



THE MCCHRYSTAL AFFAIR AND U.S. CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

By Mackubin T. Owens

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Writing before the 2008 election, Richard Kohn, the eminent historian and student of US civil-military relations, predicted that “the new administration, like its predecessors, will wonder to what extent it can exercise civilian ‘control.’ If the historical pattern holds, the administration will do something clumsy or overreact, provoking even more distrust simply in the process of establishing its own authority.” Recent events demonstrate that he was correct.

In late June of this year, it was reported that Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top US military commander in Afghanistan, and members of his staff had criticized top Obama administration officials. The story, published in *Rolling Stone*, quoted officers on McChrystal’s staff making disparaging remarks about the vice president, the national security adviser, and the president himself. Gen. McChrystal was summoned to Washington D.C., where he offered his resignation, which the president accepted.

This episode illustrates that U.S. civil-military relations remain problematic. The real danger is not a threat to civilian control of the military, but the lack of trust between civilians and the military. This is a problem on both sides. News reports indicate that President Obama’s civilian aides have been deeply suspicious of the military, accusing them of intentionally “boxing the president in” through a series of coordinated leaks to the media during last year’s policy review. For its part, many officers see the Obama administration setting up the military to take the blame should the American enterprise in Afghanistan fail.

The seeds of the problem that led to Gen. McChrystal’s removal as U.S. commander in Afghanistan go back several months. In keeping with his promise to reinvigorate the effort in Afghanistan, President Obama announced in March a “comprehensive new strategy . . . to reverse the Taliban’s gains and promote a more capable and accountable Afghan government,” pledging to properly resource this “war of necessity.”

The new operational strategy called for a counterinsurgency approach (like that of the surge in Iraq) and focused on the security of the population; it rejected the “counterterrorism” approach (which NATO had followed during the Bush years) that used special operations forces and air strikes launched from unmanned aircraft to hunt down and kill al Qaeda terrorists. President Obama even replaced the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, with Gen. McChrystal, who had been General Petraeus’s right-hand man in Iraq when a counterinsurgency strategy was successfully implemented.

But when McChrystal indicated in a confidential study completed in August that more troops would be needed to pursue the president’s strategy, President Obama did nothing. Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the joint chiefs, told Congress that more troops would be needed; and experts suggested that the number of additional soldiers and Marines necessary to execute the new strategy was thirty to forty thousand.

But this was apparently a truth Obama did not want to hear. In contrast to George Bush in 2007, who pursued what he thought was the right approach in Iraq despite the unpopularity of his decision, President Obama apparently began to rethink his Afghanistan policy out of concern that his base would not support any troop increase. His decision to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan while simultaneously indicating that they would be leaving by the middle of 2011 only helped to frustrate the military. A “population-centric” counterinsurgency approach, after all, depends on convincing the Afghan population that there is no expiration date on U.S. security guarantees.

Several clumsy missteps by the administration reinforced the perception that the president’s actions were motivated by political factors rather than strategic ones. These included an attempt by retired Marine General James Jones, the national

security adviser, to intimidate military commanders in Afghanistan into reducing their troop requests to a politically acceptable level, and a White House directive to the Pentagon not to forward a request for more troops. The most serious mistake, reported in the Wall Street Journal, was that the White House ordered General McChrystal not to testify before Congress. Thus, the administration appeared to be muzzling the military.

News reports indicated that officers on General McChrystal's staff and elsewhere were wondering why, after having declared the conflict there a "war of necessity," the president had not provided the necessary means to fight it properly. They wondered why, having selected McChrystal to turn things around in Afghanistan, President Obama had not supported him the way that George Bush supported Petraeus in Iraq.

It is easy to see the truth of Kohn's prediction that a clumsy step by the administration would sow distrust on the part of the soldiers, thereby increasing civil-military tensions, but the steps taken by some in the military made the situation worse. First someone leaked General McChrystal's strategic assessment to Bob Woodward of the Washington Post. Then an article published by McClatchy quoted anonymous officers to the effect that McChrystal would resign if the president did not give him what he needed to implement the announced strategy. Problematic as the administration's actions may have been, such leaks by military officers were simply unacceptable.

It seems clear that Gen. McChrystal had no choice but to offer his resignation in the wake of the Rolling Stone story and the president had no choice but to accept it. If nothing else, Gen. McChrystal had created a command climate that did not discourage disrespectful speech on the part of the military for civilian authorities.

Success in Afghanistan requires healthy civil-military relations and these depend on trust. The good news is that the new generals put in place in the aftermath of the McChrystal affair—Marine General James Mattis as commander, US Central Command, and Gen. David Petraeus as the commander of the effort in Afghanistan proper—both understand the importance of professionalism and trust in fostering healthy civil-military relations.

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