

ROTC, Harvard, and Hypocrisy

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, MAR 7 2011

The news is that Harvard University is allowing the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) back on campus after more than four decades of banishment. The ROTC Program is one of the three main ways the US military acquires officers (the others being Officer Candidate Schools and the military academies, like West Point). In the late 1960s, in protest of the Vietnam War, the Harvard faculty, along with faculties of several other American elite and want-to-be universities, forced ROTC's withdrawal in the mistaken belief that somehow this would both cripple the war effort and assure their morale purity. When that war and the Cold War ground on and concluded, the justification to avoid this type of association with the American military machine became that the military refused to allow equality for gays. Until the American military reformed its ways, there would be no Harvard men and women leading its formations.

But of course that was not the case. ROTC continued to exist at hundreds of other American colleges and universities, filling easily the ranks of the officer corps. Moreover, Harvard students, still qualifying for ROTC scholarships, took their required ROTC courses at MIT, two stops away on the aptly named Red Line in Cambridge, the MIT faculty having voted to retain the ROTC. The fees that Harvard would normally have paid directly for the ROTC affiliation were offered MIT via an alumni façade. The threat of losing government research funds was enough to encourage the Harvard faculty to look the other way when military recruiters came onto the Harvard campus in search of doctors and lawyers. Each year dozen of serving American officers took government paid for degree programs at Harvard or joined the roster of Harvard's visiting fellows. And Harvard faculty continued to accept research grants from and offer consulting services to the military, pursuing a relationship that stretched far back and included the World War Two development of napalm and the Cold War strategizing of Henry Kissinger and Thomas Schilling.

The severing of the ROTC ties at Harvard was purely symbolic politics. Harvard walked away from very little, if anything. The military has had many routes to every objective, including the ones of finding qualified officers and first class researchers. The war in Afghanistan finds no protests in Cambridge with conscription dormant and Barack Obama as Commander-in-Chief. The gay issue was long in being resolved, but it was destined to fall in the courts if not by the about to disappear Democrat majority in the Congress. Inviting ROTC back was also likely an invitation to Harvard Law School graduate Obama to speak at Harvard's 2011 Commencement in June. All is well as always.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.

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