Advice and dissent: An address at West Point

by Bill Moyers in the January 23, 2007 issue

Bill Moyers delivered the Sol Feinstone Lecture on "The Meaning of Freedom" at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, on November 15, 2006. The following is an excerpt.

In the months leading up to the Iraq invasion, Rupert Murdoch, the media tycoon who put his press empire at the service of the government in making the case for war, said that "the greatest thing to come of this to the world economy, if you could put it that way, would be $20 a barrel for oil." Once the war is behind us, he added, "The whole world will benefit from cheaper oil, which will be a bigger stimulus than anything else."

Today Murdoch says that he still believes it was right "to go in there" and that from a historical perspective the U.S. death toll in Iraq has been "minute."

"Minute." I have been reading about Emily Perez: Second Lieutenant Perez, the first woman of color to become a command sergeant major in the history of West Point, and the first woman graduate of the academy to die in Iraq. Because she lived in Washington, D.C., before coming to West Point, the Washington press told us a lot about her. People remembered her as "a little superwoman"—straight A's, choir member, charismatic, optimistic, a friend to so many; she had joined the medical service because she wanted to help people. The obituary in the *Washington Post* said she had been a ball of fire at the Peace Baptist Church, where she helped start an HIV-AIDS ministry after some of her own family members contracted the virus. Accounts of her funeral said that fellow West Pointers wept as they contemplated the loss of so vibrant an officer.

"Minute?" I don't think so. When I arrived at West Point I asked the academy's historian, Steve Grove, to take me where Emily Perez is buried in the cemetery, below Storm King Mountain, overlooking the Hudson River. Standing there on American soil hallowed by Lieutenant Perez and others, I thought that to describe

their loss as “minute”—even from a historical perspective—is to underscore the great divide that has opened in America between those who advocate war while avoiding it and those who have the courage to fight it without ever knowing what it’s all about.

Our founders warned us about this. They put themselves in jeopardy by signing the Declaration of Independence; if they had lost the war, that parchment could have been their death warrant, for they were traitors to the crown and likely to be hanged. In the fight for freedom they had put themselves on the line—not just their fortunes and sacred honor but their lives. After the war, they understood both the nature of war and human nature, and determined to make it hard to go to war except to defend freedom. They argued that war for any reason except preserving the lives and liberty of citizens should be made difficult to achieve. Here is John Jay’s passage in *Federalist No. 4*:

> It is too true, however disgraceful it may be to human nature, that nations in general will make war whenever they have a prospect of getting anything by it; nay, absolute monarchs will often make war when their nations are to get nothing by it, but for the purposes and objects merely personal, such as thirst for military glory, revenge for personal affronts, ambition, or private compacts to aggrandize or support their particular families or partisans. These and a variety of other motives, which affect only the mind of the sovereign, often lead him to engage in wars not sanctified by justice or the voice and interests of his people.

And here, a few years later, is James Madison, perhaps the most deliberative mind of that generation in assaying the dangers of an unfettered executive prone to engage in war:

> In war, a physical force is to be created, and it is the executive will which is to direct it. In war, the public treasures are to be unlocked, and it is the executive hand which is to dispense them. In war, the honors and emoluments of office are to be multiplied; and it is the executive patronage under which they are to be enjoyed. It is in war, finally, that laurels are to be gathered; and it is the executive brow they are to encircle. The strongest passions and most dangerous weaknesses of the human breast; ambition, avarice, vanity, the honorable or venial love of

> fame, are all in conspiracy against the desire and duty of peace.

I want to be clear on this: Vietnam did not make me a dove. Nor has Iraq; I am no pacifist. But they have made me study the Constitution more rigorously, both as journalist and as citizen. Here's James Madison again:

> In no part of the Constitution is more wisdom to be found than in the clause which confides the question of war and peace to the legislature, and not to the executive department. Beside the objection to such a mixture to heterogeneous powers, the trust and the temptation would be too great for any one man.

Twice in 40 years we have gone to war paying only lip service to those warnings; the first one we lost and the second is a bloody debacle. Both rank among the great blunders in our history. It is impossible for soldiers to sustain in the field what cannot be justified in the Constitution; asking them to do so puts America at war with itself. So when the vice president of the United States says it doesn't matter what the people think, that he and the president intend to prosecute the war anyway, he is committing heresy against the fundamental tenets of the American political order.

This is a tough subject to address when so many of you may be heading for Iraq. I would prefer to speak of sweeter things. But I also know that 20 or 30 years from now one of you may be the chief of staff or the national security adviser or even the president—Grant and Eisenhower went from West Point to the White House.

That being the case, it's more important than ever that citizens and soldiers—and citizen-soldiers—honestly discuss and frankly consider the kind of country you are serving and the kind of organization to which you are dedicating your lives. You are free men and women who of your own free choice have joined an institution dedicated to protecting a free nation, but in the process you have voluntarily agreed to give up, for a specific time, a part of your own liberty. An army is not a debating society, and neither in the field nor in headquarters does it ask for a show of hands on whether orders should be obeyed. That is undoubtedly a necessary idea, but for you it complicates the already tricky question of the meaning of freedom.

I said earlier that our founders did not want the power of war to reside in a single man. Many were also dubious about having any kind of regular or, as they called it, "standing" army. Standing armies were hired supporters of absolute monarchs and

imperial tyrants. The men drafting the Constitution were steeped in classical and historical learning. They recalled how Caesar in ancient times and Oliver Cromwell in more recent times had used the conquering armies they led to make themselves dictators. They knew how the Roman legions had made and unmade emperors, and how Ottoman rulers of the Turkish empire had supported their tyrannies on the shoulders of formidable elite warriors. Wherever they looked in history, they saw an alliance between enemies of freedom in palaces and officer corps drawn from the ranks of nobility, men and women bound by a warrior code that stressed honor and bravery—but also dedication to the sovereign and the sovereign's god, and distrust or even contempt for ordinary citizens.

The colonial experience with British regulars, first as allies in the French and Indian Wars and then as enemies, did not increase American respect for that system. Officers were chosen and promoted on the basis of aristocratic connections. Commissions were bought and ineptitude was too often tolerated. The lower ranks were often rootless alumni of jails and workhouses, lured or coerced into service by the paltry pay and chance of adventure—brutal, hard types kept in line by brutally harsh discipline—not exactly a model for the army of a republic of free citizens.

What the framers came up with was a novelty. The first battles of the American Revolution were fought mainly by volunteer militia from the states, such as Vermont's Green Mountain Boys. They were gung-ho for revolution and flushed with fighting spirit. But in the end they were no substitute for the better-trained regiments of the Continental line and the French regulars sent over by France's king after the alliance of 1778. The view nonetheless persisted that in times of peace, only a small permanent army would be needed to repel invasions and deal with the frontier Indians. When and if a real crisis came, it was believed, volunteers would flock to the colors like the armed men of Greek mythology who sprang from dragon's teeth planted in the ground by a divinely approved hero. The real safety of the nation in crisis would rest with men who spent most of their working lives behind the plow or in the workshop; and this was long before the huge conscript armies of the 19th and 20th centuries made that a commonplace fact.

Who would be in the top command of both that regular force and of volunteer forces when actually called into federal service? None other than the top elected civil official of the government, the president. Think about that for a moment. The professional army fought hard and long to create a system of selecting and keeping officers on the basis of proven competence, not popularity. But the highest

commander of all served strictly at the pleasure of the people and had to submit his contract for renewal every four years.

What of the need for trained and expert leadership at all the levels of command—a need that quickly became apparent as the tools and tactics of warfare grew more sophisticated? That's where West Point came in, filling a need that could no longer be ignored. We tend to forget that the West Point curriculum was heavily tilted toward engineering; in fact, it was one of the nation's first engineering colleges, and it was publicly supported and free. That's what made it attractive to young men like Hiram Ulysses Grant, familiarly known as "Sam," who wasn't anxious to be a soldier but wanted to get away from his father's Ohio farm. Hundreds like Grant came to West Point and left to use their civil-engineering skills in a country that badly needed them, some men in civil life after serving out an enlistment, and many right there in uniform. It was the army that explored, mapped and surveyed the wagon and railroad routes to the west, starting with the Corps of Exploration under Lewis and Clark sent out by the protean Mr. Jefferson. It was the army that had a hand in clearing rivers of snags and brush and building dams that allowed steamboats to avoid rapids. It was the army that put up lighthouses in the harbors and whose exhaustive geologic and topographic surveys were important contributions to publicly supported scientific research—and economic development—in the young republic.

The result was something new under the sun—a peacetime army working directly with and for the civil society in improving the nation so as to guarantee the greater opportunities for individual success inherent in the promise of democracy. And a wartime army in which temporary citizen-solders were and still are led by long-term professional citizen-soldiers who were molded out of the same clay as those they command. All of them were led from the top by the one political figure chosen by the entire national electorate. This arrangement—this bargain between the men with the guns and the citizens who provide the guns—is the heritage passed on to us by the revolutionaries who fought and won America's independence and then swore fidelity to a civil compact that survives today, despite tumultuous moments and perilous passages.

Today the armed services are no longer stepchildren in budgetary terms. Appropriations for defense and defense-related activities (like veterans' care, pensions and debt service) remind us that the costs of war continue long after the fighting ends. Objections to ever-swelling defensive expenditures are, except in rare

cases, a greased slide to political suicide. It should be troublesome to you, as professional soldiers, that elevation to the pantheon of untouchable icons—right there alongside motherhood, apple pie and the flag—permits a great deal of political lip service to replace genuine efforts to improve the lives and working conditions—in combat and out—of those who serve.

Let me cut closer to the bone. The chicken hawks in Washington, those who at this very moment are busily defending you against supposed insults or betrayals by the opponents of the war in Iraq, are likewise those who have cut budgets for medical and psychiatric care; who have been so skimpy and late with pay and with provision of necessities that military families in the United States have had to apply for food stamps; who sent the men and women whom you may soon be commanding into Iraq understrength, underequipped, and unprepared for dealing with a kind of war fought in streets and homes full of civilians against enemies undistinguishable from noncombatants; who have time and again broken promises to the civilian National Guardsmen who bear much of the burden by canceling their redeployment orders and extending their tours.

You may or may not agree on the justice and necessity of the war itself, but I hope that you will agree that flattery and adulation are no substitute for genuine support. Much of the money that could be directed to that support has gone into high-tech weapons systems that were supposed to produce a new, mobile, compact "professional" army that could easily defeat the armies of any other two nations combined, but is useless in a war against nationalist or religious guerrilla uprisings that, like it or not, have some support, coerced or otherwise, among the local population. We learned this lesson in Vietnam, only to see it forgotten or ignored by the time this administration invaded Iraq and created the conditions for a savage sectarian and civil war that left our soldiers trapped in the middle, unable to discern civilian from combatant, unable to kill the enemy faster than rage makes new ones.

Who has been the real beneficiary of creating this high-tech army called to fight a war conceived and commissioned and cheered on by politicians and pundits not one of whom ever entered a combat zone? One of your boys answered that: Dwight Eisenhower, class of 1915, told us that the real winners of the anything-at-any-price philosophy would be "the military-industrial complex."

The American military systems that evolved in the early days of this republic rested on a bargain between the civilian authorities and the armed services, and the army

has, for the most part, kept its part of the bargain. But at this moment, the civilian authorities whom you loyally obey are shirking theirs.

You have kept your end of the bargain by fighting well when called upon, by refusing to become a praetorian guard for a reigning administration at any time, and for respecting civil control at all times. For the most part, our military leaders have made no serious efforts to meddle in politics. The two most notable cases were General George McClellan, who endorsed a pro-southern and pro-slavery policy in the first year of the war and was openly contemptuous of Lincoln. But Lincoln fired him in 1862, and when McClellan ran for president two years later, the voting public handed him his hat. Douglas MacArthur's attempt to dictate his own China policy in 1951 ran head-on into the resolve of Harry Truman, who, surviving a firestorm of hostility, happily watched a MacArthur boomlet for the Republican nomination for the presidency fizzle out in 1952.

On the other side of the ledger, however, the bargain has not been kept. The last time Congress declared war was in 1941. Since then presidents of the United States, including the one I served, have gotten Congress, occasionally under demonstrably false pretenses, to suspend constitutional provisions that required them to get the consent of the people's representatives in order to conduct a war. They have been handed a blank check to send the armed forces into action at their personal discretion and on dubious constitutional grounds.

Furthermore, the current president has made extra-constitutional claims of authority by repeatedly acting as if he were commander-in-chief of the entire nation and not merely of the armed forces. Most dangerously to our moral honor and to your own welfare in the event of capture, he has likewise ordered the armed forces to violate clear mandates of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the Geneva Conventions by claiming a right to interpret them at his pleasure, so as to allow indefinite and secret detentions and torture. These claims contravene a basic principle usually made clear to recruits from their first day in service—that they may not obey an unlawful order. President Bush is attempting to have them violate that longstanding rule by personal definitions of what the law says and means.

There is yet another way the chicken hawks are failing you. In the October issue of the magazine of the California Nurses Association, you can read a long report titled "The Battle at Home." In veterans hospitals across the country—and in a growing number of ill-prepared, underfunded psychiatric and primary-care clinics as

well—nurses “have witnessed the guilt, rage, emotional numbness, and tormented flashbacks of GIs just back from Iraq.” Yet “a returning vet must wait an average of 165 days for a VA decision on initial disability benefits,” and an appeal can take up to three years. In the first quarter of this year alone, the VA treated 20,638 Iraq veterans for posttraumatic stress disorder—and it faces a backlog of 400,000 cases. This is reprehensible.

I repeat: These are not palatable topics for soldiers about to go to war. But freedom means that we must face reality: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” You are free enough, surely, to think for yourselves about the breaches of contract that crudely undercut the traditions of an army of free men and women who have bound themselves voluntarily to serve the nation even unto death.

I am not calling for an insurrection against the civilian deciders of your destinies—that’s the last thing on my mind. But what then can you, a citizen-soldier, do about this situation? For one, you didn’t give up your freedom to vote, nor did you totally quit your membership in civil society when you put on the uniform, even though, as Eisenhower said, you did accept “certain inhibitions” at the time. He said that when questioned about MacArthur’s dismissal, and he made sure his own uniform was back in the trunk before his campaign in 1952. It has been most encouraging, by the way, to see veterans of Iraq on the campaign trail in our recent elections.

Second, remember that there are limitations to what military power can do. Despite the valor and skills of our fighting forces, some objectives are not obtainable at a human, diplomatic and financial cost that is acceptable. Our casualties in Iraq are not “minute,” and the cost of the war has been projected by some sources to reach $2 trillion. Sometimes, in the real world, a truce is the most honorable solution to conflict. West Point graduate Dwight Eisenhower knew this when he went to Korea in 1953 and accepted a stalemate rather than carrying out his bluff of using nuclear weapons. That was the best that could be done, and it saved more years of stalemate and casualties.

Douglas MacArthur announced in 1951 that “there is no substitute for victory.” But in the wars of the 21st century there are alternative meanings to victory and alternative ways to achieve them. Especially in tracking down and eliminating terrorists, we need to change our metaphor from a “war on terror”—what, pray tell, is that?—to the mind-set of Interpol tracking down master criminals through intense

global cooperation among nations, or the FBI stalking the Mafia, or local police determined to quell street gangs without leveling the entire neighborhood in the process. If we don't change this metaphor, politicians will wage this "war on terror" without end, with no measurable way to judge its effectiveness, against stateless enemies who hope we will destroy the neighborhood and thus create recruits for their side. Help us to think beyond a "war on terror" to counterterrorism modeled on extraordinary police work.

Third, don't let your natural and commendable loyalty to comrades-in-arms lead you into thinking that criticism of the mission you are on spells lack of patriotism. Not every politician who flatters you is your ally. Not everyone who believes that war is the wrong choice for dealing with some problems is your enemy. Blind faith in bad leadership is not patriotism. In the words of G. K. Chesterton: "'My country, right or wrong' is a thing no patriot would ever think of saying except in a desperate case. It is like saying 'My mother, drunk or sober.'" Patriotism means insisting on our political leaders being sober, strong, and certain about what they are doing when they put you in harm's way.

Fourth, be more prepared to accept the credibility and integrity of those who disagree about the war even if you do not agree with their positions. I say this as a journalist who knows that it's tempting to denounce or despise reporters who ask nosy questions or file critical reports. But their first duty as reporters is to get as close as possible to the verifiable truth and report it to the American people—for your sake. If there is mismanagement and incompetence, exposing it is more helpful to you than paeans to the troops. In a study done for the army in 1989, historian William Hammond examined press coverage in Korea and Vietnam and found that it was not the cause of disaffection at home. What disturbed people at home was the death toll; when casualties jumped, public support dropped. Over time, he said, the reporting was vindicated. In fact, "the press reports were often more accurate than the public statements of the administration in portraying the situation in Vietnam." Take note: The American people want the truth about how their sons and daughters are doing in Iraq and what they're up against, and that is a good thing.

Finally, and this above all—a lesson I wish I had learned earlier. If you rise in the ranks to important positions—or even if you don't—speak the truth as you see it, even if the questioner is a higher authority with a clear preference for one and only one answer. It may not be the way to promote your career; it can in fact harm it. Among my military heroes of this war are the generals who frankly told the

president and his advisers that their information and their plans were both incomplete and misleading—and who paid the price of being ignored and bypassed and possibly frozen forever in their existing ranks—men like General Eric K. Shinseki, another son of West Point. It is not easy to be honest and fair in a bureaucratic system. But it is what free men and women have to do. Be true to your principles. If doing so exposes the ignorance and arrogance of power, you may be doing more to save the nation than exploits in combat can achieve.

I know that the final rule of the military Code of Conduct is already written in your hearts: “I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free.” The meaning of freedom begins with the still, small voice of conscience, when each of us decides what we will live or die for.