

# THE OPERATORS

THE WILD AND TERRIFYING  
INSIDE STORY OF AMERICA'S WAR  
IN AFGHANISTAN

MICHAEL HASTINGS

BLUE RIDER PRESS

a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.  
New York



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*In that spirit, we are proud to offer this book to our readers;*

*however, the story, the experiences, and the words are the author's alone.*

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TO MY FAMILY



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*I was silenced, said no more to him, and we soon left. I was sadly disappointed, and remember that I broke out on John, damning the politicians generally, saying, "You have got things in a heap of a fix, and you may get them out as you best can."*

—FROM *MEMOIRS OF GENERAL W. T. SHERMAN*, on Sherman's first meeting with President Abraham Lincoln

*...a certain irresponsibility grew.*

—HISTORIAN H.D.F. KITTO, *on the decline of leadership in Athens during its twenty-seven-year war with Sparta*

*The sons-of-bitches with all the fruit salad just sat there nodding, saying it would work.*

—PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, *on the bad advice he received from his generals, remarking on the colorful ribbons on their chests*

*We are mad, not only individually, but nationally. We check manslaughter and isolated murders; but what of war...*

—LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA, ROMAN PHILOSOPHER

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# PART I

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# THE PLAN

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APRIL 7, 2010, MILTON, VERMONT

I dialed the strange number with a sequence of digits too long to remember. The tone beeped in a distinctly foreign way. My call went through to Afghanistan.

“Hello, Duncan? This is Michael Hastings from *Rolling Stone*.”

I was in a house on Lake Champlain, smoking a cigarette on a screened-in porch with a view of the Adirondacks. I put the smoke out in an empty citronella candle, went inside, and grabbed a notebook from the kitchen counter.

Duncan Boothby was the top civilian press advisor to General Stanley McChrystal, the commanding general of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Duncan and I had been e-mailing back and forth for a month to arrange a magazine profile I was planning to write about the general. I’d missed his call yesterday. He’d left a message. This was the first time I’d spoken to him.

Duncan had a slight British accent, ambiguous, watered down. He told me I should come to Paris, France.

“We’re going to discreetly remind the Europeans that we bailed their ass out once,” he said. “It’s time for them to hold fast.”

Duncan explained the plan.

The visual: Normandy. D-day. The Allied forces’ greatest triumph. Bodies washed ashore then rows of white crosses now.

The scene: McChrystal standing on the banks of the English Channel, remembering the fallen, cold spring wind blowing up from Omaha Beach. He’s a “war geek,” Duncan said; he spends his vacations at battlefields. A few months ago, on a trip back to DC, on his day off he went to Gettysburg.

The narrative: The trip is part of a yearlong effort for McChrystal to visit all forty-four of the allied countries involved in the war in Afghanistan. This time, it’s Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, and Prague. It’s to shore up support among our friends in NATO—to put to rest what Duncan called “those funny European feelings about the Americanization of the war.” From my perspective, he told me, there would be something new to write about. No one had ever profiled McChrystal in Europe.

Duncan was a talker. He hinted: I’m in the know. I’m in the loop. I’m in the room.

“What do you make of Karzai’s outburst the other day?” I asked. Hamid Karzai, the U.S. ally and Afghan president, had threatened to join the Taliban, the U.S. enemy. He’d done so just days after President Barack Obama had met with him. “That make life difficult for you?”

Duncan blamed the White House.

“The White House is in attack mode,” he said. “It took President Obama a long time to get to Kabul. They threw the trip together at the last minute. We had six hours to get it ready. Then they came out of the meeting saying how much they slammed Karzai. That insulted him.”

I took notes. This was good stuff.

Duncan spun for McChrystal—the general had invested months of his time to develop a friendship

with the Afghan president.

“Karzai is a leader with strengths and weaknesses,” he said. “My guy has inherited that relationship. Holbrooke and the U.S. ambassador are leaking things, saying they can’t work with him. That undercuts our ability to work with him. For the McCains and the Kerrys to turn up, have a meeting with Karzai, criticize him at the airport press conference, then get back for the Sunday talk show. Frankly, it’s not very helpful.”

I was surprised by his candidness. He was giving me his critique over the phone, on an unsecured line.

“This is close-hold,” Duncan said, using a military phrase for extremely sensitive information. “We don’t like to discuss our movements. But I would suggest getting to Paris next week. Wednesday or Thursday. We’ll do the trip to Normandy on Saturday.”

“Okay, great, yeah,” I said. “So I’ll plan to meet up with you guys next week. For travel, the main thing is—”

“You’ll probably want to go to an event with us on Friday at the Arc de Triomphe, maybe sit down for an interview with The Boss, then take a train out to Normandy, and meet us there.”

“Cool. As much as I can get inside the bubble, I mean, travel inside the bubble.”

“I’ll let you know on the bubble.”

He hung up.

I e-mailed my editor at *Rolling Stone*: “Can I go to Paris?”

## SEPTEMBER TO NOVEMBER 2008, KABUL

A handful of staffers are watching television on the 32-inch flat screen outside the office of General David McKiernan at the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul. The buildings that house ISAF (pronounced *eye-saf*) used to be home to a sporting club for the wealthiest in Afghanistan, but for the last eight years it's been the headquarters for a succession of American generals who have run the war in this country. It doesn't have the harsh look usually associated with a U.S. military base: There are trees, manicured lawns, and a beer garden with a wooden gazebo. Guard towers overlooking the garden are perched on cobblestone walls, just refurbished by the Turks, with shiny new paneling, like the interior of a Hilton Garden Inn.

It's 7:00 A.M. on September 4 in Afghanistan, 9:30 P.M. on September 3 in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Sarah Palin is on the screen. She's giving her acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention. She's getting cheers from the crowd, the crowd is going nuts, but it's too early in the morning in Kabul for anybody to be excited. The door to McKiernan's office is open—it looks like a headmaster's office at a boarding school, all dark oak and thick carpet—and the general passes in and out, checking early-morning e-mail. He overhears a few lines of Palin's speech as she gushes about her husband, Todd. "Sounds like someone's running for prom queen," McKiernan says with a smile.

McKiernan has more than a passing interest in the 2008 presidential election. The next command in chief is going to be his boss. He's been on the job since June, planning to stay for a two-year tour. It's what he'd promised the Afghan generals, the diplomats, and his NATO allies.

It's the fifty-seven-year-old general's second chance to run a war. He got screwed in Iraq. He pissed off Don Rumsfeld, and Don Rumsfeld doesn't forget. McKiernan was in charge of invading that country, and his plan called for more troops to prevent an insurgency from springing up. Rumsfeld didn't want to hear it; Rumsfeld wanted to go in as small as possible. (And, by the way, a year earlier McKiernan had testified to defend the Crusader artillery weapons system, a program Rumsfeld wanted killed.) After seeing McKiernan in Iraq, Rumsfeld judges the general to be "a grouch, resisting the secretary of defense," as one retired admiral who advised the Pentagon puts it.

So after Baghdad falls, McKiernan is supposed to take over. Doesn't happen. He ends up in limbo or what passes for limbo when your country is at war in two countries—commanding the U.S. Army in Europe. His promotion to fourth star gets held up. He doesn't get it for two more years, and even then over Rumsfeld's objections.

During that time, the military world is changing. Iraq is a mess. Americans blame Bush, they blame Rumsfeld, they blame neoconservatives, oil men, Israel, the media, Dick Cheney, Halliburton, Blackwater, Saddam. The U.S. military, by and large, escapes the blame—they were just following orders. The public gives them a pass.

Not so within the ranks: There's score-settling and finger-pointing going on. The finger points to an entire generation of military commanders. The poster boy is General George Casey—he oversaw Iraq's complete spiral to shit and didn't stop it, didn't adapt, or so the story goes. He's got gray hair



He's old-school. To top it off, Casey gets promoted to Army Chief of Staff—he gets rewarded for the mess.

---

McKiernan is old-school, too. He's not one of these new-school generals, like a Dave Petraeus or Stan McChrystal. Petraeus already has a historic reputation, and McChrystal is an up-and-coming star currently working on the Joint Staff at the Pentagon. McKiernan is part of the old generation, or so they claim. He gets dubbed the Quiet Commander; headlines call him "low-key" during his time in Iraq. Even in the midst of an invasion, "he is rarely known to swear." "In any type of a chaotic situation," another general says of him, "he'll be in the middle of it, directing things without emotion." He's a golfer, shoots in the seventies. He was on the debate team in high school. His best friend growing up says he "tended to be shy." He hates PowerPoint and prefers a "walkabout style" of leadership to long-winded briefings, according to his colleagues.

He doesn't have a deep fan base in the media, either. He doesn't like to get his picture taken and doesn't suck up enough when visitors from Congress come over to check out the front lines. McKiernan wouldn't think to send an autographed picture of himself to a journalist, as David Petraeus once did. That's not McKiernan's style—he doesn't even have a good nickname. At over six feet, with silver hair and a handsome square-jawed face, he could be typecast as the father in a teen movie who scares the hell out of any boy stupid enough to take his daughter to the prom.

He still gets his shot at Afghanistan, though. He's next in line. The old school rules still hold sway on the promotion board.

It's been a bit of an awkward transition, partly because President Bush wants to pass off Afghanistan to the next president. McKiernan says a few things that aren't quite diplomatic: He notes that some of those European allies seem to treat war "like summer camp." Even more awkwardly, in October, Dave Petraeus, once his underling, now becomes his superior. Dave gets the job as CENTCOM commander, which means he has oversight of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Not the worst situation, he thinks, just a bit uncomfortable.

A month after Palin's acceptance speech, the presidential election is on television again at ISAF HQ. This time, the staff gathers to watch the vice presidential debate. It's Senator Joe Biden from Delaware, squaring off against the governor of Alaska, Palin. Afghanistan is a hot topic in the debate and they're listening to see where the candidates stand, what they can expect. McKiernan has had a troop request on the table at the White House for months, asking for some thirty thousand more soldiers. The White House has resisted—they want NATO to pony up the reserves, and McKiernan is hoping the next administration will give him the soldiers he's asked for.

Palin and Biden agree: more troops and resources to Afghanistan. What they don't agree on is McKiernan's name. Palin keeps calling him "McClellan"; two times she says it. (The staff breaks out laughing, incredulous; a McKiernan advisor pings an e-mail to the general, joking about how Palin got his name wrong.) Biden resists the urge to correct her. Instead, he points out that McCain, her running mate, has said, "The reason we don't read about Afghanistan anymore in the paper [is that] it succeeded."

Afghanistan: an American success story. The media dub it the Forgotten War. The nightmare in Iraq overshadows the conflict. The United States regularly declares success in Afghanistan, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. A year doesn't pass without public declarations of progress. In 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld says, "It's not a quagmire." In 2003, the commanding general in Afghanistan says that U.S. forces should be down to 4,500 soldiers by the end of the following summer. After that summer, General John P. Abizaid says the Taliban "is increasingly ineffective." In 2005, the Taliban is "collapsing," says General Dave Barno. In 2007, we are "prevailing against the effects of prolonged war," declares Major General Robert Durbin. In 2008, General Dan McNeill claims that "my successor will find an insurgency here, but it is not spreading

That same year, Defense Secretary Robert Gates assures us we have a “very successful counterinsurgency,” and we won’t need a “larger western footprint” in the country. The United States is spending every three months in Iraq what they’d spend in an entire year in Afghanistan; there are over thirty thousand troops in Afghanistan, about one quarter of the number deployed in Iraq.

McKiernan recognizes the trend lines aren’t great. Since 2006, violence has spiked dramatically from two thousand annual attacks to over four thousand in 2008. American and NATO soldiers are getting killed at a rate of nearly one per day. Civilian casualties have tripled over the past three years, killing a total of approximately 4,570 people. The more U.S. and NATO troops added, the worse the violence gets. The Taliban has regained control over key provinces, including those surrounding the country’s capital. On October 13, a *New York Times* reporter writes a story suggesting we’re losing. McKiernan dismisses it; the guy “was only in town for a week.” But yes, things aren’t good. McKiernan gets a classified report from America’s seventeen intelligence agencies saying the prognosis is “grim.” McKiernan wants those troops to hold the line—who’s going to be the new commander in chief?

A few weeks after the vice presidential debate, Lieutenant General Doug Lute, head of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan policies at the White House, visits McKiernan in Kabul. A White House staffer nicknames Lute “General White Flag”—he likes to surrender. It’s not a nice nickname. He didn’t want to surge in Iraq, and he’s skeptical on Afghanistan. He tells McKiernan that Obama has been locked up; it’s a foregone conclusion, Lute says. Obama is going to be the next president.

Which is fine with McKiernan. During the campaign, Obama announces after he returns from a visit to Kabul that he’d give McKiernan “the troops he needed.” McKiernan is impressed when he meets Obama that summer; he speaks to the senator in a phone call again before the election. He wants to build the relationship, quietly. And—let’s face it—McCain is an asshole, thinks he’s a military genius. Palin can’t even get his name right. McKiernan, although he would never say so publicly, is pulling for Obama, a senior military official close to him tells me. McKiernan is suspicious of McCain, too, because McCain views Petraeus as some kind of godlike figure. Anyone so close to Petraeus can’t be good for McKiernan. He’s waiting for the full attention to get back to Afghanistan.

On November 4, 2008, Obama wins the election. McKiernan is working up a new strategy to get the president—three strategic reviews are going on, one at ISAF, one at CENTCOM, and one in the Bush White House. Lots of wacky ideas are being thrown about: The CIA has a plan to just withdraw everyone and go total psyops—like broadcasting horrible atrocities of ISAF soldiers to scare the shit out of the Taliban. McKiernan’s plan calls for a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy. It’s heavily on training Afghan security forces—he puts the date of how long it’s going to take at 2014, at the earliest. He sees the country’s limitations: “There’s no way this place is going to be the new Switzerland,” he tells me during an interview that fall in Kabul.

**APRIL 15, 2010, PARIS**

The hotel *Rolling Stone* put me up in sucked.

“How can you not have wireless access?” I asked the woman at the front desk of the Hotel SynX Pavillon Louvre Rivoli. It was a modest/shitty/overpriced tourist ghetto with a do-it-yourself espresso maker in the lobby.

“We have wireless,” she said.

“What’s the password?”

“There is not a password. You pick up the signal from our neighbors.”

“Getting a signal from somebody else doesn’t count as wireless access.”

“Perhaps it is because you are on the fifth floor.”

“Can I move to another room?”

She typed a few things into her computer.

“There are not other rooms.”

I was supposed to meet Duncan in twenty minutes at the Hotel Westminster. McChrystal was staying there, too. According to Google Maps, it was a ten-minute walk.

It was April in Paris, a beautiful afternoon. The French citizens were typically hip and metropolitan walking specimens from Chanel and Christian Dior inserts. I was in basic Brooks Brothers: navy blue blazer, navy tie with gold flowerish-looking things, and gray flannels. It was what I wore when reported, a habit I started in Baghdad in 2005. I was relatively young then, twenty-five, and a polo shirt, jeans, and sneakers didn’t get me very far. It showed disrespect to the Arabs and pinged me as an even bigger asshole American than I actually was. If I dressed nicely, I didn’t get searched as often as the dozen or so security checkpoints I would pass through on a typical day. The Iraqis would think I was a VIP, a diplomat, an engineer. The illusion of respectability.

I turned down Rue de la Paix, passing the eight-hundred-euro-a-night Grand Hyatt and a Cartier jewelry boutique, a diamond necklace in the window selling for over ten thousand euros. The Westminster was right next door under a discreet gold-and-black entranceway.

The lobby was four-star: plush red chairs and couches, marble floor, table service. The Ritz Hotel—the one where Princess Di’s last security camera footage was taken as she passed through the revolving door—was around the corner. I texted Duncan that I was in the lobby. I ordered an espresso and a Perrier.

In the lobby, there was a glass display for an expensive pen (Blanc-pain, ballpoint, €150) and a pile of international newspapers: the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*. A wealthy Italian in a Brioni suit was on the phone, yelling loudly enough so whoever he was talking to could hear him, which meant I could hear, too. “I have a meeting with the Kuwaitis now,” he screamed. There was a late-middle-aged American couple with matching black Tumi luggage checking in.

I took out my notebook. I started making a numbered list. Memory was unreliable, as they said, and I’d learned that I never really knew what material I was going to need for a story until later. I tried

discipline myself to write down ten details about any scene. I had gotten to number four (~~chandelier, 2. blancpain, 3. montblanc, 4. wedged btw cartier on rue de la paix~~) when the elevator doors to the lobby opened. I slipped my notebook into my inside blazer pocket. A man in a gray suit and red tie and white shirt walked out.

“Duncan? Michael Hastings.”

We shook hands.

I still couldn't place his accent—slightly British, though he was an American. He had doughboyish smooth skin, white with any easy sunburn, cheerful. He was in his late thirties or early forties, one of the new kind of public relations experts the Pentagon had employed: the beneficiary of the government's aggressive push to privatize many functions in the war that had been done by uniformed military in the past.

“We have the Arc de Triomphe ceremony in an hour or so. I'll introduce you to members of the team,” he said. “That's Ray.” Duncan pointed to a twenty-eight-year-old Hispanic man in jeans and a T-shirt talking to the desk clerk.

Ray told me he set up communications for General McChrystal. He was a staff sergeant, and he worked for other generals. All the communications were encrypted, he told me, so they could send and receive top-secret information when they were traveling.

“We have to prevent against attacks,” he said. A number of foreign governments—both friendly and enemy—viewed trips like this as opportunities to spy, he explained. “We're always getting attacked.

“No shit?”

“Yeah, you should have seen the look on their faces at the desk when we told them we had to switch all the rooms yesterday. We couldn't get the right satellite reception.” The French, or perhaps some other government, Ray suggested, had probably rigged the rooms that the hotel had reserved for the general in order to spy on the general. It was an old trick: Book the Americans in the hotel room where the listening devices are set up. The South Koreans, in the eighties, were notorious for it; they'd bugged journalists on top of one another in the same hotel so the bugging wire just had to run up and down one part of the building. A friend of mine, an American State Department official, had recently traveled to Islamabad, Pakistan. The official had wondered why he always got the same room in the luxury Serena Hotel—he initially thought it was because they liked him.

The doors to the lobby opened. A troop of green uniforms entered. It was jarring—American military uniforms in a European capital, in color, not black-and-white. Although military officials often traveled in civilian clothes when outside a war zone, they put on their most impressive outfits when they had official business to conduct. Dark forest-colored pants and blazers decorated with shiny gold buttons and colorful pins on the lapels, an inscrutable kaleidoscope of middle-aged merit badges—tiny silver parachutes, rifles, a rainbow's worth of ribbons. I recognized McChrystal, with four gold stars on his shoulder.

As advertised from his press clippings, he was gaunt and lean. His slate blue eyes had this eerie capacity to drill down into your brain, especially if you fucked up or said something stupid. He reminded me of Christian Bale in *Rescue Dawn*, if Bale had spent a few more years in Vietnam captivity. McChrystal was unique, the first Special Forces soldier to have taken such a prominent battlefield command. Special Forces guys like him were called “snake-eaters.” It was considered a compliment.

For five years, McChrystal was America's top hunter/killer, responsible for the deaths of hundreds of enemies, maybe terrorists, maybe a few civilians. He oversaw a network of prison camps in Iraq where detainees were regularly tortured—kept out in the cold, naked, covered in mud, with the occasional beating. He'd been credited with taking one of the biggest terrorist scalps of them all, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi was killed in a strike in the summer of 2006 near Baqubah, Iraq.

McChrystal's teams had obsessively pursued him. "If we don't get Zarqawi, we will be failures," I had told his men a year earlier. After the attack killed Zarqawi and seven others, McChrystal showed up at the destroyed safe house to inspect the damage himself. There wasn't much left, just a couple burnt pages from a copy of the Arabic edition of *Newsweek* and enough of a fingerprint to confirm he was the most wanted man in Iraq. President George W. Bush publicly thanked McChrystal, saying he had done excellent work, marking him as the nation's most respectable assassin. Thanks to McChrystal's dynamic reputation, President Obama had selected him for the top job in Afghanistan a year earlier, despite a number of other controversies in his career.

I got an adrenaline kick from meeting my subject. *Time* magazine's runner-up for Person of the Year. The commanding general of the biggest war currently going on Earth. Stanley McChrystal, also known as Big Stan, the Pope, COMISAF (Commander of the International Security Assistance Force), The Boss, M4, Stan, General McChrystal, Sir. A "rock star," as his staff liked to call him.

Duncan made the introduction.

"Michael is writing the article for *Rolling Stone*," Duncan said.

"Thanks for having me, sir, it's a real privilege," I said.

"I don't care about the article," McChrystal said. "Just put me on the cover."

I paused. He was joking, sort of. I wanted to come back with something funny. Or at least make an attempt at humor. I didn't have a clue who was going to be on the cover, though. A writer rarely has much say in those decisions. The name Bono flashed through my mind. I reached for something a little more current...

"It's between you and Lady Gaga, sir."

His top staff stopped the cross talk. The moment had the potential to get awkward. Had I stepped over the line? Was I being disrespectful? What was my deal? Who is this kid? How's The Boss going to respond?

McChrystal looked at me and smiled. "Put me in the heart-shaped bathtub with Lady Gaga," I said. "Maybe some rose petals. I just want to get on the cover so I can finally gain my son's respect." (His son was in a band.)

Everyone laughed.

McChrystal and the other generals headed upstairs to get ready for the ceremony, one hour away.

I stayed in the lobby and ordered another espresso.

# 4 “INTIMIDATED BY THE CROWD”

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JANUARY TO FEBRUARY 2009, WASHINGTON, DC

It's the first ten days of his presidency, and Obama goes to the Pentagon. He walks into a room on the second floor known as the Tank. The Tank is sacred. The Tank is where the serious matters of state are discussed—"the highly classified conversations," says a U.S. military official. The Tank gets its name from where it started, in the basement, *Dr. Strangelove*-like, but now it's upstairs in the E ring with a blond wood table and big leather armchairs. It's legendary. Secretary of Defense Bob Gates makes sure to go to the Tank once a week. (Rumsfeld didn't; Rumsfeld made the generals come to him. Gates is wiser; he goes to them like he's "coming to kiss the ring of the Godfathers," says a Pentagon official.)

The president works the room, speaking to Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen and about ten other senior military officials, including a three-star general named Stan McChrystal. Gates follows behind him. Obama doesn't seem quite right, McChrystal will recall, he isn't acting like a strong leader. He seems "intimidated by the crowd," a senior military official who attended the meeting will tell me. He's acting "like a Democrat who thinks he's walking into a room full of Republicans," the senior military official added. "You could tell he was tentative."

Obama's mistake: Despite being very impressive, he's not comfortable with the military, McChrystal thinks. He made a "bad read," continues the senior military official who attended the meeting. "We wanted to be led; we would have been putty in his hands." (McChrystal would share similar feelings with his staff, telling them that Obama seemed "intimidated and uncomfortable.")

Obama doesn't get the military culture, military officials will say privately. They don't think he likes them or supports them. They sense weakness. Obama doesn't have the feel. There are questions from the highest to lowest ranks. He's a wimp, Barack *Hussein* Obama. One Marine unit teaches a local Afghan kid to call an African-American female Marine "raccoon" or "Obama"; I've heard other white soldiers refer to him as a nigger, maybe for shock value. There's that race thing. There's his Nobel Peace Prize. Some soldiers say they love him, of course, that he's the best, that everyone should have voted for him. It's mixed.

In the upper ranks of the brass: Obama is a Democrat, always a question mark. The Pentagon is filled with Republicans—it's been a long eight years, and the last three defense secretaries have all been in the GOP. A popular joke: A soldier walks into an elevator with Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, and Osama Bin Laden. Third floor, going up. He has two bullets in his pistol. Doors open: Pelosi is shot twice, Reid and Bin Laden are strangled.

A CBS sports announcer tells that joke back home in a magazine story, and he gets condemned for it. He has to issue a public apology. He tells the joke overseas on a USO tour: The troops think it's hilarious. I tell the joke once on an embed to test it out: The troops laugh hard.

Still, Democrats: easier to push around.

Obama was against the Iraq invasion, calling it a "dumb war." He's correct, of course, and opposing

it was the smart decision, the right decision, yet... He didn't support Iraq, ergo he doesn't support u Or something like that. His perceived antimilitary vibe is a political vulnerability; McCain tries exploit it during the campaign, pushing a story that Obama snubbed wounded veterans on a trip Germany. The story is false, but maybe there's something there.

As a candidate, Obama visits Afghanistan and Iraq during the summer of 2008. In Kabul, he greeted as a hero, he goes to the embassy, goes to ISAF; the word at camp gets out that Obama there, and by the time he gets to ISAF, dozens of soldiers are out to see him. He works the rope line poses for pictures; he's a big hit, according to a U.S. military official who helped arrange the trip Kabul. Then he heads to Baghdad, stopping at the U.S. embassy in Saddam's old palace. Embassy officials and military officials in Iraq are wary—they think he's using this as a campaign stop. The Baghdad embassy—this is still Bush country, this is John McCain territory. This isn't, necessarily, Obama's base.

At the embassy, he gives a talk in the main palace hall, where there's a Green Beans Coffee stand. The hall is packed, one of the biggest turnouts State Department officials can remember. After the talk, out of earshot of the soldiers and diplomats, he starts to complain. He starts to act very un-Obama-like, according to a U.S. embassy official who helped organize the trip in Baghdad. He's asked to go out to take a few more pictures with soldiers and embassy staffers. He's asked to sign copies of his book. "He didn't want to take pictures with any more soldiers; he was complaining about it," State Department official tells me. "Look, I was excited to meet him. I wanted to like him. Let's just say the scales fell from my eyes after I did. These are people over here who've been fighting the war or working every day for the war effort, and he didn't want to take fucking pictures with them?"

I push back: Look, it's a brutal schedule. I'm sure he was tired, stressed out, venting.

The embassy official isn't buying it: For the one day he's in Baghdad, no matter how tired, how stressed, Obama should suck it up. He shouldn't have bitched about taking a photo. Obama is the "crankiest CODEL"—short for "congressional delegation"—that he's had visit Baghdad, says the State Department official. And he has handled dozens of them. Embassy staffers gather afterward: Is it me, or were you all not impressed with Obama? The staffers agree: I thought I was the only one! The State Department official votes for Obama anyway. On the same trip, Obama meets with General Petraeus, and the presidential candidate tries to pin the general down on how fast he can get the troops out of Iraq.

These are the kinds of stories that fuel the suspicions high-ranking officials in the military have about Obama: He's one of the most talented and natural politicians in a generation, but he doesn't really understand them. Doesn't get their culture, doesn't get their wars. The wars, to Obama, are campaign issues. His primary relationship to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan is how they affected his electoral fortunes—his opposition to the Iraq War gave his candidacy the spark that set it off, allowing him to separate himself from the other two Democratic candidates who had supported Iraq. He wants to firm up his national security credentials, so he says he'll focus on Afghanistan, the "right war." Promising to focus on that war makes a good line on the campaign trail. He didn't serve—what that Reagan didn't, so what that Bush didn't really? They played the part. They are hooah, and the troops love hooah. Bush gave the generals what they wanted, and the generals like to get what they want.

Obama's aware of the vulnerability, writing in his second memoir how "Republicans increasingly portrayed Democrats as weak on defense." That decades-old problem for Democrats, allegedly soft on national security ever since Truman was accused of "losing China." Bullshit, naturally, and historically self-destructive, but it has had major consequences, as three generations of Democratic leaders have fallen over themselves to prove that they can play tough. Truman can't run for reelection because he's not winning in Korea (Truman had to go into Korea because we couldn't lose Korea!

Kennedy has to out-Cold Warrior Richard Nixon to get the job. Johnson has to prove he won't "lose Vietnam," so he digs an even deeper hole, destroying his presidency. ("I don't think it's worth fighting and I don't think we can get out. It's the biggest damn mess I ever saw," Johnson says in 1964, a year before he commits hundreds of thousands of troops to Saigon.) Carter—shit! He gets pushed around by the Iranians, while Reagan cuts a secret deal with them, gives them weapons, no less—but forgives that. Clinton proves the military's worst fears: He wants to let fags in, dodged the draft, smoked dope, and gets mocked when he tries to kill Bin Laden with missile strikes.

Obama, his advisors believe, has to prove he isn't really antiwar. That he's serious. That he can keep America safe. (Remember Hillary's three A.M. phone call ad?) That he'll play by the bipartisan conventions of the national security community. During the presidential campaign, he stresses that we "took our eye off the ball" in Afghanistan and have to refocus our efforts there. Obama goes out of his way to say he "doesn't oppose all wars."

That January, McKiernan's request for more troops is waiting on Obama's desk. With three reviews just complete, Obama orders up his own review. Bruce Riedel, a terrorism expert, is called in to write up the draft. On February 17, a month after visiting the Pentagon, Obama releases a statement, the first major comment he's made on the war while in office. He says he's sending seventeen thousand troops to Afghanistan, that he's approving a "months-old" troop request, pinning the blame for the delay and increase on the previous administration. Obama expands the war into Pakistan, too, upping the number of drone strikes in the first year of his presidency to fifty-five, almost doubling the number that Bush had ordered in the previous four years.

What Obama and his top advisors don't realize is that the seventeen thousand troops are just the beginning. Seventeen thousand becomes twenty-one thousand a month later. McKiernan still has a request in for nine thousand more, part of his original ask. But he will tell military officials close to him that it's all he needs to do the job. He doesn't think Afghanistan can support too many more American troops. McKiernan, an ally of the president, is not going to press for another massive troop increase. Inside the Pentagon, other senior military officials don't see it that way. Twenty-one thousand isn't enough, nor is thirty thousand, for the war they have in mind. The Pentagon wants more troops, and sets out to find a way to get them.



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