To the Editor:

Mike Nelson does a monumental job of focusing a lot of books (including two of mine) about the service academies into a finely-honed argument in his piece “The Case for the Academies” (Summer 2010). I wish, now in my 24th year in the English Department at USNA, I could be persuaded by the case he makes.

But first, kudos to Dr. Nelson for making clear just how expensive the academies are (4x the cost to taxpayers of a ROTC officer, on average); military academy administrators have repeatedly tried to dodge the uncomfortable fact of the academies’ great expense in speaking to their funding source, the taxpayers. Nelson is also spot-on in showing that in terms of longevity in uniform and in quality, there is no clear advantage to Academy-trained officers over their cheaper -to-taxpayers competitors, ROTC officers, who outnumber them in any given year 2/1. I hope Dr. Nelson’s article will therefore put a stop to the Public Affairs Officers of the various academies continuing to disseminate misinformation.

Yet if the military academies are so expensive and don’t produce better officers, why keep them? This is where Dr. Nelson offers his most interesting if problematic arguments. The first is political, the second is geographic. Political first: it’s absolutely true that civilian universities, especially East Coast elite ones, are largely inhospitable to conservatives. It’s also true that this liberal tilt of higher education is typically expressed nowadays in an antipathy toward the military. (I’ve written a book called “Why Liberals and Conservatives Clash” and am sympathetic to the frustration of conservatives with our liberal universities.) Secretary of Defense Robert Gates suggested recently at Duke that we need more ROTC at elite schools (Dr. Nelson points out it has disappeared from many East Coast schools, and that most of the Ivies lack ROTC). I concur. Furthermore, as Dr. Nelson also notes, the South is more hospitable to the military than the North, so many ROTC units are located there. He sees the academies as providing a greater geographical spread, mandated by the fact that some applicants get their nominations (which are necessary but not sufficient to admission) from their congresspeople.

However Dr. Nelson makes too much of this apparent geographical spread at the academies, as he does of the notion of “red” and “blue” states. Many midshipmen come with national nominations, which they’re handed by USNA, including the half the class that’s recruited for athletic or racial reasons. Many others are from Navy backgrounds and grew up everywhere and nowhere, though they have a congressperson. New York City and New England are still under-represented; huge numbers of our students come from San Diego and Pensacola (Navy strongholds) and from Texas. Furthermore, as a distinguished political scientist, Dr. Nelson knows perfectly well that the notion of a “red” or “blue” state is itself a statistical convenience. I come from Maryland’s Eastern Shore, a firmly “red” area in an overall “blue” state—but it’s only “blue” statewide because Baltimore City (poorer, largely black Democratic) and suburban DC (richer, largely white Democratic) have a greater combined population than the “red” edges of Eastern Shore, Southern and Western Maryland. I have only to cross from one county to another to become a force for diversity.
So North/South or red/blue—these are not the real issue. The real issue is the liberal-conservative split that characterizes our country in 2010, and of which the military-civilian divide is only one expression. Certainly, as I argue in “Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide,” the military (as Nelson notes) is now overwhelmingly Republican/red; he’s worried by this too. It’s worrisome too that overwhelmingly liberal private universities can vote out ROTC, but even so we’re not going to be left without officers: some, for starters, come up through the ranks, through OCS, and land-grant state universities in all states offer ROTC programs that are not subject to professorial petulance with the military.

Nor is the solution to have counterweight conservative institutions (such as the academies are) to balance liberal ones. The fact really is, as Tom Ricks suggests, that the academies tend to be intellectually shabby, far below the Ivies they’re sometimes compared to. They’re involuted places run by hierarchically-trained senior officers used to getting their own way, where students tend to hear what the administration wants them to hear, and where more centrist faculty members like me are easily perceived as “not team players” (a charge of a recent superintendent). And Annapolis is the only one where civilians are tenured, like me, and so can speak up: at the others they have to mind their Ps and Qs along with the military staff. The result is that at these places the military keeps itself happy by praising itself, which frequently means denigrating the civilians it’s paid to protect. My effort is to get the military to have a proper sense of pride that’s not bought at the price, as it is nowadays all too often, for disdain for the civilians they’re meant to serve.

Thus the source of some of the military-civilian divide is, yes, the civilian world. It’s absolutely true that liberals don’t like the military enough. By the same token, conservatives like the military too much—anything the brass wants, it gets, and voting against an appropriation means you’re not “supporting the troops.” Yet some of the military-civilian divide comes from the military, which must change—and will not change so long as the military elite talks to itself at the academies with no opposition, as it largely does.

The reality too of life at the academies is also not what Nelson paints. How I wish he was right and I was wrong! 23.5 years have convinced me he isn’t, and I’m not. No, I don’t care if faculty members have a PhD (I do): too many faculty members at many schools today have one and no idea how to motivate 20-year-olds. The real problem is that we attract students (our best, anyway) who are motivated “studs” (as we say) and then micromanage them according to hugely arbitrary and constantly changing rules, which frustrates and demotivates them. They count the years, months, days and then hours until it’s over—and it costs taxpayers close to half a million dollars. The surest way to turn an alpha type passive-aggressive is to make everything mandatory and have the rules enforced unevenly. And that’s exactly what the academies, as opposed to ROTC, do. The fleet or USMC are quite rational by comparison, the deployments (and their attendant deprivations) are shorter and more intense (no sex in the Yard—for four years between 18-21! Good luck!), and in the real military you have to treat people like functional adults. Granted, the academies are truly beautiful places Come to one of our parades to have your chest pop with pride at America’s finest! Is this worth the negative effects on the students? I argue not.

How did we get to this situation? Step by step, as if nobody was paying attention. ROTC has burgeoned since WW II, and the academies have become more like civilian schools since the 1960s in what we offer
academically. We’re ranked as liberal arts colleges and compete for students with universities. Yet our system is based on wraparound micro-control, the very opposite of liberal (or any other kind) of education. We tell them what to do and not to do, claiming we’re producing “leaders” by taking away situations where they can make any real decisions. We tell them they’re “held to a higher standard” than the civilians they defend, and that they alone (not ROTC students) have “taken the [harder] road less traveled by.” The academies made more sense before we gave a BS, before we had majors (both 1960s), before we wanted to play Div I football in a world of recruiting, and before we wanted to engage in racial “social engineering” with the officer corps. The focus was clear, if limited; it was different from a college; it weeded out the weak. Nowadays we recruit, and keep, the week. We are clinging to the empty formulae of a military experience without offering it, and our students are so sleep-deprived they fight to stay awake in class—or don’t.

Nobody really planned us to be the way we are; few people see what we’ve become. The administrators come for three years and think like a CEO who has to keep the stock prices high by disseminating only good news. We should get out of the business of undergraduate education, or at least stop competing with college, as Western European military academies have largely done. Sandhurst no longer offers general undergraduate education; it has multiple tracks of post-graduate military “finishing school” for students up to 30, who of course have to be treated like adults. The same is true for the French and Belgian military academies. That’s what we should do with the academies: get a BS/BS wherever (with or without ROTC), then have an adults-only high-intensity course at Annapolis or West Point afterwards.

Dr. Nelson quotes me as saying in the New York Times that our academies should be “fixed or abolished.” I’m saying it again here, because the way they are, they’re doing nobody a favor—not the students, not the taxpayers, not the military as a whole.

Sincerely,

Bruce E. Fleming, Ph.D.

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