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The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE
MONITOR

General McChrystal: What will Obama do with 'the runaway general'?

General McChrystal, commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, made derogatory comments about the Obama administration in Rolling Stone magazine's 'The Runaway General.'



President Obama meets with Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan, aboard Air Force One in Copenhagen, Denmark, in October. General McChrystal has been summoned to Washington to explain derogatory comments about the Obama administration printed in Rolling Stone's 'The Runaway General.'

(Pete Souza/AP/White House)

By Peter Grier, Staff writer

posted June 22, 2010 at 1:14 pm EDT

Washington —

Something is going to happen to Gen. Stanley McChrystal. That's foreordained. The question now is, how severe will the punishment be?

General McChrystal, the top US commander in Afghanistan, is on his way to Washington to attend Wednesday's monthly White House meeting on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Normally he weighs in via video conference. But he's in trouble for making derogatory comments about President Obama and other administration officials in an interview called "The Runaway General" in Rolling Stone magazine.

The piece quotes McChrystal as saying he was "disappointed" after his first meeting with Mr. Obama, and that the new US chief executive seemed intimidated by top military brass. It depicts the general as a lone wolf who has clashed with Obama and others about the direction of US strategy in the region.

Insubordination is a bad career move pretty much anywhere. Public insubordination is worse. Public insubordination in a magazine whose primary advertisers are beverages and body spray? That's possibly a firing offense.

"The main question raised by the profile in Rolling Stone regards General McChrystal's judgment. What did he think was going to happen when the article was released?" says Justin Logan, associate director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a think tank.

In a statement Tuesday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said McChrystal "made a significant mistake and exercised poor judgment" in his comments to Rolling Stone.

"General McChrystal has apologized to me and is similarly reaching out to others named in this article to apologize to them as well," Secretary Gates said. "I have recalled General McChrystal to Washington to discuss this in person."

Generally speaking, Washington incidents such as this end in a number of predictable ways. Here are three scenarios for what might happen to McChrystal, in order from least to most harsh:

The mea culpa press conference. After Wednesday's meeting, McChrystal (possibly accompanied by Obama) might make a quick visit to the White House briefing room to read a statement of apology and vow his full support of administration strategy. He could take a few questions, though not too many, lest he dig himself another hole. Obama would slap him on the back and say all is forgiven, and the general would get on his plane to fly back to the relative safety of Kabul.

A visit to the woodshed. Remember David Stockman? He was President Reagan's director of the Office of Management and Budget. He, too, gave an inexplicable interview to a magazine – in his case, the Atlantic Monthly – questioning administration policy. Mr. Stockman said Reagan's supply-side economic approach was something of a sham.

"None of us really understands what's going on with all these numbers," Stockman told journalist William Greider.

Stockman was allowed to keep his job but was severely reprimanded by Reagan and other top officials. Stockman himself said he "had been taken to the woodshed" by the president. His influence was permanently damaged, however, and he left the administration years before the end of Reagan's term.

Golf with McKiernan. It is possible that McChrystal will be relieved of command. After all, that is what happened to his predecessor, Gen. David McKiernan. Last May, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates moved aside McKiernan, who had led allied ground forces during the invasion of Iraq, and replaced him with McChrystal. The move was widely interpreted as the replacement of a more traditional commander with one more interested in counterinsurgency techniques.

McKiernan retired from the military shortly thereafter. McChrystal almost certainly would do the same thing if shunted aside.

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