

WorldView

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National
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Peace Corps, Pop Culture and
Public Perception p.26

Service and Sexual
Identity p.12

The Stream: Videos,
Podcasts and More p.30

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Can national service help heal America?



The Admiral Thanks You for Your Service

Admiral James Stavridis on National Service and Career Development

BY ROBERT NOLAN

The former NATO supreme allied commander and past dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy speaks with *WorldView* editor Robert Nolan about the role of Peace Corps in national security, how national service can be better incentivized and career opportunities for newly returned Volunteers.

Robert Nolan: As we were putting this issue together, it raised a question for many of us in the community about how we actually define the term “national service.” What are your thoughts on that question?

James Stavridis: I’ll get to your question, but first let me say that when I was Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, two very big groups of students every year were Returning Peace Corps Volunteers, typically a dozen or more in an entering class at Fletcher of about 250 total. So we’d get close to a dozen, and we’d get close to a dozen military veterans. And my observation was that these are very different groups in terms of their actual experiences, but they gravitated toward each other and worked together constantly. And I felt like at the Fletcher School in particular, the Peace Corps volunteers were just such a wonderful example to the rest of the student body. Certainly, the military veterans were as well, but I loved my Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. What someone

brings when they come back from typically two years is just a remarkable sense of our nation and a remarkable sense of the world, and really a ... stronger sense of themselves and being part of those bigger things. As a retired military guy ... people constantly come up to me and say, “Admiral, thank you for your service.” And it means a lot to me. It means a lot to every veteran to hear that. So whenever I do an interview where I have a chance to, I say to Peace Corps Volunteers, “Thank you for your service.”

But there are so many ways to serve this country, and I think as a nation, we could do

a better job broadening that phrase, thanking other groups like diplomats, CIA officers, police, firemen, teachers — typically in public schools teaching packed classrooms for little money. Do you think they’re serving the country? Boy, I do. Our inner-city school nurses and medical providers on the front lines of COVID for two years? Those were immense acts of service and courage. And oh, by the way, AmeriCorps [and] Teach for America, these are marvelous programs domestically that reflect the ideals and the ideas of the Peace Corps as well. So, bottom line, I think we need a very broad definition of what national service is. And I think by doing that, we can at least go some way toward resolving some of these big differences we have here in the United States.

Nolan: A couple of your armed services colleagues like General Stan McChrystal and one of your predecessors as NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Wesley Clark, have both been big advocates for national service and even, I believe in the case of Clark, mandatory national service.

Stavridis: I don’t agree with mandatory national service. What I do agree with is highly incentivizing national service. We’ve done this typically with the military. We pay very good salaries for people who have only a high school degree. And if you stay for 20 years, it’s an incredible retirement package. We’ve incentivized it, but we haven’t done similar things to incentivize Peace Corps, Teach For America, AmeriCorps, police service, firefighter service, emergency medical technicians, canine handling services, CyberCorps. All of those deserve a higher level of incentivization. And it can be straight monetary, or it can be educational benefits like the GI Bill in the military. It could be medical benefits. You could allow them access to the VA medical system. But again, because of the wrenching difficulty of trying to manage huge cohorts in this very diverse country, I think mandatory is probably not



Stavridis at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, where he worked with regular cohorts of RPCVs

the way we want to go.

Nolan: But when you look at the budgets for, say, Peace Corps, or even the Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that funds AmeriCorps and other service programs, it's obviously just peanuts compared to the defense budget.

Stavridis: Come on. Yeah, I mean, the defense budget is pushing \$900 billion a year now. I do think that's about right. I would, though, spend some of it differently. [Former Secretary of Defense] Bob Gates was fond of saying that we have more musicians and military bands than we do Foreign Service Officers in the United States. I think we could dial in some resources, and I for one would be unconcerned about using some of those resources to try and help with this idea of incentivization.

Nolan: There's this bumper sticker I've seen in the past that says "Peace Corps Is National Security." It got me thinking about recent events like the earthquake in Morocco, massive flooding in Libya, the migration crisis on the border, and of course the war between Russia and Ukraine, where Returned Peace Corps Volunteers are either on the ground helping or raising funds for aid groups providing relief. Do you think that argument about service as national security holds?

Stavridis: I would never want to get us in a situation where we were going to somehow tap into knowledge and experience and on-the-ground views of Peace Corps Volunteers in order to aid military efforts. I think that Peace Corps Volunteers could definitely be part of helping humanitarian organizations and humanitarian operations. I think there is real value there. But I think you need kind of a bright, shining line between military operations and Peace Corps Volunteers.

The front of that effort has to be the State Department. And I think there's a very comfortable relationship between the State Department's Foreign Service Officers and



Stavridis dismounting a helicopter in Helmand Province, Afghanistan

Peace Corps Volunteers. There, I think, you've got a case to be made. Here's the second point, though. Those are tactical and operational observations where I see Peace Corps as being most valuable. And I think this is what Kennedy Sergeant Shriver imagined as they created it, and that it is also a strategic benefit to the United States. It shows a United States that's compassionate and caring and young and dynamic and intelligent and forward-thinking, and capable of teaching real skills that, I would argue, and I think many others would, helps us with national security, because [they create] stability.

Nolan: So many RPCVs end up going, after their service, into other fields of international engagement. Since you're someone who likes to work with young people, I wonder what kind of skill sets you would recommend young folks coming back from the field?

Stavridis: Well, let me put on my former hat as Dean of the Fletcher School.

Nolan: One of those square ones, right? A little different from the Navy cap ...

Stavridis: A square hat with tassels. Exactly. [Laughs.] Look, if someone comes back from the Peace Corps and they decide what they want to do is move back home and take over Dad's tractor business in Iowa, hey, that's terrific. They ought to do that. But if they ... want to continue down the track of engaging the world and making the world a better place, I think a master's

degree in international relations is a terrific next step. There are many scholarships available to do that. Most are essentially 18-month programs, two academic years. You do an internship in the middle, typically, and ... here's the punchline. It's a buffet table of different ways in which you can learn specific skills. So students who come to the Fletcher School, for example, have a whole highly, highly curated track on development, on how you step up from the level of being in a village and helping develop a microeconomy to how

to scale up and help [a] nation improve its capabilities. And that prepares you for a job in the State Department, at the United Nations, at USAID, or any of the international equivalents, so development is a very specific track, one that I think would be very interesting to Peace Corps Volunteers, and it's very practical, very hands-on.

A second big track, just to pick another one, is security. In this 21st century, you are not going to create security from the barrel of a gun. I'll say that again. You're not going to create security from the barrel of a gun. You are going to have to create security, certainly with some military component, but you need the larger things that we've just been discussing. You need stability in a society. You need functioning infrastructure. You need people to have jobs. You need education, and perhaps above all, you need technology. You need electrification in rural areas, which are much more addressable now than they were 50 or 60 years ago when Kennedy and Shriver were founding the Peace Corps.

I could go on and on, but I think a Returning Peace Corps Volunteer is [at] a perfect time to go get a master's degree. If it were me in that situation, that's what I would do. It's what I did, in the sense that I came out of the [Naval] Academy. I went to sea for five years, and was on two different ships, sailed all over the world, and then I just paused, took a breath, and said, "What do I want to do next?" And the answer was "I want to learn about the world." ●