

ASHLEY: The coronavirus is the world's biggest crisis of the 21st century, worse than the tragic losses on 9/11 and the economic damage of the Great Recession. Today, we look at positive, hopeful ways to emerge from the pandemic. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Episode Four, Let's Find Common Ground: what our leaders and all of us need to learn to emerge from disaster and be more unified in the future.

ASHLEY: Our guest is Admiral James Stavridis. He spent 37 years in the U.S. Navy. He served in both Democratic and Republican administrations. During his long career, Admiral Stavridis led U.S. Southern Command in Miami and served as the 16th Supreme Allied Commander at NATO.

RICHARD: His latest book is Sailing True North. Admiral James Stavridis, thanks for joining us.

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: Pleasure to be with you.

ASHLEY: How big is this current crisis compared to others in the past, for instance the two world wars or the Great Depression of the 1930s?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: I think those are all bigger than what we're experiencing now, but let's jump forward to the 21st century. What is occurring now actually feels to me like a combination of 9/11 plus the Great Recession of '08, '09. In other words, you have the uncertainty that manifested itself coming out of 9/11 with this sense of, "How big is Al-Qaeda? All the airplanes in the world aren't flying. What are we going to do next?" Uncertainty coupled with the certainty of significant economic downturn—so I would say this is the biggest crisis thus far of the 21st century.

RICHARD: Is this COVID pandemic the biggest crisis since World War II?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: I would say it is, and one could make some arguments about a couple of other events along the road, particularly, for example, the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which the world almost came to an apocalyptic end. I'd put that probably above what we're experiencing now since we're not going to end apocalyptically. In fact, I want to make, I think, an important point. We need to recognize we are going to get a vaccine. This particular pathogen did not arrive here in a sealed capsule from orbit around the planet Zorp. We know how to do this. It's a matter of time, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel that is not the train rushing toward us.

RICHARD: Nevertheless, this is a fast and rapidly changing crisis. What did you learn from your long experience in the military about the fog of war? Because I think it's very easy for us to criticize leaders for past behavior, but it can be very confusing at the time that you're going through this.

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: The first and principal duty of any leader is to bring order out of chaos. Certainly that's true in the military. We think of the military as an organization designed to create chaos, to blow things up and wreak enormous havoc on society and on people, but in the end, what a military exists to do is to bring order out of chaos. And I think the first job of any leader in a scenario like this is to remain calm, remain balanced, have a sense of empathy for others who are going through the challenges. If you do that, you can then deal with the fog of war because you are never going to have perfect knowledge, and I think it's important that leaders project balance, a willingness to reach across ideological differences on other, less important topics and work together to build teams.

ASHLEY: Sticking to the military for a minute, you have said that the U.S. military is capable of launching missiles, but it's also capable of launching ideas. Can the military help with future planning against future pandemic and other potential health threats, do you think?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: Absolutely. Let's work from the inside out. So, when I was commander of U.S. Southern Command, I was part of the relief efforts in Haiti, which was struck by a terrible cholera epidemic. I saw firsthand how our military can go to work bringing massive logistic support, helping create order out of chaos by instilling civil authority and norms in a chaotic situation, how militaries can work with other militaries. Here we saw the Chileans, the Argentinians, the Brazilians all working together in this terrible crisis situation.

So, first and foremost, militaries can launch a logistic support, bring those medical teams to the forefront, be capable of helping create order in the immediate situation, and you saw that here in the States with the launch of the two big, beautiful hospital ships, Comfort and Mercy. Comfort was under my command many, many times in U.S. Southern Command. It's an example of the capability of the military.

ASHLEY: What's another example of what the military can do, especially in fighting disease?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: The next thing the military can do, it has a huge medical and research facility system that's really set up to deal with biological warfare, and essentially what we're in now is biological warfare. So the military has capability in research, development, and bringing that kind of capability working alongside the CDC and the other U.S. entities as well as international ones. The military is expert at creating huge stockpiles, inventory, distributing. When the next pandemic inevitably comes along, as many of us have been talking about for decades, we need to have not a few million N-95 masks but a billion N-95 masks. We need to have hundreds of thousands of respirators because we know that the pathogen path most likely will continue to be one that attacks through the respiratory system.

RICHARD: The military's really good at planning, and the U.S. government or U.S. taxpayers have spent vast amounts of money on our military. Should similar priorities be given to preparing for the next pandemic or for public healthcare in general?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: Yes, and yes. U.S. military has a command called U.S. Northern Command. It's headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Its mission is the defense of the homeland, and it works very closely with the Department of Homeland Security. That command, U.S. Northern Command, is the repository for the planning process to prepare for pandemics, and it has been not as robust as obviously it should be, and it is an obvious area where we ought to put more emphasis on the U.S. military. A particular way to do that would be, for example, to create a three-star command. And here, you would want a former surgeon general of the Army, the Navy, or the Air Force, promote them to three stars, have her take charge of this new medical establishment, and put that under U.S. Northern Command, the four-star command that has responsibility overall for protecting the United States.

Then, secondly and obviously, the military has a budget of \$700 billion. A lot of that has gone toward personnel, forward deployments overseas, overseas basing. I think there's going to be a significant look at all of that coming out of the pandemic to say: what portion of those kind of resources ought to be shifted so that they are focused like a laser beam on preparing for the next pandemic.

ASHLEY: In the past, the U.S. has played a major role in rallying the world in times of crisis. Do you think it still has a role to play doing that right now?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: Well, I think so. Unfortunately, I think at the moment President Trump is now reaping what he has sown in the sense of underweight attention to this global network of alliances. So I don't think the United States is stepping up in a global role as it should be. We have resources. We have terrific scientists, but we are not doing what we need to even here in the United States, let alone creating a broad international consensus. In fact, we're tending to create an extremely confrontational set of circumstances between us and China. This is a time when the ideas of "America first" are not going to serve us as well as the ideas of America as a global leader.

RICHARD: Perhaps it's important to point out that this argument does not come from a Democrat. You have said in the past that you're very bipartisan, and you were considered for senior positions by both Hillary Clinton, had she been elected, and also Donald Trump in 2016. So talk a little bit about the need to have bipartisan solutions or nonpartisan solutions to this.

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: Well, yes, I was vetted for vice president by Hillary Clinton, one of six people, so formally vetted, and then I was offered a cabinet position by Donald Trump. I kind of think of that as two bullets whizzing by my head. I think we need a nation where people are willing to serve in the administration of either party, particularly when they have technical skills, as I do in national security, as someone like Tony Fauci does in epidemiology, as someone like Deborah Birx does in medical distribution systems, in which she's extremely expert. And in this increasingly polarized world, it is harder and harder to find people who are willing to serve in either administration in these kind of specialized, if you will, technical roles.

RICHARD: So how do we fix that?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: I think one part of our solution here is to create a national sense of service to the country which transcends the bipartisan bickering that we have today. It's something we need to work hard to inculcate into the society, and here I'm talking to you whether you wake up in the morning with Morning Joe on MSNBC and go to bed at night with Rachel Maddow or whether you are watching Fox & Friends first thing in the morning and you can't imagine a night where you haven't heard from Sean Hannity at the end of the night. Look, we need to get past that, and part of that, and again this is supported by polling again and again in the American public, is that people are hungry for individuals who can lead from the center and who are willing to move across that ideological spectrum. Then, finally, part of this, I think, is to try and recreate a culture of civility in the country.

Hopefully, as we come out of a crisis like this, we'll see those small acts of COVID kindness, as people have called them, that can be part of bringing balm to Gilead.

ASHLEY: Can you tell us more about the culture of service you'd like to see? What might that look like, do you think? How do we get people on board so we all have something in common?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: I would start with the idea of national service not as a mandatory function but an option. So, coming out of high school here in the United States, many folks, 60-70%, rush into university, community college, higher education, if you will. How do we create a system that incentivizes people to do a year to two years of service. We have some programs that do that, Teach for America, Volunteer for America. There are a number of those kinds of programs today. I would say that coming out of an event like this, we ought to look coherently at whether or not we could create a larger set of incentives: perhaps to reduce your college tuition, some kind of a break on your mortgage, something similar to the G.I. Bill, which was afforded to service members coming out of the military after the second world war. I think we all have a responsibility as voters to find leaders who are willing to evince that culture of service and who are more centrist and more bipartisan. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French philosopher who studied democracy, came to America in the 1840s and wrote a book about democracy, largely laudatory. The salient quote in it, however, is that the tragedy of democracy is that in the end, you elect the government you deserve.

RICHARD: So how has the leadership of governors of both parties contrasted with what we hear from the White House?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: They are showing, I think, terrific leadership. To pick two Republicans who I think are showing terrific leadership, look at Charlie Baker in Massachusetts or Mike Dewine in Ohio. To pick two Democrats who are showing terrific leadership, look at Andrew Cuomo in New York and certainly the governor of California, I think, is doing a terrific job. I think the state Houses are doing, by and large, a fairly good job with this. I think the White House, by contrast, is doing a less effective job, and it's because they do not take the international, global view of this pandemic and, secondly, because they are in an endless series of difficult conversations that seem to have a political edge to them with the individual state governors. There's this tension between the executive branch at the federal level and the executive branch at the state level, and it is not serving the nation well.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. More of our conversation with Admiral James Stavridis ahead.

ASHLEY: Our podcasts are brought to you by Common Ground Committee.

RICHARD: Its public events inspire citizens and leaders to make progress on the issues through civil public discourse.

SPEAKER 4: Bringing light, not heat to public discourse—that's our motto. We put forums together where we bring panelists from opposite sides of a tough issue.

SPEAKER 5: Please welcome Secretary Condoleezza Rice. Please welcome Secretary John Kerry; Chris Wallace; Maggie Haberman; Barney Frank; Larry Kudlow.

BARRY KUDLOW: But I would give you a lot of running room on the personal tax side if you give me my 15% corporate tax rate, large and small [crosstalk 00:15:49].

BARNEY FRANK: With the right tradeoff, we could do that.

BARRY KUDLOW: I mean that. I mean that. I think there's a deal to be had.

RICHARD: Watch full events online at CommonGroundCommittee.org or on our Common Ground Committee YouTube channel. We're back with Admiral James Stavridis, and we'll hear more from him on personal lockdown tips, plus why he calls himself a very serious cook.

ASHLEY: Admiral, I'd love to talk to you about some more personal aspects of this crisis. You obviously served for decades, largely abroad. You were away from your family for a very long time. We're now, most of us, away from people we love very much. My mother lives in London. I can't get to her. I don't know when I'm going to see her again. What did your experience of being away for such long periods teach you about how to cope with this kind of thing?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: Well, first of all, as a military officer who forward deployed many, many times, I kind of took for granted my level of risk and didn't really appreciate the level of worry and concern that my wife and my two daughters underwent. I've learned now when I'm the one who's not forward deploying, and my two son-in-laws are both physicians who are very much forward in this crisis and are dealing with COVID patients every day, and my daughter, one of my two daughters, is a nurse practitioner, all of a sudden I'm the one kind of on the back foot while my loved ones are the ones forward at risk.

So I'll tell you three things that I've learned on this side of the fence. One is: use all the tools of communication you can possibly muster. We're so lucky that this has occurred while we are in a period when our information technology, our websites, all of it can support the kind of not-quite-in-person-but-still-very-real-and-intimate conversations, everything from Zoom to Microsoft Teams to Cisco Webex to FaceTime. Back in my day, serving at sea, I would see that bag of mail come over brought by helicopter and think, "Oh, my god. I'm going to see four or five letters from my wife," because in those days, we had no communication from ships at sea for months on end.

Second, focus on what you can do for others. Are there elderly people who live near you to whom you can provide service? Can you do their grocery shopping? Can you help them with the lawn? I find that getting your mind off yourself and trying to help someone else is an incredibly positive aspect to all of this. Third, challenge yourself. Learn something. Study Portuguese, which I'm doing right now. I speak French and Spanish, and I've always wanted to learn Portuguese. So I have time to do that. Do everything you can to read more, to study more, to learn more in the time that you have that perhaps is more available to you.

Then, keep it in perspective. We're not in World War II where 80 million people are going to die globally. There are going to be millions of people who die globally, but it won't begin to hit those numbers. We're not even in World War I. We're probably not going to see a prolonged global depression economically. I think we'll see a severe and hopefully relatively short recession. Then fifth and finally, stay informed. Watch the briefs that are offered on television. Learn about the virus. So much is a fear of the unknown, and the more we know, the more we can control our concerns.

ASHLEY: Earlier, you talked about your daughters. I'd love you to talk about how you think your daughters' generation is going to come out of this.

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: I'm a Baby Boomer. My daughters are Millennials. I find the Millennials are more focused on serving others. They are very skeptical of bad leadership. They are tech-savvy, and they are very willing to be part of something bigger than themselves. I've seen it in the military in the Millennials who went forward and fought for the United States and the Millennials from all around the world. But it's a big generation, and it's dealing now with this combination of a medical uncertainty and an economic crisis. I see them standing and delivering for the country. I would say, when all is said and done, watch the Millennials.

RICHARD: That almost brings tears to my eyes, and when you talk about Millennials, my daughter is a yoga studio owner. I have been stunned by how she has pulled her community together, rallied them. She is now doing online meditation and journaling for her students and has managed to save her business by changing completely the model of how she leads her community to one that's

now online while the buildings that she normally would operate from are empty. And it's exactly what you were talking about. It's that sense of community and sense of decency, as well as just, "We've got to get through this."

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: Yeah, all the above, watch the Millennials.

ASHLEY: We want to leave people with some sense of inspiration after each one of these podcasts and that there is hope. I was going to ask you how you nurture yourself during this crisis. You may already have answered that question, but you're at least partially of Greek heritage. Do you cook? Do you cook Greek food?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: In another life, I wouldn't be an admiral. I'd be a chef. I grew up in and around my grandfather who ran a small Greek diner in Allentown, Pennsylvania. I've been a busboy. I've been a waiter. I've been a prep guy. I've been a line chef. I wouldn't really call myself a chef, but I am a very serious cook. I'm also someone who enjoys a good cocktail, and often I'll put on cocktails for my beautiful wife, Laura, make a great dinner. We will enjoy that aspect of doing things. And wherever you are in this pandemic, you can find small moments of joy and inspiration and hope, but I want to make an important point.

Not everyone has those kind of resources. Not everyone has that gift of time. Many people are very, very deeply struggling, living lives of quiet desperation, wondering what is happening with their job. Where is the money for the next tank of gas coming? So I think the best thing you can do in this time is contribute. If you have funding to do so, put money toward your local food bank. Where you can do public service, do so, and where you can, do private service in your neighborhoods. That sense of serving others and helping others I think is what will get us through all this alongside the technology and the medicine and all the things we talked about. We will emerge stronger on the other side of this.

RICHARD: Why do you say that? Why do you think that we will emerge stronger from this?

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: Because my whole life experience has been watching people in very difficult circumstances who are resilient recover and do even better. Look at the 1920s and '30s when we had the great influenza, Spanish influenza. We had a global depression that lasted much of a decade followed by a global war. How did we do? We came out of that. We rebuilt society, and we have lengthened life expectancy. We've invented marvelous things. We haven't had a global war in 70, 80 years. I think that's real progress, and I think this crisis will give us an opportunity to come out of it, particularly on the economic side, I believe even stronger than when we went into it because we'll learn so much, and we will be tested. Ernest Hemingway said that a bone is the strongest in the place it's been broken. I think that's how we'll do here.

RICHARD: Thank you very much for joining us, Admiral James Stavridis.

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: What a pleasure, guys. Thank you. Very well done.

ASHLEY: Thank you.

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: Okay. Thanks a lot, guys.

RICHARD: Thanks very much. Appreciate. Okay, thanks.

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: Oh, my pleasure. Bye-bye.

ASHLEY: Admiral James Stavridis on Let's Find Common Ground, a production of the Common Ground Committee.

RICHARD: Find out more about our work and our mission at CommonGroundCommittee.org. Subscribe where you listen to podcasts.

ASHLEY: And leaving a review helps more people find us. Thanks for listening.