

# Did the NRCC Really Say Nancy Pelosi Should Be Put in Her Place?

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: October 8, 2009 05:35 AM

The NRCC issued a statement this week [attacking Nancy Pelosi for daring to question General McChrystal and calling on General McChrystal to "put her \(Pelosi\) in her place."](#) The NRCC is charged with defeating the Democratic congress, so attacks on Nancy Pelosi and other Democratic leaders should not, in general, be cause for too much anger or surprise. However, the specific language used by the NRCC reveals the contempt with which the NRCC holds not just Speaker Pelosi, but the some of the basic ideas on which our democracy rests as well.

McChrystal will not, of course, put Pelosi in her place. The voters of San Francisco and the other members of the House of Representatives have already done that and put Pelosi in her position as Speaker of the House. By questioning McChrystal, Pelosi is fulfilling her constitutional duty. Civilian control of the military is a core component of American democracy. Silence by Pelosi would amount to shirking these duties. All Americans, regardless of party affiliation or views on the war in Afghanistan should be grateful that members of congress like Pelosi challenge McChrystal and push him to make his arguments as strongly and persuasively as possible.

Military leaders, such as General McChrystal, are charged with determining how best to achieve military goals. The nature of that position leads them to frequently call for more troops, more equipment, stronger US commitment and the like. This is simply the bureaucratic logic of the military. McChrystal's call for more troops is appropriate because that probably is necessary, although, sadly, far from sufficient, for the US to achieve its goals in Afghanistan.

Military leaders, however, are not policy makers, so should not be expected to determine priorities, be concerned about what the American people want or even consider the global impact of military actions in a specific questions. This is the purview of our elected leaders. By raising these and other questions Pelosi, and others in Congress, are pushing for a discussion of goals, strategies and priorities not just tactics.

The NRCC statement reflects a lack of understanding of this basic principle and asserts that "Pelosi somehow believes she is better suited to craft our country's military policy." The proper response to this is that of course she is better suited to craft our country's policy. Unlike McChrystal, Pelosi and her 434 colleagues in the House of Representatives were elected to craft US policy, military and otherwise. Pelosi, and others in congress, absolutely should seek the expertise of McChrystal and others and even defer to them on technical matters and military tactics, but should not allow unelected generals to make major policy decisions.

While McChrystal has far more knowledge of military tactics, war and Afghanistan than Pelosi, unlike the Speaker of the House, nobody elected him. He is a bureaucrat charged ultimately with implementing the will of the people, as determined by their elected representatives, in his

particular sphere of expertise. Calling for unelected bureaucrats to put elected officials in their place simply because the latter are doing their constitutional duty by challenging the former sets a chilling tone for our democracy. It is an unambiguous attempt to stifle debate by trying to shout down those, including the Speaker of the House, who would dare to question the military.

The questions which congress should be raising about whether this war is worth it, how long we will be there, what some of the other consequences of the war will be and how the US might more effectively combat Al Quada are questions which are important to many Americans as public opinion begins to turn against the war. For this reason, the NRCC statement is, of course, not just about Nancy Pelosi. Nancy Pelosi is a tough and professional politician who, at this time, has little to fear from the NRCC. The nature of the attack on Nancy Pelosi is, however, implicitly an attack on all of us who think questions about the war should be raised. The NRCC thinks all of us should be put in our place and all of our questions should remain unasked.

In some respects it is a mistake to read too much into this latest NRCC statement. It is one of many statements which the NRCC, RNC and other Republican organizations make on a regular basis critical of President Obama, Pelosi, Harry Reid and other prominent Democrats. However, sometimes in these quotidian statements, the Republican Party shows a little too much about its true understanding and beliefs about how they would like the US to work. This is one of those cases where the NRCC made it clear that their understanding of the relationship between the military and its civilian control is disturbingly tenuous.