
To Risk It All: Nine Hard Choices and the Crucible of Decision

BOOK REVIEW BY ADMIRAL HARRY HARRIS,
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Reviewer's note: Full disclosure—I consider myself a “Stavridis-trained” man and proud of it. I first met Jim Stavridis in 1974 when I was a Plebe (first-year student) at the United States Naval Academy. We worked together on a few issues when he was the director of the U.S. Navy’s “Deep Blue” organization following 9/11, and I worked for him twice—when I commanded JTF Guantanamo, he was my boss as Commander, U.S. Southern Command, and when I commanded the U.S. 6th Fleet, he was my boss as Commander, U.S. European Command. He mentored me throughout my fourteen years as a Flag officer and continues doing so to this very day. This does not mean I go all “googly-eyed” and lose all objectivity when it comes to reading his copious writings, as this review will demonstrate, but it does mean that I respect and admire him greatly. I shall try not to fall prey to George Kennan’s “treacherous curtain of deference.”

When I was speechwriter for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1999-2001, us speechwriters, with tongue firmly in cheek, trumpeted four truisms, which we called “The Speechwriter’s Rules”: (1) Anatole France’s diktat that “when a thing has been said and (said) well, have no scruples, take and copy it;” (2) man’s most primordial urge is not the urge to procreate but, rather, the urge to edit; (3) it’s far easier and way more fun to criticize than create; and (4) it’s always the speechwriter’s fault.

Understanding full well that authors generally view reviewers like fire hydrants must view dogs, and my disclaimer notwithstanding, let’s undertake a (mostly) objective critique of Admiral Jim Stavridis’ latest offering, *To Risk It All*.

There is no shortage of moral and leadership dilemmas in the U.S.

Navy, both yesterday and today. Jim Stavridis boldly sails around these rocks and shoals with his typical eloquence and fortitude. He does not quibble over the finer points of how his book will be received. He stakes his claim without equivocation and sails on.

I consider this book *Profiles in Courage* for the nautical set.

The Admiral has done it again. Following the eleven other books that he has authored or co-authored, including *The New York Times* best-selling novel, *2034*, and his critically acclaimed memoir of first command, *Destroyer Captain*, he returns to “familiar waters” as he draws on his considerable leadership and seamanship experience. In *The Leader’s Bookshelf*, he asked his flag and general officer friends and colleagues (yours truly not included) to recommend their favorite books on leadership and to justify their choices. In *The Sailor’s Bookshelf*, he asks himself the question of what books one should read to truly know the sea and provides fifty excellent examples. These two books and others by him are worth debating but far from controversial—is *The Good Shepherd* better than *The Enemy Below*; do you favor *Mask of Command* over *Masks of War*?

This new book, however, is markedly different: Admiral Stavridis raises the stakes by appealing to more emotional—even gut-wrenching—levels. The stories in *To Risk It All* invite heated argument, because he does not rely solely on figures from our storied nautical past. He brings the narrative into the here and now, fresh off the front pages. The stories lend credence to the idea that one leader’s exemplar of intrepidity might be another’s epitome of timidity, and, certainly, anyone serving today will recognize two leaders named. In my case, for example, Admiral Michelle Howard (chapter titled “Pirates of the Gulf of Aden”) worked for me as my deputy in my very first flag assignment on the Navy Staff in the Pentagon, and Captain Brett Crozier (“The Red Flare”) worked for me when I commanded NATO’s Striking and Support Forces in Naples, Italy. This is the History Channel playing out in real time. I was entering junior high school when the USS PUEBLO (“No Way Out”) was captured by the North Koreans. I remember to this day the colorful reaction of my father who, himself, served in the Navy in World War II and the Korean War.

Nine such accounts of leadership provide us with more than a retelling of stories we read about in school, on the internet, or on social media. What makes this book different, imminently readable, and actually compelling is that Jim Stavridis imbues each leader’s defining moment with his own considerable personal Naval history—insights gained across a thirty-seven-year career commanding destroyers, carrier strike groups, joint task forces, and combatant commands. He makes these stories rele-

vant to today and shares with us his doubts and fears of what he might do in similar situations, thereby inviting each of us to do the same. This is Socratic teaching of a high order.

For example, John Paul Jones and “The Power of No” have implications for today’s leaders—military, political, and business. And who knew that Mr. John Paul, Jr. self-adopted the surname “Jones” in the New World to avoid the ignominy of his bad behavior in the Old World? He wanted to prevent his reputation from preceding him!

One can debate whether Captain Brett Crozier—who was removed from command of the USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT after the leak of a letter he wrote regarding a COVID-19 outbreak on board (“The Red Flare”)—should occupy one-ninth of a book that includes the likes of David Farragut, George Dewey, and Bull Halsey, but that’s not the point of the book. Jim Stavridis bids us to consider the mind of Captain Crozier at the exact moment of truth when individual lives literally—not theoretically—lay in the balance. Captain Crozier’s actions directly affected the 5,000 women and men who served onboard the supercarrier and its embarked airwing. Crozier’s actions resonate today.

Admittedly, it is a risky stratagem to insert oneself into the minds of one’s protagonists, but this is not a history book. Rather, it’s a subjective examination of objective decisions made by key actors at the moment of maximum risk. It provides insight into those moments upon which history is informed. Consider Lieutenant Stephen Decatur (“A Young Man’s Game”). Decatur’s stirring actions, which resulted in the burning of the captured USS PHILADELPHIA during the Tripolitan Wars in 1804, are the stuff of legend. I once wrote a speech centered on Decatur’s famous (perhaps apocryphal) exhortation to his men on the eve of their raid: “We are now about to embark upon an expedition which may terminate in our sudden deaths or our immortal glory.” Sudden death. Immortal glory. It does not get any riskier than that. Herein, the Admiral takes us to a different plane as he asks the fundamental question, “What would I do in Decatur’s shoes?”

I rarely disagree with Admiral Stavridis, yet I will do so, keeping my Speechwriter’s Rules Numbers 2 and 3 firmly in sight. From the benefit of 20/20 hindsight across a forty-three-year career in uniform and in diplomacy, I firmly align myself with Vice Admiral Hal Bowen, who chaired the Court of Inquiry which investigated Commander Lloyd “Pete” Bucher’s actions surrounding his surrender of his ship, the USS PUEBLO, in 1968 without firing a shot (“No Way Out”). It is difficult to imagine what Commander Bucher would do were he the captain on the bridge of the

USS JOHNSTON, sure that he, his crew, and his ship faced certain death off Samar during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1944. Conversely, it is easy to imagine what Commander Ernest Evans of USS JOHNSTON fame would do were he the captain of the USS PUEBLO and surrounded by North Korean gunboats. I, for one, do not believe “surrender” would have been a word in his lexicon.

See what I mean about controversial subjects, that are emotionally debated? We can quibble that some noteworthy heroes like Tom Hudner, John McCain, Paul Milius, and Jim Stockdale weren't given their due. After all, they certainly risked it all. But where do you draw the line? The Admiral does not claim that his nine are the only nine, or that they are even the *sine qua non* for leaders who risked it all. Speechwriter Rule Number 2—that man's most primordial urge is the urge to edit—is germane. The Admiral's concluding chapter is one for the ages—where else are you going to find Don Corleone in a book about Naval leadership?

Sir Winston Churchill reportedly said, “To every man there comes a time in his lifetime...when he is tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing unique and fitting to his talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds him unprepared for the work that would be his finest hour.” Relatedly, Admiral Stavridis's book focuses on men and women who were touched by fire in the crucible of hot war and uncertain peace. We learn from their examples—shining or otherwise—so that we can apply these lessons to our own journeys. If the audience for this book were primarily members of the Navy, then its value would be narrow. But if the audience is bigger—and in this case I believe it should be—encompassing the intelligentsia, the commentariat, the policymakers, the deciders, and the people who daily shoulder the burden of paying taxes to meet the Constitution's requirement of Congress “to provide and maintain a Navy,” then this is a must-read, indeed. *f*