

## **Firing an admiral for speaking the truth**

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It is a worrisome sign that Defense Secretary Robert Gates had to accept the obviously forced resignation of Admiral William Fallon, chief of the United States Central Command. Even if Gates was right to say, as he did Tuesday, that it would be "ridiculous" to take Fallon's departure as an augury of war with Iran, the fate of the outspoken admiral suggests that President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have learned nothing about the value of letting military chiefs speak their minds, particularly when they disagree with questionable administration doctrines.

As Central Command chief, Fallon presided over U.S. military operations in the Middle East. In a recent *Esquire* article that precipitated his ouster, he sagely observed that in this region, "where five or six pots are boiling over, our nation can't afford to be mesmerized by one problem" - an assertion that has been interpreted as a rebuke of Bush's approach toward Iran's nuclear aspirations.

It is possible that Fallon's fall was not the result of his holding dissenting views on Iran or, for that matter, on the pace of a drawdown for U.S. troops in Iraq. Apparently he doomed himself by airing those views, repeatedly, in public. Gates intimated as much when he termed speculation about radical policy differences a "misperception."

Instead, Gates implied he had to uphold a tradition that permits the military brass to voice policy differences only in private. Once those dissenting views have been heard and rejected, dissenters are expected to salute, swallow their pride, and accept as final the judgment of the commander in chief.

There are good reasons for this tradition. It helps preserve civilian authority over the military. The expectation that generals and admirals will voice their criticisms only privately may also help ensure that advice given to a president or defense secretary will remain confidential. In theory, such confidentiality can encourage candor.

In this particular case, however, the usual strictures against airing policy differences in public should not have been enforced. For one thing, the Bush administration has a history of stumbling into grievous strategic errors when it has refused to heed sound public warnings from senior military leaders. Before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the administration effectively fired the army chief of staff, General Eric Shinseki, after he testified to Congress that more than 400,000 troops would be needed to maintain order in the aftermath.

Perhaps even more to the point is the validity of Fallon's advice. He recommends patience and "engagement" with Iran, a quicker reduction of forces in Iraq, and more attention to Afghanistan and Pakistan. For these views he should be heeded, not fired.