Evolution of the Fourth Class System: Forged in Tradition... Transformed to Leader Development

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HI600

04 DEC 1990

The Fourth Class System does not have a specific date of origin to assist in determining its history. The Fourth Class System does not command a specific room named in its honor at the Cadet Library. There is no plaque, painting, or statue in its honor on the grounds of the United States Military Academy. To many, the Fourth Class System simply exists and has existed since the founding of the Academy. In fact, the customs and traditions that form the core of the Fourth Class System began during the Superintendency of Sylvanus Thayer. These customs and traditions, directed toward the newcomers at West Point, signified a "rite of passage" before acceptance into the group.

As the Academy evolved over the next 170 years, the customs and traditions associated with newcomers did too. Some customs remained, others were changed, added, or dropped. The only constant was that of the Fourth Classman's or Plebe's subservience to the upperclass cadets. While most graduates and educators would argue that the Academy has evolved in a positive direction over the past 188 years, can the same argument be applied to the Fourth Class System? This paper answers that question affirmatively. It argues that the Fourth Class System evolved from a less than exemplary rite of passage to an admirable model of leader development for all cadets.

Since the inception of the Military Academy at West Point, Fourth Classmen have performed duties typical of

those done by junior enlisted soldiers in the Army. During the Thayer Superintendency from 1817 to 1833, the division of cadets into four classes marked the beginning of a senior-subordinate relationship among the cadets at West Point.[1] The duties of newly arrived cadets corresponded to those performed by privates in the Army. For example, in all guard duties the Fourth Class Cadets served as sentinels. The new cadets also carried out other menial duties assigned to lower enlisted soldiers such as delivering the mail and distribution of documents.[2] This treatment eventually evolved into the performance of personal duties or chores. For example, new cadets cleaned weapons and carried water for the upperclass cadets during summer camp.[3] As the personal services expanded, the practice of hazing gradually changed into the treatment of Plebes in the form of good-natured pranks and practical jokes.

Some examples of practical jokes in the 1830s consisted of inappropriate orders to interfere with sentinels on the color line, formation of the guard, and "wiping out" or scuffing a new cadet's shoes.[4] As early as 1846, cadets crossed the fine line between good-natured humor and abuse with greater frequency. In June of that year, upper class cadets tied a cadet candidate named Thomas Seabury spread eagle, face down on the ground during his first night at the Academy. The upperclass cadets poured turpentine on his buttocks and tied a string tightly around his testicles.[5]

This developing custom of hazing or "deviling" Plebes, then known as "deviling", did not always happen without retribution. On one occasion, a Plebe slashed an upperclassmen with his bayonet[6]. During another incident, one Fourth Classman reacted to the physical abuse of being kicked with cavalry spurs while marching to the dinner meal. "The poor plebe submitted to his punishment quietly until the ranks were broken, and then, concluding that the line had to be drawn somewhere, he drew it at spurs, and proceeded on the spot to give the 3d Class man a good thrashing."[7]

From the Thayer Superintendency until 1901, there was no written code of conduct for the Fourth Classmen. The senior-subordinate relationship and customs for all cadets evolved naturally because of the rank structure and accepted customs of the Academy. Conversely, the practice of hazing, at the Academy and other well known colleges, evolved unnaturally because of the age of the students and the institutional factors which allowed it to exist.

The fraternity hazing at the Ivy League schools during the latter part of the nineteenth century should be classified as a fad because of its lack of sustainment over time. The intensity of collegiate hazing could not compare to the rigorous activity at West Point. New Cadets were subjected to what can only be described as types of physical tortures from "swimming to Newburgh" (executing swimming motions while suspended on a bar or while on the floor) to

"bracing" (an exaggerated form of attention with emphasis on moving the chin as close to the nape of the neck as possible). While the hazing at civilian colleges disappeared, the hazing at West Point merely took new forms. Eventually bracing branched out to such innovations as "squaring corners" and sitting at Attention while eating a "square" meal.

Interestingly, officials at the Academy generally accepted the custom of hazing new cadets during this pre- and immediate post-Civil War period. John Schofield, a cadet in 1852 and future Superintendent of the Academy was not punished for permitting classmates to haze Plebes that he was supposed to be assisting in math.[8] John Tidball, after forty years of Army service, including the position of Commandant of Cadets, described hazing as "more beneficial than otherwise, a weaning of the new cadets from boyhood to manhood."[9] In fact, the Board of Visitors' report of 1895 included comments from a graduate who acknowledged an increased intensity of hazing and argued that the cadets were better for it.

> As a result of their (Committee) investigations, the Board disposed to believe that the reports of the extent and the injurious physical effects of hazing have been somewhat exaggerated. Certainly the young men who are said to have been special victims of it are in excellent physical condition and are taking a high rank in their classes. This would indicate that the hardships to which they were subjected, whatever they may have been, were only temporary in their effects.[10]

Despite this tacit approval of hazing, Academy officials started initiatives to abolish hazing at West

Point. This was because the pranks and hazing customs evolved into instances of physical torture. In 1870, then Superintendent Colonel Thomas H. Ruger requested the authority of courts martial for cadets guilty of hazing.

> Recent action in regard to cadets engaged in interfering with new cadets will have a very salutary effect. In this connection I would suggest the propriety of legislation authorizing, subject to control of the Secretary of War, the superintendent of the Academy to order courts-martial...[11]

During the nineteenth century, the customs and traditions that hazing revolved around became an informal fixture of the Fourth Class year. These unwritten laws initially were recorded in the regulations of the Academy known as the Blue Book. In this precursor to Regulations, USCC, the Academy gave cadets parameters to follow from uniform wear and classroom attendance to privileges and leave policies. Every year this book further refined and defined the roles of all cadets. With regard to hazing, the outright physical abuses and the attempts of Academy officials to end the practice resulted in the first formal effort to forbid hazing at the Academy. In the Blue Book of 1884, the Academy instructed new cadets to "not submit to hazing, or ill-treatment of any kind, or to the use of insulting, profane or abusive language toward them."[12] For the first time in the history of West Point, the Academy began to issue specific written guidance with regard to the Plebe class of cadets. Subsequent written guidance from the Academy for Plebes appeared in the first issue of Bugle

Notes in 1907. If one believes that written acknowledgement of a behavior constitutes acceptance of a custom, then hazing became the first Fourth Class cadet related "custom", albeit a dysfunctional one, to be recognized formally.

The apparent inability of the cadets to control extreme forms of hazing with the death of Oscar Booz in 1901[13] and increased physical incidents resulted in even stronger efforts to abolish it. This indirectly resulted in the initial measures to formalize the traditions of the Fourth Class System and to some extent, protect the plebe.

> Even without the benefit of a prescribed Fourth Class System, it is evident, then that a transition in Plebe training occurred from 1865 to 1919. Toward the end of this period, the Military Academy saw fit to grant specific authority to members of the upperclasses to train the Plebes in virtually every aspect of their lives, so as to bring about a rapid military development in each new cadet. At the same time the authorities sharply curtailed the misuse of this authority by those who sought no purpose in their correction of Fourth Classmen but considered it as sheer sport.[14]

The years 1900 through 1921 witnessed the most intensive period during which Academy superintendents attempted to end hazing. In the Superintendent's Annual Report of 1900, Colonel Albert L. Mills reported:

> this pernicious practice, with its tendencies to develop all that is unsoldierly, and nothing that is manly, has, in its more injurious forms, been voluntarily abandoned by cadets generally; and be it said to their credit, is now a custom more honored in the breach than in the observance.[15]

Regulations USMA of 1901 included Article XI that directed expulsion for any cadets participating in hazing. This

article directly resulted from an Act of Congress in March of 1901 to end hazing at the Academy.

As stated earlier, marked the first attempt to preserve the unwritten norms and laws of the Academy. It initially focused on athletic events, a reference calendar, and an open message to all cadets from the First Captain. In the 1910-1911 Bugle Notes, the First Captain admonished upperclassman not to haze Plebes. Instead, he directed upperclassmen to teach Plebes the "standards and customs" of West Point.[16] Although this indicates that there may have been a desire to develop rather than harass Plebes as early as 1910, the process still had to travel a long and difficult road.

By 1918, the Bugle Notes included Army songs and yells for the football season. This edition contained the first documented requirements for Plebe knowledge. All Plebes had to learn the "Alma Mater", "The Corps", "Benny Havens", "Army Blue", and various yells prior to returning from summer camp.[17] As the years passed, the Bugle Notes focused more and more on a defined set of rules and guidelines for the Fourth Class. Similarly, the customs and traditions became a supplement to the "do's" and "don'ts" for the plebe. In 1922, the Academy included restrictions and privileges which defined areas where Plebes were not allowed.[18] In 1923, the first mention was made of a "Plebe System".

> The feature of the disciplinary training which most concerns you, as New Cadets, is what is known as the Plebe System...The purpose of the system is to facilitate the training and disciplining of the New Cadet, so that he shall the better deserve to bear the title of "Cadet."[19]

As of 1923 the Academy clearly recognized and named the Fourth Class System. Although it surpassed the focus of simply codifying customs, to include hazing, it did not address the development of the individual other than earning the right to be called cadet. In fact, as the information Plebes had to memorize increased in the 1920s the purpose of the system seemed to fluctuate. The 1929 message from the First Captain stated that "For the first year you will be a plebe, nothing more. Not until you have proven yourself to be a man will you be accepted by the Corps."[20] In 1930, the standard message from the First Captain urged new cadets to "play the game." [21] Clearly, the Fourth Class System remained nothing more than a rite of passage focused on tradition.

Finally in 1942, the Fourth Class System received a written purpose statement that focused on development.

> The purpose of the Fourth Class System is to lay the proper foundation, early in a cadet's career, for the development of those qualities of character which he must have to be a successful officer and leader of men in the United States Army. Qualities such as self control, honesty, accuracy, reliability, and thoroughness are essential to success in a military career. The treatment of a Fourth Classman must at all times be such as to develop pride in himself and in being a member of the Corps.[22]

This design for the Fourth Class System as a method to develop the leadership qualities of the Plebe remained

essentially the same until 1948. At that time, the Bugle Notes acknowledged the system's potential for upperclassmen to develop their leadership skills and administration of subordinates.

> The purpose of the Fourth Class System at the United States Military Academy is two-fold: to provide a foundation upon which a Fourth Classman may develop those qualities essential to a good leader; to afford upper classmen the opportunity to perform practical work in leadership and administration of subordinates.[23]

This did not last long, however, and in 1950 the purpose statement reverted to development of the Plebe only.[24] Perhaps because the system continued to focus solely on the Plebe, development took the back seat to memorization of traditions and the performance of various duties.

In 1958, the Superintendent formed a commission to review the Fourth Class System and make recommendations to improve the system. The commission, headed by LTC Robert Panke, concluded that the addition of duties and required Plebe knowledge prior to 1958 had no direct relevance to the development of the Plebe.[25] This commission focused more upon the abuses of the Fourth Class System, hazing, and the limited privileges of the Plebe rather than specific leader development.

In 1969, a commission directed by Commandant of Cadets Brigadier General Bernard Rogers to review and to improve the Fourth Class System took a much more introspective and critical look at the system than any conducted in the past. After reviewing the components of the system then in effect,

the commission determined that it was insufficient with the stated policies and goals of the Academy. The commission defined the Fourth Class System as one which helped "identify and eliminate those Plebes not strongly committed to being at West Point and those who could not function under pressure."[26] The commission's study concluded that the Fourth Class System was needed at the Military Academy but with the following provisions: the system should continue to serve as a challenging period for the new cadet and the system should provide an environment that fosters leader development for the Plebe and the upperclassman rather than one which focuses on weeding out Plebes.[27]

This recommendation for change reached fruition when the Academy restated the purpose of the Fourth Class System in 1971 to include the "furtherance of leadership opportunities for the upper classes" as one of the four basic functions of the system. The other functions were military socialization of new cadets, equalization of new cadets, and identification of those cadets who cannot function under stress.[28] The guidance suggested that the upperclasses would have the opportunity to experiment with leadership styles to motivate subordinates. Because all cadets would be able to observe these leadership styles, they would develop their own skills. In effect, the concept adhered to the learning theoristsphilosophy of vicarious and observavtional learning. Although cognitive or developmental theorists would argue against this as the only

measure to improve the leadership abilities of the upper classes, at least in 1971 the Academy considered the upper classes development as an integral part of the Fourth Class System.

In 1977, the Borman Commission conducted an extensive and wide ranging investigation of the Academy following an Electrical Engineering homework cheating scandal. Among the recommendations of that committee were that the Academy should place more emphasis on positive leadership and develop a better senior-subordinate relationship between cadets.[29] However, just as in 1948, the system took a step backward in 1978 when West Point excluded the leader development of the upper classes from the purpose statement of the Fourth Class System. From 1982 to the present, leadership returned as a purpose of the system. (I have been unable to determine specifically why this lapse occurred. It may have been simply two authors attempts to put their own "style" in the manuals.) Through last year's edition, the Fourth Class System manual, USCC Circular 351-1, once again stated that "The Fourth Class System initiates and further develops the leadership training each cadet will receive at the United States Military Academy."[30]

In 1988 a board headed by retired Lieutenant General Richard Moore reviewed the Fourth Class System for General Vuono, Chief of Staff of the Army. The board concluded that its existence was crucial to the framework of the Academy's developmental goals and provided sound foundations for

leadership.[31] Following this report and one by the Middle States Accreditation Steering Committee of 1988, the superintendent ordered another review of the Fourth Class System and Leader Development. This report made some important observations that resulted in major changes to the Fourth Class System. First, this committee concluded that the system normally drew attention after major infractions or abuses of the system. They concluded that past studies tended to suggest changes that would resolve recent abuses rather than determine the system's functionality or improve it.

The second important observation dealt with the concept of leader development. If the purpose of the Fourth Class System involved leader development of the Plebes and the upper classes and the purpose of the Academy was to produce leaders of character, then why was there not a system of leader development for the other three classes? The resulting answer to this question was the Cadet Leader Development System, which "provides an organizing framework around which the four years of the West Point Experience is designed to achieve this noble end [leaders of character]."[32] This document focuses on all cadets through their entire developmental period at the Academy from summer training through the academic year and from Cadet Basic Training to Graduation Day.

Although the genesis of the Fourth Class System can be found in a system of servitude or followership based on

traditions and customs, the current system has evolved into one that effectively and correctly focuses on leader development. The first significant step took place in 1900 with an Act of Congress forbidding hazing. The system reached a landmark in 1923 when it was officially recognized and in 1942 when its stated purpose focused on the development of the Plebe. The commission of 1969 and the Borman Commission of 1977 forced the Academy to take a hard look at the system and determine if its purpose was in accordance with Academy goals and objectives. The refinement and improvement of leader development continues today in the Cadet Leader Development System, in effect replacing the Fourth Class System with a "Four Class System."

Notes

[1]James L. Morrison, The Best School in the World: West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866 (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986) 4.

[2]"Evaluation of the Fourth Class System," Apr 58, LTC Robert Panke, President of Board, Annex B "History of the Fourth Class System", p 1.

[3]Morrison, "Getting Through West Point," 312-13; Morrison, xvii, 23-24; Benjamin Perley Poore, The Life and Public Services of Ambrose E Burnside (Providence: J.A. & R. A. Reid, 1882), 36-39.

[4]John Gibbon, "Address to the Graduating Class at West Point, June 12th, 1886," speech, United States Military Academy, 1886, 6.

[5]Morrison 66.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Gibbon 6.

[8]Morrison 68.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1895 (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1896) No page number.

[11]Superintendent's Annual Report of 1870 (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1870)

[12]Regulations, USCC, 1884 (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1884) 7.

[13]Panke 15.

[14]Will Richardson, "The Fourth Class System...Part One: The Past", Assembly, Fall 1963 (West Point, New York: West Point Press, 1963) 9.

[15]Superintendent's Annual Report of 1900 (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1900) 28.

[16]Bugle Notes 1910 (West Point, New York: YMCA Press, 1910) 17.

[17]Bugle Notes 1918 (West Point, New York: YMCA Press, 1918) 72.

[18]Bugle Notes 1922 (West Point, New York: YMCA Press, 1922) 19.

[19]Bugle Notes 1923 (West Point, New York: YMCA Press, 1923) 64-65.

[20]Bugle Notes 1929 (West Point, New York: USCC, 1929) 45.

[21]Bugle Notes 1930 (West Point, New York: USCC, 1930) 129.

[22]Bugle Notes 1942 (West Point, New York: USCC, 1942) 83.

[23]Bugle Notes 1948 (West Point, New York: USCC, 1948) 108.

[24]Bugle Notes 1950 (West Point, New York: USCC, 1950) 81.

[25]Panke 18.

[26]"A Preliminary Evaluation of the Fourth Class System," 1957, LTCs R.H. Marcrum and W. L. Golden, etc., Annex C "Historical Analysis," 1.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Bugle Notes 1971 (West Point, New York: USCC, 1971) 119.

[29]"Report to the Secretary of the Army by The Special Commission on the United States Military Academy," 1976, Frank Borman, 22.

[30]USCC Circular 351-1, 1982, I-1.

[31]"Report of Board to Review Fourth Class and Conduct Systems at U.S. Military Academy," LTG James E. Moore, Jr., President of Board, Apr 88, 5.

[32]USMA Circular 1-101, 1990, no page noted.

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