



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on June 19, 2013

Fearless Investigative Journalist Michael Hastings Dead at 33

Most obituaries about Michael Hastings' (shown) untimely death in a [high-speed single-car crash](#) at 4:30 a.m. on Tuesday morning in Los Angeles mentioned his primary and most visible contribution to investigative journalism: his authorship of "[The Runaway General](#)" in [Rolling Stone magazine](#) which led almost immediately to the dismissal of General Stanley McChrystal by President Obama on June 23, 2010. The president [referred directly to Hastings' article](#):



The conduct represented in the recently published article [in *Rolling Stone*] does not meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general. It undermines the civilian control of the military that is at the core of our democratic system. And it erodes the trust that's necessary for our team to work together to achieve our objectives in Afghanistan.

Admirers said his reporting of General McChrystal's rude behavior and mocking attitude toward his commander-in-chief and his staff was pure Hastings: indefatigable, irascible, offensive, and honest. *Rolling Stone*, [in its announcement of Hastings' death](#), wrote that Hastings' "hallmark as a reporter was his refusal to cozy up to power. He had little patience for flacks and spinmeisters and will be remembered for his enthusiastic breaches of the conventions of access journalism."

Hastings spoke earlier this year at the Burlington, Vermont, Book Festival and told his audience that he didn't believe in objectivity in journalism. Instead, he explained, "What I try to do is be intellectually honest in my writing."

Although known primarily for writing incisively about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he attacked other topics just as fearlessly. Said BuzzFeed's editor-in-chief, for whom Hastings had worked for only a few months before his death, "Michael was a great, fearless journalist with an incredible instinct for the story, and a gift for finding ways to make his readers care about anything he covered, from wars to politicians."

BuzzFeed [gave Hastings credit](#) for exposing McChrystal for his arrogance and condescension to his superiors:

Michael's most famous story, the one that got General Stanley McChrystal fired, was a great yarn, but it was also about something [else]: a military leadership that had turned its tactical sophistication inward, and trapped a president it disdained into a war he didn't want to fight. The story helped push the American government to pull out of Afghanistan, not because a general said some bad words, but because those words conveyed the general's sense of superiority to his civilian masters.

Hastings was frankly surprised at McChrystal's firing: "I did not think Gen. McChrystal would be fired. In fact, I thought his position [as commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan] was basically untouchable.



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I thought [my article] would give them a headache for maybe 72 hours.”

A measure of Hastings’ irascibility was noted when began working for BuzzFeed. During conversations leading up to his being hired, Hastings demanded a special paragraph in his contract protecting him against his being fired for angering and insulting people while doing his work:

I’d need a clause somewhere in the contract that says if BuzzFeed fires me for saying or writing something controversial or offensive on BuzzFeed or on Twitter or elsewhere, there will have to be some kind of severance payment.

I have a demonstrated ability to really piss powerful people off, and I would need some kind of assurance that BuzzFeed has my back, 120 percent.

What he was seeking was the freedom to write what he saw and hang the consequences. His article on McChrystal led to his writing of [The Operators](#), which was published last November and which the *New York Times* called “an impressive feat of journalism by a Washington outsider who seemed to know more about what was going on in Washington than most insiders did.”

His versatility was extraordinary. In February, 2011, Hastings [tackled another runaway general](#) who was illegally employing “psy-ops” on unsuspecting politicians and opinion-makers to persuade them to continue supporting a failing war effort. Wrote Hastings:

Those singled out in the campaign included senators John McCain, Joe Lieberman, Jack Reed, Al Franken and Carl Levin; Rep. Steve Israel of the House Appropriations Committee; Adm. Mike Mullen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Czech ambassador to Afghanistan; the German interior minister, and a host of influential think-tank analysts.

The incident offers an indication of just how desperate the U.S. command in Afghanistan is to spin American civilian leaders into supporting an increasingly unpopular war.

Hastings was able to arrange a [one-on-one interview](#) with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in January, 2012, and capture the essence of Assange’s motivation behind his controversial exposure of hundreds of thousands of diplomatic cables:

From the glory days of American radicalism, which was the American Revolution, I think that Madison’s view on government is still unequaled. That people determined to be in a democracy, to be their own governments, must have the power that knowledge will bring — because knowledge will always rule ignorance. You can either be informed and [be] your own rulers or you can be ignorant and have someone else, who is not ignorant, rule over you.

The question is, where has the United States betrayed Madison and Jefferson, betrayed these basic values on how you keep a democracy? I think that the U.S. military-industrial complex and the majority of politicians in Congress have betrayed those values.

Hastings told the captivating story behind the RQ-170 Sentinel, a U.S. military drone [that was lost](#) in November 2011 over Tehran, Iran, and then turned up on display in a local gymnasium there. Wrote Hastings:

The Iranian military displayed the captured aircraft as a trophy; an American flag hung beneath the drone, its stars replaced with skulls. The drone looked nearly unscathed, as if it had landed on a runway. The Iranians declared that such surveillance flights represented an “act of war,” and threatened to retaliate by attacking U.S. military bases. President Obama demanded that Iran return the drone, but the damage was done.



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Hastings [explored the plight](#) of a 23-year-old-soldier who was captured by the Taliban in 2009, Bowe Bergdahl, who, four years later, still remains rotting in a cell somewhere in Pakistan.

His acerbic, fearless writing will be missed. When the autopsy is completed on BuzzFeed and *Rolling Stone* investigative journalist Michael Hastings, it is likely there will be found at least one substance in his bloodstream: courage.

Photo of Michael Hastings: AP Images

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