

# White House-military tensions over Afghanistan

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6 October 2009

Growing tensions between sections of the military brass and the Obama administration have emerged openly in the conflict between the top commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, and the White House.

McChrystal's increasingly strident demands for as many as 40,000 additional troops, capped by his speech last week in London before the International Institute for Strategic Studies, drew rebukes Sunday from Obama's national security adviser, retired Marine General James L. Jones, and Monday from the secretary of defense, Robert Gates.

Although neither official mentioned McChrystal by name, both made it clear that his public campaigning for more troops, ahead of a decision by President Obama, was a violation of the norms of subordination of serving military officers to the civilian commander in chief.

In an appearance on CNN Sunday, Jones was asked whether it was appropriate for a uniformed officer to publicly campaign for a specific policy choice in war. Jones answered by declaring, "Ideally, it's better for military advice to come up through the chain of command."

Gates made an even more categorical statement on Monday, telling an Army convention in Washington that both civilian and military officials had an obligation to keep their opinions private while they were engaged in advising the president.

"I believe that the decisions that the president will make for the next stage of the Afghanistan campaign will be among the most important of his presidency," he said. "So it is important that we take our time to do all we can to get this right. And in this process, it is imperative that all of us taking part in these

deliberations—civilians and military alike—provide our best advice to the president candidly but privately."

He went on to say, "And speaking for the Department of Defense, once the commander in chief makes his decisions, we will salute and execute those decisions faithfully and to the best of our ability."

On August 31, McChrystal delivered a lengthy report to the Pentagon on the military position in Afghanistan, followed by a formal request for troops. He warned that there was a shrinking time window for US military victory in Afghanistan, as little as 12 months, both because the Taliban and other insurgents were growing stronger, and because public support for the war was declining.

He called for a full-scale counterinsurgency strategy, involving far more US forces than presently deployed. The report was endorsed by both Gen. David H. Petraeus, head of the US Central Command, and Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

According to numerous media reports, elements within the Obama administration, as well as the military itself, are skeptical of McChrystal's proposal and support alternatives, such as escalating US military operations targeting Taliban safe havens and anti-US insurgents in Pakistan.

On Monday, the British *Daily Telegraph* carried a report headlined "Barack Obama Furious at General Stanley McChrystal Speech on Afghanistan." In his London speech, McChrystal referred to an alternate "counterterrorism" strategy attributed to Vice President Joseph Biden, comparing it to the strategy of "Chaosistan," in which the country would be allowed to sink into chaos and dealt with "from the outside."

Asked by a member of the audience whether he believed that the strategy attributed to Biden could succeed, McChrystal replied: "The short glib answer is

no.”

The *Telegraph* noted that only one day after the speech, McChrystal “was summoned to an awkward 25-minute face-to-face meeting on board Air Force One on the tarmac in Copenhagen, where the president had arrived to tout Chicago’s unsuccessful Olympic bid.”

There is no “peace” wing in the ongoing discussions on Afghanistan policy inside the Pentagon and the White House. That was underscored in a statement by White House spokesman Robert Gibbs on Monday, who said that the one “option” that would not be considered in the policy review was a US withdrawal from the occupied country.

While all sides in the Washington debate reject withdrawal from Afghanistan, that is the policy increasingly favored by the American people. Recent polls have shown a clear majority opposed to the war.

The intervention by uniformed commanders into the discussion over Afghanistan policy is a clear expression of the increasingly assertive and self-confident role of the military brass in American political life. The Pentagon now absorbs the lion’s share of all discretionary federal spending, with more than \$700 billion appropriated in the current fiscal year for military use, including the two wars and the maintenance of the colossal US nuclear weapons stockpile.

Last year, in the midst of the election campaign, Admiral Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, publicly attacked the Iraq policy advocated by Obama in the presidential campaign. He went so far as to appear on the Fox network, a Republican house organ, to criticize the Democratic presidential nominee.

The fact that defense secretary Gates felt compelled to make a public reminder to the officer corps that it was subordinate to elected civilian leaders is itself a demonstration of the immense growth over many years of the power and independence of the military-national security apparatus. One can only surmise that, under conditions of immense crisis for the US in Afghanistan, elements within the military are threatening to openly defy the civilian authority.

This must be taken by working people as a warning of the profound erosion of democratic procedures and the growing threat of dictatorial rule. The combination of military crisis abroad, the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression, and ever-growing social

misery and economic inequality inevitably drive the ruling class toward authoritarian and repressive forms of rule.

The fundamental source of the decay of American democracy is the crisis of the profit system. It is impossible to maintain democratic procedures in a society in which all power is in the hands of a tiny layer of the super-rich, which controls the vast bulk of the wealth and has at its disposal the enormous military-intelligence apparatus centered in Washington.

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