

TERI CARTER

War College

On June 4, nineteen Colonels, an ethics professor, and eight civilians sat sequestered in a windowless conference room in rural Pennsylvania, reading and marking the transcript. In the back corner a flat-screen flashed a red FOX news logo as President Obama—speaking live from a flag-draped stage in Egypt—made his closing remarks. His voice radiated through the room. “Some suggest that it isn’t worth the effort, that we are fated to disagree, and civilizations are doomed to clash. Many more are simply skeptical that real change can occur. There is so much fear, so much mistrust.” While their Commander in Chief received polite applause from the students of Cairo University, his nineteen American officers, six thousand miles away, combed over the printed pages of his speech. They studied, parsed, drew circles, underlined, and made checkmarks while the eight of us civilians—their guests for the week—watched and waited.

This time last year I’d never even heard of the place. “What’s a war college?” “The U.S. Army War College is in Carlisle, Pennsylvania,” Don said. “It’s where high-ranking officers spend a year getting their Masters in Strategic Studies.” When I didn’t respond he added, “Think grad school for the military.” I imagined saying, “But I’m in the English Department,” which would only have led Don to say, “They speak English,” so for once I just sat back and listened. The War College, he explained, trains officers from all branches of the military for strategic leadership. The 330 students spend one year divided into twenty, smaller seminars. Right

before graduation the school invites 160 civilians to embed with the class in order for students “to better understand the views of the society they serve.” Don went last year. Now he was charged with nominating someone for the Class of 2009. “They mostly get a bunch of retired old Republicans like me,” he said. “I think they have a hard time getting women to go, especially liberals ... and from California, no less. You could add something. And you’d have fun.”

“Me in a room with a bunch of conservatives like you?” I laughed. “Are you trying to punish me?”

Still, I was intrigued and he knew it. Don and I disagreed on everything from Iraq to gay marriage to President Bush, and we’d enjoyed some pretty impassioned debates over the last decade. This year, however, the ramp-up to President Obama’s election had tapped me out. What used to be good philosophical banter too-often morphed into venom-spewing attacks with normally sane folks shouting red-faced at friends and neighbors, even at their own spouses. Any dinner party could go rabid in a flash:

The surge in Iraq is not working!
The surge is a success!
We shouldn’t fucking be there in the first place!
‘Community-organizer’ Obama has never been in charge of anything!
W. never had a real job and until he became President—for eight years!
Go ahead, vote for your Socialism!
Michelle Obama is ashamed to be a citizen of this country! She said so herself!
Sarah Palin doesn’t read!
Neither does Bush, unless it’s My Pet Goat!

I wasn’t much better. My last tangle had come over the phone with my Aunt Mary from back home in Cape Girardeau, Missouri (also Rush Limbaugh’s hometown): “Your Obama is a Muslim terrorist and he wasn’t even born in the United States,” she said, matter-of-fact and not for the first time, after which I lost my mind and screamed—screamed and cursed—at my sixty-five year old diabetic, half-blind, cancer surviving, favorite aunt until she hung up on me.

“Hey, it’s just a nomination form,” Don said. “They might not even pick you.”

By the time the War College did, in fact, pick me to spend the first week of June at Carlisle Barracks, President Obama had been in office four months and I had backed off from discussing anything political with anyone. “Wish me luck,” I said

to my husband as he dropped me at the airport. “Maybe I should just wear a big Miss America banner that reads *Liberal Female from California Goes to off to War College* and get it over with. God, I hope they don’t hate me. What if I’m the only woman in a roomful of right-wing Army brass, alpha males?”

“It’s the military. Who do you think is going to be there?”

The Sunday night I arrived in Carlisle, thirty miles north of Gettysburg, my assigned escort offered to meet me in the hotel lobby. “So we won’t have to find each other in the crowd tomorrow morning,” Paul had said on the phone. “I’m tucking my daughter into bed and I’ll be right over. Have you eaten yet?” While I waited for Paul, I leafed through the welcome packet I’d picked up at check-in. I noted that the list of distinguished alumni read like a history of famous U.S. commanders: Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower (Class of 1927), George S. Patton Jr. (1932), Omar Bradley (1934) and, more recently, Norman Schwarzkopf (1973) and Tommy Franks (1985). In the red and white course catalogue, I perused the list of class offerings.

Core NS2200—Theory of War and Strategy

Courses: NS2201—National Security Policy and Strategy

 WF2200—Theater Strategy and Campaigning

 LM2202—Joint Processes and Landpower Development

Electives: Economics of National Security

 Law for Senior Commanders

 Militant Islam

 Dirty Politics: Drug Lords, Terrorists, and Non-state Security Threats

 Terrorism in the 21st Century: Religious and Ideological Violence

 Men in Battle: The Human Dimensions of Warfare

 Military Leaders and the Media

 Health & Fitness Challenges for Future Ops

 Non-lethal Weapons

 International Hotspots and the Military Implications

 Ethics and Warfare

The War College staff had insisted there was no need to prepare, but the student in me couldn’t help but do some secret, last minute cramming, so I’d re-read three months of Thomas Freidman’s *New York Times* columns on Iraq and Afghanistan

and I was twenty pages from finishing Dexter Filkins's *The Forever War*. It wasn't Dirty Politics: Drug Lords, Terrorists, and Non-state Security Threats, but it would have to do. Yes, I thought, my friend Don was most certainly having a big old laugh at having sold me on spending a week here.

Paul was six feet tall with a standard crew cut and round eyes the color of aged pennies that never seemed to blink. Dressed in a pressed polo shirt and khakis, he strolled through the lobby looking, I thought, like a man who grinds through a thousand sit-ups and runs a quick ten miles every morning without breaking a sweat. Maybe I was looking at the next General Schwarzkopf.

Paul led me to the hotel restaurant. We skipped any small talk—except noting that we were the same age, forty-three—and he briefed me on his background while I wolfed down a giant Cobb salad. Before his year at the War College, Paul's most recent assignment had been three years as an attaché in Columbia. "I make \$90,000 a year," he said after we'd known each other about seven minutes. I liked him instantly. "\$90,000," he repeated. "It's public information. If you wanted to I'm sure you could find it on the Internet. After graduation I'll get my promotion and start my new job in Washington D.C."

"That should get you a nice pay increase."

"Oh I won't see a raise until at least November."

"They'll pay you retroactively?"

Paul laughed. "Not quite. Too much red tape and paperwork."

I finished my salad, signed the check to my room, and Paul told me what he knew about the scheduled guest speakers for the week. It was an impressive list: a well-known General, the President of the ACLU, and a congressman who'd served as Vice Chairman of the 9/11 Commission. He also rattled off a list of acronyms I would hear often during the week and emphasized the school's strictly enforced non-attribution policy. "Don't be afraid to speak your mind," he said. "We have a very opinionated group, and nothing is off the table." He stood up, shook my hand, and said he would pick me up first thing in the morning. "No need for you to wait around with a hundred people for the Army's big blue bus when I can swing right by."

Carlisle Barracks looked like a cross between an Army base and a college campus. There was a security checkpoint at the entrance gate and, once inside, I watched dozens of students toting books in under one arm, hurrying to class, like on any campus quad. Our seminar met Monday morning in a conference room in Root Hall. We shoehorned almost-thirty of us around the inside *and* outside of a hole-

punched table, a space surely intended for a group half our size, and I discovered I was not, as I'd feared I might be, the only female. The officers represented Army, Air Force, Marines, National Guard, and Coast Guard, and included two women, two international officers (Australia and Mexico) and one Special Forces Commander. Listening in from the back corners of the room were a military historian and an ethics professor. It would be their job, I learned as the week went on, to insert themselves like crowbars into our arguments when we (a) fell short on facts, (b) needed a firm yank to get us back on-topic, or (c) wandered too far across some invisible ethical line.

For a good two hours we went around the circle introducing ourselves. Listening to their truckload of accomplishments—and frankly I think they were giving us the short version—it occurred to me that I'd never known a senior officer. Until today these guys—or rather the stereotypes of them—existed mostly as characters in books: Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness*, Bull Meecham of *The Great Santini*, and even good old Pug Henry in *The Winds of War*. And though I now lived in California, the small-town Missouri boys I'd grown up with were my only real-life reference points. They had joined “the service”—as everyone back home called it—not as a career choice but as a means of last resort: they were not good in school; the factories in town weren't hiring; they had disciplinary problems and were forced into it by their parents. Both of my brothers had gone straight into the service out of high school for some—or all—of these reasons. Butch joined the Air Force and operated heavy equipment in the scorching Arizona desert; Chuck signed on with the Marines and came home an electrician. In all, regardless of their reasons for enlisting, everyone I knew served their four years like jail time and then got the hell out. This War College crowd was different.

My whole family is career military.

Mine too, but none of them ever worked in the Pentagon until me.

I knew I wanted to be a ranger when I was a kid.

I was obsessed with the 82nd Airborne.

I always wanted to jump out of planes. I'm good at it.

I started in pharmacy school but ended up in law school—and the Army.

Most had served multiple tours of duty and after their year here would be deployed yet again. The Special Forces Commander, for one, would be heading straight back to Iraq after graduation for his fifth—or was it his sixth?—tour in the Middle East. They'd earned undergraduate degrees from top universities, as well

as Masters and Doctorates in subjects like applied math and physics and law. They were more educated, better educated, than most civilians I knew. Including me. I was impressed by our backgrounds, even amongst the civilians: a North Carolina cardiologist, a New York engineer, a retired Pennsylvania state police officer, a Green Bay Packers board member, an entrepreneurial Texan who built schools for kids with Downs Syndrome, a bank president from Iowa, a retired Utah news anchor turned humanitarian activist (also female), and me. If the people in this room were dropped on a desert island somewhere, I thought, we could start an entirely new and successful civilization. Easily. From scratch.

After lunch, all 500 students and civilians gathered in Bliss Hall Auditorium for the first speaker of the week, a retired, four-star General from the Clinton administration turned-pundit for television news. I watched Peggy Noonan from the *The Wall Street Journal* (whom I'd just spotted in the cafeteria's sandwich line an hour earlier) take her seat down front. She smiled at the General. He smiled back. They talked. Then the lights dimmed and the room went quiet. Though I could barely see the notebook on my lap, I scribbled notes while the General presented a slide show titled *The Challenges Facing the Obama Administration* and threw around numbers: two million illegal aliens are living in the United States; we will largely draw down troops in Iraq in thirty-six months; violence in Iraq is down from 1,250 attacks per week in 2003 to 100 in 2009; Iraq, so far, has been a \$700 billion war; we are spending \$2.4 billion a month in Afghanistan; most of our Special Forces personnel have been on five to seven tours in a war zone; Afghanistan supplies 95% of the world's opium, with two million Afghans employed by the opium trade and earning \$4 billion in criminal funds.

When the lights came up, the General took questions. I noticed our chairs had microphones attached—"to encourage participation," Paul said—and around the auditorium hands flew into the air above the sea of square shoulders and crew-cuts, hoping to be seen, hoping to be called upon by the General. After a half-hour of Q&A, our group went back to our conference room and dissected his data.

His information is old. He must have recycled that presentation.

There are two camps regarding what retired generals should be allowed to do: Camp #1 says, "Free speech. Say what you want." Camp #2 says, "You shape policy and public opinion by speaking, and this is no longer your job."

You can really tell he's part of the old guard. Petraeus is part of the new generation, the first school of generals not shaped by the Cold War. This is not looked well upon by some of the older generals.

You don't hear much from Colin Powell anymore.

You mean the sacrificial lamb?

Let's talk about invasion. With Iraq we invaded a sovereign nation. We're a sovereign nation. Imagine if somebody had invaded us? We'd be pissed.

Well, we're in it now and we're stuck there for, what did he say, the next 25 years?

And 25,000 to 40,000 troops.

What about Mexico? He said that thing about the illegal aliens, but he didn't talk about the 2,000-mile wall we're going to have to build.

I thought he did.

Who's going to pay for that wall?

It doesn't matter. We need the wall

I was not used to the lightning-round way these people said exactly—*exactly*—what they thought without any politically-correct filtering, but also without coming across as defensive or self-righteous. It took me awhile to settle in. As the afternoon wore on we agreed and disagreed, agreed *to* disagree, raised our voices, threw our arms in the air, banged our hands on the table, and shoved our chairs back in protest. But unlike the personal attacks I'd grown so weary of recently, we did it all without the rolling eyes or the dismissive, off-handed smirk. We even laughed.

It was that first afternoon, in a roomful of strangers, when I remembered that arguing controversial topics could be civil. We listened. We made our points. We considered opposing ideals. It reminded me of being on a high school debate team where you've practiced how to clearly state your views and how to listen to your opposition without fuming over. This felt like that. And this was fun.

The few times Paul was unable to act as chauffeur, I meandered my way onto the big blue bus for the short ride between the hotel and Carlisle Barracks. One morning, as I made my way down the aisle, there sat Peggy Noonan. I plopped myself onto the seat in front of her and turned around, offering my hand to shake.

Hi Peggy. Nice to meet you. I admire your work.

Thank you. That's so nice of you to say.

I saw you at the General's talk the other day. You're here as press?

No, I'm in a seminar. You?

I'm in seminar B.

Sure. I'm right down the hall in C. Are you enjoying it?

We're having a great time. It's a lively and enlightening bunch.

Ours too.

They're not afraid to talk, in your group, with you being a member of the press?

Not that I can tell! (she laughed) They're pretty open, I think.

Well, I didn't want to bother you. I just wanted to say hello.

It was a bit of a white lie to say I admired Peggy's work. It was more like I admired Peggy. I disagreed with her on a number of issues, but as a professional woman I respected her long, successful career in the male-dominated universe of news and Washington politics. I remembered that I'd loved her book, *What I Saw at the Revolution*, about working in the Reagan White House. I couldn't wait to call my friend Don and tell him I'd met his girl Peggy. He would be jealous.

For the next few days, we followed a rigorous schedule. We listened to speakers in the Auditorium, and then our smaller seminar crammed ourselves back into the windowless conference room and debated every subject, from every angle, for hours. True to what Paul had promised that first night, nothing was off the table.

On the Media

We don't have news in this country. We have infotainment.

Yeah, I remember driving a tank down the street in Baghdad right after the invasion and throwing candy to the children. When I saw the news clip the next day they were saying, "Look at how happy they are to see the Americans!" I felt like screaming at the TV, "They aren't happy to see us! They're hungry!" The news spins everything to what they want it to be.

I read all of my news, but in a pinch I like the BBC. And Al Jazeera. I figure AJZ has to work the hardest to sound fair and balanced.

So what's with the TV in here being tuned to FOX?

We keep it on mute so we can see the ticker, to see if some "breaking news" happens that we need to be talking about.

I avoid all U.S. stations. Too many talking heads telling me what to think. I want to say, "How about you just give me the information and I'll think for myself, thanks."

They're not all bad. I remember the first time Lara Logan from CBS interviewed me. I wasn't through my first answer before she said, off camera, "Stop giving me the fucking company line and answer my question." I respected her for that. And when I'm in my Command Center in Iraq, running a dozen or more high-value target missions a night, I have embedded media sitting on one side and my lawyer on the other. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Next time you watch some General being grilled by a Congressman on C-Span, remember this: all questions and answers have been negotiated and prearranged. There are no surprises. No matter how surprised or put-out they might look, it's all for show.

On Torture and Guantanamo Bay:

I don't believe in water-boarding.

Name somebody who does. It's a ridiculous statement.

I've had this conversation with my mother-in-law. She's against it, of course. But my training includes *me* being water-boarded, which I'm not going to tell her, so how am I supposed to answer that?

Forget torture. What I need are female interrogators. These guys lose it when confronted by a woman in a power position. It's so far beyond their reality.

What about the speaker today.... She said all the prisoners at Gitmo don't really need to be there.

Is that what she said? I thought she said 10% of them were probably not guilty.

Is that her expert, legal opinion?

Actually, I think she said that if even one prisoner in ten wasn't a terrorist, it would be worth it—from a humane standpoint—to release ten to save the one.

Like I said, her "expert opinion"? Let me just say this: if they've made it all the way to Gitmo, they've made it through an awful lot of other checkpoints. You don't get to Gitmo by accident; you get there because you're damned dangerous.

I get why it has to close, but it's a shame. Gitmo is a state-of-the-art facility, and we're going to have to put them somewhere.

On Religion:

It's not all about religion.

The hell it isn't. How can you do anything without bringing God or religion into it?

What if someone doesn't believe in God?

Are we talking about God or religion? They're not the same thing.

If you believe in God but you're not "religious" does that automatically make you immoral?

I'm not saying that. Religion is fine, but it's personal. Private. You can believe what you want. I just don't think I need to see it bleeding through your sleeve.

On the Office of the President:

President Bush came here last Fall on his farewell tour. He gave a pretty standard speech at first, and then he had the press leave the room, closed the doors, and he talked to us from his heart for over an hour.

And what did you think?

I wished that second guy, the one with the doors closed, could have been our president.

Social media is scary. Kids post every stupid thing on-line. Who's going to be able to run for President—or any office—with all that baggage?

They'll all be doing it so it won't matter.

I don't know about that.

You're missing the point. Nobody will care.

That depends.

Think about it this way: forty years ago who would have thought we'd have a black President? Forty years from now we'll have a gay President and nobody will blink an eye. Times change. All the stuff we're fighting about now will be irrelevant.

I had to admit, the idea of a gay President had never once crossed my mind. Last week, if someone had told me that a Colonel in the U.S. Air Force would beat me to that kind of open-minded speculation, I would have called them all kinds of crazy.

I pictured my Miss America banner with an addendum: *Liberal Female from California Goes Off to War College ... and Gets Out-Liberalled.*

On June 4, President Obama wrapped up his much anticipated Cairo speech to thunderous applause. The TV in the corner of the room was still tuned to FOX, but the screen was now split into four boxes of talking heads and the President's big international speech was being spliced into snippets. "All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time," he was saying. "The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort—a sustained effort—to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings." When the talking heads started ripping apart the speech and each other, we hit the mute button, and

the men and women who served the President scanned their notes and opened the discussion.

Who was he talking to?

Better yet, who wasn't he talking to?

Right, who's going to feel left out?

He said the word 'Muslim' more than 40 times.

I counted 45.

He only mentioned the Koran a few times, but that's more than anyone else ever has.

He pronounced all the words properly. That's huge.

He said there's a mosque in every state of the United States. I didn't know that. Who knew that?

He never mentioned terror or terrorism.

The speech focused a lot on Islam being equal to all religions, about all people being equal, that kind of thing. And he said here, "Just as Muslims do not fit a crude stereotype, America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire."

Did he accomplish what he set out to?

Sure. It sounded to me like he was just trying to let the air out of the balloon. I certainly felt the big "let's all take a deep breath."

He didn't shy away from any topic. He mentioned them all: Iraq, Afghanistan, Israeli settlements, the Palestinians, tension with Iran, women's rights. I can't see that he missed anything.

And he certainly didn't hurt anything. It was a high-gloss speech.

He's only been in office four months. It was pretty good for four months.

He's a young President being lobbied by the most powerful egos he's ever dealt with.

So we'll see.

Exactly. We'll see.

The War College Commandant hosted his civilian guests for dinner. We filed through the receiving line for a quick shake of the hand and a *thank you for coming*, but when the Commandant saw my nametag he gripped my hand a little tighter, held it a little longer.

All the way from California! I'm so glad you took the time.

Thank you, sir. It's been great.

I'm going to ask you to do me a big favor. Nominate someone next year. We need more people like you—more citizens from the West Coast—to come here and spend the week with us. We want to hear your point of view. Can you help me?

Of course, sir.

I'm counting on you, California.

I returned home feeling both exhausted and re-energized, like I'd been through some kind of political detox. My core beliefs remained, but the edges had softened and blurred.

"They brainwashed you," a friend insisted.

"No," I said. "I just feel like a rational human again." When the rhetoric at a dinner party sailed into the stratosphere, I stated my views without raising my voice. If I felt like I was being baited, I backed off or changed the subject. Even when Aunt Mary quoted Rush Limbaugh, I kept my cool and, eventually I think, convinced her that President Obama is not a terrorist. I even started reading Peggy Noonan's opinion column in *The Wall Street Journal* to keep up with what "the other side" was talking about. I was proud of myself.

Six months later, I hit my first snag.

When the time came for me to nominate someone for the War College class of 2010, I thought carefully about whom to recommend. It had to be a woman, and it had to be someone who could add some real meat to the debate. I chose a politically active California liberal, well-informed on the issues, and who—let's be honest—could hold her own in a room full of strong-minded, charming, quick-witted Colonels. I made contact:

This is going to sound a bit out of left field, but I have something I'm hoping will interest you. (I then gave her a list of the details.)

I'm a little intrigued. How much does it cost?

You pay for airfare. They cover everything else including hotel, transportation, meals, everything. I didn't spend a dime. Honestly, I couldn't even buy a beer.

I'm trying to decide what would be the point.

It's an honest and open discussion about every topic you can imagine. We debated everything you could think of: Iraq, Afghanistan, torture, religion, Bush and Obama, border control. You'll also have a chance to go on a guided tour of Gettysburg with the resident scholar on the Civil War.

I'm sure it would be interesting, but I'm not sure I want to spend any of my own money on this. What's the point again?

They say they want the officers to better understand the civilian population they serve. You can tell them exactly what you think about the state of things and hear what they have to say.

I guess I'm just feeling particularly cynical and jaded, given how much I'm seeing education decimated in California. I'm not sure I need to see how good the military has it with their education, and how our money is being spent on these stupid occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I understand.

No. You know what. This all sounds to me like some kind of "agenda" and I'm not sure I feel comfortable with that.

If you're looking to talk about issues, I found this to be a pretty enlightening forum. I'm very liberal and critical.

Me too!

But I'm afraid I might find myself being the person who says, "Why the hell are you spending good money to get me here to convince me we're in good hands?!" These wars are nothing but an attempt to make a few people rich while destruction is really the motive.

I don't disagree.

You know, I'm going to pass. I appreciate your thinking of me, but I don't think this is the best use of my time. I'd rather go on a real vacation and channel my money and my energy into something more meaningful.

I thought back to last year when Don had convinced me to go. Why had I said yes? And why could I not convince this woman, this fellow liberal, that a week at the War College would be the *best* possible use of her time?

When I couldn't quite put my finger on it, I shared her feedback with the officers in seminar group via e-mail. Within minutes, two Colonels—one who is now on the ground in Iraq, the other serving at the Pentagon—responded as follows:

You may want to point out that liberal folks advertise we should all have open minds and that we should not draw stereotypical conclusions about groups of people. Based on her attitude, is she not sounding stereotypically conservative? It is unfortunate that there are people in the best nation in the history of mankind (I said best, not perfect) who are unwilling to become informed through experience instead of through anecdotal evidence. Personally, I would welcome meeting her to hear that point of view and to discuss the issues as intelligent, civilized people.

She is exactly the right person for the seminar. Tell her I'll cover her airfare and see what she says. I'll do it if she agrees. Coach only, of course, for a liberal.

I thanked them for making me laugh, took a breath, and tried again.

TERI CARTER'S essays and short stories can be found in *Columbia*, *The MacGuffin*, *West Branch*, and other journals. She lives in northern California and is working on her first book, a memoir about growing up in Missouri. For more information please visit <http://tericarter.wordpress.com/>.