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STOICISM AT WAR: FROM EPICTETUS AND MARCUS AURELIUS TO JAMES STOCKDALE

Abstract

The chapter is devoted to the analysis of ancient Stoic philosophy as a source of resilience for soldiers. Firstly, some historical cases are investigated, from a Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius to more recent instances from Vietnam and Iraq. Secondly, in turn, the Epictetus' distinction between the controllable and the uncontrollable is introduced with the focus on the prescription to assign value only to the former as the Stoic source of resilience. Finally, some further questions are briefly addressed including the ones concerning the sources of the Stoicism's appeal to the soldiers, its more particular applications as well as the potential drawbacks of the Stoic resilience.

Key words: resilience, stoicism, soldiers, Marcus Aurelius, James Stockdale

Stoicyzm na wojnie. Od Epikteta i Marka Aureliusza do Jamesa Stockdale'a Streszczenie

Rozdział poświęcony jest analizie starożytnej filozofii stoickiej jako źródła sprężystości psychicznej (*resilience*) dla żołnierzy. Po przedstawieniu historycznych przykładów żołnierskich odwołań do stoicyzmu, od rzymskiego cesarza Marka Aureliusza do uczestników wojen w Wietnamie i Iraku, wprowadzona zostaje stoicka koncepcja Epikteta. W szczególności sformułowane przez niego rozróżnienie na to, co podlega naszej kontroli, oraz to, co jej nie podlega, a także nacisk na przypisywanie wartości jedynie temu pierwszemu zostają przedstawione jako stoickie źródła odporności psychicznej. W końcowej części rozdziału zarysowano dalsze pytania dotyczące: źródeł popularności stoicyzmu wśród żołnierzy, jego bardziej szczegółowych zastosowań, a także potencjalnych słabości stoickiego rodzaju sprężystości psychicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: sprężystość psychiczna, stoicyzm, żołnierze, Marek Aureliusz, James Stockdale

“If your philosophy doesn’t work in the most dire circumstances, then abandon it now, because it’s a Starbucks philosophy.”

Major Thomas Jarrett, cited in: Evans, 2013, p. 70

“Each person’s master is the one who has power over what that person wants or does not want, so as to secure it or take it away. Whoever, then, wants to be free, let him neither want anything, nor avoid anything, that depends on others; otherwise, he must necessarily be a slave.”

Epictetus, *Handbook*, 14

“Hippocrates, after healing many a sick man, fell sick himself and died... Alexander, Pompeius and Gaius Caesar times without number utterly destroyed whole cities, and cut to pieces many myriads of horse and foot on the field of the battle, yet the day came when they too departed this life... And lice caused the death of Democritus, and other vermin of Socrates.”

Meditations, III, 3

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The aim of this chapter is to investigate resilience in two quite particular contexts. Firstly, more specifically, it is the Stoic philosophy that will be scrutinised as a resource that enables the individual to cope resiliently with an adversity. Secondly, in turn, individuals one will be dealing with here are a special professional group of soldiers, soldiers met within a vast historical and cultural spectrum.

The choice of soldiers as a focus of attention can be justified by referring to very special environmental pressures in which the members of this profession often find, or at least always may find, themselves. More particularly, in the context of the definition of resilience as “positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity” (Herrman, Stewart, Diaz-Granados, Berger, Jackson, Yuen, 2011, p. 259) it may be hypothesised that the bigger adversity the individual experiences, the bigger danger of maladaptation (psychopathology) and the bigger need for resilience, accordingly, exist. The soldiers, in consequence, just like the members of other professions consistently exposed to risk and danger, turn out to be a very interesting sample to study. The main focus here will be the resilience exhibited by soldiers in martial situations. Whether the ability to exhibit resilience during war is symptomatic of positive adaptation in other environments, i.e. whether it is a global-trait, or rather a local-one, is a separate and important question, which cannot be, however, directly addressed here.

The special focus of this chapter, as has been already said, is twofold. The topic is special because it refers to soldiers and because it deals with the Stoic philosophy as a source of resilience. The choice of philosophy as a potential resource for

resilient coping can be a bit surprising when suggested in the context of social sciences. As a matter of fact, however, the very idea of philosophy as a practically applicable or, even more emphatically, as a way of life is not only ancient (cf. Hadot, 1995), but also increasingly often referred to today (e.g. Evans, 2013; see also the chapter by Christopher Gill in the present volume).

Among the very rich set of philosophical resources, which have happened to be read along these lines, a special place should be given to Stoicism, a philosophical current founded in 3rd century by Zeno of Citium (see Hadot, 1998; Sorabji, 2000). The original, Greek Stoicism is often understood as arising in the particular context of the Hellenistic world, of the world in which the order of independent city-state (Greek *polis*) had been destroyed by Philip II of Macedon and which had been left in the state of constant uncertainty and upheaval after the death of his son, Alexander the Great. In a world of permanent flux and the lack of any social or institutional structures on which one could rely on, the idea of philosophy providing individual self-sufficiency (Greek *autarkeia*) could indeed be very tempting. The Greek Stoicism represented by such figures as Zeno of Citium, Carneades, or Chrysippus was soon made international and, which is especially important, absorbed by and adjusted to a particular cultural milieu of the Roman world, with Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius being the central members of the Roman current of Stoicism.

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Among the Roman Stoics it is Marcus Aurelius, to whom one should firstly refer in the martial context. He was a Roman Emperor (161–180 CE), one of the “philosopher kings” (Durant, 2011), including Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. The latter, importantly, was not only a “philosopher king,” but also, without any qualifications needed, just a Stoic philosopher. In fact, he was the author of one of the most classical Stoic texts, *Meditations* (Marcus Aurelius, 1930).

Meditations, which had been written as a medium of personal exercise rather than as a book intended for publication,¹ are especially important because a part of them seems to be written when Marcus Aurelius was a military leader. Between Book I and Book II, in particular, one can find a remark saying “Written among the Quadi on the Gran.” Between Book II and Book III, in turn, there is a note: “Written in Carnuntum.” The Quadi were a Germanic tribe who invaded the Empire in 169 CE, while Carnuntum was a military base on the Danube, Marcus Aurelius’ headquarters during the war he led against the Quadi and the Marcomanni (170–173 CE).

The notations between Books I, II, and III, according to Hadot (1998, p. 261), could have been written by Marcus Aurelius himself “who added these two

¹ Their original title is *Ta eis heauton* meaning the writings “addressed to himself.”

specifications, as he made for himself a classification of the notes he had written.” Still, however, it is not altogether clear to which books they refer, as such remarks could be added either at the beginning of a respective chapter (in which a case they would refer to Books II and III) or at the end of one (then, they would rather refer to Books I and II). Due to the very special character of the Book I, the present chapter will follow the argument by Hadot and assume that they were intended to refer to Books II and III.

These two books are of crucial importance in the present context because of their “distinctive tone” and “the haunting presence of the theme of death” (Hadot, 1998, pp. 261–262), both of which can be easily understood if one reminds that they were probably written “not only in the relative calm of a military headquarters, but amidst the discomfort of an expedition into the land of the Quadi.”² According to Hadot (1998, p. 264) it is the permanent presence of death, death “sensed as imminent” that makes Marcus Aurelius especially determined to “devote himself exclusively to spiritual exercises intended to transform moral life.”

At some points the author addresses death quite explicitly and directly, like when he writes that: “Of the life of man the duration is but a point, its substance streaming away, its perception dim, the fabric of the entire body prone to decay” (*Meditations*, II, 17) or that one should consider that “our life each day is waning away, what is left of it being ever less” (*Meditation*, III, 1; cf. also III, 3). At some others, he attempts at drawing the consequences from the imminence and necessity of death: “Go astray no more; for thou art not likely to read thy little *Memoranda*, or the *Acts of the Romans and the Greeks of Old Time*, and the extracts from their writings which thou wast laying up against thine old age. Haste then to the consummation and, casting away all empty hopes, if thou carest aught for thy welfare, come to thine own rescue, while it is allowed thee” (*Meditations*, III, 14).

A crucial theme that appears here is the one of the care of the self, as opposite to factors external to one’s real substance. A theme, which as a matter of fact seems to be present not only in ancient Greek and Roman world (cf. Plato’s *Alcibiades I*), but also in Christian tradition (“For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself,” Luke 9:25, *NASB*) and contemporary scholarship, like in the late works of Michel Foucault (1986, 1988).

The importance of Marcus Aurelius’ application of Stoicism as a medium of dealing with war consists in the fact that it is not a separate example. In fact, *Meditations* were among the favorite readings of Frederick the Great, one of the greatest modern military leaders. Still, however, there are the most recent cases which are most revealing. Out of these cases the strongest and the best documented connection is present in the life and writings of James Bond Stockdale (1923–2005).

² For an artistic depiction of the conditions in which they could have been written, obviously only partly non-fictional, one can compare the beginning of the movie *Gladiator* by Ridley Scott (2000), a movie which is full of the references to Stoicism (see Sellars, 2003; Stephens, 2000).

Stockdale was a US Navy fighter pilot, who, just after having obtained a master degree in international relations at Stanford, served aboard a carrier during the Vietnam War, taking part in the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and, thereafter, leading bombing raids over North Vietnam. During one of such raids, on 9th September 1965, his A4-E Skyhawk was struck by anti-aircraft fire and Stockdale was forced to parachute. He then became a prisoner of war, in fact the highest in rank naval POW, held in the Hoa Lo prison known as the Hanoi Hilton. During the seven and a half years of captivity Stockdale had been 15 times tortured and spent four years in solitary confinement, including 2 years in leg irons (for the original account see Stockdale, 1993, 1995a, 1995b; cf. Evans, 2013; Sherman, 2005; Sorabji, 2000).

The fact which is crucial here is that Stockdale believed that the way in which he had dealt with this terrible experience, and this included being in charge of all the other POWs as the senior officer in the chain of command, had been inspired, informed and enabled by his reading of Stoicism and, especially, the Roman Stoic philosopher Epictetus. “Within this extreme and disorientating environment,” as Evans (2013, p. 120) words it, “the teachings of ancient philosophy were his survival kit.” The first Stockdale’s encounter with Epictetus was at Stanford, where he obtained the latter’s *Handbook* as a farewell gift from his philosophy professor. After a while he felt a deep kinship with the Roman philosopher’s perspective, read his book several times, and, in fact, learned some of its parts by heart.³ During the Vietnam War Stockdale always had Epictetus’ *Handbook* on his bedside.

In the context of Stoicism applied to the situation of war James Stockdale seems to have become the paradigmatic example. Still, however, one can easily find numerous instances which are equally insightful and more recent. Many of such examples have been collected by Evans (2013) and Sherman (2005). Two of them which are of particular importance in the context of resilience are Thomas Jarret and Rhonda Cornum. Major Jarret, to begin with, was a former Green Beret as well as a counsellor trained under Albert Ellis, who returned to the Army during the Second Iraq War in order to teach a course named *Warrior Resilience and Thriving* (Evans, 2013, pp. 68–70). This course was based on the contemporary techniques of cognitive-behavioural therapy as well as the philosophy of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca⁴ and it had been provided to 14,000 American soldiers. One of the crucial lessons which one can take from his case is the fact that soldiers turn out to be very responsive “to the Stoic language of virtue and duty, which CBT had left out” (Jarret cited in: Evans, 2013, p. 69).⁵

³ Such a memorisation was an usual ancient technique intended to enable a student to have philosophical wisdom “at hand” when a severe situation arises.

⁴ Still, however, one should not be too hasty to call it eclectic, because of the very close theoretical affinities existing between CBT and ancient Stoicism (see especially Robertson, 2010).

⁵ A substantially identical claim has been made by one another Stoic warrior, a member of the US Marine Corps named Thomas S. Daley (1960–2010): “I feel a strong sense of duty, it’s one of the key reasons I’m into Stoicism” (cited in Evans, 2013, p. 232).

Rhonda Cornum was serving as a flight surgeon during the First Iraq War, when her helicopter had been shot down. She became captured by Iraqi forces, sexually assaulted and kept captive for eight days. What is especially striking is her own account of these events. Even though she admits that being “a POW is the rape of your entire life,” she is very quick to add that what she “learned in those Iraqi bunkers and prison cells is that the experience doesn’t have to be devastating, that it depends on you” (cited in Evans, 2013, p. 25). In opposition to Stockdale or Jarret, Cornum does not describe herself as a Stoic. If one goes into details of what she tells, however, it turns out that her perspective is at least in general sense stoical. While interviewed by Jules Evans she makes claims which seem to be very close to what some psychologists, like the ones discussing hardiness (e.g. Kobasa, 1979), say: “There are people who are just naturally resilient, who look at problems as challenges to be overcome. Some people even see adversity as opportunities to excel.”

What is crucial in the present context is that she is not only aware of the fact that some people, including herself, possess these qualities and some others lack them, but also emphasises that “thinking skills that lead to resilience can be taught” (cited in: Evans, 2013, p. 26). And it is exactly this latter insight that she has attempted to apply in the great \$125-million programme developed by Martin Seligman and launched by the Pentagon in 2009 (Cornum, Matthews, Seligman, 2011; Reivich, Seligman, McBride, 2011; Seligman, 2011, ch. 7; Seligman, Fowler, 2011). The *Comprehensive Soldier Fitness* (CSF) programme, in fact, being aimed at all 1.1 million soldiers serving in the US Army seems to be “the largest deliberate psychological intervention in history” (Lester, McBride, Bliese, Adler, 2011, p. 77), during which, in the words of Evans (2013, p. 27), “the US Army is trying to raise a generation of resilient philosopher-warriors, using the philosophical ideas and techniques that Athenians, Spartans, Macedonians and Romans used to cope with their own gruelling campaigns, at the dawn of Western civilisation.”

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A short review of the ways, in which Stoicism was a source of inspiration and resilience in the lives of soldiers like Marcus Aurelius, James Stockdale, or Thomas Jarret, is historical and descriptive in character. As such, in consequence, it does not provide explanation of the fact that Stoic philosophy could have played such a role. In order to at least address the explanatory issues, it will be necessary to provide some more details of this philosophical theory and its broader, metaphilosophical context.

The first point that needs to be made concerns the understanding of philosophy as practical, as a way of life. An understanding which, as a matter of fact, used to be common in antiquity. Philosophy, more specifically, very often was compared to medicine (for a review of such analogies see Nussbaum, 1996). According to

Christopher Gill's (2013) detailed analysis it is especially preventive medicine or "life-style management," in terms of which one should understand ancient philosophical practice. Gill refers here to so called *diata* or medical regimen, which was applicable before any specific disease occurred and which usually involved diet, exercise, or the choice of environment. And it is such a regimen by analogy of which one should understand ancient philosophical essays. These essays, what is crucial, were "set out to develop what we might call emotional resilience ... the ability to cope with ... personal disasters or problems without loss of emotional stability or inner calm" (Gill, 2013, p. 341), to build such a resilience, importantly, "against setbacks and disasters before they have actually happened" (Gill, 2013, p. 358).⁶

Out of the philosophers who can be understood along such a medical reading, it is Epictetus (55–135 CE) which is of special significance in the context of this chapter. As clear a member of the Stoic tradition as Marcus Aurelius, and as evidently influential on the latter (see Hadot, 1998), Epictetus had a very different social background and biographical experiences. In fact, he had been probably born a slave and as a slave were led to Rome, where he learned Stoicism from Musonius Rufus. After he had been freed he started to teach philosophy, at first in Rome and secondly, after Domitian had expelled all philosophers from the city, in western Greek Nicopolis. Just like Socrates he had not written anything and just like with Socrates his words had been saved by his pupil, a Greek historian named Arrian, in four volumes of *Discourses* and a brief *Handbook* (Epictetus, 1995).

And it is this latter work, a work which was a main source of inspiration for Stockdale, which deserves a bit of attention here. A crucial distinction drawn by Epictetus is the one between things which are under the agent's control and the ones which are not: "Some things are up to us and others are not" (*Handbook*, 1). And these are only things which are under one's control, rather than "body, property, reputation, [or, KB] office," which one should care about. The whole unnecessary psychological upheaval according to Epictetus, and to other Stoics in general, is due to the assignment of real value to things which are not up to us, an assignment, importantly, which is essentially cognitive in character: "It is not the things themselves that disturb people but their judgements about those things" (*Handbook*, 5).

A substantial insight of this Stoic theory is that a person who recognises an uncontrollable, external thing as something worthwhile of efforts subjects him/herself to an inevitable vulnerability: "if you suppose ... what is not your own to be your own, you will be hampered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, and you will find fault with both gods and men" (*Handbook*, 1). The Stoics, in fact, are ready to say that such a person "necessarily" becomes in effect "a slave": "Each person's

⁶ This feature, as pointed by Gill (2013), is a central difference between ancient philosophical preventive medicine and contemporary counseling, which is usually reactive.

master is the one who has power over what that person wants or does not want, so as to secure it or take it away. Whoever, then, wants to be free, let him neither want anything, nor avoid anything, that depends on others” (*Handbook*, 14).

The distinction between the controllable and the uncontrollable drawn by Epictetus as well as the prescriptions to take care only about the former is crucial because it seems to be at the very heart of Stoicism, or stoicism, of all the warriors mentioned above. Not only, in particular, it is evident in the accounts of the avowed Stoics such as Stockdale, but also in the one provided by Cornum, who do not consider herself a Stoic in a proper sense of the term. “When you’re a POW,” she says, “your captors control pretty much everything about your life: when you get up, when you go to sleep, what you eat, if you eat. I realised the only thing I had left that I could control was how I thought. I had absolute control over that, and was not going to let them take that too” (cited in: Evans, 2013, pp. 25–26). Similarly, she repeats to the troops participating in the *Comprehensive Soldier Fitness* programme: “I approached every problem I encountered, whether it was failing an exam or a disease or getting shot down and shot up the same way: I would fix what I could fix and I wouldn’t complain about what I couldn’t” (cited in: Evans, 2013, p. 27).⁷

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One possibility of taking a lesson from the above cases is to consider them as a kind of laboratory, in which the Stoic teaching was tested as a source of resilience in a martial environment. In fact, the very subtitle of the Stockdale’s (1995) account is “Testing Epictetus’s Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior.” An obvious outcome of these tests is the fact that Stoicism is particularly appealing to the members of military circles and, more importantly, that it seems to be working in extreme conditions of war.

(1) When faced with such a general conclusion some more particular issues can be addressed. The first of them is explanatory and refers to the question why it is Stoicism, rather than any other life-guidance philosophy, that is so popular among the soldiers. A part of the answer is provided by Nancy Sherman, the author of the *Stoic Warriors* (Sherman, 2005) who used to teach ethics at the US Naval Academy. While interviewed by Evans (2011) she claims that Stoicism is “a natural fit for the military, in the sense of sucking it up, the stiff upper lip, and so on. Being a soldier is about deprivation, survival, the minimization of need and attachment. So Stoicism suits them [the soldiers, KB].” Even though Sherman admits that most members of the army don’t think in literally Stoic terms, she adds that they have an “idealized notions of military character, as stoic in the vernacular sense

⁷ Cf. the US Army’s Leadership Manual: “It is critical for leaders to remain calm under pressure and to expend energy on things they can positively influence and not worry about things they cannot affect” (cited in: Evans, 2013, p. 32).

of the term” (Sherman, 2005, p. 1). Stoicism, in other words, “meshes well with traditional military values and culture” (Snow, 2009, p. 562).⁸

(2) The second kind of questions which can be address in the further theoretical investigations and empirical researches concerns the particular military contexts in which Stoic credo may turn out to be especially effective, including context in which Stockdale, Jarret, or Cornum did not find themselves. The accounts provided by these three American soldiers refer to the ways in which Stoicism provided them with “an inner citadel” (Hadot, 1998) protecting themselves against the enemies. Recently, however, it has been also suggested that Stoic philosophy may turn out to be helpful not only for the “Stoic soldiers,” but also those human beings that happen to be on the other side of the hill. And these were especially the events from Abu Gharib prison, where Iraqi detainees had been tortured by the US Army and CIA personnel, that have been referred to in this context (Sherman, 2005; Snow, 2009).

While attempting to argue for the usefulness of Stoicism for the prevention of this kind of abuses Nancy Snow (2009, p. 561) makes three important points. (2.1) Stoic philosophy, in particular, “contains all of the elements that might make its competitors appealing to the military mind.” The Stoics, just like Aristotle, based their ethics on the notion of the character and, similarly to Kant, feel at home in the universe of law, duty, and the account of agency focused on the will. (2.2) Secondly, Stoicism involves some more particular ethical concepts that “cohere well with traditional military values and culture,” the concepts including “honor, courage, strength, and resilience.” These notions turn out to be of particular use if one wants to maintain moral integrity and dignity, both one’s own and that of the enemy, in severe situations, which are ultimately beyond one’s control. (2.3) At third, finally, the Stoics, with their idea of reason common to all human creatures offers a kind of “cosmopolitanism” which is “well suited to guide military personnel in a globalized world.”

It may be worthwhile to notice that while for Aristotle a human creature was first of all a citizen of a polis, for the Stoics he/she is fundamentally a citizen of the cosmos and, hence, shares the same citizenship and dignity with all the other humans. Such an account broadens the view of the soldiers “beyond allegiance to their nations” and helps them to “see all humans as part of a single community – as denizens of a shared universe who deserve our respect” (Snow, 2009, p. 561).

(3) Both the biographical accounts provided at the beginning of this chapter and some theoretical and explanatory remarks made towards its end seem to justify the claim the Stoicism can be a source of psychological resilience for

⁸ Some similar points are made by Preston (2003) who compares Stoicism with the Samurai way of life (Bushido) with a special attention paid to the parallel ways in which both the Stoics and ancient Japanese warriors recognise the fear of death as the source of any other fears and provide a set of techniques to deal with it (for an existential investigation of the fear of death with insightful remarks on Stoicism see Tillich, 1962).

the soldier, “a reserve of strength on which to draw to overcome fear and guard against physically and psychologically debilitating forces” (Snow, 2009, p. 566). Stoic philosophy, in short, can help a military men or women to build an “inner citadel” about which Hadot (1998) wrote. Still, however, it may be worthwhile to ask if there are any disadvantages of the Stoic-kind resilience. This point has been very clearly made by Sherman (2005, p. 104), when she asked: “At what cost to our humanity do we arm ourselves against terror and torture?”

The limits of Stoicism in this context are connected with its fundamental emphasis on self-reliance and self-mastery. A would-be Stoic, in particular, is advised to deny all things beyond his/her control any real (moral) value and to remove all emotions, which by the very definition involve the attachment to such things. And all these so called “externals” involve, crucially, other people such as family, friends, or brothers in arms.⁹ While discussing this orthodox and extreme version of Stoicism Sherman (2005, pp. 151–152) is ready to admit that “the virtue of self-reliance, if taken to the extreme, is a flawed ideal that constricts our social and emotional natures.” In military context, more particularly, she refers to “the camaraderie, respect, and empathy,” which she sees as “a critical element in combat courage and resilience, and as essential to psychological recovery in the aftermath of war.” The Stoic self-resilience, as she concludes, provides “only partial elements of a healthy sense of resilience and humanity.” Love, friendship, and attachment still need to be added.

When faced with such worries it should be necessarily said that Stoicism itself is not devoid of theoretical resources, in terms of which such addition could be made. Sherman, for example, tries to find them in the “milder” strain of Stoicism offered by Seneca. The Stoic brand of resilience, then, certainly deserves further investigations, not only from the point of view of philosophy, but also from the one of social sciences.

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⁹ It is in this context, arguably, that one can see the fact that Stoicism, as helpful as it had been to James Stockdale, was found “useless” by his wife, Sybil Stockdale (private communication reported in Sorabji, 2000, p. 226). While James Stockdale was a POW, Mrs Stockdale “waited in the United States, most of the time not knowing whether her husband would return, or whether he was still alive.” The idea “that it did not matter whether he was alive or dead,” as Richard Sorabji (2000, p. 226) insightfully notices, “would hardly have helped her campaign to get the United States government to acknowledge that there were United States prisoners.” For the alternate accounts by both James and Sybil Stockdale (1984) see their joint book *In Love and War*.

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