

Pentagon changes Afghanistan commander as military's crisis deepens

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US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's summary dismissal Monday of the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan, is an indication of not only the sharply deteriorating situation confronting the US intervention in that country, but more broadly, the deep-going crisis within the American military as a whole.

McKiernan, who was less than halfway through a two-year stint as commander of all US forces in Afghanistan, has effectively been cashiered from the army. Asked at a Pentagon press conference whether his removal from the Afghanistan command meant the end of his career, Defense Secretary Gates responded, "probably."

In its coverage of the shakeup in the Afghanistan command, Time magazine commented sardonically, "Public beheadings in Afghanistan are usually associated with the Taliban, but on Monday it was Defense Secretary Robert Gates metaphorically wielding the axe from the Pentagon platform."

McKiernan is the first US commander in a theater of war to suffer such a fate since 1951, when President Harry Truman ordered the removal of Gen. Douglas MacArthur as commander of US forces in Korea for insubordination and a frontal challenge to civilian control of the military.

Evidently, the divisions within the US military command and the American political establishment as a whole are just as sharp today as the war in Afghanistan approaches the end of its eighth year and the war in Iraq is well into its sixth.

Tapped to replace McKiernan is Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), the military's shadowy commando force, whose budget is even secret.

In a 2006 profile of McChrystal, Newsweek magazine described the JSOC as "part of what Vice President Dick Cheney was referring to when he said America would have to 'work the dark side' after 9/11."

Veteran investigative reporter Seymour Hersh recently described the JSOC as "an executive assassination ring." Hersh stressed that the unit was unaccountable to any section of the military command and had "reported directly to Cheney's office." He added: "Under President Bush's authority, they've been going into countries, not talking to the ambassador or the CIA station chief, and finding people on a list and executing them and leaving. That's been going on, in the name of all of us."

Touting the abilities of McChrystal, Gates spoke of his “unique skill set in counterinsurgency.” These “unique” skills consist largely of deploying assassination squads to behead insurgencies opposing US occupation. He directed such a program as an essential part of the so-called “surge” initiated by the Bush administration in Iraq.

Also included in the “skill set” employed by the units under McChrystal’s command in Iraq was torture. A Special Operations unit known as Task Force 6-26 ran a detention center in which prisoners were subjected to Abu Ghraib-style abuse that was so extreme that the CIA ordered its personnel not to enter the facility.

It appears that the Obama administration wants to replicate these methods in Afghanistan, launching its own “surge,” which will entail a dramatic escalation in the bloodshed there. Significantly, Pentagon officials denied that the massacre of some 150 civilians in US air strikes against two villages in Afghanistan’s western Farah province last week had anything to do with McKiernan’s removal. Such atrocities will only become more frequent under his successor.

In announcing the change of commanders in Afghanistan, Gates said that the decision was supported by Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen, General David Petraeus, the chief of US Central Command, and President Barack Obama. Out of these four individuals, only Obama was not appointed to his position by the Bush administration. Nonetheless, the replacement of McKiernan with McChrystal makes the escalating US intervention in both Afghanistan and Pakistan even more his administration’s war.

Public explanations of the reshuffling of the Afghan command have amounted to little more than platitudes. In announcing the change, Gates remarked that “fresh eyes were needed” in Afghanistan and that “a new approach is probably in our best interest.” Similarly, Obama, while praising McKiernan, said it was time “for a change of direction in Afghanistan.”

For his part, McKiernan has declined any comment and canceled all scheduled interviews with the media.

The most evident source of friction, however, appears to be McKiernan’s request for significantly more troop reinforcements than those ordered by the Obama administration, which is funneling 21,000 more soldiers and Marines into Afghanistan over the next several months and will more than double the size of the US occupation force to 68,000 by 2010.

As the Washington Post notes, “McKiernan has an outstanding request, which neither the Pentagon nor Obama has approved, for 10,000 more troops next year.” Gates opposed the request and publicly warned against “the foreign military footprint in Afghanistan” growing too large.

The New York Times reports that tensions existed between McKiernan and Gen. Petraeus, quoting one unnamed retired general who said they were “over all dimensions of the Afghanistan strategy: the number of American troops, what kind of troops, where would they go, what role would the allies play and whether to use Afghan forces more.”

Disputes over troop levels go back to confrontations in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq invasion between then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who placed a greater reliance on precision-guided munitions, and senior uniformed commanders, who argued for a larger ground force.

At the heart of these disputes are the objective limitations of America's "all-volunteer" military, which has too few troops to conduct the simultaneous wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Obama administration's escalation of the war in Afghanistan and its extension across the border into Pakistan has been predicated on the ability to draw down the 134,000 US troops deployed in Iraq.

However, the timetable proposed by the Obama administration for a partial withdrawal of US forces over the next two years has already broken down. Last Friday, Gen. Ray Odierno, the senior commander in Iraq, reported that plans to withdraw US combat troops from the key cities of Baghdad and Mosul by June 30 had to be shelved because of an increase in insurgent attacks.

"It's not going to end, OK?" Odierno told a Pentagon press conference. "There'll always be some sort of low-level insurgency in Iraq for the next 5, 10, 15 years." The unstated corollary to this prediction is that tens of thousands of US troops will remain in the country for at least that long.

A stark indication of the stress that the two wars are placing on the American military came Monday afternoon when a 42-year-old army sergeant nearing the completion of his third tour of duty in Iraq shot five fellow US soldiers to death at Camp Liberty, the sprawling US base near the Baghdad airport.

Sgt. John Russell carried out the killings at a military counseling clinic on the base after being sent there for apparent mental problems. While his weapon had been taken away from him, he apparently managed to seize a gun from a soldier sent to escort him and killed two medical officers at the clinic and three enlisted men waiting for counseling. He has been charged with murder.

The killings drew statements of concern from President Obama, who declared himself "shocked and deeply saddened" and from Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mullen who said that the incident "does speak to me about the need for us to redouble our efforts in terms of dealing with the stress."

This outburst of violence was by no means an aberration. Suicide rates among active duty military personnel are at a record high, with 230 killing themselves last year and more US soldiers taking their own lives in January than were killed in combat.

According to a study done by the military-linked think tank, the Rand Corporation, out of 800,000 US troops who have been deployed over the course of eight years in Afghanistan and six years in Iraq, approximately 300,000 are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or serious depression.

The military's treatment for such stress consists largely of handing out pills and convincing soldiers to return to combat.

Perhaps what was most surprising about the mass slaying at Camp Liberty was that something like it had not happened earlier, given the morale of American troops sent to fight year after year in dirty colonial wars and serve as foreign occupiers in countries where they are widely hated.

The Obama administration's continuation of the occupation of Iraq and the escalation of the "AfPak" war are stretching the military to the breaking point. Intensified fighting in either theater will inevitably raise the demand for more troops.

Where are these troops to come from? Curiously, the Pentagon budget submitted by the Obama administration cuts funding for recruitment by nearly \$800 million, or 11 percent, for 2010. It is the first time in many years that more money has not been allocated in an attempt to augment the strained forces.

Perhaps the administration, its rosy predictions about the economy notwithstanding, is counting on growing and sustained mass unemployment to provide sufficient recruits through the so-called "economic draft" of young people unable to find employment anywhere but in the military.

Obama's continuation and escalation of the wars begun under Bush, however, raise the threat of a real draft. With his repeated appeals for "sacrifice" and national service, Obama has begun to lay the ideological foundations for a resumption of military conscription.

This is something that the military command has sought desperately to avoid, knowing full well the fate of America's last conscript army, which virtually disintegrated in Vietnam due to mass opposition to the war. But given the demands of the two wars Washington is currently waging, not to mention the threat of new conflicts, something has to give.

There is a growing danger that young people in the US will be subjected to outright conscription into the army to serve as cannon fodder in the militarist attempt by US imperialism to assert its hegemony over the strategically vital and oil-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

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