
An interview with the Man in the Arena

Retiring STCL Houston President and Dean Don Guter
sits down for a Q&A on leadership

WRITTEN BY **CLAIRE CATON**

InRe recently had the opportunity to sit down with South Texas College of Law Houston President and Dean Don Guter — who this spring announced his plans to retire from the law school when his contract expires in May 2019 — to ask his thoughts on leadership, the qualities that distinguish truly outstanding leaders, and his best advice for STCL Houston alumni and students — the future leaders of what he deems “the world’s noblest profession.”

Having served 32 years in the military, ultimately culminating in his appointment as the 37th Judge Advocate General of the U.S. Navy (2000-2002), Guter came to STCL Houston in 2009 with a wealth of legal expertise and leadership experience. And following his tenure as dean of his alma mater, Duquesne University School of Law (2005-2008), he also brought an unwavering student-centered focus and passion for student success.

Along the way, he garnered a few key lessons likely to benefit all InRe readers, from prospective and first-year law students to well-seasoned STCL Houston alumni. Pull up a chair and join the conversation.

InRe: Leadership is a coveted but often hard-earned quality, prized among attorneys at all stages of their careers. How do you define leadership, and, in your opinion, what is the most essential quality for a leader to possess?

Guter: While I have learned a great deal from leaders — to mirror the greatest

and distance myself from the poorest — my best leaders had one inviolable, all-important quality: integrity. Without integrity, you are unworthy of trust, confidence, or responsibility. It is the foundation of all other admirable character traits. If you lose this, you’re done; and you can lose integrity quickly and in a lot of ways.

In addition to this, I believe the ability to remain calm and open-minded during times of high stress is a hallmark of real leaders. In thinking about my time in the Navy, all of the best leaders mastered this skill. There is a poem I like by Rudyard Kipling called, “IF,” that captures this truth. He wrote:

‘If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting, too...
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it.’
There is a lot of truth in those words.

You must remain genuinely calm, more so when others have lost control.

InRe: Leaders hone their skills much more “in the trenches” than in the classroom. Are there any important lessons you may have learned the hard way?

Guter: Yes. In fact, looking back, I don’t believe I was a strong leader my first two to three years in the Navy. I was too hesitant to exert the authority I had for a simple reason: I was too concerned with what people thought about me. Good leadership is not about being liked; it is about being respected and taking care of those you are leading. You can’t remain effective as a leader if you are worried about others’ opinions of you. As long as you act in the best interests of your mission and people, you’ll find success and earn respect in the process.

I also made the commitment to never implement a policy without speaking to younger leaders first. An ego is among a leader’s most detrimental traits.

InRe: Do you recall a particular experience that taught you the importance of remaining both calm and humble during high-stress situations?

Guter: There is one experience I’ll never forget. It was approximately 2 a.m., and I was a lieutenant serving as officer of the deck of the USS Sylvania. With approximately 400 sailors asleep — including the ship’s captain — on a vessel the length of nearly two football fields, we were in the midst of four independently



steaming commercial ships. We were privileged on one and burdened on three. Unless we changed our speed, course, or both, we were on a collision course. I asked combat to provide me with a solution. After checking the radar, he informed me, "Sir, there is no solution."

Of course, having no viable solution



inside from the wing of the bridge to find my bridge watch team wearing their life vests. We shared a relieved laugh and resumed normal watch procedures.

Despite the intensity of the experience, I had no time to wake up my captain and seek his advice. I was forced to fall back on the training I'd received from a former, exceptional Navy officer, and it ended up serving me well.

InRe: Speaking of having little time to react, your tenure as JAG gave you ample opportunities to use your leadership skills. How did your training and experience prepare you to escort your employees to safety on 9/11, when American Airlines Flight 77 hit the Pentagon?

Guter: We were in the middle of a team meeting inside the Pentagon when my civilian secretary entered the room to tell me two planes had crashed into the World Trade Center Towers. "Two planes?" I said. "That's no accident." The words hardly had left my mouth when we felt the earthquake-like tremors caused by the jet's impact.

I told my staff to shut the safes, spin the dials, and follow me.

The plane's impact heavily damaged the offices of the JAG, which, incredibly — and fortunately for us — were under renovation at the time. Our temporary offices were around the corner. We evacuated through the river entrance. We waded through chaos in the halls as we ran away from the smoke. We encountered a woman who was screaming, paralyzed with fear, and frozen in place. I put my hands on her shoulders and said, "Be quiet! We're going to get out." She calmed down and joined my team as we fled the building.

I'll never forget walking down the steps outside the Pentagon and looking back to see an enormous plume of black smoke rising from the facility we had just left. "Oh, Nancy," I told my secretary, "people are dead." In fact, we would later learn that 125 people inside the Pentagon lost their lives that morning, in addition to all 64 passengers on the plane. Unfortunately, I later learned that one of the passengers on Flight 77 was one of my JAG attorneys, Mari-Rae Sopper.

After leaving the building, we congregated out of harm's way near the

is not an acceptable option.

The ships drew so close to our own at one point that — standing outside on the bridge — I could see into the portholes of the ships passing along uncomfortably close to our own.

Throughout 20 to 30 minutes of high-intensity evaluation leading to multiple small course and speed changes, we were able to steer around the other ships

without incident. Following the event, I recorded in the bridge log, "Steered various courses and speeds to avoid contacts." While true, this description did little to reveal the substantial danger we avoided that night. After we had safely maneuvered around the ships, I came

STCL Houston President and Dean Don Guter served in the U.S. Navy for 32 years, retiring in 2002 as a Rear Admiral, Judge Advocate General's Corps.

Potomac River. With buses from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center jumping the curbs to reach the wounded, I started to head back inside to assist with rescue efforts, but soldiers in full tactical gear turned me back. Phone lines were down, so we relied on the one satellite phone a colleague from another office had the presence of mind to pick up on our way out of the Pentagon.

As we gathered to plan next steps, a fighter jet flew directly over the Pentagon, and the pilot tipped its wings to signal his important mission. Everyone in the area yelled, “Go get ‘em!” as we saw the jet’s missiles loaded underneath its frame.

By remaining calm, remembering past training, and considering all our options, we were able to make it to safety and reconnect with our families.

InRe: What a truly surreal, intense experience. On a more routine note, what is your best advice for STCL Houston students and alumni?

Guter: I have three pieces of advice ... Have courage, be persistent, and work hard.

Each commencement I tell graduates, “Have courage, not just for yourselves, but for those who are disenfranchised, those who are too poor (in wealth or in spirit), too afraid, or too weak, or too intimidated to stand for what’s right. Sometimes it is easier to have physical courage than moral courage. Often you will need both.”

My words echo the sentiment of German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe — whose poignant words I also often share from the commencement podium: “I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis is escalated or de-escalated, a person is humanized or dehumanized. If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.”

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them 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, who comes short again and again ... who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

— Theodore Roosevelt

FORMER U.S. PRESIDENT AND ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE NAVY

Courageous, hard-working, tenacious attorneys have the opportunity and the responsibility to positively impact people, policies, and the profession.

InRe: Any additional thoughts you would like to share with InRe readers?

Guter: I’ll leave you with another quotation — my favorite — that embodies the essence of leadership.

Often referenced as ‘The Man in the Arena,’ these words by former President and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt define success and integrity, in my opinion.

While the quote is lengthy and worth reading in its entirety, it describes the man in the arena as one who ‘strives valiantly... spends himself in a worthy cause...knows the triumph of high achievement; and...if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly...’ (See inset).

You have to have courage. The thought of a ‘cold and timid life’ gives me the shivers.

That said, I believe self-awareness is

another important trait for a leader to possess. In that regard, it is key for the “man in the arena” to know when it is time to leave the arena. With the years remaining until the centennial celebration of South Texas College of Law Houston, there is time for a new president and dean to make his or her mark on the law school.

As I’ve told many people, when it comes to law school deanships, STCL Houston is as good as it gets. Together, we have accomplished great things for our students, school, and alumni — and we’ll continue to do so throughout the upcoming academic year.

As my retirement nears, I am confident that South Texas’ next president and dean will be a leader worthy of the school’s valued mission, outstanding faculty and staff, loyal alumni, and commendable students. ♡