Book Reviews

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

By Michael Hastings
Blue Rider Press, 2012
381 pp., $27.95
ISBN: 978-039915-988-6

REVIEWED BY GEORGE MICHAEL

As the U.S. military enters its 11th year of operations in Afghanistan, public support for the effort dwindles, according to recent polls, as a solid majority of Americans now believe the war is going badly and is not worth fighting. In *The Operators*, journalist Michael Hastings explores the recent history of America's longest military campaign through the prism of General Stanley McChrystal and his staff. Not long after his story broke in June 2010 in *Rolling Stone* magazine, General McChrystal was forced to resign. The episode illustrated the deepening division between the White House and Pentagon over the appropriate prosecution of the war.

Hastings begins his story in the autumn of 2008, when conditions noticeably deteriorated in Afghanistan. At that time, some major media outlets—including the *New York Times*—suggested that the Unites States was losing the war. Under the leadership of General David McKiernan, USA, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had reached a stalemate. McKiernan's main problem seemed to be a matter of style, as he preferred a low-key public relations approach with the media. Though well respected by his peers, McKiernan was looked upon as a member of the "old school" generation of generals, unlike General David Petraeus, who championed the popular counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine. McKiernan refused to resign, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates effectively fired him, which amounted to the first sacking of a wartime commander since President Harry Truman removed General Douglas MacArthur at the height of the Korean War. By removing McKiernan, the Pentagon saw an opportunity to escalate and reset the war in Afghanistan.

McKiernan's replacement, General McChrystal, was the first Special Forces Soldier to assume such a prominent battlefield command. Over the course of his career, McChrystal learned to walk a fine line in the rigid military hierarchy yet still succeed. He first entered the public spotlight in March 2003 when he served as the Pentagon spokesman during the invasion of Iraq. Later that year, he took over as commander of the Joint Special Forces Operations Command, overseeing the most elite units in the military, including Delta Force, Navy SEALs, and Rangers. Relentlessly, his special forces rooted out terrorists, most notably Abu Musab al-Zaraqawi, the recognized

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leader of al Qaeda in Iraq. His willingness to get results endeared him to Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, even when it included bending the rules or skipping the chain of command. Controversy seemed to follow him. For instance, in Iraq, he oversaw a network of prisons where detainees were beaten and tortured. Furthermore, he was accused of attempting to whitewash the friendly fire death in Afghanistan of Pat Tillman, the NFL star who joined the Army not long after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The pitched political battles that occurred over troop levels in Afghanistan are recounted by Hastings. Essentially, there were two major camps in the debate. The Pentagon wanted a big footprint in order to launch a comprehensive COIN program. The other camp, led by Vice President Joe Biden, favored a small footprint consisting of U.S. Special Forces that would focus on hunting and killing the remnants of al Qaeda. Through sporadic and strategic leaks, McChrystal was able to force President Barack Obama's hand. In September 2009, *Washington Post* writer Bob Woodward published McChrystal's confidential assessment of the war in Afghanistan, which concluded that the U.S. military was on the verge of "mission failure." The story spurred Washington to take action, and, in the end, Obama agreed to the 40,000 additional troops that McChrystal requested with the proviso that they begin leaving in July 2011, a year earlier than the general wanted.

President Obama, who voted against the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a Senator from Illinois, pushed for fixing Afghanistan, which he identified as the most important theater in the war on terror. But civil-military relations had been strained by the Afghan war, which led to disagreements over planning. As Hastings explains, several members of McChrystal's staff questioned Obama's ability to lead the war effort. Early into his term, military leaders sensed that the new President was uncomfortable with the military. The Pentagon—filled with many Republicans from the Bush years—viewed him with suspicion.

McChrystal was disappointed over Obama's lack of engagement in the war. Hastings relates the tenuous relationship between U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry and McChrystal as they clashed over strategy. McChrystal also had difficulty selling his COIN plan to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, whom Hastings depicts as a less-than-competent leader of very questionable legitimacy who effectively rigged the presidential election in 2009.

McChrystal operated in the shadow of General Petraeus, whose COIN campaign in Iraq—the surge—did much to stabilize the security in that country. But applying the same template in Afghanistan has been more challenging. Petraeus, in *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, argued that the cornerstone of the new strategy was to protect and gain the trust of the population. So-called kinetic operations—that is, killing and capturing the insurgents—were given less emphasis. The goal was to recreate the Afghanistan of 1979, before it was wracked with foreign invasion and internecine warfare. For McChrystal, it was imperative to switch from the "shoot-first-and-blow-shit-up" soldiering of the Special Forces to the COIN emphasis on protecting the civilian population. To that end, he issued a tactical directive that encouraged soldiers to avoid shooting in situations in which civilians could be harmed. Over time,

however, soldiers became frustrated with the new policy, which hampered their ability to fight back.

Currently worrisome is the growing insularity of the U.S. military from the rest of America. As Hastings points out, less than 1 percent of the U.S. population serves in the military or has any connection to the ongoing wars. According to his reasoning, the guilt of the general public for not having served in the military is covered up by an uncritical attitude toward those who have. As for what motivated the soldiers, Hastings found it was not so much the objectives of the war, but rather a nearly metaphysical quality that one attained through tribulation that involved sacrifice and the risk of one's life. To his loyal entourage, McChrystal was a historic figure who gave them a sense of identity.

Why, Hastings asks, did McChrystal agree to the *Rolling Stone* story? According to his take on the man, the general sought to immortalize his image as a "badass" and a "snake-eating rebel" that would be cultivated by a cover story in the magazine. As the war in Afghanistan extended to the end of the decade, it is not surprising that Hastings found that McChrystal and his entourage often comported themselves irreverently in the style of soldiers on the front-line, displaying "frustration" and "arrogance" and "getting smashed" and "letting off stress." Not long after the story was released, President Obama fired McChrystal and named General Petraeus as the new commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. According to Hastings, what was most troubling about the story to the White House's national security team was not that it questioned the competence of the President and his advisors, but rather its suggestion that the troops were in near revolt against McChrystal.

In a protracted guerrilla campaign, perceptions are important. According to Hastings, the "military-media-industrial complex" in large measure shapes policy on the Afghan war. Ostensibly, Operation *Enduring Freedom* was launched to capture Osama bin Laden and crush al Qaeda in retaliation for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Over time, however, bin Laden was practically forgotten in the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan. In a sense, his death at the hand of SEAL Team Six was anticlimactic. Nevertheless, it gave the Obama administration the political cover it needed to declare victory in Afghanistan and begin the drawdown of troops. White House officials could now make the case that the Afghan surge had worked.

The war on terror, Hastings explains, did not unfold as it was originally planned. When it commenced, President George W. Bush announced that there would be no "battlefields or beachheads." Rather, there would be a secret war, conducted in the dark with no holds barred. As it turned out, however, there were battlefields and beachheads after all, as evidenced by the fighting in Kabul, Kandahar, Baghdad, Fallujah, and Mosul. To Hastings, the military approach was misguided. Citing a 2008 RAND study—"How Terrorist Groups End: Implications for Countering al Qa'ida"—Hastings insists that the best way to defeat terrorist networks is through law enforcement rather than military force. Rejecting the "safe havens" pretext for the war, Hastings argues that terrorists do not need to take over a country and establish a sanctuary insofar as numerous terrorist plots have been planned and carried out in the West.

Overall, Hastings paints a grim picture of the U.S. experience in Afghanistan. After

the U.S. military withdraws, he believes that the warlords will take over. He questions the quality and reliability of the Afghan army, in whose ranks drug use and corruption are rife. Moreover, Afghan soldiers have occasionally opened fired on U.S. and ISAF soldiers, bringing into question their long-term loyalty to the new regime. Despite the substantial cost in blood and treasure, Hastings avers that the United States was getting its ass "kicked by illiterate peasants who made bombs out of manure and wood." His pessimism, though, is arguably overstated. To be sure, gauging progress in a guerrilla war is inexact due to the tenuous quality of the metrics used to measure success. Nevertheless, according to a 2011 survey conducted by the Asia Foundation, the proportion of respondents expressing some level of sympathy for the insurgents groups reached its lowest level that year (29 percent). Moreover, despite serious concerns about government corruption, security, and economic future, nearly half of all Afghan respondents said that their country was moving in the right direction according to the Asia Foundation. Considering the daunting challenges of building a functioning state and civil society in the tribal and war-torn country, problems are to be expected. Still, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan is far from accomplished and Hastings provides a window to view it warts and all. PRISM

Galula in Algeria: Counterinsurgency Practice versus Theory

By Grégor Mathias
Praeger, 2011
143 pp., $37.00
ISBN: 978-0-313-39575-8

REVIEWED BY RILEY M. MOORE

With the outbreak of insurgency in Iraq (followed by Afghanistan), an urgent requirement emerged for concise and easily comprehensible answers to the complex question of how to counter an insurgency. In the midst of two wars, with no time or current doctrine and with a Presidential mandate for solutions, strategic thinkers and generals were desperately searching for a foothold to halt what seemed to be the inevitable descent into chaos in Iraq. The works of David Galula played a significant role in fulfilling that mandate. Touted by General David Petraeus and other military leaders—General Stanley McChrystal, for instance, claimed to keep Galula's publications on his nightstand to read every night—Galula's work has been influential in forming current U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine. Indeed, his influence on Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, which was authored under the leadership of General Petraeus, is undeniable.

Amidst his notoriety and acclaim, there is a limited amount of information about who exactly David Galula was and how his military record measures up—specifically his successes

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