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
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 and leadership development at the public policy school named for Johnson. There is perhaps no greater expert on 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 reluc-
tance. 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, intimida-
tion, 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 humili-
ted. 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 tim-
ning and a champion who could make it a reality.

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Howard 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 instruc-
tions 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 uber-
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 dis-
tinguished himself inside the classroom and out. He started to think about what part of the Army he wanted to pursue.

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At its heart, ethical leadership leads to scandals. In the military, good leadership saves lives and bad leadership can also be observed. Businesses invest in it because it helps the bottom line. In academe, it’s re- sisting the pressure to score more highly that causes cheating; in business, it’s controlling greed.

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 at 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 academe, it’s resisting the pressure to score more highly.

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 off its back 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 seeing soldiers with just one hand. “I didn’t know if I would walk again, or whether I would ever regain control of my right hand. Then, one day, I 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
MATURE YOUNG MEN WERE LEAVING BECAUSE THEY DIDN’T WANT TO PUT UP WITH THE HAZING. PRINCE 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.’

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, ad 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. Summers 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.”

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.”