

JOE BIDEN, ANOTHER BIG FUCKING I TOLD YOU SO

The Toobz are a-tizzy this morning with a Rolling Stone article revealing that Stanley McChrystal said mean things about Joe Biden—both publicly and behind his back.

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?”

But the article is far more subtle than the tizzy lets on. And the tizzy ignores the real moral of the story, revealed after five pages of eye-popping revelations. McChrystal’s counter-

insurgency plan is failing. It's failing not because some of his aides said mean things about Biden, and not because he's got a long-running spat with Karl Eikenberry, our Ambassador to Afghanistan. It's failing because the Special Ops guys, whom McChrystal led killing bunches of people in Iraq, are not hard-wired to win hearts and minds. It's failing because both the tools at McChrystal's disposal (a bunch of JSOC guys) and the conditions on the ground mean counterterrorism, not counterinsurgency, is the best approach: precisely what Biden argued during the Afghan policy review.

When Vice President Biden was briefed on the new plan in the Oval Office, insiders say he was shocked to see how much it mirrored the more gradual plan of counterterrorism that he advocated last fall. "This looks like CT-plus!" he said, according to U.S. officials familiar with the meeting.

One of the real revelations of this story—one which actually takes up about 1/5 of the article and which is based not on aides revealing embarrassing stories but on watching grunts interact with the General they are often depicted as idolizing—is that they no longer buy that McChrystal can bridge the seemingly (and in fact) irreconcilable forces of the Afghan war; his bravado and mystique is not enough to persuade the grunts implementing his plan to buy into using less lethal force with the hearts and minds they're supposed to be winning.

"I ask you what's going on in your world, and I think it's important for you all to understand the big picture as well," McChrystal begins. "How's the company doing? You guys feeling sorry for yourselves? Anybody? Anybody feel like you're losing?" McChrystal says.

"Sir, some of the guys here, sir, think we're losing, sir," says Hicks.

McChrystal nods. "Strength is leading when you just don't want to lead," he tells the men. "You're leading by example. That's what we do. Particularly when it's really, really hard, and it hurts inside." Then he spends 20 minutes talking about counterinsurgency, diagramming his concepts and principles on a whiteboard.

[snip]

"This is the philosophical part that works with think tanks," McChrystal tries to joke. "But it doesn't get the same reception from infantry companies."

During the question-and-answer period, the frustration boils over. The soldiers complain about not being allowed to use lethal force, about watching insurgents they detain be freed for lack of evidence. They want to be able to fight – like they did in Iraq, like they had in Afghanistan before McChrystal.

I think the aides who gave Michael Hastings the access they did suffer from believing McChrystal's very carefully crafted mystique. As the story shows, McChrystal has always been a barely-contained insubordinate man, whether as a cadet or a general. His brilliance, and his cultivated mystique, has always succeeded in excusing gross errors like the Pat Tillman coverup and the Camp Nama torture. He has always succeeded in—as he himself points out in the article—ordering Special Ops guys to kill many targets but then publicly scolding them the next day so as to maintain the fiction that he's really supporting a less lethal strategy.

This mystique relies on precisely the kind of bravado that would lead an aide to share really damning comments about Joe Biden. It's the verbal ass-kicking that makes Stanley McChrystal who he is.

But, at least according to this story, it

doesn't necessarily work with the guys on the front lines, and it doesn't do a damn bit of good with an old Washington guy like Biden with decades of expertise on the region.

This article appears to be a McChrystal-led effort to shore up his tough guy cred. But the actual content of the story shows that tough guy cred won't win you a war in Afghanistan.