

Incompatibility and Divorce of Institutions

Civil-Military Conflict in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps' Departure from Yale during the Vietnam War

Midshipman Third Class Andrew Song,
Naval Reserve Officers' Training Corps

The President's Ad Hoc Committee on the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) at Yale University released a confidential memorandum to its president, Kingman Brewster Jr., on 29 April 1969. This report extensively outlined Yale's ROTC curriculum and listed possible administrative actions concerning the program's future.¹ At the time, the document stated that Yale's Army and Naval ROTC consortium hosted over 211 students—of whom 147 were Yale undergraduates.² By 1972, however, the official number of ROTC participants turned to zero. Since its inception in 1701, Yale graduated the Navy's first flying ace, taught the Nation's first spy, and inaugurated the first U.S. Naval Air Reserve unit.³ What prompted a school with such a long and rich military history to renegotiate its relationship with the Department of Defense (DOD)? What ensued following the sudden separation of American colleges like Yale and the Armed Forces?

To many historians, the answer to why ROTC left college campuses like Yale is simple: antiwar sentiments.

This article, however, argues how unrelated, preexisting sources of tension between Yale and the military functioned as the primary reasons behind ROTC's expulsion. In other words, the exodus of ROTC from Yale did not stem from the single-handed efforts of antiwar protesters. Rather, the program lost its place on campus due to lobbying efforts by various demographics that had already found ROTC's academic status and creed contrary to their interests. Faculty frustration over the excessive promotion of ROTC's academic standing, religious perspectives, and the timing of Brewster's reforms all factored in the decision to remove ROTC. The abolishment of ROTC in 1972 until its return to Yale's campus in 2012 narrates an untold story—one that exposes motivations disguised by the fervor of the American antiwar movement.⁴ The story of Yale's relationship with ROTC during the 1960s captures misunderstanding and misperception. Its event informs us about the mutual divorce between the military and higher education, and the contemporary legacy of ROTC's bans in institutions, especially those of the Ivy League. In effect, the Yale



ROTC debate gives us new understanding into a conflict surrounding a military program so significant that its presence aggravated a wide polarization in communities during and after the Vietnam War.

Background on ROTC

In order to disaggregate the key figures and groups that influenced the debate over ROTC, one must examine the prewar era when ROTC thrived and its existence was unquestioned. ROTC began under the premise of training college-aged men in preparation for a U.S. entrance into World War I. Congress legislated ROTC officially through the 1916 National Defense Act, and by 1918, over 135 colleges hosted an elementary ROTC unit.⁵ Unlike today's modern-day voluntary program, ROTC, at the time, required all physically eligible males

to participate in a two-year mandatory capacity. Upon completion, there existed no obligation to continue or commission into the National Guard or the military reserves. At the conclusion of World War I, bureaucrats viewed ROTC as an immediate success that warranted further expansion. In its infancy, ROTC excited college administrators for several reasons. The initiative bestowed physical exercise benefits to its students, taught ethics, and instructed discipline. To clarify, the central purpose of ROTC was to familiarize American males to the military environment—not to aim for the

recruitment of career officers. From the program's foundation, the military understood and predicted that the majority of college undergraduates who commissioned never planned on creating a military career for themselves. Yet, after high praise for ROTC-commissioned officers in World War II, the DOD advocated for more sponsorship of ROTC units and the establishment of more host universities. By 1955, ROTC reached 355 colleges in all of the United States along with the territory of Puerto Rico.⁶ In that period, the U.S. Navy also began to generously bestow merit-based scholarships to promising college students under the Holloway Plan in 1954. With the codification of the Holloway Plan across all branches through the ROTC Revitalization Act of 1964, ROTC transformed into its modern version that appealed to all sides.⁷ In exchange for their tuition being paid, the cadet or midshipman served five years after graduation with their respective branch. Hosting universities received cash from the government, and the merit scholarships minimized the need for schools to provide financial aid to ROTC students. There seemed to be no losers with the ROTC commissioning program.

Entering the 1960s, Yale watched their healthy ROTC relationship with the DOD start to waver. By 1968, several campuses already experienced major protest movements ignited by the first teach-in at the University of Michigan.⁸ For Yale, during this

Midshipman Third Class

Andrew Song is an undergraduate at Yale University studying for a BA in political science and serving in Yale's Naval ROTC unit. He is a William F. Buckley Jr. Fellow and an editor of the *Yale Review for International Studies*. This summer, he will serve as a Hertog Foundation Political Studies Fellow in Washington, D.C., and as an intern with the Eisenhower School of National Security and Resource Strategy at the National Defense University at Fort McNair, Virginia.

era, all eyes focused on what appeared to be a living embodiment of an oppressive military structure: the ROTC program. In the eyes of antiwar protesters, the existence of ROTC precluded any end to the unpopular war. A "Memorandum from Army ROTC to the Harvard University Committee on Educational Policy" stated that 45 percent of all active duty officers at the time were commissioned through ROTC. The

same memo also stated that 85 percent of the U.S. Army's second lieutenants were ROTC graduates.⁹ Evidently, the report detailed the Army's reliance on ROTC to draw its manpower. In fact, this dependence demonstrated by the Army was very visible and public in knowledge. Thus, antiwar protesters hoped to eliminate ROTC to cut off the human resource flow that sustained the war effort.¹⁰ Gradually, the antiwar pressure became a legitimate predicament and an unsettling issue for Brewster and the Yale Corporation. However, for various subgroups on campus, the movement symbolized a chance, or rather a glowing opportunity, to challenge ROTC's presence. ROTC's sudden vulnerability galvanized and emboldened the university's faculty on campus to express their complaints.

Yale Faculty Discontent

For a long time, the officer commissioning program infuriated Yale professors. In their perspective, the university granted academic titles to ROTC military instructors freely without consideration of academic standards. W. E. D. Stokes Jr. would write to Brewster in a personal letter stating how Yale faculty appeared irritated because a lieutenant (junior grade) could teach as an assistant professor with only a Bachelor of Arts degree.¹¹ Indeed, since ROTC's establishment at Yale, military officers were designated with titles usually implying a role or authority associated with a professorship. This was frequent practice in all universities and even in other Ivy League ROTC units. At Cornell University, military officers received titles like "professor of military programs" while at Princeton University, the administration granted ROTC staff a generous title of "visiting lecturers."¹² These conferred names infuriated faculty who believed that the significance of their hard-worked doctorate degrees and research were, to some extent, parodied by military officers who hardly rendered the same reverence for their titles. In addition, members of the Yale faculty like R. A. McConnell complained that these ROTC military instructors demonstrated no visible allegiance to the university: that their first priorities lay with the DOD—a professional community seen strictly indifferent to the activities of Yale.¹³ The professors were somewhat correct with their assessment of loyalties. After all, the DOD—not the university—paid the salaries of their active-duty personnel stationed at ROTC units.¹⁴ Yale also did not



Rev. John E. Brooks, SJ (top center), dean of the College of the Holy Cross, addresses both protesters and defenders of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program in May 1970 in Worcester, Massachusetts. Demonstrations against ROTC at Holy Cross came to a head in May 1970 when students gathered on consecutive nights outside the Air Force ROTC building. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Naval Institute)

have the power in choosing the military officers delegated to ROTC unit; the DOD kept that responsibility. Therefore, professors believed to some degree that Yale overrated its military instructors and that ROTC stole the school's attention away from its devoted faculty base.

What further insulted the faculty at Yale, including the rest of the Ivy League, was that the university recognized ROTC branches as academic departments.

For example, Harvard University designated its ROTC program as the Center for Military Studies.¹⁵ These designations predicated the idea, to the dismay of professors, that their universities treated ROTC as an academic program equal to any other department. Alternatively, the placement of ROTC on a valued pedestal further dishonored academia by promoting an “extra-curricular” to a field of study. In fact, Dr. Arthur W. Galston, chairman of the Course of Study Committee, compared ROTC to an a cappella group and proclaimed, “ROTC is like singing in the Whiffenpoofs—a perfectly fine activity, but one that we don't think merits any academic standing.”¹⁶ Concurring with Galston were 159 faculty members. Drilling and marching in uniform contested the integrity of what defined an academic activity. In signature, Galston and his colleagues expressed that the retraction of professor-rank titles served to rectify past mistakes by

the university. Yet the faculty desired more than just the strip of academic titles from ROTC instructors; they desired the discreditation of all ROTC courses.

In the minds of professors, ROTC's unearned academic reputation based itself off of its rudimentary material. Galston stated in his interview with the *New York Times* that Yale juniors preoccupied themselves with military science courses at the expense of intellectually

invigorating seminars. For one, classes such as Leadership or Small-Unit Tactics and Communication seemed rather elementary and unfit for college education.¹⁷ The names of these ROTC courses affirmed their assumptions that ROTC failed to provide any intellectual stimulation. Galston complained that courses titled Pre-Camped Orientation, and Drill and Command failed to convince him why such classes supplemented a Yale education.¹⁸ The literature and opinions of Galston resonated with the faculty. Another concern rose as a result of how the military externally controlled courses taught in a Yale classroom. The DOD decided the textbooks were supplementing the courses—books that seemingly left little room for tolerance. For example, the faculty emphasized how particular ROTC textbooks appeared to inoculate simplistic, nationalistic doctrines and one-mindedness. William Ebenstein's *Two Ways of Life: The Communist Challenge to Democracy* became a cited example of the program's ability to brainwash and counter liberal ideals.¹⁹ If anything, what caused more distrust between the faculty and the DOD was how ROTC imposed restrictions on fields of studies. According to professors that interviewed Navy ROTC (NROTC) midshipmen, the Navy prohibited their scholarship recipients from selecting preprofessional majors (e.g., agriculture, pre dental, premedical, etc.). In their contract with a NROTC unit, midshipmen also agreed to not choose majors relevant to the arts such as drama and dramatics or music. The Navy generally discouraged anthropology and religion as well because of their unforeseeable application out in the fleet. Hence, the faculty insisted that the restriction of majors contradicted Yale's holistic vision of a liberal arts education for its undergraduates. The faculty's petition for the DOD to amend its contracts in allowing free selection of majors placed Naval Service Training Command in a difficult position. Changing the prohibition of certain majors was infeasible and impractical because the Department of the Navy would need to then enact this reform across all units nationwide—not just in Yale. Moreover, if put into action, the Navy's bureaucracy made it hard to meet the harsh deadline that Yale requested.

The Beginning of the End for Yale ROTC

The dismantling of Yale's ROTC accreditation started and terminated with the efforts of Galston and

the faculty. The faculty drew up a committee report and subsequently voted for the disaccreditation of all ROTC-affiliated courses by a majority of 116–28.²⁰ Most of the dissenting votes were casted by ROTC staff—incidentally present. The faculty vote only symbolized a recommendation as the power to implement academic policies lay with the president. However, the landslide outcome convinced Brewster and the Yale Corporation to disaccredit the program 1 February 1969.²¹ His official public announcement in an Alumni Day speech three weeks later that left Yale veterans horrified and prowar supporters disappointed. Brewster emphasized that disaccreditation of ROTC did not mean abolishment. However, his rhetoric already initiated the collapse of ROTC at Yale because the DOD viewed the program's disaccreditation indicative of the school's desire to not host a detachment. Thus, the DOD did not reinstate the program at Yale following the decision. The mutual divorce became apparent quickly. In fact, the Navy reviewed Yale's admissions record for the class of 1973 and analyzed the results as an implicit confirmation of their separation. Brewster shared a letter to Vice Adm. Charles K. Duncan (chief of Naval Personnel) that detailed the admissions status of applicants whose NROTC principal first-choice was Yale. Yale rejected twenty-six of the thirty-three NROTC applicants, wait-listed one student, and accepted only six candidates.²² This 18 percent acceptance rate among NROTC applicants greatly contrasted from previous years and noticeably differed from the overall acceptance rate to the university. To put this into perspective, Yale's acceptance rate a decade later, in 1979, was still hovering above 27.3 percent—almost ten points higher.²³ By all accounts, the faculty did not intend to remove ROTC or to banish the program. They only sought to negotiate ROTC's academic status and relegate professorship titles; to that end, they succeeded. Therefore, the eventual eradication of ROTC was not a concern to most, and perhaps it was even thought by some to surpass initial objectives.

Reaction and Dismay

ROTC's existence and elevated status offended academia, but to the public, the university's stance against ROTC seemed purely political and linked to the antiwar movement. In fact, the Pentagon was flustered when Yale and other Ivy League campuses began to



hesitate in renewing ROTC contracts because the DOD realized that antiwar convictions touched its once untouchable recruitment base. Misinterpretation occurred on both sides. Correspondence between Brewster and the DOD indicates that the former World War II naval aviator wanted the Pentagon to know that Yale’s reconsideration of ROTC solely stemmed from its flawed academic model—not because of the Vietnam War. If Brewster and the Ivy League genuinely acknowledged ROTC issue with that intention, then the Pentagon miscomprehended their language. In the DOD’s viewpoint, the letters demonstrated a reluctance to communicate that antiwar pressures forced the university’s decision. Roger T. Kelley, assistant secretary of defense for manpower and reserve affairs, talked to the press and delineated the future of ROTC program, explicating that the rationale for ROTC’s removal spawned from antiwar feelings. In response to a journalist’s question about why he thought ROTC was the center of attacks, he said that “ROTC is the most military thing on campus and therefore the thing they first ought to destroy.”²⁴ Not only did the Pentagon interpret the issue as strictly

Defense Secretary Ash Carter administers the oath of office to Air Force and Naval ROTC students 23 May 2016 during a commissioning ceremony at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. (Photo by Senior Master Sgt. Adrian Cadiz, U.S. Air Force)

political but also so did much of the alumni base as well. William F. Buckley Jr., an influential conservative talk show host and commentator who wrote an op-ed lambasting the distasteful hypocritical nature of the argument against ROTC, said,

If he desires to drill with a master sergeant, or to otherwise satisfy reserve officer training requirements, what business is it of the busybodies on campus, who prate academic freedom—while designing a curriculum geared to their own neurotic lusts?²⁵

Buckley’s words gave voice to what most conservatives felt about the decision: that the move to disrespect ROTC emerged from a clear political agenda. For Yale’s conservative alumni, the faculty’s contentions against ROTC’s educational model served as an excuse for professors to retain greater power over a liberal

curriculum. Even, an incensed Republican congressman, New Jersey's John E. Hunt, announced that he and his staff called an investigation into cutting federal research grants to Yale as a result of disaccreditation.²⁶ Buckley's circulated article and the outrage from conservative alumni transformed ROTC debate into a political question and construed the conflict as an antiwar decision. Due to Buckley's op-ed and the alumni who wrote personal reprieves to the president's office, the academic argument quickly became irrelevant and perceived as a collusive ploy by liberal-minded individuals.

The media, various alumni, and the military all perceived academia's criticism of ROTC as a clever antiwar justification for ROTC's departure. The DOD lamented the loss of ROTC in many Ivy League institutions, but the scale of ROTC's pushback was grossly exaggerated and misadvertised by newspapers. According to Assistant Secretary Kelley, only 3 percent of ROTC units nationwide experienced disruption. Only ten institutions including Yale dropped academic credit by 1970.²⁷ One might then ask why Yale's situation with ROTC was somewhat unique, isolated, and a first. In summary, Yale's identity as an institution catalyzed the program's death more than other universities. ROTC's departure accelerated at Yale because of smaller-scale reasons such as the school's demographic identity, coincidental timing of Brewster's reforms, and Christian influences.

Firstly, Yale's interest in ROTC diminished from the time of its founding. In a 1967 census that surveyed six Ivy League institutions, the Yale ROTC had the smallest enrollment size.²⁸ Demographically, Yale students hailed from mostly northeastern upper-middle class families, and they generally viewed the private sector and civilian job market as more lucrative and interesting than military service. This demographic contrasted from Princeton (which continued its ROTC relationship), where the majority of its student population had been southerners.²⁹ Yale's student population also facilitated Brewster's decision to discredit ROTC because the student population supported ROTC's abolition by a ratio of almost 2:1.³⁰

ROTC's Conflict with Priorities and Faith

In 1969, Yale introduced coeducation. In exchanges with his administration, Brewster expressed that to

implement such a massive change, the Yale Corporation needed to reallocate assets. In addition, Brewster ambitiously desired the erection of new buildings during his term such as the Yale Center for British Arts.

When balancing the financial interests to reach the \$55 million needed, Brewster possibly determined ROTC program expendable for the sake of coeducation.³¹ In 1969, Yale's Naval Science Department coincidentally delivered a document to the president's office asking for an increase in budget. The staff requested more air conditioner units and for financial coverage of twenty distinguished visiting lecturers in connection to the courses—an overall expenditure increase in \$1,625 to the already \$26,500 outlaid to ROTC unit.³² Paired with its budget increase, Brewster quite likely perceived ROTC as a nuisance or perhaps an obstacle to gender integration because it inconveniently siphoned money and now demanded more financial support.

The Vietnam War was also a difficult time for Catholics in Jesuit universities around the country because post-Vatican II reforms emphasized that the gearing of young Christians for war contradicted nonviolent values. In Catholic institutions like La Salle College and St. Joseph's College, Christian protesters lobbied against the maintenance of their Air Force ROTC units.³³ Simultaneous with the protests at La Salle, leaders of the religious community at Yale pushed back against ROTC in the 1960s. The post-Vatican II reforms that condemned any militaristic operation in conjunction with Christians reached Yale through William Sloane Coffin Jr. Before the administration started to examine ROTC issue more closely in 1969, Coffin—a prominent Yale chaplain from 1958 to 1973—expressed his grievances about the war openly. In contrast to previous chaplains, Coffin was unafraid in expressing political initiatives. He was an activist in many aspects, and he had convinced Williams College to ban its unruly fraternities during his time there and target ROTC programs.³⁴ He focused on the church's role in promoting draft resistance, in which any form of joining the war effort was to be stopped including ROTC. Coffin was an intriguing figure, a man who cherished the act of resisting ideology and indoctrination. He was part of the National Emergency Committee of Clergy Concerned about Vietnam and organized rallies across Ivy League universities to speak about civil disobedience.³⁵ In Warren Goldstein's

biographic portrayal of the chaplain, Coffin worked behind-the-scenes to entice voluntary resignation of ROTC. He served as a mediator who counseled students inundated with internal dilemmas. When one ROTC senior came to the chaplain and concluded that the war was immoral, Coffin congratulated him for his thinking and reflection.³⁶ Soft-spoken when he wanted to be, Coffin was a very likable figure. His influential role as the center of religious life at Yale made him become a go-to advisor and, therefore, capitalized on his reputation to dissuade many ROTC students, internally conflicted with faith and military service, from continuing. Coffin's philosophy and the church provided credence to the ethical arguments against ROTC. His charismatic personality and eloquent ability fueled ROTC's departure in a more implicit manner.

Conclusion

To conclude that antiwar rallies did not contribute to ROTC's disappearance is incorrect. The antiwar atmosphere had a substantial role in questioning ROTC, but there is a dichotomy between the role of antiwar protesters and anti-ROTC advocates. Without the encouragement for ROTC's dismissal from various anti-ROTC groups on campus, the training program would have continued unhindered. For the faculty, ROTC undermined academia's notion of titles and the definition of departments. ROTC's academic courses competed with classes and majors subsisted by Yale College—professors believed the courses to be threatened or disrespected by ROTC's prohibitions. Along with the academic issue, a collection of minor reasons quickened the end to ROTC. Religious leadership by Coffin trickled second thoughts through the ranks of ROTC cadets and midshipmen, young men already shaken and intimidated by the lack of support from

the Yale Corporation. The combination of a student body already uninterested in military service and Brewster's coeducational reform catapulted ROTC into a weak position. What had been the true framework of reasons for ROTC's dismissal, however, was misinterpreted by the public. Still to this day, the American people understand the ROTC discussion as a politicized drama when in fact, its expulsion from Yale should be understood as a mainly apolitical academic conflict propelled and obscured by the tribulations of the Vietnam War. In essence, the Yale ROTC debate had ramifications for the military other than losing what was once an undoubtedly ROTC-friendly institution. Many national colleges and universities highly respected Yale's vision and closely followed the decisions of the administration eagerly to make sense of their own school's stance. In the days after Brewster's withdrawal of ROTC's academic credits, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Montana, and Missouri State University, to name a few, immediately sent letters asking for memos and documents dictating the reasoning behind the president's decision.³⁷ After the university's announcement, the last class commissioned in Yale ROTC was in 1972. In May 1972, only ten or so students in the inactive ROTC program were completing drills by themselves without proper uniform in a run-down facility off campus.³⁸ What had represented an achievement and building stone for the university faded away for forty years until its return in 2012. The departure of ROTC left certain individuals bitter and others rejoicing. It narrates a story about a collection of sides—each wanting responsibility and justice for their causes—in a turbulent time. Uncovered, the Yale ROTC debate epitomizes an event in a war now presented in more light and now told with more truth. ■

Notes

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