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A Model for Moral Leadership: Contemporary Applications

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A Model for Moral Leadership: Contemporary Applications¹

Introduction

This paper focuses on moral leadership in the military, not from a belief that the military has a monopoly on ethical leadership, for it does not. Indeed, last year the eminent Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles published a book titled *Lives of Moral Leadership*,² which featured historical and fictional characters ranging from a U.S. senator, to Shakespeare's version of Henry V, to a community organizer, a U.S. president, a professor of medicine, a prominent academic psychoanalyst, the German Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mahatma Gandhi, a Boston school bus driver during that city's busing controversy, and then-six-year-old Ruby Bridges, who pioneered school desegregation in a Southern city during the early 1960s.

That last, very young moral leader is one of my personal favorites. Reflecting on her attending a previously all-white school, against the daily opposition of a vociferous, sometimes violent mob, Ruby said, "I try to get there, and I figure if I do, then other kids might say they're willing to try and go, too, and pretty soon, it could be better for us here." Not a bad example of moral leadership at all, even from a mature adult, let alone a six-year-old!

No, I chose to focus on the military as *one* source of inspiration for leadership and ethics, because it offers some especially useful models. The one military example of ethical or moral leadership I have chosen to draw upon is Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale.

A 1947 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Admiral Stockdale had a brilliant career as a naval aviator, one of the best of the best, long before he was shot down over North Vietnam on September 9, 1965. The story of his seven and a half years as a prisoner of war and the book about that long ordeal he co-authored with his wife Sybil, *In Love and War*, were made into a feature-length movie starring James Woods and Jane Alexander.

After his return from prison along with his fellow POWs, Stockdale was promoted several times. He later served as president of the Naval War College in Newport, where he designed and co-taught

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a course titled “Foundations of Moral Obligation,” a ten-week running reflection on some of the classics of ethical literature: the Book of Job, the Socratic dialogues of Plato, Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, as well as writings of Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Joseph Conrad, Koestler, Dostoyevsky, and Solzhenitsyn, among them. But this is a man who not only talks the talk of moral leadership; he walks the walk, too—to this day even, with a limp that is a heritage of his capture, confinement, and torture in North Vietnam.

Earlier this fall at his alma mater, Admiral Stockdale was honored as a Distinguished Graduate of the Naval Academy. The Alumni Association named him for this honor because his entire life—and not just his years as a prisoner of war—is a life of moral leadership.

Our Ethics Center hosted Admiral and Mrs. Stockdale for several days late in 1999, the principal event being what we called “Moral Courage: An Evening in Honor of VADM James B. Stockdale.” Thus began a partnership and a relationship that we at the Ethics Center have enjoyed immensely and have benefited from deeply. As one of our newest programs earlier this year, we began a series of occasional papers, the first two of which are by Admiral Stockdale.

I have organized my remarks in three parts. First, I will outline a model of moral leadership. Second, I will briefly address how a pressing issue of the decade of the 1990s—humanitarian intervention—posed formidable challenges to our, that is U.S., moral leadership. Third, I will use this model of moral leadership to offer some thoughts and to raise some questions about what promises to be the dominant issue of this decade: terrorism and our responses to it.

I. Moral Leadership—The Stockdale Model

I was invited to be the principal speaker at the fourth annual James Bond Stockdale Symposium on Leadership and Ethics at the University of San Diego, which was held in April of 2001. My topic was moral leadership, a challenge that was simultaneously fitting and intimidating with Admiral Stockdale sitting in the room! What encouraged me to press on was that I had developed my model from Admiral Stockdale himself—not only from what he had written, but more so from what he had done. This is the model I will use here.

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As I studied his career and life, especially those years in the Hanoi prison, and read his works, I came to believe that one can derive a simple, workable model for moral leadership from him. Moral leadership, Stockdale-style, involves:

- (1) setting noble goals of great moral worth;
- (2) taking active steps to pursue those goals;
- (3) being willing, in pursuit of those noble goals, to accept costs and to pay a price personally; and
- (4) being willing to ask, even order, those subordinate to you, those close to you, to accept similar costs and to pay a similar price.

It's a package deal—you have to do all four to practice true moral leadership.

Though simple, this model is more complex and certainly more demanding than some you read or hear about. There are those who would have us believe that moral leadership is merely a matter of having noble goals, or of declaring or preaching noble goals. They are the ones who think, or even say in effect, "I must be a moral leader. Look at how inspiring my goals are! Look at the lofty speech I just gave! Look at the vision I've laid out! Look at the dreams I've articulated!"

Then, too, there are those who set and actively pursue their goals, willing to pay even severe prices. But, if their goals are self-serving, or perverted, or evil, that is hardly moral leadership. Think of Stalin, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, or Osama Bin Laden.

And there are those who set noble goals, pursue them, but draw back when it starts to cost them or theirs something tangible and dear. They draw the line at paying a price. Not a new phenomenon, to be sure, but one I think is all too common in the American experience over the past couple of decades. I'll return to this later and more specifically.

Back to the model and the man it is derived from. In his POW years, James B. Stockdale first set himself two noble goals: to remain loyal to his country and to remain loyal to his troops, those other POWs under his command. There were endless ways he could have violated those loyalties, and the North Vietnamese were experts in trying to get him to do so!

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Second, Stockdale set out from the very beginning to pursue those noble goals by his deeds, not just his words tapped out in code on prison walls. As he had from the cockpit of his combat aircraft, he continued to fight the war, now by other means, behind bars. His fellow prisoners and he set up clandestine communications networks. They sought out new prisoners to inculcate them into this new society, to make sure no one of them had reason to feel he was alone. In a phrase, he took command!

Third, he demonstrated early on that he was willing to suffer great personal costs. “The good,” he later wrote, “became individual self-sacrifice in defying our jailers.”³ And sacrifice he did—brutal beatings, painful leg irons, years of isolation and solitary confinement, and inhuman torture. Here’s his own description of the torture: “knocked down and then sat up to be bound with tourniquet-tight ropes, with care, by a professional, hands cuffed behind, jack-knifed forward, head pushed down between your ankles held secure in lugs attached to a heavy iron bar . . . knowing your upper-body circulation has been stopped, and feeling the ever-growing pain and the ever-closing-in of claustrophobia as the man standing on your back gives your head one last shove down with his heel and you start to gasp and vomit. . . .”⁴ They called that “being put through the ropes.”

Fourth, in addition to all that, Stockdale also asked, even ordered, his subordinates to suffer the same punishments and to pay the same price at a certain point in order to remain loyal to their country. Among the most poignant aspects of his POW story are the times, several times, in fact, when he tried to be compassionate with his troops and tell them to “just do what you think is right” in the face of intense interrogation and perhaps torture. And repeatedly they came back to him and said, as he put it, “We are in a spot like we’ve never been in before. But we deserve to maintain our self-respect, to have the feeling we are fighting back. We can’t refuse to do every degrading thing they demand of us, but it’s up to you, boss, to pick out the things we must all refuse to do, unless and until they put us through the ropes again. We deserve to sleep at night. We at least deserve to have the satisfaction that we are hewing to our leader’s orders. Give us the list: What are we to demand to take torture for?”⁵ And he did. And they did.

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That's moral leadership, Stockdale-style, his deeds and his words:

- (1) Set noble goals.
- (2) Take active steps to pursue them.
- (3) Pay a price yourself, if necessary, for them.
- (4) And also, if necessary, ask or order others near and dear to you to pay a price as well.

This model of moral leadership reflects values long exemplified in history and literature, the stories, factual and fictional, of our moral heroes and saints. Take, for example, Thomas More. Determined to remain faithful to his religious beliefs and to his God, More takes deliberate, though carefully modulated, steps to remain faithful to his beliefs and to his God, and—for as long as he can—to his king. But when the oath is drawn up and he can no longer avoid and evade the confrontation of conscience, he resigns as lord chancellor, then is imprisoned in the Tower of London, a punishment he stoically accepts.

But the price is paid not just by Thomas More himself: When he loses his position, he loses his income, and his family is impoverished while he is imprisoned. In one of the most emotionally powerful scenes in Robert Bolt's play *A Man For All Seasons*, More's wife Alice, daughter Meg, and son-in-law Roper visit him in his damp, dank Tower cell. They do not agree with his stand. Indeed, they have all signed the oath he in conscience could not, yet *they* are suffering because of *his* choices. When his beloved Meg starts to taunt him about what life is like at home, he recoils, "Don't, Meg. . . . Meg, have done! . . . The King's more merciful than you. He doesn't use the rack."⁶

The Tower is easier for him to take than being confronted with the harsh reality of his family's deprivation and pain. With the stroke of a pen he could free himself from the Tower and his family from their suffering, but he asks *them* to pay a price for *his* principled pursuit of *his* noble goal. It's a package—the noble goal, the active pursuit of it, the personal price willingly paid, and the willingness to have his nearest and dearest pay as well. That's moral leadership!

II. Last Decade's Problem

The post-Cold War world posed many challenges, some of which had important ethical dimensions, including, specifically, challenges

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to and about moral leadership. One such challenge seemed at times to dominate the national debate in the 1990s—the humanitarian crises that seemed endemic, the policy problems they presented—most especially, whether or not to intervene—the ethical questions those scenarios raised, and the implications of all that for U.S. moral leadership.

One can summarize the relevant history by naming the places: Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, Bosnia, East Timor, Kosovo, Sierra Leone. The particulars of geography, nationality, politics, and so forth varied, but the scenarios unfolded from a basic script—human beings inflicting massive suffering on other human beings, the latter struggling, sometimes helpless on their own, crying out for outside intervention to alleviate their suffering and pain. All of these scenes were rife with political, military, economic, and ethical challenges.

The picture was a mixed and troubling one. In late fall 1992, we demonstrated moral leadership in going into Somalia to feed the hungry. In fall 1993, we pulled out of Somalia after 18 American Rangers were killed in a firefight on the streets of Mogadishu. Not that much later, we turned around the *USS Harlan County* as it was about to arrive in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, when angry crowds on the pier did little more than jeer and shake their fists. Like the rest of the world, we stood by while a documented genocide took place in Rwanda. In Kosovo, we aimed to prevent another genocide, but chose a military strategy that seemed designed not primarily to prevent genocide, but primarily to keep our own casualties at or near zero.

Several basic approaches to this recurring set of challenges emerged. Let me briefly outline two of them, and hold them up against the Stockdale model. One such approach was that of the self-described “realists,” who were among the most prominent critics from the right of the Clinton Administration’s approach, which is the second I will look at.

The realists argued that the foreign policy of the United States should be driven only by national interests, especially our vital national interests. They further argued that the nation has the right to ask men and women wearing its military uniforms to risk their lives *only* in missions tied to our vital national interests. Rarely, if ever, does a humanitarian crisis in another part of the world affect our vital

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national interests, so therefore, rarely, if ever, should we commit troops in such operations. We avert our own casualties by not sending our troops on these missions. This is an internally consistent position.

In contrast, the Clinton approach was to argue that the nation's role in the world includes, but goes beyond, our vital national interests, that our values also are important, and that some crises challenge our values even if they don't challenge our vital national interests. The Clinton Administration committed U.S. troops to several such operations, yet drew back sharply in the face of friendly military casualties, or even the threat of friendly military casualties. Ambitious in its foreign policy goals, yet casualty averse in the extreme, the Clinton Administration, by its deeds if not its words, ended up agreeing with its realist critics that the less-than-vital-national-interests cases do not warrant risking the lives of U.S. military personnel. The Administration was tied to a rack of its own making, stuck in its own internal contradiction.

Both approaches failed the Stockdale moral leadership test. The realists failed because their foreign policy goals sold us short. They didn't soar often enough or high enough to the level of the noble aspirations of the American people, who have a persistent, though not always dominant, moral streak. It is something less than moral leadership when the richest and most powerful nation in human history *confines* its involvement in the world to, and is willing to risk the lives of its troops *only* for, its *own* vital national interests.

Curiously and ironically enough, it was this moral streak in the American people that the first President George Bush, a card-carrying realist, appealed to when, in November and December 1992, he said we should—and would—send U.S. troops to feed the hungry in Somalia, even though there was not a hint of a vital national interest there, but simply because it was the right thing to do. Somalia was a very dangerous country, a collapsed state, chock full of war-lords, and young and not-so-young men armed to the teeth. There were risks, to be sure, for our troops, but in 1992 President Bush's judgment was that this noble goal was worth those risks and potential costs. But his Somalia decision, courageous though it was, was a noteworthy departure from the realist approach.

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The Clinton approach also failed the Stockdale moral leadership test, not because its goals were too narrow or self-serving, but because it was not willing to run the risks and pay the price of its ambitious objectives, its noble goals. When the going got tough, the Clinton Administration too often “got going.”

There was, of course, a third approach, held by that distinct minority perhaps fated to be critics of the other two approaches. This third approach argued that the nation ought to be about more than just its vital national interests; that we should selectively pursue opportunities to advance our values as well as our more tangible interests; that we do have the right to ask our men and women in uniform to sacrifice, including their lives, for political objectives that do not reach the level of vital national interest, as long as those objectives are arrived at through constitutional and legal processes and are not inherently immoral. This approach calls for the kind of moral leadership—a combination of political leadership and moral courage—exercised by President George H.W. Bush in late 1992, that calls upon us to set noble goals beyond our own national self-interest, take active steps to achieve those goals, be willing to pay a price for them, and be willing to ask our troops to put their lives on the line if necessary. That would be moral leadership Stockdale-style!

III. This Decade’s Problem

This 1990s debate over humanitarian intervention was essentially erased from the national agenda, probably for the foreseeable future, on September 11, 2001. Now we have a new political, military, and moral challenge that is more demanding, more daunting, and more dangerous than the challenges of the 1990s posed by humanitarian crises. Terrorism and our response to it dominate, as President George W. Bush has repeatedly declared, not only his agenda as president but our own as a nation and a people.

We are less than two months from the airliner-bombs of that morning, and only weeks into our military operations in Afghanistan, so judgments we make are either tentative or unwise. The thoughts and questions I offer here are thus tentative at best.

How, we might ask, does our response so far measure up to the Stockdale model of moral leadership?

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I speak here, with a couple of explicit exceptions, not of any one individual leader, not the president alone, nor any single senator or cabinet member, not of one party, or of one branch of government, but rather of our political leadership more collectively.

First, our goals are clearly noble, on a high moral plane. We are about the defense of the innocent. Some formulations of our goals—for example, to rid the world of evil—have been rhetorically satisfying, but hardly practicable. They have wisely been replaced by more realistic, though not less noble, formulations. The stakes are enormous. We hold the moral high ground.

Second, we have been taking active steps to pursue those goals, indeed, an ambitious menu of measures both at home and abroad. We are already well beyond the realm of the merely rhetorical or declaratory. We are acting! Some steps are well underway. Some have just begun. Some are still on the drawing board. The tasks ahead are as enormous as the stakes.

It is after these first two criteria of the Stockdale moral leadership model, however, that I think we are on somewhat thinner ice, or should I say, the picture is more cloudy, complex, and confusing. Some political leaders, to be sure, understand that agendas they campaigned on and brought to office, as recently as last fall, are now overtaken by events. Some of the president's favorite electoral themes and program proposals, for example, are clearly back-burner, and he knows it and acknowledges it. So some of our political leaders are paying the price of giving up on, at least for awhile, some of those ideas and initiatives they treasured the most.

On the other hand, some others' prior agendas seem not to have been affected in any serious way by September 11, despite their declarations that everything changed that day. How willing will they be to pay this same price in order to respond most effectively to this new and ominous reality, to meet this new and forbidding challenge?

In a real sense, the third and fourth criteria of the Stockdale-style model of moral leadership are blended together for political leaders, as it may well be difficult to distinguish between the prices *they* are willing to pay *themselves* and the prices they are willing to ask *us* to pay. So I will not try to separate out what is the third criterion and what is the fourth. Rather, I will meld the two and talk more broadly

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about paying a price. It is here where I have the most serious questions about where we are and where we are going and how.

Let me put the point this way: How many times in the last seven weeks have you heard any major political leader use the word *sacrifice*, the word *price*, the word *cost*? My own count is quite small.

I think, for example, of a segment on *The News Hour With Jim Lehrer* a few weeks ago, in which he interviewed four members of the U.S. Senate—Democrats Joe Lieberman and John Kerry and Republicans Fred Thompson and Richard Lugar. Well into the wide-ranging and informative discussion of terrorism and our responses to it, Lehrer asked all four what kinds of sacrifice will be required if we are to be successful in this effort. I don't remember the exact order in which they responded, but I do recall that Lugar went last and that the first three essentially ignored the word sacrifice and the idea of sacrifice in their comments. Speaking last, Lugar was the only one who took Lehrer up on the theme of sacrifice, and indeed used the word several times himself in listing various specific ways in which the American people will have to pay a real, tangible price during what everyone agrees will be a long and difficult war or campaign against a determined, diverse, and deadly enemy.

Striking as that exchange was, it was not, in my observation, out of line with the rest of the national political discourse since September 11. *USA Today* says that “the message appears to be: War is hell. Let's go shopping.” Scroll back through your own memory of what you have heard politicians say, what you've read on the editorial and op-ed pages, what you've heard from the “talking heads,” or, for that matter, what you and your friends and neighbors have been saying, and compare all that to the following passage from President Franklin Roosevelt's “Fireside Chat” on December 9, 1941—only two days after Pearl Harbor. I quote from it at length:

On the road ahead there lies hard work—grueling work—day and night, every hour and every minute. I was about to add that ahead there lies sacrifice for all of us. But it is not correct to use that word. The United States does not consider it a sacrifice to do all one can, to give one's best to our nation, when the nation is fighting for its existence and its future life. . . . It is not a sacrifice for the industrialist or the wage earner, the farmer or the shopkeeper, the trainman or the doctor,

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to pay more taxes, to buy more bonds, to forego extra profits, to work longer or harder at the task for which he is best fitted. Rather, it is a privilege. It is not a sacrifice to do without many things to which we are accustomed if the national defense calls for doing without it. . . . Yes, we shall have to give up many things entirely. And I am sure that the people in every part of the nation are prepared in their individual living to win this war. I am sure that they will cheerfully help to pay a large part of its financial cost while it goes on. I am sure they will cheerfully give up those material things that they are asked to give up. And I am sure that they will retain all those great spiritual things without which we cannot win through.⁷

Sound familiar? I think not.

Now to be sure, Roosevelt had some “advantages” over today’s political leaders. He had just led the country through its deepest depression. Most of our incumbents have been in office during one of the country’s longest and broadest economic booms. By December 7, 1941, Franklin Roosevelt had struggled for almost nine years to lift the country out of its worst of economic times, while until September 11, 2001, many of our national leaders had for most of their tenure in office presided over the best of economic times.

As a nation and as a people, we have been spoiled by our successes in the economy and in the Cold War, well-earned though those successes were. President Bush and others are absolutely right when they say that this new struggle against terrorism will be a long, hard, and vital one. Their problem—and ours—is that it has been a long time since we as a people have had to do the long haul. And it’s been even longer, I think, since we have been asked or challenged to make costly collective sacrifices for noble, collective goals.

Think of it this way. The formative political rhetoric of my generation was on January 20, 1961, when John F. Kennedy charged us to, “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.”

That was more than forty years ago. Think in contrast of the political rhetoric we have all heard from political leaders of all parties, of all ideological flavors, for the past, say, two decades or more. “Vote for me, and I’ll cut *your* taxes.” “Vote for me, and I’ll

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increase programs that will benefit *you*.” “Vote for me, and I’ll make *your* life richer and happier.”

What a difference! *We* are the raw material our political leaders have to work with. If you agree that this struggle against terrorism will be long and difficult, and if you agree that our political leaders have not (at least yet) asked us to pay a price, to make sacrifices to achieve our noble goals, then ask why.

Is it because we aren’t ready to respond, or is it because they don’t think we are? Do they read us correctly, or incorrectly? Are we ready, willing, and able to rise up to the Stockdale model of moral leadership, or are we not? To be frank, I’m not sure what the answers to these questions are.

When I think not just of anthrax or airplane bombs, but of the broader threat of terrorism and the range of evils that beset this world and challenge us, I come back to Albert Camus’ haunting novel, *The Plague*. It is a parable of and meditation on massive human suffering and how different individuals respond to the challenge. Set in a town in coastal Algeria, the novel tells the story of an outbreak of plague. Some citizens of the town flee for their safety and their lives; some try to ignore the suffering of their fellows and immerse themselves in self-indulgence and pleasure-seeking; some go into denial; some revert and try to escape to what they think is the normal routine of life; some respond immediately to provide what relief and assistance they can; and some are latecomers to the relief effort.

So I close this discussion of terrorism and the challenges it poses to us with both a dark cloud and a silver lining, using passages from *The Plague* for both.

The dark cloud is that the evils that challenge us will not ever go away fully and finally. They didn’t end with the fall of the Berlin Wall or begin on September 11, 2001, and they won’t disappear until we all do. Camus ends his book reflecting on these hard realities, through the mind of the central character, Dr. Rieux, who, after a protracted, heroic struggle against the plague and its ravages, pauses for a few quiet moments after the plague has at long-last broken:

Nonetheless, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what

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assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.⁸

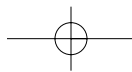
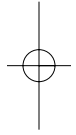
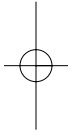
The silver lining occurs earlier in the book, in the midst of the plague, this time through the direct words of Dr. Rieux, who is asked, “. . . you think . . . that the plague has its good side; it opens men’s eyes and forces them to take thought?” Camus tells us “The doctor tossed his head impatiently,” then replied:

So does every ill that flesh is heir to. What’s true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves.⁹

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Endnotes

- 1 Another version of this talk was given at the “Fourth Annual James Bond Stockdale Leadership and Ethics Symposium,” University of San Diego, Tuesday, April 10, 2001.
- 2 Published by Random House.
- 3 Jim Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (Hoover Institution Press, 1995), 217.
- 4 VADM James B. Stockdale, *Stockdale on Stoicism I: The Stoic Warrior’s Triad* (Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics, 2001), 10.
- 5 VADM James B. Stockdale, *Stockdale on Stoicism II: Master of My Fate* (Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics, 2001), 9.
- 6 Robert Bolt, *A Man For All Seasons* (Vintage Books, 1990), 141-142.
- 7 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *Fireside Chats* (Penguin Books, 1995), 71-72.
- 8 *The Plague*, 308.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 125.



THE CARY M. MAGUIRE CENTER FOR ETHICS AND PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

The leaders of Southern Methodist University believe that a university does not fully discharge its responsibility to its students and to the community at large if it hands out knowledge (and the power which that knowledge eventually yields) without posing questions about its responsible uses. Through the Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility, SMU strives to foster the moral education and public responsibilities of those whom it empowers by:

- Supporting faculty research, teaching, and writing in ethics that cross disciplinary, professional, racial/cultural, and gender lines;
- Strengthening the ethics component in SMU's undergraduate and professional curriculum;
- Awarding grants to SMU students who wish to study issues in ethics or engage in community service.

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- Has created an Ethics Center Advisory Board of professional and community leaders;
- Organizes local seminars, colloquia, and workshops featuring SMU and visiting scholars;
- Publishes occasional papers and books based on the Center's endeavors that will be of interest to both academics and the general public.

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