

# The General Stanley McChrystal Affair: A Case Study in Civil-Military Relations

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In June of 2010 the publication of an article entitled, “Runaway General” in *Rolling Stone* magazine captivated the nation and ended the career of the commanding general in Afghanistan. The incident captured the national and international media for almost a week. For an intense period between 48 and 72 hours, when General Stanley McChrystal’s job hung in the balance, a focused national security dialogue occurred on the topic of whether or not he should retain his post. General McChrystal and his staff were not criticized for their lack of military competence, for their dissent over policy, or for failure to implement strategy. Their professionalism—especially those professional competencies related to understanding the roles and responsibilities of military leaders vis-à-vis the civilian political leadership in the context of democratic civil-military relations—was found wanting.

Among other lessons, this case illustrates the deficiencies of the Professional Military Education (PME) system, which gives short shrift to the promulgation of civil-military relations norms in its leader development curricula. Currently, the US Army is midway through its Profession of Arms Campaign during which it is refreshing and renewing its understanding of the Army as a profession.<sup>1</sup> Among the areas being assessed is civil-military relations—especially the Army’s interaction with and support of the Nation and its elected and appointed officials.<sup>2</sup>

The case of General McChrystal’s relief is detailed here for review so its elements can be mined and analyzed, thereby strengthening the civil-military norms at issue in the case. The incident provides an opportunity to examine the national dialogue of June 2010 as a window into the state of national consensus on principles of strategy and civil-military relations norms. Recommendations are offered in an attempt to emphasize the development of the “political skills” required to navigate the nexus of political-military collaboration and media

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engagement at the strategic level. PME curricula with sufficient emphasis on civil-military norms will yield commanders better prepared to lead, staffs more capable of supporting them, and enhanced trust between the political and military spheres that is essential for strategic success.

The case presents a unique opportunity for all actors involved in the national security process: senior military officers, the civilian national security team, members of Congress, the media, scholars, and the public at-large to weigh in on matters of civil-military relations and strategy. Its study will help to hone the strategic competencies of the national security community, particularly the importance of a solid grounding in the fundamentals of the American political system, the roles and responsibilities of civilian and military actors within it, and the norms of civil-military relations in a democracy.

### ***The Case Unfolds***

On Monday, 21 June 2010, an eight page article was released to reporters ahead of its planned publication date of 25 June.<sup>3</sup> “Runaway General,” the work of *Rolling Stone* reporter Michael Hastings, was intended to profile the Afghan war’s commanding general and the progress made on the execution of the war’s strategy. Instead, a firestorm erupted around the disparaging remarks reported in the article that General Stanley McChrystal, and especially his staff, made related to senior administration officials, including President Barack Obama.

Hastings was embedded with “Team America,” the moniker that General McChrystal’s staff had assigned to itself.<sup>4</sup> What was originally intended to be a brief visit with the staff was extended by a number of days when volcanic ash stalled air travel in Europe. In the meantime, McChrystal and his staff let down their guard with the embedded journalist still in their midst and spoke candidly about the civilian political leadership. Hastings’ reporting laid bare “Team America’s” irreverent attitudes and detailed the mocks and insults hurled at members of the administration’s national security team.

General James Jones, President Obama’s National Security Advisor and a retired four-star Commandant of the Marine Corps, was called a “clown” who was “stuck in 1985.”<sup>5</sup> Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, President Obama’s special envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, was mocked as a “wounded animal” fearful of being fired. McChrystal groaned about not wanting to open Holbrooke’s e-mails. Particular disdain was reserved for Vice President Joe Biden. The general and his staff, who openly disagreed with Vice President Biden’s recommendation during the 2009 Afghan strategy review, were dismissive of the Vice President when his name came up. McChrystal said, “Are you asking about Vice President Biden?” “Who’s that?” Then an aide chipped in, “Biden?” “Did you say: Bite Me?”<sup>6</sup>

The US Ambassador to Afghanistan, retired Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, himself a previous occupant of McChrystal’s post, was attacked for undermining McChrystal. Eikenberry sent uncoordinated cables to Washington that conflicted with McChrystal’s strategy recommendations. McChrystal said that he felt Eikenberry “betrayed” him and was also quoted as

saying in reference to Ambassador Eikenberry's cables, "Here's one that covers his flank for the history books. Now, if we fail, they can say, 'I told you so.'"<sup>7</sup> McChrystal depicted President Obama as "uncomfortable and intimidated" at his initial meeting with the military brass and "not very engaged" in his first meeting with him.<sup>8</sup>

Other administration officials came off better. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was portrayed as "the mastermind" behind a plan to retool the military for success in counterinsurgency operations. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Admiral Michael Mullen, was reported to be a key McChrystal ally and advocate for the counterinsurgency strategy. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton scored points with "Team America" as the only non-military member of the national security team to earn McChrystal's respect.<sup>9</sup> One adviser told Hastings, "Hillary had Stan's back during the strategic review. She said, 'If Stan wants it, give him what he needs.'"<sup>10</sup>

The article first began to circulate within the administration on the weekend of 19-20 June. By Monday evening, June 21st, President Obama had read it and it was in the hands of the press. By 22 June the whole country joined the debate when *Rolling Stone* posted the article to its website.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, General McChrystal was on his way back to Washington from Kabul to explain his remarks. Following an Oval Office meeting on Wednesday, 23 June, General McChrystal tendered his resignation. Later that afternoon, with Secretary of Defense Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen, and General David Petraeus, the nominee to succeed General McChrystal at his side, President Obama announced that he had accepted General McChrystal's resignation.

### **Issue History**

"Issue history," or understanding how previous events are relevant to the case at hand, is an important element of decision-making.<sup>12</sup> In General Stanley McChrystal's case, understanding the "issue history" is critical to understand President Obama's decision to relieve him and the competing recommendations to retain.

General McChrystal's profile in the American public space was elevated in August 2009 when he was named to replace General David McKiernan as Commander, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Afghanistan. McKiernan was the first theater commander replaced in wartime since General Douglas MacArthur was relieved for insubordination in the Korean War. Defense Secretary Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen both advocated for the change, because they thought McChrystal would be a better fit for implementing a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in Afghanistan.

The next month, while the Obama administration was in the midst of its Afghan strategy review, General McChrystal travelled to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London to deliver a speech on counterinsurgency doctrine. In a question and answer session following his talk, a

member of the audience comprised primarily of retired military officers and security specialists, asked “whether he would support an idea put forward by Vice President Biden of scaling back the American military presence in Afghanistan to focus on tracking down al Qaeda leaders in place of the current broader effort” then underway to defeat the Taliban.<sup>13</sup> “The short answer is: no,” McChrystal responded. “You have to navigate from where you are, not where you wish to be. A strategy that does not leave Afghanistan in a stable position is probably a short-sighted strategy.”<sup>14</sup>

This comment was widely interpreted as a rejection of the Biden strategy then being discussed in the White House strategy review sessions, a strategy that relied less on troops and more on special forces and drone attacks.<sup>15</sup> McChrystal also weighed in on President Obama’s prolonged strategy review. “Waiting does not prolong a favorable outcome. This effort will not remain winnable indefinitely.”<sup>16</sup> The next day he was summoned to Copenhagen to meet President Obama onboard Air Force One for a face-to-face meeting where McChrystal was widely regarded to have received a dressing down from the President. In addition, Secretary of Defense Gates offered a separate rebuke, “It is imperative that all of us taking part in these deliberations, civilians and military alike, provide our best advice to the president, candidly but privately.”<sup>17</sup> General James Jones, the National Security Adviser, when asked on CNN about McChrystal’s public lobbying for more troops, added, “Ideally, it’s better for military advice to come up through the chain of command.”<sup>18</sup>

The last important chapter of the “issue history” to recount in an effort to understand the state of play in the McChrystal-Obama civil-military relationship at the time “The Runaway General” was published is General McChrystal’s role in the Afghan strategy review process. Jonathan Alter in his book, *The Promise*, and Bob Woodward’s *Obama’s Wars* both reported that President Obama was frustrated by the narrow set of policy options that the military brass presented. Retired Lieutenant General David Barno, himself the first Commander of US forces in Afghanistan, commented in a review of *Obama’s Wars* that in reality the President was only presented with:

The One Big Option: a population-centered counterinsurgency strategy. The variants only tinker with the number of troops—will this COIN strategy be implemented with 20,000, 40,000 or 80,000 soldiers? Or as the military might put it will you accept high risk, moderate risk, or low risk? And the more boots on the ground, the less risk of The One Big Option failing. Was that truly the ‘Full Monty’ of options that were capable of meeting the president’s guidance after nine years of war?<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, President Obama’s civilian aides, who were deeply suspicious that the military brass intentionally boxed in the President during the strategy review process, also suspected that the Pentagon (McChrystal himself has not been accused of the leak) had coordinated the leaking of their positions<sup>20</sup> to include McChrystal’s conclusion that not sending at least 40,000 more troops (which amounted to an almost 50 percent plus up) would result in “mission failure.”<sup>21</sup>

A brief review of the issue history preceding “Team America’s” unfortunate engagement with Michael Hastings consequently reveals a civil-military relationship already frayed and characterized by a lack of trust between the President and his aides, the military brass in Washington, and General McChrystal and “Team America” in Kabul. Both sides of the debate made reference to the issue history when justifying their advice to the President. McChrystal’s previous transgressions of civil-military relations norms, with his public advocacy of policy positions that the administration had not yet decided, were noted as important context for the President’s decision. One scholar who would eventually land in the pro-relief camp noted, “After General McChrystal’s understandable but somewhat impolitic address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies last fall, the message from Washington was clear: Stay mum. In this business one deserves one mistake—and this second mistake is far, far worse than the first.”<sup>22</sup>

### ***Advocates for Relief and Retention***

The intensity and breadth of reaction to the series of events that “The Runaway General” set in motion makes the McChrystal relief such a rich case to study. The media representatives included pundits, reporters, editorial staffs, and experts enlisted to inform the public. Some civil-military relations scholars also passed on their professional recommendations through media outlets. Furthermore, the full range of national security actors participated in the process. Members of Congress, military and civilian members of the national security team, NATO leadership, and citizens at large—both civilian and military—made their views known. Finally, President Obama announced his decision and its rationale as commander-in-chief. The varied responses reveal a lack of consensus on civil-military relations norms across the sets of actors surveyed.

### ***The Case for Relief***

The pro-relief camp argued that McChrystal had to go because he and his team were “openly contemptuous of their political leaders.”<sup>23</sup> A columnist for the *Financial Times*, Clive Crook, represented this camp, “If this is not rank insubordination, what is?”<sup>24</sup> David Brooks of the *New York Times* contributed to the general “Pro-Relief” argument, “Once it was out there in the press, it was a challenge to his authority. He had to deal with it.”<sup>25</sup>

Editorial boards chimed in to exercise their watchdog role in democracy. Hundreds of editorials around the country framed their arguments in terms of civilian control of the military. *The Providence Journal* expressed such a viewpoint, “Under our system, an elected commander-in-chief runs the military. As long as military officials choose to serve under him, they should do their best to implement his policies and refrain from criticizing the president and the other key players publicly. As General McChrystal should

have well understood, people in his position are not permitted to blow off steam in the media.”<sup>26</sup>

*The Philadelphia Inquirer* echoed this theme when it commented on what it dubbed McChrystal’s “self-inflicted” wounds,<sup>27</sup> “By publicly airing his disdain for this country’s civilian leaders, McChrystal and his aides, in effect, endangered US troops by giving the enemy another reason to fight harder in the belief that they will ultimately prevail.”<sup>28</sup> The editorial went on to note that the remarks “amounted to an indirect slap at the president that questions a key tenet of this nation—that the military is always subservient to the civilian commander-in-chief.”<sup>29</sup>

As an aside, it is important to point out that these editorial writers may have been conflating dissent with disrespect. Team McChrystal’s outbursts were not related to disagreements over policy, while the earlier comments at IISS on Afghan policy were. Indeed, as noted earlier, McChrystal’s recommendations prevailed among others in the strategy review and he essentially got what he asked for. As Peter Feaver one of the foremost scholars of US civil-military relations, Duke Political Scientist, and a former National Security Council staffer in the George W. Bush White House blogged on the issue:

McChrystal and President Obama both claimed that there was no policy dispute at issue, neither in the *Rolling Stone* interview nor in the larger civil-military dustup. McChrystal’s disrespectful comments were directed at members of Obama’s team who, in McChrystal’s view, were not doing enough to implement Obama’s policies. This is a distinction that may not matter in terms of McChrystal keeping his job, but should influence what we learn from the incident.<sup>30</sup>

Other civil-military relations scholars and national security experts also weighed in. Among them was Eliot Cohen, noted civil-military relations expert and Professor at Johns Hopkins, who penned an op-ed the morning of President Obama’s decision in the *Wall Street Journal*:

General McChrystal’s just-published interview in *Rolling Stone* magazine is an appalling violation of norms of civil-military relations. To read it is to wince, repeatedly—at the mockery of the vice president and president’s special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, at the sniping directed toward the U.S. ambassador . . . The quotes from General McChrystal’s underlings bespeak a staff so clueless, swaggering and out of control that a wholesale purge looks to be indicated.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, Peter Feaver told the *Washington Post*, “This is clearly a firing offense.”<sup>32</sup> Julian Zelizer, Professor of History and Public Affairs at Princeton, was among those who noted that military officials have become too comfortable in criticizing elected officials. Both Republicans and Democrats have fallen victim to this trend, he argues. Relief, therefore, Zelizer argues, is justified to reverse this trend. “Even if this episode is not MacArthur-like, the tension between civil and military officials has grown significantly, so it is quite conceivable the White House will decide to relieve General McChrystal for his statements.”<sup>33</sup>

The pro-relief camp's arguments can be summed up as follows. The violations of civil-military relations norms were too serious to look the other way. Tolerating such insubordination would be tantamount to forfeiting the role of commander-in-chief to maintain civilian control. The article also laid bare the lack of regard for their civilian leaders that penetrated General McChrystal's staff. Awareness that such a climate existed and that the command's leadership tolerated it undermined the trust necessary for effective civil-military collaboration. Failure to understand that the elected American political leadership and its appointed agents embodied America's democratic institutions revealed a lack of understanding of the military's subordinate and supporting role in the democratic process. Finally, airing these views in the presence of a reporter with a completely different and legitimate role in the democratic process—to inform the public and hold accountable all in the charge of the government—further exposed the staff's insufficient understanding of the media's role. In the end, the pro-relief camp equated military officials' lack of public respect for the elected political leadership with a lack of respect for American political institutions.

### *The Case Against Relief*

Although there was almost universal sentiment that “McChrystal and his staff had crossed an almost sacred line in criticizing the civilian chain of command,” there was significant disagreement over whether or not the violation amounted to a firing offense.<sup>34</sup> Hence, the arguments of the con-relief camp must be explored. Key among these arguments was the view that General McChrystal was irreplaceable as the US Commander in Afghanistan. In general, the con-relief camp put a priority on the impact the commander's relief would have on the war effort over other considerations.

Kori Schake, a West Point professor and former government official advised:

Anyone who thinks they can do a better job than General McChrystal at putting together a counterinsurgency strategy, persuading warfighters to adopt restraint while keeping them fighting, bringing the Karzai government into the fight and up to the standard, and keeping our allies contributing, ought to step forward. Until then, we ought to let him concentrate his efforts on winning the war we're fighting.<sup>35</sup>

Others complemented this theme arguing that the primary question should be whether there is another commander available with a comparable grasp of the conflict. In these arguments, comparisons with President Abraham Lincoln and his trials with his field commanders crept into the debate. “Lincoln was repeatedly snubbed by George McClellan and vexed by Ulysses Grant, but he dumped one only when he knew that man couldn't win and kept the other when it became clear that only he could.”<sup>36</sup>

The con-relief camp also argued that the particularly inopportune timing of the incident would make it problematic to relieve McChrystal. Greg Jaffe and Ernesto Londono reported in the *Washington Post*, “relieving McChrystal of

his command on the eve of a major offensive in Kandahar, which White House and Pentagon officials have said is the most critical of the war, would be a major blow to the war effort.<sup>237</sup> Nathaniel Fick of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) advanced this “mission first” argument, “My advice is to call him back to Washington, publicly chastise him and then make it clear that there is something greater at stake here. It takes time for anyone to get up to speed, and right now time is our most precious commodity in Afghanistan.”<sup>238</sup>

Andrew Exum, a CNAS fellow and former McChrystal adviser, also focused on mission impact emphasizing that any change of command should take into account the fact that the relationship between President Karzai and the new commander would have to be rebuilt. Exum argued further, “If you think the strategy in Afghanistan is the correct one, then, you are risking mission failure by replacing the commander and his staff at this stage of the conflict. You are in effect arguing that healthy civil-military relations are more important than winning in Afghanistan.”<sup>239</sup>

Editorial boards opposed to McChrystal’s relief echoed some of the same arguments circulating in the media already mentioned. *The Wall Street Journal’s* (WSJ) editorial board represented this view, “The general is guilty of bad judgment, not policy insubordination.”<sup>240</sup> The board did not excuse the behavior, but attributed it to errors in judgment “of a distinctly political kind in which the General’s aides had not been sufficiently trained.”<sup>241</sup> The editorial argued further that the General’s own comments demanded an explanation, but did not rise to a level meriting his firing. The negative effect on the war effort, the WSJ argued “ought to make Mr. Obama think twice about advice to sack General McChrystal merely so he doesn’t look weak as Commander in Chief. He’ll look a lot weaker in a year if his Afghan policy looks like a failure. With a war in the balance, Mr. Obama should not dismiss his most talented commander without knowing who, and what, comes next.”<sup>242</sup>

Bob Woodward’s brief account in *Obama’s Wars* implies that Secretary Gates was initially in the con-relief camp. Gates was the administration official to first get wind of the article and called Jim Jones to inform him of the incident and to propose “releasing a statement reprimanding McChrystal, but hoped to salvage the situation and avoid a setback to the war strategy.”<sup>243</sup> Jones questioned whether such a move would go far enough and later recommended to President Obama that he recall General McChrystal from Kabul.

As the President deliberated, the Administration approved Gates release of a statement on the morning of 23 June, “I believe that General McChrystal made a significant mistake and exercised poor judgment.”<sup>244</sup> The previous day Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the NATO Secretary General, issued a statement saying that the article was “unfortunate” but that he had “full confidence in General McChrystal as the NATO commander and in his strategy.”<sup>245</sup>

The con-relief camp’s arguments can be summed up as follows. General McChrystal made a serious error in judgment and his behavior should not be excused. However, the primary factor driving President’s Obama decision should be the impact the general’s removal would have on the war effort.



Consequently, the con-relief camp thought that the turbulence of inserting a third ISAF commander in three years was worth avoiding if the President could live with meting out a less severe punishment for McChrystal's offense. Those in favor of retention did not focus on the previous issue history or the effects of the erosion of trust in the civil-military relationship. This camp was willing to subordinate adherence to civil-military relations norms to maximizing the United States's chance of prevailing in Afghanistan.

### ***The President Announces General McChrystal's Relief***

On the afternoon of 23 June President Obama accepted General McChrystal's resignation in the Oval Office. The general reportedly was contrite and accepted full responsibility, but was also eager to retain his position.<sup>46</sup> President Obama cited the need for his team to unite in pressing the war effort. "I welcome debate, but I won't tolerate division."<sup>47</sup> "I don't make this decision based on any difference in policy with General McChrystal, as we are in full agreement about our strategy. Nor do I make this decision out of any sense of personal insult. Stan McChrystal has always shown great courtesy and carried out my orders faithfully. . . . He has earned a reputation as one of our nation's finest soldiers."<sup>48</sup>

Then the President pivoted in his remarks to reject the argument that General McChrystal was indispensable to the war effort:

War is bigger than any one man or woman . . . . The conduct represented in the recently published article does not meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general. It undermines the civilian control of the military that is at the core of our democratic system. And it erodes the trust that's necessary for our team to work together to achieve our objectives in Afghanistan. My multiple responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief led me to this decision. First, I have a responsibility to the extraordinary men and women who are fighting this war, and to the democratic institutions that I've been elected to lead. I've got no greater honor than serving as Commander-in-Chief of our men and women in uniform, and it is my duty to ensure that no diversion complicates the vital mission that they are carrying out. This includes adherence to a strict code of conduct . . . . It is also true that 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 of that chain of command. And that's why, as Commander-in-Chief, I believe this decision is necessary to hold ourselves accountable to standards that are at the core of our democracy.<sup>49</sup>

### ***The Aftermath***

The general discussion of the pro-relief and con-relief camps' arguments as well as the evidence presented that the President's advisers were not unanimous in their support for relief, to include the usually extremely influential Secretary of Defense, indicate that the President's decision was perhaps more difficult than many assumed. The lack of consensus also revealed a less than

uniform approach to the importance of maintaining democratic civil-military relations norms. In the end, President Obama received high marks from both Republican and Democratic corners, a break from the normally super-charged partisanship that had characterized his first term to that point, not just for the substance of his decision but for the style with which he carried it out.

Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations wrote, “Obama has been looking increasingly embattled because of his failure to stop the oil spill, to cope with the Iranian nuclear program and other pressing issues. But he emerged from this test looking crisp and decisive—in a word, presidential. He did not allow the *Rolling Stone* flap to become a drawn-out drama as he did with the review of the Afghanistan policy in the fall. He decided that McChrystal had to go, and within a day he was out.”<sup>50</sup>

The President’s decision to replace McChrystal with General David Petraeus was unexpected, but widely praised. This move also disarmed one of the main arguments of the con-relief camp—that McChrystal was indispensable to the war effort. Max Boot continued, “Obama was especially shrewd to replace him with Petraeus, the best general we have, thus ensuring minimal disruption in operations. This was an unorthodox move, and Obama gets credit for making it.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, some in the con-relief camp moved into the support column due to the appointment. James Morin, a defense analyst previously cited as one opposing relief due to the potential negative impact on the war effort reversed course in his blog from Tuesday to Thursday, the day after the announcement:

Readers of my comments on Tuesday may say, “hey wait a minute Jim, didn’t you just tell us that General McChrystal’s experience and relationships will be very hard to replace?” Frankly, I could not have guessed that putting General Petraeus in that position would even be considered. Yet, no other leader could step so comfortably into that role while hardly skipping a beat, and no other leader has such powerful experience in the gargantuan task at hand.<sup>52</sup>

Clive Crook of the *Financial Times* also commented on the unorthodoxy of the Petraeus appointment. “Demoting? McChrystal’s old boss into the most important job in the armed forces is one of those things that seemed obvious the second it was announced, but not before. Nobody else would be capable of so seamless a transition. Petraeus, for the moment, helps stifle the suspicion that the whole strategy is coming apart.”<sup>53</sup>

Observers noted, too, that the White House was careful not to humiliate General McChrystal in his relief and separated the man from his actions. The White House reinforced this approach and sent a powerful signal when it permitted the general to retire at the four star rank even though he did not meet the minimum time in grade.<sup>54</sup>

Once the President made his decision, his administration closed ranks around him. Secretary of Defense Gates and Admiral Mullen both said they “fully support” President Obama’s decision to accept General McChrystal’s resignation and the nomination of General Petraeus to replace him. In a joint Pentagon news conference with Admiral Mullen, Gates said:

Like the President, I deeply regret the circumstances that made this decision necessary. General McChrystal is one of the finest officers and warriors of his generation, who has an extraordinary record in leading the fight against some of this country's most lethal enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan . . . . The statements and attitudes reported in the news media are unacceptable under our form of government, and are inconsistent with the high standards expected of military leaders.<sup>55</sup>

Admiral Mullen commented that he was stunned when he read the story. "I cannot excuse his lack of judgment with respect to the *Rolling Stone* article or a command climate he evidently permitted that was at best disrespectful of civilian authority. We do not have that luxury, those of us in uniform. We do not have the right, nor should we assume the prerogative, to cast doubt upon the ability or mock the motives of our civilian leaders, elected or appointed."<sup>56</sup> Mullen added that military personnel are and must remain a neutral instrument of government and must be accountable to and respectful of civilian leaders "no matter which party holds sway or which person holds a given office."<sup>57</sup> Finally, Admiral Mullen advised that military leaders must step down when they lose the trust and confidence of civilian leaders.<sup>58</sup>

### ***Implications for Officer Professional Development***

"The Runaway General" incident highlighted that an officer can rise to the top of the ranks of the nation's commanders without the political skills, professional competency, and a politically savvy staff to successfully carry out his mission. The McChrystal case indicates that top military leaders can be adept at defense processes, doctrine, and military art and science, but may lack the skills to deal effectively with civilian counterparts to include the professionalism to respect them.

Particularly disturbing in this case is the apparent widespread lack of a foundation in the fundamentals of the American political system and the norms of civil-military relations in a democracy. As Army Colonel and historian Matthew Moten noted, the McChrystal case points to an erosion of military professionalism aggravated by the strain of the post-9/11 wars. In this period PME opportunities have been reduced and the schools' curricula focused more on operational requirements rather "than on a broader, deeper education."<sup>59</sup> Charles Allen points out that many officers designated as having the most potential for command at the strategic levels are allowed to bypass the war college level of PME altogether in a "culture of deferral" that awards selection for the war colleges, but prefers that the most talented officers continue in operational assignments without attending senior level PME.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, General McChrystal never attended a war college. Instead, he participated in a Senior Service College fellowship at Harvard. The recent trend at the Senior Level College (SLC) of PME is to send many officers to fellowships in lieu of attendance at one of the war colleges. A sizeable talented pool of promotable officers will never be exposed to the higher level of Joint Professional Military Education (JPME II) if they attend a fellowship or skip

a resident war college experience.<sup>61</sup> Improvements in these schools' curricula cannot positively develop the strategic leader competencies of those who do not attend.

The House Armed Services Committee (HASC) Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations conducted a comprehensive review of all aspects of PME and released its report in April 2010.<sup>62</sup> To the extent that curricular topics were discussed they were often tied to the Officer PME Policy (OPMEP) with the observation that a particular topic, civil-military relations, was under-represented in PME curricula because the OPMEP did not specifically direct its instruction. Indeed, the OPMEP directs only one PME institution to specifically teach civil-military relations, the National War College.<sup>63</sup>

The OPMEP guidance for the other war colleges does not preclude the teaching of civil-military relations, but it does not specifically require it.<sup>64</sup> Consequently, PME institutions may build national security and leadership curriculums lacking a focused study of civil-military relations. More specific OPMEP guidance related to instruction in civil-military relations will lead to more uniformity within and across PME institutions.

In addition, there are no Learning Area Objectives within the OPMEP requiring a focused study of the military profession. PME institutions should seize and create opportunities to promulgate a set of civil-military relations norms that will promote effective civil-military interactions, promote trust and respect, and contribute to effective policy and strategy. A set of norms was previously offered to serve as a basis for dialogue and discussion within the American military profession as part of the Army's Profession of Arms Campaign.<sup>65</sup> Such a normative framework distinguishes between professional competencies and professional responsibilities, explores the limits of professional dissent and partisanship, and highlights the critical role of trust in collaborative civil-military relations.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the framework heightens awareness of the media's role in ensuring democratic accountability and the military's responsibility to facilitate effective media-military relations.

## **Conclusion**

The McChrystal case serves as an object lesson for current and future generations of officers in their study of the profession. Retired Lieutenant General James Dubik, a friend of McChrystal's for 30 years and who served with him in Iraq, commented, "This will be remembered as a Shakespearean tragedy. Here is a true hero who risked his life to diminish al Qaeda. He is a leader who cared for his soldiers and shared every danger with his soldiers."<sup>67</sup>

The McChrystal case, and those of other senior leaders in his peer group, such as Admiral William "Fox" Fallon, indicates that PME institutions will benefit from reflecting on their contributions to the development of the norms associated with civil-military relations.<sup>68</sup> Clearly, more specific OPMEP guidance on instruction in civil-military relations should lead to uniformity within and across PME institutions. The normative framework outlined above is a good starting point for an enhanced civil-military curriculum. The

development of more cases related to the actions of citizens, soldiers, and politicians for students to study and reflect upon will help foster an increased understanding of civil-military relations and the associated roles and responsibilities. However, if the services do not demand that their senior leaders attend SLC, then senior leader development will continue to progress unevenly. A return to a foundational approach to officer development focused on constitutional foundations, developing civil-military competencies consistent with democratic principles contributing to strategic success, and a detailed study of the profession at the various stages of officer development will result in an officer corps better steeped in the professionalism requisite for responsible command and service to a democratic state.

#### NOTES

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