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US senators faced 'psy-ops', report claims

By Matthew Green in Lahore

February 25 2011

General David Petraeus, commander of US and Nato forces in Afghanistan, has ordered an investigation into a report that the US army illegally used psychological warfare techniques to manipulate visiting senators into boosting funds for the war.

Rolling Stone, a US magazine, reported on Thursday that Lieutenant General William Caldwell, in charge of training Afghan troops, ordered a military cell devoted to what is known as “information operations” to prepare detailed profiles of visiting dignitaries and senators – including their voting records and their “hot-button” issues – over a four-month period in 2010.

<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/another-runaway-general-army-deploys-psy-ops-on-u-s-senators-20110223?print=true>

Rolling Stone said the “information operations” unit in Kabul was subjected to a campaign of retribution when it resisted the orders on the grounds that they violated laws prohibiting the use of propaganda against American citizens.

“My job in psy-ops is to play with people’s heads, to get the enemy to behave the way we want them to behave,” Lt Colonel Michael Holmes, the leader of the unit, told Rolling Stone. “When you ask me to try to use these skills on senators and congressmen, you’re crossing a line.”

The magazine reported that Lt Col Holmes received a reprimand after resisting the orders.

Gen Stanley McChrystal, the previous commander, was forced to resign in June after Rolling Stone quoted him and his aides making remarks critical of Obama administration officials.

Rolling Stone said a spokesman for Lt Gen Caldwell had issued a statement that “categorically denies the assertion the command used an information operations cell to influence distinguished visitors”.

Hours after the story was published, the Nato-led force in Afghanistan issued a statement saying Gen Petraeus, who took over from Gen McChrystal in July, was ordering an investigation.

“It would be inappropriate to comment any further at this time,” the statement said.

In an indication of the seriousness of the allegations, however, the Pentagon later said that Robert Gates, defence secretary, believed it was “important to determine what the facts are” and supported the decision to launch a probe.

Michael Hastings, the author of Thursday’s article and the Rolling Stone profile that forced Gen McChrystal to resign, said: “The incident offers an indication of just how desperate the US command in Afghanistan is to spin American civilian leaders into supporting an increasingly unpopular war.”

Rolling Stone reported that targeted visitors included senators John McCain, Joe Lieberman, Jack Reed, Al Franken and Carl Levin. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, was also on the list.

Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate armed services committee, issued a statement denying he had been persuaded to support the military build-up.

“I have never needed any convincing on this point,” he said.

Additional reporting by Daniel Dombey in Washington

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