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Mayor Emanuel Interviews General Stanley McChrystal on "Chicago Stories" Podcast

What makes a good leader? Do we create false leaders? What role does context play in leadership?

On this week's episode of "[Chicago Stories](#)" podcast, Mayor Emanuel joined General Stanley McChrystal for a fascinating conversation on the myths and realities of leadership and how they continue to shape our society today. They also covered finding the right balance between civilian leadership and the military, shared a captivating retelling of Al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and advocated for creating a universal national service.

In his new book, *Leaders: Myth and Reality*, General McChrystal set about developing a stronger definition of leadership by removing the entrenched misconceptions we have about the nature of leadership and its role in creating outcomes.

"I got to this point in my life after 63 years and I realized I studied leadership, I practiced it, but I really didn't understand what leadership itself actually was," General McChrystal said.

As he told Mayor Emanuel, our commonly held view of leadership is overly simplistic and ultimately inaccurate. We give leaders credit when leaders succeed, blame when they fail. We think that leadership is made up of a set of fixed traits that leaders are either born with or that have been hammered into them at some point in their lives. And we think people follow leaders if they are successful.

"What we found was that in all three of those cases that's not true—that's not actually what happens," General McChrystal said. "In reality, at the heart of it you're interacting with a set of requirements and a set of followers, and you're trying to produce some kind of movement or influence or outcome."

In other words, leadership is varied, leadership is complex, and above all leadership is contextual.

General McChrystal and Mayor Emanuel also spoke at length about current stratification of American society and the need for the United States to develop a program of universal national service for young people in order to create a greater sense of national mission and identity.

“I think it’s the greatest threat to America today,” General McChrystal said. “The ‘balkanization’ if you want to call it into these little groups that are echo-chambers of themselves. All of us in some way or another threaten to be in them.”

As General McChrystal said told Mayor Emanuel, “service” shouldn’t only be equated with military service, but instead civilian national service is the other side of the same coin.

“The real value of [universal national service] is not what they do while they do service,” General McChrystal said. “It’s producing people who have experienced that, because when someone comes out of that you feel differently about your responsibility to other people, and about your responsibility to the nation.”

Be sure to listen to the entire episode as General McChrystal and Mayor Emanuel also talk about the similarities between Maximilien Robespierre and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the dangers of the politicization of the military, and why new presidential administrations should go whitewater rafting with their military leaders.

Listen and subscribe to Chicago Stories podcast on [Apple Podcasts](#), [SoundCloud](#), and [Spotify](#).

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Additional Quotes by General McChrystal:

On Leadership

“What we’ve done for literally millennia is we’ve looked at leaders as being the central facet of what happens and doesn’t happen.”

“There’s not a generic set of leadership traits because it’s intensely contextual, and it has to change constantly . . . so even the same leader has to constantly change if they’re truly going to be effective in the moment.”

“I think we need [heroes]. So we force people in some cases in today’s world to try to make themselves into heroes, and that’s actually unfortunate because in some way you can make them into better behavior, but often you can make them into false behavior because they start—you shine up this veneer that isn’t real.”

On Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

“Here was a guy that believed what he was doing. He was very good at it. He was willing to walk the walk. He was courageous. He was willing to do all those things. Who’s to say that if I had been in Zarqa in Jordan I wouldn’t end up like him in his position.”

“I wasn’t able to salute an admired enemy—I didn’t feel that good about him. But I had to grudgingly admire. Here’s a guy who knew what he was doing and did it very well.”

On Commanding Military Operations in Afghanistan

“If I had to do it all over again for Afghanistan I would’ve started by saying we all go whitewater rafting—President Obama, the Vice President, you, me—and just drink a lot of beer, don’t talk about the war, and get to know each other well enough so that when it gets hard we go ‘ya, I know Rahm.’”

On the Balance Between Civilian Leadership of the Military

“Both sides need to develop an appreciation for and a respect for what the other side’s doing instead of looking at the other side as ‘they just don’t get it.’”

On President Trump

“I think that President Trump has got to think through exactly what his role with the military is because the politicization of the military is a very dangerous thing. His term ‘my generals’ was always very offensive to me because they are the *nation’s* generals.”

On Service and Citizenship

“I think that we’re a little in an imbalance now because the military has been so respected and revered for the last 20 years . . . that there’s a self-righteousness to it that says ‘I served.’ Now wait a minute, there’s a lot of people serving in different ways. I think it’s unhealthy when we have a smaller military that is ever even tempted to think that they are the repository of patriotism or repository of anything like that because once that mindset grows then you can start to drift towards what you see in a lot of different countries where the military thinks they are the saviors of the nation.”

“I think every young American between 18 and 28 should do a year of service paid. It has to be paid stipend, because otherwise only wealthy families could afford it, support that child for a year. But I think that everyone should do something in whatever fits for them. Some would be military, some would be other things, but I think we would change the basic tenor of citizenship in America if we did that.”