



## **The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan**

*Michael Hastings*

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In June 2010, Michael Hastings's extraordinary, uncensored "Rolling Stone" article, "The Runaway General," shocked the world and set off a series of events that culminated in the resignation of General Stanley McChrystal. Now, **THE OPERATORS** will lead us even deeper into the war, its politics, and its major players at a time when such insight is demanded and desperately needed. Based on exclusive reporting in Afghanistan, Europe, the Middle East, and Washington, DC, this landmark work of journalism will elucidate as never before the United States' involvement in Afghanistan in vivid, unforgettable detail. Part wild travelogue, part expos, and part sobering analysis, **THE OPERATORS** promises an unprecedented behind-the-scenes account of the war from the only journalist uniquely poised to tell it.

## **The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan** Details

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## **From Reader Review The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan for online ebook**

### **Brent says**

This is such an involving book. Has anything changed in Afghanistan since this was published five years or so ago? Well, we've lost a fine writer and reporter in Michael Hastings, whose car went off the road in Los Angeles; check Wikipedia.

Highest recommendation.

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### **Ryan Williams says**

Recently made a point of reading works written by Rolling Stone journalists. Not the equal of Generation Kill, but rewarding nonetheless.

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### **Amar Pai says**

Entertaining although I didn't learn too much new. Crazy that McChrystal would openly talk shit about Obama to *Rolling Stone*... what did he think would happen? This book is like the movie *Almost Famous* except instead of a young reporter embedding with a rock band it's a youngish reporter embedding with four star generals who have a vaguely rock-star vibe to them

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### **Micheal says**

I shudder with sadness and regret for Afghanistan, my own country and at my own naivety.

I believed, that for the purpose of women to be able to get out from under the persecution and violence of an archaic culture, for children (girls) to be able to go to school, and for a populace to eventually live in a peaceful environment, that US presence in Afghanistan was just and necessary. The counter terrorism argument lost its validity with the ouster of Osama and the start of the Iraq war; but the protection of an innocent and defenseless populace in a vacuum of security was justification to stay and oversee some sort of stability.

And so I believed (with eroding conviction) as we plodded through ten years of escalation, rife with lies and burgeoning evidence of atrocities. Civilians dying in record numbers, women still being killed and mutilated by cruel men, misguided by culture and religion. Marines video taping themselves pissing on the dead, others forming kill teams and targeting civilians, succumbing to the malaise and cruelty we were supposedly there to eliminate. Pat Tillman's death and the subsequent cover up. The over all lie that we've been making progress when in truth we've been propping up a corrupt government. Another Vietnam like experience (I studied the Vietnam war at length and have some familiarity with the many failures there).

I wasn't incredibly surprised by Michael Hastings revelations about McChrystal and his team. I served under

him briefly in the eighties, and have a vague memory of him as a higher ranking officer while I was a Private. I'm familiar with the behavior and attitudes that permeate macho culture under the covers, out of sight of the public. Imagine the high school football team able to exist in a perpetual locker room. I don't think that their actions and comments were even that shocking by themselves, but joined with events reported out of Afghanistan and Iraq in the last ten years, it points to an absence of mature leadership that I've come to believe is rampant throughout the military. The reason that a lower ranking soldier gets it in their heads that it is somehow alright to disrespect other human beings with labels like "haji" or "gook", or torture them, is because the example of superiority and disrespect is enforced more strongly than that of respect and honorable behavior. The concept that it's okay to lie as long as you're not caught is an example that's being set at the highest levels of civilian and military leadership. In the military, and particularly in elite units, the question asked of a prospective member is: "Do you have the intestinal fortitude to be here?" What isn't being asked is: "Do you have the moral fortitude to be here? Are you prepared for a violent, complex, and perhaps ambiguous mission?"

This seems to be our more crucial failing, one being perpetuated by an old school, frat boy like officer corp that doesn't appear adequate promoting the high ideals, the indoctrination if you will, that as American Servicemen we will set an example of respect and honor even towards our enemies. This is given lip service in the press with cultural interaction training given public attention, but once the soldiers get into the field and the hard realities of combat become pervasive, this sort of action loses priority. And leadership allows it to be so.

For more evidence of this read Sebastian Junger's *Restrepo*. There are countless other books available on the Afghanistan war, which along with Hastings' book have led me to the disheartening conclusion that we have no business telling anyone how to conduct themselves or how to construct their society. Especially with our military, because when we join the fray, instead of projecting the aura of higher ground, we succumb to the baser instincts of human nature, excusing ourselves with claims that the enemy cuts heads off, tortures, and kills innocents, so the ends, no matter how brutal, justifies the means. That's war.

But like I said in the beginning of this rant, I have been naive.

To say I liked *The Operators* isn't quite accurate (it was painful). I was fascinated by, and interested in Stanley McChrystal, and fully supported him when he was espousing the protection of civilians on *60 minutes*, much to the chagrin of the shoot first crowd. My opinion of him is different now, though not completely critical. Reading this book was like watching a train wreck that's been happening before my eyes even as I denied it. We couldn't have another quagmire like Vietnam...could we? The military doesn't still lie to us like it did back then...does it? The answer is yes and yes. Hastings' sometimes irreverent style, which had me doubting him at first, was entertaining and ultimately set the right tone for the story being told. Well written and, I believe, objective, despite what his critics and those with disingenuous agendas have to say.

My heart breaks for the real losers of this war. The innocent women and children who will continue to live and die in misery as we draw down and eventually leave them to who knows what. All the young men, American and Afghan alike who are sucked into this war, losing life and limb and emotional stability; true pawns of an endless cycle of mediaeval myths, greed, corruption and violence that seems to know no end. The families who suffer in grief over an effort that ultimately shows no greater cause or meaning. The list is long....

and I despair.

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### **Florence says**

The author of this book is also the author of a Rolling Stone magazine article on General Stanley McChrystal which resulted in his resignation as commander of the war in Afghanistan. Some of the book describes the time the author spent with the General's staff both in Europe while they attended various public events and continues in the war zone as well. Apparently the General spends a great deal of time on public relations and had a large staff to help him present a positive image. War duties seem to come second. And General Patraeus (aka General Betray us) who took over for McChrystal is also likened to a publicity hound. The relationships between the military commanders in Afghanistan, the US ambassador, and the White House are all screwed up. The Afghan people seem to have a choice between ongoing war, corrupt government, or fanatical Muslim rule. If you were not already cynical about this endless war, this book will remove all doubts that we have sacrificed blood and treasure for any worthwhile goal.

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### **Sketchbook says**

"He's a war geek," reporter Hastings writes here of Gen. McChrystal, the man he brought down. "He spends his vacations at battlefields." Hastings is now dead : his battlefield was LA where his car blew up. He was probably murdered by the US military complex which controls America. Meantime, our Prez is perfect for the US show window. (He isn't "allowed" to do anything). Read this book by an American martyr. Our morality has gone to Hell. (Did we ever have any?)

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### **Bradley Farless says**

As a US Army Veteran that served for 8 years and did two combat tours (one during the first six months of the war with Iraq and one later with an ADA unit), so much of what Hastings describes regarding military culture, the feeling on the ground among people who are actually doing the work and the disconnect that often exists between command officers (and sometimes E-8s) and the rest of the troops is spot on. It was also nice to see a real profile of higher ranking people that portrays them as human beings with victories and failures, rather than as mythologized, perfect representations of the military ethos. The spin that comes from the top down always annoyed me, because it felt like an insult to intelligence to try to present our leaders as perfect men while the rest of us were just scum, trying to scrape our way up a ladder to humankind. It was nice to see a real face put on real people in a real war, reminding America that something's happening over there and that shit is far from clear. When you finish reading this book, you'll be asking the question that should be asked: Why are we in Afghanistan and what is it we hope to accomplish there, and is that hoped for outcome even feasible?

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### **C. Scott says**

In June 2010 an article written about General Stanley McChrystal for the Rolling Stone was leaked. Before

the issue even hit newsstands McChrystal had already tendered his resignation. This book is the story behind that story.

Michael Hastings takes the reader behind the scenes for a very in-depth look at how his article came together and the dramatic fallout that immediately followed. Since then Hastings died under peculiar circumstances and this book was made into an anti-war movie starring Brad Pitt. After reading the original story in Rolling Stone, then seeing the movie, then reading this book I only have one question: What the fuck is the US still doing in Afghanistan???

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### **Chris says**

I didn't realize when I requested this book it was by the "infamous" Rolling Stone reporter Michael Hastings. I had to overcome my initial feelings of disdain for this guy who got McChrystal fired. But it was McChrystal who got himself fired, not Hastings. Hastings did his job and this book reads like Bob Woodward's book or Megan Stack's "Every Man in this Village is a Liar." It's visceral, penetrating, and page turning. Hastings is no wimp nor a wallflower. Once when McChrystal's staff is trying to sugarcoat an incident, Hastings steps up and tries to tell Big Stan what really happened. This book is more a message about the cult of personality in which acolytes become transfixed by their mentors-military and civilian. The book is not only about McChrystal though, all the players in this debacle called Operation Enduring Freedom are there. Petraeus comes across like the Pope of Spin. The cover of this book really pissed me off-I'd have given it five stars but for the cover and its over the top sensationalism. It detracts from the subject matter with its flip image of a man in uniform with alcohol. I also found it disturbing that DOD screwed with Hastings by denying him an embed he was already approved for once the Big Stan story broke. Hastings didn't think McChrystal would be fired and either did I. We need to get out of Afghanistan yesterday.

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### **Dave Cullen says**

Wow. I plunged into this book now, and it's electrifying.

The writing is so crisp, candid and insightful. He rips back the curtain and takes us inside this world, of senior military in a war zone in the Middle East.

The stories are incredible but it's the voice that really hit me. Kind of revelatory, actually. He's setting a new benchmark for this generation of writers. I don't say that lightly.

Go get this book now.

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### **Dan Bell says**

There was nothing wild or terrifying about this story. It was your typical story of civil-military strife during a conflict. *The Operators* was simply a journalist's look as an outsider into the workings of the military. Worse, the author, the recently-deceased Michael Hastings, contradicted himself repeated throughout the story, trying to play the selfless journalist looking out for America's best interest.

No, I'm sorry, I don't buy. From the get-go, it was apparent that Hastings saw this as a huge story that would work out in his benefit. Yes, General McChrystal and his staff were extremely stupid in how they acted around Hastings, but it wasn't really any different than any other team dynamic in the military. There's always strife between those in theater with boots on the ground and the policymakers back in the states. Hastings just got to see it where most journalists don't, or are told it's off the record.

Did McChrystal get what he deserved? Yes, but he deserved it by not having his staff proactively manage Hastings.

From a technical note, the book itself could've used a couple more revisions before publication. The book was filled with spelling errors, typos, disjointed sentences, and overall contradictory statements. For example, when talking about his story on the Kiowas and the pilots of them, the pilot drops two curses, and several paragraphs later, Hastings claims the pilot never uses profanity. Um, what? So does the pilot actually curse and Hastings was too dumb to figure it out, or was Hastings taking creative liberties with his reporting of quotes by people. Hopefully he was just dumb. Otherwise it speaks significantly to the accuracy of his reporting and thus his credibility.

Overall, I don't know why this book has received such high ratings, but I would totally disagree with the belief that it has a place in the history of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I don't recommend this book. If you're interested in reading about the U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are better accounts out there.

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### **Jamie says**

What a clusterfuck.

Hastings impressed me with the way he pulled the narrative together in the end. It's not the story of McChrystal, or his team, or Hastings himself—it's the assembly line of interchangeable generals in the unwinnable war. One of the most powerful parts is one of its simplest: two pages, back to back, with each side's blunt opinions of the other. No spin, no politicking.

Just a clusterfuck. And it's ours. We made it. With no way to get out.

(With regards to the movie, the one Netflix made falls short of the book. Armando Iannucci might be the only one who could do it a profane sort of justice. Truth is stranger than fiction; I'm not sure satire is possible when reality descends into farce.)

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### **Philip Girvan says**

I've read a fair number of books concerning the Iraq War (less so about Afghanistan), and I would rank *The Operators* at or near the top.

The book provides a good account of General Stanley McChrystal from his West Point escapades to his ruthless efficiency as head of Joint Special Operations Command in Iraq. Among other successes, JSOC

troops captured Saddam Hussein and killed the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. There were a number of scandals and controversies along the way, such as his role in the covering up of US Ranger, and former NFL player, Pat Tillman's death by friendly fire and the 'enhanced' interrogation techniques employed by the Zaraqawi unit. Nonetheless, McCrystal is appointed Commander of ISAF and US Forces in Afghanistan on June 15, 2009 replacing General David McKiernan – then US and NATO commander in Afghanistan – which Hastings notes 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. The second of course is McCrystal, who steps down June 23, 2010, as a direct result of Hastings's reporting.

While many books or articles covering the recent Middle East and Central Asian wars are very frank in their assessment of elected and appointed government officials, none that I've read so far will be as critical toward the generals commanding the troops. Hastings is granted an incredible amount of access to McCrystal and his staff. Like most reporters on the war beat, Hastings hates the war(s) but grows fond of the soldiers and officers fighting (a not uncommon phenomena -- a chapter in the book explores the phenomenon of the war journalist and their thirst for action). He is wary of the often fawning coverage the press gives top military brass and is highly aware of his own tendency to hold these men in high regard. He is quite willing to acknowledge McCrystal's valor and comment that the qualities he possesses are no small part of (temporary) US military successes in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is equally willing to comment upon, and demonstrate, the Obama administration's lack of coherence and vision regarding the wars inherited from the Bush administration. However, he recognizes that his job is report and he does so brilliantly. Highly recommended.

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### **Barry Eisler says**

The Operators covers, in excellent prose and with perfect pacing, three broad topics. First, the insanity and futility of America's war in Afghanistan. Second, the way decisions are made in Washington and at the Pentagon -- the bureaucratic battles, the petty resentments and one-upmanship, the alliances and betrayals. And third, the realities of journalism -- the tradeoffs journalists engage in between access and honesty, the way journalists allow themselves to be seduced and suborned by the powerful figures they purport to hold to account.

For nonfiction, the book was an unusually gripping read (I listened to the audio version in my car, and many evenings sat in the driveway after getting home, unable to turn it off). Hastings turns this trick by avoiding preaching, and instead illuminating his broad themes through a specific focus. The insanity and futility of the war are represented by the heart-aching death of Army Corporal Mike Ingram. The White House and Pentagon turmoil is told via the story of the rise and fall of General Stanley McChrystal, America's commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. And the realities of journalism are presented through Hastings' account of his own decision-making process; of the temptations he felt (and, to his credit, resisted); and of the reactions of other journalists to his coverage of McChrystal and the war.

The subtitle is spot-on: this really is a wild and terrifying inside account, and a deeply affecting one, too. I highly recommend it.

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## **Bill LaBrie says**

Look at this book carefully: It got one man fired and (likely) another killed.

In a personally-revealing chapter of *The Operators*, Michael Hastings cites passages from Phillip Knightley's *The First Casualty* while describing the odd subculture of the war correspondent. The whole of the famous quote used in the title of Knightley's book goes: "In war, the first casualty is truth."

In most ways, this casualty is unavoidable. The fog of war and its power to suffocate the truth is providential in many ways. It shields the troop movements, motives, and subversions needed for victory on either side. It also covers a multitude of sins on the part of the men fighting the war. So, what happens when a journalist is given unprecedented access and candor from a general and his staff in a war that can't be won? What happens when that journalist bravely takes his mission seriously enough to try and keep the truth alive?

Well, some important people get fired; others die. That's what happens.

*The Operators* started as profile on General Stanley McChrystal the Rolling Stone published in 2010. The journalist had taken the slick media-relations approach of General Stanley McChrystal's staff at face value: Nothing (or almost nothing) was to be off the record. This was to include some inopportune quotes from McChrystal on Vice President Biden ("Bite me") US Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, his fellow generals, and the war itself. Upon release, the fallout from the article was immediate. President Obama quickly relieved McChrystal of his command.

The behind-the-scenes details of the situation in Afghanistan related here should come as no surprise to most readers who've kept up with ten-plus years of America's feckless nation-building in the land that even the full, shameless force of a Soviet occupation couldn't tame. There are heartrending stories of young and promising soldiers sacrificed to IED's made of "fertilizer, wood, and manure." There are interviews with well-meaning local Afghans whom we later learn were assassinated soon after Hastings spoke with them. There are stories of mind-boggling corruption and waste, near-mutinies among US soldiers in the field, and a political agenda totally out of step with the real chances for success. All the while, there's a ceaseless, braying call to just get the hell out and forget all about it.

If only war were that simple.

A thought that occurred to me several times through *The Operators*: Smarts does not equal wisdom. McChrystal and his compatriots ingeniously corner the Obama administration into tripling the size of the American presence during the Afghan surge, only to be faced with the certainty they will fail in an even grander way than before. Wit doesn't serve them well. They pat themselves on the back while sinking even deeper in the mire. It's not for lack of intelligence nor due to any hidebound conventionality. They come across as bright, unconventional, irreverent-though-loyal-to-their-cause, and constantly willing to take a different tack to reach their goal. None of it works. Extra boots on the ground and innovative strategies only alienate and kill more of the people the Americans are there to "save."

What does come through to the close reader of this book are a few things the self-censoring US media likely glossed over out of sheer wishful thinking--or perhaps coercion. During a drunken cavaort at a bar in Paris, General Mike Flynn confesses to Hastings that he thinks they'll never get Osama Bin Laden, who at the time was the stated target of US involvement in the region. Hastings notes this point -- twice -- with awe. Very interesting.

Another episode that comes into shocking focus given the events of one evening a few years after Hastings' return from Afghanistan:

*Jake came up to me. "We'll hunt you down and kill you if we don't like what you write," he said.  
"C. (a former British SAS assassin) will hunt you down and kill you."*

On the evening of June 18th, 2013, Michael Hastings made a call to friends stating that he was "working on something big." Later that night, his new Mercedes coupe sped out of control along a sleepy L.A. street and exploded on impact, killing him instantly. Mercedes-Benz made no attempts to investigate the accident to determine what would make one of their latest vehicles in apparently fine repair explode in such a manner. The LA police determined the cause as drunk driving, despite no alcohol found in the minimal human remains. Hastings' widow at first called for justice, but was later quoted as sheepishly saying she just wanted to drop it.

Michael Hastings: A fine journalist and author who tried to keep the truth alive through the fog of war.

RIP.

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