

By Immanuel Wallerstein

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Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, gave an interview to *Rolling Stone* magazine in which he and his staff insulted the civilian leaders of his country. He was fired for insubordination by Pres. Obama. Even his defenders said that McChrystal's remarks were impolitic and a mistake. Given the fact that McChrystal is an exceptionally intelligent and very ambitious person, why did he do it?

McChrystal gave the interview in order that he be fired. And why did he want to be fired? He wanted to be fired because he knew that the policies he was pursuing and championing in the war in Afghanistan were not working, could not work. And he didn't want to be the one tarnished with the public blame.

Consider the long history that led up to this interview. The military strategy the United States forged in Afghanistan and Iraq was originally that imposed by then U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. The policy was one of unlimited machismo. Bomb the enemy from way up high and don't worry about who gets killed. Use torture on those you capture. Don't consult with anyone, even if they are so-called allies. Occupy the country, indefinitely.

Stanley McChrystal was a one-star general at the beginning of these wars, working in Washington as one of Rumsfeld's "golden boys." He had a long history, since his West Point days, of being a daring rebel who knew just when to stop – contemptuous of superiors he did not respect but always seeking to advance himself. Rumsfeld placed him in charge of the military's most secretive elite units, engaged in "special operations" and known to be a "killing machine." He performed brilliantly, as usual.

Then in 2006, if we still remember, the military, the politicians, and the press all began to say that the United States was losing the war in Iraq. Resistance seemed too strong, and the number of U.S. lives lost was steadily going up month by month. The Republicans did very

badly in the elections of 2006. Something had to be done.

Something was done. Rumsfeld was fired by President Bush. Vice-President Cheney, Rumsfeld's strongest defender, lost influence to Sec. of State Condoleezza Rice and Rumsfeld's successor, Robert Gates, who championed more "moderate" views, emphasizing diplomacy. A new military strategy suddenly gained ground, counter-insurgency (referred to by an acronym COIN). It was developed by a previously obscure military officer, David Petraeus.

Petraeus is as ambitious and as driven as McChrystal but a quite different personality. He is what might be called a military intellectual. He won the award as the top graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 1983. He got a Ph.D. in international relations from Princeton in 1989. He taught international relations at West Point. At the same time, he has a long record as a seasoned combat officer. And he cultivated favor with Washington politicians.

Since the 1980s, his published articles and reports advocated counter-insurgency as a doctrine. He drew on the experiences of the French using it in Algeria and the United States using it in Vietnam. As Petraeus' right-wing critics note, these were not notable successes. COIN emphasizes the need for "winning hearts and minds," which means necessarily incorporating diplomatic and political considerations into military tactics. The writer of the *Rolling Stone* interview, Michael Hastings, described COIN this way: "Think the Green Berets as an armed Peace Corps."

Pres. Bush turned to Petraeus in 2006 and allowed him to implement COIN in Iraq. This was the famous "surge" that involved increasing the number of U.S. troops in Iraq and changing strategy. Basically, Petraeus did two things that did indeed reduce the amount of violence against U.S. troops. The first was to bribe Sunni tribal elders in central and western Iraq to cease their tacit support of non-Iraqi al-Qaeda units. Since the Sunni sheikhs had never liked the al-Qaeda units, they were willing to forget their dislike of the Americans – for a price.

The second thing that Petraeus did was to permit ethnic cleansing in Baghdad, turning a multi-ethnic city into two segregated zones, a larger Shi'a zone and a beleaguered smaller Sunni zone. This reduced violence against the U.S. troops at the expense of increased inter-Iraqi violence. It also served the political interests of the most persistent and effective opponent of U.S. interests in Iraq, Mokhtar al-Sadr, who is emerging as the key broker in the newly-elected Iraqi parliament.

As Hastings said in an interview with the *Huffington Post* about his article, “Petraeus is sort of a genius. He managed to turn what could have been catastrophic defeat in Iraq into a face-saving withdrawal.” But of course, a face-saving withdrawal is not a victory, even if Sen. John McCain insisted so when running for president in 2008 – unsuccessfully.

When Barack Obama ran for office, he said quite clearly that he was against the war in Iraq and for the war in Afghanistan. So obviously he had to pursue it. He promoted Petraeus, adopted COIN, and named McChrystal commander in Afghanistan. True to his “rebel” style, McChrystal publicly demanded 40,000 more troops from Obama who, after months of reflection, gave him 30,000 – plus a withdrawal date.

At this point, however, McChrystal abandoned his previous machismo style and became the enthusiastic, perhaps over-enthusiastic, implementer of counter-insurgency in Afghanistan. He issued super-strict directives to avoid civilian casualties, a policy not at all appreciated by U.S. infantry units. He developed warm relations with Pres. Hamid Karzai, whom other U.S. leaders held at a distance. He thought he could win a quick victory in Marja and turn the area over to Afghan forces. Instead, it was a failure. And he recently announced that the key operation in Kandahar province, heartland of the Taliban forces, had to be postponed until September.

Even McChrystal’s Chief of Operations, Maj. Gen. Bill Mayville, says Afghanistan will be like Vietnam: “It’s not going to look like a win, smell like a win or taste like a win....This is going to end in an argument.” Hastings ends his article this way: “Winning, it would seem, is not really possible. Not even with Stanley McChrystal in charge.”

So, what would you do if you were McChrystal? You’d invite a reporter for a rock-and-roll magazine, considered to be on the left, to accompany you on airplanes and to drink fests, and sneer at the government. This was guaranteed to get you fired. And it meant that the future “argument” would not involve you.

What could Obama do? He had to fire McChrystal. Then, he tossed the hot potato to Petraeus, who couldn’t refuse it. The next year or two are going to be a fast-moving game in which Obama and Petraeus are going to try to shift the public’s blame for the defeat on the other.

The far right, the friends of Cheney and Rumsfeld, are not fooled. Diana West, one of their pundits, says: “The COIN nightmare continues.” For her, COIN means ordering troops “to exercise fantasies of cultural relativism that makes lefty sense in a PC classroom, but are nothing short of appalling on the front line.” A slightly less acerbic view was that of retired Col. Douglas Macgregor: “The idea that we are going to spend a trillion dollars to reshape the culture of the Islamic world is utter nonsense.”

Of course, Macgregor is right. What are the policy choices? The far right wants perpetual war. The only alternative is early and complete withdrawal. Obama doesn't want the first and is politically afraid to embrace the second. So he sends CIA Director, Leon Panetta, out to give ABC News an interview, saying that making progress in Afghanistan is “harder” and going more slowly than anticipated. Indeed, it is.