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## President's Notes: Taking Stock

James B. Stockdale  
*U.S. Navy*

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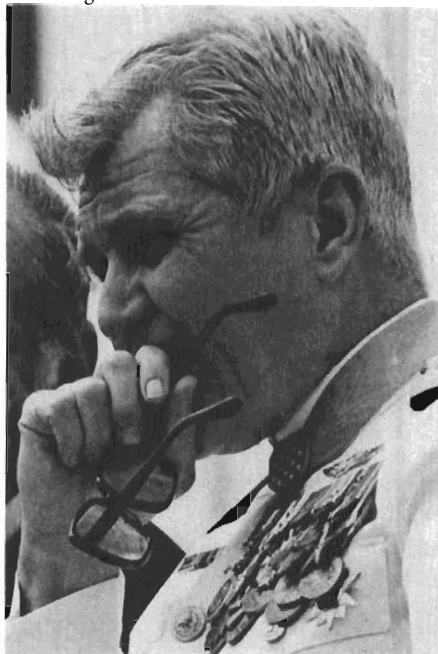
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## TAKING STOCK

Press reaction to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Harvard address last spring was extraordinary. Editorial comment was voluminous, frequently registered surprise at what one would assume were his well-known viewpoints, and seemed to avoid his major thrusts. In particular, most writers missed or ignored his principal premise, one common to almost all the Solzhenitsyn titles which have lined American library shelves for the past fifteen years, and one with which I agree. While not wanting to use the *Naval War College Review* as a forum for debating whether Solzhenitsyn is on target or not, I believe his concept of the insidiousness of creeping legalism is relevant to our fighting forces and bears investigation. The mutation of ethics in a legalistic society is a very thought provoking subject and it strikes me as odd that the editorial writers of this country bypassed it. For me, the problem boils down to displacement of personal responsibility by law in what has become an essentially litigious society, where moral goodness is defined as conformity to specified rules of conduct and where personal virtue or righteousness is considered synonymous with a mechanical disposition to submit consistently to those rules.

The flagrant, excessive use of laws, courts, regulations and the growing penchant for directing society's course by a myriad of rules has largely and sadly depreciated the burden of moral responsibility. No longer are individuals expected to make determinations of right or wrong. Now they can justify



nearly every action by some rule, some technicality, either written or conceived for the appeals process. The product of this "letter of the law" society is measured on the legal versus illegal scale with the good versus bad scale only rarely being applied, more often than not as a matter of convenience. Society as a whole has adopted the judicial process as its moral yardstick and forfeited common sense and personal responsibility. Legal is not necessarily synonymous with good.

This situation exists to a great extent in the U.S. military profession in which too many officers are armed only with technical knowledge and a legalistic, by-the-numbers approach; this type of person proceeds through his career tripping over minutiae and substituting checkoff lists for common sense. Too many have become relativists without any defined moral orientation. Too many are content to align their value systems with fads and buzzwords, and mindlessly try to obey what amounts to a hodgepodge mixture of inconsistent slogans. Error avoidance and careerism are seen to take the place of positive achievement within our ranks.

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What is to be done? If one looks at the West's cultural heritage, particularly at its roots in the classical writings, there seem to be several important guideposts designed to discourage what Solzhenitsyn calls a "letter of the law" mentality that "paralyzes men's noblest impulses." Aristotle frequently distinguished between the ethics of character and the ethics of acts by suggesting that society's main objective is to instill virtue in its citizenry, and that specific laws are a secondary concern. In fact, most philosophers of the classical Greek rationalistic tradition treated dispositions of character as primary and specific rules of conduct as secondary and derivative. We must realize that laws merely delineate a floor in our behavior, a minimum acceptable level of ethical standards, and that moral standards can and should be set on a higher plane. In the Naval Service we have no place for amoral gnomes lost in narrow orbits; we need to keep our gaze fixed on the high minded principles standing above the law: Duty, Honor, Country.

A meaning to life can only be gained through an intuitive sense of good and bad and their attendant comparatives (worse, worst, better, best). It does not obtain directly from systems of laws emanating either from the legislative or the judiciary sides, and can be positively strangled by the real culprit in our national investment in moral bankruptcy—the delegation of lawmaking powers to the administrative bodies who work far from the "canons of ethics and decency." Such social regulation is the disease that Solzhenitsyn diagnoses as totally lacking an ethical base.


It is certainly convenient to adopt the mores of the bureaucracy and not take on the unpleasant and tedious task of formulating one's own. However, if

anything has power to sustain an individual in peace or war, regardless of occupation, it is one's conviction and commitment to defined standards of right and wrong. Today's ranks are filled with officers who have been weaned on slogans and fads of the sort preached in the better business schools of the country. That is to say that rational managerial concepts will cure all evils. The flaws of this viewpoint are brightly illuminated when it is applied to fighting forces—that's one of the things Vietnam proved. The loss of that war demonstrated that we cannot adopt the methodology of business without adopting its language, its style, its tactics, and above all, its ethics. We must regain our bearings.

It is time to put the legal machinery in its proper place: to aid the people in maintaining order and seeking truth. However, regardless of the fairness of our judicial system it must not be allowed to take the place of moral obligation to ourselves, to our Service, to our country. Each man must bring himself to some stage of ethical resolution. I hope this message will travel far beyond the walls of Mahan Hall where I will be expounding it this year.

The purpose of education is not to teach people what they do not know, but to teach them to behave as they do not behave.

John Ruskin



J.B. STOCKDALE  
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy  
President, Naval War College