Case Study Instructions:

At The Vino & Veritas Society, we have distilled the key principles of liberty into six Precepts and four Civic Virtues.

These are the basic, foundational principles necessary for a free society and individual human flourishing and happiness. We encourage our members to talk about these ideas, become familiar with them, and practice communicating them to fellow citizens.

Sometimes, adhering to these principles is simple and straightforward. Other times, their practical application requires prudence, or practical wisdom, which is no easy thing.

Reasoning from first principles to the right choice or the best practical course of action, in a particular circumstance, poses great challenges, not least of which is that in politics, often we find ourselves with two or more practical, viable options, and they’re all bad.

Some might say: Just pick the lesser of the evils. That too can be challenging. Often, it’s unclear which of many evils is the lesser.

Reasonable, smart, good citizens, who agree on the basic principles of liberty, can disagree about what course of action is best, here and now, and what choice is most prudent.

Ben Franklin, the inspiration of The Vino & Veritas Society, understood the challenge of prudence. He created his Leather Apron Club in 1727 so that his trusted friends could practice making arguments regarding the application of principles to various problems, inviting the group to discuss and explore more deeply the options available.

We encourage members of The Vino & Veritas Society to approach the monthly case studies as exercises in prudence. Your task is to read the case study, as Franklin and his friends would, and think for yourself what prudence requires.

We encourage you to disagree where and when you think a better, wiser choice is possible, or a better argument is available. Disagreement can be an enlightening experience when it is informed by principles, facts, and sound moral and political logic.

Keeping the Precepts and Virtues in mind, are the ideas and recommendations in the following essay prudent? Discuss as a chapter why or why not.
It is time that free, self-governing citizens question the progressive, professional, bureaucratic institution that the U.S. military has become. The debacle in Afghanistan is a reminder why.

The world is still reeling from images of people in Afghanistan—desperate to flee Taliban tyranny—clinging to the outside of a gigantic U.S. military transport jet as it took flight, then falling to their deaths.

They are scenes of horror. And another drawn-out, endless, winless war for Americans.

The deeply disturbing news emerging from Afghanistan is especially cutting coming only days from the 20th anniversary of 9/11. That fateful date is the only reason Americans are still paying attention to that poor desert country halfway around the world.

PEARL HARBOR

The murderous terrorist attacks of 9/11 have only one comparison in all of American history: Pearl Harbor. The similarities are frightening:

- 2,403 Americans were killed December 7, 1941, as Japanese war planes flew over Pearl Harbor, dropping bombs on and attacking American bases, aircraft, Naval ships, and personnel.

- On September 11, 2001, Islamic terrorists hijacked four airplanes and carried out suicide attacks in the United States, killing 2,977 people from 78 different countries.

The differences between Pearl Harbor and 9/11, however, are also striking:

- The vast majority of those who died in the attack on Pearl Harbor were U.S. military personnel. Only 68 were civilians.

- In the 9/11 attacks, the reverse is true. About 400 of the 9/11 victims were first-responders—firefighters, paramedics, and police officers. The rest were ordinary civilians.

Perhaps more important, Pearl Harbor thrust America in World War II. Congress voted and declared war on Japan the very next day after the attack. Americans (and their allies) were victorious in WWII, less than four years later.

The attacks of 9/11, however, happened amidst decades of American military involvements around the world that have been endless, winless wars. The result of U.S. military engagement
overseas has often included the United States simply abandoning those foreigners our military has recruited, trained, funded, and befriended (as well as fellow Americans in enemy territory not lucky enough to get to a departing U.S. plane or ship).

The response of the U.S. political class and military leadership to 9/11 has proven to be the same—endless, winless wars—concluding with the ignominious and ill-planned recent withdrawal from Afghanistan.

How did this happen? How did the United States of America, after achieving decisive victories in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and both World Wars, come to engage in endless military conflicts and quagmires that rarely ever result in a clear victory for Americans, yet always result in the expansion of the U.S. military bureaucracy and budget?

Answer: Progressivism.

THE MILITARY BECOMES A BUREAUCRACY

The goal of progressivism is government central planning. Of everything. The very premise of progressivism is that the modern world is too complex and complicated for ordinary citizens, or their elected representatives, to make their own decisions. Decisions should be made by bureaucratic experts, including decisions about war.

The United States today features a professional military, of which many Americans are proud. To say it is an “all-voluntary” military is somewhat misleading. True, there is no draft, and the United States has not had such policies since 1973.

Still, members of the military today, from high-ranking military officers to entry-level trainees, are paid. Ours is a professional military. Theirs is a service of a paid professional, not a volunteer in the way we typically understand that word.

It’s also highly bureaucratic. Nearly 30,000 people are employed at the Pentagon alone, home to the Department of Defense, but not the home of many military-support agencies and contractors with which the DOD works.

Top military leadership, including those who advise the President and members of Congress, tend to be lifelong bureaucrats who are highly-credentialed with graduate degrees from elite, progressive universities, quite similar to bureaucrats employed in other government agencies and offices.

This was not always the case.
THE PROBLEMS OF A PERMANENT MILITARY

Over the span of 3000 years of political philosophy, stretching back to the ancient Greeks, every serious mind who thought about such matters understood that military power is both necessary and dangerous.

One of the key discussions in the most famous book of political philosophy—Plato’s Republic—is about the problem of creating a military force that is simultaneously strong enough to defeat enemy armies, yet not a threat to the people the military is supposed to protect.¹

The American Founders understood this problem and their solution was to limit the parts of the military that would be permanent, and rely on temporary military service only when necessary.

Consider Article I, Section 8 of the United States Constitution, which enumerates the power of Congress.

After clarifying that elected members of Congress—not military officers—have power “[t]o declare war, grant letters of marque and reprisal, and make rules concerning captures on land and water,” the Constitution adds that Congress has the power “[t]o raise and support armies,” with this important proviso: “no appropriation of money to that use shall be for a longer term than two years.”

By contrast, the next clause of the Constitution, also in Article I, Section 8, grants Congress power “[t]o provide and maintain a navy,” with no timeline, timeframe, or time constraint.

A navy requires ships, and naval warships cannot be assembled in mere days or weeks. The Constitution, therefore, wisely provides for a navy, but no permanent army, and no mention at all of permanent peacetime federal intelligence agencies.

That’s why, prior to the great world wars of the 20th century, the United States had no large standing professional army.

This was an important incentive to avoid unnecessary wars and foreign entanglements. On the rare occasion that an army is needed, according to the Constitution, the responsibility for that army would be shouldered by members of Congress, who create and fund it for no more than two years at a time, and the President, who is Commander in Chief.

¹ This is the philosophic origin of the famous question: Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Who will guard us from the guardians? To whom do we turn if those who are supposed to protect us, hurt us?
After the two modern world wars, however, and the 1947 National Security Act, the United States military became increasing permanent, professional, big, and bureaucratic, with the creation of the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, and the appendage of a Central Intelligence Agency, the first permanent peacetime federal intelligence organization.

A big military requires a big bureaucracy to manage it. And a big bureaucracy provides a scapegoat for elected politicians looking to avoid blame. Today, when any branch of the military falls short, it is common for both members of Congress and Presidents to lay blame on military bureaucrats, the same way most elected politicians respond when any bureaucracy does something wrong.

THE PATHOGEN OF PROGRESSIVISM INFECTS THE MILITARY

By January 1961, merely fifteen years after the conclusion of WWII, President Dwight Eisenhower said, accurately: “Our military organization today bears little relation to that known by any of my predecessors in peacetime, or indeed by the fighting men of World War II or Korea.”

Ike continued:

Until the latest of our world conflicts, the United States had no armaments industry. American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well. But now…we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment. We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations.

The United States military had become another progressive bureaucracy.

Eisenhower concluded his remarks with a warning: “Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.”

Since the time of Eisenhower, the United States military, intelligence organizations, and the many contractors that supply both, have become increasingly progressive and increasingly bureaucratic. Top leaders within United States military, today, are rivaled only by university faculties in the competition to be “woke” and promote the latest progressive fads such as whiteness awareness and critical race theory.

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2 In his 1961 Farewell Address, delivered three days before John F. Kennedy was sworn in as the new President, Eisenhower also warned Americans about “the technological revolution during recent decades.” “In this revolution,” Ike explained, “research has become central; it has also become more formalized, complex, and costly. A steadily increasing share is conducted for, by, or at the direction of the federal government…. The prospect of domination of the nation's scholars by federal employment, federal project allocations, and the power of money is ever present and is gravely to be regarded.”
(Some faculty members and administrators at U.S. military academies, for example, as well as bureaucrats within the Department of Defense, are pushing to include critical race theory as officer training curriculum.)

And what have been the results of our military becoming increasingly progressive and bureaucratic over the past 75 years? Multiple endless, winless wars and military conflicts. “Quagmire” has become a familiar term for modern Americans when they discuss U.S. military operations. Scenes of desperate retreats and withdrawals from foreign countries, including terrified people clinging to American airships, is becoming more, not less common.

The United States military has divided the entire globe into war zones they call “combatant commands.” Military bureaucrats, competing with each other for resources and prestige, need military conflicts, lest they warrant few resources and deserve little prestige.

The modern progressive, bureaucratic military system incentivizes endless wars. Is there any question, then, why we seem to be engaged in endless wars?

Bureaucrats in the Defense Departments often speak about their good intentions, wanting to protect the rights of U.S. citizens, advance American interests, and help American allies. Many are sincere.

Yet, we know the history of progressivism is a history of good intentions followed by dismal, even destructive results. Progressive institutions, agencies, and programs rarely ever achieve the goals promised to the American people, and usually result in more and worse problems than they were created to solve.

We are naïve—we are fools—if we know that progressivism is like a virus, infecting everything it touches, yet continue to insist that the military is somehow immune to the destructive, wasteful, corrupting effects of progressivism. It is not.

If Americans truly want to know why the Vietnam and post-Vietnam periods of American history have been and continue to be characterized by endless, winless wars, they’ll begin by looking at how progressivism has infected the growing, bloating bureaucracy of the U.S. military and the intelligence organizations, as well as the gigantic industry of military contractors they have created.

It is time to think anew about how free citizens defend themselves from foreign threats, how they think about U.S. foreign and national defense policies, and why they should be highly reluctant to allow progressive military bureaucrats to send U.S. soldiers to far-away places for extended periods of time and with no clear definition of what victory means or requires.