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Confronting the 40-Year Gap

VEENA MCCOOLE | 11:17 PM, SEP 19, 2017
STAFF REPORTER



At the start of each semester at the United States Military Academy Preparatory School at West Point, Elizabeth Verardo GRD '16 begins teaching her American Politics class. She introduces the civil-military relations block of the course by screening a video that shows a heated altercation between an undergraduate and former Head of Silliman College Nicholas Christakis '84, which began over insensitive, culturally appropriate Halloween costumes.

“What would it be like if you spoke to your officer or a member of your cadre like that?” Verardo asks the West Point sophomores, for whom this class is a core requirement. The responses she reports hearing range from “that just wouldn’t happen” to “we would probably die.” She then shows the military cadets a video of West Point’s reception day, during which new cadets bid their families farewell, receive military clothing and haircuts, learn simple drills and take the oath of office.

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Verardo explained that she contrasts these two videos as a “deliberately provocative move” to spur discussion and illustrate the differing missions that underlie Yale’s civilian education and West Point’s military preparation. “We prioritize obedience and hierarchy for a reason,” she said. “Yale is not there to create military officers.”

So where does this leave the dozens of Yale students with a joint commitment to a liberal arts education and a military career who spend several hours each week in Yale’s Reserve Officer Training Corps programs?

Verardo began her Master’s Degree at Yale’s Jackson Institute for Global Affairs in 2014, fresh off her second deployment to Afghanistan. “From the beginning of my decision to come to Yale I was apprehensive because I knew the history of the University with regards to ROTC, namely that it was off campus for several decades,” she said. Verardo graduated from West Point in 2007.

In 1926, Yale was among the first six universities to establish a Navy ROTC unit. 46 years later, the unit shut down. Alumni, veterans and current students still cannot agree as to why. Gabrielle Fong ‘16 explained that, in 1969, Yale announced it would no longer give academic credit for courses that ROTC students took as part of their military training programs. In response, she said, the Navy chose not to renew its contract with the University.

“Faculty members thought that these classes did not merit full Yale credit,” said former Yale Air Force ROTC Captain John Swisher ‘11, who was a lecturer for Yale Air Force cadets. “I understand Yale’s position and think it’s reasonable. In order to fairly give the cadets a full Yale College credit, the course would have to be significantly expanded in terms of the workload we assign.”

Fong said some of the older alumni who graduated before the program’s closure tend to attribute the unit’s closure to political pressures and student protests of the Vietnam War. But Fong, who researched the history of ROTC at Yale for her senior thesis, said Navy ROTC left campus primarily because of this academic issue.

Still, battalion commander Rusty Pickett ‘72 recalled significant campus unrest during his time as a member of the last class of Navy ROTC students to graduate before the program shut down. “We never wore uniforms,” he recalled. “It was too volatile.”

1969 saw raging anti-war protests, Black Panther trials in New Haven and the beginning of Yale College co-education. Pickett, a member of Morse College, recalled a photograph he took from his bedroom window of military tanks stationed in front of Payne Whitney

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Gymnasium that he suspected belonged to out-of-town protesters against the Black Panther trials. It was against this backdrop of enormous change and unrest that the University's ROTC program officially ended.

But the atmosphere at Yale in the midst of the Vietnam War was peaceful compared to those of campuses like UC Berkeley and Columbia, where student opposition to the Vietnam War quickly turned violent during the 1960s and 1970s.

Although Pickett maintains that the military was not well respected across the country at the time, Yale students continued to engage with opposing political opinions. Pickett said he would attend rallies hosted by the left-wing, anti-war group Students for a Democratic Society. Members of the group knew that he was in ROTC but welcomed a different viewpoint. "That's the one big difference between Yale then and Yale now," he said. "There wasn't an attitude of 'if you don't believe me, you're not a good person' that is prevalent on campus now. The ability of the University to have open discussion has sort of gone away."

He said student activists from other universities came to Yale to "agitate" and rally anti-war sentiments, but were largely ignored.

Pickett's description of the ROTC program's closure differs considerably from Fong's academics-focused account. He said Yale wanted more control over who was assigned to units as professors, and that the Navy said it wanted to continue assigning its own personnel for Yale to approve. There, he said, ROTC and Yale parted ways. Pickett added that even though ROTC officially ended in 1969, Yale University President Kingman Brewster refrained from closing the unit immediately so as not to jeopardize the students' ROTC scholarships. During 1972, Pickett's senior year at Yale, the ten or so students left in the inactive ROTC program had stopped wearing uniforms and doing drills.

Yale Veterans Association co-Founder and President Tom Opladen '66 characterized the withdrawal of academic credit for ROTC courses as a sensitive issue that was one of the linchpins of the program's departure. "As I understand, it was a mutual decision to withdraw with a lot of pressure coming from the University," he said, adding that it was difficult to attract ROTC students during that time. Opladen described the Anti-Vietnam War sentiment as one that quickly turned anti-military. "The war was a product of civilian policymakers, many of whom were Yale and Harvard graduates, so they took the brunt of the dislike of the protests," he said.

40 years later, the Navy ROTC unit returned to Yale, along with the Air Force ROTC Detachment which, according to Opladen, departed in 1958. Swisher described Joseph Gordon, who served as Deputy Dean of Yale College and Dean of Undergraduate Education until 2016, as

“one of our strongest advocates and chief supporters in navigating the opening phase [of bringing ROTC back] and continued expansion on campus.”

Gordon declined to comment on his role within the Yale administration regarding ROTC’s comeback.

Few current students can recall the history of ROTC at Yale with great detail. Madison Stenzel ‘18, who commands the Navy ROTC battalion, said participants do not receive much formal education about the original Navy ROTC at Yale. She noted little other than the presence of some photos and memorabilia displayed in the program’s office at 55 Whitney Avenue. Ryan Bauman ‘20 said his ROTC class “sat down for 30 minutes and briefly ran through the history of the ROTC” during the New Student Orientation held at the Naval Station in Newport, two weeks before the start of his first year. “That was the extent of information we were given,” he said.



Still, while Stenzel never personally experienced the hostility against the military during the Vietnam War, she could sense this shift in attitude about ROTC. When a former Navy Seal from Columbia came to Yale to deliver a guest lecture in her “Introduction to Naval Science” class, she recalled seeing him unusually dressed in full uniform.

“He wanted the chance to walk on a college campus in uniform in pride,” she said. “It was an emotional moment for him, and we all felt lucky to be in an environment where we are welcomed and accepted.”

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When the ROTC program returned to Yale in 2012, conditions were much like those that some say prompted its departure. Today, ROTC students still do not receive academic credit for military classes, physical training and leadership labs. “I think this is the way it should be,” Fong said, referring to classes such as “Navigation” that she believes should

not receive Yale credit. Opladen said that although he graduated in 1966 before the unrest began, discussions about commissionings were held in basements so as not to attract protests and problems. He added that he had heard of many people being abused in their military capacity at the University, including enlisted men being spat on. "We should never go back to that," he said. 46 years on, these tales translated into warnings from the Navy staff to the first returning ROTC class. According to Fong, she and her ROTC peers were cautioned that they might be spat on and their presence protested against. "That's how worried they were about ROTC coming back to Yale," she said.

Nevertheless, none of the five ROTC students interviewed described experiencing any sort of negative reaction to their military involvement at Yale. Instead, several praised the University's proactive and generous role throughout the reinstatement of the ROTC program.

"It makes me proud to see how fully and quickly the University has embraced ROTC, and how much it imbues the culture from the top-down," Swisher said. Verardo echoed that she was pleased to see the integration of ROTC students into the University during her two years at Yale, and the hard work of the University staff that made the smooth transition possible. Opladen said the degree of Yale's support surprised him. "Many [veterans] are very bitter and didn't believe we'd get the support that we did," he said.

Still, differences between the culture of ROTC and the University persist, which complicates the program's dual goals of integrating into the fabric of the University and training future military leaders.

Though formally apolitical, the military remains a largely conservative culture, starkly at odds with Yale's liberal campus. Verardo said political opinions persist among — and are occasionally expressed by — students at West Point. "I remember reading stuff [on "Overheard at Yale"] about how it is difficult to express conservative beliefs [at Yale], but [at West Point] it's the opposite," she said. Verardo described a political debate watch party held at West Point during the recent election, before which she gave some introductory remarks that incorporated both Trump and Clinton's slogans: "Whether you want to make America great again or if you think we're stronger together, we hope tonight is an opportunity for civil discourse." She recalled loud cheers after she recited Trump's slogan. After Clinton's, silence.

"The President is going to say and do and Tweet what he wants to," she said. "But at the end of the day it is important to reiterate that the military is not an oath to a president or political party or special interest, but to the constitution."

Bauman said he chose to forego attending the Naval Academy or West Point in favor of a less ideologically homogenous student body. "At Yale, there's a huge diversity in opinions," he said. "Being exposed to

more opinions and viewing the role of the US in the world prepares me to be the most thoughtful leader I can be." Bauman believes the culture of the Naval Academy and West Point is generally more conservative than Yale's. He emphasized that, because military personnel form a small minority on Yale's campus, Yale remains a largely "civilian-minded" campus, compared to universities with larger proportions of military students, like Virginia Tech.

The military's apolitical nature is a point of deviation from Yale's highly political culture. Stenzel said at the start of the presidential campaign season, the ROTC students received an email from the program staff, reminding them that they are welcome to be politically active on an individual level, so long as they keep the military out of it. As midshipmen and cadets, Stenzel and her peers are not allowed to endorse a candidate in their military capacities. "There is no shift in the job we have to do, this is the profession we've chosen, and it is important for us to stay professional," she said.

For example, the ROTC programs have had to navigate campus reactions to their service under the Trump administration. All students interviewed expressed commitment to their role as military professionals, no matter who the commander in chief is. Former ROTC midshipmen Zachary Kreiser '19 said his ROTC friends on opposite ends of the political spectrum had different opinions of the election outcome. Regardless, he said he doesn't think much has changed on a practical level within the unit.

Former battalion commander Curran Boyce '17 said the military has become more apolitical, and is no longer associated with certain political parties. "Since Vietnam, [people] have been able to divorce policies laid out by the government with the people who carry them out," he said. "I've seen productive conversations between people from both sides of the political spectrum, and it's been useful to see the diversity of opinion and thought within the unit."

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The ROTC's decades-long absence from Yale and its recent return gave current members a chance to embrace a new beginning. In fact, Boyce said, one of the program's main selling points today is the students' ability to lead early on and define the culture of the unit. Stenzel echoed this, noting the abundance of opportunities for students to make changes and create traditions. "We still consider it new despite its history," she said. "A lot has changed since back then."

The students' limited understanding of ROTC's history at Yale seems at odds with the University's emphasis on the importance of historical context, but perhaps the chance to redefine ROTC's place on campus has given these future military leaders the chance to bridge the civil-military divide better than their counterparts at traditional military

academies.

While Verardo's decision to screen contrasting videos of Yale and West Point illustrates the institutions' diverging goals, Yale has produced many military officers — and will continue to — despite its role as an academic institution. What Verardo describes as a crucial disparity of culture is — in its hybridity — perhaps one of Yale ROTC's strengths. According to Opladen, bridging the military-civilian gap is a broader objective of Yale's ROTC unit. And the students in the Air Force and Navy programs on campus are agents of this important unity.

"The goal [of the Navy] is to get as many well-rounded officers from as many locations, and you don't want to have everyone thinking the same way," Boyce said. "Coming from Yale, you're going to be exposed to a lot of talent and bring a different perspective to the military." Boyce added that he is grateful for the chance to attend his dream school while fulfilling his goal of being an officer in the Marine Corps.

Still, challenges remain. While parts of Yale ROTC's history are chronicled in the University's archives, it no longer feels embedded in current consciousness or conversation. The Millionaire's Unit is a celebrated film documenting a group of Yale students during the First World War who became the founding squadron of the U.S. Naval Air Reserve, yet the narratives of veterans appear lost in the forty-year military hiatus. The camaraderie, discipline and success of Yale's ROTC programs today is evident. But it seems built upon a sort of historical amnesia that doesn't acknowledge the terms of ROTC's decades-long absence from Yale and suggests these students are building a culture where once none existed. Buzzwords and phrases lauding the chance to lead early and create new ROTC traditions are reminiscent of the University's marketing efforts for its two new residential colleges, Benjamin Franklin and Pauli Murray.

Opladen described the current midshipmen and cadets, though fewer, as far more dedicated, cohesive and spirited than those of his time. Gabrielle Fong, who was on active duty aboard a ship in the seas around Japan at the time of our interview, said ROTC at Yale prepared her to step into a leadership role and manage people in a high stress environment.

"The experience made me think about the hard questions of who I wanted to be as a leader," she said. "The military could benefit from an influx of people who are looking for change and innovation, and Yale graduates can bring that spirit."