

Former NATO Commander Disguises War Propaganda as Novel

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On March 9, 2021, the former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, Admiral James Stavridis, co-authored a fiction novel with Elliott Ackerman, another former U.S. military officer. The book, entitled 2034: A Novel of the Next World War, imagines a kinetic war between the United States and China.

Given the pedigree of its authorship, the novel provides a compelling window into the psychology of NATO’s military leadership and, correspondingly, the foreign policy establishment behind it. To those familiar with said psychology, the [events of the novel](#) will not be surprising.

It begins with a Chinese ambush of a U.S. vessel in the South China Sea; an Iranian capture of a U.S. pilot; a full scale naval battle between the U.S. and China (resulting in a total U.S. defeat); and a Russian invasion of Poland. The novel concludes with a limited nuclear exchange between the U.S. and China.

Given the last few decades’ hawkish hand wringing about Chinese and Russian cyber capabilities, the tactics employed in the novel are similarly unsurprising. A Chinese cyberattack disables U.S. hardware, allowing the naval rout. The Iranians, as allies of Russia and China, similarly disable U.S. aircraft. For their part, the Russians [slice underwater](#)

[communications cables](#) leading to a complete internet blackout in the West.

To an uncritical reader, the novel appears to be a “cautionary tale” and a “warning” against global conflict. The novel’s dust jacket states:

Everything in *2034* is an imaginative extrapolation from present-day facts on the ground combined with the authors’ years working at the highest and most classified levels of national security. Sometimes it takes a brilliant work of fiction to illuminate the most dire of warnings: 2034 is all too close at hand, and this cautionary tale presents the reader a dark yet possible future that we must do all we can to avoid.

Mainstream outlets were as successful in their attempts to paint *2034* as a “warning” as their reviews were cringeworthy.

Wired, which ran a [series of exclusive pre-print excerpts](#), had [this](#) to say:

WIRED HAS ALWAYS been a publication about the future—about the forces shaping it, and the shape we’d like it to take. Sometimes, for us, that means being wild-eyed optimists, envisioning the scenarios that excite us most. And sometimes that means taking pains to envision futures that we really, really want to avoid.

By giving clarity and definition to those nightmare trajectories, the hope is that we can give people the ability to recognize and divert from them. Almost, say, the way a vaccine teaches an immune system what to ward off. And that’s what this issue of WIRED is trying to do...

Consider this another vaccine against disaster. Fortunately, this dose won’t cause a temporary fever—and it happens to be a rippingly good read. Turns out that even cautionary tales can be exciting, when the future we’re most excited about is the one where they never come true.

The *Washington Post*’s [review](#) was almost worse.

This crisply written and well-paced book reads like an all-caps warning to a world shackled to the machines we carry in our pockets and place in our laps, while only vaguely understanding how the information stored in and shared by those devices can be exploited. We have grown numb to the latest data breach—was it a political campaign (Hillary Clinton’s), or one of the country’s biggest credit-rating firms (Equifax), or a hotel behemoth (Marriott), or a casual-sex hookup site (Adult Friend Finder), or government departments updating their networks with the SolarWinds system (U.S. Treasury and Commerce)?

In “2034,” it’s as if Ackerman and Stavridis want to grab us by our lapels, give us a slap or two, and scream: Pay attention! George Orwell’s dystopian masterpiece, “Nineteen Eighty-four: A Novel” was published 35 years before 1984. Ackerman’s and Stavridis’s book takes place in the not-so-distant future when today’s high school military recruits will just be turning 30.

Between *Wired*’s ham-handed COVID-19 vaccine analogy and the [CIA Washington Post’s](#) ironic Orwell reference, the mainstream marketing campaign clearly attempts to portray the novel as a cautionary tale.

It is impossible to gaze into the hearts of men, but we do have some clues. Those clues suggest that the co-authors really do seek to warn against war with China. However, in doing so, they advocate for it. Indeed, their warning is not against the folly of empire, but against a rising China.

Ultimately the co-authors' MacBethian premonition of conflict [necessitates escalatory U.S. policy](#).

On March 18, 2021, the pair were interviewed by NPR. Stavridis had this to say:

...a subtext in all of this [the novel] is to strike a warning bell about the rise of China and the propensity in human history going back 2,500 years almost any time a [sic] established power is challenged by a rising power, it leads to war. It's a dangerous moment. And 15 years from now, I think, will be a moment of maximum danger because China will have advanced in its military capability and technology. Therefore, our military deterrent will somewhat decline. We're standing in the danger, as we say in the Navy.

Ackerman embraces this view:

...and we're not only sounding the alarm bell, but the book is also trying to situate where America is in this moment of 2034.

Further, the pair assert they do not believe in the American decline.

Interviewer (to both): "...do you believe this, that America will be the author of its own destruction?"

Stavridis: "I believe there are many in the world who do believe that. I personally do not...there are many in the world who believe our best days are somehow behind us. They would be miscalculating, in my view, to believe that."

Ackerman: "I would add I am by no way a believer in the decline of America. And I am very much committed to the idea of the American ideal. That being said, looking back throughout our entire history, the greatest threat is us turning inward and destroying that ideal. Lincoln himself said - I'm paraphrasing, but basically said that if America is going to destroy itself, we will be the author and the finisher. And I think he says, a nation of free men will live forever or die by suicide. And I don't think that's Lincoln being a declinist about the United States. But I think it's him recognizing that our divisiveness can oftentimes be the greatest threat and what leaves us the most unable to respond to challenges from outside the country."

Indeed, a reader would be hard pressed to find any point where the co-authors suggest any strategy short of increasing military confrontation with China.

Instead, they warn that America must be more united against an outside threat. It must, by implication, build up its military force, and, oddly enough, confront Chinese technological advances with less reliance on our own technology.

Stavridis expanded on his China policy prescriptions in a [June 2021 interview](#):

The South China Sea is a vital entry point for the United States today. It's a massive

body of water full of oil and gas as well as fisheries, and about 40 percent of global trade passes through it.

So, there are strong strategic reasons, as the United States values its alliances in Asia, to push back against Chinese claims.

It is not just the South China Sea but also the East China Sea, where the Senkaku Islands lie, that are vital to American interests as long as our allies operate there and trade flows through there.

And above all we simply as an international community cannot acquiesce to China's preposterous claims, which have been rejected by international law.

Indeed, a number one red line would be an attack against our allies.

For example, if China attacked and tried to forcibly take the Senkaku Islands, that would be a red line for the United States. Or an attack against the Philippines, another treaty ally of the United States. An attack against any treaty allies would be the number one red line.

A second red line would be trying to attack U.S. military personnel operating in the South China Sea.

We conduct what we call "freedom of navigation patrols." These are our warships sailing through international waters such as the South China Sea.

If China were to attack a U.S. ship to attempt to demonstrate their view that they own the South China Sea, that would be a red line. In fact, the book "2034" opens with an attack involving U.S. military personnel being killed in the South China Sea.

Stavridis believes that the U.S. must continue to devote itself to entangling alliances, against which the founding fathers warned. The U.S. must also continue to press its presence in the South China Sea.

Despite resolutely warning against a war against China, Stavridis commits the U.S. to myriad tripwires that would ignite it.

These China policy positions parallel Stavridis' [positions](#) on Ukraine. It's always more, more, more.

More funding, arming, and training Ukrainians, more U.S. commitment to NATO, more U.S. weaponization of Big Tech, more money to the U.S. State Department, more interagency cooperation, and more silencing dissent. These positions are escalatory. At the very least, they flirt with making Washington a direct party to the War in Ukraine. They may give Russia reason to attack U.S. and NATO forces.

Given Russia's nuclear footing, these policies pose an existential threat to humanity itself.

Indeed, it will always be a mystery how the hawks convinced the American public that the path to peace leads through war. Perhaps those of us who survive the inevitable result of this mantra can ponder the answer while painting on the cave walls.

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