted and expertly intentioned, will cause some degree of sarcasm and cynicism at the outset as they represent change to the organization. Adherence and consistency to the original intent will overcome such reactions, but the weathering of such responses must be anticipated and dealt with consistently.

Finally, whether cynicism comes about due to policy or organizational changes, it ultimately resides within the realm of a subordinate’s perception. As both a defense mechanism and natural

response, such perspectives must be recognized and validated in the spectrum of human emotion. “Cynical remarks oscillate between what is an apparent value of oppositions; consequently, irony as a mode of speech as already suggested is ideally adapted to express cynical remarks, for it directs attention to the basic opposition between appearance and reality in the vision of the cynic.”⁵⁶ Understanding this relationship creates the most succinct methodology and baseline knowledge required to effectively target cynicism. As perceptions open the door for attitudinal shifts toward cynicism, it is precisely these perceptions and expectations that must be aligned to focus upon the desired pride inherent in the original perspective. Consistency of message, effective dialogue, and a unified effort towards a common goal all work directly to both reinvigorate pride and deny cynicism an opportunity to gain an emotional foothold. In the end, despite the best efforts of experts in the field and diligent analysis to the issue, perhaps the best perspective on the situation again comes from the trenches as an admitted cynic describes his outlook.

“I’m cynical because I cared. I’m cynical because I expected more. I’m cynical because, deep down, I think I actually have some pride in not just USAFA, but in who I am, what I stand for, and what USAFA should be. I’m proud of the people who embody what USAFA should be, and I’m proud to know some of these people personally. I’m proud to be cynical as well, because if I am not cynical about USAFA’s failures, then I’ve either become blind to the problems, or I have lost my ability to care.”

-Anonymous USAFA graduate, Class of 2007

Notes

- ¹ Andersson and Bateman, *Cynicism in the Workplace*, 451.
- ² Dean, Brandes, Dharwadkar, *Organizational Cynicism*, 341
- ³ Ibid, 341.
- ⁴ American Heritage Dictionary Online
- ⁵ Dean, Brandes, Dharwadkar, *Organizational Cynicism*, 341
- ⁶ Ibid, 344.
- ⁷ Ibid, 344.
- ⁸ Anonymous, Interview by the Author, 15 Dec 2008.
- ⁹ Anonymous, Interview by the Author, 16 Dec 2008.
- ¹⁰ Reichers, Wanuous, Austin, *Understanding and Managing Cynicism about Organizational Change*, 51.
- ¹¹ http://academyadmissions.com/cadetlife/daily_life.php, 2008.
- ¹² Wry
- ¹³ Ibid, 48
- ¹⁴ Yoos, 57
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 58.
- ¹⁶ Eleanor M. Sickels, *Farewell to Cynicism* 31
- ¹⁷ Dean, Brandes, Dharwadkar, *Organizational Cynicism*, 341.
- ¹⁸ USAFA Folklore, http://www.usafatoday.org/wiki/index.php/Commandant_of_Cadets
- ¹⁹ Anonymous, Interview by the Author, 11 Dec 2008
- ²⁰ Ibid, 341
- ²¹ Ibid, 346
- ²² Andersson and Bateman, *Cynicism in the Workplace*, 449
- ²³ Dean, Brandes, Dharwadkar, *Organizational Cynicism*, 347.
- ²⁴ Ibid, 347.
- ²⁵ Ibid, 347
- ²⁶ Marc Gresilsamer, *The Dilbert Barometer*, 2.
- ²⁷ Interestingly, a significant fear of retribution currently exists among cadets. For additional commentary on this situation, reference “author’s note” in Appendix A, page 43, following a comment given by an anonymous cadet interview.
- ²⁸ Reichers, Wanuous, Austin, *Understanding and Managing Cynicism about Organizational Change*, 52
- ²⁹ Ibid, 52
- ³⁰ Roeder, Great Leaders of the Academy, 19
- ³¹ Anonymous, www.edodo.org/rm, “Attacking Cynicism at USAFA”, 4 Oct 2008
- ³² Anonymous, www.edodo.org/rm, “Attacking Cynicism at USAFA”, 18 Dec 2008
- ³³ Agenda for Change, 2004

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- ³⁴ Colonel L.C. Coffey, Interview by the Author, 14 January, 2009
- ³⁵ Author's personal experience, 2007
- ³⁶ Goldfein, David, *Sharing Success, Owning Failure*, 7
- ³⁷ Interview responses collected from 105 USAFA personnel
- ³⁸ Major Michael Drowley, AOC, CS15, Interview by the Author, 4 Feb 2009
- ³⁹ Ibid
- ⁴⁰ Ibid
- ⁴¹ Ibid
- ⁴² Reichers, Wanuous, Austin, 53
- ⁴³ Anonymous, www.edodo.org/rm, "Attacking Cynicism at USAFA, 18 Dec 2008
- ⁴⁴ Major Michael Drowley, AOC, CS15, Interview by the Author, 4 Feb 2009
- ⁴⁵ Reichers, Wanuous, Austin, *Understanding and Managing Cynicism about Organizational Change*, 53
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, 53
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, 54
- ⁴⁸ <http://www.af.mil/bios>
- ⁴⁹ Anonymous, www.edodo.org/rm, "Attacing Cynicism at USAFA," 18 Dec 2008
- ⁵⁰ Col (ret) Hector A. Negroni, www.edodo.org/rm, "Attacking Cynicism at USAFA", 2 Oct 08
- ⁵¹ Colonel L.C. Coffey, Interview by the Author, 14 Jan 2009
- ⁵² Author's personal experience, Dodo Editor 1995-1996
- ⁵³ George Yoos, *The Rhetoric of Cynicism*, 59
- ⁵⁴ Roeder, *Great Leaders of the Academy*, 19
- ⁵⁵ USAFA Strategic Vision 2008-2013, 9
- ⁵⁶ George Yoos, *The Rhetoric of Cynicism*, 60

Appendix A

Rather than take up precious space in the body of this work, the individual anecdotes and vignettes of cadets and graduates alike have been compiled in this appendix as an addendum to the main discussion. These stories serve as a near-real time barometer of the unique causes behind the cynicism that grows within individual perceptions. The opinions here are honest, raw, and at times inconsistent. Such disparities should not invalidate the individual responses, but reinforce the fact that information is not flowing to everyone, and that the information that is flowing is not being received universally. In some cases, the opinions collected here conflict openly with Academy goals and values. The reader may be tempted to ask why these individuals continue, or continued, through the experience. Such views should not be read as reflective of the individual, but upon the missed opportunities for instruction and mentorship. Disagreement and friction, as shown here, represents an honest opportunity for improvement. In the harshest (and occasionally incorrect) criticisms can be found true guideposts that offering effective avenues of approach for addressing these attitudes. The responses are not organized nor categorized except to group responses from the individual, with the intention being to maintain the focus upon the unique opinions of the particular respondent. Additionally, this appendix is not designed to be read in sections, but in its entirety to gain an accurate “whole-picture” vantage of the issue of cynicism at USAFA. This is the raw data, from the cadets, officers, and enlisted personnel who serve at this fine institution. Read their words not so much as “spears” assaulting the institution, but as passionate observations from honest brokers desiring a better process in cultivating officers and effective military leaders.

Who contributes (generally, or specifically) to cynicism at USAFA?

A Superintendent who professes to be for high standards, yet keeps every [expletive deleted] who comes to his office. He overturns honor cases, keeps academic and athletic slugs, etc.

This just breeds negative attitudes and cynicism among those that we need most to be (generally) positive about the AF—our best cadets. Everyone [is] cynical—I just don’t want our best cadets to be cynical about the AF and their career because losers are wearing the same ring. They should find other things to be cynical about—like taxes, marriage, government, etc.

What causes cynicism?

The vagaries of the human animal. Poor leadership or personality conflicts cause it, but so does inconsistency or a sense of unfair treatment by leadership.

How do you view the Academy?

As probably the most important part of my education and background. I owe ALMOST everything to the lessons I learned there, the friends I made, and the opportunities USAFA provided.

What is best about USAFA? When applied, the tough standards—especially the core curriculum. The fact that there is NO university or college in the US where the gap between the very top cadets (and their experience) is so close to the lowest cadet/student. That creates a bond of common experience that I will always treasure.

--Cadet, Class of 2009

Who contributes (generally, or specifically) to cynicism at USAFA?

Everyone...because cadets don't hold themselves to standards, but I think it starts with permanent party, because cadets become cynical and believe they don't have to follow the standards, because officers and enlisted don't.

What are your most cynical experiences at USAFA?

Finding out that a cadet who got a DUI (under the no tolerance clause) is still here and will be graduating, especially when he knew he was the DD and still chose to put everyone in danger, not only that, but had over a 0.13 BAC (so more than a "few" drinks).

Stories of cadets who are retained for Honor, even though they were found in violation of the code and it was obvious that there was intent or motive to break the code and then afterwards it is found out that their father/mother are high ranking officers (suspicious)

When cadets who are terrible militarily are not kicked out, even when they should be since this is a Military Academy; conduct and aptitude should be enough of a reason to not graduate someone, especially if some are so willing to kick others out for academics and athletics within the first year without giving them a chance to succeed or "rehabilitate".

What are your proudest moments at USAFA?

Seeing the cadet wing come together for events like Commandant's Challenge, Recognition, or other training events; hearing cadets say they wish they were more involved in defending our nation or in learning our future jobs; stories of cadets showing they really care.

Was USAFA what you expected it to be? Why, why not?

No, there isn't enough military training, field exercises, or understanding of what we are going into when we graduate. I expected the last year to be more specialized and focused.

I also expected there to be less alcohol issues and more pride, less issues that civilian colleges deal with; I thought this would be way different.

--Cadet, Class of 2009

When did you first recognize cynicism in yourself? What brought it on?

Three degree summer. I was scheduled to take AM251 (Soaring) but was informed during dead week that they decided to give all of the Basics rides so our go would be totally full. We were then told that we would be put into the jump program and that we could finish our jumps during transition week if we did not get them done during the summer period. Got an email when I came back from leave saying that now some basics would be getting tandem jumps and we would now be put in the Mission Support Group, sitting at ECP's and filling sandbags.

I hold onto cynicism because I truly believe that USAFA is a great institution that exposes cadets to experiences that no other place in the world can. I have had some instances where my cynical "episodes" inspire me to be a better role model for the underclassmen because I believe that if I can instill the sense of pride in them that I have than I have done my job.

What causes cynicism?

Many things. Hypocrisy from the leadership, both permanent party and cadet. Regulations that seem to have no place or purpose. Micromanaging (feeling powerless as a cadet). List goes on.

Who contributes (generally, or specifically) to cynicism at USAFA?

Wing leadership and permanent party. Cadets to some extent spread it around but it mainly takes root due to said leadership problems

What are your most cynical experiences at USAFA?

Previously stated summer experience. Micromanaging by the Group AOC, essentially taking reins from cadets and enacting his own policies governing every facet of cadets life. Having a worthless excuse of a cadet make it through while constantly lying about [a] medical condition and manipulating permanent party. This same person got the IG and Senators involved [due to a perception of being] mistreated by the clinic even though [the cadet] came in complaining about a multitude of different symptoms that... did not [exist]. The difficulty in kicking people out. Everything is now a "legal" process. One of my basics missed all of 1st BCT because he was "leaving". He met with the Comm and decided that he wanted to stay, and is still here. It is no longer a subjective process anymore. If they don't have bad grades, honor issues, or severe disciplinary issues they are able to stay even though they would reflect poorly on USAFA if they graduate.

What are your proudest moments at USAFA?

Being in the first class to have recognition after the sex scandal. Going home smack year and have people thank me for being in the military. Getting my ring. Being able to go out

into the “real world” and present projects that I have done in the Aero department (my major) that have real world impacts on Air Force and other DoD programs

What is the best example of leadership you’ve experienced or witnessed at USAFA (by cadet or officer)

Our current and previous AOC allowed our squadron to be cadet run. If we screwed up and were 40th in the Wing, then so be it. This place is a leadership laboratory, and they felt that they would let us LEAD. They only interfered when the situation dictated, such as Article 15’s, counseling, and other paperwork duties. One was a grad, the other not, yet they both new that it was OUR Wing not theirs. Our previous AOC actually stood up to Lt. Col. [X] about some of his policies. He was shot down, but the fact that he stood up had an everlasting impact.

What is broken?

The permanent party need to let go the reins of the Wing and let the cadets run it. If they screw up, then so be it. That way they learn their lesson on leadership and don’t make it as an officer and potentially endanger lives. Although I know it will never happen, the leadership needs to be less worried about what the public thinks of them. I think that the fact that no pictures from recognition can be taken because they might offend people is completely unacceptable.

One of the biggest sources of my cynicism came from the PTB (to include cadet wing staff at times) treating us like children. Now, that sort of treatment is to be expected to a point for four-digs, but when you're upper-level squadron staff as a firstie and you're still being treated like a know-nothing child who couldn't tell his ass from a hole in the wall, you tend to get a little jaded.

My class also had the unfortunate timing of showing up right at the tail-end of the sexual assault scandal, which meant that while most (if not all) of our class came in expecting a very hardcore four-dig year, we ended up being the class that everyone resented because of new training policies. We tried to make the best of it, even to the point of having our own training sessions in private because our upperclassmen (whom we respected) wanted to train us but couldn't because of new regulations and fear of trouble/disenrollment.

Add to that the fact that the Academy didn't do much in regards to teaching real-world skills. I don't even specifically mean social skills and the ability to go out with cadet friends without all looking the same. I mean knowledge to prepare us for the real world that comes after the Academy. I came to Kirtland completely unprepared for what to expect and how to get started on my own in a new town. It especially sucked because I had no sponsor here to show me the ropes. Sure, I knew the basics of PME and the Air Force's Core Values, but surely there's room in the schedule to talk to us about what life will be like outside of normal duty hours.

The two generals I will always remember and respect are LtGen Regni and BGen Born. They not only genuinely cared about the Academy and the cadets, but they went out of their way to show it. In particular, I was very impressed by Regni's decision to observe and interact at the Academy

for the first three months on the job and THEN make any policy changes he saw as necessary. The fact that he understood that the Academy has its own culture completely disparate from that of the "real" Air Force showed his wisdom, character, and leadership skills.

I think a major way to release a lot of the tension that tends to build up week after week is through spirit. In fact, I think that's one of the reasons why it began to surface. At USAFA now, there is no outlet, just another paper trail. In order to get crazy, you must first have your crazy idea submitted through an endless chain of command. By the time you can actually pull off your idea, it's either several weeks later or it has been "modified" by the chain to make it PC. You then threaten UCMJ offenses for anyone who does an unapproved spirit mission/any morale boosting activity and the cadet wing just sits in their rooms and lets the angst build.

I would read all the fun things that happened during the 80s and 90s and wondered if the USAFA I attended was the same place. We tried to have our own fun little bits at a time. At some spirit dinners my Firstie year, some cadets would get up and dance to the likes of Michael Jackson or do swing dancing just as a way to blow off steam. In response, some of the later spirit dinners had "dancing contests" written into the spirit dinner instructions written by the wing commander. For some reason, the leadership wanted to control the spontaneous nature of the dancing. Consequently, hardly anyone went up and danced during the approved dancing time.

So, my recommendation is to back off (within reason of course). If people aren't killing themselves, seriously damaging government property, or doing something illegal, throw some tours their way and call it even. Don't restrict an entire group/class/wing of cadets because a bunch of cadets were Tzo sailing or some idiots poured paint all over the walls of another squadron. Make the culprits repaint the walls and march some tours.

Also, allow some of the "rights of passage" to come back. What was ever wrong with 'nuking' an upperclassmen you respected on their birthday? What about silly little doolie games that were played. Yes, people argue that it isn't professional or that it's not how that do it at Lackland. You know what? This isn't Lackland. This isn't enlisted BMT. This is the Air Force Academy. We live together and work together. This environment is unlike any other environment in the AF and should be treated as such.

Hmm, well I'm normally a sarcastic person by nature, but I would have to say the majority of my cynicism stemmed from the change for change sake and common sense test. Seemed like there were so many policies and changes that were made simply so someone could get an OPR bullet (at least that was always the running joke). Other policies seemed to come about in reaction to events and went a step too far, the old "One guy [messes] his pants, everyone wears diapers". As for the leadership lab side, always seemed like the AOC's were there to practice leadership more than the cadets. My first two AOC's were alright, though the second was by far my worst AOC, but it was the leadership of my MTL that I remember from those first two years. My favorite AOC seemed very hands off, but I was a 2* and can't vouch for what flack the firsties caught if

any or what the 2* leadership in the squadron caught as well, but I think that speaks to her leadership in that we never caught wind of anything. My firstie AOC was an Army LTC and while the first semester was the roughest with him, the second was alot smoother, but I credit that to my sq leadership who didn't let him push them around the second semester at all. I guess the point of that digression was that the cadet leadership, especially the wing and group, always seemed like a parrot yes man of the PTB.

Main Problem #1: Treating 4,000 Type-A(ish), motivated, intelligent adults like children, while ostensibly preparing them for "the real world".

Cadet life is defined by bedtimes, feeding times, nap times, play time, arbitrary restrictions on creature comforts and limited freedom to ACT like adults, NONE of which directly apply to military service or leadership.

The over-structured environment may work for cadets naturally predisposed to anal-retentive/OCD behavior, but most others rebel against having less freedom as a 21-yo college senior than they did as high school seniors living with their parents.

So much structure & so many rules actually INHIBIT cadets' ability to learn how to run their own lives, manage their time/finances/responsibilities or improve problem-solving skills needed for life as an adult, much less an AF officer.

Cadets are coddled, restricted and hand held for 4 years. They are not permitted to learn, grow, fail or succeed as adults. People rarely learn "normal" skills beyond ironing or cleaning the sink until AFTER graduation, at which point many act like bumbling idiots who are developmentally 4 years behind their non-USAFA peers.

This fundamental lack of "mutual respect" bleeds over into the classroom as well, where teachers treat college students like kindergartners over something as stupid as which sippy cup the cadets are allowed to use.

Cynicism exists because the leadership under all the "pillars" of the USAFA experience fail to treat cadets with respect and as adults. They are children to be controlled and reigned in.

Main Problem #2: Lip service and pandering to ideals while PTB violate all their own lessons in practice. Case in Point: "You're the best and brightest, the cream of the crop! ...Now clean your room and go to bed or you're grounded!"

Cadets recognize early on that leadership actions do not match their words. [emphasis added] They experience treatment outlined above under Problem #1, but what they hear is contradictory, and they know the leadership is full of it.

Group punishment for individual offenses angers & punishes those who played no role in the offense. More importantly, this practice goes against ALL the lessons taught in the "leadership

lab" classes, etc. It teaches cadets their behavior is of no consequence, and that the "leadership" doesn't believe or practice what they preach.

The GOOD aspects of the academy I found were limited to practical leadership experiences during the summers, and in team-building activities as fourthclass cadets. Those are the only times when cadets are given the ball & told to run with it.

Examples:

AM490: real-life, quasi-military training where you are responsible for your own life, your own success or failure, and supporting those around you to succeed.

CST/SERE: real-world skills, actual "military" application, where you are responsible for your own life, success or failure, and "supporting your classmates" to succeed as well.

Soaring: didn't participate, but it's the same - responsible for your own success or failure & for helping others succeed or fail.

All other aspects of day-to-day life are so structured, it doesn't matter what you do. If you act properly, you're punished for what some other person did. If you act improperly, you're punished & cause others to be punished needlessly. Solution? Do nothing & float, waiting for the next fleeting opportunity to actually learn, fail, succeed or lead.

Failure is a necessary part of the learning process, but cadets are never allowed to fail. Doing so either implies breaking the rules or getting booted. (Not saying tolerate honor, etc - I'm talking about life experience & living as an adult).

I think if the PTB actually sat down and looked at WHY certain rules or practices are in place, and removed the ones with minimal justification, USAFA would be a better place.

If the PTB then allowed cadets to BE the intelligent & motivated adults they are, by stating the desired end goal & letting them reach it on their own (rather than "telling them how to do things"), it would be a better place w/cadets feeling more fulfilled & happier about their choice to go to the Academy.

Boils down to lack of control & knowing that the actions and words of their authority figures contradict each other and aren't to be trusted.

This is a good question as I assume all of us who spent time at the Academy had some level of cynicism by the time we left. For me personally my cynicism developed not because of the daily mickey mouse tasks (marching, cleaning sinks, sleeping on top of a made bed, etc...). These were just part of the pain of attending a service academy...and known obstacles before I signed on the line and reported to the Bring Me Men Ramp (or whatever it is now).

Rather my cynicism developed gradually over four years when those who would lay out edicts,

policy, and requirements failed to live up to the same set of standards pushed downward. This includes both Academy PTB as well as upper class cadets. For example, it use to irritate me to no end when overweight upper class cadets would refer to me and other classmates as being "weak" when they could hardly pass the PFT. Or when an active duty officer would question my military bearing because of a loose cable on my uniform shirt...when he had a food stain on his. The bottom line is leadership needs to be done out front, and with credibility, when it is not then cynicism sets in as people question the need to perform many of the tasks they are being asked to do.

By the way...cynicism does not stop at the gates of the Academy. All who participate on this board have some level of cynicism develop through their experiences on active duty or civilian life. I for one am very cynical when it comes to our political leadership...their attempts to solve the current financial crisis - while blaming anyone but themselves - is just one example.

--Graduate, Class of 1987

I'll echo the previous statements dealing with the old "treated like we're 4, punished like we're 40" attitude as the primary source of my cynicism.

To add to that, the Honor Code issues circa 2005-2007 were highly frustrating - very much a one-way street. Cadets were held responsible for the HC standards, but I don't remember a member of the PTB ever taking my word for anything. Ever. In my time at USAFA, I barely remember a single officer outside of DF who didn't institute policies that either abused or subtly ridiculed the Honor Code.

I spent a good amount of time at USNA, and I always felt the Middies were less cynical. To me, the smaller time gap between Academy and AOR always seemed to have a stronger impact. At USNA, a large portion of the Firsties from the year before were fighting the war, and some were even dying. At USAFA, with the large number of "non-com" career fields and the lengthy graduation-to-combat pipeline for pilots, we were somewhat disconnected from our eventual time in the desert. I felt that attitude played itself out at West Point in a very similar fashion.

--Graduate, Class of 2007

Why stop at "cynical" - "bitter" needs to be thrown into the mix, or you're missing a major issue. "Cynical" just implies expecting the worst from a situation, the total selfishness of your fellow cadet's motivations, and the manipulative actions of the PTB. Hell, not perceiving *those* as objective reality isn't *cynicism*, it's dealing with the fucking place the way it actually *is*. "Cynicism" is seeing the son of a 4-star end up as Wing Commander and *assuming* there's some connection. Cynicism is having a roommate with sickle cell anemia who gets kicked out less than a month into freshman year. (WHY did they waste an appointment that way?) Cynicism is seeing the Honor Code used to enforce regs, like those idiot "AUTHORIZED/OTHER" flappers outside your door. "Bitterness" comes into play when you see a famously stupid and violent jock

get drunk, take a baseball bat to the terrazzo T-38 canopy, and only getting his wrist slapped. If I had pulled that, I have no doubt whatsoever I'd be out on my ear. Bitterness is going from a [bad] 4-degree squadron to a squadron that prides itself on having a "Third Class system."

There's nothing inherent in any military academy that should enduce cynicism and bitterness as a matter of course. [emphasis added] What was obvious in the years I was a zek was no sense whatsoever of any sense of fair play, the frequently-noted treatment as some sort of mentally impaired child while being told to live up to the country's highest standards and ideals, the spawning of dozens of monstrous dancing bears, who played the system at the expense of their fellow cadet, the frequent and heavy-handed use of mass punishments, mandatory "spirit", and the regression to all that is bad in any "peacetime military".

Pat Conroy wrote something in *The Lords of Discipline* that I'll have to take another look at. Essentially, something changed in all of the Academies. I never heard real old-timers describe their cadet experience as causing cynicism, and I'm willing to bet that they didn't have the kind of mindless, knee-jerk crap coming the so-called "leaders". The place should have been cadets vs the PTB, but in my day it was very much cadets vs dancing bears. I guess that prepares you for life in some cut-throat political scenarios, but that in itself would be a cynical assumption.

--Graduate, Class of 1976

Most cadets who I have spoken with since this change to a more "kinder & gentler" cadet experience have complained that the PTB made a knee-jerk corrective action to the whining of a very few. The ones I have spoken with have wished their training, while not to the point of "days of yore...", were a LOT more stringent AND applicable. (Forcing someone to continue to mentally & physically operate efficiently in a very high-stress "in your face"-type of scenario is STILL seen as applicable to those cadets.)

P.S. To a cadet (of both genders), those I've spoken with felt that eliminating/ "reducing" SERE-type training was one of the worst decisions they've suffered with recently. They've also felt that their leadership training was lacking, due to the PTB's continued "babysitter-like" oversight.

--Graduate, Class of 1988

It would seem everyone here has a good grasp on the multiple places cynicism, and bitterness, comes from. I wonder why USAFA leadership can't seem to figure it out? The blocking of eDodo is another example of stupid mandates from above that serve no good purpose, but have the wonderful side effect of aggravating people.

My cynicism was gradual, but came from a lot of the places mentioned above. Even though hating USAFA is the popular view, I wanted to have pride. I wanted to do something worth having pride in, something challenging and honorable. I came in thinking I was joining an elite institution with the best of the best. I saw what amounted to the opposite of the Air Force Core Values in many of my leaders and in other cadets. Selfishness got you noticed and selfishness got you promoted. Political correctness eradicated worthwhile pride producing traditions and

spawned worthless displays of pretend excellence. There's no pride in performing for the media, especially when there's little to no challenge in the activities you are performing. Rewards for a good job were being able to leave USAFA. Punishments for the common cadet shenanigans might doom your Air Force career with UCMJ action. Fear was the only motivator, unless you held on to your own intrinsic motivation. Like in the movie Office Space, fear only motivates you so much, to keep your job, and do nothing more. Common sense seems to not exist at USAFA, except in the cadets (not all of course) and a few of its leaders. The ignorant reign supreme, and perception and image are all that seem to matter to them. True worth and substance are often looked over because someone else puts on a better image of what the outside world thinks USAFA should be. It would seem USAFA's image in the media is the highest priority, with promotion of USAFA active duty personnel second. With the distractions of how to keep the media placated, planning the careers of permanent party, and babysitting cadets, keeping them from causing visual problems, the goal of creating great leaders with true integrity is largely ignored.

I never would have guessed that USAFA would be this way, and I was disappointed. I never thought I'd see the standard lowered to accommodate the weak. I never thought I'd be treated more like an adult in high school than at USAFA, which gave us cadets far less respect. I never thought I'd see [poor examples] graduate because they were good at faking it and decent people get kicked out because someone documented enough little things to make a case for their expulsion. I never imagined I would be in a place where a group AOC would spend his days looking for colored bed sheets and telling cadets they shouldn't be officers because they are breaking a small, insignificant regulation no one ever heard or cared about. I never imagined I'd go to a place where I'd hear "please outprocess, it'll save me the trouble of kicking you out" and be called "worse than a murderer" by my AOC, my supposed probation mentor, because I stupidly dated a freshman girl. I never thought I'd see honor violators graduate even after lying through their teeth on stage to each class, clearly only concerned about their own careers and not their honor. I never imagined I'd hear some of the most hypocritical [items] in meetings with Air Force Officers trying to get themselves promoted by condemning cadets. I'd never imagine I could go to place where I would personally find a friend bleeding and dying from a self inflicted gun-shot wound, and no one cared enough to prevent it, or help us cope, or admit the mistakes that led to it. The best they could do was wake us up 4 hours after we went to sleep to tell us we needed to rest, and then they never speak of the incident again since they fulfilled their pitiful obligation of informing us. If it's ugly, USAFA hides it, even if there's vastly more real substance in it than you'd find in any PME class. The flashy, empty, pretend integrity they put on display is what the ignorant love, so they put it on a pedestal. It appears that shiny shoes, a starched uniform, and flashy rhetoric make you a good leader, even if you have no true integrity, honor, or even leadership skill. If you are perceived to be a good leader, then you must be a good leader, because appearance it what matters to the powers that be.

As has been stated before, allowing cadets to have more control definitely helps lower cynicism in the wing. The leadership is the defining factor. It both kills and creates the cynicism that is so prevalent here. Unlike a lot of other cadets, I don't just complain and don't do anything. I try to make change by helping form my squadron's policies and give my squad comm suggestions on

things he can take up to group staff when they have meetings to try to get things to work better around here.

I was looking forward to my class being in charge of the wing because I feel like we actually give a damn and want to make this place great again. A lot of this attitude comes from 06 being our firsties because we saw people who actually cared and wanted to keep pride in this institution. But instead the current wing staff is actively giving away our control to permanent party. A lot of firsties are [upset] at how wing staff is running stuff, to include a squad mate and friend of mine who is currently on wing staff. He definitely has the opportunity to influence some change, but the tip of the wing staff spear is a small clique who are so self absorbed that they won't accept any one else's ideas.

Here are some specific examples of where wing staff is messing up: at a class briefing with the Wing/CC, some cadets were sitting towards the back of the room and a member of wing staff went back telling them to "fill in completely from the front" and when they didn't threatened to make them do pushups. You lose all credibility with your class when you pull [stunts] like that. Wing staff was pretty [upset] that attendance was low- but when you send out an email only a few hours before the meeting saying that there is one how do you expect our entire class to come? Most people had other plans or meeting set up before this and decided to skip this since they already had other plans.

Another example is that (as rumored) for the Comm's Challenge SAMI, Stan/Eval is only going to be grading a few rooms at random per squad but with the help of permanent party. According to my wing staff friend, the reason they're having permanent party help grade rooms is because cadets are grading too easily or are not enforcing all the standards; so instead of trying to fix this problem through dealing with cadet graders, wing staff is handing over control to permanent party. They are selling us out to permanent party so that they can fulfill their own selfish desires. In the graders' defense though, they only have so much time to get all the rooms and common use areas graded. As a result they don't spend a lot of time on rooms. Suggestion to wing, make the SAMI period longer if you want more thorough inspections.

Speaking of not taking action on problems wing is concerned with—uniforms in Mitchell Hall. Wing sent out an email stating there were X amount of uniform discrepancies in Mitchell Hall last week, but what is being done? Nothing. There are wing staff monitors sitting outside of Mitch's marking down the discrepancies but not doing anything to correct it. This just goes to show that our wing staff is really a do-nothing wing staff.

Outside of cadet leadership, permanent party is another major cause of cynicism. For example, cadets are no longer allowed to wear hand-printed PC shirts to the gym. Leadership is threatening Form 10s for failure to comply- but nobody is giving us a reason as to why we can't wear them. If we paid for them, as uniform items, why are we not allowed to wear them? Non-cadet military members (DF officers, perm party, etc) do not have uniform guidelines to follow; they wear whatever they want. Why is our permanent party worried about how our names are written on our issued PC gear? They should just phase out the hand printed ones like they phase out any other uniform.

Perhaps the biggest issue with cadets is that we are expected to learn to be 2nd Lts or start acting like them, but how are we supposed to do this when we are not allowed? We get chewed out for being in our squadron but out of our rooms after TAPS (17-25 year olds awake after 10:45pm...the horror!) but yet are expected to get everything we are tasked to do done on time on top of homework.

Now I realize I've been pretty negative so far, but there are bright spots in the wing. My squadron has great morale and there is virtually no cynicism within the squadron. Why? It's because we have an awesome AOC and AMT who let the cadet run things. They tell us issues that they see in the wing or get from meeting with upper leadership and let us do what we need to do to fix it. They don't step on our feet but rather guide us to solve these issues. As a result, I would say (and I may be biased here) that we are the most accountable squadron in the wing when it comes to enforcing the standards, and we're doing it without being harsh and without resorting to what I like to call "Form 10 Leadership." I believe this through talking with friends in other squads and monitoring how other squads do things. We're about doing the right thing as opposed to not getting caught.

There is a solution to the cynicism here. It is getting cadet leadership that is proactive instead of reactive. It is getting leadership that doesn't just note cadet discrepancies but actively try to fix them. It is getting cadets who truly care about doing good things for the wing, putting their necks on the line to do what they can to keep control in cadet hands. It is getting cadets who are in wing leadership positions to feed their own egos out of those positions.

My expectations and views on this place though have significantly changed and I should not have to basically be ashamed at how this place is run, but so many cadets are. We should be able to look at this place with pride and in a way be sad to leave it instead of counting down the days until we can drive out the North Gate with our middle fingers up and aimed back at the hill.

--Cadet, Class of 2009

The heart of the matter: expectations versus reality. When you apply to any of the service academies, they set you up with absurdly high expectations. As a high-school kid walking around the post, you can't help but paint a picture in your mind of a place that is a study in superlatives: the hardest, smartest, most honorable school in the whole country. This is exactly what the academy wants you to think; this is the sales pitch that no other university (aside from the other service academies) can match. Tapping into the vision cradled by that high-schooler about to head off to the academy is the first step to understanding the cynicism.

The cynicism begins when the bubble pops. I don't think that it pops for most people during Beast--you get hints of the cynicism from the upperclass, and develop some of your own when you discover that it's not as hard as you thought it would be. Sure, it's tough sometimes, but it doesn't break you down to the extent that you expected. But it's not until the academic year that cynicism can really blossom. At West Point, the traditional time for maximum cynicism is during yearling (3rd class) year. I suspect this is so because you don't have much more freedom than a plebe, but you have enough experience to snipe at activities that are inane.

From what I've heard, lately (this was maybe three years ago that someone told me this) West Point is a less cynical place than the Air Force Academy, mostly because the scandals at USAFA had caused a spike in reactionary absurdities there. But I would be particularly interested to hear from exchange cadets/midshipmen, since they're probably the only people really qualified to compare the cynicism level at the academies.

--USMA Graduate, Class of 2003

The impression I got, from haunting eDodo and reading posts like those above, is that our Great Institution is being absolutely FLOODED with THOUSANDS of queeepy, trivial, and confusing rules. In contrast, in 1984, as firsties we had optional room arrangement in Sijan, and were genuinely treated as adults. We were more like near 2LT adults getting room and board. Much decision-making was left to us. But we EARNED it incrementally, year over year. There was always a goal in sight at any given moment during our stay.

Two types of cynicism...

1) Cynicism type A: Treated like children, overwhelmed with senseless rules, you truly do not [care] and simply want to get out, either by graduating or punching.

2) Cynicism type B: You are challenged with difficult but achievable tasks that require strong effort. This builds pride and unit cohesion. You [complain] and grumble, because it IS very difficult, but deep-down, you know you've achieved something worthwhile.

Type A is what you get with the sort of environment described by the current cadets and recent grads. Type B is what you want, and is what you'll see when you challenge cadets with programs like SERE, and keep the regs few, but tight. When not on the clock, let them be the adults they are.

--Graduate, Class Of 1984

I had a different experience from most people that I went to school with as I left the academy for 2 years after my first year and then chose to return and graduate. I had to re-apply to get back in, and then to justify why I should not start the entire four degree year over again. When I left I had no intention of ever going back - and was quite surprised when I discovered that that had changed and I had to fight to get back in. This used to be more common from what I understand back when the stop-out program was a option, but between 2000 and 2006 while I was there there was no such "program."

I preface my comments with this because the process I had to go through to get back in brought several realizations directly related to this.

The biggest one is the attitude of victimization. The majority of the people I met three degree year had some complaint because they felt trapped into their situation and no way of getting out. My first reaction was "you can always leave this place if you want to - you're not committed yet," but I think they found the lack of responsibility that comes with avoiding a choice more comfortable to live with than accepting the fact that all the unpleasanties they experienced were consequences they themselves chose every day when they woke up and decided not to leave the academy.

Later - into 2 degree and firstie years it became worse because at that point everyone was committed, but the fact remained that it was, in the end, each of our decision. and I had my fair share of complaints, but I did learn to accept that my discomforts were a consequence of my choice to stay.

I think cynicism is also a reaction when our expectations meet reality. In that sense, it shows how much hope people at the academy have. I certainly felt that while I was there. The hope I mean. I also think that trying to get rid of cynicism would be as useless to the military as asking all of its officers to discard their critical thinking skills. We all see patterns, and from those patterns stereotypes, generalizations and categories emerge, which directly precede, and usually engender, cynical statements. But we need people in the service who can effectively process information, and every human must turn their experiences into patterns, stereotypes, and categories in order to be able to catalogue it all. You don't get one without the other.

Incidentally, my biggest problem at the academy was [the Commandant] trying sell the idea that it was just like the real air force. As soon as I heard him say that I knew it was a doomed attempt, inconceivably irreconcilable with reality. It was only a matter of time that the ways that it obviously could not be reconciled would be found, catalogued in cadets' minds, stereotyped, and turned into some form of a joke. If the permanent party would acknowledge the fact that the stereotypes had factual basis that would be a good start. But my favorite response to my complaints never came in the form of a "we can fix this" or "the real air force is the same way" answer. They came from a MSgt (of course) out in GE in the form of "well what did you expect? You joined the military and they're going to tell you what to do. Now, do you still want to serve your country?"

I'm not advocating the idea that broken things should not be fixed. But I also saw a lot of complaining without any effort for change on the part of the plaintiff. Accepting responsibility (both cadets and staff) for the way things are would help things a lot.

--Graduate, Class of 2006

1. In general, I believe cynicism is generated / developed when rules, guidelines, processes, procedures, etc, are perceived to serve no purpose, are not adhered to or enforced, AND, where there is a perception these processes, procedures, etc, cannot be changed or improved.

2. There are 3 basic categories of cadets who are generally cynical:

a. Those that are inherently against authority, always (or quite often) "contrary" in nature, and generally believe they are better than the "system"

b. Those that are not at USAFA for the right reasons – IE: to play Div 1 sports, only to fly, only for the education, etc.

c. Those that are at USAFA for the right reasons, but believe the "system" is letting them down – IE: Too many rules are being broken without consequences, ineffective processes / procedures remain in place, etc... These cadets are the ones that want a challenge, want to be among the very best and want USAFA to be something much more difficult (than it is perceived to be) to get through, thus making it quite special and unique to be a graduate.

3. Based on #2 above, I believe the battle against cynicism lies in two areas:

a. Education and training -- the permanent party must develop the thought processes in these cadets toward a mentality that understands surviving adversity leads to strength, that some things are done because it's a Military Institution, that it's inappropriate to question ALL orders, etc, etc...

b. Strengthening the framework of our "institutionally imposed discipline". There are many elements to this, from the CDS itself, to the enforcement and follow-up, to the communications, etc... Recently, I've chosen to alleviate the "guess work" in the assigning of punishments to cadets for most infractions with some revisions to the CDS. So far, this has been quite effective. I've also chosen to centralize confinements (in one of the lecture halls) in order to make them more of a punishment and less of an opportunity to simply "hang out" in the room. Lastly, we're working to improve the documentation of cadet behavior / misbehavior and rehabilitation attempts (IE: Probations) in order to more effectively communicate the "real picture" to the senior leadership should there be a recommendation for disenrollment.

Ultimately, these things above are intended to elevate the quality of officer candidates produced by USAFA, thus in the long run, improving our AF Officer Core, mission effectiveness, capability, etc, etc...

--USAFA Staff, Senior Officer

Cynicism is subdued frustration at the decisions of permanent party members or upper cadet leadership. The frustration comes from many angles, which is something permanent party cannot seem to recognize. In the core classes we learn about sound leadership principles only to see

those lessons dashed by the actions of our leadership. We are taught not to procrastinate on our military duties, and yet we receive countless last-minute taskers that could have been handed out weeks ago and OPODs that have been floating from desk to desk in the Comm.'s office come out several days after we need them. This frustration is subdued because at any point in the feedback process we can be reminded that as cadets we have no real authority.

There is a difference between cynicism and disagreements with policy or how that policy is enacted. It is a history of these events that can sour a person's attitude towards the institution. Cynicism is definitely embedded in the culture here, but it doesn't have to be that way. It is almost always detrimental to the mission, and the only way I can think of for cynicism to be beneficial is when the leadership uses it to gauge the effectiveness of their policies.

Cynicism develops in my experience here in several parts. when you gather 4000 18-23 year olds and treat them like 5 year olds. complete with groundings, cynicism begins to form. When you demand that everybody like being treated like this, or else more punishments follow, helps to develop cynicism. when you make 2000 people move their cars every weekend for a basketball game, which maybe 5 people attend, and threaten those who don't or those who ask why with more groundings. cynicism begins to become its own entity. and when you put together a tiger team of 60 year old colonels to find out the cause of cynicism, and all they come up with is that these 4000 cadets need to have a weekend to go to mandatory reflection weekends on why they are cynical, cynicism becomes the 4000 cadets.

Why, I would love to answer this question. Put yourself in my position. I've been enlisted for a couple years, taken prior college, and attended the preparatory school here at USAFA. I'm 23 years old. What makes people like me subvert to cynicism?

I get treated like I'm 12.

I can't own a car.

I can't drink at the local bar.

I can't have my door closed all day.

I have to "sign out" to leave the base.

I can only leave on weekends.

I can only go out a certain amount of times in the semester (EVEN though I may have over a 3.0 GPA).

If I run out of passes to leave on weekends, I am FORCED to stay on campus and fiddle with my fingers until the next couple months have passed and my passes have refreshed.

We have to march 3 times a week, how many times do you fellas in the "real" air force march?

I'm pretty sure when I was active I marched about twice in two years.

Internet is COMPLETELY restricted and prone to crashing. And there are no options to have

personal internet lines.

Mandatory meals? What the heck is the point? To not be late to a "Mandatory formation" ? I remember being late to work once and my supervisor wrote gave me an LOC. That was sufficient for me to stop. He could have gave me an LOR had I continued.

Why is Haps only for Juniors? Sophomores that are of-age need to go off base and potentially get a DUI instead of walking over to Haps and walking back to their room? How STUPID is that? Can anyone say OPERATIONAL RISK MANAGEMENT?

Most cadets develop a habit of cynicism because nobody ever knows which rules to enforce, and it isn't practical to enforce all of them. The result is that they follow whichever rules they're in the mood for.

Was USAFA what you expected it to be? Why or why not?

No. I expected USAFA to be focused on doing the right thing no matter what. Instead, it's just another political institution. The academy cares more about football and parades than character development. Our character development programs are a joke, and they only talk about boring common-sense ideas. Upper leadership is more concerned with making USAFA look good than with doing the right thing.

My proudest moments at USAFA are when I got my jump wings, when I got to solo in the powered flight program, and when I got to be an element leader for Summer Seminar.

a)Outside of USAFA, I take pride in doing things that are difficult. I am proud of the fact that I can do things other people can't.

b)Outside of USAFA, I feel cynical about times when people are more concerned with politics than doing the right thing.

Cynicism is never beneficial, is always detrimental. this is because cynicism leaves no room for creative thought processing and problem solving. Pragmatism is good to have. If it's not the way you want it to be, find a way to change it, change your attitude, or leave; anything else is called complaining without purpose and is a detriment to morale and unit efficiency.

When people expect one thing and get another. For instance, I expected the military to be a very objective oriented environment, but the bureaucratic nature of the establishment lends itself more to a regulatory environment where we implement rules which don't achieve the desired objective but continue to follow the rules anyway. The cadet sippy cup is a perfect example. The intent of the development of the device was to provide a spill proof alternative to allow cadets to have beverages in class. Even though the sippy cup spills more often than most normal glasses, it is still the only authorized beverage container for classrooms. The rule does not fulfill the intent of the regulation, but we continue to enforce the rule and disallow cadets to bring their own, truly spillproof third party containers into class.

What causes cynicism?

Many things. The biggest cause I see is people who feel like they're forced to follow rules, like they were made to come here instead of it being a choice. It isn't much of a military academy; it's mainly people going through the motions and "playing military" during parades/formations/inspections. Military isn't emphasized enough, so when it IS (comm's challenge, etc), some people get really upset because they're used to it being easy and non-military.

I am not very proud of the Academy, because I look at my classmates and look at the low caliber of individual allowed to graduate from this institution and it ruins the credibility. After BASIC was the same thing, "well if that worthless individual made it through, than what I experienced really wasn't that worth while." If you wanted me to feel proud about the Academy, make it such that every graduate can be trusted to be a leader. It seems to me that somewhere around the 70th percentile the quality takes a sharp drop.

There will always be cynicism, it is a coping mechanism, but the level present at the Academy is outrageous, and beyond coping. It is over the top. Cynicism should be light hearted and change moods, it should not be a driving factor in cadet decision making like it currently is in most cadets minds.

What causes cynicism?

Anonymous surveys that get you in trouble when you respond truthfully. Pointlessness in some academy practices. being told one thing and having another thing be done. Cluelessness on the obvious. an example of this was the reflection weekend. SERIOUSLY, restricting the entire wing for the weekend, shutting off the internet "equipment broke in denver" for said weekend (magically it was fixed when the last reflection session ended) and having 4000 people sit around and ask prefabricated questions as to what causes cynicism? Either there was a ulterior motive in keeping us on the hill, or someone is missing the broad side of a barn.

Would you be willing to answer follow-up questions based on your answers here?

Sure. I've been honest in this survey, and I hope my responses are read by someone who is willing to take them as my personal opinion, and not try to get me late grad because of it.

--author's note: I found this response to be particularly alarming, and it wasn't alone amongst the responses provided. If cadets cannot offer their opinions to an "anonymous" interview or survey without fear of retribution, then the administration must immediately realize the problem contained within that fear. Either retributive punishments have been handed down

in the past, or cadets simply do not trust their superiors. Either course represents a failure for the Academy. When a leader solicits honest and anonymous feedback, they must be absolutely prepared for criticisms and unpopular viewpoints. Whether such feedback represents miscommunication, incorrect assumptions, or points to a significant problem for the unit, the leader must respect and protect the sanctity of the feedback process. To do otherwise either lends to subordinates "clamping up" in the presence of their superior, "pencil-whipping" feedback, or incorrect and dishonest "safe" responses. All such activities create ample breeding grounds not only for cynicism, but extreme pessimism.

Does cynicism have a place at USAFA? Is it embedded in the organizational culture there?

It's certainly part of the culture at the Academy and once you realize that, you can use it to your benefit. For example, simply by keeping a positive attitude and doing things to the best of your ability, you will be noticed by leadership as a 'good cadet.' Not that you really are good, but relative to all the nay-sayers you look pretty good. Also, as a former squad/cc, I often recognized what would be a source of cynicism and wouldn't attempt to dupe my squad into believing it, but would rather say something like "look guys, this is dumb, but we all know we need to get it done." I got positive feedback for being honest with them and we still got the things done that we needed to, and probably were happy about it since we were all on the same page.

Was USAFA what you expected it to be?

No - it was better. That's weird to say since I was pretty cynical about a year ago. I think I (along with many others) came in with the wrong expectation - mainly that this place would be a hard-core military academy where everything was perfect, and if it wasn't, they would fix it. Now I realize, whether planned this way or not, it is not perfect. I feel that makes it better, as it forces us to deal with many issues and problems. The challenges we face make us that much more creative and ready to lead in an ambiguous world.

Does cynicism have a place at USAFA? Is it embedded in the organizational culture there?

I think it does have a place, if it can be contained. A certain amount of cynicism means that you have your own ideals and beliefs, and you gut check what is being given to you before internalizing it on your own. While too much cynicism can be detrimental, a little bit can help prevent a group mind set from setting in

a. If there was not cynicism at the USAFA; then as a tax-paying, educated American... I would be VERY cautious. The USAFA is not a perfect military instillation, not a perfect educational environment, and not the best leadership laboratory. Therefore, if no cynicism was ever voiced... I would check the food, the computers, and the audio feeds for subliminal "brainwashing." (OK, that is a stretch)

- b. A form of cynicism is imbedded in the organizational culture at USAFA, because simply the AFA experience is different-- it's difficult and those two lead to "bragging rights." If a graduate from USAFA cannot or has nothing to be egotistical/proud about then the "ring" loses its luster among OTS and ROTC peers in the operational AF.
- c. Cynicism when viewed/used correctly can lead to a better appreciation of the USAFA cadet mission, as well as the civilian lifestyle after 4 years at USAFA.
- d. Yes, (see point "b") an overwhelming cynical attitude in individuals (aka cadets) can lead to the whole organization (aka CW) seeking causes (negative factors) that make life at USAFA more difficult / less fun, than the lives their peers across the nation at regular universities are living. Such an attitude can lead to severely decreased performance and motivation to perform in an active duty skill-set.

How do you view the Academy? Prior? During? Post?

- a. As the best place to become an AF officer of character and "well-rounded" background. This includes considering the USAFA as an "ivy league" education experience.
- b. and c.:Do I think that the Air Force Academy produces the best leaders and intellectuals in America? No. Do I think the Air Force Academy produces the finest officers in our nation's military? No. But, I do think that a person, with a positive attitude, unwavering drive, and solid determination... a person who can or is willing to learn how to: effectively communicate, be compassionate, be understanding, expand their mindset, experience new things, and uphold both their personal standards and the standards of their environment—can use the opportunities and experiences at the US Air Force Academy to become a great officer, a superior leader, and a primer example of our Academy's core values. That is what I want to be and that is why I chose the Air Force Academy.

Does cynicism have a place at the Academy? Is it embedded in the organizational culture there?

- a) I don't think cynicism really has a place here in what we are trying to accomplish by coming here. b) The problem is that yes I believe that it is very much so imbedded in the culture here. c)I use it to keep myself from being swept away by all the "bull" that this place can throw at you every day. d) I think it can be detrimental to the mission if you let it. I try to keep away from it when I am doing my duties. I'm mostly cynical when I am just hanging out with my friends or when I get a break from this place. e) I think it can be beneficial if used properly. Like I said I use it to keep from losing touch with what this place is really about.

Cynicism is brought about by cadets and permanent party not listening to each other. It is NOT a one-way street. Telling cadets not to be cynical is counter-productive because rather than listening to why cadets are cynical (really listening, not holding kumbaya sessions through DF) they just assume that "cadets will be cadets". Not to say that there aren't a number of cadets who

would [complain] if it was sunny out, all GRs were cancelled and Mitch's served ice cream for lunch, but most cadets recognize when things are going well, and plenty of them reprimand their peers for holding onto cynicism when things are going well. Cynicism is almost always detrimental to a mission because it decreases morale and the effectiveness of the leader.

Sure, but cadets and permanent party have to be willing to hammer out problems (because they are most often the cause of each other's cynicism). Cadets just want to get the mission done. No flowery prose, no motivating pep talks, and no lessons filled with "Air Force buzzwords" (synergy, effectiveness, integration, streamline, etc). Just do what is necessary and then move on to the next thing. Going above and beyond is difficult at the Academy because there is always something waiting to be done. Cadets get cynical when they see tasks (especially mundane ones) that seem to have no purpose. Comm'c challenge, CPME, morning formations (any formation for that matter), taskers that were due yesterday but only made it down today, etc. There is no doubt that this happens in the operational Air Force as well, but if you want to eliminate cynicism at USAFA, either explain (concisely, and in plain English) to the cadets why something is necessary, or else don't make them do it.

Political correctness has taken much of what the Academy used to be (not all of it good, but a lot of it) and transformed it into a place where there are miles of red tape, and too much talking without enough action. Cadets are not left to make decisions of any consequence, which is vital to developing future officers. Instead of being a leadership laboratory for cadets, it is a laboratory for officers, and cadets are the guinea pigs.

What are your proudest moments at USAFA?

Finishing basic as first in the group, pinning on the shoulder boards, pinning someone's shoulder boards. Overall moments that have a goal and are a capstone to something.

What are your most cynical moments at USAFA?

Legitimate military training is not as important to upperclassmen as Four-degree year. Upperclassmen are only accountable to themselves, and a common leadership trait is not to endure your own leadership, but rather cover everyone else's back so they don't get into trouble. As a Freshman, we are accountable to 3 classes above us, and the upperclassmen are only responsible to themselves, to which they would never report unless it was very serious, and to the AOC and AMTs. The ratio of accountability is very different from the freshman and the upper classes.

I was in high school prior to arrival and everyone I talked to seemed to think the academy was a great idea. It was really exciting to get a letter of appointment. Cynicism wasn't even mentioned, along with a lot of other 'details'. During my time at the academy a lot of that has changed and most people regret having made the decision to come here.

Was USAFA what you expected it to be? Why or why not?

No. Many of the cadets here are immature, and there are some whose leadership/officer potential is doubtful. But because of the system, these individuals slip through. They have good grades [and] maybe come out to a couple of training events to look like they are doing something to raise their military grade and do well on a physical fitness test. But the truth is, they only care about themselves and do nothing for anyone else. They do not reflect the qualities a good officer should have but yet they look good on paper so they slide by. Yet there are people with good officership qualities who struggle here and many of them are looked at in a negative light. This was never what I expected but this is the culture at this place. Once you're a freshman, you don't have to care any more. All that matters is doing better than your classmates academically, militarily and athletically so you can get the job you want. So it becomes about you. No one else. Just you. Yet as a leader your people always come first don't they? Interesting dilemma.

Who contributes to cynicism (generally or specifically) at USAFA?

Permanent party. First off, we are never given the opportunity to provide feedback as to how permanent party is doing. Second, we are left in the dark many a time about what is going on here and we never are allowed to provide any input on proposed changes. Third, we are held to standards that most of this base, is not. For example, I am told I have to be professional, have a good uniform, be on time everywhere and anywhere, core values, honor code, and the list goes on. However I walk into one of the provided service facilities and I feel many a time that these standards are not upheld. I understand that the permanent party to include the superintendent have command responsibilities unique to our school. However, with such rank comes power and to think a blind eye is turned to low standards being upheld by the non cadets on this base is unacceptable. That is at least the impression we get and as usual, we are powerless to do something. How am I supposed to feel as a future officer? Fourth being ordered to do things that seem to make no sense and never receiving any explanation. How are we supposed to be motivated? Last but not least, many of us feel we do not receive the training that will prepare us to become good future officers. Our field training is a joke. Last commandants challenge many of us ran around pointing our fingers as guns because we had none, not even models. We get no firearms training except during basic. I have not touched a gun since basic 2 years ago and that was the only gun I ever fired. We do no small unit tactics and learn nothing about what it is really like to lead people into war. Many individuals at our school get pilot slots and yet, they have never set foot in a cockpit. They have never been down to the airfield during their 4 years here because our registrar scheduled them for other programs consistently. And these are some of the people who are expected to do well in pilot training? I feel we are not trusted with the littlest of things. Yet we just march around every week, get room inspections consistently, and waste time doing inspections on Saturday mornings. Will this really prepare us for a future as officers?

Who contributes to cynicism (generally or specifically) at USAFA?

Lack of consistency in CW (in terms of standards and punishments), lack of communication between DF and CW, double standards applied to athletes versus regular cadets or cadets versus officers/enlisted.

Can cynicism be effectively eliminated at USAFA?

It would be very difficult. Part of the reason there is a gap between permanent party and the cadet is due to the level of experience and maturity of both parties. The "standard" cadet is working from a perspective of growing experience and maturity - there is much more reason to distrust and question the organization or establishment. The majority of the permanent party has a pre-disposed mindset of trusting first until that trust is broken. If they don't agree with a policy they will try and understand why or view it from the other perspective. They also have the luxury of gathering the background and questioning - where many cadets do not have the means or the time.

Appendix B

1. What, in your opinion or experience, is cynicism?
2. What/when was your first exposure to cynicism at USAFA?
3. When did you first recognize cynicism in yourself? What brought it on?
4. Does cynicism have a place at USAFA?
 - a. Is it imbedded in the organizational culture there?
 - b. How do you use/employ cynicism? (why do you hold onto it?)
 - c. Can cynicism be detrimental to the mission?
 - d. Can cynicism be beneficial to the mission?
5. Can cynicism be effectively eliminated at USAFA?
6. What causes cynicism?
7. Who contributes (generally, or specifically) to cynicism at USAFA?
8. In your opinion, what are the primary responsibilities of the officers at USAFA?
 - a. AOC
 - b. Group AOC
 - c. O-5s, O-6s
 - d. General Officers (Commandant, Dean, Superintendent)
9. What are your most cynical experiences at USAFA?
10. What are your proudest moments at USAFA?
 - a. Outside of the Academy, what moments in your life generate pride? Cynicism?
11. What are you most proud of with respect to your time at USAFA?
12. Was USAFA what you expected it to be? Why, why not?
13. What is the best example of leadership you've experienced or witnessed at USAFA (by cadet or officer)
14. What is the worst example of leadership you've experienced at USAFA?
15. What is the best follower-ship experience you've experienced or witnessed at USAFA?
16. What is the worst follower-ship experience you've experienced or witnessed at USAFA?
17. How do you view the Academy?
 - a. Prior to arrival (High School, enlisted, prep school etc)
 - b. During your time at the Academy
 - c. Now?
18. What is best about USAFA?
19. What is broken?
20. Would you be willing to assist with any follow-up questions that arise due to the answers you've provided?

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