

James Stockdale

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What Is Worth Resigning For?

A few weeks ago I abruptly resigned from my post as a college president and walked off the campus feeling good about my decision. The sequence of events had been very straightforward. I had found conditions that I believed to be detrimental to students and unfair to faculty, conditions with which I did not wish to be identified. When it became clear to me that prompt reform was impossible, that my governing board's resistance to change would swallow me up and saddle me with a period of complicity, I checked out. End of problem.

The specifics are really not very interesting. They involve the control of hazing, the selection of students, the rigor of the curriculum, and such less important issues as organizational streamlining and so on. The interesting part has been the split in the reactions to my resignation among those generally on my side. The split cut right down the age line. With a few notable exceptions, my elders say, "Regrettable. Too bad you couldn't work out a consensus, a compromise with your governing board." My younger adult friends sing a different tune: "Way to go!" "Stick it in their ear!"

This is not the first time I've come across this new attitude, this new spirit in our educated men and women in their 20s and 30s. I don't write it off

The writer, a retired vice admiral and Congressional Medal of Honor winner who was a POW in North Vietnam for eight years, resigned recently from the presidency of The Citadel in Charleston, S.C.

as a fallout of the 1960s, or as irresponsible exuberance of youth, or as a manifestation of inexperience. I think it is born of a new, responsible, awakening of moral sensitivity. I like it. My first brush with it came when I was president of the Naval War College. There I taught a course in moral philosophy and periodically required each of my students to submit a paper on the resolution of moral dilemmas he had experienced, or observed or read about. The student picked the subject, but naturally in a course given in the 1970s to military officers and government civilians, educated men and women between 30 and 45, issues of the Vietnam War got a lot of play. The same difference of attitude between youth and age on how to deal with Catch-22 squeeze plays, how to deal with responsibility without authority, how to deal with being trapped in the rising waters of complicity without access to either faucet or drain plug, showed up in those papers.

An oft-chosen Vietnam dilemma along those lines was the problem of the on-scene military commander who was deluged by over-control and meddling from Washington. The older officer typically wrote: "Our commanders frequently could not do what they thought was right. They were forced to make continual compromises. Nevertheless, they had a lifetime of experience that their country needed and thus a moral obligation to hang in there and work it out. No purpose would have been served by their stepping down in protest." More than a few young bucks—Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines—had a different slant: "It was a bad show. No officer should let himself get trapped into compromising or waffling his principles. Any commander

worth his salt so trapped should quit in protest."

Has my generation become hooked on collegial solutions, on "keeping the lid on," on "seeking a consensus," on making a deal to preserve unanimity? Corporate life, board life, hierarchical life breeds that slide to accommodation we are told is necessary to get something accomplished, and that invitation to moral weakness. If you don't think any weakness is incurred by having been conditioned to reasonable compromise, try living in a communist jail for a few years. There, all they want is for you to "be reasonable." The name of their game is extortion, and the source of their leverage lies in their imposition of feelings of fear and guilt. Step One is getting the American prisoner to make a deal, a reasonable deal; any deal will do for a start. From my own experience I can state that a "Prison Interrogator's Handbook" would list among suggested openers, "Let us reason together," "You Americans are a sensible, pragmatic people; meet us halfway."

I do not advocate a POW name, rank and serial number stance at every board of directors meeting here at home. But neither do I advocate suppressing moral sensibility in the interest of cooperation—or tenure. Prof. Richard A. Gabriel of St. Anselm's College, a prolific writer on military ethics, points out in the May issue of ARMY magazine that over the last 20 years Canada has had 27 generals retire or resign in protest, while during the same period the U.S. Army has had one.

It's my guess that when today's American young people reach their peak, their statistics in this respect—in military, corporate or academic life—will change. And that ain't all bad.