

Lessons not learned

Civil-military disconnect in Afghanistan

BY CHARLES D. ALLEN

The relief of two four-star operational commanders in Afghanistan, America's "war of necessity," warrants an examination of not only civil-military relations but also leader-follower dynamics and the question of whether there was a disconnect between these senior leaders and their bosses.

In June 2008, Gen. David McKiernan became commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) after serving as the commander of U.S. Army Europe. A respected officer with a stellar reputation within the Army, he was responsible for the secondary theater of war while the national focus was on Iraq. With the perceived success of the surge in Iraq and transition to the new presidential administration, Afghanistan received renewed attention on the American political landscape. The newly inaugurated President Obama directed a review of policy and military operations by U.S. Central Command and the Joint Staff. The commander in chief announced "a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan" in March 2009. The consensus among national security professionals is the strategy did not appreciably change from the revised strategy developed under the Bush administration in the fall of 2008.

McKiernan saw his primary responsibility as maintaining the partnership with the NATO coalition (he was its titular commander) and supporting the fledgling Afghan government and its military. Upon receiving the new strategy, he provided his own commander's assessment and concluded the allocated resources were not sufficient to achieve the goals of the strategy. Consistent with his analysis from April 2008 (in particular, being 30,000 troops short), which was prior to assuming the position, he provided an assessment later that summer to Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen.

McKiernan, under the Bush administration, called for additional U.S. military troops for a surge in Afghanistan. It is not well-known that in March 2009 Obama approved 21,000 U.S. troops to increase the force levels for Operation Enduring Freedom. The situation was complicated by the increased

scrutiny and sensitivity to civilian casualties attributed to ISAF military operations in spring 2009. After a visit by Gates to the theater in mid-April, McKiernan was summarily relieved of his position, with Mullen citing the need for "fresh thinking" to execute the new counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy.

By all appearances, McKiernan was the exemplar of adherence to the principle of civilian control of the military. He provided "voice" in his professional advice and counsel to senior civilian and military leaders by identifying the strategy-resource mismatch. He was "loyal" to the military profession and to the Constitution by not speaking out on the occasions

where decisions were contrary to his advice. When pressured by Mullen to retire, it was reported that he told the chairman, "You're going to have to fire me." Upon receiving notification of his relief, McKiernan told his soldiers, "But I'm a soldier and I live in a democracy and I work for political leaders, and when my political leaders tell me it's time to go, I must go." He did not choose to exit by resigning in protest to challenge civilian authority.

McKiernan's comments during the retirement ceremony demonstrated his personal philosophy when he said, "what counts most are reputation and the ability to look in the mirror and know you made decisions based on mission and taking care of troopers and their families."

Some may say McKiernan was not qualified for the job in Afghanistan, but that is an extreme and unrealistic assessment. For a more complete understanding of how Pentagon leaders select senior commanders, consider the metaphor of sitting down for a night of poker. You have to play the cards you are dealt, not only for one hand but also for each hand for as long as you are at the table — even when the dealer changes the game from Texas Hold'em to Seven-Card Stud. As your strategy changes, so too does the value of your assets. A two of hearts may fill out a straight in one hand and may have no use when the four other cards are clubs.

I offer that McKiernan had relevant experience as the Coalition Forces Land Component commander for the invasion phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom and then as an Army component commander while serving as the commanding general for U.S. Army Europe. It is possible that he was the best available leader for the year under the old, NATO-

McKiernan lost the confidence of DoD leaders, while McChrystal lost the trust of the president.

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Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Gen. David McKiernan, then-top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, meet with Afghan officials May 8, 2009. Three days later Gates said he had asked McKiernan to retire.

focused strategy, and that he was reasonably successful in that job. But when the game changed from poker to pinochle, we needed a pinochle player who really understood how to play this different and generally unfamiliar game. Perhaps this was Gates' rationale in selecting Gen. Stanley McChrystal — who had in-depth experience in counterinsurgency — to lead the effort in Afghanistan.

MCCHRYSTAL: THE NATURAL CHOICE

In June 2009, McChrystal assumed command of American and coalition forces in Afghanistan following the removal of McKiernan. McChrystal was the natural and easy choice as a successor for ISAF commander. Not only did he have extensive special operations forces experience in COIN and counterterrorism in Iraq, Afghanistan and across the globe, he was mentored by Mullen and was the director of the Joint Staff (and previously, vice director of operations, J-3). Gates had frequent interactions with McChrystal, who was considered the superstar of the "A Team" within the Defense Department. In his position on the Joint Staff, McChrystal would have been privy to the internal discussion between Gates and Mullen while having access to communications from Gen. David Petraeus

(then commander of U.S. Central Command) and McKiernan. He would have known the points of concern and hot-button issues for the most senior leaders of DoD (and the White House) as part of the Joint Staff and combatant command review of the strategy. He therefore would have been expected to consider those concerns in his command decisions and actions. While some suggested that McKiernan used coalition forces as a "blunt instrument" in COIN, McChrystal's application of force was anticipated to be more sophisticated and nuanced.

McChrystal was given 60 days to perform an assessment of the strategy as the theater commander and to make recommendations for adjustments. The national security adviser, retired Marine Gen. Jim Jones, flew to Afghanistan in July and met with McChrystal to warn against requesting additional troops. The ISAF commander's initial assessment was provided on schedule to Gates on Aug. 30. On Sept. 21, The Washington Post published the McChrystal report. It provided an assessment of risk in attaining the strategic goals commensurate with and contingent on the levels of resourcing. McChrystal's centerpiece recommendation was to add 40,000 U.S. troops to the Afghanistan force levels for the population-

PERSPECTIVES

centric COIN strategy. The need for additional troops was emphasized with statements such as “Resources will not win this war, but under-resourcing could lose it. Resourcing communicates commitment,” and the mission “will likely result in failure” without adequate resources. This request was greater than the 30,000 troops requested by McKiernan (and nearly twice the 21,000 that were already in the deployment pipeline), which would raise the U.S. force contribution to 98,000.

The first public indication of a disconnect between McChrystal and the civilian leadership occurred during his presentation to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London on Oct. 1. In his prepared remarks, McChrystal seemed to dismiss Vice President Joe Biden’s position to pursue a counterterrorism approach that would manage the conflict with a light on-the-ground presence. This statement was made while Obama was considering the strategic assessment provided by McChrystal to DoD, and the commander in chief had yet to define the U.S. strategy. McChrystal seemed at odds with the potential policy direction by referring to Afghanistan as “Chaosistan” under that scenario and providing a bleak assessment of success if the al-Qaida-centric counterterrorist strategy was adopted. The day after the IISS speech, Obama had McChrystal join him aboard Air Force One on the ground in Copenhagen for a 25-minute discussion.

There had been occasions where McChrystal seemed to be “off message” in citing the slow progress with the Afghan government, the capability of its military and the threat posed by the resurgent Taliban. However, in none of these events did McChrystal appear to be at odds with the policy or the military strategy — he was a true believer who provided cautious and candid assessments. McChrystal’s undoing was the disparaging comments made by him and members of his inner circle about the Obama administration’s national security team. Those comments were captured by a Rolling Stone reporter who spent a month in McChrystal’s ISAF headquarters.

McChrystal should have learned from past leaders’ failures.



Gen. Stanley McChrystal was fired as the top commander in Afghanistan after he and members of his inner circle made disparaging remarks about Obama administration officials.

He and the rest of the American generals watched over the past three years as Gates held several DoD officials (civilian appointees and military officers) accountable for their words and actions — especially with the firing of Central Command commander Adm. Fox Fallon after an interview in Esquire magazine. In that interview, Fallon made statements about Iran that were contrary to the policy announced by President Bush. It may be the case that, as Rolling Stone reporter Michael Hastings related on “The Colbert Report,” McChrystal was seen as “not fireable.” Perhaps because he was a favorite of Gates and Mullen, or perhaps he was held, like Petraeus in Iraq three years earlier, as the indispensable man in Afghanistan.

The questions about military leadership in support of political goals and strategy are the subject of many blogs and much discussion and debate within the military profession. As you look at military history (especially in the U.S.), there is a peacetime Army and then a weeding out and proofing period required to select leaders during military conflicts. You have to build the bench of leaders by developing them under stressful conditions and

pick those who can effectively execute the chosen strategy. The U.S. had similar challenges identifying senior leaders for operations in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. It may help to remember that the commander of the successful Operation Allied Force in Kosovo, Gen. Wesley Clark, was forced to retire afterward because of his disconnect with Defense Secretary William Cohen and President Clinton over the strategy for the campaign.

PRECARIOUS TIMES

McKiernan and McChrystal both assumed the position of ISAF commander at precarious times — periods of transition — for U.S. operations in Afghanistan. McKiernan was caught in the transition between presidential administrations and the inherent challenge to the existing strategy. It would be easy to portray him as an “old school” general who did not understand or appreciate the differences in implementing COIN in

Afghanistan. Where DoD and the White House may have wanted or needed to show substantive movement, McKiernan may have been viewed as lumbering rather than innovative. A change in commanders provided a visible indication of the importance placed on the war effort by the new administration (and not necessarily the lack of competence of the officer). Likewise, McChrystal was caught in the period of the debate on the U.S. policy on Afghanistan and how to redirect the strategy to achieve the policy goals. McChrystal's presentation to the IISS and his response to questions demonstrated a deep understanding of the operational issues and his role in the policy development process within the administration. But the perception of a "runaway general" could not be allowed by Obama.

Neither officer challenged the premise of civilian control of the military, and both dutifully implemented the military strategy aligned with U.S. policy for the theater. A key element of the civilian principal and military agent relationship is the trust and confidence that the civilian leaders have in their military officers. The essential difference is that McKiernan lost the confidence of DoD leaders, Gates and Mullen, while McChrystal lost the trust of the president.

The replacement of these senior military officers reminds us that senior civilian leaders have the prerogative to build the team they feel is best-suited to execute the selected strategy. American military culture holds civil supremacy as sacrosanct in the policy formulation and the authority to issue lawful orders and direction. Military leaders expect that civilian leaders will be inclusive in the decision-making process. This includes seeking the technical expertise of senior military leaders, giving due consideration to their advice and counsel, and maintaining engagement during policy execution. Military leaders understand that civilians are responsible for determining policy and approving military strategies for implementation. The rub occurs when military members perceive inappropriate civilian involvement in the method of implementation (ways) or a mismatch between the strategic goals (ends) and the resources (means) provided to attain the goals.

COMMANDER LESSONS

There are three lessons that military officers should take from this tale of two commanders who were relieved in Afghanistan.

1. McKiernan focused on being the operational commander

and was not sufficiently attuned to the political process outside of his theater. A theater commander must be politically savvy and nonpolitical. He should have stayed informed and engaged, sought to build and maintain relationships with the key players outside of his command structure, and to get inside their heads and establish trust with his senior leaders.

2. While McChrystal had developed and maintained a special relationship with his senior DoD leaders, he should have been wary of his role in the policy debate and formulation process. In the early months of his tenure, there was the danger of getting ahead of the president and operating outside of policy.

3. As senior military officers who represent the organization, the institution and the profession, any comments no matter how seemingly innocuous could have significant (and unintended negative) consequences. Senior leaders are strategic communicators whose words and actions count. Comments by leaders set the tone and the climate within organizations — for good and for bad — and they are never neutral.

It is important to recognize that expertise and experience are not enough to ensure the success of a military commander. Those officers who rise to three- and four-star rank are exceptionally talented, have developed great expertise through their crucible experiences while leading at the tactical and operational levels, and have demonstrated the courage and commitment to pursue any mission to fruition. By almost any measure, these skilled war fighters are the best and the brightest in the profession. However, while they may be senior leaders, they may not necessarily be strategic leaders. One Army definition of strategic leadership includes the ability of a leader to "guide the achievement of their organizational vision within the larger enterprise by directing policy and strategy, building consensus, [and] acquiring and allocating resources." This is a tall order and is especially important for military commanders who have to be concerned with sustaining support for protracted engagements as in Afghanistan. The answer is multifaceted. Not only do senior military leaders fail because of disconnect with their civilian bosses, failure may also be in their lack of ability as strategic communicators to effectively engage with those whose trust and confidence is essential. **AFJ**

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