Educating for National Security

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Abstract: National security is not simply a matter of technical skills and university degrees. To maintain power, engineering skills and knowledge of math are undoubtedly indispensable, but so is a solid understanding of, and appreciation for, the state’s civilizational underpinnings—the religious beliefs, political ideals, and moral virtues. An education for national security must start from the desire to learn and understand one’s own national culture and tradition to be able to identify what one is supposed to defend. And herein lies our biggest challenge: we are becoming increasingly more skilled at how to defend ourselves, but we are losing the tools to understand what we are expected to protect. We can do a lot but we are uncertain why we should.

It is common to assert that education is crucial for national security. In its simplest formulation, such assertion is based on the fact that education correlates with wealth, and, consequently, is a metric of national power. Politicians and policy wonks of every political persuasion, therefore, focus “like laser beams” on quantifiable measures such as the level of math skills among high school students, the number of Ph.D.’s in engineering produced by U.S. universities, or the college retention rates. And they are right to do so, as the inability of a country to maintain a highly skilled population may lead to a gradual fraying of the material foundations of its power and an enfeebled global position.1

But this is not sufficient. Technical skills and university degrees are only some of the necessary tools to maintain national security. Equally, if not more,

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important is a clear understanding of the civilizational underpinnings of the state we are to defend. The former give us material capabilities; the latter provides the reasons and the motivation to defend ourselves.

**Difference between Education and Training**

Understanding the important distinction between education and training is essential. Training, in fact, is not education, properly speaking. Training is about the “how”; education is about the “why” or the “what.” One can be a well-trained driver, capable of great mechanical feats, and yet have no sense of direction or purpose. Similarly, one can be a tactically brilliant commander and have no understanding of the overall objective; or a polyglot and polished diplomat who excels at the negotiating process but who has dim ideas on whether that process is relevant or not to the welfare of his state. Training gives one skills; education leads one toward a purpose.

To train somebody in national security is to impart a set of skills to analyze a problem, to formulate a response, or to implement it. Such skills range from the martial capabilities of soldiers, to the negotiating prowess of diplomats or the much needed financial acumen of budgetary analysts. The effectiveness of such training is measured by the products—the battles, the treaties, the balanced budgets—that one is capable of generating at the end. A persistent inability to achieve results is likely a sign of relatively weak skills, and may require a “refresher” training course. Training, in other words, is an activity limited in time, with a clear end determined by the ability to perform the tasks in question. You finish driving school when you learn how to perform a certain sets of maneuvers; you receive a certificate in logistics when you are capable of managing on-demand supply chains; you are deemed proficient in diplomacy when you are well versed in protocol, languages, and negotiating tactics. When these skills become obsolete or atrophy, a retraining may be necessary until the necessary task can be performed with ease and effectiveness.

But what is it that you know when you receive a diploma in national security, or a “certificate in homeland security” (the latter seen on an ad for a private degree-conferring institution, probably for profit)? Naturally, there are the skills mentioned earlier that are quite necessary to be able to protect the state from its enemies, and maybe such programs teach the requisite skills to identify and neutralize the potential threats. But even assuming that these skills are taught effectively, they are insufficient. In fact, we train in a dizzying array of tools, from statistical analysis to in-depth knowledge of bureaucratic management. We educate probably much less.

Education, unlike training, focuses on why an action may be necessary. It is about the purpose of that action, rather than simply about its mechanics. An educated individual is one who possesses the ability to judge the importance and rectitude of an action; a trained individual has the skills to perform it. For example, an educated driver is one who knows the reason for and destination of his voyage.
He also is aware of his actions in relations to other drivers. Similarly, an educated diplomat can judge how, and whether, the negotiations in which he is involved advance the welfare of his state, improving the nation’s standing in the world. Education, in other words, bestows upon the student the judgment and the character that are indispensable to make prudent decisions.

Unlike training, education is not time specific. True education never ends. An official course of study, whether it is grade school or a Ph.D. program, should merely encourage and begin an intellectual process, which would be a complete failure were it to end with the conferring of a degree. There is really no endpoint for education, and as such it is difficult to measure through exams or term papers. It is a lifelong undertaking, demanding constant nurturing of one’s judgment and character. And worldly success is not a metric as education alone will not bring professional or financial success. There are many truly educated individuals who are well out of the public light; a barber may be more educated than a prime time politician, including in the national security realm.

Indeed, hard as it may be to admit in this age that exalts resume-building, education does not necessarily require a formal program of learning. For instance, it seems clear that a peasant from the eastern side of the Bug River was much more educated about the evils of the Soviet tyranny than any learned Sovietologist with a prestigious academic pedigree and a wide network of contacts. Education is not measured by the complexity and verbal virtuosity of an argument, but by the simplicity of an intuition that is deeply felt and known while often remaining unarticulated.2

The question, then, is how to instill that judgment, that character, that intuition through education. It is an ancient question that preoccupied philosophers and political thinkers in every age. Each, from Plato to Fichte, offered different, often contradictory, perspectives on how to educate. This is not the time to reexamine their views. Rather, our focus is on the much narrower issue of how to educate for national security. All too often, in fact, we assume an education that in reality does not exist, and we focus almost exclusively on training individuals for a career in national security. But, again, skills are not everything.

The Fragility of Our Education

Before we know how, we ought to learn why and what we are to defend. If our understanding of, to say nothing of our appreciation for, our own nation and civilization is weak, then no set of sophisticated skills will suffice to defend us. And

2 To be clear, intuition is not some sort of presentiment, a feeling of foreboding. Rather it is a form of knowledge, of beholding, of observing. The etymology of the word comes from the Latin “intueor,” meaning “to observe, to consider with attention.”
here is where the education profession is failing. In particular, there are four trends that undermine education in national security.3

The first one constitutes the easiest target because it has been subjected to years of criticism and ridicule. This is the reality of a lack of meaningful intellectual debates in the academic milieu. Many have correctly observed that a left-of-center ideological hegemony, so dear to Antonio Gramsci and his followers, is ruling academic debates. It is certainly stifling and hindered in every way it can the rise of contrarian voices. But it is worse than that: it is boring. There are few grand substantive disagreements and debates in academia; the most interesting ones are in the public arena, concerning for instance the most appropriate military posture (counterinsurgency or great power conflict?) or the global status of the United States (still exceptional and great or virtually indistinguishable from other states and in decline?).

Given that there is little disagreement over substantive issues in academic circles, the only way to make an impact in such an environment is to compete on the basis of form. The debate becomes methodological, not substantive. The question is how to argue, not about what or why. The subject is irrelevant as long as it is methodologically avant-garde. The choice of subjects to examine is driven by how suitable they are to the employment of dazzling methods, rather than by how relevant they are to the most pressing national security issues. At the end of the day, one is left pining for the vicious culture wars of the late 1960s and 1970s, which at least had at their basis a fundamental disagreement about the role of tradition, authority, or the existence of virtue and an objective moral order.

An outcome of today’s situation is that much of academic work, and by extension of academic education, is narrow in scope, yet incredibly voluminous. There is so much information, about so many topics, and so easily obtainable, and yet there is very little education.

The methodological fetish of modern academia is connected with an esoteric language that requires years of study or initiation. It also fields a literature of its own that is by and large completely irrelevant to politics in general and U.S. national security in particular. Anybody with a modicum of curiosity and patience can read with great benefit Thucydides, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, The Federalist, or Reinhold Niebuhr. Only a few, after years of methodology courses, can understand the American Political Science Review. We used to learn classical Greek to be able to marvel at Pericles’s Funeral Oration; now, students learn Greek letters to be able to write equations computing the probability of war (which, not surprisingly, tends to be more than zero!).

The rise of al Qaeda, as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has to a degree enlivened the academic debates by bringing a clear and present reality that was hard to ignore. But discussions on counterinsurgency, nuclear proliferation, or terrorism, no matter how interesting and relevant, are still on the margins of

3 What follows is based on a presentation delivered at a Bradley Fellows Reunion-Jack Miller Center conference in Chicago, April 2011.
academia and only in rare cases truly shape the tenor and substance of the education given to students. With the exception of a few interesting programs (e.g., the “grand strategy programs” that have been seeded on some campuses), it is doubtful that academic education will be affected in a lasting way by a threat that many deem passing and in any case not existential. Indeed, the prevailing academic narrative dismisses the very idea of a national security threat.

In a nutshell, many academic debates are about the language, not the substance. We would be much better served by more discussions on the substance of foreign policy, discussions that are possible only in the presence of a common language—exactly the opposite situation of the one that characterizes modern academia.

The second trend is related to the arcane language of much of modern academic writing. One explanation is that simplicity of expression is a sign of well thought out arguments, and thus the artificial complexity of modern academic language is a sign of muddled thought. This is the benign explanation. The other, not mutually exclusive, is that such writing and the education that accompanies it is expressly not meant to be popularly accessible. Politics, and national security as a subset of it, is seen as the realm of an elite, the “experts” or the “profession,” that is reckoned to possess the requisite skills and special knowledge to manage the intricacies of social relations. A case in point is the predilection of many academics for the European Union, greeted by some as a preferred alternative to the U.S. model of political governance and as a rising star of global geopolitics. The love for the EU is not a result of an appreciation for European civilization, as most of its religious and historic roots are at best ignored and often disparaged. Rather, the EU is considered a model of elite-managed politics. The integration of European states is, in fact, less a popular movement, akin to the nineteenth century political aspirations of the various nations, and more a project administered by a classe dirigeante. It is a government by regulation, often of the minutiae of daily life.

Such a view of politics has repercussions for education, including again in the field of national security. One consequence is that there is very little emphasis on educating large numbers of people by, for instance, writing in jargon-free style or engaging in policy-relevant research. Few academic institutions focus on how to make the subject accessible to the students; there is little premium put on teaching in part, I think, because the fewer people know about national security or politics in general, the greater the sway and influence of those who claim to know it. It is a view reminiscent of something that Voltaire wrote in a 1757 letter when he admitted that “[w]e have never claimed to enlighten shoemakers and servant girls, that is the portion of the apostles.”\(^4\) Politics is meant for the few.

That not everybody will, or should, be the next general or political leader is evident. But all should be educated, that is, should be encouraged to develop the judgment and prudence necessary to participate in the political life of a state. To adopt jargon-laden language and to indulge in trendy and irrelevant research is at best a waste of time, at worst a serious disservice to a nation’s citizens and future leaders. Students want to learn what leadership is, why the defense of one’s own country is a worthwhile sacrifice, or whether there “can be good men under bad emperors” (Tacitus, *Agricola*). Instead, they receive disquisitions on theoretical catfights or on the evils of Western dominance or, more broadly, on international relations and politics written in an incomprehensible language.

The third trend is the gradual abandonment of the idea of patriotism. *Patria* is a dirty word, not just in post-modern literature departments but among many international relations academics. There are many reasons why people may dislike the concept of patria and the resulting respect one owes to the sacrifice of one’s forefathers (“patria” derives from “pater,” father) and the ideals behind it. The idea of patria is powerful and can undoubtedly be abused. Calls for patriotism, for instance, may at times serve as appeals for blind support and a suspension of judgment to push through otherwise unpopular policies. It can serve, that is, as a tactic to squelch criticism and opposition. It is thus appropriate to maintain some skepticism at every invocation of patriotic duty. The word “patria” ought not to be a cover for absence of prudential judgment.5

But in the national security realm the skepticism toward *patria* often has a slightly different tint. The broad argument goes something like this: the most pressing threats are global in scope and nature, that is, they affect the whole globe and have to be addressed by all. Globalization has made the individual national communities both powerless and dangerous, because the solitary actions of a state not only will fail to protect it but also will aggravate the global situation. Hence, the obligation of political leaders is not to their own communities but to the global “village.” And as a result universities should follow suit by educating “global leaders” to solve “global challenges.”

In fact, the adjective “global” has been attached to essentially every topic that used to have a national focus: health, development, environment, poverty, and yes, security. In some cases, the research on those subjects has not changed much and the “global” modifier is there for reasons of sexiness and grant-seeking. But in other cases it has led to a whole new subject of study and teaching that is often called “global studies.”

5 Also, patriotism needs to be distinguished from nationalism. George Orwell writes: “By ‘patriotism’ I mean devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force upon other people. Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, *not* for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.” George Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism,” in *Essays* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 2002), p. 866.
The core curriculum of such studies is often unclear. An annual perusal of undergraduate transcripts of applicants to graduate school leaves one with the impression that a major in “global studies” is at best a very watered down version of a more traditional program in international relations, with a chaotic mixture of courses peppered with fancy post-modern terminology. It is mush. Nevertheless, the broad objective of such programs is to train students to “think globally” because of the “interconnectedness” of the world. To be sure, events in distant valleys in landlocked Asian countries now have an impact on U.S. security in ways that were impossible to conceive two hundred years ago. We need to be able to look at our security by considering remote villages, faraway sea lanes, and foreign governments. But I doubt Octavian Augustus or Winston Churchill were less capable of thinking strategically by virtue of not having majored in “global studies.” Indeed, the gist of “global studies” is to create “global citizens” and not U.S. leaders who will protect U.S. interests in the world. For instance, NYU’s Center for Global Affairs states that the goal is to educate and inspire “students to become global citizens capable of identifying and implementing solutions to pressing global challenges.”6 So much for educating statesmen who prudently advance the interest of the nation, which bestowed upon them the responsibility to govern. The change of the qualifier preceding “security,” from “national” to “international,” was already a symptom of such a move away from the goal of protecting one’s own state toward the naïve hope of managing global politics.

The idea of subsidiarity, and of the attachment and responsibility to a small community, is also lost in the process. Local connections, indispensable to address problems from security to poverty, are discounted in favor of the “global village.”7 Somehow, according to the “global” fad, we are expected to feel an equal connection to our neighbors and to anonymous individuals with whom we share only the fact of living on the same planet.8 To love everything and everybody is really to love nothing and nobody. As the particular ends up being replaced by an abstraction, we lose our connection to the “here and now,” to our families, neighbors, and friends.

In the end, abstractions fail to illuminate the reality that needs to be defended and sever the connection between policy (domestic and foreign) and the people that are supposed to benefit from it. The great scholar Jaroslav Pelikan put it quite well, in a broader context but very applicable to the issue of national security. As an “abstract concept of parenthood is no substitute for our real parents, an

6 http://www.scps.nyu.edu/areas-of-study/global-affairs
7 See also William Schambra, “Conservatism and the Quest for Community,” National Affairs, Summer 2010.
8 A patria, in fact, requires the constant investment of time in learning about it, its history, its cultural underpinnings. It also evokes a sense of attachment and love, emotions whose potency is directly correlated to the size of the community. The larger and the more abstract a community, the less powerful the connection to it.
abstract cosmopolitanism is no substitute for our real traditions.... To be tone-deaf to the tradition is, therefore, to be unable to hear the voices of the past or the present—or of the future."

As we become more at ease with the abstraction of a “global” entity, which does not require the level of emotional attachment, intellectual exertion, and cultural commitment that the idea of a patria demands, we are also becoming less capable of thinking of national security threats. Instead, we think of fighting abstract nouns (“poverty,” “drugs,” “global warming” or “climate change,” and “terrorism”) rather than strategic actors, whether individuals or states. Those nouns are challenges or problems to be solved, rarely threats and enemies to be defeated. And such abstract nouns are not specific to one country but are deemed to be global in nature and scope, as they allegedly affect everyone and require multilateral cooperation. Nouns threaten all, strategic actors menace specific targets.

The reluctance of some universities to accept ROTC programs is another symptom of the deeper antipathy toward patriotism. The aversion to mixing with those who defend U.S. interests on the frontlines arises not simply out of an opposition to this or that war, to this or that commander-in-chief, but because of a preference for supporting the “global community” instead of one’s own neighbor. According to this view, abstract cosmopolitanism trumps patriotism; “global citizens” are preferable to U.S. Marines.

This is not to accuse “global studies” acolytes of a lack of patriotism or treason. The field of “global studies” broadly defined is not a crime but an intellectual blunder of enormous consequences. It muddles our thinking about national security and rejects the idea that political leaders ought to be national, as opposed to world, leaders.

The final trend is the tendency of many academics to consider the study of international relations and national security as a science. This implies that the mechanism of international relations can be understood by studying the functioning of a few select variables and their relationship. Pick your preferred variable, whether it is “power,” the “system,” or “international regimes and institutions,” and develop a set of hypotheses on how that variable leads to a specific outcome (say, peace or war); then, test it to check whether that hypothesis is correct (or, in violation of sound methodology, find cases or equations that prove the hypothesis); and in the end you have a simple and, to use a preferred term, elegant explanation of how the world works.

But herein lies the problem: states do not necessarily behave like cogs in a machine. Theoretical elegance and scientific rigor are certainly appealing because of their capability to impart order on seemingly disconnected events and actions. And yet, they are also deceiving because what the search for elegance and rigor leaves out is often crucial to understanding the nature of a threat or to formulating a response

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to it. The world is not a clock, and a scientific approach may not be the best way to study it nor to educate the next national security wardens.

Adopting a scientific outlook on national security is, in fact, severely limiting. By looking at international relations as a mechanism composed of interlocking parts, a national security science may offer an explanation of how states in general interact but is often at a loss when it needs to explain why specific states embark on certain courses of action. The reason lies in the very nature of a scientific approach, which seeks causes and not motivations. Etienne Gilson put it succinctly: “Scientists never ask themselves why things happen, but how they happen.”

The “how” of international relations is the easy part; the “why” is much more difficult to address and lies outside the realm discoverable by a scientific method.

If the object of study is not easily broken down into individual component parts—the cogs of a machine—the scientific approach encounters serious problems. Those aspects of international relations that cannot be quantified, codified, and treated as clearly delimited variables are by and large discarded and ignored. To cite Gilson again, scientists “much prefer a complete absence of intelligibility to the presence of a nonscientific intelligibility.” The Italian philosopher Antonio Rosmini similarly wrote that such a modern scientific tendency, “rationalism,” allows no source of knowledge other than reason, and as a result it generates “a defective method, that is, poor and inefficient and one that cannot lead to true science.” One cannot attempt to know things that one rejects a priori on the grounds that they cannot be handled by the scientific method.

As a result, much of human behavior is left outside of the boundaries of a scientific inquiry into international relations. An epistemology that limits itself to narrowly defined variables that can be counted, managed, replicated excludes large portions of human activity. The Little Prince of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry gave the best explanation of this severe limitation of asking scientifically replicable (that is, measurable, countable) questions. When, he says, one tells adults about a new friend, they “never say to you, ‘What does his voice sound like? What games does he love best? Does he collect butterflies?’ Instead, they demand: ‘How old is he? How many brothers has he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make?’ Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him.” Obviously, the counting adults understand little. As St. Augustine

12 Gilson, p. 130.
15 Ibid. Later on, the Little Prince in a fit of rage describes such a counting adult: “I know a planet where there is a certain red-faced gentleman. He has never smelled a flower. He has never looked at a star. He has never loved any one. He has never done anything in his life but add up figures. And all day he says over and over, just like you: ‘I am busy with matters of consequence!’ And that makes him swell up with pride. But he is not a man—he is a mushroom!” p. 29.
memorably wrote in his *Confessions*, “the hairs of man’s head are easier to number than are his affections and the impulses of his heart.”

The idea of free will is also problematic for a scientific approach because it denies the very essence of such an endeavor. The possibility of a free will, in fact, means that political leaders are not mere cogs in a machine, but may undertake decisions that are surprising, incalculable, and most certainly incomprehensible if one considers them all comparable “variables.” The great men of history, from Pericles and Julius Caesar to Churchill and John Paul II, are each in their own way anomalies, outliers that no elegant and rigorous theory can incorporate. A “theory” of World War II will focus on the industrial capabilities of the nations at war, and not on the dogged determination of a Churchill; a “theory” of the collapse of the Soviet empire will focus more on the economic inefficiency of the socialist models, less on the intuition and faith of the Pope. It is no wonder that the most interesting studies of such individuals are written by historians, open to the work of great men, and not by theorists of international relations, who prefer to count the number of divisions.

The fact that the scientific mind is limited in its capacity to comprehend political realities is not in itself an insurmountable problem. But it becomes one, and a dangerous one too, when it gives a false sense of control. If one knows how a machine works, arguably he is capable of controlling it by pulling the appropriate lever or adding the correct mixture of fuel. Science allows us to increase our capability to manage whatever is the object of inquiry. Consequently, a national security science ought to bestow upon us the capability to manage the security of a state in an increasingly more precise way, corresponding to the intellectual progress achieved by the scientists. The more rigorous and methodologically sound the science, the more secure we ought to be. Obviously, this is not the case and not only because the security reality is constantly changing with new enemies and new technologies that require adjustment in the scientific knowledge developed so far. Rather, the fact is that we cannot manipulate the “physics” of international relations to generate the desired outcome (say, “world peace” or, less ambitiously, our own territorial security) simply because there are no such physics. Politics, including international politics, is a realm that is often unintelligible to a scientific eye as it is the arena also of luck, contingency, and the fantasy of the human mind. Not every leader or state is deterrable, not every conflict of interests is comprehensible, not every war is preventable nor once started winnable, because there is no science capable of fully understanding how and why we behave the way we do.

The belief that one can acquire the scientific knowledge to manage politics and international relations is perhaps innocent in its origins but in its consequences it is dangerous because it presumes that one can educate managers of national security through a textbook. Train students in the correct methods, teach them the relevance of the appropriate variables, expose them to a sprinkling of historical case

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studies so they can play with the variables, and the outcome is that they have the skills to be scientists.

But what we need is more artists. To defend a country is an art, in fact, not a science. The challenge is that we can train scientists but we cannot teach students to be artists. We can only educate them to appreciate art. The question then is how to do it.

What to Do

The above analysis may be overly gloomy because, after all, the corruption of education in academia is not a surprising discovery. Many have written eloquently and voluminously on similar subjects. For instance, writers from Allan Bloom to Peter Berkowitz have examined, and continue to observe, the various threats to liberal education that have enduring influence on our ability to maintain a society capable of living in liberty. Awareness of a problem is the first step to fixing it. The situation described above is part of this much larger problem, but it carries a certain urgency dictated by the security environment we face. It is one thing to be uneducated and not face vigorous threats, arguably a case in the 1990s. It is quite a different thing to be unable to formulate cogent reasons for why one ought to defend one’s own nation while facing persistent, dedicated, ruthless, and confident enemies.

To put it more bluntly, we are telling a generation of students that the world is threatened by potentially rising seas (a “global” threat) while Chinese strategists think about how to expel the United States out of the South China Sea. We spend time writing equations on the probability of war (a “scientific” approach), while men in the dark alleys of overcrowded cities plot how to kill Americans. We glorify skepticism of our virtues and disdain the beauty of our attachments to the “little platoon we belong to in society,”17 while our enemies are confident in the righteousness of their murderous actions.

Certainly there is room for a wide variety of theoretical preferences and opinions, a potential sign of a healthy intellectual debate. The problem is that, as indicated above, some approaches toward international relations are not merely quirky academic products relegated to dusty tomes but shape our ability to think (or not) about national security.

What would an education toward national security mean then? First, it must start from the simple and fundamental recognition that the object of study cannot be handled with the elegance and rigor of a scientific approach. The purpose of education should not be to train scientists, self-assured in their skill to dissect and manage international relations, but to expose students to the tragic beauty of worldly affairs. As mentioned earlier, we cannot train artists, but we can encourage

students to appreciate art. This is a much more difficult endeavor and it is impossible to attain through an academic degree. A program of study can merely give the initial spur to begin a learning experience that, if properly understood, can never reach a state of perfection. We will never fully comprehend international relations and, therefore, we will remain vulnerable to strategic surprises. Scientists are puzzled by surprises, which by definition constitute challenges to their theories; artists expect surprises, which are part and parcel of any work of art.

The ability to navigate through unexplained current events and unpredictable futures ones requires prudential judgment that can only be developed by recognizing the impossibility of perfect, scientific knowledge. But that is exactly why prudence, the virtue that allows us to choose between good and evil, is indispensable and can be fostered through education. In national security this means, among other things, to develop knowledge of and respect for one’s own patria. The “who we are” can tell us a lot about why and how we should defend ourselves. It allows us to evaluate a threat as well as to consider the most appropriate response to it.

We live in a particular community, in a particular place, with a particular way of life that is the result of work done by generations. This particular patria, however imperfect, is the reality that needs to be protected and defended. To defend abstractions, be it “Communism,” “International Security,” or “Global Environment,” means to subjugate the particular communities and the individuals who live in them to theoretical concepts. It also leads to considering of policies that ignore the dignity of the human person, which becomes an irrelevant reality not worth defending. When the great power diplomats sat down at the table, after dining and dancing in Vienna, to redraw the map of Europe in order to achieve international stability, they were not concerned about the nations they were dividing; the gods of “balance of power” needed to be appeased. When policy experts and academics talk about “world order,” “global environment,” “international security,” this has nothing to do with making particular individuals safer or able to continue to live in their community, and it has everything to do with pursuing an abstraction, often a mere hypothesis that has not been properly tested.

Moral action is done only in relation to other individuals, in carne e ossa, and to educate one’s judgment means to elevate one’s own neighbor and community above the abstraction. Hence, before we teach how to defend ourselves, we need to teach who we are.

Given that the goal is to defend the United States, a concrete reality defined by history, tradition and ideals, and not an amorphous “world order,” the task of educating toward that purpose is somewhat easier. In a nutshell, start from the Founding Fathers and the long tradition of Western civilization upon which they built their thinking. Only by embarking on such a course of study can one start pondering the key grand strategic questions of who we are and where we ought to go.
More broadly, the prevailing academic approaches to international relations are corrupted beyond repair, and their influence over education needs to be mitigated by a return to a liberal arts approach to national security. In brief, we need to go to the origins of the study of international politics, characterized first and foremost by an appreciation of the limits of man’s capacity to manage events and to develop a scientific knowledge. To paraphrase Machiavelli, there is always some “reverence in the beginning,” in this case, reverence for politics as the realm of human will rather than mathematical forces. The heavily theoretical-scientific approach mentioned earlier is relatively young, taking shape in the post-World War II decades and picking up speed in the 1960-70s especially in the United States.

Whatever the merits or demerits of this body of writings and thought, it is self-evident that long-dead statesmen did quite well, or not any worse or better than the current ones, without it, and there is nothing to suggest that the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century could have been prevented had European leaders possessed a sophisticated theoretical training in the science of international relations. So, why bother with jargon-laden papers peppered with Greek letters or with books full of post-modern phrases that only a glass or two of grappa can make mildly palatable? Why be tempted by a false hope of scientific knowledge that is both wrong and dangerous?

The modern “science” of international relations has produced no great statesmen. Students of national security can instead learn much more from immersing themselves in history, or in texts written hundreds of years ago that will grace them with insights into what is often incomprehensible. Our understanding of international politics is much better served by “theory” understood in its Greek meaning, as an act of beholding and observing (theaomai from which derives the word “theory,” meaning thus an act of observing and contemplating), of being moved by the reality facing us, of marveling at the mystery of what we observe. It is an act that does not abstract or simplify, but tries to contemplate the complexity of reality, including the political one, without excluding a priori what may be difficult or impossible to understand.

To develop a sense of wonder for international politics, there is no substitute for reading some of the great books, from Herodotus, Tacitus and St. Augustine to Reinhold Niebuhr and Thomas Schelling, that comprise a vast canon of writing grappling with strategic behavior, leadership, war, and, more broadly, international relations. The beauty of those books is that they are easily accessible and do not require years of training. The only demand is patience, both to read them, as well as to finish them only to realize that they posed more questions than

they answered. In fact, these books are in many ways the exact antithesis of modern social science: they shy away from giving us answers.

While modern social scientists claim the ability to explain every event, and to propose policies for every contingency, the great books of politics present puzzles, moral dilemmas, tragic figures of “good men under bad emperors,” and once in a while offer glimpses of an intuition of something immortal. One gets the impression that students of modern social science become politicians with a portfolio of policies deemed free of error and unintended consequences, while readers of great books may have the chance of serving the patria as statesmen with the moral judgment needed to face the unpredictable and the sense of tragic indispensable to witness the failure to achieve one’s goals. This is why these books are classics; they are texts “from which one can always extract new ideas.”20 While they do train the reader to think, they do not offer laws, but educate.21

These books are not confined to the entry “international relations” in the library catalog. In fact, some of the most formative books are the great classics of literature. As Charles Hill writes in a rare book combining close reading of literature with insights into grand strategy, the “world should recognize high political ideas and actions of statecraft as aspects of the human condition that are fully within the scope of literary genius.”22 For all the wrong reasons mentioned earlier we tend to think of national security, and politics more generally, as a realm of human creativity and action somehow separate from other spheres. Consequently, we rarely encourage students interested in foreign policy to reach for, say, Homer or Dante or Tolstoy or Joseph Conrad. Thucydides and Machiavelli may make an appearance in an international relations syllabus, if only in a redacted form (the Melian Dialogue and a chapter or two of The Prince), but the others are left to the de-constructions and critiques of literature departments. And that is a mistake.

What the great classics of literature can offer is, among others, the capacity to glimpse at realities that no scientific approach can hope to examine. The indelible mark of cowardice and the desire for honor (Conrad’s Lord Jim), the foolishness of a city hoping to end a war (the Trojans in Homer), the importance of law and the danger of political factions (Canto 6 of Dante’s Paradiso, but the 6th cantos in Inferno and Purgatorio are must-reads too for anyone interested in politics) are some of the topics that only a great mind, free of the constraints imposed by an “academic field,” can convey to us. And they do so in a concise fashion because clear ideas are simple. Nothing, for instance, sums up Rome’s ambitions better than Virgil’s few words: paci imponere morum, parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.23 This elegance of words conveys so much more than a sophisticated and avant-garde scientific study.

20 Rémi Brague, Eccentric Culture (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), p. 104.
23 Vergil, Aeneid, Book 6: “to impose a virtuous peace, to spare the conquered, and to make war on the proud.”
Finally, by building upon a common inheritance of great books, the study of national security may begin to attenuate a key problem of much of modern academic thought. As mentioned earlier, the academic field of international relations is characterized by a broad agreement on substance (e.g., on the desirability and feasibility of “managing” global affairs) but deep disagreements about the methods (from quantitative analysis to post-modern critical studies). Much of what comes out of modern academia on international relations is essentially similar but spoken in mutually incomprehensible languages.

Instead, to put it imperfectly, we ought to aspire to a greater disagreement on substance but expressed in a shared language. This does not imply methodological uniformity (the “language” of academia) but it aspires to have a dialogue starting from the same assumptions and from sharing the meaning of key concepts. Without a language grounded in a shared understanding of concepts (e.g., virtue, human nature, power) and a common cultural heritage, a dialogue is impossible. We simply would talk past each other. As that “nervous historian,”24 Thucydides, observed, the collapse of a polity is associated with a revolution of the language among other nefarious consequences, and as the meaning of words is completely upset the only recourse in social interaction is violence.

The absence of dialogue leads either to the intellectual tedium and sterility of ideological dogmas or to the desire to defeat the opposing argument only by power. Both outcomes are visible in large parts of academia: paucity of substantive debates on foreign policy, limited relevance and attention to promoting U.S. national security, and constant strife to control academia through ideological correctness and power. The concept of security, mentioned earlier, is a case in point; the “global studies” faction has a fundamentally different understanding of it than those focused on their own national community. “Global security” in many cases requires the weakening of “national security” and certainly of sovereignty, which ought to be subsumed to “global governance.” The same word, “security,” has fundamentally divergent meanings and calls for often opposing policies. There is little dialogue possible; the language is simply incomprehensible to the two sides.

Here is where the great books, the classics, are indispensable because they are a source of a certain unity of thought, which does not imply uniformity of ideas and monotony of debates. Having a common basis of knowledge, on the contrary, allows for a dialogue to occur, the beginning of often lengthy deliberations without which long-term grand strategy is impossible. The Founding Fathers did not agree on everything but could have lively debates because they all started from a similar cultural foundation; they shared a knowledge of man’s fallibility, appreciated virtue, and understood the need of government, and as a result they could have a fruitful

debate about the best way of organizing the new polity.\footnote{Carl J. Richard, \textit{The Founders and the Classics} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).} Bottom line, we need substantives debates conducted in a commonly understood language, starting from the crucial point that it is the United States that we are defending.

Undoubtedly, this is ambitious. It would require an upheaval of the existing academic hierarchies and of many current educational programs. A very difficult feat, perhaps, but not hopeless because students are responsive to the great debates presented by a Thucydides or a St. Augustine. They seek the ability to have meaningful discussions, starting from the question of what is worth defending. And patriotism is intuitively and firmly ingrained in most students, and it is up to the academic environment to cherish it.