

**INTEGRATING INTERNATIONAL CADETS AT  
THE UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY**

**BY**

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The International Cadet Program at West Point and at the other service academies has come under great scrutiny in the press recently. The primary issue is that out of 115 foreign cadets currently attending the service academies, only six are paying the total cost of their education.<sup>1</sup> Some Americans feel their tax money should not be used to pay the cost for foreign students to attend the service academies. At approximately \$70,000 per student, the costs to the United States government are substantial.<sup>2</sup> To many, the idea of paying the way for foreign cadets does not seem like a frugal use of taxpayer money, especially during this period of military budget cuts. Is the Academy's International Cadet Program worth the costs to the American public?

While there is a monetary expense in sending international cadets to West Point, it does not exceed the cost of sending an American cadet, nor do international cadets detract from the number of American cadets admitted. The expense should be viewed as an investment in the United States' foreign and economic relations with friendly nations. The United States Military Academy has not made any special allowances in its admission requirements, academic curriculum, socialization process, or culture to accommodate international cadets. This policy was solidified back in 1933. In a letter from Colonel C. C. Carter, a member of the Academy's General Committee, to the Superintendent, COL Carter stated, "it will be seen from the foregoing that Foreign Cadets meet the same educational qualifications for admission as do Native Cadets."<sup>3</sup> Later in the letter, COL Carter said, "in general, Foreign Cadets have entered into the spirit of the institution both

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<sup>1</sup> MAJ Richard G. Williams, interview by author, written notes, West Point, NY., 27 October 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> COL C. C. Carter, "Foreign Cadets at the United States Military Academy," 8 February 1933, letter to the Superintendent from the General Committee, USMA Archives, West Point.

socially and officially; they have enjoyed the same privileges and met the same restrictions as Native Cadets.”<sup>4</sup> Because the Academy does not take any extra measures to accommodate international cadets, the education costs for international cadets are the same as for American cadets.

The International Cadet Program, called the Foreign Cadet Program before the 1990s, was established as a foreign policy tool to provide a means for the United States government to improve relations and to foster stability with friendly nations. The Foreign Cadet Program began at West Point in the early 1800s. The first foreign cadets were two brothers from Chile, Luis and Mateo Blanco, who arrived at West Point in May 1816.<sup>5</sup> The brothers were very young and left the Academy after only two years in 1818. Since they were twelve and fourteen when they arrived, their extreme youth was likely the cause for their early departure.<sup>6</sup> Although the age range for American cadets admitted with the Class of 1820 ranged from fourteen to twenty years old, they did not experience the severe culture shock, language barrier, and extreme isolation from their family to the extent of the Blanco brothers.<sup>7</sup>

The next foreign cadet accepted for instruction at West Point was Cadet Julian A. K. Paez from Colombia. He was admitted with the Class of 1827 but did not graduate. He was dropped from the rolls on June 30, 1827, but no explanation was given for his release.<sup>8</sup> On June 12, 1889, Antonio Barrios from Guatemala became the first foreign

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “Foreigners Authorized to Receive Instruction at the United States Military Academy, 1816 – 1954,” Not Dated, Institutional Research, USMA Archives, West Point.

<sup>6</sup> COL Clarence E. Endy, “USMA Foreign Cadet Program - A Case Study”, (diss., United States Army War College, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Descriptive Rolls of Cadet Admissions, 1813-1829, Not Dated, USMA Archives, West Point, NY.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

foreign cadet graduates were Filipinos, equating to over 27 percent of all foreign cadet graduates.<sup>11</sup> Countries with high graduation rates were Costa Rica with eight percent (twenty), Thailand with 6 percent (sixteen), and Panama with 5 percent (fourteen).<sup>12</sup>

The most difficult problem presently facing the International Cadet Program is justifying its existence. The benefits of the program are very hard to quantify because they may not be visible for several years after these international cadets graduate and take their place in their country's leadership. The survival of the program is even more tenuous since Congress voted to stop paying for these foreign students to attend the military academies.<sup>13</sup> The majority of the developing countries wanting to send their students to the academies cannot afford the tuition. If the United States government is unwilling to waive the bill, the size of the program may dramatically decrease and the effect on international relations is potentially debilitating.

The government has used three arguments to justify the program throughout its existence. First, after exposing foreign cadets to American culture and democratic ideals through a service academy education, they would return to their countries and convey these principles to their people. Ideally, the people would find these ideas valuable and be more willing to accept an American presence and influence in their country.<sup>14</sup> This would allow future American leaders to develop a more global outlook and appreciation for the methods of our allies.

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<sup>11</sup> MAJ Richard G. Williams, "After Action Review of USMA International Cadet Program, USMA '01 Admissions Cycle," 3 June 1997, West Point, New York: USMA Admissions Office.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> MAJ Richard G. Williams, interview by author, 27 October 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Congress, Senate, Special Report of William H. Taft, Secretary of War, to the President, on the Philippines, 60<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., S. R. 200, 1908. S. Doc. 200.

Second, foreign cadets could share their knowledge of how military operations were conducted in their region of the world with American cadets. By educating the future military and possibly the civilian leaders of friendly nations, international cadets would gain, "a better understanding of military concepts, standardized procedures, logistics, strategy and tactics, and even democratic ideals and goals."<sup>15</sup> The desired end-state was better coordination and execution of military and civil relief operations, as well as greater influence in these countries.

Finally, international cadets at the service academies provided another opportunity to educate American cadets on other cultures. Foreign cadets, "enrich the educational experience of the American cadets and midshipmen, through the resulting broad intercultural expansion of contacts at a formative period in their lives."<sup>16</sup> A potential spin-off of these interactions between American and international cadets was the formation of lasting friendships that might pay prove beneficial in future conflicts or disasters in a particular region of the world.

Congress has periodically reviewed the laws governing the Foreign Cadet Program and changed them as necessary to meet the country's needs. In 1938, Congress expanded the international cadet program, authorizing one international cadet per American republic. This was done at the request of then Secretary of State, Cordell Hull:

The proposed legislation is entirely in accord with the policy of this Department to put into effect a very broad program of cooperation with the American republics. Such cooperation, I am convinced, is a most important factor in the foreign relations of our country and can have only beneficial results for the

welfare and interests of the people of the United States and of other American

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<sup>15</sup> Congress, House, *Report on Military Academies—Foreign Students*. 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 1966. H. Doc. 2247.

<sup>16</sup> Congress, House, *H.R. 6600*, 96<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2d sess., 1980. H. R. 6600.

republics.<sup>17</sup>

In 1946 Congress changed the law again, authorizing each American republic to send up to three cadets with no more than twenty foreign cadets attending the United States Military Academy at one time.<sup>18</sup> Foreign cadets outside the American republics, like China and Siam, were admitted by special legislation in the form of a warrant from Congress.

This expansion was a response to the emergence of the United States as a world power and the need to improve relations with developing nations around the world in the aftermath of World War II. Another contributing factor was the benefits gained from the Filipino graduates during military operations in the Philippines in World War II. Many of these officers played a pivotal role in the guerilla operations in the Philippines after the islands were lost to the Japanese. After the war, these Academy graduates would lead the rebuilding efforts of their country.

In 1966 Congress again amended the law governing the International Cadet Program at West Point to reflect two important changes:

A person may not be admitted to an Academy for instruction under this Act unless his country at the time of admission is assisting the United States in Vietnam by the provision of manpower or bases. Not more than four persons may receive instruction under this Act at any one time.<sup>19</sup>

This legislation was specifically directed at countries in Southeast Asia wanting to send cadets to the service academies. Although this legislation increased the number of cadets

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<sup>17</sup> Congress, Senate, *Report on Instruction at United States Schools Open to Citizens of American Republics*, 75th Cong., 3d sess., 1938. S. Doc. 2036.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Code, vol. 70, sec. 1288 (1946).

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Code, vol. 70A, sec. 242 (1966).

per country to four, the cap of twenty foreign cadets was still in effect.

The demands of the Cold War drove the continued growth of the Foreign Cadet Program at the service academies. Congress authorized expansion of the International Cadet Program to forty cadets per academy in 1983 as a response to the increasing number of developing countries that had gained their independence from imperial powers. Influence in these developing countries was important to the United States' policy of containing Communism by diminishing the influence of the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War, many former Warsaw Pact countries became independent states. The service academies, particularly West Point, opened their doors to the admission of cadets from many Eastern European countries in the 1990s.

The current law allowing international cadets to attend the service academies specifically states that, "a person receiving instruction under this section is entitled to the pay, allowances, and emoluments of a cadet appointed from the United States, and from the same appropriations."<sup>20</sup> The law further states, "a person receiving instruction under this section is subject to the same regulations governing admission, attendance, discipline, resignation, discharge, dismissal, and graduation as a cadet at the academy appointed from the United States."<sup>21</sup>

The process of admission was virtually the same for international candidates as American candidates. All cadets must meet the following conditions. They must receive sponsorship by a government official of their country. All cadets must be between

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Code, Title X, vol. 97, sec. 1004 (1983).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

seventeen and twenty two years of age upon entry. A cadet must be unmarried and have no legal responsibility for a child or other dependents. Assessment of an international candidate's potential for success at West Point has been based on his background in academics, leadership, physical aptitude and score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language.<sup>22</sup>

Some foreign cadets have felt that the SAT and the PAE were the most challenging prerequisites logistically. Most countries only offer the SAT twice a year, and it often required a major logistical effort to get to the test location. With the test only being offered twice a year, it was difficult to meet the Academy's admissions processing time line, especially if the applicant was near the age limit of twenty-two. Since an American officer, preferably an Army officer, must administer the Physical Aptitude Exam the candidates the must travel to the American Embassy. The performance standards are exactly the same for international and American candidates. These challenges of the Academy's admissions process can be quite daunting and expensive for the prospective candidate.

Some other admissions requirements include a medical screening by a local doctor. The candidate must also show proof of leadership potential by providing evidence of active participation in extracurricular activities, performance in athletics, and submitting letters of recommendations from high school/college teachers.<sup>23</sup>

Most of the challenges foreign students experience were the same that American cadets face. The initial one was to overcome the culture shock of cadet life brought to the

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<sup>22</sup> MAJ Richard G. Williams, "Information Paper: USMA International Cadet Program." West Point, NY: USMA Admissions Office.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

forefront during Cadet Basic Training, the effects of which may be compounded by a lack of understanding of American culture. Once the academic year starts, all cadets must transition into the college academic environment, which can be even more difficult for the international cadet if his command of the English language is weak. Poor English language skills become very apparent in classes like History, English literature, and English composition.<sup>24</sup>

Another challenge for international cadets is that many of their instructors do not know they are foreign cadets. International cadets wear the same uniforms as American cadets with no distinguishing marks or symbols on international cadets' uniforms. International cadets, "do not want to be different from their American classmates."<sup>25</sup> An instructor will react differently to an American cadet with a motivation problem versus a foreign cadet having difficulty understanding the instruction due to language problems.

The primary reason international cadets leave the Academy is due to a lack of motivation. Between 1981 and 1997 seven international cadets left West Point because of a lack of motivation, while three cadets left for academic failures. During this time, six former international cadets received Certificates of Attendance, in lieu of a diploma, for failure to meet the Academy's academic requirements at the end of four years. The certificates are issued to international cadets as a way to save them from embarrassment for failing to graduate.<sup>26</sup>

During this same period only one international cadet left the Academy due to

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<sup>24</sup> Yoon, CDT. Hyeong-Jin, interviewed by author, written notes, West Point, NY, 29 October 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> MAJ Richard G. Williams, "Information Paper: USMA International Cadet Program."

misconduct, and one left because he was found on an honor violation. Finally, a cadet from Korea died of cancer.<sup>27</sup> No international cadets departed the Academy for physical fitness difficulties or medical problems. International cadets leave or are separated for many of the same reasons as American cadets.

International cadets have lower attrition rates than their American counterparts in all areas of the West Point experience. This can give one the impression that international cadets receive preferential treatment, but there is no hard data to support this thesis. While there is the potential for instructors and tactical officers to give international cadets the "benefit of the doubt" in those subjective grading situations, such as leadership ratings and various written requirements and exams, there is no policy requiring this.<sup>28</sup>

Between 1816 and 1959, 129 Foreign Cadets entered the Academy and only ninety-nine graduated, which equates to a seventy seven percent graduation rate. During this same period four foreign cadets received Certificates of Attendance.<sup>29</sup> A Certificate of Attendance was the only allowance given to foreign cadets that were not able to meet the academic requirements of the Academy.

Between 1989 and 1996, fifty-four international cadets entered the Academy. Six received Certificates of Attendance and the other forty-eight graduated equating to an eighty nine percent graduation rate.<sup>30</sup> The higher graduation rate for the later period could be attributed to two possible reasons. First, the Academy's Admissions Office was doing

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<sup>27</sup> Sable, Shirley, "Cadets from Foreign Countries: Class of 1981 - Up", USMA OPA/MAOR, West Point, New York, 12 November 1997.

<sup>28</sup> COL C. C. Carter, "Foreign Cadets at the United States Military Academy," 8 February 1933.

<sup>29</sup> "Foreigners Authorized to Receive Instruction at the United States Military Academy, 1816 - 1959," n.d.

<sup>30</sup> MAJ Richard G. Williams, interview by author, 27 October 1997.

a better job of selecting international cadets for attendance. Second, international cadets were preparing themselves better, especially in their English skills. Some countries sent their candidates to other American colleges prior to attending West Point to improve their language skills, to gain a better understanding of American culture, and to adapt to the separation from their families.

The justification for the program was supported in fact. Most foreign cadets have become highly placed leaders in their governments with three becoming presidents of their countries. They are Fidel V. Ramos, Jose M. Figueres, and Anastasio Somoza Jr.

The first Filipino graduate from West Point was Cadet Vincente Lim from the Class of 1914. Vincente Lim had a very distinguished career culminating with his appointment as Deputy Chief of Staff of the Philippine Army and Commander of the 41<sup>st</sup> Philippine Army Division. The Japanese executed General Lim in January 1945 for leading a guerrilla resistance group.<sup>31</sup>

Fidel V. Ramos, Class of 1950, held numerous leadership positions in the Philippine Armed Forces culminating with his appointment as Secretary of Defense. In 1992 Ramos was elected to the Presidency of the Philippines. He played a key role in the coordination of American efforts to help Corazon Aquino overthrow Ferdinand Marcos in 1989.

Jose M. Figueres, Class of 1979, was elected President of Costa Rica in 1994. His efforts as the President of Costa Rica have included helping the United States to control the flow of illegal drugs from South America. Controlling the flow of illegal drugs into

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<sup>31</sup> H.B. and F. W. H., "Vincente Lim," Assembly Magazine, January 1949, Vol. VII, No. 4, 12-13.

the United States is an issue that has been a great concern for the American public since the early 1980s. President Figueres' efforts as the President of Costa Rica have decreased the flow of illegal drugs from his country.

Not all graduates completely internalized the Academy's ideals as illustrated by Anastasio Somoza Jr., Class of 1946. He was President of Nicaragua from 1967 until 1979, when the Sandinistas overthrew him. His regime was credited with the deaths of over 50,000 Nicaraguans during the revolution and was accused of many human rights violations. Despite his violation of the Academy's espoused values, his son was still admitted with the Class of 1977, although he did not graduate. His dictatorship represents the potential backfiring of the program.

Tactical officers must have a thorough knowledge of the International Cadet Program in order for their international cadets to succeed and to become a positive influence in their company. The company tactical officer plays a vital role in the success of international cadets at USMA. This begins with focusing on the Plebe international cadets during their Beast Barracks. The tactical officer must understand the additional stresses international cadets experience. Some of the additional stresses affecting international cadets include language challenges, a lack of understanding of American culture, adjusting to Academy life and academic demands, and familial isolation. According to one First Class International Cadet, "the Tactical Officer needs to focus more attention on international cadets because of the additional stress they experience."<sup>32</sup>

Tactical officers must encourage international cadets to take part in the company's

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<sup>32</sup> CDT Margarita Mechenova, International Cadet from Bulgaria, Class of 1998, interviewed by author, written notes, West Point, NY., 29 October 1997.

social activities as much as possible. Social activities will also help them gain a better understanding of West Point and American culture. The worst thing an international cadet can do is become isolated from his peers.<sup>33</sup>

Tactical officers should take the initiative to make contact with the instructors of international cadets to open the lines of communication early. This step will help the tactical officer get notification early if the cadet gets into academic trouble. The tactical officer cannot also assume that what is common knowledge for an American cadet is common knowledge for an international cadet.

Tactical officers should structure summer assignments to maximize the available leave time for international cadets. This may be the only time during the year the international cadet can afford to go home, and leave at home will give the cadet a tremendous morale boost. Look at the possibility of giving these cadets Cadet Troop Leader Training (CTLT) and /or Advance Individual Training (AIT) in their home country. CTLT and AIT can also give the cadet the chance to learn more about their military forces that will help them transition into their military after graduation.<sup>34</sup>

A final issue for tactical officers is balancing the international cadets leader development needs versus the needs of American cadets. If a tactical officer is selecting a company commander for the next semester and he has an international cadet and an American cadet who are equal, who should he choose? Whose leader development is more important, the American cadet who will be joining the American Army after graduation or the international cadet who may be very highly placed in their military or

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<sup>33</sup> CDT Chavar Chompucot, International Cadet from Thailand, Class of 1998, interviewed by author, written notes, West Point, NY, 29 October 1997.

<sup>34</sup> CDT Margarita Mechenova, interviewed by author, 29 October 1997.

civilian government after graduation. International cadets have held command and staff positions within the Corps of Cadets at the company level and above and achieving cadet rank is just as important to International cadets as it is to American cadets. The Class of 1997 had a Battalion Commander and a Regimental S3, both Cadet Captain positions, which were international cadets.<sup>35</sup> The potential for communications problems due to weak language skills and /or a lack of social skills can exacerbate the challenges for international cadets holding command and staff positions within the Corps of Cadets. Probably the most critical thing a tactical officer must consider is how well does the cadet interact with his classmates.

The Academy has taken great pains not to change any part of the cadet experience or make special accommodations for international cadets. There is no difference between international cadets and American cadets until graduation. International cadets are not commissioned in the Armed Forces of the United States. Otherwise, the cadets receive the same experience as their American classmates in terms of academics, physical fitness, military schooling, socialization, and acculturation. Many foreign cadets who failed to meet the Academy standards were separated or given a Certificate of Attendance as opposed to a diploma.

As stated, international cadets may experience a more severe culture shock than their American counterparts due to possible language problems and a lack of understanding of American society. However, one would argue that many American cadets experience a culture shock at the same or similar level as their foreign classmates during Cadet Basic Training, due to a lack of understanding of the Army and West Point.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

International cadets may have even a greater understanding of West Point than their American counterparts depending on the education and training they receive prior to arriving at the Academy.

The tactical officer plays a vital role in the survival or failure of the international cadets. The tactical officer's ability to encourage their international cadets to participate in social activities and to interact with their classmates will make their experience at West Point more enjoyable and the bonds of friendship longer lasting. The tactical officer who takes the initiative to open the communication channels with the international cadet's instructors will be a better position to interact for the international cadet if he gets into trouble academically, militarily, or physically. International cadets want to have the same experiences, challenges, and successes as their American counterparts, but a sincere and caring tactical officer can truly make the difference in the international cadet's success or failure. Taking care of cadets and developing them into the best leaders, whether for our Army or another country's Army, is our business!

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