

US Air Force Academy chiefs removed over rape scandal

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The US Air Force has announced that it is removing the four top officials at its academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, after two months of revelations about the rapes of dozens of women cadets and the systematic cover-up of these crimes and intimidation and punishment of the victims by supervising officers.

Air Force Secretary James G. Roche and the Air Force chief of staff, Gen. John P. Jumper, told congressional leaders of the dismissals March 25. The four officers, who are being transferred rather than dismissed from the service, include the Air Force Academy superintendent, Gen. John R. Dallger, his second-in-command, Brig. Gen. S. Taco Gilbert III, vice commandant Col. Robert D. Eskridge, and the commandant of cadet training, Col. Laurie S. Slavec.

The deputy director of current operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Maj. Gen. John W. Rosa Jr., will become the new superintendent, after confirmation by the Senate. The public firings and the appointment of such a high-ranking officer to run the academy indicate the extent of the damage which the rape scandal has inflicted on the public image of the Air Force.

The action came after two senior Senate Republicans, John Warner, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Wayne Allard of Colorado, where the academy is located, demanded the removal of the academy's top leadership. At least 56 cases of sexual assault are under investigation, and Roche said as many as 100 more cases are believed to have occurred over the past 10 years.

A statement issued by the Air Force indicates how gross and systematic was the violation of the rights of female cadets at the academy. "We will not tolerate criminals, nor will we tolerate their behavior," the statement said. "We will not tolerate any individual who shuns alleged victims of criminal activity, nor will

we tolerate retribution against these victims."

According to the testimony of dozens of female former cadets, the leadership of the Air Force Academy adopted an indulgent attitude toward male cadets facing allegations of sexual assault. Women who complained to their commanders or sought to file charges were accused of breaking up unit cohesion and acting like "babies." In many cases disciplinary charges were filed against the victims but not against their attackers.

The Air Force Academy first admitted women cadets in 1976, and about 18 percent of current cadets are female. The figures released by Roche confirm the results of a 1997 survey of cadets in which 10 percent of the women responding said they had been sexually assaulted at the academy in the previous 10 months. Three quarters of those assaulted said they would not report it for fear of retribution.

So pervasive is the fear of sexual assault among women cadets that Roche and Jumper sent letters to the families of all 218 women who have been admitted to the academy for next fall's classes, assuring them that special measures will be taken to insure their daughters' safety.

Press accounts of the rape allegations said that women were punished for reporting assaults. If alcohol or date-rape were involved, for instance, the women cadets would be disciplined for violating regulations prohibiting drinking or fraternization with upperclassmen, or for wearing civilian clothes. In one case, a female cadet who was raped after a dormitory party received seven infractions for violating the no-alcohol regulation and one infraction for having sex (the rape), while her attacker was not charged.

Abuse of power was a major factor in the sexual assaults. According to the director of clinical services at the Colorado Springs rape crisis center, several cadets

were ordered out of bed at night by upperclassmen, who have command authority over younger cadets, and then gang-raped. One alleged rapist was a priest serving as a counselor at the academy; another worked as a counselor on the academy's hot line for reporting sexual assaults.

Andrea Prasse, an aeronautical engineering major, reported to superiors that she was being harassed and stalked by a classmate. No action was taken. The male cadet then filed charges against her of violating the honor code on an academic project. Eight days before her scheduled graduation last year, she was recommended for expulsion by an academy honor court, and her degree was withheld. She also has an FBI file flagging her as a "person of questionable character," her mother told the press. The cadet who accused her has graduated and gone on to pilot training.

Despite the estimated 150 cases of rape over the past decade, only one male cadet has been court-martialed on such a charge during that time, and he was acquitted. Even the most flagrant cases usually result only in discharge from the academy. In some cases, attackers have been given such "punishments" as writing a paper.

Even after removing the top academy brass, Air Force officials continued to minimize their responsibility. General Jumper, the chief of staff, called them all "fine officers with tremendous records." General Gilbert, the target of the most criticism by female cadets, is being assigned as special assistant to the deputy undersecretary of the Air Force for international affairs. He said he was not being relieved, "merely reassigned to other duties."

Press criticism has suggested that the academy supervisors were hostile to the admission of women to the academy or reluctant to prosecute future officers because the military has invested \$300,000 apiece in their training. But the current scandal is part of a long series of exposures of systematic brutality and sexual violence in the officer corps, including the 1991 Tailhook scandal and a 1993 investigation at the Air Force Academy. The 1993 probe was followed by a General Accounting Office study which found systematic harassment of female cadets at all three service academies—West Point and Annapolis, as well as Colorado Springs.

The more fundamental issue is that sexual violence is

an integral part of the degrading and dehumanizing atmosphere required to train the US officer corps. Given the overwhelming technological superiority of the US military over all potential rivals, today's Air Force officers are being trained, not so much for jet-to-jet individual combat, but to strafe, bomb and rocket defenseless targets on the ground. The premium is not on "bravery," as the media and Bush administration incessantly claim, but on cultivating an indifference to the horrific consequences of using advanced weaponry on human beings.

Air Force Secretary Roche, speaking before Congress recently about the scandal, expressed concern that a rapist could be in the cockpit of an Air Force jet "with a couple of thousand pounds of bombs under his wings." Precisely—and more than one.

What no one asks in the current media coverage of the Air Force rape scandal is this: if a sizeable proportion of Air Force officer cadets are prepared to treat their own female colleagues so brutally, with the tacit approval of their commanders, what are their attitudes likely to be toward the populations—men, women and children—of countries like Iraq, targeted for US military assault?



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