

COMMENTARY BY ADAM C. WOLFE

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## Athens vs. Sparta: the Academic-Military Divide

In the bitter winter of 1777, amid great deprivations and flagging morale, George Washington's officers gathered for a meeting. This was no awareness briefing or sensitivity session; it was to be a play, at a time when congressional statute forbade public officials from even attending them. Half of Washington's troops lacked blankets; many went without shoes, and yet these soldiers, themselves great actors on the historical stage, gathered to watch a drama unfold which depicted the final days of a Roman senator. The play was Joseph Addison's *Cato*, and the place was Valley Forge. Addison's *Cato* rang with declarations of liberty and duty; it was this play Patrick Henry paraphrased when he proclaimed, "Give me liberty or death"; it found another echo in Nathan Hale's words, "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Years later, when Washington's officers threatened to mutiny over their lack of pay, it was in Cato's words that the general spoke to them and restored their loyalty.<sup>1</sup> This was the language of free men.

Classical figures such as Cato were once part of the everyday discourse of officers, their words and deeds an inspiration, their failings a moral lesson. Citizen-soldiers at our nation's founding were animated by the intellectual excitement of Athens but troubled by its political instability, epitomized in its execution of Socrates. They admired the valor and conservative moderation of Sparta but were unmoved by its culture and repelled by a nation in permanent arms. Athens and Sparta, together with their heir, Rome, were united in a single intellectual stream of liberty and duty that combined the best elements of each. This stream runs no more. Like Sparta

and Athens, the military and academia have divided the heritage of our civilization between them. Notably absent today is a recurring figure of immense importance to Western history: the ideal of the soldier-scholar, a man well-versed in humane learning but willing to take up arms in the service of his country.

The divide between the military and academia is like nothing so much as a war between two hostile armies in the same land. One has military bases; the other, universities. One has soldiers; the other, undergrads. One is led by officers and NCO's; the other, professors and graduate students. Many recruits serve in either army for only a few years; others make it a career. Each of these armies finds itself trying to undo much of the work of the other, yet this struggle cannot be reduced to the mere political differences between the trendy leftishness of the college campus and the more conservative military. At its heart, this division arises from two diametrically different ways of looking at knowledge: what it is, why one seeks it, and the purposes for which it is used.

### **Athens**

Consider the average university. The science and engineering departments remain, for the most part, politically uncharged, but it is an altogether different story in the humanities and social sciences. The ostracism of Montgomery McFate by her fellow anthropologists for trying to assist her country's military did not occur in a vacuum. The WWII generation has disappeared from the university, and with it any noticeable portion of the professoriate with military experience. A veteran or reservist enrolled in a typical university is likely to encounter two reactions from many instructors: the sympathetically condescending, bemoaning one's manipulation by the war machine, and the intellectually combative, suspecting the motives of anyone smart enough to know better. Nevertheless, the disjunction between those who educate our young and those who lead them in combat has deeper roots than the current crop of unpopular wars.

Beyond the questionable utility of teaching young adults, at considerable cost, to disparage or smirk at the very values that our servicemen are supposed to defend, there lies an even more troubling phenomenon. Universities no longer have any notion of their ideal, of what kind of individual it is their goal to help foster—unless it be an infinitely tolerant, barely tolerable believer in nothing. Gone is the vision of a person broadly competent in many areas and with a firm sense of the whole; in fact, schools seem to have abandoned the belief that there can even be a wholeness, a right ordering of education. The academy is in the hands of the specialist, the pigeonholed professor, the grad student learning to shroud

his dissertation in unintelligibility. Instructors preach the relativity of all values in order to show the futility of having values; they exalt the competence of the specialist in his narrowly defined field in order to attack the ideal of the renaissance man. As Lynne Cheney concluded in her report for the National Endowment for the Humanities, “Since power and politics are part of every quest for knowledge—so it is argued—professors are perfectly justified in using the classroom to advance political agendas. The aim of education, as many on our campuses now see it, is no longer truth, but political transformation—of students and society.”<sup>2</sup>

It is both necessary and right that professors acquire and maintain proficiency in their area of expertise, but this does not justify abandoning the big questions and the great ideas, either by shrugging them off as irrelevant or denying they exist at all. The belief most commonly encountered on the average college campus is, properly speaking, an anti-belief, a conviction that belief is arbitrary or a veil for power and that no one can know truth. This is the slow dissolution of a nation’s loyalties and beliefs in the acid of relativism. As Allan Bloom once remarked, it took Socrates an entire lifetime of intense questioning to realize he was ignorant, but the modern college student knows this by freshman year—when did it become so easy? “Could it be that our experience has been so impoverished by our various methods, of which openness is only the latest, that there is nothing substantial enough left there to resist criticism, and we therefore have no world left of which to be really ignorant?”<sup>3</sup>

The humanities, the central core of Western thought and experience, have fallen to those who would have them be captive to history’s victims, while the procrustean impulse within the social sciences continues its efforts to quantify and dissect human experience. Between the political subversion of the humanities and the sterile judgments of the social sciences, what is lost is the idea of history, literature, and philosophy as humane disciplines, fully grounded in the lives of men and women but transcending the centuries in the pursuit of truth and the universality of human experience.

The professionalization of history and its institutional ensconcement in the university is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is no coincidence that this transformation occurred in an era when historical memory—an intimate familiarity with the broad sweep of Western civilization among those educated even only to high school—began to vanish from the American mind. First, the Latin and Greek by which the Founding Fathers directly accessed the ideas and voices of Greece and Rome fell out of favor, sacrificed on the altar of utility, and then new disciplines arose which promised a world free from the limitations so

eloquently described by the humanities. Soon history, literature, and philosophy were no longer the sinews of everyday life but only dry subjects, taught by experts, to be learned mechanically or as the vehicle of social protest.

### **Sparta**

Now consider the modern military. It certainly bears no ill will toward engineering or management; their utility is unquestioned. A few years ago, an Air Force lieutenant colonel briefed a group of lieutenants on their career paths and future promotion, explaining that they should get their advanced degrees in management or engineering; the Air Force, he pointed out mockingly, had no use for someone with a degree in “Elizabethan literature.” He had apparently never bothered to read Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, perhaps the most eloquent exploration of military leadership in the English language. Such examples are all too common. In the last century and a half, the officer corps has surrendered any custody of the humanities to the modern university, a most unfit parent, partly out of revulsion for what passes for history or literature, partly because of its own eager adoption of management and the methods of the social sciences.<sup>4</sup> “When [man] has long been absolved from the duty of thinking,” Richard Weaver wrote in 1948, “he may be seized with a sense of helplessness and panic when the necessity of it is thrust upon him. In such circumstances it is quite natural for him to turn to some member of the managerial elite, who in the industrial age of society is himself a specialist.”<sup>5</sup>

This intellectual retreat was by no means the inevitable outcome of technology’s unceasing progress. The humanities are simply not “practical” in the narrow sense now given that word. The classical tradition does not give pat answers to the questions “What’s the takeaway?” or “What’s the bottom line?” Those at Valley Forge would have been troubled by this standard of utility.

The results of this willful surrender of the humanities are tragically absurd. One is more likely to encounter a discussion on honor not within the officer corps, but in a Shakespearean Lit. course attended exclusively by those who never have, and probably never will, fight for their country. One is more likely to find the works of Thucydides, Tacitus, or Plutarch—of inestimable significance for military leadership—in the backpack of a 20-year old college student than in a junior officer’s slide-packed briefcase.

This phenomenon is comparatively recent in the profession of arms. In ancient Greece, for instance, there was no clear distinction between scholarship and military service, and the humanities were viewed as eminently useful. Xenophon was a commander of the Ten Thousand, the author of books on tactics and cavalry, and

an insightful observer of the Spartan military, yet he was also a student of Socrates, a renowned historian, and the author of works on philosophy. Socrates himself, another Athenian admirer of Sparta, served for years as a heavy infantryman, a hoplite, yet he was the foremost philosopher of his day—a man who displayed the same courage before the enemy at the Battle of Delium as he would before the Athenian mob that condemned him. The proudest accomplishment of the dramatist Aeschylus was not the triumph of his plays on the Athenian stage but the fact that he had fought as a simple hoplite on the plain of Marathon. This duality was not exceptional. The poets Tyrtaeus, Archilochus, and Alcaeus, the historians Thucydides and Polybius, the philosopher Melissus, the playwright Sophocles: all were soldiers, most of them commanders. As Victor Davis Hanson writes, such men saw “no contradiction between a life of action and contemplation, even in the extreme polarities between military service and philosophy.”<sup>6</sup> They believed that history, great literature, and philosophy were the proper and highest study for leaders and that fighting for one’s country was the ultimate act of citizenship.

This tradition in Western civilization continued for centuries, reinvigorated at key moments, but by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was definitively broken. The choice between intellectual pursuits and military service has not been forced upon us by the All-Volunteer Force or extensive deployments, but by a strong anti-intellectual current in the military. So long has this anti-intellectual attitude prevailed against any dissenters that it now speaks with authority. Consider the speech of an Army lieutenant colonel in 2006 to a class of trainees headed for infantry school, a text widely distributed via military email:

What you see standing out there is the noblest strata of our society. These new Infantrymen and their trainers are America’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century Spartans.... You see it every day on your television screens, all sorts of so-called “experts”, with great sounding titles and articles that have been published. They’re always ready to give advice, but never ready to pick up a rifle, ruck up, and close with the enemy. For my money, there are two kinds of men that walk the earth; men of action and all others [applause]. What stands before you are men of action.

Men, don’t ever think for one minute that the kids running around on some university campus, protesting, breaking things and whining about this, that and the other have anything on you....

I'm speaking here of the "Latte Biscotti Crowd"; they are simple background chatter men, and they will always exist on the periphery of any endeavor that requires selfless service or loyalty. They're not worthy of our concern, and truth be told, in the pit of their fickle cowardly hearts, they wish they could be just like you.<sup>7</sup>

This brings to mind the response of Antalcidas, the Spartan, to an Athenian's claim that the Spartans were uneducated: "At least we are the only ones who have learned nothing wicked from you."<sup>8</sup> Much of the colonel's address strikes a chord with those fighting in politically controversial wars at a time when the average man need never serve. But a distinct undertone of anti-intellectualism frames his description of the vast gulf separating the academy, with its "whining kids" and "experts with great sounding titles and articles that have been published," and the military, with its "men of action," the "noblest strata of our society." This divide is not only unhealthy for a free society; it is detrimental to our long-term military success. The answer to our frustrations is not to dismiss Athens as "not worthy of our concern," but to recapture the soldier-scholar tradition and ensure that men of action are men of mind, as well. We cannot let the leftward drift of the university and its abandonment of Western traditions of thought result in our own intellectual poverty. Without the Archimedean point the historical perspective once provided, the warriors of today can no longer hope to move the world; it is they, rather, who are moved and ultimately devoured by a perpetual present without roots or further development.

### **Overcoming the Divide**

Nearly all the Greek soldier-scholars listed earlier were Athenian, but most of them were cautious admirers of Sparta and often found themselves ill at ease in their own city. One could see the virtues of Sparta on the battlefield and in how each Spartan conducted himself, but Sparta's political ineptitude and lack of any intellectual life worth mentioning ensured that its hegemony over Greece, won by military prowess, would be both brief and acrimonious. Athens, for its part, had a glittering cultural life which continues to inspire us today—its Golden Age has found no equal—but by raising generations of young men to doubt if its accomplishments were worth defending, the city ensured its eventual prostration before the military might of Sparta, Thebes, and Macedonia. Together, Athens and Sparta had defeated an adversary far stronger, comparatively, than any we face today, and yet they became caricatures of themselves, persecuting the very men

who combined their best elements, until in mutual enmity they allowed a great civilization to fall. That noble promise would be taken up by the Romans, until centuries later they, too, would separate the camp from the academy and descend into tyranny, fit prey for foreign conquerors.

How are we to avoid a similar fate? The university clearly stands in dire need of reform, but that herculean task is the responsibility of the tax- and tuition-paying citizenry. We can, however, begin to reclaim the classical tradition that so inspired the soldiers of the Revolution, an intellectual tradition too long hidden in obscurity or subordinated to 20<sup>th</sup>-century ideology. We must start by recognizing that the truly narrow framework of managerial approaches is a far from adequate guide to conduct. By taking up the humanities once more, we expand our fund of experiences to encompass all of history, and we strengthen our resolve to defend a civilization whose greatest works animate our hearts and minds. We can begin to create a new intellectual culture in the military, eschewing the competent technofunctionary for the soldier-scholar at home with the greatest minds and deeds in history.

Some, conscious of historical myopia, have urged the military to consult professional historians.<sup>9</sup> While the intention is admirable, this problem cannot be solved by out-sourcing, the way one might consult an agronomist or mechanical engineer. It is a measure of how far we have fallen from the days in which great historical enterprises were ingrained in the minds of military leaders. The generals of the Revolutionary War (and the Civil War, for that matter) had a vision of history not as the private reserve of those who spend their entire lives in a classroom, but as a stock of wisdom open for all, if they would only apply themselves with diligence.

Some might object, despite all their talk of a new “greatest generation,” that Homer and Livy are over the heads of the rank and file. I disagree. I served in Iraq with an E-5 from an inner-city background, a high school dropout who didn’t get his GED until enlisting, and who, like many soldiers, spent much of his free time playing video games. And yet, with encouragement, he read Herodotus, and from that point on, he was hooked. Despite the demands of our deployment, he went on to read Thucydides, Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* and *Anabasis*, Arrian’s campaigns of Alexander, and all of Plutarch’s Greek lives. As we discussed the history of wars that had been fought thousands of years ago (including in Iraq and Afghanistan), he raised questions about life, leadership, and the soldier’s lot as profound as any I’ve encountered in the university. This was not an isolated experience. Wherever I have managed to get others to give these works more than a passing glance, the reaction has been electric. Unfortunately, there is no broader culture or structure within

the military to support this reclamation of our inheritance. A far more effective way to destroy books than simply burning them is to ignore them altogether, to deny their relevance to the problems of today.

We overwhelm our troops with doctrinal pamphlets, “awareness” seminars, and Powerpoint briefings of doubtful utility and effectiveness. Why not put something much more useful into their hands? One of the most insightful discussions of leadership is Xenophon’s *Persian Expedition*, including its comparison of the generals Clearchus, whose concern for the mission overrode even his humanity, and his opposite, Proxenus, of whom “it was more obvious that he was afraid of being unpopular with his troops than that his troops were afraid of disobeying his orders.”<sup>10</sup> *Antigone*, written shortly before Sophocles’ appointment as a general, contains one of the best explorations of lawful and unlawful orders. Plutarch’s *Lives* have guided the daily conduct of leaders from Henry IV to Harry Truman. Why not publish editions of works like these, not for an academic audience, but for those who, like the original authors and audience, are conscious of their heritage and expected to fight when their nation calls? We must not settle for an excerpt or a summary—nothing will suffice but their words and deeds presented before our eyes as if they yet lived. This is not a suggestion for yet another professional reading list distro’d out to the masses. We must create the institutional climate for a cultural renewal, a sorely-needed reconnection with the wellsprings of our profession.

A call to take up the great books of the Western tradition might seem out of place when the current environment seems to dictate that we delve into the languages, history, and traditions of non-Western cultures. Yet much of the cultural and cognitive gap we now face seems to arise from the confrontation between cultures steeped in tradition and one epitomized by iPods and Walmart. As Robert Hutchins wrote in his introduction to the 1952 *Great Books of the Western World*, “Not in a spirit of arrogance, but in a spirit of concern that nothing good be lost for the future, the West should take to its meetings with the East a full and vivid sense of its own achievements.”<sup>11</sup> We must come to grips with our uprootedness and re-acquire our own intellectual tradition before we can attempt to understand cultures that look with skepticism on the modern world.

Some might object that such study is the province of war colleges, but we must divest ourselves of the notion that Western civilization is something we pay lip service to unless we have leave to study full-time, away from the mission. This attitude is nothing but an internalization of that fratricidal divide between the camp and the academy. Again, they may argue that such a project is impractical,

given the pressing demands on our military today, but I invoke again the image of those huddled soldiers at Valley Forge, for whom the struggle of Cato for liberty was as real as their own. To conscientiously read Homer or Plutarch while in war is more illuminating than reading a dozen scholarly articles on either, and knowledge so gained is infinitely more practical and relevant than a treatise on management written by a corporate executive. This requires study and reflection, things often hard to come by in our profession, but if Alexander the Great carried the *Iliad* with him on campaign, surely we can, too.

Only when a sufficient number of our leaders take up Xenophon rather than the latest tripe to come off the bookstand will we be prepared to deal a final blow to managerialism, making it servant, rather than master, of man's noble aims. The managerialists will always clamor for charts and studies and measures of effectiveness, but we cannot oblige them; we must leave them to their toys. The social engineers must be content to define their own effectiveness, in a continuously self-referential circle, but we will not let them define our own. Theirs is a sharply circumscribed dominion, while ours is as broad and deep as the river of history. In these great books are the words of warriors, and what strikes one right from the opening page is not the differences wrought by the intervening centuries but the immediacy with which they speak to us. It is time to reunite Athens and Sparta for the struggles ahead.

## Notes

1. Carl J. Richard, *Greeks and Romans Bearing Gifts: How the Ancients Inspired the Founding Fathers* (New York: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 151.
2. Lynne V. Cheney, Chairman, *Telling the Truth: A Report on the State of the Humanities in Higher Education* (National Endowment for the Humanities, September 1992), 7.
3. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 43.
4. See Adam Wolfe, "Combating the Managerialist Scourge," *Proceedings* 135 (November 2009), 28-32.
5. Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), 66.
6. Robert Cowley, ed., *What If?: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (New York: Berkeley Trade, 2002), 3.
7. Text available online at <http://www.slideshare.net/RSC56/6-21st-century-spartans>.

8. Plutarch, "Sayings of the Spartans," in *Plutarch on Sparta* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 128.
9. See, for instance, Jim Lacey, "Old Ideas Needed For a New War," *Proceedings* 136 (February 2010), 54-7.
10. *Xenophon, The Persian Expedition*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 133.
11. Robert M. Hutchins, "The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education," *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 71.

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