

Statement from Outgoing Board President Tom Watjen '76

June 29, 2024

Over the past seven years, I have served on the Virginia Military Institute Board of Visitors, including the last three years as the board president. While my time as president is ending, I look forward to this last year of my service as a productive member of the board and the Executive Committee.

Serving as board president has been a very rewarding experience, but it has not been without its challenges. As I step out of my role as president, I reflect on the commitment the board made to diversity-related initiatives. It is my strong belief that, for the good of the Institute and our cadets, VMI cannot afford to backtrack on the progress made in this area over these past few years.

Those close to the Institute know VMI is unquestionably a very special place, with a timeless mission and purpose, and unique form of education. All of which has contributed to our ability to produce leaders of honor and character, something always in demand but especially during these challenging times. Since the Institute's founding in 1839, we've had to adapt to a changing world while never, ever losing sight of our uniqueness. The operative word here for me is leaders: leaders who can lead in today's more complicated, diverse world.

Over the course of our graduates' careers, they will undoubtedly find themselves leading individuals from all backgrounds, races, genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, religions, and political ideologies. I can almost assure you the groups that each of these outstanding young people will command or manage will look quite different from their classmates at VMI. The failure to recognize those differences (and similarities) as a leader will almost certainly harm their ability to lead and engage all those under their command or sphere of influence. Such a failure might even derail an otherwise promising career. We can't let that happen at VMI. We must prepare our people well, not by indoctrinating, but by educating them and giving them the experiences and exposures which prepare them for life after VMI.

Some have continually questioned whether VMI should include diversity as part of our training regimen suggesting there is no place at VMI for such initiatives. They've used labels like "woke" to describe our actions or citing critical race theory ("CRT") as a focus of our efforts or referencing selective academic theories or "research" in these areas or even implying our efforts are dishonorable, an extremely offensive suggestion at VMI. None of these criticisms focus on the need to prepare our young people to lead.

From the start of my tenure as board president, and under the leadership of Maj. Gen. Wins, the board's focus has been on working toward three simple objectives which many of us live by every day. These objectives include:

- To create and foster a more diverse VMI (it's not just about race),

- To create and foster a safe and inclusive environment for all on post (again it's not just about race), and
- To assure that we maintain a safe, rigorous process for escalating issues which have even the potential to violate the Code of the Cadet (if you "see something...say something").

These simple, timeless objectives, which were approved by the board in July 2021, have guided our actions without the addition of political or personal agendas. It should go without saying that we always followed the legal requirements set by the commonwealth.

Have we always gotten the steps we've taken to achieve these objectives right? Of course not. But, we have worked hard to adjust our focus and training to ensure we achieve our objectives while integrating into the broader VMI experience. As I said earlier, for the good of the Institute and our cadets, we cannot afford to backtrack on the progress we have made in this area.

It's been an honor to serve on the VMI Board of Visitors and as its president these past three years. I fully support the superintendent and the board's past actions, and I am confident we are on the path to maintain our rightful place as one of the premier institutions of higher education in the commonwealth and the nation where we produce unparalleled leaders of character, honor and civility so needed today.

Rah Virginia Mil!

Tom Watjen '76