

Replanting ROTC

THE editorial in *The Harvard Crimson* made no bones about it: “ROTC should not return” to campus “ever, under any circumstances.”

The editors of the school’s newspaper asserted that “establishing a chapter on campus would compromise Harvard’s academic integrity” and “even if ROTC accepted gays, it should be kept off campus for academic reasons.”

This was in April 1989—seven months before the Berlin Wall fell and four years before “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” became law. If the editorial tells us anything, it is that re-establishing ROTC on many college campuses will be difficult even though the legislation barring homosexuals from military service is now a thing of the past.

Harvard and Columbia, to cite two Ivy League examples, welcomed ROTC to campus in 1915 and 1916. Cadets, military instructors, and other students coexisted until the two universities gave the detachments the boot in 1969, a time when many universities kicked ROTC off their campuses to appease anti-Vietnam protesters. The Vietnam War ended a few years later, but ROTC never returned to the schools—although, tellingly, the stated reasons for this have changed over time.

Expect opposition to ROTC to resurface because of alleged military discrimination against women, or the old, or the handicapped or disabled. Cries about ROTC corrupting academic standards will likely return, along with nonsensical assertions that the military is opposed to “openness and critical inquiry.”

This has been a recurring theme over the years. Those opposed to the military, to recruiters’ access to schools, and to ROTC programs cite their opposition to what they describe as the Pentagon’s discriminatory policies. Right or wrong, however, these policies were completely legal.

In the case of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, it was the explicit law of the land. DADT was passed by Congress and signed by President Clinton. Neither the military nor the ROTC cadets had the power to change this, but some universities still chose to punish DOD and their own military-minded students for the actions of the US Congress.

At the end of 2010, Ivy League institutions Brown, Columbia, Harvard, and Yale all prohibited ROTC detachments on their campuses, as did the University of Chicago, Stanford, and other prestigious schools.

This has never been a majority position. ROTC did not leave most schools, and others that kicked it out during Vietnam peacefully allowed detachments to return in later years. ROTC is available at the Ivy League’s Cornell, Dartmouth,

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Penn, and Princeton, plus other top universities such as Cal-Berkeley and MIT. What makes the detachments acceptable at some of these schools and not at others is largely a matter of internal politics.

In fact, the schools that bar ROTC routinely see students participate in programs at neighboring institutions. Despite the difficulties inherent in this, Harvard has students who trek across town to participate in the ROTC program at MIT, while some Stanford students head over to Cal.

The reasons why ROTC should be on these prestigious campuses are numerous and straightforward. A professional military benefits from the most capable officers possible, and students at the top schools will, by and large, be intelligent and motivated. These are exactly the sorts of officer candidates DOD should encourage. The students at these institutions who choose military service should not be made to jump through hoops.

ROTC is good for the schools as well. The military represents all of America, and should not give up on recruiting talent from entire regions of the nation such as the Northeast. Exclusive universities, largely populated by privileged students and insular faculty, will benefit from more exposure to the military.

More officers from schools like Harvard and Yale might also put an end to an enduring canard of the anti-military establishment: the argument that, all evidence to the contrary, the military draws disproportionately from the ranks of the poor and underprivileged.

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was overturned Dec. 22. After a transition period, open homosexuals will for the first time be allowed to serve in uniform, but this will not end the controversy. Some academics embraced DADT as a convenient club with which to attack Pentagon policies, and new excuses will emerge because many campus elites simply don’t like the military or what it represents.

The true reasons for opposition will soon become clear. If new excuses for blocking ROTC are contrived, then the opposition is to the military itself and is not a principled stand against discrimination.

The schools have already shown they have fungible principles. When Elena Kagan was dean of the Harvard Law School in 2004, she sought to ban military recruiters from the school’s Office of Career Services to protest discrimination against gays. When it became clear the school would lose \$400 million in federal funding for doing so, Kagan recanted and allowed the military the same access as all other recruiters.

But exactly how ROTC will return to these campuses is still to be determined. Various school faculties and administrations must approve the return, and this might be a sticking point.

After approval, DOD then has to invest personnel, officers, time, and money to set up detachments. There are even economic arguments against a return to schools with small undergraduate enrollments. But beyond the dollars and cents, there are also symbolic reasons to return ROTC to some of these universities.

Many of the leaders of these schools, including the presidents of Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, recently expressed interest in bringing back ROTC once the “Don’t Ask” policy officially ends. President Obama, a Columbia grad, has said it is a “mistake” that “young people here at Columbia ... aren’t offered the choice, the option of participating in military service.”

The battle at the ROTC-less universities will not end quietly, but 40 years have passed. It is long past time to bring cadets back to the schools that kicked them out during the Vietnam War. Just don’t expect it to be quick or easy. ■