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Gen. McChrystal Goes to Washington

Voice of America and other news sources reported on June 22 that General Stanley McChrystal, the top military commander of U.S., International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and NATO troops in Afghanistan, has been summoned to Washington to explain critical comments he and members of his staff have made about President Barack Obama and other members of the administration.



The national media have focused heavily on "The Runaway General," an article published in the latest issue of the youth-oriented, countercultural *Rolling Stone* magazine. The article cites aides to General McChrystal to plumb McChrystal's insight into his handling of the war in Afghanistan, quotes his stated opinions of administration officials overseeing that war, and also delves into his military career and personal mannerisms. The magazine will be on newsstands by June 25, but is already [posted online](#). ??VOA quoted a spokesman for U.S. Military Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen who said that the admiral has expressed his "deep disappointment" about the comments. The spokesman said that Mullen spoke to McChrystal late on June 21.

??"I extend my sincerest apology for this profile," McChrystal said in a statement issued on June 22 from Kabul. "It was a mistake reflecting poor judgment and it should have never happened."

The *Washington Post* reported that McChrystal's civilian press aide, Duncan Boothby, submitted his resignation on June 22 as a result of the article, citing an official who spoke on condition of anonymity because it was a personnel issue.

The *Rolling Stone* article recalled a statement McChrystal made in London last fall in which he "dismissed the counterterrorism strategy being advocated by Vice President Joe Biden as 'shortsighted,' saying it would lead to a state of 'Chaos-istan,' " and said "the remarks earned him a smackdown from the president himself, who summoned the general to a terse private meeting aboard Air Force One."

In "[McChrystal Assesses Afghanistan at the IISS](#)," our own article about that event held at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), we observed:

McChrystal's visit to the IISS came the day after he had participated in a White House strategy



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session on the war by video link. The session included President Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and a group of senior administration advisers.

An attendee at the session asked McChrystal if he would support an idea put forward by Mr. Biden to scale back the American military presence in Afghanistan in order to focus on tracking down the leaders of al Qaeda, instead of devoting so many resources to defeat the Taliban.

"The short answer is: no," he said. "You have to navigate from where you are, not where you wish to be. A strategy that does not leave Afghanistan in a stable position is probably a short-sighted strategy."

Michael Hastings, author of the *Rolling Stone* article, reflected back on the occasion of President Obama's dismissal of McChrystal's predecessor as commander of ISAF and U.S. forces in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan. Hastings noted, "It was the first time a top general had been relieved from duty during wartime in more than 50 years, since Harry Truman fired Gen. Douglas MacArthur at the height of the Korean War."

An interesting historical footnote, perhaps, but Hastings missed the opportunity to note that unlike any general in recent memory, MacArthur was fired for wanting to achieve total victory in a war that — not unlike the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan — was waged by the UN (or subsidiaries thereof) to accomplish UN, not U.S. objectives.

Has McChrystal's career been put in jeopardy as a result of the intemperate comments attributed to him and his aides in the *Rolling Stone* article? Such references document the general's obvious annoyance with Richard C. Holbrooke, Obama's senior envoy to Afghanistan, and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl W. Eikenberry. For example:

- "The Boss [McChrystal] says [Holbrooke is] like a wounded animal," says a member of the general's team. "Holbrooke keeps hearing rumors that he's going to get fired, so that makes him dangerous."
- At one point on his trip to Paris, McChrystal checks his BlackBerry. "Oh, not another e-mail from Holbrooke," he groans. "I don't even want to open it."
- McChrystal and his team were blindsided by [Eikenberry's] cable [criticizing McChrystal's strategy and leaked to the *New York Times*]. "I like Karl, I've known him for years, but they'd never said anything like that to us before," says McChrystal, who adds that he felt "betrayed" by the leak. "Here's one that covers his flank for the history books. Now if we fail, they can say, 'I told you so.'"

Elsewhere in the article, Hastings touches on a matter that reveals more than he may be aware of, but which — to those knowledgeable about U.S. political dynamics — indicates that McChrystal may be a more connected part of the Obama team than is immediately apparent:

While McChrystal and his men are in indisputable command of all military aspects of the war, there is no equivalent position on the diplomatic or political side. Instead, an assortment of administration players compete over the Afghan portfolio: U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, Special Representative to Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke, National Security Advisor Jim Jones and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, not to mention 40 or so other coalition ambassadors and a host of talking heads who try to insert themselves into the mess, from John Kerry to John McCain. This diplomatic incoherence has effectively allowed McChrystal's team to call the shots and hampered efforts to build a stable and credible government in Afghanistan. "It jeopardizes the mission," says Stephen Biddle, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who supports



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McChrystal.

While Hastings identifies Stephen Biddle as a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), what may have escaped him and his readers are the significantly large number of CFR members involved in the diplomatic and military management of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, several of whom are mentioned in the above passage. These include Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Karl Eikenberry, Richard Holbrooke, Hillary Clinton's husband, Bill, John Kerry, John McCain, and — perhaps not coincidentally — McChrystal himself.

In this regard, at least, McChrystal enjoys membership in an elite, internationalist network that General Douglas MacArthur was not part of. Yet MacArthur served at the pleasure of a Truman administration that also included CFR members in key posts that must have had strong influence on his ultimate fate. These included Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Secretary of Defense Robert Lovett, and Secretary of the Army Frank Pace, Jr.

Whether McChrystal survives this controversy or not, his fellowship with powerful CFR members will certainly not have hurt him.

This Oct. 2, 2009 file photo provided by the White House, shows President Barack Obama meeting with Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan, aboard Air Force One in Copenhagen, Denmark: AP Images



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