

Afterword

Thoughts on Sparta . . .

The tone of discussion about American civil-military relations has changed considerably since this project began. At the time, the central concern of scholars and observers of military affairs was how to check a military that seemed to be challenging civilian control. The pendulum has swung. Scholars are now writing about the dangers of neglecting military advice and the limits within which members of the military may challenge commands from civilian authorities. This shift in scholarly discourse is reflective of a period of instability in American civil-military relations.

Over the last eight years, we have witnessed a period in which the secretary of defense largely directed the means by which the military would execute its mission, followed by a backlash from many of the officers involved in that decision-making process or in the execution of the resulting plans. We then entered a period when a single military officer, General Petraeus, represented the face of American strategy in the Middle East. Each of these developments is troubling in its own right. They become more troubling when combined with both the passions of partisan politics and the substantial distance between the American population and its army.

Blunting the use of the military as a weapon in partisan politics is therefore an essential first step to improving American civil-military relations. Part of this can be accomplished through education and greater interaction between the American people and their military. Members of the military should encourage and embrace studies of the institution and its relationships with American society. If nothing else, such studies serve to inoculate against stereotypes that capture the popular imagination. Military personnel should not be viewed as champions of any specific faction, nor derided as bullies or patronized as victims. Service members come from, and are shaped by, American society. As such, they should be understood as Americans who serve their country under arms, and not as a distant or alien population.

This increased understanding can come only from a more diverse engagement with the military. Since fewer Americans have experience with military service, we must be more proactive in keeping the dialogue open. Relying on the small number of existing narratives of military life can leave observers with an incomplete or a misleading impression. Even well-

intentioned portrayals often miss the larger picture or use snapshots of military life to advance a tangential agenda. Such was the case with Samuel Huntington's closing comments in *The Soldier and the State*. Describing the architecture of West Point, and by extension its ethos, as culminating in the gothic chapel on the hill above the parade grounds, Huntington conjured a monastic image of military life sharply delineated from the discord of civil society and suggested that American society would be better off emulating military standards. But is the military that different from society? At least a few officers keep Huntington's portrayal of the academy on their walls as a source of pride, but does this mean that life at West Point flows to the chapel, or that members of the military share the hierarchy of values Huntington extrapolated from the layout of buildings around the parade field?

It is true that on any given weekend a visitor is likely to find thousands of cadets flowing up from the barracks and toward the chapel, but they are more likely to walk past the chapel toward the cathedral of college football than they are to stop for prayer. In this and myriad other dimensions of life, they are just like the rest of America.¹ After witnessing the ordered serenity of morning formations or parade practice, visitors would do well to witness the exodus of cadets on evening or weekend pass. There they can observe firsthand the great dash for the gates and the palpable desire of cadets to maintain their sense of connection with the world they have temporarily left behind. For cadets, military life does not supplant the American experience but augments who they are. The military ethos does not reshape their fundamental views but offers an avenue for them to serve the broader ideals of America.

It is only at first glance that civilians and the military appear to be sharply divided. Officers and officers in training do not abandon their core American identities but learn to fuse who they are with the obligation to serve their country. Similarly, the academy itself cannot be understood as an obelisk that magically appeared on the Hudson (as with the black stone in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, sent in more gothic form by a divine hand to enlighten the primitives). Instead, we must acknowledge that each stone at West Point has been shaped and placed by American hands seeking to build an enduring institution whose purpose is to protect the people and lands from which our military leaders are drawn.

¹ Readers wishing to understand more about life at West Point are highly encouraged to read the recent works of Elizabeth Samet and David Lipsky. See Samet, *Soldier's Heart*, and Lipsky, *Absolutely American*.

. . . and Babylon

Having experienced firsthand the disconnect between life in the army and portrayals of that life in popular culture, I thought I was prepared for more of the same while attending graduate school at the institution that surely occupies the opposite pole in the imagination of a red and blue America: Columbia University in the City of New York.² Columbia's history of protest politics, dating primarily from 1968, along with its continued opposition to the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, may suggest to some that the visions of West Point and Columbia are diametrically opposed. Indeed, several minor tempests on campus in the aftermath of September 2001 seemed to reinforce the image of Columbia as dutifully reprising its role from the culture wars of the 1960s. However, a closer look reveals a more nuanced environment and a few developments that suggest we may finally be moving beyond the divides of the Vietnam War.

As New York City regained its composure in the fall of 2001, so students at Columbia began to express their opinions of the war in Afghanistan. For a few months, the dominant theme was sobriety, but as the shock of September 11 slowly faded, campus activists began to find their voice. At times one might have been excused for thinking that the United States was still at war in Vietnam as both the slogans and images of that conflict found their way to rallies and onto posters adorning the campus. This recycled rhetoric was indicative of the time and distance that have grown between the American military and academia. With the end of the draft and the closure of ROTC programs at many elite universities in the aftermath of Vietnam, the gap between the nation's armed forces and academia left many on campus with no point of reference for the military beyond the tired stereotypes.

As the war went on, it appeared that the Solomon Amendment, a law mandating that institutions receiving federal funds could not bar military recruiting, would force a greater accommodation of the military on campus. But it was not the Solomon Amendment that ultimately brought a discussion of military service to the academic community, and for this we should be grateful. By all appearances the Solomon Amendment was written as a punitive measure by a conservative congressman seeking to strong-arm universities into supporting the military. Yet the idea of leveraging the power of the federal government to police academic life seems

² Credit for using Sparta and Babylon as foils for a discussion of the differences between civilians and members of the military must ultimately go to Huntington, but readers are also encouraged to explore the deeper exploration presented by Driver in *Sparta in Babylon*.

diametrically opposed to traditionally American ideals as well as to efforts at fostering mutual understanding.

Conversely, academic disengagement from questions of national defense has done little to change military personnel policies and in fact has widened the gulf between today's academic and military elites. Although there are valid criticisms of the policy known as "Don't ask, don't tell," overt opposition to the law prohibiting the service of open homosexuals in the military seems to appear only when it is needed as an excuse to keep ROTC off campus.

It is therefore a relief that the move to return ROTC to Columbia has been driven by students proactively seeking to reengage with issues of military service and representation on their own.³ Their discussions about the presence of ROTC at Columbia have moved beyond the rhetoric of the Vietnam generation. Therefore they reflect a welcome change from the false choice presented by those who equate a lack of support for the military with treason and those who feel that any engagement with the military is automatically an endorsement of militarism and discrimination. By all indications, today's students are ready to engage in these questions from a position that recognizes these either-or options as impediments to constructive dialogue.⁴ These students were given a tremendous boost when President Obama attended a campaign event at Columbia, his only campaign appearance at his alma mater, along with Senator John McCain. As part of the ServiceNation Presidential Forum, both candidates expressed their support for the return of ROTC to Columbia. This endorsement, combined with ongoing student engagement on the issue, led to a student referendum that revealed a close split on the issue of ROTC's return.⁵

Although a renewed engagement between the military and academia will not directly lead to the resolution of debates over military manpower policies, to say nothing of the external security challenges we face, the immediate benefit of such discussions is the dissolution of the stereotypes that suggest an unbridgeable gap between the Left and the Right in America. Indeed, the appropriate starting point is to realize that there is no Left or Right, or red or blue, America. Only on the most superficial level can one suggest that Columbia and West Point are not

³ It is significant that the push for ROTC at Columbia has been picked up by a large number of students with no previous military experience and no family connections with the military, in addition to being supported by students who have served in uniform. There is also significant support from members of the faculty. See Silver, "Why ROTC Should Return to Columbia."

⁴ For an especially compelling argument, see Foote, "A Bias-Free Campus?"

⁵ Schneider, "Students Roughly Split."

complementary and connected parts of the fabric of American life. Moving beyond debates over symbolic differences and engaging from a position of mutual interest are therefore essential first steps in ensuring that we each fulfill our role in providing for the security and sustained health of our democracy.

