

REFLECTIONS ON THE STOCKDALE LEGACY

The Fifteenth Annual Stockdale Lecture, delivered on 25 January 2012 at the University of San Diego, California, by Martin L. Cook

It is a great pleasure and an honor to be invited to deliver this year's Stockdale Lecture. When I consider those who have preceded me in giving this annual lecture, I am truly humbled to be added to that roster. I am also honored to hold an academic chair at the Naval War College that bears Admiral Stockdale's name, so it is especially fitting that I offer some reflections on what my chair's namesake means to me, but more importantly for the Navy.

I am relatively new to the Navy and am still learning its distinctive language and culture. When I went to work for the Navy, one thing struck me immediately—the large number of activities and institutions that bear Admiral Stockdale's name. Here is a list of the ones I know about, and I'm sure it's only partial:

- This annual Stockdale Lecture at San Diego.
- The Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership at the U.S. Naval Academy, created as a nexus for addressing questions of ethics and character at the Academy.
- The Stockdale Chair of Professional Military Ethics at the Naval War College—my own position.
- The “Stockdale course” at the Naval War College. This is a course I teach with Dr. Tom Gibbons each trimester at Newport. It was originally created by Admiral Stockdale himself when he became the President at the College. The course is called Foundations of Moral Obligation, and in it we study major philosophical traditions of ethics. Admiral Stockdale, as I'm sure many of you know, wrote quite a bit about his belief that his study of philosophy at Stanford—in particular the Roman Stoics—was fundamental to his ability to survive the POW experience.
- The Stockdale Group at the Naval War College, which is a group of senior-class students doing research on ways to improve Navy leader development.

- The Annual Stockdale Leadership Award, two of which are given annually for outstanding leadership, one in the Atlantic Fleet and the other in the Pacific.

I think the most remarkable thing about this list is the underlying point of continuity—that every major institution and activity explicitly dedicated to questions of ethics and leadership in the U.S. Navy is named after James Bond Stockdale. Indeed, this fact is sometimes a source of considerable confusion. People who see my title, for example, often assume I must be at the Stockdale Center at Annapolis. I'm sure the various other Stockdale institutions and personnel encounter similar confusion.

Perhaps naming such things after Stockdale has been the case so long that we no longer pause to reflect on what a remarkable fact it is. Why would the Navy's culture appear to take it as obvious that anything to do with ethics and leadership should bear the Stockdale name? Of course Admiral Stockdale was a great Navy leader. But there are many great leaders in the history of the Navy. Couldn't even one of the things I mentioned be named after William F. Halsey, Raymond A. Spruance, Chester W. Nimitz, Richmond K. Turner, Stephen Decatur, or Oliver Hazard Perry?

Stockdale is distinct from those other leaders in that much of his courageous leadership occurred while he was a prisoner of war. Furthermore, his character and leadership were tested in extreme circumstances of torture and suffering. Those actions and accounts are noble and inspirational. There is no doubt that Admiral Stockdale exhibited exemplary strength of character and an unbreakable commitment to honor that is to be admired and celebrated. But there's little reason to take the leadership and character revealed in those circumstances and make them somehow normative for naval leadership in general. Great naval leadership will be required in circumstances like his only very rarely (thank God!).

Indeed, Stockdale's last true command was in the grade of commander, as a "CAG," a carrier air group "boss." Between his nearly eight years as a POW and at least one more year repairing his body and writing reports and filing charges against prisoners he believed had violated the Code of Conduct, he was completely outside normal Navy life for nearly ten years. Wouldn't it stand to reason that if we were to look for models of leadership to which future Navy leaders should aspire, Halsey or Spruance would be better and more natural choices, because their leadership under fire was tested in major naval battles? So if it's neither the unique quality of his leadership nor his exemplary conduct as a leader of prisoners of war, what is it about Stockdale that makes it all but self-evident that anything to do with ethics, leadership, and character in the Navy should bear his name?

I believe that ultimately neither his actual leadership in command nor even his strength of character (although those both give credibility to his other work)

explain this. I believe his name is associated with leadership and ethics more because his of post-prisoner of war activities. No other great Navy leader and no other former prisoner of war went on to write, think, and speak as widely and deeply about the meaning of all he had been through as did Stockdale. I believe it is the scholar side of the sailor-scholar Stockdale was that makes him unique among great Navy leaders.

In recognizing Stockdale as an exemplar of a kind of military virtue, I believe the Navy is implicitly recognizing the importance of the reflective, self-aware, and (dare I say?) philosophical dimensions of the military profession he exemplified and advocated. It is fitting that Stockdale's collection of speeches and essays, portions of which we read every trimester for the first lesson of the Stockdale Course, is entitled *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*.

This evening I hope to draw out some of the major threads of Stockdale's philosophy and attempt to apply them to issues in military leadership development now and for the future. In the end I will argue that although through the recognition the Navy gives Stockdale it acknowledges some very important truths about what's essential in leadership, in practice the Navy and the other services largely fail to make the adjustments and changes in culture and education necessary to make those truths integral to leader development.

Stockdale's written work returns again and again to a few central themes. The first of these he got from the Stoics—that life is not fair. On the face of it, this sounds trivial or banal. But as one thinks more deeply, the point is profound. The central point of Epictetus' *Enchiridion* (the Stoic book that most influenced Stockdale) is that one must reflect deeply on one crucial point, the distinction between what is truly something one can control and all the rest, which one cannot. That seems a blinding flash of the obvious, until you see where Epictetus goes with it. In the end, all one controls is one's inner reaction to events and one's own actions. What one ultimately cannot control is what those events are. As the first sentence of the book reads, "Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions." It was this central idea that was vital to Stockdale as a prisoner. Every external aspect of his life was under the control of others. What was done to him and to the other POWs was not "fair"—they all knew the Geneva Convention requirements, and it would be easy to obsess about the Vietnamese flagrant violations of international law.

Further, Stockdale had been flying directly overhead when the second supposed engagement with the destroyer *Turner Joy*, which led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and therefore the U.S. involvement in the entire Vietnam

War, occurred. As he later said, “I had the best seat in the house to watch that event, and our destroyers were just shooting at phantom targets—there were no PT boats there. . . . There was nothing there but black water and American fire power.” So to add a still deeper level of unfairness to his situation, Stockdale knew *for a fact* that the legal justification for the war itself, and therefore for the chain of events that had got him where he was as a prisoner, was completely false because the supposed attack had never taken place. He, of course, had been ordered not to disclose this fact, and one of his greatest fears was that under torture he might.

When I thought about this somewhat jarring historical revelation, I realized Stockdale exemplifies an absolutely foundational virtue required and expected of all American soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen—absolute clarity about their roles in a constitutional democracy.

He was a loyal and diligent servant of the American Republic. He wrote in later years that he considered the war both unjustified and poorly conducted, but his clarity about his role is worthy of our reflection—he knew he didn’t make policy. He reported what he saw accurately and wrote later of the guilt felt by those who, under pressure, gave false reports of an attack. But having given his honest report, he was crystal clear that he was an agent of policies (even foolish ones) he had not chosen and, unless the orders were illegal, it was not within his purview to evade or modify them.

Perhaps this passage from Epictetus came to his mind: “Remember that you are an actor in a drama, of such a kind as the author pleases to make it. If short, of a short one; if long, of a long one. If it is his pleasure you should act a poor man, a cripple, a governor, or a private person, see that you act it naturally. For this is your business, to act well the character assigned you; to choose it is another’s.” For Stockdale, the fundamental military virtue is the tough-mindedness Epictetus requires. One passage in Epictetus consistently shocks my students in the Stockdale course at Newport:

With regard to whatever objects give you delight, are useful, or are deeply loved, remember to tell yourself of what general nature they are, beginning from the most insignificant things. If, for example, you are fond of a specific ceramic cup, remind yourself that it is only ceramic cups in general of which you are fond. Then, if it breaks, you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies.

I suppose what shocks my students is the equation of loss of wives and children with broken crockery (although we all know people who have been undone by as little as a broken cup, too). But anyone who has lived long enough to have experienced loss, failure, and guilt knows there’s a profound truth here—that

such disasters destroy some people, while others find the inner resilience to pull up their socks and move on. I believe Stockdale would ask us what we're doing to develop such inner resilience in our personnel.

In the face of unfairness, Stockdale's major lesson is that regardless of the situation in which one finds oneself, one must be brutally realistic about what one can and cannot control. His Medal of Honor citation reads as follows:

Recognized by his captors as the leader in the Prisoners' of War resistance to interrogation and in their refusal to participate in propaganda exploitation, Rear Adm. Stockdale was singled out for interrogation and attendant torture. . . . Stockdale resolved to make himself a symbol of resistance regardless of personal sacrifice. He deliberately inflicted a near-mortal wound to his person in order to convince his captors of his willingness to give up his life rather than capitulate. . . . [T]he North Vietnamese . . . , convinced of his indomitable spirit, abated in their employment of excessive harassment and torture toward all of the Prisoners of War.

There is one crucial Stoic observation to make about this citation—that while Stockdale's actions achieved a good result, in that they caused the Vietnamese to change their treatment of prisoners, he didn't do what he did because he counted on that outcome. The outcome he could not control. He did it because of his own internal sense of duty, regardless of the outcome. That he could control. On another occasion he was asked who didn't make it out of Vietnam. He replied as follows:

Oh, that's easy, the optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, "We're going to be out by Christmas." And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, "We're going to be out by Easter." And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart. . . . This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

So what are the implications for today's military leaders if we take Stockdale seriously to heart? I believe we'd have to rebalance the focus on technical and operational expertise (which is where almost all our focus is today) with explicit discussion and development on the seemingly "soft" (dare I say philosophical?) internal intellectual and personal development of our people. In crisis, it's not technical knowledge or operational experience alone that sees us through. It's inner resilience and strength. Stockdale has very clear ideas about how best to develop that strength.

Stockdale himself took the initiative to study philosophy "on the side," when the Navy sent him to Stanford for a two-year course in history and economics to prepare him for future responsibilities in policy making. He grew frustrated with

his courses in those subjects. He noticed that whenever he asked a question that seemed genuinely interesting to him, the professor would cut off the conversation, saying, "Now we're getting into philosophy." That motivated Stockdale, against the advice of his adviser, to cross over to the philosophy department and begin course work there.

When he departed Stanford, his favorite professor of philosophy gave him a copy of the *Enchiridion*. He admits that when he looked at it his first reaction was that it was totally irrelevant to him as a man of action, but he read it out of respect for his professor. Only later, in the crucible, did Epictetus' words come to life and become his salvation. Nobody in the Navy and nothing in the Navy's concept of how to develop officers had ever so much as suggested that he have the very educational experience he credits with saving his life. Nothing the Navy had given, offered, or required of him as a developing officer did anything to give Stockdale the foundation his character needed to be ready to endure what would be required of him. That was entirely his initiative, undertaken at personal cost of additional work and effort for self-development.

When in busy military deployments do we find time for professional development beyond focusing on technical mastery? When would the captain of a ship invite the wardroom to a discussion of Stoicism over dinner? When, for example, do Surface Warfare Officers (SWOs) during their division-officer tours lift their horizons beyond getting their formal SWO qualification to think more fundamentally about officership and their deep self-understanding as military professionals?

I think Stockdale would suggest it shouldn't be a crazy suggestion that these things happen. Indeed, he would fear that officers who lack such inner depth, regardless of their technical and operational skill, are missing something fundamental, perhaps something that might save their lives or allow them to maintain their integrity under extreme pressure. He might, for example, look at the Army's great efforts to reground the professional ethic through the Center for the Army Profession and Ethics (see its website at www.cape.army.mil) and the Army's sustained attention to issues of ethics and professionalism in recent years as something the other services would benefit from studying and emulating.

In one chapter in *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, Stockdale recounts a conversation he had with an NBC executive who afterward became a lifelong friend. The executive criticized the usual press approach to political candidates, quizzing them on their positions on specific issues of the day. The executive went on to say that because those issues shift rapidly, the opinions of the moment would in the end be meaningless as a guide to what politicians would actually do in office. Stockdale reflected back on the conversation (with which he heartily agreed):

Character is probably more important than knowledge. . . . Of course, all things being equal, knowledge is to be honored. . . . But what I'm saying is that whenever I've been in trouble spots—in crises (and I've been in a lot of trouble and in a lot of crises)—the sine qua non of a leader has lain not in his chesslike grasp of issues and the options they portend, not in his style of management, not in his skill at processing information, but in his having the character, the heart, to deal spontaneously, honorably, and candidly with people, perplexities, and principles.*

This invites the question of how we appropriate the Stockdale legacy. Where do we consciously and explicitly strive to develop this resilient, self-aware, and philosophically informed character in our officers? Is the weight of the technical and operational knowledge essential to successful operation of ships, aircraft, and submarines, companies, and battalions being balanced with attention to self-awareness, character, and the clarity of philosophical thought Stockdale here stresses?

There is also a danger in raising the necessity of character development in the “can-do” culture of a military service. If the question is taken to be serious, there is the risk of a typical military response—establishing a new program to ensure that character is developed. To some degree, all of the service academies have in fact done this, creating “character development” bureaucracies that grow like weeds and generate motivational-speaker-level events of dubious value.

I doubt that Stockdale would have much use with those programmatic responses. He would say what is required is exposure to deep thought and internalized self-reflection of the sort that only intellectually rigorous examination can provide. While motivational-speaker character development can provide brief and perhaps exciting passing moments, what Stockdale is looking for runs far deeper.

It is beautifully described in Plato's discussion of the training of the Auxiliaries in his ideal Republic. The Auxiliaries are where the virtue of courage resides in the Republic. They are that part of the city that takes to the field to defend it. They are the professional military. Plato says they must have internalized utterly unshakable convictions that they are to be obedient to the laws of the lawmakers, regardless of pain, pleasure, desire, or fear. To achieve this, much more than motivational speaking will be required. Plato describes it as follows:

The dyers, when they want to dye wool purple, first choose from all the colors the single nature belonging to white things; then they prepare it beforehand and care for it with no little preparation so that it will most receive the color; and it is only then that they dye. And if a thing is dyed in this way, it becomes color-fast, and washing either without lyes or with lyes can't take away its color. . . .

* James B. Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), pp. 31–32. All subsequent page references are to this work.

To the extent of our power, [we are] doing something similar when we selected the soldiers and educated them. . . . [T]hey should receive the laws from us in the finest possible way like a dye, so that their opinion about what's terrible and about everything else would be color-fast because they had gotten the proper nature and rearing, and their dye could not be washed out by those lyes so terribly effective at scouring: pleasure . . . and pain, fear, and desire. . . . This kind of power and preservation, through everything, of the right and lawful opinion about what is terrible and what not, I call courage. (*Republic*, Book IV)

Stockdale, I'm pretty sure, would have embraced that definition of courage from Plato: "This kind of power and preservation, through everything, of the right and lawful opinion about what is terrible and what not." What is the process of dyeing the soul so deeply that it gains that power? The first and critical aspect of the Stockdale legacy is to invite us to ask that question deeply.

Another of Stockdale's recurrent themes is the importance of what he calls at various times "the pressure cooker," or the "crucible." He worried that plebe year at Annapolis had gotten too easy because of misguided attempts to reduce stress on midshipmen. He feared that education had lost some of the rigor necessary for knowledge to seep deeply into the soul.

Joseph Brennan, a philosopher who taught the first iterations of the Stockdale course at the Naval War College with Stockdale, wrote an essay in which he reflected on their collaboration. He says they began the course with a concept central to Stockdale's thought: "The alchemical transformation that may occur when a human being is subjected to intense pressure with a crucible of suffering of confinement" (p. 171). It is important to note that Stockdale did not especially want to call this course an "ethics" course. Indeed, he was quite skeptical about the explosion of ethics courses being offered in business, dental, and medical schools throughout the land. As Brennan put it, "He did not want his course to be the military equivalent of what he called 'ethics for dentists'" (p. 170). The danger, he feared, was that ethics would be reduced to a branch of psychology. Instead, he deeply believed that only rigorous examination of the classics of the humanities would provide the real depth required. To read deeply in Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Nietzsche was to show students that "much of what goes by the name social science serves up ideas expressed earlier and better in classical philosophy and modern literature" (p. 170).

If Stockdale is right about this, I think it poses a fundamental challenge to the culture of military education at virtually all levels. Let me cite the example I know best from my time at the Air Force Academy. The Air Force Academy (like all the academies, to various degrees) is, at its heart, an engineering school. As an extreme example, I once got into a fairly long argument with the Air Force officer charged with reporting the research being done by the Academy's faculty.

The metric he insisted on using was that only externally funded research projects (all of which fell in the engineering and science departments) even counted as research. I pointed out repeatedly that, using that metric, no publications in philosophy, literature, history, or social science would ever even appear in the “research report” of the institution. I lost the argument, by the way.

To take another example: cadets sharply distinguish two types of courses. Some are “real” subjects—math, science, and engineering. All the rest are “fuzzies”—not a term of approbation. Fuzzies include history, literature, and philosophy—not to mention art or music.

Or to work farther down the career path, what role do subjects in the humanities play in Professional Military Education curricula at all levels? Even if we leave aside the purely technical schools, which focus on teaching specific skills, there is virtually nothing. I taught in a department at the Army War College called Command, Leadership, and Management. There were two whole lessons dealing with ethics in the curriculum. But the real heart of the department was focused on the Defense Department budget process, mind-bogglingly difficult charts on the planning, budgeting, and execution process; various “flavor of the month” management theories; and notional-force-structure planning exercises.

I don’t mean for a minute to suggest these are not things senior officers need to know; many of these students would be managing those complex systems in the not-too-distant future. But the results-oriented and pragmatic mind-set cultivated by military culture is generally impatient with anything that isn’t immediately and practically relevant.

By contrast with that approach, consider Stockdale’s reflections on the Stockdale course’s effects on students:

We studied moral philosophy by looking at models of human beings under pressure, their portraits drawn from the best materials we could find in philosophy and literature. The professional implications for military men and women followed. We did not have to draw diagrams [or, one might add, PowerPoint slides]; the military implications came up naturally in seminar discussions. (p. 171)

These seem to me the main elements of the Stockdale legacy—the importance of a deeply reflective self-understanding, grounded in a clear-eyed and realistic appreciation of oneself and the world in which one acts. It stresses the central importance of character and, indeed, its primacy over technical knowledge and practical know-how. Most counterculturally of all for the military, Stockdale asserts that serious reading of the humanities is the single most important means to developing those attributes, because only such reading addresses fundamental human questions with rigor and depth.

If we were truly to take Stockdale seriously and live up to the intuitions that have caused so many Navy institutions to borrow his name and authority, we

would have to rethink a great deal about military culture, military education, and officer development. Or in the end does Stockdale play for the Navy and the other services the role of so many other saints and heroes throughout history, that of objects of veneration but not examples to be followed, not people whose teachings we truly heed? Are we content to relegate Stockdale to portraits on the wall, plaster statues of the saint, and eponymous programs that only scratch the surface? I submit we do him a great disservice if we don't take seriously the thoughts of this deeply philosophical fighter pilot.

For those in the Reserve Officer Training Corps and junior officers who are in the audience tonight, a special word. You are at the threshold of self-sacrificial service to our nation. When you swear your oath to the Constitution of the United States, you give up a good deal of moral autonomy and commit to discipline your mind and body to be prepared to meet the unpredictable, but certain, challenges your profession will send your way. Stockdale's message to you would be, don't sell yourselves short. Don't be content to remain on the surface and focus only on knowledge and skill. His example should lead you to take every opportunity (and make them if you aren't given them) to think deeply and broadly. When someone tells you, "Well, we're getting into philosophy here," don't take that as a reason to get back to the practical. Take it as the challenge to press right on. As Socrates put it twenty-five hundred years ago, "The unexamined life is not worth leading." And as the words over the entrance to the Delphic oracle reminded everyone in the classical world, γνῶθι σεαυτόν—*gnothi seauton*, "know thyself."

I'd like to close with Admiral Stockdale's description of his parachute descent into seven and a half years of hell:

On September 9, 1965, I flew at 500 knots right into a flak trap, at tree-top level, in a little A-4 airplane—the cockpit walls not even three feet apart—which I couldn't steer after it was on fire, its control system shot out. After ejection I had about thirty seconds to make my last statement in freedom before I landed in the main street of a little village right ahead. And so help me, I whispered to myself, "Five years down there, at least. I'm leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epicte-tus." (p. 189)

The "training" that saved Stockdale's life was a slim volume written by a Roman slave-philosopher in the second century. What would it mean for Professional Military Education if we thought deeply about Stockdale's message? And even more importantly, what would it mean for all of you who wear the uniform of the United States of America?

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