

Brookline TAB

Historian talks U.S. military with Brookline High parents

By Victoria Holland Klarfeld/correspondent

Wed Oct 08, 2008, 03:44 PM EDT

Brookline -

David M. Kennedy, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and Stanford professor, spoke to parents at Brookline High School Monday night about the “political implications of the present configuration of our armed forces” as part of the Parent-Teacher Organization’s annual “Conversazione.”

The event, co-sponsored by the PTO, the 21st Century Fund and the Brookline Educational Foundation, brought Kennedy to the high school for a two-day visit, during which he met with faculty, parents and students as a part of the high school’s Political Literacy program.

“We like to polish the mystique of this institution by bringing great people here,” said BHS Headmaster Robert Weintraub.

Kennedy lectured on how the current military configuration “tempt[s] the political leadership to treat it as if it were a mercenary army.”

Calling military issues a “chronic item in our national agenda,” Kennedy took a broad view of military history, noting the historically “tight relationship between citizenship and military service.”

“[The U.S.] military today is exceptionally small,” he said. “Four percent of the population is on active military duty ... 4 percent of total U.S. GDP is military spending.”

Because of the comparatively small sacrifice made in terms of personnel and budget, Kennedy said, and due to the advent of military technology such as smart weapons, U.S. leaders are “able now to put a force in the field ... without breaking a sweat.”

After Kennedy’s 40-minute lecture, parents were invited to gather for discussion in small groups and come up with questions for Kennedy.

Weintraub asked if the audience could ask about the economy, to laughter.

Adelaide Ketchum, PTO co-president, said Kennedy had parents talking about policy areas that probably were quite new to them.

“I’ve heard from several parents that they enjoyed the evening and that he piqued their interest. And because we left questions about current economic problems until the end, and his take on the situation was that it’s not hopeless, I walked away from the event feeling less discouraged than I was when I walked in.”

The Conversazione started 10 years ago “as a way for parents to come together as a community to have intellectual discussion,” said Marsha Zierk, former president of the PTO.

Monday morning, Kennedy spoke to high school juniors and seniors at an assembly “framed in the context of the Great Depression,” and also spoke with several smaller groups of students, said Kathy Fazzalano, general manager of the 21st Century Fund.

Kennedy said he was impressed by the students Brookline High.

“The atmosphere here is calm and serious compared to the raucous one at most high schools,” he said, adding that the students he spoke to in classes were “unusually attentive.

“I visit a lot of high schools across the country, and there’s an ambiance here, a spirit. It’s quite distinctive and remarkable,” he said.