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Americans are guilt-ridden, claims former prisoner of war

By Richard Hartnett
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STANFORD — Jim Stockdale, a Navy fighter pilot who spent eight years as a prisoner in Vietnam, thinks too many Americans are guilt-ridden and thus easy targets for "extortion of the mind."

Feelings of guilt, combined with the "pressurized extortionary environment" we live in are precisely the formula the communists used in their efforts to break American prisoners, Stockdale said in an interview with UPI.

Now retired from the Navy, Stockdale is a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. The handsome, broad-shouldered flier, although partially crippled from his ordeal, still looks more like an admiral than the professional thinker he has become.

He is writing two books and contributing thought to such projects as the American Leadership Institute.

"I don't know how we got there, but the intelligent person today has a bunch of causes that he supports," he said. "They are all somehow affiliated with his conditioned reflex to feel guilty about being rich, guilty about being powerful, guilty about being educated."

"There is a great levelling urge. It is more than humanitarianism. It is a disease with most Americans, certainly with the intellectuals."

Stockdale said he was shocked by this when he came home after the war ended.

Stockdale has a small, austere office in the quiet halls of the Herbert Hoover Memorial Building, right next to Dr. Edward Teller, the H-bomb scientist who is also at Stanford on a senior thinking fellowship.

"I'm writing my memoirs," Stockdale said. "Generally speaking, I have less to say about the days in prison than the days before I was shot down. I get less adrenalin going."

"I don't mean to say that life was easy in prison. But I wasn't fighting. I was in control — in a very uncontrollable way. I had no control over the Vietnamese, but I had total control over myself, and I had control over many of the other Americans."

"Which is a very comfortable position to be in. Your enemies are easily identified, and your friends are loyal."

He contrasted that experience with being "in the middle of a bureaucracy where you're surrounded by half friends and half enemies."

"One of the things I grew to appreciate in prison, and I've never been able to recapture it, is that total control of the solitary life," Stockdale said.

While in communist captivity, Stockdale was tortured 15 times. He was in leg irons for two years, in solitary confinement for four years.