

ADM Stavridis addresses audience at NDU Convocation ceremony



# Read, Think, Write

## Keys to 21<sup>st</sup>-century Security Leadership

By JAMES G. STAVRIDIS

**T**wenty years ago, on a hot August day in 1991, I arrived, like you, to begin a year at the National War College. I met striking and impressive classmates such as William “Fox” Fallon and Carrol “Howie” Chandler, future four-stars who radiated leadership. No one could know it then, but there would be several flag and general officers from our class. Everyone looked self-assured, and everyone—this may surprise you—was a lot taller than me and had far more executive hair than I did.

My daughters were very young. We lived in a little townhouse in Alexandria, Virginia, and I had just finished up a sea tour in an *Aegis* cruiser and many years at sea. I knew what I was good at and what I knew well: driving a destroyer or a cruiser, navigating through tight waters, leading a boarding party up a swinging ladder, planning an air defense campaign, leading Sailors on the deck plates of a rolling ship. But I also sensed what I did

not know or understand well: global politics and grand strategy, the importance of the “logistics nation,” how the interagency community worked, what the levers of power and practice were in the world—in essence, how everything fits together in producing security for the United States and our partners.

In the year ahead, I hoped to close that gap, and I did. You will, too.

I want to give you a sense of what worked for us in the class of 1992 in the hopes that it will illuminate the voyage ahead for the class of 2012.

The first thing I want to emphasize is the gift you have been given—namely, the gift of time. To be given essentially a year in the middle of your career, far away from the grind of combat and the endless churn of staff work, is priceless. You have to decide how to spend it.

In three words: *read, think, write.*

The quintessential skill of an officer is to bring order out of chaos. You have to be calm,

smart, and willing to do the brain work; in the end, 21<sup>st</sup>-century security is about brain-on-brain warfare. We will succeed not only because we have more resources, or because our values are the best, or because we have the best demographics or geographic advantages—all of those things matter, of course. But in today’s turbulent security environment, we will succeed and defeat our enemies by *out-thinking* them. To do that, and to be successful senior officers, you need to read, think, and write.

Let me start with reading. You will get plenty of *assigned* reading, which—as we used to say in the class of 1992—is only a lot of reading if you do it! Of course, I certainly

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believe you should read what the faculty here recommends, but you should also cast a wider net during the year ahead. Your reading should include not only history, politics, diplomacy, economics, and so forth, but also great fiction, books from distant cultures, and perhaps even a little poetry.

Recommend to each other great books that you have read. In your seminars, spend a minute or two hearing what your classmates are reading beyond the syllabus. Talk about what you have read. Keep a journal of your writing and how it strikes you. Copy down great passages. Read, read, read.

Can I offer a couple of titles from my recent reading? Try *Matterhorn*, a novel of Vietnam by Karl Marlantes. You will be pulled into combat in a real and visceral way, and you will be able to reflect on how far we have come in logistics, medicine, tactics, air support, and a thousand other things. Pick up *Colonel Roosevelt* by Edmund Morris, which concludes a trilogy of superb and highly readable books about perhaps our most energetic and brilliant President in the final, sad decade of his life when the country was politically polarized and the world order

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was changing day by day. Want to get a view into Afghanistan? Try *Flashman*, the first of the extraordinary series of historical fiction by George MacDonald Fraser, which throws Pashtun culture into vivid light, providing a view of one of the worst acts of generalship in history: Elphinstone's disastrous 1842 retreat from Kabul during which the British lost 30,000 souls in 2 weeks.

Reading is the rock upon which you will build the rest of your career. Here is your chance to create real intellectual capital from which you will earn interest, draw dividends, and make withdrawals in the two decades to come. In this way, I share Teddy Roosevelt's mindset when he stated, "I am a part of everything I have read."

Let us now turn to thinking. When President Obama was on campus in March of 2009 to dedicate Abraham Lincoln Hall, he commented, "Here at National Defense University, men and women come together to think, to learn, and to seek new strategies to

defend our union, while pursuing the goal of a just and lasting peace."

We stand here today at Fort Lesley J. McNair. It was built more than 200 years ago to protect a fledgling capital against forces that wished to do it harm. Its defenses were traditional—basic training, stockpiles of weapons, and fortifications—and the battlefields were traditional as well. Fast forward two centuries, and Fort McNair is *still* responsible for defending this nation, but the "battlefields" have dramatically changed, and the world today requires more from us all.

In this world, we must think our way to success in incredibly complex scenarios:

- a Westphalian system under attack with nation-states fighting in unconventional settings with unfamiliar tool sets
- attacks by organizations bent on ideological domination
- aging demographics throughout Europe and many developed regions
- a globalizing economy with perceived (and actual) winners and losers exacerbated by the challenges of austerity
- the exponential rise of environmental concerns directly linked to globalization
- miniaturizing technologies producing powerful effects and dangers to security
- transnational and transregional criminal organizations, trafficking in weapons, narcotics, people, money, and intellectual capital
- diffusion of weapons of mass destruction—including biological and chemical weapons
- the "cyber sea," enabling global communication at potentially everyone's fingertips—a "speed of thought" dialogue that occurs in a virtual *and* real 24/7 news cycle
- all of this taking place within the competitive "marketplace of ideas," which is ultimately at the root of conflicts, requiring sophisticated strategic communication to influence in both directions.

You must think your way through all of these new challenges. Few of them will be solved solely by combat operations, and thus tend to lurk in our intellectual seams and find our bureaucratic and cultural blind spots.

Next, let me share some thoughts about writing. Because after you read, and think, I would argue you *must* write. Writing is easy for some and hard for others, but it is essential in communicating what we have learned, as well as allowing others to challenge our

views and thus make them stronger. You will write plenty here for the faculty. But I would strongly encourage you to set a goal of publishing an article somewhere as a result of the work you have done here.

Share your ideas in print—a scholarly journal, a military magazine, a literary journal, or even a blog post. Get out there with your ideas. Nail your whispers to the wall. Conclude the trilogy of read, think, and write—and try to publish. Is there "career risk" in publishing? I suppose. It hasn't hurt me too badly over the years. What matters more is testing your ideas on the field of intellectual battle, so to speak.

We need to challenge our staffs, friends, shipmates, allies—the dedicated professionals who work with us every day. We need to constantly seek new relationships and forge new partnerships. With all that said, let me give you more food for thought.

We have too many walls in the world of security—we need more bridges. Our self-imposed legal, political, moral, and conceptual boundaries defining what constitutes *combat* versus *criminal activity*, *domestic* versus *international jurisdiction*, and *governmental* versus *private interest* all provide operational space for potentially lethal opponents with no such boundaries to respect.

As we stand here in the shadow of a building that bears his great name, I am reminded of one of my favorite quotations of Lincoln: "The dusty dogmas of the past are insufficient to confront our stormy present. As our world is new, we must think anew." We must address the challenge of effectively employing our military across these boundaries without undermining the core values and freedoms that underpin our society.

Here, you will look to expand our understanding of conflict and security beyond only lethal means and reexamine all our operations, including peacetime engagement and training activities, in order to leverage the vast knowledge—the "corporate knowledge," quite literally—of the private sector as part of a single national and multinational strategic framework.

In the course of your thinking, you must focus on the value of understanding different languages and study one yourself; understand different cultures; study determined adversaries; and seek new ways to develop cooperation and collaboration. This approach reflects another giant for whom one of your academic buildings is named, General

National Defense University (Katherine Lewis)



ADM Stavridis opens academic year at National Defense University

George C. Marshall, who embodied the inter-agency community mindset before it became fashionable.

Let me say a word to our international students and the interagency partners. You have a special and important role here as teachers to help internationalize the thinking of military students and teach them how the international and interagency communities work. Each person who passes through this university will play a different role in our collective security—some will wear a uniform, whether here in the United States or abroad in our partner nations’ armed forces; some will be diplomats; some will eventually work in the private sector. In the end, you will be the sum of what you teach each other.

Optimism is a force multiplier, as Colin Powell always said. As you think about the 21<sup>st</sup>-century security environment, beware of endless pessimism: the past is not all bad; neither is the present nor future all challenges and threats.

Indeed, there has been what I call “hopeful progress” over the past decades in places such as Peru, Colombia, and the Balkans, and in dealing significant blows to al Qaeda and transnational criminal organizations and cartels. We have also developed new and stunning technologies in everything from facial recognition to missile defense. Our advances in Special Forces are incredible.

Of course, the men and women in all our militaries—all volunteers here and increasingly so across the world—show us daily their courage, honor, and commitment. Our Special Forces have been through the cycle of triumph and tragedy in the last few

months, from killing Osama bin Laden to losing so many of their own. Yet they stand and deliver, determined and proud, each day.

There is also promise in geopolitics as rising democratic nations such as India, Brazil, Turkey, Poland, and Indonesia flourish—all of which are taking increasing roles of leadership and importance in their respective regions. We are fortunate in the United States to have positive relations with these nations and others, and many of those relations started in groups in educational settings, like what I see before me.

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Europe is still vitally important, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a foundational element of global security. At NATO and U.S. European Command, our specific challenges run the gamut from Afghanistan and Libya to the more nuanced situations such as illicit trafficking, terrorism, piracy, cyber security, and even strategic communication. In these different missions, we find that successfully meeting and then overcoming them require what we call the *comprehensive approach*—bringing together and synergizing the talents and abilities of military and civilian, foreign and domestic, public and private sectors. Afghanistan is an example: we are teaching literacy to the

Afghan army (well over 100,000 today read) and partnering in telecommunications and other sectors.

We need to continue doing this collaboratively: within and across governments and their agencies; within and between public and private enterprises; throughout academic institutions; and, most importantly, within our shared homes. Security requires complex and coordinated responses that move at the speed of thought.

Diversity of capabilities, capacities, and responses to any challenge should be seen as a strength, not a weakness, but only if the actions and tools can be used synergistically. This can only happen when all the interested parties adopt a common vision for security built on the foundation of trust and confidence and achieved through coordination, cooperation, and partnering.

Again, in today’s security environment, progress and success will result not from building walls, but from building bridges. We need to do this with speed. We will prevail if we think about innovation, if we think about how to take the next step, if we recognize that opportunities exist in real time and have a limited shelf life. We need to be prepared to move quickly in response to emergent opportunities. This is brain-on-brain warfare and that is how we will win in the end—by out-thinking our opponents.

I’d like to close with an example from something that most of you are probably familiar with and use every day—I know I do—Wikipedia. The vision statement of Wikimedia Foundation, Wikipedia’s parent company, is “A world in which every human being can freely share in the sum of ALL [emphasis added] knowledge.” The sum of all human knowledge—all of us thinking together are smarter than any one of us thinking alone.

As I look out across this wonderful group, I cannot wait to see and learn what you will contribute to that sum. You will be part—an important part—of the sum of all security.

I am full of the happiest of memories as I stand with you today. I remember my children when they were small. I remember the incredible luxury of time to read, think, and write. I remember the friendships of my classmates that now stretch across two decades. All that is ahead of you in this next year, and I envy you the voyage.

Godspeed and open water to each of you, Class of 2012. **JFQ**