Honor or Dishonor: A Study of James Gould Cozzens’ Guard of Honor

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Abstract:
The conflict between the individual and the institutions is the central theme explored during the nineteen-forties by writers like James Gould Cozzens. With the American Military turning into fascist organizations inevitably, War II writers like James Gould Cozzens depicted the fascist trends in the US military organizations from their liberal and fascist viewpoints to bring about reforms. The pro-war novelists feel that it is primarily man’s duty to sacrifice his honor, dignity, relinquish his conscience and fight for the greatest good of humanity. The question raised in James Gould Cozzens’ novel, Guard of Honor is how the Army can authorize fascist activities in the military organizations. Cozens’ Guard of Honor offers an interpretation of the indoctrination, regimentation, military hierarchy and racism. This paper tries to explore Cozzens’ fascist ideology in the military organization.

Keywords: II World War fiction, fascism, liberalism, pro-war and anti-writers, Honor-duty-dignity, insubordination, racism.

James Gould Cozzens (1903 - 1978) was an American War novelist. His writings dealt with life in middle-class America. Cozzens’ works reflect a philosophy of political and social conservatism. He received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1949 for Guard of Honor. His works offer “well springs of human character and of the social pressures that help to form it” (Prescott)

Love and Duty are fundamental to Honor Guard of Nation. The mission of the U.S. Air Force Honor Guard is to represent the military as a whole and the United States as a nation, but if regular army officers and Honor Guards (military institutions) selected for this prestigious duty to the nation fail, should the nation offer military honors to these officers and commend their projects? Should the “techniques” of such Army organizations be elevated as “military academy’s concepts” of “honor-duty-country?” While this is the question raised in James Gould Cozzens, the central intelligence, Colonel Norman Ross, by the novel, Guard
of Honor conveys that “honor-duty-country” are “solid words” in abstraction, which are elevated by “public relations experts”. It is the “work of propaganda”, that “molds almost everyone’s opinion from the top level Army to the bottom”. One may wish to call “the work of propaganda” as “indoctrination”. Indoctrination could be “benevolent and protective” or malevolent and aggressive and both: Mrs. Ross feels “that if a man is qualified to be an officer, he is qualified to go to the club. I don’t see how he can be one and not the other.”[p.439]. In fact she has a “colored girl” Zinnia working for her, very reliably. She cannot accept the “ignorant and prejudiced” Colonel Carricker, who feels with the “big majority”: that a Negro is a human being all right; that is not the condition. The condition is that the big majority doesn’t mind if he’s treated fairly, a very different thing. The big majority does not want him to marry their sister. The biggest insult or oppress him; but the big majority has, in general, a poor opinion of him. It gets awfully fed up with these colored girls. (440)

“Indoctrination”, is of “most vital importance”, says Colonel Ross (275). Cozzens’ Guard of Honor offers an interpretation of the indoctrination, regimentation, military hierarchy, military equipment, military operations and racism (on both Afro-Americans and Jews, which are the most radical parts of a fascist project prevalent in AFORAD,) in the military unit of USAAF at Ocanara, Florida. Structurally, Cozzens in Guard of Honor presents a plot that represents a conventional novel, but it is not. Cozzens, as a writer, was interested in. Cozzens’ objective and impartial analysis of the military hierarchy in Guard of Honor is undoubtedly one of the best reports in the history of the American military novel. Also it was Cozzens’ interest to relay on the immensity of the military organization, its manpower, equipment and operations, as it were.

Cozzens places Colonel Ross who is “excellent, having imagination” in the very center of the novel. Ross is a mature man capable of accepting the responsibilities of his age and experience. Ross is Cozzens’ reinforcement of his view and the novel’s main intelligence. Cozzens’ ability is evident in taking characters that are molded by profession and makes us see the world through them. In Guard of Honor, Just when the plane was going down to land, lieutenant colonel Carricker sees bright lightning flares in the southern skies. Beal’s face turns stern and audibly ask him to cut it and go on. Carricker finds the Flaps coming down and he was not able to land the flight. It is Ross, who tries to mollify Beal when he orders arrest on Carricker for bad handling of T-7 (actually b-26 moves abruptly and which is run by a Negro medium bomb group). Like Cozzens, Ross’ interest was to present “as exactly” as he could about characters, events and facts as they appeared to him, even but judge them humanly and possibly to reduce the unpleasantness and bring about cordiality in his characters. It is just unique in the American war novel. Cozzens was interested in “old, experienced, professional men” because they are practical and “undelusioned” and can ‘mollify’ things when friction is caused in the interest of the organization and the community. Though Cozzens was branded a “conservative”, he did not like anti-Semitic, anti-Negro and anti- feminist views.

The main plot centers around General Beal and his deputies who are in charge of the base and Beal’s decisions regarding the training of the first African American Bomber group on the base. The novel raises the questions of civil rights in a completely fascist way. A close examination of Guard of Honor affirms Cozzens’ commitment to war and its democratic ideals of justice and equality against anti-liberal tradition of the establishment.
Indeed, the action in *Guard of Honor* revolves round a huge organization, AFORAD with almost fifty personnel, who are presented to the reader by this “central intelligence” in the form of recollections, portraits, attitudes, plans and decisions of the hierarchy of the air staff including a chain of complex human actions that lead to a climax investigation and resolution.

The opening segment introduces the major characters and their traits by examining their reactions to a minor subplot of the handling of the querulous base commander at Sellers Field: an old Regular Army colonel who is an alcoholic. Much of the chapter is spent examining Colonel Ross’ thoughts.

Two memoranda foreshadow major incidents in the storyline: the arrival of officers of Project 0-336-3, a group of African-American pilots slated to form a bombardment squadron; and an ever-expanding grandiose plan by another problem colonel to hold a surprise birthday parade ceremony for General Beal on Saturday using numerous military aircraft and troops in a flyover. The chapter ends when the general’s AT-7, in the midst of the harrowingly-described turbulence of “night times’ thunderstorm, barely avoids a mid-air collision with a B-26 landing at Ocanara. After an angry exchange with his own co-pilot, in which he impetuously puts the co-pilot under arrest, General Beal is distracted while Colonel Ross mollifies him; his co-pilot confronts the bomber’s crew, who are all African-American, and punches the black pilot in the face. Events quickly begin to pile up early the next morning. Indignation among the newly-arrived African-American pilots, because of the assault and the Executive Officer’s arbitrary decision to create a separate officer’s club for them, results in a protest being organized.

General Beal has cooled off and wants to quietly overlook his co-pilot’s behavior. A black newspaper reporter shows up on base at an inopportune moment. The old alcoholic commander at Sellars Field has committed suicide after General Beal’s visit. Two generals are due to arrive in the afternoon from the Pentagon, one bearing a high decoration to be presented to the black pilot for prior heroism, the other investigating the suicide.

Ross was “concerned about the progress of the war”, though it is “nowhere connected with his duties” (62). Beal was a great pilot, who could “blow off B-17 to bits”, “fix and fly P-35. Colonel Ross realizes that Lieutenant Colonel Beal’s “temperament and training fitted him to state the problem” and unreservedly reply: “I can” (22). Ross describes Beal’s triumph of flying the unflyable “P-35 to Mindanao safely” and his promotion from Lieutenant colonel to Brigadier General: Colonel Ross knew Beal’s Colomb Bechar assignment, and his immediate one “with Ninth Air Force” in which the young fighter pilot upheld “a strong and well-seated opposition”.

While this is a portrait of Beal and the fighter pilots of the AAF, Colonel Ross’ yet “another example before him” is Captain Nathaniel Hicks, who had been ordered to prepare the material on Army Air Forces Field Manual One-dash-Fifteen: *Tactics and Technique of Pursuit Aviation*, but cannot find “two fighter pilots in complete agreement about the text of the proposal. The text lacked authenticity because the people “who produced it had no experience in actual combat” (24). When Hicks asks Major Post to read the Manual, he thinks “it’s crap.”
Nathaniel Hicks’s civilian talent helps him to instinctively identify and “develop themes of interest to men in general” and grasp their very limited resources of reason, patience and equanimity” (26) Hicks had a “special perspicacity” to share people with limited resources. Hicks sees the Major having a difficulty with the straps, and he instinctively understood that the Major was “disgusted with himself and his own irritability”. He doesn’t offer to help for the fear that any help “may be out of the way in the major’s attitude or remarks”(27) Caught in the war, both Major Post and Hicks knew they would “drafted anyway”, and in their present circumstances at AFORAD “were deeply and disturbingly aware that, this they would not have chosen”(28) Ross tells there “was nothing that they were elected to do and then did...Major Post’s arm with a burst of 7.7 mm Japanese bullets to landing Nathaniel Hicks in this sweat-soaked underwear on a cot in the dark at Sellers Field”(29).

Ross describes how the zeal for right and justice, and simple patriotism places people as “how you came to be where you were, involved only motives and choices of your own.” (28) Hicks knows that he “would go back to the fairly comfortable rooms he shared with a captain Duchemin and a Captain Andrews in an old hotel at Ocanara called the Oleander Towers”(29) and not his home at Connecticut. The next day he would be at his office and share his time with Captain Duchemin and a lieutenant Edsell.

Second Lieutenant Amanda Turck “is in a dither”, getting the Enlisted Women’s Day Room policed up” and scurry it around and the mess and so on, as Mrs. General was going to make an inspection”(39). Little Hogan, a little kid who had been just out of the hospital was going to greet her. The little girl blurs to Mrs. General that Lieutenant Lippa was upstairs. Mrs. General with head off having “a few rum-and cokes over the officers Club or somewhere” was not really tight. She was big hearted and tells Lippa “to call her Sal”.

In the meanwhile, “Colonel Mowbray had been hanging around over at Classified Files wanting some nonsense that wasn’t there anyway but cannot get one.” (29) Colonel Mowbray made more trouble to Ross than anyone else. His ineffective work resulted in his immediate removal. As Ross puts Mowbray put every consideration put aside and would “hew to the line” and “let the chips fall where they may”. Twenty years that Ross had seen he found it difficult to say if Colonel Mowbray “became wiser or just twenty years older”. His own experience warns him.

Colonel Norman Ross went to the Mexican border and in 1917 to France, where he ended as an Air Service supply officer at the Third Aviation Instruction center at Issoudun.” (52)“Things worked well”, he was the youngest pilots of the Aero Squadron called “Captain Ross Grandpa”, ‘loved’, ‘respected for his feats’, especially when flying was set apart as full of “unexampled dangers”. For those who survived it was bondage. Major Ross returned to the law and was elected county judge, but could not sever his connection with Issoudun flyers. “As a matter of course they expected whatever support they thought he could give to projects that advanced the interests of military aviation.”(53). Ostensibly when the new war broke out, he was given a colonel’s commission for his services were required urgently. But his wife Cora was like most women “against this male world”. He never did what she wanted him to do as it looked foolish for him in agreeing to her with such swiftness. The Army’s need for him was urgent and the judge introduced the word “duty”, to it and would go off on duty. He resolved to go higher and do anything for the organization. The Assistant Secretary of War asks Colonel Ross “for an imminent reorganization of the War Department”
as the Air force needs to be in a strong position with broader scope and new openings.”(57)

By the time the reorganization took place in March, Ross was left with a month in which time he would walk down to “Munitions Building”, saw a few “secretaries, and executive officers”, some afternoons he would take a taxi to the “Army and Navy Club” for lunch. Ross understands when the reorganization was accomplished; he had to pull strings to get an appointment with the Commanding General. When he finally does Ross shows to the general, the general affronts him. When Colonel Ross (you couldn’t be sure how having three stars might affect a man) ceremoniously advanced, halted, and saluted, the general, still warm and red, barked; “Skip all that, skip all that!

When the mislaid general affronts him Ross was not affronted. Ross explains that he had reported for duty a month before, but the officer who sent the orders had been transferred. The general wants Ross to the talk to major:

Colonel, I can’t handle the individual assignments for all Air Force personnel. You must see that. Tell the major out there that I want your case looked into. The Chief of Appointment and Procurement Division must know something. I don’t. Now, why have I got to the one to explain all this? I wish you could tell me- “He changed his face into the grin for which he had been noted in less trying times “Please don’t go away sore, Colonel” (60) Ross in one sense felt that the majority did take care of him. Ross would be glad to serve anyone anywhere he was employable. ON the bulkhead instrument panel Beal checks the “airspeed indicator leaning it until it rested on one hundred and twenty” (45). Carricker looks at the instrument panel clock and finds that it did all right. Colonel Ross read a letter Order draft beginning:

That it was an assignment of certain buildings in the AFORAD for the “use of officers” who were reporting to the Area that week. Ross was also concerned being wartime any material pouring if someone in Germany ordered changes in the fighter defense tactics. His son Jimmy was in England as a B-17 bombardier. Reading all the listed column he takes a fresh sheet and read: To: CO’s ALL AFORAD & Ocanara AAB Tactical Units. Subject: Many Happy Returns. Ross knew that this was colonel Mowbray’s surprise scheme to greet general Beal on his forty first birthday, with an elaborate parade at the Retreat. While this is sensational news, Hicks announces that some members of the Air Staff in Washington want people to know about AFORAD. Beal wants Hicks to put the AAF story about the good work done by the Military Academy.

It is Ross who checks that no friction is caused by Mr. Bullen over Colonel Mowbray’s stupid deeds. He is a great mollifier. Almost every deed of the officers at AFORAD is brought to the attention of Colonel Ross. Ross was almost trying to dismiss the matter of Carricker’s arrest; Mr. Botwinick is one officer who is reposed trust to name the officers for certain jobs at the base station. Yet he never uses his position to win some advantage and play favorites with headquarters personnel. He lays bare the protest of the Black personnel.

About the possibility of getting some colored non-corms for the Base Service Unites temporary Botwinick in order to avoid friction on charges of Quarters says “I was wonderingly assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron_”(139) Botwinick tries his best to see that every job went to the most competent and reliable man available. Also Botwinick has a lot of spies to report any matter at the base. Luke Howden wants to get to the bottom of this subversive plot which appears meaningless to Ross.
The next thing Colonel Ross announces is “This office is getting a new table of organization. I have Major Hill-He’s at Boca Negra this week- on technical inspection and he needs an assistant”(373) Ross was sure to do certain things of the Association member in good standing thought nothing of Bus’s outbreak at the breakfast table about turning in his suit-this language of sports or the locker-room was significant. It declared a whole ethos or set of attitudes. On, brave old Army team!”(374)

The downing of the paratroopers becomes real. Colonel Ross glimpses “dark hatches opening their flanks, big shadows fled out across the field dribbling behind. Like an evacuation of their cylindrical steel guts, string of tumbling paratroopers... (532)Ross felt a subdued mortification. It was all despicable. This would have to be accepted. This was one of the limits of human endeavor, one of those boundaries of the possible whose precise determining was...viewing with no nonsense the Here and the Now. (532). “Down heartedness was no man’s part. A must stand up and do the best he can with what there is” (534).It wasn’t a new discovery. Life, seemed mostly a “hard luck story” “complicated beginning nowhere and never ending,” “unclear in theme and confusing in action”, unless “somebody figures it out” (535)

It was all out there, the “sarcastic cracks about the military service, ‘the follies, ineptitude, and false principles of General Beal, Colonel Mowbray, Colonel, Ross, Major Whitney, and anyone else Edsell happened to be ranked by”(584)They were all in a jam and all because Colonel Carricker hit a black. He made trouble for everyone from Ocanara to Washington.

Ross admits that embarking a “serious military campaign” in the army needed indoctrination, for e.g. Colonel Ross remembers “an indoctrination of American arms” (276) in the song of the Civil War which sums up the attitude of the heroes of that war, how infuriated they were about the war: “When the fighting began the bitchers would fight all right. Indeed, the event, the battle, proved that - still bitching, only more so; despising their officers still more; hating the Army still more, and regarding order still less- they would usually fight to somewhat better purpose, ,man for man, than whoever was opposite them.”(276)Colonel Ross doubted if anything can triumph better than indoctrination.

The aim of the Army man is to “get out as soon as possible and go home. With the enemy in the fighting distance, that until the enemies are killed or frightened to quitting, he would never get home” (275). Colonel by his long association with Army understood that airmen of the Army between the wars were a high-strung lot. It was “natural” and “inevitable” for the endless risks of aerial flights that these men live through. It was a “condition of survival” amidst the risks of sudden death.

How can the Army authorize fascist activities of such military organizations in the country, the question raised in James Gould Cozzens’ novel, Guard of Honor. Hierarchy, subordination and indoctrination are unbecoming of the military service when both the military leader and the military organization fail. While the question centers round the organizational structure of AFORAD, a unit of the USAAF, it is necessary that we understand its high ranking military leaders, their personal traits like integrity, character, their possible influence and resources to achieve organizational goals, their problem-solving decision making skills, their effectiveness in jobs, their personal priorities, their value systems and success in personal life. Suffice it to say “it is a portrayal of the way a large institution is run, filled with detailed knowledge about a vast range of military jobs and human types”. All
this is brought to light when “things are not easy” at Operations and Requirements analysis Division, Sellers Field in Ocanara, an Army Base, (which would have been a “winter resort” if there was no war coming) at Florida, which has been in its existence for six months and as a consequence of bad handling of its resources by Colonel Woodman, has almost sunk.

It is a dishonor to the nation if a “very regular Army man” of such an organization, the escort of honor, (Colonel Woodman) irresponsibly manages and sinks the military unit, AFORAD at Seller’s field, to be queried by Washington Headquarters on its workings; it is a dishonor, if the escort of honor dies due to his “misconduct in the line of his duty” (254); it is a dishonor, if the escort of honor (Lieutenant Colonel Benny Carricker) punches an African American pilot on his nose for moving the Bomber plane B-26 under his plane on the runway, leading to a segregation crisis; it is a dishonor, if the escort of honor (Colonel Mowbray) secretly orders for separate black civilian club facilities, which is against AAF directives of AFORAD, declared by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1941. Owing to the incompetence of the organization, there is a surprise arrival of the (chief of Air Staff James’s) paratroopers on a field visit to investigate the case of suicide by Colonel Woodman and honor a black civilian, Prescott, Asst PRO for being “accredited in Washington” to do a story on the “bomb group project” (302). All this points to a chain of complex human actions of the military leaders and the range of their jobs in AFORAD, the large military base and the futility of words like honor, duty and country. In fact these were as “set of attitudes” of the “brave old Army” (374)

Nathaniel Hicks obliges Beal’s order as he likes Beal’s simplicity and his integrity towards the “Old Man” [Washington], knowing full well that stories with “such elevated Military Academy’s concepts” like “good”, “honor”, “duty” and “country” sound fine in books and papers, but in reality “everyone knew what the words meant.” (67)

The novel is split into two groups of characters on their differences of the military academy’s concepts of honor, duty and country. Epstein contends Cozzens’ view. There is also a running gunfire against intellectuals in Guard of Honor. “Few ideas,” General Beal reflects, “could be abstract enough to be unqualified by the company they kept.” (67) Mr. Bullen from the North, “well-informed about matters” who lived for the best part in army of twenty-five years says: “If there are differences of opinion, I think most of them are differences that always arise between those who have to deal with fact and those who are free to deal with theories.” (311) Cozzens’ characters often speak brutally, not because they are brutes, but because Cozzens “apparently thinks this is the way men talk.” The incident is used by Cozzens as backdrop for his analysis of the efficiency and association between white American officers and Black Civilian officers. What Cozzens did not like is “raw deal”. “I have no theme except that people get a very raw deal from life. “This is the basis of the novel Guard of Honor the “trouble involving relations between blacks and whites out” (310) at Ocanara.

At Ocanara, a few weeks before General Beal assumed command, Mr. McCormack provided bus service between downtown Ocanara and the Airbase and the new AFORAD area. Colonel Mowbray had apprehensions about this kind of business. McCormack was a “big stockholder” and “a leading citizen of Ocanara, respected, well-to-do, consequential;” (100) who got contracts from Waters. Waters would lease vehicles for “extra bus service” to the “Transit Company for operation”. (101) Colonel Mowbray misapprehends the whole
thing and obviously feels that Mr. McCormack has a deal with Waters, who was getting “handsome profit for passing government property to someone else” (101). While there was not the faintest “intention of defrauding” the War Department by McCormack, Colonel Mowbray’s ignorance is exposed in the incident. While the whole thing is protected from not being known to Washington by Colonel Ross, the Ocanara *Morning Sun* reads a memo on the birthday business of Beal as “classified Confidential”.

In *Guard of Honor*, Norman Ross, rose to “an officer” in the “militia regiment” had his “abilities” more “widely recognized in organization and administration?” (52). Though he resigned from the National Guard, his support for the commission projects, “advanced the interests of military aviation,” on the projects. The term Establishment referred to a visible dominant elite social group that holds power of the nation or authority of an organization. As Frederick Bracher says Cozzens “has a high degree of sensitivity to the institutional side of life” and displays a “profound respect for the responsible citizens” of the establishment “who actually make civilization work”. The central figures in his books are primarily “professional, middle-class white men”, such as Abner Coates in *The Just and the Unjust*, Doctor George Bull in *The Last Adam*, Ernest Cudlipp in *Men and Brethren*, Norman Ross in *Guard of Honor*, and lawyer Arthur Winner in *By Love Possessed*, who confront issues such as Honor, duty, ethics and Law in their careers while at the same time attempting to compromise their principals and the emotional demands of their personal lives. Almost every character and incident bears reality to his experience. His dedication to the craft is at the expense of his experience. The heroes of Cozzens novels are from upper middle class American society. They are well educated, highly intelligent professionals and mature men of sensibility, taste, discrimination. They are natural aristocrats and “Men of reason” Capable of acting with rational authority in a significant way… His characters exist in full functional relationships with some aspects of American life. Mal adjustments, rebellion, alienation appear in Cozzens fiction but it is to bring order to disorder and to absorb all extremes and all maladjustments into a normative way of life.

Noel Perrin deemed *Guard of Honor* “probably the best war novel of the twentieth century.” The novel balances a vast cast of intricately enmeshed characters as they react over the course of three tense days in September 1943 to a racial incident on a U.S. Army airbase in Florida. The reader is acutely aware of the war raging abroad and the effect it has had, or will have, on the multitude of servicemen who populate Cozzens’ immense canvas. As Noel Perrin commented in *The Washington Post Book World*: “There is material for two or three hundred movies in *Guard of Honor*. *Guard of Honor* deals with two of the toughest subjects of his day—the nature of war, and racial intolerance (*Time magazine*). It deals with a violent incident in a single military establishment under a clear-cut hierarchy of command. Although the war is heard in the background, Cozzens “directs our attention not man fighting, but to man commanding, obeying, intriguing, and to man refusing to command, obey, intrigue”. (Millgate 188)

Major General Beal achieves overseas command through his deep sense of Duty and Integrity to the military. Colonel Ross and Captain Nathaniel Hicks are upper middle class moral men who voice Cozzens’ comments and judgments all through the novel. Cozzens brings out frustration, disappointment of the officers and their little dramas of everyday life, love, hatred, jealousies, the competitive spirit levelled at minor goals; the interrelation of
men, whose ranks are more or less due to the chance of war. Race disintegration in *Guard of Honor* is arguably more germane in the (fascist like) directives from Washington.

Cozzens’ colonel Ross realizes that the gigantic machine of the army might injure the individuals but the gravity of the war threat requires a “postponement of individual freedom.” On the other hand, General Beal, believes in hierarchies and subordination. The main plot centers on general Beal and his treatment towards blacks. Edsell illustrates Cozzens’ settled conviction that change or reform of an institution does not lead to progress. Col Ross’ rational judgments present a realistic view of the facts. His emphatic declaration that segregation “won’t change to-day, tomorrow, this week. A man cannot choose to see what he cannot see” (440) reveals his pragmatic view of the problem. Ross and major General show utter disregard for the traditional values or moral decency.

James Cozzens was a great novelist of the American upper class establishment; he became a symbol of “The Establishment” and lampooned those against authority and “the system” within the military or otherwise. He supported the war effort and treated liberal intellectuals as villains of the military system. The anti-liberal stance of Cozzens, therefore, qualifies him to be acclaimed as the “ideological neo Fascist” of the War literature.

**WORKS CITED**


