

Top US commander publicly criticizes Obama Iraq policy

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Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, intervened in the US presidential campaign Sunday. Mullen gave an interview to Fox News in which he rejected the shift in US policy in Iraq proposed by Senator Barack Obama, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, in favor of continuing the policy laid down by the Bush administration and backed by the Republican presidential nominee, Senator John McCain.

The timing and venue of Mullen's appearance were themselves a political statement. He chose to appear on "Fox News Sunday," the weekend morning interview program of the television network most closely linked to the Republican Party, and on the day that Senator Obama arrived in Afghanistan for meetings with US and Afghan government officials, and one day before his scheduled arrival in Baghdad.

With Obama giving a much-publicized interview on the rival Sunday morning interview program on CBS, "Face the Nation," Mullen's appearance on Fox, broadcast 30 minutes earlier, had the character of a prearranged Pentagon rebuttal of the candidate who is currently leading in the polls to become the military's next commander-in-chief.

Mullen was certainly aware that, given the weekend events, he was going to be asked about Obama's campaign pledge to withdraw most US combat troops from Iraq over the next 16 months. Media interest was at a peak since on Saturday, in an interview with the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had endorsed the Obama plan.

In the course of an interview with Fox host Chris Wallace, Mullen was asked about Obama's plan and Maliki's statement. He responded at first with a carefully phrased statement acknowledging, for the record at least, that the military executes the mission set by the civilian president.

He declared: "Well, my current mission under the current commander-in-chief is to give him advice and recommendations based on our progress there, and that's exclusively based on conditions on the ground, and that's the mission that I've got. Should that mission change, and

we get a new president, and should those conditions be conditions that get generated or required in order to advise a future president, I would do so accordingly."

Wallace pressed him on the issue, saying, "But I'm asking you in the absence—forget about Obama. Forget about the politics. If I were to say to you, 'Let's set a time line of getting all of our combat troops out within two years,' what do you think would be the consequences of setting that kind of a time line?"

Mullen replied, "I think the consequences could be very dangerous in that regard. I'm convinced at this point in time that coming—making reductions based on conditions on the ground are very important."

He continued, referring to General David Petraeus and General Raymond Odierno, as well as lower-ranking officers: "When I have discussions with commanders on the ground, basically—and I did a couple weeks ago—they are very, very adamant about continuing progress, about making decisions based on what's actually happening in the battle space, and I just think that's prudent."

When Wallace asked him to elaborate on what the "downside" of a troop withdrawal timeline would be, Mullen explained, "I'd worry about any kind of rapid movement out and creating instability where we have stability."

The following day, Mullen's interview was featured as the lead item on the Pentagon's official web site. While the report carefully omitted any mention of Obama's name, it zeroed in on precisely the words that Mullen used to reject Obama's 16-month withdrawal proposal.

Not so long ago, such comments by the top uniformed officer in the US armed services on an issue that is the focus of a presidential election campaign would have been regarded as an illegitimate intervention by the military in politics. Mullen could easily have avoided injecting himself into the campaign, either by not appearing on the program at all, or by deflecting the question by suggesting that it was inappropriate for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs to comment.

Mullen's comments have been foreshadowed by a series of increasingly assertive statements from top officers, going back to the extraordinary October 2004 op-ed column written by General Petraeus—then a relatively junior figure—defending the Iraq war against criticisms by the Democratic presidential candidate of that year, John Kerry.

This culminated last year in the declaration by the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Peter Pace, Mullen's predecessor, in response to antiwar protesters, that there were limits to the right of free speech and that "this dialogue is not about 'can we vote our way out of a war.'" Pace continued: "We have an enemy who has declared war on us. We are in a war. They want to stop us from living the way we want to live our lives. So the dialogue is not about 'are we in a war,' but how and where and when to best fight that war."

Such is the decay of American democracy that Mullen's comments evoked no criticism, let alone condemnation, in official media and political circles. It is now taken for granted that top officers may challenge the primacy of civilian authority over the military with impunity.

This erosion of the constitutional principle of the subordination of the military to civilian authority and increasingly open intervention of the military in the political life of the US is the outcome of a protracted process, which has seen an immense growth in the size and self-assertiveness of the military apparatus, which rests on a professional army. In the 2000 presidential election, military officers played a critical role in tipping the disputed Florida vote to George W. Bush by forwarding illegal military absentee ballots, many of which may have been cast after Election Day.

The Gore campaign and the Democrats, for their part, exhibited their political cowardice and lack of democratic conviction by refusing to challenge the spurious military votes. A Gore advisor subsequently reported that the Democratic candidate had complained he could not assume the presidency without the support of the military.

The question should be posed: In eyes of Admiral Mullen, General Petraeus & Co., do the American people have the right to vote for an end to the war in Iraq? Or is that, too, unwise, imprudent and "very dangerous?"

Obama, of course, does not actually advocate an end to the war, but there is no question that his victory in the protracted contest for the Democratic presidential nomination was owing in large measure to his taking a more critical line on the Bush administration's decision to launch the war, and the complicity of congressional Democrats, including his principal rival, Senator Hillary Clinton, in that action.

The McCain campaign immediately seized on Mullen's remarks as a virtual endorsement of the Republican

candidate's position on the war in Iraq. McCain foreign policy spokesman Randy Scheuneman issued a statement highlighting Mullen's comments and declaring, "Barack Obama says he wants a 'safe and responsible' withdrawal from Iraq, but is stubbornly adhering to an unconditional withdrawal that places politics above the advice of our military commanders, the success of our troops, and the security of the American people."

McCain surrogates like Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Democratic vice presidential candidate in 2000 who is now campaigning for the Republican candidate, went even further, portraying Obama's position as defeatist, if not borderline treasonous. Following Mullen on "Fox News Sunday," Lieberman declared, "If Barack Obama's policy in Iraq had been implemented, he couldn't be in Iraq today," adding that Obama "was prepared to accept retreat and defeat."

McCain virtually declared victory in Iraq, telling reporters Monday at a fundraiser in Maine, "We've succeeded. We're not succeeding, we've succeeded." He added, "And the fact is if we had done what Senator Obama wanted to do, we would have lost and we would have faced a wider war."

McCain was evidently frustrated over the enormous publicity being given to Obama's overseas trip, and to his significant lead in national and state-by-state opinion polls.

The differences between Obama and McCain reflect a conflict over policy within the US ruling class over how best to carry forward the intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia. Obama represents the section of the economic and political elite which regards the Bush administration's single-minded focus on Iraq as a strategic disaster that has strengthened Iran and undermined the credibility of the American imperialism throughout the world.

While the American people have turned against the war in Iraq, the election does not offer them a genuine vote on the war. Instead, as Obama's trip demonstrates, the choice in the election is which war, Afghanistan or Iraq, will receive the preponderance of US military and financial resources.

It is ominous, from the standpoint of the democratic rights of the American people, that the military brass is now stepping into this internecine struggle in the ruling elite and making an increasingly open claim to influence policy in its own right.



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