# The Arrow in Flight

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"I do hereby promise, on my honor as a Scout, that I will always and faithfully observe and preserve the traditions of the Order of the Arrow, Wimachtendienk, Wingolauchsik, Witahemui. I will always regard the ties of brotherhood in the Order of the Arrow as lasting, and will seek to preserve a cheerful spirit, even in the midst of irksome tasks and weighty responsibilities, and will endeavor, so far as in my power lies, to be unselfish in service and devotion to the welfare of others."

An arrow flies towards a target. It is easy to forget this little fact because life is so full of concerns, demands, trivialities, worries, priorities, and pure *noise* that it is constantly possessed of a monotonous din that scrubs away our focus and chains us to what is immediately in front of us, and makes us lose sight of what truly matters. Such distraction is commonplace, but nevertheless we are arrows—drawn from many others and loosed upon a lofty journey. And an arrow flies towards a target.

It is therefore always necessary to ask ourselves whether our arrow is on the right course—whether we're acting in the right ways for the right reasons. Each of our actions is directed towards some purpose, and the purpose for which we do any action often derives its importance from some other purpose. We might collect wood to build a fire, build that fire because we want to roast marshmallows, and roast those marshmallows because they'll taste good. Most of our ends have only derivative importance and matter only insofar as they are a means to some final end, one which is valuable for its own sake. Though all our actions are necessarily directed towards some end, there is no guarantee that any particular end actually matters or that it is the right end to pursue. We can, for example, be led to pursue a pointless end due to false beliefs (go find me a left-handed smokeshifter) or become convinced that some end matters for its own sake when it doesn't (two common examples are wealth and fame). We are particularly good at losing sight of our overarching ends when put under pressure, and in doing

so reveal our peculiar capacity to act in self-defeating ways—ways that defeat our immediate purpose or, and this is key to my point in this essay, the purpose which gave that immediate purpose value.

The particular danger of this capacity is that it often makes ostensible sense to behave in these self-defeating ways, and we often don't realize that our behavior is irrational without critical reflection. How often does a scout want to be an Eagle Scout, and so rush through the requirements without truly learning the skills, or developing a truly deep commitment to the Scout Oath and Law? How often does a student become so obsessed with grades that they don't really learn, and only temporarily memorize to perform well? How often do people hoard wealth, forgetting that the reason they wanted it was to spend it? How often does a lover become so obsessed with keeping their partner that they push them away?

My reason for raising this issue is because I believe it is a problem Scouting America is guilty of having. Particularly since NOAC 2024, National[1] has made great effort to transform the OA into a vehicle for keeping scouts in Scouting—for membership retention. They believe that this ought to be the supreme end of the Order of the Arrow; that is, that the OA ought "to be why Scouts want to stay in Scouting."[2] This resulted in a veritable metamorphosis of the Brotherhood of Cheerful Service: a new Vision, Mission, and Purpose, a completely overhauled policy on American Indian Activities, and an entirely new induction experience to better reflect our new priorities.

Despite the putative importance of membership retention to any organization, these changes raise a quintessential question about the very identity of our Order. To become a titular

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[1] My use of this colloquialism is strategic. It obscures the extent to which any one person is to blame, as my aim is to motivate positive change, not start a witch hunt. It also leaves the distinction between the OA National Committee and the various governing bodies of Scouting America blurry, which, as we shall see, accurately reflects reality.
[2] Chris Grove and Ed Lynes, "Announcing the OA's New Vision, Mission, and Purpose," July 18, 2024, https://oa-scouting.org/article/announcing-oas-new-vision-mission-and-purpose

member of the Order of the Arrow, one need only take the Obligation. To truly be an Arrowman, however, one must *take on* the Obligation, must truly commit to living according to its ideals and precepts, for otherwise membership is a mere spectre, a meaningless phantom—the OA is not a thing of *that kind* of spirit. Since the Obligation is the fundamental expression of what it means to be a substantive member of our Order, it is natural to assume that it is also the essential statement of our Order's identity as a whole, yet the Obligation says nothing about membership retention. Neither did the Mission and Purpose statement we had prior to 2024, and it was never part of E. Urner Goodman's vision. There is a basic discrepancy between what we have long assumed we ought to be and what National says we ought to be, and this means that we must ask ourselves that key question: is our arrow on target?

I believe it is not. I believe that National is wrong about what the OA ought to be, and, more than that, has done wrong in trying to make it what they think it ought to be. The metamorphosis they've initiated is not that of a caterpillar, from infancy as a larva to splendor and majesty as a fully developed butterfly, but that of Kafka's Gregor Samsa: from man to grotesque insect. But whereas the troubled salesman woke up and thought of nothing but being late for work, the OA thought of nothing but retaining members.

Though I'm yet to see any of my Brothers sprout mandibles, National's agenda is harmful nonetheless. My purpose in this essay is to demonstrate how and why that is, and how we ought to do better. The main problem is that membership retention matters only because the OA, and Scouting generally, does other things that are worth doing, and so it derives its value from those things. It should therefore not be prioritized over them, and especially not to their exclusion, because then it does have any value. National has relegated its other ends beneath retaining members, and in doing so, harmed the Scouting program and its members. In mindless, myopic

pursuit of their end, they have broken promises, lied, and engaged in sophistry, obscurantism, Orwellian doublethink, and other manner of coercive tactics to manipulate public opinion surrounding their policies. The exposition of these issues and my proposed alternative comprise my Section I, which is the heart of this essay. Even after I make clear how National's conduct has been coercive, manipulative, and harmful, these infractions may seem so minor that my condemnation seems too strong, and that they really aren't all that bad, or that the ends justify the means. For this reason, Section II examines how and why National's actions are indefensible from the perspective of *every major ethical system* today, and hence morally indefensible from every plausible perspective. Because the issue is closely related, in Section III I argue that our present policy on American Indian Activities is deeply flawed, and that we ought to revise it. My position on the matter is nuanced but not subtle; I do not argue for a complete reversal of National's policy, but rather that the OA is in a unique position to do a lot of good for a lot of people through education and service and that National's policy ignores this. It is not a way to actually solve the problem AIA represents; it is a way of sweeping the issue under the rug. I will conclude in Section IV, which is primarily a reflection and reiteration of my most important suggestions on how we ought to do better.

I am not opposed to change. In fact, I believe there are many substantial ways in which we ought to change. While many of National's detractors argue that their policies do not uphold our obligation to "observe and preserve the traditions of the Order of the Arrow," I will not take this line in this essay. As I said earlier, what matters is whether we're doing the right things for the right reasons. Traditions can be wrong, like hazing, and so it is fallacious to defend a tradition on the basis that it is tradition alone. This line in our obligation ought to be understood

as committing us to preserving the traditions that we know are good and worth having, such as our commitment to unwavering cheerful service.

Now for the part that matters.

## I: An Organization Worth Being a Part Of

Though National's rhetoric has been convoluted by fallacious arguments and mixed messaging, that membership retention is the sole purpose guiding their actions is crystal clear. The first step to understanding this is to observe the Vision, Mission, and Purpose statements they released in 2024, and the Mission and Purpose statements we had prior to them. From here on in, I will refer to the current Vision, Mission, and Purpose as V, M2, and P2, respectively. Likewise, I will refer to the old Mission and Purpose as M1 and P1, and the mission of Scouting America as a whole as SM. The only substantial change in the OA's purpose statement is that they nixed camping promotion and environmental stewardship for membership retention:

| P1<br>As Scouting's National Honor Society, our purpose is to: | P2<br>As Scouting's National Honor Society, we forge lifelong bonds among the leaders in Scouting and: |
|---|---|
| Recognize those who best exemplify the Scout Oath and Law in their daily lives and through that recognition cause others to conduct themselves in a way that warrants similar recognition. | Recognize those who exemplify the Scout Oath and Law in their daily lives and, through that recognition, cause others to act in the same way. |
| Crystallize the Scout habit of helpfulness into a life purpose of leadership in cheerful service to others. | Reinforce a life purpose of leadership in cheerful service to others. |
| Develop leaders with the willingness, character, spirit and ability to advance the activities of their units, our Brotherhood, Scouting, and ultimately our nation. | Create and deliver peer-led, adult-guided, advanced leadership experiences for Scouts and Scouters that positively impact their unit, community, and ultimately our nation. |

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| Promote camping, responsible outdoor adventure, and environmental stewardship as essential components of every Scout's experience, in the unit, year-round, and in summer camp.[3] | Be an integral part of Scouting America and encourage participation in all it offers through units, outdoor adventures, and national events to further the Scouting experience.[4] |

For the purpose of making the parallels clear in this table, I changed the order of the points in P1.

Unlike P1 and P2, M1 and M2 are completely dissimilar:

| M1 | M2 |
|---|---|
| The mission of the Order of the Arrow is to fulfill its purpose as an integral part of the Boy Scouts of America through positive youth leadership under the guidance of selected capable adults.[5] | To achieve the mission of Scouting America through transformative fellowship that ignites limitless Scouting journeys.[6] |

M1: No mention of retention. M2: Our mission is to retain scouts through "transformative fellowship." Since M2 makes reference to the mission of Scouting America, we should take a look at that too. As given on the home page of scouting.org as of September 1st, 2026:

> The mission of Scouting America is to prepare young people to make ethical and moral choices over their lifetimes by instilling in them the values of the Scout Oath and Law.

It is at least good that this mission is ostensibly kept in mind, but it has not been treated properly in practice. As I will argue, many of National's actions in pursuit of membership retention have been unethical. If this wasn't problematic enough by itself, it is irrational to believe that teaching morals matters while treating those same morals as though they did not matter by violating them.

For all of National's program changes, the OA Vision statement has been most often cited as motive and justification. And it's pure membership retention:

> To be why Scouts want to stay in Scouting[7]

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[3] Order of the Arrow, *Order of the Arrow Handbook* (Scouting America, 2020), 10.
I use the printing date here because the book does not contain a specific copyright date. This citation comes from the *Order of the Arrow Handbook* I received when I was inducted in 2022.
[4] Grove and Lynes, "Announcing the OA's New Vision, Mission, and Purpose."
[5] *Order of the Arrow Handbook*, 10.
[6] Grove and Lynes, "Announcing the OA's New Vision, Mission, and Purpose."
[7] Ibid.

It should come as no surprise that these changes were made for that purpose. When they announced our new Vision and the changes to our Mission and Purpose, they told us:

> We have long said that the OA retains Scouts. Our vision now explicitly commits us to keeping all young people in Scouting—not just Arrowmen.
>
> In one year alone 60,000 Scouts between 11 and 16 years old leave the program—and Scouting America needs the Order of the Arrow to give each of them a reason to continue on their own limitless Scouting journey. Councils need our help with this…
>
> The revised mission calls for us to be a gateway for older Scouts to all the movement has to offer. The national OA committee and lodges should consider how they can include non-Arrowmen in experiences that retain them in Scouting.[8]

And likewise for the ceremonies:

> Last year, the Order of the Arrow inducted almost 37,000 Scouts into the OA, and yet membership still dropped by 5.7%. This means the OA lost nearly 39,000 Arrowmen in the last year. This trend, despite a largely consistent Inductions Experience in recent years, has highlighted the need for change.
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> "Society's changed. Young men and women have different needs, different pressures, and different resources than we had 20 years ago. It quickly became apparent to us that we need to change how we approach things. In 2019, we realized this and that we needed to start looking at ways to update and modernize our ceremonies" - Chris Grove
>
> With the passing of the new Mission, Vision, and Purpose in 2024, it became clear that not only did the OA need to look at updating the ceremonies, but the whole Inductions Experience to better retain Scouts. This is reflected in the new vision for the OA, to be the reason Scouts stay in Scouting.[9]

Clearly, National believes that membership retention is a major part of what the OA ought to do, and hence what its role in the Scouting movement ought to be. It is not merely the case, however, that they want membership retention to be *part* of its role, but rather that they want membership retention to *be* its role. That is, that the Order of the Arrow's purpose ought to be to keep scouts in scouting.

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[8] Ibid.
[9] "Campfire Chat Recap", Order of the Arrow, January 26, 2026, https://oa-scouting.org/article/campfire-chat-recap

The first evidence of this lies in the standards of the Lodge Performance Measurement Program. All the 'primary' objectives—Unit Elections, Induction Rate, Activation, Membership Retention, Membership Growth—are related to retaining members. Among the list of 'Secondary' Objectives are Council Service and Leadership Development.[10] If we refer back to P2, we see that leadership development and cheerful service constitute 2 out of the four points; it is quite literally the case that membership retention is considered a higher priority than the OA's other ends.

It is even clearer in the 2025-2027 National Business Plan:

> The 2025-2027 Order of the Arrow (OA) Business Plan orients the Order towards our mission of igniting limitless Scouting journeys through transformative fellowship. As Scouting's rebrand underscores the commitment to serve all of America's youth, so must the OA embrace a more welcoming and innovative posture to become "why Scouts want to stay in Scouting." In support of this vision, the following strategies will guide the national OA committee's work during the next several years.[11]

In the body of the plan, National sets four overarching objectives: "position the Order of the Arrow as the retention driver for all older youth in Scouting America," "support our lodges with useful tools to serve and retain older youth in Scouting," "create a member journey that attracts and retains as many young people within Scouting and the Order as possible," and "ensure a firm foundation is in place to achieve the Order's Vision beyond the current business plan."[12] I believe these aims speak for themselves. It is noteworthy that National focuses solely on the Mission and Vision; P2 serves as a face-saving paper barrier to the accusations I'm making by declaring a

[10] "Lodge Performance Measurement Program", Order of the Arrow, accessed June 22, 2026, https://oa-scouting.org/uploads/resources/forms/2026-Lodge-PMP-Scorecard.pdf
[11] "Order of the Arrow 2025 – 2027 Business Plan", Order of the Arrow, November 11, 2024, https://oa-scouting.org/uploads/publications/business-plans/2025-2027-business-plan.pdf
[12] Ibid.

vacuous commitment to the OA's long-standing principles while they surreptitiously avoid them in practice.[13]

Since National wants to "establish the OA experience as a retention tool,"[14] we ought to question why retention could possibly matter in the first place. The obvious answer is that we want our organization to continue existing.[15] Since we care about the OA and Scouting generally, it may seem self-evident that this end matters, and so we have reached the end of our chain of ends…but why is the existence of the OA and Scouting worth caring about? Existence is not by itself a substantive purpose, and if an organization did not have a purpose, it would be literally pointless. Since it must derive its value from somewhere, and its purpose is the only possibility, it follows that an organization's existence is a *means to an end* and that end is the purpose of that organization. So membership retention then is a means to keep existing, which is a means to achieve the organization's purpose. Therefore:

(A) Membership Retention matters only insofar as it helps achieve an organization's purpose.

This means that it is incoherent to consider retaining its own members part of the overarching purpose of the Order of the Arrow, as then we would be saying that membership retention matters gets its value from itself, and this is obviously false. It also means that it's self-defeating to prioritize retaining members at the cost of achieving the OA's other ends, since achieving the OA's other ends is why we're trying to retain members.

It may be argued that since, as we shall later see, National wants the OA to serve as the membership retainer for all of Scouting America, not just the OA itself, that we do not really get

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[13] I do not know if this is conscious or not. Either way, the effect is the same: potential objectors are appeased or deprived of grounds for objection until it's too late. It's called *obscurantism*, and this is but a taste of National's use of it.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Perhaps even more obvious is that we want to retain scouts so that we can have a positive impact on them, or that it's a sign that we haven't when they leave. This is to immediately admit (A) because having this impact is our purpose.

a circle, as the OA retaining members gets its value from the ends of Scouting America, which will be fulfilled if the OA keeps scouts involved in the wider program. Unfortunately, this still runs into what is essentially the same problem.

First of all, we must recognize that if Scouting America wants the OA to be the reason that Scouts stay involved in the program, then the OA must *provide reasons* for those Scouts to stay in the program. We cannot appeal to the ends of Scouting America as such, since if those were enough to provide a reason for Scouts to stay, then the OA wouldn't need to.[16] That is, it must have ends that are worth working towards as a member. If keeping scouts in scouting were the sole purpose of the Order of the Arrow, then OA members' sole aim would be to keep scouts in scouting, and they would do this by getting them to join the OA. But this clearly doesn't make any sense, as it once again gets us in a circle—retaining members must be valuable for its own sake, but it isn't. The OA still wouldn't be worth caring about, since it isn't achieving anything.

This argument establishes:

(B) The OA *must* have ends other than membership retention, from which it gets its value, and therefore it would be self-defeating to pursue membership retention at the expense of those ends.

It is worth noting that in my above argument, I presuppose that members are involved in planning and executing the OA program (and hence taking the actions that contribute to its ends), and not just participating in it. There are several reasons for this. First of all, this is a youth-run organization, so the youth members better also be youth leaders responsible for running the program. Second, if 'members' were not responsible for leading the program, then they functionally wouldn't be members at all. The people who run the things would be members, and

[16] The OA must of course have ends that align with the scouting program generally. My claim here is that they cannot be identical with those ends, as then they could not provide any news reasons for someone to stay in the program.

the ‘members’ would just be nothing more than scouts with the privilege to participate. Finally, regardless of whether members are leaders or not, the OA would still need leaders, and so we’d still run into the problem that the organization needs ends other than membership retention to be valuable.[17]

What (B) establishes is that National’s belief that membership retention is first among our ends is self-defeating, and hence irrational. This would be a merely intellectual, technical problem if National were still fulfilling the other ends of Scouting in a consistent and acceptable way. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The problem with holding self-defeating beliefs is that they manifest as self-defeating actions. This is not merely through actions that defeat their own point, but also more insidiously as failure to perform other important actions to achieve one’s ends—as negligence. National is guilty of both.

The following discussion is focused on several of the promises National has broken over the past two years and the ways their plans have or will damage the program. Many of the examples I will give will immediately strike the reader as unethical or immoral, and many of them are. Since this section focused on the impact National’s policies have had on the Scouting program, I leave the question of ethics until Section II.

First of all, National’s idea that the OA ought “ to be the reason Scouts stay in Scouting”[18] and “the retention driver for all older youth in Scouting America”[19] is self-defeating because it will harm units. The first step is to acknowledge that if this were true, then scouts would not have any reason to remain active in their unit’s program. Indeed, National practically

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[17] Obviously, this assumes that the true purpose of an organization must be able to be a purpose for all its members; that is, it must be able to provide good reasons for its members *to actually be members*. There are organizations which exist for the sake of its leaders profiting off its members or the like, but since Scouting is not one of them I do not find it worth explaining in detail why this case is not a counterexample to my argument. Suffice it to say that such an organization would have bigger problems than whether its ends are coherent.

[18] “Campfire Chat Recap.”

[19] “Order of the Arrow 2025 – 2027 Business Plan.”

acknowledges this: In the 2025 Campfire Chat, our then Eastern Region Chief Elijah Aiken said, "When you get old enough in your troop, there's not much left to do."[20] Similarly, they recognize that "Scouts BSA units have become smaller—the OA may be the only place where a 14 or 15 year old has the opportunity to lead his or her peers as opposed to younger Scouts."[21] Though these youth might be staying in Scouting, there's no reason for them to remain active in their units.

This is hardly a new phenomenon. The OA has long been accused of stealing older youth from units, and not without reason. Many Scouts who get involved with the OA stop being active in their troops, and many older scouts who are active in their troops—particularly larger ones—are not active in the OA, and National's plan isn't going to make this better. In fact, the 2025-2027 business plan includes a specific goal that's clearly going to make it worse:

> Support tighter integration of the OA's leadership, service, and adventure opportunities into the rank advancement and award programs for older youth in Scouting America.[22]

Read: Make it so that scouts can substitute participation in the OA for participation in troop activities and events for rank advancement and awards. This would, if successful, create even less reason for scouts to be involved in their units.

The problem here is that taking older scouts away undermines the fundamental structure that units rely on to succeed. Older Scouts are necessary to fill leadership positions and teach younger scouts the skills they need to succeed in Scouting, and so these jobs must fall to the adults—but you can't have a youth-led organization without youth leaders. By taking this structure away, the units that OA draws members from will decline. But without these units,

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[20] Griffin Goodno, "2025 Campfire Chat", Order of the Arrow, January 15, 2025, https://oa-scouting.org/article/2025-campfire-chat
[21] Grove and Lynes, "Announcing the OA's New Vision, Mission, and Purpose."
[22] "Order of the Arrow 2025 – 2027 Business Plan."

there is no entry point into the OA. You can't retain older scouts if you don't retain younger ones. The program must be worth being a part of *at all levels*.

It may be objected that this would only happen if *every* older scout got involved with the OA instead of focusing on their troop. But this objection doesn't hold up for multiple reasons. First of all, the fact that there are not enough worthwhile opportunities in the unit means that any older scout who stays is worse off than those who leave—but *someone* has to stay. As will be made explicit in Section II, it is unethical to force anyone into this position. Second, this objection depends on the idea that National's effort will be less than completely successful. But it is clearly irrational to work towards a goal that we don't want to be successful. If we want more moderate results than we're working towards, we should take more moderate actions.

National's myopia on membership retention is not only directly self-defeating, but it has also caused them to exclusively focus on redoing the induction, and thus neglected other important promises they made. I will name but a few examples, so I encourage the reader to investigate further for themselves. In the minor vein, National promised when they announced V, M2, and P2 to build the OA's brand:

> The revised purpose calls on us to build our brand so the honor of membership is known both inside and outside of Scouting.[23]

They repeated this promise in the 2025-2027 business plan. It has been almost 3 years now, and I for one am yet to see progress. There is no significant evidence that National has worked towards this goal, and if they have, there's been no real progress. This aim is indeed worthwhile, and it ought to have received real attention and effort.

[23] Grove and Lynes, "Announcing the OA's New Vision, Mission, and Purpose."

That example may be minor, but National has reneged on far more significant promises. There is one that is particularly worth drawing attention to, for it has been long buried—the promise for resources released to lodges to support them in building a local AIA program:

> The national OA committee will release resources for establishing tribal relationships (which several lodges have done already) and FAQs regarding specific policy questions and will host webinars to offer additional guidance. We encourage you to work closely with your council Scout executive to help establish and nurture these tribal relationships.[24]

Despite this promise, National has not actually released any resources—except for an hour long webinar released December 8th of 2024,[25] in which they make minor, obvious suggestions on getting into contact with local tribes, and then make more promises on the resources they'll provide; for example, they promised to release a searchable database of state and federally recognized tribes to assist lodges in finding one to get into contact with. This never happened. They also promised to have more webinars, release more best practices, and more program updates—this never happened either.

There are several other things wrong with the announcement, the webinar, and National's conduct surrounding AIA. First of all, they claim that AIA is a beneficial part of the program that they want to maintain:

> The intent of the national OA committee in requiring this local partnership is to allow lodges to continue their long traditions of American Indian appreciation while assuring that the local tribe is involved in a collaborative manner.
>
> By formalizing relationships with tribes, the national OA committee believes that the quality of programming will increase and the educational opportunities for Arrowmen to learn about American Indian history and traditions in their area will expand. This will provide new program opportunities that support the Order of the Arrow's mission: "to achieve the mission of Scouting America through transformative fellowship that ignites limitless Scouting journeys."[26]

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[24] Chris Grove and Ed Lynes, "Policy Update: Changes Regarding American Indian Programming," Order of the Arrow, September 24, 2024.

[25] How many youth even know what a webinar is? How many youth have time, or such fanaticism that they watch? The webinar is *boring*. Webinars as a whole are boring. It's not accessible. It's a way of hiding information while pretending not to, not a way of spreading it.

[26] Ibid.

But their failure to produce any supporting resources tells a different story. Making specific knowledge of their promises functionally inaccessible by putting them behind an hour-long webinar[27]—a tactic known as obscurantism—tells a different story. That the reason they claim to care about AIA is that it helps fulfill M2 *tells a different story*. It makes it clear that they don't care about Native Cultures or the lodges and people who value it. As I will describe in Section III, the OA's use of American Indian Programming has done serious harm, but it also represents a chance to do good—a lot of good, for a lot of people. It deserves more attention. National's promises silence dissent long enough for them to sweep the issue under the rug, but this does not solve the problem and it never will—but I digress. I will leave these issues until Section III.

Obscurantism is the practice of preventing the spread of knowledge while ostensibly being the giver of that knowledge by hiding behind vagueness, functionally inaccessible announcements, lies, or intractable jargon. It is textbook manipulation. I have up to this point avoided the topic of the ceremonies, as their matter is largely outside the scope of this essay. It is, however, impossible to avoid broaching the topic in discussing how National has controlled the accessibility of information to control public opinion and backlash.

National has used this tactic and others to control the spread of information in the Order, particularly to stifle resistance by silencing opposing viewpoints. One such example is the burial of the Higher Vision Ceremonies offered by our brothers Dr. Jay Dunbar and Paul Lackie as an alternative to the ones proposed by National. The Higher Vision ceremonies are an attempt to leave the core message intact, while changing names around to remove AIA themes from the text. Though I take it that this minimally invasive procedure is obviously desirable and would be

[27] It is important not to misrepresent how National has made information available. Their page has a FAQ section that makes many of the promises they failed to fulfill. When I say 'specific knowledge,' I mean more than knowledge of intentions—but of action plans, specific timelines, and what's already being done.

supported by many arrowman, National has taken pains to prevent knowledge of them from spreading. All in all, they represent an excellent alternative to the current ceremonies, and the refusal to take them into consideration speaks to a desire not to maintain the OA's core identity, but to steamroll it.

At NLS, we are taught that a leader has integrity if they "do what they say they're going to do." We are taught that without integrity, there is no leadership. If these claims are true, then National must admit that it has not provided leadership to Scouting America.

The divide between what National promised and what has actually been achieved demonstrates a remarkable dissonance born of the divide between the importance National assigns membership retention and the true aims of Scouting America and the Order of the Arrow. The result is what George Orwell termed *doublethink:* "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them."[28] It isn't hard to pick this out in their treatment of AIA. It is also quite visible in the arguments National provides for the changes they've made or plan to make and the ways they've tried to defend them from criticism, none of which are logically valid.

It is important to address these arguments directly because doublethink is not merely a dangerous form of mental inconsistency, but a means to manipulate public opinion. Whether or not National means to use it this way, it cannot be allowed to continue. The vile boggart of doublethink must be wrenched from the squalid mental crevices it's infected and dragged into the pale light of truth. Ignorance is captivity; knowledge is the form of freedom.

Since this essay is already going to be long enough, I will not address every statement National has made to defend or explain their position and the changes they're effecting. Most of

[28] George Orwell, *1984* (Signet Classics, 1977),214.

them fall into the same fallacies, so I encourage the inquisitive reader to consider other arguments National has made.

I will address a point from an email sent out by National in April entitled "See the Evolution of the Order of the Arrow":

> Many of you may ask, "Why are we changing something that seems to have worked well for many years?" We would answer with questions of our own: "Are we truly succeeding when 8 out of 10 people who go through an Ordeal never return to another OA event? Are we fulfilling our mission and purpose when only 1 out of every 20 members seal their membership with Brotherhood?"[29]

Here, National is arguing that the ceremonies need to change because we are not retaining members, and this is not fulfilling our purpose. This is literally the fallacy of many questions. It presupposes that membership retention is a worthy purpose for the OA, but a person who believes the ceremonies "worked well for many years" can plausibly deny that membership retention is a proper measure of the fulfillment of the OA's purpose, especially if they (correctly) accept (B).

This is also an especially vivid example of National's doublethink and manipulative rhetoric. They appeal to the OA-specific concern for membership retention, but it is not the OA's membership retention that they're ultimately worried about. When they announced V, M2, and P2, they said that "our vision now explicitly commits us to keeping all young people in Scouting—not just Arrowmen."[30] It is not just retention in the OA that they're concerned with; it's retention in Scouting America as a whole.[31] What National is doing here is called *the motte and bailey fallacy*: holding one position, usually a radical one, and only defending a weaker version of it. In this case, they hold the position that the change is because the OA ought to be the retention driver for all of Scouting America, yet defend the position that the change is

[29] Chris Grove and Josh Nero, email to all members of the OA, April 25, 2026.
[30] Grove and Lynes, "Announcing the OA's New Vision, Mission, and Purpose."
[31] Recall also the first pillar of the business plan.

because the OA needs to drive retention for itself. This is manipulative because it obscures National's actual purposes (more obscurantism) and convinces others that what they're doing is not as radical as it really is, thus preventing resistance that might otherwise exist. This is doublethink,[32] since National holds that the OA must change its purpose while simultaneously holding that the change is to guard its existing one.

Similarly, they claim that:

> What we found was something truly powerful: an experience that is welcoming, meaningful, and deeply rooted in the principles that define the Order of the Arrow. As members, we take an obligation to observe and preserve the traditions of the Order of the Arrow — Brotherhood, Cheerfulness, and Service.[33]

They are the guardians of the principles of Brotherhood, Cheerfulness, and Service. They also don't fulfill promises to their brothers; their business plan doesn't contain anything even resembling a commitment to service except for the purpose of membership retention; and they seek to "establish the OA experience as a retention tool,"[34] not a tool to further the aims of brotherhood, cheerfulness, and service in Scouting and the wider World.

This thinking is backwards, inside-out, and upside-down. The arguments they've presented do not hold up under scrutiny, and much of it is either intentionally or negligently manipulative. The Order of the Arrow ought to be more than just a retention tool. It *is* more than just a retention tool. My criticisms raise the question of what the OA should be, if not what National wants it to be. I will attempt to answer this question, but first it is instructive to speculate on how we got to this point in the first place.

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[32] The motte and bailey fallacy always involves doublethink.
[33] Ibid.
[34] "Order of the Arrow 2025 – 2027 Business Plan."

## The Birth of Distraction and the Member Frenzy

It is not the needs of the Order of the Arrow that are behind the changes we're seeing, but the misguided priorities of Scouting America. While National has particularly obfuscated this fact, it is far from necessary to infer it. Prior to the release of V, M2, and P2, National said the following about the 2022-2023 National Business Plan:

> All businesses have a plan for goals they want to achieve, and so does the Order of the Arrow (OA) with the 2022-2023 National Business Plan. As we start to emerge from bankruptcy, the strategies outlined in the business plan seek to help us re-evaluate how we work as an organization, and to be able to make modifications to help the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) meet its goals…
>
> The first strategy is evaluating the Order of the Arrow's mission, purpose, and identity to ensure that it is consistent with the needs of the BSA. This will involve looking at Scouting's needs…[35]

Similarly, in the by now familiar announcement of V, M2, and P2:

> In one year alone 60,000 Scouts between 11 and 16 years old leave the program—and Scouting America needs the Order of the Arrow to give each of them a reason to continue on their own limitless Scouting journey. Councils need our help with this.[36]

If that wasn't enough, there is plenty of evidence in the business plan. Here are just two points from pillar (A):

> 4. Define a distinct and valuable role for OA regions and sections in the Scouting America organization.
> 5. Enhance relationships with all relevant Scouting America constituencies and Scouting America's High Adventure bases to provide service and establish the OA experience as a retention tool.[37]

The question is why National became so obsessed with retaining Scouting America's members in the first place, and the answer is not hard to find—we're in a membership crisis. As they said, in one year alone 60,000 scouts leave the Scouting program. In the OA, trends are

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[35] Evan Schilling, "National Business Plan," Order of the Arrow, March 28, 2022, https://oa-scouting.org/article/oa-business-plan
[36] Groves and Lynes, "Announcing the OA's New Vision, Mission, and Purpose."
[37] Order of the Arrow, " Order of the Arrow 2025-2027 Business Plan"

similar: we lost 39,000 members in 2025 despite 37,000 inductions; both these trends have been consistent for several years.

Furthermore, our organization has been under immense pressure in recent years, especially from the sexual abuse lawsuits and our resulting bankruptcy in 2020. That is not even to mention the criticism of the OA's American Indian Activities—but that is a subject for Section III. Coupled with the insipid cacophony of senseless corporate jargon that invariably infects any business environment, this formed the perfect breeding ground for distraction and obsession with membership retention.

It is only natural to measure our organization's success by the number of its members, since it is an easy thing to measure and report. Service hours, brotherhood conversions, monetary contributions to council—all things represented in the Lodge Performance Measurement Program—are the same. They are all things that can be quantified. They can be put in a chart. They are the sort of things that you can show to your boss or the public and say, "here it is: our impact!" It is a familiar thing in a world that all too often judges success by a number on a scale or in a banking app.

But none of these will ever be a sufficient measure of Order of the Arrow. They will never tell us the impact of those service hours, how the obligation changed a scout's life, or the supreme and lasting fulfillment of a life lived in cheerful service to others. These things are not measurable. They are not material. No material thing will ever be able to judge the ultimate success of our Order because it is not a thing of material:

> The Order of the Arrow is a thing of the spirit rather than of mechanics. Organization, operational procedure, and paraphernalia are necessary in any large and growing movement, but they are not what count in the end. The things of the spirit count.
>
> Brotherhood–in a day when there is too much hatred at home and abroad.

> Cheerfulness–in a day when the pessimists have the floor.
>
> Service–in a day when millions are interested only in getting or grasping rather than giving.[38]

## A Privilege

National "[believes] our programs, from the leadership training at NLS to the excitement of a Section Conclave to the older youth fellowship at lodge events are the best Scouting offers."[39] When we ask ourselves why, there is something particular that stands out: People. The Order of the Arrow does not just make leaders—it makes good people. Becoming good people, selfless people, devoted to a life of cheerful service and possessed of the light of unwavering inner spirit is what makes the OA worth being a part of.

For some reason, they seem to think that making the program more fun is what's going to get people to stay. But quite frankly, Scouting is never going to be as pure fun as going to parties or playing video games. Someone's always gonna get soaked when it rains on camping trips. Someone's gonna burn themselves making a fire or cut themselves with a pocketknife. Someone's gonna burn the food or spill the dishwater all over themselves. Someone's gonna partial a merit badge and wish their counselor was enjoying the view 30,000ft in the air without a parachute. Scouting is hard and it's never going to be anything else.

But we don't do it because it's easy, and we don't do it because it's always going to go right. *We do it because it's worth doing*. We do it because someday we might have to use those skills we learned to save someone's life. We do it because being able to cook and clean will make us self-sufficient, independent individuals who can take care of themselves. We do it because there's something special about cooking over a fire that you yourself made. We do it because

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[38] E. Urner Goodman, Foreword to the 1961 Edition of the *Order of the Arrow Handbook* (Scouting America, 1961)
[39] Groves and Lynes, "Announcing the OA's New Vision, Mission, and Purpose."

there's something special about the look in a younger scout's eyes when they finally figure out that knot you taught them. We serve because there's something special when we've finally got all those tents up for the summer, finally got all the cabins painted, finally got all the trails cleared—*I* did that. *We* did that. At the end of that journey, we sit down among the people we worked with to enjoy rest and recreation with them, for there is no greater nor closer feeling of companionship than to be with those who understand, as you do, that the duty to others is also a duty to self, and who work with you to make the world just a little bit better than it had been. Brotherhood, Cheerfulness, and Service are not three heterogeneous concepts. They are three aspects of one and the same principle.

The Order of the Arrow is not the only way to catch this Higher Vision. The unit program can be extended to teach those same lessons through different means, and it ought to be. Many people in this world do not understand what it means to live as brothers, and do not live meaningful, purposeful lives. Many youth growing up today enter the world without the skills they need to live happily and healthily. Despite these things, many do not perceive Scouting as worth joining. We must show the world that Scouting is worth it.

Therefore I propose a new Vision, not just for the OA, but for all of Scouting America:

**To be an organization that is worth being a part of.**

The program needs to be improved for the troops. There need to be opportunities for older scouts to do worthwhile things and have worthwhile experiences directly within troop programs, such as having high adventure and career exploration opportunities. I fail to see why National does not offer more jobs or internships to youth; many scouts are interested in working with or for nonprofits. I fail to see why Scouting has no partnerships with companies that could be future employers for scouts in the program; why it could not be a route to career connections and

opportunities. I fail to see why National is not helping to facilitate these programs and similar ones at the council level. I do not think it would be that difficult, since many people who could help introduce such programs are already part of the movement.

And it's not just about convincing today's youth. Parents are often far greater barriers to their entry or retention because they want their children to be in programs that will help them "succeed"—a term that for an unfortunately large number of parents means get into a good college and end up with a high-paying job. We need to create opportunities relevant to these ends if we're truly going to be an organization worth being a part of, for otherwise we're simply wasting our members' time.

Scouting is a movement. It's not a business, or a company, or merely one more thing for kids to do. Scouting's purpose is something special and supremely worthwhile, and it is up to us to execute it properly.

We ought to keep an eye on the summit. The trail ahead of us is difficult, and littered with things to make us forget our purpose and fall down the mountainside. But we do not climb this mountain alone. We make this journey together, and there is no reason to ever wish otherwise. Life wouldn't be worth living all alone. Life is a privilege because we are privileged to live it together.

## II: Ethics

Even if none of the things I said in Section I produce any real change, it is crucial that the things said in this section do. While misconstruing the importance of membership retention is not a moral failure, much of National's conduct in service to that end has been. While it is obvious to most people that using disingenuous arguments and manipulative rhetorical strategies—not to

mention breaking promises—is unethical, there is more to it than that. It is important to understand exactly why these things are wrong, and witness fully the breadth of their condemnation. It may seem like though National's infractions are wrong, they are excusable because they are minor, and because they were trying to do what they thought was best for scouting.

This is an illusion, and a harmful one. The problem lies in the fallacy of equivocation, present in the use of the word 'excusable.' When we say that an action is excusable, we could mean either that it is *negligible*, in that they are not seriously wrong and can be allowed to continue, or we can mean that it is *forgivable*, in that we ought to forgive it, but still prevent it from happening in the future. Upon reflection, it is clear that using the former sense is analytically equivalent to saying that "National's actions are obviously wrong, but they are not really wrong", which is obviously self-contradictory. We cannot simultaneously truly believe that something is wrong and that it ought to be done.[40] That it is so easy to fall into this trap is precisely why a rigorous study of morality is important, so that we might understand what makes things wrong, and so understand when something really ought not to be done.

My aim in this section is to demonstrate that none of the major plausible views of morality permit National's conduct. It is not a matter of degree here, only the binary property of wrong or not wrong.[41] One may be tempted to say that this is too black and white—but this claim is based on a misunderstanding of logic. What is X cannot also be not X. If an action is wrong, it

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[40] If this concept is not clear enough, think of the phrase "how could something that feels so right be wrong?" Anyone using this phrase clearly does not believe that the something in question is truly wrong, they simply understand that the something is generally taken to be wrong.

[41] The category 'not wrong' includes the subcategories 'permissible' and 'right.' It is important to recognize that right and wrong are not simple opposites, as it may be possible for an action to not be disallowed while not being morally permitted or endorsed—which actions fall into this category depends on the ethical system in question. An intuitive example of a permissible action is when a perfectly healthy person (outside of potential extenuating circumstances) eats cake for pleasure; they are not morally required to eat the cake, nor would it be morally wrong to do so.

cannot simultaneously not be wrong, for that would be a contradiction. The extent to which an action is wrong may play a role in how it is appropriate to react to that wrongness, such as whether we regard that action as forgivable or not. It is important to see that though National's infractions may be taken as minor (though 'minor' is a minimizing word that serves only to disingenuously downplay the wrongness of their actions), they are nonetheless categorically, unequivocally wrong.

## Contractualism

The contractualist critique is short and sweet. Contractualism is a form of ethics based on common agreement proposed by Harvard philosopher T.M Scanlon in his seminal paper *Contractualism and Utilitarianism* in 1982 and then further developed in his book *What We Owe to Each Other* in 1998. It is based on a single, simple principle:

> An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement.[42]

A rejection is reasonable if it has substantial reasons behind it. There are such reasons for not wanting to be deceived or coerced, for promises to be kept, and for our substantial ends not to be relegated beneath membership retention (as I demonstrated in the previous section). As such, any principle that would allow National to engage in its present conduct can be reasonably rejected, and so that conduct is wrong.

Similarly, a member who is retained through coercive means, such as being lied to about what the OA program is or what it does, and so wastes their time, could reasonably reject any principle that allowed that to happen. The same is true if the structure of our organization necessitates that some older scouts be unable to get the most out of Scouting because they have

[42] T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Harvard University Press, 1998),153.

to serve as leaders to their unit, but all the opportunities for older Scouts lie in being part of the OA. As I argued in the first section, this is likely to occur for many scouts if we continue down the current path, and that is wrong.

## Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is an ethical system focused on maximizing the aggregate well-being among all people. In *rule utilitarianism*, we try to find the principles of actions such that, if they were universally followed (or implemented as laws), would maximize aggregate well-being. We might, for example, claim that it would maximize aggregate well-being if we never infringed on free speech[43]. In *Act Utilitarianism*, we do not consider principles of action, but rather actions themselves. We might, for example, believe that it is right to tell someone a lie if telling them the truth would hurt their feelings.

Rule and Act Utilitarianism can be at odds. Consider the principle "we ought never to infringe on free speech" again. There are conceivable situations where an act utilitarian would violate this principle, such as by taking down banners flying racist messages. Since it is not hard to see that any plausible form of Rule Utilitarianism would disallow National's lying, breaking promises, and coercion,[44] I will focus only on Act Utilitarianism here.

Utilitarians are also divided in what they believe "well-being" is. Those who believe in a desire fulfillment theory of well-being argue for *Preference Utilitarianism*, while those who believe in a hedonic theory of well-being argue for *Hedonistic Utilitarianism.* In the former, the aim is to maximize the fulfillment of preferences and minimize the extent to which these preferences are subverted or infringed. It is relevant that since people often have contradictory

[43] Indeed, this is part of what the utilitarian John Stuart Mill argued for in his famous essay *On Liberty*.
[44] See the essay mentioned in the previous footnote.

desires, or desires that they wouldn't have if they were fully informed, only desires that would be held if they had determined which of their conflicting desires they want more and had full access to all relevant information count. In the latter, the aim is to maximize happiness and minimize pain.[45]

The Utilitarian critique is not long, but it is important to address because it is the only system that would possibly allow National's conduct. Because it cares about maximizing aggregate well-being, utilitarianism is a form of *consequentialism*; that is, it doesn't care about the actions themselves, only about their effects—intuitively, that "the ends justify the means." It is important to demonstrate that they do not.

Preference Utilitarianism condemns National's conduct for reasons similar to contractualism (we will see that this is a theme). Most people have a desire not to be deceived or coerced. Most relevant people would have a desire for National to fulfill the promises they made that were broken. Anyone that wishes to join or stay in Scouting would have a desire for the program to be the best it can be, and so for the program to be improved, and for the OA and Scouting not to impede their own ends. As I argued in the first section, the program would be better served by means other than National's current ones.

Hedonistic Utilitarianism is not so clear at first glance, but it too disallows National's conduct. For this, we must accept the claim that:

(C) The ends of the OA and Scouting America contribute to the overall happiness of all people, and the minimization of pain in the world.

I do not believe that any scout could reasonably reject this claim. If this claim were false, then Scouting would not be worth being a part of. Clearly then, undermining these ends cannot be for the best unless it were in service to some ends that did more for the aggregate well-being

[45] Where "pain" refers not just to physical pain, but to all forms of distress.

of all—but this is clearly not the case with National, since they are being undermined for their own sake. The final subsection of Section I gives an alternative to what National's have been doing that better serves the ends of Scouting, and hence, according to (C), does more for the general good. It follows that Hedonistic Utilitarianism also disallows National's actions.

## Kantian Ethics

The most powerful argument against National's conduct comes from Kantian Ethics, a system first developed by the legendary philosopher Immanuel Kant at the tail-end of the Enlightenment. He believed that there must be a fundamental moral rule, knowable to us completely *a priori*—by reason alone. Such a moral rule would be an absolute and inviolable command, which it would always be irrational to act against—a categorical imperative. He found his categorical imperative, and gave its supreme command in multiple forms. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on the Formula of Humanity:

> Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or anyone else's, never merely as a means, but also always as an end.[46]

For Kant, rational beings[47] have unconditional value simply by virtue of their nature. This means that they are always to be regarded as the ultimate purpose of our actions for their own sake—as an end in themself. It is wrong to treat a person as though their value were merely conditional, and particularly wrong to treat them as though their value were purely instrumental—as though they were a mere means. According to Christine Korsgaard, a leading contemporary Kant Scholar:

> When Kant says rational nature or humanity is an end in itself, it is the power of rational choice that he is referring to, and in particular, the power to set an end (to make

[46] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Christopher Bennett, Joe Saunders, and Robert Stern (Oxford University Press, 2019), 42.
[47] Kant uses the term 'humanity' to refer to all rational beings, not just humans.

> something an end by conferring the status of goodness on it) and pursue it by rational means.[48]

The key here is that Kant's moral system is based on the idea of *autonomy* (the power to set one's own ends), and the claim that reason necessitates that we respect the autonomy of ourselves and others as something unconditionally valuable. That each and every person has this same obligation demands that morality be a relation of *reciprocity*. As Korsgaard explains, "in the positive sense, to treat another as an end in itself is to make her ends your own,"[49] and "in the negative sense, to treat another as an end in itself is to respect her autonomy—to leave her actions, decisions, and ends to her own choice."[50] I cannot overstate the importance of this latter concept, because it means that anyone joined in a reciprocal (cooperative) relationship, such as in an organization like Scouting or the OA, must be given a chance to choose:

> If my end requires your act for its achievement, then I must let you make it your end too. Both what I choose and the way I choose it must reflect this constraint. You must be free to choose whether you will contribute to the success of my project or not. . . . If I force you to contribute to an end you had no opportunity to decide for or against, or if I trick you into contributing to one end under the guise of soliciting your help with another, then I have used you as a mere means.[51]

It has long been known that consent is an indelible element of Kant's philosophy. To coerce someone into doing something, whether it be by force, deceit, or omission, is to strip them of their autonomy—to treat them as a mere means, a *thing* instead of a person.

As I demonstrated in Section I, National is quite guilty of this immoral reification. Their use of obscurantism, their failure to fulfill their promises, and their dishonest sophistry treat those they swore to as brothers as if they were mere objects. It tries to force the end of

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[48] Christine Korsgaard, "Formula of Humanity," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 124.
[49] Christine Korsgaard, "Creating the Kingdom of Ends," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 193.
[50] Ibid, 192-193.
[51] Ibid, 193.

membership retention on them by taking away their ability to choose, [52] and so violates Kant's Formula of Humanity.

National's "vision" for the OA is to use the OA and its members as a means to retain members. In being manipulative, National uses the OA and its members as a mere means. Furthermore, it asks them to recruit more members to its ranks and hold them in Scouting. But as I have argued, if the program is not worth being a part of, then we cannot recruit people without some mode of deception or coercion, and hence without violating the moral law. If a person is recruited, not for the good that recruitment will do for them, but for the good it will do for the Order, then they are being treated as a mere means. Similarly, if we make the OA the reason why scouts stay in Scouting while necessitating that some older scouts be unable to fully participate in it because their unit will collapse without them, we use them as means. This is true even if they volunteer to do this because "someone has to." They are still being forced into a position where someone has to make this self-sacrificing decision, and this is still to treat them as a mere means.

## Looking Ahead

I chose to only address the three most prominent ethical systems in the modern day, but there are others—none of them permit National's conduct either. While they're unequivocal in this, some of them just aren't intuitively very relevant and don't make strong cases. Virtue Ethics, for example, holds that we ought to do what will contribute to our acquisition of virtuous characteristics, like Temperance, Courage, or Truthfulness. While I doubt that anyone would argue that National's actions have helped make them virtuous, this critique is at best indirect

[52] If someone does not have full knowledge of what they are choosing, then they are not really being given the chance to choose. If relevant information is withheld from them with the goal of manipulating their decision, then their autonomy is not being respected.

because it doesn't address the relationship between National's actions and other people—it might be true, but it seems to go after the wrong thing. Care Ethics—based around the interchanging roles of caretaker and care-receiver in interpersonal relations—is similar because although National hasn't done a very good job as a caretaker of their organization, this seems a very roundabout way of repudiating their actions. Many other systems like Natural Law Ethics, G.E. Moore's Pluralist Consequentialism, or W.D. Ross' Pluralist Deontology, apart from just not being widely accepted,[53] would largely just involve repeating the same arguments the other systems make, especially the utilitarian one. Apart from redundancy, the subtle technical differences between these systems are complicated enough that I believe including them would simply be confusing to most readers.

None of this is even to mention National's by now obvious violations of the Scout Oath and Law—but I digress again. My point is that there is no plausible moral perspective from which National's actions can be justified. This means they need to change—*we* need to change. The first step is to make a new plan for Scouting America's direction in the coming years. That plan must then be made wholly available to the public, along with a full explanation of the reasons supporting it. We have long struggled with cover-ups and half-truths—the exact sort of secrecy that allowed sexual predators to operate in our movement so effectively for so long. *Scouting America needs to have nothing to hide.*

It is never fun to be told that you are doing wrong, but such hang-ups will not fix anything. At the same time, National's actions do not merit retribution, and witch hunting won't fix anything. It's not about who's to blame, or who needs to be fired, or who should feel guilty. It's about doing better now that we know we have to.

[53] Because they're seriously flawed.

## III: To Love One Another

In the previous two sections, I have focused on Scouting's issues largely in a vacuum; though they form the majority of this essay, I believe they are its least important aspect. What matters far more is how Scouting can and should impact the world at large.

Salient here is the Order of the Arrow's AIA policy. While it putatively addresses the long-standing issue of cultural appropriation in the Order of the Arrow,[54] in truth it merely tries to bury the problem instead of fixing it. To see this, we must look at the AIA policy and National's rationale for it in detail.

There is no reasonable objection against the essential part of this policy, which is that "any program involving American Indian traditions—such as dancing, costuming, drumming, crafts, and pow-wows—must be done in conjunction with a state or federally recognized tribe."[55] This is wholly proper. It is the following that is objectionable:

> The local nature of tribal governance has led the national OA committee to determine that it is not appropriate to conduct American Indian programming beyond the lodge level. Competitions, training, and other American Indian programs at the section and national level will conclude in 2025…

Ostensibly, this is wholly sensible. But it in fact homogenizes 575 federally recognized, and many more state-recognized, tribes, each of which has its own unique history, heritage, and culture. The claim National is making here is that because there is no single governing body or unified council, there is no authority by which the OA could acquire unilateral permission to have AIA programs. Implicit in this claim is the assumption that there *needs to be such a governing body* and that *permission to have any AIA programming needs to be unilateral.* Both

[54] I know this is a claim that many Arrowman take issue with, but it *has* been a long standing issue. No one likes to be guilty of wrongdoing, and our most used defense mechanism is simple denial that it happened, or that it's actually wrong. This is yet another form of distraction; a way of dodging rather than fixing the issue.
[55] Grove and Lynes, "Policy Update: Changes Regarding American Indian Programming."

these assumptions do not treat each tribe as a self-determining entity that is capable of making decisions and holding relationships independent of all other tribes. In other words, it doesn't distinguish between different native groups while simultaneously claiming that we need to.

It is wholly possible that the OA holds a relationship with a single large tribe and includes "programming"[56] based on that tribe's heritage, culture, and *independence*. It is possible to have many such relationships, up to and exceeding 575 in number. The idea that these tribes require a single, unified voice is essentially dehumanizing because it treats them as though they do not possess independent agency.

Obviously, the issue is that the OA is quite guilty of cultural appropriation and that cannot be allowed to continue. There are many accounts of this, but I find the anthropologist John H. Moore's account particularly illuminating:

> Of all the institutions in American Society, the Boy Scouts of America have probably done the most damage in miseducating the public about Native American Cultures. Although their "Indian Lore" merit badge has recently experienced a dramatic improvement through the advice of anthropologist David Hurst Thomas, the honorary society called Order of the Arrow annually initiates thousands of boys into the martial, romantic version of Indian culture through ceremonies drawn from the writings of Longfellow and James Fenimore Cooper. More than 175,000 American boys have been through these ceremonies and subsequent activities, and many of them are drawn into classes in Native American studies when they attend college.
>
> Several authors have written elegantly about the assumptions and expectations of this class of students as they approach the study of native cultures. Essentially they see American Indians as primitive versions of themselves, except a little further down on the evolutionary tree. They expect to see the alleged ancient characteristics of their own cultures represented among American Indians. They see Indians as Robin Hood or Lancelot or Davy Crockett. They embrace and exaggerate the significance of any apparent similarity between Native American culture and their own, especially those descriptions that depict Native Americans as warlike individualists, moral do-gooders obsessed with martial honor and personal vengeance, like Cooper's Chingachgook.
>
> Such students, with such expectations, do not like to hear that many Native American cultures were and are highly collective rather than individualistic in their values, that they

[56] I despise this term because it seems to trivialize the significance of including representations of Native cultures and education about those cultures in our program.

> were familial, communalistic in their attitudes towards land and personal property, and "heathen" in their religious views. Rather than listening to these propositions, these students want to know how to make a weapon, or make a drum, or make a "costume" that will allow them to dance about and endorse what they perceive as Native American values—which are really the values of their own culture, dressed up in beads and feathers.[57]

Moore's description goes on. His account is but one of many, each detailing roughly the same idea: the OA misrepresents Native cultures and values. This is a serious problem, and it is not what E. Urner Goodman intended when he chose to incorporate AIA into the heart of the OA's program; perhaps it has been forgotten why he did. Luckily, he was not silent on the matter:

> One of the significant things that Scouting in America has done apart from opening its doors to boys of all races and creeds—has been the perpetuation of the lore and traditions of those first Americans, the Red Indians. We have a task before us still to square accounts with these aboriginal peoples, for there were many cruel acts of injustice as the white settlers took over.
>
> Treasure Island itself, my old camp on the Delaware River, was an Indian camping ground. It was also part of the land given to a man named Marshall for his part in the famous Walking Treaty—an affair which, I understand, did the Red Man out of a considerable tract of land.
>
> So the debt hangs heavily upon us yet. Government has its part to play, of course, but the Order of the Arrow has its own particular opportunity to pay off the debt of brotherhood in its preservation of Indian culture in this generation.[58]

The OA has not succeeded in fulfilling this debt; America as a whole has not. Native Americans face many serious contemporary issues, most of which are not known to the majority of the American public:

> Poverty: The publicity given to the casinos on tribal land is misleading. While they have provided some measure of economic benefits, equitable prosperity has not come. As per the U.S. Census Bureau data, 27% of all Native Americans live in poverty. For example, three of the reservations in North and South Dakota are among the five poorest counties in the country. In a Montana reservation, the unemployment rate was 69% a few years ago.

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[57] John H. Moore, "Truth and Tolerance in Native American Epistemology," in *Studying Native America: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Russel Thornton, (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), https://books.google.com/books?id=_EA-UwvN_HUC&pg=PA299#v=onepage&q&f=false, 299.
[58] E. Urner Goodman, *The Building of a Life* (Boy Scouts of America, 2015), 74.

> Lack of Educational Opportunities: Native Americans make up under 1% of the student population of the U.S.A. Over the last decade, the graduation rate of Native Americans has been steadily dropping, and their dropout rate is twice that of the national average. Efforts must be made to understand the causes of the problem. While it appears that prejudice, a lack of appreciation of their academic needs, and the deterioration of the school system are among the primary causes, until the reasons are fully understood, the situation will remain unchanged.
> Violence against Women: Just fewer than 50% of all Native American women have experienced some form of physical abuse, including rape, domestic violence, and stalking. In some tribal habitats, the murder rate of women is ten times more than the national average. A Department of Justice report released some years ago states that 80% of the abuse suffered by Native American women is perpetuated by non-Native Americans.[59]

These are just a few of the issues facing Native communities. While exact rates are difficult to estimate, alcohol abuse is disproportionately prevalent among Native communities, to the point where "the age-adjusted alcohol-related death rate in 1992 was 5.6 times higher among the Indian population than among the U.S. population in general; this rate was 7.1 times higher in 1980. Nearly twice as many Indian men as Indian women die from alcohol-related causes between ages 45 and 64, the peak age range for such deaths. Chronic liver disease and cirrhosis are 3.9 times as prevalent in the Indian population as in the general population; alcohol-related fatal automobile accidents are 3 times as prevalent; alcohol-related suicide is 1.4 times as prevalent; and alcohol-related homicide is 2.4 times as prevalent."[60] Systemic racism is heavily damaging to Native Communities, including in many ways outside the ones we typically hear about from news and media:

> Physical and cultural genocide has been practiced against Native Americans for half a millennium. In the modern era, these forms of genocide have been superseded by a more insidious, and ultimately more destructive, form. Environmental genocide is perpetrated by the U.S. government and by private corporations alike; some of their methods are legal, while others are not. . .

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[59] "Native American Issues Today," Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, August, 2021, https://www.muwekma.org/blog/2021/august/native-american-issues-today.html
[60] Fred Beauvais, "American Indians and Alcohol," *Alcohol Health and Research World* vol. 22,4 (1998): 253-9, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6761887/

> One very significant toxic threat to Native Americans comes from governmental and commercial hazardous waste sitings. Because of the severe poverty and extraordinary vulnerability of Native American tribes, their lands have been targeted by the U.S. government and the large corporations as permanent areas for much of the poisonous industrial by-products of the dominant society.[61]

We do not normally hear about or consider environmental racism like this. Nor do many Americans recognize that what's happened to Native Americans since 1492 *is* a genocide. It has in fact been one of the largest and most successful—the systematic extermination of the persons and cultures of more than 575 distinct peoples across an entire continent.

The Order of the Arrow has failed to be a proper source of education and reparation. It has perpetuated harmful stereotypes and served to mischaracterize hundreds of unique Native cultures. The current policy tries to pretend that the OA never had any AIA affiliation. It tries to bury our mistakes instead of facing them. Far from helping Native Americans, it will serve to efface their cultures and people further.

But we can do better. The OA's commitment to the good of Native Americans, despite its misguided and harmful execution, puts us in a unique position to do a lot of good for a lot of people. We can remove hazardous waste and pollution from reservations; help fund or build ( as in literally send arrowmen out for parts of the construction) tribally controlled schools, which are a key element of the contemporary Indian Self-Determination Movement; raise money; collect food; build homes; build museums or websites to preserve local tribal history; or even just help with parking at tribe events—not as a means, but because it is the right thing to do. We can extend an open invitation to all tribes to *come to us*, to choose to come to OA events and educate scouts on their culture and history; a benefit to both groups, for mutual benefit is a natural consequence of being part of a community of man, or as Kant would say, a Kingdom of Ends.

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[61] Daniel Brook, "Environmental Genocide: Native Americans and Toxic Waste," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 57, no. 1 (1998): 105-06, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1536-7150.1998.tb03260.x

For this the ceremonies must indeed change. Relationships must be built. We must overcome centuries of mistrust, abuse, and mistakes, and never shy away from what is right just because it is hard—we must lift and bear the burden.

## IV: The Winds of Change

In 1915, Urner E. Goodman loosed the Arrow from the bow, and its journey since has been a complicated one. It had to navigate an era of unprecedented technological advancement and global conflict. It witnessed the Moon Landing, the Civil Rights Movement, the Sexual Revolution—the Holocaust, the Cold War, and the rise of the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction. The ever-shifting winds of change have blown our Arrow to and fro, given it new direction, buoyed it high above the clouds, sent it whizzing through the golden fields of fortune, and sent it plummeting straight to the ground. It has flown through fog and thicket, through soupy clouds and thunderstorms. In the stygian night, shrieking wind, and rolling thunder, the Arrow may seem lost, invisible against the pitch darkness, inaudible through all the noise. Flung so far afield of where our founder shot it, the Arrow may seem useless, dangerous, or meaningless—was Goodman right to shoot it where he did? Was his aim true? Did that Arrow ever mean something? Was the Vision no more than a Dream?

If it were but our Natenska, could we not help but love it anyway?

An Arrow flies towards a target. That target is the mission of Scouting America. Scouting is unique among all the organizations in the modern day that youth have available to them because it is the only organization whose purpose is to make them good—the knowledge necessary to live a fulfilling, successful, and self-determined life, and a strong moral character to use that knowledge for the right purpose. It doesn't matter how many members we retain if they

don’t get that out of our program because that purpose is what makes Scouting worth being a part of. No matter how the wind blows, we must not forget our target.

It will not be easy. Great gusts blow all over the world, for today humanity stands on the hinge of history. The threats of Climate Change, Authoritarianism, and Nuclear Annihilation loom much larger than many of us in the “developed world” care to think about. In the next ten years, our actions will have a larger impact than they ever have before, and perhaps than they ever will again. They will determine whether our species sinks or swims—whether we die in nuclear hellfire or live to see an unprecedented golden age. The stakes have never been higher.

Most of us acknowledge this truth, yet I look around and I see a distracted world. I see a world obsessed with wealth, power, and material convenience. I see students who can't understand basic writing without AI and can barely bear the abject horror of forming an independent thought. I see businesses that seek ever more to “optimize” and “make advances,” without any clue what they’re advancing towards. I see politicians who once stood for something run again and again simply because they don’t want to give up their power and position—More often I see politicians who never stood for anything do the same. I see a world that’s eating its own tail and thinks progress is when it manages to fit more down its throat. I see people who are willing to talk but not willing to do. I see a hundred nations who would rather ignore our problems because it’s easier than solving them.

Above all I see ignorance; not ignorance as such, but ignorance of our ignorance. Most of us assume we know far more than we do, and that we know it far better than other people. Most of us have incoherent worldviews because we accept contradictory propositions at different times as we fancy without asking if there are any relevant differences. Most of us hold the political views that we do because of how we were raised and how different issues make us feel, not

because of critical reflection or the possession of reasons. Most atheists[62] believe there is no God "because there is no evidence," but must simultaneously admit that the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence, and so that the proper conclusion is agnosticism[63]—that they don't know. Most theists believe because they were raised to and do not question whether they are justified in doing so, or worse, that the very question is immoral. Most people who oppose communism have not studied *Das Kapital* or Dialectical Materialism, and neither have most supposed "Marxists." Many people who profess a worldview based on logic and reason have never heard of syllogisms or modal necessity. Many people "don't care what anyone else thinks" unless it's positive, and many defer to "it's just my opinion" if presented with evidence against their view, which is a fallacy. Many would accept the claim that anything not provable by the scientific method is merely a subjective matter of opinion, without then considering what justifies the scientific method.[64] As a result of that ignorance, most people are unwilling to change. So long as we hate, war, accuse, attack, degrade, or riot for the sake of what we believe, ignorance will always be the source of truly pointless evil.

It may seem that I have a pessimistic worldview, but that is not the case at all. The world may be a certain way, but that does not mean it has to be that way. We really can do better. We can choose to embrace a better future, if we listen and remember.

It may seem odd that I choose to include all this in the conclusion to an essay about the comparatively minor problems of an extracurricular program for youth. Indeed, I encountered

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[62] I speak here of uncritical atheists who have never critically studied religious philosophy or theology. For those curious, it is generally accepted in the modern day that no deductive proof or disproof of God is possible, but that inductive evidence is possible. These debates largely center around what is called The Problem of Evil.

[63] As the above note implies, it is possible to justify (though not apodictically) atheism. My claim here is that basing atheism on the absence of evidence is fallacious. The main misconception here is that the burden of proof lies on the side making a positive claim, which is false—the burden of proof lies on anyone making a knowledge claim.

[64] In case this is too subtle, the point is that it's circular to claim that the scientific method verifies the scientific method, because it would already have to be valid to verify itself. Therefore we need epistemic mechanisms that can prove the scientific method, which means that there must be objectively true propositions which can't be empirically verified.

many who did not understand why I would spend energy on something like this, who believed that I've wasted my time and that my effort wouldn't make any difference. Perhaps it will not. But change needs to start somewhere, with someone, if we are ever to swing the hinge in the right direction. I believe that The Order of the Arrow is one of the places that change can start.

Because once upon a time I was drawn from many others and sent upon a journey. On the trail of that journey, I found my brothers, and for the first time I knew I was on a trail worth taking. I was told then that I was on a Quest for the Arrow, for the Higher Vision, and the trail began to lead upwards. One day, my brothers told me that I had found it, though nonetheless that the trail was not over. The Vision was yet to take me higher still. I followed the trail until one day they chose me as their lodge chief, and then I reached the summit, and the whole sky stretched out endlessly before me. Up there I performed my duties, each day waiting, watching for the Higher Vision. At the end of my term, I was selected for something greater. On a rainy and windy night, I watched a fire, tended and sheltered it beneath the hidden firmament above. When dawn finally broke and the sun shone through the clouds, I descended the mountain, and there at the bottom, I found that the Highest Vision had been waiting for me all along—the sight of my fellow man.

The power of one person is the ability to change the minds of many. Life is a constant storm, and in the modern day more than ever we are constantly flung about, pulled this way and that, our thoughts silenced by the booming thunder. But we can control these winds. We can do better than we have. We can hold ourselves to a higher standard. We can seek the Higher Vision. We can reject the apathy that obliterates the simple wisdom we need to keep *The Arrow in Flight.*

"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing's going to get better. It's not."

- Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*

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