

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
AIR FORCE RESERVE OFFICERS TRAINING CORPS (ATC)
MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA 36112



18 May 1979

Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale
President
US Naval War College
Newport, RI 02840

Dear Admiral Stockdale

I regret missing you when I called your office sometime ago. I was prompted to call after reading your article, "What is Your Ethnical Resolution," in the January 1979 Supplement to the Air Force Policy Letter for Commanders as reprinted from the Naval War College Review, Fall 1978.

The article carries a vital and important message. We consider the message so important that we request your permission to reprint it in our Air Force Junior ROTC Newsletter which goes to 285 AFJROTC units enrolling over 30,000 students. Due to the reading comprehension level of many of our high school students, we have taken the liberty of modifying the article somewhat. A draft of the revision is attached for your consideration and approval. Please feel free to edit and revise our revision as you desire.

Also, I am aware of some of your other articles and speeches. If it is convenient, please send copies of other works as available. I think highly of your philosophy, intellect, and communication skills and have a personal interest in your works as well as a desire to pass them on to others. In my present position in Air Force Junior ROTC Curriculum I plan to request your permission to reprint more of your works in the future.

I have been in the Air Force ROTC program since eventual medical grounding from the beri-beri. Donnie and the boys live with me on Maxwell AFB. We would be honored and truly enjoy a visit from you should you come to Air University (Maxwell). I will look forward to seeing you at the next reunion.

Sincerely

GBU

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Thomas E. Collins", is written over the typed name.

THOMAS E. COLLINS, Lt Colonel, USAF
Chief, Curriculum Division
Directorate of Junior Program

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Article

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WHAT IS YOUR ETHICAL RESOLUTION?

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By Vice Admiral J. B. Stockdale

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Press reaction to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's Harvard address last spring was extraordinary. Editorial comment was surprise at what one would assume were his well-known viewpoints. Most writers missed or ignored his principal premise, one common to almost all Solzhenitsyn's writings, and one with which I agree. I believe his concept of the insidiousness of creeping legalism is relevant to our society and bears investigation.

For me, the problem boils down to displacement of personal responsibility by law in what has become an essentially legalistic society. Moral goodness is now defined as conformity to specified rules of conduct; 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 lessened 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 legal 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.

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 disposition of character as primary, and specific rules of conduct as secondary and derivative. We must realize that laws merely set a floor on our behavior-- a minimum acceptable level of ethical standards--moral standards can and should be set on a higher plane.

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

It is certainly convenient to adopt the standards 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.

It is time to put the legal machinery in its proper place: to aid the people in maintaining order and seeking truth. Each person must bring himself or herself to some stage of ethical resolution. Regardless of the fairness of our judicial system it must not be allowed to take the place of moral obligation to ourselves and to our country.