

Obama sacks Afghan war general, turns to Petraeus
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President Barack Obama placed the sapping Afghan war in the hands of Iraq hero General David Petraeus, after firing US commander Stanley McChrystal for speaking out of turn.

With the bold and swift action, Obama sought to impose his authority as commander-in-chief and to revive a new escalation strategy that may define his political fate, but some supporters fear could already be flagging.

NONE"War is bigger than any one man or woman, whether a private, a general or a president," Obama said, after sacking General McChrystal (right) for mocking senior members of his civilian war cabinet in a magazine interview.

The president said his hand was forced by a need to ensure the integrity of civilian control over the military and warned he would not tolerate divisions and pettiness in his national security team.

McChrystal's swift fall from grace came despite expressions of support from Europe and Afghan President Hamid Karzai - who later welcomed the nomination of the talismanic Petraeus in a call with Obama on Wednesday.

Petraeus enjoys a vaunted reputation in Washington, after he framed a troop surge strategy that turned around the Iraq war, and brings political savvy and a deep knowledge of counter-insurgency doctrine.

As head of Central Command, he was a key architect of Obama's troop surge strategy announced last year, and is well known by the key players in Europe, Kabul and Islamabad.

The furor over the damaging remarks by McChrystal and his staff focused a harsh spotlight on Obama's tactics as the war reaps an ever bloodier toll and public support for the conflict plummets.

Obama praised McChrystal's "remarkable" career, before bluntly saying: "The conduct represented in the recently published article does not meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general."

NONEMcChrystal was ordered back to the White House to be fired, and spent a half hour with Obama, while turning in his resignation.

The president then went into a meeting with senior national security subordinates, and read them the riot act on the war.

"I would describe the president's remarks as stern," a senior administration official said on condition of anonymity. "His overall message was that we have to remember why we are doing this... he did not want to see pettiness."

Obama said unity was vital, as thousands of extra American troops pour into Afghanistan in an effort to finally beat the Taliban and bring stability to a nation hammered by decades of war.

"I've just told my national security team that now is the time for all of us to come together.

I welcome debate among my team, but I won't tolerate division."

In a conspicuous show of unity, Obama was surrounded in the White House Rose Garden by Petraeus, Vice President Joe Biden, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen and Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

Petraeus, architect of the successful troop surge strategy in Iraq, will step aside as the commander of US forces in the Middle East to take over the faltering NATO-led campaign in Afghanistan.

He must now bring his counter-insurgency expertise in a nation seen as more problematic than Iraq, due to terrain, intractable tribal conflicts and chaotic governance after decades of war and strife.

McChrystal was contrite in a statement issued after he spoke to Obama.

"I strongly support the president's strategy in Afghanistan and am deeply committed to our coalition forces, our partner nations, and the Afghan people," he said.

NONE"It was out of respect for this commitment - and a desire to see the mission succeed - that I tendered my resignation."

British Lieutenant General Nick Parker has taken interim command of NATO's Afghan forces in McChrystal's absence, Downing Street and White House officials said.

Some NATO nations with troops in the US-led Afghan force meanwhile fretted that the episode sent an unwelcome signal to US enemies.

German Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg told German television that NATO forces were facing a "very tough summer" and that the alliance needed steady leadership.

The uproar comes at a pivotal moment in the Afghan war with US lawmakers increasingly anxious that the mission is failing amid delays in a make-or-break offensive to drive the Taliban out of their Kandahar stronghold.

The clock is also ticking on a White House deadline to start withdrawing some US troops by July 2011, and Obama had been under pressure from certain quarters to keep McChrystal so as not to throw this timeline off course.

In Rolling Stone's profile, titled "The Runaway General," McChrystal aides mocked Biden, dismissed Obama's national security adviser as "a clown," and revealed that McChrystal was "disappointed" by his first meeting with Obama.

- AFP