

US commander pushes for rapid escalation of Afghanistan war

Bill Van Auken
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With the release of a declassified version of Gen. Stanley McChrystal's recommendations for a change of course in Afghanistan, the Pentagon command is pushing President Barack Obama to quickly approve another major escalation of the US-led war.

The report was first made public Monday on the Web site of the *Washington Post*, which was leaked the document and then reached an agreement with the Pentagon to post a version from which key passages on US strategy were redacted.

The thrust of the document, submitted by McChrystal to US Defense Secretary Robert Gates last month, is hardly a surprise. It is an argument for a more aggressive—and bloodier—war in Afghanistan with a substantial increase in the number of American troops occupying the country.

While McChrystal gives no numbers in relation to the additional soldiers and Marines he believes should be thrown into the Afghanistan “surge,” he is expected to submit his proposal to the White House shortly.

McChrystal's 66-page report bluntly describes the situation in Afghanistan as “deteriorating.” The general acknowledges that a “resilient and growing” resistance to the occupation has seized the “initiative” from US-led forces, which—after nearly eight years of fighting—have antagonized the population by inflicting large numbers of civilian casualties and by propping up a corrupt and hated puppet regime.

Media reports on McChrystal's proposed change in strategy invariably refer to a supposed shift from hunting down “insurgents” to “protecting” the Afghan population. This innocuous rhetoric disguises the real content of the proposal, which is the prosecution of a far more aggressive counterinsurgency campaign that would send American troops into hostile population centers, like Kandahar City, to systematically suppress and intimidate popular opposition to US aims.

The US commander repeatedly criticizes what he describes as a preoccupation on the part of US and NATO commanders with “force protection” and calls for the

occupation troops to operate with “less armor and less distance from the population.”

McChrystal acknowledges that the result will be a further escalation in bloodshed. “It is realistic to expect that Afghan and coalition casualties will increase,” he writes.

Given McChrystal's background as the former chief of the US military's Joint Special Operations Command—tasked with hunting down and assassinating individuals deemed terrorists by the US government—the increasing use of similar methods in Afghanistan can be anticipated. This would likely involve death squads composed of Afghan security forces and US “advisors” killing suspected opponents of the occupation and intimidating the rest of the population.

The general's report also includes a section on the detention of “insurgents,” which stresses that this should be an “Afghan-run system” that would guarantee US forces “access to detainees for interrogation.” No doubt, McChrystal is incorporating lessons learned in Iraq, when the unit he commanded became notorious for the torture of detainees at the prison facility it operated. Giving Afghan security forces formal responsibility for the detention system provides the US military with a buffer against similar torture charges.

There is one glaring contradiction in McChrystal's report. It stresses repeatedly that the counterinsurgency operation can only succeed if the Afghan people support their government against the elements resisting occupation. At the same time, however, it acknowledges that “corruption and abuse of power by various officials...have given Afghans little reason to support their government.” The report was submitted just after the wholesale fraud in last month's Afghan election stripped the regime of President Hamid Karzai of the last pretense of legitimacy.

While including various references to achieving an “improvement in governance,” there is no indication of how this aim is to be achieved. Some analysts have begun referring to Karzai as the Afghan Diem, Washington's puppet in Vietnam, whose corruption and abuse of the

population came to be seen as an impediment to US counterinsurgency efforts, leading to his overthrow and assassination in a 1963 US-backed military coup.

McChrystal's repeated references in the report to inadequate military "resources" in Afghanistan leave no doubt that he will seek tens of thousands of more troops deployed there.

"Failure to provide adequate resources also risks a longer conflict, greater casualties, higher overall costs, and ultimately, a critical loss of political support," he writes. "Any of these risks, in turn, are likely to result in mission failure."

He states further: "Our campaign in Afghanistan has been historically under-resourced and remains so today. Almost every aspect of our collective effort and associated resourcing has lagged a growing insurgency—historically a recipe for failure."

The content of the report and its being leaked to the media are part of mounting pressure from within the Pentagon for the Obama White House to quickly approve the further escalation of the Afghanistan war.

As the *Wall Street Journal* reported Monday, "Although the assessment was classified, senior military officials said it was only at the 'confidential' level, and several had urged it be made public in order to better explain to political leaders and the American people the new campaign being undertaken by Gen. McChrystal."

The *Washington Post* reported that Obama administration officials are complaining that "the military has been trying to push Obama into a corner with public statements such as those of Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the situation in Afghanistan is 'serious and deteriorating' and 'probably needs more forces.'"

Given Obama's plummeting approval rating and the growing public controversy over his health care restructuring proposals, the White House doubtless has little appetite for announcing a major escalation of the Afghanistan war, which is deeply unpopular, particularly among those who voted the Democratic president into office. The military brass, however, appears unwilling to tolerate further delay.

The *Post* cited a Pentagon official as indicating that this delay "is a source of growing consternation within the military." The official told the paper, "There is a frustration. A significant frustration. A serious frustration."

Republicans have solidarized themselves with this campaign by the military brass, pressing for McChrystal to be recalled to Washington to testify before Congress. Under the Bush administration similar testimony two years ago by Gen. David Petraeus, then commander of US forces in Iraq, served to quell opposition from congressional Democrats to the surge in that country.

For his part, Obama has insisted that no decision has been made on increasing troop levels beyond the additional 21,000 that he ordered into Afghanistan last March, bringing US forces there to 68,000.

"We are not going to put the cart before the horse and just think that by sending more troops, we're automatically going to make Americans safe," he said in one of several television interviews he gave Sunday as part of a media campaign aimed at drumming up support for his health care program. "Right now, the question is, the first question is, are we doing the right thing? Are we pursuing the right strategy?" he said in another.

The *Wall Street Journal* speculated that the remarks suggest that Obama "might not rubber-stamp military officials' expected request" for more troops and that the "White House could be reassessing its strategy in Afghanistan."

However, Obama's statements do not directly contradict McChrystal's report, in which the general writes, "New resources are not the crux. To succeed, ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] requires a new approach"; and "without a new strategy, the mission should not be resourced."

Moreover, there are indications that the Afghan surge is already under way. The *Los Angeles Times* reported over the weekend that the CIA has dramatically increased the number of "spies, analysts and paramilitary operatives" deployed in Afghanistan, and that its "presence in the country is expected to rival the size of its massive stations in Iraq and Vietnam at the height of those wars."

Obama also stated Sunday that once he has reviewed recommendations on troop levels in Afghanistan, "what I will say to the American public is not going to be driven by the politics of the moment." Given poll after poll indicating that a growing majority of the American people opposes the Afghan war and, by even wider margins, any escalation, Obama's remark appeared to echo the frequent assertions by George W. Bush that he was not influenced by such popular sentiments.



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