U.S. Smart Power in Latin America

An Interview with James G. Stavridis

Admiral James G. Stavridis *currently serves as the Commander of the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). Prior to this, he served as Executive Assistant to the Secretary of the Navy and Senior Military Assistant to the Secretary of Defense. From 2002 to 2004, Adm. Stavridis commanded the Enterprise Carrier Strike Group, conducting combat operations in the Arabian Gulf in support of both Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.*

Adm. Stavridis earned a Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy and, in 1984, a Ph.D. from The Fletcher School, where he won the Gullion Prize as outstanding student. He is also a distinguished graduate of both the National and Naval War Colleges. He holds various decorations and awards, including the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, the Defense Superior Service Medal, and five awards of the Legion of Merit. He is author or coauthor of several books on naval ship handling and leadership, including Command at Sea *and* Destroyer Captain.

On March 4, 2008, The Forum*'s senior editor Bjoern H. Seibert spoke with Adm. Stavridis about the future challenges of the Navy, his work at SOUTHCOM, the recent developments in Cuba and Venezuela, and the detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay.*

FLETCHER FORUM: *What, in your mind, are the greatest challenges the U.S. Navy is currently facing?*

ADMIRAL JAMES STAVRIDIS: The number one challenge for our Navy is recapitalizing; our ships are aging and we need to buy newer and better ones. As the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Gary Roughead has said that we need a fleet that has sufficient reach to get around the world and to be involved—as the United States is—on a global basis, as a global navy. The second challenge is to make sure that we have quality people. That means recruiting the best and keeping them in a very competitive marketplace.

That is a continuous challenge for us, but I am generally pretty optimistic about it. Third, I think the United States Navy, like all the services, has to think through an era of asymmetric warfare. The best example of that in a Navy context is probably the attack on the U.S.S. *Cole,* which was mounted by a small group of terrorists, who just about sank a billion-dollar Navy warship, using a small go-fast boat and dynamite. So stepping up and addressing those types of asymmetric challenges will be very, very important for the Navy.

FORUM: *In a* Joint Force Quarterly *article in 1997 you warned of a second Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), which would entail the application of asymmetrical power against the United States. In your view, have we entered into the second RMA yet? And if yes, how can the United States respond to that?*

STAVRIDIS: As I look back on that article, I think it stands the test of time—most obviously when we look to Iraq and Afghanistan, where we have in many ways been challenged and forced to deal with asymmetric opponents. We see, for example, the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and the use of civilian cell phones, both as technology in IEDs and for battlefield communication. We could go on and on. The type of small boats that were used to attack the U.S.S. *Cole* is probably another good example. This is exactly what I was talking about in that article. In other words, our opponents are not going to follow us into the high-tech revolution in military affairs. They are not out there trying to build Aegis Cruisers; they are building small, lethal means of attacking us and are doing that very effectively. The good news is that we are learning lessons every day on the battlefields of Iraq, in the waters of the Arabian Gulf, in the mountains of Afghanistan. We are improving our capability in dealing with this asymmetric threat and learning as we go.

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FORUM: *The* Washington Post *journalist Dana Priest, in a book in 2003, characterized the Combatant Commanders as the "Proconsuls to the Empire." How do you feel about this characterization?*

STAVRIDIS: I feel that this characterization is not right. Obviously we are not an empire but a democratic republic. We are anything but an empire, in

the sense of trying to hold territory or dominate other cultures. By the same token, the proconsul in the Roman Empire was an individual who went and dispensed what passed for governance over a subjected people. This has nothing to do with what we do. I would say a Combatant Commander is simply an individual who represents a regional approach on behalf of the Department of Defense over a broad area. We are not responsible for but rather focused on that area, and we seek solutions to address the problems of this region.

In my area of Southern Command there is a wide spectrum of threats we address. To address them does not require high-end military technology but rather an approach that is international, interagency, and private/public. As I always say about this area of the world, "We are not launching Tomahawk Missiles, we are launching ideas," and thus our ability to do strategic communication, for example, is extremely important. I do not think the proconsuls in the Roman Empire devoted much time to thinking about strategic communication or working with international partners in a cooperative sense.

FORUM: *What are the lessons you have learned at SOUTHCOM and how could they be applied to other Combatant Commands? I am especially thinking of AFRICOM, as it also primarily seeks to focus on preventing conflicts and strengthening partnerships.*

STAVRIDIS: Absolutely—both Southern Command and Africa Command share a need for solution sets that come out of the three key things I have mentioned: international cooperation, interagency dialogue, and an understanding of how to connect with the private sector. At Southern Command, we are reorganizing along these lines so we can get better in those things. As is the case for AFRICOM, one of my two high-level deputies is a very senior foreign service officer at the post-ambassadorial level, and my other senior deputy commander, like AFRICOM's, is a three-star military officer. So I sort of have two deputies, one a civilian foreign service officer with a focus on the interagency approach and the other a more traditional military deputy, which is crucial to making the interagency part of this come alive.

FORUM: *You have called for the establishment of a new type of deployable group, which you refer to as a Humanitarian Service Group (HSG). Can you elaborate on this idea?*

STAVRIDIS: This is a maritime concept. The idea is that instead of having a group of ships centered on an aircraft carrier, whose primary mission is to launch strikes on shore, we ought to have groups of ships that have as primary functions training, providing humanitarian disaster relief, and

supporting humanitarian projects. What I am thinking about specifically is centering a group around a hospital ship and then including in that group several smaller ships that bring training capability with them.

This very broad approach is what SOUTHCOM needs, as this is not an area in the world where I see real military conflict—at least in the immediate future. So I think there is a great deal of promise in deploying a humanitarian service group down here. One thing we did last summer was deploy the U.S.N.S. *Comfort,* a hospital ship, which had 400,000 patient encounters, performed 1,200 surgeries, immunized 32,000 patients, trained 28,000 medical students and technicians, handed out 25,000 pairs of eyeglasses, and thus made a real difference in people's lives in a dozen different countries for several months. Also, the U.S.N.S. *Comfort*'s crew was international, interagency, and private/public, including volunteers from NGOs.

I certainly believe that the United States will continue to need real combat power, as we live in a dangerous world, but I also think we could devote some portion of our budget to ideas like the Humanitarian Service Group.

FORUM: *How is the United States doing with the problem of narcotics in SOUTHCOM's area of responsibility?*

STAVRIDIS: The problem of narcotics is a big one. The government does a fair deal of work on that: we have devoted $13 billion to combating drug trafficking overall. Of that, about a third is related to demand problems. We also try to address problems on the supply side. In my case, where the coca leaves are grown in the Andean Ridge, the State Department works to eradicate crops, creating substitution crops for farmers in those areas. And then that part in the middle—the transit zone, where the cocaine moves from the Andean Ridge to the United States—that is our piece of it in the Department of Defense (DOD). Our job is to detect it, to monitor it, and eventually to get our interagency partners like the Drug Enforcement Administration and the U.S. Coast Guard in a position to interdict the drugs.

FORUM: *How could the DOD effort be improved?*

STAVRIDIS: We are actually doing pretty well. On average, we stopped 230 metric tons of cocaine over the last couple of years. We can talk about supply and demand and price and purity; we are starting to see some indications of price going up and purity coming down in the U.S. market, so I think we are scoring some successes. In order to improve the DOD part of

this—the transit zone—we need better surveillance systems, human intelligence, and in particular, the ability to go after a new threat that is emerging: the traffickers are using mini-submarines to move drugs our way. So there are plenty of challenges out there. We are addressing those with the DOD, and it has to be part of addressing the demand side and the supply side.

FORUM: *What is your assessment of the situation in Venezuela, and what is the state of the military-to-military relations between the United States and Venezuela?*

STAVRIDIS: Historically, we have had wonderful relations between the United States and Venezuela over a period of decades. Unfortunately, at this moment, the Government of Venezuela is not interested in having military-to-military relations with the United States. Our hand is out; we would like to be involved with the Venezuelan military. For example, I very recently hosted a conference with the military leaders of South America, and representatives from virtually every country attended except Venezuela, which chose not to come. That same lack of cooperation manifests itself in counter-narcotics efforts, where we cannot count on suitable cooperation from the military of Venezuela. So unfortunately, due to political events at the moment, our military-to-military relations are weak to nonexistent. I would like to see that improve because I think an understanding of each other's militaries always helps prevent misunderstandings and potential conflicts. So, we will continue to put our hand out to work with the Venezuelan military.

FORUM: *Are you concerned about the growing relationship between Venezuela and Russia and especially the increased Russian arms sales to Venezuela?*

STAVRIDIS: I am concerned about the general trend in Venezuela to buy very large amounts of arms. I scratch my head in trying to understand why a country like Venezuela, which has no threats around it, would need that. No one seeks to invade it, least of all the United States. There is absolutely no theory whatsoever that we would ever invade Venezuela, despite being accused of that occasionally by those in Venezuela who are opposed to the United States. So it makes you wonder why Venezuela would feel the need to buy, for example, 25 advanced fighter

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aircraft from Russia; why it would want to buy 50 advanced helicopters; why it would want to buy 100,000 AK-103 automatic rifles for a standing army of only 40,000 people and then ask to buy the license for 25,000 rifles per year—rifles that last 40 years. I don't have a good answer for that, and so I'm concerned about the high level of arms purchases, which do seem to come from Russia. I don't see a political connection there particularly; I think the Russians are dealing with the Venezuelans on a cash-for-trade basis. But I am sorry to see such a high level of arms purchases on the part of Venezuela.

FORUM: *Are you concerned about Iran's increased willingness to engage in the region?*

STAVRIDIS: Iran is a terrorism-sponsoring state. Iranians are seeking to create a nuclear program, they are sanctioned by the United Nations in that regard, and their links with terrorist organizations like Hezbollah are well-documented. When I see the President of Iran come many, many times to this region over the course of the last two years and attend inaugurations in several countries in the region, that is of concern to me, because I don't like the idea of Islamic radicalism coming into this hemisphere.

FORUM: *Fidel Castro has recently resigned as Cuba's president. Do you foresee any fundamental changes in the political system in Cuba? And how do you assess the future of U.S.–Cuban relations?*

STAVRIDIS: Unfortunately, I don't see any changes. When the national assembly of Cuba elected a new president and Fidel Castro stepped aside, which was on a Sunday, I say to people that Cuba on Monday looked a lot like Cuba on Friday, just a different first name for the Castro brother who is running it. Unfortunately, Raúl Castro appointed to his immediate circle of vice presidents people who are just like him, who are hardline ideologues and who I do not believe intend to try to create the positive change to democracy that is so sorely needed in Cuba. Cuba is the only nation in the hemisphere that is not a democracy—the only one out of 34 nations. It's a single-party system, a single candidate. There is political repression and, unfortunately, under Raúl Castro I do not see that changing. I think that U.S.–Cuban relations will remain much as they are until there is a real willingness on the part of the Cuban government to move towards democracy, and unfortunately, I don't see much hope of that under Raúl Castro.

FORUM: *How do you foresee the future of the detention facilities in Guantanamo and under what circumstances would you recommend the closure of these facilities?*

STAVRIDIS: I think the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs have all spoken to their desire to see the facilities close. That will occur when there is a national consensus, which will have to be derived from a conversation at the national level between the judicial, executive, and legislative branches of the government as to what to do with the detainees and when the appropriate time is to close it. That is a policy issue that will occur at the national level. Our job, in the meantime, is to run a detention facility that is done in a transparent, humane, and legal way, and I am absolutely convinced we are doing that. Guantanamo today is, I would argue, the most transparent detention facility in the history of prisons or detention facilities. We have had 3,600 journalists and 3,200 legislators, human rights activists, and observers of all different types visit Guantanamo Bay over the last six years. All detainees are afforded the rights of Common Article III of the Geneva Convention, they eat an excellent diet, and they have incredibly good medical care with an extremely high ratio of doctors to patients. Every confinement area in the facility has an arrow painted on it that shows the way to Mecca. Detainees are afforded the opportunity to worship, have the Qu'ran, have access to books in an 8,000 volume library, have access to writing materials, have access to legal counsel as they pursue habeas corpus appeals, have the right to receive and send mail, and have right to a phone call. I would argue that we are keeping them in a very humane, legal, and transparent setting, and will continue to do that until a decision is reached at the national level. That is part of our role at SOUTHCOM.

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FORUM: *You are one of the most accomplished military officers in the United States Armed Forces. What advice can you give young men and women joining the military?*

STAVRIDIS: I always say there are three wonderful things about the military. Number one: you will never work with a greater group of people, because everyone is a volunteer. Everyone has raised their hand; everyone wants to be a part of the organization if they are in the armed forces. By and large, there are people who are smart, who are friendly, who are outgoing, who have a sense of duty and a sense of honor about themselves, and who care about their country. So you are joining a great, wonderful group of people, and

the camaraderie is just fabulous. Second, I can't think of another profession that offers a more adventurous life—at times a dangerous life but certainly an adventurous one—where you are not simply seated behind a desk clicking away at a computer screen all day long. You are out in the world, being part of the world, and being part of what matters in the world. And then third, and this is a very prosaic thing but I think a real thing, is that the military offers great job security and a wonderful retirement system, probably better than any civilian one out there. You don't make a heck of a lot of money, but you're comfortable. If you work hard and do well, you can advance in the organization. It's got an absolutely terrific retirement system, so young people coming in can have pensions at 37 or 38 years old, move on and have second careers, and still have some financial security behind them. So I think it's a pretty good package overall.

FORUM: *You have authored several books—including* Command at Sea—*which discuss in some depth the responsibility of commanding officers. In short, what skills should a commanding officer in the twenty-first century have?*

STAVRIDIS: Well, I would just broaden the question and say a twenty-first century leader ought to be several things. I'm a big believer in being calm and not losing your temper, being someone who recognizes that things will change and challenges will occur, and working through the problems in a sensible calm way; I put that at the very top of my particular list of attributes for any leader in the twenty-first century. Second is the ability to change. The preconceived assumptions that we had in the Cold War are all gone, and the world has been deconstructed in ways that we're just now beginning to appreciate. Change is accelerating, and I think we can all see that in our own short lifetimes. The pace of life and the way information comes at us—the complicated way the world works in a day and is reported in a 24-hour news cycle—is a staggering consequence. Third, I would put honesty and integrity, which I think are the bedrock for any leader. You have to know what you believe in, and you have to be true to that. You can't lie, cheat, or steal, which are the three things they always told us at the Naval Academy. So, integrity and honesty I think are very important qualities in a leader. The fourth one I would throw out there is a sense of humor, which is in some ways the most important one. You have to recognize that things aren't always going to go well, so be prepared to not take yourself too seriously. When things don't go well, try to see the humor in the situation.

FORUM: *Thank you for speaking with* The Forum. ■