

Petraeus to probe claim that army attempted “psy-ops” against US senators

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The top US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus, has ordered an investigation into charges that a US Army unit was illegally ordered to carry out “psychological operations” directed at visiting members of the US Congress, aimed at securing their support for increased funding and troops for the war.

The announcement was in response to an article in *Rolling Stone* magazine that appeared on February 24 and described in some detail the operation ordered by Lt. Gen. William Caldwell IV, the three-star general in charge of training Afghan troops, as well as the resistance to his orders from Lt. Col. Michael Holmes, the leader of the “information operations” (IO) unit at Camp Eggers in Kabul.

“My job in psy-ops is to play with people’s heads, to get the enemy to behave the way we want them to behave,” Holmes told *Rolling Stone*. “I’m prohibited from doing that to our own people. When you ask me to try to use these skills on senators and congressmen, you’re crossing the line.”

Holmes’ unit was ordered to develop techniques to secure the cooperation of a long list of visitors to Afghanistan, including Senators Carl Levin, Jack Reed, Al Franken, John McCain and Joseph Lieberman. He was told to provide a “deeper analysis of pressure points we could use to leverage the delegation for more funds.” Caldwell’s chief of staff asked Holmes, “How do we get these guys to give us more people? What do I have to plant inside their heads?”

This was, according to unnamed “experts on intelligence policy” questioned by the magazine, “like the president asking the CIA to put together background dossiers on congressional opponents.” Federal law forbids the military from practicing psy-ops—defined in *Rolling Stone* as “the use of

propaganda and psychological tactics to influence emotions and behaviors”—on its own citizens. “Everyone in the spy-ops, intel, and IO community knows you’re not supposed to target Americans,” said another unnamed psy-ops veteran. “It’s what you learn on day one.”

When Holmes discussed his concerns about Caldwell’s orders with the spokesperson for the Afghan training mission, Col. Gregory Breazile, he replied, shouting, “It’s not illegal if I say it isn’t!” according to Holmes.

Eventually, after Holmes had consulted with an army lawyer who agreed that the psy-ops order was not appropriate, the instructions were more narrowly defined to include gathering only publicly available material. Holmes’ unit reluctantly gathered material such as biographical information and voting records of prospective visitors, a task that would normally fall under the responsibility of public affairs assistants to the army brass, not the “information operations” unit.

Somewhat later, Holmes was the subject of a disciplinary investigation that he attributed directly to his earlier questioning of Caldwell’s orders. He was formally reprimanded on flimsy charges unrelated to his views on the psy-ops orders, but clearly in retaliation for those views. The charges included, among others, using Facebook too much, having an “inappropriate” relationship with a subordinate, and going off base in civilian clothes without permission. Holmes maintained that all of the charges were either false or, particularly in the case of the alleged overuse of Facebook, clearly a case of selective prosecution.

The *Rolling Stone* revelations are the latest indication of the growing crisis of US imperialist policy in Afghanistan. Even though there is little or no evidence of the slightest resistance in Congress or the White

House to its demands for more troops and funding, the military leadership is desperate to guarantee the quick and expeditious approval of all of its demands. The mounting evidence of military stalemate and political and strategic disaster for US forces in Afghanistan leads the generals to conclude that they must take preventive measures against the growing danger of popular anger erupting against the war.

More ominously, the mindset behind the orders of General Caldwell reflects the growing contempt within the military brass for the civilian government and the historic and traditional civilian control over the military apparatus. The *Rolling Stone* article, by Michael Hastings, is headlined “Another Runaway General,” a clear reference to a previous article by Hastings, published only eight months ago. At that time, Hastings’ revelations of the open contempt on the part of General Stanley McChrystal for the Obama White House and its national security officials led to McChrystal’s forced resignation several days later.

The latest reports indicate that “runaway” is not a very accurate term to describe either McChrystal or Caldwell. They are blunt and perhaps indiscreet by comparison to others, but they are openly voicing views held by the overwhelming majority of the officer corps and top military brass. In recent decades, as the WSWS has pointed out (See “Militarism and democracy: the implications of the McChrystal affair”), a military caste has coalesced in growing opposition to democratic rights and with open contempt for its civilian “leadership.” Increasingly the military regards itself as a fourth branch of government alongside the executive, legislative and judiciary. As social tensions and political polarization deepen, it is tempted to regard itself as the most important branch. The officer corps has the closest ideological affinity to the religious right and the most reactionary sections of the Republican Party.

Nor does the latest provocation, including the promise to “investigat[e]...the facts and circumstances surrounding the issue,” reveal any significant constituency within the political establishment and US ruling elite for democratic rights.

The response of Michigan Democratic Senator Carl Levin to the charge that the military had tried to carry out some kind of “information operation” against him was typical and significant. Far from expressing

outrage, even hypocritically, Levin simply called the effort a wasted one. “For years, I have strongly and repeatedly advocated for building up Afghan military capability because I believe only the Afghans can truly secure their nation’s future,” said Levin. In other words, the military didn’t need to brainwash him because he was on their side already.

Levin did not bother to explain what the US invasion, now in its tenth year and having devastated the country and slaughtered hundreds of thousands of its people, had to do with “securing” its future. Nor did he comment on the threat posed by the military to the democratic rights of the American people.



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