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FOUNDATIONS OF MORAL OBLIGATION

After Forty Years

Thomas J. Gibbons

In these times of ethical uncertainty, especially among senior Navy leaders amid the ongoing “Fat Leonard” fiasco, we need to look to our roots. The Foundations of Moral Obligation elective, otherwise known as “The Stockdale Course,” has been a mainstay at the Naval War College (NWC) for most of the past forty years. Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale, USN, the fortieth President of the College, collaborated with Dr. Joseph Brennan, a professor emeritus from Columbia University’s Barnard College, to develop the elective shortly after Stockdale assumed the presidency. Little did they know how popular the elective would become and the positive impact it would have on graduates over the years. The Foundations elective has become a part of the moral fabric of both the institution and the U.S. Navy.

One indication of this is that NWC’s formal role in both leadership and ethics has expanded relatively recently. Then–Chief of Naval Operations Jonathan W. Greenert approved the first Navy Leader Development Strategy in January

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2013 to “synchronize the Navy’s leadership and strengthen our naval profession by providing a common framework for leader development.”¹ In early 2014, Greenert directed the President of the Naval War College to be responsible for all officer and enlisted leadership and ethics curricula for the Navy.² A few months later, in March 2014, the Naval Leadership and Ethics Center was created at Naval Station Newport to provide leadership education and training, curriculum support, research, and assessment.³ With their Foundations elective,

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Stockdale and Brennan laid the foundation for leadership and ethics instruction at the Naval War College, and their work continues to have a profound impact on leaders throughout the Navy today.

Stockdale and Brennan wrote the Foundations syllabus and cobbled together the reading list and assignments in about six months during the first half of 1978. The course was offered for the first time in the fall trimester of academic year (AY) 1978–79, then was taught again during the winter trimester that same academic year. Stockdale himself only taught the course that bears his name for one year (actually two trimesters). Brennan continued to teach the elective until he retired in 1992. Professor Paul Regan began teaching the Foundations elective in the fall trimester of 1994 while on active duty as a U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) captain. He retired from the Coast Guard the following year, but continued to teach the Foundations elective for the next sixteen years, through 2010. Dr. Martin L. Cook assumed duties as the Stockdale Chair at the Naval War College in June 2009 and cotaught the elective with the author until his retirement in 2016. Each of these men brought passion and vigor into the classroom to make the course successful.⁴

The purpose of this article is to highlight the history of the Foundations of Moral Obligation elective and to illustrate how it has changed over time—and yet how much it has remained the same. The article also will attempt to answer the question of why this elective has remained one of the most popular at the College. It seems deeply counterintuitive, on the face of it, that midgrade and senior military officers and government civilians—a group typically educated in technology and management and focused on the practical—would find the reading of difficult primary sources in philosophy and literature such an important part of their NWC education.

Stockdale graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy with the class of 1947. His classmates include former president Jimmy Carter; Senator John McCain; and Admiral Stansfield Turner, USN (Ret.), who later became director of the Central Intelligence Agency.⁵ While serving as President of the College, Turner made sweeping changes to improve the curriculum, based on his experience as a Rhodes Scholar. In fact, many of the improvements instituted during the “Turner Revolution” are still in effect today. Stockdale, having spent nearly seven and a half years as a prisoner of war at the infamous Hanoi Hilton, came to Newport intent on making an impact and establishing an elective course in ethics. In a letter to Brennan dated December 5, 1977, Stockdale wrote, “I have come to the conclusion that if I am to leave a legacy here it must be done from the classroom. My boss, Jim Holloway, and my predecessor, Stan Turner, and others advise against ‘getting tied down’ to a lecture schedule. I’m going to ignore their warnings—and try, by next fall, to structure an elective course in something like ethics.”⁶

The Stockdale legacy of leadership and ethics has grown exponentially throughout the U.S. Navy over the years. As Dr. Cook highlighted, “I think the most remarkable thing . . . [is] that every major institution and activity explicitly dedicated to questions about ethics and leadership in the U.S. Navy is named after James Bond Stockdale.”⁷ Stockdale’s legacy in leadership and ethics throughout the U.S. Navy is unquestionable. However, he was not always interested in ethics.

THE INFLUENCE OF EPICTETUS

After his graduation from the Naval Academy, Stockdale pursued tough operational Navy assignments. He eventually attended flight training and became a fighter pilot and later an experimental test pilot. In 1960, he was selected to attend graduate school for two years at Stanford University to get a master’s degree. While at Stanford, Stockdale wandered over to the halls of the Philosophy Department one morning. He became enamored of philosophy, although his academic adviser tried to discourage him, telling him it was a waste of time.

We all experience moments like these, those crossroads at which we choose a path that fundamentally changes the course of our lives. This visit to the Philosophy Department was a life-changing moment for Stockdale. That morning he met a USN veteran of World War II, Professor Philip Rhinelander, who was teaching in the Philosophy Department after a long and distinguished academic career. Rhinelander took Stockdale under his wing, enrolled him in his course, and over the next few weeks tutored him privately. Stockdale thrived, and even took additional philosophy courses from other professors at Stanford.⁸

In their last meeting together prior to his graduation, Rhinelander gave Stockdale a copy of Epictetus’s handbook, *The Enchiridion*.⁹ Stockdale was dumbfounded, but took the book and read it, out of respect for Rhinelander. In a letter to Brennan years later, Stockdale confessed, “I recognized nothing that applied to the career I had known. I was a fighter pilot, an organizer, a motivator of young aviators, a martini drinker, a golf player, a technologist—and this ancient rag talked about not concerning oneself with matters over which he had no control, etc. I thought to myself, ‘Poor old Rhinelander—he’s just too far gone.’”¹⁰

Little did Stockdale know that this small book would be his salvation, his source of strength in the prison camps of North Vietnam. Stockdale would embrace the Stoic philosophy and make it his own. He would write essays and deliver speeches to audiences throughout the country. In fact, years later as President of the College, he often began his remarks to students with the phrase “Remember, life is not fair. Once you accept that, you can move on.”¹¹

Epictetus’s teachings and the Stoic philosophy would play a major role in Stockdale’s life, especially while he was imprisoned in North Vietnam. He wrote to Brennan, “My ‘secret weapon’ was the security I felt in anchoring my resolve to

those selected portions of philosophic thought that emphasized human dignity and self-respect. Epictetus certainly taught that.”¹² While in prison, Stockdale lived in the world of Epictetus and applied the lessons and teachings from *The Enchiridion* to survive. “The Stoic philosopher Epictetus was foremost among my consolations in the pressure cooker of Hanoi.”¹³

After his release from prison in 1973, Stockdale spent nearly a year in recovery healing his physical wounds—and pressing charges against fellow prisoners who had collaborated with the enemy and violated the Code of Conduct. Stockdale wrote, “To the Stoic, the greatest injury that can be inflicted on a person is administered by himself when he destroys the good man within him.”¹⁴ Stockdale argued that the collaborators had betrayed the trust of their fellow prisoners and deserved punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice; however, the U.S. government took no action against the collaborators and eventually allowed them to retire. In 1976, Stockdale became a national hero and received the Medal of Honor for his service in Vietnam, which included spending almost seven and a half years as a prisoner of war, much of it in solitary confinement.¹⁵

STOCKDALE AND BRENNAN

In 1975, Dr. Joseph Brennan was teaching philosophy at Columbia University. He became intrigued by what he read about Stockdale and his study of Epictetus and the Stoics. He sent Stockdale a letter asking how philosophy had given him inner strength throughout his time as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Brennan subsequently requested to add Stockdale’s lengthy response to an upcoming book he was writing. This exchange laid the groundwork for a friendship that would endure for the rest of their lives.¹⁶

Stockdale took command of the Naval War College as its fortieth President on October 13, 1977. Shortly after taking over, he contacted both Brennan and Rhinelander to get their assistance with and feedback on his proposed philosophy course. Although they had corresponded by letter for almost two years, Stockdale and Brennan did not meet until the change of command. In a letter to Brennan dated December 5, 1977, shortly after taking command, Stockdale wrote, “What are the philosophic roots of a military profession? What are the watershed distinctions that separate bureaucrats from warriors, winners from losers? I know this is no simple matter to get a layman up to speed to teach such sensitive material—but I want my students to have something more than a few mutually contradictory slogans when their backs are against the wall. . . . I need a theme, a recommended reading list, and a lot of time to think.”¹⁷

Brennan visited Newport and the College again over the Christmas holidays in 1977. He met with Stockdale several times during the visit to discuss the proposed ethics course. Brennan was on track to accept a position in India with the

State Department, but turned it down when Stockdale offered him a part-time job as his assistant to develop and teach the course. In a letter to a friend dated January 21, 1978, Brennan wrote as follows:

My job title is Consultant to the President, term: 11 months of 1978; my duties include preparing the course, getting up a reading list, conferring with the admiral until 17 August when my wife and I will move to Newport for the 16 weeks that the class runs. I'll be on standby to give classes when the admiral is called away. The hardest part will be to prepare the course—it's easy enough to do that for oneself, but when somebody, who is not a professional, is to teach it, that's a new one for me.¹⁸

Brennan immediately went to work preparing the course. In his undated NWC journal notes, Brennan wrote, "When I suggested I'd like to visit classes and talk to other faculty, he [Stockdale] said, 'Don't pay too much attention to those guys.'"¹⁹

As the new President of the College, Stockdale spent time reviewing the curricula for all courses. He was concerned about what he found, and decided to implement electives for all students during the following AY, 1979–80. In a letter to Brennan dated January 13, 1978, he wrote as follows:

I've created quite a stir with the Departments, asking for electives—not only for myself—but for Constitutional Law, Soviet foreign policy, etc. I'm telling 'em that I can drive a truck through the Gaps our three departments leave in the educational base for mid-career officers and that the option is to let me supervise a broad electives program or move over and give me 25 percent of the room for *my 4th* department (Philosophy & Law—or whatever). The profs *Love* it; the Administrators are adapting.²⁰ [emphasis original]

Stockdale was passionate about implementing changes to make sure the curriculum and the faculty met the needs of its graduates, then and in the future. The existing curriculum did not address any of the things that Stockdale had found most valuable during his time as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. As Stockdale noted, "No philosophical survival kits are issued' when man goes to war."²¹

Stockdale and Brennan both spent long hours trying to decide on an appropriate name for the course they would teach. As Brennan noted, "Stockdale did not like the word *ethics*. He thought the contemporary 'ethics explosion' had eroded the older, nobler sense of the word. He knew that ethics courses were spreading rapidly, not only in military institutions but also in business, industry, and the professions."²² Stockdale thought that the term *moral philosophy* was more suitable because it tied into the humanities.²³ Stockdale and Brennan finally agreed on the course title Foundations of Moral Obligation. But they spent many additional hours deciding on the absolute best readings and lessons for the course.

In a letter to a friend dated January 21, 1978, Brennan wrote: “I do know that he is interested in anything that has to do with prison camps—he is trying to get Alex. Solzhenitsyn up to the War College for a lecture. He also wants to put some literary works on his reading list, and mentioned Camus. Since he, Stockdale, is an enemy of bureaucracy, I thought that something of Kafka might do. Even *Darkness at Noon* occurred to me as a possibility. . . . If you have any suggestions, I’d be grateful.”²⁴

In a letter to a friend dated February 5, 1978, Brennan wrote as follows:

I spent this last long weekend, Thursday through Saturday, with Adm Stockdale at Newport and Providence. . . . He is a very intense, very attractive man. . . . We now have a course title, “The Foundations of Moral Obligation,” as well as a tentative reading list which includes the Book of Job, the Socratic Dialogues of Plato, selections from Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Kant’s *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, Sartre on Existentialism, as well as fiction readings including Conrad’s *Typhoon*, Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, Kafka’s *Trial* . . . and Solzhenitsyn’s *Ivan Denisovich*.²⁵

Stockdale and Brennan finalized the course readings and syllabus during the spring of 1978 and prepared to offer the elective during the fall trimester.

THE STOCKDALE-BRENNAN ERA

Neither Stockdale nor Brennan knew how well the new course would be received by students once they actually started teaching. Both worked diligently to ensure that the syllabus, reading list, and subsequent seminar discussions would provide valuable information to midgrade military officers in search of a moral compass. Brennan wrote, “Through the winter, spring, and summer of 1978, Admiral Stockdale and I met frequently for intensive discussions concerning the organization of the course.”²⁶ Stockdale fervently believed the course would fill a void in the students’ careers. He told a reporter, “Today’s ranks are filled with officers who have been weaned on slogans and fads of the sort preached in the better business schools—that rational managerial concepts will cure all evils. This course is my defense against the buzz-word-nomograph-acronym mentality.”²⁷

In an address he gave at Trinity Church in Newport on Sunday, May 7, 1978, for Rhode Island’s Independence Day, Stockdale used material from the upcoming course in his remarks. Stockdale highlighted both Viktor E. Frankl’s book *Man’s Search for Meaning* and Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* to illustrate the importance of freedom to the individual.²⁸

The news of Stockdale’s Foundations of Moral Obligation course spread quickly to the Navy Staff. A retired Navy captain who was in the first seminar shared the following: “By early 1978, the word on the street around DC was that this course is a ‘must take’ if you wanted to think deeply about the business you were

in and were lucky enough to get orders to the War College.²⁹ Stockdale's reputation as a Medal of Honor recipient, along with Brennan's prowess as a scholar, fueled the media blitz. The fact that they were team-teaching a philosophy course for military students, many with recent combat experience in Vietnam, added to the attractiveness for the media. Brennan wrote, "Word got around that a Vietnam war hero with the Medal of Honor was teaching a course in moral philosophy at the Naval War College, and the media moved in with tape recorders, television cameras, and fast-writing reporters."³⁰

The initial seminar, offered in the fall 1978 trimester, was capped at fifty students. The second offering was in the winter trimester; it had thirty-five students and fifteen auditors. Brennan related that the students idolized Stockdale, so there was no difficulty filling all the seats.³¹ The course was designed for Stockdale and Brennan each to deliver one-hour lectures on Wednesday afternoon, followed by a one-and-a-half-hour seminar discussion on Thursday afternoon. The elective met for ten weeks during the trimester. Stockdale intended to use original classic material along with popular novels, and he created a challenging reading list.³² Stockdale said, "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."³³ The syllabus included the following:

- Week One Introduction. The Prisoner of War and the Human Predicament. The World of Epictetus.
- Week Two The Book of Job and the Problem of Evil.
- Week Three The Socratic Example. Four Platonic Dialogues.
- Week Four Aristotle and the *Nichomachean Ethics*.
- Week Five Law: Of Conscience and the State. Kant and Hart.
- Week Six Happiness as Utility; Justice and Fairness. Mill and Rawls.
- Week Seven Individualism and the Collective I. Emerson; Sartre; Camus.
- Week Eight Individualism and the Collective II. Lenin and Soviet Philosophy.
- Week Nine Science and Values. Monod and the Moral Ideal of Objective Knowledge. Wittgenstein and the Ethic of Silence.
- Week Ten Return to the Beginning. The Stoic Ideal and the Ethic of the Military.³⁴

Each student took a midterm and a final examination and submitted a short paper. The weekly readings were difficult for the students, especially those without a background in philosophy. However, the seminar discussions allowed

Stockdale and Brennan to interact with students and facilitate the learning process. Moreover, the elective gave students an opportunity to expand their horizons and to read and discuss material they never would have read on their own.

During the first academic year it was offered, the Foundations elective received high ratings from students. In fact, in a report to the President of the Naval War College, Brennan related that it “ranked highest of the 18 electives offered, topped only by FE-117, a course in advanced electronic warfare.”³⁵ Student evaluations ranged from 6.19 to 6.58 on a 7-point Likert scale.³⁶ Overall, the initial offering was very successful. Brennan related that one of the few negative comments was that “[t]here was not enough structure to the seminars and there was a tendency to rely too much on unprepared class discussion to carry them.”³⁷ Stockdale and Brennan worked to improve the seminar discussions for the second offering.

Both Stockdale and Brennan were passionate about the Foundations elective because it filled a void in the students’ professional development. This passion was evident to the students, faculty, and staff at the Naval War College and throughout the Navy. Unfortunately, Stockdale retired from the U.S. Navy and left the College shortly after AY 1978–79 to accept a position as president of The Citadel. However, his interest in and influence on the Foundations course continued long after he retired. Likewise, the bond of friendship that Stockdale had forged with Brennan continued to grow and prosper over the years.

THE BRENNAN YEARS

After Stockdale’s retirement, Brennan decided to remain at the College and continued to teach the Foundations elective himself as a part-time employee for the next thirteen years. Brennan did not change the course significantly during those years. However, he limited the course to twenty-five students to make it more manageable for only one instructor. Brennan continued to offer the course for two trimesters each academic year.³⁸

During the period 1986–91, Brennan developed and taught another elective, “Philosophy in American Values.” This course was popular at the College and allowed Brennan to dig deeper into American philosophy and literature. He also served as an academic adviser to international students at the Naval Command College. Although still a part-time employee, Brennan carried what many today would consider a full load.³⁹

Throughout this time, Brennan’s friendship with Stockdale and his family continued to blossom and grow. In a letter to Stockdale dated September 13, 1979, Brennan wrote as follows:

Yes, Foundations of Moral Obligation did meet for the first time yesterday, but it was a little like putting on *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. Still, the class is delighted to know that you will come to deliver the valedictory lecture at the 10th

session. . . . This academic year will show, I think, whether EL 101 (Foundations of Moral Obligation) has what-it-takes to stand on its own feet. I think it can and should, but the comparatively large audience for the course's first trimester is still a result of your personal contribution and fame.⁴⁰

In a subsequent letter dated November 6, 1979, Brennan wrote, "Mid-term is past, course papers are being busily written, and so far all seems to have gone very well, though I do miss you. I've had to do a lot more restructuring [of] the course than I had thought. Not that the content or the reading has changed—no, just the way of doing the course without you."⁴¹

Stockdale contemplated introducing the Foundations course to students at The Citadel.⁴² He continued to rely on Brennan's feedback and advice in his outside presentations and articles. But he also provided input to his successors as NWC President about Brennan's success with the elective at the College. In a letter to Brennan dated March 19, 1982, Stockdale wrote, "Before I forget it, please let me know what you hear about the identity of Ed Welch's successor. I'll get on the phone with him right away and make a plea to keep the Philosophy Department (i.e., You). All I need is his name."⁴³

Stockdale subsequently wrote to Rear Admiral James E. Service, Commander, Carrier Group Two, the incoming College President, on August 5, 1982:

I'm always afraid that NWC will be put under pressure to rid itself of all *apparently* quasi-military courses such as the Foundations of Moral Obligation which I founded with my good friend Dr. Joe Brennan.

I have no idea that you would even consider discontinuing it, but just as a *precaution*, let me give you my impressions of how it has gone under Joe Brennan alone since I left. I speak to his classes nearly every year. (He has added an American Values course which also draws a lot of subscribers in the spring trimester). As the classes filed out of their joint session to hear me this spring, officer after officer—particularly Marines—said "Best course, Best teacher in the place." I think a review of the class critiques will verify this. Joe rings the bell.⁴⁴ [emphasis original]

Stockdale also spoke to Rear Admiral Joseph C. Strasser, a later President of the College, about Brennan and the Foundations elective. In a letter to Brennan of January 10, 1992, Stockdale wrote:

Then at my request he buzzed the Admiral, and I told Joe [Strasser] how proud I was to be a part of your project. We shared stories about the number of Marine and Naval officers we've each run into, who, on mention of the Naval War College, immediately mention "Joe Brennan's courses." As I count it, you are now in your 14th year there, and some of our 42 year old students in '78-79 are now 56! Some retired Admirals and Generals telling young grandchildren about their career highlights. . . . Admiral Strasser is a great fan of yours.⁴⁵

Upon his retirement in 1992, Brennan received many accolades, including designation by the Secretary of the Navy as professor emeritus of philosophy.⁴⁶ His book *Foundations of Moral Obligation: A Practical Guide to Ethics and Morality* was published in 1992, shortly before he retired.

Brennan died in 2004, but his legacy is well established at the Naval War College. He helped to develop the Foundations elective and continued the course for thirteen years after Vice Admiral Stockdale retired. However, his legacy consists of much more than that. Brennan touched the hearts and minds of hundreds of NWC graduates and inspired them to look at things in a different light and to consider alternate paths to achieve their own *eudaimonia*.⁴⁷

At Dr. Brennan's retirement ceremony, Stockdale said, "From the classics, throughout 14 years of teaching here, you have conducted what I consider to be the world's best course in military leadership. Never after taking your course will anyone be comfortable in believing that the analytic and reasoned approach is the 'be all and end all' of officership."⁴⁸

Perhaps that is the essence of the Naval War College education.

THE REGAN YEARS

Paul Regan began teaching the Foundations of Moral Obligation elective in the fall trimester of AY 1994–95 while on active duty as a USCG captain assigned to the College as the USCG adviser. There was a two-year gap in the course between Brennan's retirement and Regan taking over.

Originally, Regan was recruited, with two other faculty members, to teach the Foundations elective to end the temporary discontinuation of the course. Regan had a background in philosophy and volunteered to assist. When both the other faculty members fell out, Regan agreed to teach the elective alone. Even after his retirement from active duty in 1995, he continued to teach the elective one trimester every academic year for the next fifteen years. He worked for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in Boston and drove to Newport one afternoon each week to teach.⁴⁹

Regan was also responsible for keeping the Stockdale name associated with the elective. Regan wrote, "About halfway through my time with the course I began to realize that many of the students no longer associated the course with him [Stockdale], so I requested the name change to include 'The Stockdale Course.' Enrollment figures immediately jumped up."⁵⁰

Regan did not change the course significantly when he started teaching. In a statement dated June 6, 2016, Regan confessed, "I made a conscious decision to stick with the basic outline that Stockdale initiated and Prof Brennan continued. Since my degree is in scholastic philosophy, which is heavily based in classic philosophy, I say—and continue to see—the value of reading the actual works of the

great philosophers. Quite honestly, from my background in philosophy, were I to design the course from scratch I would have used much the same approach as Stockdale and Professor Brennan.”⁵¹ However, when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the original lesson on Lenin and Soviet philosophy became outdated and was removed.

Regan continued to use Brennan’s book *Foundations of Moral Obligation* as a major course text. The major change he instituted was to establish two different paths, a reading path and a writing path. Students in the reading path completed all assigned readings and the final examination; students in the writing path completed only the major readings and Professor Brennan’s book, and were required to write a ten-to-twelve-page paper on a topic dealing with ethics or moral judgment.⁵² Regan explained, “After a while it was clear that the workload for this course was substantially greater than that of most other electives. Indeed, even after a degree in philosophy and years teaching, I could read most of the material at about 6 pages an hour. I attempted to level out the course by letting the students choose to express their thoughts in a longer paper (the standard elective length) or devote their time to the reading.”⁵³

Although he only taught the course for one trimester each academic year, Paul Regan’s legacy is that he kept the elective vibrant and exciting for the students. He taught the course alone longer than Brennan had. His seminars were popular and full of lively discussions. Regan admitted, “Having lived real lives, students were not afraid to (courteously) say, ‘Captain, you’re full of crap’ . . . which [led] to debate and, hopefully, the opening of minds.”⁵⁴ Regan summarized it best as follows: “And finally, I think every good teacher realizes he or she learns as much as the students. Teaching the Stockdale Course was a privilege for me. I mentioned that in the last few years I taught by taking leave from FEMA every Wednesday and got no reimbursement—but really would have paid to teach for all I learned and all the fine and dedicated students I had over the years. . . . It was an honor and has become part of who I am.”⁵⁵ Regan left the College after AY 2009–10.⁵⁶

THE COOK YEARS

Dr. Martin Cook came to the Naval War College in 2009 as the Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale Professor of Professional Military Ethics. He cotaught the Foundations elective with Dr. Tom Gibbons. Cook came from the U.S. Air Force Academy but also had taught at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for several years. His record of publication and teaching professional military ethics was unsurpassed, and he integrated quickly into the College’s leadership and ethics team.

Dr. Cook knew little about the Foundations of Moral Obligation elective before he arrived but quickly realized its value for active-duty military officers.

Accordingly, he made the decision to offer the elective during all three trimesters of the academic year. Cook also modified the curriculum to reflect contemporary issues affecting the military today. He added lessons on non-Western religion, including reading the Hindu Bhagavad Gita, and a lesson entitled “Finding Meaning in One’s Life,” reading Leo Tolstoy’s short story *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and Elie Wiesel’s novel *Night*. Cook introduced Jostein Gaarder’s novel *Sophie’s World*, an easy-to-read history of philosophy, to help students gain a better understanding of the different philosophers they studied.⁵⁷ Karl Marlantes’s book *What It Is like to Go to War* is one of the best accounts of modern combat ever written, and became popular with students and faculty alike. Cook sponsored Marlantes as a guest speaker at the College every year.

Cook’s syllabus included the following:

- Week One Greek and Roman Stoics. Epictetus. Stockdale’s *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*.
- Week Two The Greek Tradition. Socrates/Plato. “Euthyphro,” “Apology,” and “Crito.”
- Week Three Plato. *The Republic*.
- Week Four The Greek Tradition. Aristotle. Nichomachean Ethics.
- Week Five The Western Religious Tradition.
- Week Six The Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant.
- Week Seven Life in Society. UN Charter, Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, and Kant’s “Perpetual Peace.”
- Week Eight Finding Meaning in One’s Life. Tolstoy and Wiesel.
- Week Nine Non-Western (Hindu) Perspective. *The Bhagavad Gita*. Early Christian “Just War,” and Karl Marlantes’s *What It Is like to Go to War*.
- Week Ten Some Skeptical Challenges. Dostoyevsky’s “The Grand Inquisitor,” Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and the Book of Job.

Cook established at the Naval War College the “Great Books” method taught at his alma mater, the University of Chicago, and at St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland, and Santa Fe, New Mexico. The students read original-source great books and then discussed the readings in seminar, with the faculty members facilitating the discussion. In other words, the seminar discussion was the primary focus, not the faculty members’ lecturing from the front of the classroom. Cook and Gibbons sat at different ends of the classroom to facilitate and moderate the

student discussions. Students learned just as much from each other and from the readings as they did from the faculty moderators. Cook commented, “I personally believe that the modified great books method makes the students engage far better than a lecture-discussion course would.”⁵⁸

Cook also relied heavily on technology; he instituted use of the Blackboard learning management system. The electronic syllabus he built within Blackboard actually came alive on screen with links to podcasts, embedded videos, and contemporary lectures on relevant topics. From the readings each week, every student wrote a one- or two-page posting of thoughts, criticisms, comments, and points to be explored. Students also were required to read and comment on each other’s postings. This system had several advantages. First, students started the weekly discussions before they even arrived at the classroom, by commenting on each other’s postings. Additionally, students improved their writing skills through the weekly postings and immediate feedback, rather than writing a ten-to-twelve-page paper at the end of the course. Blackboard enabled Cook and Gibbons to jump-start the seminar discussion before they actually came to class.

Cook departed the Naval War College in 2016 to work at the U.S. Air Force Academy as a distinguished visiting professor. His fame and reputation as a leading scholar in professional military ethics had enhanced the Foundations elective and helped to establish it as one of the most popular electives during his tenure. His legacy of using technology, along with the Great Books method, improved the delivery of the course and brought it into the twenty-first century.

STAYING POWER

Why has the Foundations of Moral Obligation elective continued to be so popular after nearly forty years? This simple yet thought-provoking question has many answers. The easy one is that the course owes its success to a triad of the faculty, the syllabus and readings, and the students. But there is much more to answering the question than that.

The faculty members who taught the elective over the years were all qualified and competent in their discipline. Moreover, they were all gifted and talented educators. Even more than that, they were passionate about the curriculum and brought that energy and passion to the classroom. Each in his own way set the conditions that enabled the students to think about the material, apply it to their lives, and then share those experiences with others in seminar. Regan revealed, “Most tellingly, in the class students would often bare their souls and bring to light moral dilemmas they had to deal with—and most implicitly trust their classmates not to let their statements be repeated.”⁵⁹ Rather than simply spouting information about ancient philosophers or literature in the seminar, the instructors

empowered their students to apply what they learned to their daily lives and share this with their classmates.

The syllabus and course readings that Stockdale and Brennan originally selected almost forty years ago have remained fairly consistent across time. Of the ten lessons in the original syllabus, six are relatively similar today. In an after-action report dated January 29, 1980, Brennan wrote, “[T]he course should center on, though not be restricted to, important classical and modern readings in philosophy and the humanities. Moreover, whenever possible the readings should consist of primary, not secondary, sources.”⁶⁰ This guidance has stood the test of time and still is reflected in the syllabus. In 1982, Stockdale noted that “[w]e 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 implication for military men and women followed. We did not have to draw diagrams: the military applications came up naturally in seminar discussions.”⁶¹

Many of the readings are time-consuming and difficult to understand the first time through. Students often ask themselves, “Now, what did I just read?” However, the lessons and pearls of wisdom in the readings are priceless. Cook wrote, “I guess I was pleasantly surprised how many students seemed to make serious and genuine efforts to read and understand the material, even if they really didn’t get it until class.”⁶² In the seminar it is easy to see when the light goes on and a student suddenly “gets it” and really understands the text. This enables the learners to apply a text to their own lives and share it with others. One important metric of success is that, no matter how uncertain they were whether they had understood the week’s assigned reading when they arrived in class, during subsequent lessons most students would refer back unflinching and accurately to previous readings.

Although they are difficult for many, the course readings are timeless and tend to make a lasting impression on students. In fact, many times on the last day of class the instructors provided supplementary reading lists for students to continue their studies in military ethics long after graduation. One student wrote, “I believe that I am better prepared after taking the Stockdale Course. Dr. Regan has given us a pretty impressive reading list to follow up our studies in this course. I’m making it a mission in my life to try and read all these classic works. If anything, this course has provoked a hunger in me to learn more about ethics and moral behavior. It must surely be a positive thing in a man’s life if he at least yearns to learn more about living a proper existence.”⁶³

For some, the readings opened new doors and exposed them to material they never would have selected on their own. In a letter to Brennan a student wrote, “The readings introduced me to material that I should have read a long time ago, and never had either the inclination or the opportunity.”⁶⁴ Stockdale wanted

students to read and discuss the classics. He trusted that doing so would help them to develop a moral compass and enable them to think critically. Brennan later wrote, "Training in the humanities, Stockdale believed, would show that much of what goes by the name 'social science' serves up ideas expressed earlier and better in classical philosophy and modern literature."⁶⁵ This course provided an opportunity for many Naval War College graduates to read and discuss classic literature, which shaped their personal and professional development and had a positive impact on their lives.

The students are the third critical element in the triad of success. For the most part, the students at the Naval War College are motivated, want to learn, and work hard. In other words, they are avid consumers of the educational experience. Many have recent combat experience and are willing to share those experiences with classmates. They bring a willingness to learn and an insatiable desire to question things that others often take for granted. Why do the students like the Foundations elective? Regan's analysis is as follows:

Almost any military career path is technical in one way or another. Rarely is there the opportunity to answer the real questions: What makes life worth living? For the military, what is worth dying for? How should I raise my children? These fundamental questions require a certain maturity to address. The students at the NWC have reached an age where these questions are important, as are the answers. There are few times in life when one has the opportunity to look in depth at such questions.⁶⁶

The Foundations elective provides an opportunity for students to ask these "hard questions" in a nonthreatening environment among peers who are asking the same things. Cook opined, "I think it's popular because I think Aristotle's observations about the study of ethics (that it's not useful to do it with the young, who lack experience) is borne out by the fact that after a couple of decades of adult experience they seem so eager to think about these matters."⁶⁷ There is a difference between studying philosophy as an undergraduate and as a graduate student: the graduate student can relate more to the lessons because of his or her greater life experiences.

Countless letters express students' gratitude to the College for offering the Foundations elective. A USN officer and future President of the Naval War College wrote to Stockdale, "Some students questioned the course's relevance, if you can believe it. For me it would be like questioning the relevance of oxygen. . . . I find the subjects of the course extremely useful. Thanks for the effort—it is still bearing fruit 20+ years later."⁶⁸ Another student wrote, "It's a dangerous and deadly working environment we have *chosen* to work in. Without this foundation (pun intended) in moral and ethical behavior, when we do get in the buzzsaw, can we really be sure we'll be prepared?" (emphasis original).⁶⁹

Students continue to rate the course high on their end-of-course evaluations. Recent students' comments reflect this sentiment.

"Amazing course to only add to my tool box in becoming a better effective leader and thinker."

"Reading and understanding certain philosophers like Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Thomas Aquinas, Kierkegaard, etc. can be difficult. This course definitely challenged my ability to read and interpret their works. Also, the course work challenged my thinking and long-held beliefs, which was great."

"Foundations of Moral Obligation is one of those courses that changes one's perspectives and the lenses that we perceive events in life—both of which is [*sic*] important in an increasing multi-national world."

"Had me think about why I did certain things or why I should do things differently."

"Excellent course. Needed for anyone who considers themselves a future senior leader."

"The best course that I have taken."⁷⁰

It is not just one or two things that have made the Foundations elective popular for almost forty years. It is a combination of many that contributed to making possible those magical moments in seminar when students are able to discuss controversial issues and then open their minds to a different way of thinking.

Naval War College graduates have liked the Foundations of Moral Obligation elective so well that some have proposed making it part of the core curriculum, to be taken by all students. This aspect is especially relevant given the recent spike of events questioning the moral compass of senior USN leaders.

However, it would be a mistake to require all students at the College to take Foundations of Moral Obligation. Part of the value of the course comes from the well-qualified and passionate instructors who have taught the elective in the past. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to educate enough faculty members to offer the course to all students at the same level of proficiency. Nor would the quality of student participation be as high if the course was a mandatory requirement. Those students who choose to take the course do so out of a desire to discover new ways to think about life's fundamental questions.

Vice Admiral Stockdale understood the importance of a liberal arts education and the study of the humanities in a highly technical defense organization. "The philosophy course he took at Stanford in his thirties, said Stockdale, did him a lot more good in Hanoi than any of the Naval Academy's technical subjects."⁷¹

Stockdale also realized that leaders need to develop more than just their technical proficiency. As Brennan noted in 1983, “The study of good philosophy and literature, he [Stockdale] held, would benefit human beings; and, since military officers were human, it would be good for them, too, not only as human beings but as military officers.”⁷²

Stockdale recognized the importance of military officers becoming lifelong learners. Officers should never stop learning and questioning. Brennan related that “[w]hat the officers liked best about the Stockdale course was the opportunity to reflect on questions they felt had always been in their own minds, but just below the surface. This course, they agreed, provided them with the chance to raise those questions to the level of mature consciousness.”⁷³

The continuing relevance and popularity of the course only serve to reinforce Stockdale’s original reason for establishing it: to develop a course for military officers, focusing on leadership and ethics, that gives them the moral tools for success, whether on the battlefield or in a staff job at the Pentagon. A reporter from the *Washington Post* summarized it best when he wrote as follows:

Called “Foundations of Moral Obligation,” the course that Stockdale himself will teach represents the latest attempt to help American fighting men cope with pressure, including but not limited to that inflicted by captivity.

He will try to convey to young officers what teachings got him through his 7½ years of captivity, which began on Sept. 9, 1965, when he parachuted from his damaged A-4 fighter-bomber into a tree. He will try to explain how and why a man can summon up astonishing courage if he has committed himself to integrity—“one of those words which many people keep in that desk drawer labeled ‘too hard,’” in Stockdale’s words.⁷⁴

Over 1,900 graduates and family members have taken the Foundations of Moral Obligation course since Vice Admiral Stockdale and Dr. Brennan introduced it in 1978. Little did the two men know at the time how this one course would impact the lives of so many over the years.

NOTES

- Jonathan W. Greenert [Adm., USN], *The Navy Leader Development Strategy*, January 2013, p. 1, available at www.usnwc.edu/.
- Jonathan W. Greenert [Adm., USN], “Navy Leader Development Update,” e-mail, January 29, 2014.
- Naval War College, *Academic Catalog AY 2016–17* (Newport, RI: Naval Leadership and Ethics Center, 2016), available at www.usnwc.edu/.
- In addition to Stockdale, Brennan, Regan, and Cook, Dr. Thomas B. Grasse taught the Foundations of Moral Obligation elective for one trimester during AY 2007–2008, and Dr. Timothy J. Demy cotaught the elective with the author for one trimester during AY 2008–2009.

5. "This Professor Learned the Hard Way," *Time*, February 19, 1979, p. 98.
6. James B. Stockdale to Joseph Brennan, December 5, 1977, James B. Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 1, Naval Historical Collection, Naval War College, Newport, RI [hereafter Stockdale Papers].
7. Martin L. Cook, "Reflections on the Stockdale Legacy," *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 3 (Summer 2012), p. 8.
8. James B. Stockdale to Joseph Brennan, November 24, 1975, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 1.
9. Epictetus was a famous Stoic philosopher who lived from AD 55 to 135.
10. Stockdale to Brennan, November 24, 1975.
11. Paul Regan to author, June 6, 2016.
12. Stockdale to Brennan, November 24, 1975.
13. Jim Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1995), p. 20.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
15. Jim and Sybil Stockdale, *In Love and War: The Story of a Family's Ordeal and Sacrifice during the Vietnam Years* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 444–45.
16. Joseph Gerard Brennan, *Foundations of Moral Obligation* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1994), p. xv.
17. Stockdale to Brennan, December 5, 1977.
18. Joseph G. Brennan to Erik, January 21, 1978, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 3.
19. Joseph G. Brennan, NWC journal notes, n.d., Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 3.
20. James B. Stockdale to Joseph Brennan, January 13, 1978, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 2.
21. "This Professor Learned the Hard Way," p. 98.
22. Brennan, *Foundations of Moral Obligation*, p. xxi.
23. Joseph G. Brennan, "The Stockdale Course," in *Teaching Values and Ethics in College*, ed. Michael J. Collins (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983), p. 75.
24. Brennan to Erik, January 21, 1978.
25. Joseph G. Brennan to Loren, February 5, 1978, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 3.
26. Joseph G. Brennan, "Report on Elective 101, 'Foundations of Moral Obligation,'" January 29, 1980, p. 2, Stockdale Papers, box 7, folder 1.
27. "This Professor Learned the Hard Way," p. 98.
28. James B. Stockdale, "On the Occasion of Rhode Island Independence" (public address, Trinity Church, Newport, RI, May 7, 1978), Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 4.
29. James F. Gibling Jr. [Capt., USN (Ret.)], e-mail to author, June 12, 2016. Gibling became NWC provost after his retirement from active duty.
30. Brennan, *Foundations of Moral Obligation*, p. xxii.
31. Brennan, "Report on Elective 101," p. 3; Brennan, "The Stockdale Course," p. 77.
32. Brennan, "Report on Elective 101," p. 2.
33. Brennan, "The Stockdale Course," p. 76.
34. Brennan, "Report on Elective 101," p. 3.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
36. *Ibid.*, app. F2.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
39. Joseph G. Brennan to Capt. Marvin Rice, USN, July 2, 1990, Joseph G. Brennan Papers, box 2, folder 17, Naval Historical Collection, Naval War College, Newport, RI [hereafter Brennan Papers].
40. Joseph G. Brennan to Vice Adm. James B. Stockdale, USN, September 13, 1979, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 4.
41. Joseph G. Brennan to Vice Adm. James B. Stockdale, USN, November 6, 1979, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 4.
42. *Ibid.*
43. James B. Stockdale to Joseph Brennan, March 19, 1982, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 7.
44. James B. Stockdale to Rear Adm. James Service, August 5, 1982, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 7.
45. James B. Stockdale to Joseph Brennan, January 10, 1992, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 7.
46. Joseph C. Strasser to Prof. Brennan, July 22, 1992, Brennan Papers, box 2, folder 3.
47. *Eudaimonia* is a Greek word commonly translated as "happiness" or "welfare";

- however, “human flourishing” has been proposed as a more accurate translation.
48. James B. Stockdale to Joseph Brennan [letter to be read at his retirement ceremony], July 22, 1992, p. 3, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 17.
 49. Regan to author, June 6, 2016, p. 1.
 50. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
 51. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
 52. Prof. Paul Regan, “Syllabus, Elective Course WE 592, 1996–1997, Foundations of Moral Obligation,” p. 6.
 53. Regan to author, June 6, 2016, pp. 2–3.
 54. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
 55. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
 56. However, Captain Regan’s son, Cdr. Sean Regan, USCG, took the course a few years later with Drs. Cook and Gibbons.
 57. Dr. Martin L. Cook and Dr. Tom Gibbons, “Syllabus, EL-592, Foundations of Moral Obligation (The ‘Stockdale Course’).”
 58. Martin L. Cook to author, June 22, 2016.
 59. Regan to author, June 6, 2016, p. 4.
 60. Brennan, “Report on Elective 101,” p. 2.
 61. Brennan, “The Stockdale Course,” p. 76.
 62. Cook to author, June 22, 2016.
 63. P. D. Marghella to Vice Adm. James B. Stockdale, USN (Ret.), February 23, 1998, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 18.
 64. W. Strong to Dr. Joseph G. Brennan, November 1, 1984, Brennan Papers, box 2, folder 20.
 65. Brennan, “The Stockdale Course,” p. 75.
 66. Regan to author, June 6, 2016, p. 4.
 67. Cook to author, June 22, 2016.
 68. P. Wisecup to Admiral and Mrs. Stockdale, February 22, 1998, Stockdale Papers, box 6, folder 18.
 69. Marghella to Stockdale, February 23, 1998.
 70. Student comments from electives survey, SE592, Foundations of Moral Obligation, Spring 2016.
 71. G. R. Wilson, “A Navy Man’s Code of Honor,” *Boston Globe*, April 30, 1978, p. A3.
 72. Brennan, “The Stockdale Course,” p. 75.
 73. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
 74. Wilson, “A Navy Man’s Code of Honor,” p. A3.