



Time is issue in Afghanistan war

By Retired Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey

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The least of our U.S. national security problems is the huge media controversy generated by the Rolling Stone article that shocked the Washington policy community by revealing the animosity and arrogance of the senior McChrystal battle staff toward their own governmental leadership team. The damaging article documented appallingly bad judgment, surprising military disloyalty and probably was fatally damaging to Gen. Stanley McChrystal's ability to orchestrate a NATO allied and inter-agency counter-insurgency operation.

Gen. McChrystal has been effectively replaced by Gen. David Petraeus without significantly damaging the execution of the president's announced strategy for Afghanistan. Petraeus is a strategic genius and the most effective military leader we have produced in more than a generation. He will provide the determined leadership required in this crisis situation. This was less a case of a modern day General MacArthur defying his commander-in-chief, than a damaging revelation of macho talk by a senior staff who sounded like a politically naïve group of U.S. commandos who forgot they were not running lethal kinetic ops at detachment level and talking bad about the conventional forces, but instead running a theater-of-operations involving 42 allies and a war being minutely followed by a global community with laptops.

Too bad. General McChrystal has been in nearly continuous combat since 9/11 and is probably the most daring, creative and competent counter-terrorist operator the U.S. Armed Forces has ever fielded. This damaging lapse is also indicative of a beleaguered and under-manned volunteer US Armed Forces, many of whom have multiple combat tours and who now suspect the politicians are running for cover, the country has forgotten their battles on the frontier and their military families are losing heart.

The real national security challenge facing us is that the war is not going well. We are in the ninth year of a war on terrorism that has cost 46,000 U.S. killed and wounded, \$800 billion in resources and has now lost the support of the American people. U.S. military forces are locked in a nation-building effort 600 miles from the ocean and the supporting power of the U.S. Navy. The 40,000-strong Taliban enemy forces are gaining strength and drastically increasing violence against NATO forces.

The Afghan government we are trying to shape and empower is corrupt, incompetent and frequently goofy in their deliberations. The Karzai government holds little sway over a giant and cruel land consumed by tribal hatreds and fueled by massive opium-induced criminality and addiction. The Pashtun rebellion at the very heart of the war is succored by active sanctuary in Pakistan and its ungoverned tribal areas and fueled by Jihadist international money and cadre. Finally, we are logistically supporting this massive undertaking at the end of our resource tether with contracted and corrupt Pakistani transportation moving supplies over hundreds of miles of roads interdicted by various criminals and insurgents being bribed with U.S. dollars to allow our passage.

There is some good news. We have a remarkable experienced, level-headed and talented Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the most competent and battle-hardened U.S. military we have ever fielded. Despite the weakening of our economic power and the shakiness of our allies, we could, in my judgment, achieve our desired national security objective of creating a stable

Afghanistan that would not act as a haven for international terrorism.

Our problem is time. We are running out of time. We told the American people we would begin withdrawing in July of 2011. Unless we can intimidate and bribe the Taliban into allowing our peaceful retreat — it is unlikely we can politically sustain the five- to fifteen-year international nation-building and military effort that is likely to be required to construct a stable nation from the ruins of 40 years of brutal war against the Soviets and the civil war that followed. Although the harmful consequences of failure and disgraceful withdrawal to the U.S. and our allies would be enormous — it will be difficult to make the case over time to the American people that endless war in Afghanistan at a monthly cost of \$5.4 billion and several hundred killed and wounded is serving the vital national security interests of the United States.

The minor problem is the embarrassing lapse of good judgment by the McChrystal team. The looming major challenge is “what should we do in Afghanistan?” President Obama has made his choice and picked a top-notch replacement in Gen. Petraeus. It’s time to refocus our attention on winning the war in Afghanistan.

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