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TITLE PAGE

THE LIFE OF THE MIND IN CAPTIVITY

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THE LIFE OF THE MIND IN CAPTIVITY

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An eight year prisoner of war has things to say to people who wonder about how they would handle life as a captive.

"Captivity is an excuse for losing control of your circumstances, but not for losing control of your mind. Learn its unique quirks, how to calm it, how harness its fire, how to get the best out of it, and it will bring you through." JBS

On the matter of common ground between author and ordinary citizens concerned about being precipitously captured: Although early in the Vietnam War I was shot out of the sky as a naval aviator in a single seat bomber, a uniformed combatant in an international armed conflict, I was never held as a prisoner of war. No Americans held in North Vietnam were afforded that protection. On parachuting to earth, I was overwhelmed by a civilian police force, and taken to a civilian penitentiary. Physically helpless with a broken back and a broken leg, I was transported there in the back of a civilian truck, lying in a stretcher, covered by a tarpaulin to conceal me from public eye. For the first two months thereafter I was left in a back room of the penitentiary, unable to move, flat on my back on a large dilapidated table, unattended. When I became able to hold myself up on my feet and walk with the aid of crutches, I was put into an imprisonment regime the North Vietnamese described as their most severe, normally reserved for what they called their own "blackest criminals," their political prisoners. Through my experiences in these circumstances, I believe I earned credentials to talk of coercive captivity - in almost all its current forms.

Chapter 1: Get Your Head out of the Box .

Do you remember the swimming pool scene at the Navy preflight school in the movie "An Officer and a Gentleman?" Richard Gere's class was being introduced to the "Dilbert Dunker." The Dilbert Dunker has for generations been the nickname of the U.S. Navy training device that provides fledgling naval aviators instruction in how to escape a crashed, flipped over, fighter-type airplane as it heads to the bottom of the sea. A mock cockpit, canopy open, student strapped in, accelerates down a steep track and into the pool, doing a forward half-somersault about the time the thing hits the water and starts sinking.

Before starting down that track, each flight student is well briefed on what to expect. The drill is to catch and hold your breath on water impact, let the cockpit come to a stop after it flips over, open your eyes, and positively actuate the handle that frees you from your seat and shoulder straps. You then breaststroke through the opening above your head (which in the upside down position you find yourself in is to swim toward the bottom of the pool), get yourself clear of the machine, and swim to the surface. It is a very simple logical evolution, which half the little tykes in the summer neighborhood swimming-pool set would perform effortlessly and naturally on the first try with only a brief and general explanation of how the thing worked before they got into it.

But some kids would get disoriented and panic, have trouble finding or operating the seat strap release handle in their upside down position, forget which way was up, and drown unless life guards came to their assistance. And those who panicked would do so because

of something in their natures completely separate from swimming ability, athletic coordination, or body power. In "An Officer and a Gentleman" the moviegoer saw this contrast when an intense, powerfully built, male, preflight student required frantic action by the life guards to pull him out on his first try, while the rest of the class of ten or so, including more awkward and less physically fit types of both sexes, took the whole drill in stride as though there was nothing to it.

Something was different about the way the intense man dealt with the need to be cool and collected in boxed-in and somewhat disorienting circumstances. He panicked when his freedom of action was inhibited, the clock was ticking, and his life was at stake. He couldn't seem to work his mind right, to make it calmly set aside the urgency of his predicament and focus purposefully on performing the simple remedial actions it knew so well. This is not to say he would always panic when boxed in. And it certainly does not say that he could not learn to overcome this panic tendency by practice, introspection, and self discipline. In fact in the movie story, he clearly does learn to overcome it and is continued in flight training.

In such cases we are seldom privy to exactly what mental quirk the person recognized in his personality or what trick of mental adjustment he devised to overcome it. He might not be able to articulate his real hang-up or the corrective process, but even if he could, he would likely prefer to keep it to himself. Those of us who have spent our lives untangling our mental knots to get through such tests know that sophistication being what it is among vigorous young people in competitive physical programs, it is not de rigueur to talk

about it after you have failed, learned to get control of yourself, and conquered problems that were easy for the majority to start with. Maybe it's just as well that everybody keep certain categories of mental achievements to themselves and not seek public approbation. After all, we all certainly have a category of motivations and private mental processes that are "up to each of us alone and nobody else", not amenable to external advice. I'm thinking particularly about those that have to do with the way we have learned to control our self-destructive impulses. This is just an obvious example of the truism that the solution to many of our most personal and important problems must lie solely within ourselves.

There are many personal mental processes like these in the category where external advice is worse than nothing, inappropriate, even dangerous. That is not just because we individually discovered them, but because they are unique links in our personally unique "damage control" apparatus. They are part of us. Few of us who have gone through the sequence of failure and self correction can deny that in the process we learned priceless things about ourselves, about how "I", the individual "I", must shift to "my" uniquely peculiar mindset to avoid panic or other self-defeating mental states. And forever after, it is often with a twinge of pride in our self-sufficiency, a smug thankfulness for our self-knowledge, that we employ our own private trick of gaining personal control and keeping it, even as we are being closed in upon by other outside forces and thwarting them simultaneously.

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This is not the beginning of a book on the psychology of stress.

It is an attempt, after sifting through nearly eight years of coping with an almost total loss of external control, to enter the subject of captivity on the plane that matters most when you're there: the mental plane. Captivity puts one in a position in which a despondent, panic-prone person can act to destroy his own life, or to destroy something many of us have learned is even more precious than mere life, one's own self-respect. Captivity is not peculiar, hazy, easily forgettable not-for-credit interlude in one's life; it is a full-fledged chapter, a total life, with emotional hazards, physical hazards, and moral hazards, the mis-handling of which you will take to your grave, or worse: to eternal self-loathing. And the terrible truth is our knee-jerk tendency in modern society to seek solutions through interaction with others - making a deal, polishing the apple, greasing the skids - buying into influences that are beyond our control, avoiding seeking solutions within yourself, can be the very triggering mechanisms that start the time bombs of those hazards ticking. What I am going to advocate throughout this book is a mental orientation that makes a full-time job of monitoring, tending, each his own impulses, desires, aversions, in other words only those matters over which he has control, while letting the world of "externals," the world of matters which are not up to him, fend for itself.

There is no "school solution" on exactly what to think about to calm down and deal with the claustrophobia induced by the Dilbert Dunker. Somehow, you just "get a hold of yourself and take charge of your mind."

A lesson in my taking charge of my own mind came from a Navy Chief

Petty Officer on the staff of a prison-survival school out in the California desert thirty years ago. He framed his lesson in the slogan "Get your head out of the box!"

Even in those long ago 1950's before Vietnam was even a rumor, the U.S. Navy ran a "check your rank at the door, no holds barred, no king's x," special physical-hazing-authorized training course for aviators, underwater demolition swimmers, and others considered to be in "capture risk" jobs. I was a fighter pilot, customarily flying jets off aircraft carriers in the Western Pacific, thirty five years old, in the middle of the second week of this two week prison-survival course, being put in "punishment" in a mock prisoner-of-war compound. The punishment on that hot day was to be stuffed, handcuffed, head forward and down, in a cramped, knee-bent position, into a tiny wooden sun-drenched hot box. The box lid, then pushed down against my back and locked, kept my body in compression. Although I could peek around and see a few light cracks down around my cramped knees, the interior was painted jet black, and as the sun heated the stuffy air, gloom, doom, and then panic overcame me.

It wasn't long before I became obsessed with the idea that I had to get out! Now! Did these people know what they were doing? I would die of suffocation in this stupid peacetime drill! I started "humping" the lid with my back - trying to break my way out. I started screaming! "Come on, God damn it!" "The game is off!" "I cannot get air!" "I am taking charge as an officer." "I order you to open up!"

My future friend's, the Chief Petty Officer's solution? He ordered a bunch of "prison guards" (specially trained American sailors

in mock foreign uniforms) to start clubbing my box with baseball bats, raising dust inside and nearly splitting my ear drums with noise. I intensified my screaming, pushing up with what was by box design my poorly positioned back, trying to break the box's lid.

Eventually, in their own time, the "prison guards" opened the lid and lifted me out, spittle running down my chin, chest heaving, gasping for breath. The disgusted Chief dropped his disguise as a commissar, walked up to me and shouted: "For Christ sake, Commander, get your head out of the box!" "Take charge of your own mind." Then standing me aside, he partially closed the box' lid and pointed to the light cracks at the bottom. "The air pressure down there and all through this box with the lid closed is 14.7 psi, the same as it is out here in the open, 14.7 psi. You're not going to suffocate. Quit thinking about the inside of that damned black box and glue your mind to something that takes you a thousand miles away from it. Do you remember the route you took from your house to grade school? Now we're going to put you back in that box, and I want you to walk to school! And walk slowly and try to remember the faces you used to meet on the sidewalk. Go out your front door, remember each house as you pass it, turn at the right corners and get yourself to the front steps of your old school. My men will be beating the hell out this hot box, but you've got to learn that you run your life and they don't. So keep your mind, your head, out of this box!"

Well of course it was easy that second time around. That Chief had a good record as an inmate of a prisoner of war compound during the Korean War and years of experience analyzing and giving words of wisdom to guys like me who could have choked to death and killed

themselves in the mock torture chambers on that California desert. He made absolutely no pretense of being a psychologist, but in one short lesson he taught me more about the human mind, my mind, than I ever learned in psychology class.

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After three more years of flying off the carriers, the Navy sent me to two years of graduate school in politics, economics and history to complement my essentially technical background for broader future assignments. There at Stanford University I had plenty of time for electives, and though I did take a course in psychology, it was in philosophy that I found my home. There in those ancient texts I found the man whose viewpoints matched in essence what that wise Chief had taught me: "Don't waste yourself trying to change that world outside your sphere of influence; concentrate on matters that lie within your sphere of control, particularly control of yourself." His name was Epictetus, a first century Roman slave, crippled by a cruel master. Although a heathen, he became my patron saint.

Epictetus was a major contributor to the Stoic ethical tradition and as I studied his texts I found that there was very little of the "I'll hold out my arm and you break it" fare of hearsay tales, but a lot of good advice about how to take charge of our own life, asking no quarter and giving none, and not spending your days as a passive victim - being buffeted by the forces of good and evil - but in acting on the reality that the essence of both lies in the attitude of your willpower. Epictetus teaches nothing about Yuppie "virtues" like being good at "interacting," or "sharing," or being "caring". But he is very good on the importance of self-sufficiency, the dignity of the

individual, the brotherhood of man, and the fatherhood of God. As a fighter pilot, I was in a dangerous business, and his frequent allusions to the world I knew, armed combat and body-contact sports, drew me to him.

Difficulties are what show men's character.
Therefore, when a difficult crisis meets you,
remember that you are as the raw youth whom
God the trainer is wrestling.
[Footnote: The discourses of Epictetus, p 51]

As if by Providence, these writings provided me the seeds of the best mental approach that I could conceive for how to behave when I found myself in a political prison in Hanoi, three years after I left that philosophy classroom.

And throughout that eight year Hanoi episode, I had plenty of use for "keeping my head out of the box," using whatever "private tricks" my mood would accept as a guide to keeping my mind focused on that which was up to me, and shunning that which was up to others. Sometimes this was useful in physical predicaments of the sort cited in the illustrations above. But what the Stoics were addressing in the final analysis was the avoidance of mental perturbation. And no matter what your captivity problem, you may be sure that mental perturbation will in the last analysis be your Achilles' heel, deserving of your best attention. It is my hope that in this short book you may discover the key to the mental discipline required to avoid entanglements with captor's desires, hates, opinions, and all things over which he, and not you, has control. It is only by this route that you may take possession of, and hold to, that freedom that ironically exists in all captivity, the freedom to maintain your own attitude about what is going on. Through this comes peace of mind and

some degree of imperviousness to the poisonous rays of fear and guilt than emanate from all prison walls.

Chapter 2: Capture

Because of the way I was captured and brought into prison, I missed living through the normal capture phase - undergoing the shock of being instantly whisked, without any reflex defence, from normal man-on-the-street existence to captivity. But I think my experience as a political prisoner makes up for much of the lack. At least I have strong ideas about what should be borne in mind along the trail from being snatched off the street to being established in a hideaway.

No matter what you read before you are taken captive, when the axe falls you are probably going to secretly hold out for the idea that it's some sort of fluke, a mistake, that they got the wrong guy. As the minutes wear on and that possibility fades, it's then natural to grasp at the straws of hope that those holding you might not have their hearts in it, that with just the right nudge from you they might modify the project to your advantage, perhaps even set it aside.

These are comforting thoughts, maybe like nature giving you a shot of adrenaline to tide you over the panic period. So it would never do to discourage one's having them, and certainly I do not - so long as you can contain yourself. What I mean by containing yourself is having the mental discipline to keep your wits about you, guarding that inner personality which is yours, to be kept very privately yours now that you're captured, and not hearing yourself float some revealing willingness to compromise your integrity, to give aid and comfort to those who capture you in a frantic knee-jerk search for an immediate solution to your monumental problem.

Strange that I should mention such a thing so quickly perhaps, but the true depth of the terror and feeling of anxiety that strikes one's heart upon realizing that he's truly been had deserves such a warning. And I can imagine it would seem so natural to a person coming from a hustling goal-oriented world where the early bird gets the worm, to

get a "feel out" offer out on the street fast. Surely, your flustered mind might think, there is some quid pro quo which would set me free. Why not shop around and find out what it is?

Well, all things may have a price in the World of Wall Street, but don't count on it in this World of Epictetus you just entered. Here, a totally different standard of value applies. By that I don't mean that it would be any grave error to try to buy your way out. Good luck - but if you choose to try, make your pitch solely in terms of money, [£] never in terms of your loyalties, your mind, or your personal honor. Yes, I said personal honor; that old fashioned concept has suddenly become the determining factor in what all is going to happen to you. There is no problem in investing your money in your flights of fancy. It's just that here, you can't afford to invest your character, your reputation in them.

For this captive battle you're now entering is in its essence a battle of wills. The captor's goal is to use the captive; the captive's goal, at least by the time he comes to realize that all uses of him are at the very least, degrading, becomes one of resisting, staying off the hook.

Built into the captor's role is constant probing, testing, listening for signals of a chink in the moral armor of his captive, an entry point for his extortionistic crowbar, his tool of manipulating shame. He knows that from this time on, he can put on the squeeze through deprivation, carrot and stick, physical abuse, frame-ups, you name it, at any pace he selects, closing in, plying his trade, uncovering more vulnerabilities, working to get his victim on the hook. And thus any prisoner, particularly a brand new one, who hints

of being willing to make a deal on the plane of loyalty or personal honor immediately becomes very interesting to the ringleaders of any abduction gang.

What a fresh-caught sophisticated captive might see as a clever way to ease himself into a common-ground position conducive to good treatment and a short prison stay is in reality a bid for special propaganda work-ups and a very likely longer, rather than shorter, prison stay. And that is not to mention the emotionally destabilizing living hell of a prolonged imprisonment with fellow captives who distrust you. You have left the world of "every man for himself"; in prison societies the world over, the putting of loyalties out for hire is seen as reprehensible opportunism. Remember Epictetus:

If a person had delivered up your body to some passer-by, you would certainly be angry. And do you feel no shame in delivering up your own mind to any reviler, to be disconcerted and confounded?
[Footnote, Enchiridion, Chapter XXVIII]

So much for a warning about capture-phase ethical hazards. What about physical hazards? What about making a break for it and going for an escape in the initial confusion of capture? There are recorded examples of mix-ups of timing in the captive relocation maneuver, and stories of other unexpected events that have provided broken field running room for kidnap victims. Some of them have made it; some have not.

There is lots of U.S. Government advice in print that discourages taking physical chances, including tempting ones during the capture phase. You can read documents like the Foreign Service Institute's Terrorism: Avoidance and Survival, or the U.S. Third Army's Terrorism: Security Survival Handbook which offer advice like this:

"After being seized, don't fight back or attempt to aggravate the hostage taker. You may be blindfolded or drugged....Pause, take a deep breath, and attempt to organize your thoughts....Comply with the instructions of your abductors as well as you can....Obey terrorist orders or commands....Do not complain, act belligerently, or be uncooperative....Do not deliberately turn your back to a terrorist; particularly, not to the terrorist leader....Be extremely courteous and polite to the terrorists....If captured, play the game...."

I don't agree with the tone of the sort of guidance. That is not to say that I would suggest you "fight back or attempt to aggravate the hostage taker." That is the antithesis of my advice, the advice of Epictetus. A "me versus him" mentality, like a "me in collusion with him" mentality (evidenced by such things as rushing to get a feel-out for your quick release out on the street), is the seedbed for mental perturbation first, and eventually if carried to extremes, the collapse of the will, spirit, even the nervous system of the captive.

In fact "me versus him" and "me in collusion with him" are to the Stoic but two aspects of the same mentality, two sides of the same coin. The idea is to have the self discipline to rid yourself entirely of that coin, to concentrate, to the exclusion of all else, on your own aims, own opinions, own desires, own aversions, in short that which is up to you, and avoiding getting emotionally involved in the mental process, desires, hates, or opinions of the captors. The key to the habitual prison posture advocated herein is not getting emotionally involved in such matters as are "externals", matters over which you have no control, those not up to you.

What is the practical fallout of this on the physical risk scene?

It is to have the confidence and composure to be your own judge on when to purposely take a chance on getting hurt. And on that I by no means suggest that your judgment be foolhardy. You can get killed in an escape. And take it from me, life is worth living in prison, you can live through it, in fact with a strong will and the right mind set you can prevail, and learn, and perhaps even make the experience the one lyric passage of your life. So forget anything that's entered your head about suicidal escapes; your life is still precious, figure that in. But that still leaves plenty of room for fate to present to a brave and fit person what he comes to feel in his gut is a realistic chance to break free if he makes a run for it. The truth is that should such a combination pop up during his capture phase, the odds are that it is very likely to be the best such chance he'll ever have in captivity.

There you have it, my hypothetical prisoner captured for only five minutes, and already tempted by the wiles of ethical opportunism and risky escape. On the matter of the first temptation, I say, "regardless of your gut feelings, you must not do it." On the second, I say "your gut feelings are your best guide." These temptations, in a nutshell, sum up my philosophy on how things should line up in captivity: The moral regime should be considered controlling, and rule-bound; the physical regime subsidiary and contingent. One should have the goal of absolute minimization of risks in the moral sphere, but absolute minimization of risks in the physical sphere is self-defeating. For in captivity, even death, the ultimate physical risk, is so random in its occurrence, so infrequently a function of the audacity of its victims, as to discourage making it the sine qua

non of one's operational style. Sailing under a banner of minimizing physical risks curtails too many of man's finest impulses: to serve as an example to his fellows, to demonstrate his sense of personal honor, to express his indignation, to lead the way in self-sacrifice for others, all involve it.

In captivity, think of moral decisions as strategy, physical risk decisions as mere tactics. Ethical hazards are strategic trip-wires. Fail to regard them seriously, and the extortionist system of the prison will get you on the hook and drive the quality of your life, your morale, your self esteem down a slippery slide that you can stop only by taking overdoses of physical abuse. Facing up to the need to arrest an established downhill slide by going challenging the torture train plowing down the track, willfully taking those overdoses of physical abuse, is a brave and critical use of tactics, something that many honorable prisoners, especially those who involve themselves in the special risks of clandestine leadership, find themselves in need of doing. But for the general case, the need to illuminate the obvious is clear: the more diligently the moral high ground is held in the first place, the less likely the downhill slide is to start.

Breaking free of a "reliable lacky" reputation is the most painful transition of prison life. For you are refusing to do what your captors have become used to your willingly doing, and they don't like that.

An extortionist prison works on the "ratchet" system. To refuse comply with a demand that you do "A" means punishment. But to do "A" on demand and then refuse to do it on a subsequent demand, is a completely different matter. In the first case you are guilty of

being a "die hard", of having a generally uncooperative disposition. (It may not be obvious when you are first scolded for being in this category, but sooner or later you will realize that that is exactly the status you want to maintain.) In the second case, after complying with initial demand(s), and later refusing to continue, you will be charged, not with stubbornness, but with ingratitude, perfidiousness, betrayal, faithlessness - crimes of moral turpitude. That means real punishment. Suppose, sensing that, you set that decision aside and allow yourself to be coaxed into doing the even more compliant "B", then the still more compliant "C", and finally "D". Seeing you are on a disastrous downhill slide, you then recover your bearings and decide to work yourself all the way back to being an ordinary "diehard", a regular prisoner who who is not spotlighted for every public relations event, one having just a normal "generally uncooperative disposition". First, by making that decision, you will have just passed one of prison's greatest tests of character: to come back, against all odds. It will likely cost you months of pain and loneliness. But it will be worth every agony in the long run, because if you stay on the downhill slide, your captors will take you to the very bottom of the barrel. Making such a run back to "diehard" status, and breaking free, if only temporarily, gives one a sense of having learned what the world is all about; you will have earned your spurs as witness to the fact that you without self respect you have nothing.

Viktor Frankl has written that three years in such straits as I am describing equates to a university PhD in the humanities; this is why.

We who have spent significant periods of time as what I call "political prisoners," i.e. we whose confinement regimes were designed

principally to break down our willpower (in that incessant battle of wills) so to use us, look back on such experiences as an almost spiritual rather than physical trial.

This distinction was brought out in a conversation I had with a fellow prisoner in Hanoi several years after we had been captured. His name is Vern Ligon. The year was 1971; I was 47 years old, and he was 49. We happened to be able to talk face to face because we had been locked in a punishment cell together after a riot of our underground organization had resulted in so many arrests there weren't enough cells to put all us culprits back in solitary. In fact we were not only two to a one man cell, we were two to a one man "bed," side by side, each with one leg in the pair of stocks mounted at the foot of our three foot wide cement slab.

But we were happy. We had been picking up, via messages coming through our underground organization's clandestine communication network, telltale signs that spelled the imminent end of the torture and isolation era of our prison lives. We talked much of the immediate past five years, feeling relieved that life was soon to change.

This was not Vern Ligon's first imprisonment as a shot-down military aviator. He and one other of our Hanoi group that grew over the years to about 400 captured pilots, had also been prisoners of the Nazis during World War II. Vern talked about his years in the Nazi prison. It was an old fashioned prisoner-of-war camp, a relic of more innocent times, the type you see on TV serials where a group of Americans live what you might call an "army life," under their own (captured) commanders, sitting around visiting and playing tricks on

the jailers. Vern said that life in a prisoner-of-war camp and life in the political prison in which we had been living were not comparable. "About the only things I had to worry about in Germany were cold and hunger, and although there were more of both there than here, in looking back it was a piece of cake. There was no mental agony, no threats of being made to look like a traitor; the Germans were interested only in having us locked up in safekeeping. Oh, there was some discipline. If you struck a guard, you got thirty days in solitary.

[Footnote: The Geneva Conventions pertaining to treatment of prisoners of war allow for punishments for prisoner violations of legitimate prison camp regulations. According to these Conventions, the maximum length of solitary confinement that can be imposed for any crime is thirty days. The Nazis followed International Law as a guide to treatment of U.S. prisoners of war during World War II.]

We got so bored in the big cell blocks with nothing to do but visit, and so tired of the same faces and same stories, that solitary was looked on as a rest camp. I remember one guy who had it down to a science. When about once every six months he felt like he was going to blow his stack, he would take station in front of the cell-block door in the early morning when he heard the guard unlocking it. And then as he yelled "today's the day", he would knock the guard flat as he crossed the threshold. The Germans could be counted on to be methodical and do the same thing time after time; they would hustle our friend off to a solitary cell. And right on the mark, thirty days later, he would be brought back to us, unharmed, beaming, relaxed, and rested."

"Those days were nothing like this Hanoi life: constant solitary,

complete silence, having to hold our heads low while taking our bucket to the dump, being spied upon, hounded down, interrogated, harassed, beat upon. I'll tell you, in the Nazi camp my only concern was wear and tear on my body. Here it's wear and tear on my nervous system. No comparison."

Most Americans think of "captivity" in terms of those TV movie sets. When you come home from a modern day political prison, you have no recourse but to join in their inevitable question sessions that assume you were with Hogan's Heroes. "How was the food?" "How much weight did you lose?" "Did you get any fresh air?" "Were you warm enough all the time?" "Did you have any feelings of friendship for your captors?" "How was the mail service?"

But when you get one old political prisoner alone with another, we exchange tales of quite a different nature: of nervous exhaustion, uncontrollable sobbing in solitude, the wages of fear, and the feelings of inadequacy, of guilt. It doesn't do to discuss these matters with strangers; they put you down as some sort of wacko.

A couple of last points for the captive on the way to his first lockup, on the road to such a life as I'm starting to describe: (1) start preparing yourself mentally to be all alone for at least a couple of months. Our popular image of prisoners being cooped up together is more often off the mark than on it, especially right after capture. (2) Start shedding any semblance of a "student body president" personality that's left in you. You'll soon be meeting your interrogator, and he eats student body presidents alive. By that I mean, he will size up your general needs to be praised and thought of as an attractive and agreeable person, hoping against hope that

your needs along these lines are very strong. For it is the aggressively social person, our typical student body president, who can most readily be drawn into his captor's causes, grievances, hates, desires, and all the rest. For this student body president, the epitome of the well brought up American, has been coached from birth to coax the flow of social intercourse, to have a sense of obligation to make conversation interesting, to respond openly -- if not provocatively, to keep the talk civil, and if put off by a levied demand that is distinctly not to his liking, to minimize abrasiveness by perhaps making counter suggestions.

In short, our American social model becomes in prison a "player", an interesting person presiding over a seemingly bottomless supply of possibilities for his own exploitation. "Players" are easy marks for clever interrogators; they fairly beg to be put on the hook.

Captives are well advised never to make counter suggestions, even if their results would be harmless if accepted. To do so is to make an investment in your captor's regime. Investments in their doings is in the long run a bad way to go. Forever thereafter what you suggested, and all that grew out of it as it was modified and gained new meanings over the years, will be thrown up to you as "your idea".

The best long term posture is to maintain the Stoic indifference to things within "their" power, particularly things having to do with how they run their extortion mill. The name of the game is to be as uninteresting as possible. Try portraying a measured defiance, while exuding a sinister unpredictability. This will keep you just short of the interrogator's threshold of uncontrollable physical reprisal, too risky to take to a public press conference, and too menacing for

comfortable conversation. That's right where you want to be.

Interlude: Before we talk about torture

In this twentieth century, many notorious prison camps have practiced physical torture of inmates, but some have not. The life of the mind in captivity is very much affected by which of the two sorts of camp the inmate occupies. Whereas with regard to other aspects of captivity, one can lump several general types of prison camps together and present a generalized account that is fairly informative, descriptions of torturing regimes and non-torturing regimes don't mix. For background information, three categories of prison regimes are herein described and defined. All names and definitions are the author's.

(a) Irrational Regimes: These are confinement systems which show little evidence of any plan for the purposeful exploitation of captives. Fickleness and vengeance seem to be their only earmarks. Best modern example: Japanese prisons for Americans during World War II. They seem to have been run by the whims of local authorities, even whims of prison guards. Unsupervised prisoner-bashing by belligerent guards for recreation or pure meanness was seemingly ignored, as was self-serving fraternization by obsequious guards begging English language coaching, sometimes from the same prisoners in the very same call block! In short, accounts come down to a potpourri of disconnected, seemingly unfocused events, highlighted by purposeless brutality. Few modern tyrants or cult kingpins would tolerate such wasteful self-indulgence. Irrational regimes are now exceedingly rare. Given the availability of modern worldwide communication facilities and the rising literacy and political

consciousness of the world's people, prisoners are now generally being seen as too valuable as political pawns or objects of propaganda to be squandered as recreational punching bags for the hired help.

(b) Rational Regimes With Torture: A rational regime is one designed to extract theatrical propaganda-oriented services from the captives. I define torture using the very specific meaning it acquired among us American captives in North Vietnamese prisons: the intentional application of pain in an effort to force a prisoner's compliance with specified demands, e.g. writing a statement or recording a confession. To be tortured was to undergo a process that had a well defined beginning and a well defined ending, a one or two hour episode throughout which specially trained "torture guards" worked to obtain the cry of "I submit" from the prisoner. Neither the wearing of handcuffs nor restraint in leg irons, or being slapped around by a prison guard in an unprogrammed manner, qualified as torture. For those were all part of the daily routine in that prison system and fell, by our system of explicit definitions, into the category of "inconvenience." (For clarity in our clandestine communication we had to know which was which for tactical reasons: "torture," we knew from experience, was always the product of a specific decision of the Vietnamese prison command chain, a policy matter okayed by the commissar. "Torture" was programmed; "inconvenience" was casual. Why prisoner leaders found it important to keep track of which was which has already been explained.)

(c) Rational Regimes Without Torture: There are many examples of these, including some segments of the Communist Chinese detention system during the Korean War. [Footnote: In Every War But One, pp.

88, 89]. Common in these confinement regimes is the manipulation of prisoners in such group-think processes as "Criticism Self-Criticism" wherein what start out as soft-sell discussion groups become transformed in response to the powers of suggestion and the imperatives of group dynamics into guilt-producing pressure cookers. All exploitation systems generate pressures of self-revulsion to gain control of targeted victims. These non-coercive ones just concentrate on generating internal conflicts, self-generated pressures.

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"Inconvenience" measures, solitary confinement, and isolation are not uncommon in (a), (b), or (c). Most of what I write about is what I have experienced, and from this point on the focus of this book is on confinement regime (b), rational regimes with torture.

Chapter 3: The Torture Machine

It is not the critic who counts or how the strong man tumbled and fell, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotion, and spends himself in a worthy cause. And if he fails at least he failed while daring greatly so that he'll never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory or defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt

It is said that all things are possible in torture. A person can be killed, maimed, or driven insane. That is why so many people have a morbid curiosity about the subject. That is the idea behind the terror the mere prospect of torture engenders in the man on the street. And of course that is what propels that father of terrors - human imagination - into working such deviltry within our minds, blinding us with fear even before torture's first blow approaches.

Nobody escapes this fear, not even the Stoic; his fears, like all his emotions, are up to him. Thus human fear is an integral, indeed a functional part of the torture phenomenon. The efficacy of the whole mechanism is wrapped up in it. And that makes cool headed analysis of it, the taking apart and examining of it as would Teddy Roosevelt's "critic", the abstract thinking your way through its elements and their powers and limits, - - and experiencing it, taking it as "the man who is actually in the arena" takes it, two entirely different matters. When it comes to torture, analysis is sterile without anecdotal accounts of how it is to take it. And anecdotal accounts alone force thoughtful readers to see it only through the frenzied eyes of a person engulfed in irrational as well as rational fears.

Arthur Koestler is one of the few authors whose writings manage to cover both sides of this matter. Take for instance the way he handles fear and reality in the chapter he calls "The First Hearing" in his classic Darkness at Noon. He does it through the thoughts of the old Bolshevik leader and experienced prisoner Rubashov as the latter takes stock of his familiar predicament from his cell soon after he was hauled up in a Stalinist purge of the late 1930's:

Rubashov heard the sound of several people marching down the corridor in step. His first thought was: now the beating-up will start. He stopped in the middle of the cell, listening, his chin pushed forward. The marching steps came to a halt before one of the neighboring cells, a low command was heard, the keys jangled. Then there was silence. Rubashov stood stiffly between the bed and the bucket, held his breath, and waited for the first scream. He remembered that the first scream, in which terror still predominated over physical pain, was usually the worst; what followed was already more bearable, one got used to it and after a time one could even draw conclusions on the method of torture from the tone and rhythm of the screams. Towards the end, most people behaved in the same way, however different they were in temperament and voice: the screams becoming weaker, changed over into whining and choking.

Darkness at Noon, p 13

After years of reflection, this old man who is your author, one who "knows the great enthusiasms", strived, and like all who battle the torture machine, fell time and again, has come to believe that in the interest of learning, both the analytical and anecdotal approaches are worth a look. In this chapter I will do my best to speak both as "the critic" and "the man who is actually in the arena".

The first bit of analysis has to do with the business of this over-worked idea about "all things being possible in

torture". When you add the idea of rationality, torturing mainly to feed a theatrical propaganda machine, death and insanity pop up as total waste, and maiming becomes a problem requiring risky cover up. Doesn't that mean that the odds of a person being totally wrecked in the torture mill are way down around the running percentages of accidental strangulations or other overshoots of over-zealous goons practicing their art "in the arena"? It means just that.

I'm not saying that thoughts of this nature can be expected to occur right off to a person about to be taken into the torture mill for the first time. I mean that as time wears on, after several trips into the teeth of it, he just might have come across some facts that set him thinking, facts something like those that jumped out at me. I mean perhaps the interrogating officer's constant use of the future tense, his ceaseless assurance that in time you will be convinced that the only intelligent thing to do is to go along with his demands to get in the jeep and go and behave "civilly and calmly" at a press conference, and so on. And then comes the realization of the neophyte that the torture goons are under wraps to not permanently mark him (cloth jammed under the ropes binding his arms before tourniquet pressure is applied, heel-of-the-hand head jolts to the jaw, just sufficient to make him see stars, rather than skin-cutting fist jabs to nose). When such evidence surfaces repeatedly it can't fail to occur to our the prisoner that he has some trump cards too, that his true value seems to be based on his present state: alive, sane, and unmarked.

Such a realization can strike a spark of hope in a desperate man and start him on the captive's most profitable quest: figuring out how the overall extortion system that he is pitted against really works. What is its purpose? What are its limits? What and who powers it?

It is natural that in hindsight, such a realization of their being limits, or at least tradeoffs, working to restrain the captors' use of what had at first seemed to be infinite power to pulverize him, would cause our hypothetical prisoner to think back and reflect on his impressionable and fear-drenched reactions to his very first experiences in captivity. Surely there were at least a few hours when he intentionally gave ground grudgingly but cautiously, taking stock of the situation, not yet having quite mustered the courage to reply with the flat "no." If he's honest with himself, he'll thank his lucky stars that he ultimately didn't take a real dive merely on threats of death or worse. But unless he's a very rare American, he would also have to admit that he now has thoughts of regret that he didn't take a stand sooner.

For the one internal decision that is agonizing beyond all others in captivity is finally coming up with that flat two-letter word "no" when it means willingly forcing, daring, the captor to carry out his threat of physical abuse. This great turning point almost always takes place in a frenzied moment with the new prisoner awash in a sea of guilt and fear. The guilt comes from having "gone along" with the captor's demands for a little of this and a little of that, while in the fashion of most

well-brought-up Americans, he had chosen "the middle way" (to his now devastating regret) as he took preliminary measure of his predicament.

And the fear! It will likely surpass any he will ever experience again. Arthur Koestler, now in the first person, described his initial fear of torture (in a Fascist prison in Spain) as "not a healthy fear, but of the obsessional and morbid variety...the neurotic type of anxiety...the irrational anticipation of the unknown punishment."

Until you say "no," it is fair to assume that a rational regime will keep upping the ante of humiliating requirements till they find the upper limit of your degradation tolerance. That is part of their calibration process of "knowing their enemy," even as the smart captive is already taking mental notes in pursuit of his same goal of getting to "know his enemy". Rational torture regimes are primarily tied to the public relations business and have to be able to predict the "acting up" or "going bananas" threshold of any captive they intend to put on display. A rebellious scene before the cameras of neutrals or unreliaables at a press conference can cost the prison commissar his job.

But of course I'm now way out ahead of the "hypothetical prisoner" scenario that started this discussion, and well into personal hindsight. But in the main this chapter is based on hindsight, almost completely composed of data that pops into focus only after you've put all the pieces together, and know the "arena" well enough to properly interpret what all is taking place in it.

As the incisive prisoner seeks answers to questions like just how does the system work?, what is its purpose?, what and who powers it?, he is sometimes surprised to find out that it's not at all like the movies where the uncooperative prisoner is pounced upon by thugs, lined up against the wall, and brutalized with blows to the solar plexus, eye gougings, and so on. What the extortionist's logic demands is the breaking of the "obdurate" prisoner's will, breaking his resistance in a manner that will trigger his "volunteering" the statement being demanded. All convincing propaganda material must seem to come "from the heart". Barroom brawl tactics would serve only to enrage and peak up the resistance of the victim, probably making him hang on till he was knocked unconscious, rendered incapacitated, and thus useless.

As a matter of fact, pain saps the resistance more effectively if the victim is made to feel that he is actually inflicting it on himself. And that is exactly how the torture process works. It is the prisoner, not the goon who in effect says when it starts, and when it stops. The impression is meant to sink into the prisoner's consciousness that it is he himself who starts, stops, and controls the throttles of the torture machine. And that, in the general case, is not a false impression. The whole rational torture regime is cast in the dialectic of a reform school. "Every right-thinking person has a social obligation to support our cause; we make reasonable requests; when you show bad faith and refuse you of course must be punished; you know the rules and it's all up to you; the

system runs in automatic." Force makes no appearance as long as "student" does everything asked of him; it is only when he says "no" that "punishment becomes necessary". And when he says "I submit", it stops.

But that is not to say one would want some kind of certified psychologist masterminding this operation. All you need is a commanding and mean s.o.b. who has an instinct for what makes people squirm. And the squirming usually starts at an interrogation table, which is ordinarily part of the furniture in the enclosed area I'm calling the arena. Over the previous days or weeks, before the captive is lead into the arena, the interrogation/calibration process will probably have worked itself up to the stage where the interrogating officer has a good hunch that he is nearing the point of the captive saying "no." When the captive (seated before him, on a lower stool to add that always present extra measure of psychological stress), does refuse, saying "no" to that demand for action or that demand for information, the officer will probably throw a dramatic tantrum and yell for the guards. Now the captive's squirming will get serious as something on the order of what follows commences taking place.

Three or four ordinary guards plus one or two torture goons carrying a long (six feet or so) heavy (eighty pound) iron bar, thick iron ankle lugs, and coil of manila hemp rope will barge in from their stand-by position just outside the door. The interrogating officer will rant while the guards and goon pick up with huzzah's and other general hate shouts, filling the room

with an impending "hanging" atmosphere designed to peak the fear level of the captive.

The interrogating officer might clear the room and ask for a reconsideration of the "no"; endless possibilities exist for manipulating fear and trying to get the captive to wise up and "think of his loved ones" before the real torture operation is triggered. When this "reconsideration" drama has run its course, and the interrogating officer decides it is time to strike, he shouts the order, the goons rush in again, probably knock the captive off his stool with a head-jolting heel-of-the-hand to the jaw, huzzah's build, and then in rapid succession ankle lugs go on and fasten the victim to the heavy bar in the sitting position, one goon slaps his face alternately right and left while his partner moves behind him and locks his wrists together with tight "squeeze" manacles, and then immediately commences intricate rope reevings under, through, and between the prisoner's upper arms.

The stage is now set for the crucial action to begin, and every effort will have been made in prior threats, and now with atmospherics, to imprint in the mind of the victim that there are no restraints on the goons, no limits to the action to be taken against him until he "submits," in effect withdrawing his "no."

(In this hindsight view, I wish to make it perfectly clear that in Hanoi torture deaths have been recorded in such settings. On reconstruction after the Vietnam war, after the data was all in, the occurrence of death turned out to be relatively rare, in some proportion of less

than 2% of all tortures, yet finite. There were almost no prisoner witnesses to torture, and although we are convinced that some cases of death sprang from vengeance, the exact causes in most cases are open to conjecture. But given the theatrics and emotional pitch generated as part of the psychological mood to spur submission, the stage was set for inadvertant overshoots. Even in a "black box" drill at the Navy's California desert survival school, described above, there was a years-ago case of a death brought about a man suffocating in his own vomit.)

Huzzahs continue as the goon behind the prisoner (the usual position of the boss torture mechanic), pushes the victim's head forward, then stands up on his back and jumps him down to a jackknife position with his face pushed flat against his lower legs. This chief torturer then commences strenuous upward jerks on the rope ends, each taking a tighter non-slip "bite" of the victim's upper arms as these limbs are pulled closer and closer together, blood circulation having long since stopped in them.

The mind of the man on the bottom is now awash in overlapping pains, agonies, and apprehensions. With each jerk of the ropes his shoulders are pulled closer together, his back is bowed to where he thinks his chest bones are about to pop out. The rope grooves in his upper arms are smarting, the blood stoppage has made his lower arms dead numb except for piercing pains that feel like cattle probe shocks when his elbows are banged, and claustrophobia is closing in on him while his head is

pushed forward by the heel of the extended foot of the goon standing on his back. Within minutes the prisoner's feelings become concentrated in stark urgency, of trying to get his breath through a compressed windpipe, of somehow knowing that the blood-starved nerves in his lower arms are causing permanent damage, its severity increasing with each ticking minute, of knowing all this will go on and on and get worse and worse unless he blows the whistle. Finally comes the shut-off point in his mental processes beyond which there is no thought of past, future, cause, or purpose; it just happens that at some level of consciousness he hears the "no's" he has been screaming in reply to the officer's shouts of "Do you submit?" suddenly change to "yes's."

And it's all over. Heavenly peace, but not quite. There is the poignant pause, then the torture goon's personal "signature" of something like a couple of "exclamation mark" rope jerks, and then he starts loosening the bindings and literally getting off the captive's back. The latter then gets a shocking sensation of something like hot oil rushing into his arms as they start to throb in pain, rhythmically. The blood is coming back. Then real heavenly peace. He would rather have died in the ropes but there was no way to get at himself.

Sounds grim. It is. Once you're put back alone in your cell the psychological backlash can be devastating. You have just come face to face with the fact you too are human; you too have limits. After the first time through this process you can't get rid of the idea that surely you have been carrying these

serious character flaws around with you all the years without knowing it. Didn't John Wayne stare down the commissar, grit his teeth, and hold out for God and Country?

But you're not as bad as you think; you just don't know the statistics yet. Hundreds of times just such episodes took place over a five year period in Hanoi. The "men actually in the arena" were not irresponsible kids. All were college graduates, most of them adventuresome fighter pilots, at least half of them football players, and all had to have been experienced in body-contact sports. And not one John Wayne. In that sense, there were no winners.

But look at it this way. Neither, among that broad sample of men I was incarcerated with, did I know a single case of person being turned into a willing zombie, broken in spirit, ready to do the captor's bidding without question, even after repeated trips into this arena. The torture machine did not turn out to be a "behavior modifier" which established a lasting fix; it was good for only one time stands: one rope trick, one confession.

The fact that no John Wayne's arose to vanquish the machine did not mean it did not produce heroes. Those heroes were ordinary guys, most of them out of college only a few years, and in no sense zealous ideologues. They were by and large just well brought up middle-Americans, too dignified, too put off, and too sensible to hold still for any "ratchet system" pleas like "But you agreed to do this yesterday; you must do it today." It was they who would not buy any of the "behavior modification" bunk.

They would just say "no," day after day, watch the goons rush in with their torture tools time after time, and let them do their damnest.

The fact is, a high price is paid by a captor's organization when a torture program is made an integral part of his extortion system. Every person who goes through it is thoroughly alienated, thoroughly turned off, and permanently made angry. And the more the torture program's "customers" think about the mentality behind such a policy, the more angry it makes them.

And after a man's been through this torture mill three or four times he gains tolerance for it and becomes more clever in making them work for a "submit" (always make them work for it), and submitting in visible anguish (always in visible anguish), and now that he realizes that the "settling up" part of the game occurs at the nearby table after the tumult and the shouting die, he consciously (always consciously) submits at a point short of loss of mental skills. He knows to be inwardly cool and calculating when he staggers anonymously from the floor over to that interrogation table to pay the "price" for his submission. He can't hold the pen because his fingers are numb; he fumbles; he appears dazed; he loads the confession with double entendre of the sort he has learned will probably go undiscovered; he is taciturn, but seems more confused than he really is. He is learning how to get even.

In short, he has learned to be less than satisfactory as a "repentant student" but not a mad dog asking to be stomped into a mental oblivion. He has become a Stoic, and like the Stoic

Epictetus, he "plays well the given part."

Remember you are an actor in a drama of such sort as the Author chooses - if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one. If it be his pleasure that you should enact a poor man, or a cripple, or a ruler, or a private citizen, see that you act it well. For this is your business - to act well the given part, but to choose it belongs to another.

[Footnote, Enchiridion, Chapter XVII]

Like a Stoic, our young prisoner is not ashamed of his ego, but he has grown to the point where he does not need to wear it on his sleeve.

Quality propaganda that rings of heartfelt commitment is almost never obtained from a reluctant candidate with whom the torture battle has been joined. All that is usually obtained is flat, sing-song, obviously insincere material. Only with prolonged isolation that seriously destabilizes the nervous system can any hope be held out to salvage such a bungled case. Blackmail is probably a better bet than either torture or isolation. But for that you need a man with a conscience and a deep shame.

That commanding and mean s.o.b. who runs the extortion system has to know how to make people squirm in this physical game, but his big payoffs come from knowing how to make them squirm in the shame game, the moral game. As Napoleon said, in combat the moral is to the physical as 3 is to 1.

The bottom line of this mixture of analysis and anecdotal accounts of the torture machine is that a vigorous person can learn to live with it. Moreover, when you live with it, you live with self-respect. Nobody in our Hanoi underground organization was ever turned into a boot-licking broken-spirited accomplice by this device. Yet we did have boot-licking broken-spirited accomplices in our midst. Those

were the few guys who never said "no." They didn't want to face up to the general prudential rule for living within torture regimes: the indignity performed to avoid torture is more devastating to the soul than the indignity tortured out of you.

Chapter 4: Alone

Let others practice law-suits, logical puzzles and syllogisms: let your study be how to suffer death, bondage, the rack, exile: let all this be done with confidence and trust in Him who has called you to face them, and judged you worthy of this place you hold.

[Footnote: Epictetus, Discourses, page 74]

You will pretty well know when your shakedown sessions in the torture arena are coming to an end. The manner of the interrogator and goons will speak for the fact that they think they have squeezed out about all the juice they're going to get out of you for the time being. You will be frazzled, hurting, and very tired. Your sleep throughout the days and nights since you arrived in prison will likely have been only catnaps between torture sessions, on the floor under the interrogation table. The big tip off that you're about to be moved would be getting stern and detailed orders to "keep silent at all times in the cell block areas". "Any communication whatsoever with other criminals", and you will be right back in the grip of the torture machine.

After you signed your final statement, your prison kit would be brought in and thrown down beside you: two sets each of prison coveralls and underwear, some sort of "go-ahead" footwear, probably a drinking cup and plate resembling dog dishes, a blanket, and maybe a towel. It would be indicated that all this travels with you rolled up in the blanket whenever you are moved. You would put on your assigned coveralls as all personal items are taken from you—every stitch of clothes and everything you were carrying when you were captured: all papers, money, pictures, pendants, eye glasses, watches, rings, etc.—

And away you would go with the armed escort guard, possibly wearing a blindfold, through a maze of dark tunnels in which there was no sign of life. When you are stopped by a touch on the arm by the silent guard, a cell door bolt is thrown back, you are pushed in, blindfold removed, the door slammed and bolted behind you, and the last sound you hear is the big padlock clicking shut and then banging against the door once or twice after the guard releases it and silently steals away.

As relieved as you are to be away from the torture machine for a while, deep gloom will probably overcome you within a few hours. The cell would be dirty, small, and dingy. The air would be permanently smelly and stale. There would be no windows, no light on, just enough inside daylight leaking around the boarded up transom to see where you are going. Reading would be barely possible even if printed material were present. But as a general rule you would have no access to reading material, and no eye glasses provided even if you needed them. You would have no way to judge the time of day, except by prison routine, with which you are not yet familiar. You feel like you have just been stashed in an ante room to hell. You are in body and in spirit, totally alone.

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Although the life of the mind during sieges of torture occasionally focuses itself on the future, "My God, what's next?", and sometimes between bouts reflects on the immediate past, "Oh Lord, what will they do with that tape recording I just made?", by far the mind's most common field of vision is the present. While in the torture arena, you have your hands full in the "here and now," parrying

immediately threatening thrusts.

But when locked up more or less permanently alone, and surely once you acknowledge to yourself that this is really happening to you for keeps, you come to live in the past. Reflections and memories seem to be always in your mind. And more than you would have guessed, and certainly more than you would like, in that solitary gloom they tend to haunt you.

In the sense that in the world of the mind, torture is the playground of fear, in solitary confinement, your mind becomes the playground of guilt, that creeping feeling of inadequateness and failure with respect to your obligations.

And whereas in the previous chapter I expressed my belief that in the public mind, torture is overrated as a behavior modifier, in this chapter I will endeavor to explain why I think that isolation is by and large underrated as one. But to have that be true, the reader must understand, I am talking about solitary confinement and isolation in terms of years, not months.

[Footnote: "Those POW's who were not subjected to long periods in solitary or isolation believed that multiple tortures were the most effective action taken against them. However, POW's who were subjected to both torture and solitary identified solitary as the specific action that had the most effect on their value system." A Comparison Study of Human Values of the Vietnam Prisoners of War Experiencing Long-Term Deprivation, Rutledge, 1974]

I am talking about my personal experience (over four years alone); I am talking about the solitary experience of only a few (one out of twelve) of my fellow long-term prisoners in Hanoi. For it was only that small proportion who had over two years alone. Having lived through it, I can say that (except for what might be called unusual

cases) it takes time spans of two years or more totally alone before most people come to truly feel that real possibility out there that you could in fact come to lose the grip on yourself.

Of course where behavior modification is the goal of a captor, there are things that can be done with the confinement regime of loneliness that will facilitate driving the victim into depression to speed up the disintegration process, just as we saw that in torture there are things you can do with the way in which pain is applied that will facilitate a victim's speedy submission. (To let him in effect torture himself, for instance.)

It's an irony of an extortionist prison that no matter where you are in the process, in torture or solitary, random, seemingly irresponsible action, completely out of the control of the tormenting forces has a more destabilizing and resolve-breaking effect on the victim than images of regimented military discipline and "irresistible force". You learn a lot about human nature in prison, your nature included, and I came to realize how much more comforting to the human psyche is dependable routine, even the most highhanded, militaristic, even sadistic routine, than slapdash randomness. Fyodor Dostoevsky, an eight year prisoner of the Russian Czarist regime in Siberia in the middle 19th century, concluded that "Man is a creature that can get accustomed to anything, and I think that is the best definition of him." [Footnote: The House of the Dead, (1861), page 8] But once man gets accustomed to things working in a certain way, seemingly senseless aberrations of established routine can drive him up the wall.

Of course it goes without saying that if one is clever enough to

try to unhinge prisoners by playing on this trait of human nature, the careless action and lack of control cannot in any way be perceived as being "put on"; the jail staff needs to have a well established ne'er-do-well reputation with the inmates to be credible. But that ordinarily comes easy in jails of the sort extortionists and terrorists run.

For instance, I'll never forget the terror that was struck into my heart by the awkward fumbling of a hick novice guard's unsupervised and unconscious fooling around in a way that endangered a third-time breaking of one of my recently re-broken knees. At the time, I was in solitary, stashed with my legs locked in the lugs of the six foot eighty pound torture bar. This strong-boy "village idiot" type kid opened my cell door and wandered in, lifted up the leg bar, haphazardly tried to balance it on a little stool, and then roamed about the cell while it teetered this way and that waiting to fall. He was not particularly menacing, just seemed to be amusing himself by "teasing the animals." I had no reason to believe that this guard knew anything about the history of my leg breaks, let alone that if the bar fell off the stool in the wrong direction the stresses would tear the cartilage apart again. To make matters worse, he was known to have absolutely no knowledge of the English language.

His totally ad hoc random activities really shot my anxiety level up, clear off the scale of where it normally peaked in the ropes, all the more so (this eliminating in my mind the comforting possibility of his just acting as a part of a trick), because I was positive that for the sake of their convenience, the prison authorities did not want that knee broken again. This all went together to mean one thing:

that there I was, at the mercy of a random, mindless, irresponsible force. It was like being a prisoner of the Japanese in World War II! Talk about destabilization! I was never so vulnerable to an acquiescence to an on-the-spot propaganda demand. Had there been an interrogator there with sixth sense of extortion and a note pad, I could have been had. Anything to get the oaf to put the bar down and leave!

Examples of destabilizing vagaries in the solitary confinement case would include such things as having food delivered to cells by totally irresponsible guards who seemed to forget which cells had prisoners in them and bypass certain occupied ones time and again. Of course political prisons of the sort common we encountered in Hanoi have no grievance system, no way for the hungry to communicate with the food carriers. To call out, in any language, to make any noise, is a punishable offense. In this situation, unreliable delivery of normal food rations was more destabilizing and devastating to the prisoner who was alone and bypassed than a starvation diet, imposed as a spiteful punishment, acrimoniously but reliably delivered, on the dot, at each meal time.

Ill disciplined jailers who ignore full toilet buckets, forget to let the prisoner sweep his cell out, absent mindedly half fill water jugs, and can't be relied upon in any way, build more internal pressure within the captive than martinets who set up and hold petty cleanliness inspections regularly.

And building pressure, building pressure, is the essence of exploitation systems. Whereas in torture, the pressure comes from anxieties and pain imposed from outside the victim, the key in

isolation pressure-building is triggering the build-up of the captive's internal, self-generated pressures. Frustration is a key mechanism for generating that internal pressure.

Political prisons always have "trip-wire" regulation systems, made to be violated. They load their books up with regulations that run counter to human nature (like the "no communication rule"), as well as a too thick sheaf of small-minded, chicken manure regulations so plentiful and detailed that even the most cautious prisoner is usually in violation of several at any one time. The idea is to keep everybody on the hook and off balance; at any instant an off-the-shelf moral justification is available to call in "the usual suspects" for punishment from any quarter, any time. But the most powerful destabilizing aspect of this tactical "trip-wire" system comes from never having authority pronounce a definitive sentence, never closing a discipline case. Completing an clearly defined imposed punishment for a specified wrong creates in a prisoner a feeling of satisfaction and finality that he is never entitled to have. (None of this WWII German "thirty days in solitary for striking a guard.") Furthermore, much use is made of the ruse of casting offenses in the mold of moral turpitude, "ingratitude for humane treatment" rather than "communicating contrary to regulations." The punishment can go on and on, be stopped, and then be started all over again, indefinitely. All they need to say is, "Your apology for ingratitude lacks sincerity."

The prisoner can never pay his debt; the books are never balanced. Gloom and guilt are meant to permeate the cell block atmosphere as the internal pressures build, and build, and build.

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In your loneliness, you pace the floor up and down the length of your cell: four steps up, spin around, four steps back. There is a cement slab bed (ankle stocks affixed to its foot) on which you are expected to lie at night. You know it's night when a single bare bulb hanging too high to be reached is illuminated. Dingy semi-darkness all day, incandescent brightness in your eyes all night; that is the lighting scheme. The only thing that ever seems to move is the cover of the "judas hole" (peep hole) in the door. It pops open every so often to be silently filled with a single sinister eye of the patrolling guard, putting the "whammy" on you.

During the day there are a couple of feeding times when the cell door opens to reveal a bowl of gruel or some such on the floor outside; you are to pick it up, bow to the waist, and back into the cell with it while the non-speaking scullery cook who brought it glares at you mutely. Aside from that, a daily walk with a supervising guard to the privy to dump your toilet bucket, and infrequent trips to the prison-yard horse tank to wash your hands, face, and maybe your shorts if you have time, is all that every happens. Unless you are also in punishment on a part time basis.

Other humans are never seen nor heard; from the time your cell door is opened till it's bolted behind you, all prison yards and walkways within your vision span are cleared. You listen for other cell door openings and closings, look for signs of other prisoners being kept nearby. Nothing.

For months, you seem to be totally absorbed in worry and guilt about the material you were forced to give in the initial torture

shakedown. You are constantly preoccupied with thoughts of those you left behind - if and how they might have an idea of where you are, what your predicament is. And you worry about the many regulation trip-wires that can put you in the ropes on most any whim of the jailers. (As always in a political prison, it is you who initiate pain and trouble.) In short, your morale is at rock bottom as you stare ahead into the endless possibilities for grief that extend to your mental horizons and beyond, halfway sure you'll meet your fate in insanity from loneliness.

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But nature has a surprise for you. You're not going to go crazy in there as you pace four steps up and four steps back month after month. "No such luck," you might think, when one day it dawns on you that you're stuck with yourself and that you might as well get acquainted with that person you really are. You might have already noticed that you have been subconsciously shaping your days into a repetitive routine. And did you stop and realize that time was not moving so slowly as it did at first? Now, there was getting to be a self-imposed routine, a time for this and a time for that, hardly enough left to squeeze any in for your own pure pleasure! That was the unexpected thing: having your life under control seemed to bring you more comfort than "just letting it all hang out", languishing in some flaccid form of indulgent self-pity.

You don't just sit on the side of that cement slab bed when the light goes off in the morning and start conjuring up happy memories of a life gone by. That's recreation; that comes later. Right now you have to do some sitting up exercises; you have to have a couple of

exercise periods every day if you're going to get tired enough to drop off to sleep right after that bare bulb light comes on. And a particular time in the day gets established for prayer or meditation, and a right time for casual "walks down memory lane" when you just let old ideas float, and a right time to remember, specifically remember, sequences of your life in seasons past.

This is not to say that you've consciously cooked up a schedule for yourself. There are larger forces at work than some "self sustaining coping routine" you might have found yourself purposely designing. You are not making blueprints for those houses in your mind that all the newsstand books say prisoners come to mentally build. You are being enveloped by, "returning to" you might say, the primeval instincts of the human race. Man builds order to replace chaos; routine and ritual satisfy some deep need. "Is the need for ritual in your life connected with mankind's drive for organized religion?" (You get so you dare to pose such blasphemous questions as that to yourself.)

What is happening over the months is that your mind, robbed of its customary daily (junk?) inputs of sensory and empirical data, is drying out and starting to bloom as a creative thinking device. You first notice the surge of memory acuity. "Why do those images keep popping into my mind? That was years and years ago, and I had forgotten all about that phase of my life."

The feeling comes over you that "forgotten" phases may be loaded; they particularly need exploring. "Why is it that I feel uncomfortable about that association? Ah, now I know. I had successfully forgotten that. Why bring that embarrassment up in this

awful place where I'm barely hanging on to my equilibrium by my fingernails?" But something tells you you don't deserve to ignore those embarrassments. You seem to know that in this life where you now find yourself it isn't right to dust off irritations with the flimsy excuses that used to be so easy to find in all that happy clatter of the big world of freedom, that big wide world of yackety yack. "You have but one self and here is where you must get to know him, all of him. Here, alone, in this dungeon, is where your back is to the wall and where you must properly marshal all your resources. You must take inventory of what you have on your shelves, good stuff and bad. Come clean; dig out those hidden cancers, have a look at them, scrape them clean."

And that takes months, and you never quite get finished. But surprise surprise, though at first it doesn't always make you feel good to see your past stripped bare, you experience a comfort in having done so. You know it has to be done if you're to be honest in conversations with yourself month in and month out, ad infinitum. (Yes, you unabashedly speak aloud to yourself now; there are really two "selves" in this cell, you know.) Suddenly here, where you can't escape from yourself, facing every reality becomes a cleansing thing.

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Thus go weeks of almost uninterrupted reflective thought. But then when you least want to break away, things happen to flip flop moods in your life. Always the interruption, the irritation. These people are so unreliable! Three days without a bucket dump; you heard him twice yesterday and he just walked by. It started overflowing and there was piss all over the floor. What kind of a person would treat even an

animal like this? You got so mad you started to cry.

But you got over it when you stopped and got your head out of the box and back into your heavy work schedule. "For Christ sake, Commander, get your head out of the box!" "Take charge of your own mind." How many years ago did that Chief Petty Officer teach you that? At least ten. Smart guys, old jail birds.

But sometimes we have to learn the hard way. Like a couple of months ago, the first time the guy let your bucket overflow. You were your old self there for a few minutes: a loud mouthed naval officer who "needed to get some action going". The third time you heard him walk by you let fly: "Open the door you lazy son of a bitch; we've got to get this bucket dumped!"

Well, you got some action going, all right. The guard came, slapped you around, took you to the interrogator. The travelling irons were clamped to your ankles. "I provided you humane treatment on the condition that you remain silent. You flaunted my kindness and made loud talk. You are ungrateful; go to the wall." And there you stood, day and night, for a steady four days, arms high up on the wall, guards stationed in shifts behind you to kick the short irons (into which your ankles had swollen) whenever you let arms slump or acted up. Then the one-shot routine: ropes, submission, apology, a statement signed, and of course a friendly lecture.

"You have been alone for over a year now. You don't have to live like this. All we ask is to be shown consideration. Our cause is just. Things can be arranged. Ask the guard for a paper and pen if you ever want to write me a note of request for reconsideration".

And then back into this cell. So sleepy. "These aren't my feet",

you remember hearing yourself say when you looked down in surprise at the totally unfamiliar puffed up, skin-stretched, blue, mosquito-bitten things attached to your legs. Just then you collapse on the cell floor in a stupor. Epictetus was sounding better all the time:

I ask you, is it possible to avoid men? How can we? Can we change their nature by our society? Who gives us that power? What is left of us then, or what means do we discover to deal with them? We must so act as to leave them to do as seems good to them, while we remain in accord with nature.
[Footnote: Discourses, page 33]

Slipping back into the arms of nature was buying you time. Despite your periods of frustrated rage, you had perfected certain "hard to articulate" mental adjustments within yourself, keeping you focused only on what was up to you in this "black box" of isolation. In exhilarated moments, your dried out but full-blooming mind would free you from the wheel of life. At last you were learning to use that mind as a deep probe instrument rather than as just a defensive scanner keeping your six o'clock clear. Hard to realize, but that had seemed to be its main purpose back there in the years when you were striving for achievement and success in the big wide world of yackety yack.

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Then there was this evolution that bought you still more time while you were running up your record in solitary. It was an evolution you wouldn't have missed, but one that ultimately sent you back into the deep pangs of guilt.

In a surprise move one night you were blindfolded and moved across to the other side of the prison and put in another tiny cell, but in a

location where the next morning you could hear cell doors being opened and closed in sequence. You had prisoner neighbors! And they had a very clever and clandestine way of communicating by tapping almost silently to each other through the walls. And in due course you learned the code and found yourself doing the same thing and becoming a member of an invisible but very real society.

This was a different slice of life, a chance to "get your head out of the box", not merely through introspection, but in helping and loving others, real people. Yes, "loving", for this was the first time in the two years since you'd been captured that you found yourself within earshot of living, breathing, minds who shared your predicament. American minds! How many dozens of times in your periods of meditation had you vowed to never again be petty or selfish or mean to one of those wonderful creatures if you should ever again get into contact with one?

And the power of comradeship enveloped you as you came to "know" each member of that society, to learn enough about each person's past and his ideas and attitudes to think of him as a close acquaintance. Especially did you get an appreciation for how each handled the prison life. For much of what was communicated by that tap code to all in the whole society had to do with who was hauled away to the "arena" for punishment and in what particular way had he become ensnared in the network of regulation trip-wires. And when he came back, you heard his report of what torture methods were used on him and his warnings about exactly whatever prisoner organizational secrets got forced out of him by the interrogator.

It was the latter matter, how in this invisible society, common

danger and goodwill had joined to tear down the barriers of selfishness and vanity, that was what took your breath away. These men kept absolutely no secrets from one another! One for all and all for one was really working here. And in the late night in your continuous solitude under the bare bulb you said to yourself more than once: "I love these guys. I am with them to the end."

But you weren't with them to the end. Because in your case, when you got caught in communication and had your turn in the barrel, after the authorities put you through the ropes, and got some of your recent comrades' organizational secrets out of you, they stuck you back in this same old black box in the isolation zone on the other side of the prison. And this came as the worst blow you had had yet.

You couldn't control what you intellectually knew was a product of your runaway imagination: that by not being able to re-enter the bosom of that that invisible society and pour out your story as all others had, had not been able to warn them of the damage you had done in losing secrets, you would be singled out for distrust and criticism. They would surely come to hate you and distrust you. You had lost the only thing you had left: your reputation! The following winter this feeling of guilt stuck with you and brought you worse remorse than had ever known before. No longer did you brood over just what you thought of as unworthiness of yourself, but over potential physical reprisal you might have brought upon others you had come to love.

You knew that someday all this had to be handled; you couldn't afford a nervous breakdown here. Day after day you would oscillate between the extremes of being morbidly consumed by guilt, generating

thoughts you knew to be self-destructive, and then switching to thoughts you knew to be disingenuous, trying to make yourself believe that saying "after all, I was tortured," was excuse enough. You knew in your bones that you had to face the truth, and that was the middle ground, somewhere between the two. Finally you sat down in your solitude and did what you had come to know was right: you dealt with the guilt just as you had learned to deal with all the matters you had let be smudged out of your past. You sat there and looked at the facts full in the face and said to yourself, "this is reality, this is it," and thereby ate the guilt, if you will, and pledged to use it for what it may have been intended, as a searing flame to cauterize your will, to make you stronger next time.

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All this gave you much difficulty and destabilized you considerably. But within a year or so the wounds to your conscience had almost healed, and there you were, sweating out total loneliness as a full time job again, pressing the limits of your own mind and being exhilarated by it when you could, and venting frustrations on the wasted pain of rebelliousness when you had to. "Open the door you lazy son of a bitch; we've got to get this bucket dumped!"

What a profound and delicate instrument memory can be when all the sensory and empirical clutter is cleaned away from its lens and you have the time and patience to use it properly, to "see" human nature for what it is! When your mind is in the probing mode, you learn to sneak up on deeply buried matters. And when you get blanked out on the way to your "target shot", you just let your mind drift around the borders lightly and wait for a clue to pop out at you.

As an example, you might proceed something like this: Suppose you are going back to the book of your life to fill in all the pages on your birthdays. It was the summer of 1929. You know it was 1929 because you weren't wearing splints. Your mother had rented Dickinson's pony and cart for your birthday party and you got to drive the pony and you distinctly remember not having yhour arms encumbered with splints. The splints came in 1930; that had to be the year you started first grade and so that had to be that summer that you broke both arms falling out of the tree because you were worried that they wouldn't be off for your first school day. But in 1929 you had to have four kids beside yourself at the party. You were turning five and your mom always said she liked to have the same number of kids as your age, and so far you've only got three besides yourself. Don't push! You're forcing your memory now, and you're squeezing it all back into the black oblivion. Relax, drift, think of something else and that fourth kid's picture or name will pop out of nowhere when you least expect it.

Wait! I've got a clue. He did something to the pony. What was it?

Damn! That guy's at the door with food now. Interruptions interruptions; you've got a schedule to keep and it keeps getting interrupted. You don't have a moment to yourself in this place!

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Oh Lord, this up and down stuff itself gets to you after a while - literally from the sublime to the ridiculous and back and forth. One thing that makes the life so gloomy in here is its being so completely disengaged from nature. The only colors you see for years on end are

drab gray and dirty brown. You never get to see the moon or a sunrise or a flower or a blade of grass. Also, why is it that ever since you passed the four-years-in-solitary mark you seem to be on the fringe of a breakdown. You get to shaking and sobbing at the most insignificant reversal, like you had met your goal and are running out of steam. But you must not let that son of a bitch at the peephole see you in tears or the interrogator will think of another way to get you strung out even farther.

Sure as hell, if you ever do get out of this place, the town's self appointed "spiritual and patriotic leaders" are going to ask you: What made you hang in there? Oh, they and their buddies will want to hear about God, and they'll want to hear about country, and I wouldn't deny here to myself that either idea has not pulled me through some tight periods. But what if I told them about the third leg of this three legged stool that I've relied on to hold me together: ego, willpower, the refusal to play the role of a victim. That is pure Epictetus. Would they buy that?

A man's master is he who is able to confer or remove whatever that man seeks or shuns. Whoever then would be free, let him wish nothing, let decline nothing, which depends on others; else he must necessarily be a slave.

[Footnote: Enchiridion, Chapt. XIV]

Or maybe I could get right to the point and just say I relied on that enigmatic mixture of conscience and egoism called personal honor.

[Footnote: Jacob Burckhardt, Renaissance in Italy (1871)]

AFTERTHOUGHTS

"Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."

Sun Tzu, The Art of War, 400 B.C., page 84.

A remark made by Sartre to a newcomer, Catholic Priest Marius Perrin, in the prison camp in which they were both being held at Trier, Germany, in 1940: "Remember while you're here: the important thing is not what they do to you, but what you do with what they do to you."

Fr, Marius Berrin, Avec Sartre au Stalag 12D, courtesy Dr. Joe Brennan.