

Should Obama Fire Gen. McChrystal?

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Not too late for President Barack Obama to follow the example of Harry Truman, who fired Gen. Douglas McArthur in 1951 for insubordination.

Then, as now, the stakes were high. Then it was Korea; now it is Afghanistan.

No more slaps on the wrist for Gen. Stanley McChrystal. In my view, Commander-in-Chief Obama should fire him for cause.

Then

In the Truman-McArthur showdown nearly six decades ago, the President and his senior advisers were preparing to engage North Korea and China in peace negotiations, when MacArthur, commander of the U.N. forces in Korea, issued an unauthorized statement containing a veiled threat to expand the war into China.

McArthur had been playing a back-channel game to win the support of like-minded Republican congressmen to widen the war, when Truman faced him down. With the backing of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as the secretaries of state and defense, he rose to the occasion and fired the distinguished "old soldier."

Now

Today, Gen. McChrystal is conducting a subtler but equally insubordinate campaign for wider war in Afghanistan, with the backing of CENTCOM commander David Petraeus. It is now even clearer in retrospect that the President should not have appointed McChrystal in the first place, given what was already known of his role in covering up the killing of football star Pat Tillman and condoning the torture practices by troops under McChrystal's earlier command in Iraq.

Two months ago when McChrystal became more and more outspoken about what he considered the best approach to the Afghanistan war, policy discussions were under way in Washington to help the President make enlightened policy choices among the various views and possibilities. Since decisions were (are?) still pending, and since McChrystal's private input was already part of the mix, he was clearly out of line in going public at so sensitive a time.

Senior generals know better than to do that; there is little doubt his outspokenness was deliberate. McChrystal should meet the same fate as McArthur, and "silently steal away." Obama should have taken the telegenic general to the woodshed instead of inviting him to confer quietly on Air Force One.

McChrystal to Obama: Fogh You

McChrystal's continuing defiance shines through in the gratuitous remarks by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at a NATO meeting on Nov. 17 in Edinburgh. Siding clearly with McChrystal, Petraeus, and Joint Chiefs Chairman Mike Mullen in the intense debate over sending more forces to Afghanistan, Rasmussen blithely announced that NATO countries will soon order "substantially more forces" there.

Rasmussen promised "new momentum" behind the military campaign, adding, "I'm confident it will be a counter-insurgency approach," which is what McChrystal says he needs 40,000 additional American troops to undertake.

But here's the thing: Rasmussen's past behavior makes it abundantly clear that, on such matters, the only tea leaves he reads are the ones given him by those he concludes wield the real power in Washington. Besides, he was one of George W. Bush's best buddies in the days of "shock and awe."

Something Rotten in Denmark

As Denmark's Prime Minister (2001-2009), Anders Fogh Rasmussen was one of George W. Bush's most sycophantic supporters-particularly when it came to the war on Iraq. Although amply warned by Danish intelligence officers of the deceptive nature of the U.S. case for war, he shunned them and outdid himself cheerleading for war.

For example, while Danish intelligence professionals told then-Prime Minister Rasmussen there was very little evidence that Iraq had "weapons of mass destruction," he decided to take his cue from the neo-cons in Washington. On the day before the invasion of Iraq he told the Danish Parliament:

"Iraq has weapons of mass destruction. This is not something we just believe. We know."

Thus, Rasmussen has a long record of kowtowing to what he perceives to be the power center in Washington. And his perception now? Apparently it is that the real power ain't in the White House this time; it's in the Pentagon.

As NATO Secretary General Rasmussen was announcing what he called plans to send "substantially more forces" to Afghanistan, President Obama, in Beijing, struck a defensive tone in telling CBS News, "I think that Gen. McChrystal shares the same goal I do."

Wait a second; he thinks?

Granted that the President has a lot on his plate and, in my view, is to be applauded for the deliberate pace he has set on making big decisions on Afghanistan, he is projecting the image of a Mr. Milquetoast-a highly educated, well-spoken wuss on many key issues. This is not only damaging on the international scene; it gives the U.S. military and domestic political rivals the idea that he is a slow-moving lightweight, who can be either easily pushed around or evaded when it comes to issues on which they are deeply engaged-like Afghanistan.

Even regarding Rasmussen himself, President Obama was warned about the former Danish prime minister's subservience to Bush and the neo-cons, and yet did not lift a finger to

prevent Rasmussen from becoming NATO Secretary General.

Most stunning is Obama's caving in on the issue of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian areas. In a plaintive, powerless tone, Obama told Fox News on Nov. 18: "Well, there is no doubt that I haven't been able to stop the settlements."

As for his domestic priority of health care, he has not been heard to protest as the draft legislation falls far short of his own expectations.

Kid Gloves for Karzai

In the same acquiescent tone, Obama's senior policy people are telling the Washington Post that U.S. officials, from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on down, have now "turned on the charm" with Afghan President Hamid Karzai. According to the Post, the administration has decided that its tough approach to Karzai was counterproductive, "fueling stress and anger in a beleaguered, conspiracy-minded leader whom the U.S. government needs as a partner."

The Post article says that criticism of the earlier approach is most pronounced among senior U.S. military leaders, who complain about the failure of the State Department to "fix" Karzai's government. Sensitive to that kind of charge, Secretary Clinton is said to have urged Karzai "to use merit, not cronyism, as a criteria (sic) for filling cabinet posts," according to the Post. That should be enough to take care of that problem, don't you suppose?

This may be part of what the Post's hard-right columnist, Michael Gerson had in mind in his Friday op-ed, titled "Obama the Undecider," as Gerson criticized Washington's "dysfunctional Afghan decision-making process." More to the point, Gerson reported that Gen. McChrystal is feeling "stabbed in the back" by the leak of two classified messages from U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan (and former Army general) Karl Eikenberry, arguing against troop increases.

Gerson, actually, makes a valid point in summing up Obama's dilemma. Depending on his ultimate decision, the president "will be vulnerable to charges of buckling to military pressure or disregarding the advice of his commanders."

The sooner President Obama accepts that there is no win-win solution to his dilemma, the better.

Right-wing pressure, including from Robert Gates, the defense secretary Obama kept on from the Bush administration, will not abate. At a press conference yesterday, Gates, who reportedly favors sending 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan made it seem like a foregone conclusion that the President will opt (has opted?) to escalate. He said:

"...I anticipate that as soon as the president makes his decision, we can probably begin flowing some forces pretty quickly after that."

Adm. Mullen was even more specific:

"We think we have a way ahead. But as the secretary said, it's not going to be five brigades — it's not going to be a brigade a month because of the infrastructure piece — the ability to receive it, literally, in Afghanistan.

Pundit Certainty

Most pundits already had concluded, even before Thursday's remarks, that the basic decision to send more troops was a done deal, that the only question remaining is how many can be sent and how quickly, and that Obama's continuing consultation with senior advisors is a charade. They may be right. I'm not sure.

However, if the President is, as he claimed this week, "angrier than Bob Gates about the leaks" regarding Afghanistan policy deliberations, I would think his anger would extend to those feeding talking points to the likes of Rasmussen. There remains a chance, I believe, that Obama may decide to stop letting himself be pushed around.

If Obama does not put a decisive end to McChrystal's politicking, and does not remonstrate with Rasmussen, we can conclude that the pundits are right. If so, and if the troop increase is substantial-even though it will probably be portrayed as mostly for training of the (barely existent) Afghan army-disaster looms both in Afghanistan and in the corridors of power in Washington.

The dangerous impression would persist that, when the chips were down, Obama is no Jack Kennedy, nor Harry Truman, both of whom had the guts to face down the Pentagon by rebuffing military demands for wider war.

It would be difficult indeed to write a Profile in Courage for one who bowed as low to his recalcitrant, myopic generals, as he did, de rigueur, to the Japanese emperor last Saturday.

If Obama does bow to the generals, "transfer cases" (the euphemism the Washington Post uses for coffins carrying soldiers' remains) will continue to arrive in Delaware-and in greater numbers. By expanding the war in Afghanistan, Obama would let down these dead soldiers and their grieving families. Euphemism will be no help at all. And it will be a daunting challenge, to even the most soaring rhetoric, to make a persuasive case that these dead have not died in vain.

The supreme irony would remain; namely, that the Republicans would continue to batter Obama, whatever he does regarding a war that their erstwhile hero George W. Bush started but could not finish.

Already, many demoralized Democrats are looking fearfully toward Election 2010 and then Election 2012 when the Republicans could attribute the continuing quagmire in Afghanistan to Obama's "indecision," and to cite this as proof that he does not deserve a second term.

At that point I can visualize a GOP ticket headed by Petraeus and Gates and a platform advocating, as McArthur did so many years ago, for wider war.

Now is the time for President Obama to stop this latest March of Folly. Now.

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