

## Out With McKiernan, In With McChrystal

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On Monday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates abruptly announced the removal of Gen. David McKiernan as commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, saying that "fresh eyes were needed" and that "a new approach was probably in our best interest." McKiernan, "who led U.S. ground forces during the 2003 Iraq invasion," took command of the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan in June and was scheduled to serve in the post for two years. But he will be replaced by Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, "a former commander of the Joint Special Operations Command. He served in Afghanistan as chief of staff of military operations in 2001 and 2002 and recently ran all commando operations in Iraq." Asked if the dismissal -- the first such removal of a top commander since President Truman fired Gen. Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War -- had ended McKiernan's military career, Gates replied, "Probably."

THE NEW COIN OF THE REALM: "If you want a sign of how thoroughly Gen. David Petraeus is taking command of the Afghanistan war," wrote the Washington Independent's Spencer Ackerman, "look no further" than his replacement of McKiernan with McChrystal, who "is known as one of the smartest and least conventional thinkers in the Army, and a counterinsurgent's counterinsurgent." McChrystal was the commander of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) responsible for hunting al-Qaeda in Iraq, employing what he called "collaborative warfare," using every tool available simultaneously, from signal intercepts to human intelligence and other methods, that allowed lightning-quick and sometimes concurrent operations." According to Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward, "beginning in the late spring of 2007, the U.S. military and intelligence agencies launched a series of top-secret operations that enabled them to locate, target and kill" key insurgent, militia, and terrorist leaders in Iraq. "The operations incorporated some of the most highly classified techniques and information in the U.S. government." McChrystal was head of the team that killed Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS: McChrystal may face a few potential roadblocks at his confirmation hearing. Questions could arise over the death in 2004 of Army Ranger and former NFL star Pat Tillman. In April 2004, "McChrystal approved paperwork awarding Tillman a Silver Star after he was reported killed by enemy fire, even though McChrystal suspected the Ranger had been killed accidentally by fellow American soldiers." An investigation cleared McChrystal of any official wrongdoing, but held him "accountable for the inaccurate and misleading assertions" regarding Tillman's death. McChrystal also "oversaw a task force that was criticized in 2006 for abusing detainees and harsh interrogation methods at Baghdad's Camp Nama." But Andrew Exum, a fellow with the Center for a New American Security who served under McChrystal in Iraq and Afghanistan, told NPR that he didn't think that "as savvy a political actor" as Gates "would have let [McChrystal's] nomination go forward if he thought either of these were going to be serious problems."

OWNING THE AFGHANISTAN WAR: The retiring of McKiernan in such a public way is evidence of Obama's serious intention to right a war effort that is, by most accounts, going very poorly. According to a report from the Center for American Progress, the "chronic and unacceptable neglect" of the previous administration "has led to a resurgent Taliban, a fierce insurgency, a weak Afghan government tainted by corruption and incompetence, a booming opium trade, and an increasingly disillusioned Afghan people." The Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other insurgent groups "are now stronger than at any time since the 9/11 attacks on the United States, operating out of neighboring Pakistan and Afghanistan and making key inroads in both countries." According to White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, the President praised McKiernan's leadership, but said it was time for a "change of direction in Afghanistan" requiring a new military commander versed in counterinsurgency methods. Slate's Fred Kaplan wrote that "McKiernan's ouster signals a dramatic shift in U.S. strategy for the war in Afghanistan. And it means that the war is now, unequivocally, 'Obama's war.'" Stapleton's Tower Ledger