

Sailing True North

Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character by Admiral James Stavridis USN (ret.)

A Book Review by Zachary Shapiro

An Unspoken Lesson on the Complexity of Character
Admiral James Stavridis's new book, *Sailing True North*, offers an implicit rejection of the "cancel culture."

The so-called "cancel culture" was not born in 2019. But it took on new forms last year when it stretched beyond Hollywood and came for the Founding Fathers. In July, the city of Charlottesville, Virginia announced that it would no longer celebrate Thomas Jefferson's birthday as an official city holiday. Toward the end of the year, former President Barack Obama came out against the ascendant "cancel culture" movement, warning that "[t]he world is messy; there are ambiguities."

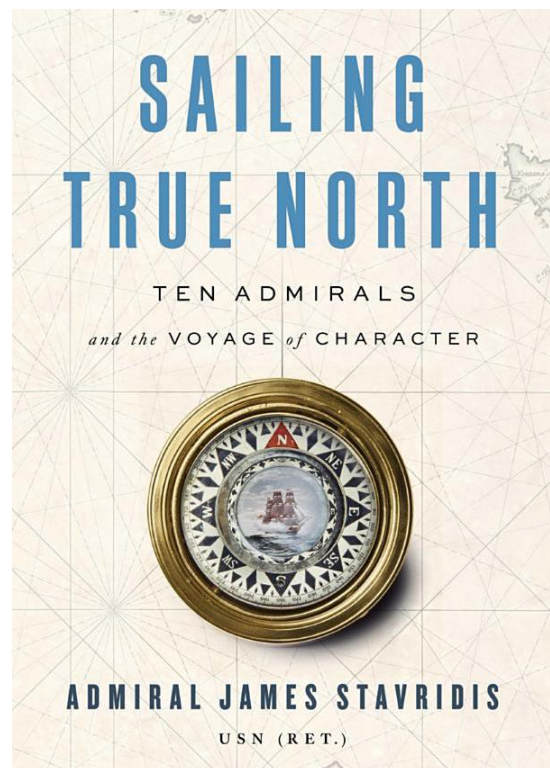
The timing of former NATO Supreme Commander Admiral James Stavridis's new book could not be better. *Sailing True North: Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character* explores a range of great warriors of the sea and delves into their defining traits.

It is not a book about "cancel culture." That phrase does not make an appearance. Stavridis does, however, lament "the slow death of character" of late, which has been accelerated, in part, by shrinking "attention spans." He worries about the rise of a "global popular culture that has turned increasingly away from classic values—honesty, commitment, resilience, accountability, moderation—to a world that moves at break-neck speed and refuses to slow down and consider what is right and just."

Stavridis offers reasoned, albeit brief, criticism of today's cultures of outrage and virtue signaling. But his embrace of historical complexity offers an implicit rejection that echoes President Obama's warning. Through ten chapters and final reflections, Stavridis shows that a nuanced look at history can enrich our knowledge and growth—provided we see things properly.

The strength of *Sailing True North* does not lie in its concluding list of recurring traits that mark integrity. None of them is particularly surprising; many are familiar traits of great leaders at sea, on land, and elsewhere. Rather, the success of *Sailing True North* lies in Stavridis's well-curated selection of vivid stories, which highlight the formative nature of process behind great character and leadership.

Stavridis carefully avoids the temptation of focusing his book on outright combat courage. That sort of mettle, of course, deserves praise. And he pays tribute to those admirals whose careers were defined by grit under fire. But the author takes



care to explore character as it is forged beyond the field of combat. *Sailing True North* is better for it.

The author, for instance, tells a fascinating story about famed Admiral Chester Nimitz. Upon his appointment to Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific after Pearl Harbor, Nimitz "took great care to do what he could to protect the man he was replacing," who had been relieved of his command in the wake of the attack. Why? Because, as Nimitz explained, "[it] could have happened to anyone." Even in a time of tremendous crisis, Nimitz was so compassionate as to consider his disgraced predecessor.

This defining trait rears its head again in Stavridis's analysis of Admiral Elmo Zumwalt. After ordering the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, Zumwalt became "a national advocate for service members who had been harmed by exposure to [it]" and "also became a proponent of reconciliation with Vietnam." Zumwalt even "personally sponsored



Norfolk, VA, U.S.A. Admiral Michelle Howard addresses the crew of the USS Wasp. (Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Andrew McCord / Public Domain)

South Vietnamese refugees seeking citizenship in the United States.” Beyond Vietnam, Zumwalt fought countless bureaucratic battles, working tirelessly to foster a more inclusive Navy.

Stavridis also pays touching tribute to more recent trailblazing naval icons: Admirals Grace Hopper and Michelle Howard. Hopper overcame countless obstacles towards women in the U.S. Navy, rising to the rank of Admiral and revolutionizing the use and development of computer systems in the Navy and beyond, all the while “constantly push[ing] others to excel.” Howard became “the first black woman four-star admiral” who showed unfettering “drive and determination” to break longstanding barriers. “In many ways,” the author explains, “Admiral Howard’s career fulfilled and institutionalized some of the tantalizing promise that had appeared in the Navy under Admiral Zumwalt, whom she admires.”

Sailing True North does hesitate to confront failures of character. Sir Francis Drake gives Stavridis plenty of opportunities to address major moral flaws. A swashbuckling, slave trading rapist, Drake “did whatever it took to succeed.” He also led the British Navy to victory over the Spanish Armada in one of the defining battles in naval history.

Stavridis nimbly offers more than a simple condemnation of Drake’s repugnant behavior. He draws a crucial takeaway from his studies of the life of the pirate: “the effects of his harsh methods, applied with brutal force, have echoed across generations.” The author wisely counsels that Drake’s maritime accomplishments will forever be clouded by his staggering moral failings.

Naturally, some cases are more intriguing than others. Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan was, as Stavridis notes, an intellectual powerhouse who revolutionized the field of naval warfare. But Mahan’s “iciness” does not necessarily lend itself to enrapturing storytelling. Furthermore, the selection of 10 admirals (plus two modern admirals, Michelle Howard and William McRaven), forces Stavridis to sacrifice depth for breadth, which is a pity when some cases merit deeper exploration. Admiral Zumwalt’s life and actions after Vietnam, for instance, are worth a book of their own.

Overall, *Sailing True North* is a useful and compelling reference on leadership and growth. It is an important call for nuance when simplistic virtue signaling is en vogue. As the excesses of political correctness begin to change how many read, interpret, and teach history, Stavridis’s thoughtful approach is one worth heeding. So, too, is his unspoken lesson.

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