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The Nation

It's the Occupation, Not Just McChrystal

By John Nichols

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Obama is now getting some high marks for ditching General McChrystal and replacing him with General David Petraeus. Unfortunately, their continued policy of U.S. occupation of Afghanistan is unwise, says John Nichols.

When President Obama and his political team were scrambling to figure out whether it was safe to ditch General Stanley McChrystal as head of the president's occupation of Afghanistan, one of the savviest members of Congress when it comes to issues involving civilian control of the military was already providing a sound assessment.

While other leading Democrats deferred to the president, House Appropriations Committee chair David Obey, D-Wisconsin, minced no words.

The committee chairman who oversees funding of the military -- and who has delayed action on the administration's request for a massive "emergency" increase in funding of the Afghanistan occupation -- issued an immediate call for the removal of the general. But he did it for the right reasons.

"In recent history -- which runs from (Korean War) General MacArthur, to (Vietnam War) General LeMay, to General McChrystal, we have seen a long list of reckless, renegade generals who haven't seemed to understand that their role is to implement policy, not design it," Obey explained. "General McChrystal's comments are not the first time we've seen a General contemptuous of his civilian superiors. It isn't even the first time we've seen this General be contemptuous. But his comments, and those of his

subordinates, dismissing the President, the Vice-President, General Jones, Ambassador Eikenberry, and Richard Holbrooke suggests that General McChrystal is locked into an 'everybody is wrong but me' approach to the world."

Obey continued: "In apologizing this morning, McChrystal said his comments were 'a mistake reflecting poor judgment and should never have happened.' I couldn't have said it better myself. Anybody, including a U.S. Army General, is entitled to making a damn fool of themselves once. But General McChrystal hasn't appeared to learn from his mistakes.

"In London last October, he made a deliberate determination to try to box in the President, and the President was generous to give him another chance to prove that he understood the chain of command.

"His repeated contempt for the civilian chain of command demonstrates a bull headed refusal to take other people's judgments into consideration. That is damn dangerous in somebody whose decisions determine life and death for American troops and others in the region.

"That is something that we simply cannot afford!"

Obey's point is the essential one here. The problem is not only that General McChrystal displayed contempt for the president, the vice president, ambassadors and others -- although that is a serious matter. The problem is not just that General McChrystal repeatedly displayed disrespect for the civilian chain of command -- although that is an even more serious matter, which goes to the heart of the American experiment. The problem is not even that General McChrystal refused to listen to opposing views regarding his plan to surge tens of thousands of additional troops into Afghanistan. The problem is that General McChrystal put his blinders on and, for too long, Obama still followed his advice.

Obama is now getting some high marks for ditching General McChrystal and replacing him with General David Petraeus. Unfortunately, as Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman John Kerry, D-Massachusetts, says: "The commander in chief has made it clear no one is bigger than the mission and nothing less than a unified effort in Afghanistan will get the job done. His decision to return General Petraeus to the battlefield (insures) continuity in philosophy..." with regard to the occupation.

That, unfortunately, is the problem. What needed to change was what Obey was talking about: that "bull headed refusal to take other people's judgments into consideration" which really is "damn dangerous in somebody whose decisions determine life and death for American troops and others in the region."

Unless General Petraeus and Commander-in-Chief Obama start listening to the military men and women, diplomats, defense analysts, international affairs specialists and

terrorism experts who say that the continued U.S. occupation of Afghanistan is unwise -- and that expansion of the occupation is madness -- the whole General McChrystal mess will be merely a footnote to the much more serious Afghanistan mess.

Obey has been steadily on target when he has said -- since last fall -- that expanding this war makes no sense. It is a point that has been equally well made by U.S. Senator Russ Feingold, D-Wisconsin, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations and Senate Intelligence committees.

After McChrystal was removed, Feingold said: "The comments of General McChrystal and his aides were very troubling, and the president's decision to accept his resignation is appropriate. But I continue to have strong concerns about our misguided policy in Afghanistan. The massive, open-ended military operation in Afghanistan will cost a hundred billion dollars this year with no end in sight. Meanwhile, al Qaeda continues to operate and recruit around the world. After nine years, it is time to give the American people, as well as the people of Afghanistan, a timetable to end this war so our nation is better able to focus on the global threat posed by al Qaeda and its affiliates."

As sound as the arguments from Obey and Feingold are, however, it is Congressman Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, who has nailed it:

"The counterinsurgency strategy is falling apart. The doctrine of counterinsurgency has broken down just as the chain of command has broken down. The Karzai Administration is broken by corruption. Our budget is broken. General Petraeus has served his country honorably, but we can't expect a different outcome from a new general with the same old strategy. The only way to repair this mess is to get out of Afghanistan," says Kucinich.

Appropriately blunt and unapologetic in his opposition not just to General McChrystal as a commander but to McChrystal's wrongheaded policies -- wrongheaded policies that, tragically, remain in place even after the man is gone -- Kucinich concluded: "What we have to show for our strategy is the death of over 1,100 U.S. soldiers and countless innocent civilians. The U.S. has not been made safer, and the Afghan people are left to fend for themselves between the failure of their government, and ours, to protect them. Bring our troops home."