



WTH will the next world war look like? Adm. James Stavridis and Elliot Ackerman imagine war with China in 2034, and it's not pretty for America

Episode #99 | April 21, 2021 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen, Adm. James Stavridis, and Elliot Ackerman

Danielle Pletka: Hi, I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: And I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: Welcome to our podcast, "What the Hell Is Going On?" Marc, what the hell this week?

Marc Thiessen: What the hell is going on is I am on vacation and I just read an amazing book. One of the great things about taking some time off is a chance to read fiction, which we don't do enough these days, at least I don't. And I just read a great book of fiction, which could become nonfiction, which is called "2034" by Elliot Ackerman and Admiral Jim Stavridis. Jim and I worked in the Pentagon together. He's a brilliant Admiral, Elliot is an incredible writer, and they have written a novel of the third world war between the United States and China.

Marc Thiessen: It unfolds in ways you couldn't imagine. It's both great because it's good fiction and gripping, but it also makes you think, because the reality is the number one foreign policy challenge we face is China. And one of the problems we've had in this country is the failure of imagination. The failure of imagination on 9/11, did not anticipate that, we've had a failure of imagination now recently with a pandemic, and they're trying to make us imagine a future that could very well come true if we don't take action between now and 2034.

Danielle Pletka: So, it's really interesting. We had Congressman Mike Waltz on talking about the Beijing Olympics, and talking about the nature of this enemy. The week before we had Marty Makary on talking about the coronavirus and the pandemic. And it's interesting to me thematically, that one of the big takeaways from this month is, A, we face a very formidable, very determined opponent in Beijing, but that we also don't have a lot of humility about ourselves. And I think that this book sort of underscores what we don't appreciate about our own capacities, our own ability to compete, and what we fail to appreciate about the strength of our adversaries. It's pretty worrying. And we saw that on display in Anchorage, in the confrontation between our own new National Security Adviser and our new Secretary of State and their Chinese counterparts. In which they treated them, frankly, this is the Chinese, treated them like dirt, because they felt like they could.

- Marc Thiessen: That's exactly right. And the other thing is that one of the things we've seen in the pandemic is the display of America's remarkable technological capabilities, that we were able to take this virus and come up with a vaccine in nine months that is essentially going to vanquish it. We are head and shoulders above the rest of the world when it comes to technology. But one of the things, and I'm not going to give away too much of the book, because I want you all to buy it and read it because it's that good, is that technology is our Achilles heel in this book.
- Marc Thiessen: We do not anticipate the ways in which our adversaries take our dependence on technology that has given us this amazing military superiority over them, and, unbeknownst to us, have figured out ways to counter and eliminate those advantages, putting us in an incredibly vulnerable position where we are almost, they don't say this in the book, but almost no longer a superpower. And that is a frightening scenario because now with the pandemic we're just pushing even faster and the pandemic has accelerated our dependence on technology. We're Zoom calling instead of coming into work, we're putting analog behind us, and going digital and going high tech and depending more and more on AI and all these other technologies. And one of the messages of their book is this could become our Achilles heel in the future and it's frightening.
- Danielle Pletka: So, to our listeners, for those of you who are like me and unbelievably directionally challenged, think about being in a strange place without your phone because you don't have a map in your car. Now translate that on a larger scale, translate that onto an aircraft carrier if you don't know how to read radar...
- Marc Thiessen: Imagine you driving an aircraft carrier, Dany.
- Danielle Pletka: Oh my God. Oh listen, the living dream. I would love that. But not to give anybody nightmares, but imagine this to yourself. Without this technology, we are talking about big hunks of metal that do not work. I remember when I first heard that the Chinese had figured out how to spoof our F-35 commands, so that they could make our enemies look like friends, so that they could make missiles look like airplanes. If you understand this marvel of technology where you can control targeting with your eyes as being an unbelievable vulnerability, then you understand what it means if our enemies are able to do those kinds of things.
- Danielle Pletka: And I think that the other thing that many, many people don't understand and frankly I don't even understand the full extent of it, although this book gives us a window into it, is that these capabilities are not just in the hands of big bad guys, the Russians and the Chinese. They're also in the hands of pretty rinky-dink bad guys like the Iranians, like the North Koreans, and we need to have more of a national conversation about what our capabilities are in the face of pretty determined, pretty bad enemies.
- Marc Thiessen: Cyber is the poor man's nuclear weapon. It's cheap. You need to know how to hack. Anybody can get computer power and the internet, and the knowledge of how to do it. You don't have to be a superpower and you can bring a superpower to its knees through this technology. So, it's a fascinating thing because the technology has made us a superpower in many, many ways, but technology is also a leveling force because it is so accessible to so many different

people, and so this is something that we are going to have to grapple with both in terms of deterrence posture going forward... Because in the Cold War we had the nuclear triad, which was our deterrence posture against a nuclear threat. We need the equivalent of a strategic triad when it comes to cyber, and in a way that is going to deter other people. We need declaratory policy, which I don't think we have. We don't like to imagine the possibility that America could be bought to its heels, and this book imagines it in ways that will really make you think. And I think it ought to be a wakeup call for our national security leaders.

Danielle Pletka: Let me tell you a little bit about the two authors who we have with us. The book is called "2034: A Novel of the Next World War." Admiral Jim Stavridis is an old friend to both you and to me Marc, he spent 30 years in the Navy, he rose to the rank of a four star, he was the Supreme Allied Commander, by the way that's just my favorite title in the entire military.

Marc Thiessen: It is the best title in all of national security.

Danielle Pletka: It is. So, he was Supreme Allied Commander of NATO and he also commanded US SouthCom which oversees our military operations in Latin America, he commanded a destroyer, he has a PhD from The Fletcher School, he was actually the dean there and he's written a number of nonfiction books before this. Elliot Ackerman, no mean military guy himself, is first of all a fiction author, he's written a number of books and he's actually been nominated for the National Book Award. He wrote "Red Dress in Black and White," "Waiting for Eden," "Dark at the Crossing," as well as a number of others. He's a former marine, a White House Fellow, served five tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, Silver Star, Bronze Star for valor, Purple Heart, you couldn't wish for two better folks to join us.

Marc Thiessen: It's a magical combination when it comes to a novel. It really is.

Danielle Pletka: Here's the interview.

Marc Thiessen: All right. Well, Admiral and Elliot, welcome to the podcast.

Elliot Ackerman: Thank you.

Adm. James Stav...: Great to be with you, Marc and Dany.

Marc Thiessen: We're so excited to have you. I just finished your book, it is outstanding. You wrote it as a cautionary tale and I'm cautioned. The book is about the third world war, takes place in 2034, not too far distant in our time. Tell us why you wrote it. Admiral, I'll start with you and what the message you're trying to get across is.

Adm. James Stav...: Well, I came to look into the future by looking at the past, which is to say that I looked at that rich body of Cold War literature that we all are old enough to remember, "The Third World War" by Sir John Hackett, "Red Storm Rising," Tom Clancy, "Dr. Strangelove," etc. And observed that that had to have been at least a part of why we never ended up going to war with the Soviet Union. We could imagine how terrible it would have been. So then project forward, clearly, we are

trending in a bad direction with China. And if you look at trends in the 10-to-15-year future, it is far from impossible that we could end up sleepwalking into a war with China. So, my thought was to write a novel that would describe how terrible that would be, and how frankly, easy, it would be for miscalculation, much like Europe in 1914 managed to stumble in a war that was to no one's advantage, hence, a cautionary tale.

- Danielle Pletka: So, the two of you wrote this together, tell us a little bit about this collaboration, because I don't want Marc to ruin it for our listeners, so no spoilers. But tell us a little bit about what brought the two of you together.
- Elliot Ackerman: I'll take that. So as Jim already alluded, this was his idea to write a novel that was a cautionary tale. And we had known each other from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy when he was the dean. I'm an alum of the school, and he invited me to be a writer in residence. And we also, in addition to our Fletcher connection, share an editor at Penguin Press. And so, our shared editor approached me and said, "You know, I think this would be an interesting collaboration for the two of you to try to write this book together." And that was how we were matched up editorially. Although we knew each other beforehand.
- Marc Thiessen: Why fiction? Why not just write a nonfiction book instead that warns of this coming disaster and how it could unfold?
- Elliot Ackerman: When we first started discussing the book, one of the things that the Admiral and I were in total alignment on was this should be a character driven story. And why is that? Because I was taught in the Marine Corps that war is the contest between two opposing human wills, and you can't truly understand a war unless you understand the human component of it. And you can't really tell the story, because of the human component, without character. So, "2034" imagines this war between the United States and China, but it does so through a structure of five principal characters who take you into that world. And yes, there's lots of technology in the book. Yes, there's lots of geopolitics in the book. But there's also lots of just individuals in this book, trying to navigate through this cataclysmic war. And so, I think both of us felt very much aligned that it was important for the reader to also have the experience of becoming invested with the people who are involved in the war.
- Danielle Pletka: So, one of the things that I thought was absolutely fascinating here is the role that technology plays, the role that cyber plays. So, you are taking current day news stories, whether it was the Russian SolarWinds hack in the United States, or even the Chinese hack on the Office of Personnel in the United States. You're taking that and you're playing it forward, and the answer to it, I think is absolutely fascinating. Talk a little bit about the threat that you see being posed. Admiral, you said you thought that we were sleepwalking. It's a very Churchillian phrase and he wrote, obviously a book with that title, but we're sleepwalking into war. Talk a little bit about the component parts here.
- Adm. James Stav...: Let's start with the technology. And recall, we wrote this book, sat down and were writing it a year and a half ago or so, long before SolarWinds, long before the Microsoft Exchange Chinese hack. But it certainly wasn't hard to foresee where this is all going. And if you project to the end of this decade, Dany and

Marc, as you both know, what happens? Quantum computing changes the foundations of computer science. We don't know exactly how that's going to unfold, but I think we can even at this reach, understand that it will profoundly change not only cyber and cyber security, but impact artificial intelligence, machine learning, and the application of those technologies to war.

Adm. James Stav...: So, in the context of the novel "2034: A Novel of the Next World War," this is a trend line which potentially could embolden one side or the other. And this is where the idea of miscalculation of a big door that swings on what appears to be a small hinge. The book opens in the South China Sea, which the Chinese claim as territorial waters. It's a preposterous claim. The South China Sea is the size of half of the continental United States of America, we're not going to cede that to the Chinese. But for the Chinese, it is approaching red line status. And boy, that's a pool of gasoline waiting for a match to be thrown in it, and when you add to it the technology trend lines, it's very easy to feel like you're in the middle of Barbara Tuchman's, "The Guns of August," and a 1914 war that nobody wants and is in nobody's interest occurs.

Marc Thiessen: So, one thing that I found fascinating about the book, building on Dany's question, is we've become used to the idea of American military preeminence, that we are the most powerful nation on Earth, the Chinese are rising, but they're not ahead of us. And certainly, other powers are not even peer competitors yet. We always refer to China as an aspiring peer competitor. And through technology, I don't want to give away too much of the plot, but through technology, they are able to essentially remove our dominance and basically achieve strategic dominance over us in this war.

Marc Thiessen: And not only that, but other countries like India, who comes into this book, are basically pushing the United States around. We get pushed around a lot in this book. Admiral, is this a worry that you have? And is this inevitable? Is technology going to level the playing field and remove our dominance so that smaller powers can dictate to us by threatening basically our infrastructure and our ability to dominate them?

Adm. James Stav...: In terms of American military dominance globally, I have three words for you: get over it. It is not going to be the way of the world going forward. China will rise. And by the way, I would argue 300 years from now, when a historian writes the history of this century, she will not focus on the rise of China, she'll focus on the rise of India. Because by the end of this century, the demographics kick in. The fact that India is already a democracy, benefits that their linkage is with the West, English as a lingua franca, keep your eye on India, and that is, you're correct, part of the plot of "2034." So, we've got to get over this idea that we can muscle our way through any military conflict. That means, and you have both written about this, turning the dial of that rheostat away from some of these very traditional, very comfortable military platforms, toward things that are challenging, that's cyber, artificial intelligence, nano-technologies, unmanned vehicles, special forces who are human performance enhanced. All of that is coming. Your proposition is correct. It will create equalizers for smaller nations. And we have got to be on our game going forward.

Elliot Ackerman: I would just add to what Jim said and to Marc's question, I mean, this is a story

that is as old as warfare with regards to technology. I mean, there are a bunch of 15th century dead French knights on the battlefield of Agincourt, that would tell you they had the greatest armor anyone had ever seen. Right? It was as high tech as it came back then. It was just the wrong technology. And there are a bunch of English bowman who had the right technology, even though they had no armor. So, I mean, Marc's point is absolutely the right one. It's not just enough to have the most cutting-edge technology, you also have to have the right technology and to never become complacent about the type of technology you have.

- Adm. James Stav...: And I'm going to add one more point which is simply that as you will see in the book, sometimes technology is your friend and sometimes it becomes your enemy. As is true for all of us, sometimes your greatest strength is also your greatest weakness. And this is something that our opponents can be very aware of and there will be times when less technology may make more sense.
- Marc Thiessen: Is our military spending enough time teaching our pilots how to fly without all these advanced contraptions in their planes, to teaching our sailors how to navigate celestially as opposed to relying on GPS? Because if this is our Achilles heel, one of the solutions you find to the technology problem in the book is going back in time and using antiquated technology. Is that the answer?
- Adm. James Stav...: That's exactly right. And no, we are not doing enough of that, I call it primitivization. I'm not sure that's even a word but I know what it means.
- Marc Thiessen: You just made it.
- Adm. James Stav...: You know I graduated from Annapolis in the 1970s, late 1970s otherwise known as 1.2 million years ago, and yeah, we were pretty good with the sextant in our hands. By the middle of my career when I commanded a destroyer, didn't know what a sextant was. Everything was GPS, just like driving your car around. Today those midshipmen are in fact re-grounding themselves with sextants in their hands. That makes a lot of sense to me. We ought to do a bit more of that.
- Danielle Pletka: You know, it's funny. I remember reading a couple of years ago that the Russian foreign ministry had become so concerned about intercepts of its communicators that it had actually brought out from storage a lot of typewriters in order to communicate. But of course, for those of us who are old enough we remember that they used to attach little listening devices to typewriters in order to be able to identify the keys. So, let me ask you a really big picture question. Elliot, I'll start with you because it's been interesting to me reading some of your interviews in particular, to see your take on this big question of the decline of America. Right? You both hit it front on and you've given pretty nuanced answers. So, I'd love to hear from both of you. Elliot, why don't you take the first bite.
- Elliot Ackerman: You can't write a book and engage with ideas about existential threats to the United States without also looking internally at what the condition is of the United States and our national fabric. And so that obviously becomes a theme in the book. We, with the pandemic, have just gone through probably the greatest cataclysm in 20 years, I would say obviously it's probably greater than the September 11th attacks. But I'm old enough to remember what the national

response was after 9/11, and although it was finite, there was a clear and definite sense of national unity as we all got together and said, "How are we going to meet this threat?"

- Elliot Ackerman: That has not occurred around the pandemic. This has probably been one of the most divisive years in our political history, and that should serve as a warning to us as we look forward to meeting whatever the threats are that come down the road. If we can't figure out how to unite as a country against existential threats to our existence, our existence as a country is by definition going to be finite. And that's something in a totally nonpartisan way, I am extremely concerned about as the father of two young children who I would like to see grow up in this country.
- Adm. James Stav...: Let me put it in maybe a different perspective as follows. I wouldn't bet against America on anything. Because we have an incredible hand of cards. Our geography is astoundingly good, vast oceans to the left and the right, benign neighbors north and south, abundant land, water, arable land, Silicon Valley innovation, biotech 128, universities, for all their political correctness, are still the envy of the world. And frankly, the biggest thing is our youth, our demographics. We are a young nation and people want to come here, they want to immigrate here. They want to be part of America. That's a very strong hand of cards, particularly given that we have a great network of allies, partners and friends. So, I wouldn't bet against us. Now I'm not a triumphalist, but I agree with Elliot, that our biggest challenge is not out there, it's in here. And we have to find a way to reach across the aisle, to work together. There are going to be policy disagreements, but for God's sake, we've got to stop making them personal.
- Adm. James Stav...: And that is coming from both sides, from the right and the left. It's not serving us well, and it will hurt us going forward. And that is yes, part of the cautionary tale.
- Danielle Pletka: Let me just play devil's advocate here for a sec. I don't want to sound like an offshore balancer, because I can't stand those guys. But at the same time, I think historically, if you look backwards to the period that I certainly know best the 1930s, that was a period of intense division. That was a period in which the American people were extraordinarily personal, extraordinarily divided, and extraordinarily distrustful of a president who they thought was going to drag them into war again. And yet we still managed, it took us a couple years, but we still managed to get there. Are we just not a country that can rev up in the same way, or are our enemies simply more capable? You talk a lot about China in the book, I think underscoring that it might be a different enemy is something very important for people to understand.
- Adm. James Stav...: I agree with that and I will merely add to your observation, that if you go back obviously, to our civil war, we were immensely divided. We've been divided many times as recently as the late '60s, with the war in Vietnam and race riots in our cities. So yes, we have been resilient. And again, that's why I'm optimistic, cautiously optimistic, that our best days lie ahead of us. I think to Elliot's point, certainly 2020 was not a strong year for us, particularly facing the pandemic and watching the political fallout both right and left. So, Dany, I would say, our best years are ahead of us if we can find ways to work more coherently together.
- Marc Thiessen: Admiral, when we were in the Pentagon together, our former boss Don Rumsfeld

was very fond of Roberta Wohlstetter's book on Pearl Harbor. And the introduction to that book described Pearl Harbor as a failure of imagination. And we've had a series of failures of imagination in just recent history, 9/11 was a failure of imagination. The pandemic was a failure of imagination. In fact, we sort of knew it was coming, but we really didn't prepare for it. And there was a failure of imagination in terms of preparing for it and dealing with that. And you write about this book as a sort of a failure of imagination, that you've laid out a scenario for failure of imagination. How do we fix this?

Marc Thiessen: I look at the pandemic, for example, and I think that every terrorist in the world is looking at this and saying, "Bioweapons. We spent a couple \$100,000 on 9/11, did a bunch of damage, but nothing compared to this. Imagine what damage we could do with a bioweapon." When you say things like that people say, "Oh, you're crazy. And that's ridiculous. And it's outlandish." How do we work imagination into our national security strategy planning? Because it seems to be something that throughout history, even the greatest minds have failed to imagine what could be done to us?

Adm. James Stav...: I think you start with doing exactly what we've done here, which is to write about it and to use the medium of fiction. When you write nonfiction, you asked at the start, why didn't we write a bunch of policy papers and staple them together? And I've certainly done my share of that, as have the two of you quite credibly. On the other hand, when you tell stories, when you have characters, you resonate in the minds of people in a way that a policy paper won't. People have an emotional response. It then becomes part of the larger conversation. So, I for one, believe in the study, the art, the engagement in fiction, in film, I think is another very powerful medium.

Adm. James Stav...: And precisely to your point, we've got to imagine the next couple of disasters, which could be you mentioned biotech, bioweapons. Sure, how about quantum and artificial intelligence, Isaac Asimov, the three laws of robotics, what happens when artificial intelligence does outstrip ours? Or how about climate? Whether you're a believer or not, I happen to think the environment is a very significant challenge to us as this century unspools. So, I think collectively, we need more imagination. Let's bring the arts into the conversation.

Elliot Ackerman: I would just briefly add the writer George Saunders said about this summer and this past year that 2020 was a failure in American storytelling, meaning the stories that we tell ourselves, they failed. So, what do we do? The stories a country tells itself really matters and is very significant. So, if we're telling ourselves stories, collectively of American triumphalism, and that America can never be touched, that we will, by definition, always outmatch our peers, those are probably dangerous stories for the collective to keep telling itself. If we're telling ourselves stories about remaining vigilant, innovating to meet new threats, those are probably healthier stories. And that might sound like a very mushy, well what does that really mean? Let me give you just sort of a fact I think storytelling actually really features into how a nation **behaves**.

Elliot Ackerman: So, you all have seen the mini-series "Band of Brothers," right? I would argue that coming out of the 9/11 wars now after 20 years of war, that a series like "Band of Brothers" focused on the greatest generation. I just recently rewatched it with my

son, it's sort of like out of step. And we're not seeing a lot of that coming out of Hollywood right now. Those aren't the stories America is telling itself right now. But it's very interesting to go back in time, when we were telling ourselves those stories about the greatest generation. And "Band of Brothers" premiered on September 10, 2001. I just think that's an interesting litmus test. That's where America was as we entered into the 9/11 wars. So, what are the stories we're telling ourselves right now? It's worth being cognizant of those.

- Danielle Pletka: I'm so happy that you brought that up, Elliot. Because I want to ask a question about China. And one of the things that I think we've never confronted is an adversary, a very serious, a very wealthy, a very well-armed adversary that also has much more control over our information space. So yeah, of course, "Band of Brothers." Awesome. Do you think that Sony Pictures would make a movie about the Chinese threat to the South China Sea, to the United States? Certainly, what we've seen over the last few years is that Hollywood is very, very much being pushed away from that direction, because they're afraid of Chinese buying power. So, help us, you've got this awesome book, which I think does a terrific job.
- Marc Thiessen: And would make a great movie.
- Danielle Pletka: Right. For all of those in Hollywood listening, it would make a great movie. But I mean, how do you contend with that, because we've never had that challenge before. Elliot, you're in that space.
- Elliot Ackerman: I would offer in the space that I've been what I've noticed, is actually the greatest form of censorship, and we all know this, is self-censorship. So, the much more insidious thing is not necessarily that the PRC is saying, "This will not fly," it's that... That happens, but what happens even more broadly and has the more devastating effect is all of the self-censorship. So, when the "Red Dawn" remake is being made, however many years ago, if you remember that, they were remaking the 1980s film "Red Dawn," but instead of the Soviet Union it was going to be cast as the Chinese, and Chinese got wind of this, the whole production got shut down. It was rebooted with North Koreans. The thing was a high budget flop.
- Elliot Ackerman: That was one film. But the impact that film had on many, many, many other projects that were in development, that could have potentially had that problem was far more devastating than the one film. Listen, we see this internationally and we see it with domestic culture. What I see as a writer what people are willing to write about. The conversations I have with other writers are much less, "Oh, my publisher said I can't write this." And it's more, "Well, I don't think I should write this because I'm worried it's just going to cause me problems." So, I think, listen, self-censorship has huge, huge consequences. So that, to me is an area of concern.
- Elliot Ackerman: One of the reasons this is a character driven book, I mean, we didn't set out to write a book that was in some ways adversarial of China or adversarial of Iran. If you read this book, you'll see there are fully imagined Iranian characters, Chinese characters, Indian characters, and when those characters step onto the page, they are making their case to the reader as though they're making their case

before God. And you're going to hear how the Chinese character views the world, views the United States, views our foibles, and he's not going to hold back. And then you'll see the American character and then you as the reader will step away from the book and then you'll decide.

Marc Thiessen: You know, it's funny because the best example of that self-censorship I've seen right now we've got, three decades later, the new "Top Gun" movie coming out and they took the Taiwanese flag off of Maverick's jacket, because they don't want to anger the Chinese. My exit question is, you talk a lot about this issue of technology and sort of overdependence on technology and failure to communicate and still know how to communicate in analog ways, right? The pandemic has really accelerated that in our society. I mean, we're doing this by Zoom, everybody's meeting by Zoom, everybody's becoming more dependent on technology. I think one of the lasting results of the pandemic, even after we're done with the health crisis, is going to be a deeper and deeper immersion of our society and dependence on technology.

Marc Thiessen: How vulnerable does that make us as a society to, for example, not nuclear weapons, but a cyber-strike that could be a weapon of mass destruction, in terms of the impact it has? Is that a danger that we face?

Adm. James Stav...: It is, and this isn't really a spoiler alert, because it happens in the first 20, 30 pages, there's a major cyber demonstration to the United States from China, that's based loosely on a similar event that occurred in Ukraine caused by Russia. We are going to see these scalable cyber offensive weapons eventually, and sooner rather than later, have the capability to inflict long-term sociological kinetic damage to our societies, permanently dropping portions of our electric grid, for example. It is a reality, and I would say, Marc and Dany, that the time for policymakers has come to develop a regime of deterrence. Mutual assured deterrence, are these familiar terms? Yeah. Because that's what kept us from lobbing nuclear weapons at each other through the long decades of the Cold War. And frankly, the offensive capabilities inherent in cyber are not going to be defensible, ultimately, and as a result, we need deterrent regimes. And I think that is a chore that our policymakers ought to address post-haste.

Danielle Pletka: All I want to say to both of you, to Admiral James Stavridis, Elliot Ackerman, thank you so much. "2034" goes, really a very substantial way in helping fill what we could call the imagination gap. I recommend it to everybody. Marc has finished it and loved it. We're not going to ruin it for all of you. But as we speak, you're number six on the New York Times bestseller list. Thank you so much for joining us. Just a terrific book and a terrific conversation.

Elliot Ackerman: Thanks, Dany and Marc.

Adm. James Stav...: Thanks a lot. And let me just return the compliment to your podcast, which I listen to regularly. It's smart, it's balanced. It makes sense. I don't agree with everything I hear, but that's why I like it. And also, to both of you as writers and particularly Marc, having watched you as a speech writer in those Rumsfeld years, you are top shelf with a pen my friend. Thank you much.

Marc Thiessen: Thank you.

- Danielle Pletka: Okay, so Marc, we've talked to the authors, we've read the book, for you, what's the biggest takeaway that doesn't ruin it for everybody?
- Marc Thiessen: That's really hard because we had a little bit of a discussion about "Band of Brothers," right? And how we celebrated the greatest generation, and that we're not making movies and writing books that way anymore. The purpose of this book is not to restore your confidence in America's eventual triumph in the world, it is a wakeup call to us. We just assume that in the post-Cold War world or unipolar world, we're the lone superpower. China's rising. But yeah, but they're not yet a peer competitor. And even if they become peer competitor, they're going to be way behind us. That's not necessarily true.
- Marc Thiessen: What's interesting for me is that the reason for wakeup calls is to avoid the fate described. Right? And I believe that what they described in this book is not inevitable. Jim said at the beginning of the interview, that if you think America's dominance of the world is going to go on, you're mistaken. I don't know that that is a fate that is already assured. I think that books like this, which imagine a way in which we could lose our preeminence are critical to maintaining. Because we need to maintain our preeminence because literally the freedom of the entire world depends on it. Because I look at the rest of the world and all the powers out there, would I want my freedom to depend on them? I don't think so. So, we have to find a way to maintain American preeminence militarily, economically. If we don't have that, the Pax Americana is over.
- Danielle Pletka: I agree about the Pax Americana. Here's where I really have some doubt. I think Elliot was too kind when he talked about the self-censorship issue and the Chinese issue. And I don't want to let Hollywood off the hook. Because yeah, there's no question that people engage in self-censorship. Whether it's on social or cultural questions, or it's on big, big money questions. We've seen this in the NBA, we've talked about it ad nauseam. But I think that one of the very big differences, starting in 1941, Hollywood ramped up, they made amazing movies about the evil of the Nazis, we can go on and on.
- Danielle Pletka: And it's not just the big ones like "Casablanca," it's plenty of others. We had movie stars who enlisted. People like Jimmy Stewart, and others who enlisted in the military, who were heroes to the American people, who brought home the threat to the American people. The problem for us is, the Chinese are so economically interwoven with us that we see companies and we see Hollywood afraid to speak truth to the American people. And without that truth, I think that not only our preeminence, but our ability to inform the American people about the threat we face is at risk.
- Marc Thiessen: 100%. And one of the reasons is, it's not just that they're interwoven with us, but if you make a movie today, you're counting on more than half if not three quarters of your box office to come from China. So, if China won't show it, if China is offended by it... Why do you think "Top Gun" took the Taiwanese flag off? Why would you do that? Because they wouldn't show the movie in China. And they would lose most of their revenue. Hollywood is completely in the pocket of China. And they won't say anything to offend them, and they won't say anything to paint them in a negative way. It would be fascinating to see if this book is made into a movie and how.

- Danielle Pletka: Well, that was really my big question. I know. And I wanted to ask them, but I didn't want to put them on the spot. But I really felt like, exactly, this is going to be a really important test. Because this would make a great movie, but I worry about all those things we just talked about. Anyway, it was a great opportunity to talk to them and everybody should go out and grab the book, have a read and share it with your friends.
- Marc Thiessen: Thanks for listening. Please rate and review the podcast, share with friends, complaints to Dany, compliments to me, and we'll be back next week with another episode of "What the Hell Is Going On."
- Danielle Pletka: Take care everyone.