

THE JORDAN HARBINGER SHOW

Worksheet for Admiral James Stavridis | The Voyage of Character (Episode 276)

Ever notice how the majority of books you'll find at an airport kiosk or bestseller list lately address the influence and management of others? Pondering this phenomenon prompted **Admiral James Stavridis** — the first four-star Navy admiral ever to serve as the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO — to wonder if maybe our society has become “overweight in thinking about leadership and underweight in thinking about character.”

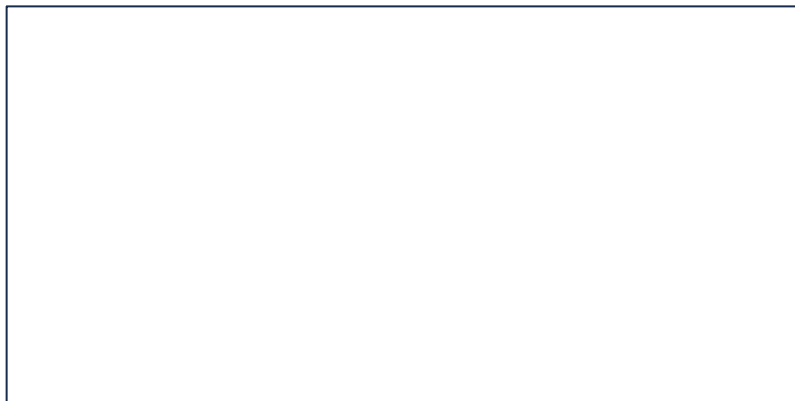
It might seem odd that a proven leader of such caliber made this observation about our collective obsession for leadership over character, but [on this episode](#) we talk to Admiral Stavridis about how these qualities have intersected among some of the most distinguished naval leaders of the last 2,500 years. In his book *Sailing True North: Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character*, he makes the case that among admirals from Themistocles to Francis Drake, from Chester Nimitz to Grace Hopper, none were perfect, but all have lessons to teach us about the value of character — particularly among those who make life and death decisions.

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Leadership and Character

“Leadership is how we influence others,” says James. “It’s that big door swinging that causes you to make other people want to follow you. That’s leadership. But that big door of leadership swings on the small hinge of character that’s buried in your heart, and I wanted to tell some stories that illustrated characters who were good leaders. Certainly, every one of the admirals in this book is a good leader. People follow him or her. But what I wanted to talk about was not the voyage of leadership that’s external, not that big, swinging door. I wanted to talk about that small hinge in the human heart. And to find 10 good stories, it took me 2,500 years of looking at different admirals.”

James believes our society is “overweight in thinking about leadership and underweight in thinking about character,” and went on to explain how we’re constantly being pulled in multiple directions by people who want to lead us, but seldom compelled to reflect on the inner selves that compose our character. When you think about it, what compass do you feel your character uses to navigate the world at large? What questions do you ask yourself to stay on course, how do you measure the value of your life, and how do you keep in touch with the person you’d like to be remembered as?



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A Ritual of Self-Reflection

If you have trouble self-reflecting or taking a break from the external noise of the world, some people swear by meditation, yoga, surfing, or going for long walks. James has a different approach.

“I will come home at the end of the day. I put down books and turn off the television set and just spend a moment sort of collecting my thoughts and then I will settle down [with my wife] in the winter with a single malt scotch or maybe in the summer we’ll have a vodka gimlet and have a conversation, and it will range widely over both current events and what’s happening with our two daughters and what’s happening in the world. That’s my sounding board. That’s my true north. And not everybody has a wonderful relationship like that, but even so, and even if you want to leave aside the vodka gimlets and the single malt scotches, it is not a bad idea. At the end of the day, don’t come home and flip on the cable news and ramp up with which side of the political argument you’re on. Stop and take a minute and just think about the events of the day. And if I can push you one step further, instead of diving into a great streaming series on Netflix — which we ought to do from time to time — mix it up with reading a good novel, read a good work of nonfiction. Let that filter into your thinking as well. All of that helps the voyage of character.”

What’s your self-reflecting ritual of choice — and if you don’t have one, what might you be willing to try?

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Second Guesses, Second Chances

“In the Suez Canal between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, I did almost run the ship aground,” says James. “I was saved by one of my junior officers who recognized that the captain — me — was making a bad navigational choice. He stood up and said, ‘Captain, I’ve got this,’ and anchored the ship. I initially was pretty upset, and then we put a boat in the water and measured the water where I was driving the ship under the advice of an Egyptian pilot. Turns out he was entirely correct to stop the ship where he did. At that moment, if I had overruled him and continued on, we would have gone aground. I recognized in him such determination and such certainty about his position that it caused me as the leader on that bridge to think again, and thus it was quite effective on his part and I respect him deeply for doing so. The greatest tool of character is maybe the simplest, and it’s the act of listening.”

That lieutenant is now a one-star admiral. If you were in the lieutenant’s shoes, would you have been able to stand up to Admiral Stavridis for the sake of the ship even if being wrong might derail your career? If you were in Admiral Stavridis’ position, would you have followed the lieutenant’s instincts, or might you have let ego drive you — and the ship — aground? As a bystander watching the drama unfold, what is your impression of each of these officers and their strength of character to do — as it turned out — the right thing?

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Rewarding Innovation and Creativity

When a consulting firm was brought in to survey the Navy's admirals, it was discovered that, while the admirals were excellent at decisiveness, they were terrible at taking bureaucratic risk. The higher someone got in the hierarchy, the less they were willing to jeopardize their progress.

"They were willing to take risks with their lives operationally, but you put them behind a desk in a bureaucracy and they become the most conservative group out there," says James. "Because militaries are inherently hierarchical, they're tradition-bound, and success has often equated to slowly, surely, foot by foot, putting yourself on the ladder to success. So there are built-in impediments in the military system. How do you overcome that? I'll give you three answers:

1. **It's a leadership requirement to find and promote innovators.** [Officers are assessed every year on their ability to innovate.]
2. **The organization needs to tell the stories of boldness and taking chances — both operational and bureaucratic.** [Whether it's John Paul Jones proclaiming "I have not yet begun to fight" and prevailing when all seemed lost, or an officer following through with the mind-boggling logistics to reorganize the structure of the Navy.]
3. **Create pipelines to the top leaders.** [Ensure there's protocol in place for junior officers to freely share their good ideas with superiors in the hierarchy.]

In your own organization, how are innovation and creativity encouraged and rewarded at the leadership level? Can any of these methods be adapted to clear whatever bottlenecks might be holding you back from doing so?

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Making High-Stakes Decisions

When I ask Admiral Stavridis how he makes high-stakes decisions that may put people in harm's way, he says he relies on these three steps.

1. **Assess your own personal ability to make the decision.** "Do I really understand the facts here or do I need more advice? Expand that circle. Those around me, how confident am I in their abilities to assess? Expand the circle. What resources are at my disposal as I make this decision? Maybe I'm the captain of a destroyer. Maybe I am the commander of NATO with three million troops to draw on. What are the resources? Where are they? Where are they positioned? So you're expanding that circle out from the innermost point of yourself."
2. **Assess the problem before you.** "You have to look at your opponent. Look across at what's the problem and make sure you understand it clearly and make sure you've done the research and the understanding of the culture."
3. **Put it in a temporal context.** "What's my timeline? Do I have to make this decision now? Do I have another day? Do I have another year?"

James says: "I think when you put those three things together, what's on your side of the decision pattern, what is on the problem side of the decision pattern, and then lay it against a temporal context, that is where you can make, I think, the best set of decisions."

Your own decisions may not carry life and death consequences, but how can you use these steps to attack the problems you do face every day?

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Maintaining Composure

In 2012, there was an anonymous complaint against Admiral Stavridis that had him under investigation for allegedly using his office for personal gain. When it was investigated, it was discovered that the grievance was mistaken and he emerged from it with his reputation as a model officer intact. But how did he maintain composure when this was going on?

James says: “Anybody in that situation becomes very angry and you have to very consciously steady yourself and say, ‘Look, somebody turned in this anonymous complaint. Presumably because they believed there was malfeasance here. Let’s investigate it.’ I gathered my staff immediately and said, ‘I don’t want anybody getting angry here. I don’t want anybody trying to retaliate. We’re going to lay out the facts.’ And I had the advantage of — I knew I had done nothing wrong. There was no question in my mind that this was entirely legitimate, but the wheels of these kinds of investigations grind slowly. They look at everything and it’s really a matter of self-control and telling yourself that this is an example of the greater good. And if you know you’re in the right, you can work your way through it. But that’s where having a family, that’s where having close friends, that’s where having deep peer relationships can also help you out. Those peers, friends, family [are] crucial to developing character.”

If you were similarly accused of wrongdoing you know you didn’t commit, could you set aside your sense of personal affront for the greater good if getting to the root of such accusations might uncover malfeasance proven to be beyond your sphere of control — and open up the potential for improvement? What would be the advantages of setting aside your ego for the sake of doing the right thing?

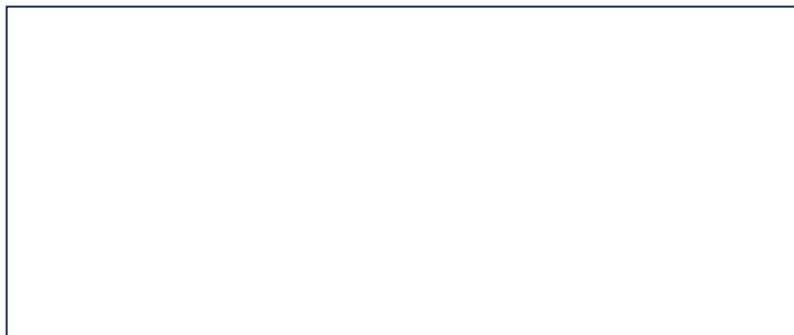
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Remember The Maine

“Every office I’ve ever had, I’ve always had a picture of the USS Maine,” says James. “It was sunk in Havana Harbor, [on] February 15th, 1898. We immediately accused Spain and Spanish terrorists of blowing up The Maine, and so we launched ourselves into the Spanish-American War. 50 years after 1898, we went down to Havana and we finally got around to salvaging the ship and truly understanding what happened. It blew up because of an internal boiler explosion. So it was clear that it was not Spanish terrorists putting a mine on the side of the ship. This was an internal accident, yet we launched ourselves into war.” So here are the three reasons James remembers The Maine:

1. Remember **not to make a precipitous decision before you have all the facts.**
2. Remember **to honestly assess and not indulge yourself with propaganda.**
3. Remember **that your own ship can blow up underneath you at any minute.**

If you were to hang a picture on your wall to remind you of a historical event, what would it depict, and what are its three most important lessons that might inform your career, life path, and character?



Full show notes and resources for this episode [can be found here.](#)

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About



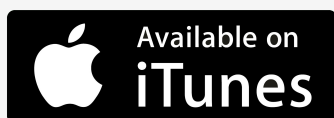
Join us as we get deep into the untapped wisdom of the world's top performers — from legendary creators to intelligence operatives, iconoclastic writers to visionary change-makers.

We deconstruct the playbooks of the most successful people on earth — and learn new strategies, perspectives, and insights you can't find anywhere else. Then, take these valuable insights into your own life and live what you listen.

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