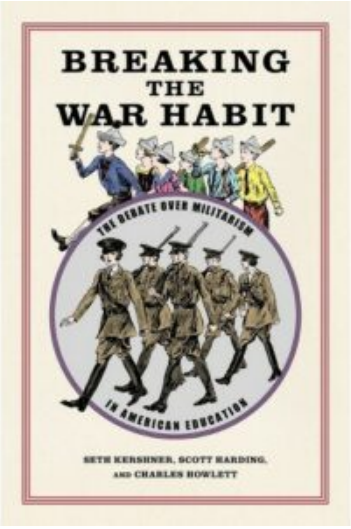
The Rise, Fall, and Rise Again of School-Based Military Training

written by Steve Early | October 20, 2023



A review of Breaking the War Habit: The Debate Over Militarism in American Education*, by Seth Kershner, Scott Harding, and Charles Howlett. (University of Georgia Press, 2023).*

In the late 1960s and early 70s, no symbol of university complicity with the Vietnam War aroused more students than military training on campus. Campaigning against the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program became a major focus of the anti-war movement. Critics demanded everything from stripping ROTC courses of academic credit to, more popularly, kicking the program off campus. Foot-dragging by college trustees, administrators, and faculty members reluctant to cut ties with the military sparked an escalation of protest activity, from peaceful picketing to more aggressive action. ROTC buildings were trashed, bombed, or set on fire — most famously at Kent State University. There, a May 1970 arson attempt triggered a National Guard occupation that led to the fatal shooting of four students (one of them a ROTC cadet) and then the largest student strike in US history.

During the Vietnam era, the manpower requirements of the U.S. military were met by conscription, draft-driven enlistments, and volunteers. In the last category were graduates of West Point, other service academies, and private military colleges like the Citadel and VMI. The Department of Defense (DOD) needed far more first lieutenants than these institutions could produce. So a then-fifty year old infrastructure of DOD-funded Military Science Departments at two thousand colleges and universities, around the country, played a critical role in generating the necessary newly commissioned officers.

When I entered college in 1967, I became one of 250,000 ROTC cadets drilling in uniform, firing guns at the rifle range, and studying military science that year. Two years before, at my alma mater, I would not have had any choice; ROTC enrollment was mandatory for all freshman and sophomore males. Apolitical at the time, I was already the beneficiary of a great class injustice—student deferments which enabled millions of draft age young men to avoid being drafted as long as they maintained their under-graduate or graduate student status. (See Cheney, Dick, the infamous Republican chicken-hawk who got six such deferments prior to reaching the safe age of 26 in 1967).

But, even with college attendance providing draft protection for four years, there was still the need for military service contingency planning, post-graduation. "When you have to go," we were advised by sage elders. "It's better to go as an officer than an enlisted man." Plus, at the small private college I attended, ROTC defenders on the faculty—World War II vets among them–claimed that having a stream of non-military academy graduates with liberal arts backgrounds serving, as army officers, would have a leavening influence on the U.S. military.

It didn't take long for most of my freshman ROTC class to conclude that our future citizen-soldiering was unlikely to have such positive impact. No one was enthusiastic about US intervention in Southeast Asia, except our instructor, a gung-ho Army captain recently returned from Vietnam. His impassioned lectures about fighting "world communism," there and everywhere, were met with mounting skepticism and derision, leading to a sizeable number of defections after a single semester. I was not the only former cadet who became very active in efforts to abolish the draft, kick ROTC off campus, and end the Vietnam War, in whatever order any of those goals could be achieved, locally or nationally.

Little Known History

Our anti-ROTC activism in the Vietnam era was not informed by any knowledge of previous campus or community-based campaigns against military training of students, of the sort described in *Breaking the War Habit.* For that little-known back story, *New Politics* readers can now consult this valuable history of anti-ROTC campaigning, over the last century. It's co-authors include Seth Kershner, a PhD candidate at the University of Massachusetts, Scott Harding, who teaches at the University of Connecticut, and Charles Howlett, a retired professor of education at Molloy College,

As they report, the creation of ROTC via the National Defense Act of 1916 did not go uncontested, either before or after World War I. By the mid-1920s, "nearly two-thirds of all universities hosting ROTC had made the program mandatory for at least some of its male students." So a national Committee on Militarism in Education (CME) was formed in 1925 to seek a Congressional ban on compulsory military training "in any educational setting other than a military school." Even the conservative AFL-CIO backed this effort. Organized labor warned that the U.S. would soon become a "militaristic nation" if the "propaganda of military sabre-rattlers" was allowed to "make goose-steppers out of the school boys of America" (and potential strike-breakers as well).

Between the two world wars, CME effectively debunked the notion that ROTC was an innocuous form of "citizenship training" and helped persuade "dozens of colleges and universities to abolish compulsory military instruction." Its "small cadre of committed individuals—pacifists, educators, socialists, and clergy—believed that, by opposing the militarization of education, they could prevent the formation of the military mindset capable of tipping the nation into another world war." But the climate for "peace education" was not very favorable in the late 1930s. Many of CME's own "longtime allies began to view war as the only path to eliminate the threat of fascism" in German, Italy, and Japan. When conscription was re-introduced in 1940 by the Roosevelt Administration, the group folded its tents and disbanded.

In the post-World War II era, as the authors of *Breaking the War Habit* note, a victorious United States emerged "as the sole global superpower" but used its rivalry with the Soviet Union to justify the "largest peacetime military establishment in U.S. history." The resulting "repressive Cold War atmosphere constrained peace activism throughout the 1950s."

All that had changed by 1967, when President Lyndon Johnson escalated U.S. military intervention in Vietnam but did not want to call up either the National Guard or reserve units to fight. His "decision to move nineteen-year-olds to the top of the draft list catalyzed the anti-war movement and

sparked a much bigger wave of protest against on-campus military recruiting."

ROTC Redux

That wave peaked during the student strike of 1970, with its widespread targeting of ROTC facilities on campus. By the following spring, when I graduated from college, ROTC enrollment had shrunk to 87,000 and the program had either been evicted from a number of colleges and universities, or forced to shut-down due to declining enrollment. So, like many other former student radicals, I went on to other causes and campaigns, paying very little attention to what became of school-based military training in the era of the "all-volunteer army."

As Kershner points out, after US troops were withdrawn from Vietnam and the draft ended in 1973, "high schools became the answer to the Pentagon's manpower problems." While the armed forces beat a strategic retreat from the Ivy League and some elite private colleges, enrollment in public high school Junior ROTC programs (JROTC) mushroomed.

The DOD began targeting "under resourced schools and low-income communities, where opportunities are limited and young people are susceptible to the military's promise of career advancement and college benefits."

According to a *New York Times* analysis, "majority minority schools are nearly three times as likely as majority white schools to have a JROTC program." Nationwide, half a million teenagers now get military training in 3,300 public high schools throughout the country. About 40 percent of the cadets who spend three years in such programs end up enlisting after graduation. This makes JROTC a key component of the Pentagon's annual struggle to meet its "all-volunteer force" recruitment quotas.

JROTC is not promoted as a pipeline to active duty. Rather it's sold to teachers, parents, and school board members as an opportunity for additional adult mentoring, exposure to military discipline, and inculcation of civic values. Cadets get to drill in uniform, handle weapons, learn military ranks and history, and stand at attention when visitors come to their classes. Their instructors are military veterans certified by the DOD, although many states don't require them to have either teaching certificates or a college degree. In addition, the DOD leaves day-to-day monitoring of their classroom performance (and after class behavior) to school administrators busy with many other responsibilities.

That lax oversight has had calamitous results. As the *New York Times* recently revealed in a major investigative piece, at least 33 JROTC instructors have engaged in sexual misbehavior with young women in the program during the last five years. And that JROTC rap sheet does not even include the "many others who have been accused of misconduct but [were] never charged" or the inappropriate behavior that went unreported because cadets were afraid of jeopardizing their potential military careers.

Adult Mentoring?

The front-page revelations sparked outrage from two House members with government oversight functions. In an August, 2022 letter to DOD Secretary Lloyd Austin and the Secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, US Representatives Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and Stephen Lynch (D-MA) called incidents of sexual harassment and abuse "completely unacceptable and an abject betrayal of the trust and faith these young men and women placed in the U.S. Military." The House members specifically demanded to know what action Pentagon leaders are taking in response to the reports, including whether additional oversight of JROTC instructors is being planned "to insure the safety and well-being of cadets."

If the DOD's past response to sexual harassment and assault of women in uniform by fellow soldiers is any guide, its efforts to protect vulnerable teenagers from pre-enlistment exposure to "military culture" will also fall short. The criminal behavior of so many "military science" instructors, implanted in public high schools by the DOD, may have two unintended consequences, however, First, it could give campaigners against such programs a new issue to organize around. Second, as Maloney and Lynch note, negative publicity about JROTC could further dampen enthusiasm for military enlistment.

Even with the Pentagon dispatching some 20,000 recruiters, spending $1.4 billion every year on 1,400 military recruiting stations, and gaining wide access to high schools throughout the country, only one in ten young people are considering military service. As Major General Edward Thomas, Jr., commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service, says of that polling result, "There are just lower levels of trust with the U.S. government and the military." By June of 2022, for example, the Army had only 40 percent of the 57,000 new soldiers it needed to signed up by last fall — so it began offering enlistment bonuses as high as $50,000.

In addition, three-quarters of the 17 to 24-year-olds targeted by recruiters have disqualifying conditions like no high school diploma, a criminal record, chronic obesity, or some other physical or mental health problem that renders them ineligible to serve without a special waver. Among those in the last category are some of the damaged survivors of Junior ROTC. One, profiled by the *Times*, is Victoria Bauer from Picayune, Mississippi who wanted to become a Marine before she was sexually assaulted, at age fifteen, by her instructor. To this day, she still wants to know why those ostensibly responsible for defending the US can't even protect their "own people."

Counter-Recruiting

Activists trying to spare other high school students the traumatic experience that plunged Bauer into depression and self-harm can learn much from the case-studies in *Breaking the War Habit* and an earlier book by Kershner and Harding called *Counter-Recruitment and the Campaign to Demilitarize Public Schools* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). As anti-JROTC campaigners in Baltimore learned, the hard way, challenging the "school to military pipeline for economically disadvantaged youth" in communities of color requires deft coalition-building. Despite persistent efforts, led by the American Friends Service Committee, foes of military training in Baltimore inner city schools "ultimately failed…because their antimilitarist, ideological messages did not connect with pragmatic school board members and the local community."

During an earlier phase of this struggle, Maryland peace activists got critical backing from U.S. Rep Parren Mitchell, a co-founder of the Congressional Black Caucus and the first African-American elected to the House from his state. In a letter to the Baltimore school board, Mitchell acknowledged the need for programs that encouraged young people to stay in school, learn job skills, and stay out of gangs. But he strongly differed with those in the community "who believe that having military training for students…will dissipate underlying currents of unrest, anger or frustration" among African-American youth. "This is a poor solution to a serious problem" Mitchell declared. "You do not solve the problems of our young people by teaching them to march and shout, 'Yes, sir!'"

Like younger veterans involved in countering JROTC today, Mitchell had the street cred of past military service. Before becoming a local civil rights leader, he served as an infantry officer in World War II and received the Purple Heart after being wounded during combat in Italy. But voices like his—or the late Congressman Ron Dellums (D-CA), a Marine Corps veteran critical of JROTC—are few and far between today. More typical is the boosterism of a non-veteran named Barack Obama who used his 2011 State of the Union address to encourage a ROTC come-back at colleges and universities across the country.

Two years later, the Department of Defense celebrated its return to City College in NYC, where ROTC had been ousted four decades earlier and student resistance to military training began in 1925. As the authors note, strong opposition from the Professional Staff Congress, which represents thirty thousand faculty members, did thwart the DOD at several other City University of New York campuses, “a partial victory that was one of the few bright spots in an era marked by growing acceptance of ROTC.”