

**Senator Jim Webb '68**  
**EXCERPT FROM the USNA "Link in the Chain" Honor Ceremony**  
**Alumni Hall, U.S. Naval Academy**  
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We're here tonight to formalize the Honor Concept as it applies to your class, to discuss its meaning and its importance, and to explain why personal integrity is the very bedrock on which every leadership challenge in the military is founded.

I had the privilege of serving on the Brigade Honor committee during all four years of my time at the Academy. In terms of examining human behavior, this was an educational and often sobering experience. The Honor Concept was clear in its parameters – "Midshipmen will not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate among them those who do." But because we had a concept rather than a rigid, written code, the burden was on an individual's conscience as to whether to bring a case forward, to ignore it, or to personally counsel the individual involved. We had neither the requirement nor the moral luxury involved in the strict honor codes at West Point and the Air Force Academy, where a cadet was obligated to refer to a written regulation that required him to turn the other person in, and in fact, made it an honor offense not to do so.

Here at the Naval Academy the burden, as in real life, fell on the individual's subjective conscience. It took the automatic formula away. It made you think. It helped you grow. At the same time we all knew that once a case was brought forward, there would be no second chances if someone was found to have violated the honor concept. No probation or demerits for an honor violation, however insignificant the issue might have seemed.

We also learned that when it came to subjectifying lies, cheats and steals it wasn't always as simple as the words made it sound. But we took very seriously the notion – which still exists today – that the policies in place at the Naval Academy set the ethical and leadership standards for the entire Naval Service. Every one of you has been intensely screened prior to being appointed to the Naval Academy. All of you are known to be people of good character. The question for you now, and for the next four years, is how your personal character will adapt and grow and enhance the unusually stringent ethical system that is the foundation of good military leadership.

One of the greatest of our memorable Great Naval Sayings sits above the doors of the Naval Academy Chapel: Non Sibi, Sed Patriae. Not Self, But Country. There is no other profession that makes such a demand on our citizens, and on its leaders. But what does that really mean?

Ethics dominates military leadership because integrity is the basis of trust, and the military is by definition a hierarchical group environment, held together by the glue of mutual trust. How and why is this so? True leadership requires the constant application of the principles of "loyalty up, loyalty down." It also requires that you accomplish your mission while you take care of your people. Much of our military operates in high-risk

group environments, where the truth can save lives and a lie can kill a lot of people. Operations in these environments are often fast-paced, and commanders often need to make decisions quickly. There's no time to shake the self-righteousness out of a sea lawyer, or to untangle the half-truths of a dissembler.

At the same time, the military is unique in how it defines loyalty and trust. That doesn't mean we're all angels or aspiring saints, but it does mean we're different. Years ago I was working on a military film with a very successful Hollywood producer and he joked that half of the producers in Hollywood would kill their mothers in order to get a big movie made. I laughed and then told him that the biggest lesson I took away from the Marine Corps was that most Marines I had ever met would risk their lives or even die to save someone they didn't know and even someone they didn't like, simply because he was a fellow Marine and that was their duty. There is a sobering truth in that observation, which goes to the necessity for a special level of ethics in our military leaders. On an operational mission our military members often find themselves working with people they do not know, did not hire, and have never even met. But what they do know, because of the foundations that have been laid in places like the Naval Academy, is that they can trust them, and can count on the truth of what they say. And this clear expectation of integrity is the glue that holds our military together.

*Not self, but country.* That doesn't mean you have to do stupid things, or go to the extreme that the Japanese soldiers did in World War II where suicide was preferred over surrender, as a gesture of their loyalty to the Emperor. But on the other hand, if you can't be trusted, the entire system falls apart. You don't lie to cover up a personal mistake. You don't dissemble with half-truths because the full truth could be embarrassing. You don't call in that you've passed Check Point Three on a patrol because you know the company commander is going to write a bad fitness report if you're still on the way, only to see an artillery mission land on top of your platoon because you aren't where you said you were.

When I was a just-turned 23 year-old lieutenant I jumped off of a truck in a passing convoy and took over my rifle platoon on the side of a hill in the middle of a combat operation. I had just enough time to say hello before I took the platoon on a night patrol where within an hour we engaged an enemy unit. One of the first things I said was, "I trust every one of you. Anything you tell me, I believe. You say the sky is brown, I will believe you. But if you ever lie to me, you're dead meat."

Two months ago my most recent book was published. Two of the chapters dealt with the years that our class spent at the Naval Academy. An interviewer on National Public Radio asked me what I considered to be the most important impact the Naval Academy had on my life. I had no hesitation in answering that it was the honor concept, even though it was never formally taught in a classroom. We lived under those principles every day, attempting always to meet their standards, learning what it meant to match harsh but necessary expectations against inevitable human frailty. Sitting on the Honor Boards in remote, private hearings some of us were required to listen to testimony and pass judgment on our own classmates who in many cases had simply yielded to the

pressures of a frustrating or intimidating moment. But we knew that it was our responsibility, and indeed our duty, to live up to the example of those who went before us. And we learned how vital this concept was to the fabric of the entire naval service.

As with all the attributes of leadership, the honor concept became something very different from an academic major or an athletic talent. It became an inseparable part of our daily makeup, more an attitude than a skill. You can learn and unlearn an academic course, but once an attitude has been infused, it is ingrained in you, and it is very difficult ever to change it. With the harsh demands of the honor concept, that is a valuable thing. Wherever I have since gone, the importance of this code of ethical conduct has stayed with me, as I know it will stay with many of you.

It has been a privilege as a member of the Class of 1968 to share these thoughts with you tonight, and I wish all of you the best as you begin a journey that in less than four years will provide you the ultimate reward: leading America's sailors and Marines in defense of the security of our country.