

**Colonel David Butler**  
**Communications Adviser to Chief of Staff of the Army**

**Mark Schauerte - Introduction**  
**Institute of Politics**  
**University of Chicago**

**Thom Shanker - Moderator**  
**Project for Media and National Security**  
**George Washington School of Media and Public Affairs**

**31 July 2024**

**Mr. Schauerte:** I think you all are officially qualified to be members of the US Postal Service as well, in addition to the Army. [Laughter].

My name is Mark Schauerte. I'm the Director of Development, at the University of Chicago, Institute of Politics. We wanted to say thank you very much for braving the rain. You're very hardy. And we're excited to have a conversation this evening moderated by Thom Shanker with Colonel Butler. I'll turn it over to Thom, to take it from here.

**Moderator:** Thanks so much. I'm the Director of the Project for Media and National Security at George Washington University. It's great to partner with the Institute of Politics from the University of Chicago.

This is on the record tonight. I'll be producing a transcript if people want it.

I could not be happier or prouder than to host Colonel David Butler. He is an absolutely consummate professional in military public affairs with a remarkable career. He was the chief spokesman for the Special Operations community. He was chief spokesman for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Milley during a really dramatic time in our nation's history. And right now he has the honor of working for General George, the Chief of Staff of the Army. So he's returned to his own service in service of the Army.

Colonel Butler, thank you so much for being here, sir.

**COL Butler:** Thanks for coming.

Honestly, it wasn't probably easy to get here. I appreciate you guys coming.

Professional Word Processing & Transcribing  
(801) 556-7255

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

Who's from the University of Chicago? Nice group. GW? And a couple of Army guys. I asked these guys to come because the main thing about this is interaction. You should meet these guys. They're great dudes as well. I'll just include myself in that too. [Laughter].

I do a couple of things like this every once in a while. I'm usually the guy behind the guy, so let's just open it up. Keeping my eye on that, remember I'm on the record.

**Moderator:** I've got your back. I'm the guy behind the guy behind the guy.

**COL Butler:** Thom does a great job, by the way, because we do Defense Writers Group. He can assemble this many or more top tier journalists. Not because he's easy, but we trust him in the Pentagon.

How long have you been doing this?

**Moderator:** I was the New York Times Pentagon reporter for 14 years.

**COL Butler:** That's a long time.

**Moderator:** We'll have a reception afterwards with chow and more time to mingle.

The run of show is, Colonel Butler and I will have a one-on-one discussion for 20 minutes, half an hour, at the end of which I'll invite you to share some comments or thoughts, a final word, then we'll go to Q&A. Then we'll adjourn to a more informal conversation for as long as people have time.

First question. What do you think are the most important skills to be a successful military spokesman? Separate from civilian, corporate, et cetera. What's the military piece of that?

**COL Butler:** I don't know that it's super separate from any other organization. I mean you have to know what your organization's doing. You have to be well versed across the whole organization. In the military our acronym is PAO, Public Affairs Officer, but I would say the O is for operations because we should be focused on what our organization is doing, what the

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

operations of the organization are.

When any journalist comes to me with a question or I need to be able to explain something, or I need to put something on context so my boss can figure out how to say it, I have to know what the hell we're talking about to be able to -- it can't be foreign to me. I think that's the main, main thing.

It's not different though. I'm going to be long-winded, I just drank a Red Bull.

It's not super different. My brother sold high-end watches, and he's a super successful watch guy, right? And I asked him what makes him good? He said nobody knows these watches better than I do. And that's kind of what I want to -- in any organization that I serve, nobody should know that organization better than I do because I'm the guy explaining it. I'm not a specialist. All facets of the organization.

**Moderator:** But there must be something different. Having covered the military for a long time, now I'm in academics. There's something -- you all wear a uniform but you don't think uniformly. But I would say overall there's more of a distrust -- and like the Heisman to the media -- than one finds in the private sector or the arts, elsewhere. If you disagree, please say so.

**COL Butler:** No, that's right. Because what the media presents is risk, especially to my bosses, you know, the bosses I work with now aren't going to get promoted any farther, they're all four stars. But coming up, if they're a one-star general and they say something stupid in the media, they think -- I don't think that's true, but they think that might affect them to be a two-star general or adversely affect their organization. And you won't say something stupid in the media if you never talk to the media. Right?

I flip that every time for them, and I say -- I'm trying to, I'm having this conversation with another senior leader in the Pentagon. If you want to be known for achieving things, be bold in the media. Tell people what you're doing and take risk and get out there. Show the American public what we're doing.

I'll just go one more thing on this. We're lucky. We live in a very, very unique country. There's a lot of rhetoric out there

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

about the free press or the transparent, not transparent government. I've been around the world, these guys have too, we are very, very lucky as American people to have a government that intends to be transparent and a free press that's resourced to dig into the details and hold people accountable so that you guys, the electorate, can make informed decisions. We're just so, so lucky to be Americans in that way. Hopefully that doesn't go away. I think that's at risk, but I do take pause in how different we are as a country.

**Moderator:** If I can just foot-stomp your comments. Having spent most of my adult life around the military, it's incredible to me that officers who run to the sound of fire, who don't let weather or terrain stop them, quake in their Army boots when there are reporters on the phone. It's really strange to me.

What I say to them is, if you talk to this reporter, I can't guarantee you'll like the story, but your voice will be represented. But if you don't talk to them, I guarantee you won't like the story.

**COL Butler:** That's fair. The really good ones love the media. Not because they want to be super stars or whatever, because they're usually pretty smart and interesting people.

Think about this guy. He's covering the Pentagon for 14 years. He knows probably a little bit more than I do about what's going on in the Pentagon. So the smart generals, the really good, bold generals are super friendly with the media.

**Moderator:** You talked about how the one-stars -- I'll put you on the spot here. What does Colonel Butler know today that Colonel Butler wishes LT Butler, Captain Butler and Major Butler knew?

**COL Butler:** One thing is, and General George says this quite a bit. Life is not a race, like we're not trying to get to a finish line from A to B. So you can take -- and this is really, you guys can take all kinds of circuitous routes to where you're going. Just because the rulebook said, high school to college to career to this to this to this, it doesn't mean you have to run that race. Especially now, I think you have the chance to do quite a bit and you should take that kind of risk.

I think that oftentimes, especially in the military, because

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

it's a hierarchical system. We have career maps that say this is what you're supposed to do. We do that. I've been lucky, though, that I got taken off that path and landed in Special Operations. I've done a lot of cool things that were not prescribed to me. And I became a public affairs guy. That was certainly not prescribed to me. I had plenty of people tell me not to do that.

**Moderator:** For those of you who don't know the military well, Colonel Butler has a Ranger tab on his shoulder, one of the most difficult trainings in any military anywhere in the world. And he's Airborne on the other shoulder. So --

You mentioned Special Operations. They're known as the quiet professionals. More often than that, they're the silent professionals. Talk a little bit about how you balance the public's right to know what the military is doing in its name, and the understandable need for operational security at some place like Special Operations Command, which as you all know holds not just the Rangers, but runs all the groups they're making news about. Delta, SEALs, all that stuff. The most secret units we have. How do you balance that, sir?

**COL Butler:** It's inevitable. So we did a super cool operation in Libya. We captured a guy -- I said we. It wasn't me. I was on a bigger ship off the coast with lots of men. We captured a guy and put him on little boats to bring him to the big boat, right? As soon as the little boats pulled off the shore, it was probably Eric Schmitt, published the story. We, one, had no idea that he knew. But two, the operation wasn't over yet. People were still at risk. We certainly had an interest in that not getting out. But that's just the way it happened.

So really over my career timeline, it's gotten so much that you can't hide. People know what we're doing just about anywhere. Right? The bin Laden raid, there was some dude on Twitter that was like hey, there's a bunch of helicopters over my house. This is weird.

**Moderator:** Sure.

**COL Butler:** I have no idea if this answers your question. It doesn't actually.

Let's just talk about laundering information real quick. How

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

information becomes fact over time, or gets out of whack.

So we were doing, again we, we were doing an operation in Yemen and I forget what the operation was, why we were doing it. Unfortunately a SEAL was killed in the operation and we crashed a CV-22, like a big helicopter thing. It went heartily awry actually. And it was the first operation under President Trump. So you could see how this operation would be looked at in a political frame, right? Everybody was waiting to see what happens with President Trump in the new administration and we do this operation and a whole bunch of bad things happen and a Navy SEAL was killed.

It was Eric Schmitt who I was talking to on the phone and said - - this is about 24 hours after the operation -- said we're talking to some folks, in Yemen. This is the reach of the New York Times, right? They've got folks in Yemen, of course they do. We're talking to some folks in Yemen and they said they heard the helicopters ahead of the thing so Dave, I think your operation was compromised. I was like compromised? Compromised? What is that? Nooooo. You know, this is semantics. I'm like well, it wasn't really compromised. You know, I'm a spokesman. So we're going back and forth.

So he agreed, I don't know if he actually agreed to this, but he -- it wasn't like a main part of the story. It wasn't a New York Times headline, "Operation Compromised. Navy SEAL Dead" or anything like that. It was part of the story. Responsibly they had to say some folks in Yemen heard this.

So it's a little bit of pack journalism, is that the term? Where everybody follows? Pack journalism. The New York Times publishes, everybody in the Pentagon is chasing that story. They want to match it so they try to publish, and most of the time they can, so they said according to the New York Times, you know? But it's in the news cycle now. It's on TV. And I'm like man, this one word got so far out of hand that we're in a really bad situation now. The President's like going to have to explain this to the American people. And I remember so vividly, Senator McCain came off the floor and there was usually a little pack of cameras right outside the floor of the Senate. And he walked out and he was like that Special Operations raid under the President was compromised. And I was like oh, God, this is like so bad.

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

So I have no idea what your question was. [Laughter]. I only bring that up to just say information nowadays, these days, it's just like it's everywhere and so fast. And right or wrong, it's really, really difficult to control.

So the OpSec, operational security discussions I have with our Intelligence officers, with my bosses, I say we're going to hold this as long as we can, assume it's going to get out, know what to do when it gets out, and I'm going to lean on my relationship with journalists to make sure that there's nobody at risk.

Thom's had plenty of scoops before. And we've gone to Thom and said, hey man, can you just hold that? You'll be the first to know, but do not put these men and women at risk. And of course Thom or any of the journalists in the Pentagon or anywhere else will say got it. Nobody's going to put an American soldier at risk for a scoop. They might accidentally. Anyway.

**Moderator:** Moving from one mountain top to another mountain top, that was Special Operations Command. Then you became chief spokesman for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The military's highest-ranking officer. Under General Milley.

Now if I remember your career correctly, Colonel, you came on after Lafayette Square.

**COL Butler:** Yeah.

**Moderator:** You all remember Chairman Milley in uniform marched with President Trump out to view what was going on.

**COL Butler:** Do you guys remember that?

**Moderator:** Again, I've known General Milley. Not speaking for him. I don't need to. He did not know it was going to become so politicized. Right? He did not go as a potted plant, but that's what happened. He gave a speech at National Defense University a week or two later, a very brave thing to do, admitting what so many senior officials don't admit. He said, I made a mistake.

So had you been his spokesman then, what would you have done and what did you learn when you became his spokesman that helped you do your job for him? And my history is correct, is that right?

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

**COL Butler:** That's right. I was kind of interviewing for the job when that was happening.

I think they did it right, and General Milley has a knack, he's one of the generals that is certainly happy to talk to the media. He's got a great relationship with the media. And he's such a constitutionalist, and such a like fierce American that he does believe in the free press. Sometimes it made my life a little bit difficult.

So I thought fundamentally that was handled very well. Of course the apology was the right thing to do, a brave thing to do, and not something that anybody normally does. But what he did, because he's got a great relationship with the press, is the same day he brought a bunch of people in on background and off the record and explained to them what happened. Then he did the apology in kind of a formalized speech in front of National Defense University. It was Covid, so it was recorded. And then we talked about that I almost say -- I worked for him for three years. Ninety percent of the interviews at least had a question about that. And he was always bummed out about it, because he was like you know, I'm the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, my legacy is this, he called it the Perp Walk. One walk behind President Trump where -- just for the record, he's well behind the President and he sees what's happening and he goes to his security guard, Chuck, this big massive guy, and he was like this is (expletive deleted) up, Chuck, let's get the (expletive deleted) out of here.

**Moderator:** I may edit that out of the transcript.

**COL Butler:** Yeah. And they beelined, and the President did the whole thing in front of the church with the Bible and all that, and General Milley wasn't there for that part because he said this is jacked up and it's time to leave. So. Interesting times.

**Moderator:** Those lessons again, you had -- I'm not going to make it about domestic politics because there was so much internationally, but you also were there January 6<sup>th</sup>.

**COL Butler:** Yes.

**Moderator:** Another very difficult day for our country, for our democracy and for the military. There were some who wanted to

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

call out the active duty force to police, and you all know there's all kinds of laws about when the active duty force can and can't be used, et cetera. Colonel to the extent you can, talk to us about not the day, but your public affairs advice that day.

**COL Butler:** What were you guys doing? Were you here? You were in high school. You can say it. We're old, you're not.

And speaking of being old, like I'm 75 years old, I broke my hip --

**Moderator:** You're not 75 years old.

**COL Butler:** On Thanksgiving, the Thanksgiving before, I was riding my bike in Alexandria and I was just going through [inaudible], and I crashed my bike and I broke my hip like a 75 year old man. In the Army, you know, they put like three giant metal screws in there. So even by January 6<sup>th</sup> I was still on crutches. I remember in General Milley's office and we got that report that there were shots fired in the Capitol and then we turned on the news. The joke goes that I threw my crutches out the window and it was off to the races after that.

But we got some, we got a lot of flack, the military did, for not responding fast enough to the calls for security. And it's a really complicated situation. It's actually super weird. Something to study someday.

Get this, who's the governor of Washington, DC? Who's the mayor of Washington, DC? Mayor Bowser. Who's the governor? The Secretary of the Army. How weird is that?

**Moderator:** What he's saying is the National Guard answer to governors, which in the District of Columbia is this one of a kind thing with the mayor. The mayor does not own the DC Guard. The Army Secretary does, it was Ryan McCarthy at the time.

**COL Butler:** It's crazy, because that's not what he does day-to-day. Not what she does day-to-day. So there's all these calls to deploy the National Guard. We were in a strange time in the administration. We had an Acting Secretary of Defense, Chris Miller. And it was a lame duck administration, right? I was right outside -- I was inside and outside the Secretary of Defense's office with General Milley. And we finally got the

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

gravity of the situation. General Milley went to the Secretary of the Army and the Director of the National Guard, whatever he's called, and said get the National Guard from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, DC and get them here as fast as you can.

Is anybody in the National Guard? They're just like you. They're college students. They're teachers. They're not active duty servicemen who wear the uniform every day. so that's kind of a high order to deploy all these folks, get them all up and ready and deploy them.

There was a lot of politics, because remember, just before that in June we had Black Lives Matter protests, and the National Guard got a lot of bad media for how they were interacting with the Black Lives Matter folks. So the mayor at the time said we don't want the National Guard. And it was a lot.

So the Pentagon press really pretty much understood because we've got people that have been in there for 14 years or a couple of years and they know about like the deployment of the National Guard, but the American public they're like well, you guys have guns. Why weren't you at the Capitol? We spent a lot of time trying to explain it's just not that simple.

We had a pre-planned interview with -- it wasn't even an interview. It was a pre-planned talk with Andrea Mitchell on NBC, she was like the moderator for some discussion, but she's a news person. So she asked why wasn't the military there fast enough, General Milley? And he answered that we were there super fast. That's just not the way it works. There's a lot of cops there, whatever. Didn't think it was a big deal.

She had Speaker of the House Pelosi right after that, like literally immediately after, and she's like General Milley said the military responded very quickly and it was fine. She's like, well General Milley doesn't know what he's talking about. So that created a whole new news cycle that we had to deal with. Anyway, we just did a lot of explaining.

**Moderator:** You said the American people don't understand that the Guard can be deployed in domestic law enforcement like after hurricanes and fires. The active duty, it takes a presidential order to get them on the streets of America. And as a democracy, that's the way you want it. We are not an authoritarian country where the Army's out on the street

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

shooting people.

So what you had to do was the right thing constitutionally, but it was misunderstood.

**COL Butler:** That was one of General Milley's rules. He said, We're never going to turn the guns on the American people. That's a guy you can get behind there. It's unfortunate that he had to say that, but that was one of our things.

**Moderator:** Never turn the guns on the American people. If you see General Milley, thank him for that one.

**COL Butler:** Hell, yeah.

**Moderator:** As a total policy wonk, I do have one policy question for you, then I'll invite you to have any wrap-up comments and then go to questions for a bit. Then we'll adjourn for free food and continue the conversation.

**COL Butler:** Is that why you guys are here? [Laughter].

**Moderator:** Sure. That's why I'm here.

So my policy wonk question is earlier this week Eric Edelman and Jane Harman released -- they were the chairs of something called the Bipartisan Congressional Commission on National Defense Strategy. It's a document ordered by Congress. All of these defense intellectuals look at the military, military spending. What they said was the world is in a new age of danger. Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and as of today we don't have enough budget for our strategy nor enough force for our strategy.

As the communications advisor to the Army Chief of Staff, the largest force in the military, what do you think?

**COL Butler:** Does anybody know what the defense budget is?

**Voice:** \$866 billion.

**COL Butler:** Nicely done. Are you in the Army?

**Voice:** No.

**COL Butler:** Do you know what the Army is?

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

**Voice:** No.

**COL Butler:** Do you guys? You might know.

\$185 billion. That's a lot of money, right? \$860 billion?

That's so much money, guys. That's so, so much money. My advice to General George, and he doesn't want to say this, is never say we need more money. We have a lot of money. The way it's spent is really, really bad. Our ability to spend money is wrapped up in mountains of laws and regulation. You want your military to have congressional oversight. You want the Congress to be able to know why and how we're spending money. But the way we spend money is very, very wasteful. Not as an Army or as a DoD, as a government, as an institution, just because it's the way it's regulated and managed.

So we're trying to work on that. It's very, very difficult to try to get these laws changed. People really have to want it.

But I'll tell you, this is my stump speech, just very quickly. The world has changed on the battlefield, right? Technology has changed so fast. You guys see it in Ukraine. I don't know how much TikTok you watch in terms of like the drone videos and -- that's not stuff that we, that our military is used to dealing with and it's certainly not the way we spend money. We buy tanks seven years ago at a time and technology changes seven weeks at a time. So we're working very, very hard with the Congress and even in our internal processes to change the way we spend money, spend it much, much more efficiently and be able to stay ahead of technology. Because right now we're staying behind technology. It's difficult.

The other question is do we have a force big enough? That goes to money. I should be aware that \$185 billion, just under 50 percent goes to payroll, goes to people. And we have an Army of, we talked about it today, we've got 460,000. We have an Army of about 460,000 people. And we recruit about 60,000 people a year. And technically, that's probably not enough for what we're being asked to do. Let me put it that way.

**Moderator:** You either have too much strategy or not enough money to do it.

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

**COL Butler:** Yes.

**Moderator:** A quick question. Who here has military personnel in your family? (Raised hands.) That's a higher number than you normally see.

Before we ask student questions, Colonel, any concluding thoughts, ideas, things you want to share?

**COL Butler:** No, I've been talking so much --

**Moderator:** -- Dave Butler's career?

**COL Butler:** No, I want to hear you guys' questions. Hopefully it's not boring, and let's have a good conversation.

**Moderator:** If you can just say who you are and what you're studying and where, that would be great.

**Student:** Hi, I'm Elijah. I'm a [inaudible] major in Chicago.

**COL Butler:** What major?

**Student:** [Inaudible]. So my question is more like [inaudible] focused and crisis happenings. I [inaudible], so I was wondering like how you guys interact with each other and make sure that you have the same message in situations where it's very volatile and lot of information [inaudible].

**COL Butler:** In terms of communication, right?

**Student:** Yes.

**COL Butler:** That's a great question.

Even when we're doing operations anywhere in the world, the Ambassador's still the person in charge. Even like when we're all the way in Afghanistan or Iraq or something, we have massive amounts of troops, the Ambassador is the person who really is approving the bigger things going on.

I was the lead spokesman in Afghanistan in like 2017 or '18. I spent a lot of time with the Ambassador and with the embassy spokesperson there. So I think it's one of the rules of communication where you're only supposed to talk about your

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

thing, right? And I think most of the time if we're talking about military operations or something military, the State Department doesn't get too concerned about it. Once you start veering into State-like stuff, I might get a phone call or something.

State's way different in the way they communicate. Not just anybody can talk to the media in the State Department. It usually comes back here to DC to be able to talk to like a tier one media. In the military, we're much more decentralized. So although we wouldn't expect like a staff sergeant or a young soldier to be talking to the New York Times, really anybody could go talk to the New York Times about -- as long as they're staying within the rule-set about what they're doing. So that takes some getting used to for State.

Honestly, the communications folks usually kind of envy the way we do it because we're a little bit faster and tell a better story, my opinion. Our stuff is cooler to talk about.

**Moderator:** You have better toys.

**COL Butler:** Much better cool stories.

**Student:** And a follow-up question to that, so you speak to the public. Are those [inaudible] for you or is that stuff that's happening [inaudible]? I know at State like [inaudible]. So like where is that in terms of you? Are you writing the stuff you are [inaudible] in public or in your words, [inaudible] clear the stuff you write on?

**COL Butler:** People don't clear the stuff I talk about. [Laughter]. But I'm a trusted spokesperson for the Army.

One of the things is stay in your lane. Is that a civilian term too? Stay in your lane? It is, right? So as long as you're sticking to your thing, nobody in the Department of Defense would expect me to be talking on the record about what's going on in Israel right now, and Hamas, because that's not my schtick right now. When I was a Joint Staff guy, when I worked for General Milley, I might be talking about that. I probably would be talking about that. But I would be doing it with the NSC's guidance in mind and then with OSD, the Office of the Secretary of Defense's guidance in mind. And I'm trusted to do that. And my bosses are too. So we're much more decentralized.

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

General Milley, honestly. We're on the record, so to just be careful. General Milley, nobody was writing General Milley's talking points, including me. Sometimes we would go out there - he was one of the first guys to say, in New York I remember cringing a little bit, to say that the Ukraine war isn't likely going to end well and we should go to negotiations. That was a far break from where everybody else in the government was at the time, and so I got a lot of phone calls about that. But he's the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He gets to have an opinion.

**Moderator:** And he's been proven right.

**Student:** I'm Juliette, a rising third year in Chicago [inaudible]. I'm working in (inaudible) this summer.

**COL Butler:** [Inaudible] so you can join the Army -- [Laughter].

**Student:** My little brother actually just went to West Point, so I think my family's good. We filled our quota.

**COL Butler:** Congratulations.

**Student:** Yeah, he's in Basic right now. So [inaudible].

**COL Butler:** Jeff's a West Pointer.

**Student:** I wanted to ask a little bit about how you guys plan. You said that you [inaudible] information get out, and you try to make [inaudible] when it does. Obviously organizations like [inaudible] due diligence and try to report as close to the truth as they can find. Maybe not every journalist will. So I wanted to hear a little bit about how you plan [inaudible] information or [inaudible]. Is that factored into the conversation [inaudible]?

**COL Butler:** It does. Sensationalization is somewhat easy, because you kind of know what's, you know, the term of what is it, news value? Anyway. Like you know kind of what's newsworthy and what's interesting, and then you can apply that to how something could be sensationalized.

War stories, real quick? In Afghanistan I was with the commander, a four-star General Scott Miller who was a fabulous guy, and he was standing next to General Raziq who was a

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

commander in the Afghan Police. And right next to him, General Raziq was killed. So a shooter who was posing as a security guard got up and killed General Raziq, right next to General Miller. Right? And then him and I were taking up a fighting position behind a pickup truck after that. `

I called Barbara Starr. She just retired. She was the chief Pentagon correspondent for CNN. Because in my mind, my four-star general just got shot at. This is a major international incident. It's going to be on every news channel. It's going to be the top news in the US, right? So I called Barbara Starr. Within minutes. Like I put my gun away and called Barbara Starr while stuff was still going on. I wanted her to understand the facts. Everybody's okay. The mission continues. General Miller's okay. And you know what? We're going to stay here for a little while. A little tough guy at the end. We're not even going to leave.

So she got the story. It went out. It's like a tidal wave of information. It's all factual. And 24 or 48 hours later I got a call from the New York Times guy in Kabul. He said, you know, man, everybody in this city, and I think this country, thinks that General Miller killed General Raziq. And I was like that's crazy. Come on. And like a rational spokesperson you would say I don't want to address these crazy things because by addressing it, if I'm going to deny it I'm giving it more gravitas, right? I'm putting it more on the stage. But this rumor took over. This misinformation actually took over. And the whole country of Afghanistan basically believed that General Miller, our guy, killed General Raziq, the Afghan.

There's a whole bunch of reasons for that. So not easily controlled. Luckily, we knew a lot of the media in Afghanistan, personally knew them, and we had a lot of venues to talk about it, and we slowly chipped away at it. People were still very, very skeptical.

How do we plan for that? It's really, really hard. It's a long term plan. Like wherever you are, you have to have a relationship with not just the media but the people who are going to influence and inform the population you're at, and I've got to be able to call Thom or OpEd, Thom's counterpart wherever and say hey man, what you're hearing is not true. You trust me, I trust you, so please go tell the people the truth about this. Easier said than done. People believe some crazy stuff. And

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

we're seeing it more and more and more and more. And then deep fakes and I mean it's a wild world you guys are going to be operating in.

**Moderator:** That's an incredible story.

**Student:** My name's Felicita, I'm also [inaudible] here [inaudible] policy and an intern at the ACLU [inaudible].

My question is, building on that, are there any times when you felt like the media doesn't trust you? And if there haven't been times like that, how do you build trust with the media?

**COL Butler:** There have been. Luckily since I'm wearing a uniform people know that I'm not a politician, right? So these guys know and I mean everybody in the Pentagon press knows, I'm not -- I was going to say I'm not going to spin -- well, I mean. [Laughter]. I'm certainly not going to misinform anybody. I will tell our side of the story, and I am a biased representative of the military. But I'm not going to misinform anybody. And that's the rule. If the people in my job who do misinform people, you know, they're done. We don't play those games. If you're wearing a uniform.

But I work for politicians. We're in a civilian-led military. And I'll just -- I remember one time, without naming names, we got into a fight with the Russians in Syria. This was a couple of years ago. And now they're kind of famous, the Wagner Group, people didn't really know who they were then, but they were creeping up on our positions. And we had communication channels to the Russians and we were like hey, tell your guys to turn around because they're coming closer to us and they have guns and stuff and we're going to perceive this as a threat eventually. And the Russians were like no, not our guys. We're like yep, those are your guys. They came closer, and we said if your guys don't turn around we're going to do something about this. They continued to come. I don't say this lightly. We killed like 200 of these guys. It was terrible. Right? Because they wouldn't turn around.

Just to say we're very thankful to have the trust of the media. We work really hard not to damage that trust in any way. There are plenty of disagreements, there are plenty of times when the reporters are like I don't believe what you're saying. Most of the time, to be honest, it's because the reporter usually knows

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

something that I just don't know. Most of the time they're right, I'll just admit it. But there's been times, especially as things get more and more polarized, when the media don't believe us. And there's some crazies out there nowadays that call my office and call me a liar. You know.

**Moderator:** Maybe two more and we'll adjourn for food.

**Student:** Hi, my name's Vance. I'm going to be a fourth year at U Chicago studying economics and public policy. I'm at the White House working communications.

I was wondering if you could talk about what you think some of the advantages and disadvantages are for joining the military, for people interested in national security or defense careers.

**COL Butler:** Yeah. I'm a little biased, guys. I just had this conversation with my son, he's 15. He was like wait, you don't have to join for 30 years? I was like no. No.

It's an awesome short-term deal. It's an awesome long-term deal, but you've got to be into it.

I just think of a young person -- now I really do sound like a 75 year old. I think of a young person coming out of college and think of what four years in the military can do for you, or five or six years. Whatever makes you comfortable. Probably not less than four. You get to go around the world with your buddies, usually. You know. Men and women that are trusted and are trained and are good Americans. You get to go around the world and do super cool things, meet super cool people, and be a part of something much larger than yourself.

It's such a unique opportunity. And I think, this would be on the record. I just met, with General George I just met Jamie Dimon, the CEO, the President of JP Morgan Chase, we were in New York and sat down with him. He was just like I want you to know, you've got to do better telling the story. I hire veterans. I go out of my way to hire people that have some experience in the military because they come with leadership, they come with teamwork, they come with some type of responsibility that you don't get anywhere else.

When I popped out of college I was, I don't know, 23 years old or whatever, I was in charge of 42 dudes. It was all dudes at

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

the time. I was in the Infantry. I was in charge of 42 dudes and we bounced around the world for a couple of years and just did cool things. I fought fires in Montana. This was peacetime. We went all over the place. The California deserts. And I just, it's such a unique opportunity that you don't get anywhere else.

Disadvantages? You've got to uproot your life a little bit. We move around a decent amount. It's hard to like -- unless you're going to -- if you're single I'd say it's hard to like meet somebody and find a long-term relationship because we're back and forth and gone a lot, and I mean just to be honest, keep looking at the on the record, Thom. We don't get stationed in like the best places in the country. Some places are cool, but a lot of it's kind of rural. So there are some disadvantages.

You know what most kids would say? The disadvantage is you're going to get shot at or you're going to get hurt or PTSD or whatever. The facts just don't line up to that. There's a lot of news that's interesting and exciting. Very few of us get shot at, especially now. And you don't leave the military damaged, you actually leave much better as a person. There is so much value.

I'm biased.

What disadvantages did I miss? I want to be fair.

**Voice:** [Inaudible].

Today it's a little bit easier than when I joined [inaudible]. [Inaudible].

**Moderator:** But also to be fair, using the power of the chair, there are other careers that bounce you around a bunch without your own choice. I.e., being a foreign correspondent. So there are civilian careers, very meaningful, also bring you great joy. If you want to be a 9 to 5 person, with all due respect accountants, go to accounting school.

I said two more, but I saw more hands. So those will be the last two. And I hope the Colonel and Majors, you can hang around for a bit.

**COL Butler:** That would be great.

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

**Student:** [Inaudible].

**COL Butler:** What's your last name?

**Student:** [Inaudible].

**COL Butler:** Have we ever talked before?

**Student:** [Inaudible].

**COL Butler:** Okay.

**Student:** [Inaudible]. Do you [inaudible]. I just remember [inaudible] statement that [inaudible]. And [inaudible]. Obviously the Ukrainians [inaudible], but I was curious to know if you [inaudible]?

**COL Butler:** It's less strategy than you think. Just to explain practically, I was signaling with the Ukrainians Chief of Defense's person like me, and it was like hey, we're going to probably say this. What do you guys have to say? And it was like literally, that's how we built strategy.

I think various parts of our government had that, but it's not as well synchronized I don't think as you think. Since we've been doing this now for a couple of years, we're better off on that, but we're trying to -- we try to be careful. We've made mistakes in other countries. We try to be careful not to tell Ukrainians what to tell Ukrainians. And other countries what to tell their own populations, and just leave that to them and we'll take care of the Americans and the rest of the world that we have to talk to. But it was interesting.

Most of it's personal relationships. General Milley would be on the phone with General Zaluzhnyi. They were friends. Milley would pull me into those phone calls, so I'd sit there with him and listen to them. So I kind of, I would be able to monitor. And then I would go text his spokesperson and say this is what's going on, this is what I think we should do.

**Moderator:** Last formal question?

**Student:** Hi. I'm [Inaudible], University of Chicago studying history. I'm with the Treasury this summer.

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

I wanted to go back to the story about General Raziq. There was an interesting like New York Times piece about him that came out relatively recently. It was like accusations against him. I was wondering what kind of, the communication strategies you guys develop when you're engaging with pretty controversial figures.

**COL Butler:** That's so great you think we have this great strategy. [Laughter]. That's why the Russians can't figure us out -- [Laughter].

We don't have a great communication strategy for that. Those are, there were two articles, right? That was a great series, and that guy, I forget his name, super, super talented journalist, of course it was New York Times. So I talked to him while he was writing the article.

Sometimes, I'll choose my words wisely. In Afghanistan, in the thick of things, you know, you're going to have to make some hard choices about who you're partnering with. Hopefully that reflected in the article. He wasn't a great guy, but he was our not so great guy in Kandahar. But that was an interesting time, and a lot of that was made known to us through the article after the fact. We knew he wasn't like a Boy Scout or whatever, but we didn't know all that stuff that this guy reported out.

A lot of times the media do a great job of being able to report that kind of stuff out that we just don't get that. That was one of our shortcomings in the Raziq story. You know, we're in a foreign country, we don't speak the language, we don't really understand the culture, we don't understand -- Raziq is layered like this. It was this massively complex social network and drugs and weapons and crime and, you know, we didn't figure that out. Those were tough times.

So we don't have a communication strategy, to answer your question. Thanks for making me feel bad about that. [Laughter].

**Moderator:** So Colonel, in conclusion as you can see, a standing room only crowd, a number of people who wanted to hear what you have to say. You've had a front row seat at the Security -- You've served our nation. This has been a master class in communications. All I can say is thank you most sincerely, sir.

Colonel David Butler - 8/1/24

**COL Butler:** Thanks for having me.

# # # #