

GEN Z GOES TO WEST POINT:

How The Academy Should Adapt to Overcome Safetyism and Victimhood Culture

Kenneth A. Segelhorst

This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Faculty Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 2022.

TRIGGER WARNING

If you were born between the years of 1995 and 2015, you may find the following essay traumatizing. For the sake of your emotional safety and mental wellbeing, we recommend you immediately move to a safe space and take to social media, where you can anonymously villainize the author while bringing attention to your own fragility and victimization

Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z), the generational label given to those born from 1995 to 2015, accounts for more than 90% of the United States (U.S.) Army's junior enlisted ranks, 35% of all junior officers, and 100% of cadets at the United States Military Academy (USMA).¹ As Army leaders, it is vital that we understand this younger generation in order to effectively build the strong, cohesive, and antifragile teams the U.S. Army needs to fight and win the nation's wars.² While Gen Z is best known for being the first generation to grow up fully "connected," with readily available access to the internet and social media in the palm of their hands, it is also known for being the most physically safe generation in U.S. history.³ While at first glance these key factors may appear advantageous, and undoubtedly in some ways they are, paradoxically they have also led to Gen Z being the most hypersensitive and mentally fragile generation to date.⁴ Such characteristics are ill-suited for the harsh realities of modern warfare and present significant challenges to Gen Y (1980-1995, also known as millennials) and Gen X (1965-1980) officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) charged with leading formations primarily made up of Gen Z soldiers.⁵ While academia has largely capitulated to Gen Z's sensitive nature, the impact simply leaves their graduates ill-prepared for the real world. When military institutions such as USMA bend a knee to Gen Z's hypersensitive and fragile nature, it becomes a matter of national security. This essay will examine (1) the factors that shaped Gen Z, (2) safetyism and the rise of victimhood culture, (3) Gen Z's social tools, and (4) what steps USMA should take to overcome the challenges associated with this generation and ensure it continues to produce leaders of character prepared for the realities of modern warfare.

Key Generational Differences.

In her highly regarded book *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, Dr. Jean M. Twenge identifies several key trends that help define Gen Z, or iGen as she refers to them.⁶ These include Gen Z's delayed development,

¹ Hanks, Roland. "What Soldiers Want." *NCO Journal*. U.S. Army, February 2022. Accessed 26MAR2022.

² Kuhlman, Kwenton K. "Army Leader Practices for iGen Soldiers." Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2020. 1

³ Twenge, Jean M. *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Underprepared for Adulthood and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. New York, NY: Atria Books, 2017. 312

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Birth years that define generations slightly vary by source.

⁶ Dr. Twenge coined the term iGen for the "internet generation," those born in 1995 and later. For the sake of this essay, the term iGen is synonymous with Gen Z.

preference for online interaction, insulated nature, and general insecurity.⁷ These trends have significantly contributed to the generation's obsession with safety and its overall mental fragility.

Members of Gen Z are growing up at a slower pace than previous generations. This does not necessarily mean that Gen Z is less mature; instead, it means that Gen Z lacks the same life experience as previous generations at the same/given age. For example, an 18-year-old from Gen Z is more akin to a 15-year-old from Gen Y or a 13-year-old from Gen X when it comes to life experience.⁸ On average, members of Gen Z spend less time doing homework, working after-school jobs, volunteering, participating in extracurricular activities, and dating than previous generations.⁹ Gens X and Y counted down the days until their sixteenth birthdays, eager to obtain their drivers' licenses and the freedom they provided. Gen Z appears content with letting their parents chauffeur them around town, a task that their overprotective parents happily oblige. Their general lack of interest in, or even fear of, "adult" activities, or "growing up," has led to Gen Z missing out on unsupervised opportunities for experiential learning and development during their formative years.¹⁰

Gen Z's slower development can be attributed, at least in part, to its preference for online interaction. Not only does Gen Z spend less time acting like adults during their formative years, but they are also less social, at least in the traditional sense. Between the years of 2000 to 2015, the number of teens who got together with their friends (offline) nearly every day dropped by over 40%.¹¹ In fact, Gen Z spends less time interacting with one another in person than any previous generation.¹² While Gen Z spends considerably less time engaged in traditional human interactions during their formative years, these "digital natives" spend considerably more time glued to their online devices. Some studies show that many Gen Z teens spend 10 hours a day on their phones, tablets, and computers.¹³ It should come as no surprise then that Gen Z has demonstrated a clear preference for online interaction over traditional, offline human interaction.¹⁴ This preference for online interaction may help explain Gen Z's increased fragility. Members of Gen Z are largely in control of their online experiences. They choose the websites they visit, what videos they watch, and who to interact with on social media. Advertising technology runs their browser history and user demographics through complex algorithms to provide Gen Z with content tailored to their specific tastes. While engaging with others on social media, if members of Gen Z see something they do not like or agree with, they can simply ignore, dislike, unfriend/unfollow, block, or report that content or interaction in an online escalation of force, if you will. Gen Z's sharp decline in traditional interaction and companionship, coupled with its preference for and control of online interactions has contributed to two of the generation's defining characteristics: insulation and insecurity.

The insulated environment in which Gen Z is being raised has significantly contributed to its hypersensitive and fragile nature. As Colonel Kwenton K. Kuhlman notes in his U.S. Army War College thesis, members of Gen Z "are the products of an overly-protective society and parents who have not allowed them to fail."¹⁵ The seemingly constant presence of their parents, often referred to as "helicopter parents" for their tendency to hover over their children, has made Gen

⁷ Twenge, 3

⁸ Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up A Generation For Failure*. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2018. 148

⁹ Twenge, 32

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46

¹¹ Kuhlman, 3

¹² Twenge, 78

¹³ Kuhlman, 3

¹⁴ Twenge, 32 & 41

¹⁵ Kuhlman, 25

Z less independent.¹⁶ They have grown accustomed to their helicopter parents swooping in to solve life's problems. However, it is not just parents who are to blame for Gen Z's protective bubble; the American school system and greater society have also contributed.

The American school system has expanded Gen Z's protective bubble to encompass their formal education, further isolating the generation and failing to prepare them for the real world. The current education system incentivizes primary and secondary teachers who "teach the test" rather than provide a holistic education that will help prepare their students for challenges later in life. As such, Gen Z is spoon-fed information through rote learning techniques that more closely mirror indoctrination than the Socratic method.¹⁷ This has negatively impacted Gen Z's ability to think critically, making processing information from outside of their protected bubble a more mentally challenging and emotionally stressful undertaking.

America's devolving public education system has coddled Gen Z as opposed to challenging them to grow and develop. Educators place more focus on their pupils' feelings and self-esteem than they do on their education. Educators frequently promote students who have yet to master primary skills.¹⁸ Grade inflation has increasingly become an issue as educators reward their students indiscriminately. Similar to how many youth sports programs award trophies to all participants, educators are increasingly awarding grades not based on ability or achievement but instead on other, non-performance-based factors, such as race, gender, color, or background.¹⁹ Beyond contributing to Gen Z's insulated mindset, this behavior has arguably led to an entitlement, mindset with members of Gen Z expecting to be rewarded simply for "showing up" regardless of their performance.

American society's greatest disservice to Gen Z, and a major contributing factor to its insulated state of mind, is the propagation and legitimization of emotional reasoning over the past two decades. Nihilistic in nature, such emotional reasoning subjugates objective reasoning with one's own subjective feelings and emotions.²⁰ Rather than examine the merits of an argument, Gen Z has been taught, "Always trust your feelings."²¹ As such, this generation has a tendency to reject objective truths they find inconvenient or distressing in favor of their own, more agreeable "personal truth," which they refer to as "my truth." Since Gen Z has been taught to use their subjective and ever-changing emotions as objective evidence, they expect others to accept their personal "truth" as objective fact. Because of Gen Z's insulated upbringing, when such "truth" is challenged, it can lead to significant mental and emotional distress and insecurity.

While Gen Z's slower-paced development, preference for online interactions, and insulated upbringing have greatly contributed to its physical safety, it has also led to a general sense of insecurity and is contributing to a significant spike in teen mental health issues. Just like an immune system, children need to be exposed to challenges and stressors, especially failures, to mature into strong, healthy, and capable adults.²² By overprotecting and coddling Gen Z throughout childhood, parents, educators, and greater society are unintentionally preventing their growth and development. Parents, educators, and society's over promotion of Gen Z's self-esteem and identity-affirmation through indiscriminate reward systems and emotional reasoning has contributed to Gen Z's inability to productively engage with people and ideas that challenge

¹⁶ Twenge, 112-113

¹⁷ David, Joe. "How the American Education System Suppresses Critical Thinking." *Observer*, January 11, 2018., Accessed 06JUN2021.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ MacLeod, Adam J. "Undoing the Dis-Education of Millennials." *New Boston Post*. 09NOV2017. Accessed 26MAR2022.

²¹ Lukianoff and Haidt, 148

²² *Ibid.*, 31

their personal beliefs and moral convictions.”²³ As author Mark Bauerlein notes, this flawed pedagogy has led to any such debate being viewed not as “an intellectual contest,” but instead as “an existential threat.”²⁴

Information that challenges their beliefs quickly overcomes Gen Z’s fragile nature. Even the most protective parents and coddling educators are often unable to mend their gentle souls. While past generations could lean on companionship in the face of such hardships, Gen Z’s abandonment of traditional offline interaction in favor of online interaction has left them increasingly vulnerable to mental health issues. Studies show a clear connection between increased online activity and mental illness.²⁵ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Gen Z’s rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide are significantly higher than those observed in preceding generations.²⁶

Ultimately, Gen Z’s delayed development, preference for online interaction, insulated nature, and general insecurity has led to its hypersensitivity and fragility. Parents, educators, and society in general failed to expose Gen Z to the necessary developmental opportunities, to include challenges and even failures, required for growth and development. In essence, we failed to provide Gen Z the psychological tools required to effectively confront and overcome life’s challenges. As the older members of the generation begin to leave the insulated bubbles afforded them by their overprotective parents and coddling educators, they have largely failed to adapt to the challenges of the real world. Rather, they demand that society adapt to accommodate their hypersensitive and fragile state, extending their bubbles beyond their childhood homes and schools to encompass American society at large. This has led to the permeation of safetyism and society’s devolution into a victimhood culture.

Safetyism and the Rise of Victimhood Culture

Gen Z’s hypersensitivity and fragility has led to the rise of safetyism and the rapid spread of a victimhood culture across the country. Safetyism is a term first coined in Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt’s book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*. It describes the cult-like obsession of safety and its elevation to that of a sacred virtue by members of Gen Z and those from previous generations who coddle them. As Lukianoff and Haidt write, “Safetyism deprives young people of the experiences that their antifragile minds need, thereby making them more fragile, anxious, and prone to seeing themselves as victims.”²⁷ Safetyism has vastly expanded the traditional scopes of safety, violence, and trauma, essentially redefining each term to better suit Gen Z’s hypersensitive and fragile nature.

For those of past generations, the term “safety” has traditionally meant physical safety. However, the term has taken on new meaning for members of Gen Z. During the twenty-first century, the word’s meaning has gradually expanded to include “emotional safety” and subjective feelings.²⁸ To Gen Z, making someone feel uncomfortable is a direct threat to that person’s safety and is therefore deemed an offensive act.²⁹ However, Gen Z takes this obsession with safety even further. Through safetyism, words and ideas that make one feel uncomfortable are labelled as

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Bauerlein, Mark. *The Dumbest Generation Grows Up: From Stupefied Youth to Dangerous Adults*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2022. 168-169

²⁵ Twenge, 77

²⁶ Lukianoff and Haidt, 5

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 32

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24

²⁹ Tenge, 157

hurtful and “violent.”³⁰ Safetyism equates speech to physical violence; thus, causing someone mental discomfort, or “emotional injury” as they refer to it, is the equivalent of material injury.³¹ This has also led to the redefining of the term “trauma.” While once used almost exclusively to describe physical damage or injury, its definition has gradually broadened to encompass any “experience by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful... with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”³² In an era largely defined by identity affirmation, nearly every action or word is a potential offense. As Lukianoff and Haidt write, “...the potential for offense-taking is almost unlimited.”³³ Unfortunately, safetyism’s acceptance by institutions hoping to sooth and swaddle this softer generation has also contributed to the rapid spread of victimhood as Gen Z’s moral culture.

Moral cultures are the prevailing ideas, feelings, and responsibilities associated with morality.³⁴ This may include the ideas pertaining to grievances and how a society chooses to handle them. Moral culture in Western nations has largely revolved around honor and dignity cultures. In honor cultures, one’s reputation is sacred and even minor challenges to that honor are often met with a violent response, whether it be a gentlemanly duel or vengeful killing spree. There is a natural resistance to seeking assistance from authorities in an honor culture, as one’s reliance on others is perceived as a sign of weakness and therefore shunned. In honor cultures, victims of wrongdoing downplay and conceal such status due to the embarrassment and dishonor associated with it. While these cultures still exist around the world, to include segments of the U.S., advances in Western society, specifically with regard to law and order, have given rise to dignity culture.³⁵

A dignity culture places less value on one’s public reputation. Insults and offenses are less likely to draw a response as people in a dignity culture turn the other cheek or shrug off such slights. In a dignity culture, people are encouraged to have “thick skins.” As the childhood saying often associated with this type of culture goes, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”³⁶ However, in the event conflict escalates to an unavoidable level, people in a dignity culture are likely to attempt deescalating the situation personally through negotiation and reason. If such negotiation fails, or in the case of more serious offenses, they may appeal to authorities for assistance in mediating the situation. While dignity culture served as the U.S.’s dominant moral culture throughout the twentieth century, de-evolution has led to victimhood culture

Gen Z’s hypertensive and fragile nature and fixation on safetyism has enabled the spread of victimhood culture. This de-evolution of moral culture blends components of both honor and dignity cultures. Gen Z’s fixation on safetyism and identity affirmation makes them exceptionally sensitive to perceived slight. Any such injustice presents a potential threat to Gen Z’s safety, be it physical, mental, or emotional, and therefore necessitates a response – from others. The generation’s insulated upbringing and general insecurity leads to their dependence on authorities and other third parties to address perceived offenses against them. What victimhood culture does not take from honor or dignity culture is its most defining quality, for which the culture takes its name, the elevation and advertisement of victim status.

³⁰ Campbell, Bradley and Jason Manning, 90

³¹ Tenge, 156

³² Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt, 26

³³ *Ibid.*, 42-43

³⁴ Kavolis, Vytautas. “Moral Cultures and Moral Logics.” *Sociological Analysis* 38, no. 4 (1977): 331–44. 335

³⁵ Campbell and Manning, 14-15

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14

	Honor Culture	Dignity Culture	Victimhood Culture
Sensitivity to Slight	High	Low	Very High
Probability of Response to Slight	High	Low	Very High
Likely Respondent	Self	Self - or - Authorities	Authorities - and/or - Other Third Parties
Type of Response	Violence	Informal Negotiation/Mediation - or - Legal	Legal, Administrative, Social
Potential Sources of Stigma	Failure to seek justice - or - Appealing to authorities for assistance	Being too touchy - or - Overreacting to slights - or - Taking matters into own hands	Failure to fight perceived oppression
Victim Status	Concealed, Downplayed	Discreet, Inconspicuous	Publicized Exaggerated, Seeking Sympathy

Unlike in honor cultures, where one's status as a victim is something to conceal and downplay, in victimhood culture it is willfully publicized, promoted, and often exaggerated. It is common for members of Gen Z to take to social media to share their "truth" about perceived slights against them to garner sympathy and support. Their digital cries provide much needed emotional support via views, likes, and shares, each delivering a small dose of dopamine to the victim's brain.³⁷ Beyond accommodating the victim's weakened emotional state and general insecurities, Gen Z also leverages social media to seek support from third parties that may enter the fray on the victim's behalf.³⁸ Such mobilization attempts, if successful, can quickly transform the victim into an untouchable and vindictive bully with a long list of demands related to microaggressions, trigger warnings, and safe spaces.

Microaggressions, Trigger Warnings, Safe Spaces, and Vindictive Protectiveness

Just as an archaeologist examines the tools of past civilizations to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for their members' way of life, we too must examine the social tools Gen Z employs in order to gain a deeper understanding of their victimhood culture. Such tools include microaggressions, trigger warnings, safe spaces, and vindictive protectiveness.

Although coined in the 1970s, the term microaggression was popularized by diversity training specialist Derald Wing Sue. In 2010, Sue defined microaggressions as "the brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group."³⁹ The microaggression movement gradually gained momentum before exploding in popularity as the eldest members of Gen Z headed off to college. Examples of microaggressions may include statements such as, *"I believe the most qualified person should get the job,"* *"Everyone can succeed in America if they work hard enough,"* and such common questions as, *"Where are you from?"* and *"Where were*

³⁷ Lembke, Anna. *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*. Narrated by Dr. Anna Lembke, Penguin Audio, 2021. Audiobook.

³⁸ Campbell and Manning, 40-41

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3

*you born?*⁴⁰ While such statements and questions may be entirely innocent in nature and stated or asked with no intent to “harm,” in a victimhood culture only the interpretation of one’s act matters, not the intention of the actor.⁴¹ This misconception is reinforced by the use of the word “aggression,” which implies both intent, as one does not accidentally aggress, and physical violence. Based on Gen Z’s embrace of identity affirmation and hypersensitivity to slight, almost any interaction may be interpreted as a microaggression.

Due to Gen Z’s hypersensitivity and obsession with safety, to include emotional safety, “trigger warnings” have become increasingly common throughout academia and even U.S. society at large. Trigger warnings are verbal or non-verbal statements or signals that provide advanced warning of words, images, or ideas that people may find distressing. By providing advanced notice, trigger warnings ostensibly protect people from distress by allowing them to avoid the potentially disturbing information or content. A growing number of universities have instituted policies that require all course syllabi to include trigger warnings for any course content that could stimulate, or “trigger,” trauma symptoms, to include violence, warfare, sexual assault, rape, slavery, racism, classism, colonialism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, and any other -isms or phobias associated with perceived privilege, oppression, or wrongdoing. Many universities now allow students to forgo classes and assignments containing such material without negatively impacting their grades.⁴² Some institutions take it a step further, requiring instructors to sanitize their courses of any lectures, readings, or other content that might offend someone.⁴³ Given Gen Z’s hypersensitive nature and a victimhood culture in which people actively search for things to offend them, even the most benign statements are now falling victim to trigger warnings and censorship.

While institutions believe they are protecting Gen Z’s fragile minds with trigger warnings and censorship of potentially uncomfortable material, such actions may be causing them more harm than the content from which they are meant to be protected. Most students demanding trigger warnings are not victims of traumatizing experiences. Rather, they believe that unwelcome exposure to potentially troubling information or content will be traumatizing in and of itself. Supporting such beliefs reinforces the misconception that words and ideas can cause trauma and wrongfully gives weight to the fallacy of emotional reasoning.

For those who have endured traumatic life events, avoiding potential “triggers” is a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), not a treatment for it. Harvard’s Department of Psychology found trigger warnings to be counter-therapeutic because they encourage avoidance, which ultimately prolongs PTSD.⁴⁴ Instead, cognitive behavior therapists treat PTSD patients by intentionally exposing them to stimuli they find “triggering,” which ultimately helps them overcome their fear.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, Gen Z rejects such notions of antifragility. In fact, their self-perceived fragility is so severe that trigger warnings are insufficient. Rather, Gen Z demands entire areas, known as safe spaces, which are so secure from mental and emotional discomfort that trigger warnings are not necessary.

Just as trigger warnings have become ubiquitous since Gen Z’s arrival on college campus across the nation, so has the concept of safe spaces. The Oxford Dictionary defines a safe space as “a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they

⁴⁰ Twenge, 257

⁴¹ Campbell and Manning, 7

⁴² *Ibid.*, 75-76

⁴³ Twenge, 156.

⁴⁴ Lukianoff and Haidt, 29

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.” While the idea of safe spaces for various races, genders, sexualities, and other identity groups predates Gen Z, the expansion of safe spaces to protect against any words, images, or ideas that someone may dislike or disagree with is an unfortunate byproduct of this generation’s hypersensitivity and fragility.

In many ways, safe spaces resemble Gen Z’s childhood homes and primary schools, not only in the physical, mental, and emotional insulation they provide but also the coddling and childish activities that take place. It is common for safe spaces on college campuses to feature coloring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, Legos, nap areas, stuffed animals, and even live “emotional support animals.”⁴⁶ More akin to a child’s playroom than a therapeutic environment for seriously traumatized adults, such safe spaces cater to Gen Z’s delayed development and childlike mental and emotional states. Unfortunately, this generation appears motivated to transform society into one giant safe space where they are never exposed to anything they may find offensive, uncomfortable, or generally unpleasant.

Gen Z initiated its campaign to make all of society a safe space beginning with college campuses. In 2017, 58% of college students said it was “important to be part of a campus community where I am not exposed to intolerant and offensive ideas.” The percentage was even higher among self-identifying liberal students, at 63%.⁴⁷ As such, Gen Z has relentlessly cried and bullied its way to making entire universities safe spaces. On campuses across the U.S., Gen Z has worked to erase reminders of what they perceive to be historical injustice. They have led the charge to remove statues and rename buildings commemorating historic figures who fail to live up to Gen Z’s hypersensitive and identity-fueled moral standards. Applying emotional reasoning and a victimhood mentality, Gen Z has used their subjective feelings to posthumously condemn historic figures such as former U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, nineteenth century statesman and former U.S. Vice President John C. Calhoun, and even the author of the Declaration of Independence and third U.S. President, Thomas Jefferson.^{48, 49}

Even objectively innocent names and words are subject to attack in Gen Z’s relentless pursuit to expand safe spaces. In 2015, students at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania demanded administrators rename Lynch Memorial Hall, citing the name as a harmful, if not glorified, reminder of the practice of lynching. In reality, the building was named after former college president Cylde A. Lynch.⁵⁰ Such absurd claims in the name of safetyism and safe spaces are not limited to little known private schools. Even America’s elite Ivy League institutions are not safe from Gen Z’s hypersensitive and intolerant demands. Harvard, Princeton, and Yale have all conceded to Gen Z’s narrow-minded association of the word “master” with slavery. Gen Z rejected the fact that the Ivies’ use of the word as a title for faculty who oversee its residential colleges or academic departments derives from the Latin “magister,” meaning chief, captain, head, director, and teacher.⁵¹ The legacy of the “master” title within the academic systems of these once prestigious institutions can be traced to Oxford and Cambridge in England, which the Ivies were largely modelled. However, in 2016, these Ivy League institutions, steeped in history and tradition, dropped their “master” and “house master” titles in favor of “faculty dean” and “head of college,”

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 48-49

⁴⁸ Campbell and Manning, 82-83.

⁴⁹ In 2020, Princeton University’s board of trustees gave into Gen Z’s demands and voted to remove all references to Woodrow Wilson, which included renaming the university’s public policy school as well as a dormitory. Woodrow will had served as Princeton’s president, New Jersey’s governor, and the twenty-eighth President of the United States, leading the nation through the First World War.

⁵⁰ Shire, Emily, “The Dumbest College Renaming Debate Yet” in *The Daily Beast*, 10DEC2015 (Accessed 27MAR22).

⁵¹ Campbell and Manning, 83

titles far less likely to trigger a hypersensitive and easily offended generation.⁵² Unfortunately, Gen Z's successful war on long deceased historical figures and misunderstood words has given them the confidence to open up a new front in their campaign for safety.

Today's victimhood culture has provided Gen Z the maneuver space needed to expand its attacks beyond the deceased and to target all who offend them through a practice known as vindictive protectiveness. Campbell and Manning define vindictive protectiveness as the "tendency to punish offenders in the name of guarding the feelings of those thought to be weak or disadvantaged."⁵³ Through Gen Z's embrace of victimhood culture, such attacks are justified against even the most benign and well-intentioned misstep.

Vindictive protectiveness normally takes the form of public shaming. First, the alleged victim seeks sympathy and support from third parties. To garner support, there is a tendency to exaggerate the perceived transgression.⁵⁴ Then comes the shaming of the perpetrator. Beyond mere social pressure, other lines of effort may include administrative, legal, or economic action, to include but not limited to seeking suspension, demotion, or termination of employment. Legal actions may include the weaponization of the U.S. legal system, otherwise known as Lawfare, to seek retribution for perceived slights via criminal or civil court proceedings. Economic actions are likely to include the boycotting goods and/or services associated with the offender. The unrelenting punishment and cruelty exercised in the name of protection transforms the accuser from a potential victim to a power wielding bully, or "crybully."⁵⁵ However, the credulous nature of victimhood culture lends itself to the accuser, to whom society grants exceptional protection without objective evidence, enabling them to conduct their attacks with impunity. Unfortunately, the victimhood culture is largely impervious to objective reasoning and simple logic and many people and institutions cave to the mob's vindictive demands.

Vindictive protectiveness is enabled by social media. Social media provides a means for members of Gen Z to overcome their insecurities and fear of confrontation by allowing them to retreat into their protective online bubbles, which shield them from opposing views while providing sufficient self-confirmation. By surrounding themselves with likeminded individuals and groups, Gen Z can instantly connect to sympathetic audiences eager to take up digital arms in the name of safety and protectiveness.⁵⁶ The ensuing social media storm of likes, shares, follows, and hashtags rewards accusers with digital sympathy and self-validation. Like the star of a viral online video, the accuser feels a boost in social status as they enjoy their fifteen minutes of fame. Unfortunately, the psychological distance and anonymity provided by online social media platforms also enables a moblike mentality, lending itself to villainization, demonization, and dehumanization of not only the accused but also any person or institution not overtly signaling their condemnation of the perceived transgression as well.⁵⁷

Gen Z's shielding from and active avoidance of ideas and concepts they dislike via the internet, trigger warnings, and safe spaces, in conjunction with their reliance on emotional reasoning, has left the generation ill-equipped to provide logical arguments in support of their opinions.⁵⁸ Instead, Gen Z leverages the protections and credulity afforded to them by victimhood

⁵² *Ibid.* and Wang, Monica and Victor. "'Master' to Become 'Head of College'" *Yale Daily News*. 28APR2016 (Accessed 27MAR2016)

⁵³ Campbell and Manning, 24-25

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 133

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10-11

⁵⁶ Lukianoff and Haidt, 71-72

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 73

⁵⁸ Twenge, 306.

culture to villainize, demonize, and dehumanize those who disagree with them.⁵⁹ Gen Z is quick to publicly label their opposition as Nazis, white supremacists, racists, sexists, misogynists, ableists, homophobes, transphobes, Islamophobes, and any other “-ists,” or “-obes,” they believe will mobilize third party support, thus enabling them to sidestep the need for a logical argument. With the help of online trolls, instigators, and other third-party actors, such meritless accusations reverberate to the point of their blind acceptance as objective truth.

Gen Z’s hypersensitive nature and propensity for vindictive protectiveness makes navigating life a virtual minefield – any misstep can lead to life altering implications. Exaggerated or even false accusations of wrongdoing often result in the accused becoming a social pariah, condemned to navigate the remainder of their life as *persona non grata*. Based on the high probability and impact of offending Gen Z’s delicate sensibilities, we now live in a society “in which everyone must think twice before they speak up, lest they face charge of insensitivity, aggression, or worse.” As Lukianoff and Haidt note, “Engage in small talk and you might be guilty of microaggression... Teach about something unpleasant and you might be guilty of triggering someone.”⁶⁰ Express your religious or political beliefs and you might be guilty of violence.”⁶¹ In essence, everyone is “walking on eggshells, afraid of saying the wrong thing, liking the wrong post, or coming to the defense of someone whom they know to be innocent, out of fear that they themselves will be called out by a mob on social media.”⁶²

What West Point Can Do About It

It is no secret that American universities have become the epicenter for safetyism and victimhood culture. As Gen Z move out of their parents’ homes and onto university campuses, even once prestigious institutions such as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale have conceded to this generation’s cries for “safety.” Rather than providing an environment where students are exposed to and forced to confront different viewpoints and opinions, universities have increasingly abandoned Socrates’ legacy of challenging and questioning students as a means of forcing them to critically examine their own beliefs and provoke higher level thinking.⁶³ Further, they have largely abandoned their focus on objective reasoning and empirical evidence in favor of emotional reasoning and subjective feelings.

Unfortunately, even West Point’s thick granite walls and storied history have failed to protect this prestigious institution from the modern Zeitgeist. Caving to social and political pressures, West Point has bowed down to Gen Z’s hypersensitive and fragile nature. Over the past decades, the Academy has transformed from an institution that developed leaders and built comradery through shared hardships and discipline to a protectorate bent on safeguarding and sheltering cadets from mental and emotional discomforts. In support of this new direction, the Academy has adopted numerous practices which arguably coddle the Corps, support the expansion of a victimhood culture within the U.S. Army, and fail to prepare Academy graduates for the harsh realities of modern warfare. To ensure West Point graduates are prepared to lead America’s sons and daughters, the Academy should reassess the practices that reinforce Gen Z’s fragility and halt the spread of a victimhood culture within the Academy and greater U.S. Army.

First, the Academy should stop treating cadets like children. The Academy’s 2021 “Wellness Week” provides a perfect example. For one week in April, the apron in front of

⁵⁹ Bauerlein, 193.

⁶⁰ As quoted by Campbell and Manning, 24-25

⁶¹ Campbell and Manning, 177

⁶² Lukianoff and Haidt, 72

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 48-49

Washington Hall was transformed into what more closely resembled a 5-year-old's birthday party than the world's preeminent leadership institution charged with preparing its graduates for careers of professional excellence and service to the nation as officers in the U.S. Army. The Academy covered the apron with children's activities, from bouncy houses and other inflatable activities to petting zoos featuring baby goats and other farm stock. These enabling activities not only further stunt Gen Z's development but fuel their resistance to growing up and acting like adults, let alone Army officers. Rather, the Academy must take active measures to introduce cadets to adulthood.

Second, the Dean's directorate must put an end to practices that coddle cadets in the classroom. During the 2021 academic year, cadets had significantly more time available to dedicate to academics. Social distancing and other COVID-related protocols largely prohibited traditional cadet activities, such as drill and ceremony, mandatory meals, trip sections, and off-post privileges, thus leaving the Corps of Cadets with significantly more time for academic pursuits. Despite this, the Dean of the Academic Board instead asked departments to reduce overall course loads, cancel term end examinations, and grade "compassionately" as means of safeguarding what USMA staff and faculty viewed as cadets' fragile mental and emotional states.

The idea of compassionate grading further contributed to the Academy's issues with grade inflation. Based on interactions with cadets enrolled in MX400: Officership, the Superintendent's capstone course, several first-class cadets believe that they merit top marks simply for attending class. Slightly more reasonable cadets believed that their grades should reflect the effort they contributed to the course as opposed to their actual performance. Yet another cadet, who was dissatisfied with her grade in the Superintendent's capstone course, reasoned that her instructor should take her performance in other courses into account when assigning her a grade for MX400. Unfortunately, Gen Z's coddling throughout primary and secondary school have led to this misconception, with USMA staff and faculty reinforcing this mindset throughout the cadets' 47-month West Point experience.

Third, we must allow cadets to fail and hold them accountable when they do. Many faculty members, some of whom are parents to members of Gen Z, have taken on the role of surrogate helicopter parents, ready to swoop in and protect or extract their cadets from life's challenges. For example, in the fall of 2020, eleven cadets failed to take the end of course assessment for MX400 during the prescribed 48-hour window, resulting in a score of 0/200 on the assessment. Despite instructors having repeatedly reviewed the assessment's requirements and issuing the cadets numerous reminders throughout the 48-hour window available to take the assessment, some Department Academic Counselors (DACs) attempted to swoop in and rescue their deficient cadets. Rather than support holding these cadets accountable for their actions (or inactions), multiple DACs, to include one in the rank of colonel, came to their cadets' defense and attempted to pressure the MX400 course director into overlooking their protectorates' failures. The DACs were not the only ones who attempted to rescue these cadets. Multiple instructors began manipulating past scores and overinflating instructor point scores to rescue their cadets from their own failures. These efforts to jump in and solve cadets' problems prevents them from learning valuable life lessons.

Fourth, West Point cannot afford to legitimize the fallacy of emotional reasoning. West Point has proven unable to break cadets' habit of relying on emotional reasoning to support their arguments. Even first-class cadets base their arguments on subjective feelings and emotions in lieu of objective evidence. Their application of emotional reasoning extends beyond the classroom. During investigations and inquiries, to include those associated with the Academy's honor system, many cadets accept subjective human emotion as factual evidence. Unfortunately, several USMA staff and faculty have also fallen prey to this fallacy, accepting subjective and

emotionally charged statements as evidence on par with that of objective truths or indisputable facts.

Fifth, the Academy must reject victimhood culture, instead establishing a moral culture which draws on the positive aspects of honor and dignity cultures. Gen Z's sensitivity and acceptance of emotional reasoning has given rise to a victimhood culture within the Corps of Cadets, which has been further enabled by USMA faculty and staff's actions. The constant stream of awareness months and activities, such as Honorable Living Days, contributes to cadets' affirming their identities based on their race, gender, and sexual orientation rather than that which they all share as members of the Army profession. While meant to raise awareness and promote understanding, these activities have traditionally focused on highlighting perceived social injustices of the past and/or present. Such events reinforce a victimhood culture by sowing seeds of division and distrust that can lead to vindictive behavior in the name of social justice. Outside of these Corps-wide activities, instructors discussing critical race theory and senior faculty lecturing cadets and faculty alike about their "white privilege" further promote identity affirmation and fuel a victim mindset among minority identity groups.

Sixth, the Academy should immediately end hiring practices that award points based on factors such as gender and race over other merit- and experience-based qualities. Such practices further legitimize victimhood culture at West Point. For example, during this year's application process for the Eisenhower Leader Development Program (ELDP), the Brigade Tactical Department (BTD) placed significant weight on "Diversity and Inclusion." In fact, diversity and inclusion accounted for 20% of an applicant's score, second only to their ratio of Most Qualified to Highly Qualified ratings on the applicant's officer evaluation reports, which accounted for 35%. Still, diversity and inclusion was worth twice as much their coming from a combat arms branch (10%), twice as much as their fitness test score (10%), twice as much as their having company-level command (10%), four times as much as their undergraduate grade point average (5%), four times as much as deployment experience (5%), and four times as much as having the necessary knowledge and skills associated with the position (5%).⁶⁴ This allocation only serves to reinforce the Academy's focus on identity and the belief that many identity groups are "victims" in need of third-party intervention and support.

Seventh, the Academy should put an end to practices that support and enable a victimhood culture, to include the concepts of microaggressions, trigger warnings, and safe spaces. West Point's hyperfocus on identity has likely contributed to an increased sense of microaggression. As previously noted, many of West Point's activities, while well intentioned, actually sow seeds of divide and distrust. As a result, cadets have a heightened sense of distrust and insecurity with those from different identity groups. For example, a simple spot correction, if coming from someone from a different identity group, may be perceived as a deliberate attack based on the recipient's identity rather than a reasonable correction regarding one's uniform or lack of discipline. A cadet with an instructor from a different identity group is less likely to take ownership of his or her poor academic performance, instead believing their grade to be based on conscious or subconscious bias based on identity group. As Lukianoff and Haidt note, schools that teach about and recognize microaggressions are "encouraging students to engage in emotional reasoning and other distortions while setting themselves up for higher levels of distrust and conflict."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Brigade Tactical Department rating scale for ELDP applicants.

⁶⁵ Lukianoff and Haidt, 51

Cadets' calls for trigger warnings and safe spaces largely go hand-in-hand, as both revolve around the desire for a safety culture where they are free from encounters they find unpleasant or otherwise undesirable. First-class cadets have repeatedly requested that MX400 include trigger warnings for content related to war violence, race, prostitution, and sexual assault in the name of safety and mental wellbeing, citing the practice as commonplace in their other USMA courses. Some MX400 instructors, concerned about their cadets' fragility, have gone as far as to suggest that each lesson include a listing of potentially triggering content and allow those who may find it disturbing an opportunity to forgo the readings and associated coursework. However, such fragility will undoubtedly leave graduates ill-equipped to confront such traumatic events in real life as Army officers.

Arguably, the Corps of Cadets has expanded safe areas beyond the library and other academic buildings to throughout central area and the greater military reservation as the Corps refuses to regulate itself and enforce standards, adopting a "live and let live" mentality. This resistance to enforcing standards likely stems in part from Gen Z's fear of confrontation and desire for third parties to come to their aid, but also out of an understanding and appreciation for their generation's vindictive nature.

Eighth, the Academy must take appropriate measures to end Gen Z cadets' application of vindictive protectiveness. As is common within Gen Z's victimhood culture, cadets leverage all available means to respond to the most benign slight. Cadets have weaponized administrative systems, to include the SHARP and EO systems, as a means of targeting those they believe have wronged them. For example, one cadet enrolled in MX400 filed an EO complaint against her instructor after receiving a less than favorable grade in the course. The cadet complained that her low grade was clearly based on her race and sexual orientation. Her statement failed to include the facts that she had missed more than 30% of the lessons, failed to read either of the course's book-length case studies (amounting to two of the course's five blocks), and turned down an offer from the course director to have two different instructors anonymously grade all her previously submitted writing assignments. While this cadet's complaint held no merit, it was one of numerous accusations this cadet had made throughout her time at West Point in an apparent effort to leverage the credulous nature of victimhood culture.

While some cadets abuse and weaponize the Academy's administrative systems, the Corps reserves its most vindictive and heinous acts for social media. While cadets seek sympathy and third-party intervention through a variety of online social media platforms, their vindictive protectiveness is most apparent on the anonymous social media application Jodel. Offering complete anonymity, these soon-to-be "commissioned leaders of character" take to Jodel to villainize, demonize, and dehumanize people and policies they find oppressive or unjust. The application's popularity with the Corps provides accusers with access to an ever-present audience of like-minded cadets who are willing to amplify or pile on to the attacks in a blatant disregard for good order and military discipline.

Just as students and faculty at civilian institutions feel as if they are walking on eggshells, afraid to say or do the wrong thing, so do those at West Point. Victimhood culture has infiltrated the U.S. military. The mere accusation of being an "-ist" or an "-obic" is enough to rapidly pump the brakes on any officer's or NCO's career. Even frivolous and unfounded accusations often take months to clear and can easily derail one's career. In today's victimhood culture, staff and faculty, as well as cadets, are hesitant to step forward and enforce standards out of fear their actions may be misconstrued and used to level attacks against them. West Point can no longer afford to entertain frivolous and vindictive accusations that carry no merit other than emotional reasoning.

Doing so has an immediate and detrimental impact on maintaining good order and discipline within the ranks.

By taking timely action to address these issues, the Academy can help turn the tide on safetyism and victimhood culture at West Point. There is an adage among educators that goes, "Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child." We cannot adapt war to accommodate for Gen Z's sensitive and fragile nature. Therefore, we have no choice but to prepare them for that which we cannot change.

Conclusion

In closing, it is vital that we understand this younger generation in order to effectively build the strong, cohesive, and antifragile teams the U.S. Army needs to fight and win the nation's wars. However, empathy is different from sympathy; we must refrain from weakening the Army to appease this softer generation. While Gen Z has several redeeming qualities, it is undoubtedly the least mentally prepared for the harsh realities of combat based on its hypersensitive nature and mental fragility. Only by standing firm in the face of safetyism and victimhood culture and actively promoting an antifragile mentality can the Academy and greater U.S. Army prepare Gen Z for the harsh realities of modern warfare. Anything less would be a disservice to them and the nation that we serve.

Bibliography

- Bauerlein, Mark. *The Dumbest Generation Grows Up: From Stupefied Youth to Dangerous Adults*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2022.
- Campbell, Bradley and Jason Manning. *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.
- David, Joe. "How the American Education System Suppresses Critical Thinking." *Observer*, 11JAN2018. (Accessed 21MAR2022) [Link](#)
- Hanks, Roland. "What Soldiers Want." *NCO Journal*. U.S. Army, 28FEB2022. (Accessed 26MAR2022) [Link](#)
- Kavolis, Vytautas. "Moral Cultures and Moral Logics." *Sociological Analysis* 38, no. 4 (1977): 331–44. (Accessed 26MAR2022) [Link](#)
- Kuhlman, Kwenton K. "Army Leader Practices for iGen Soldiers." Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2020.
- Lembke, Anna. *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*. Narrated by Dr. Anna Lembke, Penguin Audio, 2021. Audiobook.
- Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up A Generation For Failure*. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2018.
- MacLeod, Adam J. "Undoing the Dis-Education of Millennials." *New Boston Post*. 09NOV2017. (Accessed 26MAR2022) [Link](#)
- Page, Oliver. "How to Leave Your Comfort Zone and Enter Your 'Growth Zone.'" *PositivePsychology.com*, 12JUL2021. (Accessed 24MAR2022) [Link](#)
- Shire, Emily. "The Dumbest College Renaming Debate Yet" in *The Daily Beast*, 10DEC2015. (Accessed 27MAR22) [Link](#)
- Swain, Jordan and James Watson. "West Point Lieutenants Lack Self-Awareness." West Point, NY: The Center for Junior Officers. (Accessed 02OCT2021) [Link](#)
- Twenge, Jean M. *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Underprepared for Adulthood*. New York, NY: Atria Books, 2017.
- Wang, Monica and Victor. "'Master' to Become 'Head of College'" *Yale Daily News*. 28APR2016 (Accessed 27MAR2016) [Link](#)