

# Dignity and Honor in Vietnam

By JAMES BOND STOCKDALE

Chivalry was dead in my prison. Its name was Hoa Lo, meaning "fiery furnace," located in downtown Hanoi, a prison the French built in 1895.

I arrived there, a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, in the late morning of a rainy Sunday in September 1965, a stretcher case. I had a broken leg (which my welcoming party, a street mob of civilians, had inflicted), a broken back (which I charge off to my carelessness in not having had the presence of mind to brace myself correctly before ejecting into low-altitude, high-speed air from a tumbling airplane), and a gunshot wound in my good leg (which an irate farmer had pumped into my stretcher during my first night on the ground, an act I credit as morally neutral just to keep the score balanced). The North Vietnamese officer who presided over my arrival after three days in the back of a truck was about my age (42 at the time), also a career military man.

## A Propaganda Factory

I asked him for medical attention for my broken bones and open wounds. "You have a medical problem and you have a political problem," he said. "In this country we handle political problems first, and if they are satisfactorily resolved, that is, if you demonstrate a proper understanding of the American war of imperialist aggression in Vietnam and take concrete actions to stop it, we will attend to your medical problems." That was the last time the subject of medical attention for me ever came up in my next eight years as a prisoner of war.

In intense, bizarre form, the prison was an extortion factory, a propaganda factory. It was much like the one Dostoyevsky described in 19th Century Siberia, like the one Solzhenitsyn described in the modern Gulag. It was almost identical to the one Koestler described in the Moscow of the Stalinist purges, in that prison book, "Darkness at Noon," fiction no less, that gives me more shudders of authenticity than any other in print. Cervantes experienced the same pressures for seven years in a Moslem political prison in Algiers, after he was captured in the battle of Lepanto over 400 years ago.

These prisons are all the same; the name of the game is to unstring their victims with fear and polarize them with guilt. There are always more rules than can practically be obeyed, always a tripwire system to snare you in a violation that the jailers can brand as moral turpitude—and there is always an escape valve, a way to make amends if you repent.

The tripwire in Hanoi was based on the "no communication" rule. As with all tripwires, the prisoner had a choice to make, and he stood to lose either way. If he obeyed and did not communicate with his comrades, he accrued the conscience problems of betraying his fellows and at the same time sentenced himself to a desperate loneliness which would likely get to him after a year or two. If he communicated, and this was the only way to go for loyalty, for a feeling of self-worth, for dignity, he would periodically be caught and tortured under the charge of ingratitude for the "humane and lenient treatment" he was being given.

## Koestler's Commissar

(Incidentally, communication grew to be a very refined, high-volume, high-speed, highly accurate though dangerous art. We used the same code Koestler's fictional Commissar N.S. Rubashov used during his Moscow trial and execution period in the late 1930s).

By torture, I don't mean leg irons or handcuffs or isolation. We were always careful to remind ourselves that those were just inconveniences, not to panic. By torture we meant the intentional imposition of pain and claustrophobia over as short a time as necessary to get the victim to "submit."

In my experience this is best done by heavily slapping the prisoner, seating him on the brick floor, reeving his upper arms with ropes, and while standing barefoot on his back cinching up the elaborate bindings by jerks, pulling his shoulders together while stuffing his head down between his feet with the heel of your foot. Numb arms under contorted tension produce an excruciating pain and a gnawing but sure knowledge that a clock is ticking while your blood is stopped and that the longer you wait before submitting the longer useless arms will dangle at your sides (45 minutes of blood stoppage usually costs about six months of dangle). The claustrophobia also concentrates the mind wonderfully.

How long to submission for a good man? About 30 minutes. Why not hold your silence and die? You can't just will your-

self dead and have it happen—especially in that position. Why not just give them what they want and be done with it? Reasons that come to mind include dignity, self-esteem, contempt for B-grade pageants. They can make you tell them most anything they know you know. The trick is, year in and year out, never to level with your captors, never let them really know what you know.

There are a lot of things you can't do with torture. Aristotle said that compulsion and free will can coexist, and he was right. Unlike our courts, spring-loaded to excuse any action to which the general term coercion is attached, prison societies get down into the messy details of degree of coercion and complicity before making judgments. The man about to undergo torture must have burned into his mind the fact that he can be hemmed in only within a very narrow window and that he need not volunteer information or "spill his guts."

How exactly to behave in the ropes, to make the torture team work for everything they get—the specific information, the personal concessions—to give no indication that you're short on courage yet supply a convincing submission before you've lost your mental skills, to minimize their net gain after you are let up and sat before the tape recorder, are all matters of dramatic art—a deadly dramatic art, which if revealed for what it is will assure your being reduced to a whimpering heap in minutes.

For all this, it obscures the fact that the extortion experience, even in a harsh political prison, is not a physical experience. It's an emotional experience.

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falling into the arms of your captor, smitten by "Stockholm Syndrome." Yes, over time, pain and isolation, a "persuasive interrogator" and lack of sleep can probably bring about discontinuities in the victim's decision-making patterns, but never a "whammy" that would go as deep as character change. Nobody who has had any extensive experience in captivity would have the guts to try to pass off succumbing to intolerable pain or even suffering a nervous breakdown as a case of being "brainwashed" or "breaking" or developing a "syndrome." Seasoned hostages see these terms for what they are—polite expressions that allow the inexperienced to feel more comfortable in avoiding the issue of holding a person responsible for his actions.

To keep your integrity, your dignity, your soul, you have to retain responsibility for your actions, to deal with guilt. ("Yes, I lost the bubble, I might have done better, but I didn't.") You need to look squarely at what you did and measure its limited gravity in the light of the overall truth of the total situation, then use the guilt, such as it is, as a cleansing fire to purge the fault, as a goad for future resolve, and above all not be consumed by it. But you have to do all this yourself. To say guilt doesn't exist or that it was the work of "evil spirits" or "brainwashers" is self-delusion.

## Prison Nightmares

The political prison experience is an emotional experience in that you learn that your naked, most inner self is in the spotlight, and that any detected shame or deep fear, any chink in your moral armor is a perfect opening for the manipulative crowbar. And once the manipulator gets it into you, he can put you out front working for him because he has something on you of which you are genuinely ashamed; he has the means to destroy your reputation if you fail him. Fates like that are what prison nightmares are made of, not fear of pain.

When good people try to commiserate with a person coming out of these circumstances, the language of both parties seems to find common meaning only in terms of physical things—years of solitary, months or years in leg irons, torture stories, mail deprivation, weight loss and so on. Relatively speaking, those are hardly problems at all. (It was not uncommon among us to try to starve yourself, to make yourself an immobile Gandhi, just to take yourself out of the eligibility zone of those they were trying to entrap into public exposure with the touring of a "fact-finding" American.) For us, the deprivations from the physical side of the good life and even the pain and the loneliness were shallow complaints compared to finding yourself stripped of all entitlement to reputation, love or honor at home.

I am often asked: "What are the attributes of those who best measure up in these circumstances?"

Rather than high thresholds of pain, I think it was the persistent practitioner of endurance who carried the day for courage. The game of physical intimidation was not won or lost in one grand showdown. The hero of us all was the plucky little guy who made them start all over every day, the person who refused to accept the extortionist's logic of "being reasonable," of accepting the inevitable, of granting yesterday's tortured concession free of charge today.

Fierce political dedication undoubtedly strengthened the resolve of some. But if I were an interrogator trying to make a good estimate as to whether the new prisoner across from me was likely to be a soft touch, I wouldn't base my estimate on the vehemence of his political protestations. But I would be delighted if he seemed to need my reaction to his expression of political virtue. The player who needs to interact with those around him, even his enemies if friends are not available, is an extortionist's dream. Lock people like that up

for a few months and they start looking for a friend.

Religious conviction? It was certainly a positive force for the great majority of us. But indispensable? No. Some good prisoners did not rely on it. What is indispensable to avoiding entrapment in the web of fear and guilt is the ability to stand isolated, without friends and surrounded by entreaters, and quite uncharitably say "no," without the crutch of anger, without embarrassment, with finality and with commitment to the consequences. This is a very hard thing for many well-brought-up, manly, considerate, American men and women to bring themselves to do. It seems so impolite to leave it at just "no."

## A Confrontation

This sort of thing was a big initial hurdle for the typical young, well-brought-up, well-educated American pilot in prison. He was put through the gantlet when shot down, and maybe the next day's target list was beaten out of him. This he more or less expected. But a month later, after lying low, learning to communicate through the wall, receiving all the standing orders of unified resistance, he is pulled out for interrogation and told to read Harrison Salisbury's Hanoi articles from the New York Times over the prison public-address system. He has been warned by the American next door that this would be coming up. Moreover he has been coached by this experienced friend, and so he goes through the dialogue, but it seems awkward to him this first time:

"Good morning," says the interrogator. "You look well. I have your first assignment for you. We want to provide the American criminals with news from U.S. newspapers, but we Vietnamese have an accent that makes us difficult to understand on the camp radio. You will read these American articles into the tape recorder and they will be played at noon today."

"No."

"What do you mean, no. The camp regulations require that you obey all orders. You must do it. My superior has decreed that you shall do it."

"I refuse."

"You can't refuse. You must obey the laws of this country. You are a criminal. If you refuse, you will be severely punished. Shall I call the guard and have him punish you? I think you remember the punishment, and that you cannot overcome it. What do you say?"

"I say nothing. The problem is not mine, it is yours. It's up to you."

Many of us are brought up to believe that a person, particularly a person in authority, is entitled to an explanation, at least a better answer than a figurative "stick it in your ear." It seems so unfair, so unnatural not to drop in a word of regret or at least a counterproposal. (And any smart extortionist will know that.)

It was the counterproposal that our captors counted on to get us on the hook—we become partners that way, guilty partners. "You are an American, you are a pragmatist, your submission is inevitable. We don't like to punish you. Meet us half way. Be reasonable."

## Fighting City Hall

Young Americans in Hanoi learned fast. They made no deals. They learned that "meeting them half way" was the road to degradation. My hypothetical young prison mate soon learned that impulses, working against the grain, are very important in political prisons, that one learns to enjoy fighting city hall, to enjoy giving the enemy upside-down logic problems, that one soon finds himself taking his lumps with pride and not merely liking but loving that tapping guy next door, the man he never sees, the man he bares his soul to after each torture session, until he realizes he is thereby expiating all residual guilt. Then he realizes he can't be hurt and he can't be had as long as he tells the truth and clings to that forgiving band of brothers who are becoming his country, his family.

This is the power of comradeship and high-mindedness that ultimately springs up among people of good will under pressure in mutual danger. It is a source of power as old as man, one we forget in times of freedom, of affluence, of fearful pessimism—like now.

Eight years in a Hanoi prison, survival and dignity. What does it all come down to? It does not come down to coping or supplication or hatred or strength beyond the grasp of any normal person. It comes down to unselfish comradeship, and it comes down to pride, dignity, an enduring sense of self-worth and to that enigmatic mixture of conscience and egoism called personal honor.

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