

TACTICAL OFFICER EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

THE ORIGINS BEHIND THE CADET LEADER DEVELOPMENT  
SYSTEM

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BY

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LTG David Palmer, the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy from 1986 to 1990, changed West Point's leader development system from the Fourth Class System (FCS) to the Cadet Leader Development System (GLDS). Several events that occurred outside the Academy, prior to Palmer's Superintendency, such as the performance of the Army in Vietnam, the increasing use of drugs within society, and the hollowness of our Armed Forces after Vietnam all contributed to Palmer's decision.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, changes within the Academy such as the Academy doubling in size, the construction of more barracks, the honor scandal in the 1970's, the elimination of mandatory chapel, and the admission of women in West Point influenced his decision as well.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these external and internal events affected the individual values that each cadet brought in with himself or herself into the Academy, and in an indirect manner, contributed to what Palmer thought was wrong with the FCS.<sup>3</sup> Palmer concluded that the primary problem associated with the FCS was the mistreatment of plebes by upperclass cadets. At times, upperclassmen stripped the Plebes of their human rights and dignity, which was not consistent the leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Donnithorne, Larry R., Preparing for West Point's Third Century: A Summary of the Years of Affirmation and Change, 1986-1991, (West Point, 1991), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2-22.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2-4.

styles emulated by the Academy. In short, some of the leadership techniques used within the FCS were not supportive of the Academy's mission and purpose. Consequently in 1990, Palmer discarded the traditional FCS and adopted the CLDS as West Point's new leader development system in hopes to eliminate the numerous human rights violations associated with the FCS and bring West Point on-line with its mission and purpose.

General Carl Vuono, the Chief of Staff of the Army, appointed LTG David Palmer as the Superintendent of the Academy in 1986, and charged him to bring West Point from this tumultuous period of change and lead West Point into its third century, continuing to meet the Academy's mission and purpose--developing leaders of character.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will focus on why Palmer made this significant change by examining several studies that were made available to Palmer while he was Superintendent. Each of these studies have a common thread--human right violations due to inappropriate leadership techniques used by the upperclass cadets--which highlites what influenced Palmer to make his decision.

Many studies, dating back to 1957 and as recent as 1990 examined the usefulness and probleme associated with the FCS. A common thread inclusive in each of these studies was the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3-5.

inappropriate leadership techniques used by the upperclass, resulting in violations of human rights and dignity.

A study conducted by LTC Robert Panke in 1957 was the first admission by an Academy official that the preservation of dignity and human rights not being complied with. Robert Panke was appointed by the Commandant of Cadets in 1957 to study and evaluate the FCS. His findings reinforced the relevance of the FCS while not specifically mentioning any flaws with the system.<sup>5</sup>

In his report to the Commandant, Panke supported the FCS and concluded that a new cadet must recognize that he has assumed a new role in a new environment, and that this role is characterized by immediate, willful, and intelligent obedience by response to authority and by a strong sense of duty that places the mission before personal desires and comfort.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, Panke defined the basic precept of the FCS-- preserving human dignity--and alluded to possible violations of the FCS by upperclass cadets. According to Panke, the practice of hazing and maltreatment of Plebes resulted in personal humiliation and indignity.<sup>7</sup> Panke argued that there was no place for these negative elements in a system designed to produce comradeship, brotherhood in profession, and lifelong friendships.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Panke, Robert E., "Fourth Class System - Privlidgee, (West Point, 1957), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 9.

A second study conducted by the Academy within a ten year period which uncovered the use of inappropriate leadership techniques and practices within the FCS. LTC Robert Marcum's study was accomplishing its mission of producing highly motivated officers who can set the standard of excellence for the Army. More specifically, this study concentrated on the contributions that the FCS was making to the Academy's mission, and whether or not modifications should have been made to enhance the quality of the Academy's product.

Similar to the 1957 study, Marcum concluded that there was no evidence to support the premise that the requirements placed on plebes--duties, knowledge, and mess hall procedures--was done so with forethought to its character building potential.<sup>9</sup> Like Panke, he stated the objectives of the FCS were sound and congruent with the Academy's purpose and mission. However, Marcum stated that if the Academy was truly interested in developing leaders, then the leadership style practiced at West Point should be an example of that needed in the Army.<sup>10</sup>

According to Marcum, this was not always the case. The basic fallacy of the FCS was that it provided an artificial crutch for upperclass cadets. Upperclass cadets tended to rely on techniques such as "bracing and hazing" to

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<sup>9</sup> Marcum, R. H. et al., "Preliminary Study of the Fourth Class System", (West Point, 1969), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 7.

facilitate the handling of leadership problems.<sup>11</sup> The artificial stress produced within the FCS onto Plebes was a function of improper senior-subordinate relationships. This practice was not conducive to the development of supportive upperclass leadership.

Contrary to the results of the 1957 and 1969 studies, LTG James E. Moore, by the order of Vuono, formed a board of officers and conducted a comprehensive review of the current state of the FCS and concluded that there were not any significant problems with the FCS. In fact, Moore concluded that the missions, goals, and administration of the FCS were clearly stated and that the FCS circular was well organized, well written, clear, and concise.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to past findings, Moore did not find any evidence of Plebes being abused or required to perform any personal service for upperclassmen. In fact, the report stated that the senior-subordinate relationship was clearly understood and worked well to build a solid foundation for development as a leader.<sup>13</sup> This was the first study conducted during the Palmer Superintendency.

A second study conducted during the Palmer Superintendency uncovered the use of improper leadership techniques by upperclass cadets resulting in the maltreatment of plebes and the infringement of their dignity and human

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>12</sup> Moore, James E., "Review of the Fourth Class System". (West Point, 1988), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 5.

rights. In 1988 the interim report by the Middle States Accreditation Steering Committee, chaired by Colonel James R. Golden, reported similar findings to that of Panke and Marcum. Golden concluded that the FCS's guidelines were generally excellent, but actual practice has consistently deviated from the approved norms.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the system, as practiced, had a negative impact on the achievement of Academy goals. Specifically, Golden stated six problems with the FCS. The six problems were:<sup>15</sup>

1. The time devoted to the system is equivalent to an additional academic course each term.

2. The duties required in the system conflict with Army practices.

3. The senior-subordinate relationships and leadership techniques actually used in the system do not reflect appropriate respect for the individual.

4. Upperclass Cadets learn improper leadership techniques that are inconsistent with those practiced in Army units.

5. The system conflicts with the goals of the academic program in terms of the attitudes created toward intellectual development.

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<sup>14</sup> Golden, James R., "Interim Report of the Accreditation Steering Committee", (West point, 1988), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

6. The system conflicts with the goals of competitive sports portion in contributing to heavy stress and in the negative affect on initiative and creativity.

Each of these problems reinforced earlier findings that the FCS had some serious flaws pertaining to the treatment of Plebes.

Palmer sent a memorandum, dated 18 December 1989, to each department head seeking more information and requesting that they respond to three questions concerning the Fourth Class System. The three questions were:

1. Why do we have a Fourth Class System?
2. Why should we have a Fourth Class system and what should its elements be?
3. How should the system be implemented?

Every department head responded by memorandum and cited problems with the FCS. Common to each response was a concern for the abuse of the fourth class cadet. Colonel James Kays, Department of Systems Engineering, stated that many of the leadership goals that the Academy is dedicated to are abused and denigrated in the most formative years of a cadet's career.<sup>16</sup> Colonel James Golden, Department of Social Sciences, argued that the entire system is supervised in order to prevent abuse, however, we can not eliminate all the

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<sup>16</sup> Kays, James L.. "Fourth Class System". (West Point, 1990), 2.

abuse that was going on.<sup>17</sup> Colonel Raymond Winkel, Jr., Department of Physics, stated that the opportunity for poor leadership styles was present in the Fourth Class System and as a result, Plebe and upperclass relations develop disrespect for each other as individuals which may carry over into the Army.<sup>18</sup> Finally, Colonel Robert Doughty, Department of History, stated that there was a wide variety of application of the system with often undesirable results.<sup>19</sup>

Every department head responded with a concern for the treatment of Plebes by the upperclassmen. However, the majority of department heads cited the importance of the "rites of passage" associated with the FCS, and recommended to Palmer that the Academy's leader development system transition into a system that is concerned with the development of cadets throughout their entire West Point experience. Therefore, they recommended that the Superintendent retain the "rites of passage" portion if a new system were developed.

A third study, conducted during the Palmer Superintendency, reported three major problems with the FCS. Cadet Michael J. Thorson chaired this "Cadet Committee" and submitted his findings on the "process and effectiveness of the FCS" to Palmer on 20 April 1995. The three

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<sup>17</sup> Gordon, James R., "Fourth Class System", (West Point, 1990), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Winkel, Raymond J., "Fourth Class System", (West Point, 1990), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Doughty, Robert A., "Fourth Class System", (West Point, 1990), 2.

problems Thorson reported were congruent with the findings of Panke, Moore, and Golden. The first problem was the FCS failed to create a proper atmosphere of subordinate development during both the fourth class year and continuing on in the upperclass years.<sup>20</sup> The FCS focused exclusively on developing fourth class cadets. It did not develop a cadet's leadership ability after their first year at the Academy. Thorson argued that the development of upperclass cadets was also essential and is notably lacking in the FCS. The second problem with the FCS was the inconsistency across the Corp in administering the FCS.<sup>21</sup> The system allowed a variation of both unprofessional and unnecessary activities to take place across the Corp of Cadets. Examples of these unnecessary activities included unnecessary hazing, "pinging"--walking in a race walking manner, and enforcement of a double standard at the dinner table.<sup>22</sup> The third problem was a lack of consistency in implementing the system throughout the Corp of Cadets. The upperclass cadets held a wide variety of views on how to treat fourth class cadets.

Finally, a fourth study conducted during the Palmer Superintendency uncovered similar allegations of inappropriate leadership techniques and human rights violations within the FCS. In conjunction with forming the

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<sup>20</sup> Thorson, Michael J., "Cadet Committee Review of the Fourth Class System", (West Point, 1990), 6-14.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 6-14.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 6-14.

cadet committee, Palmer requested the formation of a staff and faculty committee to review the FCS. Colonel Steve Hammond chaired this committee and submitted his findings to the Superintendent on 25 April 1990. Although the committee agreed "the West Point experience" should be exceptionally challenging and developing, Hammond concluded the principles recognized by the Army make clear a leader's responsibility is not to create stress, but to enable and empower subordinates to deal effectively with the stress inherent in meeting demanding tasks and achieving high standards.<sup>23</sup>

According to Hammond, the FCS has two flaws. First, Hammond asserted that cadets mistakenly assume adaptation to one form of stress (yelling at someone) is transferable to another form of stress (bullets flying over your head in combat).<sup>24</sup> Second, much of the stress induced by the FCS comes from inappropriate leadership techniques utilized by the upperclass. Consequently, for many Plebes, the challenging nature of the fourth class year derives as much from stress imposed by some leaders as from stress inherent in required tasks or duties.<sup>25</sup>

After reviewing these reports, Palmer summoned the help of a past Board of Visitors member from 1976, Robert M. Kaufman. On April 30, 1990, LTG Palmer invited Kaufman, a member of the law firm of Proskauer, Rose, Goetz, and

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<sup>23</sup> Hammond, H.S. et al., "Report of Staff and Faculty Fourth Class System Review Committee", (West Point, 1990), 1-15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1-15.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 1-15.

Mendelsohn, to sit down with the three committees (the Cadet Committee, the Staff and Faculty Committee, and the AOG Committee) to gain his reaction of the past and present status of the FCS. Kaufman agreed with each committee stating that the FCS was flawed and reinforced inappropriate leader behavior.<sup>26</sup> In his report to Palmer, Kaufman agreed with many of the findings and recommendations made by the Cadet Committee and the Staff and Faculty Committee. He recommended to eliminate the title, "The Fourth Class System", and to have more emphasis placed on the development of leaders, focusing on the upperclass as well as the fourth class.<sup>27</sup> Kaufman disagreed with the AOG's recommendation that the FCS had some minor flaws and could be fixed by making some minor adjustments. Instead, Kaufman recommended to Palmer that the FCS, as it stood, be abolished, and that West Point implement a leadership system similar to the one recommended by the Staff and faculty committee.<sup>28</sup>

Palmer had at his disposal several possible Courses of Action (COA). Each committee that studied the FCS recommended a COA to LTG Palmer. Many of the COAs proposed were the same, but some were less detailed than others.

The Cadet Committee's COA focused on eliminating the FCS title and the FCS Manual. The committee felt that the

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<sup>26</sup> Kaufman, Robert M., "Review of the Fourth Class System", (New York, N.Y., 1990), 1-10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1-10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 1-10.

fourthclass year should be regarded as the initial development stage of a four year leader developmental process.<sup>29</sup> They recommended that the duties, responsibilities, and authorizations afforded the Plebes should be clear, concise, and disseminated through out the Corps.<sup>30</sup>

The COA recommended by Moore and General (Retired) Sam S. Walker of the Association of Graduates (AOG), was similar to the cadets, however, it focused on retaining the current FCS and making only minor adjustments to the FCS.<sup>31</sup> Very little was different from the recommendations made by Walker, Panke, and Marcrum. Each study focused on only minor changes based on the reason that the FCS was meeting the needs of the Army in terms of the standards of lieutenants. According to Moore and Walker, the primary tweaking needed by the FCS, was the clarification of the principle, "demanding and not demeaning."<sup>32</sup> Specifically, these two committees recommended that the Commandant of Cadets reword the goals of the FCS to include the phrase that "Cadets must learn to be followers before they become leaders."

However, one recommendation from Moore's committee was consistent with the cadet committees COA was the institution

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29 Thorson, Michael J., "Cadet Committee Review of the Fourth Class System", (West Point, 1990), 1-10.

30 Ibid., 1-10.

31 Moore, James E., "Review of the Fourth Class System", (West Point, 1988), 5-10.

Walker, Sam S., "Report of Leader Development - Fourth Class System Committee", (West Point, 1990), 1-9.

32 Ibid., 1-9.

of a cadet rank structure, that clearly defined the roles of each class. Palmer also supported Moore's plan to have all third class cadets assume the role of corporals, all second class cadets assume the role of sergeants, and all first class cadets to assume the role of officers.<sup>33</sup> This proposed change greatly defined and reinforced the upperclass cadets' authority and responsibility within the FCS.

The COA recommended by Hammond was the most thorough, detailed, and aggressive of the COAs. It focused on the elimination of the traditional FCS and proposed the implementation of a totally new leader development system. The committee named their new system, the Cadet Leader Development System (CLDS). According to the committee, this system would provide the highest level framework for integrating and organizing cadet leader development experiences and eliminated the use of inappropriate leadership techniques used by upperclass cadets.<sup>34</sup>

CLDS articulated the principles, values, and standards to be observed throughout the West Point experience, and not just Plebe year. Its singular purpose--to provide what the FCS lacked--is to provide an organizing framework of progressive leader-subordinate experiences for cadets that fosters the assimilation of leadership principles, promotes transition from civilian through cadet to commissioned

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<sup>33</sup> Moore, James E., "Review of the Fourth Class System", (West Point, 1988), 5-10.

<sup>34</sup> Hammond, H.S. et al., "Report of Staff and Faculty Fourth Class System review Committee", (West Point, 1990), 1-15.

officer, and supports Academy goals and objectives for cadets within the academic, military, and physical programs.<sup>35</sup>

Before concluding why LTG Palmer made his decision to eliminate the FCS and implement the GLDS, it is important to understand why Vuono selected Palmer to serve as the Superintendent. Vuono wanted Palmer to ready the Academy for its third century and continue to meet the Academy's mission of developing leaders of character to serve the common defense. Colonel Larry R. Donnithorne, Special Assistant for Strategic Planning Office of the Superintendent, stated that when Palmer arrived at the Academy, West Point was in a tranquil state, compared to what the Academy had gone through during the past three decades.<sup>36</sup> Donnithorne stated that Palmer brought with him a belief that leadership, in any organization, had a responsibility and obligation to chart a course for the future.<sup>37</sup> This obligation propelled him to uncover any inconsistencies between the Academy's purpose and mission. Thus, Palmer requested help from former Superintendents, Board of Visitors, senior leadership from the Army, the AOG, the faculty, and cadets to decipher the effectiveness of the FCS and to solicit recommendations for change. After reviewing the many studies presented along with their recommendations, LTG Palmer implemented the COA recommended by the Staff and Faculty committee.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 1-15.

<sup>36</sup> Donnithorne, Larry R., Preparing for West Point's Third Century: A Summary of the Years of Affirmation and Change, 1986-1991, (West Point, 1991), 1-35.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 1-35.

Palmer chose this COA for two reasons. First, this was the only COA that recommended a sweeping change by eliminating the FCS and the inappropriate leadership techniques associated with it. This COA had everything that LTG Palmer was looking for and stressed leader development throughout a cadet's West Point experience. Second, Palmer realized that the FCS would never be perfect and the mistreatment of Plebes would continue unless a system was implemented that focused on the development of the upper three classes as well as the Plebes. Unlike the FCS, Palmer's solution focused on a four year leader development program that delineated the specific duties and responsibilities of each class.

The new leader development system's goals and objectives clearly supported the mission and purpose of the Academy because that was Palmer's mission as stated by General Vuono. More importantly, Palmer believed that CLDS was a step forward in leader development, stressing the effects of positive leadership rather than the negative leadership techniques affiliated with the FCS.

Many ideas emerged during this period of affirmation and change, 1986 - 1991. Some COA were good and some were not. Palmer concluded that change was necessary because of the numerous responses he received from the staff and faculty, various committees, cadets, parents, and personal observations on the consistent violations and abuse within the FCS. Palmer also realized that if changes were made the

time to do it was now, during a period of tranquility and equilibrium. Palmer received an infinite amount of ideas suggesting ways to change. The implementation of GLDS was the best solution Palmer had at his disposal which would prepare West Point for its third century. GLDS focused on the development of future leaders for our Army, not losing sight of the Academy's purpose and mission--to provide the Nation with leaders who serve the common defense.

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