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Institution Versus Occupation: Obama's sacking of McChrystal

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President Barack Obama's sacking of General Stanley A. McChrystal exemplifies a dilemma US military professionals now face: which is more important, the values of the institution, or the imperatives and pressures of the specific occupation they are employed in?

NO ONE knew until the last minute whether President Barack Obama would sack General Stanley A. McChrystal. The Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan, who is now reportedly leaving the Army, had publically disrespected his political superiors in an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine. Yet, McChrystal had also done an able job turning American operations in Afghanistan around, and injected a new sense of optimism that the war there was still winnable.

Obama's Dilemma

The dilemma President Obama faced was whether McChrystal had to be relieved because he broke the US military's sacrosanct value of utmost respect for its civilian leadership, or retain him because he had achieved results in Afghanistan. In the end, President Obama chose to defend the military's institutional value of respecting the chain-of-command, overlooking McChrystal's occupational ability.

Forty years ago, the late military sociologist Charles C. Moskos forwarded the Institution/Occupation thesis of the military profession. He argued that the US military seemed to be moving away from an institution of personnel who shared common values that transcended self-interest to a community of occupations where staffing would be determined by labour-market economics, as was the case with other occupations.

Moskos' thesis, however, focuses predominantly on the monetary remuneration of servicemen. The McChrystal controversy, however, suggests this thesis can be expanded to include differences in job

expectations from both perspectives. Is unconditional respect for the institution more important than, as Moskos put it, the occupational expectation that the "employee usually enjoys some voice in the determination of ... work conditions." -- an implicit suggestion that those in military occupations should enjoy a certain level of autonomy and choice, especially in areas that affect the quality of the job done. McChrystal was clearly unhappy with the political conditions he had to work under, a hindrance to the work he had to do.

The dilemma US military professionals now face is this: which is more important, the values of the institution, or the imperatives and pressures of the specific occupation they are employed in? Both are not necessarily always congruent or complementary.

If there is a dichotomy, the only way to bridge the gap is skilful political manoeuvring. It is for this reason that President Obama's appointment of General David Petraeus, an officer who has shown particular deftness in balancing diverging institutional and occupational expectations, to replace McChrystal comes as no surprise.

Political-savviness in US Military

In the US military today, political-savviness has two dimensions. Firstly, because of the hybridisation of strategy where plans involve military and civilian aspects fused together, senior military personnel need a keen understanding of how to navigate both worlds. The traditional occupational expectation that soldiers will work with only their own kind is therefore no longer valid. McChrystal, lacking the political-savviness to connect both the military and civilian realms, may therefore have failed to adapt to this changed occupational requirement.

Recognising this, Newsweek's Fareed Zakaria has made the valid point that the main issue is not how McChrystal trash-talked his superiors and civilian counterparts, but how he could not interact appropriately with them, suggesting that he was not the best man to implement a Counter-Insurgency strategy in Afghanistan that precisely requires extremely close civil-military relations.

Secondly, and more obviously, McChrystal surprisingly lacked the common political sense to not bad-mouth his superiors in public. He ignored the basic institutional value of respecting the chain-of-command. As a serving military officer, McChrystal should have bit his tongue. During World War Two, General George C. Marshall privately expressed concern and frustration that President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not always seem to be fully behind him, but he certainly never revealed that in public. Ironically, it might very well have been the different institutional value of straight-talking, derived from the culture of the Special Forces which McChrystal had served extensively in, that loosened his tongue in the *Rolling Stone* interview.

This politically obtuse, open critique of problems has become increasingly common among senior American military officers. Three years ago, Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Yingling's sharply criticised America's general officer corps in his controversial article "A Failure in Generalship". The idea that their occupation — the efficient execution of their specific jobs and the prevention of the unnecessary loss of lives of the men they lead — has apparently triumphed the traditional notion of unconditional loyalty to the American military institution. If the latter is itself an obstacle, then it is the right of those whose occupations are affected by it to protest.

Reconciling Institution with Occupation

Interestingly, the US military has been contradictory in its views of critical opinions. Yingling's career has suffered because of his inflammatory article, as will McChrystal's now. Yet, General Peter Chiarelli, the Vice-Chief of Staff of the US Army, to a group of newly appointed brigadier-generals, specifically pointed to Yingling as the type of officer the US Army needs, one who is "passionate,

intelligent and engaged". Perhaps McChrystal felt he could get away with his remarks because of a perceived change in the institutional climate? Unfortunately, McChrystal was not only wrong about that, as evidenced by President Obama's decision, but also shared his occupational frustrations, regardless of their validity, unsophisticatedly.

The challenge therefore is how to produce politically-savvy officers who can reconcile the centrality of mainstream institutional values, such as utmost respect for the chain-of-command, with the opinions their occupations, a duty of which is to do the best job possible, afford them the right to articulate. In sum, military professionals should neither be institutional "yes men" nor prioritise the occupation's emphasis of "getting the job done" above institutional values. They must reconcile the two and skilfully walk a very precarious tight-rope. How that is to be achieved remains to be seen, but one can certainly now turn to Petraeus for direction.

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