

Tragedy, Comedy, and Modern Times

by James Bond Stockdale



Wiktor Sadowski

This essay grew out of a request that I conduct a reprise of “The Bull’s Eye of Disaster,” my wrap-up conclusions on the Vietnam War that appeared in the August 1989 *Chronicles*, in light of what’s happened in the post-Cold War world since that essay appeared. I was thus thrust onto the stage of modern times, to be whipped by the slipstream, or dust-cloud, of a fast moving *perestroika*, and probably be doomed to follow the example of the average op-ed writer of the past year—receiving praise for his right-sounding conclusions the day they came out, and being booed for sounding silly in light of the status of affairs a week later.

But this is a magazine, and I have more room to marshal pertinent explanations, to be cagey, and to stick close to what I believe to be solid ground. And the most solid continuum I can think of that connects what proved to be the mistakes of the Vietnam period and lurks as a constant danger of the post-Cold War period, is the bad habit of seeking the comfort of relying on the legitimacies and truisms of the past. Today to be swept up in rallying calls to “go to the defense of the brave freedom fighters of Lower Slobovia” (when the connection between such action and America’s vital interests is hazy), is to answer the same siren song L.B. Johnson heard from the “Wise Men” he insisted on consulting at the decision point of Vietnam commitment. At that juncture, LBJ marshaled the idols of his youth, architects of American Cold War strategy in the late 40’s, and put it to them: “Should I go in or not?” Spokesman Dean Acheson said that he had no choice except to press on, and with that his colleagues (John J.

McCloy, Robert Lovett, and others) “came thundering in like the charge of the Scot’s Greys at Waterloo.” It was July 8, 1965, when the “Wise Men” said “go.” Three weeks later, on July 28, LBJ doubled the draft call and added another fifty thousand troop increment. The latter marked the beginning of a regrettable trip down a long road.

America’s trip down that road turned out to be a case study in how Cold War verities could wipe you out when applied to difficulties that were not generic to that 1947 model of a world in which two superpower ideologies were locked in eternal combat for world domination at center stage and all else was window dressing.

When the “Wise Men” spoke in July 1965, it had already been a long time since the world *was* that simple. Though the “best and the brightest” of the Vietnam buildup years left no evidence that they saw anything out there but one big monolithic communist menace, even I, insignificant fighter pilot Jim Stockdale, knew better than that in those days. In 1958, seven years before, thirty-two years ago last summer, a territorial squabble in the Far East, quickly and like a powerful magnet, drew instantaneous Soviet and American interest. China had commenced shelling two little offshore islands under *de facto* control of their enemy and America’s ally, Taiwan. Under the Formosa (Taiwan) Resolution of 1955, America (the Seventh Fleet) was pledged to defend Taiwan against attack from the mainland—and the United States had reserved the right to repel Chinese boarders should they be landed on those two little offshore islands, Quemoy and Matsu. The Soviets and China had a mutual defense pact that would draw the Soviet Union into any fighting between China and the United States. I was operations officer of the lead Fighter Squadron on scene with the Seventh Fleet, aboard the aircraft carrier *Midway* that summer, and we flew daily over the Taiwan Straits staring down MIG pilots on similar standoff missions over those two little islands below us. World War III seemed imminent, as Soviet leader Khrushchev ridiculed the power

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of American carriers like my *Midway* in the press, boasting that he could dispose of such "pleasure boats" any time he chose.

Similarly, in daily press releases, Mao's China was spewing out rage at the Seventh Fleet's blocking action in the Taiwan Straits, and vowing to mount amphibious assaults to reclaim their "rightful possessions" offshore. To the man on the street, it was two on one, the Soviets and China in their mutual defense pact, ready to throw down the gauntlet in the face of the United States. At least that's the way it looked to me in the air every day, and that's the way it was projected in the world press.

Because I had to keep up with the state of play to brief my pilots, I spent most of my time between flights puzzling over the official classified message traffic pouring into the *Midway's* command center from all over the world. And what an education that was for this then-thirty-five-year-old U.S. Naval officer! So help me, behind those closed doors, the Soviets and the mainland Chinese were starting to act like they were more angry with each other than either one was with us; it was becoming clear that the Chinese invasion was not going to take place. The Soviets, while bad-mouthing our Fleet's action in every press release, were behind closed doors harassing the Chinese to back down. What I was reading in the command center was telling me that the Soviets were more than happy to have the U.S. Seventh Fleet right where we were, keeping their "communist brothers" in check, and out of the Pacific Ocean. And what was clear to insiders, happened. The Chinese kept their fleets in port, and everything petered out in early fall.

I became so interested in the sort of things I had seen transpire that summer that I got the Navy to send me to political science graduate school at Stanford for my next shore duty. After a year of course work, I spent another in the library of the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace on that campus, pouring over modern Soviet and Chinese documents, learning of the details of what had been their secret split-up in 1957, shortly before my straits crisis, and writing a 1962 master's degree thesis I entitled "Taiwan and the Sino-Soviet Dispute."

After two years ashore, I then let the zigs and zags in that cauldron of intrigue between the Soviets and Chinese go its own way, as I turned down a Navy suggestion to stay at Stanford for a doctorate, and took a fighter squadron command the other side of the Navy house had ready for me. By February 1963, I was back flying those same F8 Crusaders—not over Asian islands, but over the Asian mainland of South Vietnam, from a different carrier, the U.S.S. *Ticonderoga*. And the rest, as they say, is history. I spent ten years in Vietnam, fired the shot that started the war in the North the next summer, got shot down after another year and a half of flying, rotted in jail for nearly eight years, and like all other American prisoners was freed in 1973 as a direct result of our beautiful B-52 bombings of December 1972.

It wasn't until three years ago, back at the Hoover Institution, now as a senior research fellow, that I ran into a man who was picking up what I would call practical Sino-Soviet scholarship where I had left it twenty-five years before. He, too, had fought the Vietnam War, boarding a

plane heading there in December 1970 (just before my sixth Christmas in prison), as a twenty-three-year-old West Point graduate, to be posted to a tiny jungle outpost near the Cambodian border for his baptism of fire. Lieutenant F. Charles Parker left an America disillusioned by an indecisive war in its seventh year with a gut feeling that "something is wrong here." He fought well and ultimately came home feeling even more strongly that "something had been wrong." Staying in the Army, he had trod a tough 15-year path to find out, as best he possibly could, just what that "wrong thing" was, before I met him: that tough path took Parker through a Ph.D. in history from George Washington University and the study of both the Russian and Chinese languages. At Hoover on a one-year fellowship from the Army, *Lieutenant Colonel* Parker was putting the finishing touches on a book published last year: *Vietnam: Strategy for a Stalemate*. In a nutshell, he starts out by clarifying some points that are overdue to be made, that the war was played against a larger backdrop than just preserving the freedom of the South Vietnamese. From his introduction:

The United States wanted to preserve an independent non-communist South Vietnam. But more than the welfare of the people in Vietnam had to have been at stake for the United States to commit an army to combat in Asia. The United States thought it was containing communism in general and Chinese communism in particular when it developed an open-ended commitment to the Republic of Vietnam. The Soviet Union made a fundamental commitment to supply North Vietnam with the military matériel that gave the North Vietnamese the capability to match the American buildup. Without Soviet support, the North Vietnamese could not have escalated the level of conflict. Yet the reason the Soviets bore the costs and took the risks had less to do with Vietnam and more to do with China.

Soviet aid had all to do with their trying to reestablish the Sino-Soviet relationship that Mao had begun to rupture in 1957—specifically, to drive China into their own arms again by keeping the Vietnam War heated up to a certain critical temperature (which they could monitor and more or less control with their aid to the North), which would multiply and strengthen the pro-Soviet population of China out of fear of U.S. incursions near their borders. Khrushchev was trying to provoke a Sino-American—not a Soviet-American—confrontation over Vietnam. In doing this, he was combating a Mao zigzag that from 1960 onwards had seen to it that Chinese policy was driven by the goal of improving relations with the United States as a way to shuck dependence on the Soviets. Putting all this together, Parker's point of departure is a Johnson administration, spearheaded by Robert McNamara and Harvard's "best and brightest," rushing American troops forward to contain a Chinese communism that didn't need to be contained, indeed a China that was, even at the time McNamara was demanding the deployment of more troops than the American Army could accommodate in South Vietnam, sending tacit signals (missed by a tone-deaf American State Department), begging for an American rapprochement of the sort

Richard Nixon later brought into being.

The irony of all this, insofar as *my* story goes, is not so much the injustice of it all, as the self-inflicted wound our leaders put on us by staking out at the outset great precautions against arousing the Chinese tiger to act as it did in Korea—to enter the fray and directly attack the American forces. Totally ignoring the effects of *the* political event of the era, before *perestroika*, the Sino-Soviet split, America stuck to pre-split logic, Cold War imperatives, and nonsensically gave up the Hanoi bombing option as of 1964 and in doing so lost the whole ball game.

As my reprise of my “Bull’s Eye of Disaster” article I’ll simply say that its main thrust was that contrary to the view that some insist on grinding into the history books—*i.e.*, that our Vietnam experience was a one-of-a-kind mixup in which our civilian and military leaders misjudged the nature of the problem, and once in, sank into an unexpected quagmire that was beyond almost anybody’s practical control—the fact was that few military men who were making policy before our troops started in had any doubt in their minds that the U.S. Army moving into South Vietnam was a very bad idea. The official Joint Chiefs of Staff position flatly opposed the idea of American ground troops being deployed into the jungles of Southeast Asia. In their November 1964 rebuttal, when they were being pressured to send them there anyway, their statement was as follows: “Instead of working to buttress the South Vietnamese government in order to defend itself, the United States should take stern actions against North Vietnam to make that defense needless.”

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What they had in mind was precisely what was successfully done nine years later—fifty-eight thousand dead American bodies later: seal off all transportation of goods into or out of Hanoi by seriously, heavily, for hours at a time, bombing their dock and rail yards and mining their harbors, particularly that of their major port city of Haiphong. I was in Hanoi when that bombing finally started and I heard that city—which for years had generated a carnival atmosphere with loudspeaker music in the streets between sporadic tactical (small planes, quick strike) raids—*go dead silent*. And frequently in those few days I was eyeball to eyeball with those North Vietnamese authorities whose habits and personalities I had studied closely throughout seven and a half years as their prisoner. In that time they lost heart, evincing fright, despair, even solicitousness. The bombardment was accurate and the casualties light (dozens rather than the thousands per day common in World War II). But implicit in the bombardment’s persistence and

power (the earth shook and the plaster rained down in buildings five miles from the impact areas), was the inevitability of its prevailing. Anyone there knew that but for American humane intentions, the bombsight reticles could be skewed a few degrees and everybody in that city would be dead by sunrise. That realization broke the will of a government, and that’s what war is all about. In only 11 days, the bombs stopped, and we shouted to one another: “Pack, we’re going home.” There was no question that we had witnessed a surrender. And not a question in anybody’s mind that the same thing could have been accomplished in any 11-day period in the previous nine years.

Why did we send *troops* in, when heavy B-52 bombing of Hanoi could have won the whole ball game in a few days? It was the only approach left after “the best and the brightest” had set their conditions back in those crucial days of 1964: no bombing of Hanoi/Haiphong area, no harbors mined, no reserves called up, yet victory before the American elections of 1968.

So we were “in” with the ground troops, on LBJ’s orders and the concurrence of the “Wise Men,” but winning was another thing. McNamara kept score on that with his production-line number crunching efficiency. He came up with what he called the “crossover point” as the key variable of his figuring, and the crossover point was that point in time when our killing rate started exceeding the enemy infiltration rate. He had it figured out that this crossover had to be accomplished by such-and-such a date or the war would spill over into the American elections of 1968, yet another “no-no” political restriction that was part of the “best and brightest” restriction package. To check where he was on the crossover point problem, he assigned intelligence forces to submit enemy troop counts in South Vietnam every so often. He would bang these numbers against his “body counts” and see “how it was going” on his “howgozit” curves. It was a grim business, and the more he got into it, the more his figures showed we were losing by the indices he had invented. (Those pesky Soviets were outfitting new soldiers up north faster than we could kill them down south.)

Well, you know the story. One sad fallout was that after months of badgering the Army to get more and more troops into the south to make his “howgozit” curves turn up toward paper victory, he privately and very early—Parker says October 1966, McNamara’s depositions for Westmoreland’s trial of CBS show late ’65—wrote the war off as a loss. Think of all those who went over and died *after* his war machine had canceled out all plans for victory. But LBJ’s official point of despair had to await the blessing of the “Wise Men” again. They met in March of 1968, and the same ones that had said “get in” in July 1965 now said “get out.” At their afternoon session, Acheson tried to blame the getting in as well as the losing on the Armed Forces. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs said his group had not only recommended against the Army going into South Vietnam but had never been polled to check agreement with contrary orders to do so from above. Bad Blood. Bad War. *Bad Idea to seek advice from has-beens*—particularly when they had become famous using assumptions that no longer apply.

My friend Bill Crowe—sworn into the Navy at my side

at Annapolis in 1943, ultimately to rise to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in time to face *perestroika* when it was new—told me that one of the best things about the total newness of it all was that there was no man in the world to whom George Shultz could turn for advice. He said you were just asking for trouble if you started fumbling around with somebody locked into Cold War—particularly *old* Cold War—ideas.

I know Bill well enough to know that he did not mean he advocated some kind of “new age” thinking, or new moral codes, or that he thought there was any metamorphosis of human nature going on about the world. He was talking about the wheels-spinning—and sometimes hard feelings—of getting mixed up with people who are out of it tactically. (On football tactics I mentioned some thoughts of my old friend Woody Hayes to my new friend Bill Walsh a few years ago when he had me traveling with the 49ers, and got a dose of those same vibes. Good parallel: Acheson was to Shultz as Hayes was to Walsh.)

What about case studies of post-Cold War temptations to make knee-jerk commitments of American will, treasure, and perhaps blood, in support of those who cry out in freedom’s name? The Tiananmen Square episode in China and the Lithuanian separatist efforts are typical of what we can expect more of, but thankfully not very exciting to recount from the American scene because President George Bush has had the good sense not to overreact to significant public cries for “action.”

My reaction to such episodes is permanently affected by my firsthand observations of human nature in prison. The drive by the timid to become “part of the action” when monolithic power blocs start to give ground is I believe a perennial trait of human response to unexpected restraint on the part of the mellowing vicious. Their cries are particularly appealing to Americans who remember inscriptions on such monuments as the Statue of Liberty, and national policies that had applicability in the past (the Truman Doctrine comes to mind), and who feel awkward and ask themselves “why are we just standing around?” when distant cries for rallying against tyranny are heard. Intervention, when long-term trends bode improvement, and particularly in the absence of a clear-cut serving of our national interest, is in my mind foolhardy. A true story might make my views understandable.

What we faced in the prisons of primitive communist North Vietnam was a twisted version of the confinement regime of their own convicted civilian enemies of the state, as they were kept in the high security prisons of that hybrid Asian/Marxist culture. We and their lifers had really two things in common: first, we had *no rights*. It sort of took you aback no matter how many times you heard it—and it was often said in response to our demands for such basic minimum standards as food, water, air, the sight of another American, a torture-free existence. But “you have no rights” was *not* shouted as though it was a just retribution for being a war criminal—it was said calmly, often with bemusement, by a commissar truly perplexed to think that any criminal could imagine a just prison being operated otherwise.

Surprised that I use the word “criminal” without a little speech about the moral indignation of it all? They pretty

much beat that out of you. They couldn’t make you feel like you *were* one, of course, but you just have the strength to stand on your dignity on a finite number of issues, and generally speaking, this one was a wheel spinner. The second thing we were told we had in common with domestic criminals was a *severe social maladjustment*, and that the purpose of our imprisonment was to rid us of our chronic propensity for antisocial behavior. In any sort of argument, the relationship between us and our interrogators was held to be the same as the relationship between us and our psychiatrists back home. This last idea comes from the Marxist-Leninist side of their house, of course. The idea of no human rights for evildoers might come from the oriental tradition. We got used to the idea that the whole regime was a kind of weird amalgamation of those two orientations.

I said this was a twisted version because they had a third, payoff side, to this thing of holding American prisoners: we were to be manipulated and used as propaganda agents, suppliers of military secrets, and informers on one another (organized resistance was the highest crime in their book). So they kept the natural leaders in solitary, and through a trip-wire system of interwoven absurd regulations (like never communicating with an American not your cellmate) they devised “punishment” regimes for those caught in violation—which were in effect private torture sieges for extracting military information, propaganda statements, and details of the prison underground. Not much new in the above for most of you. But how did American prisoners respond in this regime?

Very few acted dishonorably, that is, as informers on fear alone, without torture. The ringleaders of our underground resistance were another special breed, and of course on the completely opposite end of the behavior spectrum. For numbers, I’m talking maybe 2 percent informers, and 10, or more like 8 percent true hard-line ringleaders, plotters, and implementers of tactics for the captor’s biggest “no-no,” organized resistance. The Vietnamese had names for these groups. The first were “willings,” the latter “diehards.” The big third category, the broad floating majority, the Vietnamese called (optimistically) “partial willings.” From the Vietnamese viewpoint, the “willings” were in their pocket, the “diehards” were hopeless—ultimately to be exiled into old French outlying dungeons rehabilitated for that purpose, and the “partial willings” (even after three or four years of punishment and coaxing), were still considered unreliable but worth working on. (By these identifiers, they had constructed a model of a Marxist society—the middle group *had* to be worth working on or their revolutionary theory was invalid.)

Actually, as the diehards saw them, “partial willings” were, first and last, the broad target group we were continually trying to rally into our fold, though their personalities and drives varied all the way from near-diehards to the honorable timid, who would go along with organized resistance but would seldom instigate it.

Did the diehards accomplish anything? Yes; they were the soul and conscience of the prison society. They included the men who commanded the prison underground (these were the seniors, but not *all* the seniors). *And* they included self-selected standout juniors who goaded the ringleaders into ever-strengthening the rigor of our rules of minimum

standards of prisoner conduct, pretty much ran the clandestine communication system that made a prison society possible, planned and executed escapes, started riots on signal, and generally charged the bull head-on without compunction. When the diehard underground choked up the system, had everybody refusing to do the same things and thus shutting down the propaganda factory (nobody but “willings” to be put before visiting dignitaries at press conferences), there were purges, where all diehards (remember, I’m only talking maybe 25 or 30 out of maybe 300 people), were illuminated and frequently had their bones broken.

Over a period of months in 1970, it became clear to all—not by announcement, but by deduction—that North Vietnam had given up torture as a matter of policy. Whether the diehards or outside forces brought this about is a question, like the one Gorbachev brought up at Stanford University about who won the Cold War, that is still open for wrangling. This move came hard to the head commissar who, though left in office, became a scapegoat for his ultimate failure to deliver mobs of chanting “American prisoners against the war” for Western consumption via North Vietnamese movie cameras. I and other diehards knew this head commissar and his top henchmen well. Late in the tough period, he had visited us regularly at a special “dark place” prison where most of us were by then confined in solitary and leg irons. “There are new rules, Sto-dale,” he told me, “but I have been assured that I can always demand respect and personal dignity.” And he knew that I knew him well enough to know exactly what he meant by those words.



And then what happened? Something I was totally unprepared for. After gradual liberalization in our several prisons, the Son Tay raid of helicopter-borne American commandos against one of those prisons—unluckily for us, abandoned—frightened the Vietnamese so much they crowded us into the large cell blocks of the big downtown Hoa Lo penitentiary. After a week of sheer elation as we greeted each other after years of separation, some of our American troops showed signs of growing restlessness in this life of practically assured torture-free ease. Pockets of self-styled “freedom fighters”—and the following not being contrived, but being absolutely true—composed of the

most timid and laid back of the “partial willings” we had unsuccessfully been trying to arouse for years, demanded a standoff show of force in the name of liberty.

The “church riot” of 1971 was their game plan. Believe it or not, though through the *great* and *fast* changes in the confinement regime of the previous weeks, we were being allowed to live together, 60 or 70 to big old cell blocks, the communists decreed that though we could converse freely in small groups, no one person could ever address a cell block population as a whole. (This regulation readily connects with their fear of those who, in their words, “have the innate ability to influence others,” and their fear of organized resistance.) But of course among the precluded activities were formal church services for the whole cell block—so church was chosen as a vehicle of defiance.

Us diehards were not congenitally built to talk our comrades out of spirited action, but we tried. “You can’t stand prosperity,” I told them. The diehards knew the commissars firsthand, and we knew in ways we could not explain to these neophytes fighting at last for their place in the sun, that a reactionary crackdown that could set us back at least a year was inevitable.

I never learned so much about human nature so fast as I did that week as I watched the pressure building up—the timid sitting in corners delivering “give me liberty or give me death” lectures to one another. They had not allowed their frustrations to be relieved in the defiant abandonments of the riots and face-offs when we had something to gripe about during the hard years, but now that the word was out that the jailers had been de-fanged, *they would be heard*. One was known to shout “Screw Ho Chi Minh!” whenever the guards would deliver food. The old diehards shook their heads, half-snickering, half-griped, realizing we were sitting on a bomb awaiting detonation for no purpose.

The riot was staged and it happened. The Vietnamese could easily sense its coming. They burst in, bayonets fixed, wearing masks to counter the tear gas that poured from the upper windows. The prison was clamped down. The next morning the prison yard was filled with fist-clenched and shouting civilians, standing room only (we were right downtown; they had heard the riot and were being spurred on to counter-riot by their political cadres). The door of the cell block swung open, the names were called out by the supervising officer. “Sto-dale” was number one, followed by the senior ringleaders—most of whom already had had up to four years solitary as compared to a cell block average of about six months (the Vietnamese couldn’t believe anybody could rally our compatriots but us). We few were bound in ropes and handcuffed, paraded through the crowd, swung at, spat upon, then blindfolded and taken back into the dungeons to be clamped back in leg irons for several more months.

Counter-riots back in the big cell blocks? Not a one. Dead silence. We later got word that playing cards had been issued and that now bridge tournaments were becoming the thing.

This true story of human nature has stayed with me—believe me, not with a sense of personal bitterness, but with thanks for the opportunity to receive that rare education that allows me to better understand some of the events that are going on in many parts of the world today. ◇



National Service

by Theodore Pappas

"I call, therefore, a complete and generous education, that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously, all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war."

—John Milton

National Service: Pro & Con

*Edited and introduced by
Williamson M. Evers*

Stanford: Hoover Institution Press;
261 pp., \$21.95 (cloth),
\$14.95 (paper)

On February 25, 1906, to a full assembly at Stanford University, William James gave his most famous speech, "The Moral Equivalent of War." James coined this phrase to contrast the noble and heroic human qualities that war evokes with the destructive purposes they most often serve. In James's view there were many values of military life that were worth preserving if not encouraging, such as "intrepidity, contempt for softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command," all of which "remain the rock upon which States are built." James even suggested the conscription of youth into national service for the purpose of in-

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culcating these "martial virtues":

To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, clothes-washing, and window-washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes, and to the frames of skyscrapers, would our gilded youths be drafted off, according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas.

These martial virtues, concluded James, though "originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods."

Many in America today hold a similar belief, that our country's sense of citizenship has deteriorated to such an extent that only by mobilizing our youth for a moral equivalent of war can we hope to reinstate a sense of civic duty. The Hoover Institution Conference on National Service, held Sep-

tember 8-9, 1989, brought together a panel of both the leading critics and proponents of national service, and *National Service: Pro & Con* is a collection of the papers and comments made at the conference. As Williamson Evers writes in his introduction, the debate can be summarized as "opposing libertarian and communitarian ideologies": those who oppose national service emphasize individual rights, constitutional protection, and free market economics; and those who favor it stress civic virtue, citizenship, and community service as a common duty of all. To the Hoover Institution's credit, no other book has ever presented as balanced a picture of the national service debate. The polemics are intelligently drawn and eloquently stated, and the frank and free fashion in which the issue is debated is a treasure rarely found in contemporary American discourse.

Anyone who doubts that this is an issue whose time has come should simply take note of the number of bills recently proposed in Congress. In