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Schools that ban ROTC believe right makes might

Colman McCarthy | Apr. 12, 2011

The Navy ROTC color guard before a University of Notre Dame football game in South Bend, Ind., in 2008. (Necwcom/©Icon Sports Media Inc.)

Left-leaning colleges like Harvard University are said to scorn the military. Proof? They ban ROTC programs, as Harvard administrators did four decades ago in protest of the Vietnam War. In recent years, and with Vietnam fading from memory and relegated to history seminars, the ban was kept in place by the military?s discrimination against gays and lesbians. Now that the ?Don?t ask, don?t tell? policy has been repealed, campuses are calling out to the ROTC: Come back, let?s be buddies again.

If academic freedom and open inquiry are the only two standards that matter on the nation?s campuses, then yes, bring in the colonels, sergeants and retired soldiers to be professors of military science and lore in the classrooms and instructors on the drill fields.

This is the view of Georgetown University in Washington, to take one school as an example. Last May, 26 ROTC cadets were sworn in as second lieutenants. In exchange for four years of free tuition -- plus book money and monthly stipends -- they will serve eight years in the military on active or reserve duty. The ROTC battalion has long been a fixture at the Jesuit university. Since 1918, 4,100 cadets have been commissioned.

As seemingly lofty as the academic freedom/open inquiry argument appears to be, it doesn?t hold up for long. The late Jesuit Fr. Richard McSorley, pacifist and Georgetown professor who believed that ?kill and destroy is the central function of the military,? raised the question of whether his school would be as welcoming to other outside groups as it is to the ROTC.

What if, he posed, an international prostitution ring offered to fund a department of prostitution at Georgetown: ?All the teachers would be chosen from the international prostitution ring.? Courses would include ? ?The Psychology of Solicitation,? ?The History of Prostitution,? ?Comparative Prostitution and Its Relationship to Other Cultures? [and] ?Leadership in Prostitution.? These courses would be taught by duly recognized and certified national and international pimps.?

McSorley told of a Georgetown student who was having a bit of trouble with this analogy. She asked if he considered the ROTC presence at Georgetown a moral question. He replied: ?I consider it both a moral and an

academic question, and if anyone thinks it is unfair to the military to compare them to prostitution, I reply that it may be unfair to prostitution. Prostitution doesn?t threaten the survival of the world. Prostitution isn?t supported by taxpayer?s money and the power of the Pentagon.?

I knew and admired McSorley. As a seminarian in the Philippines in World War II, he was captured and imprisoned by Japanese soldiers. He survived the Bataan Death March. Seeing up close the insanity of militarism, whether advanced by his government or any other, marked him for life. He knew that Georgetown administrators, chummy with a Pentagon less than three miles away, would never give ROTC the boot. But he kept on, a lover of long shots.

Besides academic freedom and open inquiry, a third standard -- an overriding one -- exists: educational purity. A college campus ought to be the one place teachers of military violence, or any kind of violence, are kept at bay. War is America?s largest federal program, overseen by Congress, cheered by military contractors, lavishly funded by public money and carried out by government workers known as soldiers. It?s noxious enough that ROTC is on more than 350 campuses and an equal number of high schools, but in addition the nation has three military academies, several war colleges and a fat recruitment budget.

State universities that host the ROTC believe the country is better served with college-educated soldiers in the ranks. Catholic institutions like Georgetown, Massachusetts? College of the Holy Cross and Indiana?s University of Notre Dame chime in that their cadets will ?Christianize the military,? to use the phrase of Holy Cross Fr. Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame. No credible research backs up those fantasies. Are Afghan civilians slain by American soldiers any less dead because a Christian did the killing?

Non-ROTC schools like Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia, Goshen College in Indiana, Guilford College in North Carolina, Vassar College in New York, Haverford College in Pennsylvania, George Fox University in Oregon, Hobart College in New York, Wilmington College in Ohio, and others believe that America?s national security is better served by teaching students about nonviolent conflict resolution, economic justice and human rights. Instead of might makes right, they go with right makes might.

[Colman McCarthy directs the Center for Teaching Peace in Washington and teaches courses on nonviolence at four universities and two high schools.]

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