

US commander recalled from Afghanistan after mocking Obama

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Following the appearance of an article in which he and his aides disparaged President Barack Obama and other top civilian officials, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the US commander in Afghanistan, has been ordered to return to Washington for a White House meeting with the Obama administration's security team.

According to administration and Pentagon sources, McChrystal will be asked to explain his remarks to Obama and other officials during the meeting, which convenes Wednesday in the White House situation room.

The controversy has erupted over an article, entitled "Runaway General," which appears in an issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine that hits newsstands Friday.

Among the remarks attributed directly to McChrystal, perhaps the most damaging is his charge that Karl Eikenberry, the US ambassador to Afghanistan, who was himself previously the top American military commander in the country, had "betrayed" him.

Eikenberry had reportedly opposed the counterinsurgency strategy with which McChrystal is identified. The US ambassador stressed in a cable to Washington last fall that the corrupt regime of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul was "not an adequate strategic partner" for a major US military escalation aimed at clearing the country of insurgents, securing the cities and countryside and turning the areas over to the existing government.

"We will become more deeply engaged here with no way to extricate ourselves," Eikenberry warned.

In the interview with *Rolling Stone*, McChrystal is quoted as saying that Eikenberry's aim in sending the cable was to "cover his flank for the history books," allowing him to say, "I told you so" after a defeat of the US military.

Other statements made by the US commander expressed the continuing tensions over the divisions that surfaced in the debate within the administration last fall over Afghan strategy.

Asked by *Rolling Stone's* reporter Michael Hastings for his opinion about the position taken by Vice President Joe Biden

during that debate, McChrystal responded, "Are you asking about Vice President Biden? Who's that?" An aide sitting in on the interview piped in with, "Did he say bite me?"

Biden had opposed the counterinsurgency strategy, proposing instead a counterterrorism approach that would include increased use of Predator drones and special forces killing squads to target insurgents on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, while training Afghan puppet forces to fight the Taliban.

In open contempt of civilian control of the military, a bedrock constitutional principle, McChrystal publicly opposed Biden's proposal and campaigned for his own plan for deploying tens of thousands more US soldiers and Marines in the country.

Speaking before an audience at a London think tank last fall, he derided Biden's strategy as "short-sighted" and a recipe for "Chaos-istan."

While Obama formally upbraided the general for his remarks during a brief meeting aboard Air Force One, there were no consequences. And his strategy carried the day, with Obama's decision last December to send another 30,000 more troops into Afghanistan. The escalation was joined with a sharp increase in drone attacks on Pakistan and a meaningless pledge to begin withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan in July of next year.

Among the remarks attributed to McChrystal's aides was one open denunciation of Obama. Commenting on the general's first meeting with the president, the aide said that Obama "clearly didn't know anything about him, who he was. Here's the guy who's going to run his f---ing war, but he didn't seem very engaged. The Boss was pretty disappointed."

Another aide quoted McChrystal as describing Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke as "dangerous," like a "wounded animal" because of supposed rumors he may be fired. In the presence of the reporter, the general made no attempt to conceal his contempt for the presidential envoy. Receiving an email from him, McChrystal remarked, "Oh, not another e-mail

from Holbrooke. I don't even want to open it."

Aides described White House National Security Adviser James Jones as "a clown" and derided leading US politicians, including Senators John Kerry (Democrat, Massachusetts) and John McCain (Republican, Arizona).

While some media commentators initially tried to deflect criticism of McChrystal by suggesting he was misquoted or thought he was speaking on background or off the record, *Rolling Stone's* editor, Eric Bates, stated Tuesday that the general had been allowed to review the piece before it was published and voiced no objections to its content.

One telling comment that appeared in several articles covering the affair is the observation that the *Rolling Stone* freelance reporter was far more likely to accurately report McChrystal's disparaging remarks about civilian authority than someone assigned to cover the military in Afghanistan, who would be afraid of earning the general's wrath and being denied access. The clear implication is that the remarks made in front of Hastings are likely mild by comparison with what the US commander and his aides say in front of those "embedded" members of the media they trust to withhold such information from the American people.

On Tuesday, when the uproar began after advance copies of articles were provided to the media, US-led forces suffered 10 fatalities, the second time that single-day casualties have risen to that level this month. The total number of US troops killed since the beginning of the war has risen to 1128, while the total number of fatalities for all US and NATO-led forces has hit 1854, according to iCasualties.org, which compiles casualty reports.

Meanwhile, the US military command has been compelled to postpone the offensive against the city of Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city and a stronghold for insurgents resisting US occupation, because of setbacks in the area. At the same time, McChrystal was compelled to acknowledge that the recent offensive carried out by US troops in the largely rural Marjah district of Helmand province had failed to dislodge the Taliban and had turned the area into a "bleeding ulcer."

The corrupt puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai, fearing an American defeat, has increasingly distanced itself from US objectives, reportedly opening up independent negotiations with the Taliban.

It is in this context that the bitter remarks attributed to McChrystal and his aides in the *Rolling Stone* article take on their real significance. They are part of the recriminations within the military and the Obama administration over the failed policy in Afghanistan as leading personnel seek to blame each other for this evident debacle after nearly nine years of war.

There is another, more ominous, side of the controversy, however. The remarks of McChrystal and his aides are indicative of the open contempt with which large sections of the US military command regard the civilian government and the bedrock constitutional principle of civilian control over the military.

Sections of the media have compared the present controversy over McChrystal to the showdown between President Harry Truman and Gen. Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War.

While no doubt both cases involve a challenge to civilian control, the differences are striking. MacArthur openly challenged Truman's policy in Korea, demanding authority to use nuclear weapons and openly appealing to the Republicans in Congress for support.

In the present situation, Obama's policy in Afghanistan has been largely dictated by McChrystal. Anxious over potential accusations from the Republicans that he is insufficiently resolute as a "commander-in-chief," the Democratic president has surrendered even greater power to the military.

What action Obama will take—if any—in response to McChrystal's statements is unclear. The general himself issued a public apology, acknowledging "poor judgment" and stating that his behavior fell short of the "principles of personal honor and professional integrity" that he espouses.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs Tuesday described Obama as "angry" over the interview, calling it "an enormous mistake in judgment." Asked if the president would fire the general, Gibbs replied, "All options are on the table."

Firing McChrystal would no doubt provoke a storm of criticism from the Republican right and renewed charges that Obama is insufficiently supportive of the military. The most likely reaction of the White House to such attacks would be a further turn to the right and increased militarism.

Leaving the general in place, however, would constitute a public admission by Obama of his administration's subservience to the military brass.

Whatever McChrystal's fate, the incident has once again exposed the political power and assertiveness of the military, which, together with the intelligence apparatus, increasingly dominates the American state.



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