

Corrected Copy:

**An open letter to the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) Board of Visitors (BOV)
from Mike Staso '79**

CF: Virginia Secretary of Education
Alumni Free Speech Alliance
Governor Glenn Youngkin

Dear Members of the VMI BOV:

I respectfully submit this open letter, requesting that it be placed in the BOV public records and that you, as the BOV, respond to the issues it contains. The attachments to, and the links within this letter provide you with the underlying evidence and justification to support my call for you to execute your statutory responsibilities and take appropriate action to address the issues it surfaces.

I additionally request that all discussions that address the Human Resource process and organizational structure issues that it contains be covered in public, rather than private session, providing the tax paying citizens of the Commonwealth and any other concerned parties the opportunity to scrutinize the response the BOV takes, as is their right.

In the past, the acting BOV Secretary, COL Bill Wyatt, has either not posted any public comments to the Board in a location that is readily accessible, or they have instead been posted to a site where they are essentially unfindable without the searcher putting in a significant amount of effort to locate them. In response, I request this letter and any others sent to the Board be published in a readily accessible public on-line location along with the minutes of the meeting. This request complies with the mandate contained in Commonwealth Statute § 2.2-3707, which requires that all documents made available to the Board are also made available to the public at the same time as they are provided to the Board.

Here is the Open Letter:

The bedrock of the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) is its honor system. A single violation receives a single sanction – **dismissal** – no quibbling, no “loopholes,” no

excuses. One must now seriously ask: “Why are cadets held to this standard while those who run VMI appear to “get a pass?”

On 10 January 2024 the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) Chief of Staff, John Young, sent out a message (**enclosure 1**) to the VMI faculty and staff that he was “pleased to announce that COL Bill Wyatt will assume the role of Executive Officer (XO) to the Superintendent [Major General (MG) Cedric Wins] effective immediately.”

Those who’ve followed VMI and its aggressive repression of free speech and viewpoint diversity the last several years under MG Wins will readily identify Wyatt in his former job at the Institute’s communications helm. In this role, he served as the central protagonist in the Administration’s efforts to take control over the cadet run newspaper, *The Cadet*, or, failing that, doing just about anything and everything possible to force it to shut down or have it discredited in the public’s eyes. Several concerns exist over the mechanics of how this announced change in jobs occurred, specifically over whether or not this movement adhered to VMI’s own ethics policies or was in violation of the Commonwealth’s Human Resource regulations, or both.

Many alumni, parents, Cadets and members of the public are asking how VMI could “promote” this individual, who was, as substantiated in VMI’s own documents, the principal architect and accuser in questioning the honor of its own VMI Cadets after they received several Virginia Press Association (VPA) [accolades](#) last year for their journalistic endeavors. These awards included one which was [the highest](#) that this organization can bestow, which, up until this instance, had never before been awarded to a student newspaper. Wyatt’s proactive efforts to control or discredit *The Cadet* newspaper in order to bend it to the VMI administration’s will, MG Win’s attempt to [cut any financial support](#) to it or individual cadets unless he approved such, and the tactics which he used to pursue these efforts, were blatantly wrong, if not illegal, in almost anyone’s “book.” One need only read the detailed accounts of what transpired in *The Cadet*, starting with the article [Is VMI where freedom of speech goes to die?](#), and watch the [accompanying video](#) from the Board of Visitors (BOV) meeting on this topic to see the depths of this subterfuge and malfeasant behavior. VMI’s own records document COL Wyatt’s overt and covert actions to deliberately promote and advance negative reporting by [Cardinal News](#) and the [Washington Post](#) while creating the VPA controversy. They also show evidence of his intimidation of at least one emotionally vulnerable cadet reporter in this process.

Reviewing these articles and any number of documents and accompanying official VMI records, along with [formal complaints](#) by the Alumni Free Speech Alliance (AFSA) and others, deepens one’s understanding of why one VMI BOV member, [Teddy Gottwald](#), drug the BOV Executive Committee (EXCOM) kicking and

screaming to the decision to request an investigation into what occurred regarding the perceived efforts by VMI to discredit its own Cadets. In response, MG Wins, with full support of the VMI BOV President, Tom Watjen '76, [deliberately took control of the "investigation"](#) over these "irregular" actions rather than having it being performed by a truly independent entity or individual, as would be appropriate in such circumstances. MG Wins subsequently assigned the investigation to someone he directly supervises, and that he had just recently promoted to the position of VMI Inspector General (IG). This "investigator" was an individual who was undeniably abiding to MG Wins for her job, was much lower in "rank" than he, and was undoubtedly aware of the fact that he, MG Wins, was a potentially culpable individual in the alleged "persecution" and potentially illegal actions executed by VMI and his Communications Director against VMI Cadets and *The Cadet* Newspaper. This decision hardly protects VMI from accusations of impropriety in its conduct of the investigation.

It appears that despite efforts on the part of many with personal involvement in the "affair" [to contact the IG](#) and the BOV to provide firsthand knowledge of what transpired, few if any were ever contacted or interviewed during the investigation. For example, none of the current or former Cadets on the newspaper, nor its alumni advisor, were ever approached for their view of what transpired. On the surface, this would lead one to surmise that only a one-sided accounting of what occurred was recorded. Now that the investigation is "complete," MG Wins refuses to release its findings and recommendations, and he, along with the BOV, are keeping the content of this report secret from the public and other concerned parties; not-in-the-least VMI alumni and Cadets. It has been reported that MG Wins even refused to provide the actual IG report to the BOV Executive Committee, citing that the document constituted his "working papers," and were therefore considered confidential and not subject to release. His verbal version would have to suffice.

This investigation is but another in a long list of poor command decisions on the part of the Superintendent since his appointment, which, in the "real" Army would have most likely resulted in a statement of "loss of confidence in his ability to lead" from his superiors and his prompt removal from his position of command authority. This leads us to the ambiguity of COL Wyatt's re-assignment. Was he promoted or demoted for his actions? Let's peek behind VMI's curtain to find the answer to this question and look at the facts as well as the serious ethical, and possibly legal, questions they raise.

Whether to support the Superintendent's ego or another reason, VMI changed "Executive Assistant to the Superintendent/BOV Secretary" (**enclosure 2**) to "Executive Officer to the Superintendent" when it [advertised back in September](#) to

backfill the former occupant, a Lieutenant Colonel (LTC). In the Army, a “regular” Four Star General would not be authorized an aide with the rank of Colonel, much less a Two Star such as Wins.

The official Position Description (PD) published in the [Job Announcement](#), per [Virginia Department of Human Resource](#) (HR) Management records, shows the individual hired would merely assemble information, review correspondence, coordinate meetings, record minutes of the VMI BOV meetings, liaise with selected internal entities, perform other administrative duties appropriate for an assistant as directed by the Superintendent, and supervised a single administrative assistant for the BOV. This would definitely be considered a demotion on the surface from COL Wyatt’s previous position as the Director of Communications and Marketing, as well as VMI’s Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Officer.

The “tricky wording” in Young’s announcement, however, speaks to a much larger potential role within the organization, having Wyatt “**oversee a broad range** of administrative support functions **as directed by the Superintendent.**” [emphasis added]. A pretty ambiguous statement, by design? Is this representative of a Trojan horse that could give Wyatt even more power to do the Superintendent’s bidding in the future? That outcome would cause grave concern on the part of many concerned parties if it were to be the reality considering what has transpired in the past.

After Young’s announcement [raised several questions](#) with some VMI observers, VMI suddenly “updated” the organization chart on 18 January 2024, just eight (8) days after COL Wyatt was installed in the position (**enclosure 3**). The update significantly changed both the position title and its responsibilities. The new organization eliminated the lesser “Executive Assistant/BOV Secretary Position” in favor of the new XO position COL Wyatt now occupies. The Secretary to the BOV is now a separate, vacant position, resulting in both an administrative assistant and a secretary to the BOV. This effective doubling of administrative support to the BOV is curious considering it only regularly meets four times a year. Did the new position result from an assessment that the COL can’t handle the same workload as the junior LTC he replaced, or will COL Wyatt just be extremely busy continuing to do MG Wins’ bidding, leaving insufficient time to attend to other duties?

These staffing changes normally require justification from a validated workload or classification study, conducted by an HR professional. Did such occur here? MG Wins modified one position to the point it constitutes an entirely new one that should, ethically, be re-competed. He unquestionably “split” the old position into two separate ones, and must now recruit, and pay, an additional employee as a result. Talk about institutional “bloat.”

Do these actions adhere to the procedures governing state employment? On the surface, this entire transfer appears suspicious from a number of angles. Those interested in competing for the position would have been required to follow the hiring rules and substantiate their capabilities to satisfy the published job requirements. They would then subsequently have been scored against that criteria, presumably by an independent selection board. Wyatt, on the other hand, was apparently hired into the position regardless of the others who applied, who may have been more qualified, and then the job title and responsibilities were promptly changed thereafter. VMI received, and supposedly has been fairly, and ethically, considering applicants for the position since September. Under the published PD and Human Resources policies in place, that is definitely not what appears to have happened. Are there records even showing COL Wyatt applied for that job, and was evaluated the same as the other applicants in the selection process?

The salary range advertised for the position COL Wyatt filled was \$120,000 to \$130,000 annually, along with a competitive benefits package, but it appears COL Wyatt will be paid much more. He loses the BOV Secretary workload, yet receives a significant pay increase, and becomes one of the highest paid employees at VMI. [Public records](#) show COL Wyatt's 2022 Communications and Marketing Director salary was \$119,000. The [same source](#) shows VMI paid the incumbent Executive Assistant to the Superintendent/BOV Secretary (now the XO) \$159,961.00 that same year. According to GovSalaries.com, "This salary was 180 percent higher than the average and 244 percent higher than the median salary in Virginia Military Institute." COL Wyatt appears to be receiving at least a \$40,000 annual salary increase as a result of his move. This makes it readily apparent that Wyatt didn't get a demotion, at least in terms of compensation.

Where will this money come from? VMI continues to avoid revealing much of its total salary and compensation information, such as the \$656K+ annually paid to MG Wins, of which approximately 47% (and estimated \$308,437) is [paid by the VMI Alumni Agencies](#) without the knowledge of many of its members. Alumni also footed the bill for Wins' recent \$100,000 and \$50,000 bonuses "to boot." This is also not well known.

Given these facts, it's now reasonable to question MG Wins' motivation regarding Wyatt's "transition." Why was this approach chosen to "deal" with COL Wyatt following the conclusion of the investigation? Was the BOV told "not to worry," and that he would be moved as a result of his actions, only to be deceived as well, or are they complicit in this outcome?

Did MG Wins do this to show the Governor, the BOV, and everyone else that **he** runs VMI as he chooses, and rather than chastise Wyatt for his pursuit of actions against Cadets and *The Cadet* Newspaper, he instead can “reward” him and sing his praises as he pleases, particularly since the results of the investigation discussed above have now been swept under the rug and will likely never see the light of day? After all, MG Wins previously stated he fully supports all the actions COL Wyatt took regarding *The Cadet* and those involved. Was this move, and the way it was made and advertised, a means to pay back loyalty?

What would VMI do to a Cadet who engaged in such deceptive behavior?

What of the Cadets on the newspaper staff and alumni whose honor was questioned so publicly? Wyatt’s actions aiding the press wrongly “convicted” the former Editor-in-Chief of *The Cadet*, now a Marine Corps Second Lieutenant, by name, of participating in plagiarism and deceptive reporting about the Cadet Counseling Center (CCC) at VMI in the *Washington Post*, *Cardinal News*. The allegations [proved false](#), but his honor and reputation were maligned as a result.

Where is the reward for those fearless cadets who fulfilled their “obligation” to “Speak truth to power” in the past while reporting in *The Cadet* newspaper? MG [Wins told attendees](#) at Governor Youngkins’ recent Free Speech Summit that VMI sets the standard on this topic within the state, at least according to reports of his comments which were so highly praised in the recent [Richmond Times-Dispatch article](#) written by one of VMI’s own public relations staff. For those alumni and the public who are “in the know,” this reporting is unabashedly hypocritical considering VMI’s attitude and behavior towards the cadet run newspaper.

As discussed above, the VMI Superintendent, COL Wyatt, and others are likely engaging once again in deliberate acts of misdirection and outright deception. Under its current President, the BOV, which should be performing its [statutory oversight obligations](#), continues to trivialize and ignore these and other related activities on the part of MG Wins and his administration. This borders on dereliction of duty on its part.

Willful deception **does matter** in the VMI world and in the honorable world of VMI men and women---*at least it once did.*

Here is what the outside world sees of this: MG Wins, once again, “won” against his old Corps, mostly white, critics, and the “martyr,” Bill Wyatt, receives a public promotion for all his past “good” work at VMI.

Here is what the Cadets in barracks see: COL Wyatt was promoted for his past efforts stamping down concerns of cadets, alumni, parents, and other interested parties, so there is no use in questioning or disagreeing about anything at VMI; you'll get no satisfaction. We can personally attack you, impact on your future career or current cadetship, and all those responsible will ultimately be rewarded for their efforts. If you think the BOV is in control, and will protect your rights, you're naive. In short, the BOV effectively works for me (MG Wins). I can take any actions I so desire, and I am impervious to any repercussions or negative consequences. Unlike Claudine Gay, the former disgraced President of Harvard, I'll never be forced to resign or be fired.

This promotion is a deliberate signal by MG Wins and the VMI administration that Wins' critics "got it wrong," while the *Cardinal News* and the *Washington Post* got it right. These accumulated actions represent all that is bad about VMI today. Let's not forget that, regardless of the reader's view of the matter, the former Superintendent, GEN Peay, was forced to resign by then-governor Northam over unsubstantiated allegations made in the *Washington Post* (and refusing to remove a statute) **before** any "investigation" was actually conducted.

Was MG Wins technically allowed to do what he did in promoting COL Wyatt? The answer is likely "yes." Was he ethically right? That answerer is a resounding "NO." VMI's own ethics policy in [General Order 46](#) states, "No unlawful practice or a practice at odds with these standards can be justified on the basis of customary practice, expediency, or achieving a "higher" purpose...It is not acceptable to ignore or disobey policies if one is not in agreement with them, or to avoid compliance by deliberately seeking loopholes..."

The Institute may still be a "[crowd of honorable youths](#) pressing up the hill of science with noble emulation," but these behaviors and decisions prove VMI's leaders are not among them as they march. This leads to the question of "What quality of leadership is the current Administration really demonstrating at VMI?"

Anyone who donates even a dime to VMI, or sends their child there, while remaining silent on these issues, allows VMI's Administration to continue un-checked as a bad actor. Continued acceptance of this situation by the BOV, the Attorney General, and the Youngkin Administration is silent consent to what is occurring.

The BOV meets again January 25 – 27, 2024, this time with COL Wyatt in the position of acting Secretary to the BOV and he, along with the Board President and Superintendent, will be responsible for setting the meeting agenda. Potential irregular hiring practices; a transgender policy in violation of MG Win's promise to the

Governor that he would adhere to the Commonwealth's policy; increasing expense to the Institute from lawsuits; and irregular treatment of Cadets and *The Cadet* newspaper, with the hidden results of an improper investigation into the same, are but a few of the concerns that should be addressed, in public, by the Board. Will the issues surfaced here be on the agenda or will they (again) be ignored or hidden in another secretive "closed session"? This appears to be the preferred approach on the part of the Board to veil the majority of its discussion and actions, even if doing so appears in violation of relevant legal requirements prohibiting such practices. Doing so as a routine matter of course obviously protects the Board from any outside scrutiny and charges of dereliction of duty and misplaced loyalty, which should preeminently be to the Commonwealth and its people, and not unilaterally to VMI and its administration.

It is also long past the time for VMI's "experiment in leadership" to end, but will we just hear more "crickets" from you as time transpires?

Respectfully,

Mike Staso '79

Enclosure 1

Personnel Announcement: COL William "Bill" Wyatt: Executive Officer to the Superintendent

Young, John <youngjm@vmi.edu>

Wed 1/10/2024 4:17 PM

To: Chief of Staff <chiefofstaff@vmi.edu>

Cc: VMI-Superintendent <VMI-Superintendent@vmi.edu>

VMI Faculty, Staff, and Colleagues:

On behalf of the Superintendent, I am pleased to announce that COL Bill Wyatt will assume the role of Executive Officer (XO) to the Superintendent. This appointment is effective immediately.

COL Wyatt began his tenure at VMI in February 2020 as the Director of Communications & Marketing. During his time with the Institute, COL Wyatt and his team have worked to modernize the Institute's marketing and communications efforts establishing a strong digital and social media presence for the Institute. Additionally, C&M, under Wyatt's leadership, has developed new content creation resources and processes that continue to advance the Institute's mission, vision, and values. In his new role as Executive Officer, COL Wyatt will coordinate MG Wins' executive communications and oversee a broad range of administrative support functions as directed by the superintendent.

Bill holds a bachelor's degree in political science from Frostburg State University and a Master's of Public Administration from James Madison University. He has more than 16 years of experience at Virginia institutions of higher education. Additionally, COL Wyatt spent 14 years working with state legislatures throughout the country.

As the Institute begins its search for our next director of Communications and Marketing, LTC Michelle Ellwood will serve as the interim director of C&M. LTC Ellwood has capably served the institute for five years as a member of the Marketing & Communications department.

Please join me in congratulating COL Wyatt on his new role.



John M. Young, DPS

Colonel, Virginia Militia

Chief of Staff

Office of the Superintendent

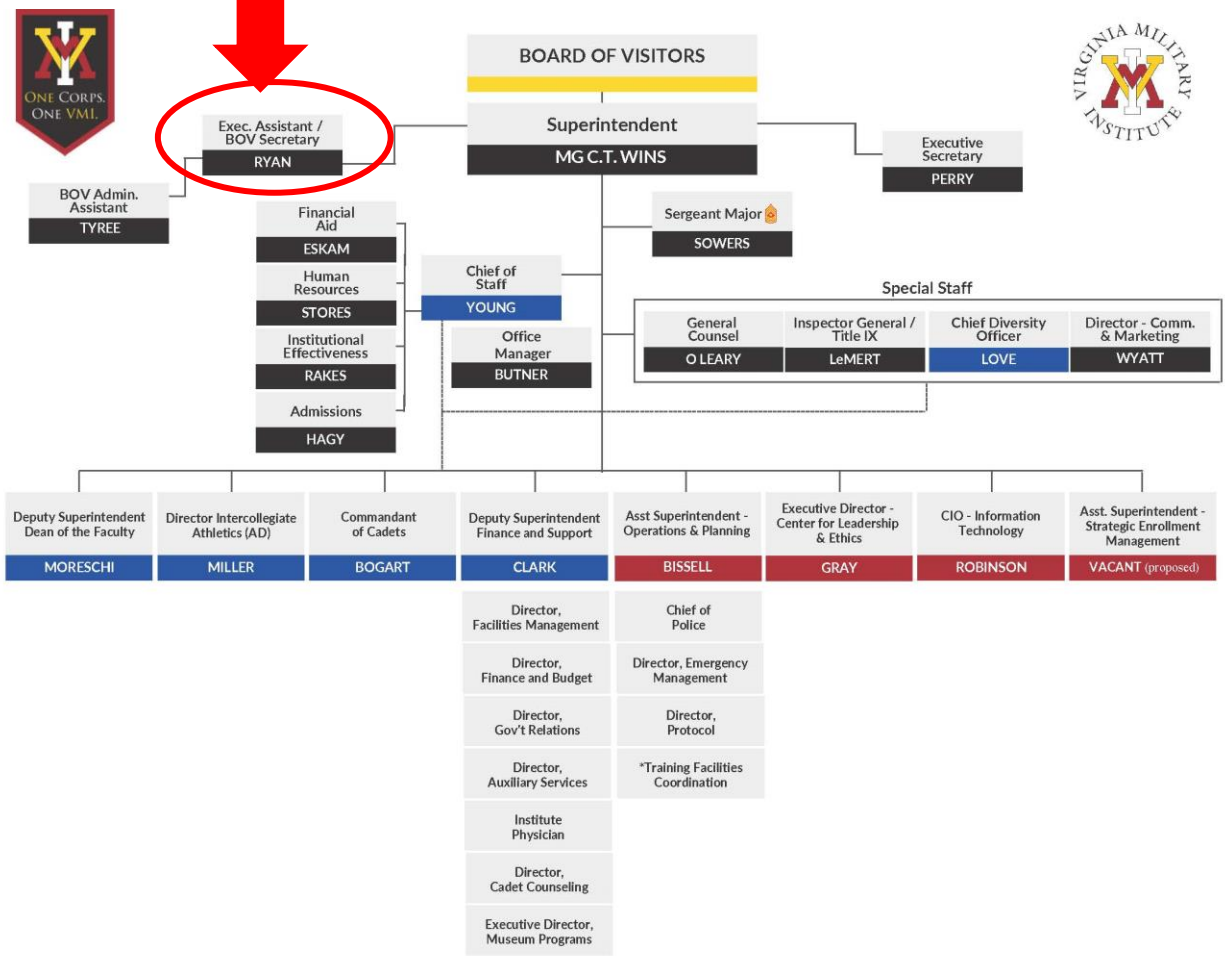
Virginia Military Institute

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Enclosure 2

The position VMI “rebranded as the “Executive Officer” position in the job announcement



Enclosure 3

