

NR Comment

The Official Word

Real Life at VMI

The new realities of a coed Virginia Military Institute.

By Kathryn Jean Lopez
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Last week, the National Women's Law Center, a feminist non-profit, announced their outrage over a new pregnancy policy at the Virginia Military Institute.

According to the new rules, "a VMI cadet who chooses to marry, or to undertake the duties of a parent (including causing a pregnancy or becoming pregnant by voluntary act)" will be expected to resign as a student at the school or will be subject to expulsion. While it's always been forbidden to marry as a student at VMI, the parenthood rule is new. Students also must now sign an annual statement agreeing to abide by the policy.

The policy addresses the reality of a coed VMI, now in its fifth year. Last winter a junior cadet became pregnant. She completed the semester and has not returned (by choice). The school's Board of Visitors passed a resolution last spring instructing VMI's superintendent, Josiah Bunting, to write a policy "whereby a VMI cadet who chooses to marry or to undertake the duties of a parent, by that choice, chooses to forego his or her commitment to the Corps of Cadets and his or her VMI education."

The National Women's Law Center, a non-profit feminist legal group, warns that the policy is sex discrimination and should be repealed immediately, or VMI will wind up back where the feminists took them in 1989 — to court. (In 1997, the Supreme Court ruled that the Virginia Military Institute, which is a publicly supported school, had to admit women.)

But the "new" policy may just work (the new aspects are the written agreement and the parental, not just marital, obligations). Just ask Ben Ashmore. He had to leave VMI, giving up his free financial ride, under the marriage-prohibition rules — which have always been in effect — and he's glad he did.

Ashmore was a cadet at the Virginia Military Institute in January 1997 when his high-school sweetheart and fiancée, who was back home in Michigan, called to tell him she had gotten pregnant during his Christmas furlough.

For Ashmore, military life had been a dream since childhood. He knew he wanted to serve in the military after graduation. But after a few days of considering his options, Ashmore quit VMI.

Ashmore knew other guys at VMI who had pregnant girlfriends, wives, and kids. It wasn't allowed, but they managed it. They'd live nearby, and the students would visit them on weekends. "It would have been the easiest course of action," Ashmore remembers — but he knew it was wrong. He wasn't overjoyed, but he resigned his scholarship.

And now, two kids later, and happily married to the same woman he left VMI for, he is quick to defend

VMI's policy.

"Everything at VMI is based on accountability," Ashmore says. "Young men and women know this before attending. The 'Rat Line' (what the first year is referred to) is designed to instill the highest level of accountability, in every area of a cadet's life." And accountable is what he was when he resigned from VMI, he says — accountable both as a parent and as a cadet. The only way he could see his family, if his girlfriend moved to Lexington, would be only a few hours a week and on Sundays, or illegally. That's no way to be a father. "Not being accountable as a father would have been just as bad as not being accountable in my cadet duties, which would mean that I learned nothing" from VMI.

Funny thing is, Ashmore and the feminists who disagree with him could easily find themselves at the same cocktail parties. Ashmore worked last year as a policy adviser on the Gore/Lieberman campaign in Michigan. He is on the board of directors of the Michigan ACLU. Ashmore even takes up the feminists' concerns: While vehemently endorsing VMI's new official policy, he also cautions them to ensure it is gender-blind in enforcement — since, as he says, it's harder to find the men who get women pregnant than it is to find women who are pregnant.

If a coed military and coed military schools are to be successful, standards must remain the same. VMI has been unrelenting on this count. Before launching lawsuits, the National Women's Law Center ought to get a lesson on the essence of VMI from Mr. Ashmore. And any woman — or man — who insists that pregnancy, or the behavior that leads to pregnancy, should not bar them from remaining at VMI, ought to reconsider why they are there in the first place.