

Sexual Assault in the U.S. Military

More Rapists Attend the Air Force Academy Than Any Other College In America

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The annual sexual assault report from the Pentagon was just released for the service academies during the 2013-14 academic year. Headlines across the nation are currently making a big deal about how the academies' numbers are so much lower than in previous years and how they can become a [template model now for how civilian college campuses](#) can improve their assault numbers. But before we congratulate the military for its discipline in overcoming rape as an out of control disgrace, so vastly improving their gender relations and good manners amongst our nation's cream of the crop, a closer look beyond the current smoke and mirrors is necessary to accurately assess this highly important issue.

In recent years a parallel process has been alarmingly observed of a sexual crime epidemic on both [civilian college campuses](#) as well as at the service academies and armed forces in general. Sexual assault in the military jumped off the daily headline pages for an entire year during 2013 when it was revealed that an unprecedented number totaling [over 26,000 incidents of unwanted sexual contact](#) was reported by service men and women in an anonymous survey taken in 2012. Meanwhile, every week another high profile officer often in charge of reducing assaults was being investigated and charged himself. The heavily covered cases of star football players at both the Air Force and Naval Academies proved that rape was an across the board problem up and down the ranks in all the services. Then based on information made available last year during this same period from 2010-2012 in a federal report mandated by law, last July the [Washington Post published an official record of reported sexual assaults](#) on all of America's 1570 college campuses with an enrollment over 1000 students that indicated an equally disturbing spike of unprecedented numbers. The frequency of forcible sexual offenses in 2012 on college campuses jumped 50% in just three years.

Interestingly enough, the list from the Washington Post fails to include the assault statistics at the US Military Academy at West Point, the US Naval Academy at Annapolis and the US Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs. Instead, the Pentagon compiles those numbers and releases them separately. However, if the academy assaults are compared directly with the assault records at civilian schools, America's best and brightest at our most honored institutions might be housing more rapists than any other colleges in the nation. When those numbers are included as they should be, by far the Air Force Academy has more rapists on campus than any other college in the country. Over the same three year period [it accumulated 130 forcible assault](#) cases to the next highest in the nation at 84 at Penn State University, over one and a half times greater. The final year 2012 was upwardly skewed at Penn State because that was the year the assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was indicted for sexually abusing young boys on campus and the entire school was enflamed in a media circus scandal lasting more than a year. Harvard University logged in 83 cases, only

one less than Penn State over the three year period.

The next highest civilian college was University of Michigan at 64, then Ohio State at 61, University of California at Davis at 60, followed by Stanford University at 59. Indiana University reported 54, University of North Carolina and Emory University in Atlanta were tied at 52, then the US Naval Academy and the University of New Hampshire at 50. My alma mater West Point between 2010-2012 reported only 35 cases to Air Force Academy's 130.

Another important consideration is the size of the student enrollment. Penn State and Harvard reported 56 and 31 cases in 2012 with student sizes of near 46,000 and over 28,000 respectively. The Air Force Academy reported 130 with a cadet enrollment of just under 4,000. Thus per 1000 students, at Penn State only 1.22 reported rape and Harvard 1.1 person out of 1000 was assaulted. Meanwhile, at the US rape capital the Air Force Academy, 11.27 rapes were reported for every 1000 cadets. Thus a much larger percentage of the student population at the United States Air Force Academy experienced sexual assault than at any other university in America. Only one civilian school has a near equal per capita rape incidence and that's Gallaudet University in northeastern Washington DC. However when the per capita over the three year period is considered, near 2 more rapes per 1000 occurred each year at the Air Force Academy than Gallaudet. Other colleges with high incidence of rape per student population were such small private, prestigious liberal arts schools as Grinnell College in Iowa at more than 10 per 1000, Reed College and Amherst College at over 9, Hampshire College at more than 8 and Swarthmore at more than 7. The per capita numbers at Annapolis in 2012 was 3.31 (3.68 for the three years) and West Point 2.18 (2.54 over the three year period). Thus again both other academies have far fewer assaults than the notorious Air Force Academy.

One more factor bears consideration. Upwards of [45% of the 1570 colleges](#) reported zero incidents of rape on their campus. Experts state that this gross under-reporting strongly indicates that many assaults never get reported and that those that are reported never go on record as they simply get dismissed, conveniently swept under the rug as if rape never happened. Because some corrupt school administrations place their reputation and alumni endowments over the well-being of their female students, a gross miscarriage of justice is an all too common result. It is not infrequent that a wealthy father pays to have his perpetrator son go unpunished at exclusive private elitist institutions.

On the other hand, some of the universities reporting higher incidents of sexual assault emphasize the importance of coming forth to the authorities and have support programs in place that would prompt more victims to disclose. The increased numbers in recent years at the service academies have largely been explained away by administrations' contention that more victims are willing to file claims nowadays, not that actual rates of sexual violence are rising. Yet there is no empirical evidence to refute that higher reporting rates don't reflect higher incidence.

Turning to the [just released record](#) for the academic year 2013-2014, which was not included in the civilian university records released last July that only went up to 2012, the Air Force Academy had 27 reported sexual assaults, the Naval Academy 23 and West Point 11. That total of 61 was down from last year at 70, and the peak year of 2011-2012 at 80. So from assessing these combined numbers decreasing over the last couple years, the Pentagon would have us believe that the academies' sensitivity training and heightened awareness to policing sexual misconduct within its ranks are proving to be highly effective. But again Annapolis number went up this last year from 15 to 23, a jump of 35% and even

West Point went up from 10 to 11. The only reason the total dropped at all was the soaring Air Force rate was lowered from 45 to 27 last year. With two of the three service academies' total number of incidents still rising, a case can hardly be made that the rape situation is improving at all. It's just that the worst offender that's still the worst offender of the three has lowered its reported assaults enough to make it appear that gender relations are becoming more civil at the academies. But again comparing records alongside civilian universities, the Air Force Academy appears to be the most dangerous school for women in the country. Placing the Naval Academy's 23 assaults in with the last available year amongst civilian colleges, only Penn State, Harvard and Michigan that include far higher enrollments had more rapes.

Additionally, one in ten female cadets at the Air force Academy claim that they have been sexually harassed. *Veterans Today* managing editor and columnist [Jim W. Dean in an interview](#) on Thursday with Press TV stated, **“Sexual harassment against US Air Force Academy’s female cadets is indicative of leadership failure in the Air Force.” Even hiring the first female superintendent in academy history more than a year ago seems to be making little difference at the Air Force Academy that has long been most plagued with this glaring blight of entrenched sexual assault and harassment.**

As if to gloss over any signs showing lack of progress, the Pentagon claims that the percentage of anonymous survey respondents at the service academies reporting unwanted sexual contact has diminished in the last year from [12.4% of female cadets in 2012-13 to 8%](#) and amongst male cadets from 2% to 1%. Of course the US military is determined to keep status quo with sexual assault cases being kept in the chain of command rather than be taken out of military jurisdiction and placed in civilian courts. Thus, there is both equally enormous amounts of pressure and motivation to ensure that all these latest statistics reflect much needed improvement. Having been a cadet and officer, and observed both the military and government consistently lie and be extremely deceptive over the years, forgive me for not being so won over by the Pentagon's rather rosy, overly optimistic report.

The military's good ol' boys club has always been very long on tradition and the academies are known bastions of the most rigid traditions. Less than a year ago the Senate voted against changing adjudication of sexual assault over to civilian courts, falling short of the needed 60 by just five votes. At the exact same hour the good ol' boys in the Capitol building were pushing back any chance of change, the Pentagon was forced to announce that the lead prosecuting officer in charge of reducing sexual misconduct in the Army was himself being investigated for sexually groping and trying to kiss a female lawyer who worked under him. The Air Force counterpart a few months earlier was also facing misconduct charges. Historically no real substantive change has occurred in the military.

No more than a couple weeks after that major setback for women in the armed forces came two more shocking announcements on the very same day. General Sinclair accused of sexual assault was given a [slap on the hand fine](#) and allowed to retire with an honorable discharge pension despite at two grades lower and the highest profile case in academy history at Annapolis was granted an acquittal. These decisions in March 2014 only reinforced perception that nothing really is changing in the military and that the chauvinistic old-school attitude toward the “weaker sex” still prevails. The culture of rape and disrespect that has been a fixture appears unchanged despite all the hype that the armed forces are actually doing something to eradicate the epidemic.

About a year ago a report leveling heavy criticism particularly toward athletes at the service academies demonstrate blatant disrespect and contempt towards women. Denigrating emails had resulted in the disbanding of the [West Point rugby team](#). The report also stated that this prevailing culture of rape and disrespect had female cadets feeling that reporting misconduct was an exercise in futility and that justice would never be served because academy officials remained largely unresponsive. Additionally, those women cadets who complained are typically singled out by male peers for even further harassment, ridicule and retaliation.

This year's just released Pentagon report on Wednesday alluded to little to no change in this regard, disclosing that nearly half the victims of unwanted sexual contact at 40% believed they experienced retaliation by either superiors or peers. This dismal finding is reflective of how women in the armed forces across the boards at over [60%](#) regularly experience a backlash of hate and harassment after reporting sexual misconduct. The stigma that has posed the most serious barrier to incidents getting reported in the past is still operating. Because the hierarchical power of differential rank is so fixed in the armed forces, a persistently common problem has been when higher ranking perpetrators sexually assault subordinates. This retaliatory backlash indicates that no actual change is occurring and that the traditional denigration of women that has always been embedded in the services still persists. That's why taking it out of the hands of the flawed military justice system is the most plausible way of holding the guilty accountable.

[Rep. Niki Tsongas](#) (D-MA) from my old home state, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, stated:

The continued prevalence of these crimes and the retaliation that takes place evidences a flawed military culture and underscores the fact that much more needs to be done.

Realizing that the good old boys system is still very much alive and well in the US military, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) has led a valiant fight to remove prosecutorial duties from commanders. And despite coming up short last year, and now facing a Republican controlled Senate, her quest to bring justice to women in the armed forces may be even more of a challenge in the current session of Congress. But undaunted, she plans to reintroduce a bill that would transfer sexual assault into civilian jurisdiction. Last December just prior to the holiday recess Gillibrand tried to force a vote but powerful conservative member of the Armed Services Committee Senator [Lindsey Graham](#) (R-SC) accused her of grandstanding, "This is no longer about reforming a system. This is a political cause going out of control." And so it was never even brought to vote. The feisty New York senator's response was:

The Department of Defense has failed on this issue for over 20 years now, and the scandals of the last 12 months and the latest data shows that they still don't get it.

The fact is despite the yearlong debate in Congress, the outcome of events and developments have cast a foreboding dark shadow on women in uniform's future safety and protection. The subsequent harassment and humiliation that the one in ten rape survivors who do come forth and report sex crimes are subjected to amounts to double punishment, being re-traumatized and re-victimized by a military system that fails to convict and

imprison [97% of military rapists](#). Adding the turn of events from last March madness to the already dismal record and the prospect that women would be any better protected in the future remains somewhat bleak.

Two months ago the Pentagon released the latest findings of sexual assault in the armed forces. The [Pentagon's official release](#) revealed the predictable outcome. 8% more incidents were reported from the year before (6,000 last year compared to just over 5,500 the year before) and that the rate of just one in ten reporting assaults in 2012 is alleged to be one in every four victims reporting incidents in 2013. The numbers were generated from two sources, an annual anonymous survey of unwanted sexual contact and actual assault cases reported. That astounding 2012 number of 26,000 cases from the anonymous survey dropped to near 19,000 this last year (10,500 men and 8,500 women). Note more males in the military report unwanted sexual contact than females in uniform.

On the eve of the Pentagon's annual report two months ago Senator Gillibrand held a press conference flanked by three Republican senators and two Democratic colleagues vowing to reintroduce the latest bill to reform the system. Timed on that same day in December, the Department of Defense Inspector General's office announced that its plan to investigate the Air Force Academy's handling of recent sexual assault cases involving three dismissed football players. The Academy subsequently [kicked out a fourth cadet](#) that provided incriminating evidence resulting in the three star players' separation as retaliation. Despite the female Academy Superintendent General Michelle Johnson's flat denial that cadet Eric Thomas' "disenrollment" six weeks prior to his graduation had anything to do with his damaging testimony to the star athletes, Cadet Thomas suddenly ended up with too many demerits as retaliatory punishment for bringing the rapists to justice.

The case against Eric Thomas is much like my own at West Point. His due process was clearly violated in that he was never allowed to challenge the demerits against him while on duty with the Office of Special Investigations (OSI). We both were ousted on excessive demerits due to command conspiracy. Back in my day as a cadet in 1972 due process as our constitutional right still meant something in this country. But now this fundamental rule of law is no longer upheld, honored or practiced in this nation of current police state tyranny.

Three months ago [ESPN was running an in-depth segment](#) exposing the Air Force Academy's unfair punishment toward Thomas as the momentum of negative publicity continues piling up against the service academy's gross injustice. And now the Pentagon's top investigative office will be closely scrutinizing the Academy's malicious mishandling of the Thomas case. Instead of supporting and lauding Eric Thomas for proactively stopping rape at the Academy, allowing him to graduate in 2013, it went out of its way to break him down by abruptly ending his education just before graduation and denying him his officer's commission while sending an all too obvious message to the rest of the Corps of Cadets to not come forth and report rape.

The Department of Defense is merely responding to the increasing political pressure being brought to bear mainly by Eric Thomas's South Dakota Senator John Thune and again Senator Gillibrand to relook at this over-the-top travesty of justice. Clear-cut evidence exists that the Academy superintendent at the time, [General Michael Gould](#), himself a former AFA football player, attempted to squelch Thomas from ever testifying against his teammates. The general went so far as to refuse to even allow OSI to interview the Air Force football coaching staff during the rape investigation. For damage control purposes, three months

after Thomas was unjustifiably terminated from the Air Force Academy, General Gould was retiring. The former superintendent was suddenly being replaced for the first time by a female in General Johnson who earlier this year called for the Air Force Inspector General to investigate the Thomas case and Academy football program. No surprise that it delivered a whitewashed report of the ongoing scandal giving the AFA Athletic Department a clean bill of health for its handling of the assault cases and former cadet Thomas.

Another scandal within the scandal is taking place at the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (OSI). For two years Cadet Thomas was used by OSI to act as an informant to uncover not only assault cases but drug offenses at the Academy as well. Thomas was told that he must keep his involvement with OSI totally secret from everyone else at the Academy. Though he had been assured by OSI investigators that should his OSI assignments get him into trouble, the Office of Special Investigations would surely have his back. Yet when he was being harassed and railroaded out of the Academy after the three star football players were terminated, the OSI agents he had been working with were nowhere to be found. That was because they too were not allowed to intervene on Thomas' behalf. Former [OSI Agent Brandon Enos](#) claims that after the incident he also was unfairly targeted and retaliated against by his OSI commander as well. Having resigned recently from the Air Force, Enos has gone public with damning evidence of how both Cadet Thomas and he were duly punished by Air Force high command.

Had the three rapists been any other Air Force Academy cadets and not top football players, Eric Thomas would never have been kicked out. The payback against Thomas for doing the righteous and honorable thing in stopping rapists from raping again shows the criminal lengths that those in power will abusively go to protect their own self-interests, in this case, the Academy's reputation and specifically its struggling football program desperate to maintain NCAA Division I football.

This abhorrent attitude and behavior has not changed in the forty years since I was a US Army officer. I observed it alive and well at West Point as a cadet attending hops, the dances the US Military Academy sponsors for its Corps of Cadets and young co-eds in the outlying local area. I distinctly recall what cadets referred to as "pig pool contests" where a group of cadets would agree to participate in a chauvinistic and degrading competition where each cadet would attempt to locate the ugliest girl at the hop and ask her to dance. After the dance all the "good ol' boys" would gather round to vote on the ugliest girl chosen and reward the cadet who dared to dance with her \$10 from each contest loser. I was appalled by this inhumane treatment and utter contempt for women, but based on observable events in the armed forces today, it appears that nothing much is changing. The culture of disrespect toward women as the prevailing attitude and exploitive, aggressive, criminal behavior against women so reprehensible then is still obviously being pathologically acted out today.

What I observed as a young man years ago is merely representative of how males in the military have traditionally treated and viewed women. Higher military rates of sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence and divorce compared to the general civilian population consistent over time all confirm a longstanding significant correlation measured between sexism, sexual violence and America's culture of violence and war. In a hyper-masculine sub-culture like the military, where physical aggression and fighting the designated enemy is mandatory, a direct link between physical violence and sexual aggression co-exists.

Despite the fact that women have been attending the academies side by side with men since the year 1976, it appears the battle between the sexes is still raging with little progress amongst America's future leaders of the free world. What does this say about America's "cream of the crop" - our finest young men as Academy cadets are so often ascribed, if they regularly denigrate women as simply their cultural norm, all soon commanding both male and female soldiers and as of next year together in combat zones no less. If anything, it sadly says the blind are still leading the blind, that disrespecting women amongst the military has such longstanding historical roots that resistance to positive change continues to prevail. If at this nation's most honored institutions of leadership widespread gender disrespect, criminal sexual activity and sexism remain the entrenched norm that has been condoned for centuries, no wonder incidence of rape and harassment throughout our armed forces today remain rampantly out of control.

Though sex crimes appear far more pervasive in US military than the US civilian population, they reflect an across the board alarm signal nationally as well as globally. The [Centers for Disease and Control](#) released findings a couple years ago that one in three women in the world is sexually assaulted by her intimate male partner.

Tradition in the military has always reigned supreme, apparently even when barbaric, brutal rape going relatively unpunished becomes an upheld traditional norm. With recent outcomes this month not favoring women, it appears the armed services are failing to correct their epidemic problem. Rape is not so much sexual as an act of violence, power and control. It is neither surprising nor shocking that men whose occupation is fighting wars have more serious anger and violent tendencies than their male civilian counterpart, be it in the US or elsewhere. Again accountability has been grossly lacking for way too long, allowing so many men in uniform to regularly get away with both disrespecting and violating women. And based on these recent trends and developments, it appears little is changing.

Joachim Hagopian is a West Point graduate and former US Army officer. He has written a manuscript based on his unique military experience entitled "[Don't Let The Bastards Getcha Down.](#)" It examines and focuses on US international relations, leadership and national security issues. After the military, Joachim earned a master's degree in Clinical Psychology and worked as a licensed therapist in the mental health field for more than a quarter century. He now concentrates on his writing and has a blog site at <http://empireexposed.blogspot.com/>.

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