



Photo by Jerry Bauer

WHERE LIBERAL EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP DIVERGE

by Jim Sleeper

Among the many dubious contributions of the movie “Jarhead” to American popular culture is its dramatized notice that some Marines in Iraq call their Corps “The Suck.” That’s not the total dismissal of all moral value you hear whenever your roommate says of some bad situation that “It sucks.” The Suck is more and less than that. It gives institutional concreteness – in this case, the U.S. Marine Corps – to the macho admonition to “Suck it up,” to prove you can endure a bellyful of degrading, seemingly meaningless pain and even death and that you can inflict the same on others. Supposedly it’s all in the service of something worthwhile. But when you’re in The Suck, that worthwhile “something,” that moral or political justification for brutal pain, recedes pretty much beyond visibility or moral imagination. Virtue seems to lie in sacrifice itself, not in any larger, nobler end.

The most obvious civilian analogy is to organized crime: A mafia “stand-up guy” is admired for being tough enough to endure and inflict evil for “the family” he’s joined. All that counts are his loyalty and strength – in the service of *what*, exactly, is for the don, not the soldier, to decide. But while the military model operates abroad under presumed Hobbesian conditions of lawlessness, force and fraud, the mafia or any other mob operates inside of, yet in violation of, a constitutional and civic-republican code of rational, legal standards and conduct. Alexander Hamilton wrote that history had destined Americans, “by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.” The constitutional order reserves to government a monopoly on lethal force and promises its citizens conditions of order and justice that will make force, coercion, and fraud (as in markets and marketing, for example) unnecessary and illegitimate.

Jim Sleeper ‘69, a lecturer in political science at Yale and a writer on American civic culture and politics, is the author of *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York and Liberal Racism*.

That’s one reason why war veterans returning to a republic from “The Suck” aren’t inclined to regale others with their experiences. The ultimate justification of whatever they did abroad is connected to their destiny, obligation and plain good luck to have Hamilton’s experiment to carry on here at home. We don’t want to start thinking of conditions here as Hobbesian, tribal, and warlike. We don’t want calculations based on force and fraud to overtake our political, cultural, and commercial life, eclipsing the freedom that comes only with reflection, choice, and mutual trust. We don’t want civil society, at Yale or in our hometowns and workplaces, to morph gradually into that of the “Sopranos” and from there into that of “Jarhead,” so that New Orleans begins to resemble Baghdad or that the Republican Party of John McCain becomes that of Tom DeLay, Dick Cheney, and Karl Rove (who fraudulently savaged the war hero McCain in the 2000 Republican primaries, by the way). We don’t want the conservative movement or the left to become places where activists learn mainly to “suck it up.”

But that is what is happening now so palpably in our politics, cultural life, and commerce. It’s not only that the hypocrisy, corruption, and incompetence of the War in Iraq have seeped into domestic life; a more proximate cause is that many of our “small-r” republican, commercial, and religious leaders have betrayed Hamilton’s experiment and induced their followers, employees, and students to scramble unquestioningly in ways that accelerate mistrust and betrayal. The Bush administration has done that, many times over. The sad corruption in the Roman Catholic Church; the implosion of Enron and similar malefactors of wealth; the swaggering arrogance of so much corporate investment, mass marketing, and employment policy all are currents in what I’d call a “riot from the top” against republican reflection and choice by this country’s multi-problem, pathological overclass. Membership in that class is alluring; force and fraud are seductive. Powerful investment groups and perverse leaders can rouse people’s fears and baser impulses and accustom them to calculate not in civic-republican terms but in semi-Hobbesian ones. In such a society, “sucking it up” can bring

“A liberal education should deepen moral imagination and courage, along with the arts and skills of republican leadership.”

short-term rewards. People I know have become proud of being “stand-up” guys in it, especially since 9/11. Children in such a society grow up yearning for an oath and an order; they stop prizing decisions made through reflection and choice.

What is Yale doing about this? Liberal education for a civic republic depends on both curriculum and extracurriculum, where you learn to practice and lead in republican self-government through reflection and choice. Doing that requires a strong moral imagination and the courage to stand against seductive, encroaching conventions – a courage that “disdains fame, and wins it,” as a motto above a Periclean citizen-warrior in the Woolsey Hall Rotunda puts it. A liberal education should deepen moral imagination and courage, along with the arts and skills of republican leadership. If athletic-team initiation rites and fraternity hazing started to resemble *The Suck*, if student writers and activists decided to titillate readers’ negative instincts because they hadn’t

anything loving or life-giving to offer, if our classes became decorous boot camps for *The Suck* in business corporations or high government agencies, we’d soon become, as Cicero said of his fellow ancient Romans, “too ill to bear our sicknesses *or* their cures.”

Not all loyalty and toughness are the same. Liberal education commits you to defend in everyday life the difficult proposition that Truth emerges not from radical pronouncements of the general will, from religious dogma, or from “following orders,” but provisionally, from the trust-building processes of deliberative democracy. “[A]nyone who is himself willing to listen deserves to be listened to,” Yale’s President Kingman Brewster, Jr. wrote in a 1967-68 annual report: “If he is unwilling to open his mind to persuasion, then he forfeits his claim on the audience of others.” He knew that a liberal democracy and free economy depend on virtues and beliefs that the liberal state itself can’t nourish or defend because it is constitutionally committed to protect the autonomy and



A Mixed Welcome: President George W. Bush DC '68 was greeted with a few signs of protest at the Yale commencement ceremonies in 2001. Sleeper asserts that Bush is not upholding the Yale tradition of civic-republican leadership. (Shawn Thew/AFP/Getty Images)



Restoring Hamilton's Legacy: A conservator cleans up a sculpture of founding father and the first Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton inside the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. Hamilton considered America a bold experiment, testing whether "societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice." (Alex Wong/Getty Images)

rights of individuals who may disagree and even hate each other. Necessary though they are, armies aren't sufficient to defend that commitment, and money can't buy it. The commitment to self-government through reflection and choice must somehow be nourished all the more intensively in leaders of a liberal republic. That's what Yale is for, above all else.

"To a remarkable extent this place has detected and rejected the very few who have worn the colors of high purpose falsely," Brewster told my entering class on Sept. 13, 1965. "This is done not by administrative edict, but by a pervasive ethic of student and faculty loyalty and responsibility that lies deep in our origins and traditions." Sometimes that ethic breaks down: In October, I was meeting with some students in a room we'd reserved just off the Branford College dining hall. A couple of other students burst in with their trays. "Sorry," I said, "this room is reserved tonight." "That's a pretty slick move if you really didn't reserve it," said one of the students as he sailed out. He showed no loyalty to an ethic of trust, only clever cal-

culations based on force and fraud. If he thinks society a hustle, from top to bottom, he will make his prophecy self-fulfilling unless fellow students "detect and reject" him.

The Marine motto — "Semper Fidelis," "Always Faithful" — is noble in battle. "For God, For Country, and for Yale" sounds similar, but, like liberal education, it's more multilayered and pluralistic. During the Vietnam War, many here struggled to reconcile God and country, but found them opposed and tried to enlist Yalies on the side of the "sacred" civic-republic which they believed the government was betraying. The Iraq War may be more tragic and complex, but the challenge to liberal education remains what Brewster said it is: To open the doors of leadership not just by ratcheting up meritocratic standards but by deepening civic-republican commitments and skills through "a pervasive ethic of student and faculty loyalty and responsibility" that helps keeps future citizens and leaders of Hamilton's republican experiment from entering a decorously slippery slope toward The Suck. ■

"The commitment to self-government through reflection and choice must somehow be nourished all the more intensively in leaders of a liberal republic. That's what Yale is for, above all else."