ASHLEY: From the appalling suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to deep divisions in our politics and demands for racial justice heard across the country, 2020 was a year like no other. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. This is our year-end show, Special Moments of 2020. In our first year of this podcast, we've been amused, surprised, and enlightened, and not necessarily in that order.

ASHLEY: And for reasons of time, we've also had to leave out some memorable shows.

RICHARD: Yeah. This has been a tough one to put together, mostly because of what we didn't include.

ASHLEY: We start with Creative Strategies to Pull Out of the Pandemic. That was the title of Episode Four, released in the late spring.

RICHARD: Our guest was retired Navy admiral, James Stavridis. He served in both Democratic and Republican administrations and led U.S. Southern Command in Miami, as well as, between 2009 and '13, he was Supreme Allied Commander at NATO.

ASHLEY: I asked him how big a crisis the pandemic is compared to others in the past.

ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS: 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 9/11with 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.

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. 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, again, and 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 idealogical 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.

ASHLEY: Retired admiral, James Stavridis.

RICHARD: One example of bipartisan leadership can be found in the Problem Solvers Caucus in Congress, 25 Democrats and 25 Republican members of the House who work together on a range of issues. Their compromise proposals on COVID relief helped break the rigid divide between both parties on how to get help to people who are suffering economic hardship in the pandemic.

ASHLEY: In October, we spoke with Representatives Abigail Spanberger and Brian Fitzpatrick, both members of Problem Solvers Caucus. She's a Democrat. He's a Republican. I asked both of them what they like most and least about their jobs.

BRIAN: I love being able to help people, especially people that are in a really dark place in their life, whether they've lost a family member to addiction or lost a child to childhood cancer or somebody's who's really in a tough spot and they need that light at the end of the tunnel to help them get through it, and being able to help them be that light by getting them involved in a piece of legislation that might be done in the memory of their family member or their child. It gets them excited. It gives them hope.

What do I like least about my job? Being the target of a lot of anger over social media. It can get pretty ugly, and they always tell us don't read your social media feeds. But Abigail and I are human beings. Every once in a while, we take a peek, and there's a lot of vitriol out there.

ABIGAIL: I think the best part of the job, and Brian touched on part of this, is just being able to have entree into people's lives, to be invited into people's experiences, the very, very bad and the very, very good, and to know that when people are telling you a story of something that may have impacted them, that you might be a part of ensuring that the next family has that same opportunity or ensuring that the next family avoids that same heartache.

RICHARD: And what do you hate about your job?

ABIGAIL: I'm going to copy Brian on this one, too. Social media, it's a wonderful thing for sharing, but it really is amazing just how once you reduce things to a certain number of characters these days, you can just be so simplified in... I have small children. So, actually comically, I suppose, my husband sent me a photo this afternoon. The kids were doing an art project, and they had a YouTube tutorial for the art project they were working on. And he snapped a picture right as one of the particularly ridiculous attack ads against me came up. So my six-year-old and my nine-year-old are there doing a painting project for a Halloween decoration, and it's, "Abigail Spanberger, she's terrible, terrible, terrible." That's just... It's unfortunate because it erodes at some of the trust that exists within Congress, and it makes it harder to do all the other stuff that we've talked about for the past 40 minutes.

RICHARD: Do both of you agree that there are issues that are being politicized that really shouldn't be?

BRIAN: Yeah, how about all of them? Any issues that get politicized shouldn't be. Again, this is, I'm sure, what frustrates Abigail as much as it frustrates me. The people that come here for the right reasons and with a good perspective on the job want to fix things. That's it. We don't want to not fix a problem so that they can campaign on it.

RICHARD: Brian Fitzpatrick and Abigail Spanberger, who are both from opposing parties, but they told us they agree with each other much more frequently than they disagree.

ASHLEY: Sometimes people disagree because of language. Climate change is a hot-button issue. We spoke with Eva Botkin-Kowacki of The Christian Science Monitor.

RICHARD: I asked her if the debate over the environment can be framed in a different kind of way to help people from different backgrounds and ideologies find common ground.

EVA: People tend to get their hackles up when it's said wherever they are on the spectrum of opinion on it. They know that it's just become this heated, in many ways, topic that evokes a certain reaction in folks. I've seen in it my reporting, and some of our colleagues have seen it in their reporting and written about this, as well. One of our colleagues wrote about the Midwest flooding last year. That was pretty extensive. He spoke with a number of different farmers in Nebraska. I believe the headline was something along the lines of Nebraskan Farmers Will Talk About Climate Change, But Don't Use Those Words. So I think the place to really talk about it now and to find common ground is through those effects that we're seeing.

So I think if we can kind of separate ourselves from the heated debate that's happened and just talk about what's happening now and what we can do about it in a more grounded sense, I think that's really where you can start to have that conversation. When I've interviewed folks, just average folks, homeowners, farmers, not scientific experts, about climate change, often I've heard them say, "I'm not an expert, but here's what I've seen. Here's what I've experienced." I talked to fishermen about the fish that they're catching changing, how frequently they're catching them, the time of year that they're catching them. And then you can have a conversation about warming waters.

But because it's become so heated, when you say climate change, it makes people think, "Oh, I don't know enough about that to say. I don't want to wade into that debate," and yet everyone does have knowledge on this. Everyone has knowledge just by living their lives and looking around and experiencing what we're experiencing living here on Earth. So I think if we speak from that place of: what are you seeing? What am I seeing? Okay, what are you experiencing? What is it like to live on Earth right now in your part of the world? and compare notes in a certain way, I think that's how we can find common ground.

ASHLEY: Eva Botkin-Kowacki of The Christian Science Monitor, from our election episode about climate change. She's a staff reporter on the newspaper's Science, Technology, and Environment team.

RICHARD: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. This is our year-end show, Special Moments: Our Search for Common Ground. Coming up, several discussions on race and the police. Plus, Jordan and Chris, two buddies from very different political backgrounds who go on a road trip across America.

ASHLEY: Let's Find Common Ground is produced for Common Ground Committee. We bring together people of different points of view to discuss one of the most urgent concerns of our time: how to shed light, not heat on public discourse.

SPEAKER 7: 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.

Please welcome Secretary Condoleezza Rice. Please welcome Secretary John Kerry; Chris Wallace; Maggie Haberman; Michael Steele; Donna Brazile.

RICHARD: Watch full events online at commongroundcommittee.org or on our Common Ground Committee YouTube channel. Coming next on Let's Find Common Ground, a show from the summer when we discussed law enforcement reform with a leading critic of the police, as well as a police chief.

ASHLEY: In 2020, outrage, grief, and despair over cases of police brutality and racism erupted into nationwide protests with demands for major reforms. The demonstrators appeared to sway public opinion. A Washington Post poll in June found that 69% of Americans agreed that the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis suggests a broader problem within law enforcement.

RICHARD: We spoke with Art Acevedo, the police chief in Houston, one of America's most diverse cities. He says we live in a violent country, and while police reform is needed, it should be placed in context.

CHIEF ACEVEDO: I find it interesting that we focus on law enforcement, and I support the fact on law enforcement. We should be under a microscope, but it is a little bit disingenuous for people to talk about police violence and not talk about just societal violence in this country. We are armed to the teeth in this country. We have mental illness that goes unabated in this country without sufficient treatment. We have addiction in this country. There are so many failures of society in this country that go well beyond law enforcement. I think the elephant in the room is that... Are there too many police shootings? Absolutely. There's too much violence in our society, period, and for every police shooting... People forget there are 800,000 police officers in this country, 800,000 with tens of millions, tens of millions of contacts.

If you actually assess the percentage of those contacts that result in the use of force by police officers, they're miniscule. And if you look at how many times we use deadly force, they're even more minuscule. And if you look at the total number of times that people actually die at the hands of police, they're even more miniscule. But let's be real. We still look around the country, and we see incidents like the George Floyd death. That was sickening to watch. It makes me angry to think about a man calling for his mama. I'm a spiritual person so I felt like he was seeing his mom at that point as he was getting ready to transition from the flesh to the spirit. And we still have to do a lot of work, but we will be having this conversation two generations from now if we don't go and look beyond the challenges of policing and look at the societal shortcomings that we have yet to address in our country.

ASHLEY: Chief Acevedo says the number of police departments across the country should be reduced. Currently, there are 18,000. And he says the death of George Floyd made it clear that minimum national standards are needed.

RICHARD: On that same episode called Reforming the Police, we also spoke with Maya Wiley, a civil rights activist and former Board Chair of New York City's Civilian Complaint Review Board. She's also among the candidates running to be the city's next mayor.

ASHLEY: I asked Maya about her conversations with police officers. Do African-American officers view their jobs differently?

MAYA: The short answer is no community is a monolith. I've had amazing conversations with police officers who are white. I have sometimes had disturbing conversations with police officers who were not. But I will say, on the whole, police officers who are Black and Latino did have different perspectives. They were less likely to have positive views of their police union and to feel that they were being served by their police union. They were deeply committed to community policing and to figuring out how to do that.

I had one police officer, Black, had been in a uniform for over a decade, he did not tell his son that he was a police officer. He told his son that he was in security because he was afraid his son would walk in his footprints and because he told me that the racism within the department was so rampant. He gave me a very poignant example about how he was trying to support training a white patrolman he was partnered with as the more senior officer. He was saying, "When you're in a low-income community of color where people are in overcrowded housing with no air-conditioning, and it's summer, and they want to have a beer, guess where they're going to have it: on the front stoop because it's hot in the apartment, and there are too many people in the apartment."

This Black officer says, "The guy's just having a beer on his front stoop because it's too hot in his apartment." White police officer jumps on to the property, rousts the man off his stoop, "Show me some ID. That's an open carry. I can arrest you for that. Oh, and here's a summons, by the way, and you're going to have to show up in court now

with a misdemeanor summons that gives you, potentially, a court record if you're forced to plea or to be forced to pay a fine you can't afford." That is exactly the kind of difference that I hear police officers talking about who understand what they're looking at is a societal problem, not a crime problem.

RICHARD: Maya Wiley from Episode Seven.

ASHLEY: I think our next extract is from one of the most personal and moving episodes we did. We spoke with an interracial couple about their marriage and how other people see them. Errol Toulon is the first African-American sheriff of Suffolk County, New York. His wife, Tina MacNichols Toulon, is a physician liaison and business development executive. He's Black. She's white. We discussed Tina's views on white privilege.

TINA: Probably 20 years ago, if you had said I had white privilege, I would've said, "Uh, no we don't." We didn't have a lot of money. So I didn't have privilege, but I understand better now for a lot of reasons. I wish we could name it "white benefit of the doubt" because the word privilege kind of throws people off. And the only way to explain it is if I get pulled over, I'm not worried about it. I'm worried about getting a speeding ticket. If an African-American person gets pulled over, they’re worried what's going to happen. They have to keep their hands on the steering wheel. Don't say anything. There's a whole bunch of other stuff that happens.

ASHLEY: How has that become clear? Errol, have you witnessed things that you never expected to?

ERROL: Well, I think one of the things that we've experienced is sometimes looks from people. Even now, in 2020, when we would walk around, whether it's in a restaurant or in a mall, that we would get certain looks, whether they're from African Americans or Caucasians looking at us together. There was an incident where I was driving Tina's black Mercedes. We were heading from Connecticut back into New York City. We were driving through Westchester, and a police officer from Westchester, as I drove by the vehicle... Tina reminded me yesterday that I had said, "We're going to get pulled over driving while Black." Sure enough, within three or four minutes, the car was right behind me, and the officer pulled us over. He said that I was doing 67 in a 65 and was extremely, extremely nasty. He was very belligerent.

TINA: He scared me. That's how bad he was.

ERROL: I even identified myself as a law enforcement person. He lambasted me for even informing him of my position, and I thought, if I was the 30-year-old Errol or the 25-year-old Errol, the situation, especially if my wife wasn't in the vehicle, would have probably have ended up a lot differently because I don't think I would've been as calm as I was that particular day. And I remember, as we drove away, we were both extremely quiet for quite some time because I was seething. I was also embarrassed

that this happened in front of my wife. So, clearly, an African-American man driving with a Caucasian woman in a black Mercedes was cause enough for him to pull me over. There was no reason, and we do know that law enforcement officers who have committed more serious violations while driving are always given a courtesy. Here I am, a deputy commissioner, being extremely polite to him, and I was thoroughly embarrassed.

ASHLEY: Errol and Tina Toulon from Episode Eight.

RICHARD: So far, we've had some very personal moments on some of our podcasts. In November, there was a remarkable political conversation between a mother who voted for Trump and her daughter who went for Biden.

ASHLEY: But Richard, let's end this episode with two young men on a series of road trips in an old car. What could possibly go wrong?

RICHARD: Yeah, two friends, one Democrat and the other Republican, search for common ground. Jordan Blashek and Christopher Haugh wrote a book called Union about what happened. I like this question that you asked Jordan.

ASHLEY: I'm thinking about one particular fight that you write about. It's post-the Trump rally that you attended. I think you came this close to thinking, "Gosh, can we continue doing this? Have we really got it in us to really stay with each other in this car?" Can you talk about that?

JORDAN: The fight that you're talking about happened as we were driving through Nevada, through these long, open stretches of highways. And it started sort of innocently enough, where both of us were trading remarks about the night before, from the Trump rally. At some point, I said to Chris that it really bothers me that the President is always characterized in the worst possible light for whatever he says, and then that characterization is used to tar all of his supporters.

That started us down this path of discussing the President's remarks about undocumented immigrants and the wall and how those may or may not have been racist. And it led to this brutal, all-out fight where we moved from the issues to ad hominems and started questioning each other's underlying values and motives and ended with us in silence, steaming about the other person and unable to continue talking. We didn't say a word to each other for quite some time, probably about an hour, until finally, Chris was able to break the silence and say that he was still angry, he needed to time to heal, but he still loved me. That began the process of reconciling.

RICHARD: What did you learn from that? What did you learn from your disagreements in terms of how to disagree?

CHRIS: What I learned is the importance of coming back to the table. You don't solve all your issues in one conversation. I didn't convince Jordan of my perspective in that 45-minute battle we had, and he didn't convince me. But what matters is summoning the desire to keep going, the grace to say, "Look, I love you, man. You're one of my closest friends. I'm angry, but I want to come back to the table. I want to try again," because the honest truth is that common ground is hard. It's not easy, and it takes so many conversations. It takes making mistakes. We wrote Union very intentionally to show those mistakes. We wanted to show that battle, that fight because we wanted people to know that we're not experts. We had to figure it out as we went, as well.

ASHLEY: Christopher Haugh and Jordan Blashek with a timely reminder: finding common ground is hard.

RICHARD: But we need to try. You can hear Jordan and Chris's full interview plus other episodes by searching Let's Find Common Ground podcast on your browser.

ASHLEY: Or better yet, subscribe to us wherever you get your podcasts. We have new episodes every two weeks.

RICHARD: Thanks to all those who helped us put together our shows in 2020: Common Ground Committee cofounders Erik Olsen and Bruce Bond; our producer and sound designer, Miranda Shafer.

ASHLEY: Our podcast team also includes Donna Vislocky, Mary Anglade, Olivia Adams, and Jonathan Wells.

RICHARD: I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: Wishing you a better new year, and thanks for listening.