The Runaway General
- Or the wimps in the White House?

By Michael Hastings
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"How'd I get screwed into going to this dinner?" demands Gen. Stanley McChrystal. It's a Thursday night in mid-April, and the commander of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan is sitting in a four-star suite at the Hôtel Westminster in Paris. He's in France to sell his new war strategy to our NATO allies - to keep up the fiction, in essence, that we actually have allies. Since McChrystal took over a year ago, the Afghan war has become the exclusive property of the United States. Opposition to the war has already toppled the Dutch government, forced the resignation of Germany's president and sparked both Canada and the Netherlands to announce the withdrawal of their 4,500 troops. McChrystal is in Paris to keep the French, who have lost more than 40 soldiers in Afghanistan, from going all wobbly on him.

"The dinner comes with the position, sir," says his chief of staff, Col. Charlie Flynn.

McChrystal turns sharply in his chair.
"Hey, Charlie," he asks, "does this come with the position?"

McChrystal gives him the middle finger.

On the ground with the Runaway General: Photos of Stanley McChrystal at work.

The general stands and looks around the suite that his traveling staff of 10 has converted into a full-scale operations center. The tables are crowded with silver Panasonic Toughbooks, and blue cables crisscross the hotel's thick carpet, hooked up to satellite dishes to provide encrypted phone and e-mail communications. Dressed in off-the-rack civilian casual – blue tie, button-down shirt, dress slacks – McChrystal is way out of his comfort zone. Paris, as one of his advisers says, is the "most anti-McChrystal city you can imagine." The general hates fancy restaurants, rejecting any place with candles on the tables as too "Gucci." He prefers Bud Light Lime (his favorite beer) to Bordeaux,

Talladega Nights

(his favorite movie) to Jean-Luc Godard. Besides, the public eye has never been a place where McChrystal felt comfortable: Before President Obama put him in charge of the war in Afghanistan, he spent five years running the Pentagon's most secretive black ops.

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"What's the update on the Kandahar bombing?" McChrystal asks Flynn. The city has been rocked by two massive car
bombs in the past day alone, calling into question the genera\'s assurances that he can wrest it from the Taliban.

"We have two KIAs, but that hasn\'t been confirmed," Flynn says.

McChrystal takes a final look around the suite. At 55, he is gaunt and lean, not unlike an older version of Christian Bale in *Rescue Dawn*. His slate-blue eyes have the unsettling ability to *drill down* when they lock on you. If you\'ve fucked up or disappointed him, they can destroy your soul without the need for him to raise his voice.

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"I\'d rather have my ass kicked by a roomful of people than go out to this dinner," McChrystal says.

He pauses a beat.

"Unfortunately," he adds, "no one in this room could do it."

With that, he\'s out the door.

"Who\'s he going to dinner with?" I ask one of his aides.

"Some French minister," the aide tells me. "It\'s fucking gay."

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The next morning, McChrystal and his team gather to prepare for a speech he is giving at the École Militaire, a French military academy. The general prides himself on
being sharper and ballsier than anyone else, but his brashness comes with a price: Although McChrystal has been in charge of the war for only a year, in that short time he has managed to piss off almost everyone with a stake in the conflict. Last fall, during the question-and-answer session following a speech he gave in London, McChrystal dismissed the counterterrorism strategy being advocated by Vice President Joe Biden as "shortsighted," saying it would lead to a state of "Chaos-istan." The remarks earned him a smackdown from the president himself, who summoned the general to a terse private meeting aboard Air Force One. The message to McChrystal seemed clear: *Shut the fuck up, and keep a lower profile.*

Now, flipping through printout cards of his speech in Paris, McChrystal wonders aloud what Biden question he might get today, and how he should respond. "I never know what's going to pop out until I'm up there, that's the problem," he says. Then, unable to help themselves, he and his staff imagine the general dismissing the vice president with a good one-liner.

"Are you asking about Vice President Biden?" McChrystal says with a laugh. "Who's that?"

"Biden?" suggests a top adviser. "Did you say: Bite Me?"

When Barack Obama entered the Oval Office, he immediately set out to deliver on his most important campaign promise on foreign policy: to refocus the war in Afghanistan on what led us to invade in the first place. "I want the American people to understand," he announced in March 2009. "We have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt,
dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan." He ordered another 21,000 troops to Kabul, the largest increase since the war began in 2001. Taking the advice of both the Pentagon and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he also fired Gen. David McKiernan – then the U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan – and replaced him with a man he didn't know and had met only briefly: Gen. Stanley McChrystal. It 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.

Even though he had voted for Obama, McChrystal and his new commander in chief failed from the outset to connect. The general first encountered Obama a week after he took office, when the president met with a dozen senior military officials in a room at the Pentagon known as the Tank. According to sources familiar with the meeting, McChrystal thought Obama looked "uncomfortable and intimidated" by the roomful of military brass. Their first one-on-one meeting took place in the Oval Office four months later, after McChrystal got the Afghanistan job, and it didn't go much better. "It was a 10-minute photo op," says an adviser to McChrystal. "Obama clearly didn't know anything about him, who he was. Here's the guy who's going to run his fucking war, but he didn't seem very engaged. The Boss was pretty disappointed."