

The Accidental Admiral: A Sailor Takes Command at NATO

By James Stavridis

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After he was selected to be NATO's sixteenth Supreme Allied Commander, *The New York Times* described Jim Stavridis as a "Renaissance admiral." A U. S. Naval Academy graduate with a master's degree and doctorate from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, conversant in both French and Spanish, this author of numerous books and articles impressed the Navy's leaders and senior Pentagon civilians with his wide range of interests, educational background, keen understanding of strategic doctrine, mastery of long-range planning, and command of international affairs.

Since NATO had previously been led by generals, Stavridis saw his assignment as the first admiral to take command as somewhat "accidental." As the American and NATO commander in Europe responsible for 120,000 coalition troops serving in fifty-one nations, on three continents and at sea he had come a long way since almost leaving the Navy for law school five years after receiving his commission.

The Accidental Admiral offers an intimate look at the challenges of directing NATO operations in Afghanistan, military intervention in Libya, and preparation for possible war in Syria—as well as worrying about the Balkans, cyber threats, and piracy, all while cutting NATO by a third due to budget reductions by the twenty-eight nations of the alliance. More than just describing the history of the times, Stavridis also shares his insights into the personalities of President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretaries of Defense Robert Gates, Leon Panetta, and Chuck Hagel, Afghan President Hamid Karzai; Generals David Petraeus, Stanley McChrystal, John Allen, and many more.

Known as an innovator and an early adopter of technology and social media, Stavridis' ability to think "outside the box" and sail in uncharted waters is unmatched. He shares his insights on leadership, strategic communications, planning, and the convergence of threats that will confront the United States and its allies in the near future. Stavridis is an advocate of the use of "Smart Power," which he defines as the balance of hard and soft power. He explains that in creating security in the twenty-first century it is critical to build bridges, not walls, and stresses the need to connect international, interagency, and public-private actors to achieve security.

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Editorial Review

Review

"His chapters on ?leadership, strategic ?communications, and? innovation are also useful words for all military leaders."??*Parameters*

?Coalition warfare, whether based on established alliances such as NATO, or so-called coalitions of the willing like that against the Islamic State (ISIS) group, continue to be the order of the day and appear to be Canada?s preferred method for sending forces off to what we rightly or wrongly call ?war? these days. This highly engaging account of one man?s approach to this type of generalship (or more accurately the art of the admiral) is both timely and a very worthwhile read."??*Canadian Naval Review*

?Stavridis says he wants to show the reader not what happened during his four years, but rather why it happened. He proceeds to take the reader on a tour of challenges: from the toppling of Qadhafi to the civil war in Syria, Israeli security, a resurgent Russia, the Balkans, and finally, of course, Afghanistan. Thus the first few chapters are a whirlwind of individuals, meetings, and events. Among all this, he often pauses within chapters to highlight some of the more important senior military and political officials that make up the NATO alliance. His new memoir is a refreshing dose of honesty, intelligence, and reflection?much needed in today?s Navy and tomorrow?s leaders."??*Naval War College Review*

?First, Stavridis provides valuable historical perspective of the major conflicts that occurred or were ongoing during his time at the helm of NATO/EUCOM. Second, he shares his views on strategic leadership to include the advantages and pitfalls that come with Twitter, Facebook, and the other tools of a more interconnected world. Fans of Admiral Stavridis?s previous works are surely going to enjoy *The Accidental Admiral*. For new readers, it can serve as a valuable introduction that will then pull them toward his other works."??*Naval Historical Foundation*

"Stavridis? perspective on how he arrived as the first admiral to ever hold the senior position at NATO proves interesting. After taking command in 2009, he recounts in six chapters his most pressing challenges. He does this primarily through a geographical lens with chapters focused on Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, the Balkans, Israel, and Russia. In each chapter he paints a candid picture from a strategic leader?s viewpoint on how he approached the problems he encountered in each region. After the historical tour of challenges, he shifts to a discussion of leadership in a broader sense. There are five chapters on various aspects of leadership. Most of these leadership tents are valid, not just at the four-star military level, but to all leaders."??*Military Review*

"Adm. Stavridis has been variously called a 'renaissance admiral,' 'a military intellectual,' 'the best of the new breed of military officers.' All appropriately laudatory, but I suspect he?d settle for something simpler?the son of a man who set a high standard by serving as a (naval) officer for more than 30 years, perhaps; a devoted husband and a proud father, who was chosen to speak to his daughter?s NROTC graduating class; an accidental admiral, a sailor and a patriot, whose success and service to his country was no accident at all."??*The Washington Times*

?Stavridis writes with a career?s worth of confidence in never being too concerned with rocking the boat. He continues to consider himself a ?disruptive innovator,? based on a career advanced with ?house money? and never expecting advancement. In *The Accidental Admiral*, he appeals to modern militaries to consign their

traditional introspective and repetitive practices and instead develop akin to the modern technological world, which embraces risk and innovates rapidly.??**Australian Defence Force Journal**

"*The Accidental Admiral* is valuable, and perhaps even vital, for those seeking to understand the history and context of major foreign policy decisions during the Obama administration. On balance, Stavridis agreed with President Obama's decisions more often than he disagreed with them. But some of those disagreements were on hot-button issues. Most notably, the Admiral endorses a longer and firmer commitment to Afghanistan and associates himself with Senator McCain's interventionist position on Syria. Stavridis, however, does this without any of the buck-passing or back-biting that have featured prominently in many other recent foreign policy critiques. *Accidental Admiral* has many other strengths. The book offers rich lessons in the challenges of running too many headquarters, regularly interacting with dozens of foreign heads of state and senior defense officials, and overseeing major military operations in multiple hotspots. The book's 10th chapter on leadership should be mandatory reading for all military officers, and not just in the United States. 'Spend at least one-fourth of your disposable time on personnel matters, and 'Make mentorship a priority,' Stavridis intones. The Admiral clearly understands the human factor in everything as well as anyone – not least in the context of leadership."??**War on the Rocks.com**

Adm. Stavridis, through his recollection of his friendship with Amb. Rogozin and others, demonstrates that he understands well the importance of partnerships and friendships in navigating global crises as part of the 'smart power' agenda that he personally promotes. U.S. foreign policy toward Russia and in general would benefit if it remembered that isolating adversaries may feel moral, but resolving crises requires a foundation of personal engagement. The White House could learn a lot from Adm. Stavridis.??**The Diplomatic Courier**

The Accidental Admiral covers only a short period of time but it is packed full of absorbing and fascinating stuff. His book is one of the best autobiographies of a senior officer to appear for many a year. Stavridis, who is a prolific reader of everything from social media to newspaper editorials in three languages, also writes extremely well and without a plethora of acronyms. After so many dry and dull military stories, the Stavridis story is like a cleansing gale of salt air. His autobiography is breathtaking and unputdownable.??**Warships International Fleet Review**

"Much of the strength of the book lies in its style and structure. The text is admirably succinct but retains warmth and candour throughout, which make for an engaging read. A good balance is struck between specific events during the author's command and general issues of concern to today's senior officer? In this concise and readable memoir, Admiral Stavridis has provided an insightful overview of NATO operations during his eventful command. More importantly, perhaps, he has made a well-informed contribution to the debate about the future of the Alliance."??**The Naval Review**

Admiral Jim Stavridis is one of the most forward-thinking military officers and enlightened leaders of his generation. Afghanistan, Libya, the Balkans, Syria, piracy and cyber threats were just a few of the enormous challenges he superbly handled as Supreme Allied Commander at NATO. *The Accidental Admiral* gives readers a window into what it is like to wrestle with the toughest 21st century problems of strategy and diplomacy.??**Robert M. Gates, Secretary of Defense, 2008-11; author of *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War***

Admiral James Stavridis may be an 'accidental admiral' but he is no ordinary commander. He is equal parts thinker and doer, asking hard questions and continually challenging himself and the men and women under his command. His tour of duty as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe encompassed some of the

most trying and important issues of our time in Europe and the Middle East. A rollicking and fun read.??**Anne-Marie Slaughter, President and CEO of The New America Foundation; Director, Policy Planning Staff, U.S. Department of State, 2009-11**

"Admiral James Stavridis is a military intellectual who has written an engaging, deeply thoughtful book about leadership in the crucible of great events. In particular, his arguments about the continued relevance of NATO are prescient given the crisis in Ukraine. His defense of Generals Stanley McChrystal, David Petraeus, and John Allen is both poignant and necessary. This book should be required reading for young officers.??**Robert D. Kaplan, best-selling author of *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* and *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate***

?Jim Stavridis is a unique breed of leader?at once both a seasoned practitioner, and a thoughtful, charismatic intellectual. He embodies the very definition of a ?renaissance man.? A generation of our leaders benefited from working for and with Jim?myself included. Readers of *The Accidental Admiral* will benefit from the insights of a proven leader's reflections of a pivotal time in history.??**Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, USA (Ret.), Commander, U.S. Forces Afghanistan, 2009-10; co-founder and partner of the McChrystal Group**

?There was nothing accidental about Jim Stavridis becoming an Admiral or Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. He is one of the best of the new breed of military officers?equally proficient at waging war and waging peace, equally learned in military history and cultural history. Whether dealing with Afghanistan, Russia or the Middle East, Jim has always demonstrated an ability to find new ways to look at and try to resolve age-old problems. In *The Accidental Admiral*, he brilliantly shares hard won lessons learned on the application of ?smart power? in the modern world and also offers readers critical insights into leadership, innovation, planning and communication. After I got to know Jim and to appreciate the range of his intellect and interests, I regularly would ask, ?What are you reading Admiral?? The books he recommended were always great reads from which I learned a lot. The same will be true for anyone who reads *The Accidental Admiral*.??**Joseph I. Lieberman, Senior Counsel, Kasowitz, Benson, Torres & Friedman; United States Senator, Retired**

About the Author

Adm. James Stavridis, USN (Ret.) is a 1976 distinguished graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy who spent over 35 years on active service in the Navy. He commanded destroyers and a carrier strike group in combat and served for seven years as a four-star admiral, including nearly four years as the first Navy officer chosen as Supreme Allied Commander for Global Operations at NATO. After retiring from the Navy he was named the dean of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in 2013. In addition, he currently serves as the U.S. Naval Institute's Chair of the Board of Directors. He has written articles on global security issues for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Atlantic Magazine*, *Naval War College Review*, and *Proceedings* and is the author or co-author of several books, including *Command at Sea 6th Ed.* and *Destroyer Captain*.

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