

The “Hitler” option in Afghanistan

Patrick Martin
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The removal of Gen. Stanley McChrystal as the US commander in Afghanistan and his replacement by Gen. David Petraeus is not, as portrayed by Obama’s political apologists, a principled defense of civilian control over the military. Nor is it, as the official line emanating from the White House would have it, a change in personnel only, not in policy.

There is every indication that the change in command is the result of growing dissatisfaction with McChrystal’s counterinsurgency methods, which have failed to dislodge the Taliban-led guerrilla forces that control the bulk of southern and eastern Afghanistan. It presages a drastic increase in the level of US military violence, and especially the scale of civilian casualties among the Afghan population. Their “crime” is to sympathize with and support the anti-US insurgency.

Petraeus is already, according to one media report, preparing to modify the rules of engagement to allow for greater use of force.

According to a report Sunday in the British *Independent*, McChrystal had grown increasingly pessimistic about the prospects for success, particularly after he was compelled to postpone the planned offensive into the key southern city of Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. He reportedly briefed NATO defense ministers earlier this month “and warned them not to expect any progress in the next six months.”

The newspaper writes: “It was this briefing, according to informed sources, as much as the *Rolling Stone* article, which convinced Mr. Obama to move against” McChrystal. The article adds, “The general was judged to be ‘off message’ in his warning to ministers not to expect quick results and that they were facing a ‘resilient and growing insurgency.’”

A media campaign has begun in the United States, spearheaded by the *New York Times*, portraying McChrystal as excessively concerned about the deaths of Afghan civilians caught in the escalating warfare

between US and NATO forces and the Taliban-led guerrilla forces.

This began with an article June 22 by C. J. Chivers which described growing frustration among field officers, NCOs and rank-and-file soldiers in Afghanistan over being “handcuffed” by McChrystal. The general’s tactics supposedly restricted “the use of Western firepower—airstrikes and guided rocket attacks, artillery barrages and even mortar fire—to support troops on the ground.”

This theme was taken up by several *Times* correspondents in online commentaries on the newspaper’s web site—Robert Mackey, John Burns and Dexter Filkins all chimed in—and then by the newspaper’s op-ed columnists, both liberal and conservative.

Bob Herbert, a liberal columnist, suddenly discovered his vocation as an adviser on military tactics in a column Saturday headlined “Worse Than a Nightmare.” He denounced the counterinsurgency strategy of McChrystal and Petraeus, declaring that its advocates “seem to have lost sight of a fundamental aspect of warfare: You don’t go to war half-stepping. You go to war to crush the enemy. You do this ferociously and as quickly as possible. If you don’t want to do it, if you have qualms about it, or don’t know how to do it, don’t go to war. The men who stormed the beaches at Normandy weren’t trying to win the hearts and minds of anyone.”

He continued: “Among the downsides of this battlefield caution is a disturbing unwillingness to give our own combat troops the supportive airstrikes and artillery cover that they feel is needed.”

Ross Douthat, a conservative *Times* columnist, raised the same issue Monday, arguing that “success is our only ticket out” of Afghanistan. The Obama administration “hasn’t been choosing between remaining in Afghanistan and withdrawing from the

fight. It's been choosing between two ways of staying"—i.e., a prolonged stalemate, or outright military victory.

Douthat noted that the *Rolling Stone* article which provided the occasion for McChrystal's ouster was "ostensibly a left-wing, antiwar critique of counterinsurgency." But it actually gave voice to "complaints that the current strategy places too much value on innocent Afghan lives." He cited another analyst summing up the article as criticizing the current strategy "because it doesn't allow our soldiers to kill enough people."

It might appear farfetched that General McChrystal, a longtime commander of Special Operations forces who was responsible for the assassination of thousands of insurgents during his years in Iraq, should be deemed insufficiently bloodthirsty. The logic of such criticism was spelled out in a significant analysis in the July 2010 issue of *Washington Quarterly*, the magazine of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a major policy think tank in the US capital.

Written by Lorenzo Zambarnardi, an Italian academic now working in the US, the article discusses what it calls "Counterinsurgency's Impossible Trilemma."

Zambarnardi argues: "Counterinsurgency involves three main goals, but in real practice a counterinsurgent needs to choose two out of three. ... The impossible trilemma in counterinsurgency is that, in this type of conflict, it is impossible to simultaneously achieve: 1) force protection, 2) distinction between enemy combatants and noncombatants, and 3) the physical elimination of insurgents."

According to this schema, McChrystal had chosen the second and third goals, with the resulting spike in US-NATO casualties and increasing dissatisfaction among the rank-and-file soldiers ordered to take greater risks to avoid civilian casualties. The alternative, the author writes, is to focus on the first and third goals instead: "A state can protect its armed forces while destroying insurgents, but only by indiscriminately killing civilians as the Ottomans, Italians, and Nazis did in the Balkans, Libya, and Eastern Europe, respectively."

This choice, what the author later calls "a policy of barbarism," could perhaps be described as "the Hitler option."

That is where American policy in Afghanistan is now headed: towards a dramatic escalation of violence in a

war that has always been characterized by extreme brutality and disregard for the destruction of innocent lives.

Such is the response of US imperialism to its failure to suppress popular opposition in Afghanistan to Washington's neo-colonial war and occupation. The push to escalate the bloodbath arises because the anti-US insurgency has mass popular support. This struggle of the Afghan masses against foreign occupation is entirely legitimate.

Tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have been killed in more than nine years of warfare, the longest single military engagement in American history. US air strikes have hit wedding celebrations, family outings, even funeral ceremonies.

Thousands of Afghans have been seized and detained and tortured at the infamous Bagram prison camp and at other such facilities throughout the country. US Predator missiles have been fired from drone aircraft at villages on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, with hundreds, probably thousands, dead.

This is the bloodbath that Obama publicly supported as the "good war" in his presidential campaign, and which the liberal wing of the Democratic Party embraces enthusiastically to this day, in the face of growing popular opposition within the US. Those who are making the decisions to continue and escalate this conflict are guilty of war crimes. Those who supply the political rationalizations to "sell" this war to the American people are their accomplices.

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