

After McChrystal

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President Obama did the right thing this week in firing General Stanley McChrystal. Allowing McChrystal to remain in office after the [Rolling Stonestory in which McChrystal belittled members of the Obama administration](#) would have allowed his rather outrageous insubordination to stand unchallenged. It also would have encouraged further insubordination in the military which can ultimately threaten the notion of civilian control of the military. Obama is the Commander in Chief; and he acted accordingly this week. Similarly, Obama's choice of General David Petraeus as the man to replace McChrystal is also politically a good one because Petraeus, the military man associated with whatever success we have had in Iraq in recent years, is well respected among most political elites and opinion makers.

Obama's actions were a necessary response to an immediate problem, but they also raise bigger questions about the future of the war in Afghanistan. The firing of McChrystal brought the effort in Afghanistan back into reasonably sharp focus. [John McCain, for example, questioned the wisdom of Obama's withdrawal deadline of mid-2011](#). Criticisms like McCain's will likely grow stronger over the next twelve months as it becomes increasingly, and predictably, clear that the US will not meet its goals in Afghanistan before this time.

More notably several respected analysts including [Tom Ricks have suggested that President Obama use this moment to clean house in Afghanistan](#), firing US Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry and Special Representative to the region Richard Holbrooke as well. The ostensible reason for this would be to give Petraeus the opportunity to choose his own team. However, a shakeup of this scope would be something of an admission that things aren't going as hoped in Afghanistan. Although this may be obvious, it is probably not an admission that Obama would want to make at this time. That the idea has been bandied about by some of the punditry, however, suggests that there is growing awareness of the problems we are facing in Afghanistan which cannot be easily ignored.

Obama spent much of 2009 seeking to determine an Afghanistan policy before deciding to send more troops. The latest round of events in Kabul and Washington demonstrate that policy is still not resolved. Regardless of whether or not Obama continues to change the leadership in Afghanistan, the sense that things are not going well there is not going to go away. The McChrystal firing provides Obama with an opportunity to revisit much of his Afghanistan policy. While radically changing course there because of McChrystal's interview with *Rolling Stone* would be a mistake, using this moment to lay the groundwork for a policy shift would be wise.

The central problem Obama faces in Afghanistan is the same one he faced when he made his speech at West Point in December, or for that matter, when he took office in January of 2009. It is difficult to get out of Afghanistan today, but it will be more difficult to get out tomorrow. Thus the decision to get out requires the foresight to understand the real likelihood of things getting

worse not better, as well as the wisdom to take the political consequences for getting out now rather than postponing them until later when those consequences will be greater. Given that a decision to withdraw troops will lead many on the far right to deem Obama a quitter, appeaser, soft on terror or other ad hominem attacks, there is added pressure on Obama not to withdraw from Afghanistan.

By postponing that decision, however, Obama will only create a more difficult dilemma later. The chances of Petraus turning the war around to the point where it will be possible to begin substantially drawing down troops beginning in mid-2011 is quite small. The problems in Afghanistan are not the kind that can be solved simply by changing American military leadership. Moreover, if this were the case, then McChrystal should have been fired months ago and not simply as a response to his recent poor media judgment.

Thus, it is likely that as the withdrawal date approaches, Obama will be faced with the same tough decision about whether or not to withdraw troops from Afghanistan which he confronts now. However, by mid-2011, this decision will be more difficult because failure to honor his commitment will raise the ire of many who opposed the initial buildup. They will argue, not without cause, that not only has Obama pursued the wrong policy in Afghanistan, but that he has broken his promises regarding the war as well.

Firing McChrystal was a relatively easy decision for Obama. Had he not done it, his authority, and that of the entire civilian government, over the war effort would have been brought into question. Unfortunately, the other decisions the President faces regarding Afghanistan are not as easy, but postponing them will only make those decisions harder.