

Why was General McChrystal fired?

Barry Grey
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Reactions within the US establishment to the firing of Gen. Stanley McChrystal indicate that disparaging remarks by McChrystal and his aides concerning President Obama and other civilian officials published in a *Rolling Stone* article were not the principal cause of his dismissal.

Rather, the article brought to a head the deepening crisis arising from the failure of the US military to suppress the popular resistance in Afghanistan to Washington's colonial-style war. Dissatisfaction with McChrystal's leadership had been mounting within the Obama administration since the failure of the offensive in Marjah launched last February. The decision announced earlier this month to delay for at least three months the assault on Kandahar was widely seen as an embarrassing setback.

Despite McChrystal's reputation as a ruthless practitioner of counterinsurgency warfare, responsible for the killing of thousands of Iraqis, the general has more recently been the target of growing criticism that the effectiveness of the operation in Afghanistan was being undermined by his excessive concern over civilian casualties.

That concern has nothing to do with humanitarian considerations. Rather, it is based on the cold calculation—the *Rolling Stone* article refers to McChrystal's "insurgent math"—that for every innocent person killed, ten new enemies are created.

The article, written by Michael Hastings, deals relatively briefly with the remarks of McChrystal and his aides about US civilian officials in Afghanistan. They are predictably crude, and could hardly have come as a surprise to Obama, let alone to the Pentagon. They are familiar with the fascistic and debased character of McChrystal's entourage. Hastings concisely describes the general's staff as "a handpicked collection of killers, spies, geniuses, patriots, political operators and outright maniacs."

The comments made by McChrystal about Obama, Vice President Joseph Biden and special envoy Richard Holbrooke have generated the most media attention. But Hastings devotes far more space relating the complaints of American soldiers that McChrystal is tying their hands by enforcing rules of engagement which limit the use of air strikes and mortar fire against potential civilian targets and restrict the ability of US troops to enter the homes of Afghan civilians.

Hastings writes that "McChrystal has issued some of the strictest directives to avoid civilian casualties that the US military has ever encountered in a war zone." He continues: "But however strategic they may be, McChrystal's new marching orders have caused an intense backlash among his own troops. Being told to hold their fire, soldiers complain, puts them in greater danger. 'Bottom line?' says a former Special Forces operator who has spent years in Iraq and Afghanistan, 'I would love to kick McChrystal in the nuts. His rules of engagement put soldiers' lives in even greater danger. Every real soldier will tell you the same thing.'"

Describing a meeting near Kandahar between McChrystal and disaffected troops, Hastings writes: "The soldiers complain about not being allowed to use lethal force, about watching insurgents they detain be freed for lack of evidence. They want to fight—like they did in Iraq, like they had in Afghanistan before McChrystal."

Whether this view is really widely held among soldiers is not clear. But it appears that this argument is gaining support within the Washington policy-making elite and within the media. Hastings indicates his own standpoint—and, more broadly, that of many of McChrystal's establishment critics—when he declares: "When it comes to Afghanistan, history is not on McChrystal's side. The only foreign invader to have any success here was Genghis Khan—and he wasn't

hampered by things like human rights, economic development and press scrutiny.”

The New York Times weighed in on Wednesday, before the White House meeting between Obama and McChrystal at which the general submitted his resignation, with an article by its Afghan war correspondent, C. J. Chivers, headlined “Warriors Vexed by Rules For War.”

The article makes the case for the US to “take the gloves off” and dramatically escalate its assault on the Afghan population. Chivers quotes unnamed soldiers denouncing McChrystal for limiting the use of air strikes and artillery, and declares: “As levels of violence in Afghanistan climb, there is a palpable and building sense of unease among troops surrounding one of the most confounding questions about how to wage the war: when and how lethal force should be used.”

He continues: “The rules have shifted risks from Afghan civilians to Western combatants... Young officers and enlisted soldiers and Marines...speak of ‘being handcuffed...’”

“No one wants to advocate loosening rules that might see more civilians killed,” he writes. But this is precisely what *The New York Times* is demanding.

In its lead editorial published on Thursday, entitled “Afghanistan After McChrystal,” the *Times* demands a “serious assessment now of the military and civilian strategies.” It then writes, in chilling language: “*Until the insurgents are genuinely bloodied they will keep insisting on a full restoration of their repressive power.*” Reports that some State Department officials are also advocating a swift deal with the Taliban are worrisome.” [Emphasis added].

This statement, by the authoritative voice of the liberal Democratic Party policy-making establishment, provides an insight into the deeper issues involved in McChrystal’s removal. Apparently, for the *Times*, the United States has not pursued with sufficient vigor the work of “seriously bloodying” those in Afghanistan opposed to foreign occupation during more than eight years of war.

Tens of thousands of Afghans have already been killed by US and NATO forces—nobody knows the full extent of the slaughter since Washington does not bother to count its victims. Tens of thousands more have been wounded, jailed or tortured in US prisons.

This campaign of killing and terror is aimed at

drowning in blood an entirely legitimate struggle by the Afghan people for national liberation against a colonial occupier. The main problem the US faces is that after eight years of war and more than three decades of US subversion and provocation, popular resistance by the Afghan masses against American imperialism is growing. The answer of the US ruling elite is to murder more Afghans.

The war in Afghanistan is a crime against humanity, and those who are perpetuating it are war criminals.

The struggle to arouse opposition in the working class within the United States and internationally must be renewed.

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