

# and the Navy's childcare worries

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By Elaine Donnelly

Alumni of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis are justifiably proud as the institution celebrates its 150th anniversary. Many are concerned, however, about the long term implications of a new policy regarding pregnancy among midshipmen that was recently announced by Superintendent Adm. Charles R. Larson.

Midshipmen who become pregnant will now be allowed to take one year's leave of absence, with medical benefits at military facilities, before applying to the Academic Board for readmission. The leave-of-absence option only applies if the parent can prove that custody and financial responsibility have been surrendered to someone else, or the child has been put up for adoption.

Unlike rules effective in the rest of the Navy, marriage and pregnancy have historically been considered incompatible with the Academy's mission and expectations of midshipmen, who receive an expensive public education with a six-year service obligation attached. An unwritten loophole in the policy, however, permits midshipmen to regain child custody following graduation.

Adm. Larson was entirely correct in rejecting an advisory panel's previous suggestion that midshipmen who are pregnant or have caused a pregnancy should have 30 days to terminate the pregnancy or face dismissal. Still, the new policy presents a different set of problems and moral dilemmas that are difficult to reconcile with the Academy's Honor Concept.

As Adm. Larson explained in an August speech before the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, the Honor Concept asserts that "midshipmen may not lie, cheat or steal — and will do what is right and honorable." The Academy's four-year integrated Character Development Program reinforces the Honor Concept by nurturing and protecting basic values of the Navy and Marine Corps, such as "honesty, integrity, teamwork, equal opportunity and respect for human dignity." Adm. Larson went on to say that the Academy is, "[I]n a sense, counter-culture in that we are going against some of the norms of society when we do this character development."

Adm. Larson deserves praise for encouraging the midshipmen to aspire to exceptional standards of

integrity. Even though individuals frequently fail to live up to those lofty ideals, the Honor Concept and similar codes of conduct at the other service academies are considered essential to the institution's unique mission and proud traditions.

In view of the admiral's stated opinions, it is possible that the new rules were imposed on the Academy by political appointees in the Clinton Administration who may be oblivious to the practical problems and ethical conundrums likely to result.

For example, contrary to the basic principles of the Honor Concept, the leave-of-absence option encourages midshipmen to forsake their own children in pursuit of their careers, implying that an Academy education is more valuable than one's own offspring.

It also sets the stage for dishonorable behavior if the parents involved intend to marry and regain custody following graduation. A court order is required to surrender child custody and financial responsibility to someone else. The parents will therefore have to lie about their intentions in order to obtain legal documents necessary for re-admission of the midshipmen.

Implied pressure to divest oneself of a child also discourages marriage and family formation — something that used to be considered "right and honorable" in human relationships. Years later, pangs of personal regret among those who otherwise might have married and formed a new family could be severe, particularly if the midshipman does not pursue a full naval career.

Aside from the question of what is done with the child, the occurrence of pregnancy outside of marriage has been granted more leniency and tolerance than cheating on an exam or petty theft. It also departs from the principle that postponement of personal gratification is a character building experience and a mark of personal integrity.

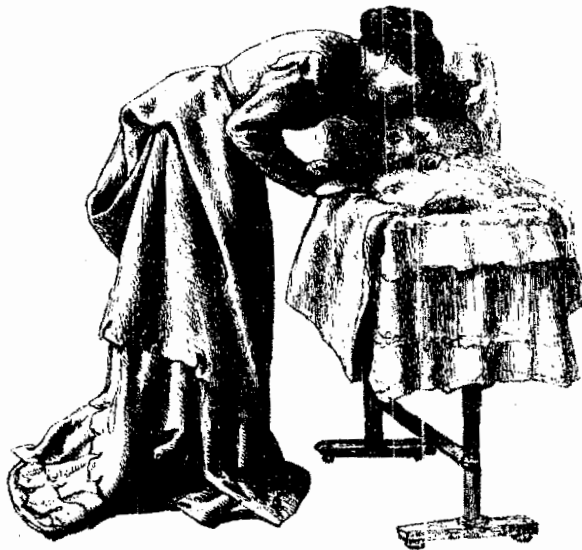
Legal challenges to the policy are very likely in view of the official policy on pregnancy announced by Navy Secretary John Dalton earli-

er this year. Mr. Dalton's directives for the rest of the Navy and Marine Corps declare unequivocally that "pregnancy and parenthood are compatible with a naval career," and provide generous medical, housing and employment security benefits for pregnant women — regardless of marital status.

Political pressures for consistency with this non-judgmental policy will set up the Academy for further incremental change in the wrong direction. If official tolerance of single parenthood is extended to the Naval Academy and the issue is framed in terms of "career opportunities" and "fairness," to midshipmen, baby carriages and child care centers on the grounds of all the service academies won't be far behind. The real problem here is not inconsistency, but Mr. Dalton's liberal policy.

This issue must be viewed not in the context of values commonplace in the civilian world, but in relation to the Academy's higher expectations, which Adm. Larson described as "counter-cultural." A 1993 Honor Review Committee proclaimed that the service academies have a "special responsibility to provide an environment that cultivates, indeed demands, the internalization of honor, loyalty, integrity and moral courage, the qualities essential to developing leadership."

But instead of countering the prevailing culture, the new pregnancy policy accommodates it. Instead of reinforcing the canons of character development, it places an asterisk on the honor code. The result is ethical confusion and a dizzying wave of moral vertigo. That's a profound disappointment to those who expect the Academy to lead, not follow.



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