



Neither Fools nor Cowards

By Eliot A. Cohen

In an era of budget tightening and frequent foreign missions, both the military and many of our elite civilian universities have increasingly undervalued higher education as part of officer training, yet many soldiers credit their studies as indispensable training for the demands of contemporary warfare.

“The nation that will insist upon drawing a broad line of demarcation between the fighting man and the thinking man is liable to find its fighting done by fools and its thinking by cowards.”

—Sir William Francis Butler

Soldier and scholar, the sword and the book. Despite some remarkable individuals distinguished in both fields—Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, hero of Gettysburg and a professor who ended the war as one of Grant’s favorite generals; or General John Galvin, Supreme Allied Commander Europe in the 1980s and a noted historian of the American Revolution—the academy and barracks often look askance at one another. While the United States is in the midst of a war that obliterated part of their city, the university senate at Columbia University recently voted overwhelmingly to ban the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) from returning to the campus.

This contemptible vote will, if the government has the nerve and realizes what is at stake, bring down on the university the weight of the Solomon Amendment. That legislation allows the federal government to cut off public money to schools (other than established pacifist institutions) that prohibit or prevent the establishment of ROTC units. Perhaps the prospect of lost research grants will achieve what the call of

service cannot, but it will be a sad day when a slash to a university’s budget has to take the place of an appeal to its patriotism.

Not all of the country’s leading institutions of higher learning are that way, of course: My own Johns Hopkins University, for example, proudly claims one of the oldest ROTC programs in the country. At Harvard University, President Larry Summers lends his presence and eloquence to the commissioning of Harvard students who still attend the program across the city at MIT, which has a large and vigorous program. The churlishness of Columbia’s decision, however, reflects not so much animus as disdain; and unfortunately, that is a sentiment reciprocated too often by those in uniform.

The sad truth, moreover, is that the institutional military is not all that eager to reestablish an ROTC presence on elite campuses. There are many arguments—the faculties are too fractious, there are too few students interested in service (Catch-22, one would think, since how would one know there are no likely cadets if one is not present to recruit them?), it is so much more efficient to consolidate ROTC units, and so on. It was largely civilian organizations (see, for example, www.advocatesforrotc.org) that have pressed to bring ROTC back to elite campuses: senior military and civilian defense officials do not give the

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matter much weight. As the patriotic spirit so evident after September 11 fades, so too has an opportunity to bring back together the country's military and the institutions that produce its leaders in so many other fields.

Devaluing Military Education

But the divorce between thinking and fighting goes deeper. The impending base realignment and closing commission report may relocate several major military educational institutions—the Army War College and the Naval Postgraduate School are most often mentioned—in the name of fiscal savings, without considering the impact on the educational mission. Pentagon accountants have totted up the savings that distance learning supposedly offers and convinced themselves and others that a couple of hours sitting alone, staring at a computer screen after a fourteen-hour workday, will yield the same educational benefit as a morning seminar with a dozen other senior professionals and an expert instructor. Senior officers, eager to acquire or award credentials (necessary for promotion and career advancement) are happy to declare that degrees earned that way mean as much as those spent at a major university or a war college. Officers know that a teaching assignment is often a career killer, and many of those best suited for such roles avoid them. Recently, one defense official defended a proposal to shut down temporarily parts of the army's advanced professional military educational system with the remark, "Some of the experiences they are getting today are better than anything they will get in a classroom. . . . It's not giving up something for nothing. We have a generation of leaders in the Army today that are battle-tested and are much more capable of leading the Army from the actual experience they have."

The stupidity of this last remark is as depressing, in its way, as the cravenness of the Columbia University senate's vote. It implies that knowing how to maneuver a battalion through an urban fight is the same thing as crafting a strategy for winning a counterinsurgency. It suggests that at least some at the top of the Pentagon do not understand that the next war will be as different

from Iraq 2005 as Iraq was from Somalia, and Somalia from Panama, and Panama from Vietnam. Combat experience can indeed give us an army that can fight and win America's battles, but it is education that provides the intellectual depth and breadth that allows soldiers to understand and succeed in America's wars.

A perfect storm is besetting professional military education. A high operations tempo means that generals, understandably, strain every nerve to keep frontline units manned with the best people—even if that scants the educational system of teachers and top students. A stretched budget means that the revenue brought in by

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the sale of some valuable real estate leads defense officials to overlook the turmoil caused by relocating a war college. A lack of experience in delivering higher education makes officials—seeking to save money and cut down on family moves—eager to accept the claims of the purveyors of pedagogical patent medicines. Manpower economists, who think of management as putting round pegs in round holes, limit the exposure to higher education in the social sciences and humanities—although some of our most successful commanders in Iraq declare that their master's and Ph.D. degrees in history, or political science, or anthropology provided some of the best preparation

possible for the novel challenges of insurgent warfare. Senior military leaders, and a few civilians, acknowledge the existence of the problem but seem to lack the ability or the will to do something about it.

The best commanders do their best to counteract these pressures. They draw up reading lists for their subordinates and hold them to it; they rely on informal networks to bring that West Point social sciences instructor back out into a field assignment that will keep him competitive for command; they struggle to make staff colleges educationally alive despite turnover in the faculty that would be the despair of any civilian dean. But that is no substitute for an institutional awareness that an educated officer corps is indispensable, and that it is the responsibility of both the military, through its own educational institutions, and the nation's great universities to ensure that we have it. The military is not led by fools, nor the universities by cowards, but a demarcation exists, and it is broadening.