

Washington Post

June 9, 2007

Naval Academy Gets New Leader

Superintendent Leaves Legacy of Tough Policies

By Raymond McCaffrey, Washington Post Staff Writer

Almost everything about U.S. Naval Academy superintendent Rodney P. Rempt evoked passionate debate – from his policies to discourage sexual harassment, to more benign subjects, such as the way he zipped around the Annapolis campus in a golf cart outfitted with tiny flags and emblazoned with his title, “Supe.”

Critics and supporters agree that Vice Adm. Rempt, who stepped down yesterday, will be remembered for his aggressive crackdown on sexual misconduct, alcohol abuse and honor violations by midshipmen.

But they agree on little else, including whether he should be remembered fondly for promoting a culture of change at a troubled academy or loathed for kowtowing to Congress and liberal women’s groups.



Vice Adm. Rodney P. Rempt is saluted as he steps down from his position as superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy at a change-of-command ceremony in Annapolis. (Photos By Mark Gail – The Washington Post)

Under Rempt, who is retiring and was replaced by Rear Adm. Jeffrey L. Fowler at a change-of-command ceremony yesterday, the academy initiated such policies as subjecting midshipmen to routine breathalyzer tests to support a tough new alcohol policy and requiring them to take classes as part of an effort to prevent sexual harassment and assault. The result, supporters say, is that the academy is providing outstanding leaders of character at a time of war.

At yesterday’s ceremony, Rempt was commended for taking a bold stand on gender equality and sexual harassment issues and for helping to lead the academy out of a Cold War mind-set and toward the challenges of the future.

“You served as a bridge between two eras,” said Adm. Michael Mullen, chief of naval operations.

Critics – some of whom are academy alumni – argue that Rempt went too far in prosecuting high-profile sexual assault cases, such as the one involving former Navy star quarterback Lamar S. Owens. They have assailed the superintendent in message groups and even threatened to

withhold contributions to the academy after Rempt expelled Owens, who was cleared of raping a female midshipman but convicted of misconduct for having sex in a dorm.

As for the golf cart, some view it as the ultimate sign of arrogance; others see the avuncular touch of an academy graduate who liked to mix with midshipmen whenever possible.

“I think being out on that golf cart just adds a little bit of humanness and makes people smile,” said J. Bonnie Newman, chair of the academy board of visitors, an advisory committee that includes members of Congress.

It is Rempt’s humanity, not pressure from Congress, that prompted him to tackle sexual misconduct and other issues, Newman said. “For Rod Rempt, this is a matter of right and wrong.”

Rempt is known to be a man of strong opinions. Before the Owens case went to trial, Rempt was faulted for e-mails sent to the school community that a Navy judge said insinuated the midshipman’s guilt in the alleged rape.

His critics see him as a pawn of special-interest groups. Last year, the Center for Military Readiness nominated him for its inaugural “Patsy” Award, dispensed to “An Official Whom Feminists Have Used to Impose Their Policies on the Men and Women of the Military.” Rempt, according to the organization’s Web site, was “nominated for repeatedly using ‘double standards involving women’ (DSIW) in disciplinary matters, including several high-profile prosecutions for alcohol abuse and sexual misconduct by male but not female midshipmen.”

The center’s founder, Elaine Donnelly, said: “That’s building a part of his legacy, and it’s not a good legacy.”

Rempt, Donnelly said, “went overboard” in response to the congressional pressure from such feminists as Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D-Md.), a member of the academy board of visitors.

Mikulski issued a statement saying that she believes that Rempt’s “most lasting legacy at the Academy will be changing the culture regarding sexual misconduct. Under his leadership, we have a renewed emphasis on accountability and personal responsibility, which is fostering a culture that does not tolerate sexual harassment or misconduct.”

At yesterday’s event, Rempt called the moral development of the midshipmen “the most important part of our mission.” He said midshipmen should be instilled with “a clear sense of right and wrong.”

Surveys indicate higher approval ratings than previously among female and male midshipmen on such issues as whether the academy provides a positive environment for women. But Donnelly said Rempt pushed “gender quotas” so that about one in five midshipmen are now women at a time when the Navy and Marines need more men to serve in combat.

Critics also say that in targeting Owens, a prominent black midshipman, Rempt unintentionally set back the advancement of African Americans in the Navy. Next year's prospective graduating Class of 2008 has 253 women, roughly three times the number of female midshipmen in 1980. By comparison, next year's graduating class of 2008 has 69 African American inductees, four more than in 1980.

Peter Optekar, a former Navy football player, sent a letter to Rempt asking him to recuse himself from Owens's case because Rempt's handling of it would damage the recruitment of qualified black midshipmen.

"The Naval Academy has had a long history of disparity in the treatment of blacks," said Optekar, who said he observed racial discrimination when he was playing football during the early 1960s.

Rempt did remove himself from any further consideration of Owens's legal case, although he said allegations of his lack of neutrality were untrue. He made the final administrative decision on Owens's future.

Rempt declined a request to be interviewed. But Rear Adm. Bruce MacDonald, the Navy's chief lawyer, in a memo obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, sided with Rempt after Optekar submitted an affidavit saying that the superintendent insinuated Owens's guilt during a conversation with him and other alumni at an Idaho barbecue after the jury verdict.

MacDonald, the judge advocate general, said that Rempt was "reported to have said that the accused was guilty of sexual assault, that the victim was in the fetal position for two days, and that had this case not been referred to trial by general court-martial, every feminist group and the ACLU would be 'after us.'" Although not conceding that Rempt made the comments, MacDonald wrote: "The fact that he articulated an observation does not mean he was espousing an improper motivation."

Staff writer Mary Otto contributed to this report.

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