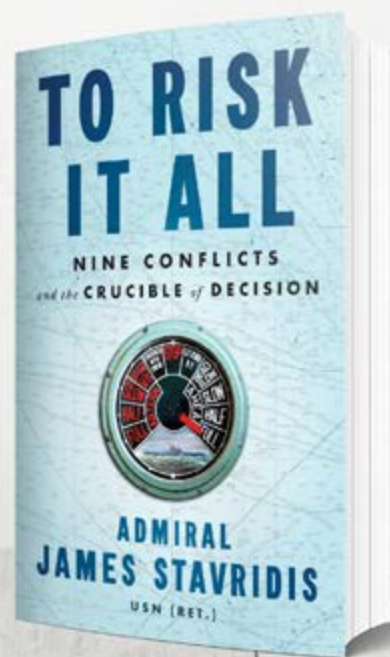


To Risk It All

Nine Conflicts and the Crucible of Decision



James Stavridis, Penguin Press, New York, 2022, 352 pages

Mark Montesclaros

Even the most ardent landlubbers will benefit from the valuable insights contained in a new book by James Stavridis, a career naval officer and prolific writer. In *To Risk it All: Nine Conflicts and the Crucible of Decision*, he demonstrates his powers of analysis and critical thinking stemming from his affinity for naval history and tempered by his own experiences in command positions at sea and ashore. This is not a coffee table book about “famous naval heroes” but a serious analysis of character and decision-making by nine different sailors in a variety of challenging contexts spanning over 240 years of naval history. The result is a highly readable, educational, and insightful look at those who made critical decisions that risked both themselves and their shipmates. More than just a collection of potential “lessons learned,” Stavridis’s book will provide valuable perspectives, particularly for its nonmaritime readership, on the Navy culture and the uniqueness of decisions made at sea, both in peace and in war.

The book is similar in design to *Sailing True North: Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character*, the author’s previous effort.¹ Packaged very nicely with nine stand-alone chapters, *To Risk it All* is bookended by an introduction that provides the overall context for the work and an effective conclusion that provides additional personal observations from the author. In contrast to *Sailing True North*, which examines the character of admirals of different nations spanning two millennia, Stavridis limits the scope of this

book to nine American sailors who face difficult choices in a variety of challenging situations. The author’s subjects represent an eclectic mix. The first six face the crucible of naval combat and are perhaps recognizable to this publication’s general audience. These include ship’s captains (John Paul Jones and Stephen Decatur), squadron and fleet commanders (David Farragut, George Dewey, and William “Bull” Halsey), and an enlisted crew member (Doris “Dorie” Miller). Together they span conflicts from the American Revolution to the Second World War and are generally exemplars of courageous decision-making under fire. The seventh subject, Lloyd Bucher, garnered attention during the Cold War as his ship, the USS *Pueblo*, was seized by North Korea during the Cold War. Michelle Howard, the eighth, commanded the combined task force that rescued Richard Phillips, captain of the commercial vessel *Maersk Alabama*, after his much-publicized capture by Somali pirates in 2009. Finally, Stavridis scrutinizes the case of Brett Crozier, captain of an aircraft carrier whose crew was stricken by an early outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. How all nine of these sailors responded under duress is at the crux of *To Risk it All*. The author himself considers the book “a historical meditation on the nature of decision-making under stress ... and a resource for any reader who must make hard decisions in his or her work and life.”² For the nonsailor, the book illuminates the nature of Navy culture and in particular those factors that drove the subjects of *To Risk it All* to make the choices they did.

The author arranges the book chronologically and the chapters follows a uniform pattern. Stavridis begins by explaining his personal connection to each of his subject sailors and how he “interacted” with them at various points during his long and distinguished naval career. His affinity for naval history is clearly evident, as is his skill in telling their tales. Next, the author provides insight into the personality of each figure, focusing on character, skills, and attributes rather than a litany of dry biographical details. He is quick to point out the bad as well as the good; most of his subjects are flawed in one way or the other but are quick to advance through the ranks despite these shortcomings. Stavridis then explains the context and events leading up to the “hard decision” each sailor made, whether during the crucible of combat, the Cold War, or in the current operational environment—doctrinally known as the “competition continuum.” In each case, the stakes varied but were high—the fate of a fleet, a ship, an individual, a career. The core of the analysis is next. Stavridis dissects each case, discerning the factors that had the greatest impact on the sailor at the time of the decision. These could include skills, attributes, or character traits previously mentioned, or perhaps a new aspect that came to light based on the exigencies of the crisis each sailor faced. He concludes each chapter with an analysis of each figure’s legacy on the modern Navy, especially earlier stalwarts such as John Paul Jones, Stephen Decatur, and David Farragut. He then makes some final observations on how he personally applied “lessons learned” in his own decision-making processes, again returning to his own experiences as a leader throughout various touch points in his career. Thus, each chapter stands alone, purposely crafted by the author to emphasize the “so what” of each case study to establish relevance for the reader in multiple ways.

While beyond the scope of this review to examine each chapter in detail, it is appropriate here to make some broad observations regarding the book in general and then add some specific comments on the case of Adm. William “Bull” Halsey in chapter 6. First, the book shows the exigencies of naval command, particularly in the case of combat. In *The Mask of Command*, eminent British historian John Keegan wrote: “The first and greatest imperative of command is to be present in person.”³ While Keegan referred to leaders of land forces, the same principle applies to command at sea, where captains are expected on the bridge and to lead by example. There is nowhere to hide at sea. All the sailors in the book exemplify Keegan’s dictum of the importance of being there when it counts and making decisions under

pressure. Second, based on the title of the book, one might assume that there must have been some element of “throwing caution to the wind” in each character’s calculus that figured in their decision to risk everything. Indeed, in his excellent study of the admirals who achieved five-star rank, historian Edgar Walter Borneman noted, “Commanders make educated decisions based on facts, experience, and gut-level instinct, but at some point, a willingness to roll the dice takes over.”⁴ Perhaps one of the author’s key points is that that each leader must strike a balance between emotion and reason, tempering “gut instinct” with rational calculus.⁵ Said another way, the author states that this “sixth sense” must be accompanied by a careful consideration of options and risk, “versus simply deciding to cut the Gordian knot and move out.”⁶ This is a central theme in *To Risk it All* as each sailor in the book approached his or her “wicked problem” in a different way. Finally, the book provides insight into the immediacy of decisions made at sea and reinforces notions such as “the captain goes down with the ship” or “the ship is the captain,” concepts that might be foreign to this publication’s general readership. There is an intimacy between captain and crew and between captain and ship that is reflected in many of the cases in the book. Thus, a non-Navy reader of *To Risk it All* will achieve a greater appreciation of this sister service and the unique pressures placed on maritime leaders in crisis situations.

A case in point is Halsey, particularly noteworthy for his aggressive heroism, temper, and singular focus—the latter of which impeded his ability to make sound decisions at crucial times. The author observes that Halsey was the epitome of naval fighting spirit, yet made critical errors during the Battle of Leyte Gulf that placed him under great scrutiny, both during and especially after the war. During the Battle of Leyte Gulf, Halsey, in his haste to destroy the Japanese main fleet, failed to adequately protect U.S. landing forces, making them vulnerable to attack by a Japanese task force. Halsey was questioned by his superior Adm.

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Chester Nimitz, who sent the now-famous dispatch regarding the location of the fleet that was supposed to protect the landing force: “WHERE IS RPT WHERE IS TASK FORCE THIRTY FOUR RR THE WORLD WONDERS.”⁷ Naval historian Ian Toll observed, “In effect, Nimitz was fixing blame on Halsey for letting the Japanese sneak up on the Seventh Fleet.”⁸ Halsey later corrected the error—which he later admitted. The landing force was spared, not due to American action but based on the timidity of the Japanese naval commander in the area, who lacked Halsey’s instinct for aggression. The case of Halsey is particularly instructive because it reinforces the author’s point that a combat leader must balance emotion or “gut instinct” and logic. Indeed, the author concludes that “Halsey’s persona is not the right model for every situation, but his determination, resilience, and confidence are often key ingredients for victory.”⁹ Halsey is thus an imperfect hero who has survived the test of time, overcoming criticism for his actions at Leyte Gulf as well as in response to two typhoons. One of the more compelling figures in the book, Halsey’s case is representative of the nine sailors in *To Risk it All*.

Not all readers may agree with the author’s approaches in the book. Some might be surprised when he states, for example, that John Paul Jones got inside the “OODA” loop of his adversary, applying a modern doctrinal principal developed by the U.S. Air Force to “orient-observe-decide-act.” He also pulls no punches on where he stands regarding the sailors in the book. For example, he advocates for the awarding of the Medal of Honor to Doris Miller, an upgrade to the Navy Cross he received for actions at Pearl Harbor. Stavridis also disagrees with the Navy’s general take on Lloyd Bucher, who bucked Navy tradition and gave up the USS *Pueblo* without firing a shot—the antithesis of the sailors portrayed

in the first half of the book. Although he was not court-martialed, Bucher was vilified by many for not resisting the North Koreans. The author is empathetic, arguing that Bucher made the best of a very bad situation, and faced the toughest decision of anyone in the book. Aside from these comments, some may like to see the author’s take on other sailors in other “crucibles;” one such suggestion is Adm. Ray Spruance during the Battle of Midway, a decisive point in the World War II’s Pacific theater. It would be interesting to see Stavridis dissect Spruance’s decision to “risk it all” against the Japanese main force before all the facts were in. Was it based on gut instinct or careful calculation? As Toll states, “He [Admiral Spruance] ...decided to make the strike “all or nothing,” launching every dive- and torpedo-bomber, so that the Japanese would be hit simultaneously by a concentrated mass.”¹⁰ The example of Spruance seems tailor-made for inclusion in the book. These comments attest to the fact that *To Risk it All* is bound to spark discussion on a number of topics, whether historic or contemporary, among its readers. This is the mark of a successful book that contributes to the professional discourse.

To Risk it All is highly recommended to military professionals of all services, but particularly to the non-Navy readers of this publication. The book will provide valuable insight into the Navy’s culture of decision-making during war and peace, and especially when the fate of ships or fleets could be determined in a manner of minutes. *To Risk it All* would be ideal for undergraduate or graduate studies in leadership, and its format would make it ideal for professional development sessions in any of the services’ academic institutions or operational units. The book is highly accessible, thought-provoking, and a worthy addition to one’s professional library. ■

Notes

1. In *Sailing True North: Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), James Stavridis examines ten admirals of different nations, each of whom made singular contributions to the maritime domain. The cases span over two millennia in time.

2. James Stavridis, *To Risk it All: Nine Conflicts and the Crucible of Decision* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022), xxvi.

3. John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 329.

4. Walter R. Borneman, *The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King—The Five-Star Admirals Who Won the War at Sea* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 376.

5. See Edgar F. Puryear Jr., *American Admiralship: The Art of Naval Command* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2008), 51. In his

excellent study of high-level naval leadership, Puryear noted that the most effective leaders had a “sixth sense,” or a “feel” for their commands that helped leaders in their decision making. This combines “gut instinct” or intuition, with a natural feel for the officers and sailors under one’s command, based on familiarity and trust.

6. Stavridis, *To Risk it All*, 155.

7. Ian W. Toll, *Twilight of the Gods: War in the Western Pacific, 1944-1945* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), 278.

8. *Ibid.*, 279.

9. Stavridis, *To Risk it All*, 185.

10. *Ibid.*, 234.