An Officer and a Professor
By WILLIAM C. CORLEY

For the past year and a half, I have been both a college professor and an officer in the military. What surprises most people is that I began those positions at almost the same time. In June of 2004, I graduated with a Ph.D. in American literature and moved my family to a new city where I had taken a job as an assistant professor. Three months later I joined the reserve component of the U.S. Navy as a commissioned officer.

College professors and military officers are rarely, if ever, paired in the popular imagination. It's not hard to understand why. Although high-minded men and women enter both professions with the goal of preserving a just and peaceful society, the methodologies of the two professions could hardly be more different. Military officers are involved in a killing enterprise, while college professors tend to eschew violence, preferring the pen to the sword. Academe educates future policy makers who will help make decisions about when and where the country will go to war, whereas military officers help define how those wars will be fought.

Yet despite those and other obvious differences, my own military and academic identities derive from similar values and complement each other. An explanation of those commonalities might help illustrate the connections between the seemingly opposite worlds of academe and the military and how academics can build on those connections for the benefit of all.

In May 2004, my understanding of both military personnel and the college classroom were radically challenged by a National Public Radio commentary by Andrei Codrescu about the Abu Ghraib prisoner-abuse scandal. Codrescu's description of the soldiers involved in the scandal drew connections that he, as a college professor, was well placed to make:

"The images from prisoner torture in Iraq look like sadomasochistic porn, but they're not. Real people are suffering in them. The torturers are not some rogue sadists who slipped somehow past psychological profiling to get into the Army. They are American kids who've seen their required share of violence, movies, and porn, the same kids who like to binge drink at their school. These kids are my studentsnot literally, but they could be."

Codrescu's point, as I understand it, is that colleges and the military work with the same constituencies and thus face many of the same challenges. Our understanding of both organizations will be enriched if we view them as related branches of our society's efforts to help young people become productive adults. Academic institutions and the military both claim to provide valuable training and crucible experiences that will make young people attractive to future employers. The interweaving of academic and military constituencies extends from basic building blocks like the economic subsidies provided by the GI Bill and research supported by the Department of Defense to more overt programs like the Reserve Officers Training Corps on college campuses and the military's highly developed infrastructure for online education.
Codrescu's commentary also helped me realize that my commitment to inculcating humanistic values in undergraduates runs up against the same cultural challenges that beset military officers who must transform raw high-school graduates into responsible bearers of lethal weapons. Military service is often promoted as a means of developing individual discipline and responsibility. Any college professor with a teaching load heavily weighted toward first-year students knows that inculcating discipline and responsibility in students is vital to their success in both college and life. Members in two of our military branches ascribe to a credo of "honor, courage, and commitment," values as pertinent to civil society as they are to success on the battlefield.

The academic touchstones that prepared me to understand my careers in academe and the military as closely related are the Marxist social theorists Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. According to Althusser, in a given society, both repressive state apparatuses (such as the military) and ideological state apparatuses (such as educational institutions) ensure the replication of fundamental values and social processes to which the society is consciously or unconsciously committed. Althusser argues that members of a society cannot stand outside of its fundamental ideologies, which explains how seemingly disparate institutions support and reproduce each other within a coherent ideological system. Foucault similarly argues that power within a society circulates through all of its members and comprises the sum of their conscious and unconscious decisions to support or obstruct its goals and structures. In language reminiscent of Althusser's, Foucault asserts that no member of a society is outside or excluded from power.

I use such obfuscating verbiage to answer my colleagues who ask how I could join an organization that is directed by forces beyond my control to accomplish goals I may sometimes consider abhorrent. How could I, an educated person committed to justice, diversity, and peace, lend my abilities to the engines of war? My short answer is that we all are equally culpable for military actions from which we equally benefit. There are no innocent bystanders, especially in America, where the ballot box and the Internal Revenue Service are only the most overt signs that our social and political system and our economy operate with citizens' continual and tacit assent. While some critics view Althusser's and Foucault's theories as positing cynical and hopeless views of human agency, I see in them a more dynamic and hopeful alternative for understanding the relation of the individual to his or her society. "Be the change you wish to see," Gandhi averred, and I concur.

But unlike Gandhi and many of my academic colleagues, I am no pacifist. I would do what is necessary to stop a crazed terrorist in Oklahoma City and in the air above New York City if I knew it would save others. In the same way, I respond firmly to verbal bullying in my classroom, to ethnic stereotyping, and to class-based posturing that denigrates less-educated members of our society. My visceral responses to the terrorism of September 11, 2001, and the abuses of Abu Ghraib were similar: Something must be done to make our world a better, safer place, where hatred, cruelty, and violence are forever extinguished.

Most academics probably had similar emotional responses to those two instances of human evil, but I don't think that joining the military occurred to many of them. My particular area of academic expertise, however, prepared me to view military service as a natural extension of the civic duty of all citizens in a democratic republic. As a scholar of early American literature, I have long pondered the cultural milieu that shaped the Declaration of Independence. For me, the Constitution of the United States is a living document, and I am more familiar with Alexander Hamilton's defense of it in The Federalist Papers than any contemporary extension or critique of...
it. Consequently, I did not consider myself exempt from military service by virtue of my education, nor did I view that education as making me unfit to fulfill the role of warrior. The sophisticated terror networks we face today will not be effectively countered by Tomahawk-missile-throwing Neanderthals, nor does military service require (or, in fact, benefit from) compliant personalities devoid of commitments to humanistic virtues and ideals.

Joseph J. Ellis points out in *Founding Brothers* that the United States was born in the crucible of war, and military officers formed the core of its leadership and the basis of its political coherence. At one point in the nation's history, ministers and military officers were the bellwethers of public opinion in the way that reporters and professors are today. Throughout our history, a large proportion of our political leaders have served in the military, and that experience has been considered a part of their qualifications for office. And now universities are directing more of their energies toward developing civic-mindedness in their students, through programs that encourage social service and political activism. That move toward civic engagement is driven by the belief that college graduates, not ministers and military officers, determine the political future of the country.

In a recent forum sponsored by the Modern Language Association, the novelist Toni Morrison argued that "certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so stupefyingly cruel, that — unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, rights, or the good will of others — art alone can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination." I, too, believe in the power of art, and my commitment to teaching literature to university students has been strengthened by my closer relation to the traumas of war. Furthermore, because my "moral imagination" had already been sharpened by years of humanistic study, I have been able to envision a response to terrorism that avoids reductive stereotyping of enemies while not disavowing my desire to defend the powerless and the innocent.

War is not antithetical to humanism. Take the case of Stephen Tschiderer, an Army medic who was shot in the chest by an enemy sniper while on patrol in west Baghdad. Because he was protected by body armor, Private Tschiderer was only knocked to the ground by the bullet. He immediately recovered himself, called for help, pursued and disarmed his attackers, and then treated the wounds of the man who had only a few minutes before attempted to kill him. Generals may be able to write rules of engagement that mandate such humane actions, but only soldiers who already have such rules written in their hearts can implement them in the heat of battle and at the potential cost of life and limb.

The heart and mind of a soldier are complicated places, capable of encompassing the highest ideals of our culture alongside knowledge and experiences that illustrate our most destructive capabilities. Whatever other qualifications are called for, men and women like Stephen Tschiderer need officers capable of grasping moral complexities and historical exigencies such as those that occupy the finest minds in academe. Given our complicity in the excesses and virtues of the extraordinary kaleidoscope that is America, more academics should commit themselves to military service. I'm angered by the fact that it is often the poor and undereducated who bear the costs of war, and I've vowed that I won't leave others to bear the moral, emotional, and physical burdens of my country's defense.

The dramatic expansion of America's universities and colleges in the mid-20th century was driven and enriched by the financial and intellectual contributions of the GI Bill and returning servicemen who brought to academe their experiences of the world at war. At a time when the
United States desperately needs critically aware and globally informed decision makers, universities could repay their debt to the nation's military by joining in the ethical and intellectual burdens of its leadership. In this manner, we may all find our way to a better future and a more peaceful world.

*William C. Corley is an assistant professor of English at California State Polytechnic University at Pomona.*

[http://chronicle.com](http://chronicle.com)
Section: The Chronicle Review
Volume 52, Issue 29, Page B14