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In a rare extended interview, we speak to Michael Hastings, whose article in Rolling Stone magazine led to the firing of General Stanley McChrystal. Hastings' piece quoted McChrystal and his aides making disparaging remarks about top administration officials, and exposed long-standing disagreements between civilian and military officials over the conduct of the war. The Senate confirmed General David Petraeus as McChrystal's replacement on Wednesday, one day after McChrystal announced his retirement from the military on Tuesday after a 34-year career.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** The Senate has confirmed General David Petraeus as head of the Afghan war. He was tapped after General Stanley McChrystal was fired over disparaging remarks made about the Obama administration that were published in a Rolling Stone article. In addition, McChrystal has made comments along with his aides about Joe Biden, Karl Eikenberry, the article exposed longstanding disagreements between civilian and military officials over the conduct of the war. President Obama announced he was stripping him of his command last week.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** As difficult as it is to lose General McChrystal, I believe is the right decision for our national security. 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. It erodes the trust that is necessary for our team to work together to achieve our objectives in Afghanistan.

**AMY GOODMAN:** General McChrystal announced retirement from the military Tuesday after a 34-year career calling his comments published in Rolling Stone a mistake reflecting poor judgment. Michael Hastings is the reporter who broke the story. The article is called "The Runaway General." Michael Hastings is just back from Afghanistan and joins us in our studio. Were you surprised by the effect of your article?

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Very surprised. I had been reporting on this article for a number of months and I knew I had strong material, but I did not know what the impact would be. I figured it would be, might give General McChrystal and his team a headache for a couple of days and

then it would be swept under the rug. Then I would lose my access and go on and write another story and they would think I was a jerk and we would go on from there.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** The article, interestingly I think, most of the coverage was of the few remarks of the general or his staff, but you laid out a pretty convincing argument that General McChrystal had been in conflict with the Obama administration almost from the very beginning.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Sure, I think--I wanted to actually write a somewhat sympathetic and different portrait of General McChrystal and I was surprised the sort of comments that people talked about so much—yes, the story was about he was using General McChrystal as a way to look at the larger problems of the Afghanistan strategy. Obviously, there were tensions with the White House, that was confirmed right after the piece came out when President Obama decided to fire General McChrystal, obviously there were problems between General McChrystal and the civilian side of things and now theres a lot of rumors about kind of a shake up on the civilian side of the folks involved in the Afghanistan policy. Obviously there's problems among the troops who were not happy with the Rules of Engagement that General McChrystal had recently pushed down on them. So there were very serious issues, there was problems with the withdrawal timeline. I had a senior military official in Kabul tell me if things were going well, they're going to ask for another surge of troops next summer. So these were all issues—they had been out there. I think the reporters covering stories have done a great job, for The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, McClatchy, they do a great job of covering this stuff. I think it just happened to be this moment, where in Rolling Stone we were able to take all these sorts of feelings and sentiments that were out there and just concentrate it in 8,000 words or 6000 words and thats why it created such an impact.

**AMY GOODMAN:** A lot was made just at the beginning of the article, for example, you going with them to a bar in Paris, with General McChrystal, and the senior staff, the images of the senior staff dancing to the words "Afghanistan". Can you describe that scene by the way?

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Sure, I had got off the airplane in Paris I believe on Thursday. That was a Friday night, I believe, if my memory serves. It was General McChrystal's 33rd wedding anniversary. And I just happen to have stumbled onto this thing at the right time. You know, we went to this bar around the corner from one of the hotels in Paris, a sort of your cheesy Irish pub. These guys were infantry guys letting loose. I was not surprised necessarily about that. I spent a lot of time with the military, my younger brother is a decorated combat Veteran, was a platoon leader in Iraq. So I have been around military guys when they tie one on, so to speak. I had never seen folks of this high level do so. I was sympathetic to them in the fact they have very difficult jobs. The past nine years they have been living and fighting these wars. The wars

are there reason of existence in many ways. So, yes, there were songs, a lot of booze. There were only two quotes I used from that night. Some people have said, oh all of these quotes I have were from a boozy dinner, thats not actually true. Their only two that were taken while these guys were drunk. The "Afghanistan, Afghanistan" song, which if you count as a quote-

**AMY GOODMAN:** Their dancing and singing.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Their dancing and singing, and giving toasts and fairly typical, sort of band of brothers atmosphere. These guys are very tight knit. To General McChrystal, those men on his team are his family. These guys would die for each other and that is what General McChrystal told me. And actually that is the only quote I used from that night besides the Afghanistan song. So, in many ways, it was a very powerful moment just to see the people who are really shaping the policy of this war in a setting that we have never—I had never seen them in such a setting before.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Some in the mainstream media said you violated the so-called ground rules in writing or article. Let me play a clip from Lara Logan, the chief foreign affairs correspondent for CBS news, she's interviewed by Howard Kurtz on CNN.

**HOWARD KURTZ:** If you've been traveling with General McChrystal and heard these comments about Jim Jones, Joe Biden, Obama, would have reported them?

**LARA LOGAN:** It depends on the circumstances. If you believe Hastings, he said there were no ground rules laid out, and I mean that does not make sense to me. Becuase if you look at the people around General McChyrstal, if you look at his history, he was the Joint Special Operations Commander and has a history of not interacting with the media at all. His chief of intelligence Mike Flynn. I know these people, they never let their guard down like that. To me something does not add up here. I do not believe it.

**HOWARD KURTZ:** Washington Post quoted an unnamed senior military OFFICIAL said that Michael Hastings broke the off record ground rules. But the person is said this was on

background and would not let his name be used. Is that fair?

**LARA LOGAN:** Well its Kryptonite now, do you blame him? The commanding general in Afghanistan just lost his job. Who else is going to lose his job? Believe me, all the senior leadership in Afghanistan are waiting for the axe to fall. I have been speaking to some of them, they do not know who is going to stay and go. The question is really, is what General McChrystal and his aids were doing so egregious that they deserved,—I mean to end a career like McChrystal's? I mean Michael Hastings has never served his country like McChrystal has.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Lara Logan. Michael Hastings, your response?

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Look, Lara Logan has done fine ...

**AMY GOODMAN:** She's chief correspondent for CBS.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Sure, and she's done fine work. I think its unfortunate she decided to go down this road. I know she's been the victim of a lot of journalistic backbiting in her career and I thought was unfortunate she would decide to go down this path with me. I had been up front with this from the beginning. Everything I used was on the record, and that is clear.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Was there a lot that you—did not use because it was off the record?

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** There was a lot of on the record material I did not use, that I could have used. I think this sort of push back from anonymous officials--look it took them six days to get their story straight and they're still lying. I think that is unfortunate. Obviously, look, the anonymous officials are guys who just lost their jobs and the guy they love, General McChrystal, got fired. I totally understand why they're angry. But you know I have been in this business now for almost 10 years, I have done a lot of stories. I have a pretty good track record. I have been covering the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2005. So I followed all of the rules, here, as they were laid out, or in some cases not laid out.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** I want to get back to some of the substance of the article. Beginning with the title, "The Runaway General," I think to some degree that does summarize a main theme of the article, that there were constant problems not only in terms of the relationships with the White House, but also questions of general McChrystal's role in the Pat Tillman case, the NFL star who was killed by friendly fire, you mentioned that. There were questions about to what degree he knew about torture or abuses at a particular camp in Iraq. Could you talk about the continuing problem McChrystal has had over many years?

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Sure what I think the key, the story here really, and what's sort of got everyone's attention is the relationship between General McChrystal and the Obama White House. I think what had happened when President Obama put General McChrystal in, he lost control of his Afghanistan policy. Obama had said he wanted to narrow the goals—U.S. goals in Afghanistan, very explicitly where McChrystal's strategy was in fact exponentially widening our goals. That to me, was one of the key sort of factors and kept tensions in the piece.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** And McChrystal played a key role in trying to press for more come the second escalation that Obama did.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Yea, Exactly. I know the White House was upset that you know, look, Obama had already agreed—this is old news now—agreed last year to send 21,000 more troops and all of a sudden McChrystal goes over there and says, oh wait, we're losing, we need x number of more. And I know people in the White House believed that they undercut Obama's authority and strategic impact of the 21,000 they were already sending.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That he leaked a report from the Pentagon saying they want 40,000 troops.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** We know the report was leaked. We do not know who leaked it. But I do know from my reporting that General McChrystal's staff after initially, like a 30 minute period they were unhappy with the leak, they sort of embraced it. And so this was not an isolated incident. Rolling Stone did not fire General McChrystal, the White House fired General McChrystal. It is this moment where President Obama this last week was reasserting his control over the Afghanistan policy, or trying to reassert his control over the Afghanistan policy.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We will take a break and come back to this very important discussion over what were the key issues raised in the Rolling Stone article that led to the firing of General McChrystal. We're joined by the reporter who did this story, just back from Afghanistan, Michael Hastings. Stay with us.

[music break]

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is Democracy Now!, [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org), the War and Peace Report. I'm Amy Goodman with Juan Gonzalez. In a rare, extended interview, we're joined by Michael Hastings, The Rolling Stone reporter who wrote that piece, "The Runaway General," that led to the firing of General Stanley McChrystal. Now General Petraeus has been unanimously confirmed to replace him as the head of the Afghan war. Continuing on the question Juan asked you, the key points in your piece and this division between the military, which you point out has a how many hundred billion dollar budget in Afghanistan and overall \$600 billion or \$500 billion?

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Right. The joke is that you could fit every foreign service officer on one aircraft carrier. There are more people in the army band in the entire foreign service, that's the State Department.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, \$50 billion for the State Department....

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** \$600 billion plus [for the military].

**AMY GOODMAN:** So the power that this general, whether it's Petraeus or McChrystal has, versus the civilians who are supposed to be in charge in this country.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** There's the structural problem in terms of the basic weight that the Department of Defense has, so much so that even Secretary Gates has said, look, D.O.D. has too much power, we need to give more power to the State Department. And if you go back and read David Halberstam's "The Best and the Brightest," the State Department was where the action was at in the '50s and '60s and that sort of shifted to, and I forget who I'm quoting here, but someone said, our defense policy is our foreign policy. So I think those are very serious structural issues. Plus in Afghanistan you have the supreme allied commander, that's not the official title, which Petraeus is now, and then on the diplomatic side you have a number of—often in some cases talented—diplomats sort of fighting over who is the strongest diplomatic voice. Four or five people. And I think there's now a sense that has to be clarified. I think if there's a positive impact to the article. At least if they're going to do this crazy strategy,

at least they might try to get it right.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** I wanted to ask you in all of the disparaging references to the Obama administration officials, you noted that there was one official they were laudatory of, Hillary Clinton, and that for some reason the McChrystal camp considered her a friend. Could you talk about that?

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Secretary Clinton has had a good relationship with Secretary Gates. Gates is a big McChrystal backer. I think Clinton's run in with Petraeus in 2007 made her a little hesitant to appear in any way sort of anti-military or anti-general. But also her policies have been pretty center-right. When the debate was going down, she disagreed with her ambassador, Karl Eikenberry, and basically said, give Stan what he wants. I think that's to build up her own defense credentials and I think that's also what she believes.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Let's talk about Karl Eikenberry. This is a significant split between McChrystal and the ambassador, also a general or retired general, Ambassador Eikenberry, and the cables that he sent that Dan Ellsberg has called the new Pentagon Papers that he sent to Hillary Clinton but were leaked.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** I think this is the most fascinating development and the guy whose job is sort of the most in the balance right now is Ambassador Eikenberry, because it's known as General McChrystal's strategy, but guess who was also writing that strategy? General Petraeus. It was a devastating critique. I recommend anyone to go back and read those cables to see probably what was the most prescient and scathing critique of the strategy we're pursuing and the leak angered McChrystal's team beyond belief.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Explain what he said.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** General McChrystal said that he felt betrayed and this was a cable that was leaked to cover their flanks for the history books.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And what Karl Eikenberry wrote?

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Eikenberry wrote that the strategy wasn't going to work, basically, and that Karzai would play the general off the Ambassador, that we'd get stuck in this quagmire—he didn't use the word quagmire I don't think—but essentially we'd get stuck going further and further and further into a mess.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** And of course in the days before the firing of General McChrystal, you had President Karzai come out and essentially back the general and urge, not directly, but tell President Obama that he thought General McChrystal was doing a good job.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Right, and I think the New York Times columnist, the great Frank Rich, said, having Hamid Karzai and his brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, as your character witnesses was like having Rod Blagojevich to come to your defense. I think that was very telling.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Your description of McChrystal with Karzai at Walter Reed Hospital and then General McChrystal trying to wake up President Karzai for the largest offensive in a year. That was Marjah. Explain both situations.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Devastating. The day of the Marjah operation, General McChrystal wanted to get President Karzai's sign off. Essentially the idea behind counterinsurgency is that you need a credible partner in government. Karzai is not a credible partner. What you do? You make him a credible partner. It's what we did with Primer Minister Maliki in Iraq. You will him by your support, he eventually becomes a credible partner and becomes what they call a Commander-in-Chief. Karzai starts acting like the president. We see that from our perspective where Karzai is dealing with a number of other political sort of dynamics where he does not necessarily want to be responsible for Afghan citizens being killed. He does not necessarily want to be responsible. He wants plausible deniability on a lot of these military operations. So the day of this big offensive, General McChrystal wanted to get in touch with President Karzai, calls over to his office, they won't let him through. He's taking a nap, he has a cold, delay, delay, delay, delay. And this is a huge operation about to launch. Finally, General McChrystal had to drive over with the Afghan Defense Minister and basically wake him up and say, look, this is your country, why don't you take charge of it? Really incredible. The Walter Reed scene was devastating, to have President Karzai in Walter Reed meeting American soldiers and saying, I did not even know we were fighting in that province. What does that say? McChrystal's people were very aware of Karzai's limitations but they felt he was the only game in town.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** You also write about General McChrystal in the case of Pat Tillman. He's the former NFL star who joined the military after 9/11 and was killed while serving in Afghanistan. The military initially said he died while charging up a hill toward the enemy to protect his fellow army rangers but in fact Tillman was killed by his own men in so-called friendly fire. McChrystal was at the center of the military cover-up. This is what Pat Tillman's mother, Mary, had to say about McChrystal when we spoke with her two years ago. I asked her about a memo that McChrystal wrote regarding her son.

**MARY TILLMAN:** This memo was a means of exonerating Stanley McChrystal from having any kind of culpability in any kind of coverup because on April 29, he sent this P4 memo, it's a personal memo, to General Abizaid, General Kensinger, and General Brown that Pat was indeed killed by friendly fire or at least suspected friendly fire, although he's playing with language there because they did know—they suspected it within 24 hours but by April 29 they knew. He's saying that they should tell the president and secretary of the army because they were going to be making speeches at the correspondents' dinner that weekend and that they didn't want him or the secretary of the army to make any embarrassing statements about Pat's actions if the circumstances of Pat's death were to become public. Not "when" the circumstances become public, but "if." Which suggests they had no intention of telling us the truth unless they had to.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That was Mary Tillman, the mother of Pat Tillman. McChrystal's role in that and also in Iraq when he was in charge of black cops for the five years before he became head of the Afghan war, the issue of torture?

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** I think on the Tillman issue, in fact an officer called me yesterday and we were chatting and he said, what he had heard, or that there was this idea that Tillman should have disqualified him for the job. The fact that it didn't showed poor judgment along the way. But he was such an impressive character that they gave him a pass on this and that should've ended his career. The torture allegations, this kind of stuff, you know he was in the business of killing. That's what they do. He's a warrior, he's a killer, hunting people down and hunting America's enemies down. And in many cases, real bad guys.

**AMY GOODMAN:** But this is prisoners who are being held at a camp in Iraq who Human Rights Watch report put out were being tortured and the scene of McChrystal being there.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** And he did not get dragged into that, either. He sort of skated that as well. From my conversations with people on his staff, I think—I don't think McChrystal was a fan of this sort of "enhanced interrogation."

**AMY GOODMAN:** He didn't want to be in charge of it in Afghanistan because of how close he came to getting in trouble in Iraq.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Exactly. He viewed detention policies as a a political swamp. It's tough. What is General McChrystal's morality? He gets the job done, he's willing to bend the rules to do that. I don't think though he would have tolerated things going too far, but we know people were punished and we know he wasn't punished.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Ultimately though isn't it a fact that the counterinsurgency strategy is not going well in Afghanistan, probably also had an impact on the final decision of the president that if things were going well, the possibility of him overlooking some of these remarks might have been there?

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** Sure. I think that's absolutely correct. If he had not just called Marjah a "bleeding ulcer" a couple of weeks earlier, he'd probably still have a job. Success gets you a lot of support in Washington. Part of the trick with counterinsurgency is that you need to communicate. It's a battle of perceptions both in Afghanistan and America and you need to have sort of a great communicator to tell the story about why you're having success, to create this narrative of success or this narrative of how we will reach success. I think when all is said and done, General McChrystal's great failure in fact was his inability to communicate his strategy and what they perceived as having success. If you want to communicate a strategy of success, I would avoid using words like "bleeding" and "ulcer."

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** And avoid interviews with Rolling Stone.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** I welcome all interviews with Rolling Stone and I'm sure people will talk to me in the future.

**AMY GOODMAN:** I know you have to race out of here because you have an interview scheduled with General Petraeus later this morning, but I did want to talk for just one moment before we wrap up and go to Congressman Conyers, the chair of the House Judiciary Committee, I wanted to just ask you, you've been reporting in Iraq and Afghanistan for five years now, you're quite experienced in war reporting. You've been embedded, you've not been embedded. Your fiancé was killed in Iraq and you've set up a fund for her.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** It's called the Andy Foundation. It's a fund that helps, there's domestic scholarships that we give out but we've also along with National Democratic Institute have an annual fellowship where we bring a young woman from a developing nation over to Washington, D.C. to learn about human rights and democracy so they can go back to their own home countries and try to institute these rule-of-law programs. We brought one woman over last year from Iraq. It was really incredible. She was even able to spend Christmas with the Parhamovich family. This year we have another candidate who came over from I believe Burma. The war has been pretty tough on a lot of people. But you have to just figure out a way to take what happens and go forward and try to do the best you can.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Finally, quick question on counterinsurgency. You say it's not working but they're bringing in Petraeus who is keeping the same strategy going. Obama was very clear about this, we're changing the personnel, not the policy. Yet right now, at the end of June, more than 100 foreign trips dead in Afghanistan, vying with the top deaths in Iraq. We don't know how many Afghans are dead.

**MICHAEL HASTINGS:** I think we're fight to—again, Petraeus' genius in Iraq was engineering this sort of face-saving withdrawal despite the fact, I still think Baghdad is more violent than Kabul. But people on the beltway have convinced themselves we've won in Iraq. What are we fighting? Two or three more years of bloody fighting and then draw down to maybe 50,000 troops and then we're going start doing counter-terrorism plus which is what Vice President Biden had been advocating all along, which is going to take us three years to get there.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Michael Hastings, thank you for being with us, Rolling Stone reporter who wrote the piece "The Runaway General" that led to the firing of General McChrystal. This is Democracy Now!, [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org), the War and Peace Report as we go to Washington.