



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

The General and the President: Obama's "Harry Truman" moment?

Emrys Chew

30 June 2010

Historical parallels have been drawn between the removal of wartime US generals Douglas MacArthur and Stanley McChrystal by their respective commanders-in-chief. While the key question remains the issue of civilian authority over the military, the grounds for dismissal were different.

US PRESIDENT Barack Obama accepted the resignation of General Stanley McChrystal, the US-NATO commander in Afghanistan, on 23 June 2010, in the midst of an Afghan campaign against the Islamist insurgency. This has been compared to President Harry Truman's sacking of General Douglas MacArthur, the US-UN commander in Korea, on 11 April 1951, amid the conflict with international communist forces during the Korean War. Is this comparison justified?

Broad similarities

Both cases focus attention on the issue of civilian authority over the military, especially in times of war, to achieve US national security objectives. MacArthur and McChrystal were both top commanders tasked by their respective commanders-in-chief to fight "limited wars" abroad in defence of "liberty". As part of a containment strategy against international communism, MacArthur's mission was to repel North Korean forces without escalating conflict beyond the spatial constraints of the Korean Peninsula. In a counterinsurgency strategy against Afghan insurgents in the US war on terrorism, McChrystal's mission was to overcome Taleban forces in the "Af-Pak" region within a fixed timeframe.

Both generals ultimately refused to subordinate their military strategies to the wider political strategies of the day, just as their campaigns were suffering tactical reverses, and both were consequently relieved of their command for insubordination to their civilian bosses at these critical junctures. Finally, there were parallels in the explanatory statements issued by the two US presidents.

“Full and vigorous debate on matters of national policy is a vital element in the constitutional system of our free democracy,” declared President Truman. “It is fundamental, however, that military commanders must be governed by the policies and directives issued to them in the manner provided by our laws and Constitution. In time of crisis, this consideration is particularly compelling. General MacArthur’s place in history as one of our greatest commanders is fully established. The nation owes him a debt of gratitude for the distinguished and exceptional service which he has rendered his country in posts of great responsibility. For that reason I repeat my regret at the necessity for the action I feel compelled to take in his case.”

President Obama accepted General McChrystal’s resignation “with considerable regret,” acknowledging his well-earned reputation as “one of our nation’s finest soldiers” and that “all Americans should be grateful for [his] long record of service in uniform”.

Still, in Obama’s words: “War is bigger than any one man or woman, whether a private, a general, or a president. And as difficult as it is to lose General McChrystal, I believe that it is the right decision for our national security. ... Our democracy depends upon institutions that are stronger than individuals. That includes strict adherence to the military chain of command, and respect for civilian control over that chain of command. ... I welcome debate among my team, but I won’t tolerate division. ... We need to remember what this is all about. Our nation is at war.”

Specific differences

Significantly, however, the specific grounds for dismissal did differ. Prior to his Korean appointment at the onset of the Cold War, MacArthur was already a five-star general, a Pacific War hero and an “American Caesar” in Japan. MacArthur, supremely egotistical with a flair for political theatre, had expressed contempt for President Truman and President Franklin Roosevelt before him, but was never dismissed for disregarding the underlying principle of civilian control over the military.

MacArthur was sacked in the context of a largely conventional war, for his very public disagreement with the Truman administration and UN allies over matters of policy and grand strategy. Appealing to the American public and the President’s Congressional opponents, MacArthur had advocated the use of more aggressive tactics against the communists, announcing that there was “no substitute for victory”. He had proposed air raids, an American-led invasion of China and even the deployment of atomic bombs — with Hiroshima and Nagasaki in recent memory, a prospect that horrified America’s enemies and allies alike.

MacArthur’s tactlessly unequivocal appeal, without the President’s consent, angered Truman who perceived this as an insubordination of his leadership. Convinced that MacArthur’s recklessness might push America to the brink of a third world war, Truman swore privately: “The [expletive] isn’t going to resign on me, I want him fired.”

McChrystal, prior to taking command in a post-9/11 Afghanistan, had a distinguished yet secretive career in special forces operations. He enjoyed a “Spartan” reputation for being a soldier’s soldier, with little appetite for the drama of “Athenian” high politics. Last September, McChrystal clumsily leaked a report calling for troop increases in “under-resourced” Afghanistan, mocking the probable outcome of Vice-President Joe Biden’s alternative strategy — urging greater reliance on drone missile strikes and special forces operations — as creating a state called “Chaos-istan”. This earned McChrystal a rebuke from President Obama.

McChrystal’s resignation was finally accepted in the context of counterinsurgency operations requiring close civil-military cooperation, where personal comments disparaging the civilian leadership effectively undermined basic trust and unity. The *Rolling Stone* article entitled “The Runaway General” exposed the McChrystal team’s contempt for the President, Vice-President, and

other civilian officials whose diplomatic and nation-building efforts were deemed equally vital to the success of the mission.

Truman's dismissal of MacArthur, a war hero lionised by the American public, proved hugely controversial and unpopular. Obama's dismissal of McChrystal, a more private figure, is unlikely to generate as much controversy. Ironically, MacArthur's immediate successor — the comparatively unknown General Matthew Ridgway — is credited with securing a more favourable outcome for US-UN forces in the Korean War. It remains to be seen whether McChrystal's replacement with General David Petraeus, the hero of the successful "surge" strategy in Iraq, will restore momentum to the flagging US-NATO Afghan campaign.

Emrys Chew is Assistant Professor of History at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.