

Gen. Stanley McChrystal discusses leadership with President Fitts at Book Fest

March 10, 2023 7:45 PM Mary Ann Travis
mtravis@tulane.edu



Gen. Stanley McChrystal (left), a leader of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and a current senior fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, and Tulane President Michael A. Fitts (right) engaged in a discussion about military leadership and the importance of self-discipline on Friday at the New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University. (Photo by Rusty Costanza)

Retired four-star general Stanley McChrystal regaled a standing room-only crowd at Tulane's Navy ROTC building with tales of military leadership and the importance of

self-discipline during a late afternoon session on Friday, March 10, the second day of the New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University. McChrystal displayed a sense of humor, confidence and an astute understanding of American successes — and failures — in war.

President Michael A. Fitts welcomed McChrystal, a leader of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2003 to 2010 and a current senior fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, to the stage. Community members, ROTC cadets as well as other students, faculty and staff filled the atrium of the historic building for the talk.

Prompted by questions from Fitts, McChrystal also discussed his book, *Risk: A User's Guide* (Penguin, 2021).

Fitts said a national business leader told him that McChrystal's book is one of the best outlines of how to run a business successfully.

"It's about leadership on the battlefield and leadership in life," Fitts said. And it's about leaders, too, who "must spend a lot of time thinking about communication, and the ability to be coherent and clear, and then get your organization talking to one another."

As the conversation turned to the country's ability to assess risk, McChrystal was frank, "The truth is, we suck at it." While many risks are external, McChrystal said, "the greatest risk to us — is us."

"Think about it," he said. "We routinely get it wrong, and then we have to fix it as we go. Because we don't predict what the next war is going to be like. We don't predict what the next enemy's going to be like. We don't predict what technology is going to arise. We don't predict any number of factors. And what I learned is, you can't. And we'll never be able to do that."

"What you can predict is there will be a crisis. There will be a problem. There will be threats that come your way. So, if you start with the idea that you're never going to know what pitch the pitcher is throwing next ... it really all comes down to how do you make yourself most prepared for the unexpected? How do you make the organization you're a part of — the popular word now is resilient — but it's strong. It's a boxer stance. It's the ability to do things that don't throw you off your game, when they are different than you expect."

In McChrystal's experience, he said, "Every time I thought I had the right answer going into a problem, it turned out to be wrong. But being able to figure out what was happening and adjust in the moment was the most valuable."

Audience members asked McChrystal about a raft of current events including the war in Ukraine and threats to Taiwan from China. He also discussed leadership during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The last question of the session came from a ROTC cadet preparing for a career in Navy intelligence. He said that McChrystal's book is already on his reading list but asked the general for other recommendations on what to read. McChrystal mentioned no specific book titles or articles, but suggested the cadet should read anything "centered on information warfare."

McChrystal is certain that the outcome of the next conflict is going to be decided by information warfare.

"In fact," he said, "I would argue that what we are seeing in Ukraine right now is the most effective information warfare in history."

His advice to the cadet was "to get his expertise and mind" around information warfare. If he does, he will be "incredibly valuable" in a military job and to the country.

In addition to being a Book Fest event, the discussion between Fitts and McChrystal was part of the Presidential Speaker Series, which was established by Fitts in 2019 to provide an opportunity for the Tulane community to learn from distinguished professionals with unique perspectives, talents and stories.



(Photo by Rusty Costanza)