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On Leadership



LEGAL SCHOLAR

Benjamin W. Heineman, Jr.

Benjamin Heineman is a business ethics expert and senior fellow at Harvard's schools of law and government. A former General Counsel for General Electric, Heineman is also a former assistant secretary for policy at the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (now Health and Human Services.)

When the reason trumps the result

Q: In confronting the issue of Gen. McChrystal's apparent insubordination, did President Obama have any choice but to remove him? Going forward, what can Gen. Petraeus do to overcome this dramatic shakeup and keep his troops reassured and on mission?

President Obama was right to accept (or force) General McChrystal's resignation. More importantly, he acted for the right reasons. As he said yesterday, "The conduct represented in the recently published article does not meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general."

In describing his first reason for accepting the resignation, the president went on to say: "That includes adherence to a strict code of conduct. The strength and greatness of our military is rooted in the fact that this code applies equally to newly enlisted privates and to the general officer who commands them. That allows us to come together as one. That is part of the reason why America has the finest fighting force in the history of the world.

"It is also true that our democracy depends upon institutions that are stronger than individuals. That includes strict adherence to the military chain of command, and respect for civilian control over that chain of command. And that's why, as Commander-in-Chief, I believe this decision is necessary to hold ourselves accountable to standards that are at the core of our democracy."

In inexplicably giving a Rolling Stone reporter access for several weeks to record the comments of the general and his inner circle, McChrystal displayed horrific judgment; intentionally sought publicly to air personal disputes and dislikes relating to civilian authorities; directed contemptuous comments toward some of those authorities; and ignored the military chain of command in unilaterally criticizing, the administration's policy-making apparatus, if not the Afghan policy itself.

Together these failures did not meet the standards expected of a military leader in 21st century America.

What the president did not do was analyze the problem as a balancing test: General McChrystal's violation of standards weighed against his value to the war effort. Many have viewed the issue that way, including the editorial page of The Washington Post, which recommended that the president

retain McChrystal because he is vital to the war effort and his remarks are only symptomatic of a larger dysfunction in the Afghan team.

But organizations and societies have certain bed-rock principles and standards that no person, however valuable, can violate. No cause is so great; no person is so indispensable that violation of those standards can be ignored. The generals truly must be held just as accountable as the privates. That is why President Obama's reasons were just as important as the result.

There are, of course, numerous unresolved issues relating to Afghanistan, including as back-biting and confusion on the civilian side of the Afghan effort.

Rather than just calling for unity, the president has to deal with that issue, but, once he violated core standards of a the American military and American democracy, General McChrystal forfeited his role in resolving that and many other Afghan issues, as President Obama rightly decided

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