

Commander's Resignation Shows a New Era of Micromanagement

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Global Research, March 13, 2008

Washington Post 13 March 2008

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

On the surface, the early retirement of Adm. William Fallon appears to be another instance of the Bush administration's contempt for military advice and a mark of potential war with Iran.

Fallon's "views on strategy in the region have put him at odds with the Bush administration," says The Post. Fallon "had rankled senior officials of the Bush administration in recent months with comments that emphasized diplomacy over conflict in dealing with Iran, that endorsed further troop withdrawals from Iraq beyond those already under way and that suggested the United States had taken its eye off the military mission in Afghanistan" says the New York Times.

Yet we are not going to war against Iran, and Fallon's leaving is not going to change anything in Iraq. The issue is that we have entered a new era of micromanagement and control, where the view of the "commander" in the field is secondary to the needs of Washington.

Fallon, the commander of the U.S. Central Command, which oversees military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, abruptly resigned yesterday, asking for and receiving permission from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to seek early retirement. Known as "Fox" Fallon, he had taken over the job from two failed Iraq commanders just last year.

The "reason" for Fallon stepping down is ostensibly a profile in this month's Esquire magazine where Fallon is portrayed as challenging President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney over a potential war with Iran. In the article, written by a military expert and former War College professor, Fallon says a war with Iran would be ill-advised. Last year, he also said that "bellicose comments" from Washington about Iran were "not particularly helpful," an admonition that many saw as a direct criticism of the president.

In a statement issued by his headquarters yesterday, Fallon acknowledged that "recent press reports suggesting a disconnect between my views and the president's policy objectives have become a distraction at a critical time and hamper efforts" across his theater. "I don't believe there have been any differences about the objectives of our policy" in the Middle East, Fallon said.

Many senior military officers were quick yesterday to point out that Fallon's views were in line with both Gates and Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Yes, perhaps Fallon had been forceful in his opinion, and didn't believe that war with Iran made sense or was winnable. But that is not a sufficient explanation for his resignation.

Previously the commander of Pacific Command, perhaps the most powerful and expansive posting for any American military officer, Fallon took up the Middle East post and soon found himself having to contend with a losing war in Iraq, a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and a White House seemingly intent on confrontation with Iran. What is more, though Fallon was the new “combatant commander” with the authority to direct day-to-day dealings and tactics of the Iraq war, he instead found himself largely marginalized.

Fallon was a naval officer commanding in a ground-forces theater that had only seen Army and Marine Corps commanders. And with the anointment of Gen. David H. Petraeus as savior of Iraq, he was made secondary in terms of directing the war effort there.

Then came an odd phenomenon associated with the surge and the American political debate about support for the troops. The armed services, which are supposed to raise and train the forces, were pitted against the “needs” of the commander, who is supposed to determine requirements and strategy to fight and win (under the law, the combatant commander, and not the services, is supreme). For political and domestic reasons, the Army and Marine Corps’ views regarding how many troops they could afford and the health of the services became paramount.

What is more, when President Bush said he was listening to his “commanders,” even if it were indeed true, the impression was that he was listening to Petraeus and not Fallon. So the supreme commander for the Middle East became more adviser and kibitzer than commander.

Relegated to handling the Iran portfolio, military strategy and approaches regarding Tehran soon became a point of friction between Fallon and the White House. In the end, it was Fallon’s strange and untenable position as commander-but-not-commander that doomed him.

In Esquire and in the news media, Fallon is characterized as speaking out on Afghanistan and troop strengths in Iraq and Iran, as if somehow he was stepping out of line or “meddling.” Some will find it worrisome that the administration only makes a pretense of listening to its military commanders. I find it much more worrisome that there is nothing particularly “military” associated with most of the decisions we are making regarding Iraq, Afghanistan or Iran, and yet we continue to make a fetish of according the brass some superior understanding of the nation’s needs.

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