

Administration

A Warrior Undone

By James Kitfield

■ His “black-ops” background did not make Gen. Stanley McChrystal a savvy counterinsurgency general.

■ This is not a Douglas MacArthur moment, but disdain of civilian authorities cannot be tolerated.

■ Placing Gen. David Petraeus in charge puts a quick cap on Obama’s Afghanistan spill.

The Delta Force commander’s description of an early morning raid in Baghdad was in strictest confidence, befitting the secret world that the Army’s crack counterterrorist force inhabits. In the dead of night, U.S. commandos had broken into a house where a “high-value target” was hiding. Shooting and pandemonium erupted inside. After the smoke cleared and the unit exited the dwelling, the troops, wearing night-vision goggles, saw two figures waiting across the street. One was the command sergeant major for the Special Forces unit. The other was Gen. Stanley McChrystal, at that time the head of the Joint Special Operations Command in charge of the elite “hunter killer” teams in Iraq.

The story of how McChrystal regularly observed and participated in nighttime

raids during his time in Iraq helps explain why, especially in tight-knit Special Forces circles, he is a beloved and even legendary commander. His teams killed hundreds, if not thousands, of terrorists and insurgents, including in 2006 the most wanted man in Iraq—Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the notoriously bloodthirsty leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

This week, however, President Obama accepted McChrystal’s resignation as the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan and named Gen. David Petraeus as his replacement. McChrystal’s inability to move beyond the elite culture, ethos, and operational mind-set of Special Operations Forces ultimately cost him his job. The instincts that he developed during five years in the cloistered, secret world of Joint Special Operations Command simply did not serve him well at a strategic-level headquarters overseeing an alliance of 150,000 troops and a massive counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan.

One active-duty, senior Special Operations officer who made the same transition from “kinetic” counterterrorism operations to the more “touchy-feely” imperatives of counterinsurgency, where protecting civilians is the primary goal and dealing with the media and the political aspects of armed nation building are integral to the job, acknowledged to *National Journal* that the change can be jarring.

“When I interviewed for a job commanding a conventional unit involved in counterinsurgency operations, the first thing they asked was, ‘How much experience have you had engaging with Iraqis?’ ” said the senior officer, who asked not to be named. “My answer was, ‘Well, I’ve shot at a bunch of them. Does that count?’ ”

The comments attributed to McChrystal and his top aides by a reporter for

■ Wartime Switch



■ President Obama announced his decision to put U.S. Army Gen. David Petraeus in charge of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan on June 23.

Rolling Stone magazine read like a textbook for running afoul of Article 88 of the Uniformed Code of Military Justice, which prescribes a court martial for “any commissioned officer who uses contemptuous words against the President, the Vice President, Congress, the Secretary of Defense ... or the Governor or legislature of any State ...”

In the *Rolling Stone* article, McChrystal's top aides are quoted as firing scattershot volleys of such contempt at much of the civilian chain of command, up to and including Obama (“intimidated” by the military), Vice President Biden (nicknamed by an aide “Bite Me”), National Security Adviser James Jones (a “clown”), special envoy Richard Holbrooke (a “wounded animal” terrified of being fired), and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry (a betrayer who covers his backside “for the history books”). Even NATO allies such as the French come in for derision during a visit to Paris (McChrystal's dinner with a French minister is, in the words of an aide, “fucking gay”).

In taking command in Afghanistan, McChrystal brought a core circle of staff assistants with him, including a former head of British Special Forces, two Navy Seals, an Afghan special forces commando, and at least two dozen combat veterans and counterinsurgency experts. As *Rolling Stone* reported, McChrystal's aides jokingly called themselves “Team America,” after a raunchy movie send-up (*Team America: World Police*) of an elite, and clueless, U.S. counterterrorism organization.

McChrystal's Team America wasted no time in trying to graft the warrior culture and can-do bravado of Special Operations units onto NATO's notoriously laid-back International Security Assistance Force headquarters in Kabul—banning alcohol, closing down the Burger King, and spurring headquarters staff to a breakneck pace. His aides laud McChrystal as a “snake-eating rebel” who sleeps only four hours a night, eats a single meal each day, and runs 7 miles every morning.

Yet a successful war commander operates as much in the political and media realms as in the world of combat operations, and there McChrystal stumbled. He was the U.S. official who developed the most successful relationship with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, but the

general also took heat from rank-and-file troops for restraining their use of airpower in order to minimize Afghan civilian casualties.

Special Operations units are exceptionally informal in terms of relationships and interactions among commanders, junior officers, and enlisted troops. They are also notoriously testosterone-fueled. Because Special Ops are almost always conducted in secrecy, the units have little institutional familiarity with the media. The *Rolling Stone* article suggests that the culture that developed inside McChrystal's team was one in which aides felt free to show great disdain for civilian authority without fear of rebuke from the boss, and with almost no understanding of the protocols and ground rules that govern a reporter's coverage.

“When I was a commander, I would never have tolerated internal language from my staff that denigrated the enemy like that, let alone the civilian authorities,” said Gen. Barry McCaffrey, a retired four-star commander and highly decorated veteran of the Vietnam War and the 1991 Persian Gulf War. “Stan McChrystal and his team are true believers who have been at war for nine years, and they were certainly naive to let a *Rolling Stone* reporter embed with them and listen to their innermost thoughts. At that point, I felt McChrystal's effectiveness as a commander was fatally impaired. My bigger concern is that a U.S. battle staff in a theater of war doubted that the country's political leadership and public were behind them, and they clearly felt alienated from their own government. That tells me we may have bigger problems with the war in Afghanistan than Stan McChrystal or his aides.”

Richard Kohn is a history professor at the University of North Carolina, and an expert in civil-military relations. He recalled that McChrystal had gotten into similar trouble with the White House last year when he gave an on-the-record speech and question-and-answer session at a London think tank in which he argued for tens of thousands more troops and a counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan. At the time, Obama was

still weighing his strategy for the war. White House aides were enraged that McChrystal seemed to try to publicly box in his commander-in-chief.

“Given the trouble that General McChrystal had already gotten into, it's almost incomprehensible to me that he remained so clumsy and clueless when it came to dealing with civil-military relations and the press,” Kohn said. Though the controversy leading to McChrystal's resignation fell well short of the insubordination over grand strategy that occurred between Gen. Douglas MacArthur and President Truman during the Korean War, he said, most senior military commanders understand the necessity to swallow their dislike or frustrations with civilian masters.

“And even if a *Rolling Stone* reporter is ‘off the record,’ he's going to pick up on a command atmosphere and ethos that is arrogant and disdainful of civilian authorities,” Kohn added. “The only explanation I have is that McChrystal spent so much of his career in the black world of Special Operations that he never became adept at civil-military and media relations.”

In choosing Petraeus to replace McChrystal, Obama went a long way toward easing many of the immediate concerns that the *Rolling Stone* controversy raised. As the intellectual father of the Army's counterinsurgency doctrine and the hero of the Iraq troop surge of 2007, Petraeus helped shape the strategy in Afghanistan. He currently heads Central Command, putting him in the direct chain of command for the war, which largely eliminates any worries about a long learning curve for a new commander at a critical juncture. Petraeus is also generally acknowledged as the most political and media savvy officer of his generation.

“Stan McChrystal did a hell of a job in Iraq with a Special Operations mentality of ‘full speed ahead,’ and keeping beneath the radar to avoid any political interference,” Lawrence Korb, a defense expert and former Pentagon official now at the Center for American Progress, said. “But he was a political neophyte who was really naive in dealing with the press. He lacked the sophistication of David Petraeus, who you can't even imagine getting into this kind of trouble because of an errant press aide.”

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National security experts debate what's at stake for the U.S. in Afghanistan, this week at security.NationalJournal.com.