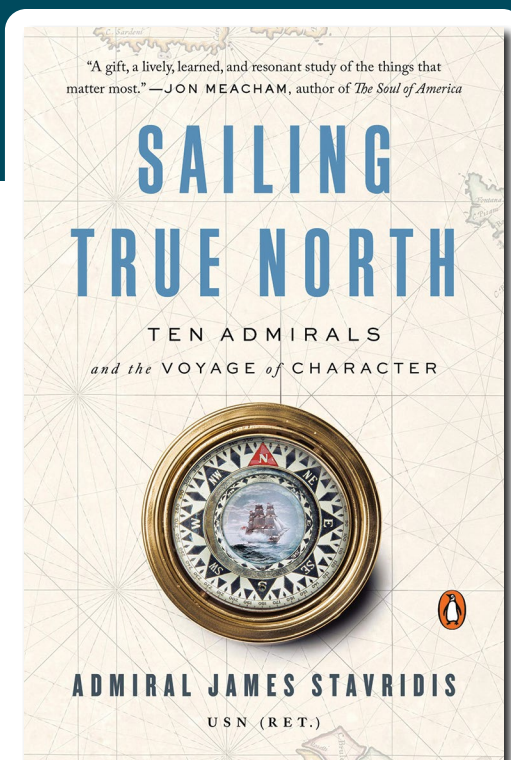


Sailing True North

Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character

Adm. James Stavridis, U.S. Navy, Retired,
Penguin Press, New York, 2019, 336 pages



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In *Sailing True North: Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character*, retired Adm. James Stavridis—a two-time U.S. geographic combatant commander, former NATO supreme Allied commander, and prolific writer throughout his entire naval career and beyond—offers up another thoughtful and expansive book that reaches into history to demonstrate timeless virtues desperately needed in this time of complex, vexing problems coupled with the accelerating speed of transformation on so many fronts. It is a valuable and easy-to-read primer on ten individuals—famous or infamous—who, through their exercise of character and leadership, or at times, lapses on those counts, provide examples the reader can juxtapose with contemporary dilemmas and challenges to find a better way forward. The individuals' failures are particularly worthy for what they may convey, and the

book serves to underscore those failures and show they are often just a prelude to greatness.

These chronological accounts span more than two millennia and include the likes of

- Themistocles (ancient Greece),
- Zheng He (Ming Dynasty, China),
- Sir Francis Drake (explorer and pirate),
- Horatio Nelson (Britain's foremost naval hero),
- Alfred Thayer Mahan (the bookish visionary who had little time for driving ships),
- Lord Jacky Fisher (who, as Stavridis puts it, was a "revolution in a bottle, and the taste could be bitter indeed despite being sugared with a great deal of personal charm when he chose to deploy it"),
- Chester Nimitz (Pacific Fleet admiral during World War II),

- Hyman Rickover (a bureaucratic virtuoso and angry visionary for the potential of atomic energy within the Navy),
- Elmo Zumwalt (chief of naval operations, 1970–74, and a reformer amidst the Vietnam debacle and serious domestic social upheaval), and finally,
- Grace Hopper (a pioneer at the dawn of the computer age).¹

Stavridis's writing benefits immensely from his innate talents and a rich, firsthand repository of lessons learned. He has a deft command of the language; a gift for balance—neither diving too deeply (so as to convolute the larger message) nor remaining too shallow (that the intended broader message remains cryptic); an evident, firm grasp of history writ large; and a vast array of experiences logged over decades at sea leading sailors and marines, which he is able to marry to these historical case studies, providing useful, contemporary parallels in a much-changed world.

The book has value far beyond the nautical realm. The character traits and leadership traits discussed within the pages are transferable far beyond the sea domain. Living in the age of the internet and the explosion of media sources (with varying agendas and commitments to the truth), the lines between fact and outright falsehoods have blurred so much that we are compelled to canvas a variety of sources if we are to have any reasonable hope of getting close to objective reality. When we are caught up in a maelstrom of competing, often subjective narratives where information is purposely “weaponized” to sow discord and confusion among people or toward leaders and institutions, it is hardly surprising that so many people of integrity forgo national service—an ancillary theme of sorts running throughout Stavridis's volume.

Truly gifted leaders, or potential leaders who are deterred from national service or from reaching for the next rung on the leadership ladder because they think the costs (to self, to family, to reputation) outweigh the gains represent a national tragedy. It is against this backdrop and others that Stavridis wrote the book. It is not just a message for military readers, but it is also a study in character that can carry great consequences to be leveraged by anyone seeking to lead effectively and with character in stressful situations. It is intended to show that

despite adversities, these historical figures made a lasting difference (if not *the* difference between victory and defeat, often in the face of considerable unknowns, hardship, obscurity, or gross recriminations). It is, in a sense, a call to duty.

By complementing these ten studies in character as the book closes, Stavridis gives us a “top ten list” of qualities he believes distinguish truly superlative leaders. Admittedly, many of the things he offers up have been said many times over. While he echoes those other cries, he does so with a palpable sincerity and credibility derived from long service to ideals bigger than himself. Stavridis identifies several critical traits effective leaders must possess in abundance.

Creativity. To achieve it consistently, one has to have “a willingness to embrace the new despite the difficulties and challenges of doing so.”² Creativity gives birth to innovation and progress.

Resilience. In the face of adversity, Stavridis argues, “It is insufficient to be capable and good when things are going well, because sooner or later they will go badly.”³

Humility. He nails it when writing, “So often the evil doppelganger of success is arrogance.” And he beseeches us to avoid it like the plague.⁴

Balance. This one routinely gets lots of rhetoric but less traction in our lives. I, myself, have been guilty of this “sin” on too many occasions, and it cost me. Whether ambition or fixation on something other than the true, central importance of family and friends, “struggling with [this one] is an act of character for us all.”⁵

Honesty. That is, “being truthful, no matter the cost.”⁶

Empathy. Exemplifying trait number five above points out the importance of *empathy*, acknowledging that most of us are exceedingly self-centered. Stavridis admits he has to fight the tendency within himself, noting that the world around us—and maybe our genetics—wire us that way. We have to look at the world through a wider aperture. Unfortunately,

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many people who are very successful lack the ability to express this. Yet for all of us, building up a reservoir of empathy requires a lifetime.

Justice. The message Stavridis offers is more nuanced than one might expect. His sense of justice, like so many of these traits, evolved and grew over time and through the accumulation of knowledge and experience. It is intimately related to the empathy trait mentioned above. For Stavridis, justice involves recognizing the shortfalls around us, where our mantra or rhetoric outstrips the reality on the ground, at least for some. As an example of what he means here, he says he tries to “think what it must be like to be a young black man in poverty, with a very limited set of choices, under constant supervision by law enforcement. How do we address that?” Stavridis quickly clarifies by asserting, “This is not to say our society is fatally or even deeply flawed.”⁷ To that point, he leans on Winston Churchill’s famous quip that “[d]emocracy is the worst form of government ... except for all the others.”⁸

Decisiveness. One can only admire the problem so long. Dithering back and forth may have its benefits in a certain context but is often inappropriate. It also skirts the uncomfortable—having to decide. In the book, Stavridis relates a story of when he was in command and had it not been for the decisiveness of his navigator—not him—his career would have been finished by running the ship aground despite assurances from the local pilot steering the boat toward its anchorage that all was well in hand.

Determination. Here, Stavridis draws once more from Winston Churchill, and Churchill’s tenacity in the face of the German onslaught in 1941 when Britain was the last holdout (the United States was not yet involved in World War II), when he says, “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense.”⁹ We can all admit that drawing that line is not always easy, and sometimes we can become obstinate. However, more often than not, determination and an unwillingness to quit when times are tough is essential to effective leadership.

Perspective. We must always be mindful: “[W]e are but sailing in a tiny ship on a boundless sea ... [the] perspective [of] which leads to a sense of humor and the gift of not taking ourselves too seriously. ... [We] must understand that eternity is rolling out there in front of us, and our time is brief. ... Character is knowing that we are decidedly not eternal, and that we should live our lives in the best way we can.”¹⁰

The book was a pleasure to read; each chapter was nimble and interesting. The author has to be complimented for corraling such a diverse group of characters spanning so much time together in one place. He makes the history come alive and continues to be a shining example of the warrior-scholar we should strive to emulate as guardians of the military profession and military ethos. This book is a worthy addition to any collection. ■

Notes

1. James Stavridis, *Sailing True North: Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 121.

2. *Ibid.*, 269.

3. *Ibid.*, 272.

4. *Ibid.*, 273.

5. *Ibid.*, 276.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 280.

8. Winston Churchill, as quoted in Stavridis, *Sailing True North*, 280.

9. *Ibid.*, 283.

10. Stavridis, *Sailing True North*, 285–86.