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Afghan mission impossible

By George F. Will

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Gen. MacArthur had some of the genius and much of the egomania of a former artillery captain, Napoleon. This made MacArthur insubordinate and got him cashiered by a former artillery captain, Harry Truman. Although McChrystal is a fine soldier who rendered especially distinguished service in Iraq, there is no reason to ascribe to him either egomania or insubordination. He did, however, emphatically disqualify himself from further military service, and particularly from service in Afghanistan. There the military's purely military tasks are secondary to the political and social tasks for which the military is ill-suited.

The American undertaking in Afghanistan is a fool's errand and McChrystal is breathtakingly foolish. Even so, he and it were badly matched. This, even though the errand is of the president's careful devising and McChrystal was the president's choice to replace the four-star general who had been commanding there.

Counterinsurgency, as defined by McChrystal's successor, Gen. David Petraeus, and tepidly embraced by Barack Obama for a year or so, does not just involve nation-building, it is nation-building.

The McChrystal debacle comes as America's longest war is entering a surreal stage: The military is charged with a staggeringly complex task, the completion of which - if completion can even be envisioned - must involve many years. But when given the task, the military was told to begin bringing it to a close in a matter of 18 months.

It is difficult, and perhaps unwise, to suppress this thought: McChrystal's disrespectful flippancies, and the chorus of equally disdainful comments from the unpleasant subordinates he has chosen to have around him, emanate from the toxic conditions that result when the military's can-do culture collides with a cannot-be-done assignment. In this toxicity, Afghanistan is Vietnam redux.

In July 1945, with the war in the Pacific still to be won and Winston Churchill engaged in the Potsdam conference, the British electorate turned him out of office. When his wife Clementine suggested that this might be a blessing in disguise, he replied: If so, it is very well disguised indeed.

The shattering of McChrystal is a messy blessing if the president seizes upon it as a reason for revisiting basic questions about whether Afghanistan matters so much and what is possible there and at what cost. It may be said that with the Afghan mission entering - or soon to enter; it is late and now may become more so - a crucial military phase in Kandahar, the cradle of the Taliban, McChrystal is indispensable. Any who may say that should heed the words of another general, one of the 20th century's greatest leaders and realists. Charles de Gaulle said: The graveyards are full of indispensable men.