

# The Runaway General

Stanley McChrystal, Obama's top commander in Afghanistan, has seized control of the war by never taking his eye off the real enemy: The wimps in the White House

By Michael Hastings  
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Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, works on board a Lockheed C-130 Hercules aircraft between Battlefield Circulation missions.

U.S. Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Mark O'Donald/NATO

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**H**ow'd I get screwed into going to this dinner?" demands Gen. Stanley McChrystal. It's a Thursday night in mid-April, and the commander of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan is sitting in a four-star suite at the Hôtel Westminster in Paris. He's in France to sell his new war strategy to our NATO allies – to keep up the fiction, in essence, that we actually *have* allies. Since McChrystal took over a year ago, the Afghan war has become the exclusive property of the United States. Opposition to the war has already toppled the Dutch government, forced the resignation of Germany's president and sparked both Canada and the Netherlands to announce the withdrawal of their 4,500 troops. McChrystal is in Paris to keep the French, who have lost more than 40 soldiers in Afghanistan, from going all wobbly on him.

"The dinner comes with the position, sir," says his chief of staff, Col. Charlie Flynn.

McChrystal turns sharply in his chair.

"Hey, Charlie," he asks, "does this come with the position?"

McChrystal gives him the middle finger.

The general stands and looks around the suite that his traveling staff of 10 has converted into a full-scale operations center. The tables are crowded with silver Panasonic Toughbooks, and blue cables crisscross the hotel's thick carpet, hooked up to satellite dishes to provide encrypted phone and e-mail communications. Dressed in off-the-rack civilian casual – blue tie, button-down shirt, dress slacks – McChrystal is way out of his comfort zone. Paris, as one of his advisers says, is the "most anti-McChrystal city you can imagine." The general hates fancy restaurants, rejecting any place with candles on the tables as too "Gucci." He prefers Bud Light Lime (his favorite beer) to Bordeaux, *Talladega Nights* (his favorite movie) to Jean-Luc Godard. Besides, the public eye has never been a place where McChrystal felt comfortable: Before President Obama put him in charge of the war in Afghanistan, he spent five years running the Pentagon's most secretive black ops.

"What's the update on the Kandahar bombing?" McChrystal asks Flynn. The city has been rocked by two massive car bombs in the past day alone, calling into question the general's assurances that he can wrest it from the Taliban.

"We have two KIAs, but that hasn't been confirmed," Flynn says.

McChrystal takes a final look around the suite. At 55, he is gaunt and lean, not unlike an older version of Christian Bale in *Rescue Dawn*. His slate-blue eyes have the unsettling ability to *drill down* when they lock on you. If you've fucked up or disappointed him, they can destroy your soul without the need for him to raise his voice.

"I'd rather have my ass kicked by a roomful of people than go out to this dinner," McChrystal says.

He pauses a beat.

"Unfortunately," he adds, "no one in this room could do it."

With that, he's out the door.

"Who's he going to dinner with?" I ask one of his aides.

"Some French minister," the aide tells me. "It's fucking gay."

The next morning, McChrystal and his team gather to prepare for a speech he is giving at the École Militaire, a French military academy. The general prides himself on being sharper and ballsier than anyone else, but his brashness comes with a price: Although McChrystal has been in charge of the war for only a year, in that short time he has managed to piss off almost everyone with a stake in the conflict. Last fall, during the question-and-answer session following a speech he gave in London, McChrystal dismissed the counterterrorism strategy being advocated by Vice President Joe Biden as "shortsighted," saying it would lead to a state of "Chaos-istan." The remarks earned him a smackdown from the president himself, who summoned the general to a terse private meeting aboard Air Force One. The message to McChrystal seemed clear: *Shut the fuck up, and keep a lower profile*

Now, flipping through printout cards of his speech in Paris, McChrystal wonders aloud what Biden question he might get today, and how he should respond. "I never know what's going to pop out until I'm up there, that's the problem," he says. Then, unable to help themselves, he and his staff imagine the general dismissing the vice president with a good one-liner.

"Are you asking about Vice President Biden?" McChrystal says with a laugh. "Who's that?"

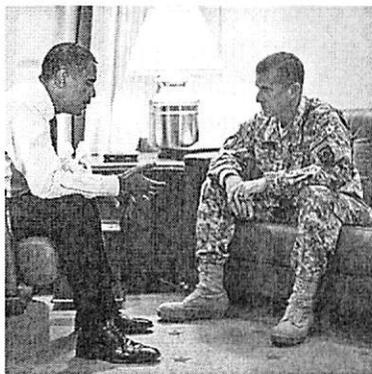
"Biden?" suggests a top adviser. "Did you say: Bite Me?"

When Barack Obama entered the Oval Office, he immediately set out to deliver on his most important campaign promise on foreign policy: to refocus the war in Afghanistan on what led us to invade in the first place. "I want the American people to understand," he announced in March 2009. "We have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan." He ordered another 21,000 troops to Kabul, the largest increase since the war began in 2001. Taking the advice of both the Pentagon and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he also fired Gen. David McKiernan – then the U.S. and

NATO commander in Afghanistan – and replaced him with a man he didn't know and had met only briefly: Gen. Stanley McChrystal. It was the first time a top general had been relieved from duty during wartime in more than 50 years, since Harry Truman fired Gen. Douglas MacArthur at the height of the Korean War.

Even though he had voted for Obama, McChrystal and his new commander in chief failed from the outset to connect. The general first encountered Obama a week after he took office, when the president met with a dozen senior military officials in a room at the Pentagon known as the Tank. According to sources familiar with the meeting, McChrystal thought Obama looked "uncomfortable and intimidated" by the roomful of military brass. Their first one-on-one meeting took place in the Oval Office four months later, after McChrystal got the Afghanistan job, and it didn't go much better. "It was a 10-minute photo op," says an adviser to McChrystal. "Obama clearly didn't know anything about him, who he was. Here's the guy who's going to run his fucking war, but he didn't seem very engaged. The Boss was pretty disappointed."

From the start, McChrystal was determined to place his personal stamp on Afghanistan, to use it as a laboratory for a controversial military strategy known as counterinsurgency. COIN, as the theory is known, is the new gospel of the Pentagon brass, a doctrine that attempts to square the military's preference for high-tech violence with the demands of fighting protracted wars in failed states. COIN calls for sending huge numbers of ground troops to not only destroy the enemy, but to live among the civilian population and slowly rebuild, or build from scratch, another nation's government – a process that even its staunchest advocates admit requires years, if not decades, to achieve. The theory essentially rebrands the military, expanding its authority (and its funding) to encompass the diplomatic and political sides of warfare: Think the Green Berets as an armed Peace Corps. In 2006, after Gen. David Petraeus beta-tested the theory during his "surge" in Iraq, it quickly gained a hardcore following of think-tankers, journalists, military officers and civilian officials. Nicknamed "COINdinistas" for their cultish zeal, this influential cadre believed the doctrine would be the perfect solution for Afghanistan. All they needed was a general with enough charisma and political savvy to implement it.



As McChrystal leaned on Obama to ramp up the war, he did it with the same fearlessness he used to track down terrorists in Iraq: Figure out how your enemy operates, be faster and more ruthless than everybody else, then take the fuckers out. After arriving in Afghanistan last June, the general conducted his own policy review, ordered up by Defense Secretary Robert Gates. The now-infamous report was leaked to the press, and its conclusion was dire: If we didn't send another 40,000 troops – swelling the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan by nearly half – we were in danger of "mission failure." The White House was furious. McChrystal, they felt, was trying to bully Obama, opening him up to charges of being weak on national security unless he did what the general wanted. It was Obama versus the Pentagon, and the Pentagon was determined to kick the president's ass.

Last fall, with his top general calling for more troops, Obama launched a three-month review to re-evaluate the strategy in Afghanistan. "I found that time painful," McChrystal tells me in one of several lengthy interviews. "I was selling an unsellable position." For the general, it was a crash course in Beltway politics – a battle that pitted him against experienced Washington insiders like Vice President Biden, who argued that a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan would plunge America into a military quagmire without weakening international terrorist networks. "The entire COIN strategy is a fraud perpetuated on the American people," says Douglas Macgregor, a retired colonel and leading

critic of counterinsurgency who attended West Point with McChrystal. "The idea that we are going to spend a trillion dollars to reshape the culture of the Islamic world is utter nonsense.

In the end, however, McChrystal got almost exactly what he wanted. On December 1st, in a speech at West Point, the president laid out all the reasons why fighting the war in Afghanistan is a bad idea: It's expensive; we're in an economic crisis; a decade-long commitment would sap American power; Al Qaeda has shifted its base of operations to Pakistan. Then, without ever using the words "victory" or "win," Obama announced that he would send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, almost as many as McChrystal had requested. The president had thrown his weight, however hesitantly, behind the counterinsurgency crowd.

Today, as McChrystal gears up for an offensive in southern Afghanistan, the prospects for any kind of success look bleak. In June, the death toll for U.S. troops passed 1,000, and the number of IEDs has doubled. Spending hundreds of billions of dollars on the fifth-poorest country on earth has failed to win over the civilian population, whose attitude toward U.S. troops ranges from intensely wary to openly hostile. The biggest military operation of the year – a ferocious offensive that began in February to retake the southern town of Marja – continues to drag on, prompting McChrystal himself to refer to it as a "bleeding ulcer." In June, Afghanistan officially outpaced Vietnam as the longest war in American history – and Obama has quietly begun to back away from the deadline he set for withdrawing U.S. troops in July of next year. The president finds himself stuck in something even more insane than a quagmire: a quagmire he knowingly walked into, even though it's precisely the kind of gigantic, mind-numbing, multigenerational nation-building project he explicitly said he didn't want.

Even those who support McChrystal and his strategy of counterinsurgency know that whatever the general manages to accomplish in Afghanistan, it's going to look more like Vietnam than Desert Storm. "It's not going to look like a win, smell like a win or taste like a win," says Maj. Gen. Bill Mayville, who serves as chief of operations for McChrystal. "This is going to end in an argument."

The assembled men may look and sound like a bunch of combat veterans letting off steam, but in fact this tight-knit group represents the most powerful force shaping U.S. policy in Afghanistan. While McChrystal and his men are in indisputable command of all military aspects of the war, there is no equivalent position on the diplomatic or political side. Instead, an assortment of administration players compete over the Afghan portfolio: U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, Special Representative to Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke, National Security Advisor Jim Jones and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, not to mention 40 or so other coalition ambassadors and a host of talking heads who try to insert themselves into the mess, from John Kerry to John McCain. This diplomatic incoherence has effectively allowed McChrystal's team to call the shots and hampered efforts to build a stable and credible government in Afghanistan. "It jeopardizes the mission," says Stephen Biddle, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who supports McChrystal. "The military cannot by itself create governance reform."

Part of the problem is structural: The Defense Department budget exceeds \$600 billion a year, while the State Department receives only \$50 billion. But part of the problem is personal: In private, Team McChrystal likes to talk shit about many of Obama's top people on the diplomatic side. One aide calls Jim Jones, a retired four-star general and veteran of the Cold War, a "clown" who remains "stuck in 1985." Politicians like McCain and Kerry, says another aide, "turn up, have a meeting with Karzai, criticize him at the airport press conference, then get back for the Sunday talk shows. Frankly, it's not very helpful." Only Hillary Clinton receives good reviews from McChrystal's inner circle. "Hillary had

Stan's back during the strategic review," says an adviser. "She said, 'If Stan wants it, give him what he needs.'"

McChrystal reserves special skepticism for Holbrooke, the official in charge of reintegrating the Taliban. "The Boss says he's like a wounded animal," says a member of the general's team. "Holbrooke keeps hearing rumors that he's going to get fired, so that makes him dangerous. He's a brilliant guy, but he just comes in, pulls on a lever, whatever he can grasp onto. But this is COIN, and you can't just have someone yanking on shit."

Michael Hastings at the ISAF base in Kabul, Afghanistan.  
Photograph by Mikhail Galustov for RollingStone/Redux



At one point on his trip to Paris, McChrystal checks his BlackBerry. "Oh, not another e-mail from Holbrooke," he groans. "I don't even want to open it." He clicks on the message and reads the salutation out loud, then stuffs the BlackBerry back in his pocket, not bothering to conceal his annoyance.

"Make sure you don't get any of that on your leg," an aide jokes, referring to the e-mail.

By far the most crucial – and strained – relationship is between McChrystal and Eikenberry, the U.S. ambassador. According to those close to the two men, Eikenberry – a retired three-star general who served in Afghanistan in 2002 and 2005 – can't stand that his former subordinate is now calling the shots. He's also furious that McChrystal, backed by NATO's allies, refused to put Eikenberry in the pivotal role of viceroy in Afghanistan, which would have made him the diplomatic equivalent of the general. The job instead went to British Ambassador Mark Sedwill – a move that effectively increased McChrystal's influence over diplomacy by shutting out a powerful rival. "In reality, that position needs to be filled by an American for it to have weight," says a U.S. official familiar with the negotiations.

The relationship was further strained in January, when a classified cable that Eikenberry wrote was leaked to *The New York Times*. The cable was as scathing as it was prescient. The ambassador offered a brutal critique of McChrystal's strategy, dismissed President Hamid Karzai as "not an adequate strategic partner," and cast doubt on whether the counterinsurgency plan would be "sufficient" to deal with Al Qaeda. "We will become more deeply engaged here with no way to extricate ourselves," Eikenberry warned, "short of allowing the country to descend again into lawlessness and chaos."

McChrystal and his team were blindsided by the cable. "I like Karl, I've known him for years, but they'd never said anything like that to us before," says McChrystal, who adds that he felt "betrayed" by the leak. "Here's one that covers his flank for the history books. Now if we fail, they can say, 'I told you so.'"

The most striking example of McChrystal's usurpation of diplomatic policy is his handling of Karzai. It is McChrystal, not diplomats like Eikenberry or Holbrooke, who enjoys the best relationship with the man America is relying on to lead Afghanistan. The doctrine of counterinsurgency requires a credible government, and since Karzai is not considered credible by his own people, McChrystal has worked hard to make him so. Over the past few months, he has accompanied the president on more than 10 trips

around the country, standing beside him at political meetings, or *shuras*, in Kandahar. In February, the day before the doomed offensive in Marja, McChrystal even drove over to the president's palace to get him to sign off on what would be the largest military operation of the year. Karzai's staff, however, insisted that the president was sleeping off a cold and could not be disturbed. After several hours of haggling, McChrystal finally enlisted the aid of Afghanistan's defense minister, who persuaded Karzai's people to wake the president from his nap.

By some accounts, McChrystal's career should have been over at least two times by now. As Pentagon spokesman during the invasion of Iraq, the general seemed more like a White House mouthpiece than an up-and-coming commander with a reputation for speaking his mind. When Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made his infamous "stuff happens" remark during the looting of Baghdad, McChrystal backed him up. A few days later, he echoed the president's Mission Accomplished gaffe by insisting that major combat operations in Iraq were over. But it was during his next stint – overseeing the military's most elite units, including the Rangers, Navy Seals and Delta Force – that McChrystal took part in a cover-up that would have destroyed the career of a lesser man.

After Cpl. Pat Tillman, the former-NFL-star-turned-Ranger, was accidentally killed by his own troops in Afghanistan in April 2004, McChrystal took an active role in creating the impression that Tillman had died at the hands of Taliban fighters. He signed off on a falsified recommendation for a Silver Star that suggested Tillman had been killed by enemy fire. (McChrystal would later claim he didn't read the recommendation closely enough – a strange excuse for a commander known for his laserlike attention to minute details.) A week later, McChrystal sent a memo up the chain of command, specifically warning that President Bush should avoid mentioning the cause of Tillman's death. "If the circumstances of Corporal Tillman's death become public," he wrote, it could cause "public embarrassment" for the president.

"The false narrative, which McChrystal clearly helped construct, diminished Pat's true actions," wrote Tillman's mother, Mary, in her book *Boots on the Ground by Dusk*. McChrystal got away with it, she added, because he was the "golden boy" of Rumsfeld and Bush, who loved his willingness to get things done, even if it included bending the rules or skipping the chain of command. Nine days after Tillman's death, McChrystal was promoted to major general.

Two years later, in 2006, McChrystal was tainted by a scandal involving detainee abuse and torture at Camp Nama in Iraq. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, prisoners at the camp were subjected to a now-familiar litany of abuse: stress positions, being dragged naked through the mud. McChrystal was not disciplined in the scandal, even though an interrogator at the camp reported seeing him inspect the prison multiple times. But the experience was so unsettling to McChrystal that he tried to prevent detainee operations from being placed under his command in Afghanistan, viewing them as a "political swamp," according to a U.S. official. In May 2009, as McChrystal prepared for his confirmation hearings, his staff prepared him for hard questions about Camp Nama and the Tillman cover-up. But the scandals barely made a ripple in Congress, and McChrystal was soon on his way back to Kabul to run the war in Afghanistan.

The media, to a large extent, have also given McChrystal a pass on both controversies. Where Gen. Petraeus is kind of a dweeb, a teacher's pet with a Ranger's tab, McChrystal is a snake-eating rebel, a "Jedi" commander, as *Newsweek* called him. He didn't care when his teenage son came home with blue hair and a mohawk. He speaks his mind with a candor rare for a high-ranking official. He asks for opinions, and seems genuinely interested in the response. He gets briefings on his iPod and listens to

books on tape. He carries a custom-made set of nunchucks in his convoy engraved with his name and four stars, and his itinerary often bears a fresh quote from Bruce Lee. ("There are no limits. There are only plateaus, and you must not stay there, you must go beyond them.") He went out on dozens of nighttime raids during his time in Iraq, unprecedented for a top commander, and turned up on missions unannounced, with almost no entourage. "The fucking lads love Stan McChrystal," says a British officer who serves in Kabul. "You'd be out in Somewhere, Iraq, and someone would take a knee beside you, and a corporal would be like 'Who the fuck is that?' And it's fucking Stan McChrystal."

It doesn't hurt that McChrystal was also extremely successful as head of the Joint Special Operations Command, the elite forces that carry out the government's darkest ops. During the Iraq surge, his team killed and captured thousands of insurgents, including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq. "JSOC was a killing machine," says Maj. Gen. Mayville, his chief of operations. McChrystal was also open to new ways of killing. He systematically mapped out terrorist networks, targeting specific insurgents and hunting them down – often with the help of cyberfreaks traditionally shunned by the military. "The Boss would find the 24-year-old kid with a nose ring, with some fucking brilliant degree from MIT, sitting in the corner with 16 computer monitors humming," says a Special Forces commando who worked with McChrystal in Iraq and now serves on his staff in Kabul. "He'd say, 'Hey – you fucking muscleheads couldn't find lunch without help. You got to work together with these guys.'"

Even in his new role as America's leading evangelist for counterinsurgency, McChrystal retains the deep-seated instincts of a terrorist hunter. To put pressure on the Taliban, he has upped the number of Special Forces units in Afghanistan from four to 19. "You better be out there hitting four or five targets tonight," McChrystal will tell a Navy Seal he sees in the hallway at headquarters. Then he'll add, "I'm going to have to scold you in the morning for it, though." In fact, the general frequently finds himself apologizing for the disastrous consequences of counterinsurgency. In the first four months of this year, NATO forces killed some 90 civilians, up 76 percent from the same period in 2009 – a record that has created tremendous resentment among the very population that COIN theory is intent on winning over. In February, a Special Forces night raid ended in the deaths of two pregnant Afghan women and allegations of a cover-up, and in April, protests erupted in Kandahar after U.S. forces accidentally shot up a bus, killing five Afghans. "We've shot an amazing number of people," McChrystal recently conceded.

Despite the tragedies and miscues, McChrystal has issued some of the strictest directives to avoid civilian casualties that the U.S. military has ever encountered in a war zone. It's "insurgent math," as he calls it – for every innocent person you kill, you create 10 new enemies. He has ordered convoys to curtail their reckless driving, put restrictions on the use of air power and severely limited night raids. He regularly apologizes to Hamid Karzai when civilians are killed, and berates commanders responsible for civilian deaths. "For a while," says one U.S. official, "the most dangerous place to be in Afghanistan was in front of McChrystal after a 'civ cas' incident." The ISAF command has even discussed ways to make *not* killing into something you can win an award for: There's talk of creating a new medal for "courageous restraint," a buzzword that's unlikely to gain much traction in the gung-ho culture of the U.S. military.

But however strategic they may be, McChrystal's new marching orders have caused an intense backlash among his own troops. Being told to hold their fire, soldiers complain, puts them in greater danger. "Bottom line?" says a former Special Forces operator who has spent years in Iraq and Afghanistan. "I would love to kick McChrystal in the nuts. His rules of engagement put soldiers' lives in even greater danger. Every real soldier will tell you the same thing."

In March, McChrystal traveled to Combat Outpost JFM – a small encampment on the outskirts of Kandahar – to confront such accusations from the troops directly. It was a typically bold move by the general. Only two days earlier, he had received an e-mail from Israel Arroyo, a 25-year-old staff sergeant who asked McChrystal to go on a mission with his unit. "I am writing because it was said you don't care about the troops and have made it harder to defend ourselves," Arroyo wrote.

Within hours, McChrystal responded personally: "I'm saddened by the accusation that I don't care about soldiers, as it is something I suspect any soldier takes both personally and professionally – at least I do. But I know perceptions depend upon your perspective at the time, and I respect that every soldier's view is his own." Then he showed up at Arroyo's outpost and went on a foot patrol with the troops – not some bullshit photo-op stroll through a market, but a real live operation in a dangerous war zone.

Six weeks later, just before McChrystal returned from Paris, the general received another e-mail from Arroyo. A 23-year-old corporal named Michael Ingram – one of the soldiers McChrystal had gone on patrol with – had been killed by an IED a day earlier. It was the third man the 25-member platoon had lost in a year, and Arroyo was writing to see if the general would attend Ingram's memorial service. "He started to look up to you," Arroyo wrote. McChrystal said he would try to make it down to pay his respects as soon as possible.

The night before the general is scheduled to visit Sgt. Arroyo's platoon for the memorial, I arrive at Combat Outpost JFM to speak with the soldiers he had gone on patrol with. JFM is a small encampment, ringed by high blast walls and guard towers. Almost all of the soldiers here have been on repeated combat tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and have seen some of the worst fighting of both wars. But they are especially angered by Ingram's death. His commanders had repeatedly requested permission to tear down the house where Ingram was killed, noting that it was often used as a combat position by the Taliban. But due to McChrystal's new restrictions to avoid upsetting civilians, the request had been denied. "These were abandoned houses," fumes Staff Sgt. Kenneth Hicks. "Nobody was coming back to live in them."

One soldier shows me the list of new regulations the platoon was given. "Patrol only in areas that you are reasonably certain that you will not have to defend yourselves with lethal force," the laminated card reads. For a soldier who has traveled halfway around the world to fight, that's like telling a cop he should only patrol in areas where he knows he won't have to make arrests. "Does that make any fucking sense?" asks Pfc. Jared Pautsch. "We should just drop a fucking bomb on this place. You sit and ask yourself: What are we doing here?"

The rules handed out here are not what McChrystal intended – they've been distorted as they passed through the chain of command – but knowing that does nothing to lessen the anger of troops on the ground. "Fuck, when I came over here and heard that McChrystal was in charge, I thought we would get our fucking gun on," says Hicks, who has served three tours of combat. "I get COIN. I get all that. McChrystal comes here, explains it, it makes sense. But then he goes away on his bird, and by the time his directives get passed down to us through Big Army, they're all fucked up – either because somebody is trying to cover their ass, or because they just don't understand it themselves. But we're fucking losing this thing."

McChrystal and his team show up the next day. Underneath a tent, the general has a 45-minute discussion with some two dozen soldiers. The atmosphere is tense. "I ask you what's going on in your world, and I think it's important for you all to understand the big picture as well," McChrystal begins.

"How's the company doing? You guys feeling sorry for yourselves? Anybody? Anybody feel like you're losing?" McChrystal says.

"Sir, some of the guys here, sir, think we're losing, sir," says Hicks.

McChrystal nods. "Strength is leading when you just don't want to lead," he tells the men. "You're leading by example. That's what we do. Particularly when it's really, really hard, and it hurts inside." Then he spends 20 minutes talking about counterinsurgency, diagramming his concepts and principles on a whiteboard. He makes COIN seem like common sense, but he's careful not to bullshit the men. "We are knee-deep in the decisive year," he tells them. The Taliban, he insists, no longer has the initiative – "but I don't think we do, either." It's similar to the talk he gave in Paris, but it's not winning any hearts and minds among the soldiers. "This is the philosophical part that works with think tanks," McChrystal tries to joke. "But it doesn't get the same reception from infantry companies."

During the question-and-answer period, the frustration boils over. The soldiers complain about not being allowed to use lethal force, about watching insurgents they detain be freed for lack of evidence. They want to be able to fight – like they did in Iraq, like they had in Afghanistan before McChrystal. "We aren't putting fear into the Taliban," one soldier says.

"Winning hearts and minds in COIN is a coldblooded thing," McChrystal says, citing an oft-repeated maxim that you can't kill your way out of Afghanistan. "The Russians killed 1 million Afghans, and that didn't work."

"I'm not saying go out and kill everybody, sir," the soldier persists. "You say we've stopped the momentum of the insurgency. I don't believe that's true in this area. The more we pull back, the more we restrain ourselves, the stronger it's getting."

"I agree with you," McChrystal says. "In this area, we've not made progress, probably. You have to show strength here, you have to use fire. What I'm telling you is, fire costs you. What do you want to do? You want to wipe the population out here and resettle it?"

A soldier complains that under the rules, any insurgent who doesn't have a weapon is immediately assumed to be a civilian. "That's the way this game is," McChrystal says. "It's complex. I can't just decide: It's shirts and skins, and we'll kill all the shirts."

As the discussion ends, McChrystal seems to sense that he hasn't succeeded at easing the men's anger. He makes one last-ditch effort to reach them, acknowledging the death of Cpl. Ingram. "There's no way I can make that easier," he tells them. "No way I can pretend it won't hurt. No way I can tell you not to feel that. . . . I will tell you, you're doing a great job. Don't let the frustration get to you." The session ends with no clapping, and no real resolution. McChrystal may have sold President Obama on counterinsurgency, but many of his own men aren't buying it.

When it comes to Afghanistan, history is not on McChrystal's side. The only foreign invader to have any success here was Genghis Khan – and he wasn't hampered by things like human rights, economic development and press scrutiny. The COIN doctrine, bizarrely, draws inspiration from some of the biggest Western military embarrassments in recent memory: France's nasty war in Algeria (lost in 1962) and the American misadventure in Vietnam (lost in 1975). McChrystal, like other advocates of COIN, readily acknowledges that counterinsurgency campaigns are inherently messy, expensive and easy to

lose. "Even Afghans are confused by Afghanistan," he says. But even if he somehow manages to succeed, after years of bloody fighting with Afghan kids who pose no threat to the U.S. homeland, the war will do little to shut down Al Qaeda, which has shifted its operations to Pakistan. Dispatching 150,000 troops to build new schools, roads, mosques and water-treatment facilities around Kandahar is like trying to stop the drug war in Mexico by occupying Arkansas and building Baptist churches in Little Rock. "It's all very cynical, politically," says Marc Sageman, a former CIA case officer who has extensive experience in the region. "Afghanistan is not in our vital interest – there's nothing for us there."

In mid-May, two weeks after visiting the troops in Kandahar, McChrystal travels to the White House for a high-level visit by Hamid Karzai. It is a triumphant moment for the general, one that demonstrates he is very much in command – both in Kabul and in Washington. In the East Room, which is packed with journalists and dignitaries, President Obama sings the praises of Karzai. The two leaders talk about how great their relationship is, about the pain they feel over civilian casualties. They mention the word "progress" 16 times in under an hour. But there is no mention of victory. Still, the session represents the most forceful commitment that Obama has made to McChrystal's strategy in months. "There is no denying the progress that the Afghan people have made in recent years – in education, in health care and economic development," the president says. "As I saw in the lights across Kabul when I landed – lights that would not have been visible just a few years earlier."

It is a disconcerting observation for Obama to make. During the worst years in Iraq, when the Bush administration had no real progress to point to, officials used to offer up the exact same evidence of success. "It was one of our first impressions," one GOP official said in 2006, after landing in Baghdad at the height of the sectarian violence. "So many lights shining brightly." So it is to the language of the Iraq War that the Obama administration has turned – talk of progress, of city lights, of metrics like health care and education. Rhetoric that just a few years ago they would have mocked. "They are trying to manipulate perceptions because there is no definition of victory – because victory is not even defined or recognizable," says Celeste Ward, a senior defense analyst at the RAND Corporation who served as a political adviser to U.S. commanders in Iraq in 2006. "That's the game we're in right now. What we need, for strategic purposes, is to create the perception that we didn't get run off. The facts on the ground are not great, and are not going to become great in the near future."

But facts on the ground, as history has proven, offer little deterrent to a military determined to stay the course. Even those closest to McChrystal know that the rising anti-war sentiment at home doesn't begin to reflect how deeply fucked up things are in Afghanistan. "If Americans pulled back and started paying attention to this war, it would become even less popular," a senior adviser to McChrystal says. Such realism, however, doesn't prevent advocates of counterinsurgency from dreaming big: Instead of beginning to withdraw troops next year, as Obama promised, the military hopes to ramp up its counterinsurgency campaign even further. "There's a possibility we could ask for another surge of U.S. forces next summer if we see success here," a senior military official in Kabul tells me.

Back in Afghanistan, less than a month after the White House meeting with Karzai and all the talk of "progress," McChrystal is hit by the biggest blow to his vision of counterinsurgency. Since last year, the Pentagon had been planning to launch a major military operation this summer in Kandahar, the country's second-largest city and the Taliban's original home base. It was supposed to be a decisive turning point in the war – the primary reason for the troop surge that McChrystal wrested from Obama late last year. But on June 10th, acknowledging that the military still needs to lay more groundwork, the general announced that he is postponing the offensive until the fall. Rather than one big battle, like Fallujah or Ramadi, U.S. troops will implement what McChrystal calls a "rising tide of security." The Afghan

police and army will enter Kandahar to attempt to seize control of neighborhoods, while the U.S. pours \$90 million of aid into the city to win over the civilian population.

Even proponents of counterinsurgency are hard-pressed to explain the new plan. "This isn't a classic operation," says a U.S. military official. "It's not going to be Black Hawk Down. There aren't going to be doors kicked in." Other U.S. officials insist that doors *are* going to be kicked in, but that it's going to be a kinder, gentler offensive than the disaster in Marja. "The Taliban have a jackboot on the city," says a military official. "We have to remove them, but we have to do it in a way that doesn't alienate the population." When Vice President Biden was briefed on the new plan in the Oval Office, insiders say he was shocked to see how much it mirrored the more gradual plan of counterterrorism that he advocated last fall. "This looks like CT-plus!" he said, according to U.S. officials familiar with the meeting.

Whatever the nature of the new plan, the delay underscores the fundamental flaws of counterinsurgency. After nine years of war, the Taliban simply remains too strongly entrenched for the U.S. 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 the massive influx of aid championed by McChrystal is likely only to make things worse. "Throwing money at the problem exacerbates the problem," says Andrew Wilder, an expert at Tufts University who has studied the effect of aid in southern Afghanistan. "A tsunami of cash fuels corruption, delegitimizes the government and creates an environment where we're picking winners and losers" – a process that fuels resentment and hostility among the civilian population. So far, counterinsurgency has succeeded only in creating a never-ending demand for the primary product supplied by the military: perpetual war. There is a reason that President Obama studiously avoids using the word "victory" when he talks about Afghanistan. Winning, it would seem, is not really possible. Not even with Stanley McChrystal in charge.