

Warrior Monks, Rock Stars and House Guests

By
Professor Gene Kamena

General Stanley McChrystal's reputation as a successful warfighter, creative tactician and superb leader is unsurpassed in today's military, or at least it was. He lived hard, worked hard and did what it took to succeed. Growing up in the Army's special operations community, McChrystal learned early in his career what it took to win, how to lead other hard men, and the meaning of sacrifice. He also grew up working in small groups, often leading small teams in combat – in the special operations world a person's value is not measured by rank, but on performance and loyalty to the group. Often the relationship within these small groups is informal. General McChrystal held onto much of the lifestyle of his special operations roots, even after he entered the ranks of a General Officer, he ate one meal a day, slept only four hours, went months without seeing his family; he was as close as we could get to a modern warrior monk. Living as a warrior monk is fine and works well when you are surrounded by other monks, in this case, other special operations warriors. In the world of warrior monks, you can say what you think without fear of leaks or reprisal.

Theater Commanders, however, live in a rock star world. In this world, the press is omnipresent; the inner circle of a four star general is, by necessity, a very large circle. General McChrystal trusted the people around him, as he always had, and they let him down.

When the inner sanctuary of a warrior monk, now living in a rock star world, is penetrated by an outsider, alarms should go off. Why Michael Hastings (the reporter that brought down the four star) was allowed to stay as long as he did is one question, more importantly why was he allowed unfettered access into McChrystal's inner circle? My guess is a combination of factors. The staff, and in particular the public affairs officer, failed to do their job.

McChrystal and his staff let their guard down which is easy to do when you are too comfortable in your surroundings. After a year in country everyone, even four star generals get tired; they sometimes let down their guard; and too often, they start to believe their own "press." In reality, nothing good happens when an outsider is allowed too much access within the inner circle for an extended

period. Think of it as a house guest that stays too long. They eat your food, get in the way and have their own agenda.

For General McChrystal, recent events resulted in an abrupt and poignant end to an outstanding career. For the nation, recent events are a distraction from an already hard-fought war. For the military, this is a setback in civilian-military relations that may take years to overcome. There are however, some things we should learn and remember from this episode, albeit a “first blush” look:

- Unfortunately, infringements on the golden rule regarding military griping were committed. You never make disparaging comments about your boss in the presence of subordinates – period. Inner circle and trusted aides aside, the reported comments were inappropriate.
- The staff and those responsible for advising senior leadership on media engagements failed the general and the nation. A good staff serves and protects their leader to a point. The staff also allowed an outsider to get too close for too long.
- There are no winners in this episode. Yes, the reporter got his story, but at a very high price to the nation. The warrior monk was publicly admonished and forced to relinquish command drawing a shadow over an otherwise sterling career and reputation. Even warrior-monks living in a rock star world are well-advised to remember basic rules of discipline and leadership, especially when it comes to house guests.

Gene C. Kamena is a professor of Leadership & Strategy at Air University's Air War College. The opinions expressed here are solely those of the author and may not represent the policies of the US Air Force, US Army or the Department of Defense.