

Militarism and Democracy: the Implications of the McChrystal Affair

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The political crisis in Washington, sparked by the publication of inflammatory comments by General Stanley McChrystal, the overall commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, culminated in the firing of McChrystal Wednesday morning and his replacement by General David Petraeus, the former US commander in Iraq.

McChrystal was summoned from Afghanistan to a White House meeting where he submitted his resignation over the publication of a lengthy article in Rolling Stone magazine, in which he and his top aides were quoted making disparaging references to President Obama and nearly all the administration's top national security officials.

Obama accepted the resignation, and McChrystal left the White House immediately. After three hours of meetings with his national security council and Pentagon brass, Obama appeared before television cameras to announce McChrystal's ouster and the nomination of Petraeus to succeed him.

In his brief remarks, with no questions allowed from the media, Obama emphasized that he remained fully in support of the program of military escalation and counterinsurgency warfare with which McChrystal is identified. He pledged to do "whatever is necessary to succeed in Afghanistan," adding, "This is a change in personnel but it is not a change in policy."

General Petraeus, who was McChrystal's superior as head of the U.S. Central Command, was closely involved in the administration's Afghan policy deliberations and fully supported the decision last December to dispatch an additional 30,000 US troops.

Two aspects of the McChrystal affair deserve consideration. First, and most obviously, the firing of McChrystal demonstrates the worsening position of the US intervention in Afghanistan. The general would not have been summarily dismissed over a magazine article if the war had been going well.

The day McChrystal was fired, the death toll for US and NATO troops rose to 76 in June, making this the worst month for the foreign occupation forces since the US first invaded Afghanistan in October 2001. Among the Afghan people, President Hamid Karzai is widely reviled as a corrupt American puppet. Antiwar sentiment is mounting in all the European countries with military contingents in Afghanistan, as well as in the United States, where a majority in opinion polls now say the war is not worth fighting.

A report issued Monday by a congressional committee found that the supply chain for US troops in Afghanistan funnels hundreds of millions of dollars into the coffers of corrupt local

warlords, many of whom in turn pay Taliban insurgents not to attack their trucks. The Pentagon is thus indirectly financing the insurgency, to the tune of \$2 million a week according to one estimate cited in the report.

On Tuesday evening, three of the most pro-war US senators, John McCain and Lindsey Graham, both Republicans, and Independent Democrat Joseph Lieberman, issued a joint statement condemning McChrystal's comments as "inappropriate and inconsistent with the traditional relationship between commander-in-chief and the military."

They effectively endorsed his dismissal in advance, declaring, "The decision concerning General McChrystal's future is a decision to be made by the president of the United States."

The backing for Obama from congressional Republicans and many right-wing media pundits shows that significant sections of the ruling elite have lost confidence in McChrystal and his counterinsurgency strategy. There was growing criticism for the past month, following the evident failure of the US intervention in Marjah and the forced postponement of the planned offensive into Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city and a Taliban stronghold.

Obama's selection of Petraeus to replace McChrystal is a clear effort to appease these right-wing critics. Petraeus directed the US military escalation in Iraq in 2007-2008, which is credited in ruling circles with salvaging the US intervention there, although some 90,000 US troops still remain. The appointment of Petraeus was suggested in advance by neoconservative columnist William Kristol, and hailed by the right-wing media as a political masterstroke.

The second key element in the McChrystal affair is what it has revealed about the internal state of affairs in the US military. An entire layer has developed in the officer corps and high command, which is openly contemptuous of civilian authority, while their nominal superiors are themselves thoroughly intimidated by military opposition.

The Army plays an ever-growing role in American political life, fueled by an endless succession of wars. The US military has been continuously engaged in combat operations for nearly nine years, the longest such period in American history, and the Pentagon operates under a "Long War" doctrine, which envisions a more or less indefinite continuation of such warfare.

A few of the more perceptive press commentators have pointed out this aspect of the McChrystal affair. Simon Tisdall, writing in the British Guardian, observed, "The disrespectful behaviour of the US commander in Afghanistan and his aides was symptomatic of a more deeply rooted, potentially dangerous malaise, analysts suggest. This week's events might thus be termed a very American coup."

Liberal Yale law professor Bruce Ackerman, writing in the Los Angeles Times about "An increasingly politicized military," argued that the McChrystal affair is more ominous than the celebrated Truman-MacArthur clash of 1951, which ended with MacArthur's dismissal in the midst of the Korean War. That is because McChrystal voices openly the sentiments an officer corps that has become, through a political selection over the past three decades, overwhelmingly oriented to the right-wing of the Republican Party and to Christian fundamentalism.

Ackerman cites surveys showing that "a majority of active-duty officers believe that senior

officers should ‘insist’ on making civilian officers accept their viewpoints” and that “only 29% believe that high-ranking civilians, rather than their military counterparts, ‘should have the final say on what type of military force to use’.”

The ominous implications of this trend were expressed in two reports published today in the New York Times. An article by correspondent C.J. Chivers describes growing frustration among field officers, NCOs and rank-and-file soldiers in Afghanistan with McChrystal’s counterinsurgency tactics, which, in the name of reducing civilian casualties, call for “further tightening rules guiding the use of Western firepower—airstrikes and guided rocket attacks, artillery barrages and even mortar fire—to support troops on the ground.”

Chivers claims the rules “have shifted risks from Afghan civilians to Western combatants,” leading to widespread resentment among the troops over “being handcuffed” in the fight against the Taliban and other insurgents. His unstated conclusion is that the replacement of McChrystal should be welcomed as a step to unleashing the full power of American weaponry on the Afghan population.

A commentary by correspondent Robert Mackey, published on the Times web site, takes note of the Chivers article and poses the question, “Is a Culture War Between American Soldiers and Civilians Inevitable?” Mackey points to the growing gulf between the American population and an all-volunteer military, much of its leadership recruited from the families that have provided several generations of military officers.

McChrystal himself, he notes, was the son of a major general who served in the US occupation government in Germany after World War II and later at the Pentagon. All five of McChrystal’s siblings either joined the military or married into it.

What such commentaries begin to reveal is the emergence in the United States of a distinct military caste, virulently hostile to democracy, civilian control and any form of popular opposition to American imperialism.

The firing of McChrystal and his replacement by Petraeus represents, not a blow against this trend, but the means by which Obama and the Democratic Party adapt themselves to the demands of the military brass. McChrystal’s only crime—his “error in judgment”, in Obama’s parlance—was to express in too blunt and unguarded a fashion the sentiments of broad sections of the US officer corps.

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