

Rolling Stone and Stanley McChrystal: A Case of Muck-Raking

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In Fall 2010 Stanley McChrystal delivered a speech at California Polytechnic State University where he described the following: “I want you to picture the aftermath of a fatal plane crash. Now think of a field, strewn with wreckage. The presence of emergency vehicles, police tape, emergency workers, and there's an unmistakable sense of tragedy and loss and failure. Typically, an investigation is conducted to determine the cause of the accident and the conclusion is often that the pilot experienced something called vertigo, a sense of confusion and loss of spacial awareness. It causes an otherwise proficient pilot to make decisions and manipulate the flight controls in ways inappropriate for the situation; what happens is the pilot literally flies the aircraft into the ground. Now, let me get you to put another image in your mind. It's a school, in eastern Afghanistan, in Kunar province, in the district of Kamdesh; it's a mountainous, difficult region. The new school building is badly damaged and there are no teachers, no students, and smoke still lingers from the fire. Predictably, coalition forces investigate who attacked the brand new school and why they would do that. And they discover that a school was requested by two villages both from the same tribe, about three kilometers apart. Someone who was an efficiency expert picked a spot one point five kilometers equidistant from each of those, and there they built a school. And it was attacked by the villagers themselves. And the villagers resented the fact that this was perceived as an effort to make the students, the children of the two different villages, go to school together. Though all the people had the same tribal background, they hated each other. And that hatred only went back about one hundred years. And when the school was built, instead of hiring locals who needed employment, an outside element was brought in to construct the school. So what happened was, well-intentioned actions by coalition forces not only failed to solve the problem, to provide education, we created a new one by taking an incorrect action due to misunderstanding. It sounds an awful lot like vertigo. We flew the school into the ground. Vertigo is a deadly phenomenon. It's also fascinating as a well-intentioned and otherwise intelligent individual takes an incorrect action based upon a misunderstanding of the situation, and the outcome is tragic.”

~ General Stanley McChrystal (Ret.)

In a prophetic article, Yale Law School professor Bruce Ackerman in 2009 commented on General Stanley McChrystal's controversial comments made in London. McChrystal noted that Vice President Biden's Afghanistan strategy would lead to “Chaos-istan” (Burns). Ackerman reported, “McChrystal was almost cavalier in dismissing this point. After praising his superiors for encouraging straight talk, he laughingly suggested that ‘they may change their minds and crush me some day.’” McChrystal was relieved of command less than a year later and is now a “senior fellow with the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs” at Yale (Drake).

On June 22nd General of the Army Stanley McChrystal was quoted in a *Rolling Stone* article

as having said, “How'd I get screwed into going to this dinner?” “The dinner comes with the position, sir,” replied his chief of staff, Col. Charlie Flynn. McChrystal turned sharply in his chair. “Hey, Charlie,” he asked, “does this come with the position?” McChrystal gives him the middle finger” (Hastings 92). McChrystal's published comments and opinions were embarrassing, unbecoming, and understood as an act of blatant insubordination against his Commander in Chief. “Officials who participated in the discussions say no single passage was fatal to McChrystal, but ‘the opening was really bad’ (Allen). The outcry that rose up against Stanley McChrystal was both unified and clear: “McChrystal should be dismissed, dismissed immediately, and unceremoniously returned home” (Wong). Following the uproar, President Barack Obama acted decidedly. After calling Stanley McChrystal back to Washington and a brief private meeting, McChrystal turned in his resignation.

This incident between McChrystal and Obama was not the first time something like this has happened. As James L. Golden noted in his work, *Towards a Meaning-Centered Theory of Rhetoric*, “As humans, happenings in the past give our responses their character of meaning” (174). This event was heavily interpreted with the past in mind. The clash between president and general marked another historic episode of military-civilian eruptions, the most famous of which was between Douglas MacArthur and Harry Truman (Duffy & Carpenter). General Stanley McChrystal's comments and actions depicted in *Rolling Stone's* “The Runaway General” were given their character of meaning in light of Douglas MacArthur’s insubordinate actions half a century before him. Similarly, Barack Obama's acceptance of McChrystal's resignation, was interpreted in the same manner as Harry Truman's a half a century earlier. McChrystal's actions might not have caught as much attention if Douglass MacArthur decades before had MacArthur not challenged Harry Truman. Because MacArthur was insubordinate in speaking out and Truman fired him, Obama could do the same with McChrystal. If Truman had not exerted his constitutional powers so many years ago, then the choice before Barack Obama might not have been as clear. It was no coincidence then, when Obama evoked

the memory of the Truman MacArthur conflict, in his speech noting McChrystal's removal from command. He said, "our democracy depends upon institutions that are stronger than individuals. That includes strict adherence to the military chain of command and respect for civilian control over that chain of command" (Obama).

The Historical Critical Approach

The goal of this study is accurately reflected in I. A. Richards assertion of rhetoric's purpose: "Rhetoric, I shall argue, should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies. We struggle all our days with misunderstandings and no apology is required for any study which can prevent or remove them" (Richards 3). Misunderstandings surrounding Stanley McChrystal's insubordination require a candid look into the rhetoric, key actors, and events with the goal of debunking probability from possibility, and perception from reality. In a similar vein to Gordon Mitchell's, "Team B Intelligence Coups," I will examine the events surrounding McChrystal's resignation and strive to refute commonly held public assumptions including those described by Michael Hastings in "The Runaway General." Mitchell's explains: "This upstream focus on the communication practices responsible for generating flawed intelligence stands to complement rhetorical studies that explain downstream dynamics of how official speeches and media coverage framed popular understanding of the intelligence once it began circulating in channels of public deliberation" (147). Michael Hastings' portrayal of McChrystal filtered and sent "flawed intelligence" downstream, which explains how "official speeches and media coverage framed popular understanding" of the event once it was published. Barack Obama and his cabinet reacted and made decisions based on a biased source. To a large extent, "The Runaway General" is a representation of many Americans' commonly held understanding of the war in Afghanistan and is the primary focus of this study. McChrystal's actions, his interpretation of Afghanistan, and his reasons for insubordination are prime grounds for clarification.

The comments made by McChrystal's aides led to an eruption of criticism in the White House.

In response to McChrystal, the President had to choose what should be done with the General. How should it be publicly explained? What was the best way to justify the decision? McChrystal's rhetoric and his actions drew attention to President Obama's choice of words and style of persuasion. According to *Washington Post*: "In the resolution of the MacArthur showdown, the country learned a lot about Harry Truman. Whether General McChrystal stays or goes for what he said to *Rolling Stone* ... the nation is likely to learn a lot about Barack Obama" (Sanger). The very nature and character of ideas in transmission is dependent upon configurations of language. The interpretation of a speech calls for a more complete understanding of what goes into a speech, the purpose of the speech and the interplay of factors which comprise the public speaking situation, of nuances of meaning which emerge only from the reading of a speech in the light of its setting." (Scott, 107). Obama's "Remarks on McChrystal" were part of the "interplay of factors" that was caused by the *Rolling Stone's* publication. The remarks provide a better understanding of the "nuance of meaning."

Precedence and the President

Obama spoke to stop the damaging fallout from his hand-picked General who, after only one year, had twice made public remarks against him (Burns). Obama justified his Constitutional authority over the military, cited the responsibility he bore, and affirmed his decision for relieving the insubordinate General. Using the Constitution as his supporting argument, Barack Obama's acceptance of McChrystal's resignation was based not only on it but also on direct and indirect use of precedence. Obama drew heavily from Harry Truman's example (Schweid). Despite being orators with very different speaking styles, Truman being direct, brief and blunt, Obama being eloquent, well versed and suave; Obama's remarks have a strong number of persuasive appeals similar to those used by Truman. Truman was a natural orator while Obama who in nature and education is among the ranks of America's most eloquent leaders (White 38). Obama relied upon Truman's structural use of evidence in his speech through repetition of words, Constitutional authority, and force of language, "We are

going to break the Taliban's momentum. We are going to build Afghan capacity. We are going to relentlessly apply pressure on Al Qaida and its leadership..." Also he praises the newly-appointed general, "General Petraeus fully participated in our review last fall, and he both supported and helped design the strategy that we have in place" (Obama). He then turns his remarks to the resigning general: "He [McChrystal] has earned a reputation as one of our nation's finest soldiers." In expressing regret over the old General's departure, Obama says, "I did so (fired Stanley McChrystal) with considerable regret." Obama justifies his authority based on the Constitution with, "the reasons that led me to this decision are the same principles that have supported the strength of our military and our nation since the founding" (Obama). Each one of these elements is a near mirror of what Truman said when he fired Douglas MacArthur (Duffy, *Warrior*).

With precedence in mind, a question arises about why the President did not take a more direct, two-sided argumentative stance against the damning claims made in *Rolling Stone* article? Though Obama's speech is more eloquent, Truman is quoted at several key junctures. His lack of examples and contextual rebuttals is unlike Harry Truman's speech which has held up under historical scrutiny. Obama's deviates argumentatively. According to Daniel O'Keefe, "Specifically, refutational two-sided messages are dependably *more* persuasive than one-sided messages; non-refutational two-sided messages, on the other hand, are significantly *less* persuasive than their one-sided counterparts" (221). O'Keefe summarizes by saying "Persuaders are best advised to meet opposing arguments head on, by refuting them, rather than ignoring or (worse still) merely mentioning such counterarguments" (O'Keefe 220-21). The President might have been advised to avoid issues which could evoke policy feuds and instead establish an idealized future of success and achievement. That being said, Obama's remarks were too narrow in focus. Obama had the freedom to refute and address his General's insubordinate claims made in *Rolling Stone*, yet he did not. His audience was wider than the American public and extended to Karzai as well as other allies in Afghanistan. The arguments made in *Rolling*

Stone were left completely unaddressed. McChrystal, Obama, and the Constitution were the focus of Obama's remarks, not the *Rolling Stone* or counter arguments.

According to Ronald Carpenter in *Rhetoric in Martial Deliberations and Decision Making*, “The rhetorical skills that lead to persuasion in the past are the same that will work (or fail) in the present” (Carpenter viii). Regardless of the success or failure of Obama’s speech, one must consider the equally important artifact, “The Runaway General,” which sparked the conflict with McChrystal in the first place. If there had been no text, there would have been no speech. McChrystal’s behavior was interpreted within the context of previous historical conflicts. With the past in mind, was McChrystal in fact insubordinate, just a bad communicator caught off guard, or was there another less obvious force at work?

Courage and Caution

“Officers must understand their audience and offer them good reason to believe that his or her proposed course of action not only will work, but will do so better than any other.” and “the serving military commander, in proposing action for the greatest success must prudently balance ‘caution and courage.’”

~ *Rhetoric in Martial Deliberations viii, ix*

Whatever McChrystal's attempts at balancing “caution and courage” were, they evidently were not successful. After having been head commander in Afghanistan for only a year, McChrystal had “managed to piss off almost everyone with a stake in the conflict” (Duffy, “Exemplars”). Even after being reprimanded for speaking out in London, McChrystal appeared still not to understand, or purposefully disregarded his superiors wishes that he keep his mouth shut (Hastings, “Runaway General”). Why did General Stanley McChrystal, after thirty-four years of being an army officer, step so far out of line as to ridicule his President? (McChrystal, “Retirement”). By all accounts a brilliant man, McChrystal's actions come off as strikingly naive and insubordinate for such a high ranking

commander. By his own acknowledgement and that of Robert Gates, McChrystal admits that he might be ironically “a modern Patton of strategic communications,” which is no compliment (McChrystal, “Retirement”). That being said, McChrystal had twice before navigated through career-ending events. The first was a cover up of Pat Tillman's death (Stein), and the second the scandal at Abu-Ghraib (Hastings, “Runaway General”). Yet despite these, McChrystal navigated the storms and achieved promotion through them both.

Reasonably speaking, McChrystal from the beginning should have known better than to challenge Obama. There was no chance of achieving the reforms he wanted simply by looking at the example of Douglas MacArthur. Few military leaders can offer a history close to the astoundingly brilliant service of MacArthur. Douglas MacArthur's time as a soldier is full of numerous masterful victories. He fought in WWI, directed battles in the Pacific, oversaw the conclusion of WWII, and reconstructed Japan, to name a few (Rovere 3). MacArthur was next to God to many of the American public in the 1940's and 50's, and he knew it. If such a soldier as MacArthur could not get away with insubordination, logically none following would either. This however does not mean that McChrystal completely rejected MacArthur's example or was naive to the situation. If nothing else McChrystal after his blunder learned from MacArthur by not fighting in commander and chief. MacArthur brought his status down by getting into a Constitutional power struggle with the president, which McChrystal clearly chose not to do.

Was McChrystal insubordinate or simply impolitic? Justifying McChrystal's insubordination through comparison to MacArthur is a hard case to prove. There exists a significant difference between the men that most critics seem to have passed over. MacArthur on one hand went so far as to threaten nuclear deployment against China, while McChrystal believed in a heavily restrained counterinsurgency campaign to win over the civilian population (Sanger). McChrystal, even after he was removed from command, supported the President's policy. Obama himself made clear that

McChrystal's actions did not reflect a disagreement in policy. In contrast, MacArthur made his differences in policy with Truman well known and used them as a benchmark to rally behind politically. McChrystal's insubordination is arguably completely different from that of MacArthur's. As "The Afghan Conundrum" says, "This was no MacArthur" (Krauthammer).

A more comparable match to McChrystal would be George S. Patton. Patton himself is an ideal example of a brilliant military general, who was known for his tactics in the Battle of the Bulge, but made painfully rash statements. Print and radio journalist Drew Pearson's initial report contained inaccuracies, but did expose General Patton for slapping a soldier hospitalized for battle fatigue. Patton exemplifies a great general whose knowledge in good public relations was lacking. He let his mouth run and it got him into trouble (Davidson).

What happened to McChrystal was less like MacArthur, who was accused of being an egotistical warmonger or George Patton, who was painfully naive. Rather, McChrystal falls more in line with the lesser known Israeli General Ori Orr. General Orr made "impolitic remarks attributed to him by a reporter" and was removed from command based on this publication (Rabinovich). General Orr unknowingly made these comments to a reporter who had a hidden agenda whose subsequent publication distorted the General's image so much that he was also removed from command.

The similarities of his situation differ to that of other generals in U. S. history. Though there are strong comparisons with McChrystal to the three previous commanders, McChrystal's actions stand in their own unique place, time, and context.

The question persists: How and why did Stanley McChrystal allow a *Rolling Stone* journalist to get close enough for such an article to be published? Was he caught off guard, recklessly brash and cocky, naive or deceived? (Davidson) There is no simple or swift conclusion that can be drawn as to why McChrystal was insubordinate. However, the media and public seem to have been quick to condemn McChrystal's actions as insubordinate. They were remiss in questioning the validity of

Rolling Stone's article. This approach fails to take into account all of the agents and evidence involved when considering McChrystal as a complex person interacting in an elaborately complex environment.

It can be argued that the lack of unity between McChrystal and the White House had put McChrystal in hot water after disparaging comments he made about Vice President Biden in London (Burns). One could say the roots of disunity were already there; *Rolling Stone*, the article, simply allowed the root form of disunity to be brought into fruition.

Frustration is not an uncommon thing in the political world and neither is conflict, which Obama himself admitted in his remarks: "All of us have personal interests; all of us have opinions; our politics often fuels conflict." The issue was not over conflict, which is admittedly healthy, but over the expression of that conflict in an unhealthy manner and publication of that opinion. Especially in the military "the environment itself requires often honest, quick, and brutal assessments of situations" (Carpenter).

Beyond the simple political and opinion level of conflict, was there a more powerful form of frustration which boiled over leading McChrystal to publish his views in *Rolling Stone*? After being relieved of command, McChrystal delivered a speech detailing the poor and frustrating roadblocks he faced with communication and cooperation in Afghanistan. McChrystal described how an intelligence community back in the States withheld information from him and his team on a key enemy leader (Mulrine). The environment McChrystal described was fraught with lack of trust and poor communication. Some of the frustration, which likely faced the internal members of both the military and civilian group, was expressed in a recent *New Yorker* publication. "What's more, American investigators have been ordered not to speak to reporters. Almost without exception, top American diplomats will not... 'I'm handcuffed,' an Embassy official told me recently. He held his arms out and pushed his wrists together" (Filkins). Perhaps McChrystal was more like MacArthur, who felt bound by the restrictions placed on him until he reached a boiling point. Both men did face wars with limited

parameters.

With this gag rule in place, another variable to consider which caused frustration is the contradictory statements that were coming from McChrystal and the White House. As *Jerusalem Post* noted, “the President of the United States announces the Afghan surge and, in the very next sentence, announces the date on which a US withdrawal will begin; the Afghans – from President to peasant – take note.” And later, “Vice President Joe Biden is adamant that ‘in July of 2011, you’re going to see a whole lot of people moving out. Bet on it’ (Krauthammer). These mixed messages regarding the United States resolve is precisely what McChrystal noted in the introduction of his “Report on Afghanistan”: “there is also a crisis of confidence among Afghans -- in both their government and the international community -- that undermines our credibility and emboldens the insurgents. Further, a perception that our resolve is uncertain makes Afghans reluctant to align with us against the insurgents” (McChrystal, “COMISAF” 1-1).

But was McChrystal’s behavior due to frustration? Was his out-of-line behavior because of an inability to handle the environment he was in? If Hastings’ article is completely credible, then yes, this would seem to be the case. However, when comparing McChrystal’s own words and actions following his resignation, there is a striking difference between the two. In his retirement speech McChrystal admitted his frustration, “This is frustrating” (McChrystal, “Retirement”). However, after this one comment, McChrystal did not boil over into an attack against his former superiors. He did not begin a lengthy apologia such as MacArthur had in his speech in front of a joint meeting of Congress (Ryan). McChrystal did not use his retirement and post-military career to build on an attack against the President. The General has been surprisingly silent on the matter and even honoring in his comments (McChrystal, Cal Poly). If McChrystal was truly frustrated, then why has he not been more vocal? If he was as bothered as critics have claimed, why has he not spoken out? If there are no longer strict limits

on his language, why has he held back? With relatively little left to lose, McChrystal could easily have blown up the situation. His silence now does not necessarily validate what his intentions were then. McChrystal knew that it was not his place to criticize the Administration policy.

Without jumping to a conclusion, in consideration of McChrystal's frustration could *Rolling Stone* have been his means of retiring preemptively? If McChrystal did intend to preemptively retire, which is unlikely, wouldn't there would have been numerous and more effective ways of doing it than making back-handed comments in a pop rock magazine? Like MacArthur before him, McChrystal could have written letters to senators or made public comments against key cabinet members at important moments. It would not have been difficult for McChrystal to use multiple channels to publicize his frustration.

However, would the media and public have responded favorably to a clear criticism by McChrystal and rallied behind his cause? The media and public reaction, like that of Truman and MacArthur, would most likely have been exactly as it was, supporting Obama's decision to remove his General. McChrystal would have known that generals like MacArthur, who had a history of respect for civilian authority, and could not get away with it, neither could he. No general is indispensable.

Is it possible then that McChrystal's head was not in the game and he stopped caring? It is highly unlikely that McChrystal boiled over so much that he chose to ignore the obvious ramifications of speaking out. In his retirement speech, McChrystal's tone was any thing but apathetic or bitter, but instead expressed a deeply seeded care and involvement in his mission, "I left unfulfilled commitments made to many comrades in the fight, commitments I hold sacred." And later, "It is tempting to protect yourself from the personal and professional costs of loss by limiting how much you commit, how much of belief and trust in people, and how deeply you care. Caution and cynicism are safe, but soldiers don't want to follow cautions and cynics. They follow leaders who believe enough to risk failure of disappointment for a worthy cause" (McChrystal, "Retirement). McChrystal did not stop caring,

despite the somber tone; he was consistently very respectful. When asked about his relationship with President Obama in a speech delivered at California Polytechnic State University, McChrystal described a beneficial and “good” relationship between them. (McChrystal, Cal Poly). Frustration does not explain McChrystal’s motives or behavior.

If McChrystal was not bursting with frustration, perhaps he was foolish or negligent enough to let jesting and crude talk get in the way of proper formality and respect. Arguments offered have suggested that his former role in the black ops world killed his chances at later being a visible public commander (Boteach). Like Patton before him, McChrystal could be considered an effective military practitioner but not adept enough to handle the public forum wisely. This is unlikely as well, because he had not only survived two previous career-killer controversies, but had moved forward in spite of them. He clearly knew enough not to be considered stupid. Even his speech against Biden while in London was a weighed move and not done from ignorance (Burns). It was a calculated risk. As stated earlier, Stanley McChrystal knew how communication worked and that the source of information mattered. McChrystal was so good that he backtracked faulty information channels until the missing link was located and remedied. Perception was especially important to McChrystal (Mulrine).

McChrystal himself understood the power of metaphors. Like MacArthur, McChrystal is good at verbalizing his thoughts. His speech at Cal Poly conveyed the idea of vertigo to help his audience understand deeper strategic problems in Afghanistan and misguided good intentions (McChrystal). Also, his retirement speech was loaded with clever conclusions and word pictures. *Rolling Stone’s* article and his unwillingness to refute it could explain how well he understood the severity of the message and code of honor which he was committed to until his final moments of service. In his retirement speech, he expressed regret but not a sense of dishonor or shame, and in a question-answer time, he replied by speaking of his respect for the President and how his own actions jeopardized the mission. Extreme commitment was conveyed in these two areas.

McChrystal understood his role as a leading officer and the careful line of conduct he walked. “Any commissioned officer who uses contemptuous words against the President, the Vice President, Congress, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of a military department, the Secretary of Transportation, or the Governor or legislature of any State, Territory, commonwealth, or possession in which he is on duty or present shall be punished as a court-martial may direct.” (McChrystal and Article 88). It is unlikely that McChrystal presumptively retired by using *Rolling Stone* as his mouthpiece or that he was unable to navigate through the complex political environment. Acknowledging the mistakes McChrystal might have made and potential motivations as expressed rhetorically, what else is left to be considered?

McChrystal blundered by granting *Rolling Stone* reporter Michael Hastings an extended interview. But can we consider McChrystal as significantly responsible for consequences arising from “The Runaway General” without looking more closely at Michael Hastings?

Michael Hastings and Muck-Raking

When considering Michael Hastings’ job as a reporter, grounds for questioning his professionalism need to be justified. We most often think of a reporter's job as taking the responsibility for breaking important news stories and reporting on abuses in the system. But should a line be drawn? What other case is there to be made for and against investigative journalism? What is and is not healthy investigative reporting? (Protest).

How America understands current investigative journalism started with, “Vietnam improprieties(that) turned public opinion against the war, which led to change in American foreign policy. Similarly, news stories that linked top White House officials to Watergate crimes were held responsible for the public loss of confidence in the Nixon administration” (Protest 3). Because of this war and political scandal, we came to expect reporters to question and reveal on a level previously thought disrespectful. Unfortunately, “reporting is often not about finding the best available truth,” but

“uncovering something somebody wants kept secret, whether that is right or wrong” (Protest 5). The key to investigative journalism is that, “investigative journalists *intend* to provoke outrage in their reports of malfeasance. Their work is validated when citizens respond by demanding change from their leaders” (Protest 5). Hastings’ article did just that; it provoked outrage, but was the change healthy? “They (the victims) are representative examples of larger patterns of wrongdoing.” (Protest 9). Did Hastings see McChrystal as the “wrongdoer” or see an opportunity for using him as a representative of a larger pattern of a broken system? Reporter John Phillips claims, “Hastings did a wonderful job. He called out McChrystal as he should have done. That’s his job” (Goodman). But Protest also notes, “Occasionally, they (the investigative journalist) may misrepresent their identity to get information, a strategy that raises a paradox of its own: is it proper to lie in order to uncover the truth?” (21). What truth then was it that Hastings uncovered and did he lie in the intention of writing a provocative article?

Hastings bias distorted McChrystal the man. The *Rolling Stone's* article was portrayed as a revelation of the true nature of Afghanistan, but how much of what McChrystal said in it is an honest portrayal of him and the situation? *Rolling Stone* is not an academic journal, and there is no question that Michael Hastings’ article is provocative in nature. This journalistic appeal of shock and incendiary language is what a reader of *Rolling Stone* would expect to find. Hastings depicts a brash, arrogant, and gun-ho general who has no qualms about challenging his President while at the same time foolhardily committing himself to a futile situation in Afghanistan. Stories of McChrystal wreaking havoc at West Point, surviving two military scandals with Pat Tillman and Abu Ghraib, his punk attired son with a blue mohawk haircut, and the way he took his wife out for fast food on their anniversary are compiled to portray McChrystal in a particular light (Hastings, “Runaway General”). This level of in-depth knowledge and blunt candor is unusual, especially against someone like McChrystal who is such a senior military commander. Hastings’ report does not hold ground when comparing the assertions made with professional reports. Hastings summarizes: “After nine years of war, the Taliban simply remains

too strongly entrenched for the US military to openly attack. The very people that COIN seeks to win over - the Afghan People – do not want us there. Our supposed ally, President Karzai, used his influence to delay the offensive and massive influx of aid championed by McChrystal...” (Hastings, “Runaway General” 121).

Hastings’ claims about the situation in Afghanistan are completely contrary compared with Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute's Saban Center for Middle East Policy (Anderson). Bruce asserts: “It is a myth that Afghanistan is an ungovernable space. That’s bad history and a misunderstanding of the situation” (Anderson 4). Later Peter Bergen, Co-director, Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative, New American Foundation, asserted, “68 percent of Afghans say they think that the United States is either doing a fair, good, or excellent job” (5). And later, “When asked, would you prefer to be ruled by the current government or the Taliban, 82 percent of Afghans say they prefer to be ruled by the current government...63 percent strongly support or somewhat support the U.S. Military in Afghanistan” (5,6). Bergen goes on to make the argument that we spent “18 times more per capita in Bosnia and in Kosovo compared to what we did in Afghanistan...It is no wonder then why ramping up counter insurgency measures is so highly prioritized” (Anderson 5, 6).

The pictorial presentation is also a powerful message used by *Rolling Stone*. There are excerpts in bold highlighting particular comments that are not only taken out of context, but also fail to communicate the complete picture. For example: The General’s team makes jokes about the Vice President, whom Obama chose in part for his foreign policy experience. “Biden?” laughs a top aide. “Did you say: ‘Bite me?’” Or “McChrystal isn’t just in charge on the battlefield: he also calls the diplomatic shots” (Hastings, “Runaway General” 92). Inflammatory language like this is used to make McChrystal seem almost presidential in power and reckless. *Rolling Stone* even displays a chart of the “Team of Rivals” which shows eight individuals, four of whom are against McChrystal, and four who

have “sided” with him (Hastings, “Runaway General” 97). The visual interpretation alone infers infighting between McChrystal and the White House. Hastings creates a image of the culture like a dogfight over power, “an assortment of administration players compete over the Afghan portfolio” (“Runaway General” 94).

Further evidence of Hastings’ abuse of information is with his reporting of the personal time that McChrystal and his men spent with their families despite being asked to keep it private (“*Rolling Stone*”). His rendezvous with his wife was specifically asked to be “off the record,” and this was “a rare occasion” for the men to be with their families. This personal event was used as evidence against the General when it was simply a family get-together. It was private and asked to be kept that way. A member of McChrystal's team who was present for a celebration of McChrystal's 33rd wedding anniversary at a Paris bar said it was "clearly off the record" (DeYoung). Aides "made it very clear to Michael: 'This is private time. These are guys who don't get to see their wives a lot. This is us together. If you stay, you have to understand this is off the record' " (DeYoung).

Hastings chose to apply “Team America,” an incendiary title, to McChrystal’s culture. When asked if “McChrystal's staff jokingly referred to themselves as “Team America,” the Army's response was, “not really – we joke that we are sometimes perceived that way by many of the NATO forces” (DeYoung). However in the *Rolling Stone* article, these men are portrayed as being prideful and arrogant about such a title, casting it in a macho-militaristic light. “The General’s staff is a handpicked collection of killers, spies, geniuses, patriots, political operators, and outright maniacs. There's a former head of British Special Forces, two Navy Seals, an Afghan Special Forces commando, a lawyer, two fighter pilots, and at least two dozen combat veterans and counter insurgency experts. They jokingly refer to themselves as Team America...they pride themselves on their can-do attitude and their disdain for authority” (Hastings, “Runaway General” 93). The description leading into the joke makes it sound as if they are a group of fraternity boys having a good laugh, joking over how others refer to them and

the power of influence they control. There is a significant difference between talking about how others joke about you and taking that title to use it for yourself.

Even Hastings' metaphorical comparisons were manipulative. Hastings compares Afghanistan with Vietnam twice. "In June, Afghanistan officially outpaced Vietnam as the longest war in American History." And also, "...Afghanistan, it's going to look more like Vietnam than Desert Storm" (Hastings, "Runaway General" 93). An extremely inaccurate comparison, when last we checked, Vietnam geographically, politically, militarily, and historically was nothing like Afghanistan. Bergen asserts: "This will not be Obama's Vietnam; this is a crazy comparison... it's a very different conflict. The North Vietnamese Army was a 500,000-man force supported by the Soviets and Mao; it was a major problem for the United States. At the height of the violence in Vietnam, 154 American soldiers were being killed every four days. That's the same number that were killed last year in Afghanistan. So policy by analogy doesn't work in this case" (Anderson 6). The insurgency in Afghanistan is also estimated to be close to 20,000 troops, as compared to 175,000 to 250,000 who were fighting the Soviets during their war" (Anderson 6). The comparison between the two does not hold up to analysis. In Vietnam the death toll was far more horrific, the civilian population was much more united against us and the hostile forces which we face were vastly greater than in Afghanistan.

Even minute and seemingly irrelevant details were disproportionately inflated. *Rolling Stone* mentions McChrystal's nunchucks, which is a specialized martial arts weapon, and portrays them in a machismo way to describe who McChrystal was as a leader. They were, in fact, nothing more than a prank pulled on McChrystal by his staff and in no way were taken seriously. "He (McChrystal) does not carry them. His protection detail made them for him as a joke as well as a special holder in the console of his vehicle. It came from one day M4 was testing his personal staff to make sure they had everything before we left for a meeting. 'My glasses?' 'Check sir.' 'My Briefing book?' 'Check sir.' 'My nunchucks?' (He was joking to show his staff that they hadn't thought of everything, so they went

out and had a set made for him)” (“*Rolling Stone*”). However, *Rolling Stone* described this as follows: “He carries a custom-made set of nunchucks in his convoy engraved with his name and four stars” (Hastings, “Runaway General” 96). In *Rolling Stone* the nunchucks are understood to stand for a macho-like attitude which is arguably what the audience reader would have understood. Instead they symbolize at best the loyalty of a team towards their commander or at the least nothing more than a joke (*Rolling Stone*).

Rolling Stone’s portrayal of the relationship between Karzai and McChrystal is skewed; instead of reflecting an accurate relationship built on trust, *Rolling Stone* depicted a negative one. *Rolling Stone*’s version of Karzai was contrary to McChrystal’s own interactions. *Rolling Stone* states that as Karzai was sleeping on the eve of a major offense, McChrystal had to drive over to have him sign off on approval. This would be a serious offense if true. Later, Hastings quotes Karzai as being uninformed when he said, “General, I didn’t even know we were fighting in Uruzgan!” (Hastings, “Runaway General” 95). Again, Karzai was portrayed by *Rolling Stone* as being stubborn and uninformed. Yet McChrystal’s aide in the thirty-question briefing clarified this because it was not a common practice to inform or gain approval from Karzai before McChrystal became commander. “Karzai gave it (approval for the mission) but was stunned. Said that in 8 years as President he had never once been consulted on a military operation in his own country.” Hastings quotes an aide as saying: “He’s (Karzai) been locked up in this place the past year,” but Karzai’s reclusive nature is because “Karzai, following 5-6 assassination attempts, has spent most of his 8 years in office secure behind palace walls,” and McChrystal had been active in getting him out (“*Rolling Stone*”). McChrystal “in the past several months” helped Karzai tour the country. Karzai as a “tinpot” leader is not an entirely accurate description when all the circumstances are considered (“*Rolling Stone*”).

Publication of McChrystal’s voting record is the most egregious abuse on *Rolling Stone*’s part, and is the most explicit signifier of Hastings’ disregard for journalistic honesty and his willingness to

distort or exploit facts to get a story. Pre-publication of “The Runaway General,” McChrystal's aide responded to *Rolling Stone's* editor in capital letters:

IMPORTANT - - PLEASE DO NOT INCLUDE THIS (McChrystal's voting record) - - THIS IS PERSONAL AND PRIVATE INFORMATION AND UNRELATED TO HIS JOB. IT WOULD BE INAPPROPRIATE TO SHARE. MY REASON FOR THIS AS IT WOULD PRESENT AN UNDUE COMMAND INFLUENCE ON JUNIOR OFFICERS OF SOLDIERS WHO SHOULD MAKE THEIR OWN POLITICAL DECISIONS. THERE ARE VERY STRICT RULES IN THE MILITARY ON SEPARATING CHURCH AND STATE ON THIS SORT OF STUFF – HAVE TO KEEP OUT OF POLITICAL PREFERENCE AND PERSONAL CHOICE. ~ (“Rolling Stone”)

Hastings subsequently referred to McChrystal’s voting record in print: “Even though he had voted for Obama” (92). The question then is this: if McChrystal so clearly did not wish to have something as simple as his voting record published, which is in fact the case, why was it published? *Rolling Stone* executive editor, Eric Bates, “said that the remark was ‘absolutely’ not off the record, and he noted that Booth's appeal ‘isn't on accuracy or even that it was off the record,’ but that it was irrelevant. He said the magazine, like other news organizations, “had no obligation to warn sources that they had made unwise remarks” (DeYoung). According to sources involved in the Army investigation over McChrystal’s comments, these “unwise remarks” were not said by McChrystal or his top aides (Lubold).

McChrystal and Honor

Military honor is not well understood in mainstream culture. Accused malefactors guilty or not, justify themselves through defense and often redirect blame. However, McChrystal seems to have reasoned beyond this. His career was fast coming to an end. He seems to understand that a good leaders and commanders should be willing to take the responsibility and heat for other’s mistakes. McChrystal

himself may not have made those comments in *Rolling Stone* nor any of his aides. Jeopardizing other people's careers and more importantly jeopardizing the mission was not worth the cost to McChrystal. McChrystal said so himself: "I offered my resignation to President Obama because the furor created over that article I thought put him in a position that was going to make it more difficult to complete the mission" (Cal Poly). Lt. Col. Edward T Sholtis, "a U.S. military spokesman in Kabul," said "arguing about the merits of the article would have seemed like, we were trying to protect or excuse ourselves rather than acknowledge our mistake. That may have not been the best PR (public relations) strategy, but it was the approach consistent with the character of General McChrystal" (DeYoung). This bespeaks his self-confidence and a more dignified acceptance of his resignation.

His public apology and silence in refusing to refute *Rolling Stone* has been hastily translated into an acknowledgment of guilt. His actions are explained by an understanding of honor and the military code of conduct. McChrystal was depicted as rebellious and having a bone to pick against his President when McChrystal's actions since have validated the complete opposite conclusion. He has not spoken against his Commander in Chief. Rather, he has been positive in his remarks, "we had a good relationship before that; we had a good relationship that day; I still think we have a good relationship. And I did what I thought was right, and I'm comfortable with that" (McChrystal, Cal Poly). Instead of taking down his Commander, and other men's careers, McChrystal assumed a mistake even when it cost him (Hertzberg). McChrystal's rhetoric during his retirement ceremony and subsequent speeches following his resignation express a story with a different sense of honor and respect for his former Commander in Chief. Hastings' story wrongly portrays their relationship and the respect McChrystal had for the President. McChrystal's sympathy for the people of Afghanistan is completely different from what *Rolling Stone* claimed it to be.

Hastings' report was no Watergate. No great evils were brought into light. Instead a destructive bias which deluded the truth, twisted words, and stoked a public uproar was sold. The

President of the United States made a historically important decision based on “The Runaway General” which led him to remove his General. Hastings spoke in depth about his reporting style in 2008 in a GQ publication where he said “get sources drunk and singing, then report back the behind-the-scenes story.” Later Hastings admits more clearly, “If that sounds like I had some trouble being ‘objective,’ I did. Objectivity is a fallacy” (Hastings, “Hack”). For the lingering unconvinced critic, Hastings’ agenda was not a one-time event. Since gaining glory and winning the Polk award, Hastings has published two more stories attempting to indict two more generals (“Michael”). Hastings has gone after General Paetreaus, McChrystal’s replacement in Afghanistan, and Lt. Gen. William Caldwell on accusations of spying on senators (Hastings “Another Runaway”). Hastings himself has admitted to taking liberties in his approach to telling the truth (Bryant). In the most clear way Hastings recounts what he does and his goal in journalism. “...your sources of information are the people who work for him. (in this case the 08’ presidential candidates) So you pretend to be friendly and nonthreatening, and over time you ‘build trust,’ which everybody involved knows is an illusion. If the time comes, if your editor calls for it, you’re supposed to fuck them over; and they’ll throw you under a bus without much thought, too” (Hastings, “Hack”). The likelihood of Michael Hastings being more interested in taking advantage of an opportunity to create a story using inflammatory language, and using Stanley McChrystal as a deflective scapegoat to sell an anti-war cause is no stretch. In place of healthy investigative journalism, which does have its place and is essential in the cases like Watergate and Vietnam to expose corruption and wrongdoing, Hastings reporting was anything but healthy. Hastings investigative journalism is what Teddy Roosevelt condemned in his famous “Man with the Muck-Rake” speech.

Conclusion

“The man with the Muck-rake, the man who could look no way but downward with the

muck-rake in his hands; who was offered a celestial crown for his muck-rake, but who could neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor.”

~ Teddy Roosevelt and The Man with the Muckrake

By relieving Stanley McChrystal, the long-lasting implications of McChrystal's resignation and Barack Obama's justifications are subtle at the start. Precedence now has been established. No longer does relieving a general need to be founded on arguments from policy but now may be justified by a circumstantial inflammatory case of muckrake journalism. The lapse in historical understanding of precedence was in not allowing a reasonable amount of time to pass for McChrystal's actions to be studied and assessed to see if his words were his own. In MacArthur's case there was no confusing what he had done. Truman purposely waited until it was so clearly insubordination that he only had to briefly elude to it. Yet with McChrystal, many questions still remained elusive and unanswered. The unpublished Army investigation reports suggest that neither McChrystal nor his aides made any of the damning comments. Instead, they point to a “mid-level naval officer” (Lubold).

It will be seen in greater detail what McChrystal's take on the matter is in his up-and-coming memoirs (Bosman). Hastings' publication “The Runaway General” obfuscated the truth, and Hastings' true colors have since revealed themselves. “Another Runaway General” and “King David's War” will reveal themselves. The implication of these publications and the President's response will have to be seen in time. They open the door for future presidents to relieve their commanders based upon reckless comments even though in truth these commanders maintain agreement with their president. Journalism has been given too much leeway in reporting without accountability. “The conflict between the military and the media will pervade the future just as it has the past. Because the institutions collide at moments of such high stress for themselves, and usually danger for their nation, the conflicts seem more abrasive than they do in the natural camaraderie of citizens of the same nation under fire on the battlefield”

(Overholser 328). The true danger in this case lies not in insubordination or lack of civilian control over the military, but in unaccountable muck-raking journalism.

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