

Top US commander in Middle East quits over Iran war report

Patrick Martin
13 March 2008

Admiral William Fallon, head of the United States Central Command, with authority over the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, submitted his resignation Tuesday after an article in the April issue of *Esquire* magazine portrayed him as opposing a Bush administration drive to war against Iran.

The resignation was announced by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates while Fallon was on his way to Iraq for discussions with US commanders there. It is only the latest in a series of incidents demonstrating that the military-intelligence apparatus is deeply divided over the evident desire by the White House to find a pretext for a military attack on Iran.

The Pentagon dispute follows the release of a National Intelligence Estimate last December, in which US intelligence agencies undermined previous Bush administration claims that Iran was rapidly developing nuclear weapons. The NIE concluded that any such Iranian program had been suspended in 2003 and not resumed. Earlier this month the administration seemed to put aside this finding, beginning a new escalation of diplomatic pressure on Iran, and pushing a third sanctions resolution through the UN Security Council.

The *Esquire* article by Thomas Barnett, a former professor at the Naval War College, was written with Fallon's full cooperation. It described him in the most flattering terms as a "brilliant" officer who is single-handedly holding back a reckless White House determined to wage war on the Iranian regime.

The article suggested that Fallon might be forced out of his high military position because of his views. If so, Barnett writes, "it may well mean that the president and vice president intend to take military action against Iran before the end of this year and don't want a commander standing in their way."

Gates's main purpose, at the press conference where he announced Fallon's resignation, was to deny the inference that the ouster of the commander of CentCom meant that a US attack on Iran was imminent. Asked directly by reporters, Gates rejected the suggestion, declaring, "It's just

ridiculous."

Both Gates and Fallon agreed to pretend that the admiral had no significant policy differences with the White House and was quitting because of the exaggeration of these differences in the *Esquire* article. Fallon issued a statement saying, "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" at Central Command.

Gates said that there was a "misperception" of a gap between Fallon and the White House on Iran. "We have tried to put this misperception behind us over a period of months and, frankly, just have not been successful in doing so," he said. "That's why I believe he has made the right choice."

Army Lieutenant General Martin Dempsey, Fallon's deputy, will head the Central Command until a replacement is nominated and confirmed by the Senate. Press and Pentagon speculation immediately centered on General David Petraeus, the Iraq theater commander who was well-known to have a bitter rivalry with Fallon, and regularly bypassed his nominal superior to communicate directly with the White House.

No one can believe that Fallon, a 41-year veteran of the Navy who flew hundreds of combat missions during the Vietnam War, is ending his career because of press distortions of his views. He is part of a substantial section of the military brass that has come to believe that the Bush administration's single-minded focus on Iraq has come at the expense of broader strategic interests of American imperialism.

He reportedly held the position that the war in Iraq had become counterproductive from the standpoint of maintaining US domination in the region where Central Command operates—from Egypt to the Indian subcontinent, including the entire Middle East and South Asia, where the bulk of the world's oil and gas resources are located.

Fallon has made occasional statements critical of Bush administration foreign policy. Last fall, he told the *Al*

Jazeera television network that saber-rattling statements against Iran by top civilian officials like Vice President Dick Cheney were “not helpful and not useful.” Only last week, in testimony to a House committee, he called for “some kind of an accommodation” to be reached with the PKK, the Kurdish nationalist movement that is waging a guerrilla war in southeastern Turkey.

Fallon has reportedly advocated a limited withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and their redeployment to Afghanistan, along the lines advocated by Democratic Party presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.

Clinton issued a statement calling Fallon a “sensible voice” and called for a congressional vote before any military action against Iran. Senator John Kerry, the Democrats’ defeated 2004 presidential candidate, said, “Congress needs to determine immediately whether Admiral Fallon’s resignation is another example of truth tellers being forced to the sidelines in the Bush administration. His departure must not clear the way for a rush to war with Iran.”

Fallon’s ouster touched off a barrage of speculation about imminent US military action against Iran. *Washington Post* online columnist Dan Froomkin, in a comment headlined, “Are We Closer to War?”, observed, “It’s still not really beyond Bush and Cheney to order a full-scale preemptive attack on Iran. But the more likely scenario is that there will be an asymmetrical US response to a (possibly trumped up) Iranian provocation.” In other words, a commentator in the leading daily newspaper in the US capital takes it for granted that the Bush administration is prepared to manufacture a pretext for military aggression.

The web site of *U.S. News and World Report* published a column headlined, “6 Signs the US May Be Headed for War in Iran,” which listed Fallon’s resignation, the trip by Vice President Cheney this week to the Middle East, the deployment of US warships to the Lebanese coast last week, and several actions by Israel, including last September’s air strike on Syria.

There was at least one online report of a White House war council meeting on Saturday, March 8, to discuss “plans to hatch a strike of some sort on Iran this spring.”

There has been extensive media commentary on the intensity of the internal conflicts within the Pentagon. The *Wall Street Journal*’s news report compared the removal of Fallon to President Truman’s firing of General Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War, noting that Fallon had repeatedly clashed with General David Petraeus, the Iraq theater commander and a White House favorite.

NBC Nightly News reported that Gates had forced Fallon’s resignation, under pressure from the White House, even refusing to take his telephone calls. On CBS News,

Pentagon correspondent David Martin noted, “Virtually every senior military officer is opposed to war with Iran. But from now on they might be more cautious about how they say it.”

Fallon’s own role in the *Esquire* article suggests that that he was deliberately going public with his longstanding differences with the White House, either in the knowledge that he had considerable support within the military, or out of concern that an act of military aggression was imminent and might be delayed or forestalled altogether by the media spotlight.

The *Wall Street Journal*’s editorial page, a strident advocate of expanding the US military aggression in the Middle East, published a commentary that presented the ouster of Fallon as part of a wider debate over policy in Iraq. “Senior Pentagon officials — including, we hear, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Joint Chiefs Chairman Mike Mullen, Army Chief of Staff George Casey and Admiral Fallon — have been urging deeper troop cuts in Iraq,” the newspaper wrote.

Citing conflicting statements made over the past two weeks about when the last additional troops deployed to Iraq in the “surge” would be removed, the *Journal* argued that concerns that the war is putting a strain on the military “are best dealt with by enlarging the size of the Army and Marine Corps and increasing spending on defense to between 5% and 6% of gross domestic product from the current 4.5%.”

The newspaper called on Bush to side with Petraeus and a more aggressive commitment to military victory in Iraq: “Having successfully resisted pressure from Congressional Democrats for premature troop withdrawals, it would be strange indeed for Mr. Bush to cave in to identical pressure from his own bureaucracies.”



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