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Soldier Poets, a Gadfly, and the Long-Haired Persian

Keynote Address, delivered at The United States Air Force Academy, April 28, 2000, for the “Outstanding Academy Educator Awards” ceremony.

Although many of America’s finest teachers are alive and well and right here in this room, doubtless each is too bashful to claim being the greatest who ever lived. But who was? Well, if we set aside religious figures, maybe it was a certain homely, snub-nosed gadfly who spent much of his life bugging his fellow citizens in ancient Athens.

And what bugged them? Not conceit or snobbery. He gave himself no fine airs. Though more poor than rich, he took no fees for his teaching. Instead it was his pesky, habitual questioning that maneuvered many of his self-important fellow citizens into admitting they often didn’t know—truly know—what they were doing. Naturally enough, his quizzing angered persons who felt foolish at being made to think in public. By contrast, certain junior faculty here are today being *honored* for stimulating cadets to use their brains.

That oddball educator wasn’t so lucky. Disgruntled Athenians looking for scapegoats near the end of a long, losing war finally treated him to a free drink of hemlock. Ever since then, his interrogative ways have influenced teaching methods all over this planet, which is especially ironic in view of his playful claim that if he were wise in anything, it was in knowing that he knew nothing. That amusing ploy lightened up his serious aim of reminding fellow-citizens and pupils how much of our presumed knowledge simply falls apart if we look at it closely.

I’ll return to him in a moment. First let me explain that I’ve mentioned an ancient Greek because the main source of our Euro-American culture is Greece. All faculty at the Air Force Academy know that the very word “academy” is Greek, as is the concept. Not all may be aware that both derive from Plato’s school in Athens, nor, perhaps, are

many aware that Athenians of more than two millennia ago were, like us, vitally concerned to keep the difficult balance between military clout and cultural values that make life worth living.

Back in the fifth century B.C., the words most revered by Greeks were, not so surprisingly, those of a war poem. Its characters you know about: Achilles, Odysseus, Ajax, Agamemnon—and Hector, King Priam, Helen of Troy. Along with the proverbial “cast of thousands” it offered—as special effects—armored muscle by the acre, hurtling spear points of bronze, spattered brains, and a rambunctiously heroic chaos of bloody skirmishes. To us, the *Iliad* may seem mere literature, though it would be odd to call the greatest poem ever written “mere,” but for ancient Greeks its epic range gave it a near-scriptural authority. City governments paid professionals to recite it aloud for the benefit of citizens. Had it been written by an American, its warrior heroes would—inevitably—have been American. How could they be anything else?

Well, of course they *could*, if to our American minds that possibility could occur. The *Iliad*, however, is typical of Greece’s clear-eyed objectivity, in that Homer (himself a Greek) does not make Trojans the bad guys. Easily the most likable figure in the poem is the Trojan warrior, Hector, who drives his ash spear through scores of Greeks. Quite rightly. Homer would have thought our black hat / white hat polarities illusory if not childish.

In fact, that’s the single most obvious mark of ancient Greek poetry: no bull. Take for example Archilochus, a tough-guy poet if ever there was one. He lived somewhere around mid-seventh century B.C., and, though a poet, was proud to earn his bread soldiering, as he tells us in this fragment: “By spear is kneaded the bread I eat, by spear my Ismaric / wine is won, which I drink, leaning upon my spear.”¹ I picture him then leaning forward and saying, “Any questions?” Even the scraps of Archilochus that survive make nonsense of American male insecurities about poets and poetry.

On the other hand, being a foot soldier, he knew that sometimes you have to take to your heels—and was securely macho enough to admit it:

Some barbarian is waving my shield, since I was obliged to
leave that perfectly good piece of equipment behind
under a bush. But I got away, so what does it matter?
Let the shield go; I can buy another one equally good.

He could be ga-ga over a woman, and admit that too: “Here I lie, sick with desire, stuck through the bones with love.” Shrugging, he could also admit an amusing truth men know intimately well: “. . . but even iron bends too, / and most of the time / this old poker / is limp as a rag.”

Aeschylus, who lived after Archilochus, wrote some of the greatest dramatic verse ever penned. He too saw combat but as a citizen soldier, not a professional. Serving as an officer at the battle of Marathon he faced an invading Persian army that outnumbered his fellow Athenians more than two to one. Maybe that’s why, at dawn, the Greek commander, Miltiades, gave the order: “Attack!” In the ensuing carnage and despite those odds, Athenians won a victory that set Persian ambitions back ten years. As a dramatic poet whose work was highly esteemed in its own time, Aeschylus seems to have been less proud of his literary fame than of his service against the Persians at Marathon and elsewhere. By chance, his epitaph survives, which he very possibly either wrote himself or told others what it should say, with a clarity typically Greek:

Under this monument lies Aeschylus the Athenian,
Euphorion’s son, who died in the wheatlands of Gela. The grove
of Marathon with its glories can speak of his valor in battle.
The longhaired Persian remembers and can speak of it too.²

Considering his pride in having given the “long-haired Persian” something to remember him by, it is absolutely astonishing to find that when he came to write his play *The Persians*—about a second Persian defeat at Salamis ten years after Marathon—he refused to demonize his enemies. That refusal remains, so far as I know, unparalleled in human history.

Think of it. Persian troops had ravaged the Athenian countryside, seized the Acropolis, killed every one of its defenders, sacked then destroyed its temples, and set fire to the very city in which Aeschylus’ *The Persians* was later performed. Moreover, everyone in his Athenian audience had either seen action against that enemy, or had lost family members to them, or both. At Marathon, Aeschylus’ own brother was killed, but not—so goes one report—before getting his arm lopped off by a Persian ax. What’s more, the stakes were freedom or slavery, and in the ancient world that slavery was unmetaphoric. Losers not slain outright were put very often into actual bondage by the city-full, lifelong, because slave trading in prisoners of war was universal.

Yet Aeschylus’ pride in his combat record didn’t blind him to the

reality that “the enemy” is human too. And that governments lie. “In war,” he wrote, “the first casualty is truth.” Less obvious and far more important, he had also seen that by degrees men can become what they set out to oppose. His dramatized versions of that tragic insight influenced all subsequent expression of tragic vision. Far from a being a “merely” literary fact, it’s a truth ranking among the deepest that humans have achieved. Persons or nations claiming any kind of moral superiority need to be aware of it.

The most memorable order given me when, as a 2nd lieutenant, I joined my infantry unit during the Korean War was worded a bit deviously by the battalion commander, a light colonel. Apparently some Chinese had managed to crawl, undetected, quite close to battalion positions before rising into view, hands up. Obviously, that raised doubts about a unit’s battle-readiness. Blowing those chinks away would prevent the colonel’s having to face embarrassing questions at regimental HQ. Deviously put or not, the colonel’s meaning was clear: I was to tell my platoon to shoot enemy soldiers coming in to surrender. I was twenty-three. Silently I told myself, “No way.” Before my attitude became an issue, that C.O. was rotated back to the States, with my moral courage, if any, never put to the test. To my surprise, our new battalion commander eventually suggested I make the army my career, so I naturally felt maybe I wasn’t a complete misfit.

We were allegedly in Korea to oppose the inhumane machinery of Communism. But blasting an unarmed man who offers to surrender is itself de-humanizing. My doing what we were there to oppose would have made me more like the enemy than I meant to become. True, I’d been trained to follow orders, and except for that one did my best. But I’d been educated to at least try to know what I was doing.

This blurring of a hero’s actions into behavior like that of his antagonist is a main feature of Greek tragedy because all-too-often a dramatic feature of Greek life. Its cleverest expression occurs in a play called *Oedipus the King*. There Oedipus sets out to solve a murder and punish the killer but gradually learns that he himself is that very man. Again, we need to remember that literary situations echo reality. Throughout U.S. history, from Indian wars to Desert Storm and beyond, we have sat astride our dubiously moral high horse while perpetrating things uncomfortably like the enemies we sought to oppose. At Sand Creek, Colorado, by wholesale murdering of women and children whom we called “savages” we became worse than savages. When General Curtis

LeMay said of Ho Chi Minh and his North Vietnamese, “We’ll bomb them back to the Stone Age,” he became in that moment crude-minded as any caveman’s stone club.

The Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka has rightly insisted that nothing is more destructive than that kind of cocksureness. The moment you believe, as Soyinka puts it, “that *you* have the totality of truth, that you have measured, you have reasoned things out with the worldviews, phenomena, and so on—you reach a point of absolute certitude in which no alternatives can be permitted. Communism suffered from that level of precision, that dangerous and destructive level of precision.”³

My oddball gadfly, Socrates, whose death made hemlock notorious, argued therefore that ideas held with what Soyinka calls “absolute certitude” and “precision” need examining. As a logical consequence he also held that true knowledge and right behavior go hand in hand. In his view, the man who does bad things doesn’t really know what he’s doing. If he truly knew the long-term consequences to others and himself, he wouldn’t do it. At first hearing, that sounds hopelessly soft-headed. Is it? Psychopaths and sociopaths set aside, the Socratic explanation grows strangely persuasive. There’s a line in an American blues lyric, “You got to reap jes’ what you sow.” Think, for example, Agent Orange. Not knowing what we were doing, we sowed it all right. We’re still reaping. And Agent Orange is only an instance.

By the way, lest you suppose Socrates was some bearded, limp-wristed, sandal-wearing, herbal-tea sipping wimp, think again. Yes, he was bearded. He did wear sandals, though he sometimes went barefoot. If Plato’s account of him at the drinking party described in *The Symposium* is reliable, Socrates—though no boozier—could drink us all under the table yet never himself be drunk. In his day, “symposium” meant “party,” which meant food and plenty of wine. The party Plato wrote of lasted till dawn, by which time all but a couple of guests had either passed out, fallen asleep, or gone home. Not Socrates. Although he had downed as much wine as everyone else, there he was: still apparently sober and discussing plays with the playwright Agathon.

He was also an Athenian of the fifth century B.C. That meant military service anytime Athens had a fight on its hands, which was often, because Greek city-states warred with each other at the drop of an insult or hint of advantage. Neither Plato nor Aristotle thought that odd or even undesirable, and—though each had plenty of other political suggestions—neither philosopher offered any schemes for avoiding it.

Unlike us, however, if the Athenian assembly voted in favor of war against, say, Thebes, members under sixty years of age knew their next move was to go home, fetch spear, shield and field rations, and stand ready to march. Imagine our U.S. Congress under the same obligation! “You voted to fight? OK, now get your rifle and pack.” As an Athenian citizen soldier, Socrates himself saw action during the Peloponnesian War, at the battles of Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium. Back then, combat was up close and personal, which surely is why males stayed in shape as if their lives depended on it. They did. Yet Socrates the philosopher impressed his fit, fellow infantrymen with a physical stamina they found unusual, plus an equally remarkable endurance of hardship, and his cool when under attack. He knew there was a time to philosophize and a time to fight.

Athens’ neighbor state was Sparta, and their cultures were polar opposites. Athens believed in education, Sparta believed in training. The Athenians thought drama a civic affair, more vital than mere entertainment. They not only built a big theatre; they voted ticket money for citizens otherwise too poor to attend the plays. This too is unparalleled in the annals of government. More surprising still, despite the theater and plays being state-sponsored, playwrights handled subjects with a freedom—social and political—that hasn’t happened since, not in the U.S. or anywhere else, dramatizing actions sometimes highly critical of Athenian policies and politicians! With straight-ahead candor, this verse by Euripides, another Athenian playwright, helps us understand: “A slave is he who cannot speak his mind.”

In contrast, Sparta tolerated neither drama nor much criticism. Athens welcomed painters, philosophers, sculptors, poets, architects, singers, and dancers, whereas Sparta mistrusted such touchy-feely stuff, lest it make men soft. Today our word “Spartan” denotes that severe and rigorous self-discipline, but doesn’t convey details. So, because the cultural chasm between Athens and Sparta furnishes a useful parallel to the difference between education and training, a few features may be worth dwelling on.

In Sparta, from cradle to grave the state exercised iron control in producing soldiers to serve the state. Art there was the art of war.⁴ A baby born physically weak was done away with. Family life, strictly limited. Male children stayed with their mothers till age seven, then were placed in barracks, not for education but for training with shield and spear. By age twenty a man was permitted to marry but required,

nonetheless, to continue living in barracks, visiting his wife as he could. His values were military discipline, endurance under hardship, and physical courage. That was a Spartan male's entire concern. To keep him focused, he was forbidden to farm, go into business, or take up any profession except that of soldier. Other pursuits were left to slaves called Helots. Paradoxically, it needed the constant readiness of that Spartan army to keep the lid on these same eruptive Helot slaves. In effect, Sparta was an armed camp where strangers weren't all that welcome.

Meanwhile, 200 air miles northeast, Athens was wide open to foreigners and had no standing army. Male citizens under sixty were called to active duty as need arose. If it came to a fight between the Athenian pansies and those well-honed Spartan hunks, the smart money would be on Sparta and give odds, right? Wrong. Amazingly so. The Athenians—for all their love of philosophy, poetry, money-making, parties, and the arts—proved themselves equal to Spartan opponents. In the Peloponnesian war, Sparta and its allies did *finally* defeat Athens, but only with the help of Persian money, and after twenty-seven years of hostilities. And—even then—only because the Athenians were high rollers whose habit of going for broke led them to outfit a pair of disastrous expeditions related to Sparta very indirectly.

In fairness, however, it's important to note that Greeks everywhere admired Spartan virtues, and felt the obvious appeal of highly disciplined subordination to the common good. Despite enmities, Athenians shared that admiration—all the more because individual egos among themselves often created dangerous crises. Their praise for Sparta's virtues did not, however, imply that Athens had the slightest desire to adopt such a narrow view of life.

From all this you're right to suppose that I think my country best served by officers who, in the Socratic sense—which is the largest sense—know what they're doing. That calls for more than practical skills and subjects, *vital* as they are, and *central* as they must be. A practical result, however, will be fewer officers quick to apply cures that turn out worse than the disease.

But neither good teachers (nor poets who are any good) kid themselves. Humane studies guarantee nothing. Even when offered to someone capable of an open mind, they modify personality so invisibly, so subtly that their effect can never be quantified. All the same, because behavior is learned by imitation, and because from our range of experience we imitate what we admire, the value of humanities in widening

that range is crucial. Any reader of the *Iliad* admires Hector's bravery and human decency, just as anyone reading Plato's account of Socrates' final days finds his moral and physical courage unforgettable.

Perhaps the most fascinatingly mysterious power of literature in the educated imagination is that a personality met only on paper can, and often does, exert greater influence on our lives than any number of actual acquaintances. That influence is everything. Humane values unexercised amount to self-flattery. If they don't show up in our behavior, we don't have them.

Benjamin Jowett was a famous scholar / translator of Socrates' best student, Plato. As an Oxford teacher during WWI, he learned that his own best student was about to leave for the trenches in France. Jowett decided to give the young man a going-away present. What should it have been, do you think? Perhaps some pocket-size, handsomely bound book of philosophy? Nothing of the sort. Conceivably with Socrates in mind, or Aeschylus, he presented to his pupil a first-rate revolver.

Nearer our own time, Robert Lowell's poem "For the Union Dead" paid tribute to the moral and physical courage shown by those Civil War soldiers of New England who thought slavery worse than the risk in fighting to abolish it. In that poem's most hauntingly insightful phrase, Lowell expresses his awed admiration for "man's lovely, / peculiar power to choose life, and die." No Greek would say, "I'm happy to die for my country," though Greeks in their many tens of thousands did perish for theirs. A Greek would shake his head: "*Happy* to die"? Nobody wants to die! But if it comes to that, I will—rather than be another man's slave."

To the extent that military training finds time for humane values, a *few* more of our officers may know a little more truly what it is they're doing. Insofar as they do, our nation and the world will be very much the better for it, *out of all proportion to that fewness*.

Such knowledge kept Greeks like Aeschylus from demonizing their foes, but certainly didn't make pushovers of him and the greatly outnumbered Athenians at Marathon, who attacked, then finally chased Persian troops literally into the sea. So it's unlikely to turn our cadets to marshmallows. Nor in the age of cyberspace should all that be chucked onto a junk pile dismissively called "ancient history." Greece's example is young, alive, and red-blooded among us. After all, "democracy," is a Greek word. Greece is where democracy began. And the Athens of a soldier poet showed us how.

Notes

¹Trans., Richmond Lattimore, *Greek Lyrics*, 2nd. rev. ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955) 1. Of Archilochus's poems only fragments remain. Those cited are drawn from this translation.

²The Complete Greek Tragedies, eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, vol I (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1959) 1.

³Cited from "The Nobel Laureates of Literature," *The Georgia Review* (Winter 1995) 842-43.

⁴Sparta's meager interest in what we call "culture" accounts for our correspondingly scanty information on her social history and daily life. Compared to Athens, Sparta left us almost no direct record of itself.

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