

SAILING TO A NEW PORT

Commencement address delivered at the Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, on 15 June 2007, by Admiral James G. Stavridis

When Admiral Shuford asked me to make a trip to Newport, it brought back wonderful memories of my time here as a junior officer, with Lieutenant Jake Shuford. I can't say much more about that, mostly on advice of counsel, but suffice to say it was a wonderful time and involved jazz festivals, a lot of time on the tennis court, sailing, and an occasional cold beer.

It's wonderful and inspiring to see what a joint, interagency, and international event this is today. I do want to begin with a story which illustrates a bit about each of the services.

One day, three colonels were hiking together and unexpectedly came upon a wide, raging, violent river. They needed to get to the other side but had no idea how to do so. The Air Force colonel called out to God, praying, "Please God, give me the strength to cross this river." *Poof!* God gave him big arms and strong legs, and he was able to swim across. It did, however, take him more than an hour, and he almost drowned a couple of times. Seeing this, the Army colonel prayed to God saying, "Please God, give me the strength and tools to cross this river." *Poof!* God gave him a rowboat and oars. He was able to row across, but it still took almost an hour, it was very rough, and he almost capsized several times. The Marine colonel saw how things worked out for the other two, so when he prayed to God, he said, "Please God, give me the strength, tools, and the intelligence to cross this river." *Poof!* God turned him into a Navy lieutenant—a Surface Warfare Officer, actually. He looked at the map, hiked upstream a couple of hundred yards, and walked across the bridge.

That's a true story, in case you were wondering.

And lest our colonels in the audience get discouraged, let me tell you a true story—this one really is true—about Alexander Haig's promotion ceremony from colonel to one-star general. When Haig got his first star, he was working in the White House at the National Security Council staff as Henry Kissinger's military assistant. At a little ceremony in his White House office to pin on the star,

Henry said that in his years as a professor in the national security field he had met a lot of bright colonels—but not that many bright generals. Therefore, he said, he planned to work Haig extra hard in the coming period “before the mental deterioration set in.”

Since you can only imagine the mental deterioration that has set in in my case with each subsequent promotion, I will try to be brief today.

Seriously, my intent is to take a few moments today and lay out an idea for our graduates about how the future might look for the security of the United States—essentially, how we might think about structuring ourselves. Much of my thinking is shaped and reflected by the audience today and especially the graduates—joint, interagency, and multinational. I hope to share with you a new idea, and in that context it is interesting to think for a moment about the name of this beautiful, small town on the Narragansett Bay. It is, of course, “Newport”—quite literally a *new port*—founded in 1639 after the city fathers had a political falling-out with the larger colonial community in Portsmouth. Newport offered a fresh start. Over its storied history, this city used creativity and innovation to maintain its relevance as a tolerant and forward-thinking enclave.

Of course, this Naval War College has so often been an incubator for new ideas, new concepts, new innovations, dating back to its foundations and the golden years of Alfred Thayer Mahan, Stephen B. Luce, and others. Indeed, during my thirty years’ time in the Navy, the Naval War College has been at the center of debates ranging over the Maritime Strategy of the 1980s, of . . . *From the Sea* in the 1990s, and now, as Admiral Michael Mullen, the Chief of Naval Operations, seeks to write a new maritime component for the national military strategy.

And so in this new port—in sight of the vibrant Naval War College, which has been involved in new ideas for its entire life—I want to talk for a moment this morning about how we need to change and grow in the way we approach national security broadly here in the United States.

This unfolding twenty-first century presents our entire national security structure in general, and U.S. Southern Command in particular, with an unprecedented opportunity to define and shape new means and capabilities that will achieve U.S. national security objectives in an era of transnational and unconventional threats. Let me explain.

We live in a dangerous age. Globally, international terrorism will be the principal national security threat to the United States for the near future. Having said that, it is clear that the risk of regional conventional conflicts, such as in Asia and the Middle East, will persist. Clearly, the United States must maintain the capability to fight and win conventional wars, although they will probably not be the defining conflicts of this age.

Rather, it is the small, radical organization that holds the most significant threat to U.S. national interests. Driven by unprecedented technological advancement, globalization will continue to simultaneously disenfranchise and empower radical actors who will attempt to coerce representative governments through terrorist tactics. Defeating terrorists is a significant challenge for the United States, because our established national security tools—centered on military-backed diplomacy—are less capable against this asymmetric threat. Of greatest concern, of course, is the possibility of a terrorist organization obtaining and using weapons of mass destruction.

Preventing terrorism and defeating terrorists requires a multifaceted approach that reduces terrorist resources and capabilities while simultaneously addressing the underlying conditions of poverty, inequality, and corruption that create the conditions that give rise to future terrorists. Currently, no single arm of the U.S. federal government has the ability or authority to coordinate the multiple entities required to execute an effective international antiterrorism campaign.

Frankly, this is not war as the U.S. military has historically envisioned it, which leads to significant challenges in training, equipping, and organizing our forces for a new sort of war. Perhaps most challenging, we in the Department of Defense must expand our understanding of conflict beyond lethal means and reenvision all our operations, including “peacetime” engagement and training activities as part of a single strategic framework. These are the new fundamental conditions of the twenty-first-century security environment:

- Attacks by radical organizations bent on religious or ideological domination
- Nation-states fighting in unconventional settings with unfamiliar tool sets
- The “war of ideas” at the root of conflicts, requiring sophisticated strategic communication
- A globalizing economy with perceived winners and losers
- Rising environmental concerns, coupled to globalization
- Miniaturizing technologies producing powerful effects
- Diffusion of weapons of mass destruction—including biological and chemical
- “24/7” news coverage with satellite radio and television
- Satellite information and instant, global communication at everyone’s fingertips
- Exploding Internet with bloggers, hackers, and chat rooms
- Cell-phone cameras and recorders, making everyone a “reporter”
- Sophisticated media engagement by transnational terrorists and organizations.

A difficult set of conditions, to be sure. Accordingly, we must clearly understand ourselves to be daily embroiled in a struggle of ideas wherein every activity attributable to the United States communicates to some audience. Therefore, exactly what we wish to communicate must be predetermined and guided through a systematic, yet flexible and effective, process.

Perhaps nowhere in the unified command system does this new set of conditions present itself more fully than in U.S. Southern Command. As a traditional military jurisdiction, its area of responsibility is notable for its current lack of conventional military threats; but the region's persistent conditions of poverty, inequality, and corruption provide fertile soil in which international criminals and terrorists can flourish.

Throughout this area of responsibility—thirty-two countries, thirteen territories, five hundred million people, fifteen million square miles—security threats most often take forms that we more readily associate with crime than war. In the region's growing gang activity, we see criminals and the disenfranchised banding together and combining traditional criminal activities in ways that threaten U.S. national security. Kidnapping, counterfeiting, human trafficking, and drug trafficking—which leads to over ten thousand deaths annually in the United States—combine with extremist ideologies to create a dangerous blend. All of these conditions can undermine fragile democracies. Ecological issues are bubbling fast, especially in South America and the Caribbean. Radical ideologues are gaining sway and putting real pressure on democratic norms in a variety of nations.

These new threats—while ultimately not susceptible to combat operations—tend to operate at our intellectual seams and thrive in our bureaucratic and cultural blind spots. Our system of legal, political, moral, and conceptual boundaries defining what constitutes combat versus criminal activity, domestic versus international jurisdiction, and governmental versus private interests all provide operational space for lethal opponents with no such boundaries to respect.

Countering such threats and reacting to the informational realities will require new organizational structures not predicated on traditional notions of war and peace. Our old model, wherein the State Department offers a “carrot” in time of peace while the Defense Department threatens the “stick” in time of war, provides solutions only when peace and war are readily distinguishable. Today they are not so neatly divided. Given an environment of unceasing microconflict and constant ideological communication, “carrot and stick” must work not merely hand in hand but hand in glove—synchronized with a single purpose and unity of effort, across national and tactical echelons—in ways previously unseen in our country's history.

Which brings me to U.S. Southern Command. We cannot expect clear transitions between peace and war, and, thus, we need to explore a new standing

organization chartered to operate within today's dynamic and changing international environment.

The Combatant Commands of today appropriately seek to maintain a vital regional perspective on security issues. However, enabling truly joint and inter-agency activities may require additional modalities and authorities to provide effective synchronization of various U.S. government agencies' resources. We need vastly better integration across the entire government of the United States and better coalition integration.

We need to "test drive" a new model that truly evokes joint, interagency, and international. U.S. Southern Command is well suited as a test case: it could easily transition over a relatively short period to a more integrated posture that expands its strong interagency perspective and capacity.

Specifically, we need:

- *More interagency integration:* a true interagency team, with senior representatives from each key agency and cabinet actually holding command positions throughout the organizations. We need directorates reflecting the missions of the command in the twenty-first century, including stability, prosperity, security, and intelligence.
- *State Department teaming:* Of particular note, we need greater engagement with the State Department throughout the enterprise. This should be highlighted by sending a three-star-equivalent, post-ambassador deputy to the command.
- *Combined/international partnering:* An expanded set of partnering arrangements with all the nations and territories in the region, to include more liaison officers, both military *and* civilian, from the region.
- *Strategic communication focus:* We are in a geopolitical marketplace of ideas, and strategic communication thus becomes the "main battery" of U.S. Southern Command—both in the sense of providing power like a battery *and* of sending shots downrange, as in the "main battery of a ship." At SOUTHCOM we aren't launching Tomahawk missiles—we're launching ideas. Strategic communication should therefore be a direct report to the commander and become the direct responsibility of a two-star chief of staff. In the geopolitical marketplace of ideas "down south," we must increase our market share!
- *Public/private linkages:* So much of the power of the United States to create successful partnerships in SOUTHCOM is found in the private sector. At the command, we must find ways to work with nongovernmental organizations, private charitable entities, international organizations, and the private sector. We should look for ways to do this in appropriate staff nodes.

- *High-speed staff process:* Using new methods of connection and a flattened organization, linking the staff to move at requisite speed in the era of the twenty-four-hour news cycle is also a prerequisite for success.
- *Less in Miami, more forward:* We must seek ways to place more staff resources forward with embassies, and team with the State Department and other agencies in the field.
- *Culture of both war and peace:* While remaining capable of combat operations, we should recognize that the real thrust of twenty-first-century national security in this region is not vested in war but in intelligent management of the conditions of peace in a volatile era.

We are moving in this direction now, but there is much to be done. Taking this new approach at SOUTHCOM would be a useful experiment in creating new organizations to best meet twenty-first-century security challenges. It seems clear that it is time to at least consider rethinking the fundamental structure and approach of Southern Command and then intelligently seeking to leverage the lessons learned for the future.

I want to close with some thoughts about how ideas are passed along from generation to generation.

Over a week of vacation last week, I had the chance to get to two books on my current reading list—both novels. As an aside, I am an enormous believer in reading fiction, which I think in many ways does a better job than nonfiction of capturing the real ideas of culture, history, social justice, humor, compassion, and competition—all of what makes up the fabric of our societies. I read two utterly different novels, but they had something vital in common, and I want to close on that thought.

The first is by one of the sharpest observers of U.S. culture, Christopher Buckley. It's called *Boomsday*, and with tongue firmly in cheek, he tackles key issues like social security, the aging of the baby boom, conflict between generations, pop culture, and a dozen other topics. I won't steal his thunder, but to say the least, his character's "solution" to the enormous bow wave of baby boomers headed toward social security is creative indeed.

The second novel is a dark story of life in the United States following an apocalyptic event, and it describes the wandering of a father and a young son around a country that is devastated and living in complete anarchy. It's called simply *The Road*, and it is notable in every sense, most particularly for the heartbreaking beauty of its poetic language and as well for the utterly bleak situation it portrays.

You should be wondering what on earth two novels like that have in common. The answer is simple: both are about what generations owe each other. In *Boomsday* we have a satiric vision of the cut-and-thrust between generations as

they jockey for the best life in a world of rich resources—but disagree bitterly about how to divide them. The generations must learn to work together to solve the problems they face, with creativity and innovation. In *The Road* we see the care and love—and the life lessons passed—between a father and a son in a bleak world in which there are virtually no resources to divide. Above all, the father passes to his son hope—hardest of all in the world they inhabit quite literally “on the road.”

Both Christopher Buckley and Cormac McCarthy touch the central idea I want to leave you with today—that each generation must learn and strive and accomplish but must also learn to pass along what it learns to the successors. That, as any of us with teenage children will attest, is hard work indeed. But it is vital and important to our society and our civilization.

It also has a distinct meaning within the context of this graduation day. Today, nearly six hundred new graduates of this war college will sail on, including well over a hundred distance-learning graduates. They are all part of the Class of 2007 from this College, which numbers over 1,300 graduates. They wear many different uniforms, they come from many different U.S. government agencies and many different countries, and they have each learned very different things.

But I would submit that one of the crucial things they all share is that they must return to their ships and submarines and aircraft squadrons and SEAL teams and battalions and divisions and brigades and Coast Guard cutters, their countries and their agencies and cabinet staffs, and all the rest—they must pass the spark of innovation and creativity that they have been given here, in this War College, in this New Port, in a time of seemingly infinite challenges and I believe equally extraordinary promise.

The Greeks say you never cross the same river twice—the water moves on. Sail bravely into your future! Accept each new assignment as the invigorating, life-enhancing challenge that it can be. That is what makes a life such an incredible experience to cherish, especially if you do the kinds of things all of you are about to do. Hand off your brilliant ideas to the next generation! And as all of you depart on the beautiful trajectory of your lives and careers, I am confident you will do exactly that. I wish you all Godspeed and open water in the voyage ahead.

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