

HOW IS MCCHRYSTAL DOING AT FULFILLING HIS PLAN?

As Rachel Maddow pointed out last night, this isn't the first time that Stanley McChrystal has been insubordinate. He—or his aides—have mouthed off to the press on two earlier occasions without getting fired.

As Rachel mentions, the first of those was a memo leaked to Bob Woodward just in time to demand more troops. That memo provides an interesting benchmark to assess McChrystal's own plan.

Troops and Rules of Engagement

The key point of the leak to Woodward, of course, was for more troops. But McChrystal tied that demand to treating Afghans better.

McChrystal makes clear that his call for more forces is predicated on the adoption of a strategy in which troops emphasize protecting Afghans rather than killing insurgents or controlling territory.

[snip]

The key weakness of ISAF, he says, is that it is not aggressively defending the Afghan population. "Pre-occupied with protection of our own forces, we have operated in a manner that distances us – physically and psychologically – from the people we seek to protect. . . . The insurgents cannot defeat us militarily; but we can defeat ourselves."

[snip]

Toward the end of his report, McChrystal revisits his central theme: "Failure to provide adequate resources also risks a

longer conflict, greater casualties, higher overall costs, and ultimately, a critical loss of political support. Any of these risks, in turn, are likely to result in mission failure.”

As I pointed out yesterday, McChrystal has changed the rules of the engagement with the infantry, which is losing faith precisely because they can't respond to violence with violence.

But however strategic they may be, McChrystal's new marching orders have caused an intense backlash among his own troops. Being told to hold their fire, soldiers complain, puts them in greater danger. “Bottom line?” says a former Special Forces operator who has spent years in Iraq and Afghanistan. “I would love to kick McChrystal in the nuts. His rules of engagement put soldiers' lives in even greater danger. Every real soldier will tell you the same thing.”

But McChrystal admits in this story that he still demands lots of killing from the special forces, even while he pretends to scold them after they succeed.

Even in his new role as America's leading evangelist for counterinsurgency, McChrystal retains the deep-seated instincts of a terrorist hunter. To put pressure on the Taliban, he has upped the number of Special Forces units in Afghanistan from four to 19. “You better be out there hitting four or five targets tonight,” McChrystal will tell a Navy Seal he sees in the hallway at headquarters. Then he'll add, “I'm going to have to scold you in the morning for it, though.” In fact, the general frequently finds himself apologizing for the disastrous consequences of counterinsurgency. In

the first four months of this year, NATO forces killed some 90 civilians, up 76 percent from the same period in 2009 – a record that has created tremendous resentment among the very population that COIN theory is intent on winning over.

This quote—unlike some of the more inflammatory ones in the article, direct from McChrystal—was one of the most disturbing to me. Is the call for fewer casualties just a joke? Just something the grunts have to abide by? Or can the special forces guys just live by their own rules, even though their fuck-ups are the ones that really convince Afghans to hate us?

Corruption

McChrystal's memo does warn of the dangers of corruption.

The assessment offers an unsparing critique of the failings of the Afghan government, contending that official corruption is as much of a threat as the insurgency to the mission of the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, as the U.S.-led NATO coalition is widely known.

“The weakness of state institutions, malign actions of power-brokers, widespread corruption and abuse of power by various officials, and ISAF's own errors, have given Afghans little reason to support their government,” McChrystal says.

[snip]

McChrystal continues: “Afghan social, political, economic, and cultural affairs are complex and poorly understood. ISAF does not sufficiently appreciate the dynamics in local communities, nor how the insurgency, corruption, incompetent officials,

power-brokers, and criminality all combine to affect the Afghan population.”

We haven't solved these. We've still got the corrupt Karzai. And money from contracts is still going into the pockets of warlords we oppose.

Detention Facilities

There's McChrystal's call to hand off operation of the Afghan detention facilities.

McChrystal outlines a plan to build up the Afghan government's ability to manage its detention facilities and eventually put all such operations under Afghan control, including the Bagram Theater Internment Facility, which the United States runs.

McChrystal **has** moved towards handing back the prisons in Afghanistan to the country. Yet, at the same time, DOD is building a big new facility, which curiously would be finished just as the Afghans are supposed to take over the prison.

The U.S. military is getting set to expand its controversial detention camp at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan – just as new reports of a “black jail” inside the facility are surfacing.

In a solicitation issued today, the U.S. military put out a request for a contractor to build three new detention housing units next to the existing facility, known formally as the Afghan National Detention Facility at Parwan (Bagram is in the southwest corner of Parwan Province). As of last September, 645 prisoners were held there.

The cost of the project – which will include construction of one special housing unit and two detention housing

units – is projected to run between \$10 million and \$25 million. The contractor will have approximately nine months to complete the entire project.

Presumably, these new buildings are in addition to Bagram's separate and previously clandestine detention facility, revealed by the International Committee of the Red Cross yesterday. Nine former prisoners say they were abused there, according to the BBC.

Timing here is key: The jail is supposed to be handed over to Afghan control of the place, sometimes called "Obama's Guantanamo," sometime next year. (Afghan president Hamid Karzai would like to make the hand-off even earlier.) Afghan and U.S. officials have signed an agreement to hand control of the Parwan facility to the Afghan ministry of defense, and eventually to its ministry of justice. The transfer may help resolve an issue that has caused a fair amount of controversy for the U.S. military.

And someone—whether McChrystal himself or his superiors—floated retaining a special facility under US control in Afghanistan so we'd have some place to abuse prisoners.

Casualties

But on one point McChrystal covered his ass was right: casualties.

McChrystal warns that in the short run, it "is realistic to expect that Afghan and coalition casualties will increase."

The number of US casualties has gone up significantly.

Now, I understand we're only halfway through the big surge period of this plan. I understand some of these things are out of McChrystal's control. I understand this is a near-impossible task in

any case.

I know we won't get it, but this flap—whether or not McChrystal gets fired—is the ideal time to assess whether McChrystal's plan was ever realistic. Because it's not clear it was.