

New US commander in Afghanistan assembles team of assassins

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Confirmed Wednesday as President Barack Obama's new commander for the widening war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, General Stanley McChrystal has been given extraordinary powers to assemble his own staff.

According to press reports published Thursday, in forming a permanent war council-dubbed the Afghanistan-Pakistan Coordination Cell-McChrystal is drawing heavily from a super-secret assassination squad that he commanded under the Bush administration.

That unit, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), was formed in December 1980 in the wake of the military's abortive operation to free US hostages in Iran. Comprised of the Army's Delta Force and Navy SEALs, the command directs Special Mission Units that carry out classified operations, often in collaboration with CIA squads.

Commanded by McChrystal between 2003 and 2008, JSOC has been linked to assassinations in over a dozen countries as well as abduction and torture. Under the Bush administration, it was reportedly used to carry out covert operations inside Iran, which included the abduction and assassination of officials suspected of aiding Iraqi militia groups.

Earlier this year, veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, who is writing a book on the subject, termed the command "an executive assassination wing." He said that it was tasked with "going into countries...finding people on a list and executing them and leaving." Hersh added that, under the Bush administration, the unit reported to Vice President Dick Cheney's office.

According to the *New York Times*, McChrystal "has been given carte blanche to handpick a dream team of subordinates, including many Special Operations veterans." The newspaper attributed the "extraordinary leeway" granted to the general to the Obama

administration's concern over the war, which over the past year has registered the highest levels of violence since the US invasion of the country in October 2001 and has seen the Taliban and other insurgent elements gain control over much of the country.

Citing Pentagon figures, McClatchy News reported, "The first five months of this year have seen a 59 percent increase in insurgent attacks in Afghanistan, a 62 percent increase in coalition deaths and a 64 percent increase in the use of improvised explosives compared to the same period last year."

Last month, Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced the sudden ouster of Gen. David McKiernan and his replacement by McChrystal, a move that reflected increasing desperation in Washington. The shakeup followed the findings of a Pentagon task force headed by McChrystal in May that reported in relation to Afghanistan that the "security situation in key areas is poor, stalemated or deteriorating."

Tapped to serve as McChrystal's deputy and assigned to oversee day-to-day operations in Afghanistan is Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, the former commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, who was chosen last year by Defense Secretary Gates as his personal military assistant. Rodriguez is reportedly a longtime friend and protégé of McChrystal.

McChrystal has selected Maj. Gen. Michael T. Flynn as his intelligence advisor for Afghanistan, the *Times* reported. Flynn, who is currently director of intelligence for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, had previously served as McChrystal's intelligence chief in the shadowy operations of JSOC.

Chosen as commander of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Coordination Cell is the longtime special operations officer Gen. Scott Miller, who as a captain commanded Delta Force troops in the US military's "Blackhawk Down" debacle in Mogadishu, Somalia.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, coordination cell is “modeled on a system Gen. McChrystal put in place in Iraq, when he commanded the Navy Seals and other Special Operations personnel.”

The units that he commanded in Iraq are reported to have carried out an assassination program in that country aimed at eliminating suspected leaders of Iraqi insurgent groups hostile to the US occupation. Personnel under his command also ran a detention and interrogation center near the Baghdad airport known as Camp Nama, where prisoners were subjected to systematic abuse amounting to torture. The motto of the unit running the camp was “No Blood, No Foul,” meaning that any form of abuse that did not draw blood was acceptable and would not result in investigations or prosecution. Soldiers assigned to the facility have reported that McChrystal was a regular visitor.

Given this background, it is noteworthy that the Democratic-led Senate Armed Services Committee subjected McChrystal to no serious or sustained questioning during his confirmation hearing last week. The committee’s chairman, Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, disposed of the torture issue at the outset by helping McChrystal to lay the blame on then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and on orders from Washington.

The right-wing editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* gloated over the Democrats’ failure to make an issue out of torture, writing on June 4 that it assumed this was the case “because General McChrystal happens to have been nominated by President Obama, not President Bush.”

In the end, the only obstacle placed in the way of McChrystal’s nomination was general procedural foot-dragging by the Republicans.

To break the logjam, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid went to the Senate floor Wednesday and made a dramatic announcement that he had received a telephone call from Adm. Mike Mullen. The Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman had told him, Reid said, that McChrystal had to fly to Afghanistan that very night and was “literally waiting by an airplane,” because there was no commander on the ground in Afghanistan.

“Let’s get the man approved tonight so he can go,” Reid said. Senate Republicans responded by moving to confirm McChrystal and two other military nominees.

Media coverage of McChrystal’s confirmation and the changes in war strategy surrounding the creation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Coordination Cell has centered on innocuous suggestions that the planned rotation of this

the core group of 400 between the war in Afghanistan and Afghanistan-related planning in Washington would allow these personnel to “accumulate expertise.”

McChrystal’s military career and those of the chief officers he is selecting as his aides, however, suggest that what is being prepared is a dramatic escalation of the killing in Afghanistan, through the utilization of the type of methods employed during Operation Phoenix in Vietnam or the death squad killings during the US intervention in El Salvador.

Speaking to reporters during a flight to a NATO meeting in Brussels, Defense Secretary Gates reiterated the repeated warnings from senior military officials that, as the US continues to build up its forces in Afghanistan to a target of nearly 70,000 troops by the end of the year, the bloodshed will grow accordingly.

“We’ve been very upfront about the fact that as we send in more troops, and go into areas that have not had an Afghan government or ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] presence yet, that there will be more combat and the result of that will be more casualties,” Gates said.

In its escalation of the US war in Afghanistan, and its increasing extension across the border into Pakistan, the Obama administration has chosen as its senior commander an officer who is among those most deeply implicated in the criminal operations carried out under Bush and Cheney. This appointment, and its confirmation by the Democratic-controlled Senate, is a clear warning that the ruling establishment in Washington is pursuing a consensus policy that will involve even greater war crimes against the Afghan people, as Washington continues its attempt to assert hegemony in Central Asia by military means.



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