



# A Warrior's Last Stand

**Vietnam War hero and LBJ School professor Howard Prince, PhD '75, transformed leadership training at the United States Military Academy and launched the country's first-ever civilian undergraduate degree program in leadership at the University of Richmond. Now he's fighting the final battle of his career — trying to convince The University of Texas that leaders aren't just born, they're made**

*by Tim Taliaferro*



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FROM HIS HOSPITAL BED, *Captain Howard Prince had a clear view of the TV screen as President Lyndon Johnson came on to address the nation. It was March 31, 1968, and the war in Vietnam was going badly. Prince knew. He'd been downrange, fighting in the rice paddies and marshes of Southeast Asia. Five weeks before, during the Tet Offensive, Prince was leading an assault to relieve the Marines caught in the city of Hue when a mortar round landed virtually on top of him, shattering his right ankle, snapping his right tibia, and blasting open his whole right side.*

When his commander-in-chief started speaking, Prince forced himself to sit up. Johnson's address lasted just six minutes, at the end of which he announced something only he and Lady Bird knew beforehand — that he would not seek re-election. The war, he seemed to Prince to be saying, had been a mistake. The news landed like a mortar, and for Prince, it cut deeper than all the shrapnel that surgeons had pulled from his body.

"I was really angry at Johnson," Prince remembers. "I felt betrayed. People I knew had been killed and wounded in Vietnam. I was in the hospital and didn't know if I would ever walk again, ever use my right hand again."

What Prince heard and felt that day spurred an interest in leadership and ethics that would come to define his career. Four decades later, Howard Prince, PhD '75, teaches ethical leadership at the public policy school named for Johnson. There is perhaps no greater expert on leadership development in the country. No one has more profoundly altered the character and leadership training of the modern United States Army.

Now he's fighting one last battle: trying to convince The University of Texas that the greatest service it can do for the nation is not just to educate tomorrow's teachers, lawyers, businesspeople, and government workers, but also train them to *lead* — in a conscious and ethical way.



Prince in February 1968 during the Tet Offensive.

*Define leadership.* Go ahead and give it a shot. Notice the ancillary questions that pop up: Who is a leader? What makes for a good leader? How do leaders actually lead? Are they born or made? Leadership is one of those concepts, like art or beauty or love, so vast and nuanced that the best that language can do is poke at its meaning. Now try *ethical leadership*. Doubly slippery! What is ethical and to whom? How does one lead in an ethical way?

These questions reach back to antiquity. The Greeks, in their experiment with self-government, tried to figure out how best to select leaders. Plato believed only certain people were born to lead. Promising young men were to be sent to his academy, where he would shape them into elite philosopher kings to govern the republic. Aristotle went the other way, believing in a far more democratic version of leadership. All men were called on at certain times to serve in leadership roles, but when their terms ended, their responsibility was then to follow once again.

For millennia, philosophers have pondered the meaning of leadership but never systematically studied it. Only in the 20th century did psychologists and sociologists begin examining leaders and leadership using the scientific method.

In 1946, shortly after the end of World War II, then-Army chief of staff Dwight D. Eisenhower sent a letter to the superintendent of West Point urging that cadets be trained to lead. "Too frequently we find young officers trying empirical and ritualistic methods in the handling of individuals," the former Supreme Allied Commander wrote. "I think that both theoretical and practical instruction along this line could, at the very least, awaken the majority of cadets to the necessity of handling human problems on a human basis and do much to improve leadership and personnel handling in the Army at large."

Eisenhower would prove far ahead of his time. The Army, perhaps more than most institutions, changes with glacial reluctance. The leadership at West Point in the '40s still subscribed to a system that since 1802 had been used for identifying leaders — trial by fire. It was tradition. It was Cro-Magnon.

First-year cadets, called plebes, faced ruthless hazing, intimidation, and physical punishment then. Their first summer, called Beast Barracks, was legendary for its sadism. The thought was by making life so hard for the plebes, they could separate those who had what it took to lead. The rest went home broken and humiliated. There was no *developing* of leaders.

Nevertheless, Eisenhower's vision remained an idea at West Point, shut away but not forgotten. All it needed was the right timing and a champion who could make it a reality.

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**H**oward Prince grew up in Belton, the oldest of four children. From early on, his father pushed him hard. Coming from one of the many farms swept away like dust in the Great Depression, his father, having received just a fourth-grade education, enlisted in the Army to make ends meet. He could intuit the value of the education he never got and used to quiz Howard on multiplication tables well into middle school. "He knew I needed to know math," Prince says, "and that was the highest math he knew." In high school, Prince used to shut himself in the bathroom with his books so as not to wake up his siblings as he studied late into the night.

At his father's urging, Prince applied to West Point his senior year. In the last week of June, he still hadn't heard back. He was set to attend Temple Junior College when a telegram arrived with instructions to report to West Point on July 1 with \$300 for uniforms. Prince's dad went out that day and borrowed the money to buy his son a plane ticket to New York and front him the \$300.

Prince survived Beast Barracks and excelled at the über-competitive West Point. Back then, the school used to post the academic rank of each cadet every week. By the end of his plebe year, Prince was in the top 10 percent. By his third year, he had distinguished himself inside the classroom and out. He started to think about what part of the Army he wanted to pursue.

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he answer was easy — infantry, where the toughest and most ambitious cadets often go. Prince graduated in the top 5 percent and was assigned to the prestigious 82nd Airborne division. Per West Point tradition, his first salute after the commencement ceremonies had to be to an enlisted soldier. Prince saluted his father.

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As slippery as the concept of leadership might seem, elements of good leadership can be defined. Honesty, vision, competency, and devotion to followers rank among the most common traits people cite in leaders they admire. The effects of leadership can also be observed. Businesses invest in it because it helps the bottom line. In the military, good leadership saves lives and bad leadership leads to scandals.

At its heart, ethical leadership is a force that encourages followers' best behavior and discourages their worst. George Orwell once said, "Most people wish to be good, but not all the time." According to Prince, "Ethical leaders help people be good more of the time." In a military setting, that means checking the human tendency toward violence; in academia, it's resisting the pressure to score more highly that causes cheating; in business, it's controlling greed.

On the first day of classes, Prince takes his LBJ School students on a thought experiment. Let's say you've won a prestigious Presidential Management Internship in Washington, D.C., and your boss calls you in. She has a special project for you. She wants you to devise a strategy for the U.S. Postal Service to get out of the red and wants you to look at how to increase revenues by offering payday loans.

Prince asks for ideas, and the students throw themselves into the project, offering some basic ones at first but gradually developing more sophisticated and ambitious plans. Imagining their fake internships on the line and their fake boss offering them a chance to impress, the students bring all their ambition and creativity to the task. At the end, Prince makes his point. "I heard a lot of great ideas, but how come no one asked whether the postal

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service should be raising money on the backs of poor people? The first step in ethical leadership," he says, "is recognizing when you're facing an ethical dilemma."

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The first time Howard Prince jumped out of a helicopter and landed on the battlefield of Vietnam, he was on a hair trigger. Officers who have never seen combat feel incredible pressure to prove themselves, particularly when the men they're supposed to be leading have often done several tours. As he jumped off the helicopter, Prince mistook the door gunner's covering fire for incoming and ducked down. His battle-hardened sergeant strolled over, tapped him on the shoulder, and told him everything was OK, sir.

It didn't take long for Prince to establish himself on the battlefield. Bob Child was a lieutenant under Prince at the time. "Sometimes we got a captain who was kind a jerk and was never out there with you," Child says. "Howard was not a yeller. He was very competent; he was well trained and well respected. He wouldn't ask you to do anything he wouldn't do."

Typically, Bravo Company, a group of about 100 men that Prince commanded, made two air assaults a day. Groups of six helicopters, each carrying a pilot, a co-pilot, a door gunner, and seven men, would fly into an area, hover for a matter of seconds while the seven jumped out, then fly back to pick up the next wave of 42.

Once on the ground, the troops secured the immediate area and got organized. This was where Prince ran the show. He had to find the enemy, determine how best to attack, and direct the assault. The resulting battles could last two hours or two weeks. Whenever it was over, it was on to the next site. "We were always moving," Child says.

Juan Gonzales served during Vietnam as a pathfinder, an elite airborne soldier who specialized in aviation and helicopter warfare, and got to know Prince in late 1967. "Prince came in, he was a West Point grad, and he was good," Gonzales remembers. "When Captain Prince talked, everyone listened." As a pathfinder, Gonzales could walk with whichever company he wanted. Almost always, when Bravo Company moved out, he did too.

On Jan. 30, 1968, in violation of a mutually agreed-upon ceasefire, the North Vietnamese Army launched the Tet Offensive, surprising the American military and capturing the coastal city of Hue. Marines south of the city counter-attacked and reached the citadel, where they became bogged down in urban fighting. On Feb. 8, the 5th Battalion of the 7th Cavalry regiment moved into the woods north of Hue to help relieve the Marines caught in the city's center.

"It was a true hornet's nest we were dropped into there," Child says.

On Feb. 21, the Army, tried to punch through the enemy's main stronghold on the northern perimeter. The battalion com-



Prince, fourth from the right, checking a map before the Battle of Ti Ti Woods on Feb. 21, 1968.

mander, who had come to rely on Prince, made Bravo Company the tip of the spear. To attack meant leaving the woods and crossing an open area, an infantryman's worst nightmare.

Prince's forward platoon made it across under cover of darkness, and at daybreak, the Battle of Ti Ti Woods commenced. Needing to see what was going on, Prince, Child, and three radio operators moved up into the open to assess the situation. The only cover they could find were a few Vietnamese burial mounds.

There they were, a cluster of troops crouched among graves, with three radio antennas sticking up. They were a ripe target. Prince doesn't remember hearing the mortar that landed next to him, but he remembers a cloud of dirt and manure raining down on him.

Shrapnel from the explosion ripped open his entire right side and shattered his eardrums. His body mostly shielded the others from the blast. One of Prince's radio operators was also wounded, but Child, lying only feet away, escaped unscathed. Somehow Prince managed to crawl back to the treeline, where, broken and bleeding, he passed out.

"I didn't think he was going to live," Child says. "There was so much blood. He was wide open."

Prince needed an evacuation if he was going to survive, but the firefight raged on. The pilot of the medevac helicopter didn't want to land. Gonzales, hearing the pilot's reluctance over the radio, grabbed the receiver and told him to land or he would shoot the helicopter down himself.

Then Gonzales did something incredible: he told the pilot to follow him in and proceeded to sprint into the clearing. "I remember they were shooting at me, and I could see the bullets hitting the dirt," Gonzales says. The helicopter came in, Gonzales lifted Prince inside, and off it went. "He looked like he was dead," Gonzales remembers. "He was totally out of it, covered in blood and limp. It hit me hard. I had a lot of respect for that man."

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For the first few weeks he spent in the hospital, and especially after President Johnson's speech, Prince felt sorry for himself. He didn't know if he would walk again, or whether he would ever regain control of his right hand. Then, one day, he looked around and saw that things could have been much worse. Guys in nearby beds were missing limbs; one was badly burned. All of a sudden, his own maladies seemed trivial. That's when his real recovery began.

After nearly a year in the hospital, Prince was released, able to walk and to use his hand. He had been an Army Ranger and Senior Parachutist with a Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, three Bronze Stars, an Air Medal, two purple hearts, and a Combat Infantryman Badge, but his wounds were too severe. He could not rejoin the infantry. The Army offered Prince a chance to go back to school and earn an advanced degree. "I jumped at the chance," Prince says.

He decided to study clinical psychology and explore the science of motivation and leadership. In Vietnam, Prince recalled feeling utterly unprepared to lead. His first day as company commander, he had ordered his troops to move out when word reached him that an entire platoon was refusing. Prince's first instinct was to yell at them — "that was all I knew how to do."

When he gathered himself and walked over, he discovered the men were simply scared. They'd been given bad information about the mission and thought they were being ordered to certain death. Once he explained the strategy behind the orders and alleviated their fears, they moved out.

Thinking back on it in his hospital bed, Prince realized that not only did West Point fail to give him the leadership tools he needed, it gave him exactly the wrong ones. He decided right then and there





to dedicate his life to eradicating the idea that leadership couldn't be taught.

Prince enrolled in a doctoral program in 1971 at UT, where the Vietnam War was unpopular. On his first day, a fellow graduate student walked up, told Prince he despised him, and swore he would never speak a word to him. For four years, he kept his promise.

Prince wrote his dissertation on a topic in social-learning theory. He explored whether and when people imitated certain behaviors based on consequences. If a cheater gets punished, does it make the observer less likely to cheat? (Yes. The opposite is true, too.) The research had a particular emphasis on the impact of role models. He defended his thesis on April 30, 1975, the day North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon.

The Army sent the new PhD back to West Point.

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In the summer of 1975, early in his tenure as West Point commandant, Gen. Walter Ulmer asked everyone at the table to go around and report how things were going. It was mid-summer, and Beast Barracks was underway. The reports were all positive; then came Prince's turn.

At the time, part of Prince's job was to interview plebes who decided West Point wasn't for them. Prince had noticed a troubling trend: many promising and mature young men were leaving because they didn't want to put up with the hazing: the shouting, the pushups, the constant humiliation. Prince, then a lowly major, told his boss that not all was well. "The other officers thought I was toast," Prince says. "When I got to Ulmer's office, he said that I was the only person who was telling him that things weren't perfect since he'd arrived, and that he wanted to meet with me every week."

With the new commandant as his protector, Prince, still seething from his experience in Vietnam, started sounding off on what he thought was wrong with his alma mater, a lone voice calling for dramatic change. Prince had a three-year assignment at West Point, at the end of which he thought he'd return to Texas. He had nothing to lose. All his agitating might well have been for nothing if a cheating scandal in 1976 had not almost brought the institution down.

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It costs the American taxpayers on the order of \$300,000 to educate a cadet at West Point. By contrast, it costs about \$50,000 to put a young person through a college ROTC program. The justification military leaders have always given for the service academies' worth is that they are uniquely equipped to develop leaders of character.

West Point is founded on a code: that cadets do not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate anyone who does. When in early 1976 a cadet admitted to cheating on a test, it set off an investigation that found 150 of his peers had cheated as well. The very foundation of West Point had been compromised.

As the administration took a hard look at its curriculum, that letter that Dwight Eisenhower wrote 30 years before resurfaced. Maybe it was time to incorporate some formal leadership training after all.

The administration decided to create a new department, its 13th, for the study of behavioral sciences and leadership. The question was: who would run it?

On most college campuses then — and still to this day — leadership was widely considered a subject too nebulous and ephemeral for the academic side and so relegated to the realm of student life. When West Point created the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership, the student-life folks saw it as too pointy-headed and intellectual. The academics saw it as a lightweight.

The academy needed someone who could navigate both camps, who had practical and academic expertise in the subject of leadership. They found their man on campus, a West Point graduate and decorated Vietnam veteran with a PhD in clinical psychology from The University of Texas. He had been running the academy's Cadet

Counseling Center and calling for serious changes. He was young, bright, and opinionated. His name was Howard Prince.

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Prince was a surprise pick to run the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership. He was promoted so fast he became the youngest full colonel in the army. So anointed, he felt the eyes on his back. Not only was the department new and viewed with suspicion (if not derision), it was now charged with developing two core courses that all cadets would take. Yet here was his chance to equip young officers with the leadership tools West Point had never given him. Here was his chance to make Eisenhower's dream a reality.

"I thought if we could change the education of cadets at West Point, in a few decades we could change the Army," Prince says.

Prince also took an early and risky stand in favor of integrating women into the academy. "I believed since all taxpayers paid for West Point, everyone should have a chance to get in," Prince says. By Congressional mandate, the academy was integrated in 1976, so Prince had to figure out not just how to train women cadets but also how to train them to lead — and lead men.

By all accounts, his run as department head was a triumph. He brought in brilliant faculty from both inside the Army and out. He overhauled the way cadets were trained and implemented a sophisticated curriculum that mixed the theoretical elements of leadership with practical experience and feedback. He helped eliminate the most insidious parts of Beast Barracks. And he developed the first and only graduate degree program in West Point's history, the Eisenhower Leader Development Program.

"Of all the people I worked with, the person with the best insight into leadership was Howard Prince," says John Wattendorf, who taught in the department for 16 years and succeeded Prince as head. "He has an incredible mind, but much more than that, he cares so deeply for the subject."

Today, the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership is one of the flagship departments at the academy. "That department is red-hot," says Prince, who in May returned to West Point to hand out the Howard Prince Award now given annually to the top cadet in the department. "When we started, we were No. 13 of 13," Prince says. "Now the department is right in the center of what goes on at West Point."

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"This country," Prince says, "was founded by people who were running away from bad leadership. We have a deeply rooted sense of rugged individualism. Yet we suffer as a country by leaving the development of leaders to accident. The founders wrote the constitution specifically to make leadership difficult — that was a system that was



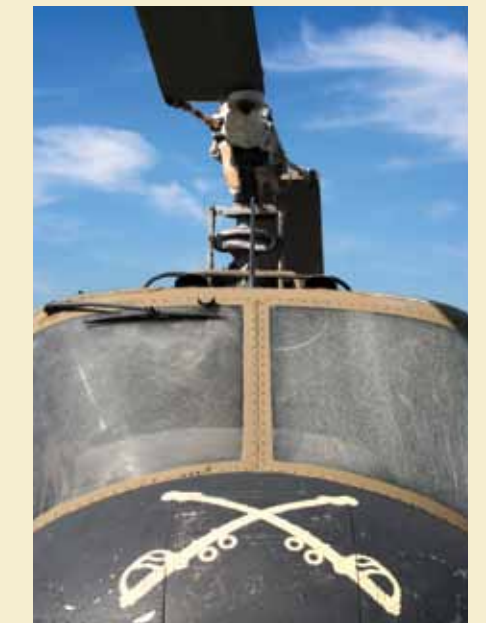
Prince with the man who saved his life, pathfinder Juan Gonzales, at a reunion for the 5th Battalion of the Army's 7th Cavalry regiment.

## Lucky Day

On one day in Vietnam, Howard Prince was twice shot down while in a helicopter. The first time, he and a colonel were observing a battle from 1,500 feet. They circled for about an hour, directing the assault from above, when suddenly the helicopter was hit by anti-aircraft fire. The engine went out, and the pilot executed the autorotation technique, shutting off the power and folding in the blades of the helicopter. He waited until nearly crashing before fanning them about again and slowing their descent. It worked, and everyone survived.

A second helicopter arrived to pick them up. That pilot, spooked by what happened, decided to fly at treetop level. They had just about returned to base when an enemy soldier stuck his rifle in the air and riddled the helicopter as it flew by. Thankfully, the pilot managed to keep the helicopter in the air long enough to crash land inside the base. Everyone survived.

"We were a bunch of lucky guys that day," Prince says. "It was some really skillful flying by those pilots."



Top: Prince meeting Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam from 1964-68, after Prince was nearly killed by a mortar round. He spent almost a year recovering. Above: Prince later in his career at West Point.

Prince had noticed a troubling trend: many promising and mature young men were leaving because they didn't want to put up with the hazing. Prince, then a lowly major, told his boss that not all was well.

acceptable to them. Leadership, as our founders imagined it, is about collective effort toward a shared purpose. People say leadership is all common sense. If that were true, bad leaders wouldn't be so common."

This is the message Prince wants to get across to administrators at The University of Texas. With few exceptions, academia has forsaken the teaching of leadership and applied ethics in favor of more specialized degree tracts in traditional academic disciplines.

One of the those exceptions is the University of Richmond, which in 1990 started the nation's first-ever undergraduate degree program in leadership studies outside of the service academies. Businessman Robert Jepson and his wife, Alice, donated \$20 million to found it. Prince had been traveling to conferences for small liberal arts schools and telling anyone who would listen that they needed to be implementing leadership studies as part of their curriculum. The provost at Richmond called Prince, told him about Jepson, and said it was time to put up or shut up.

Prince retired from the Army a brigadier general and arrived in Richmond to take up his first civilian post as dean of the new school. If he thought it had been hard winning over the faculty at West Point, he was wrong. Many faculty at the University of Richmond were openly dismissive of a leadership school. On the day he was introduced to the faculty, the provost said to him, "Don't screw this up."

Like with everything else, Prince threw himself into the effort. He assembled a diverse and renowned faculty. He represented the school to students, to donors, and to naysayers. For as much pushback as he felt from faculty, students showed enormous interest.

"There was never a question of whether we would have appropriate student interest," says John Roush, who worked with Prince on setting up the Jepson School and is now president of Centre College. "It met a real need that lots of institutions at the time were trying to address around the edges. Howard helped make it a legitimate intellectual pursuit, and it was first-rate right out of the block." Jepson and his old department at West Point remain the authorities on leadership studies in the nation.

The effort took a toll on Prince. In 1995, he developed kidney cancer and in 1997 retired. He moved back to Austin to recover, and less than two years later UT came calling. Then-LBJ School dean Ed Dorn, wanting to incorporate leadership training into the masters of public affairs program, called Prince out of retirement.

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When the Commission of 125 released its report in 2004, Prince interpreted it as saying that UT wanted no Enrons, no high-profile ethical lapses involving its graduates. At the time, he thought the University was willing to experiment with leadership in the curriculum, and indeed in the Commission's final report Recommendation 13 read: *Emphasize the study of leadership and ethics*. Prince, as director of the Center for Ethical Leadership, presented the administration with 10 possible plans, everything from a signature undergraduate course to the creation of a College of Leadership. None of them went anywhere.

In March, Prince will turn 70. He continues to teach classes in the LBJ School, run the annual Hatton W. Sumners Student Leadership Conference, and he will give special seminars as part of the Texas Exes' new 40 Acres Scholars Program. His body aches, and he moves slower. The toes on his right foot remain curled up from nerve damage. A few years ago, Prince went to the doctor, who discovered a bullet had been lodged in his kneecap for 38 years.

He isn't surprised with the resistance leadership development has faced at UT. It took a crisis to make the change at West Point, and his project at Jepson cost him a kidney. At a place as vast and disparate as UT, change — if it can be made at all — takes time. There were 4,000 students at West Point; at the University of Richmond, there were 3,000.

This spring, the Center for Ethical Leadership had its budget completely cut. Still, Prince says, he'll keep on fighting the good fight and teaching students to lead. "I feel a real obligation to serve," he says. "The American taxpayer has paid for all my education and all my training. I want to pay it back." 🐮

## Pathfinder Finds His Captain



Juan Gonzales, the pathfinder who saved Prince's life, didn't hear whether Prince had made it until a book was published in 1993 with Prince quoted in it. Gonzales got Prince's address from the author and wrote him a letter. "I have always wondered if you lived," Gonzales said, "or whether it had been in vain running through that field." Prince wrote back, thanking him for saving his life, and the two arranged to meet in Austin, where Gonzales still lives. "He was waiting with a map of Ti Ti Woods," Gonzales remembers. "We've been close ever since."