Can Leadership Be Taught?

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The question for consideration here is, Can Leadership Be Taught? In a technical sense, this is an Anglophone question, since French lacks a clear substantive that corresponds to "Leadership"—it tends to come out as an action, "direction" or "gestation"—in English it's a thing. Still, allowing for differences of expression, the larger question posed is one that transcends linguistic borders. It may not, as I consider below, transcend the particular time and general cultural contours of the world in which we ask it—the West in the new millennium, since the problem behind it is the product of a specific time and place in the history of ideas, and of societies.

The theme of this conference, military academies, dictates that we consider this question. The reason for this is that in the late twentieth and now twenty-first centuries, the military academies of the democratized West have taken to justifying what they do on the grounds that they teach "leadership." We thus need to ask: what is this? Are you in fact teaching it? Better than other institutions or experiences? If so, how? Can it be taught at all?

The mission of the US Naval Academy, in somewhat long-winded fashion, is "to develop midshipmen morally, mentally and physically and to imbue them with the highest ideals of duty, honor and loyalty in order to graduate leaders who are dedicated to a career of naval service and have potential for future development in mind and character to assume the highest responsibilities of command, citizenship and government." The US Military Academy at West Point is even grander in its claims to teaching leaders: "Renowned as the world's premier leader development institution, West Point accomplishes its mission by developing cadets intellectually, physically, militarily, ethically, spiritually, and socially." Students at Annapolis and at West Point take mandatory classes in "Leadership," for which they receive academic credit.

RMC in Kingston is somewhat less blatant about the claims of teaching leadership; the reader of the Web site has to go some ways before he or she finds this: "Junior cadets develop their teamwork and followership skills that every leader must master before they are able to assume the responsibilities of command. At one time or another, all cadets find themselves assuming a leadership role." The same text in French shows the difficulty in translating "leader" or "leadership" into French: it's also "leader" here: "Les élofs junior développent leurs qualités de suiveur et de travail en groupe, les qualités que chaque leader doivent maitriser [sic—I'd say "doit maitriser"] avant qu'ils soient [qu'il soit] prêts [sans 's'] a y prendre les responsabilités de commandement." St-Cyr prefers the technically more French but actually questionable translation of "meneur" for "leader": "L'officier est tout à la fois un ***meneur d'hommes***, un ***serviteur de l'Etat***, un ***promoteur de la paix***, un ***citoyen*** et un ***soldat***. Il doit être animé par la volonté essentielle de gagner." The Belgians go with the Canadians on the translation of "leader," which is to say, no translation: Here's the Ecole Royale Militaire in Brussels:

"Les officiers diplômés de l'Ecole sont des leaders capables d'agir efficacement dans des circonstances variées, complexes et exceptionnelles au profit de la communauté nationale ou internationale."

So leadership, it seems, is the reason for the academies. My principal claim here is that leadership can't be taught at all, and the tendency to insist that military schools teach it is a result of the fact that, perhaps most clearly in North America, they find many other institutions that produce the same product more efficiently.

Here, I'll focus on the American academies—I'm aware that St-Jean was closed and now has been re-opened, so perhaps the debate is underway in Canada in a way it isn't south of the border on the necessity, in this day and age, of stand-alone military academies in Western democracies. Ultimately, however, I'll be suggesting that the American academies need to become more like the Western European ones, which is to say institutions that do not attempt to reproduce universities. In brief, my conclusion is that there's now no justification for stand-alone military institutions in the USA that produce officers of the same quality as the vastly cheaper alternative paths of development, namely the now-extensive ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) and the up-from-the-ranks commissioning program, OCS (Officer Candidate School).

To be clear: One of the reasons why institutions like Sandhurst and St-Cyr are ahead of their American counterparts is that they have briefer tracks within their walls for just such alternative commissioning paths. (The Belgians still offer a Bachelor's, in addition to several other tracks, but only in Engineering; it lasts three years and the military exercises are concentrated into two specific periods, in addition to the initial "welcome" of a boot camp.) American military academies, by contrast, purport to replace the four year colleges to which they are a vastly more expensive alternative, offer a wide range of specializations, and mix military training with academics in a way that profits neither. And they justify themselves by claiming that they—apparently unlike the civilian universities to which they are now so similar—teach "leadership." They do all that universities do, and something else—in order to get which, you have to go to the military academies.

I think that the American academies, my point once again, will ultimately have to become more like their Western European counterparts, more heterodox in students, more focused in the classroom, and separating out the military side of things from the academic. This in turn will reduce the necessity for their outlandish claims to teach "leadership."

Let me thus briefly give some background about the American service academies. The first was West Point, in 1802 (Sandhurst also1802; St-Cyr 1803). Navy followed in 1845; Coast Guard in 1876; Air Force split off from Army after WW II and got its own academy in 1954. All are now accredited colleges that give a Bachelor's Degree—a BS in all cases, as opposed to a BA, which produces the anomaly that my students graduate with a BS having been an English major. Thus they compete with and replace the (for the US) standard four-year undergraduate degree, which follows the High School Diploma. Students at Annapolis can major in English, History, Arabic, Political Science, Economics, Maths, Physics, Chemistry, in addition to Engineering of various sorts. Our students are thus typically 18-21 years old. The oldest entering age is 22. The older students, those who are 24 or 25 at graduation, are students who have been enrolled at other colleges, for which they do not get time credit—all start over as plebes, freshmen, even if they've spent three years at a civilian university (I've often wondered who would be crazy enough to do this, given that with one more year they could have graduated and become an officer through the pipeline of OCS) or the sailors or Marines taken from the

active service, who also do four years. This group is small—about 5% of our class is composed of prior-enlisted sailors and Marines, with an even smaller group of students who have been enrolled elsewhere.

Thus we are first and foremost an undergraduate college, with a single track to graduation (this is how we are different from European academies). We're now ranked with other colleges in national rankings (US News and World Report, the most regarded of such rankings, places both Annapolis and West Point 16th—some of this is based on specious data, as I'll be happy to explain if asked). Our students are told that going to class is their primary military obligation (though many times it's not true in fact); some complain that their grade point averages determine their lives. Some Annapolis graduates such as author and US Senator James Webb have criticized the over-"academization" of the US academies, finding that they should by contrast be something closer to commando schools. (Senator Webb also created waves that continue to ripple with his article from the l970s, "Why Women Can't Fight"). What it also produces are institutions that alone among colleges proudly seek to mold the morals of students—the word "morals" occurs over and over on the West Point Web site, and in the mission statement of all of them. Sex on campus is forbidden, as is PDA (public display of affection), as is of course (still, currently) anything homosexual. We tell them what to do and when to do it, as well as what not to do. The claim is that this produces better officers than more open-ended officer tracks, and this is the claim that has never been justified.

This process by which US military academies have become undergraduate colleges comparable in all but military training to civilian institutions has been gradual; so too has the process by which other alternatives to them have expanded and become more inviting. USNA offered a BS degree first in the l960s, about the same time majors were introduced (before this time the terminal degree was unique only to the Academy, and everyone took the same curriculum). A stand-alone library was finished only in the l970s. (Academy graduates owe the nation 6 years service after graduation at minimum, and many take their BS degree and get subsequent degrees, in or out of uniform, in civilian schools.) West Point has undergone a comparable development.

At the same time as the Naval Academy curriculum has become more comparable to civilian schools, ROTC has burgeoned. Though instituted in the l9th century, a college-based military officer track blossomed after WWII, with the result that now the service academies produce only 20% or less of the commissioned officers in any given year, with ROTC, whose programs are scattered over many US colleges and universities, producing twice as many. ROTC students lead normal student lives, wear a uniform only a day or two a week and take a few military courses. The remainder of officers in a given year come from OCS, which trains prior-enlisted military members in only a few months, and from direct commissioning of specialists like doctors and lawyers.

The St-Cyr Web site speaks of its history: "Pendant 150 ans, elle . . . forma l'élite des officiers." If we change "elite" to "lion's share," this is true of the American academies as well. Now it isn't. Vastly more officers are produced by other means—and the punch line is that nobody says they are, as a group, inferior to those produced by the micro-controlled curriculum of our military academies.

They receive the same commission as academy graduates, and advance at the same rate up to 0-3. Much has been made of the tendency, diminishing in any case, for them to stay in the service longer than their ROTC counterparts: this may well be

ascribable to other factors, such as the greater military family history of the type of student who chooses a military academy. If the same people went to college at civilian schools, who's to say that they would not have the same favorable rapport with the military? Too, a preponderance of academy graduates at highest ranks—especially for some reason in the Navy—has led some to suggest that academy graduates are simply better. Just as probable is the old boy network, and the huge skew in this sample produced by the fact that flag officers are all graduates of an earlier time when ROTC was not so developed: in any case this preponderance is dropping, perhaps as a result of more ROTC officers, and also as a result of the conscious choice to promote more women and officers of color (a phenomenon that I'll be happy to speak more about if asked).

A study of the Management school of the US Navy's Supply Corps puts the conclusion like this:

> "Across services, it is not clear whether this tendency is due to the quality of service academy programs or other factors that have tended to favor academy graduates.
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> Thus, except for the predominance of academy graduates achieving the highest general/flag officer ranks, commissioning source quality indicators of success (retention, career progression and attainment of flag rank) reveal commissioning sources are essentially indistinguishable during officer's careers."

One advantage of the academies to the students, hugely important in America, is that they do not charge fees. Europeans will fail to see the advantage of this until reminded that private universities in the USA cost about 50K $ per year (sic), and even public ones can approach half this amount. Thus the impetus for many Americans to go to military academies is "free" education—something that is certainly a peculiarity of the American system.

However students who wish do follow an ROTC program at a civilian university can get federal scholarships to do so. The most expensive of these is a full ride, currently at 200K$ for four years (sic!), but many ROTC scholarships give less. The cost per student of the military academies (all these are taxpayer dollars) varies from almost twice that, 377K$ currently quoted for USNA, to ca 450K$ for West Point. ALMOST HALF A MILLION DOLLARS. The average cost of a ROTC scholarship, which produces the same product, to the US taxpayer is FOUR TIMES that of the cost of producing an officer through the academies.

So why do they even exist? To a large degree, they justify themselves by the fact that they have, at least by US standards, "always" existed: they just are. But they haven't always existed in the form they are, and with the other comparable options for producing officers we currently have.

In the l9th century, military academies were, to echo St-Cyr, elite institutions. Think of the role that military institutions played in Prussia, in the Austro-Hungarian empire, and in Russia: all were imperial emanations, for which access was limited to the aristocracy or those to whom the emperor wished to show favor. In England, the military was an acceptable route for a younger son, which is to say not the son who was to inherit

the title and the land, to follow: the eldest son inherited, the next son went into the military, the next into the Church.

The people who attended them, by being part of the ruling caste, were by definition the future leaders of their societies, at least the military officers—those who gave the orders, hence by logical progression "leaders." All Victorian education, limited as it was to the upper crust, presupposed that it was educating leaders—not, as we now claim, producing them. Leadership was a fact of who they were, not something added subsequently.

But the world has changed. Now we take young people from all social levels—increasingly in the US with its "positive discrimination" based on race—and purport to *make them into* leaders. This means, we teach leadership—a commodity useful not only to the military, but also translates to the civilian world many of them will enter after their service.

Of course we can make lists of successful graduates of military institutions. Have they become "leaders" because of the institutions? They might say so, but there is no evidence that the % of "leaders" coming from military institutions is higher than that coming from any success-driven educational institution of international level. Does Annapolis produce more leaders per l00 products than Harvard, Chicago, Stanford, ENA, McGill or Queen's? These institutions merely go about their business of teaching their subject matter, let the students do socially what they do, make no pretense of inculcating morality, let them study when they want, work out when they want, leave when they want, talk normally (no "sir" or "ma'am") to students one class above them, graduate, and then go to boot camp. The result seems to be the same in terms of officer quality. In other words, we merely teach them normal subject matters, let them interact with each other as they will (sex on the campus of the US Naval Academy is an offense punishable by being thrown out), mature as they do (or don't), become moral by whatever means people become moral (or not)—and no attempt is made to teach "leadership."

And with good reason: it can't be taught.

To cut to the chase: it's nonsense to talk about teaching "leadership," and the insistence of (especially) the American academies that they can teach it—or even can say what it is—is the futile attempt to justify institutions that no longer, at least in their current form, serve a clear purpose. The American academies have to stop competing with civilian colleges, which apparently do just as good a job as the academies' vastly more expensive and vastly more intrusive versions of four years for a bachelor's degree, and become, if they are to exist at all, more like the shorter more polyvalent specialist schools of Western Europe. As it is they're forced into justifiable rhetoric about "leadership," a form of smoke and mirrors that becomes increasingly ridiculous.

I'm not saying we can't recognize good leadership when we see it, only that we can't teach it, certainly not on an institutional scale. Someone can be a good technician as a violin player, but for that person to be the concert master of an orchestra, he or she needs something more: what to call this? Style? Pizazz? A certain something? That's leadership, and I don't think Juilliard or the Conservatoire de Paris claim to be able to teach it.

There are many competent officers with little charisma or aura, few people skills, and inspiring little affection from their men and women. These people are not "leaders." But for the ones whom you remember—that professor who held you captive until the bell

rang, that officer you'd literally have died for—who taught them this skill? Nobody: they figured it out. It's a mixture of people skills (genuinely liking and respecting others), physicality (tall and good looking is good, to be clear, as are nice suits, a good haircut, and a dazzling smile—not to mention an athletic physique), energy, and a desire to shine.

Clausewitz thought that great leaders were born, not made. (I've written on Clausewitz; he's quoted so often because he allows people pick and choose the quotes they want as they used to from Virgil or the Bible—you have both alternatives, usually.) He was thinking of Napoleon I, against whom he fought. I don't go as far as Clausewitz: I think some of the constituent skills that go into leadership can be taught—but not that extra something that makes the leader more than the sum or his (or her) parts. We can teach analytical ability, we can force them to work out so they look nice in their uniforms, we can inspect them so the uniforms themselves look nice, we can make them cut their hair. And we can model this extra something—inspire them, make them dream.

I argue that the problem with military academies nowadays is precisely that they kills dreams of the young—especially the very young ones we get in the US. The basis of life at a military academy is relentless micro-managing, taking from them the decision-making capability we would hope they develop. The result is actually negative, rather than positive: they become sullen and dependent on the system, looking for ways to assert their shrinking selfhood in petty ways, counting the days until the next football game, or until graduation. The miracle is that academy officers are as good as they are.

The military academies as they are in the US have lost their way in a changed world. They fill the void between goal and reality with Mickey Mouse micro-management on one hand and the empty verbiage of "leadership" on the other. Even the European institutions that are more modest in their pretensions and more focused in their curricula seem to think it necessary to claim or imply that students there get skills or qualities not available elsewhere. The US military institutions should cease competing with universities and institute technical training tracks and abandon the pretense of teaching a commodity that cannot be acquired elsewhere.

Finally, there's an even greater danger in stand-alone military institutions for the young that compete with and replace civilian universities. The insistence that all this micro-control is somehow uniquely moral in a way the gone-to-hell civilian world is not encourages one very bad thing: a military sense of superiority to the civilian world it defends—a toxic danger for democracies where few citizens wear uniforms that is the subject of my just-out book "Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide."