



## Admiral James (Jim) Stavridis, former supreme allied commander of NATO, on An Admiral's take on leadership

### [Transcript](#)

#### **Mike Kearney:**

Since day one when we started the [Resilient](#) podcast, it has been my goal to bring on the podcast leaders from outside of the business world. And you may ask why. Well, I actually believe—it's my hypothesis—that leaders outside of business have a lot to share. I think their stories, their insights, their perspectives can change or maybe help us do our job a little better.

And today we are starting out big. And to say that we're starting out big is kind of an understatement. We are going to be interviewing Admiral Stavridis, a four star admiral. I'm blown away that he actually took the time. That's pretty big for me, so I'm excited about this.

He is a graduate of the US Naval Academy. He was the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, which, I would guess, that's probably a pretty big job and he probably has a lot of insights. And he was even vetted.

If you Google his name you'll see his name everywhere because he was vetted to be Hillary Clinton's running mate. And today he is the Dean of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. We have a lot to cover. He has a 30+ year distinguished career in the Navy.

He's also writing a book that's going to be coming out in about the next six months, where he had the opportunity to interview military leaders. And basically it was a simple question: What is your go-to leadership book? He chronicles those and he talks about the leadership insights that we can all benefit from. And I had the incredible opportunity to get an advance manuscript where I can go through this and understand all of these really interesting leadership insights.

**James Stavridis:**

I think too many leaders see, metaphorically, a ball coming at them. And they ought to just sort of wait and catch the ball, but so often they're leaping forward at it. And it's a long way of saying, "Slow down. Watch the trajectory of events before you leap to make a decision." So really understand the trajectory of the ball before you seek to catch it.

**Mike Kearney:**

Welcome to *Resilient*, where we hear stories from leaders on risk, crisis, and disruption. And we get those stories by jumping on a plane and meeting our guests on their home turf. And I will tell you, one of the coolest things is actually to meet these leaders in their own environment because it tells you a lot about who they are, their values, the things that are important to them.

My name is Mike Kearney and I'm the leader of Deloitte's Strategic Risk practice. And I have this unbelievably cool job at Deloitte. But I also have this opportunity to sit down with incredible leaders who really define what it is to be resilient. And today I'm sitting in the Admiral's offices at Tufts University just north of Boston.

And one of the programming notes I think is important—you may be listening to this a few months from now. Guess what? We are going to talk about the presidential election. And the chances are by the time this comes out you will know the results, so just take that into account.

So, without further ado, let's get to my conversation with the admiral.

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**Mike Kearney:**

I have to start off—you were the first admiral to serve as a Supreme Allied Commander of NATO. You also were referred to by the New York Times as a renaissance admiral. And I'm curious, what makes you tick?

**James Stavridis:**

What I love is to have the opportunity to try lots of different things. And so you probably wouldn't expect to hear it, but I love to cook. And if I weren't an admiral or a dean, my third choice would be to be a chef.

I love painting. I paint watercolors. I love to read, as we'll talk about in a bit. I've just done a book about reading novels to become a better leader. And, of course, I love the military and going to sea and the ocean.

So I guess I have kind of a hunger to be involved in as many different things as I possibly can. And when I think about a historical figure that I'm really drawn to, it's Teddy Roosevelt. And I don't think anyone'll ever do this again—he won a Medal of Honor in the military as a Colonel, famously, in the Spanish American War and he won the Nobel Peace Prize for settling a war between Russia and Japan in the early 20th century.

He writes dozens of books. He writes hundreds of articles. He's the president. He's a police commissioner. He's a secretary of the Navy. It's just an

extraordinary life. And it's because he was hungry for experiences and ideas—and that's kind of how I am. I guess that's what makes me tick.

**Mike Kearney:**

So you're always looking for the next new thing?

**James Stavridis:**

I am. Although, I also like old things. I collect antiquarian maps. You're looking over my shoulder at a couple of cool, old 17th-century maps. I love fountain pens, which are a real throwback to bygone eras. So I'm this weird mix of someone, I think, who's highly interested in new experiences—kind of a “What next?” kind of person—but I also enjoy history and what sustains us from the past.

**Mike Kearney:**

So I spent some time on your LinkedIn page, which is fantastic, but I loved—it's funny, when you look at people who provide recommendations or vouch for you on your LinkedIn page, it's pretty cool when you have General Petraeus.

And he put a quote on there that I'm going to read. He said that you're “A thinker, a writer, a doer, and a leader. He is one of those about whom one says, ‘He does all things, all the time, well.’ In truth, he does them better than well.”

And what's interesting is, in my experience, a lot of times you'll have people that are extremely cerebral but don't necessarily do well at getting stuff done, if you will. So it seems like you blend these two things. And I'm curious, is that something that you learned over time—that you've developed these skills? Or is this innate, —just who you are?

**James Stavridis:**

I think a fundamental part of me has, as we talked about a minute ago, a hunger for ideas. But also my feet are on the ground. I want to get things done. And part of that is the family I grew up in. My dad was a Marine colonel, was the ultimate warrior, never spent a tour in the Pentagon, was an extraordinary—as we would say in the Navy, a Deckplate leader.

My mom, on the other hand, has an enormous library, is a huge reader of books, is an intellectual. So I kind of had both those influences working on me from a young age.

Dave Petraeus, very kind comment. He and I worked together on a number of occasions. He actually worked for me in Afghanistan where he was the commander of our forces in Afghanistan after General McChrystal unfortunately departed the pattern rather suddenly.

And General Petraeus ... I don't know how you can blush on radio, but I blush at his comment. It's such a kind one.

**Mike Kearney:**

So let's talk—you mentioned your parents, but I want to go back to your childhood. So you were born in West Palm Beach. And I think you may—although I was trying to cross reference this—that you may have spent some time in Greece as well. I don't know if that's—

**James Stavridis:** Yes.

**Mike Kearney:** Okay, so it is true. But can you talk about your childhood?

**James Stavridis:** I can. Because my dad was in the Marine Corps we bounced around a lot. I am a native Floridian and a very proud Floridian. I love that state. I'm married to a Florida girl who was born up in the north part of the state.

But as a child, my dad was posted to the American Embassy in Greece. He was in command of the Marine Detachment protecting the Embassy. And so we lived in Athens, Greece for three years.

Obviously, from my name, you could surmise that I'm Greek American, and I am. And so those early years in Greece were very formative for me as well, and gave me kind of an interest in the international world; an interest in languages, which sustains until this day.

**Mike Kearney:** Fantastic. You went to the Navy Academy—Naval Academy.

**James Stavridis:** I did.

**Mike Kearney:** What made you choose the Navy? Your dad was a Marine.

**James Stavridis:** Yeah, exactly. And I went to the Naval Academy absolutely committed to being a Marine, just like my dad. Marine Infantry Officer. And I went through my freshman year, which is called your Plebe Year, very committed to the Marine Corps.

And then, at the end of your freshman year they send you to sea. So I was sent to San Diego and I got on a destroyer. The ship got under way as the sun was setting and we sailed into the Pacific. And I walked up on the bridge, Mike, and I was—I was like Saint Paul on the road to Damascus.

**Mike Kearney:** You were hooked.

**James Stavridis:** I suddenly knew I wanted to be a sailor, not a marine. So I went home and explained all this to my dad who was, you know, a little crestfallen, if not disappointed. But he got over it fairly quickly. He got over it about 30 years later when I pinned on my first star as an admiral.

**Mike Kearney:** I was going to say you've done okay.

**James Stavridis:** Finally, dad was happy.

**Mike Kearney:** I was joking earlier today because my dad was in the military and my dad loved reading. I'm like, "This would've been—" and he passed away about eight years ago, but I would've said, "This is when he would've been proud of me." Damn it, he's not here.

**James Stavridis:** Now, I don't know about you, but I used to call my dad every Sunday. And every Sunday when I reach for the phone to call my mom, I think of my dad and wish he was here. And my dad passed away about ten years ago, so I think you probably feel the same way.

**Mike Kearney:** Absolutely. There's a great story that I read. I think—we're going to go back to Greece for a second.

**James Stavridis:** Sure.

**Mike Kearney:** But you talked about a letter that you wrote to your grandfather when you were sailing in on a destroyer into a port in Greece. And you reflected on the fact that he had been pushed out of Turkey—and I guess this was the exact same port that he had come into. What did that mean to you?

**James Stavridis:** It's a pretty extraordinary moment in my life. And I'm—at this point, I was in my late 30s. I was the captain of this billion dollar US warship.

**Mike Kearney:** Which one was it?

**James Stavridis:** USS Barry, named after John Barry, an early revolutionary war sailor. And my ship is ordered to go to Turkey, and I realized that we're sailing through these same waters and in this same port that my grandmother, my grandfather, had escaped from as refugees 70 years earlier, which is not that long.

**Mike Kearney:** No.

**James Stavridis:** They were—my grandmother was pushed out in 1922 from a city called Smyrna, today called Izmir. And I came back in 1994. So about 72 years later, I'm back sailing in these waters and thinking today, Mike—flash forward another 20 years.

Think of those refugees coming out of Syria today. And I'd look at them and I see, you know, the face of my grandmother who was a young 19-year-old. And I can't imagine all that she went through on that road. So it gives me a great deal of compassion and sympathy for these refugees and migrants.

**Mike Kearney:** So what's interesting is—I think I said it was into a port within Greece. It was in Turkey.

**James Stavridis:** Oh, yeah.

**Mike Kearney:** See, I didn't catch that when I read that. Interesting.

**James Stavridis:** Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely it was in Turkey.

**Mike Kearney:** So you know what? As I was reflecting on this conversation I was like, I could spend—especially after reading *The Accidental Admiral*—I could spend, like, hours asking you questions about your Navy career.

**James Stavridis:** Oh, that's kind.

**Mike Kearney:** But that's not the purpose of this.

**James Stavridis:** Right.

**Mike Kearney:** But I do have a few questions I want to ask you.

**James Stavridis:** Absolutely. Fire away.

**Mike Kearney:** Because I want people to understand who you are and everything that you've done. So I am going to boil your 30+ year Navy career down into three questions. I know that's killing you.

**James Stavridis:** Fire away.

**Mike Kearney:** I'll tell you the three questions and we'll start from the beginning. So what role taught you the most about being a great leader? That's the first question. What was your most challenging role? And if you could go back to one role, for whatever reason—good, bad, or indifferent—what would it be and why?

**James Stavridis:** Sure.

**Mike Kearney:** So let's start with the one that taught you the most.

**James Stavridis:** Yeah. I think the job that taught me the most is unquestionably the first time I was the captain of a ship at sea. I was the captain, as we talked about a moment ago, of the destroyer called USS Barry. And I was 37 years old, so I'm still very young, and I'm in charge of this billion dollar warship.

I'm in charge of 350 crewmen—men and women. I have a mixed gender crew, one of the first mixed gender warship crews in the Navy. And we're doing frontline operations. We're in the Arabian Gulf. We're all over the Mediterranean. We're in the Balkans while there's a war going on in the Balkans—this is in the mid '90s.

And I learned, first of all, that this is the moment of my career where I'm really inescapably accountable for lives, for enormous capital stocks. Up until now, I've worked for a captain on a ship along the way, or I've worked on staff for a principal. But now I am the leader.

And so, like any leader in that situation, I failed a lot. I made many, many mistakes. But ultimately the ship was a very successful one. And I actually wrote a book about that called *Destroyer Captain*, which is a very short book.

It's maybe the best thing I've ever written because, Mike, it's just—it's based on the journals I kept as a captain. And it is very raw. It's the good, the bad, and the ugly. And so what I truly learned from that was a big one—it was a big failure.

When the ship had won a bunch of awards, we were riding high, we felt like we were the top dog on the waterfront, and we had a big inspection. Think an audit, maybe, in the context of the business world. And we failed. And we failed

miserably. We failed so badly that the ship actually broke down at sea and we had to be towed back into port.

**Mike Kearney:**

Oh, geez.

**James Stavridis:**

Oh yeah. And so we were towed past all the other ships. It was kind of the ultimate humiliation on the waterfront. That was on a Friday. And I went home that night and I told my wife, "It's over. We're going to have to get out of the Navy. I'm going to resign my commission tomorrow. I'm going to try and do it before the Commodore comes and fires me, which he no doubt will tomorrow morning."

So we had a big cry together about it and we told our daughters literally, "Hey, we're going to be moving rather suddenly and we don't know where we're going because daddy just really had a terrible day at work."

My daughters were like, you know, eight and three. And they're looking at me like two basset hounds staring up at me. We actually had a basset hound and the dog was looking at me pretty worried also.

And so I went back to the ship the next morning, Mike, and I learned three things. First of all, almost every ship on the waterfront, the captain of those ships called me and said, "Jim, what can we do to help?"

We had sailors from other ships come and say, "Hey, we want to help rebuild the engine that had broken." We had supply corps officers from other ships saying, "What parts do you need to fix all this?" And what I learned was your peers really matter.

And so often in the business world today—and in every world—people are elbowing their peers trying to get ahead. I've never done that. I'd always tried to be a good shipmate horizontally, and boy, was I rewarded for that. So that was kind of lesson one.

Secondly, my commodore came down and he didn't fire me. He said, "Look. You had a terrible day. This is a big failure. But we see potential in you and we're going to try to allow you to recover. So I'm going to give you fifteen days to put your engine back together, get out to sea, and bring this thing back."

And I was—frankly, I was shocked. I really thought he was going to walk aboard and say, "I need your letter of resignation right now." But he gave me a second chance.

And then thirdly, all day long my crewmembers would come up to me and say, "Captain, don't worry. We got this." So I learned on that day that it's all about the 360, you know?

If you're spending all your time trying to impress your boss—wrong. If you're spending all your time only on your crew, probably not going to make it. And

boy, you better have good peer relationships. So that moment in that tour was probably the crystalizing moment for my philosophy of leadership.

**Mike Kearney:** Meaning treat people well, irrespective of who they are overall.

**James Stavridis:** Exactly. It's what I call servant leadership, or 360 leadership. In other words, you treat your boss exactly the same way you do the most junior person in your organization. I think that's pretty fundamental.

**Mike Kearney:** Can I ask you, do you think that had you not treated them prior to that accident that it would not have turned out the way it did?

**James Stavridis:** Absolutely my point. Exactly. What I saw was, if you will, a validation of a philosophy I'd been developing since I was at the Naval Academy. But as so often is the case, it's your moment of greatest failure that crystalizes the most important lessons for you. This was the case for me.

**Mike Kearney:** Absolutely. That's fantastic. How about your most—that may have been your most challenging role too, but maybe not.

**James Stavridis:** It was a pretty—let's put it this way: That was a tactically dark moment. The strategic challenging role was obviously being the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO.

So in that role you have three million people who are in the militaries of the 28 nations of NATO. You have 200 thousand people on any given day who are in active combat operations. During my time in Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, the Balkans. Counter piracy, cyber. So 200 thousand doing that.

And you have a huge staff and infrastructure numbering tens of thousands in—arrayed on a series of bases all around Europe. So a big, huge organization. And it was challenging, A, because it was so big. B, because it was 28 different countries.

You haven't lived until you've needed to go to the Bulgarian Foreign Minister and convince him that Bulgaria needs to up their troop numbers in Afghanistan as part of the alliance responsibilities. And then go back to Iceland and convince them to say yes on the deployment even though it's pretty hard to make that connection for Iceland to be Okaying a deployment into Afghanistan. And then go to the big four: United States, Germany, France, UK, and convince them to help move the alliance.

It's just such a big, multicultural role with so many different stakeholders. I'm sure I'll never have a job as challenging again. Like all really challenging jobs, it was rewarding. But we had successes and we had failures along the way.

**Mike Kearney:** How about the role that you'd go back to?



**James Stavridis:** Again, easy one for a guy born in south Florida. Before I became the NATO commander, I was commander of US Southern Command, Mike, so I was in charge of all military activity south of the United States.

And beautiful headquarters in Miami. I love that city. It's just multicultural, highly personally enjoyable. And here's the big takeaway: Because it's Latin American, the Caribbean, you don't get a lot of adult supervision, you know?

Unlike when you're the NATO commander and the Secretary of Defense is calling you every 20 minutes about something you did wrong, in South Com you're kind of actually in charge. You've got about 50 thousand people, you're moving them all around the Caribbean, Central America, and South America.

It's a good mission. You're not in a combat setting. You're doing a lot of humanitarian work, disaster relief, counter narcotics. It's culturally interesting and Miami is just a magic city.

**Mike Kearney:** So what made you—because that was almost your dream job.

**James Stavridis:** It was.

**Mike Kearney:** And then you were asked to leave NATO after that. Was it a hard decision?

**James Stavridis:** It was a very hard decision. I put in—I had actually told the Secretary of Defense, Bob Gates, who was a wonderful boss, that I was going to retire after my Capstone tour at South Com.

And I actually had a job lined up to be a dean at the University of Miami. I was going to be dean of the School of Oceanography, and I was super excited about that.

And then Secretary Gates called and said, “Nope. Jim, we got one more gig for you. Off you go to Europe.” And I—it was a hard decision. I pushed back on it and eventually I said yes. I'm glad I did. But my life, I think, would've been equally enjoyable had I left the military before the NATO tour.

**Mike Kearney:** I cannot leave—Oceanography. So that is another example of the diversity of, like, your interests.

**James Stavridis:** It is, although, let's face it, I'm an admiral. I've spent the first 30 years of my career—I spent 15, 16 years assigned to ships. I probably spent day-for-day 10 years of my life on the deep ocean.

**Mike Kearney:** Wow.

**James Stavridis:** Yeah, I know the oceans pretty well. We're going to talk about my leadership, but I have another book coming out right behind that which is called *Sea Power: The Turbulent Oceans of the 21st Century*, about the oceans of the world and why they matter to us. So not that much of a stretch.

**Mike Kearney:** We are going to be asking you questions about that. So let's move to The Leaders Bookshelf.

**James Stavridis:** Sure.

**Mike Kearney:** What inspired you to write it?

**James Stavridis:** I think that leadership attributes, skills, and qualities are kind of distributed at birth in a lot of ways. So if you're tall and you're good looking and, if you're a man, if you have a nice head of executive hair. And, you know, that's just a gift you get at birth. And I'm short and I'm bald. I was not given that suite of gifts.

And so I've always thought about, "Well, how can you become a better leader if you're not given at birth, not only the good looks, but also kind of the personality and the striking, innate leadership skills?"

And I think there's a lot of ways you become a better leader, Mike. A lot of them are experiential; the things we go through, the way we're raised. But I think you can learn a lot about leadership from reading books.

And it's inexpensive. It is somewhat time consuming. But every book, to me, is a leadership simulator. You get to put yourself in another situation and think, "How would I do? What would I do in this case?" And you get to try different ideas through your imagination.

You know, it's often said that 9/11 was not a failure of intelligence, it was a failure of imagination. I think reading unlocks a leader's imagination.

**Mike Kearney:** Do you think there's a challenge, though, because one of the—and I was going to ask you about this later, but I'm asking you now. It's one thing to read, it's another thing to apply.

And I think that's one of the challenges I oftentimes have is, I read a great book on leadership or whatever it may be and then I think about, "Am I taking the amount of time to actually not only apply it, but think about really what it is, how it applies to my life, and then do something about it."

**James Stavridis:** Thank you. That is exactly the right question to ask. And so that, in the end, is why I wrote the book. Because not only do people not have time to read 50 books, but they probably don't have time to extract the good ideas from them.

So the whole idea of *The Leaders Bookshelf* is actually not that you methodically read 50 books and write down all the lessons. The idea of the book is that in this busy world, as a leader, you can read the—I think, —pretty tight, pretty crisp summaries of the books, and then you can read the extracted lessons. And that's when you can have that mental conversation with yourself.

You can also then find—maybe not the 50 books—but you find the seven books you want to read over the next two years. And also, Mike, in the book *The*

Leaders Bookshelf it talks about how to translate those ideas into real practice. That's part of the book as well.

**Mike Kearney:** Well, it's interesting because in *The Accidental Admiral*, correct me if I'm wrong, but there is a reading list at the end.

**James Stavridis:** There is.

**Mike Kearney:** Is that partially what inspired where people said, "Wow, those are some great books—"

**James Stavridis:** That's exactly right. I had so many people say to me—

**Mike Kearney:** I'm making this stuff up.

**James Stavridis:** No, you're great. I mean, that's magic. I had so many people say, "Admiral, I love your reading list. But it's really long. I don't know which books to read. I don't know—I can't really tell from the titles what's in those books."

So I started by writing a very short sentence or two about each of the books on my reading list, and that wasn't enough. And that's what grew into *The Leaders Bookshelf*.

**Mike Kearney:** I should've asked, because it's not published yet, when is it coming out?

**James Stavridis:** I can tell you exactly. It's going to come out on the 6th of June, 2017, which is easy to remember because it's D Day. 6, June, 2017.

**Mike Kearney:** 6, June, 2017.

**James Stavridis:** Yeah, exactly. So it's a great father's day gift too.

**Mike Kearney:** So people are getting a sneak peak in some regards, because we're going to talk about some of the insights to it.

**James Stavridis:** You bet.

**Mike Kearney:** Why 50 books?

**James Stavridis:** Yeah. We started with 30 books, and it just kind of kept expanding. And the basic premise of the book is that myself and a co-writer did a bunch of interviews of very senior military people from a bunch of different generations. And we asked, "What books really shake you as a leader?" Thinking that military leaders—these are all four-star officers, every one of them—have a huge amount of life experience.

So we went through, and as we took the ones that they came up with, we could then build that list out. And we went from 20 to 30. We ended up at a hundred at one point. And so 50 just seemed kind of like the magic number.

**Mike Kearney:** A lot of the folks that are listening to the podcast—and really, the audience that we're focusing on are executives and board members in business.

**James Stavridis:** Sure, of course.

**Mike Kearney:** A lot of the folks that provided insights on leadership are military leaders. Thoughts on how those lessons translate?

**James Stavridis:** Yeah, I would argue extremely well. And if you look at the track record of senior military who come out of running big organizations like NATO, like US Pacific Command, like being Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it's pretty hard to imagine bigger executive responsibility than that.

**Mike Kearney:** Absolutely.

**James Stavridis:** Secondly, the way the military runs, contrary to the caricature most people have of a highly hierarchical, top-down organization. The military is actually quite innovative and creative, and does a pretty good job of listening from the ground up. And I think that translates very well.

Third, the ethos of military leadership, which we just discussed; taking care of your people, being a good teammate, not throwing elbows to your peers, treating everyone in your organization with the same with dignity, I think translates well.

And then fourth, I'd say look at the military's track record. We're not perfect, but we were the first to really integrate racially. We were the—have been way ahead of the curve on bringing women into positions of responsibility. We've done a pretty good job, I think, with transgender and gay, of late. So we're—we've been on the front edge of a lot of things that I think are very important.

And then fifth and finally, and I'll stop, just look at senior military performance on boards.

**Mike Kearney:** So one of the things that I loved about going through the book was, first of all, just reading about these 50 books. But the part of it—just to give everybody a sense as to how it's structured, and it may change a little over the next several months—but at the end of each of the chapters you would provide leadership lessons that you could take away.

So I actually have a piece of chicken scratch I'll show you later where I was writing down my favorite lessons. And I boiled it down to, like, 12 books. I want to kind of go through each of these, and I've got some questions on them.

And we're going to start, I think—and I may be wrong because I didn't audit this—but there were two books that you referenced. And there may have been more. The first was Best and Brightest, and the second one I've never heard of. And this one's really hard to read quickly, it's called How: Why How We do Anything Means Everything.

**James Stavridis:** Yeah.

**Mike Kearney:** That is a mouthful.

**James Stavridis:**

It is. And so let's boil it down to how. And the simplest explanation of how to give you—and you're from a firm that's very invested in trying to figure out how we make people follow the rules, right? This is what audit is. This is what accounting is, right? It's a rules-based culture.

The theory of how is that rules matter. And you've got to tell people where the right and left limits are. But what matters more is creating the culture that says, "How we do things matters. We're going to do things with integrity. We're going to do things with appropriate balance." In other words, you can't write a rule set that is going to make people do the right thing.

**Mike Kearney:**

Some of the companies that have had the biggest crises over the last 10 or 15 years had great rule sets, right?

**James Stavridis:**

Bang. Exactly. And so that's what that book is about. It's by a guy who's a philosopher named Dov Seidman. And I highly recommend it, particularly for the business folk, because it may be a little different approach to how you create the outcomes you want. And you're not going to do it by writing 237 pages of rules and regulations. You're going to do it by creating a culture of "how we do things really matters."

So the other one I really liked on the booklist is *The Best and the Brightest* by David Halberstam. And this is a book about how President Kennedy, when he came into office, brought the best and the brightest into government.

He took the most superior intellects he could find and he brought them all into government. And what did they come up with? They created Vietnam. That's how that story turned out. And I think it's a cautionary tale for all of us.

We're all enamored with talent, and we all want very talented people around us. But be cautious in groupthink, in solutions that flow from a group of people who all have the same background. That's really the lesson of *The Best and the Brightest*. It's not that you shouldn't go after top talent. It's an argument for diversity in the group.

**Mike Kearney:**

Yeah, the two takeaways that I had—and I'm going to ask you a question based on these. One with *The Best and the Brightest* was character matters most above all else, which I think is—and it's funny because this is like our 13th or 14th interview. We hear that consistently from CEOs.

And then the other one I love is—and this is from the how book—doing the right thing is not only the moral thing, but will inevitably lead to good outcomes.

**James Stavridis:**

Exactly.

**Mike Kearney:**

I love that. So here's a question I have for you: In the world, oftentimes results are prioritized more over character. What, in your mind—and we could probably spend hours talking about this—but what does good character look

like? And how did you spot it? That's the hardest thing sometimes. How do you spot it in people?

**James Stavridis:**

It is. First, I think personal impressions do matter. And I think as you're hiring and looking at people, it's mandatory that you actually spend time with them.

Number two, you have to obviously do a deep dive on every attribute of someone's career as they've come along and think consciously about what is the sum of the parts of this résumé that's in front of you.

Thirdly, in today's world, you need to be investigative in the social networks and take a hard look. And if you have candidates who are unwilling to be part of that, I think that's kind of a red flag, frankly.

**Mike Kearney:**

So kids, watch your social media channels, right? That's the message.

**James Stavridis:**

You got it. You got it. And then fourth, I think looking at what people do outside the job is very, very important in terms of community activity, charitable work, volunteer work, athletics. The whole person concept really comes to mind here. I think those things matter.

A great book on this, which is not on our list because it has just come out, is by David Brooks, and it's called *The Road to Character*. And he talks about the difference, Mike, between our résumé values: I got a PhD, I'm a four star admiral, I am the commander of an aircraft carrier, as opposed to what he calls our eulogy values.

Eulogy is the speech given at your funeral. You know, at your funeral—at my funeral—I hope people are not going to dwell on the fact that I was the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO. What I hope is in my eulogy is I was a great dad. I was a loyal, faithful husband. I was a terrific friend.

Both are important. You've got to have résumé values, but those eulogy values are what you end up with. And I think that's a pretty powerful lesson about character as well.

**Mike Kearney:**

Yeah, it's funny because there's—and I'm not going to say who it's from—but there's a life plan that I follow. It's almost like a template. And one of the questions that they ask is write your eulogy. And then everything from that eulogy should stem out with regard to the goals you create and the things that you do. It was helpful for me.

**James Stavridis:**

It's very powerful. Can I give you another one that I often sort of assign when I'm talking about leadership? It's called "Who are your heroes?" Who are your heroes? And what I challenge you to do, Mike, tonight when you are flying back home on the plane to the Bay area—you're going to have a nice six hours.

**Mike Kearney:**

Seven maybe.

**James Stavridis:**

Yeah. Have a glass of your favorite beverage. Maybe a vodka with lime in it or a nice scotch. And write down on a piece of paper five heroes. And they can be someone in your family—your uncle Ted. They could be a historical figure. It could be a current political actor. Write down five. And then next to that, why? Why?

I'll give you my five. I would put George Marshall, a Secretary of Defense. A four star general who then breaks character completely and invents the Marshall Plan. And as Secretary of State, rebuilds Europe. I love that jump shift in his life.

On my list would be Juan Manuel Santos, the President of Colombia, who has just delivered a peace deal after a 50-year insurgency that is probably going to cost him his political career and his life. He's a profile in courage.

On my list is my dad, Colonel George Stavridis, who's a great father, a great friend.

So put down your five, put down the qualities, and then ask yourself, "How am I doing? Am I as innovative as George Marshall? Am I as willing to break the mold? Am I as willing to take risk for good as Juan Manuel Santos? Am I as wonderful a father as my dad was?"

And that's a tough thing to do. And I have done that list a couple of times over the years. The heroes change. I always fall short, but I always find things I can work on, like your eulogy.

**Mike Kearney:**

Yeah, I love that. Actually I'm going to add that to my life plan, who are my heroes.

**James Stavridis:**

Who are your heroes?

**Mike Kearney:**

That's fantastic.

**James Stavridis:**

It's a pretty good drill.

**Mike Kearney:**

So let's move to Team of Rivals. Leaders need to manage their state. I find this one fascinating because—and it's really almost hard to define "state" sometimes. But when a leader has that state, that has all the qualities that we know of a leader, you just know. The question that I have for you is: In your perspective, what does state look like in a great leader?

**James Stavridis:**

Yeah. I think that it is crucial that all leaders maintain balance; that they maintain a sense of equilibrium, and that you don't over tilt on the basis of personality. You build your team without fear or favor. And if you do that as, Lincoln did—and this of course—Team of Rivals is the story of Lincoln's cabinet by Doris Kearns Goodwin.

If you do that, and you use good humor along the way, you use storytelling along the way, all the qualities that Lincoln brought to his state, I think, are important for leaders to have.

**Mike Kearney:** So you mentioned balance. Is that at odds with—sometimes leaders that motivate me are ones that truly inspire me, and are maybe just off a little in a good way. Is that at odds with that for your thinking?

**James Stavridis:** I don't think so. I think that there's a fine leveling that has to occur there. And you don't want to fall into the—what I call the seductiveness of eccentricity. In other words, by the time you're at the top of an organization, there's a certain temptation to be eccentric, to dress oddly or swing for the fences on everything, or blow up from time to time. Don't give into that. It's very important that leaders maintain their state of balance, I would say.

**Mike Kearney:** Are you saying almost don't be seduced by the position, to a certain degree?

**James Stavridis:** Yeah, exactly. I mean, that's a huge part of it. And there are many ways you can be seduced as a leader. Some are, if you will, good deals you can take inappropriately. Some are simply the right to the rules don't apply to me. That's generally where people really get into trouble. And sometimes it's just letting your personality have a little bit too much free sway.

**Mike Kearney:** It's interesting, I'm reflecting back on the interview we did with a gentleman by the name of Keith Wandell, who was the CEO of Harley-Davidson. And one of the things I found fascinating—this, once again, is kind of one of these trends—is that the most effective leaders understand what their role is and they don't let it become bigger than it is. So they're humble. Maybe humble is the right word for that.

**James Stavridis:** You know, the word I like to use, Mike, is servant. Servant leadership, which is pretty simple. It's seeing yourself as the enabler of the talent around you. I often say, "I just pump the gas." I just put the resources in the car. I've got brilliant people driving the car, maintaining the car, designing the car, painting the car. I just have to get the gas in the car.

**Mike Kearney:** I just have to get the gas in. That's good.

**James Stavridis:** Right. And then secondly, I think servant as leader means mentoring, means—and that's such a loosely used word. I challenge people to say, "Hey, I'm a great mentor." I say, "Okay. Well, do you have a list of 200 people you're tracking? Do you consciously reach out? Are you the one reaching out to people? Do you have five-year plans for the people you're mentoring?" So many people use that word but don't want to put the elbow grease into it that a servant leader is willing to do.

**Mike Kearney:** Do you do—because I was going to ask you about mentorship at the end. So, like, literally you have a list of—

**James Stavridis:** Absolutely. It's my good people list. I can pull it up for you on the computer.

**Mike Kearney:** Is that what you call it, the "good people list?"



**James Stavridis:** I call it the good people list. And I've been keeping it for 30 years.

**Mike Kearney:** Wow.

**James Stavridis:** Yeah. And a lot of the people who started on it as lieutenants are now three-star admirals. And a lot of them got out at the commander level because I failed in my mentorship and I didn't put exciting things in front of them, and now they're doing successful things in other walks of life. And some of them just failed. Some of them ran ships aground and failed in their career.

But if you want to be a mentor, recognize that that's real work. And I'm a big believer in not letting people kind of loosely use that phrase.

**Mike Kearney:** How often will you reach out to them?

**James Stavridis:** I reach out on a cyclical basis, at least once every six months to someone who's on my list.

**Mike Kearney:** That's 400 connections a year?

**James Stavridis:** Correct.

**Mike Kearney:** I'm pretty good at math, so ...

**James Stavridis:** Well—I know. And what's—although personally I try never to do math in public because I'm not so good at math. But I do think that what's made that immensely easier in today's world is, of course, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter.

You can maintain these connections at levels that would've been—that were much more difficult when 30 years ago I had 20 people on that list. And reaching out meant writing them a letter or calling them on the phone. Today, I can reach out to my mentees constantly, some of whom are four-star officers and some of whom are young professors running around the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

**Mike Kearney:** We're going to talk about social media later, but I want to keep on these lessons. So the next one is, once again, on Lincoln. The book is Lincoln on Leadership.

**James Stavridis:** Yeah, he's sort of an endless source of everything.

**Mike Kearney:** Well, I tried to group them all, but—

**James Stavridis:** Yeah, exactly.

**Mike Kearney:** So it's persuasion, not coercion.

**James Stavridis:** Yeah.

**Mike Kearney:** And you've already even kind of hit on this. My question, though, is what do you think great leaders do to persuade and not coerce? Like, what are some of the tricks of the trade?

**James Stavridis:**

I think one of the huge ones is good humor. And Lincoln was wonderful at this. And that doesn't mean telling jokes or having little quips, although that's helpful. But it just means, like, your resting facial expression should be something besides a scowl.

You shouldn't act like it costs you \$5 every time you smile and say hello to people. You should walk around your enterprise wherever you can. You should recognize that in this electronic age, personal contact still trumps everything. So I think good humor and an outgoing personality are very helpful, and maybe a little underrated.

Secondly, to persuade people you have to have rock solid facts. You have to have—you ought to be the first person in a meeting to deploy an actual number. You ought to be the one who knows what the population of Libya is, what's the cubic feet of gas that's coming out of it, where are the oil refineries. Here I'm speaking about the run-up to events in Libya. You have to know your brief. Lincoln was quite good at that.

Number three, you have to kind of celebrate the diversity. Back to Team of Rivals, Lincoln was endlessly amused by the interplay of personality and character. Like Will Rogers, the American writer and statesman from the 20th century. Will Rogers said, famously, "I never met a man I didn't like." You have to kind of have a little bit of a taste for the wide spectrum of human behavior.

And for the fourth and final thing, I'm actually going to get up and grab something ...

**Mike Kearney:**

We're in his office, which is first of all decorated with some amazing pictures of people he hangs with.

**James Stavridis:**

And I'm going to read you a small plaque. And it's blue bakelite and it has a Lincoln penny taped to it. It's a quote from Lincoln, which is, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

I think that is Lincoln-esque. And that it's about the servant leader, about the humility of leadership, and about the fact that too many people are seduced by power. I think that's the fourth and final thing that I'd say Lincoln got right, among many other things. So that's why I love that book.

**Mike Kearney:**

So let's go to the next one. From Dereliction of Duty, "Leaders should follow the truth wherever it leads." And the question that I have for you—this one almost seems like a no brainer—until that truth leads you somewhere you don't want to go.

**James Stavridis:**

Yeah, until it's not. Yeah, so this is by someone who today is Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster. When he wrote this book when he was a graduate student, a major, a young officer. And it was a searing exposé of the failure of the joint chiefs of staff during the war in Vietnam, who did not follow truth. They were

hiding the numbers on Vietnam. They were overstating successes, body counts, and they were part of the debacle that Vietnam became.

And so H.R. McMaster, who's a young major, is writing this book that's extremely critical of senior army leaders, many of whom are still alive at this point, who had lead the army through that period. So it's a very courageous book.

When he wrote that book, H.R. McMaster ended up on Jim Stavridis' good people list. And as a one star, for his reward I brought him to Afghanistan to be a one-star general in charge of fighting corruption in Afghanistan. He's gone on to three stars, and I suspect theirs a fourth star out there for him. But "Follow truth wherever it leads" is exactly the right way to put it.

We used that phrase earlier, "without fear or favor." That's how we ought to approach our duties. And it gets into the ultimate responsibility of a leader, which is integrity.

**Mike Kearney:**

So let's say you're a junior executive and you find truth is evident, but it's being suppressed. Or maybe people aren't bringing it to the forefront and you know something's not right. What council do you have to that person that has, you know, a family, a mortgage, their personal brand in front of them.

**James Stavridis:**

Such a tough situation. I would argue, as a society, we've moved to a much better place here. And I think in today's world, most businesses recognize that suppressing that kind of person will lead to dire consequences.

And so my council for a young person is have faith in your chain of command. Go to your immediate supervisor and say, "Look, I think something's really wrong here." Lay out the case. I will say document everything you're doing. Make sure that you have a paper trail of why you think this. Have the ability, if challenged, to show the fact-based case, and demonstrate to your immediate senior that you've got the facts.

I would say that you have to follow the truth. And I think it will come out well for most young people who do that. There are certainly examples where it doesn't come out as well. I think if you go first to your chain of command, second to internal auditors, and then third, in a really dramatic case where there's public safety involved, I think at that point you probably go outside the corporation. Let's hope you're not in that situation.

Those were obviously extreme cases and get into some very dangerous zones. But I think as a general, bit of advice for young people in a corporation is go to your chain of command, but also document. Keep a track record on what you're providing to protect yourself as well.

**Mike Kearney:**

I think there's a related lesson learned that was further down on my list, but I'm going to go here because there's a quote that I just love based on what you just

said. And it was all around difficult decisions. It's number nine on my list and it's from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "Hard right cause," I love this, "Is better than the easy wrong one." And then the other one was from Truman: "Make decisions that everyone will not like."

**James Stavridis:**

Yeah. And, you know, back to the endless Abraham Lincoln, it's hard to please all of the people all the time. And a corollary to that is if everyone's happy with what you're doing, you're probably doing something wrong.

So I think that the first one, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is a classic example of someone doing the right thing; following truth wherever it leads. And the end of that novel where Atticus Finch walks out of the courtroom having defended someone who was not guilty, and the audience—in the audience an African American says to his daughter, "Stand. Your daddy's passing." Pretty good book.

**Mike Kearney:**

Yeah.

**James Stavridis:**

And, you know, there are—doing the right thing can have powerful, powerful rewards. It can also have real challenges, as we just talked about.

**Mike Kearney:**

Do you have an example that, as you think about your career, where you had to make a really tough decision where the majority, at the time, didn't agree with it?

**James Stavridis:**

Yeah, I can. I can think of several.

**Mike Kearney:**

Yeah, I'm sure you can.

**James Stavridis:**

Several near misses on career-ending events. Probably the biggest one was, as a one-star officer—so I'm just sort of vested. I'm really beginning to be somebody in this big corporation called the US Navy. I'm in charge of a think tank that was created immediately after 9/11. It's called Deep Blue, and our job is to come up with innovative ways to conduct the response to 9/11 that the Navy can participate in.

And I start down a path of using our heavy, amphibious ships with Marines and Army embarked onboard. And this is very unpopular with the Carrier Navy, because it's seen as undercutting the powerful aviation lobby in the US Navy.

So I began to get phone calls from very senior—including four-star admirals—telling me, "Jim, you need to modulate your positions. We need to talk more about what carriers can do in this battle." You know, "You're getting a little bit away from the heart of the Navy," which of course is aircraft carriers.

And I said, you know, gulp. "Well, admiral, thank you for those excellent observations, sir, and I will certainly incorporate those into my briefings." And I went right on doing what I was doing.

And then the phone calls started to get quite pointed, you know? "Do you want a second star? Do you want command at sea again? You're not on that track,

Jim. You're steering into danger." Pretty direct—I don't want to say threats, but certainly a lot of counseling that I was moving down a path that would—

**Mike Kearney:**

Counseling that was not favorable to your future.

**James Stavridis:**

Indeed. So, you know, I had a—like anybody would—a mental conversation about what are my ambitions, what are my goals, but what is the right thing to do for the Navy, what's the right thing to do for the nation. And in the end, it wasn't a hard choice. And I continued down the path of talking about what special forces could do, what amphibious operations could do, what unmanned air vehicles could do.

It wasn't popular with aviation, but fortunately for me, events began to show that those were the kind of forces that we needed. And so I was eventually promoted and got through that patch. But it was a period of time, again, where I went home to my wife and said, "I think we're going to retire as a one star." You know, "Tell the kids we're moving again."

But I tried to do what I think comes out in many of these books, which is taking the hard right over the easy wrong. It would've been very easy for me to rewrite those briefs and talk about how great carriers were and how they were the heart of the Navy. I wasn't going to do that.

**Mike Kearney:**

It obviously ended well, but does that matter? Meaning, you made what you felt was the right decision at the time.

**James Stavridis:**

Your observation is precisely correct. For the rest of my life, I can look myself in the mirror and say, "I did the hard thing because it was the right thing to do."

**Mike Kearney:**

But how do you—because there's a lot of people in different circumstances who probably don't necessarily do what they believe in their heart. What is it that enabled you to stick to your values? Because I think that's what it was.

**James Stavridis:**

I think at any of these moments you become the sum of your life, and you think about what would my dad, a career military officer who never made general—and his advice to me was always, "Whatever you do, don't take a tour in the Pentagon." You know, I had seven tours in the Pentagon.

But I thought, "What would my dad think?" I thought, "What would the captain of my first ship think?" Someone who helped me understand leadership as a very young officer. I thought, "What will all the people I'm mentoring think, who have followed me and tracked me over the years?"

I think at some point, all the books you've read, all the lessons you've learned, your family—it all comes together in those moments.

**Mike Kearney:**

You know, one of the things I try to do is—and I certainly have not had decisions like that to make—but to try to think of the bigger picture.

**James Stavridis:** Hey, all decisions are different for each of us. I often say, honestly, that the decisions that our cleaning crew makes every night, in their spectrum, are as important, as stressful, and as challenging as any decision I made as a NATO commander. I absolutely believe that.

**Mike Kearney:** Agreed. What has served me well, though, is oftentimes when I think about a decision, the challenge is it's in that moment. So the context you have—the time horizon's very small, so it's a really big decision.

But when you look back in time, one of the things I reflect on my career when I think, "Oh," you know, "Something potentially could've gone bad." It invariably doesn't. And you learn how to pivot to whatever the change may be.

And so, for me, what helps is thinking about time—and maybe going back to the eulogy. Like, what do I want to be remembered for when I pass? Is it somebody that just did not live to their values and always succumbed to what other people thought I should do?

**James Stavridis:** I think that is a terrific observation, Mike. And I'll only add to it slightly, which is that sometimes you don't get the luxury of a huge amount of time to make a decision like that. So in my context, in combat, you have to make a decision whether to fire that missile or not, knowing that it might be a civilian aircraft or it might be an Iranian F14 coming in. You don't have perfect knowledge.

At that moment, you become the sum of everything that's been poured into you. And back to The Leaders Bookshelf, you don't have time at that minute to crack open 50 books. So hopefully you've read enough, thought enough, and that becomes part of your calculus. And I'm firmly convinced the books on these lists will help you, in that moment when you don't have the luxury of time, to make the right decision.

**Mike Kearney:** Yeah, and just to clarify my point—I agree with that wholeheartedly. It's to think about a decision in the context of the—that's what I was trying to—

**James Stavridis:** I got you.

**Mike Kearney:** Yeah, that's where I was going. So let's go on to another observation. It was around humility and compassion. Not something you oftentimes—well, I think you do hear it in leadership books. It may not be discussed a lot.

So one was from Ulysses Grant: "Humility and closeness—" they used the word intimacy—"with your people," which I thought was an interesting word, and "Compassion and high standards" from Master and Commander.

**James Stavridis:** So these are two extraordinarily different books, but they kind of come down in the same place. The Grant book, Ulysses Grant, these are his memoirs. And Grant had a very hard scrabble life growing up.

He came off a poor farm in Ohio, but rose to the highest levels; became the general commanding the armies in the Civil War and became the president. But he never lost touch with his people. He was—and I think intimate is the right word. He spent a lot of time with his team walking around. He cared for them deeply and he saw himself as a servant leader.

The other book, *Master and Commander*, is a novel about a 19th-century royal Navy—British—sea captain who talks about the happiness in a taut ship; in a ship that is tightly run, yet happy. How do you find that balance? And the protagonist in the novel is Jack Aubrey, Captain Jack Aubrey, and his view is a fighting ship is a taut ship is a happy ship. You don't need to flog people, you need to know people.

And when you put those two books together, Grant's memoirs and *Master and Commander*, I think you have a pretty good prescription for a leader of any enterprise.

**Mike Kearney:**

So describe how you would get to know people. Because I actually think that this is probably the number one thing in my leadership style, is not to have kind of a passive relationship with the people that I work with. Like, the richness of people goes well beyond their work, in my opinion.

**James Stavridis:**

It does. And first of all, in today's world, you can begin by knowing them through electronic profiles, which is an advantage people have never had—leaders have never had. But I take a look and I try and be friends on Facebook, I try and be on LinkedIn, I try to connect with people frequently and take advantage of social networks.

Secondly, let's face it, personal contact trumps everything. So the degree to which you can even spend five minutes talking to somebody to enrich what you've learned in the social world is hugely additive.

All this, of course, sits on top of the box of their work performance and everything you can observe about them. But in a business context, if you put those three vectors together, what they're doing for the enterprise, how they're portraying themselves in the social world—if they are—and how you connect with them through personal contact. You get kind of a 360 view of people that's, I think, deep and powerful and makes a huge difference.

**Mike Kearney:**

One of the things that I use it for, which actually, I think, benefits me and the people that I work with. If you really understand who they are, like who they really are—their passions and what they're good at—you could start to identify their strengths and potentially even modify a little of the things that they're doing or how they're doing it. Because if people are focused on what they enjoy, I have experienced that they do things ten times better.

**James Stavridis:**

I completely agree with that. And I think an additive component to that is how you can channel some of that energy into good work outside of the workplace.

Does your enterprise, your corporation, your business, your ship, your battalion—do you have ways to connect with the community? Do you have projects you're doing? Are you engaged in what some call socially responsible activities?

I think that's another dimension. And, to your point, Mike, if you know the person and you understand them, you can help channel them or their part of the organization into particular projects that are of enormous benefit.

**Mike Kearney:**

Okay, let's move to "innovate in a non-traditional manner to succeed", and this was in two books: Nimitz and Beirut to Jerusalem. One of the things that I find in very large, bureaucratic organizations, it's hard to innovate. What's your thoughts on that?

**James Stavridis:**

It is hard to innovate. And certainly the military has that challenge in spades because it is hierarchical. It is command and control driven. So here's a group of things that I think are important: create an innovation cell. Keep it close to leadership. Give it limited resources. Keep it lean and hungry, but create a center to bring leaders the best ideas.

Secondly, reward innovation. That's everything from a post-it on somebody's desktop computer saying, "You rock! What a great idea," to formalized programs that people can bring in innovation and be rewarded for it financially in a bonus sort of setting or in promotional kinds of ways.

Thirdly, evaluate it. Make it part of your company's evaluative process. Demand a comment on how innovative or creative is this particular person in the process.

Fourth, put symbols around your enterprise that cause people to stop and say, "Wow, that's pretty striking." What we did at US Southern Command was take a drug-runner submarine that we had captured, which was built in the jungle of Colombia—it looked like Batman's submarine—and we put that thing on a pedestal right in front of the headquarters. So every day, thousands of people drove by it and they looked at it.

And I didn't put it there as a war trophy, Mike. I put it there as a symbol that our opponents were innovating every day, that we had to innovate to keep up with the challenges. Those kind of visual symbols and signals, I think, have real power.

And then fifth and finally, talk about innovation all the time. Make it—you know, we are what we say, at the end of the day. Self-talk matters. And so your leaders have to be out on foot patrol talking about leadership and telling the stories of innovators inside the corporation.

**Mike Kearney:**

You said—I'm going to pick up on two things, because there are two things I think are brilliant in what you said. The first one is—I'm going to use my



words—“Innovate on the edge.” And, in some respects, starve the investment, which is totally counterintuitive in many organizations because they throw a bunch of money at it.

But if you think of kind of a lean startup, they don’t have a lot of resources and money. And the reason they succeed is because of purpose beyond funding. And I think that’s a really interesting insight.

**James Stavridis:** Exactly right. Can I add one third one to that? You’ve hit two great points. The third one is permit failure. “Fail fast,” this is sometimes called. But any innovation cell—you know, it’s kind of like baseball. If you’re batting .250, one in four, that’s pretty good.

**Mike Kearney:** Could make a few million dollars a year.

**James Stavridis:** You got it. And here’s a newsflash: If you’re batting .333, one in three, you’re headed for the Hall of Fame.

**Mike Kearney:** Absolutely.

**James Stavridis:** No one’s looking for—no one bats 1,000. No one bats .500. A really good player’s batting .300, .333. I’ll take that all day long. Innovation cell needs to know that too.

**Mike Kearney:** And I’ll add maybe a fourth to your third. I don’t know where we’re at, but when you talk about rewarding failure, I think you need to really reward. Communicate it. This person took a risk in our organization, and it did not succeed, but it was because of things outside of their control, and we need more people like that. That’s one of the things I think more organizations could do.

**James Stavridis:** I agree. And back to the books, that’s what Nimitz was a master at. He let people fail. Classic example, of course, is Admiral Bull Halsey, who had multiple failures, including terrible medical conditions, some very bad tactical decisions at the Battle of Leyte Gulf. But Nimitz had faith in him. Told him he had failed, helped course-correct him, and harnessed his fighting spirit to win the war in the Pacific. That’s really the story of the book.

**Mike Kearney:** Well, it goes back to your story at the beginning that you shared about—I hate to say failure—but that’s how you characterized it.

**James Stavridis:** No, no, it was totally a failure.

**Mike Kearney:** Now look where you are.

**James Stavridis:** Exactly.

**Mike Kearney:** And then the other thing is symbols. So I’ve been at Nike and Southwest in the last month and a half, and one of the things that I love—and it’s not necessarily just about symbols—but when you’re at Nike and Southwest, you know their

culture and what matters, and it's because of their culture. But it's the words and the symbols that they use everywhere around their campuses.

**James Stavridis:** It's incredibly powerful.

**Mike Kearney:** I love that notion of symbols.

**James Stavridis:** And in the military, you have a fair amount of that built into the system because we wear uniforms, we have statues, we have a history and a culture. But you need to take that to the next level to underline innovation. Too often in all of our companies, we're celebrating the past. Where's the symbol for—

**Mike Kearney:** The future, yeah.

**James Stavridis:** The future, the next big thing, the big idea, the innovation.

**Mike Kearney:** I love that. I love that. Okay. A few more. The other leadership lesson, number eight, is to not over rely on subordinates, and this was from Lee's Lieutenants.

And the question—I agree with this, but there's one other theme that we haven't even really talked about that was actually peppered throughout the book, and I think it's actually in one of the final chapters, around the need to delegate. How do you strike this balance?

**James Stavridis:** Yeah. It's one of the toughest things you do as a leader because, at the end of the day, your coin of the realm as a leader is your time. And you have to think about how am I spending my resource, which is my time.

What I tried to do in command was spend about one fourth of my time on people. Mentoring, people decisions. About a fourth of my time on operations, actually making decisions about how many troops to deploy, where are we going to put this, what's the supply chain. About a fourth of the time on innovation. Blue Sky activities, thinking about where we're headed. And about a fourth of the time on building intellectual capital, so reading, learning, watching films. Everything you can imagine—input. Allowing time to take input.

So often, people neglect innovation and input in favor of operations day to day. And you've got to get that balance about right. This gets into delegation.

You've got to, I think, delegate enough so that you are putting up points in all four of those boxes. And how much to delegate is a complete function of the organization you're in, other than one point I will make. You need to know what the red lines are; what are the decisions that only you are going to make.

And so, in a combat situation, I would argue that's anything that's going to kill somebody. The release of ordinance which is kind of anything that's going to kill somebody else, or anything that has to do with the integrity of the unit, the honesty, the reputation.

So to translate that into the business world, I think that for a CEO, a red line is something that is life-threatening to the corporation. Something that—a decision that you’re betting the corporation on. You’re not going to delegate that.

On the offensive side, I think it’s the big marketing decisions. I think those have to reside probably with the CEO, with a lot of advice from his or her team. And the integrity one, I think, is pretty straight forward.

Back to so many different companies we’ve seen fail in that regard because things were delegated. These were failures of leadership that delegated, I would guess, too much, too far down.

**Mike Kearney:** It’s a bit off of what the insight is, but you said something that I found interesting, just even how you think about your time. Personally breaking it down. Are you fairly—I mean, it sounds like you’re obviously intentional. How do you take it from the theory, or quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, to actually application, which is I think where a lot of people fall down.

**James Stavridis:** I’ve got two words for you: Microsoft Office. And I don’t mean to shill for a particular software program. Take any software program. At the end of six months, look at what you did. Anybody in a serious position is tracking, has a calendar. I happen to use Outlook, which I think is pretty good. I’m sure there are other really good ones.

At the end of six months, I look at how much time did I actually spend doing personnel things? How much time did I spend doing operations? How much time did I spend doing input? In other words, did I have blocks? What I do here, Mike, for example, is I come in at 6:00 in the morning.

And from 6:00 to 9:00 in the morning is my input time. That’s when I read. That’s when I do my own building of intellectual capital; watch all the news channels, surf all the key publications. I block out an hour to read every morning, just to read a book every morning. I do my workouts late in the day.

So I can look at my calendar, and I won’t drag you through the whole thing, but I can show you that I do roughly one fourth in the areas that I just talked about.

**Mike Kearney:** The word that jumps out in my mind is you’re intentional about your calendar, which I think a lot of times people fall prey to the calendar because stuff is falling onto it.

**James Stavridis:** Exactly. Or even worse is to fall prey to your inbox, and just—your agenda becomes whatever your five direct reports barf up every morning. Big mistake.

**Mike Kearney:** Your priority list is somebody else’s email. So yeah, I agree with that.

**James Stavridis:** Exactly.

**Mike Kearney:**

This is actually—this next leadership lesson is by far and away I think my favorite statement, or the verbiage. And it's, "Today competes with tomorrow." That is—I love language. That's so evocative, and I would love just—and it was from the book *Hope is Not a Method*.

And the question that I have is, why do you think organizations have such a hard time responding to change? And this is something we've studied a lot. And every company, every industry to a certain degree, is under some form of disruption. And they know—I think the misnomer is, "Oh, Blockbuster," for example, "didn't see it coming." They saw it coming, right?

But so why when companies, CEOs, know that change is in front of them, is it so hard to change?

**James Stavridis:**

A couple of different reasons. One is really grounded in human nature, and it's that crisis management and day-to-day management actually works pretty well in the short term. And I'm reminded of John Maynard Keynes, the famous economist in the 20th century, who was testifying in front of congress. And he was trying to convince the congress of the long-term way that we could work our way out of the Great Depression with expansion as policies, fiscal and monetary.

And he was talking about the long term, the long term, the long term. And a congressman said, "Mr. Keynes, with all due respect, people eat in the short term." And that's kind of human nature. We're wired—our biology, our psychology is wired toward solving the immediate need. So you're overcoming human nature whenever you do the long term.

Secondly, to the business world, it's all about shareholder value. It's the stock price. It's—there's incredible accountability placed on the short term at the expense of long-term strategic thinking that the enterprise does, that the board hopefully participates in, because of the transparency and the acceleration of information. It's very hard to convince anxious shareholders to—"Hey, it's going to be okay. We've got a long-term vision to develop this thing."

And then thirdly, day-to-day stuff is easier and fun. You get to just, like, jump up. You're solving problems, you're fixing things. You feel really energized at the end of the day because you answered 172 emails and you made 14 phone calls. And yet you haven't spent a lick of time thinking about what's happening in the long game. You're going to lose that one.

**Mike Kearney:**

So let's move to the last one that we're going to cover. And this one is from *Buffalo Soldiers*, and I love this one, which is "Leaders must overcome prejudices."

And I don't know if this is what they were getting at, but I think all of us have biases. So my question to you is how—and it's very hard to overcome bias or

prejudices—how have you seen leaders, or how have you yourself, overcome biases that you have? Are there any recommendations or council that you have?

**James Stavridis:**

Yeah. I think a couple of the things that we talked about really play into this. And a big one is simply reading the stories of those who have struggled and, in some cases overcome, and in some cases failed because of prejudice and bias.

And secondly, I think it's extremely important to consciously examine what you're doing constantly. That's less about prejudice, which is generally regarded as a conscious act, but bias is something that is very hard to control. It's kind of baked into our lives and experiences.

And in order to overcome that, you need kind of constant self-examination. But you also need trusted outsiders. This is where your family can be extremely helpful.

And, you know, at the end of the day, who are we? Are we the public persona we project? Do we understand that character is what we do when we think no one is listening?

And so self-examination is important. Outside examination from trusted friends, peers, and family can be even more valuable in that regard. And then coupling that with reading and understanding the stories of those who have been forced to overcome can make you much more empathetic—different than sympathetic—empathetic is doing the right thing.

**Mike Kearney:**

So the one thing I loved about the book is—we've now covered probably about, I don't know, 12, 13, 14 books, which has just been fantastic. But at the end of the book, there's some guidance, I think, that really takes a lot of the themes from throughout the books. So I'm going to call this the lightning round so we can get done.

**James Stavridis:**

Sure. Quick answers.

**Mike Kearney:**

So I'm going to jump in and ask you a bunch of quickies. Why—in a short answer—why is reading important to you?

**James Stavridis:**

Because it allows you to step into another life completely, to examine a situation that you wouldn't have a chance to do otherwise. And it's something you can do anywhere, anytime. It's incredibly efficient and it builds intellectual capital.

**Mike Kearney:**

Where do you find the time? I know that you said you spend an hour in the mornings, but—

**James Stavridis:**

I do, but I also spend a lot of time travelling. I'm on the road about 50 percent of the time, so I have a lot of dead time in airports, in cars, and on airplanes. I do the majority of my reading then.

**Mike Kearney:** Okay, so the next one—and we talked a bit about this, but I want to hear a little more. Why do you think it's important to be humble and to use humor?

**James Stavridis:** Because they make a leader approachable. Everybody likes someone who has a smile on their face. Everyone likes a little bit of humor. That can be overused, but I think everybody likes a fair amount of humor. And everybody likes someone who is not acting as though they were the answer to all the questions. I always say, "If you're the answer to the question, you're asking the wrong question."

**Mike Kearney:** These two questions are interrelated. Why is working out, being physically fit, important to a leader? And the next one is: Why is relaxation, kind of the opposite side of the coin, so important?

**James Stavridis:** Because they recharge you. I think anybody who works out regularly would immediately tell you, "I work out for an hour, but I get three hours of productivity as a result of that that otherwise I wouldn't have." That's physiology 101.

Relaxing is important because, in those quiet moments, you're actually—your mind is literally building intellectual capital. Your subconscious is processing in ways you don't even appreciate. This is why sleep is also important. I'm always suspicious of people who say, "Yeah, I only sleep three hours a night." Or, "I only need five hours of sleep a night." You know—

**Mike Kearney:** How many hours a night do you get?

**James Stavridis:** Well, I get about five. But I'm suspicious of that myself. I have been striving lately to sleep more. And I am beginning to believe that is important, so I'm edging toward six or seven. And I think I'm going to find more productivity in that. Jury's out on that one. Good book about it by Arianna Huffington called Sleep.

**Mike Kearney:** I was just—so I listened—

**James Stavridis:** You want to interview her, by the way.

**Mike Kearney:** So she has been on several podcasts, and I love listening—that book she came out with just a couple months ago—

**James Stavridis:** It's terrific. And that has influenced me. And that's why I am working consciously to get some more sleep. I also wrote a short piece that's kind of fun to read, it's called "Sleep as a Weapon," about the military importance of sleep. But it's really about making good decisions. A well-rested decision maker is a better decision maker.

**Mike Kearney:** I will go back to Arianna Huffington, because she is—I think a lot of people know sleep is important, but she doesn't just talk about, "It's important." She actually gives some really great tips.

**James Stavridis:** Lays the case out.

**Mike Kearney:** Like the one thing she said—and this happens to me because I’m travelling, you know, in consulting. She said, “If I have a dinner that I have to go to in the evening, I don’t book anything—” It’s kind of simple but, “I don’t book anything at 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning the next morning so that I could get my sleep.”

**James Stavridis:** Exactly.

**Mike Kearney:** Fantastic. Okay, what about—I love this. So there were a few quotes, once again, or metaphors—and I love this. You share that “You shouldn’t lunge at the ball.” What do you mean by that?

**James Stavridis:** I think too many leaders see, metaphorically, a ball coming at them. And they ought to just sort of wait and catch the ball, but so often they’re leaping forward at it. And it’s a long way of saying, “Slow down. Watch the trajectory of events before you leap to make a decision.” And I’ll put it in a ship-handling context.

A lot of times when I have a young ship handler on the bridge of the ship, he or she will start trying to maneuver the ship in close quarters around the pier, and you hear, “Port engine ahead, two thirds. Starboard engine back, two thirds. Left full rudder. Right full rudder. Bring that engine back. All back full.”

A lot of times you’ve got to put an order on the ship, “Left full rudder,” and see what happens before you get to the next word. You can get ahead of your own decision loop. So really understand the trajectory of the ball before you seek to catch it.

**Mike Kearney:** I think—I don’t know if I have this quote right, but John Wooden, great guy—

**James Stavridis:** Yeah, oh gosh.

**Mike Kearney:** “Be quick but don’t hurry.” That is one of my favorite quotes ever, which I think falls under this.

**James Stavridis:** There’s a good book about this also called Fast Decisions in Slow Time, and it’s a pretty good book as well.

**Mike Kearney:** So I would be remiss if I did not ask you about social media. You are very—I was actually going through your Twitter feed last night, your LinkedIn, obviously, and Facebook.

**James Stavridis:** Well, let’s put a number on it because, you know, it’s about 50,000 total. So just to put it in context, Lady Gaga has 37,000,000. But yeah, I’m out there.

**Mike Kearney:** You’re not competing with the Kardashians yet, but—

**James Stavridis:** Exactly.

**Mike Kearney:** But the thing that I'm very interested in is you took to social media at an early time. Like you even announced—and I don't know if this is fully true—but the end of the Libya conflict.

**James Stavridis:** I did. On Twitter.

**Mike Kearney:** On Twitter and Facebook, right?

**James Stavridis:** I did. I will go down in history as the first commander to announce the end of a war on social media. It was on Facebook, actually.

**Mike Kearney:** So why did you take to social media so quickly?

**James Stavridis:** Because it's incredibly efficient. Because you get to move your message instantly to so many different people. Because it's visual and exciting. Because it's short and snappy. And, above all, because our opponents are doing it.

You know, I could show you a picture of the world according to Facebook, which would show you the brighter the white, the higher the concentration of Facebook users. And I would say, "This is wonderful. 1.6 billion people all interconnected, exchanging ideas."

Here's the bad news, Mike: It's also the command and control network of the Islamic State. They're recruiting, they're conducting operations. So we've got to be in that world.

**Mike Kearney:** Got to be using it.

**James Stavridis:** And people say to me, "Oh, Admiral, you're right. It's a real war of ideas out there." No. It's a marketplace of ideas. And I think business people, above all, understand that.

**Mike Kearney:** That's fascinating. So we need to compete.

**James Stavridis:** Exactly.

**Mike Kearney:** So this is all about your book, but what book do you gift more than any other? I know that's probably hard for somebody that reads as much as you do, but is there one that stands out?

**James Stavridis:** Yeah. A book that I love to give people prothletising! I'll give you two, actually, both of which probably will surprise people, none of which are on this list. One is *Candide* by Voltaire, which is a very short satirical book about resilience, about overcoming disaster after disaster, and ends with the phrase, "We must tend our garden." It's a book about life, a book about coming back and overcoming challenges, and is full of good humor written 300 years ago.

**Mike Kearney:** And it's *Candide*?

**James Stavridis:** *Candide* by Voltaire. C-A-N-D-I-D-E. It's the name of a character. And the other book is by Hemmingway, and it's *The Sun Also Rises*, which is a novel set in the



1920s about a fiesta in Spain. But it's really about the challenges of interpersonal relationships and how, at the end of the day, what defines us are our friendships and our family. And it's a book that I enjoyed deeply and have often recommended. So those two.

**Mike Kearney:** Two final questions. And I don't want to go too deep into this, but it's fascinating, because when you Google your name it's all about you and Hillary Clinton. So you were being vetted.

**James Stavridis:** I was.

**Mike Kearney:** And actually, you've got to tell me what that list is later over up on the wall, but the question I have is not about the politics of the day. But after going through all of these books, is there one leadership attribute that you think would well serve our politicians today, irrespective of the party?

**James Stavridis:** Yeah. I'll start by saying I was vetted for the vice presidency with Secretary Clinton, and I was honored that she asked me to do that with a tiny handful of people. And I believe I was the only non-political person who was deeply vetted for that position.

Ultimately it went to Tim Kaine, who's wonderful. And I'll tell you, looking at politics today, there are moments when I feel like I heard a bullet whizzing by my head when I wasn't chosen.

But I think we'll know how the election comes out soon, and I think Secretary Clinton would be a very good president of the United States. The leadership quality, I would say, at the top of the list for a president is something we've talked about quite a bit here, is balance.

It's keeping things in perspective. It is maintaining your state, as Abraham Lincoln would say. It is listening to everyone. It's a collection of attributes, but fundamentally it means not losing your temper. Not lunging for the ball. Not demeaning others. It means building bridges, not building walls. And I think that's what good leaders do.

**Mike Kearney:** We didn't even touch on your TED Talk, which could be a whole other conversation. The name of the podcast—and we put a lot of thought into this—is Resilient, because what we're really looking at is resilient leaders.

And actually I almost jumped to my final question when you brought up Candide, but what are the attributes, in your opinion, based on all of your experiences, of a resilient leader? And is there one person that jumps out in your mind that you would say, "They epitomize a resilient leader."

**James Stavridis:** Yeah. I think a very resilient leader—and there are many, many in history—I would say is Theodore Roosevelt, who suffered enormous personal tragedy. When he was a young man, both his wife and his mother died within 24 hours. And throughout his life, he physically had a lot of challenges.

He overcame all of that to go on and become the man we know of, who was a renaissance president who wrote dozens of books, who's an expert boxer and rifleman, who won the Medal of Honor and the Nobel Peace Prize. He just overcame an enormous amount in a very compressed life. And that brings me to, "So how did he do that? What are the characteristics of resilient people?"

I think, first of all, his perspective. You know, this planet's been around for a billion years, and hopefully we'll be here for another billion. And, you know, we're just passing through. And so don't over invest in your self-importance or your legacy. You're a blink of an eye. And keeping that perspective, I think, allows you to remain humble. And I think that allows resiliency.

Secondly, a sense of humor is helpful. Recognize that some of this is just not your fault. There's a certain comic quality to it all.

Thirdly, it's reading and learning about other people who have suffered. And I try and think—when I'm having a bad day, I think about what President Lincoln was going through, watching the country fall apart in front of him. His casualty list: Tens of thousands dying in a war day after day after day. You realize your day-to-day challenges about a 10-year case at The Fletcher School, or even decisions you make about Afghanistan, don't rise to that level.

So I think resilience is keeping things in perspective, keeping them in context. And then having a sense of humor; a sense of humility about yourself. And celebrate the small victories, because in the end everyone is going to have failures. Everyone's going to have challenges. Celebrate ... when the good things happen.

**Mike Kearney:**

So the other day when I was prepping for this, I was out at a client. And there were two formal naval officers that I was sitting with, and they're not Deloitte consultants. And they actually said, "Ask him if he knows what Secret Scroll or Power Point Ninjas are," so that's what they would equate themselves to.

But when I told them I was sitting down with you, they said, "Do you know how honored and lucky you are?" They said, "You know, officers like ourselves would die to get 10 minutes."

And so the reason why I'm bringing that up is just to thank you for the gift of time. This was incredible. It was a lesson in leadership for me, so thank you.

**James Stavridis:**

Well, it was my pleasure to do it, Mike. And I look forward to—now that I know about Resilient—to listening to multiple podcasts, because it sounds like it will be a great way for me to build more intellectual capital and learn more about leadership. And thanks, also, for talking about The Leaders Bookshelf. It's a book that means a lot to me.

**Mike Kearney:**

I can't wait until it comes out.

**James Stavridis:**

Thanks a lot.

**Mike Kearney:** Thank you.

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**Mike Kearney:** Wow! That was an incredible conversation. And I really want to thank, again, the admiral for spending about two hours with us talking about his career, talking about his perspectives on leadership, talking about his book. That was a gift that he has given us, and I want to thank him for that.

And I want to thank you for listening to this [Resilient](#) podcast, a dream that I had about a year ago that is coming to fruition. A Deloitte podcast produced by our friends at Rivet Radio. And like I've talked about before, you could go to Deloitte.com if you want to take a listen to it there, or you can go to your favorite Podcatcher, keyword Resilient.

And I'd encourage you—if you enjoyed today, which, if you're listening to the end, my guess is you probably did. If you enjoyed it, go back to some of the previous episodes. I have interviewed some incredible leaders, incredible CEOs, senior executives, board members, and other leaders.

And I'd ask that you hit me up on LinkedIn or Twitter with any comments or recommendations for future guests. You know what? You are going to be hearing a guest, probably in the next couple months that actually reached out to me on LinkedIn. And I'm now going to be interviewing them, which is so cool.

So if you have any good ideas of resilient leaders that should be on this podcast, hit me up. Please, please, please do that.

My profile on LinkedIn is under Michael Kearney, and my last name is spelt K-E-A-R-N-E-Y. And you can just look me up on Twitter, it's @mkearney33. I had a hard time getting a screen name, so we had to go with @mkearney33, so that's why it's that.

And I've been blown away, like I said before, by the engagement online. I have a lot of new friends, which is really cool—the power of social media—so please keep it coming.

And, like I always close this out: Remember, leaders who embrace risk improve performance and are more prepared to lead confidently in the volatile world we live in.

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