

General McChrystal publicly campaigns for Afghanistan “surge”

By Bill Van Auken
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With his appearance Thursday before a British think tank, Gen. Stanley McChrystal intensified what has become a public campaign for his proposal to escalate the US war in Afghanistan with the deployment of 40,000 more American troops.

McChrystal delivered his speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London in the midst of an ongoing debate within the Obama administration over US strategy in Afghanistan.

According to media reports, significant elements within the civilian leadership of the government, led by Vice President Joe Biden, have opposed McChrystal’s plan for an intensified counterinsurgency campaign aimed at breaking the resistance of the Afghan people to US occupation. Instead, Biden and others have proposed an alternative strategy, which reportedly relies on air strikes, accelerated training of Afghan puppet forces and the use of US special forces troops to strike against insurgents across the border in Pakistan.

Both of these plans are designed to further US imperialist interests in Afghanistan and the wider theater of Central Asia. Whichever one is implemented, it will involve intensified bloodletting, first and foremost among the civilian populations of both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Supposedly, the civilian government of the United States, having heard the advice of its military commanders, is to decide the strategy that best serves the so-called national interest, and the generals are bound to accept and implement it.

In this case, however, there is an increasingly evident campaign by McChrystal and others within the military to impose their will upon the White House, or, at the very least, make it politically costly for Obama to reject their counsel.

Asked to present recommendations on US policy in Afghanistan, McChrystal submitted a confidential report that represented an unqualified brief for his counterinsurgency policy—“success demands a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign”—giving Obama no options and warning that unless the general’s own strategy is implemented, defeat will be virtually certain. Reports circulated that if his plan were rejected, McChrystal would resign his command.

Then this report was leaked to Bob Woodward of the Washington Post, which published it in a redacted version,

thereby taking to the public the campaign that McChrystal and others in the military had been waging within official channels.

The general took the opportunity of an appearance on the CBS television news program “60 Minutes” broadcast last Sunday to further promote his strategy.

With the London speech, this public campaign has been ratcheted up to another level. He used it to publicly argue for the proposal he submitted to the Obama administration, describing the situation in Afghanistan as “serious and deteriorating” and complaining that the government had “under-resourced our operations.”

In his speech, McChrystal referred to the “counterterrorism” strategy attributed to Biden by saying that “many people offer their own suggestions” on how to proceed in Afghanistan, comparing it to the strategy of “Chaosistan” in which the country would be allowed to sink into chaos dealt with “from the outside.”

Asked by a member of the audience about whether he believed that the strategy attributed to Biden could succeed, McChrystal replied:

“The short glib answer is no. The first reason I believe is that you have to navigate from where you are and not from where we wish we were.... A strategy that does not leave Afghanistan in a stable position is probably a short-sighted strategy.”

Asked how soon Afghan security forces could be built up to the strength needed to defend the US-backed government, McChrystal said no sooner than 2013, but went on to explain that this was “not an easy goal to attain” and that reaching the point where these forces could function without the US military presence “will be much later than 2013.”

The response of McChrystal’s audience, composed largely of security experts and former military officers and defense officials, was telling. McChrystal was asked at one point what strategy he had for “circumventing” civilian governments in NATO that opposed escalation. Another questioner, who identified herself as a British officer, commented that she was far more confident now in the Afghanistan command than she had been when British Prime Minister Gordon Brown had spoken at the same forum last month.

McChrystal was careful not to identify himself publicly with these sentiments, answering the “circumventing” question by

declaring, “I’m certainly not going to circumvent any political leadership, because at the end of the day, political leadership and the people are who I work for.”

While according to the US Constitution, this is the right answer, the general’s public actions call into question precisely this principle of civilian control of the military.

If Obama were now to reject the proposal for which his handpicked commander is campaigning, McChrystal knows that it will unleash a political firestorm. Republicans will charge that the Democratic president is unfit to serve as “commander-in-chief,” a political category that has been turned inside out over the course of the last decade to symbolize not civilian control of, but rather subordination to, the military.

As McChrystal was speaking in London, Republicans in the Senate forced a vote on a resolution calling for the general to be immediately recalled to Washington to testify on Afghanistan. The measure was defeated by a 59-40 vote that split strictly along party lines. Meanwhile, elements of the Republican right have raised a chorus of denunciation of Obama for having met only once with McChrystal.

The US president attempted to deflect this criticism by meeting with the general for 25 minutes in Air Force One before returning to the US from Denmark following his failed bid to have Chicago host the 2016 Olympic Summer Games. The encounter was an indication of the growing concern within the administration that it is being portrayed as insufficiently supportive of the military.

The New York Times commented nervously Friday that McChrystal’s “relaxed demeanor” at the London speech belied “any suggestion he might be headed for a showdown with the White House over war strategy—for the kind of clash that Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur had with President Truman during the Korean War.”

McChrystal’s public persona no doubt presents a sharp contrast to the imperious arrogance and narcissism that characterized that of MacArthur, who publicly repudiated Truman’s war policy, called for the use of nuclear weapons against China and appealed for support to the Republican leadership in Congress.

The Afghanistan commander appears prone to self-effacing humor, has denied any conflict with Obama and has avoided identification with either political party.

But McChrystal is by no means naïve and knows full well the significance of his pronouncements. He is a political general. Before taking command of the war in Afghanistan, he served as commander of the super-secretive Joint Special Operations Command, which was tasked with organizing assassinations, carried out systematic torture of detainees in Iraq and reportedly answered directly to the office of Vice President Dick Cheney.

At this point, his public actions, unlike MacArthur’s, are more preemptive than directly insubordinate, given that Obama

has yet to enunciate his Afghanistan strategy. Yet by publicly promoting his strategy and denigrating that proposed by senior civilian leaders, he is stepping over the same bounds.

Involved in this controversy are not merely the machinations of one general or the political calculations of the Republican Party. It is the expression of more fundamental processes within the American state apparatus, which is increasingly dominated by the massive and growing power of the US military along with the country’s intelligence agencies.

This is not a new phenomenon. Nearly half a century ago, Republican President Dwight Eisenhower used his farewell speech to warn the American people of the growing danger posed by the power of the “military-industrial complex.”

Today, that complex is far more powerful, with funding for the Pentagon—not including money for nuclear weapons and the Afghanistan and Iraq wars—consuming well over half of the federal government’s discretionary budget.

Four-star generals like McChrystal in Afghanistan or Raymond Odierno in Iraq function as virtual imperial proconsuls dictating conditions for entire populations. Moreover, the military has increasingly been used within the United States itself, including through domestic spying operations mounted by the National Security Agency against US citizens.

The majority of the American people oppose the war in Afghanistan, and by even larger numbers they are against any escalation of the US deployment there. These mass antiwar sentiments, however, are opposed by the Obama administration and the Democratic leadership, which are committed to continuing the Afghanistan war as well as the occupation in Iraq.

With both big business parties backing a policy of militarism abroad, the militarization of politics at home increases unchecked, and the principle of civilian control becomes ever more tenuous. Under conditions of deepening economic crisis and unprecedented social polarization, there is a threat that the military will be employed, either by its own commanders or civilian leaders, to suppress mass social struggles of the American working class.

Those who believe that a military coup “can’t happen here” underestimate not only the influence of the military within the American state, but also the degree to which all sections of the US ruling elite have eschewed any commitment to basic democratic rights.

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