



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on June 26, 2010

## MacArthur, Obama, and War Without End

President Barack Obama's dismissal of Gen. Stanley McChrystal as the top commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan has inspired comparisons to the drama played out nearly 60 years ago when President Harry Truman relieved Gen. Douglas MacArthur of his command of the Far East. Neither of the current actors benefits from the comparison.



Nor did either Truman or Obama demonstrate that finely honed ironic wit that Lincoln employed in his message to McClellan when the overly cautious general had refused too many times to go on the offensive against the Confederate forces: "My dear McClellan: If you don't want to use the Army I should like to borrow it for a while.

The article in *Rolling Stone* magazine was apparently the straw that broke the back of the President's patience with McChrystal and his staff and their grumbling about and sniping at senior administration officials, up to and including the Vice President and the President himself. Most of the disparaging words found in direct quotes are from McChrystal's aides rather than the general himself, but it seems clear they were reflecting the boss's perspective on the quality of leadership, or lack of it, from the White House. And, to borrow Truman's motto, "the buck stops" with the man in command, even if his subordinates have made some change with it along the way.

And it was not the first time that McChrystal's displeasure with the decisions — or prolonged indecision — and policies of the administration had come to the public's attention. Last fall, while Obama was delaying a decision on the general's request for an additional 40,000 troops, McChrystal was openly critical of the slow pace of decision-making.

"Waiting does not prolong a favorable outcome," he said in a speech to the Institute International and Strategic Studies. "This effort will not remain winnable indefinitely, nor will public support." Concerning a strategy of relying more on drone missiles and Special Forces operations to defeat the al-Qaeda in Afghanistan — a strategy that Vice President Biden was reportedly promoting — McChrystal said it would lead to "Chaos-istan." When asked if he would support it, he replied: "The short answer is no."

In December, Obama announced he was sending 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, while announcing at the same time a withdrawal of forces beginning in July 2011. But McChrystal's dissatisfaction with this administration's approach to the war continued. And while Obama made a point of saying the change of command was not based on any "personal insult," the commander in chief was obviously put on the spot by comments from McChrystal's aides that the general thought the President was intimidated by him and seemed disengaged from the war in Afghanistan. Neither could Obama have



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been pleased that the general's men, by contrast, appeared to be going out of their way to praise his former (and possibly future) rival for the presidency, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. "Hillary had Stan's back during the strategic review," the *Rolling Stone* quotes an adviser in McChrystal's "inner circle" as saying. "She said, 'If Stan wants it, give him what he needs.'"

If the war in Afghanistan either ends in defeat or lingers as a bloody stalemate a year from now, while the economy remains resistant to Obama's "stimulus," who would be surprised if Secretary Clinton resigns from the State Department and challenges the incumbent in the presidential primaries? The thought has no doubt crossed the mind of Obama and those who are watching *his* back.

Truman likewise believed MacArthur was deliberately playing into the hands of his political opponents — namely the Republicans — during the Korean War, when the general was frustrated by the absence of clear policy and the indecision shown by the commander in chief and his joint chiefs of staff. By early 1951, the White House had quietly abandoned the United Nations Resolution of the previous October that declared the unification of Korea under democratic rule as the ultimate goal of the war effort. The invasion of Communist Chinese forces by the hundreds of thousands had shifted the momentum away from the UN forces and persuaded Truman that a stalemate was the best that could be hoped for without a further widening of the war and the risk of bringing in the Soviet Union. MacArthur, who believed the goal in fighting a war was to win it, was at first not so much in defiance of administration policy as in search of one. He asked for permission to bomb Chinese bases in Manchuria and it was denied. He repeatedly asked for permission to bomb the bridges across the Yalu River, over which Chinese troops poured into Korea. He was eventually told he could bomb the southern half of the bridges. The old general was said to have privately growled that nothing in his 50 years of military experience had taught him how to bomb half a bridge.

Here is an example of the kind of direction MacArthur received from his superiors when he had asked for additional troops:

We believe that we should not commit our remaining available ground forces to action against Chinese Communist forces in Korea in face of the increased threat of general war. However, a successful resistance to Chinese-North Korean aggression at some position in Korea and a deflation of the military and political prestige of the Chinese Communists would be of great importance to our national interest, if they could be accomplished without incurring serious losses.

As historian William Manchester dryly observed, "As inspiration, that was something less moving than the Atlantic Charter." As clarification, it was ambiguity on stilts. Britain's Field Marshall Lord Alanbrooke had this to say about MacArthur in Korea: "He has been accused of taking action without previous political approval, but he had been unable to obtain the political policy and guidance he had sought. To my mind a general who is not prepared to assume some responsibility on his own, when unable to obtain political direction, is of little value."

But eventually MacArthur, after ordered to silence, gave press interviews in which he said things that he knew ran counter to decisions, however ambiguous, made in Washington. And when Truman, having settled for stalemate, circulated among our allies a proposal for inviting China and North Korea to peace negotiations, MacArthur, who had been informed of the overture, torpedoed it by issuing a message of his own to Peking. It was an ultimatum in which he apprised the Chinese of the inferiority of their firepower on the ground and other "military weaknesses" and warned that that "a decision by the United Nations to depart from its tolerant effort of to contain the war would doom Red China to the risk



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of imminent military collapse." Both the substance and tone of the letter the infuriated the Chinese and forced Truman to temporarily shelve his proposal for peace talks.

By then the general was so far out of step with what passed for administration policy that his imminent departure was certain. In a response to a written query from House Republican leader Joseph Martin of Massachusetts, MacArthur wrote of the unprecedented constraints he was under and how they prevented him from successfully prosecuting the war. Martin went public with the letter and Truman could stand no more. The general had to go.

MacArthur came home to thunderous ovations and ticker-tape parades. "In war," he said to a joint session of Congress and in speeches around the nation, "there is no substitute for victory." Two years later the stalemate in Korea was formalized in an armistice signed at Panmunjom, but no treaty of peace has ever been agreed upon. Korea remains divided, with Communist North Korea, now armed with nuclear weapons, still threatening to conquer its neighbor to the south. Fifty-seven years after the shooting stopped, 30,000 American troops remain in South Korea. The war is still not over. Perhaps, 60 years from now, the same will be said of the current war in Afghanistan.

*Photo: Douglas MacArthur*



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