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# SET AND DRIFT



## THE DEBATE CONCERNING OUR NATIONAL DEFENSE POLICY: TOWARD HONOR OR EFFICIENCY

by

**Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale, U.S. Navy (ret.)**

*Delivered at the Hoover Institution Dinner for Congressional Staffers,  
Stanford, California, October 8, 1980*

Just twenty years ago this fall I was a U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander, a fighter pilot just off carrier duty, when I started the most important years of study of my life here at Stanford and the Hoover Institution. In a rather loosely administered two-year post-graduate program that I'm sure would alarm our guests, the Congressional staffers, I was literally given a blank check by the American government with the only requirement that I get a Master's degree and take whatever courses I thought appropriate for a Naval officer in the time remaining. For me, that came to about 125 quarter hours, mostly in the humanities. Our government never spent any money more fortuitously. Within three years of leaving here, I had been shot down over North Vietnam, imprisoned in an old French dungeon in Hanoi, and was becoming the head-of-government of a covertly organized colony of American prisoners of war—such colony destined to remain autonomous for nearly eight years.

Mark Van Doren of Columbia University used to tell his students that, Published by U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons, 1981

before proclaiming a man educated, one should ask himself this question about him: Could he re-found his civilization? The re-founding of a civilization became my lot, and this Naval Academy engineer thanked God for those twenty-four months of history, politics and philosophy, on this campus, under the tutelage of teachers like Jack Bunzel, Peter Duignan, Steve Jurika and Phil Rhinelanders here tonight.

Perhaps I should explain how desperately we needed to re-found our own civilization in those prisons of North Vietnam. The Communist regime put us all in solitary confinement in an attempt to sever all our ties with each other and with our cultural heritage. This comes hard after a few months, particularly a few months of intermittent torture and extortion. In fits of depression one starts seeing the bottom of the barrel and realizes that, unless he gets some structure, some ritual, some poetry into his life, he is going to become an animal. In these conditions clandestine encrypted tap and flash codes get improvised and start linking

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lives and dreams together. Then comes the need for common practice in united resistance, and, in due course, if things are working right, codified law commences to emanate from the senior prisoner's cell. The communication network strengthens the bonds of comradeship as over the months and years a body politic of common customs, common loyalties, common values take shape. Isolation seems to have some sort of purifying effect on the soul; as time wears on, ever more highminded discourse flows from hard-worked memories which dredge up recollections of the best from the educational background of their owners. Compassion fairly seeps through the walls as the familiar tapping style and mind-set of the never-seen neighbor next door become a substitute for family. Morale is tied to the box score of the continuous battle of wits and determination waged against the prison administration. The prisoners' underground, under the positive control of their senior, alternately plays for time, riots, and drives the interrogators up the wall. Where else could one better prepare himself for leadership in such a life than in this Hoover Institution? After lectures by Alexander Kerensky and courses from Bob North on comparative Marxist thought, I felt ten feet tall, even when forced to kneel before that irate political cadre. I could look him in the eye and quietly tell him: "Lenin didn't say that. You're a deviationist." (That was usually a quick and blessed ticket back to my cell.)

This week, I was invited back here from Newport, Rhode Island, to talk with our Congressional staffers about the state of national defense. I believe all I read in the better journals: All our military materiel indicators are down. The United States is number two in the world in conventional forces for sure and in nuclear forces very likely. The Department of Defense's so-called "solutions" to such inferiorities are more often than not buried in both high-risk

technology and in the "out years" of the budget. Neither high risk nor out years bode well for our national arsenal, and everybody knows it. Dwindling forces and false official optimism bring up that most important aspect of our current dilemma: Public confidence in our defense establishment is eroding. Opinion makers are concluding that military and civilian planners lack heart in what they're doing. They say that every link in the defense chain—Congress, Pentagon, White House, civilian contractors—all seem to be faking it. The fancy scenarios to which we are treated are seen all too frequently to wind up as just plain smoke. Of course, in my last couple of sentences, I have paraphrased Meg Greenfield's column in last week's *Newsweek*.

As I left Newport, my War College friends advised me: "For God's sake, don't go out there and regurgitate a lot of data that every Congressional staffer knows. Tell them what you really think victory or defeat, the success or failure of arms, ultimately depends on." I brought up Meg's reference to public perceptions of faking it, of smoke, of lack of heart precisely because forty years in uniform, and particularly that decade of war and life behind enemy lines, have taught me that, more than any other factor, military success or failure depends on the moral sentiment, the ethos, the spirit of the man in the street.

That sounds "preachy," doesn't it? Well I'm in good company. Napoleon: "Sentiment rules the world, and he who fails to take that into account can never hope to lead." Pericles, honoring the military dead in his famous funeral oration: "... the important thing today is not to review the details of battles, but to discuss the *spirit* with which our country faces trials."

Can anybody produce evidence that in the last 50 years the American people ever yielded up the wherewithal for winning, in the absence of a grass roots

sense of special value of their society, its institutions, its direction?

Let me tell you, in a Communist country at war, in a Communist city under siege, *nothing* takes precedence over public support of national policy. We know, of course, that it's a force-fed system; Lenin rigged it that way. The point was not only that the nightly sings, the bribe-proof guards, and their diligent work on their patriotic essays seemed indicative of close coordination between national sentiment and military policy; it was the feel of the party's intimacy with and influence over the man on the street. You have to give the old Bolsheviks credit for forehandedness for designing the whole state system around a party whose primary job it is to track and steer the confluence of public sentiment and policy.

Midge Decter in a recent article contrasts the effort communist countries make to monitor deep-rooted public sentiment vis-à-vis public policy and the way the United States has let the two get more and more out of phase over the past quarter century. Perhaps this is partly because we have become hooked on opinion polls, the statistics of those coarse measurements more or less adequate for data on people's preferences on particular issues. Normal everyday opinion polls, Midge says, are not adequate for ferreting out deep moral sentiment, that ethos which is individually divulged only over time and usually in heart to heart associations. The sentiment that counts lies beneath opinions on issues; it is too fine grained for polls or voting booths. But if it is ignored and kept isolated from the light of political attention, it "... will fester in the nether regions where ideas circulate and grow powerful and then become distorted and poisonous."

The classic modern example of this was Lyndon Johnson and his gang of systems analysts' tone deafness and myopia at the outset of public disenchantment with the Vietnam War. The

Johnson government was at first insensitive to the disconnect, and then inept in making an early explanation of what was going on. I was in combat and prison when that "nether region" vortex got going in America, but I had a front row seat in North Vietnam when the communist world started watching and enjoying our leaders' belated recognition of the problem and then their overreaction to it. If spontaneous poster construction at the private soldier level can be considered the ultimate indicator of national elation, then that winter morning in 1968 when prison guards were firing firecrackers and displaying crude sketches of a teary-eyed McNamara leaving the Pentagon for the World Bank had to be their counterpart of VJ Day. That was at about the time most of the Democratic hawks started becoming chickens, (or chicken-hawks?). I was in leg irons in cell 13, Alcatraz prison, when the pidgin-English voice on the prison squawk box announced the appointment to office of a certain defense department undersecretary. Two years later, while I was still in cell 13, still in leg irons, the same pidgin-English voice announced on the same cell loudspeaker, that undersecretary's indignant resignation—and then went on to read excerpts from a book of "confessions" he had already written and distributed, describing his disillusionment with the war.

Did we in prison read this public turmoil in the way I'm sure the Vietnamese thought we would read it—as evidence of an unjust war? Certainly not. We read it as 5 years of inept national leadership—as executive failure to insure that the public and the policy were in tune. Sensitivity to that interconnect comes naturally to a combat leader—particularly to a prison leader who has to build and tend his own infrastructure of support. James McGregor Burns calls the type of leadership that is always needed in these cases, indeed needed in any political leadership

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job in times of stress, "transforming" as opposed to "transactional" (bargaining table) leadership. Good leaders are transforming leaders who make themselves continually conscious of what is going on in the minds of their followers. They are able to do this at a sensitivity level and with a timeliness that permits them to make subtle adjustments to policy when required, and subtle adjustments to the understanding and even mind-set of the man on the street, to match. Great leaders can implant highminded needs in the place of self-interested wants in the hearts of their people.

OK, you say, public sentiment is an important part of the national power equation. So, Mr. Self-Appointed Expert, how do you read that deep-seated American sentiment now? My answer is that, from talks on a hundred college campuses and meetings at a hundred community halls, I think today's American man on the street is frustrated by: (1) the belief that America is weakened to a point where she is no longer in control of her destiny, (2) the fact that he doesn't like this situation, and (3) the problem of his getting no satisfaction from abstract debates between high-level politicians, or from the indecipherable jargon of the Pentagon. Moreover, he is tired of wearing a hair shirt—tired of apologizing for America. He is willing to make more patriotic commitments than his political leaders feel they dare ask. What I see in him is not jingoism; it is neither exaggerated love of country nor doctrinaire hatred of the Russians. It is honest pride in a good and decent society. Our people feel good about being in the core of that shrinking minority of people of this world who are committed to free choice, to the putting down of tyranny, to respect for the due process of law. The restoration of American influence in the world is seen not merely a material benefit, but as a moral benefit, a good in itself.

Will the President elected in 1980 be disposed to accommodate this sentiment

as he sets our national course? You and I know that a change of thrust toward an American resurgence in the name of freedom would require at the very least a loud and clear public demand, no matter who is President. How could such a demand be generated?

With that rhetorical question, I could end this speech right now and let the whole thing stand as a sort of sketchily supported pep talk. I'm not going to do that. I'm going to take a crack at that question about what it takes to generate public demand for resurgent action, because I've had some pertinent experiences along that line.

My experience had to do with trying to generate a consensus to support a grand escape attempt from a Hanoi prison. The parallel sounds farfetched, perhaps, but hang on; it will clear up. You might first ask: Why should generating escape support be difficult? Everybody knows that the prisoner's code requires escape whenever possible and unanimous support of all escape efforts. It was not until late—when we were approaching our sixth or seventh year in the lockup—that the ardor of some for a big breakout had cooled. Over the years, several groups had, after months of planning and preparation, made it over the wall and into the jungle—only to be recaptured, returned, and tortured for names of collaborators in their effort. In time, the North Vietnamese imposed camp-wide reprisal actions following each escape. Bones were broken. The subject of escape became an emotional issue; to argue for more escapes, even when the way had been paved for better-than-ever chances of success, was to ask people to accept risks and to pay costs in support of an *idea*. The escape idea is a good idea, a heroic idea, but for the guy who stays behind, as most must, it's just an abstraction about which the question "What's in it for me?" has no answer. What I'm saying is that asking for a public demand for an American resurgence in the name of

that good and heroic idea of human freedom poses the same problem. You're asking people to accept risks and pay costs when their answer to "What's in it for us?" is necessarily unclear.

Here's the way arguments over "ideas" line up: You have, on the one side, the supporters of the heroic idea—call them romantics or idealists. You have opposing them the profit and loss guys, the bottom-line guys, the "efficiency" worshipers, the systems analysts, if you will. And then in the background you have the silent majority, or should I say tongue-tied majority, too proud to deny the validity of the idealists' arguments, yet too timid to lay their necks on the line.

How does the debate come out? On which side does the silent majority throw its weight? It depends on the frame of reference within which the argument is conducted. If the bottom-line guys, the accommodators, are in control, most escape plans will be scrapped. Fellow prisoner John Dramezi wrote a book about his Hanoi escape plans being scrapped because the criteria for go/no go was set by the straight-sounding, "bottom-line" test: "Compare what we all have to gain with success to what we all have to lose with failure."

Well, no escape could ever go with that criterion, with that rule of evidence. If such a test had been the standard of judgment of the U.S. Navy in 1942, Admiral Spruance would never have engaged the Japanese fleet at the Battle of Midway and we might have lost World War Two. Of course, World War Two was fought before the systems analyst cult had gained the upper hand and imposed such clamps on inspired action. Dramezi's book, *Code of Honor*, covers territory familiar to me because, as you can read, I was the leader of the romantics, who tried unsuccessfully to carry out his plan. All was poised in readiness that March morning

in 1971 when a faint-hearted Colonel pushed two years' work down the drain.

John's book is well named because, as I saw it, it was in fact "honor" that was in the balance. On the other side of the scale was a profit/loss ratio, a "What's in it for us?" measurement. American resurgence in the name of freedom is in the same predicament as is honor in a "What's in it for us?" test. *Any* idea is in trouble if a group opposing it, an "in group," is allowed to set up the criteria which evidence supporting it must meet.

The issue of national defense policy should not be the private property of this or that cult and its particular definitions of reason or justice. To him who says that honor, being unquantifiable, deserves only a footnote in a rational solution, I can reply that sanctifying efficiency, for all its quantifiability, is merely an expediency to avoid facing an important obligation, to avoid risk and pain.

The outcomes of our most important debates on national defense policy depend primarily on the biases (whether toward honor or toward efficiency, toward idealism or toward accommodation) of those who control the rules of admissibility of evidence, those who set the frame of reference into which the arguments must be hammered. It's obvious that I'm tired of being told that national policy decisions are to be restricted to a "bottom-line" process, and that honor and idealism have to be checked at the door. I think that's wrong from a moral standpoint, and its particularly wrong at this point in time if we are to keep public ethos and public policy out of conflict. On issues pertaining to national survival, we don't have to accept narrow rules of evidence set by a self-serving cult which is at the same time tone-deaf to public sentiment. Transforming leaders, not myopic managers, should position the fulcrum for these arguments. The choice