

## FEATURES

Up in Arms  
 The Power of Soft Power  
 Sing On!  
 Healing Art  
 Punching Above Our  
 Weight

**THINK TANK**

**WELLNESS**

**PLANET TUFTS**

**NEWSWIRE**

**THE BIG DAY**

**DEPARTMENTS**



## The Power of Soft Power

**NATO'S FORMER SUPREME COMMANDER BRINGS TO THE FLETCHER SCHOOL HIS FIELD-TESTED IDEAS**

**BY MICHEAL BLANDING**

**PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSE CABEZAS/ AFP/ GETTY IMAGES**

The biggest lesson Admiral James Stavridis learned about national security before he retired from the U.S. Navy this summer wasn't on the battlefield in Afghanistan, which he oversaw as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe. It wasn't as commander of a carrier fleet in the Arabian Gulf or as captain of a destroyer during the Bosnian War. It was at a health clinic in Nicaragua in 2007.

Then head of the U.S. Southern Command, overseeing all military forces in Central and South America, Stavridis was aboard the hospital ship USNS *Comfort* to check on health clinics that U.S. soldiers had set up in the area for locals. As he came ashore to observe their work, he was told some residents had hiked miles, and in some cases days, to bring their children for treatment. One woman came with her eight-year-old son, who was severely myopic. Stavridis watched the boy's look of amazement as a doctor put glasses on his face for the first time. "Mama," the child said. "Veo el mundo."

I see the world. Stavridis never forgot that moment—the validation of years of thinking, writing, and acting on his beliefs that American power must go beyond the blunt instrument of military might to embrace "soft power" initiatives like hospital ships, literacy programs in Afghanistan, even baseball exchanges, all made possible by the U.S. Armed Forces. The boy "looked up at the trees," Stavridis says, "and I think for the first time in his life he could actually see individual leaves. It just crystallized things for me."

Our future depends on how the world views us, Stavridis contends. "Through missions like a hospital ship and individual episodes like that young boy," he says, "you create a vision of the United States that is compassionate, that is confident, and that is capable—and above all is reaching out to another part of the world. That creates security for us, and for other regions as well." He has developed those ideas into a concept he calls "open-source security," arguing that we can protect ourselves better from today's threats—terrorism, piracy, cyber warfare, natural disasters, global pandemics—by collaborating and sharing information than we can through secrecy and force. "We will not deliver security solely from the barrel of a gun," he said in a recent TED talk. "My thesis of open-source security is about international, interagency, private-public connection, pulled together by this idea of strategic

communication on the Internet.”

That view is far from orthodox in the U.S. military-industrial complex, which has spent trillions to build the most formidable strategic power the world has ever known. When the military has partnered with other countries or outside contractors, it has been mainly to enhance that might, all tightly controlled by a disciplined command structure. Directly at odds with this approach, Stavridis’ concept of open-source security is more like the model of open-source software—loosening and decentralizing control to allow health organizations, business leaders, teachers, and others to join in building security. And yet, through a combination of charm, conviction, and military credentials, Stavridis’ unconventional worldview propelled him to the highest ranks of the armed forces. This past summer it also began to inform his latest post as the new dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy—the school from which he received both a master’s in 1983 and a Ph.D. in 1984.

Arriving on the fourth floor of Cabot Hall for a late-afternoon appointment with Stavridis, I find an office that’s run with military precision—I’m told the new dean started the day with an eight a.m. breakfast presentation to a women’s leadership group, and has been in meetings ever since. My time with him is rationed to the minute.

I enter his office, prepared to be overwhelmed by the larger-than-life figure his friends and associates have described. Instead, I find someone trim and compact, and surprisingly relaxed for a man who’s been going all day. His office is decorated with nautical memorabilia, interspersed with photos of his wife and his two daughters—one a newly minted U.S. Navy nurse—as well as his basset hound, Lilly.

Despite the time pressure, he starts the interview by asking me questions, taking a leisurely ten minutes out of his own time to inquire about my education and upbringing. We ease into a discussion about our mutual love of old maps—Stavridis collects seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sea charts of the Atlantic—then smoothly segue into history and the role of the military in world power. The minutes seem to lengthen as Stavridis delivers his tightly packaged answers in invisible bullet points, some with invisible subpoints, before deftly wrapping up our conversation by returning the focus to me with questions about my children.

Stavridis’ gift for engaging with people from all walks of life is well known to friends and colleagues, I learn later. “He has a supreme ability to meet people where they are,” says Pete Daly, a retired vice admiral who served alongside him and has known him for thirty years. “Whether he is talking to a junior sailor or a head of state, they come away feeling like he uniquely understands their perspective.”

Mel Immergut, retired chairman of the New York law firm Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy and a senior defense advisor, toured operations in Afghanistan with Stavridis and remembers watching him speak with everyone from brigadier generals to a soldier in a forward operating base on the Pakistan border that was under heavy fire. “Not everybody can interact with a seventeen-year-old from Council Bluffs, Iowa, in a mess hall and get him to open up,” Immergut says. “He spoke to him about the quarters he lived in, the food he ate, as well as the dangers they faced.”

But his ability to connect is only one of many strengths. Immergut, who is a trustee of the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum, in New York City, presented Stavridis with the Intrepid Freedom Award in 2011. During the ceremony, he called Stavridis a “Renaissance admiral,” a name that has stuck with him after it was taken up by the *New York Times* to describe him. “I’ve had a chance to see him in so many capacities—as a warrior, author, speaker, leader, family man, the whole gamut of what you would want for someone in the positions Jim has filled,” Immergut says. “He is the embodiment of all of those qualities. It’s the rare person who can truly be said to fit that description.”

Born in south Florida, Stavridis went to the U.S. Naval Academy to follow in the footsteps of

his Greek-American father, a marine. While on training cruises, he fell in love with the sea and decided to enlist in the navy instead. Even at Annapolis, he showed a broad intellectualism, majoring in English literature before graduating in 1976. But the first time Stavridis began to consider ideas of “soft power” was when he entered the Fletcher School in 1981 as a graduate student. “Up to that point, I had been entirely focused on learning my profession, going to sea, driving ships, becoming a good navy officer,” he says. “When I came to the Fletcher School, I began to learn about the world”—through classes in developmental economics, international business, and diplomatic history. He came to understand not just how wars are fought, but how they start and how to avoid them.

More than the class work, though, he says it was his fellow students who opened his eyes to the complexities of the world and the privileged place the United States held in it. He listened to the stories his Latin American and Caribbean classmates told about the clumsy way the United States sometimes threw its weight around in the region. “I began to see that military force in and of itself—hard power—seldom yields the results you are seeking,” he says.

Unlike most of the students from the navy, who gravitated towards the national security program, Stavridis sought out Jerry Cohen, a professor of political economy, to guide his dissertation on treaty negotiations over the law of the sea. “He has a natural interest in just about everything,” says Cohen, now chair of the political science department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. “He doesn’t exclude anything.” Cohen remembers mentioning offhandedly that he was reading *The Natural*, Bernard Malamud’s mystical baseball novel, and Stavridis pointing out the many ways in which the book was based on the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail. While at Fletcher, Stavridis took time to teach a course on the literature of the sea at the Tufts Experimental College and to spar with Cohen on the tennis court. “He was far better than me—he insisted on giving me a few lessons,” Cohen laughs.

After graduating from Fletcher in 1984, Stavridis soared through the naval ranks, excelling at ship handling in a way that earned the attention of his superiors. “It’s unusual to get widely known as a junior officer—unless you’d done something bad,” says Daly, the retired admiral who served with Stavridis. “Jim was widely known even as a lieutenant.” Besides driving ships himself, he wrote articles on tactics and maneuvers, eventually serving on the board of the U.S. Naval Institute, which publishes a monthly journal of musing, opinions, and criticisms of the service.

From 1993 to 1995 he commanded a destroyer, the USS *Barry*, which he captained in the Persian Gulf following the Gulf War and in the Adriatic supporting UN peacekeepers in the Bosnian War. It was during that time that he first realized how much good the military could do. The United States was trying to help return Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power in Haiti when his ship took part in humanitarian operations there. “I saw firsthand the grinding poverty of Haiti, and how well received the shipment of U.S. aid, loaded on the pier by navy sailors, was—far more so than weapons and security,” he says.

It was a lesson he remembered as he rose to command his own destroyer squadron—six warships—in 1998, and then the *Enterprise* Carrier Strike Group, with its dozen vessels, in 2002 during the Iraq War. By the time he was appointed head of U.S. Southern Command in 2006, he was ready to put his ideas into practice on a wider scale.

Evelyn Farkas, F95, F99, met Stavridis when she was a staff member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, which oversaw his command (she’s now deputy assistant secretary of defense). She watched as he created more positions that served as liaison with the State Department and other agencies and as he channeled military resources toward things like medical aid and clean water development. He wanted his senior officers to study native languages, and led the way by learning French, Spanish, and Portuguese. “His philosophy when he met with State Department officials was that his military officials were there to support diplomatic efforts,” says Farkas. “Most military commanders have very little

understanding of that. He is the first one I saw articulating that message.”

One of Stavridis’ prime goals was to encourage companies and nonprofits to work with the military in areas beyond supporting combat operations. For a project called Continuing Promise, he helped set up a partnership between the U.S. Navy and such nonprofits as Operation Smile, Project HOPE, and Rotary to provide construction services and medical care. In another case, he enlisted business executives as volunteers to study the inner workings of drug cartels and recommend ways to thwart their business and financial networks.

In part, it was such innovation that caused the Obama Administration to tap Stavridis for the job of Supreme Allied Commander Europe, one of NATO’s top two military posts, in 2009. Before him, no navy commander had ever held the position—a particularly relevant fact at the time, given NATO’s focus on landlocked Afghanistan. The surprise pick raised eyebrows, though military observers quickly praised the choice by pointing to the admiral’s skills as a commander.

After Stavridis’ appointment, Farkas, then a NATO official, worked with him to set up public-private partnerships in Europe as well. For example, computer executives were recruited to help one of the Baltic countries set up a defense for its cyber vulnerabilities. “The work they did pro bono,” Farkas says, “was something that even our wealthy allies would have trouble affording if we put a price tag on it, and the whole thing was done in a number of weeks.” Such partnerships are controversial in the Defense Department. While they can help cut costs and take advantage of skills the military doesn’t have, they can upset military hierarchies and open the government up to charges of conflict of interest. Stavridis and Farkas navigated these treacherous waters by putting buffers such as an independent search committee between Defense and private enterprise to make sure that choices were based on merit and not special interests.

As head of NATO’s military strategy, Stavridis was instrumental in the drawdown of American troops in Afghanistan and the transition to Afghan forces under Obama. At the same time, he helped put soft power to the test in the part of the world marked by the most anti-American sentiment, starting programs such as a countrywide effort to teach more than 200,000 members of the Afghan coalition forces to read.

He has run into his share of skeptics for diverting resources into such programs—both privately within the military and in the punditry at large. A Pew Research Center study of humanitarian efforts, for example, pointed to opinion polls showing they made only a small dent in anti-U.S. attitudes. “The impact of humanitarian assistance should not be overstated,” it said, referring to efforts in Pakistan and Indonesia. “Solid majorities in both countries continue to have a negative impression of the U.S.”

But Stavridis remains unapologetic. “Teaching young Afghan soldiers to read is extremely in the wheelhouse of American security,” he says. “It opens a different world for young Afghans. It gives them real tools and skills. It differentiates us from the Taliban. It encourages them to participate in the political process.”

He calls such initiatives “building bridges,” in contrast to “building walls,” the strategy that has prevailed through most of the history of American security efforts. “Look back at the twentieth century when we built walls and killed people to protect ourselves,” he says. “Well, how’d that work out? Sixty million dead in two world wars, a cold war that almost destroyed the planet. Frankly, that didn’t seem to be a particularly effective way of generating security.”

Among the bridges Stavridis talks about are social media, which he himself uses with gusto. He was known in the military for being unusually accessible by email, and one of his first actions at Fletcher was to set up a new [blog](#), complete with a video introducing himself to the school. He has fifteen thousand followers on Twitter, where his recent tweets range from

opinions on intervention in Syria, boasts about the incoming Fletcher student body, and reports of a recent lunch with the prime minister of Greece.

What excites him most about social media is their potential to “change the arc of history,” as Facebook and Twitter did during the Arab Spring. “Social networks flatten hierarchies and undermine authoritarian regimes because they allow people to exchange information freely,” he says—and not just information about their own society but about anyplace on earth. “They can look at another’s life using a social network and see that a world of liberty and democracy and education and gender equality exists and is working, and they want that too,” he says.

Social media are a marketplace of ideas, and Stavridis thinks the United States should do more to compete in it. “We have a pretty good narrative: democracy, equality, and human value—essentially the values of the Enlightenment. But in order to move our message, we need to be in that space. The lead should be at the State Department, but every level of the U.S. government has a role to play.”

Of course, the growing importance of digital networks presents threats as well as opportunities. Cyber security could become a critical strategic issue in the coming decades—so much so that in a recent *Foreign Policy* article, Stavridis argued for the creation of a new branch of the military, a U.S. Cyber Force, that would wage both offensive and defensive cyber operations. He compares the emergence of cyber attacks to the invention of airplanes, which eventually led to the need for an air force. “We are on the beach at Kitty Hawk in cyber, and it is evident that there will be a military component,” he says. Already, countries have used cyber attacks to steal and destroy data, he says. We must not only learn how to defend against such attacks, but be prepared to launch them ourselves.

Two other trends will transform the military in the next twenty years, he says: the increased use of special forces for small-scale surgical strikes, such as the attack that took out Osama bin Laden, and a growing reliance on unmanned vehicles, better known as drones. “We’ll also have unmanned surface vehicles, we’ll have unmanned vessels operating at sea on the surface, and we’ll have vehicles operating at depth in the ocean,” he says. The value of drones, he argues, is threefold—they allow the military to avoid putting humans at risk, they are cheaper to operate, and they can perform in harsher conditions.

Asked about the more controversial aspects of drones, such as highly publicized civilian casualties from drone strikes, he defends their use saying that the more precise targeting technology of drones actually reduces so-called collateral damage, a benefit that will only increase as technology improves. “Many of the same arguments were made with submarines—that they were illegal, that they were surreptitious and operated without warning and sunk innocent ships. Yet over time, we’ve become very comfortable with submarines as part of military operations, and I think it’s going to be the same with airborne drones.” He adds that drones are widely used for humanitarian operations, such as monitoring disaster relief sites, aiding agricultural development, and dropping food and medical supplies in hard-to-reach areas. “That’s part of the message we need to express more clearly.”

In all of these areas, Stavridis’ forward-looking ideas have revised the traditional conception of the military. His friends and colleagues don’t doubt he’ll bring equally innovative ideas to the realm of international relations as Fletcher’s new dean. “First of all he knows the school,” says his former advisor, Jerry Cohen. “But beyond that he is a man of real vision. He is thinking of what’s over the horizon, not just what’s happening now.”

In his inaugural blog for Fletcher, Stavridis included a list of emerging issues in international relations that would hardly be on the lips of mainstream analysts—including the Arctic, biosciences, and environmental challenges. “I think we’re passing out of the age of information,” he says by way of explanation. “The next radical set of changes will come through biology.” He points to examples such as food and crop security, response to

pandemics, genetic manipulation, and increased human performance. He adds that it's an area Fletcher is uniquely suited to address in collaboration with Tufts' "constellation" of life-science schools.

No matter what new directions Stavridis introduces, the fundamentals of Fletcher—the very concepts that broadened his own worldview as a student—are likely to remain intact. “A place like Fletcher that represents all the disciplines of international relations—development, economics, security, law, diplomacy—is the ultimate place we can come together to create solutions,” he says. And it may be an ideal place for a new generation, one perpetually connected and prone to collaborate through social media, to learn how to put his theories into practice.

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