In the Best of All Worlds, Thomas Jefferson once wrote, Americans would have nothing to do with other nations. Yet, he knew that war would "sometimes," maybe even frequently, "be our lot; and all the wise can do, will be to avoid that half of them which would be produced by our own follies, and our own acts of injustice; and to make for the other half the best preparations we can."

As President, Jefferson’s record on war "preparations" was mixed. His republican concern with frugality led him — disastrously — to downsize the navy, even as he continued to promote international trade. In pursuing so contradictory a policy, he left American citizens and ships vulnerable to foreign attacks and imperiled the very honor and justice he sought to defend.

But this was nothing compared to his deep and abiding distrust of a standing army. Part of his opposition stemmed from in the conduct of British troops in the years leading up to the Revolution. Even after the revolution had been vanquished, however, Jefferson remained faithful to the classic Whig doctrine that viewed standing armies as a danger to republican liberty and as nursery for despotism. In Europe, where nobles could buy military commissions, army officers were too closely tied to the aristocracy, and Jefferson feared (wrongly, it turned out) that the well-born army officers who fought for independence might also be tempted to betray the Revolution. He saw conspiracies everywhere.

Thus, it comes as some surprise that only a year after taking office, Jefferson, with the backing of the first Republican Congress, signed into law a bill establishing a national military academy on the grounds of the old garrison at West Point, in Alexander Hamilton’s New York. His reasons were both political and scientific. Whatever Jefferson may have meant when he declared in his First Inaugural that “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists,” he most assuredly did not mean that officers loyal to Hamilton and, in his view, secretly favoring aristocracy and monararchy, should remain at the head of the armed forces. The establishment of West Point solved the problem of where this new corps of army officers might come from. As a man of the Enlightenment, Jefferson hoped he could use the academy to promote science, the exploration of the west, and other less martial pursuits.

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Duty, Honor, Country
On the Importance of the Military Virtues in Preserving our Republican Institutions

Of course, to achieve this kind of cultural cross-fertilization between the civilian and military worlds, we need to think about more than just the role of West Point and the service academies. Not everyone is cut out to live the life of a combat officer. And this is especially true in the kind of commercial republic the Framers established. America is not Sparta or Rome. But it would be a good thing for both the military and the broader civilian society if more of our young people had at least some minimal experience of the rigors of military life, and some first-hand appreciation of its distinctive virtues.

One way to achieve this is to return ROTC to our elite campuses, from which it was ingloriously evicted during the Vietnam years. As the Wall Street Journal recently reported, at the beginning of the 1990s, these institutions would not even permit military recruiters on campus, arguing that the military’s policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” violated their moral commitment not to discriminate on the basis of sexual preference. Instead, the elite universities imposed their own version of “don’t ask, don’t tell”: interested students had to meet with recruiters at designatated off-campus sites. Beginning in 1994, Congress began to retaliate, insisting that these institutions must either permit recruiters on campus or risk losing their federal funds. But they have come around only grudgingly, letting students know that acquiescence is by no means approval.

This is the climate in which the current debate over ROTC is taking place. At the moment, among the Ivies, only Cornell has ROTC units on all three service branches on campus. Princeton offers only army ROTC; Penn, navy ROTC; Harvard and Yale, along with Columbia and Brown, offer programs with exercises conducted at other institutions, imposing considerable burdens on the students enrolled in these programs. The so-called conservative Ivy, Dartmouth, offers no ROTC programs either on or off campus. If anything, the situation is even worse at the top liberal arts colleges, where there are not even discussions about whether to bring it back.

What the presence of ROTC programs on college campuses did was to help bridge the gap between the military and civilian worlds, much as Jefferson thought the militia might do. (In fact, here too, ROTC seems another exception of what Jefferson intended. Rather than West Point graduates returning to lead their militia units, civilian-educated officers serve limited tours of duty in the active army.) Of course, there are the inevitable tensions between the graduates of the academies and the officers coming out of the ROTC programs, between the combat professionals and those fulfilling their short-term military obligations, but on the whole, this kind of levelling is good for the officer corps, and good for the country. This kind of cross-fertilization is still going on, but without the participation of our political and cultural elites.

Yet even if we could finally manage with the present war on terrorism to put an end to the debilitating "Vietnam syndrome" that has gripped our educated classes and opinion makers for the last thirty years, I do not mean to suggest that we could ever completely overcome the tension between the civilian and military cultures. And here again, our situation seems to be the reverse of the problem Jefferson faced. Jefferson worried about a mil-
DUTY
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

The military culture that did not reflect the values and virtues of the larger republican society. Of course, there are critics of the military who believe that that is still the problem with our armed forces today. But I think the problem is that our military has been pushed too hard — often by politicians with no military experience — to reflect the values of the broader civilian culture. As one critic observes, whenever people talk about the need to close the gap between the civilian and military cultures, what they mean is that the military must give way. Now, in one sense this is right and proper, for military authority is constitutionally subordinate to civilian authority. But in another sense, it is wrong and dangerous, because it imperils the distinct mission of the armed forces.

The military cannot and should not try to mirror exactly the principles of democratic society. The military is not a "civic instrument" that reflects social progress. Nor is it a social welfare agency. The relationship between the military and civilian spheres is more complicated. Although the military defends the principles and ideals of democratic society, it cannot fully embody them. Its end is victory, not liberty; its virtues are courage, loyalty, and obedience, not justice and tolerance; its structure is hierarchical, not pluralistic and open-ended. In short, although the military defends democratic principles and is inevitably shaped by the regime of which it is a part, it is not, and should not try to be a microcosm of the larger society. And if this is true when the civilian culture is strong and healthy, it is even more so when the larger culture has grown soft and corrupt. To try to bring the military into closer alignment with such a culture is especially corrosive since it undermines the distinctive virtues of military life while exposing it to all the vices of civilian life. Specifically, the more West Point seeks to emulate the ethos of these institutions, the more it will wind up with the same problems: cheating, drugs, sex scandals, and the like.

At the most theoretical level this means that we need to recognize that the service academies and our leading colleges and universities will nurture and develop different parts of the human soul. West Point will speak to the spirited part of the soul — the part that is roused by anger and righteous indignation to fight for the higher principles to which America is dedicated. It will elevate honor and subordinate self-interest, even the interest in self-preservation. What spiritedness seeks to preserve is not the life of the individual soldier, but a way of life, and in accepting this duty, it is bound back to the sacrifices of warriors gone before: "The Long Gray Line." Spiritedness operates in the grand tragic-heroic mode.

In theory, our liberal arts colleges and universities seek to encourage the love of knowledge, wisdom, and beauty for their own sakes. At their best, they seek to awaken the deepest longings of the soul, though in practice these days they usually succeed only in stimulating the desires of the body. When genuine liberal learning takes place, it calls forth a certain playfulness that is more closely akin to comedy. Often, however, it operates at the level of farce.

At a more practical level this means that the kind of education West Point cadets receive should differ from that of our leading liberal arts colleges and universities. To be sure, there is a place for the humanities and fine arts at West Point, but these subjects should be taught in such a way as to reinforce the kind of heroic character and military virtues that the Academy wishes to promote. It must strive to reinforce a shared understanding of duty, honor, and country among its members, and to unite the present corps of cadets with the principles and ideals of previous generations.

The heart of the West Point education must focus on those subjects that bear most directly on its central mission, which is to prepare its officers for combat leadership. From the beginning, this has meant an emphasis on math and science on the one hand and the combat arts on the other. And within the military world a great battle rages over what should be the proper mix of these elements. However this issue is resolved — and we should note that the tension between the scientific and the warrior spirit goes back to the days of Jefferson — West Point can never be just another college. Its mission, in the words of Douglas MacArthur, "remains fixed, determined, inviolable — it is to win our wars." Inevitably, this education produces a different kind of character. Dealing with matters of life and death, with honor, duty, and courage, military men and women may grasp this more instinctively than we civilians do. In the coming months and years, you will be called upon to protect us from a new and more deadly round of barbaric assaults. And in what may be the ultimate Jeffersonian irony, it may well be the military officers — along with their civilian counterparts — who lead us as a nation back to the republican virtues of patriotism, courage, and steadfastness. Because these are the virtues West Point has always sought to instill in its officers, the days ahead, whatever the hardships, will be better days for you. And they will be better days for America because of you.

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Leading a Coalition in War is a notoriously difficult enterprise. As Winston Churchill wrote in The Hinge of Fate, “In war, it is not always possible to have everything go as one likes. In working with Allies, ... happens that they develop opinions of their own.” Napoleon Bonaparte expressed a preference for fighting alone against a coalition. “The allies we gain by victory will turn against us upon the bare whisper of our defeat.”

Waging Modern War by retired U.S. Army General Wesley Clark is a fascinating account of coalition warfare: NATO’s 1999 war against Yugoslavia in Kosovo. In this, NATO’s first war, Clark ostensibly controlled vast assets. In reality, so many conflicting forces—political, diplomatic, military, and legal—compromised his command that it’s remarkable NATO was able to achieve anything resembling victory. This effort was against a militarily weak foe, leading one observer to question whether NATO would be able to maintain solidarity and combat effectiveness against a more equal opponent.

Clark, who was commander both of NATO and of U.S. forces in Europe, described the unprecedented problems in executing this war. The first and most important was that the members of NATO were unable to agree on the goals of the war, the strategy, and the extent of force that could be brought to bear against Slobodan Milosevic. NATO civilian leaders entered into the war expecting that it would end quickly—Milosevic would be cowed by a few days of air strikes.

Second, the civilian leaders undercut the coercive potential of the military campaign by declaring at the outset how limited it would be. For instance, President Bill Clinton announced that NATO would not use ground forces, and NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana stated that the air campaign would last only “days, not months.”

Third, the influence of lawyers on the conduct of the war in Kosovo was unprecedented. Not only did Clark have to contend with the sort of civilian interference in military operations that characterized the Vietnam War, he and his subordinates had to have every target vetted by the lawyers. In this war, lawyers became De Facto tactical commanders.

Finally, Clark had to deal with an administration that, for whatever reason, did not fully trust him and a military establishment that did not support him—indeed, arguably did what it could to undercut him. Clark was never invited to a strategy discussion with either the secretary of defense or the president. So bad was the relationship between Clark and his Washington counterparts that Defense Secretary William Cohen and Joint Chiefs Chairman Hugh Shelton conspired to keep Clark away from the NATO summit meeting in Washington during the war. He attended anyway, but was ostracized by the president, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Cohen and Shelton. As he approached their receiving line at a reception, several glanced at him. “Stay away” was the clear message from the body language, he writes. “It was jarring.”

But there was more humiliation to come. After having presided over a victory of sorts in Kosovo, Clark was unceremoniously ousted from his command in order to make way for Air Force General Joseph Ralston.

Waging Modern War also reveals that, despite claims to the contrary, the Vietnam War continued to shape the way policy makers, both civilian and military, thought about foreign affairs during the 1990s. To begin with, President Clinton was not interested in foreign affairs, preferring to focus on domestic politics. Unfortunately for Clinton and his legacy, events in the international arena did not cooperate. Almost from the start, Clinton found he could run but couldn’t hide from events overseas. This forced him to focus on that part of his job in which he had the least interest and the least competence.

Clinton’s foreign policy team was not the strongest in the history of the Republic—some have described it as the Carter administration’s third string. Most of the civilian policy makers in the Clinton administration had cut their teeth in the anti-war movement of the 1960s. Yet over time, many became advocates of military intervention and the use of force to prevent human rights abuses.

For obvious reasons, the officer corps did not trust the Clinton foreign policy team. Even those too young to remember Vietnam thought that these “hawkish” civilians who were so eager to involve them in conflicts abroad would abandon the military if the going got tough, leaving the soldiers to twist slowly in the wind.

There was also a cultural aspect to this distrust. The officer corps as a whole tended to reject the sort of “constabulary” operations that became so prevalent during the Clinton administration. The military in general and the Army in particular became casualty-averse during the 1990s, not wanting to lose soldiers in operations that they did not believe were in our vital national interest. As a result, the Army often dragged its feet in these kinds of operations.

This foot dragging comes through loud and clear in Waging Modern War. Indeed, all the contradictions of post-Cold War foreign and defense policy—pro-intervention advocates among the civilians; reluctance on the part of the military, with the exception of the Air Force, which would be the featured actor in this operation—emerged during the war in Kosovo. On the one hand, the civilians wanted war on the cheap. Many civilians, both American and European, were reluctant to even call it a war.

On the other hand, the military was heavily influenced by the argument made by H.R. McMaster in his remarkable book on the origins of the Vietnam War, Dereliction of Duty. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, McMaster writes, acquiesced in the irresponsible decisions of the Johnson administration that led ultimately to defeat in Vietnam. As a result, the military was as culpable as Robert MacNamara’s “Whiz Kids” in supporting a limited intervention in Vietnam that was bound to fail. Trying not to repeat that mistake, the military dragged it’s feet in Kosovo and elsewhere, which made it impossible for the administration to follow a strategy based on the correct lessons of Vietnam, had it been so inclined.

As a result, the war in Kosovo was waged as if Vietnam had never taken place. Serbia could have been brought to its knees had the West been willing to employ decisive force at the outset. This lesson of Vietnam was driven home nearly two decades ago by the foremost American expert on Vietnamese communism, Douglas Pike, in his books Viet Cong and PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam, are classics. In a paper delivered in 1983 at a Wilson Center symposium on Vietnam, Pike wrote that “the initial reaction of Hanoi’s leaders to the strategic bombings and air strikes that began in February 1965 — documented later by defectors and other witnesses — was one of dismay and apprehension. They feared the North was to be visited by intolerable destruction which it simply could not endure.”

Based on interviews and intensive archival research, Pike concluded that...