

A Commanding Force

McChrystal Speaks Out on Military, Leadership

By Rebecca Patrick

It was no shock that General Stan McChrystal was straightforward and didn't miss a beat in our 30-minute telephone interview.

What was a bit surprising, however, was the introspection that, at times, came through in his remarks. Whether that was talking about leading the top secret Joint Special Operations Command in Iraq during the Persian Gulf wars, his time as the chief commander of American forces in Afghanistan or what he learned from the infamous *Rolling Stone* article that led to his retirement from the Army.

But with virtually every topic, what also resonated was his strength and leadership. Those traits are certain to be on display as the general addresses the crowd at the Indiana Chamber's 24th Annual Awards Dinner on November 12. That night features a special tribute to Hoosiers in the armed services as well as recognition for Indiana business leaders and companies with military ties.

Military takeaways

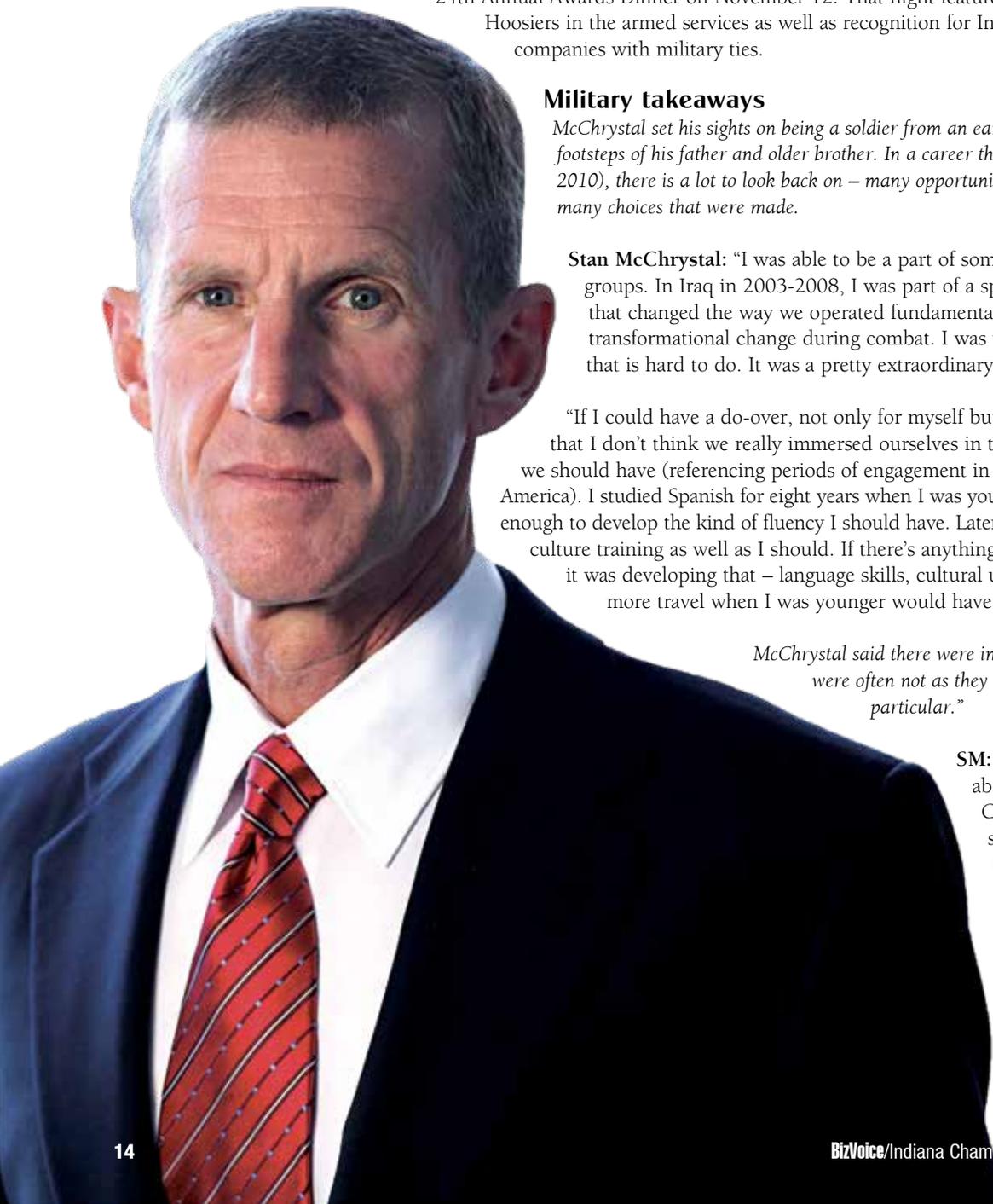
McChrystal set his sights on being a soldier from an early age, following in the footsteps of his father and older brother. In a career that spanned 34 years (1976-2010), there is a lot to look back on – many opportunities that were available and many choices that were made.

Stan McChrystal: "I was able to be a part of some pretty special teams, groups. In Iraq in 2003-2008, I was part of a special operations taskforce that changed the way we operated fundamentally. And we did that very transformational change during combat. I was very proud of them, because that is hard to do. It was a pretty extraordinary ability to do that.

"If I could have a do-over, not only for myself but for the wider military, it's that I don't think we really immersed ourselves in the cultures as effectively as we should have (referencing periods of engagement in the Middle East and Latin America). I studied Spanish for eight years when I was younger, but I didn't follow it enough to develop the kind of fluency I should have. Later I didn't push language or culture training as well as I should. If there's anything I wish I had been better on it was developing that – language skills, cultural understanding and maybe more travel when I was younger would have been valuable."

McChrystal said there were individuals he encountered "who were often not as they seemed, in Afghanistan in particular."

SM: "There was a young man – about 33 years old – known as Commander Razeek; he didn't speak any English. He worked for the Afghan military as a border policeman but in reality he controlled an area down near the border. In some ways, he sort of fit the model of a warlord. He had a tremendous charismatic hold over a



number of fighters down along the border that he controlled – and he did that very well. He could produce a tremendous amount of security.

“He was trying to figure out the future and trying to figure out how he fit into the new Afghanistan. I remember going down and dealing with him, and clearly there was corruption going on. Clearly he and his guys were taking part of the border duties that should have been given to the Afghan central government and they were keeping a good percentage of it. I told him one thing that could improve down here is that the government is not getting all the money that I calculate that they should be based on the amount of traffic through here. He looked me in the eye and said, ‘How much should the government get?’ I said about twice what they were getting now. Within about a month, the government was (getting the right amount).

“Now you can say here is a corrupt guy, but he was a product of the chaos that he had experienced – and yet he was also trying to figure out, ‘OK, we’re going to have this viable central government; how am I supposed to act?’ The question you can ask yourself is how is he supposed to know unless someone sits down and tells him. If you don’t grow up in an orderly society where people pay taxes and do and don’t do certain things, how do you know? It was an interesting experience, and I ran into a number of people like that. And I couldn’t view them as evil or good – I viewed them as products of their experience, and I think sometimes we have to make allowances for that.”

Coping with chaos

McChrystal believes the most difficult part leading the efforts in Afghanistan was the inherent unpredictability and not being able to control all the elements necessary for rebuilding the country.

SM: “If someone gives you a task and they say, ‘Dig a hole,’ and they give you a shovel, you know you’re going to dig a hole; you’re going to do it and you control it. In Afghanistan, what we were trying to do was help the people of Afghanistan protect their own sovereignty, develop their own government and rehabilitate their own economy – and you can’t do it for them. So the hardest thing about it is not only pulling together a diverse 46 nations in the coalition that supported it, but also helping the Afghans develop their own capacity; and they were having a tough time because they had had a very difficult 30

years before. ... They had the civil war, the Soviet era. It is dealing with a path that is not straightforward; it’s not like entering Europe and defeating the armies of Nazi Germany. It’s much more nuanced than that and much more indirect.

“I was never overwhelmed by the job per say, but at times overwhelmed by the complexity of it. In reality, we had to fight fights against the enemy; simultaneously we had to help them rebuild the economy – which part was agriculture and part was structure – and simultaneously to that we had to help them build government. And when we say government, it’s not

just at Kabul (the Afghan capital and largest city) but all the way down to the local level.

“We are trying to do all these things in a country so ravaged by war and so emotionally damaged by what they’ve been through that you are trying to build institutions that we take for granted in the United States ... that we literally had to start from scratch.

There were days when you would think you worked hard and made progress on this front, but then you would be told that you’ve got corruption over here or

we’ve got physical infrastructure problems here. It seemed never-ending in terms of the number of challenges.”

Rolling Stone effect and ‘Joining Forces’

McChrystal is known for being a leader who speaks his mind. Often an admirable trait, it can also get one in trouble depending on the circumstance. For McChrystal, that time came in June 2010 when a Rolling Stone article was published online; it featured unflattering remarks about Obama administration officials, including Vice President Joe Biden, from both McChrystal and his aides. McChrystal called Biden to apologize. The barrage of media coverage led to McChrystal resigning his post and retiring from the military the next day. Later on, the Pentagon cleared McChrystal in its report and strongly questioned some of the alleged statements in the article.

SM: “The experience I went through obviously felt unique to me, but I think that many leaders and many people undergo that sometime in their careers. They suddenly find themselves under the spotlight. When that happens, the whole story – in context, the actual truth of what happens – very rarely comes out right then. It’s very hard. You think about the recent Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman case; we don’t know those people. We saw them for a snapshot (in time) and people try to draw conclusions.

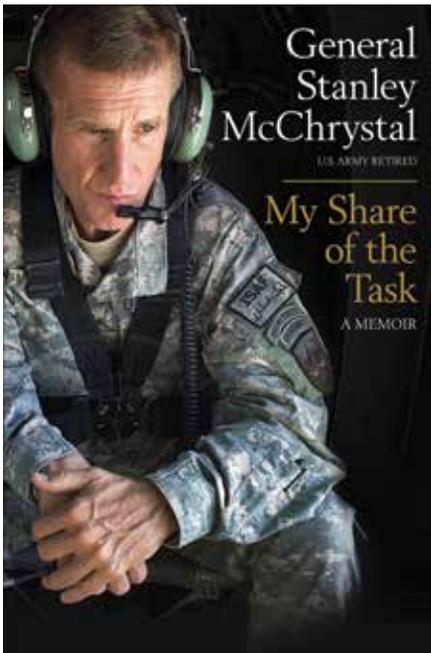


McChrystal was basically the epitome of being off the grid in leading the super secret Joint Special Operations Command to then being in charge of the war in Afghanistan and thus, in many ways, the face of the military. That transition wasn’t an easy one. “All of a sudden I’m dealing (with media) on multiple levels that I had not before. I found it interesting; I didn’t find it a bad thing, but I found it very new.”

“What I learned is that is sort of the way it is now. If you are watching, you have to withhold judgment because you know you don’t have the whole story. But if you go through it, you also have to not let it erode who you are as a person. Don’t judge yourself or don’t base your feeling of self-worth on the basis of what in the near term the media might write, or what a blog writer might want to say. Because if you do, then I think you are giving your sense of value away to other people – to people who don’t know enough to judge but they don’t hesitate to do that.”

McChrystal reconnected with the Obama administration over two years ago, agreeing to lead the three-member advisory committee of Joining Forces, an initiative supporting military families that is headed by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden, the vice president’s wife.

SM: “What Joining Forces has done I think very effectively is raise awareness of the need for the nation – and not just the government programs but also private corporations, private citizens and local governments – to understand the position of military families. And we’re not just talking wounded veterans, we’re talking those on current active duty, former soldiers, family and children. So that in the areas of education, health care, wellness and jobs, we are encouraging and prodding different parts of society to do more local programs that provide the necessary support.”



Latest chapters

Admittedly, McChrystal “hadn’t thought through retirement.” He was sure, though, that he didn’t want to work for defense firms, a typical path for retired officers. His landing place was to start a consulting firm, the McChrystal Group.

SM: “I wanted to form something small with people that I felt very deeply about. And leadership was a natural passion. Really the thesis for our firm, the McChrystal Group, is that we are trying to help change America by helping businesses operate better. We believe the environment in which businesses operate now is so much faster, so much more complex than before that the more bureaucratic and more conservative models just aren’t able to share information fast enough, make decisions with enough clarity and implement them as they need to be. Processes that worked even as recently as 10 years ago don’t work anymore. So what we do is help civilian firms; we don’t work in the defense space at all or the government space. We try to help companies break down silos, develop better information management processes, cooperate better on things like decision-making. There’s a leadership component to it, but it’s leadership and organization effectiveness that really drives us.”

Instituting a national service program of sorts has been another passion for McChrystal. In July, he helped launch the Franklin Project (an initiative from the Aspen Institute). McChrystal is chair of the leadership council, which also includes former U.S. secretaries of state Madeline Albright and Condoleezza Rice and journalist Tom Brokaw among the participants.

SM: “What we are trying to do is push an initiative that would make national service a rite of passage. It would be optional, not mandatory, but it would be expected in our culture for young people to do a period of full-time paid service, and they would get a living stipend – \$12,000-\$15,000 a year – to give at least a year of their lives to their country. I believe strongly in having the experience of contributing as a citizen in a very direct and meaningful way. And that service could be military or it could be health care; it could be teaching, it could be conservation, it could be any number of areas. It changes the individual who is given that opportunity. And I also think it connects individuals with different parts of our society that in ways we struggle with right now.”

In January 2013, McChrystal also released his memoir, My Share of the Task, which focuses on two central themes.

SM: “One was I entered the service in 1972 when the Army was almost at its modern low point, so I had this arc of experiences of the Army changing so dramatically (for the positive) during

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General Stan McChrystal

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the course of one career, and I found that interesting. But then within that, my experience in the special operations command where we changed so fundamentally between about 2003 and 2008. It was within an Army that transformed itself over my career. That was a period in which we transformed even more rapidly and even more radically than I would have ever expected. Really the core of the book is that experience and how it changed me as leader, how it changed how we thought about how we interacted with each other. That to me was something that I thought was particularly unique. Generals all have an experience and most have gone to war, but that particular experience – no one had gone through that before. So I thought I could potentially share that history.”

How to lead

A typical day for McChrystal has many similarities to his military tenure. He still does physical training in the morning (usually lifting weights or running) and is a big proponent of daily update meetings; the latter is a routine he believes more business leaders should look at doing to keep them focused.

SM: “I’ve found that it’s very effective for everyone that I’ve seen do it. What it really lets you do is prioritize. Because typically a lot of people will start the morning and they think how

much they will get done that day, and then they go to bed that night and they go, ‘I really didn’t get any of the important things done.’ Getting a disciplined process of establishing what is important and then addressing those things at certain times or in the order of importance, I think really makes people more effective. Otherwise what happens is that you get distracted by the phone calls, emails, the visitors and pop-up things. It’s probably more important than ever.”

What’s more, McChrystal believes leaders could show greater sensitivity to the situations of those around them; that’s a defining characteristic to him.

SM: “The key part of good leadership begins with empathy. And I don’t say sympathy, but it’s empathy. It’s caring about the people that you serve and trying to truly understand them. Try to put yourself in their shoes so you can view it. It doesn’t mean you are going to make it easier. I couldn’t go to soldiers and tell them I’m going to make the load lighter or less dangerous. But I can empathize. When we talk about leadership, you are going to have to make tough decisions. But if you allow yourself the discipline of empathizing so that you truly appreciate, I think you do better. It doesn’t make you brilliant, but it lets you care and lets you be a little more thoughtful.”

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