

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

---

Volume 17  
Number 1 *Parameters* 1987

Article 31

---

7-4-1987

## IN WAR, IN PRISON, IN ANTIQUITY

James Bond Stockdale

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

---

### Recommended Citation

James B. Stockdale, "IN WAR, IN PRISON, IN ANTIQUITY," *Parameters* 17, no. 1 (1987), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1469.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

# In War, In Prison, In Antiquity

JAMES BOND STOCKDALE

© 1987 James Bond Stockdale

The best education, the best preparation for a full and successful life, surely entails a proper blend of classical and contemporary studies. While we pursue the keys to the kingdom of modernity—studies in political science and economics and high technology—we need to understand the importance of a broad background in the readings of antiquity, those readings that form the basis of our civilization. In time of duress, in war especially, is that classical background important.

Achieving that magical combination of ancient and modern grounding took me half a lifetime to improvise. I grew up as a veritable prince of modernity; as a young man I was a test pilot, flying supersonic fighters when they were headline news and sharing a schoolroom with future astronauts. Then, at 37, too late for graduate school in high tech, a turn in my life took me to the quite different atmosphere of the study of moral philosophy. By that I mean old-fashioned philosophy—Socrates, Hume, Mill—mixed with literature with moral overtones—Shakespeare, Dostoyevski, Camus, and the like. I was deeply exposed to the thoughts and actions of men of the ancient past, of mankind dealing with Ultimate Questions.

In the course of my study of moral philosophy I have been privileged to have wonderful mentors. One was Phil Rhineland at Stanford. He introduced me to the great stoic tract by Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, and explained that Frederick the Great never left on a campaign without having a copy in his knapsack. Three years later I was slapped in a

political prison for four years of solitary confinement—in the very world of Epictetus. Another mentor was Joe Brennan of Columbia. He came to the Naval War College when I was its president to help me introduce moral philosophy there. For ten years he has taught a course in “Foundations of Moral Obligations.” He has taught a generation of Navy and Marine Corps leaders, and they are better leaders for having taken his course. Those two mentors, despite their differences, had a great deal in common; each had one foot in modernity, one in antiquity. They gave me much. They led me to a treasure of striking insights such as this one by Mark Van Doren: “Being an educated person means that given the necessity [after doom’s day, so to speak], you could re-found your own civilization.”

The Stoics said that “Character is fate.” What I am saying is that in my life, education has been fate. I became what I learned, or maybe I should say I became the distillation of what fascinated me most as I learned it. Only three years after I left graduate school, I participated in the re-founding of my own civilization after doom’s day, when the giant doors of an Old World dungeon had slammed shut and locked me and a couple hundred other Americans in—in total silence, in solitary confinement, in leg irons, in blindfolds for weeks at a time, in antiquity, in a political prison.

That refounded civilization became our salvation. Stripped to nothing, nothing but the instincts and intelligence of the ancients, we improvised a communication system dredged up from inklings of a distant past (actually the tap code of Polybius, a second-century Greek historian with a flair for cryptography), and lived on comradeship in a polity that would have been a credit to Polybius’ Athens. The spiritual power (not necessarily religious) that seeped into us as we surreptitiously joined forces against our common enemy came as a surprise.

In my solitude the impact of this unexpected spiritual power sometimes caused me to wonder. Does modernity (post-Enlightenment life under big governments and big bureaucracies, constantly competing to remake the world in the image of the new) deaden our noblest impulses? Does it smother or atrophy the power of the human spirit, the power of human nature? Do the readings of ancient times, the classics, serve merely to give us insight into the events of the past? Or do not the texts of those self-contained cultures of antiquity portray human power in all its vibrant potential? Do they not contain evidence of a more imaginative and fundamental grasp of

---

Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale served for 34 years as a Navy officer, most of them at sea as a fighter pilot aboard aircraft carriers. Shot down over North Vietnam in 1965 during his second combat tour, he was the senior Navy prisoner of war in Hanoi for eight years—tortured fifteen times, in leg irons for two years, and in solitary confinement for four. He is a former President of the Naval War College, currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, and widely published. Among his combat decorations is the Medal of Honor.

---

the essence of being human than can be found even in 20th-century texts that have since joined the classics on the humanities shelves?

**I**n Homer's immortal epic, *The Iliad*, as Hector is about to leave the gates of Troy to fight Achilles—knowing, as he must have known, that he would lose and he would die—he says goodbye to his wife and baby son at the gates, and the baby starts to cry, frightened by the nodding of the plumes on his father's shining helmet. Some would think the tale of the Greek-Trojan war to be an irrelevant relic of bygone days. Some would think it should be stricken from the reading list because it glamorizes war. Some would think that now at last, with reason to guide us, we can scoff at a warrior's suicidal obligations. But others of us react quite differently, seeing in that scene a snapshot of the ageless human predicament: Hector's duty, his wife's tragedy, Troy's necessity, the baby's cry . . .

My reaction, of course, is the latter, not only because I am a romantic by nature, but because by the time I first read *The Iliad* I had lived in antiquity (and I am not referring to the lack of electricity or plumbing). I had lived in a self-contained culture, a prison culture I watched grow among men of good will under pressure. I knew what it was to be a human being who could be squashed like a bug without recourse to law, and I knew that the culture, the society, that preserved me had to be preserved or nobody had anything to cling to. I knew that civic virtue, the placing of the value of that society above one's personal interests, was not only admirable, it was crucial to self-respect, and I knew that to preserve that culture, sometimes symbolic battles had to be fought before real battles could start. I knew that obligations, particularly love and self-sacrifice, were the glue that made a man whole in this primitive element, and I knew that under the demands of these obligations being "reasonable" was a luxury that often could not be afforded.

I also knew during this prison existence that I was being shown something good—that life can have a spiritual content one can almost reach out and touch. I suppose it can always have that, but I was used to the idea of it being fuzzed up, powdered, fluffed, and often ridiculed here in man-made modernity, where changing the world takes precedence over understanding it, understanding man himself.

The same message comes through in the writings of Fyodor Dostoyevski, Arthur Koestler, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. They've been where I've been. So had Miguel Cervantes. This future author of *Don Quixote* was a young officer in the Spanish army taken prisoner after the Battle of Lepanto in the 16th century. He spent seven years in an Algiers political prison. Same story: "Confess your crimes," "Discredit yourself," "Disavow your roots." He was tortured to disavow Christianity; he could get amnesty and go home if he would disavow it. I was made much the same offer. I was to disavow "American Imperialism." Good boy, Cervantes,

you hung in too. You knew how this age-old game is played. Political prisons are not just sources of fables of the past. They could just as easily inspire the literature of the future. Unable to tolerate dissent, totalitarian governments must have them. How else to suppress and discredit their enemies within?

**Y**ou know, the life of the mind is a wonder—the life of the mind in solitude, the life of the mind in extremis, the life of the mind when the body’s nervous system is under attack. If you want to break a man’s spirit, and if your victim’s will is strong, you’ve got to get physical. Sometimes you might think that you can unhinge strong people with psychological mumbo jumbo. Sorry, there is no such thing as brainwashing. But even physical hammering will not alone change all hard-set attitudes. The real method to jellify those attitudes, that is, to extract those seemingly heartfelt “confessions,” is the artful and long-term imposition of fear and guilt. Solitary confinement and tourniquet-tight rope bindings are mere catalysts for the fear and guilt conditioning. Remember, I’m talking about strong-willed victims. They’re going to make you hurt them. They know from experience that the compliance extracted by brute force is in no way so spiritually damaging as that given away on a mere threat. And they have learned from experience that in the end it is a spiritual battle. The leak in the dike always starts from within.

How does the mind of the victim respond to these challenges? How did we respond in those North Vietnamese prisons? Realize the situation here: They’ve got man in a laboratory test that no university in the United States could set up. They’re not going to leave him in a room just to fill out a bunch of questionnaires, or give him some innocuous maze to work his way out of. They’re going to boil the *essence* out of him as a chemist would heat and pressurize a specimen to study its properties, its nature, in a laboratory. What is the nature of man? What surprises does human nature have in store under these conditions?

First, regarding the loneliness, the solitude: It’s not as bad as you think. Don’t forget, the time factor is stretched out way beyond most psychological experiments. There was a professor at Stanford who got national attention several years ago for locking some students in the

---

*Political prisons are not just sources of fables  
of the past. They could just as easily inspire  
the literature of the future.*

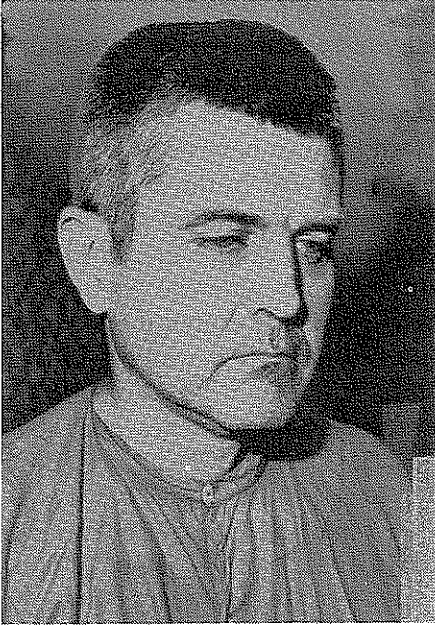
---

basement of a library for a few days, and then writing a book about his observations on their behavior. I laughed when I read it. You don't know the first thing about a person until he has been in the cooler for a couple of months. He has to first go through the stage when he is preoccupied with going insane. That's a normal prelude without lasting significance. Figure on that phase lasting for the first three to four weeks. It ends when it suddenly dawns on him that he'll have no such luck; he's stuck with himself. Almost everybody then sets himself up in a ritualistic life. Something deep-seated in human nature likes, feels safe with, repetition—a time for this, and a time for that, repeated regularly every day. You get to thinking about how liturgies of worship must have gotten started in some prehistoric clan.

Your mind drifts to many anthropological questions. How do institutions and governments get started? Are they the product of a man on a white horse? Does some powerful person impose rule: "We gotta get organized; here are the tribe's rules; break 'em and I'll cave your skull in." I doubt it. When you're scared (and that's probably why people grouped into those first crude polities—fear of predators, human or otherwise), you don't feel the urge to take charge. And when you're expected to, by virtue of heredity in clan or tribe, or seniority, for sure, among military prisoners, on first contact you seem compelled to say something becoming a well-brought-up American boy, like: "In these circumstances when you are being threatened or tortured to do things that offend your very being, I can't bring myself to order you to do this or that. Everyone must have the autonomy to choose the best of the alternatives facing him. Do the best you can and God bless you."

How civilized and compassionate! But it will never sell. Those fine young people in trouble won't let you get away with that. Their response is sure to be something like this: "You have no right to piously tell us each to seek out the good, and then back out of the picture. You are in charge here, and it's your duty to tell us what the good *is*. We deserve to sleep at night, feeling that at least we're doing *something* right in all hewing to what our leader says. We deserve the self-respect that comes with knowing we are resisting in an organized manner. We expect you to tell us to take torture before we comply with any of their demands. Give us the list!" There's nothing rational about such a reaction. Anybody could see that we probably weren't going to win the battle. But on the other hand, as the veteran prisoner Fyodor Dostoyevski aptly noted, "Man's most deep desires in life under pressure are not for a rationally advantageous choice, but for an independent choice."

On the parade ground, all the rankers vie for leadership, to be out front; but in a political prison, being the boss means you're the first guy down the torture chute when the inevitable purge starts. In that place, the drive for discipline and organization starts at the bottom and works its way up. Maybe it always does when lives and reputations are at stake.



**The author as POW, about six months after his capture in September 1965.**

How about the handling of fear and guilt? Those are determining forces in any life. You can't accomplish anything without a little of both ("fear of failure" can keep you going once you get started), but if you let them get out of control, they'll tear the very core out of your being.

Did I say a little guilt—a feeling of inadequacy with regard to your duties—was a good thing? Most modern psychiatrists would have us float around on a pink cloud of emotional tranquility, free of conscience's nagging, but you've got to have a goad if you're going for anything big. In Arthur Koestler's *Arrival and Departure*, the brain of a restless young southeast European exile, who is determined to get back into the fighting of World War II, is given a spring house-cleaning by a female psychiatrist, who finds him hiding in Portugal in 1940. "What's eating him?" his friends all want to know; "He's seen enough war," they conclude. Predictably, the psychiatrist finds the problem in his past, a troubled childhood, and after clearing him of his hangups (she thinks), she awaits him on a ship with tickets that will take them both to a safe, carefree life in America. At that point he runs aboard the ship only to divulge the shocking news that he has just signed up with British Intelligence to be parachuted as an agent behind enemy lines. Old prisoner Koestler writes him a notable farewell speech: "The prosperity of the race is based on those who pay imaginary debts! Tear out the roots of their guilt and nothing will remain but the drifting sands of the desert."

There's power in feelings of guilt.

Yet there's devastation when it rises to such levels that it consumes you (remember, in your wartime prison cell you're waiting to be picked off by the first vulture to interrogate you), or when it creates self-delusion ("After all, I *was* tortured; maybe something came over me; my poor performance must not have really been my fault; I must have been broken or brainwashed."). Such rationalizations won't play well in the cold light of day when you're edging yourself out on the thin ice separating you from a nervous breakdown. And a nervous breakdown you cannot afford in this place. So there you are, wretched, about to sink into the Slough of Despond—bow first or stern first, depending on which crutch (consuming yourself or deluding yourself) you elect to use. Either will guarantee you the loss of your self-respect; that being all you have left, you have to learn to just sit there in your solitude and throw away both crutches and heal yourself—there's no outside professional help available. You have to deal with guilt, eat it, if you will. You can learn to use its fire for what it was intended, a flame that cauterizes your will to make you stronger next time. Of all the challenges guilt brings in a political prisoner's life, working off the feeling of having brought harm to a fellow inmate is the most demanding.

Later, out in public, you have no recourse but to join in the inevitable discussion of your so-called "agony" in prison: "How was the food?" "Did you get any fresh air?" "Were you warm enough all the time?" "Did you have any feelings of friendship for your captors?" "How was the mail service?" But when you get one old political prisoner alone with another, they exchange tales of a quite different nature, of nervous exhaustion, uncontrollable sobbing in solitude, the wages of fear, and the feelings of inadequacy, of guilt. It doesn't do to discuss these matters with strangers; they put you down as some kind of wacko.

But believe it or not, as time wears on in solitary you get better at dealing with these matters. The ultimate accommodation with them comes from focusing intensely on leading a very, very clean and honest life, mentally and otherwise—and you find yourself being consumed in a strange, lasting, and unexpected high-mindedness. By this, I don't mean "joyfulness," and I particularly don't mean "optimism." (In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl makes the point that babbling optimists are the bane of existence of companions under stress. I totally agree with him—give me a pessimistic neighbor every time.) What I mean by the setting in of high-mindedness is the gradual erosion of natural selfishness among people of good will facing a common danger over time. The more intense the common danger, the quicker the "me-first" selfishness melts. In our situation, at about the two-year point, I believe most of us were thinking of that faceless friend next door—that sole point of contact we had with our civilization, that lovely, intricate human thing we had never seen—in terms of love in the highest sense. By later comparing notes with others, I found I was not alone in becoming so noble and righteous in that solitude that I could hardly stand



myself. People would willingly absorb physical punishment rather than let it fall to their comrades; questions arose in my mind about the validity of the much-talked-about instinct of self-preservation. Solzhenitsyn describes his feelings of high-mindedness in his Gulag writings in words like these:

It was only when I lay there on the rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not between states nor between classes nor between political parties but right through every human heart, through *all* human hearts. And that is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me, "Thank you, prison, for having been in my life."

Was I a victim? Not when I became fully engaged, got into the life of unity with comrades, helping others, and being encouraged by them. So many times, I would find myself whispering to myself after an exhilarating wall-tap message exchange: "I am right where I belong; I am right where I was meant to be."

**I**n all honesty, I say to myself, "What a wonderful life I have led." No two of us are the same, but to me the wonder of my life is in escaping the life Captain McWhirr had programmed for himself in Joseph Conrad's *Typhoon*: "to go skimming over the years of existence to sink gently into a placid grave, ignorant of life to the last, without ever having been made to see all it may contain of perfidy, of violence, of terror." And the author adds, "There are on sea and land such men thus fortunate—or thus disdained—by destiny . . . ."

Phil Rhinelander, my philosophy mentor at Stanford, died a short time ago. We were preparing a book together, and consequently I was with him almost every day at the last. He sat up in his bed at home, surrounded by his books and papers, writing on a yellow legal pad, never mentioning the cancer in his liver which he knew would take him in a matter of weeks (he was nearly eighty). One of the last things we talked about was our agreement on a point we had each separately stated publicly: "The challenge of education is not to prepare a person for success, but to prepare him for failure." It is in disaster, not success, that the heroes and the bums really get sorted out.

Always striving for true education is the best insurance against losing your bearings, your perspective, in the face of disaster, in the face of failure. I came home from prison to discover something I had forgotten; in my old Webster's collegiate dictionary I had pasted a quotation from Aristotle: "Education is an ornament in prosperity and a refuge in adversity." I had lived in the truth of that for all those years.