

# UnTextbooked

*A history podcast for the future.*

Transcript: [The false mythology of good leadership.](#)

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Guest	General Stanley McChrystal
Season - Episode	1 - 4
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Gabe Hostin 0:08

You know that famous painting of George Washington Crossing the Delaware River. In the painting, Washington stands on the bow of a boat. He surveys the stormy icy water head, continental soldiers paddle frantically, an early version of the American flag blows in the wind. You know, the one I'm talking about,

is supposed to show this really pivotal moment of the Revolutionary War. But many things about this painting are inaccurate, the flag the boat stance, but historical accuracy isn't the point here. The painting is part of the cultural legend of America's founding. And for that legend to work, the founders have to look heroic, and their enemies have to look like cowards.

Victor Ye 0:53

UnTextbooked Producer Victor Ye is a first generation American with immigrant parents, politically wise, I think I was awakened, particularly from the 2016 election, young people weren't turning out for elections, I was very frustrated to understand that the only way to make changes if you vote, the only way to make changes is if you represent your population and your voice. And so that's when I felt that maybe I could do something as a leader to help others realize the importance of being civically engaged. Civic Engagement is something that Victor cares deeply about. This year. Victor's voting for the first time. But for him, that's just one part of being involved. He wants to be a leader too. There are other reason why I want to be the leader is that I see a bunch of problems existing and no one is doing anything about them to change it. And so the only way for it to be changed as if I get into the loop and try to change it in any way possible. Victor's desire to change the world led him to study history's great leaders. And that led him to the writing of general Stanley McChrystal, the US Army.

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Gabe Hostin 1:58

General McChrystal has spent most of his life in leadership roles culminating his command of US forces in Afghanistan.

Victor Ye 2:06

I want to talk to General McChrystal because I felt like as someone who has been able to go from humble beginnings, all the way to his career and service, and then the end, heading forces a thousands of troops overseas, I know that he has accomplished his childhood dream and success. But General McChrystal, his view on leadership is unusual. A couple years ago, he co wrote a book called leaders, myth and reality. He argues that the stories we tell about our leaders are more legends than fact. And when he looks at True Stories of leadership, he finds it to be much more complicated than it seems. In the book, he profiles effective leaders of all kinds, even wrote a chapter on the effective leadership strategies of the kind of leader that he fought against for years.

Gabe Hostin 2:55

After the break, you'll hear Victor's conversation with the general talking about the American dream, the myths of leadership, and how young people can fix the country. I'm Gabe Hostin, and you're listening to UnTextbooked

Unknown Speaker 3:14

UnTextbooked.

Victor Ye 3:23

Thank you so much General McChrystal for this conversation. I'm super excited to be speaking to you. Um, what does that American Dream look like to you.

General Stanley McChrystal 3:32

For me? I always thought of the American Dream first as a question of opportunity, giving everyone an opportunity to make of yourself what you want to or what you are able to. I always thought growing up that I was very fortunate. I was my father and mother had six kids. So I was number four, six. Most of my young life My father was a fairly junior officer. So there was no money. We didn't have any money. But we were always comfortable. And I went to good public schools that my brother and one sister, so I had opportunities for a very normal life. My father went to Korea and then multiple tours to Vietnam and combat. But I thought that that was just a natural thing to do. And I was very proud of him for doing that. Even though the Vietnam War of course, by the time I was in high school became very, very unpopular. When it came time for me to consider what I wanted to be in life.

A small part was the idea that you serve. You just do you don't go through a big question about it. You just serve you find some way that you serve society and from that you derive a certain

amount of satisfaction. Being a soldier. It's interesting to me It looked like a good life. I've very much admired my father. I like the way he conducted himself. He was a very modest quiet man.

And I think

I found what he was very appealing to me. And so the idea of being a soldier didn't take me a lot, I didn't go through a big decision making process, I didn't do hand wringing about it from a very young age, which is just, I'm going to be a soldier.

Victor Ye 5:14

It's definitely a very admirable because I know, as a young person, myself, I'm still navigating what it looks like for not only my next four years of life, but also then what happens after that. So I want to learn a little bit more about your book in general. And I know that you kind of were starting from zero, and you work your way to the very top when it comes to going overseas and leading thousands of troops and very, very intensive missions as well. So and that respect, what were some of the qualities of leadership that you share with some of the characters that you mentioned in your own book? And how does that kind of reflect upon how leaders are supposed to act in this particular century or this particular generation on time? Yeah. And this is a journey that you Victor in your generation, and have to go together because it's, you're going to define that. But I can do my thoughts on it. The first is I got to an age in my 60s. And what I realized, or I came to the conclusion, I didn't really understand leadership. I had practiced it, I've been taught it, I did all these things related to leadership.

General Stanley McChrystal 6:13

But I didn't understand that like, I think I should have, or and I wish I did. So hence, we took up the study of this book reflected in the book leaders. And we wanted to look at leaders and say why they leaders not pick good people, not you know, who were people you admire, but pick people who were successful as leaders, they, they got a certain amount of influence over people or things. So we picked 36 pairs, and then an additional person, Robert E. Lee. And what we found was, first is that there's no list of traits to be a good leader, I can't give you a list and say, do these things, you're going to be an effective leader, I can't even take an effective leader from one organization has proven themselves, put them in another organization with any high expectation, but then repeat the performance, because it's too contextual. What we concluded was, leadership is really like a chemical reaction that's between the person, the leader, the followers, or the other people involved, and then the context of the moment. And those things come together and they create this witch's brew. And then from that comes leadership, you get an outcome. And that's frustrating, because people say, What if I just go find the right leader, everything will be okay. That's not our experience. But But when we study leadership, we have tended to do it through biography. And if you think a biography, like a play, you put the star on the stage and you put the spotlight on them. Everybody else on the stage is in the shadows, because they're not the star. And so you start to think that everything that happens or doesn't happen is based upon what the starters, when in reality, the other players

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often have much more impacted or what happens than that. But it's it's simpler. And so we write biography that way. We do movies that way. We do heroes that way. And so we have a tendency to say, okay, Victor is a hero, put them on a pedestal and let's wait and see what he tells us to do.

And that's very disappointing, because when you wait for that person to get on the pedestal and tell us what to do, sometimes they'll get up there and they'll have just the right answer. But, but over time, traditionally they don't. They're just human.

So as we looked at the 13, leaders, we studied, we looked at geniuses, we looked at reformers, we looked at boss, tweed, lied, you know, we looked at Walt Disney, we looked at Coco Chanel, people in very different or survived, were very successful, that there are a few common things. One of them is that they choose to lead, they're actively get out there and make a decision to do it. there's typically a level of self discipline involved. And that's really, you can always say commitment, they really want it and so they they tend to stay focused on it. But besides that, they tend to be dramatically different. And that's, that's frustrating to people who want to have a leadership manual that says do this and go to greatness. Yeah, that respect, I know that you basically compiled 13 leaders together. Can you talk a little bit more about like how you kind of went about that? Because I know that you mentioned boss tweeted you put while Disney there's also Robert E. Lee, also very much different characters from different areas of society. How did that kind of go about? Yeah, it's interesting because people say, Okay, you got I wish there were six of us writing the book three young people who were full time on it, and three older people. And the three older people had all had military service. And it was interesting because we all looked at leaders different because different backgrounds, different experiences, different ages, and

The first thing we said is we don't want to give, you know, just generals or admirals, because that sort of people would expect me to do that. So I wanted to get a span of people that were different walks of life, Leonard Bernstein, Albert Einstein, you know, geniuses, but very different. We wanted reformers, Martin Luther, and then Martin Luther King, Jr. Very different, but an overlap their founders, Coco Chanel, and Walt Disney. And so we decided first to pick a number of names, and we put some rules together. One of them was you couldn't be alive.

We considered a couple people who were alive, but we thought it would make us write about them differently, we might pull our punches if they were alive if we didn't want to offend them. So we said you got to be dead to get in the club. Then we looked for diversity, we wanted to get diversity not just of sex, but also of nationality of era of walk of life, it was hard to get a couple of those particularly sex because for many years, women just didn't have the opportunity.

We got Margaret Thatcher, who certainly was an incredible leader, and then Harriet Tubman as well and

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Coco Chanel, but there wasn't the same breadth of people available. And we wanted to make sure we got some people who were good, but not good. What I mean is effective leaders but not admirable people. And of course, Robespierre, the French Revolution, is certainly on the edge. You can admire things about him, but he had a heck of a lot of people get in Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who I fought personally for two and a half years. And we ultimately killed but but I admired his leadership. And then boss tweet, this corrupt politician in New York who, even though he was corrupted, people knew that they still voted them into office, and in many ways, they still relied on him. So it was that contradiction about people. Everyone loved Walt Disney. But there was much about Walt Disney not to admire.

people hated have Musab al Zarqawi. But there was much about him to admire and emulate as a leader. And so it was those opportunities to get the tension there that we found fascinating. Yeah. Can you talk a little bit more about like, how does separate leadership from the morals of the leaders themselves? I know that a lot of people tend to have a difficult time trying to separate actions from they're also more values. So can you talk a little bit more about that? And great fixture because if someone asked me, is Victor, a good leader, let's say I knew you really well. And you were a dishonest person. And you were leading an effort that I just despised, but you got people to follow you and you made stuff happen? I probably say, you know, yeah, he's an effective leader. This is where the word good starts to, to have a problem there. And so I tend to fall back on effective I'd say, Yeah, he is an effective leader. Now, if you're asking me if he's a good person, or good values, that's a different question. And of course, that's partly the eye of the beholder. But

it's, it's remarkably important. And we've gotten those wrapped up. Because in many cases, there are people who we just admire, we just think they're just wonderful people. But reality, they could lead anybody to do anything. Because people just not good at it. And then there are other people who are pretty nefarious characters, Adolf Hitler characters who've taken people to absolute tragedy. But one of the things that many people don't realize is Adolf Hitler was still hugely popular with the German people. The day he killed himself 12 years after he'd taken power and brought Germany to ruin, and he was still popular. And in that has to make us think about what is our relationship with leaders?

Victor Ye 13:58

Yeah, and that really reflects upon some of the stories that you bring in the book as follows. I never learned inside my own history classrooms, like, Is there something wrong with how we teach history at the same respect, because I know, you mentioned I think very vividly a story about George Washington Crossing the Delaware River. And then you also then mentioned that like, really isn't the same depiction as we see them painting. So is there something wrong in the valleys in which we set ourselves to learn about these characters in general?

General Stanley McChrystal 14:24

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Yeah, it is interesting. And the story you mentioned is so fascinating, because the picture I grew up with Washington Crossing the delawares, there's this very small rowboat, and he's standing at the front sort of leaning forward. And these other guys were all rowing. And I would always joke with people I said, Who's the leader in the picture? And they say, George Washington. And I said, Well, yeah, he's the only guy not doing any work. He just standing there with a rolling, but the reality was, for a dark night on an icy river in the middle of an operation, standing up. George Washington wasn't stupid.

But, but it's a representation of him of his role in the operation. And so from that standpoint, Is it wrong? I am less clear saying that it's inaccurate.

But he was the reason they went across that river. He was the reason they did that operation apset, Washington, that probably would not have occurred. And so the idea that he is the barrel chested person standing above everyone else, there's a certain artistic license to it. The danger is we get confused, we start to believe that stuff, we start to think that

that person that that is what leadership looks like, we start to think that leadership has to be taller, stronger, smarter. leaders can never say I don't know, because they know everything. leaders can never be scared. Human beings are scared. I mean, there are all these things, that we start to either demand of ourselves as leaders or demand of other leaders that are completely unrealistic. And the thing we should really want from leaders is what we need to think about. Yeah, I know that one particular figure that I was super intrigued by is, again, Robert E. Lee, can you talk about your relationship with him and your upbringing, and then how that's kind of changed over time when I remember the vivid story of you throwing the painting away in your own house as well. So can you talk a little more about that? Sure. I'll start with that for people unfamiliar.

In the spring of 2017, I took a painting of Robert E. Lee, off the wall in my little office, and in our house in Alexandria, Virginia, I took it to the garbage in our garage and threw it away. And my wife had given me that 40 years before when I was a Second Lieutenant, it cost 25 bucks, which was a lot of money at that point to us. And I had treasured it. For all those years, every military quarters we lived in, I hung out because I was proud one to look at him as a leader I admired and to, for people who came to my house, I wanted them to see the kind of people that I admire and therefore, you know, so signal my values. And I live about 75 feet from the home he grew up in. So I'm by him every day and I grew up with the idea of Robert E. Lee. And went to Washington Lee High School. When I went and played for the Washington Lee generals. When I went to West Point, I lived in Lee barracks. And at West Point, Robert E. Lee never got an American his time there. He was known as the marble man, he was just, he's this figure that is an ideal. So I grew up with the idea that here's a guy who's brave, brilliant, honest, everything. And that's why American history carried him for 150 years. But she had come to me, my wife, and he had come to me about a month before. And she said, I think you have to take the picture down. And I said, What are you talking about? You gave that to me? That's generally and she

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goes, No, this was right after Charlottesville. And she says, I think people come into our house may think that you align with white supremacy and some of the things like that. She goes, I know you don't. And I said, Well, that's not what the picture means. And she says, well, it doesn't mean that to you mean that to someone else. So we talked about it for about a month. And then finally I just one morning, Sunday morning, I just came to conclusion that she was right. And so I picked it threw it away. It was kind of emotional. And this gets to a number of factors. Because in many ways, this was a very admirable guy. This was a guy who had extraordinary values, extraordinary self discipline, he had crafted himself a way of calculating what his responsibilities were. He took the same oath at West Point that I did. And yet, after serving 31 years in the US Army, he left it and tried to destroy the nation, but his forebears George Washington done so much to create. So it's this incredible contradiction. You've got the guy who's so good. And then suddenly he does something that if you put on the list of what things you can do try to destroy and divide the nation. That's pretty bad. And and why don't you do it now to preserve slavery. And you go, Whoa. But yet, it's so much more similar that because he felt he had this value system that convinced him that that was what he should do. I'm sure he felt morally right to do that. I disagree. I think he got it completely wrong.

But when I think of that, and then I juxtapose that on Abu Musab al Zarqawi. Or someone else who was I was absolutely opposed to the fact that I don't think they're right doesn't necessarily make them wrong. It means that I don't think they're right, my my values aren't dead. And this is where it started. To get so hard because we want to judge everybody through our own lens through our own values, and we say, because of this, they are wrong. And they are because they are wrong. They are evil.

And Robert E. Lee is almost the classic case, because otherwise he is just so incredibly good as a leader in person, except this little thing he tries to destroy the United States of America.

Victor Ye 22:14

Yeah, no, definitely. So I guess in a respect, how do you glorify someone that fought to keep black people enslaved? And how does that kind of work out in that lens?

General Stanley McChrystal 22:23

Yeah, people can do some great things, and then have attributes or behaviors that you're just not comfortable with. But if we take them completely bombed them up and throw them in the trash bin, we thrown off a lot of good. And I also think there's a, there's a reality to context to the time had I been a young southerner, in 1861, there's a much greater chance that I'd have joined the Confederate Army, me, then I would have stepped back and say, No, I'm gonna join the northeast and try and defeat the states in the families.

A few people get that. But the reality was, that's an uncommon behavior, and would probably be uncommon, unlikely, I can pretend now that I would see slavery as an evil and therefore I would do that.

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But most people didn't. And I can't assume that they were all bad people. So I think we've got to, we've got to admit the power of context. We've got to admit the reality that you do reflect the society that you're in the pressures that are on you the values of the moment, and it's not realistic for us to step back and say, Why did Thomas Jefferson keep slaves wrote so eloquently about liberty, but he kept slaves, absolute contradiction. The reality is that was an accepted Mori at the time and he was a human being he reflected that, and that doesn't mean we look back in and say he was right. You know, we can't step back and say, because he was so accomplished, because he was our third president, our first secretary of state wrote the Declaration independence. It's okay that he had slaves now. It's not,

but it doesn't take away the things that they did. And so this is where we've got to be as people today very mature, very thoughtful and as we craft for ourselves.

What are we going to be as leaders, we need to think about it, I got a good friend of mine who constantly reminds me says, There are things we do right now, that 30 years from now, people are going to absolutely criticize us for if anybody ever put a statue up to one of us it get ripped down 30 years from now for something we don't think is wrong. And you go, Well, I'm just what's the deal?

And I think we have to admit, that's the way it is. The way I think about this now is we go to choices, particularly about leaders, leaders, for businesses, or leaders for political office, I'm not looking for any perfect candidates anymore. Because you're just not going to find them. What I'm looking for is people,

ladies and gentlemen, into those offices, who will assemble talent around them. And we'll be humble enough to say, Okay, what we're really going to do is get good talent to work this program. And then we've got to take a mature values based approach to it. I'm not very interested in what their policies are, because the reality is over the course of their time in office situations are going to change. And so their policies are going to be impacted by evolving things, emerging crises that come and so you can't ask somebody what they're going to do in office and have them give me an accurate answer, because they don't know. What you can do, however, is you can vote on values. You can look at someone and say, are they honest? Do I believe that they will be honest? Do I believe that they will be stable? Do I believe that they will be loyal? Do I believe that they will be open minded enough to listen to various opinions and put those together? You know, we're gonna make a lot of mistakes as a country over the next, you know, four years, eight years, whatever period we want to look at, we just thought,

but if they're mistakes of specifics, as opposed to being mistakes of intent, or mistakes of values, that's okay. We fix this. What we can't fix is when we aren't just society we need to be what worries me now is, of course, many of our allies around the world. Doubt us our values. They've always doubted our decisions. I always well,



but they generally thought we were trying to do the right thing. And I don't think that that's the way the view is right now. And that's, that's what I think we got to think about. I think at the end of the day, I've been a part of this nation, and I really wanted to be a society that I'm proud I'm a part of.

And I want to feel like I'm doing what I can to make that so.

And it's really important to me, what my wife, my son, my three granddaughters think of me. And I never want them to read or hear something about me That's true, and be embarrassed about it.

Or ashamed, that would be devastating to me. And I think most of us probably feel that way.

Victor Ye 28:14

The other really hits deep, I think when I'm kind of thinking about my own legacy, or how I'm supposed to kind of for the next generation, it typically relies upon ourselves to hopefully make the best decisions that would advance society forward. And that case, like, that's what you're kind of service your initiative as well. Can you talk a little bit more about like the work that you're doing with that? And also, why you're so passionate about it?

General Stanley McChrystal 28:34

Yeah, this is this is great. I'm the chairperson for the service year Alliance. And, and that means I'm a figurehead. That's the reality of it. There's a bunch of people who do a lot of work to make this happen. But it's really important. And I didn't get involved until after I got out of the army because I never thought about civilian service. When I was in the military I, you said service. That's a military. But when I got out, I realized that there are certain realities. The first is that society, the United States is only an agreement between a bunch of people to be a nation stuff more than that God didn't draw it out and say this is the United States. bunch of people got together and said, we're going to form a nation. And it's been imperfect. But a bunch of people said, to form this nation, we've all got to accept certain responsibilities that go with these rights. We really cherish our rights. We have to cherish and look at our responsibilities. And so what are our responsibilities? It's a little broader than just voting or paying taxes. It's how do we make society better. And if you think of citizenship in a local level, it used to mean going down and helping your neighbor raise their bar or getting a volunteer fire department. And I think that's eroded a lot partly because we move around and for other reasons. I think that the idea of it, what a citizen is and what that responsibility is, and is shrunken.

And most of us got our citizenship, by accident of birth, we didn't do squat for it. Other people worked for it, and they tend to value it more highly, but I think we have a set of responsibilities. And so how do you build that in people? You know, I think you learn things through experience. You know, I think of the things in my life that changed the way I behaved. Typically, somebody

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had to make me behave a certain way for a while. And then I started to believe in it, I think we have to give people an experience upon which they, they come away with a certain amount of satisfaction and pride. You know, 71% of young people in America could not enlist in our military if they wanted to. They're not qualified, they couldn't for academic or for drug use, or physical unibit. So when we talk about thank you for your service, when we see a servicemember, 71% of young people in America can never hear those words, because they can't serve a military. But we don't want everybody to serve in America, we don't need that many people in the military. What we do need is everybody to serve the nation, education, health care, the environment, there's so many things that need doing. But in the process of doing, people can build in themselves this habit of doing that. And you do that for a year, or you do that for two years, and then you go on with the rest of your life, and you're not going to be the same person, you can be a better person. And employers are going to get a better person colleges, you're going to get a better student, America is going to get a better set of citizens. And maybe if we do things with people that are very different from us, have a different background, different experience set will realize that, because they see things differently, doesn't mean they're stupid or evil. It means they see things differently. And if we'd had that same experience, we might have those same views.

This gets back to what we talked about in the beginning. If the American Dream is the opportunity for me to get as much as I can. That's a pretty narrow view of the American dream. In my mind.

I think the American dream is to be part of something a valued part of something that you admire.

So that's a long answer to a great question.

Victor Ye 32:22

Yeah, no, definitely. I think that, you know, can I want to tie this into one of my last questions, which is about young voters in this election? We don't really know how this is going to turn out at the end. What are some advice that you would have to young voters like myself, who are trying to use and maximize our first time voting status to make a difference in our society? Yeah, the first thing is vote.

General Stanley McChrystal 32:46

If you don't vote, you know, I got no time for you.

I actually think voting should be mandatory in the United States, I think every eligible voter should have to go vote. And we can make it easy. And you can vote for this candidate, that candidate or nobody, but go through that. So we can get rid of voter suppression, just we need to take that off the table, but it's not going to happen this time. So the first thing is vote. The second thing I'd say is admit you might not be right. What I mean by that is, if you are very

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conservative, go start reading much more liberal progressive stuff, start watching msnbc start so and so if you are very liberal, start watching Fox News, start reading that start listening to that and don't just do it for five minutes. And God is guys are folded. If you just vote like all your buds, whether it's left or right or whatever, if you just kind of fall in line, you're not vote you're just moving like the herd. And and that's unfortunate for setting.

Victor Ye 33:51

Yeah, no, thank you so much for for this conversation. General McChrystal, what is your book and how can we find it? Yeah, um, it's leaders myth and reality. And it came out of penguin. It's the story of 13 leaders, and it's a way of looking at leadership by looking at 30 leaders. Awesome. Thank you so much. General McChrystal, for this conversation really, really appreciated your advice and your insight. I really appreciate it thoughtful questions, and I enjoyed the conversation. Thank you so much, everyone for so have a good day.

Gabe Hostin 34:33

General Stanley McChrystal is the retired head of the Joint Special Operations Command and former commander of the United States forces in Afghanistan. He's also the Board Chair of the service here Alliance, which advocates for young people to do a year of paid service after high school.

Victor Ye is a social entrepreneur and the co founder and CEO of InnovaYouth, an organization that helps young people become community changemakers. He is currently on a gap year before studying at the University of Southern California.

Our music is by Silas Bowen and Coleman Hamilton, who are a senior and recent graduate at walnut Hill School for the Arts in Massachusetts.

UnTextbooked is edited by Bethany Denton and Jeff Eggman Fernanda Raine is our emergency contact.

We are already thinking about the future. We have more stories on board. And we have so many more topics we want to explore. We want UnTextbooked to grow and be as good as it can be. And you could help us do that. Go to UnTextbooked calm and click support.

Our website is UnTextbooked.com. Follow us on Instagram, tick tock and Twitter at UnTextbooked. That's where you'll find stories from the present and the past that shouldn't be overlooked.

UnTextbooked is a project of Got History?, an organization that believes in a world where all young people can advance civic well being for themselves, society and the planet.

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