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Is President Barack Obama so dense that he could not see why Gen. Stanley McChrystal might actually have wanted to be fired — and rescued from the current March of Folly in Afghanistan, a mess much of his own making?

McChrystal leaves behind a long trail of broken promises and unfulfilled expectations. For example, there is no real security, at least during the night, in Marja, which McChrystal devoted enormous resources to conquer this spring.

Remember his boast that he would then bring to Marja a “government-in-box” and offer an object lesson regarding what was in store for those pesky Taliban in Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second largest city?

But it’s now clear that there will be no offensive against Kandahar anytime soon. On its merits, that is surely a good thing, but it is a huge embarrassment for McChrystal and his former boss, the never nonplussed Gen. David Petraeus.

When McChrystal and his undisciplined senior aides let a Rolling Stone reporter know what they really thought of the “intimidated” Obama and most of his national security team, Obama and his advisers rose to the bait.

They let McChrystal fold his tent in the night and steal silently away from the disaster he leaves behind. White House advisers then came up with the idea of replacing McChrystal in Kabul with the straight-arrow Petraeus whose is known for running a tight command.

Since the announcement Wednesday, the Stanley-out/David-in move has been hailed by Official Washington as a political master stroke, but not for the right reasons.

The conventional wisdom holds that Petraeus is the military genius who can still prevail in Afghanistan, but the real cleverness of the choice is that it dumps in Petraeus's lap a mess that he also helped create, along with McChrystal and Obama (not to mention, Bush, Cheney, et al).

Petraeus gets a mission that virtually everyone but Sens. John McCain, Joe Lieberman, and Lindsey Graham realizes is an impossible assignment. It also gets Petraeus out of the country and, the Obama folks hope, out of contention for the 2012 Republican nomination.

Instead of possibly running against what a mess Obama has made of Afghanistan, Petraeus has been put in charge of the mess.

Vietnamistan

Still, the White House maneuver is too clever by half — and is extremely dangerous. It also makes the prospects dimmer for Obama executing a rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan beginning in July 2011, as some of the relative doves in his administration had hoped.

In replacing McChrystal with the popular Petraeus, who outnumbered Obama 100 to zero in the merit badges on his left breast, the President has given the sainted general the option of calling for more and more troops and firepower lest we “lose” in Vietnamistan — sorry, Afghanistan.

But where would the additional troops come from, and what would they be able to do that is not already being done?

For those old enough to remember a similar stage in the “counterinsurgency” operation in Vietnam, the ramrod image of Petraeus evokes shivers. He resembles much too closely the American commander in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland, an equally handsome gent

decked out with all manner of ribbons and medals with which to dazzle Congress in a way that President Lyndon Johnson could not.

A lawsuit after the war demonstrated that Westmoreland deliberately misled Congress by insisting that there were only half as many Vietnamese Communists under arms as his intelligence analysts knew there were.

Westmoreland's periodic appeals for more and more troops – as he pursued the light at the end of the tunnel – built U.S. forces up to 536,000.

Finally, in early 1968, President Johnson convened more sober and honest advisers who told him Vietnam was a fool's errand. Johnson finally told Westmoreland "no," but it was too late. Johnson wound up losing the presidency as well as the war, opening the door to Richard Nixon and all that followed.

In later mea culpas, Johnson's Defense Secretary Robert McNamara bemoaned the fact that as many as three million Vietnamese were killed, as well as over 58,000 American troops. As the contemporary song went, "When will they ever learn?"

Rock and Hard Place

Obama's main dilemma now is likely to be how to say "no" when, as seems inevitable, Westmoreland — sorry, Petraeus — makes requests for more "surges" of troops into Afghanistan.

Petraeus is likely to tell Obama he must have additional forces, or he will go the way of McChrystal and invite removal — and then possibly run for president in 2012. In that case, Obama's political advisers would probably say send more troops from wherever they might be scrounged up.

Casualties would rise exponentially; there would never be enough troops; most of those NATO allies that have not already withdrawn their troops would do so. The remaining “coalition forces” would not “prevail” (whatever that means).

And by the end of 2011, the Teflon-as-well-as-merit-badge-clad Petraeus might well quit anyway and join McChrystal in blaming the carnage on the “clowns” around President Obama.

We may well end up with either a President Petraeus or another President Clinton in the person of Obama’s hawkish Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was one official praised by McChrystal’s wild-boy crew because she favored giving the general whatever troops he wanted.

A McChrystal aide is quoted as saying, “She said, ‘If Stan wants it, give him what he needs.’”

Is it possible that Obama can be blissfully unaware of the dangerous political kill zone into which he has maneuvered his presidency?

The tragedy is that all this is unnecessary. If President Obama could get beyond these ill-conceived short-term political considerations, he already has available some well-reasoned guidance as to how to extricate the United States from the Afghanistan morass.

He got solid advice last fall from retired Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, his ambassador in Kabul, who knows more about Afghanistan than Petraeus, McChrystal and special envoy Richard Holbrooke do, put together.

And that knowledge and experience shows through clearly in sensitive cables Eikenberry sent to Washington in early November 2009. It’s telling that the New York Times editorialists have suggested that Obama should include Eikenberry in a “wider housecleaning” of the administration’s Afghan brain trust.

The news columns of the Times, however, do deserve credit for having published the text of

Eikenberry's cables, [posted online](#) . To the credit of the Times' source (reportedly a U.S. official), he/she was able to do a truly patriotic thing to ensure that those interested could learn about what Eikenberry really thought, especially his doubts about the effectiveness of a military escalation.

Clearly, the source saw what ethicists call a "supervening value" in making that unauthorized disclosure to the Times.

Nevertheless, last fall, President Obama apparently put his finger to the prevailing political winds of Washington and chose to go with McChrystal's counterinsurgency "surge" rather than the advice from Eikenberry and from Vice President Joe Biden, who also opposed the escalation.

Obama sided with McChrystal, Petraeus and Clinton (as well as Defense Secretary Robert Gates), agreeing to triple the U.S. troop levels to about 100,000. In the months that have passed, the levels of American casualties have jumped but the prospects for victory (or some modicum of success) remain stuck in a deepening quagmire.

Now, with some indiscreet comments to Rolling Stone magazine, McChrystal has managed to get plucked from the swamp as if some "deus ex machina" derrick from a Greek tragedy had appeared magically behind stage and lifted the hero out of an impossible situation.

Obama now has turned to what might be called "Petraeus ex machina" to salvage his benighted strategy in Afghanistan, but this new device is unlikely to lift the larger military cause out of grave danger. Instead, many of the U.S. troops committed to this dubious plan seem doomed in what is becoming a real-life tragedy.