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Judging McChrystal's War

By MAX BOOT

ON Tuesday, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan, was called back to Washington to explain disparaging comments he and his aides made to a Rolling Stone reporter about senior administration officials. The general's ill-advised remarks, which have prompted him to prepare a letter of resignation, will only feed the general sense of despair and impatience that Americans seem to feel about our progress in Afghanistan.

When President Obama announced last year the deployment of 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, the expectation was that progress would be as rapid as it seemed to be during our earlier surge in Iraq, where violence fell more than 70 percent from 2007 to 2008. But only about 21,000 of the reinforcements have arrived; the rest won't be in place until the end of August. Any suggestion that the war is lost is ludicrously premature, and it could prove just as wrong as the naysaying in early 2007 that the Iraq surge had failed at a time when it had barely begun.

It's important to remember that in Iraq the turnaround didn't occur overnight: as a direct consequence of the surge, April, May and June 2007 were among the highest-casualty months of the war. So, too, we are now seeing more killed and wounded among coalition forces and Afghans. Increased casualties are obviously not good news, but they aren't necessarily a sign of impending disaster. They could be the price of victory.

There are also significant differences between the two situations that need to be kept in mind. By the time of the Iraq surge, the United States had been fighting with at least 140,000 troops for most of the previous four years. We have been in Afghanistan longer — almost nine years — but still don't have 100,000 troops there and won't for a few months.

What's more, thanks to our larger commitment in Iraq, by 2007 the enemy had suffered considerable attrition, the civilian population had been exhausted and the United States had shown the will to prevail. These factors were crucial in bringing about the Anbar Awakening, when the Sunni tribes turned against the insurgency. While the Taliban are just as unpopular as the Iraqi militants were — only 6 percent of the population want them back in power — it will still take more time to convince the people of Afghanistan that it's safe to turn against them.

Iraq was also much more violent. Last year 2,259 civilians were killed in Afghanistan. Compare that with 34,500 civilians killed in Iraq in the pre-surge year of 2006 — 15 times as many. And not only was there more violence in Iraq, but much of it was concentrated in Baghdad, so it was easier to show rapid progress by flooding the zone with troops.

In Afghanistan, the violence is much more diffuse, making it harder to measure security gains. Indeed, until recently, many parts of southern Afghanistan had barely seen an American soldier, and there are still critical areas where the Americans lack sufficient troop density to impose their will.

That leaves the news media free to focus on bad news, of which there is no shortage. In recent days, we have been reading about General McChrystal's gaffes; the continuing insecurity in Marja, which Marines entered in February; and the [assassination of an important district governor](#).

Such concerns are valid, but as the head of Central Command, Gen. David Petraeus, recently pointed out, what the public doesn't see is what NATO forces have been doing behind the scenes to create the right "inputs" to carry out a "comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign." Much of this has involved making sure that troops are operating in ways that will win over, not alienate, the populace.

Top-notch American officers have also been brought in to rejigger an unwieldy NATO command structure. A three-star general, David Rodriguez, was appointed to supervise daily operations in Afghanistan, as Raymond Odierno did for General Petraeus in Iraq in 2007. (General Rodriguez would be the obvious choice for the top job if General McChrystal is fired.)

A new two-star Regional Command Southwest has also been set up to run operations in Helmand Province, enabling the existing Regional Command South to focus its attention on

Kandahar. Such bureaucratic shuffling isn't glamorous, but it can set the conditions for future success.

Just as important is the new NATO training mission, under Lt. Gen. William Caldwell, that was set up to supervise the expansion of the Afghan security forces. Thanks to its efforts, the Afghan police and army have grown from 156,000 men in January 2009 to more than 231,000 today, and their quality has improved through intensive mentoring.

The biggest difficulty in Afghanistan, as in Iraq, remains the lack of an effective, accountable government. General McChrystal is starting to address that issue, using intelligence assets to uncover corruption and setting up a new task force to monitor coalition contractors.

Some people will argue that the presence of President Hamid Karzai, who is linked to dirty dealings and predatory officials, makes this an impossible mission. But many of Mr. Karzai's actions (like [his decision to fire his interior minister and his intelligence chief](#), two of the most effective and pro-American members of his cabinet) can be seen as a natural reaction to Mr. Obama's pledge to begin withdrawing troops in July 2011. If you were the president of Afghanistan and you believed that your main ally was abandoning you within a year, you too would be looking to cut deals with the Taliban and various warlords to assure your survival.

In fact, for all of the well-founded concerns about Mr. Karzai, he did display effective leadership [at a meeting with local Kandahar leaders on June 13](#), where he raised popular support to drive the Taliban out of the largest city in the south. Mr. Karzai and other Afghans would be willing to do even more if President Obama were to make clear that our troops will stay in Afghanistan long enough to assure its success as a stable democracy.

By letting his aides mouth off to a reporter, General McChrystal has displayed a potentially fatal lack of media savvy. But he deserves credit for energizing a lethargic command and putting in place the right strategy to turn around a failing war effort. Whether or not he carries it out, his plan can work. We just need to give it a little time.

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