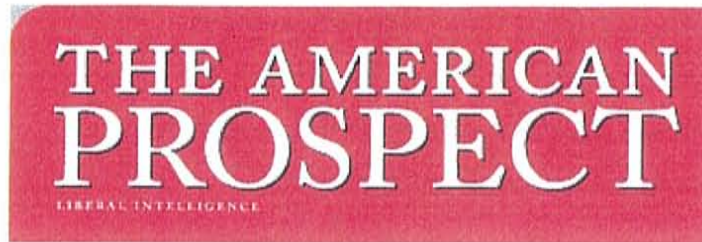


October 16, 2006



Duty Bound

Assessing the civic-republican tradition that has defined Ned Lamont's family history.

By [Jim Sleeper](#)

How to tell "the good fight" from a bad one against liberal democracy's enemies? In 1941, a 17-year-old at Exeter struggled with that question as World War II raged in Europe and storm clouds gathered over America. Wrestling with his demons under New Hampshire's charcoal skies, he penned this sonnet:

When pausing in our drowsy show of life
Where bloated pigmies hold their petty sway,
The mind fights up above the tawdry play
To stages draped with courage, death, and strife...
For ever there are hearts which, not to be
Constrained by walls, by rules, by easy creed,
Rebel against dishonored peace and flee
The dull hypocrisy of word and deed.
Thus eager youth forever quits debate,
And fighting with brave certainty meets fate.



Thomas William Lamont II

It's striking enough for a 17-year-old to give a classical literary form to his youthful yearning for action. More interesting still is his closing line's grim sense that "brave certainty" may fail. Brave, he was: Even in 1937, at 13, he'd watched a newsreel of Italian troops marching through Spain and Japanese guns firing into Shanghai and had written in his diary: "'What a world,' meekly murmur some. 'What a world! And something has to be done about it!' say I."

His indignation had grown that year at the Swiss Ecole Nouvelle de la Chataigneraie, whose students he described in a letter to his father as "suckers who fall for Mussolini and Hitler and all their show off and propaganda." He got into fights with them and detested fascists' belligerent "lust for land and power," but he also hated how "Hitler has cruelly treated the Jews" and how Franco was crushing democratic hopes in Spain. Soon he also developed "extreme misgivings and disappointment at ... Soviet foreign policy" and Communism.

Six months after Pearl Harbor, his sense of foreboding about totalitarianism of both right and left had hardened. Delivering Exeter's Senior Class Oration of 1942, he said of his cohort, "We have our dreamers, our fighters, our cowards, and our boys who just don't care. Robert Frost thinks we will all mellow in time... Perhaps we will -- if we live long enough, and if we win... I think most of us expect to fight, and we do not delude ourselves with hopes of a short war."

He extended, yet rebuked, Exeter's and his own ancestral Calvinism, announcing that, now, "there is no religious creed strong enough to maintain any spiritual unity... [I]t is impossible to practice Christian ethics in a vacuum... American youth has turned to nationalism -- not consciously, but through necessity -- for psychologically it fills the breach left by the inability of religion, or faith in science, to provide a driving, realistic credo." He condemned his influential audience's failed post-World War I statesmanship and insisted "that the economic administration of this nation will and must change."

He defended "the political structure of the United States" as "the fairest, most liberal, and most equitable yet devised" and vowed,

"For this we will fight under the flag with as much fervor as those young men who fought for many of our principles almost a thousand years ago under the cross. But we are realists. We do not link the word Crusade with World War II. You have not heard us flaunt the old phrases -- "A war to end wars"; "Make the world safe for democracy." The gold trappings have been cut away. We do not say all we feel. But we are resolved to stamp Fascism from the face of the earth, and, rest assured, we will not leave the peace conference to the babblings of obese old men."

I can imagine the Exeter audience feeling both reassured and unnerved by this apparition of intellectual, moral, and physical courage. No one

there doubted that even privileged young men would serve and fight. Americans hadn't yet been so beguiled out of their republican liberties and obligations. They weren't yet like Edward Gibbon's late-republican Romans, who, trusting their security to the emerging emperor Augustus, "no longer possessed that public courage which is nourished by the love of independence, the sense of national honor, the presence of danger, and the habit of command. They received laws and governors from the will of their sovereign and trusted for their defense to a mercenary army..." To the contrary, this young American would never hire someone less fortunate to do his public duty.

But notice, too, that he was challenging his society to come up with shared referents and resonances worth fighting for. No ideologue, he was doing his "thinking without banisters," as Hannah Arendt would later put it. He'd decided that totalitarianism would have to be fought not just because it was brutal but also because it drew the oxygen out of politics, asphyxiating human moral initiative both in war and in false peace. An angry decency was carrying him into action, able to tell a "good fight" from a gratuitous one. But, like the last line of his sonnet, the last line of his graduation speech carried a dark warning: "It is a rotten thing to die in vain."

With "brave certainty" that fascism must be smashed, this young man, Thomas W. Lamont II, volunteered for submarine service and served in the Pacific,

closing in on Japan. But he never saw the peace he hoped to shape. Among the first to learn that his U.S.S. Snook had been lost in May, 1945 was his brother Teddy, who nine years later would have a son named Ned.

"[Tommy] was a rare person -- intelligent, attractive, with an entertaining scorn for those he disliked and a genuine affection for those whom he liked," Norman James, an Exeter friend, said of Tommy. "He was occasionally irritating, in the way in which all fascinating people are, but he was usually immense fun."

A year before Ned's 1954 birth, family friend Francis Plimpton penned a sonnet that answered Tommy's of 1941, braiding the old Lamont strands of public obligation and private independence:

He bore an honored name, another's name
 That stood for high achievement, leadership --
 Most boys who start with someone else's fame
 Are quite content to let their lives just slip
 Along prepared and easy grooves; not he --
 He was himself, and no one else. He thought
 His own way through until he reached the free
 Convictions of a searching mind that's taught
 But tests the teaching. His the sturdy kind
 Of independent thinking that insists
 That no idea has any right to bind
 Men to it, but that each idea exists
 For man, not man for it...

He chose the silent service, submarines,
 Where courage isn't flame, but means the test
 Of taut and tightened nerves against machines.
 And now -- the restless sea, it gives him rest.
 He bore an honored name, but what is more

He added honor to the name he bore.

I can imagine some people squirming against this old, clean poetry of civic grace. They'd remind us that it's easy to get sentimental about a privileged life foreshortened before it could be spoiled. And I acknowledge that I've rendered Tommy Lamont as a *fata morgana* of the American republic -- a fading mirage of our civic virtue, his sacrifice itself a requiem for the kind of citizen we're losing not at terrorists' hands but at our own.

Yet a life and a death this conscious and bravely skeptical offers no easy pickings to faux populists, of left or right. Activists and ironists might poke and pick at Tommy's story, hoping to deconstruct it -- and any nostalgia for it -- as elitist, sexist, racist, even militarist. But do they mean to say that no one who isn't rich, WASP, or male can or should (or indeed already has) become an independent-minded young leader like him, "elite" yet outward-facing, patriotic yet internationalist, self-sufficient yet generous? What, exactly, is it that they affirm instead?

Tommy's example is an even stronger rebuke to the neoconservative "patriots" who not only have never served but don't give much evidence of having worried themselves about that as they carry on their weekly Iraq-war damage control in the *New York Times Book Review*. They rely on a republic's liberties but affirm nothing that strengthens them. Had Tommy survived, he'd be 82 years old now, and had he opposed the Iraq war in any highly public way,

conservative political operatives and their writerly fellow travelers and apologists would be slaming him as shamelessly as they did such veterans as John Kerry, Max Cleland, John Murtha, and even John McCain.

A balance like Tommy's -- of personal independence and communal obligation -- is especially foreign to those who find themselves careening into one of two abysses: Floating upward into a mystical or ideological universalism, like some post-modernist, post-republican leftists; or, like neoconservatives, succumbing to the irresistible siren songs of blood and sacred soil, the imagined kinships of aggressive, ever-more idolatrous nationalism.

People gripped by either temptation fear a Tommy Lamont. They look for ways to discredit people like him, as Jennifer Senior, a *New York* magazine writer, did recently in a tawdry *Times* review of a book by that grand old civic-republican Lewis Lapham.

Alternatively, they wind up ingratiating themselves to the same exemplars of the old republic over cocktails at the Harvard or Yale Clubs, whose civic-republican residues and trappings they secretly crave.

But the lesson of Tommy's life and sacrifice for truer seekers of "the good fight" is that in a republic's life there's a necessary balance, or oscillation, between personal independence and respect for ancestral example, between skepticism and brave sacrifice. There wouldn't be any history at all worth remembering if people didn't break with convention

sometimes to show intellectual, moral, and physical courage, in existential, seat-of-the-pants ways. This Tommy did in condemning his elders' false peace and unjust economy and in challenging them to come up with something better.

But, equally often, courage like his draws, in its inevitable loneliness and adversity, on the examples set by predecessors in a community cast up across time and space. This Tommy did, too, as both the classic form of his sonnet and the citations in his letters and his speech to elders make clear. In an op-ed column in *The New York Times*' Connecticut section yesterday, I've sketched the Lamonts' ancestral story, which runs back to old Calvinist cross-currents of communal obligation and defiance of the powers that be.

Does this have anything to do with Ned Lamont's Senate bid? It would be wrong to judge him by his ancestors, for good or ill. He didn't serve in the military like Tommy, probably because he was born too late to face a war. (Joe Lieberman did come of age with both the Vietnam war and the draft in full swing, yet he never served.) And Ned Lamont may prove to have been more of a protest candidate than a political leader. He has told anyone who'll listen that he became Lieberman's challenger because he couldn't convince anyone else to make the race. But his courage in doing that reminds me of the uncle he never knew: Both have risen to a civic-republican standard which too many others have forsaken.

Jim Sleeper is a lecturer in political science at Yale.

© 2006 by The American Prospect, Inc.

http://tapdev.browsermedia.com/cs/articles?article=duty_bound



He extended, yet rebuked, Exeter's and his own ancestral Calvinism, announcing that, now, "there is no religious creed strong enough to maintain any spiritual unity... [I]t is impossible to practice Christian ethics in a vacuum... American youth has turned to nationalism -- not consciously, but through necessity -- for psychologically it fills the breach left by the inability of religion, or faith in science, to provide a driving, realistic credo." He condemned his influential audience's failed post-World War I statesmanship and insisted "that the economic administration of this nation will and must change."

He defended "the political structure of the United States" as "the fairest, most liberal, and most equitable yet devised" and vowed,

"For this we will fight under the flag with as much fervor as those young men who fought for many of our principles almost a thousand years ago under the cross. But we are realists. We do not link the word Crusade with World War II. You have not heard us flaunt the old phrases -- "A war to end wars"; "Make the world safe for democracy." The gold trappings have been cut away. We do not say all we feel. But we are resolved to stamp Fascism from the face of the earth, and, rest assured, we will not leave the peace conference to the babblings of obese old men."

I can imagine the Exeter audience feeling both reassured and unnerved by this apparition of intellectual, moral, and physical courage. No one

closing in on Japan. But he never saw the peace he hoped to shape. Among the first to learn that his U.S.S. Snook had been lost in May, 1945 was his brother Teddy, who nine years later would have a son named Ned.

"[Tommy] was a rare person -- intelligent, attractive, with an entertaining scorn for those he disliked and a genuine affection for those whom he liked," Norman James, an Exeter friend, said of Tommy. "He was occasionally irritating, in the way in which all fascinating people are, but he was usually immense fun."

A year before Ned's 1954 birth, family friend Francis Plimpton penned a sonnet that answered Tommy's of 1941, braiding the old Lamont strands of public obligation and private independence:

He bore an honored name, another's name
 That stood for high achievement, leadership --
 Most boys who start with someone else's fame
 Are quite content to let their lives just slip
 Along prepared and easy grooves; not he --
 He was himself, and no one else. He thought
 His own way through until he reached the free
 Convictions of a searching mind that's taught
 But tests the teaching. His the sturdy kind
 Of independent thinking that insists
 That no idea has any right to bind
 Men to it, but that each idea exists
 For man, not man for it...

He chose the silent service, submarines,
 Where courage isn't flame, but means the test
 Of taut and tightened nerves against machines.
 And now -- the restless sea, it gives him rest.
 He bore an honored name, but what is more

conservative political operatives and their writerly fellow travelers and apologists would be sliming him as shamelessly as they did such veterans as John Kerry, Max Cleland, John Murtha, and even John McCain.

A balance like Tommy's -- of personal independence and communal obligation -- is especially foreign to those who find themselves careening into one of two abysses: Floating upward into a mystical or ideological universalism, like some post-modernist, post-republican leftists; or, like neoconservatives, succumbing to the irresistible siren songs of blood and sacred soil, the imagined kinships of aggressive, ever-more idolatrous nationalism.

People gripped by either temptation fear a Tommy Lamont. They look for ways to discredit people like him, as Jennifer Senior, a *New York* magazine writer, did recently in a tawdry *Times* review of a book by that grand old civic-republican Lewis Lapham. Alternatively, they wind up ingratiating themselves to the same exemplars of the old republic over cocktails at the Harvard or Yale Clubs, whose civic-republican residues and trappings they secretly crave.

But the lesson of Tommy's life and sacrifice for truer seekers of "the good fight" is that in a republic's life there's a necessary balance, or oscillation, between personal independence and respect for ancestral example, between skepticism and brave sacrifice. There wouldn't be any history at all worth remembering if people didn't break with convention

Jim Sleeper is a lecturer in political science at Yale.

© 2006 by The American Prospect, Inc.

http://tapdev.browsermedia.com/cs/articles?article=duty_bound