



OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT  
UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY  
WEST POINT, NEW YORK 10996-5000

10 May 2016

Members of the United States Corps of Cadets, the Long Gray Line, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I know that you are all acutely aware of the recent photo that has garnered the national spotlight by showing a group of cadets posing in full dress uniform with their fists raised.

Thank you for your patience as we completed an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding this photo. The primary purpose of the inquiry was to examine if these cadets violated any DOD or Army Policy.

In particular, the inquiry sought to determine whether the cadets were making a prohibited political statement with the photo. The inquiry found that the cadets did not pre-plan or set out to make a political statement. As did many of their classmates, this group took multiple graduation photos, some of which were in a long-held tradition of mimicking nineteenth-century cadet photos. The inquiry concluded that the photo in question was taken on the spur of the moment and was intended to demonstrate their pride in graduating from one of the most challenging undergraduate experiences in the country.

The impact of this photo was division, not the shared unity that it intended. It is clear in retrospect that the symbol of the clenched fist carries with it many, varied and emotional responses. Symbols mean many things to many people.

Some have suggested that this photo solely represents political activism. The inquiry determined that this is not the case and the Commandant and I accept that finding. Groups at West Point have used clenched-fists in the past year to represent support for a team, or pride in serving the Army and the Nation. For instance, last July, the class of 2019 spontaneously raised their fist in pride upon the playing of the Army Strong song during the Fourth of July concert. Last December, on the night before the Army-Navy game, I joined hundreds of staff and graduates in raising our fist in support of the Army football team during the Army-Navy pep rally video. The time, place and manner of a symbol can also hold significant meaning and influence perception.

While the inquiry did not find that these cadets violated a policy or regulation, it did determine that they demonstrated a lapse of awareness in how symbols and gestures can be misinterpreted and cause division. The impact of this photo, regardless

of its intent, is evident. It is unfortunate that this perception brought attention to our Alma Mater for all the wrong reasons.

We must all learn from this incident. As members of the Profession of Arms, we are held to a high standard, where our actions are constantly observed and scrutinized in the public domain. We all must understand that a symbol or gesture that one group of people may find harmless may offend others. As Army officers, we are not afforded the luxury of a lack of awareness of how we are perceived. Accordingly, the Commandant will administer a developmental block of instruction for these cadets to address their intent versus the impact of the photo. There are teaching points that must be captured, and this is an opportunity to learn them.

The four-year West Point leader development experience is centered on the reality that we must build teams where everyone feels that they are a valued member. Our Army's mission to fight and win our nation's wars demands it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "R. Caslen, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Robert L. Caslen, Jr.  
Lieutenant General, US Army  
Superintendent