

Liberal Education at the Academy: A Conversation with West Point Professor David Bedey

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Published online: 19 April 2008
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Editor's Note: *Colonel David F. Bedey is a professor of physics at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where he has been a member of the Senior Faculty since 1996. His previous military assignments include tours of duty with combat engineer units in the United States, Europe, and Southwest Asia. He has been deeply involved in examining the purpose of education at the Academy and its effectiveness in preparing future military leaders. He writes regularly for the Family Security Matters website.*

Iannone: Thank you for agreeing to speak with us.

Bedey: And I in turn would like to thank you for this opportunity to discuss the education of the future leaders of our Army. This issue is especially relevant in the face of the myriad challenges that our nation will need to confront throughout the twenty-first century, not the least of which is a “long war” against radical Islam. But I do not purport that my views reflect positions held by the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

Iannone: Please tell us something about your background—your schooling, your field of study, your military experience, how you came to teach at West Point.

Bedey: I graduated from Montana State University in 1977 with a degree in civil engineering, an interest in eventually pursuing graduate studies in

economics, and a commission as a second lieutenant in the United States Army—gained through a four-year ROTC scholarship. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the late 1970s were tough years for the Army. But the situation changed dramatically with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. As the “malaise” under which the Army had been struggling to rebuild itself dissipated, I started thinking about making the service a career.

Then while in command of a 325-man combat engineer company at Fort Drum in (far) upstate New York, I was asked by the head of West Point’s physics department to join his faculty. Having neither set foot on West Point before nor contemplated studying—much less teaching—physics, I was shocked by his offer. But the challenge was intriguing. So it was off to the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, for two years to gain a master’s degree in physics, followed by three years as an instructor at the United States Military Academy.

I enjoyed teaching, but left West Point in 1989 eager to return to a tactical unit. I arrived in Germany just in time to see the end of the Cold War and the start of a massive drawdown of our military forces—the so-called “peace dividend.” In the midst of these hopeful signs, I deployed to the Persian Gulf region as a member of the VII Corps staff to participate in Operation Desert Storm.

Upon returning from the war, I was asked to come back to West Point as a member of the Academy’s senior faculty. This was a tough decision, for accepting this assignment would foreclose my opportunity to command troops. But on balance, I judged that I could contribute more to the Army by helping develop its future leaders. So in 1996, after completing a Ph.D. in space physics at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, I rejoined the West Point faculty.

Besides holding departmental leadership positions (up to and including department head), I have been deeply involved in Academy governance in the areas of resource allocation, curriculum development, and program assessment. I do not see myself merely as a professor of physics but rather as a steward of West Point’s core curriculum. To that end, master’s degrees in national security and strategic studies earned at both the Naval War College and the Army War College have helped to broaden my intellectual horizon. Although not an Academy graduate, I have spent half of my nearly thirty-year Army career at West Point. One might say that I have come to possess the zeal of a convert when it comes to thinking about West Point’s academic program.

***Iannone:* What was the original conception behind a military academy and behind West Point in particular? Is it the same today or has it changed through the years?**

Bedey: The United States Military Academy at West Point was established by President Thomas Jefferson in 1802 to educate professional officers to lead America's army. Interestingly, civil engineering was at that time the foundation of the curriculum. West Point graduates—both in and out of uniform—were largely responsible for building the roads, railroad lines, bridges, and harbors that the young nation needed to grow its economy and to expand westward during the nineteenth century.

The Academy's essential purpose—educating the nucleus of a professional officer corps—has not changed over the past two 220 plus years, but over time the Academy has had to adapt its curriculum to technological changes in warfare and to America's changing place in the world. Today, the Academy's stated mission is to produce "commissioned leader[s] of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army."

***Iannone:* Tell us something about how West Point has figured in our nation's wars.**

Bedey: One need only recall the names of some of our great wartime military leaders—for example, Grant, Lee, Pershing, Eisenhower, Patton, MacArthur, and Bradley—to gauge the impact that West Point graduates have had on our nation. Presently, of the Army's three primary commissioning sources (the other two being the Reserve Officers' Training Corps [ROTC] and Officer Candidate School [OCS]), West Point produces a bit fewer than 20 percent of the second lieutenants commissioned each year. But West Point graduates infuse the entire officer corps with an intangible—almost mystical—ethos: "Duty, Honor, Country." That is one of the reasons that we have the best army in the world.

***Iannone:* What does the Academy look for in its students?**

Bedey: The Academy seeks to admit well-rounded men and women who have a high probability to complete the forty-seven-month "West Point

experience” and a propensity for military service. Accordingly, applicants are screened for scholastic aptitude, athletic ability, and leadership potential. The ranking of candidates is based on merit, but each year several marginally qualified “at risk” cadets are also admitted—typically to support intercollegiate athletics or to meet certain demographic goals.

I think that just about anyone who visits West Point comes away impressed by how poised, fit, and articulate the cadets are.

***Iannone:* Do all cadets receive a war zone command upon graduation?**

Bedey: Most will find themselves in Iraq or Afghanistan within a year or two. Immediately after graduation, a newly minted second lieutenant first undergoes specialty-specific training (for example, Infantry, Military Police, or Quartermaster) for a few months before being assigned to a unit. After that, the timing of deployment to a war zone depends on when the officer’s unit is scheduled to go. But given the intensity of the war we are fighting against radical Islam, most of our graduates will have their first taste of battle fairly soon after leaving West Point.

***Iannone:* What sort of job does a new lieutenant typically do?**

Bedey: Second lieutenants usually serve as platoon leaders in charge of around forty soldiers—the exact number depends on the type of unit. When a platoon is not deployed for an operation, it trains for its wartime mission. A platoon leader answers to a company commander—usually a captain with five to eight years of service—but remains personally responsible for the platoon’s readiness and for leading it in peace or in war.

***Iannone:* Reports in the *New York Times* and in the *Boston Globe* indicate that recent West Point graduates are leaving the Army at alarming rates. How does this square with the Academy’s mission to produce “commissioned leader[s] of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army”?**

Bedey: That is an excellent question. The effect of multiple combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan is taking a toll on young officers and their families. So

it is not too surprising to see some increase in the number of officers electing to leave the service after completing their initial service obligation (five years on active duty for West Point graduates).

Not reported in the news stories you cited is a matter of more concern to me: the retention of Academy graduates has been lagging behind that of officers commissioned through ROTC and OCS. This disturbing development is not a consequence of the war; it started with officers who came on active duty in the mid-1980s.

Some here claim that this is not the Academy's problem. After all, they say, our mission is only to *prepare* a cadet for a career of military service; experiences after graduation govern an officer's decision to remain on active duty. But if that is the case, why do these adverse influences seem preferentially to target West Point graduates? Still others point out that West Pointers leave the service at about the same rate as those ROTC officers who had been selected for the ROTC's four-year scholarship program. (West Point cadets and ROTC scholarship students have similar characteristics.) But this certainly doesn't let the Academy off the hook. Yes, it may imply that our program itself does not depress retention. But it also damns us for not inspiring more of our cadets to careers of service, despite the fact that they are under our control for four years.

The official response to the retention challenge has been well reported in the press: graduating cadets are being offered incentives (graduate schooling, home station of choice, or army specialty of choice) to stay on active duty beyond the normal five-year commitment. But West Point has not looked within itself to see why it has been failing to meet a central part of its mission. I would suggest that such self-scrutiny is long overdue.

***Iannone:* We'll get to that presently. How is a West Point education unique, and how is it the same as at ordinary colleges and universities?**

Bedey: Two things distinguish education at West Point from that found at most other colleges and universities. First, in addition to their academic studies, the cadets participate in mandatory physical and military training throughout the year. And second, three-quarters of a cadet's academic time is devoted to a prescribed common core curriculum comprised of thirty courses spanning the humanities, basic sciences, social sciences, and engineering.

One thing that the Academy has in common with other schools is that it offers a broad slate of majors (about forty in number) ranging from history to economics to civil engineering to physics. Majors weren't introduced until the mid-1980s. Since then, the academic departments have focused much effort on perfecting their majors. This has to some degree diverted attention from the main (and distinctive) component of West Point's academic program, its core curriculum.

Aside from getting to select one of seven three-course engineering sequences (for example, civil engineering, electrical engineering, or nuclear engineering), the remaining twenty-seven courses in the core are dictated. But we do not do well at fusing the thirty core courses into a cohesive whole. We have breadth, but single courses or small clusters of courses exist largely independent of each other. For example, core science courses focus on scientific principles and experimental methods but do not delve into how scientific thinking permeates our worldview, nor is that subject taken up elsewhere in the curriculum. Ideally, this rich and important topic could be jointly addressed in several core courses, say in history and philosophy, as well as in science.

Some here maintain that our core curriculum is "a mile wide and an inch deep." And it is in this sense that I would say that the core curriculum is too diffuse, as is, I believe, the stated "overarching goal" of West Point's academic program, i.e., "to enable [our] graduates to anticipate and respond effectively to the uncertainties of a changing technological, social, political, and economic world," a goal that would be equally appropriate for the education of future businessmen, lawyers, and engineers.

***Iannone:* Are there different schools of thought regarding what the curriculum should be? Are there agreed upon areas, contested areas?**

Bede: I'd say that two schools of thought exist here. Some think that education should focus on the immediate needs of our graduates by providing them the skills required to perform well as platoon leaders. Others (myself included) think that undergraduate education ought to promote the intellectual sophistication required as officers rise to higher ranks. Obviously, the curricular implications of the two are quite different. The first connotes a training activity (the Army's forte); the second is consistent with a traditional liberal education.

Iannone: What are your own views on what a West Point education should do, then, the kind of graduate it should produce, the kind of leadership it should develop?

Bedey: As you can tell from the answers I have given to earlier questions, I think that the “overarching goal” of the curriculum ought to be replaced. And replacing that goal would likely necessitate making changes to the curriculum. In an essay I published online at *Family Security Matters* I put forward my thoughts on a new goal for West Point’s curriculum and on the principles one could apply to design a curriculum to meet that goal. I am glad to have the chance to share these ideas with you.

So what should be the goal of academics at West Point? A useful way to approach this question is to view cadets not merely as prospective lieutenants but rather as future lifelong members of the officer profession. At the pinnacle of the profession stand strategic leaders—colonels and generals serving as high-level commanders or staff officers. Considered from this perspective, undergraduate education ought to promote the intellectual sophistication and agility necessary for synthesizing the practical experience, training, and formal education gained throughout a professional career. A succinct “overarching goal” aligned with this purpose is *to provide cadets an intellectual foundation for future strategic leadership*.

I suggest that this goal could be best achieved via a core curriculum oriented on developing “self-awareness,” a concept that plays a prominent role in emerging army doctrine on strategic leadership. Cadets can gain self-awareness by grappling with an ostensibly simple question—*what is my place in the world as a human being preparing for a career as an army officer of the nation that stands at the forefront of Western civilization?*

Gaining such self-awareness is an ongoing process of situating oneself in the wider world. This involves contemplating four interrelated domains: the natural world of the things and nonhuman life that surround us; the social world comprised of other human beings and the institutions mankind has created; the mysterious world of the mind—the locus of one’s thoughts, dreams, and aspirations; and the spiritual world that putatively exists beyond the limits of human reason. Academic disciplines are generally aligned with the study of each of these four realms: the basic sciences for the natural world, the social sciences for the social world, the humanities for the world of

the mind, and theology for the spiritual world. But the boundaries between domains are neither distinct nor impermeable. Recognition of this fact is essential to avoiding disciplinary insularity when designing general education programs.

***Iannone:* So how might disciplinary insularity be avoided?**

Bedey: A way of attaining the curricular integration necessary to promote a cadet's formulation of a seamless, self-consistent worldview is to identify unifying themes that facilitate the coordination of clusters of courses from across the disciplines. I suggest that the following three themes would suffice for promoting self-awareness in West Point cadets: science and society; cultural awareness; and faith, reason, and ethics.

The study of "science and society" would concern itself with how modern science influences the way we comprehend the world, with how science's product—technology—can both promote and threaten humanity, and with the influence of science on the military profession. Its object must be scientific literacy, but in a much broader sense than is usually associated with the term. Beyond learning scientific principles, cadets would also take up the elusive question: What is science? Serious consideration of this philosophical issue inevitably leads one to ponder how Western science has evolved, to explore the differences between the social sciences and the natural sciences, and to appreciate the extent to which scientism shapes our perception the world.

"Cultural awareness" as it applies to educating future army officers is not synonymous with the multiculturalism currently in vogue on many university campuses. Of course, familiarity with other cultures is becoming ever more important. To this end, West Point's core curriculum should include a well-coordinated treatment of such topics as human geography, sociology, foreign languages, and comparative politics. But to comprehend other cultures in anything save for a superficial way requires a firm grounding in one's own culture—the lens through which others are perceived. Our Western history, our Western moral standards, and our Western religious views all coalesce to form the mental framework within which we judge the history, moral standards, and religious views of others. This rhetoric might strike some as melodramatic or perhaps even chauvinistic. Be that as it may, unless one has absolute confidence in the value of one's own culture, sustaining principled commitment to a career of service as a military officer is inconceivable—the

alternative is to be content having our Army led by mercenaries. Thus, central to raising cadets' cultural awareness must be a thorough study of Western civilization and its American manifestation.

***Iannone:* I gather you feel that this is not emphasized enough in the Academy at present?**

Bedey: That is correct. And I believe that fragmentation of our curriculum—the consequence of a lack of focus—is the primary culprit. But there is some good news. Our history department recently revised its two-course sequence in world history explicitly to accentuate the development of Western civilization. But on the other hand, three years ago the emphasis of our required course in literature was changed from “selected works of Western literature” to “selected works of literature from diverse authors.” Incongruity of this sort might be avoided if we had a clearer sense of direction.

***Iannone:* Please continue. We are up to the third theme in your recommended curriculum.**

Bedey: My third theme, a study of “faith, reason, and ethics,” is an indispensable part of a curriculum devoted to promoting self-awareness because the moral-ethical systems that order the lives of a people or govern subgroups within a society (for instance, the military profession) are the fruits of philosophical and theological thinking. Yes, it would be necessary to overcome widespread hypersensitivity to the very notion of discussing religion in the classroom. But scholarly dialogue between philosophers, theologians, historians, and scientists could produce a study of the historical development of religious and philosophical ideas free of the scourge of proselytism.

***Iannone:* A couple of things in these proposed curricular goals seem to relate especially to your idea that we must be prepared for the unique challenges of the present century and the present conflict: encouraging more graduates to make the army their career, since we are in a long war with Islamic fundamentalism; and fostering belief in our civilization, since we face enemies, both at home and abroad, who wish to destroy our way of life and replace it with theirs.**

Bedey: During the twentieth century we fought two major wars to defeat the proponents of totalitarian ideologies—World War II against fascism and World War III (better known as the Cold War) against Communism. We prevailed in these long and costly endeavors despite setbacks, impatience, and some domestic opposition. So some might ask, “What is different about what Norman Podhoretz has astutely labeled ‘World War IV’?”

Of course, two differences immediately come to mind—the spread of weapons of mass destruction (in the hands of unpredictable regimes and nonstate actors) and the emergence of transnational terrorist organizations (enabled by information technology). Both conspire to make war more dangerous and more difficult for us to prosecute. But it would be a mistake to focus all of our attention on these factors, for neither is our main challenge. Rather, our key vulnerability is our national will without which we cannot hope to counter the Islamists in the long run, no matter how technologically advanced or materially powerful we might be. The strength of national character that allowed us to crush the Nazis carried over through the Cold War, although it started to ebb as elements of the radical Left took control of our campuses. Today, we face a crisis of cultural self-confidence. It is for this reason that I advocate a reorientation of the curriculum at West Point. An in-depth study of our culture would stiffen the resolve of our graduates by making clear what it is that we must fight for. And I cannot see how this can do anything but ease our problem with officer retention.

Although it promises to be an uphill battle, all who believe in the value of our Western civilization must strive to restore sanity within America’s colleges and universities by opposing the proponents of cultural suicide who reign therein. West Point could help lead the way in this effort by setting an example of academic excellence based upon the implementation of a true liberal education. This would arguably be as great a contribution to our national security as producing our next generation of strategic leaders.

Iannone: What are some of the practical obstacles that would stand in the way of implementing such an ambitious program?

Bedey: It would be naïve to believe that realizing this project could be painless. Requiring the study of religion would be contentious. And sustaining the level of cross-disciplinary faculty interaction needed to assure curricular integration would run up against two obstacles endemic in

academe. One is the overspecialization of the professoriate—a consequence of the emphasis that research receives in the graduate education of up-and-coming professors and of the related “publish-or-perish” dynamic that drives decisions on retention and promotion of junior faculty. The other is the academic department, a familiar institution in higher education, which in fulfilling its bureaucratic functions often exacerbates its faculty’s research-related predisposition towards insularity. Changing such engrained elements of academic culture will require novel approaches, such as broadening the scope of what counts as respectable faculty research to include scholarly activity outside of one’s own discipline or the formation of extra-departmental loci for cross-departmental interaction akin to Princeton’s James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions but empowered to take an active role in managing the core curriculum. But if a liberal education that focuses on educating future strategic leaders is to be had at West Point, the Academy’s leaders and faculty must rise to meet these challenges. I believe that we can do it.

***Iannone:* This is all very impressive. Could you describe the kind of graduate this sort of approach would produce? Are there examples of military leaders who have had the kind of depth you are looking for?**

Bedey: I believe that throughout history the truly great military commanders—Julius Caesar and Ulysses S. Grant immediately come to mind—have possessed the kind of self-awareness I described above. How each came to possess it depended on the circumstances of the times in which he lived. The curriculum I envision is tailored to the nature of our society and to the reality of military service in the twenty-first century.

***Iannone:* And the education of today is simply not producing this kind of awareness?**

Bedey: We could do much better but are hindered by a remarkable lack of appreciation for the value of education. Most cadets today see their education as an ordeal—an obstacle to be overcome—and for a great many this clouds their perception of the worth of learning both during their West Point years and beyond. Unfortunately, uncertainty about the value of undergraduate education is not limited to cadets.

Recently, General David Petraeus, who holds a Ph.D. in international relations/economics from Princeton, penned an article in the *American Interest*, where he persuasively argued for the benefit civilian graduate education can impart to military officers. But in the course of making that case, General Petraeus revealed an attitude that I find to be prevalent among senior officers (colonels and generals) when he offered the following “tongue-in-cheek” remark: “Those of us who attended West Point...felt it represented 150 years of tradition unhampered by progress. Of course, West Point has changed enormously over the years and it is a national treasure, but despite the varied curriculum and experiences it provides, it is not an institution that puts creativity, individuality, and discovery before all else.”

No doubt, General Petraeus and most other senior officers recognize that a West Point education is of value to future leaders. But I submit there is no consensus within the officer corps as to what that value might be. Likewise, cadets might come to value their education—if only they could divine its purpose. In my judgment, the fault for this confusion lies at West Point’s gate. The Academy has failed cogently to articulate the unique contribution that undergraduate education makes to the process of officer development.

***Iannone:* What prompted you to start thinking in these directions?**

Bedey: Three things occurred in short order a few years ago. First, I happened upon Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*. Before that, I had believed that the breadth of the Academy’s core curriculum was all that mattered. But Bloom prompted me to begin thinking holistically about our culture, and I started to question whether simply offering the cadets an intellectual smorgasbord was sufficient. Shortly thereafter, I spent a year as a student at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania (the Army’s graduate school, attended by colonels and senior lieutenant colonels). There the curriculum is oriented on strategic thinking and leadership. This prompted me to ponder how undergraduate education contributes to educating future strategic leaders. Finally, I returned from Carlisle in the summer of 2001—a fateful time for all of us. The attacks of 9/11 stimulated a sense of urgency in my thinking about how the Academy could best lay the intellectual foundation for those who will lead our Army in the future.

***Iannone:* Bloom especially advanced the importance of the Great Books for their value in opening hearts and minds to the breadth of our**

intellectual heritage and in encouraging questions about how to live and what is the good? Can such ideas have a place in your vision?

Bedey: Speaking for myself, I can think of no better education for life—be that of an army officer or of any citizen—than immersion in the Great Books. But from a practical standpoint, a wholly Great Book curriculum, such as that found at Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, California, would be extremely difficult to put into place at West Point. I believe that we will have to be satisfied with introducing some of the Great Books here, and then work to inspire our cadets to keep reading after they graduate.

Iannone: **Have relativism, postmodernism, deconstruction, feminism, postcolonialism, anti-Americanism, revisionist history, etc., penetrated education at West Point? If so, do you think these influences could be damaging to a professional class charged with defending our country and our way of life?**

Bedey: None of these maladies has made significant inroads at West Point. And that is a very good thing because the officers we trust to lead our soldiers should have absolute confidence in the value of our culture—and by this I mean our shared American culture, the product of over two thousand years of evolving Western civilization. I am not suggesting that we turn a blind eye to defects in our system or unfortunate episodes in our past. But the dubious scholastic enterprises that you mentioned are bent on destroying our Western culture—not improving it. However, multiculturalism has a way of insidiously creeping over the wall. For example, some here advocate a program called “Leading Diversity.” This project denigrates the idea of assimilation and, in my view, promotes racially-oriented group identification. While Leading Diversity has not yet been put into place at West Point, its implementation is under serious consideration, as evidenced by the recent formation of the “USMA Leading Diversity Office.”

Iannone: **Could you describe the thinking behind Leading Diversity?**

Bedey: Leading Diversity is the creation of dedicated and sincere people who have their eyes on lofty ends. But once one peels away reasonable sounding

allusions to such things as “enhanced organizational effectiveness,” a troubling agenda is revealed.

Although the proponents of Leading Diversity claim that their model applies to any differences between people, its *de facto* aim is to strengthen the group identity of minorities and of women (and of course to encourage—indeed compel—everyone to see the value that this sort of “diversity” brings to the Academy). One of the program’s premises is that the “dominant culture” is so well understood by all, that nurturing our common bonds can be given a low priority. And while Leading Diversity grants that a degree of “acculturation” (but definitely not assimilation!) is necessary for an organization like the Army to function, its central focus is on cultivating racial, ethnic, and gender differences. Why? Because it is assumed that a “diverse” organization is necessarily a more creative and effective organization. It is further posited that “an organization’s culture is derived from its leadership.” The program’s creators go on to stipulate that “Army culture is derived from 230 years of White male leadership.” Hence, it should come as no surprise that changing the complexion of the leadership (including the faculty) at the Academy is a key component to Leading Diversity. Colorblindness has no place in this project.

***Iannone:* Sounds horrible. What in your view is wrong with that approach?**

Bedey: There are at least three reasons for opposing the adoption of Leading Diversity at West Point.

First, it flies in the face of some of the most basic precepts of military leadership, which place a premium on unity of effort and *esprit de corps*. One builds a cohesive unit through building a shared vision. Fixating on differences undermines this challenging task. Balkanizing the Academy (or the Army) cannot enhance military effectiveness.

Second, this program’s fascination with adjusting the racial-ethnic-gender composition of the organization promotes the pernicious idea that if the composition of the officer corps is not proportionally aligned with the composition of the Army as a whole, then the officer corps is in some sense illegitimate. But as noted sociologist Charles Moskos has pointed out, the military has been a great success story with respect to integration. This has been achieved by relentlessly punishing discrimination while simultaneously insisting that high standards apply to all. Leading Diversity—with its

concentration on the manipulation of outcomes—is antithetical to the merit-based system that Moskos has rightly touted.

My third—and most serious—objection is that Leading Diversity is at its roots an implicitly racist doctrine. How a person looks is the measure of how that person thinks (or should think). One could not depart much further from the spirit that animated the original civil rights movement. And on a personal level, I find this to be demeaning to the many minority and women soldiers with whom I have served over the past twenty-nine years.

It is an indisputable fact that we are citizens of a diverse nation. But how are we to perceive our fellow citizens? As differing individuals with unique personalities? Or as members of some subgroup to which we can automatically attribute certain attitudes and tastes? The Leading Diversity program is aligned with the latter. I believe that this sort of thinking is deleterious to the Academy, to the Army, and to our nation.

Iannone: You indicate above that some degree of affirmative action is practiced at the Academy? Is this thought to be necessary?

Bedey: Yes. The Academy has demographic goals for the composition of the Corps of Cadets, and our admissions office aggressively seeks out qualified candidates from underrepresented groups to meet these goals.

Title X of the U.S. Code dictates how offers of admission to the West Point are to be made. All candidates must be academically, medically, and physically qualified to receive an appointment. Those qualified applicants nominated by a member of Congress (each member is allotted a set number of nominations) or those with service-connected nominations (for example, the children of a Medal of Honor recipient) must be offered admission. The remainder of an incoming class will be selected from a national waiting list of qualified applicants who did not win these nominations. Title X does not require the Academy to choose candidates from the waiting list by order of merit.

Sometimes a composition goal is not met due to a lack of qualified candidates within a target group. But if a goal has not been met and qualified candidates from the target group are available, they may well displace other candidates from outside that group, even if the displaced candidates ranked higher on the national waiting list.

***Iannone:* Do you think that this is a legitimate form of affirmative action?**

Bede: I believe that West Point’s admission process, as it now stands, comes uncomfortably close to the line with respect to faithful adherence to affirmative action’s original intent. But there are some at the Academy, including the chief proponent of Leading Diversity, who would go further—lowering admission standards for minority candidates by deemphasizing standardized test scores. (Supporters cast this as “placing more emphasis on other factors.”) The desired effect is to increase the number of “qualified,” but “at risk,” minority candidates who could then displace higher-ranked, non-preferred candidates. Such a strategy for meeting “composition goals” strays far from the spirit of affirmative action. And for all of the reasons that I oppose Leading Diversity, I also oppose this hypocritical manipulation of West Point’s admissions system.

***Iannone:* Since we are presently involved in a war, some of our readers might be interested in your response to this question and it may well have implications for undergraduate education at the Point. Why has the army not been more successful in establishing security in Iraq since the fall of Saddam?**

Bede: Numerous experts have offered critiques of the prosecution of the war in Iraq (or as I prefer to think of it, operations on the Iraqi front in our long war against Islamofascism). But the war’s implications for undergraduate education at West Point—and elsewhere in the country—can be best appreciated if one does not become bogged down in tactical details. Rather, it is profitable to step back and consider a fundamental truth about the nature of war illuminated by the Prussian military genius, Carl von Clausewitz: “force is...the means of war; [but] to impose our will on the enemy is its object.” I believe that a series of events over the past forty years led our national security establishment—military and civilian, Democrat and Republican—to misunderstand Clausewitz’s dictum. Both the relative ease with which we deposed Saddam Hussein and our present difficulties in Iraq are consequences of this misunderstanding.

The army came away from our nation's defeat in Vietnam frustrated by what it perceived to be a breakdown of our national will. This led military and political leaders to search for ways to protect our vital interests without having to rely upon sustaining the will of the American people. This gave rise in the early 1990s to the "Powell Doctrine," a central tenet of which is that an "exit strategy" must be defined before commitment of the military to action. The demand for exit strategies may seem to be a simple matter of prudence, but in fact it connotes a tacit lack of confidence in the will power of the American people.

Our quick and decisive victory over Saddam's army during Desert Storm demonstrated a possible way forward: superior military technology might obviate the need to sustain popular support for a war effort. And with the downsizing of the military precipitated by our triumph in the Cold War, extending our technological edge was judged to be even more urgent. So plans were put into place to create a more agile and lethal—though much smaller—force.

Accompanying this technological transformation was the development of a strategic concept for the employment of the transformed force: direct and devastating attack on an enemy's strategic "center of gravity," i.e., the source of an enemy's ability to wage war. The result of such an attack would be the abrupt collapse of enemy resistance. An "exit strategy" would thus be easy to define, and the problem of maintaining national commitment to a war effort eliminated. It seemed as though technological advances had put us in a position to forego prolonged conflict. This hopeful attitude permeated our strategic thinking.

At first the operation in Iraq seemed to vindicate our assumptions. The "shock and awe" campaign of precision attacks on key targets in Baghdad, followed up by a breathtakingly rapid land offensive, epitomized the idea of striking an enemy's strategic center of gravity. Once Saddam's command-and-control system was disabled, resistance collapsed. But the war did not end. While concentrating on perfecting the means of war, we misread our adversary's will, and moreover deluded ourselves into believing that war can be fought without attending to our own will power. But the disconnect between our initial success in Iraq and our subsequent difficulties was not—in my estimation—an error in either political or military judgment per se. Rather, it was the almost inevitable consequence of the mindset that had been born in the aftermath of Vietnam and that had flourished within our national defense establishment since the end of the Cold War. Clausewitz would not have been surprised.

The recent success of “the surge” (a counterinsurgency strategy) is an encouraging sign that we have a better understanding of what it will take to bend the enemy to our will. But what of sustaining our own will power? Short of conceding defeat at the hands of the Islamists, America must brace itself for a long and difficult trial. Determined political leadership now and in the years ahead may be able to mobilize the national will necessary for us to prevail. But the effectiveness of political leadership is constrained by the character of the citizenry. Among the many factors that form our national character is our higher education system. However, in recent years many colleges and universities have come to define their mission to be that of questioning the worthiness, or very existence, of a common American culture. Sustaining national will in war demands a common frame of reference and a sense of shared pride. If we are to survive this war—and those that will inevitably follow as new challenges emerge—our institutions of higher education must cease preaching cultural relativism (or blatant anti-Americanism) and instead turn to instilling in our college students a thoughtful appreciation of our shared American values.

But maintaining the will to win in war is not only a concern for the American people as a whole. In the face of a long and bloody war against a barbaric belief system, the members of the army’s officer corps must have absolute confidence in the value of our culture if we are to prevail. How is sustainable willpower created? It is not a matter of training or indoctrination—commitment to a set of ideals cannot be piped into one’s mind. Rather, it requires deep engagement and introspection. The implications for the United States Military Academy are clear. A durable belief in one’s own culture presupposes an understanding of that culture. So, as I indicated above, a comprehensive study of Western civilization with an emphasis on our shared American culture—complete with its blemishes as well as its triumphs—ought to be at the center of the West Point curriculum. In my view, the Academy has no more important task than to ensure that it best fulfills this critical function. Change is slow to come to a tradition-bound institution like West Point. But the threat posed by the Islamofascists won’t go away. I only hope that we shake off our complacency in time to do our duty.

***Iannone:* What you have said prompts me to a couple more questions. First, you sound rather negative toward the Powell Doctrine, implying almost that it’s a strategy for a frivolous television nation now**

accustomed to changing the channels at will. I think a lot of people thought it was a good formulation that would help the country avoid futile, open-ended, ideological crusades that were beyond the ability of the military to carry out. Do you feel that it may have served its purpose in curing the “Vietnam Syndrome” of doubting that we could ever win a military action again, but that now it is no longer useful?

Bedey: I must admit that when it first appeared, I agreed with the Powell Doctrine for all of the reasons that you have cited. It seemed like an exceedingly rational way to decide upon the use of military force as an instrument of national policy. But in retrospect, I have come to see that its applicability is limited to relatively low-stakes “police actions.” It is not very useful when contemplating strategies for confronting an existential threat, such as was the case for World Wars II and III and is now the case for World War IV.

Iannone: **Second, you are saying that higher education in general, not just military education specifically, is responsible for an unseemly diffidence about our culture that harms our national efforts. In our system, military leadership is subject to civilian control, so the importance of training future leaders and citizens capable of understanding and defending our culture’s values should be an aspect of liberal education in general. This would be important both for those who wish to argue in support of our efforts or for those who would form a loyal and healthfully critical opposition. So the people who discounted or continue to discount the radicalization and postmodernization of the academy as peripheral to the general well-being of our nation were and are very mistaken. Would you agree?**

Bedey: I absolutely agree with you. Our nation faces a threat that cannot be countered unless we pull together as a people. But in the absence of a shared self-identity, our resolve will be too fragile to withstand the trials that await us.

The Islamists cannot defeat us on the battlefield. But the war of ideas is a different matter. American higher education may well play a decisive role in determining the outcome of World War IV. But if we are to emerge victorious, those who blithely dismiss the corrosive effects of the radicalization of our campuses must wake up.