The Accidental Admiral: A Sailor Takes Command at NATO

Christopher Nelson

James G. Stavridis
pages of endnotes. Uniquely, the book also develops practical recommendations for implementing the strategy with serious attention to timelines and regional nuances. Where Layne’s *Peace of Illusions* traces historical failings of the hegemonic approach, *Restraint* is a timely, fleshed-out policy proposal.

Ultimately, many policy makers will never get past page 1, where Posen defines American national security interests as the traditional sovereignty, safety, territory, and international power position. Threats to those are modest and Posen makes a compelling case they are best managed through limited overseas commitments. On the other hand, many in Washington believe American hegemony—euphemized as “leadership”—is *in and of itself* a fundamental interest, and that no economic and physical risks are acceptable. That one televised beheading five thousand miles away can so alarm America suggests this will not change soon. For those willing to think critically about America’s security needs, however, *Restraint* offers a deeply logical challenge and a thoughtful blueprint.

DAVID T. BURBACH


In the early days of the Second World War, General Eisenhower, the first Supreme Allied Commander of Europe, struggled to keep the alliance together. One of the more interesting anecdotes about this struggle is when he almost fired a member of his staff because the officer was, shall we say, culturally insensitive. The story goes that an American officer, a colonel on Eisenhower’s staff, insulted a British officer by calling him a *British* bastard. Ike wasn’t pleased. Ike threatened to bust him down to private. Being a bastard, he said, was not a national characteristic. All were equal in the eyes of the allies. But admittedly, handling NATO has not gotten any easier over the years. Secretary Gates, prior to his departure, had some choice words for the alliance, urging more NATO members to meet the required 2 percent of their GDP on defense spending. America, he noted, continues to pick up the slack—from Afghanistan to Libya. Yet the alliance remains.

Admiral James Stavridis, USN (Ret.), most recently Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and commander of U.S. European Command (EUCOM), and unofficially, the Navy’s advocate of the well-known John Adams quotation—“Let us tenderly and kindly cherish, therefore the means of knowledge. Let us dare to read, think, speak and write”—has written an enjoyable memoir of his time in Eisenhower’s old chair. Stavridis’s memoir stays away from criticism of U.S. officials and discussions of contentious closed-door meetings. This is in contrast to two other high-profile, former administration officials’ memoirs—those of Ambassador Christopher Hill and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta—which were published around the same time to much hoopla. While Stavridis was dual hatted as SACEUR and EUCOM his reputation around the headquarters was one of civility and intelligence, certainly not a bad combination. Stavridis says he wants to show the reader not what happened during his four years, but rather why it happened. He proceeds to take the reader on a tour
of challenges: from the toppling of Qadhafi to the civil war in Syria, Israeli security, a resurgent Russia, the Balkans, and finally, of course, Afghanistan. Thus the first few chapters are a whirlwind of individuals, meetings, and events. Among all this, he often pauses within chapters to highlight some of the more important senior military and political officials that make up the NATO alliance.

Stavridis spends considerable time in these early chapters setting up the facts—stating what happened—and then trying to balance it against why it happened and what he learned from it. The first part of the book, however, feels rushed and compressed, and even in his best efforts the balance tilts toward more numbers and facts and away from a deep exploration of the why. If there was one weakness, this is it. You are left wanting more discussion on how the policy was shaped in Washington and in Brussels. What was the dialogue during these many meetings? And why was it persuasive?

The second part of the book shines. Here he discusses leadership, strategic planning, innovation, and strategic communication. All of these chapters are excellent and well worth the price of the book. In one chapter, Stavridis talks about the actions that led to Generals McChrystal’s and Petraeus’s resignations—and his own stumbles. It is here he almost passes the George Orwell test. Orwell once said, “Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats.” And for Stavridis it is not all good. Stavridis explains that he was nominated to be the Chief of Naval Operations, following what was, by many accounts, a successful tour as the supreme allied commander. This was not to be. He describes, plainly, that some of his official travel was not properly paid for, and a single trip was deemed questionable by the inspector general. He accepted responsibility for his and his staff’s mistakes, and made reparations. Although he was cleared by the Secretary of the Navy from any wrongdoing, the long investigation was enough to complicate the political winds that are Washington, and the Secretary of Defense had to remove his nomination. While certainly not rising to Orwell’s definition of disgraceful, nonetheless, it was not his shining hour.

For this reader, the stories of his days commanding USS Barry, beautifully captured in his book Destroyer Captain, remain my favorite. Its style, written in a journalist’s hand, is intimate and moving—a man that loves the sea yet knows he is human and only can go as far as his crew takes him. Still, his new memoir is a refreshing dose of honesty, intelligence, and reflection—much needed in today’s Navy and tomorrow’s leaders.

CHRISTOPHER NELSON


From Johnny Horton’s 1960 ballad “Sink the Bismarck” to James Cameron’s Expedition Bismarck for the Discovery Channel in 2002, the sole sortie of the German battleship in May 1941 has held the attention of both the general public and naval historians. The latter mainly concentrate on the destruction of