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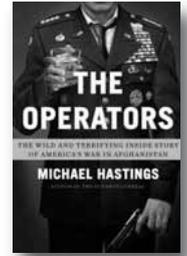


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The Operators: the wild and terrifying inside story of America's war in Afghanistan

by Michael Hastings

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In late June 2010, an article titled *The Runaway General* was published by *Rolling Stone* magazine. A few days later, United States President, Barack Obama, announced that, as a consequence of statements quoted in the article, he had accepted the resignation of General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of the 150,000 international and United States forces in Afghanistan. That explosive and award-winning article has now been expanded into this book.

Michael Hastings, author of both the article and this book, is an American journalist and a writer. He was a regular contributor to *Gentlemen's Quarterly* and now is a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*. From 2002 to 2008, he was a *Newsweek* journalist, famous for his Iraq War coverage.

Hastings accompanied McChrystal during a spring 2010 trip across Europe during which McChrystal sought additional Allied help for the war effort. To Hastings' astonishment, McChrystal and staff had plenty to say about the White House and its handling of the war – none of it complimentary, much of it contemptuous, and almost all of it on the record.

Hastings ignored the harm that his reporting would cause to America's overseas interests. The firing of McChrystal removed the one American who enjoyed the confidence of Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, and of Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, chief-of-staff of Pakistan's army. It also widened the gulf between Karzai and Washington. Karzai became convinced that the White House had removed McChrystal as another slap in his face for disregarding American lectures. To the Afghan president, it was inconceivable that the United States government would fire its top military officer because of unattributed quotes in a pop-culture magazine.

In the article, Hastings attributed few quotes to specific individuals. In *The Operators*, he names names. We now know that most of the incendiary statements came from a 33-year-old lieutenant commander. In the article, Hastings attributed the lieutenant commander's assertions at various times to a "team member", an "aide" and an "adviser", leading readers to conclude that the statements emanated from a broad range of McChrystal's staff. Moreover, an investigation by the Defense Department's Inspector General found insufficient evidence to attribute some of the offending quotes to team members and determined that other quotes had been taken out of context.

In the book, Hastings recounts the behind-the-scenes tale of the "McChrystal affair", set against the larger backdrop of the war. Although the events leading to McChrystal's removal are the book's main theme, many chapters analyse the war itself. They are noteworthy less

for their content than for their snide tone. Hastings asserts, for instance, that "the simple and terrifying reality" for United States military officers in Afghanistan was that "they were getting their asses kicked by illiterate peasants who made bombs out of manure and wood".

In contrast to many correspondents covering Afghanistan, Hastings has not invested the effort required to comprehend the war's complexities. He echoes superficial criticisms of the United States military, such as one claiming that counterinsurgency invariably fails. Success in counterinsurgency depends heavily on local indigenous leaders, a group virtually ignored in the book.

Hastings repeatedly questions just what the United States is seeking to achieve in Afghanistan. He claims that the counter-insurgency mission has little or no connection to the stated mission of eliminating al-Qaida in Afghanistan and denying the group sanctuary; that Al-Qaida's numbers among insurgents are minimal at best; and that none of the terror plots of the past 10 years were planned in Afghanistan. Hastings castigates the military for manipulating the White House and the public into a troop increase and an escalation in the war.

Perhaps most interestingly, Hastings sheds light on the continued divide between civilian and military America and the role that divide played in the United States troop increase in Afghanistan. Hastings claims that members of the military leadership, like McChrystal, responsible for the Afghan war's escalation, have grown to see themselves as immune to civilian scrutiny. He also calls out America and the media for too often deifying military brass: "We'd grown accustomed to seeing the general as a superman – and the press rarely challenged this narrative in their coverage."

Hastings asserts that, in pushing for the troop surge, McChrystal and his team were members of "a warrior class that had lost touch with the civilian world ... He'd spent much of the last decade overseas consumed by the conflict, preferring war zones to Washington ... He'd seen his wife, Annie, fewer than thirty days a year since 2003 ... When he and his men did have to deal with civilians, they were accustomed to ritual genuflections of awe."

Readers' views on the war in Afghanistan will likely colour their opinion of the book, but Hastings' observations and perspectives are worth reading and at least considering.

Marcus Fielding¹

¹Marcus Fielding, a councillor of the Royal United Services Institute of Victoria, recently transferred from full-time to part-time service with the Australian Army. He has held a variety of command, staff and instructional appointments and has served on operations in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Haiti, East Timor and Iraq.