

The Washington Post

ROTC's hard road back to campus

By Eliot A. Cohen

Wednesday, December 22, 2010; A17

Now that "don't ask, don't tell" [is dead](#), ROTC can return to the Ivy League. Left and right seem to agree on this, although, curiously, the more energetic arguments come from conservatives who deplore the politics of America's universities. No matter; it is the right sentiment. The problem will be taking this proposal beyond mere words.

Many elite universities kicked ROTC off campus during the Vietnam War and never brought it back. (Not the one at which I work, I hasten to add: Johns Hopkins has had ROTC since 1916.) But in truth, the military's policies toward homosexuals were, for the most part, merely an excuse for keeping recruiters at bay. The attenuated memories of Vietnam, a restoration of patriotic sentiment, a far less turbulent student body and the trauma of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks have made it easier to contemplate the return of ROTC. During the 2008 election campaign, Barack Obama and John McCain both supported it.

And in theory, who could object? ROTC offers another career path and tuition assistance to recession-spooked undergraduates; it is entirely voluntary, and even if the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are unpopular among the professoriate, faculty have made some progress since 1968 in their ability to distinguish between a policy and those who execute it.

This moment of apparent reconciliation between academic gowns and uniforms, however, will yield little unless all concerned realize how difficult it will be actually to return ROTC to elite campuses. The two cultures have, over more than a generation, grown apart. Neither relishes the idea of coming back together.

Let's consider the players: Except for a tiny minority of the professionally discontented, students will not oppose ROTC. Faculty of a certain generation are more likely to have reservations. Some will stereotype those stiff-backed, austere young men and women in uniform, many of whom will not embrace the politics of the modern campus. The military is, in the nature of things, conservative; and for some time, elite universities have been liberal. (That, by the way, is an excellent reason to force them to interact.) As any dean knows, faculties are masters of passive-aggressive behavior, and while they may not overtly reject ROTC they can find ways of containing, obstructing or subverting it. Tussles for office space, refusal of excused absences for training or merely a stream of disparaging remarks can make it clear that ROTC may be present but is not welcome.

More serious resistance, however, may come from the military. As has become distressingly clear to me in numerous conversations with serving officers, many really do not want to return to the Harvards, Stanfords and Yales of our country. They fear that going back to the Ivies will prove inefficient - too many cadre for too few cadets - and doubt they can recruit many elite undergraduates. Some officers and sergeants will feel uncomfortable, if not downright insecure, dealing with Ivy League professors. The services will have to give up some (silly) rules, such as requiring that the military appoint a voting member of the host university's faculty or insisting on course credit for military training. And deep down, some officers simply do not want all that many young people who belong to a class that is now unfamiliar with military service and out of touch with - and possibly hostile to - military culture.

So why go through this trouble? For two reasons.

First, whatever one thinks of the state of American humanities and social sciences, the students who go to top colleges and universities are smart, hardworking and able. Our armed forces need them. And the military won't know how many of the top students it can recruit unless and until it tries hard to do so.

More important, though, these young people, who will some day run our businesses and our politics, should share the burden of national defense. The symbolism as well as the substance of having ROTC on elite campuses matters. Reaching the pinnacle of our educational system is in itself a privilege; morally healthy schools, and the society they serve, tell young people that privilege implies obligation and responsibility. There is no deeper or nobler discharge of that responsibility than putting your life on the line for your country.

If we are serious about bringing back ROTC, university presidents and deans, the secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff will struggle to make it happen. As Lincoln told Ulysses S. Grant during the Civil War: "I repeat to you it will neither be done nor attempted unless you watch it every day, and hour, and force it."

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