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Between Harvard and West Point, a deep—and dangerous—cultural chasm

BY PAT C. HOY II

HARVARD ISN'T EXACTLY AN UNFRIENDLY PLACE, but most people here go their separate ways, preoccupied as they are with the play of their own minds. At West Point, where I spent more than 14 years as a soldier and professor of English, we had a different preoccupation. We shared a joint responsibility for educating and training cadets to become officers in the U.S. Army. That mission drew us together in a partnership committed to service. ♦ Retired from the army now, I teach writing at Harvard and serve as the senior tutor of Mather House. Our common mission is education, but there is certainly no common understanding about just how we ought to be educating. Nor should there be. Nevertheless, I miss the fellowship afforded by teamwork and can't help wondering what might happen if we tried to harness all that intellectual power and turn it toward the common good—assuming, of course, that we could reach some consensus about the common good. I realize that harnessing interferes with freedom, but at Harvard, where I see so few signs of restraint, I'm yearning for the gifts of community. At West Point I had yearned for freedom and solitude. ♦ West Point breeds restraint deep into a man's soul. A senior cadet can stand behind a plebe and put his face up close to that man's neck and tell him to stand straighter, or to recite "Schofield's Defini-

SOLDIERS

WEST POINT



& Scholars

Illustrations by Brian Cairns

tion of Discipline,” or to lead his squad mates in a rousing cheer—or he can give that plebe a series of tasks rapid fire, tasks that would lead most anyone else to frustration; and the plebe will stand there cool as Napoleon’s seventy-fifth maxim demands that he be, and he will take up the tasks one at a time until he gets them right—or he will suffer the wrath of the upperclassman. Take that same plebe to the bayonet course down by the river and tell him to execute the vertical butt stroke series with his bayoneted rifle, and he will rip the sawdust-filled dummy to shreds. A casual observer, on the sidelines of these military spectacles, might think he’s watching homicidal maniacs at work. But he would be wrong. The cadet is no less human than he, and probably much less prone to random acts of violence. The cadet just happens to be trained in the art of war. He understands the merits of restraint as well as the application of force.

WHILE I WAS STILL IN THE ARMY, I came to Harvard for a semester to learn as much as I could about the writing program. During that fall term, I measured everything I saw against West Point, looking always for what I could take back with me to improve our department’s work. At the end of the experience, I was surprised at what I had learned. I left with more than I bargained for.

Almost 30 years before, on a weekend trip away from the military academy during the late spring of my junior year, I had accompanied the varsity swimming team to Williams College and

gone. But when they measure their own daily struggles against what they imagine their peers to be doing at Harvard, cadets seem pretty certain they will come in first on Judgment Day because Harvard demands less, permits more fun and frivolity, and knows far too little about sacrifice. In their imaginings, cadets miss the real differences between the two worlds, and their judgments are as superficial as those of the mock cadet in that Harvard dining hall 30 years ago.

When I came to Harvard as a visitor, I expected to teach and return to my rooms to write, having little to do with students aside from workaday routines. But I lived in Kirkland House with almost 400 sophomores, juniors, and seniors, a handful of graduate tutors, and a few other faculty members. Evening meals in the House led to deepening friendships with students and tutors as we talked night after night about politics, about our courses, or about papers we were writing. We had no such ritual at West Point. When cadets sit down, their primary business is eating, eating fast, so they can get back to other commitments. They miss a chance to nourish the mind and the body at the same table. They miss the opportunity to play with ideas. They’re too busy.

My students at Harvard were more unusual than I expected them to be. I assumed they would be intellectually bold, bordering on obnoxious; instead they were quiet and rigorous, eager to put their minds to any writing task I devised, no matter how difficult. Ideas intrigued them. At West Point I spent a great deal of

HARVARD clings unconsciously to destruction. West Point incites a passion for preservation and leans always toward the status quo.

to Harvard. Memory preserved only the extraordinary beauty of the Williams campus and an unusual greeting we got in a Harvard dining hall.

As we entered the hall in our high-collared dress gray uniforms, a hush fell over the place. After we took our place in the cafeteria line, the chatter resumed, but only a moment later, a Harvard man scurried through the hall, tray held rigidly in front of him as he moved briskly at attention. He had turned his sport coat around backward, giving it the appearance of a dress gray coat. His exaggerated performance drew a laugh from those in the dining hall. We ignored the insult, but I never forgot it. For almost 30 years it defined for me what it meant to be a Harvard man—arrogant, disdainful, smug.

Harvard still preys on cadets’ imaginations. Harvard—so the legend at West Point says—is a place where cadets might have

time trying to convince bright students that it was all right to be smart, that getting high on the play of the mind could be as exciting as teamwork and victory.

Harvard’s admissions people, unlike West Point’s, would not put *well-roundedness* and *decisiveness* at the top of their wish list. Nor would they cherish *adaptability* and *charisma* as the most promising indicators of worth. A sign of brilliance, no doubt, would please them. Perhaps an inclination toward community service. But most important, a quirkiness, an intellectual passion—eccentric, understated—that would set each student apart, distinguishing one from the other. *If the greater world reveals itself only to those courageous and daring enough to reimagine and test the very foundations of knowledge, our task, Harvard seems to say, is to nurture and develop minds unsettled and unsettling enough to look into the darkness.* And so Harvard clings unconsciously to destruction. Creation lies just on the other side.

West Point, citadel of traditional strength, incites a passion for preservation and leans always toward the status quo. There on the banks of the Hudson, young men (and now young women) wed rugged individualism with adaptability. The army’s sublime work is done in concert, individuals so synchronized in their individual efforts they seem graced. A line of glit-

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tering sabres on the parade field or a search-and-destroy maneuver in the killing fields dazzles observers, friend and foe alike. Few watch soldiers on parade or at work without feeling the seductive rhythms of their concerted efforts.

Even soldiers' individual acts of heroism—performed as if some force moves them toward sacrifice—even those outrageous acts of destruction seem bent on preserving the sacred lives of fellow warriors. Or if, in retrospect, a soldier chooses to look at his work from another vantage point, distant from the field of battle, he must be able to see that his acts of destruction do indeed *preserve* the land of the free and the home of the brave. The dirty work of actual destruction must be purified by noble ideas about sacrifice and service and preservation, and certainly no soldier worthy of his citizenship claims destruction as his life's work. His duty is to make things last.

So, Harvard and West Point, at first glance, seem strangely at odds with one another, ideological opposites—institutions polarized by obligations so subtle and yet so fundamental to their very nature that their relationship one to the other remains hidden, unexamined. They do not exchange their gifts. And yet, at the very highest levels of government, the graduates of Harvard and the graduates of West Point seem always to wage war together—politics and might making the world safe for democracy. Still. After all these years and all those wars.

As I got to know the 15 young men and women in my writing class at Harvard, I began to think of what they might be like as army officers. Only three would have made crackerjack lieutenants, comfortable in the grit and grind of the combat soldier's daily life. Yet 10 of those other students in that class of 15 would have made top-notch staff officers without even a day of experience in the trenches. Were I facing a tough problem—any problem—on a high-level staff, I would take one of those 10 or all of them in a minute to help me think—to help me see what I might be unable to see without them. But the U.S. Army as I knew it, corporate and competitive, would not have rewarded those fierce individualists. They would have been restless anyway, waiting during all those years of apprenticeship for a chance to play again with ideas. Strategy and national policy lie outside the purview of company-grade officers.

ON THE ROLLING GROUNDS of his wife's family farm just outside Boston, Lieutenant General George S. Patton (retired) raises vegetables and sells them. He's traded his helicopter gunship for a pickup truck, but like his more famous father, he's



still full of piss and vinegar. Two years ago, I was sitting in his expansive backyard at a picnic the Pattons give each year for West Pointers. When the general drove up in his pickup, he looked down at me from the cab and announced that he didn't believe he knew me. I stood, walked over to the truck, and told him who I was. He was listening but looking out over the farmland as I talked. When I said that I had retired from a West Point faculty position and was teaching at Harvard, he snapped around and looked me over, head to foot.

"Damn," he proclaimed, after what seemed a long pause, "You've got a haircut, your belly's not hanging over your belt, and you

look mean as hell. You're just what Harvard needs." He didn't crack a smile as he drove away.

I had left Harvard at the end of that fall semester with an invitation to return. The invitation had something to do with what I knew about writing. It had nothing at all to do with what General Patton had in mind that day at his farm. The job intrigued me because there was still much to learn at Harvard that I could not learn at West Point, something about the range and play of my own mind working in concert with others who also had a passion for writing. I went back to West Point, passed on the lessons learned, and retired after 28 years of soldiering. Six months after I left Harvard, I was back.

At West Point during that interlude, I found it difficult to fall back into the soldier's rhythms. In Cambridge I had begun to grow accustomed to an intoxicating freedom. I became a boy again at 50, a boy high on the notion that he could follow his spirit wherever it took him.

Satisfaction at first came from my just thinking about new possibilities. I didn't need to do anything. But, before long, I was experimenting, writing into the early morning hours and then sleeping until noon—however and whenever the spirit moved me. I found happiness writing and wandering through my apartment while the rest of the world around me slept, so I was quite surprised when, after a month of meandering, my body collapsed and sickness followed—nausea, hoarseness, even loss of voice.

My life had been built on steadiness and routine, on working in concert with fellow soldiers to create what we called unit cohesiveness—the finest artillery battalion in the country or the best English department we could imagine. When I shifted suddenly from that collective network of support to my own neglected spiritual needs, my body warned me not to fly too high

too fast, but I wasn't astute enough to pick up the signals. I called my Harvard sickness the flu.

Back at West Point what I remembered and cherished most from Harvard were the days free from organizational restraints, days of writing, long lunches with colleagues, spaces that I could fill any way I chose. I had no obligation to the Harvard writing program except the one class I taught—no obligation to shape the program or question it or try to improve it. I was at Harvard to teach and observe, to learn and live. Period. So when I was back at West Point, the eight-to-five office day began to weigh heavily on my soul as I sat waiting for retirement and a new beginning.

My thoughts about what West Point could learn from Harvard were not radical. I wanted more space in a cadet's daily life, more time for thinking and personal interactions. West Point required 12 more courses than Harvard for graduation, plus military science instruction and a demanding physical-education program. Cadet life itself added to the burden—marching, running, marching, cleaning, marching, cooperating, marching.

Even the academic side of West Point's house falls prey to the emphasis on time management and efficiency. The life of the mind—the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake—lags far behind in priority even though teaching and education remain paramount, always, for West Point's military faculty. It is not the play of the mind that West Point cherishes, but the application of mind. Plug and chug, cadets call it—the application of knowledge always winning out over the sheer thrill of thinking.

West Point measures success in *utils*. One foot in front of the

HARVARD WOULD GIVE ME back what I had freely surrendered at 19 to the U.S. Army. Service to the nation had been for me just what MacArthur said it is, a matter of "patriotic self-abnegation." But I know now what I did not know then. Military service need not come at the expense of a man's soul. West Point had failed to teach me that. Harvard would remind me of the loss, and give me as well a clearer sense of how the soldier and the scholar—the West Pointer and the Harvardian—might trade gifts and both be spared the loss of soul.

After I returned to Harvard, one of my students wrote a stunning essay about beauty. He suggested that the house of cards his uncle used to build for him held one long and enduring fascination—the chance to pull the card that would destroy the house. "The only good way to get a sense of the delicate precision involved in creating it," Gian wrote, "was to touch it gently, to try to alter it ever so slightly, and have it crumple to nothing." There was not anything malicious about pulling the card, but there was something powerful about it, something lasting in the stolen glimpse of beauty that revealed itself only in the moment of destruction.

I wonder now if Gian Neffinger wasn't onto a mystery beyond the reach of his experience. I had never been able to understand the scene in *Patton* when Old Blood and Guts stands on the battlefield in Italy, gazing out over the smoking debris, the charred bodies—the carnage that is war—and exclaims with passionate conviction, "God, I love it." That was a scene against which I once measured my fitness to command a combat division and

IT IS NOT the play of the mind that West Point cherishes, but the application of mind. Plug and chug, cadets call it. West Point measures success in *utils*.

other. Getting to the assigned place at the assigned time...and winning. "There is," as Douglas MacArthur told us so long ago, "no substitute for victory!" Those hallowed words, etched in the gray walls of the gymnasium, echo across the Plain where MacArthur stands stone still forever, watching parades, listening certainly for what he called the "strange mournful mutter of the battlefield."

There are no words etched anywhere at West Point about the value of the mind's work, and in all my years there, I never heard an old soldier come back to address young cadets who had anything to say about the mind's value. Always they came to render after-action reports, celebrating victory, erecting against the ravages of time monuments to their own magnificence...and West Point's. Many of those old soldiers were brilliant in their own right. Many. But they inadvertently repudiated the mind, turning always away from it in silence, never acknowledging what mind itself had to do with action, their action—all action except the most heroic, and that comes from somewhere so deep down it can't be taught or thought. Silence about mind, in a place like West Point, underscores and perpetuates the notion that the most holy form of theory is *action*.

came up short. I didn't have it in me to be sanctified by my own destructiveness.

I suspect now that Patton must have seen in all that carnage a touch of beauty such as a man sees reflected in the face of a woman transformed momentarily by his love. In her radiance, he glimpses himself. For a fleeting moment, she is a part of his handiwork. But as she awakens again to her own independence, he cannot bear what he sees—the loss, the beauty of that intoxicating togetherness. That's her allure and war's. She and war allow a man to taste the complexity of his own powermaking—Venus and Mars and Pygmalion all at once, creating a reality no mortal can bear for long and few can live without. The intoxication can be habit-forming and destructive and beautiful.

If we divorce the carnage of Patton's battlefield from an elusive idea about that carnage—Patton's own grand conception of himself as a charismatic, historical figure with a sacred mission—we have left only the fact of carnage itself. In that unadorned fact, no one but a psychotic can see beauty. It is altogether too ghastly to look at. But we know that the consequence of the soldier's deed can never be disentangled from the idea that motivated it. So, in the final analysis, it is the

purity of the idea itself that determines how we view the carnage. We redeem such destruction only through acts of mind—long before the deed is done or long after, depending on our predisposition.

What makes me shudder in this, my fifty-fourth year, is not our capacity for idea-making but our instinctive urge to lash out as a way of defending and preserving what we hold most sacred—ourselves, our loved ones, the nation, an idea. Deep within us we know that to strike out is to affirm ourselves against the odds, even if there's destruction in it. Striking out as a nation—warring—is nothing more than a collective manifestation of that instinctive urge. W. B. Yeats saw in that manifestation a pattern—man's habitual acts of destruction playing themselves out on a grand scale, again and again. As he looked down upon that "tragic scene," he conjured a cheerful resignation and imagined a kind of "gaiety transfiguring all that dread."

After a life of soldiering that was both real and vicarious—my brothers' war in Europe, mine in Vietnam, my students' in the Gulf—I have nothing but scorn for Yeats's transfiguring gaiety. I find little consolation in the false notion of inevitability. Nothing actually demands that we turn our a priori self-preserving aggression into cycles of destruction. We perform the deeds. We do it to ourselves. Seduced by a transfiguring notion about inevitability or another about noble service, we may forget that, in the end, our survival on this earth may depend on nothing more complicated than a different idea—one that speaks in a different way about communal responsibilities.

ABOUT TWO MONTHS AGO, I got a call from a young navy lieutenant, a Harvard man. As a veteran of the Gulf War, he had gotten more than he bargained for from George Bush, who seemed to have a penchant for drawing lines in the sand—as if he and the Pattons had cut their eye teeth on the same grandiose notions of statesmanship and might. War had not inspired Pat to trail *glory* behind him. He called about loss.

During his last sea voyage, he was at the helm of his carrier late at night, all alone. His father, along on the cruise as a guest of the U.S. Navy, was asleep with the other men below deck. Lieutenant Patrick Long was the man in charge, completing the last leg of a long journey.

"You know, sir, it got to me that night. Those 5,000 men asleep below the deck were in my keep. Every move I made affected them—whether they knew it or not. Going into port, I knew I'd be giving up that responsibility. I'd never feel it again, and I knew I'd miss it."

"I know what you mean," I said.

"No one else at Harvard would," he told me.

I think he was right. Most here wouldn't be able to fathom the mystery of command that binds people together in those benevolent hierarchies, creating what my friend Roy Reed calls the "throngs of community." Harvard can pay respect to such an idea, but it's an idea that doesn't take root here. The reality of shared responsibility and teamwork is as hard to experience at Harvard as unfettered freedom is at West Point.

Harvard is a loose federation of individuals isolated from one another by the very acts of mind that make this a great university. No one can be around Harvard long without experiencing bouts of insecurity in the face of astonishing performances by so many gifted people. Yet those others—those other gifted people—do little to create the despair. Harvardians do it



to themselves, individually, within their own minds. Clear signs of such turmoil come from undergraduates late at night when alcohol (or despair itself) cracks the thin veneer of restraint, and a young man lashes out in an outrageous act of self-affirmation or assertion, smashing glass entryway doors or walking from roof to roof down a line of cars leaving his mark—just for a night.

Given a faculty that also isolates itself, Harvard students learn little about mutual support from their elders. Those in positions of leadership seem to know almost nothing about enabling hierarchies. Because they have long been caught up and consumed in a world of their own idea-making, they have been denied a lasting return on communal investments.

At West Point, from day one—even as cadets are learning to stand up under the most grueling individual tests—they are always investing themselves in each other's lives. They repeat over and over their mantra of survival. *Cooperate and graduate. Cooperate and graduate.* Few believe they can make it alone. Those who try usually fail. A lone rifleman does not wage war and win.

Within those enabling hierarchies, soldiers know their places and can express and work out their frustrations within a protective organizational framework. What they need to know for survival, they learn from leaders tasked to look out for their welfare. Every person becomes an integral part of a team, and teams make it together—whether an 11-man infantry squad or an international joint force of 500,000. But, of course, a soldier has to tuck part of his psyche away to get the job done, and therein lies the corporate danger—a loss of soul, a narrowing of the range of consciousness.

The West Pointer in me yearns for more community than Harvard affords, and I see signs of yearning all around me. But leaders here, primarily men—bound as they are to notions of fierce individualism and the libertarian's idea of unfettered freedom—

find it difficult to imagine how to create hierarchies that stabilize lives and generate synergy while still preserving the right to one's own ideas and own way of doing things. Few here can imagine that doing it your own way need not mean doing it alone.

There is another complication. To challenge someone's ideas at Harvard is to challenge the person. Within this loose federation of brilliant individuals, I do not find a free and open marketplace of ideas. I find instead that people cling quietly, and sometimes desperately, to their own ideas. Yet if their organizational work—the real work of the university itself—is to be effective, it must challenge the *known*. Effective leaders in academe must be able to suffer the loss of their own creation. They must be able to glimpse a satisfying beauty in the work that others create under their direction.

Once, in Vietnam, I stood in the aftermath of a battle and observed the carnage of war. I helped train the soldiers who won the battle, but I had played no part in the fighting itself. I flew to the scene in my helicopter after the fighting was over and saw the carnage and the satisfaction on the soldiers' faces. Being there was not my job. My work had been done long before the battle, and satisfaction came to me privately as I stood watching those soldiers recover through the saving rituals they performed together—burying the dead, policing the battlefield, stacking ammunition, burning left-over powder bags, hauling trash, shaving, drinking coffee, washing, talking as they restored order and looked out for one another's welfare. They were bound up in the

didn't put our minds to it. None of us did, neither Harvardians nor West Pointers.

IN THE DIVERSITY OF LIFE, E. O. Wilson, Harvard's eminent biologist, asks: "How much force does it take to break the crucible of evolution?" The answer to that question had come to him as he sat alone in an Amazonian rain forest studying the riddle of the earth's diversity. Wilson had come to that place in his quest for knowledge. What he saw concerned him enough to make him abandon momentarily that lonely scientific quest, and he issued a call to action—a soldierly plea to the rest of the world.

I like to imagine Wilson sitting in that primeval forest in the midst of a tropical storm looking deep into the earth's complexity—seeing with the eye of a Sphinx all we need to know to know how to survive. When I think of him, I think of Conrad's Mistah Kurtz. Looking deep into the underside of human nature, Kurtz could only exclaim, "The Horror! The Horror!" Marlow brought that insight back to civilization but could not tell the truth about it.

Wilson has sufficient faith in his fellow man to tell the truth about what he saw in that Amazon Basin. "If there is danger in the human trajectory," he writes, "it is not so much in the survival of our own species as in the fulfillment of the ultimate irony of organic evolution: that in the instant of achieving self-understanding through the mind of man, life has doomed its most beautiful creations."

WE AS A NATION should never forget that those two and a half million soldiers who went to Vietnam went for want of a better political *idea*.

throngs of community, and that communal satisfaction was its own pure reward.

But, as sweet as that victory was, my satisfaction remains tainted. Those men had done the soldiers' dirty job in a war that will probably never end—for them or for this nation. The Vietnam War will not be transfigured by a purifying idea. The men and women who fought there will forever be haunted by the fact of carnage itself. The ones who actually looked straight into the eyes of death will scream out in the middle of the night and awake shaking in cold sweat for the rest of their lives—and there will be no idea, nothing save the memory of teamwork, to redeem them. That will not be enough. That loneliness is what they get in return for their gift of service to a nation that sent them out to die and abandoned them to their own saving ideas when they came home.

We as a nation should never forget that those two and a half million soldiers who went to Vietnam went for want of a better political *idea*. They were there because we as a nation lacked the resolve—the necessary cooperative effort on the homefront, the necessary sense of community—to prevent the senseless destruction so far away. We lacked a restraining idea. We just

From what Wilson tells us it is clear that we need not necessarily be doomed. The order and the mystery of our survival are there in those diverse organisms he studies—what Wilson refers to as the plants and bugs. We are destroying them and ourselves, perhaps through careless disregard. Once we see our place alongside the other organisms, he thinks, we will be able to "acquire the knowledge on which an enduring ethic, a sense of preferred direction, can be built."

I wish Wilson had said more about that preferred direction, but I think I get his point. What he has in mind is not the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but rather the application of knowledge for the sake of our survival, and the world's. The tricky part has to do with that "enduring ethic" Wilson mentions almost in passing—the saving idea that will restrain us and give us life.

Until we can draw comfort and pleasure and direction from that paradox of organic evolution, we may be destined only to catch fleeting glimpses of beauty as the world we should be saving disintegrates before our very eyes. For want of cooperation, and community, and a restraining idea—life as we know it may come to an end. And in the end, we'll all be there together, finally. ◻