

Research Paper:

The Fourth Class System: 192 Years of Tradition  
Unhampered by Progress from Within

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The Four Class System at the United States Military Academy at West Point is the current four year leadership development program aimed at cultivating both the Fourth Class and the upperclass cadets. The present system evolved from the Fourth Class System which began as a practice of Plebes performing personal services for the upper classes. While much of the system has changed, many of its practices remain remarkably untouched. West Point cadets cling to these traditional practices for the same reasons today that they did in 1918 when Superintendent Samuel Tillman's Annual Report explained the difficulties in changing the system:

...The tradition...has always been exercised...Each class knows that its predecessor indulged the custom...Many visiting alumni see no harm in the practice and often attribute specific beneficial results in their practice of it...<sup>1</sup>

Given such fervor for the traditions of the old Fourth Class System, one wonders why change occurred at all. West Point's Fourth Class System changed only due to pressure from outside of the Academy. Most major change in the Fourth Class System was a result of the American society, most often through Congress, demanding reform. Although given a new name, cadets operating under the Four Class System perpetuate the old traditions.

The Four Class System originated as far back as the 1830's as a practice of "devilish plebes," in which upperclass cadets engaged the new cadets in seemingly

harmless, absurd games and required the new cadets to perform menial tasks. During summer encampment, upperclassmen would designate "Special Duty Cadets," Plebes who would make the upperclassman's bed, clean his rifle, and fill his water bucket, among other odd jobs.<sup>2</sup> However, the games became more serious and dangerous. Some practices in the early 1900s included bracing, chewing rope ends, eating soap and quinine, holding clubs at arm's length, doing the "Spread Eagle" (deep knee bends with arms held out at both sides), and "swimming to Newburgh" (balancing one's stomach on a pole and pretending to swim). Upperclassmen would drop hot grease on the new cadets' feet and throw new cadets on sentinel duty into ditches.<sup>3</sup>

Academy leaders held investigations which illuminated unpleasant facts, and made spasmodic efforts to suppress the harmful "games." Despite attempts to stop hazing in the late 1800's and early 1900's, Academy administrators failed to suppress the tradition. USMA officials did not want Upperclassmen subjecting the Plebes to "unnecessary annoyance." On the other hand, officials "desired not to lose the soldierly results quickly brought about by the sharp disciplinary control of the new men both in and out of ranks."<sup>4</sup> Many graduates of USMA vehemently argued that "to uproot this tradition was equivalent to destroying the Academy itself."<sup>5</sup>

The Board of Visitors 1892 report noted that it

approved of the customs and traditions of the Fourth Class System:

"Of course the Academy cannot create manhood, but it has trained and developed it to its highest expressions of courage...We doubt if there is anywhere a more complete training... physical, moral and mental, and it brings out all of good in the young man who takes it...it instills into him thoroughly the lessons of discipline..."<sup>6</sup>

The 1894 Board of Visitors report confirms this attitude:

...men...must be ready to lead...To this end the cadet is ...from the very outset subject to a course of rigorous discipline, coupled with rigorous physical and mental training.<sup>7</sup>

Also in the Gilded Age of the late 1800's, many graduates became members of the military affairs committee of Congress where they made sure the Academy held to its old ways by reinstating cadets who had been dismissed for hazing.<sup>8</sup>

At the turn of the century, hazing at USMA attracted the attention of those in Congress less sympathetic to the customs of West Point. Congressional investigations in 1900 revealed that upperclass cadets had devised over one hundred ways to harass Plebes. The most publicized case was that of Oscar Booz, a former cadet who died from a condition aggravated by the daily consumption of tabasco sauce forced on him by upperclassmen.<sup>9</sup> Arousing public outcry, this well-publicized incident led to the first major change in the system, occurring in 1901 when Congress outlawed hazing.

Following suit and under pressure from the Secretary of War, Academy officials instituted rigorous regulations in 1902 to eliminate hazing. A short time after the change of regulations went into effect, unhappy cadets demonstrated. Academy officials dismissed five cadets for insubordination and punished thirty more.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the 1901 law and the subsequent USMA regulations, hazing of the Plebe class continued. Academy officials and graduates unofficially condoned the hazing activities. Academy leaders made no serious efforts to suppress hazing, except the cases in which the practices were carried to discreditable extreme. Cadets and faculty alike believed that hazing was a tradition and saw no harm in the practice.<sup>11</sup> They believed these practices had the advantage of rapidly instilling in a New Cadet the mental attitude and physical bearing necessary of a member of the Corps.<sup>12</sup> Colonel Frederick Sibley, as Commandant of Cadets responsible for maintaining cadet discipline, testified in 1910 before the Senate Committee on Military Affairs against the dismissal of a cadet for hazing. The upperclassman had forced a Plebe to brace, ride on a rail (injuring his groin), and fence. The First Classman then hit him on the head and stole his rifle. The Commandant justified these actions by admitting that as a cadet he had done much more severe actions.<sup>13</sup>

Historians often credit General Douglas MacArthur,

Superintendent in 1919, with the codification of the Fourth Class System in an effort to eliminate unacceptable hazing practices. MacArthur, who saw West Point graduates bullying enlisted soldiers in the same way an upperclassmen abusively addressed Plebes, believed cadets were learning bad leadership techniques. He prompted a change in the USMA Regulations to specify acceptable and unacceptable hazing practices.

However, Congress and the War Department were the real initiators of the change in the Fourth Class System after a cadet suicide brought public outcry. The barking, hissing, and snarling of upperclassmen was more than Cadet Stephen Byrd could endure when he committed suicide on New Year's Day in 1919.<sup>14</sup> After the suicide, Congress demanded a complete investigation of the continuing hazing practices at the Academy.

The Fourth Class System did not change significantly from 1919 to the 1960's. The Academy conducted major studies of the system in 1940-41 and 1946, but these yielded only minor changes. For instance, Plebes reported two minutes prior to formation versus ten minutes prior to formation. Officials codified many mess hall requirements such as proper serving techniques and announcements concerning the food. Plebes performed many of the same menial tasks in the early 1960's that they had in 1919: mail carrier, clothing carrier, trunk room orderly, minute

caller, and window closer.

Some opponents criticized the system. Lieutenant General John Throckmorton, a former Commandant, commented in 1962, "I do not believe...the System as now constituted serves the Military Academy and the Army as a whole to the best advantage."<sup>15</sup> However, the feeling of "keeping it tough" persisted. The Assistant Adjutant of the Corps of Cadets, Major W.R. Richardson, published an article in the 1963 Assembly which expressed the attitude of many officials and graduates alike:

The Military Academy has for years been swimming upstream against the current of opinion that life should be made easier for each generation. Proponents of such opinions fail to understand...The Fourth Class System is the foundation upon which are built men who are strong, decisive, and confident that they can meet any obstacle under any condition.<sup>16</sup>

Despite MacArthur's attempts at codification, the Fourth Class System varied considerably from year to year, and even from regiment to regiment throughout the 1960's. An attitude survey of the Class of 1972 revealed that 59 percent stated aspects of their required duties were personal services. In certain companies, Plebes would go to "Boodlers" to buy snacks for the upperclassmen. One officer found a Plebe standing by the clock tower waiting for an upperclass pizza delivery. Likewise, 52 percent of the Class of 1971 felt that Plebes did not get enough to eat.<sup>17</sup>

A 1969 study of the Fourth Class System found many deficiencies in the system. The report highlighted upperclassmen's use of bracing primarily as punishment, thereby fostering poor leadership practices. The report charged that Academy officials countenanced this behavior by casually referring to the practice as posture correction.<sup>18</sup> The report concluded that the essence of the System was negative and that it taught improper leadership techniques. Furthermore, the report found the System fostered the erroneous belief that the entering new cadets lacked the motivation to do a good job, and thus had to be constantly harassed in order to perform. The authors of the report charged that in actuality the entering new cadet was highly motivated, and thus the current system only reduced the new cadets' motivation.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the Fourth Class System that existed in 1969 was not much different than the System that MacArthur attempted to change in 1919. Just as Superintendent MacArthur faced cadets unwilling to change their System of customs and traditions, the 1969 report cautioned that "any modification to the Fourth Class System will be perceived as a threat and resisted by some cadets."<sup>20</sup>

Several changes occurred in the 1969 New Cadet Barracks as a result of the 1969 report. Academy officials implemented the elimination of bracing, the elimination of shouting at Plebes, the reduction of Plebe knowledge, and

the requirement that each Plebe would be allowed to eat three complete meals a day.<sup>21</sup> Despite the written changes, abuses of the System continued to occur. Opponents within the Academy continued to balk at change which "sets a climate of activism in which certain cadets find justification in their rebellion against the system."<sup>22</sup> The Director of Military Instruction in 1972, Colonel Richard Gruenther, wrote the comments of a review board of the Fourth Class System:

...the new Fourth Class System tends to bend too far in its attempt to avoid the abusive aspects of the old system...While the Board does not recommend a complete reversion to the old system, it supports a shift in emphasis to some aspects of the old system.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, the 1972 Annual Committee Review of the Fourth Class System reported that the elimination of the practice of bracing lessened the difference between the outward appearance of upperclassmen and Plebes and reduced the gap between them. The committee also commented that the trend toward positive leadership introduced factors that weakened the effectiveness of the Fourth Class System.<sup>24</sup> Once more, insiders resisted any change to the traditional System.

The Cheating Scandal of 1976 caused more reverberations throughout the Academy. After the cheating scandal, Secretary of the Army Alfred Hoffman created a special commission, the Borman Commission, to assess the honor scandal and its underlying causes. The Borman Report

concluded that several areas at USMA were problematic, including the Fourth Class System. Despite the comments of Brigadier General Walter Ulmer, then Commandant of Cadets, that "Abuses of the Fourth Class System represent the greatest potential for future public embarrassment of the Military Academy," the Academy's leaders did not institute immediate changes.<sup>25</sup> The Chief of Staff of the Army, General Bernard Rogers, however, did feel the need for a broad, searching examination after the Borman Commission's findings, and so directed the formation of the West Point Study Group.<sup>26</sup>

The Study Group expressed serious concern over both the potential for abuse and potential ill effects in the Fourth Class System. The committee learned that in the first week of the 1976 Cadet Basic Training (CBT), the Regimental Commander (the highest ranking cadet in charge of CBT, affectionately referred to as the "King of Beasts") called in the detail and told it, "I want to see some smoking butt out there."<sup>27</sup> Likewise, many cadets informed the Group they had no leadership tools if they could not deprive Plebes of food or use verbal abuse.<sup>28</sup>

The Study Group's recommendations became the guideposts for the 1978-79 revisions of the Fourth Class System, constituting the first major revision in nearly a decade. Academy leaders implemented many proposed recommendations to include reduction of required total memorizations, creation

of a more realistic senior-subordinate relationship between upperclassmen and Plebes to correspond with that of an officer and enlisted in the Army, standardized company boards, and a greater emphasis on positive leadership. Most of the changes recommended by the Study Group in 1977 were based on the previous 1969 internal report on the Fourth Class System. However, Academy officials largely ignored the internal study until <sup>the</sup> Department of the Army-directed Study Group gave impetus for change.<sup>29</sup>

In the first part of the 1980s, USMA tried to stabilize the Fourth Class System by making only minimal changes. Cadet perceptions of the system showed that sixty-eight percent of those asked in 1980 made comments such as: "too lax and non-challenging; standards have dropped; needs more discipline, stress, and higher standards."<sup>30</sup> Despite this tilt towards negative leadership, the 1984 Fourth Class System Task Force reported that the system was "generally sound" and did not require any significant modification. Results of the 1986 First Class Questionnaire showed an eighty-eight percent approval of the system.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the official statements that all was well, the Self Study conducted from September 1987 to April 1989 indicated, "Dealing with Subordinates" and the "Fourth Class System" as areas of concern.<sup>32</sup> A survey of Army battalion commanders supported these concerns-- a majority ranking West Point graduates significantly below their ROTC

counterparts in their ability to deal one on one with subordinates.<sup>33</sup>

Academy leaders found themselves caught between an antiquated system and an alumni and student body bent on continuing traditional practices. One Parents' Association newsletter expressed concern that "the conditions under which the Plebes are operating this year are infinitely easier than has been the case in the previous 184 years of the Academy."<sup>34</sup> Then-Commandant of Cadets Brigadier General F.A. Gorden assured the Eastern Oklahoma Chapter President that the Plebe System had remained substantially unchanged in the last six years.<sup>35</sup> A 1987 Cadet Basic Training list of disciplinary awards showed that despite outside attempts at changing it, the System had not changed. Cadets continued to perpetuate hazing-type practices, with Regimental Boards being given for offenses such as:

Using profanity, threatening with physical violence, and failure to follow written proximity rule; abusing the Fourth Class System; using unnecessary harsh actions with physical contact to correct individuals; using unnecessary or harsh actions involving physical contact to correct an individual, i.e. jerking and kicking weapons from cadets and slamming them into the chest, using abusive and obscene language...; deprived New Cadets of food on numerous occasions.<sup>36</sup>

In 1988, the Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh, Jr. appointed an outside investigator to examine the case of ex-cadet John Edwards, who claimed he was dismissed from West

Point because he refused to psychologically haze Plebes. Although retired General Roscoe Robinson found the Academy justified in dismissing Edwards for deficient military development scores, the much publicized case prompted the Army to appoint a panel of officers, led by Lieutenant General James Moore, Jr., to review the current state of the Fourth Class System. The Secretary was obviously concerned. He charged the Moore Panel with determining whether the Fourth Class System met the needs of the Army in terms of standards expected of new lieutenants, and whether it gave the proper motivation and development to cadets.

The Moore Panel found in almost every case, cadets believed that the Fourth Class System "should be tougher." The panel recommended several changes in the Fourth Class System, such as rewording of USMA goals to include, "Cadets must learn to be good followers before they become leaders." The panel also recommended that leaders stress the philosophy, "demanding but not demeaning."<sup>37</sup>

An USMA Inspector General (IG) sensing of the Fourth Class System in February 1988 revealed several deficiencies, such as verbal abuse with upperclass cadets "in the face" of Plebes (i.e. yelling at close range of the Plebe's face, thereby violating his or her personal space) and food denial and "haze tables" in the Cadet Mess. The IG found several cadets who disagreed with the system and made their own rules. Many wanted to retain a hard Fourth Class System as

a "rite of passage," seeing very little leadership development value in the system for upperclass cadets.<sup>38</sup>

The warning signs of a troubled system were apparent. The Institutional Self Study dated July, 1989, recommended that the Commandant "review the impact of the Fourth Class System on the ability of cadets to communicate effectively with, to develop, and to care for subordinates."<sup>39</sup> The subcommittee reviewing the Military Program observed that "countenanced behavior" of upperclass cadets often violated the letter and spirit of the Fourth Class System regulation. Furthermore, some typical upperclass treatment of Plebes was in conflict with sound leadership principles.<sup>40</sup>

Consequently, Academic Year 1989-90 became the year of reassessment of the Fourth Class System. Three independent reviews--one by a committee of cadets, one by staff and faculty, and one by trustees of the Association of Graduates (AOG)--found that the system was in major need of revision. Not only did the Fourth Class System fail to create an atmosphere of development, but unprofessional and unnecessary activities were also taking place. An unhealthy "we versus them" attitude existed between upperclass cadets and the Fourth Class cadets.

Some might argue that Academy officials established the internal committees because they recognized the need to reform the Fourth Class System. However, one would have to ask why the Academy conducted drastic internal reviews in

1988-89 when most accounts of the Fourth Class System from 1980-1987 revealed a generally sound system--one which the Academy reported it wanted to stabilize throughout the beginning of the 1980's. Perhaps the threat of imminent pressure caused by the publicity of the obscure Edwards case caused Academy officials to reform itself rather than have outsiders do it. As a former Board of Visitors member warned the Superintendent after examining the reviews' findings, "The issues of public perceptions, public interest, and public support of the institution and its practices should not be minimized in evaluating what steps are to be taken to correct the present System."<sup>41</sup>

While all three committees corresponded, the AOG report was the most conservative of the three, urging a recognition of the fundamental value of the plebe experience and suggesting moderate revisions. With a more liberal view, the staff and faculty committee concluded that the System was fatally flawed and advised substantial modifications. The Superintendent, Lieutenant General David Palmer, and the USMA Policy Board based their final decisions mainly on the recommendations of the conservative position recommended by the alumni committee.<sup>42</sup> Prior to implementation, the Commandant of Cadets, Brigadier General David Bramlett, attempted to assuage the rumors and suspicions "that there is any inclination to water down the West Point experience."<sup>43</sup> Thus, when change did occur, West Point

officials took the most conservative, least threatening change possible in order not to offend the traditional hardliners of the System, yet satisfy the public's cry for reform.

The major change from the year in review was the implementation of the Cadet Leader Development System (CLDS) in August 1990, which focused on developing all four classes, not only the Plebes. Specific changes included elimination of "pinging, squaring corners, and hugging walls," elimination of a separate system of discipline for Plebes, allowing Plebes to eat "at ease" in the Mess Hall, and restriction of Plebe knowledge during the Academic year. However, Plebe duties such as delivering laundry, distribution, and newspapers continued. Interestingly enough, the developmental Four Class System instituted in 1990 sounds remarkably similar to the recommended changes from the 1969 report on the Fourth Class System:

There is a need for a Fourth Class System which is primarily development oriented so that each new cadet is provided the opportunity to achieve his full potential and where the leadership he receives supports him in his efforts to do so."

After two years under the new system, a 1992 General Accounting Office report on hazing at the service academies found that while the new Four Class System did reduce inappropriate treatment, some forms of hazing continued. Such actions included having to assume an unnatural

position, do multiple sets of exercises, and brace for an extended period of time.<sup>45</sup> Increasingly, upperclass cadets forced Plebes to act in a demeaning way, memorize and recite trivia, and endure an upperclass cadet screaming in their face.<sup>46</sup> The report suggested that the improper treatment continued because not all the changes had been fully accepted by the cadets and would take some time to become fully institutionalized. Statements from several cadets illustrated this attitude. One cadet described how the disgraceful and unprecedented elimination of the Fourth Class System prompted he and his classmates to adopt the class motto "Hibernate and Graduate." Another cadet commented:

I agree with the way the old Fourth Class System was written, not the way it was enforced. When I was a Plebe, an upperclassman dumped tobacco spit on me and nothing happened to him after I reported it. Now the regs are taken too literal. An upperclass was punished for raising his voice to a Plebe.<sup>47</sup>

Despite over two years under the new Four Class System, the GAO Report noted that some questionable elements of the traditional Fourth Class System continued to exist, and called for still more changes.

By focusing on the development of the upperclass cadets as well as the Fourth Class cadets, the Cadet Leader Development System represented a fundamental move away from the stigma of the old Fourth Class System. This change gradually occurred in answer to the bad publicity of a minor

incident and some externally-imposed panels of review. It represents one of the major changes to the original "devilling" system which have arisen in answer to the public's cries for reform. A 1901 article commented that hazing would end only because:

The Military Academy is dependent upon Congress for its support, and the Congressmen who hold the purse-strings will be able to gain their ends with the certainty that ordinary measures of reform in manners and morals could not hope to reach for years to come.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout West Point's history, the Plebe system has been a battle between cadets bent on upholding tradition and officials struggling to keep the public satisfied. While CLDS changed the appearance of the system, only time will tell if Congress will need to intervene again. If the 1992 GAO Report is any indication, change continues to be resisted from within. Lieutenant General Howard Graves, Superintendent of USMA, cautioned during his 1994 semi-annual briefing to the community of West Point, that with CLDS at the five year mark of reform, now is the time we must become most cautious of maintaining CLDS.

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