

The US-NATO Afghan Debacle: Commander Dismissed As War Deaths Reach Record Level

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On June 23 President Barack Obama announced the dismissal of General Stanley McChrystal, commander of all foreign troops in Afghanistan, and within hours Associated Press reported that the Western military death toll in the country had reached at least 80 so far this month, making June NATO's deadliest month in a war that will enter its tenth calendar year on October 7.

McChrystal, appointed on June 15 of last year as top commander of all U.S. and all NATO-led International Security Assistance Force troops in the South Asian war zone - currently 142,000 with thousands more on the way - was to have led the largest assault of the war this month in the province and capital city of Kandahar.

The campaign, which was to have consisted of 25,000 U.S., NATO and Afghan government troops, appears to have been postponed indefinitely and may in fact never occur.

The Kandahar offensive was planned as the culmination of McChrystal's much-vaunted counterinsurgency strategy that was inaugurated in earnest on February 13 of this year with Operation Moshtarak in the Marjah district of Kandahar's neighboring province, Helmand.

In that operation at least 15,000 U.S., British, French, Canadian and Afghan National Army troops poured into a district that has been described as a loose aggregation of small agricultural hamlets and other communities with a combined population as low as 50,000. A CBS News report of February 9 stated 30,000 troops were to be involved in the U.S. Marine-led offensive. [1] One major Western news agency estimated that the amount of insurgents confronting the 15,000-30,000 NATO and Afghan government forces was as low as 200.

Far from overwhelming and quickly subjugating the area, however, the Western troops and their Afghan subordinates, the latter reluctantly dragooned into service for the attack, encountered fierce and intractable resistance.

Almost a month into the fighting - an operation by U.S.-led forces with as much as a 75- to 150-1 advantage in numbers - the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission estimated that 28 civilians, including 13 children, had been killed and 70 more civilians had been wounded, 30 of those children. The report issued by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission attributed most of the casualties to U.S. and NATO rocket and artillery fire.

Having taken the rural district by storm and, to employ the Pentagon parlance faithfully passed on by the mainstream media, eliminated the last pockets of resistance, the U.S. and NATO victory soon evaporated with the West's inability to pacify Marjah for transfer to the

control of the Hamid Karzai regime in Kabul.

The prototype for not only the largest but what was planned as the decisive military offensive of the long-drawn-out war preparatory to the White House's pledged withdrawal of troops starting next year - the assault on the insurgent stronghold of Kandahar - evidently fared poorly enough for the latter offensive to be delayed if not scrapped.

Even without an operation in Kandahar, though, the West has already lost 80 soldiers in Afghanistan this month, the most since July of 2009 when 79 U.S. and NATO personnel were killed, with almost half of this month's fatalities being non-American.

To employ one of the expressions from the cliché book of Western journalism, several grim milestones have been reached this month. U.S. military deaths in Afghanistan have officially surpassed the 1,000 mark. The Pentagon has now been conducting the longest sustained combat operations in the history of the United States, exceeding in duration those in Vietnam from 1964-1973.

The British death toll has reached at least 303, more than in any other conflict since the 1950s. Australia lost three soldiers on June 21, the most deaths in one day the nation has suffered after its role in supporting the U.S. in Vietnam.

Romania, a new NATO member which will soon have over 1,600 troops in Afghanistan, lost two soldiers on June 23. "Romania began to send troops to Afghanistan in July 2002. The action was the country's first military mission abroad after the Second World War." [2]

On June 6 a rocket attack on the Polish forward operating base in Ghazni province wounded four soldiers and on June 12 a similar attack on the same base killed one soldier and wounded eight more. Poland, with 2,600 soldiers serving under NATO in Afghanistan and another 400 held in reserve for deployment there, has lost 17 soldiers in one of the country's first two overseas military operations - Iraq being the other - in its history and its first combat role since the Second World War.

As for NATO as a whole, the Afghan mission has achieved three major precedents: The first armed conflict outside of Europe, the first ground war and the first combat deaths (several hundred such) in the military bloc's 61-year history.

It is against this backdrop that General McChrystal was abruptly and summarily relieved of his dual command over U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

After a 30-minute tête-à-tête with McChrystal, then a war council with Vice President Joseph Biden, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, National Security Advisor James Jones and White House Chief of Staff and in many respects grey eminence Rahm Emanuel, President Obama stood behind a podium in the White House Rose Garden and announced McChrystal was not to return to Afghanistan as commander of U.S. and NATO forces.

His career had ended the way his predecessor's, Army General David McKiernan, had a year before: He was unceremoniously deposed.

Flanked on both sides by Mullen, Biden, Gates and McChrystal's hastily appointed successor General David Petraeus, Obama characterized the sacking of the Afghan war's military chief

as a resignation, the public relations equivalent of leaving a loaded revolver on the desk of a discredited subordinate.

The uptake of the American commander-in-chief's address was contained in two sentences: "The conduct represented in the recently published article does not meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general. It undermines the civilian control of the military that is at the core of our democratic system." In fact the piece in question would not be published for another two days.

He was referring to leaked excerpts from a Rolling Stone magazine feature on McChrystal and several of his aides, in particular off-the-cuff comments by aides as well as McChrystal, including ones uttered during a bibulous bus ride from Paris to Berlin in April. Wine keeps neither secrets nor promises as Beaumarchais observed.

Members of the establishment press corps (consumed with envy at not scooping the scandalous quotes themselves) scrambled for a thesaurus to characterize McChrystal and company's less than flattering word portraits of Biden, U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry and White House Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke as intemperate, indiscreet, impolitic and so on down the list. Recall that their indignation was provoked by assorted obiter dicta issued on the wing and on the run over a month-long period. Being unenthusiastic about opening emails from Richard Holbrooke is not a crime of lese majesté, of high treason.

Along the lines of Obama's reference to maintaining civilian control of the military, mainstream political analysts and commentators made strained allusions to Abraham Lincoln's firing of General George McClellan during the American Civil War and Harry Truman's cashiering General Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War.

The freelance reporter whose story was the occasion for McChrystal's departure, Michael Hastings, said after the dismissal that "he believed the story would last for 72 hours and then McChrystal and his staff would get back to business as usual." [3]

Not so much a matter of changing commanders in midstream as it is throwing overboard the captain of a ship threatened with being capsized in a tempest.

That the commander of all foreign military forces in the world's most extensive military conflict, one that involves over 50 nations [4] on six continents and will shortly reach its ninth year, would be dismissed within two days of a leaked report from an entertainment magazine (two days before its publication) is to all outward appearances a dramatically disproportionate response, one that itself could be branded intemperate.

There were and are other, more substantial, dynamics at play.

Another American general who left his last post under a cloud, former U.S. European Command chief and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Wesley Clark - never one to be shy of the limelight or a television camera - appeared on CNN the evening of McChrystal being dumped and dutifully echoed the official post-purge position: "I think that there are lines you can't cross and I think there's responsibilities that you have to uphold as a senior commander."

In reference to Central Command head David Petraeus taking charge of 150,000 U.S. and

NATO (and in truth what there is of an Afghan National Army) troops, Clark added a revealing item which may prove to be the main intention behind and result of McChrystal's dismissal: "I don't know what the timetable means. Whether it means you've got to pull a brigade out or four brigades out or half the troops out or, you know, an outpost out, I'm not quite clear." [5]

With mid-term congressional elections in early November and Obama's presumed reelection bid two years later, Petraeus' appointment may have a distinctly political dimension. Either simply an effort to put a new face on a disastrous affair or to signal a shift in war tactics. But if meant to boost the election prospects of Democratic candidates this year and Obama in 2012, the White House may get more than it bargained for.

A graduate of the West Point Military Academy like McChrystal, Petraeus has been the subject of rumours – for at least three years – that he intends to run for the U.S. presidency, and in fact has been deftly positioning himself for just that eventuality.

Presented as the hero of the war in Iraq who as commander of Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF-I) from January of 2007 to September of 2008 presided over the so-called surge during that interim – and ballyhooed as the father of a Petraeus Doctrine at the time – his reprising that role in Afghanistan could enhance his appeal as a war hero cum man on horseback in 2012, much as the aforementioned Wesley Clark attempted (with scant success but having tested the waters) in 2004.

Commentators have alluded to the 1962 novel (and its cinematic adaptation two years later) *Seven Days in May* [6] lately in reference to outgoing Afghan war commander Stanley McChrystal. The parallel may more properly suit Petraeus.

When he assumed command of the Multi-National Force – Iraq in the very month that President George W. Bush launched the Iraq surge with the announcement of 20,000 more troops to be deployed there, Petraeus took control of all foreign occupation forces in the country, not only from the U.S. and Britain but also from dozens of other nations, primarily at the time 20 new NATO and NATO candidate and other partner states from Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine.

All of the above except for Kazakhstan and Moldova (for the time being), with new nation Montenegro added, have troops assigned to NATO in Afghanistan.

The war in and occupation of Iraq provided Petraeus and the Pentagon an unprecedented opportunity to integrate the armed forces of dozens of nations – others included Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Mongolia and Singapore, which now have troops in Afghanistan as well – for purposes of weapons and combat interoperability and for NATO membership and assorted partnerships under wartime conditions.

Preceding his appointment as commander of the Multi-National Force – Iraq in 2007, Petraeus was named both head of the Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq and the first commander of the NATO Training Mission-Iraq in 2004.

Before that, while a brigadier general, he served in Bosnia in the early years of this decade as part of NATO's Operation Joint Forge and as Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations for the

NATO-led Stabilization Force and Deputy Commander of the U.S. Joint Interagency Counter-Terrorism Task Force.

In recognition of his command of his role in Iraq, in April of 2008 Secretary of Defense Gates announced that President Bush was nominating Petraeus to head up U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which post he took up on October 31, 2008.

The U.S. is the only nation in history to divide the world into military commands. CENTCOM's area of responsibility includes, in addition to Afghanistan and Iraq, other nations beset by armed conflicts like Pakistan and Yemen, and all of the Middle East (except for Israel), the Persian Gulf (including Iran) and Central Asia. Egypt is the only African nation left to CENTCOM, with Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Seychelles, Somalia and Sudan ceded to the new U.S. Africa Command, though Lebanon and Syria were transferred from European Command to Central Command in 2004.

In the past twenty months Petraeus has not only overseen ongoing military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen and supported those in Pakistan, but has also worked assiduously at building a far-reaching nexus of military overflights, land routes and transit bases from the Persian Gulf and the South Caucasus to Central Asia for the Afghan war.

He will now step down as head of CENTCOM to command 150,000 U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan.

The lionization of Petraeus began before the fact regarding the dual Afghan commands and within hours of his announced appointments, with the predictable claque clapping like trained seals.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen guaranteed that Washington's 27 partners in the military alliance would sheepishly keep their own counsel: "After all, they are only supplying 25 percent of the alliance's 130,000 troops in Afghanistan. They will accept Mr Obama's step, be it with some disappointment because they generally agreed that McChrystal was doing a good job." [7] Hardly a passionate endorsement of the organization he heads and which is touted as a "military alliance of democratic states in Europe and North America."

The Washington Post's David Ignatius regaled his readers with a glowing panegyric entitled "Gen. David Petraeus: The right commander for Afghanistan," which is replete with these specimens of fawning puffery:

- Gen. David Petraeus didn't sign on as the new Afghanistan commander because he expects to lose.
- Obama has doubled down on his bet, much as George W. Bush did with his risky surge of troops in Iraq under Petraeus's command.
- [A]s I've heard him say: "The thing about winners is that they know how to win."
- Petraeus is, among other things, the most deft political figure I've seen in uniform. In just two years he has gone from being Bush's go-to general to Obama's. [8]

The piece goes on in that vein for an unconscionably, an insufferably, long time.

It is emblematic of the peculiarly American art of concocting an overnight hero mythos. The identical technique was exhibited a year ago when Stanley McChrystal was promoted to general to take command of the Afghan war.

Petraeus, like the fox in the fable of Aesop, may want to think twice about entering a lion's den in which he sees footprints enter but not come out. Unless political ambition blinds him to the evidence.

Notes

- 1) <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/02/09/eveningnews/main6191709.shtml>
- 2) Xinhua News Agency, June 24, 2010
- 3) New York Daily News, June 24, 2010
- 4) Afghan War: NATO Builds History's First Global Army
Stop NATO, August 9, 2009
<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/09/01/afghan-war-nato-builds-historys-first-global-army>
- 5) CNN, June 23, 2010
- 6) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Days_in_May
- 7) Radio Netherlands, June 24, 2010
- 8) Washington Post, June 24, 2010
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/23/AR2010062304005.html?hpid=opinionsbox1>

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