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The Supreme Court, broadly interpreting the Freedom of Information Act in favor of disclosure, said yesterday that concern for personal privacy must not defeat the law's goal of making government more open.

"Disclosure, not secrecy, is the dominant objective of the act," the court declared in a 5-to-3 decision.

The court ruled that records of honor code enforcement by the military academies may not be withheld from the public solely out of fear that the privacy of present or former cadets may be infringed.

The decision, which could open heretofore secret government agency and medical files to public inspection, was the federal government's first Supreme Court defeat in six recent cases testing the exemptions from disclosure provided in the 1966 law.

The court's opinion, delivered by Justice William J. Brennan Jr., gave a narrow interpretation to two of the law's nine specific exemptions to the general rule that citizens are entitled to most government information.

The exemptions safeguard files on "internal personnel rules and practices of an agency" and files "the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy."

Over objections by the Defense and Justice departments, the court held that Air Force Academy honor code records sought by researchers must be turned over to a federal judge who, with the help of military lawyers, must make the documents public if names of individual cadets can be "sanitized" out of them.

The decision, the result of three years of litigation,

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came down at a time when another service academy—West Point—has been touched by a new cheating scandal in which the enforcement of an honor code is part of the controversy.

Investigations of more than 100 West Point cadets have brought renewed complaints that the cadet-run honor system is unfair to accused undergraduates, exposing them to interrogation without legal safeguards and the danger of arbitrary punishment.

Such complaints were made in 1973 by the researchers who sought the Air Force documents and sued for them under the information act.

The researchers, all connected with the New York University law review, included former Air Force Capt. Michael T. Rose, now 28, author of a 194-page report contending that "intolerable" disciplinary procedures were being used at West Point, Annapolis and the Air Force, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine academies.

Rose, a graduate of the Air Force Academy and NYU law school, has been a source of irritation to the Air Force for several years. He filed formal requests with the Pentagon to discipline academy officials—requests that were denied—and later charged that he was hounded out of the service because of his critical writings.

Justice William J. Brennan Jr., writing for the court, said the subject of Rose's inquiry — the "adequacy or inadequacy" of service academy discipline—is "undeniably significant to the public role of the military" and that citizens have a stake in that issue.

The ethical training of future military leaders and the fairness of a system that forces dismissal of many cadets are matters of public concern, Brennan said. Release of information about those issues, he added, fits the information law's main purpose of opening up government secrets except in areas specifically exempted.

Government lawyers had argued that a judge's secret screening of the honor code documents would be ineffective because, even with names removed, individual cadets would be identifiable.

Brennan said the screening idea seemed workable and should be tried. He admitted that concern over cadet exposure "cannot be rejected as trivial" but said that danger was outweighed by the informing purpose of the federal law.

The screening "cannot eliminate all risks of identifiability," Brennan said, but he added that the law "does not protect against disclosure every incidental invasion of privacy—only such disclosures as constitute 'clearly unwarranted' invasions of personal privacy."

Brennan was joined by Justice potter Stewart, Byron R. White, Thurgood Marshall and Lewis F. Powell Jr. Strong separate dissents were filed by Justice Harry A. Blackmun, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger and Justice William H. Rehnquist.

Justice John Paul Stevens who joined the court after the case was argued, did not participate.

"I fear," Blackmun said, "that the court today strikes a severe blow to the honor codes, to the system under which they operate, and to the former cadets concerned. It is sad to see these old institutions mortally wounded and passing away and individuals placed in jeopardy and embarrassment for lesser incidents long past."

Burger said the screening process "would place an intolerable burden upon a district court" unintended by Congress. He said the act did not contemplate a federal district judge acting as a rewrite editor" of secret material.

Rehnquist agreed with Burger and Blackmun that since the screening system was not authorized by the information act, it could not be used to satisfy the requirements of the privacy exemption.

A spokesman for the American Civil Liberties Union, which supported Rose's suit, said yesterday that the decision may be especially helpful in attempts to obtain release of more historical files, including still-secret documents in the cases of Alger Hiss and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.