



Photos by Cathaleen Curtiss/The Washington Times

**Future looks bright:** Newly commissioned Ensign Tiffany Hatfield shows off her diploma at yesterday's Naval Academy commencement.



**From the top:** Gen. John Shalikashvili congratulates 3rd Company Midshipman Matthew James Duffy.

## Former midshipmen say academy may be too smart for its own good

By Sean Scully  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The dean of admissions at the Naval Academy likes to joke to his friends from the Class of 1955 that "there's no way we could have gotten in here" today, given the high academic caliber of the current brigade.

Statistics from Dean of Admissions Jack Renard's office show that the percentage of midshipmen who graduated in the top 20 percent of their high school classes rose from 68 percent in 1960 to 80 percent today.

Graduation rates have improved from 73 percent to just over 80 percent in 1995. Scholastic Assessment Tests scores of incoming

midshipmen have remained fairly steady since the mid-1960s, at slightly more than 1,200 points on a 1,600-point scale.

So what's wrong with the academy? Well, it may have gotten too smart for its own good.

Many graduates and academy watchers say at least a part of the problem is that military discipline has slipped since the 1960s, when the academy began to place a greater emphasis on academic freedom and lost sight of its mission as a military academy.

"For a while there, we were going out to compete [with civilian colleges] for students with the highest SAT scores," said retired Adm. Leon "Bud" Edney, a 1957 graduate and the commandant

from 1981 to 1984.

"There has always been a pull between academics and military at the Naval Academy," former Navy Secretary James H. Webb Jr., a 1968 graduate, said. "Do we want to be MIT on the Severn [River] or a fundamentally military school?"

The academy — which boasts its honor code forbidding midshipmen to lie, cheat or steal — was rocked by the worst cheating scandal in its history in 1993, when 133 midshipmen were accused of cheating on an electrical engineering exam.

In the last year, one current and four former midshipmen were

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charged in connection with a car-theft ring, another was jailed for reportedly threatening at least one of four women who accused him of sexual assault, and a third was charged with sexually abusing a toddler.

The point should not be just to recruit the best students, Adm. Edney said. The point should be to recruit bright students who can also handle the pressures of military command.

"If [the student] comes in barely able to handle the course — but he handles the course — that's what I want in a military leader," Adm. Edney said.

Others agree that administrators in the '80s were blinded by the competition with civilian schools for the highest academic achievers.

"I think in recent years, there's been a tendency to loosen up when that maybe was not the best course," said retired Vice Adm. Charles Minter, a former superintendent.

Adm. Minter, a 1937 academy graduate, was the commandant — the academy's equivalent of a civilian school's dean of students — from 1961 to 1964 and superintendent from 1964 to 1965.

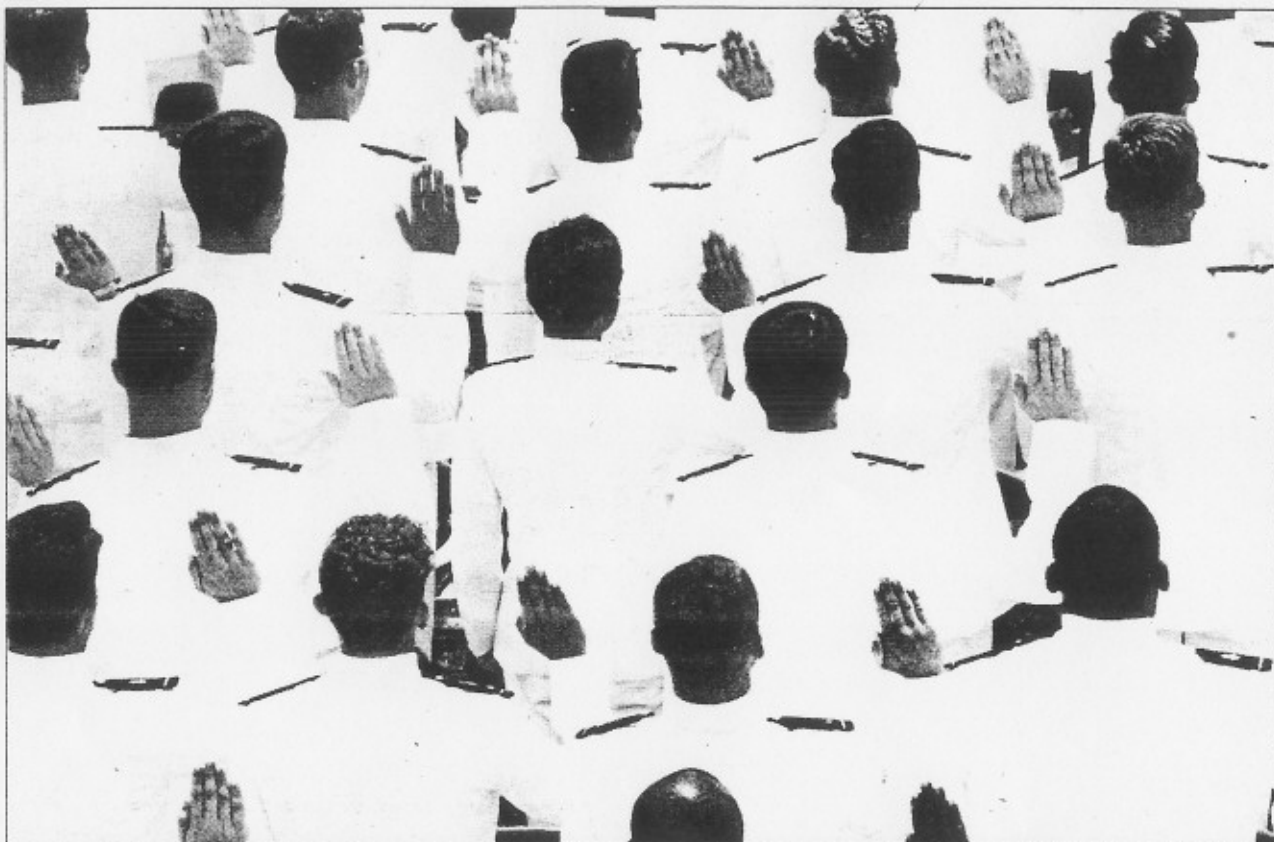
Until the 1960s, midshipmen were subject to stiff regimentation — all students took the same classes, marched to class as a group, and were afforded little free time. From the 1960s through the early 1990s, students' privileges and freedom gradually increased, officials say.

Juniors and sophomores — called "second class" and "third class" students at the Naval Academy — for example, were granted extra weekends off. Sophomores received the privilege to wear civilian clothes and to own and operate automobiles during the school year, spokesman Capt. Tom Jurkowsky said.

It's hard to put a finger on when military standards were loosened, Capt. Jurkowsky said. The change was very gradual.

Mr. Webb, who has been critical lately of the political climate in the Navy and at the academy, said the pendulum seems to be swinging back toward military standards. Mr. Webb said he believes the current superintendent, Adm. Charles Larson, and other academy officials are on the right track.

In 1994, in the wake of the cheating scandal, Adm. Larson reduced the number of free weekends, known as "liberty," by a third



Naval Academy midshipmen take the oath of office, after which they become Navy ensigns or Marine Corps second lieutenants.

and banned third-classmen from using automobiles at school. He also canceled Wednesday night free time so midshipmen would focus on classes and special programs.

"What Admiral Larson wanted to show is that privileges are earned. ... That's the way it is in the fleet," Capt. Jurkowsky said.

Just in the past month, Adm. Larson tightened rules for wearing civilian clothes, Capt. Jurkowsky said. Freshmen and sophomores are forbidden to even possess civilian clothes. Juniors and seniors are allowed to wear civilian clothes only on their limited weekend liberty.

"I think he ought to do more" tightening of discipline, Adm. Edney said approvingly.

While some critics have blamed the incidents on some sort of systemic problem at the academy, current and former officials, along with many graduates, blame the problems on a broader breakdown in societal values.

Thirty years ago, incoming students knew little about drugs,



William Edward Pilcher hugs another 3rd Company member after receiving his diploma at Naval Academy commissioning ceremonies.

other than alcohol, and had little contact with serious crime, said 1958 graduate Sen. John McCain, Arizona Republican. Students today often have firsthand experience with either or both.

In response to changing social conditions, the academy's 12-member board of visitors decided May 13 to strengthen its admissions process by requiring a criminal records check of prospective

students by their hometown police.

The academy will now also request the full background investigation report on each student, prepared by the Pentagon's Defense Investigative Service. Formerly, Mr. Renard said, the DIS only notified the academy of whether the student was eligible for a secret clearance; school officials never saw the final reports.

Had the complete DIS reports been available, Mr. Renard said, authorities might have been able to spot trouble with at least two students who later became involved in the criminal activity of the last few months.

The academy will also beef up its own investigations through a network of volunteers known as "blue and gold officers." The volunteers, usually retired military officers, interview would-be students and help them through the complicated application process.

The volunteers will now be asked to try to verify the good character of applicants as well, Mr. Renard said.

Photos by Cathleen Curtis/The Washington Times