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Author(s): David L. Leal

Source: *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Jul., 2007), pp. 479-483

Published by: American Political Science Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20452000>

Accessed: 12-01-2018 19:32 UTC

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# Students in Uniform: ROTC, the Citizen-Soldier, and the Civil-Military Gap

“[T]raining citizen-soldiers allowed the United States to have a military large and professional enough to protect the nation from without while avoiding the dangers of heightened militarism, which, if unchecked, could destroy the nation from within.”

—Michael Neiberg (2000, 3), *Making Citizen-Soldiers: ROTC and the Ideology of American Military Service*

“Generally people are pretty supportive, but most don’t know much about the service. It’s unfortunate how little they know of the military, its components, its mission, and its people.”

—Roxanne Bras, Harvard Class of ’09 and ROTC cadet<sup>1</sup>

On many campuses, the sight of a student in a military uniform is common. On other campuses, the military is a distant institution with few visible affiliations. Why are some students in uniform, what are they doing, what are the costs and benefits to the individual, and what are the implications for the nation? This article will discuss these questions, along with a brief history of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) program and its relationship to the often-discussed civil-military gap.

by  
**David L. Leal,**  
The University of Texas at  
Austin

## ROTC: A Short History

Americans have long worried about the consequences of maintaining a large standing army, a suspicion we inherited from the British and because of the British. As Weigley (2001, 219) noted, “American colonists fully accepted the Whig antimilitary tradition and indeed integrated it into American political culture.” The colonists were also unhappy about the British troops garrisoned in the colonies after the French and Indian War and the taxes levied to support them. As a result, American armies and navies were traditionally small and underfunded except in times of war. Even during the Revolutionary War, “The Continental Congress supervised the Continental Army with irrational distrust of it” (Weigley 2001, 220). Our more recent experience of maintaining large standing armies during peacetime is quite different from

the pattern prevailing from the independence of the United States until the beginning of World War II.

How, therefore, did a program begin that trained military officers on college campuses? Michael Neiberg (2000) has written the most comprehensive history of ROTC, from which the following account is largely drawn.<sup>2</sup> He describes how ROTC officially started before the U.S. entry into World War I, but its roots are intertwined with those of the modern American university. While the Morrill Act of 1862 is best known for the creation of the land grant university system, it also required these institutions to offer military training.<sup>3</sup> The act was unclear as to what this meant in practice, but by 1900, 42 colleges and universities offered training programs of varied quality with War Department support.

On the eve of World War I, the 1916 National Defense Act (NDA) organized the military into the force we largely know today, with active duty components, reserve components, and state National Guard units. It also created ROTC,<sup>4</sup> which incorporated the various existing collegiate programs. ROTC was designed to provide officers for the reserve and National Guard, but it did not provide scholarships. It was also divided into a two-year program for freshmen and sophomores, which was mandatory at many schools, followed by a two-year “Advanced Course” leading to a reserve or Guard appointment. The NDA also attempted to establish a standard educational and training curriculum.

Despite relatively unenthusiastic military support, ROTC had produced 40% of reserve officers by 1940. While ROTC was suspended during World War II in favor of shorter officer training programs, the availability of ROTC-trained officers was credited with playing an important role in the mobilization of the military after Pearl Harbor. ROTC was reinstated in 1946, and the 1948 Gray Commission recommended keeping it for three reasons: it was cheap, it was in the best citizen-soldier tradition, and the military needed college-educated officers who could understand new technologies.

As the military expanded during the Cold War, ROTC transitioned from preparing reserve and Guard officers to commissioning active-duty officers. In the 1960s, colleges and universities that required compulsory ROTC began to abolish this requirement, and enrollments fell. In 1964, the ROTC Revitalization Act

for the first time funded a large number of scholarships (5,500),<sup>5</sup> allowed cross-enrollment by students at nearby universities, created a two-year program option, and dropped the number of “contact” hours with cadets. Enrollment increased, and while some students used ROTC to postpone being drafted, numbers substantially dropped after 1969 when the draft lottery made it clear who was likely to be called.

While a variety of alternatives to ROTC were debated during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Department of Defense ultimately decided to keep ROTC as the primary means of commissioning young officers and “ROTC emerged from this crisis stronger in many respects than ever” (Coumbe 1999). The primary arguments in its favor included relatively low costs, the importance of a balanced officer corps, the need for capable, flexible, and independent officers, the value of an “intellectually capable” military leadership, and the contribution of ROTC to closing civil-military gaps (Coumbe 1999).

With the implementation of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973, the challenge for the military was to attract students to ROTC without the motivation of the draft. Many units were initially placed on probation for having low numbers of cadets, but numbers were increased through (1) a recruiting campaign that focused on scholarships and opportunity, (2) the unrestricted admission of women to ROTC, beginning with the Air Force in 1970, (3) a focus on increased diversity recruitment, and (4) loosened hair, uniform, and drill regulations.

## Numbers

Any discussion of the officer corps will probably call to mind a picture of the military service academics at West Point, Annapolis, and Colorado Springs. However, ROTC programs produce almost twice the number of officers as do these academies.<sup>6</sup>

ROTC units can be found at many colleges and universities. There are 273 campuses that sponsor Army ROTC units, 71 that sponsor Navy/Marine Corps NROTC units, and 144 that sponsor Air Force AFROTC units.<sup>7</sup> For most service branches, the plurality of officers is commissioned through these ROTC programs. For example, in FY 2004, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point commissioned 976 men and women as active duty second lieutenants. By comparison, Army ROTC programs nationwide contributed over 3,300 active duty second lieutenants—2,285 were on scholarship and 1,077 were non-scholarship participants (more about this distinction later). In addition, another 858 active duty officers were produced by Officer Candidate/Training Schools (OCS/OTS), 724 by Direct Appointment, and 383 by other means. Of the total 6,303 new U.S. Army active duty commissions, then, over half were from Army ROTC. For the entire Department of Defense, of the 19,084 active duty officers commissioned in 2004, 6,866 were from Army, Navy, and Air Force ROTC units and 3,413 from the service academies.<sup>8</sup> In addition, for the 2003–2004 academic year, Army ROTC produced an additional 554 reserve officers and 614 National Guard officers.

ROTC is an important source of racial, ethnic, and gender diversity in the military. In 2004, the service academies graduated 528 female active component officers in comparison to 1,517 commissioned through ROTC. ROTC also commissioned 42.3% of new active component Latino officers and 39.5% of African-American officers in 2004 in comparison to 36.6% of Anglo officers.<sup>9</sup> The most well-known African-American General, Colin Powell, was commissioned in 1958 through the ROTC program at the City College of New York. For many years, ROTC units were as segregated as the campuses themselves, but this began to change with desegregation. In addition,

the military has operated units on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities.<sup>10</sup>

## Responsibilities and Benefits

The basics of ROTC are well known. The obligation is that students take military science classes and participate in some military training during their collegiate years and accept commissions in the military after graduation. The benefit is that the military pays for tuition and some other expenses. However, there are a variety of complexities that are not well known but which make a significant difference to the ROTC participants.

### *Benefits to Students*

The best-known benefit is the scholarship for college tuition. This can be won regardless of whether the student is enrolled at a private college or the local state university. However, some units pay for room and board while others do not. ROTC also pays a monthly stipend for 10 months of the year that varies by year in the program, and students also receive free uniforms and a yearly stipend for books. In an era of rapidly escalating tuition costs, this is no small benefit. With the average college student graduating with almost \$20,000 in debt, an ROTC cadet or midshipman on scholarship has a good chance of graduating debt free.

However, there is variation within this basic rubric. For instance, the military offers ROTC scholarships for four, three, and two years. When ROTC was first created, membership in all four years was required for a commission. This required students to make a very early decision and prevented non-freshmen (including transfers) from choosing ROTC. The program was later changed to allow two- and three-year options, but all scholarship options entail the same post-graduation commitment.<sup>11</sup>

There are other ways for a student to pay for college through military service, but ROTC is still the most common overlap of the military and collegiate experiences. For those who served on active duty for at least two years and received an honorable discharge, the Montgomery GI Bill can cover some tuition costs and living expenses. Enlisted personnel are required to contribute \$100 a month for 12 months, and then can receive up to 36 months of benefits at any point during the next 10 years. The current monthly payment to the student veteran is about \$1,000 and is made directly to the individual. This amount can be increased by other enlistment or retention packages.

In many states, students who join the National Guard do not have to pay college tuition at state-supported colleges and universities. There is also a program available for students who want to become a commissioned reserve officer after graduation. Called the Guaranteed Reserve Forces Duty (GRFD) Scholarship, it provides two- and four-year scholarships to students who participate in normal ROTC activities as well as normal reserve duty (one weekend a month, two weeks a year). ROTC students can apply to transfer into this program after two years if they prefer a reserve commission. There are also programs whereby enlisted personnel can enroll in college and join ROTC in order to become an officer (called “Seaman-to-Admiral-21” in the Navy and “Green to Gold” in the Army).

### *The Obligation for Students*

Upon receiving a commission, the minimum total service obligation is eight years. This is usually divided between active and reserve duty, often four years of each, but the exact mix depends upon the specific program, the needs of the branch, and individual preference.

The reserve obligation could include either the Regular Reserves or the Inactive Ready Reserve (IRR). The latter entails

essentially no regular activities, but membership in either reserve component can result in being called to active duty—as many reservists have discovered in the last few years.

As indicated above, a sizeable number of ROTC participants are not paid. For example, in NROTC, a non-scholarship undergraduate may enroll in the “College Program” and incur no service obligation for two years. Students simply take military science courses as they would any elective class. To continue for the next two years, such students have three paths. First, they can apply for and accept a scholarship—which is known as a “side-load scholarship”—and receive a commission after graduation and serve the normal obligation. Second, if they do not receive a scholarship, they can continue to “Advance Standing” (junior and senior year) with no tuition scholarship, but they do receive the monthly stipend and an eventual commission. This also entails a military obligation. Third, if not selected by either program, the midshipman must leave NROTC.

If a student receives a scholarship starting in the freshman year, there is no obligation to remain in the program or repay the scholarship until the beginning of the sophomore year. After that, any decision to leave will likely entail a repayment, although the amount will depend on the cost of tuition at the institution.

One fact to remember is that time spent in ROTC is not equivalent to military service. While ROTC participation may entail subsequent service obligations, the student is not a “real” member of the military until they are commissioned. Students who participate in ROTC but do not thereafter join the military are not veterans. In addition, except for the time involved in summer military activities, students are not subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).

### *The Experience for Students*

As David Axe noted (2007, 9), “it’s not unfair to call ROTC the hardest minor ever.” Academically, students will take eight ROTC classes, normally one per semester. At some schools, they can receive academic credit for all or some of these classes. The issue of course credit has been debated for many decades, and it is up to each college or university to decide whether ROTC classes are awarded credit.

Part of the ROTC experience includes drill as well as exercises designed to familiarize cadets with military equipment. This is often called “Leadership Laboratory” or simply “lab.” Cadets may also be seen exercising early in the morning two or three days a week, sometimes drilling in formation, and occasionally wearing their uniforms to drill or other activities. On the other hand, there is much less drill today than in the past, less emphasis on discipline and the receiving of demerits for infractions, and crew cuts are no longer required. Cadets also spend some weekends in ROTC activities. For those cadets who are “cross enrolled” in an ROTC program located on another college campus, they must also spend time driving to activities on that campus.

Cadets also spend at least one summer engaged in military activities. In NROTC, midshipmen take a “First Class Cruise” for six to eight weeks in the summer before their senior year. Most others will take additional summer cruises as well. In the Army, the pre-senior year experience is called “Advanced Camp,” and cadets will likely spend other summers in Army training programs.

### *Potential Problems for Students*

Students agree to maintain a minimum cumulative grade point average, although it varies by branch. It is 2.5 for future

Navy officers, 2.0 for future Marine officers, and Army ROTC cadets must maintain a 2.5 to receive a scholarship and 2.0 to remain in the program. Enrollees must also be a student in good standing at their college or university, meet physical training (PT) requirements that vary by gender and age, and adhere to weight and character requirements.

While there are a number of ways to be “disenrolled” (expelled) from ROTC, the consequences vary. There is a persistent rumor that students who fail to meet ROTC requirements will be forced to enlist—meaning start at the bottom as a private, airman, or seaman. This is theoretically possible, and it also applies to cadets at the service academies. On the other hand, a cadet who is forced out of ROTC is not always considered good enlisted material. The outcome depends on the nature of the problem, the recommendation of the unit commander, and the decision at ROTC headquarters.

A student in his or her first scholarship year, or first and second non-scholarship year, has incurred no obligation to the military and would likely simply be separated from ROTC. On the other hand, a cadet in his or her second, third, or fourth scholarship year, or third or fourth non-scholarship year, would be committed to the military and cannot leave without permission. The most likely result is a requirement to pay the government back for the cost of the scholarship. The military expects a return on its investment; after a certain point, students cannot expect to simply walk away.

## **The Civil-Military Gap and ROTC**

Scholars have long been concerned about the relationships between militaries and the societies they are tasked to protect. The problem is that militaries may decide they should rule, or insert themselves inappropriately into the civilian decision-making process, or become estranged from civilian society. The most significant recent scholarship on the subject is Feaver and Kohn’s volume (2001), which outlines the problems, investigates the realities, and discusses consequences and strategies for the future. They note that while a civil-military culture gap is longstanding and to some degree necessary, the relationship in the 1990s was more ominous and included a new element of negativity and bitterness. As observed by Gronke and Feaver (2001, 132), while public support for the military is strong in public opinion polls, this masks “an undercurrent of alienation in the relationship,” although it is unclear to what degree this applies today after the terrorist attacks of 9-11 and the Iraq War.

Feaver, Kohn, and Cohn (2001) noted that this is not a new subject of study and discussed three previous waves of literature.<sup>12</sup> They concluded that while there was no immediate crisis, there were problems that should not be left unaddressed. Weigley (2001) similarly observed that these issues were old and recurring. Although civil-military relations went through several stages in American history, much of the problem was mitigated by the reality of a very small military or the presence of a war that smoothed over differences. At the end of the Cold War, America was faced with both a larger and more alienated military—which was unique in American history. While civilian control over the military is deeply embedded in American culture, it is risky to assume that the past is always prologue. And the concern is not necessarily a coup as much as a growing tension that impedes military and foreign policy effectiveness.

Evidence of a civil-military gap has been studied for some time. For example, some have studied differences between West Point cadets and other young people, and others have discussed elite civilian and military gaps across a number of cultural and political questions, particularly partisanship.<sup>13</sup>

Another issue is the shrinking number of personal connections between the military and both the civilian political leadership and the general public. With the end of the draft, the proportion of veterans in the population is shrinking. Bianco and Markham (2001) noted that in the 1990s the veteran percentage in Congress dropped below cohort averages for the first time.

What solutions did Feaver and Kohn (2001) propose for these civil-military gaps? They suggested (1) increasing the military presence in civilian society, (2) increasing civilian understanding of the military, and (3) improving instruction on civil-military relations in professional military education. One step forward is ROTC, which “provides a singular opportunity to increase contacts between the military and future civilian leaders” (470). However, they pointed out that opponents of ROTC include not only some academics but also “bean-counters and ‘culture-warriors’ in the Pentagon and Congress” (470). In addition, a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* (Jaffe 2007) discussed the closure of many northeastern and urban ROTC units, and Desch (2001, 322) suggested that ROTC units should be better distributed across the nation and in “elite” universities.

One reason for this geographic change is cost; there may be pressure to support “efficient” programs at southern and western state universities that produce many officers rather than smaller units on elite and urban campuses that produce relatively few second lieutenants and ensigns.<sup>14</sup> This trend might be accentuated in these times of tight resources as well as declining reenlistment rates of West Point graduates (Bender 2007). While the 2006 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Rumsfeld v. FAIR* could lead to the return of ROTC units to some Ivy League (or other) campuses, it remains to be seen whether the Department of De-

fense will seek to reestablish programs that might generate relatively few—albeit well educated—new officers.<sup>15</sup>

Why is a regionally concentrated ROTC a problem? First, the *Wall Street Journal* article discussed how such urban closures negatively affect diversity, an issue of particular concern when “success in places like Iraq and Afghanistan hinges on the ability of Army officers to win the trust of a suspicious and often culturally alien population.”

Second, an officer corps drawn disproportionately from particular regions only enhances the civil-military gap. Some Americans may begin to see the military as led by unusual others, not by people like themselves.

Third, military effectiveness is enhanced by well-educated officers, and many of the top-rated American universities are in the northeast and urban areas. As Eliot Cohen noted (2005), “it is education that provides the intellectual depth and breadth that allows soldiers to understand and succeed in America’s wars.” Relatedly, in surveying centuries of military history, Kennedy and Neilson (2002, xi) concluded that “war fighting is the greatest challenge to a student’s capacity for dealing with the unknown, and those trained, as opposed to educated, have seldom managed to muster the wherewithal to cope with that environment.”

In sum, the ROTC experience is long and complex and sometimes controversial—as in the 1960s because of the Vietnam War or today because of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” legislation<sup>16</sup>—but the Ivory Tower has largely supported its mission.<sup>17</sup> It not only provides scholarships for students and well-educated officers for the military, but it also helps to break down the walls between the civilian and military worlds, thereby reducing a civil-military gap that can endanger military effectiveness and democracy alike.

## Notes

\* The author would like to thank Captain Donald S. Inbody, USN (retired) and Dr. Arthur T. Coumbe, Historian, U.S. Army Cadet Command, for their assistance with this paper.

1. Cep (2007).
2. In addition to being one of the few published accounts. See also Stancik and Hall (1984) and Coumbe (1999).
3. According to Stancik and Hall (1984), “Morrill had no sooner found his seat in the House in 1855 than he began to work vigorously for both vocational and military training in state-supported colleges.”
4. Followed by Naval ROTC in 1926, and the Marine Corps became part of NROTC in 1932. Air Force ROTC officially began in 1947, when the Air Force became a separate branch, but there were Air ROTC units as early as 1920 (Stancik and Hall 1984).
5. Previously, the only scholarships were offered by the Navy’s relatively small Holloway Plan.
6. ROTC commissions a significant share of officers for the Army, Navy, and Air Force, although many fewer for the Marine Corps.
7. Although unit numbers vary according to how they are counted.
8. [www.dod.mil/prhome/poprep2004/download/download.html](http://www.dod.mil/prhome/poprep2004/download/download.html).
9. [www.dod.mil/prhome/poprep2004/officers/race\\_ethnicity.html](http://www.dod.mil/prhome/poprep2004/officers/race_ethnicity.html).
10. See Johnson (2002) for a history of HBCU units from the NDA to the AVF.
11. In addition, some units offer scholarships that are paid from private sources. At the University of Texas at Austin, the local NROTC alumni association raises money for scholarships that are awarded by the unit commander.
12. As they discussed, the first wave began with the debate between Huntington (1957) and Janowitz (1964) and discussed whether the military should adjust to civilian culture. The second wave of post-Vietnam War literature discussed demographic and occupational changes to the military as

well as a growing civilian lack of knowledge about and sympathy to the military. A third wave of post-Cold War literature addressed military and civilian values in terms of the so-called culture wars (see Ricks 1997). Scholars in the Janowitz tradition argued that the military was too conservative, while scholars in the Huntington tradition argued that the problem was a liberal civilian elite. However, Feaver, Kohn, and Cohn (2001) made the point that few of the above claims were based on solid evidence.

13. See Barreto and Leal (2007) for some discussion as well as Jennings and Markus (1977); Hammill, Segal, and Wechsler Segal (1995); Karsten et al. (1998); Feaver and Kohn (2001); Holsti (2001); Segal et al. (2001); Cummings, Dempsey, and Shapiro (2005); Dempsey and Shapiro (2006); and Dempsey, Shapiro, and Cummings (2006).

14. Among elite universities today, Cornell sponsors Army, Navy, and Air Force ROTC; Princeton ROTC and AFROTC (the latter technically through Rutgers); Dartmouth ROTC (technically through Norwich); and Penn NROTC (Princeton and Dartmouth originally ended their ROTC programs during the same time period as did other Ivy League schools but later reinstated them during the 1970s). In addition, MIT has Army, Navy, and Air Force ROTC programs, and UC Berkeley has Army and Navy ROTC on campus.

15. See Lindemann (2006–07) for one perspective on ROTC and the Ivy League in light of the *Rumsfeld v. Fair* decision.

16. There has also been opposition on religious grounds to the presence of ROTC on Catholic campuses (see Thomas 2007 for discussion).

17. In fact, Neiberg (2000, 4), observed that “College and university administrators have thus seen ROTC not as an example of the military in the university but as an example of the university in the military. ROTC’s strongest and most important critics have been in uniform, not on campus.”

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