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TEACHING PEACE TO THE MILITARY

Dr James Page

Abstract

One of the interesting challenges in teaching peace and conflict studies is the number of military personnel enrolling in such studies. Within this essay, I propose five overarching principles for teaching peace to the military, namely, 1) respect but do not privilege military experience, 2) emphasize the just war tradition, 3) students should be aware of the case for non-violence, 4) students ought to be encouraged to deconstruct and demythologize, and 5) recognize the value of military virtue. It is concluded that teaching peace to the military is important not merely because the military represents a key professional group, but that the task also assists in clarifying some of the complexities and ambiguities of peace education in general.

Essay

The study of peace and conflict is a complex emerging field of study and one interesting development is the number of military personnel enrolling in such courses. It is understandable that military personnel might see peace and conflict studies as a field of study within their own sphere of professional competence. Military personnel train for war and may have direct experience in conflict situations. Yet the phenomenon of military personnel studying peace provides an interesting challenge from a peace education perspective, given that the military is an institution which ultimately exists for

war and given that military training is ultimately training for war. One could argue that the project of teaching peace to the military is therefore counter to the essence of the military and counter to assumptions central to military training. From a military perspective, teaching peace to the military may be seen as an extremely disruptive and even subversive activity. Teaching peace to the military is therefore a complex concept and an even more complex undertaking, and this essay aims to provide some reflection and principles for this.

Before commencing this discussion, it is perhaps useful to look at some representative critical views of the functioning of the military. Charles Tilly links war and the state as a form of organized crime, wherein the military and politicians benefit from invoking external threat to extract funding and allegiance from individual citizens (1985). The only difference between ordinary criminals operating a protection racket and the military, according to Tilly, is that criminals operate without “the sanctity of government” (1985:171). What makes this situation more complex is that opposing military forces have a symbiotic relationship with each other, as the supposed threat from one re-enforces the existence of the other, and vice versa. Anatol Rapoport is perhaps kinder to the military when he writes of war as a social institution or system (1989:414-439), with the military as one of the keys within that outdated system. Moreover, Rapoport is highly critical of military science, which he characterizes as an irrational science, whose “loss of contact with reality” becomes pronounced at higher levels of strategy, as it becomes more obvious that military solutions are ultimately [571/572] self-destructive of the population that the military purportedly exists to protect (1989:258).

As a matter of balance, it is instructive to enquire as to how the military view criticism of their role and critiques of war making. It is difficult to ascertain this accurately, given the reluctance of military personnel to become involved in political debate. Samuel Huntington (1957) famously characterized military professionalism as involving a separation between the civic and military spheres, and this ethic in part explains a reluctance of the military to become involved in political debate. Ole Holsti (2001:95) argues that every profession has its own norms, values and expectations, and that it is

only natural that for the military to act in a professional sense to re-inforce the importance of its own role. Yet one can understand how the military might feel a sense of resentment at outside criticism. The realist-idealist distinction within international relations theory carries an implicit assumption that those advocating reliance upon military force are perhaps less idealistic than others. Moreover, the military are, as Peter Feaver puts it (2003), merely armed servants of the nation-state. One can argue that there is a massive inconsistency in criticism of the role of the military by those within advanced industrialized nation-state, in that the safety which allows citizens to criticize the military arguably only comes from the service and commitment of that same military in safeguarding those advanced nation-states.

The task of teaching peace to the military is therefore a complex one. Within this article I propose five principles which might provide some guidance for this task. The first principle I want to suggest is this: *respect but do not privilege military experience*. One of the problems for peace education is that we live in a society where popular culture continually elevates war experience. War experience is often considered the ultimate test for leadership and at times even the ultimate test for human character. Moreover, military personnel will often come into peace and conflict courses with specific experience in conflict zones, and sometimes with combat experience. This sets up a dichotomy of theory and practice, with an unstated implication being that those who have not experienced armed conflict ultimately cannot comment on this, or at least not with any credibility. It is thus understandable that military personnel may be deeply suspicious of non-military persons who write and teach about peace and conflict, in that such theorizing is supposedly out of touch with the practicalities and realities of human nature and human conflict.

The solution may lie in recognizing that there is a mythology which elevates war experience and not to surrender to this mythology. To use a medical analogy, not to have suffered from a particular disease does not preclude a scientist from writing effectively and credibly about that particular disease. So too, not having experienced a conflict zone and combat does [572/573] not preclude a political scientist from writing about peace and

conflict. Moreover, peace and war is the business of every person. Indeed non-military persons, and especially those in caring and nurturing roles, may well have special perspectives on peace and conflict that the military do not have. At the same time, those with military or conflict experience can bring to questions of peace and conflict much insight. This does not necessarily mean that they are authorities on conflict, although it does mean that personal experience may mean that they may be in a position to bring insight into the origins and resolution of armed conflict.

The second principle is: *emphasize the just war tradition*. The just war tradition is often seen as concentrating on *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, although it would seem that what is involved in just action within war, that is, *jus in bello*, is or ought to be well covered within military training as such. This involves such areas as the rules of engagement and protocols for dealing with prisoners and civilians. What is of more direct interest from a peace and conflict studies perspective is *jus ad bellum*, including the criteria of last resort, proper authority and proportionality, developed from Augustine in Chapter 19 of *De Civitas Dei* and Thomas Aquinas in II.II.Q40 of *Summa Theologica*. What makes the notion of just war important is that the recourse to war within the modern era is often predicated upon this notion and indeed it is arguable that the existence of the military forces is underscored by just war theory. Just war theory offers an ethical rationale for the military profession, and it is thus logical that the military ought to be aware of this theoretical tradition.

Of course, being aware of just war theory also implicitly involves being aware of the controversial aspects of just war theory. One of the controversial implications of just war theory is that, given the destructive nature of modern weaponry and the extent to which violence tends to encourage further violence, under the proportionality criterion there is no such thing as a just war in the modern era. Similarly, the existence of alternatives to armed conflict in the modern era, such as diplomacy and nonviolent resistance, tends to suggest that there may be no such thing as a just war in the modern era. Just war doctrine also implies the problematic notion that for a soldier there is a duty to refuse to participate in a war which is unjust or to participate in unjust conduct in war.

Just war theory does carry with it the implication that there are times where there is a moral obligation upon soldiers to refuse orders, a prospect which any military authority would see as being very serious.

This leads to the third principle I want to suggest for teaching peace and conflict studies to the military: *students should be aware of the case for nonviolence*. One of the immediate problems for teaching nonviolence to the military is that there is a tendency for those within the military to see nonviolence as either not a solution or totally impractical. This is only to be expected, as nonviolence is generally not taught within military colleges [573/574] nor is nonviolence an element within military tactics and strategy. The answer is for the military to be taught a) exactly how nonviolence works and b) the historical evidence indicating where nonviolence has worked, such as documented by Gene Sharpe (1973) and more recently Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall (2000).

Of course, it is not surprising that nonviolence might at surface level be seen as being the opposite to military science. One might even define military science as the study of conflict resolution through the use or threatened use of violence. However on a deeper level nonviolence and the military are not necessarily mutually exclusive entities. The notion of the just war presupposes the exhaustion of all other means of conflict resolution, including nonviolent conflict resolution. Therefore it follows that the military ought to be trained in what exactly nonviolence resistance involves. Moreover the increasing use of the military in peacekeeping operations means that there is much to be learned from techniques of nonviolence, including negotiation skills, the power of restraint, deflecting aggression and personal empowerment. Much of this is already taught within the official peace keeping manuals of the United Nations, although it useful to acknowledge the impact of nonviolent techniques.

The fourth principle is that *students ought to be encouraged to deconstruct and demythologize*. Notions which do need deconstruction and demythologizing include defence, the inevitability of violence and the nationalism. Defence is something of a

political shibboleth and in reality can be extended to include justification of almost any form of violence. It is interesting how defence has become so entrenched as a rationale for the military that we now not merely refer to defence as a policy but also to defence to denote an institution and establishment. The inevitability of violence is a particularly insidious notion as it is ultimately self-fulfilling. If we believe that violence is inevitable then we will prepare for violence and more readily commit ourselves to violence, thereby confirming our original belief. Nationalism is important for the military in that the existence of the military is interlinked with nationalism. Past military sacrifices and glories provide the definition of what it means to be a nation, and conversely it is the need to preserve national unity and integrity which provides the rationale for keeping the military.

The difficulty of encouraging critical consciousness within the military is that there is a sense in which political questioning is not part of the role of the military. Military science normally focuses on the achievement of tactical and strategic objectives, rather than dealing with political questions. This is especially so in liberal democratic societies, where there is a strong tradition that the military ought not to be involved in civil affairs. Yet this does not mean that the military ought not to be politically [574/575] illiterate. Moreover, the more advanced in the chain of command, the more independence of judgment is actually required of military commanders. One could argue that engaging in political reflection is just one aspect of this. It is interesting to note that many military leaders become outspoken for peace in retirement, something which Robert Lifton has described as the "retirement syndrome" (1986:97). It may be that retirement gives the military space for reflection, although there is no reason why this ought not to be encouraged and facilitated earlier.

The fifth principle is: *recognize the validity of military virtue*. These military virtues include self-discipline, commitment, loyalty, physical and mental endurance, compassion, civility, respect for authority, respect for country, self-sacrifice, and, above all, courage. For those committed to the cause of peace, there may be a tendency to see the military as part of the problem, and in this essay it has been suggested that there is a sense in which

this is true. However, the problem is that it is too easy to move from a critique of the military as an institution to a failure to recognize the idealism inherent within those who are committed to serving within the military. What complicates this situation is that military virtue tends to be quite grotesquely exaggerated within popular culture, within the movies, fiction, nonfiction which frames our thinking. I suspect that this exaggerated view of military virtue stems from something of a moral vacuum, where there are very few ideals to hold on to. At the same time those within the military are keenly aware that this exaggerated view of military virtue is unrealistic. From a perspective of peace and conflict studies, it is important to recognize that there are valid military virtues, and the military, even if a flawed institution, can nevertheless serve to encourage human excellence.

There is, however, an important additional military virtue that I want to suggest as appropriate for a contemporary understanding of teaching peace to the military, and this is what might be called the post-modern virtues of self-criticism and reflection. The idea of a professional ethic of self-criticism and reflection is indeed a central one for a notion of professionalism. Donald Schon refers to a professional as a reflective practitioner (2003). The true professional is prepared to work so that he/she no longer has work to do, such as, for instance, the doctor working to promote health and wellbeing in his/her practice. So too, those within the military ought to hold a commitment to a situation when their work will no longer be necessary or that there will be at least the transformation of the role of the military. All this is highly problematical, as it involves questioning the purpose of the military, and not merely how existing aims ought to be achieved. Peace and conflict studies offers an opportunity for those within the military to engage in such questioning. [575/576]

One of the objections that may be raised to any concept of purposefully teaching peace to the military within existing peace and conflict studies is that one may be involved in sacrificing overall educational goals to suit a minority of students. After all, it would rarely be the case that military personnel constitute the majority within any university course in peace and conflict studies. The majority of students would most likely still be

civilians. There is a sense, however, in which those who engage in organized violence are not merely the military. The military, at least in democratic theory, only acts on behalf of elected governments and thus the challenge of how we can integrate the military into any peaceful model of society is one that confronts both military and non-military individuals alike.

In conclusion, therefore, the value of teaching peace to the military consists not merely in the general value of teaching peace to any group of people and not merely the value of teaching peace to a key group of professionals. Understanding the task of teaching peace to the military necessarily involves clarifying some of the important contradictions and subtleties in teaching peace. The five principles suggested in this essay have been framed for the task of teaching peace to the military. But these principles are arguably important for any person seeking to understand peace, war and international politics. In a sense what we do when thinking about teaching peace to the military is that we are personalizing the task of peace education. Teaching peace to the military might seem to be the most difficult of all tasks. However I would suggest that this represents a misunderstanding of those involved. Ultimately teaching peace to the military is the most logical and natural exercise of this important task.

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