

LEARNINGS FROM THE DEPARTURE OF ADMIRAL FALLON FROM THE CENTRAL COMMAND

*By Raphaël RAMOS,
Director of Production, ESISC*

On Tuesday, March 11, Admiral William 'Fox' Fallon relinquished his duties as Chief of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) responsible for overseeing all United States military operations in the Middle East.¹

Admiral Fallon's work at the head of CENTCOM was hailed by President Bush and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. The latter paid his respects to the talent, experience and '*rare strategic vision*'² of the four-star admiral. For his part, the American President was more moderate in his praise but nonetheless congratulated the boss of the Central Command for '*confirmed progress in Afghanistan and in Iraq.*'³

This early retirement of Admiral Fallon was made public in a communiqué in which he mentioned that '*recent articles in the press suggesting the existence of divergences between my position and the objectives of the President have become a distraction (...) harming the efforts of CENTCOM in the region.*'⁴ This statement makes reference to an article in the monthly magazine *Esquire* in which Admiral Fallon is presented as being the only person capable of preventing the American Administration from attacking Iran. According to the author, Thomas P.M. Barnett, a military expert and former instructor at the Naval War College, the early departure of Admiral Fallon from CENTCOM would signify that '*the President and the Vice President are envisaging military action against Iran before the end of the year.*'⁵

¹ The area of responsibility of CENTCOM includes Afghanistan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Erythrea, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Seychelles, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

² *DoD News Briefing with Secretary Robert Gates from the Pentagon*, U.S. Department of Defense, March 11, 2008. <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4172>

³ *Statement by the President on Admiral Fallon*, Office of the Press Secretary, March 11, 2008. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/03/20080311-5.html>

⁴ 'Fallon statement released by U.S. Central Command,' *Navy Times*, March 11, 2008. http://www.navytimes.com/news/2008/03/military_fallonstatement_031108w/

⁵ Thomas P.M. Barnett, 'The Man Between War and Peace,' *Esquire*, April 2008. <http://www.esquire.com/features/fox-fallon>

Though the statement by Mr Barnett may seem exaggerated given the domestic American context (recent intelligence report on Iran, the Presidential campaign, Congress with a Democratic majority...), the departure of Admiral Fallon nonetheless poses a certain number of questions on the process of elaboration and on the changes to the policy of the United States in the Middle East, as well as on the relations between the civilians and military within the American Administration.

1. 'The man between war and peace'

It is in these terms that the former boss of CENTCOM is described in a very flattering article dedicated to him in *Esquire*. Though the Admiral's experience was justly hailed by Robert Gates, the assessment of his twelve months at the head of American forces in the Middle East is more mixed.

♦ *An officer and a diplomat*

William J. Fallon began his long military career **in the Navy's air wing during the Vietnam War**. It was at this time that he picked up the nickname of 'Fox.' This graduate of the Naval War College and of the National War College later participated in the operation Desert Storm in 1991, as well as in the operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia. Between 1997 and 2000, Admiral Fallon commanded the U.S. Second Fleet, with an area of responsibility covering the Atlantic Ocean from the North Pole to the South Pole.⁶

In October 2000, Fox Fallon became Vice Chief of Naval Operations. On this occasion, **he voluntarily went to Japan as Presidential envoy⁷ in order to present the apology of the United States following the collision of an American submarine with a Japanese boat** which caused the death of ten Nipponese fishermen.⁸ This visit, which was highly appreciated by the Japanese authorities, was the source of the Admiral's reputation as a diplomat. In 2003, he was named to head the U.S. Fleet Forces Command and the U.S. Atlantic Fleet.

In 2005, Admiral Fallon took up one of the most prestigious posts in the American Armed Forces, that of commander of PACOM (U.S. Pacific Command). At the head of the Pacific Command, with an area of responsibility covering nearly one half of the planet, **the Admiral once again demonstrated his qualities as a diplomat by encouraging a military dialogue with China**. Though this initiative had been approved by the then Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, it brought Fallon an angry response from many conservatives. He was accused of wanting to restrict American intelligence activities against China out of fear that their revelations might tarnish relations between Washington and Beijing.⁹

♦ *Fallon's arrival at CENTCOM*

The Admiral's experience and capabilities as a diplomat allowed him to become, in March 2007, the first U.S. Navy officer to be named to the head of CENTCOM. This post was traditionally reserved for Army or Marine Corps generals. **This nomination came in the**

⁶ Based on the biography of Admiral Fallon presented on the internet site of the Department of Defense. <http://www.defenselink.mil/bios/biographydetail.aspx?biographyid=49>

⁷ Thom Shanker, 'Adm. William J. Fallon: An Experienced Naval Officer, and a Diplomat,' *The New York Times*, January 8, 2007.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/08/world/middleeast/08fallon.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

⁸ Fred Knapp, 'Admiral goes to fishing village in Japan to apologize for sub crash,' *Stars and Stripes*, March 2, 2001. <http://www.stripes.com/01/mar01/edo30201g.html>

⁹ Frank J. Gaffney, 'Vice President Fallon?' *The National Review*, March 12, 2008.

<http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NGU2YmQzZTJjYWMyN2NkZmIwOGNiODkzZGU4YTlxODU=>

context of the review of American strategy in Iraq following the Republican defeat in the Congressional elections of November 2006 and the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld.¹⁰ This change of direction was accompanied by a reshuffle of civilians and military men which saw the arrival of Robert Gates at the Pentagon and the nomination of General David Petraeus to command the American Armed Forces in Iraq. The name of Admiral Fallon was recommended to President Bush by Mr. Gates and was then supported by General Petraeus.

The departure of Donald Rumsfeld and these various nominations were perceived as a sign of the return to realism within the American Administration. We must remember that this change was preceded by the presentation of the conclusions of the Baker-Hamilton Commission on Iraq. The report presented diplomacy as the principal solution to American difficulties in Iraq but left the door open to a slight increase if the troops if the military command deemed it necessary.¹¹

Though the White House largely rejected the diplomatic dimension of the report, **Admiral Fallon's reputation as a diplomat and the experience of General Petraeus in the domain of counterinsurgency**¹² seemed to place these nominations in the context of a change in the American approach on Iraq largely inspired by the recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton Commission.

These specifics spelled out the action of the two new officers in charge of the Middle East and Iraq. **Admiral Fallon was going to concentrate on the diplomatic dimension while General Petraeus would take charge of managing the situation on the ground in Iraq.** According to Rear Admiral Stephen Pietropaoli, there was no reason to expect that Fallon *'would advise Dave Petraeus on how to clean up Fallujah. He will concentrate on establishing relations in the region as he did in the Pacific.'*¹³ The ex-member of the Navy's flight team was taking to the air.

2. Dissension between the White House and the Pentagon

As the portrait in *Esquire* reminds us, the boss of CENTCOM did not depart from his reputation as a diplomat. He traveled a lot, meeting the highest regional officials such as President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf or the Egyptian head of state, Hosni Mubarak.¹⁴ Nonetheless, his twelve months of work at the head of the Central Command and his departure have shed light on dissension between the White House and the civilian and military authorities in the Pentagon.

♦ The form: Iran

It is interesting to note that **the announcement of the departure of Admiral Fallon from the Central Command came the week before the visit of the Vice President Dick Cheney to the Middle East.** Mr. Cheney is presented as one of the most ardent partisans of an American military operation against Iran. He is, to this day, the American official having backed the hardest proposals with regard to the regime in Tehran. Last

¹⁰ See Raphaël Ramos, *Iraq: The Hidden Side of the New American strategy*, ESISC, January 23, 2007. <http://www.esisc.org/documents/pdf/fr/strategie-americaine.pdf>

¹¹ James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton, Co-Chairs, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, New York, Vintage Books, 2006, pp. 70-71. http://www.c-span.org/pdf/iraq_study_group_report.pdf

¹² General Petraeus co-authored in December 2006 the US Army manual on the subject of counterinsurgency.

¹³ Ann Scott Tyson, 'Admiral's Diplomatic Skills Could Prove Crucial,' *The Washington Post*, 14 janvier 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/13/AR2007011301019.html>

¹⁴ Thomas P.M. Barnett, 'The Man Between War and Peace,' *op. cit.*

October, Mr. Cheney said that the United States would not tolerate a nuclear Iran and promised 'serious consequences' if the Iranian leaders do not renounce their uranium enrichment activities.¹⁵

The toughness of these statements contrasts strongly with the positions formulated by Admiral Fallon during his twelve months at the head of American Armed Forces in the Middle East. Even before taking up his duties, he opposed sending a third American aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf.¹⁶ Publicly, **the Admiral then repeatedly made known his wish to favour dialogue in order to avoid an armed conflict with Iran.** Last autumn, he told the channel *Al-Jazeera* not to expect that war would break out with Iran, adding 'that is what we are working towards.'¹⁷ In private, the boss of CENTCOM showed himself to be less diplomatic but decisive, saying that an attack on Iran would not happen 'on my watch.'¹⁸

However, **it would be a mistake to conclude that these divergences over Iran were the source of the departure of the Admiral from the Central Command. Though the fact that this dissension was publicly displayed undeniably placed the Admiral in an awkward position vis-à-vis the White House, we should remember that he was not the only one to have expressed doubts about the validity of military action against Iran.** The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen was very prudent when he said that one must '*attentively reflect on the consequences of a conflict with a third country in this region.*'¹⁹ Robert Gates, who was behind the nomination of the two admirals had also expressed many times his reservations about prospects for armed conflict with Iran. Moreover, it is interesting to emphasise that in the *Esquire* portrait Admiral did not appear to be an ardent supporter of Tehran. Regarding the Iranian regime, he said that '*these guys are ants. When the time comes, we will crush them.*'²⁰

One may therefore be allowed to think that contrary to what has been conveyed by certain media²¹ Iran is not the source of the departure of the admiral from CENTCOM. **Iraq, and in particular the divergences between Fallon, supported by the Pentagon, and his subordinate, General Petraeus, supported by the White House, seem in fact to have played a much more important role in the resignation of the commander of U.S. Armed Forces in the Middle East.**

♦ *The substance: Iraq*

Even if their roles were well defined, some tensions appeared between Admiral Fallon and his subordinate, General Petraeus, over the question of the reduction of American personnel in Iraq. Last September, the evaluation of the situation on the ground presented by General Petraeus and the U.S. ambassador in Iraq, Ryan Crocker, allowed President Bush to announce a reduction, by 30,000 men, of the American presence in Iraq in the summer of

¹⁵ Sheryl Gay Stolberg, 'Cheney, Like President, Has a Warning for Iran,' *The New York Times*, October 22, 2007.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/22/washington/22cheney.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=cheney+iran&st=nyt&oref=slogin

¹⁶ Gareth Porter, 'Fallon falls: Iran should worry,' *Asia Times*, March 13, 2008.

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/JC13Ak01.html

¹⁷ David Ignatius, 'A Centcom Chief Who Spoke His Mind,' *The Washington Post*, March 13, 2008.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/12/AR2008031203395.html>

¹⁸ Gareth Porter, 'Fallon falls: Iran should worry,' *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Thom Shanker, 'Joint Chiefs Chairman Looks Beyond Current Wars,' *The New York Times*, October 22, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/22/washington/22mullen.html>

²⁰ Thomas P.M. Barnett, 'The Man Between War and Peace,' *op. cit.*

²¹ Mark Thompson, 'Iran Dissent Cost Fallon His Job,' *Time*, March 12, 2008.

<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1721491,00.html>

2008.²² In a few days, the general and the ambassador are expected to present new recommendations concerning the possible continuation of this process.

This question of the rhythm of reduction of American troops in Iraq raised intense debate in Washington and particularly in the Pentagon. It is at the source of the divergences between Admiral Fallon and General Petraeus. The latter believes that **an overly large reduction in the American presence in Iraq could cause an increase in violence.** This point of view is shared by the commanders on the ground. **The supporters of General Petraeus would like around 140,000 soldiers, including fifteen fighting brigades, to remain in Iraq up to January 2009.**²³ This scenario would necessitate a pause in the reduction of personnel in Iraq. The White House, which is very satisfied with the work of the commander of American forces in Iraq, favours this option.

On the contrary, **the main civilian and military officials at the Pentagon favour a continuation, even an acceleration, of the process of reducing the United States presence in Mesopotamia.**²⁴ Admiral Fallon is pessimistic over the degree of progress made by the Iraqi authorities towards national reconciliation and he would like to give the priority to Afghanistan and to Pakistan. The Joint Chiefs of Staff also wants to see the reduction of the American presence in Iraq continue. Admiral Mullen believes that the threat of increase in violence in Iraq should be weighed against the risk of maintaining a prolonged presence on the state of the Armed Forces and in particular of the Army and Marines Corps.²⁵ Consequently, the Joint Chiefs of Staff favours continuation of the reduction of the American presence in Iraq to reach the figure of 120,000 men at the end of President Bush's term in office.

These differences of evaluation, which are explained logically by the duties of each of the main actors, are the basis for a certain animosity between the Admiral and the General. The *Esquire* portrait also sums up the very tense meetings between the two men. Despite denials by the Admiral, these difficult relations were largely confirmed by various observers.²⁶ It appears that the position of Fox Fallon vis-à-vis his subordinate became more than delicate. **The support of President Bush for General Petraeus, whose popularity at the White House has won him the sobriquet of 'King David,' considerably reduced the margin of manoeuvre of the boss of CENTCOM.** The commander of American troops in Iraq has been in direct contact with the President. This distortion of the chain of command, which resulted in the marginalisation of Admiral Fallon, did not allow him to fulfill properly his mission of commander of American Armed Forces in the Middle East.

3. Relations between civilian and military officials within the American Administration

After a career of forty-two years in the Navy, this early retirement of the boss of the Central Command is the latest illustration of the cleavages existing between the civilian authorities and the military command within the Bush Administration.

²² Michael Abramowitz, Jonathan Weisman, 'Bush to Endorse Petraeus Plan,' *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/11/AR2007091100738.html>

²³ Julian E. Barnes, 'Pentagon divided on Iraq strategy,' *The Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 2008. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-na-milassess20mar20.0.2536700.story>

²⁴ 'The Pentagon vs. Petraeus,' *The Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2008. http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/SB120527897136528683.html

²⁵ Julian E. Barnes, 'Pentagon divided on Iraq strategy,' *op. cit.*

²⁶ Peter Spiegel, Julian E. Barnes, 'U.S. commander in Mideast steps down,' *The Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 2008. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-fallon12mar12.1.7387456.story>

◆ *The legacy of the Bush Administration*

Indeed, one cannot speak of the relations between civilians and military men within the Bush Administration without going back to Donald Rumsfeld. His second term at the head of the Department of Defense²⁷ largely contributed to the worsening of these relations. Iraq evidently played a major role in this process. Mr. Rumsfeld and his team did not hesitate to reject the various recommendations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff with respect to the number of troops necessary for the American move into Iraq. Although constitutionally the military command should answer to the civilian authorities, **the work of Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon contributed to the creation of an imbalance marking the supremacy of civilians over the military officers.** This excess gave rise to a reaction that was also disproportionate when a certain number of retired generals publicly called for the resignation of the Secretary of Defense.²⁸

One might nonetheless have believed that an Administration consisting of two former Secretaries of Defense (Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld) and a former head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Colin Powell) would be able to create relations of trust between the Executive power and the military leadership. President Bush arrived at the White House with the firm intention of imposing ‘*a new way of thinking and making difficult choices*’²⁹ on the Armed Forces. From the moment of his arrival at the Pentagon, Mr. Rumsfeld got down to a ‘transformation’ of the American Army which gave a more important place to high technology. **Anticipating what he perceived as hesitancy inherited from the archaic way of thinking of the military, the Secretary of Defense sought, insofar as possible, to move them to one side of the process of change.** He believed that only a strong civilian push could allow his project to succeed.³⁰

These various episodes created a certain set of expectations when the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld was announced in November 2006. The nomination of Robert Gates to succeed him was interpreted by military officials as a sign of renewal of relations within the Pentagon. In certain respects, **Mr. Gates did not disappoint these hopes by restoring the influence of military officials over the main issues for which the Department of Defense is responsible.** Moreover, his decision to support the request for increase of Army personnel was hailed by the Joint Chiefs.³¹ This broke with the attitude of Mr. Rumsfeld, who, for reasons of cost, was opposed to this initiative. This difference between the two Secretaries of Defense also appeared on the occasion of the scandal over instances of negligence at the Walter Reed military hospital. Robert Gates obtained the resignation of the hospital’s director, of the Secretary of the Army and of the Army Surgeon General. The contrast between the handling of this scandal and the scandal over the Iraqi prison at Abu Ghraib contributed to shaping the positive image which Donald Rumsfeld’s successor enjoyed at the Pentagon. Nonetheless, it should be noted that **the influence of Mr. Gates over the White House remains largely below that of his predecessor.** The departure of Admiral Fallon from the Central Command is the most recent illustration of that.

²⁷ Donald Rumsfeld occupied the duties of Secretary of Defense from 1975 to 1977 within the Ford Administration.

²⁸ Fred Kaplan, ‘The revolt against Donald Rumsfeld,’ *Slate*, April 12, 2006.

<http://www.slate.com/id/2139777/>

²⁹ Michael C. Desch, ‘Bush and the Generals,’ *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2007.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070501faessay86309-p10/michael-c-desch/bush-and-the-generals.html>

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Thom Shanker, Mark Mazzetti, ‘New Defense Chief Eases Relations Rumsfeld Bruised,’ *The New York Times*, March 12, 2007.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/12/washington/12intel.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=1&adxnnlx=1206381700-seveYci6nNww2KSBv6HbrQ

◆ *Prospects for the next President*

Though the departure of Donald Rumsfeld permitted an improvement in the relations between civilians and military officers, the two terms of President Bush will remain marked by the marginalisation of military managers in running relevant affairs of the Pentagon. Aware of this reality, the three main candidates for the American Presidential elections wish to present themselves as attentive to the needs of the military.

The Republican John McCain, whose stature as Commander-in-Chief constitutes his main advantage, appears to be the candidate likely to maintain the best relations with the military authorities. Mr McCain's past as a hero of the Vietnam War and the military prestige that forms a halo over his name play in his favour. Moreover, his support for sending reinforcements to Iraq and his opposition to Mr. Rumsfeld, whom he listed among the '*worst Secretaries of Defense*'³² in history, have given him the image of a pragmatist. This allows us to think that he could continue the process of appeasement initiated by Robert Gates. The hundred generals and admirals who support the candidate McCain attest to his popularity within the American Armed Forces.

On the other hand, if a Democrat is elected in November, the question of tensions between the civilian authorities and military officials could become very topical. The Democratic positions, in particular, those defended by Barack Obama on the question of Iraq, do not seem to be compatible with those of the General Staff. **On Iraq, while Mr. Obama recommends a withdrawal of American troops, Admiral Mullen recently expressed criticism of the consequences of a '*precipitous retreat*.'**³³ The potential for conflict appears less great with the camp of Hillary Clinton, whose positions in these questions are much more consensual. Moreover, unlike her Democratic adversary, she enjoys the support of major military officials among whom there are two former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Generals Shelton and Shalikashvili, and a former commander in chief of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) forces, General Wesley Clark.

4. Conclusion

At the end of this analysis, it would seem difficult to back up the risky thesis of Mr. Barnett whereby the early departure of Admiral Fallon from CENTCOM would be a sign heralding future American military action in Iran. As we have seen, the opposition of the Admiral to the positions of General Petraeus over the evolution of American strategy in Iraq put him in an extremely uncomfortable situation, depriving him in fact of all power. From that, one cannot see how this hardened officer could remain at the head of the Armed Forces of the United States in the Middle East.

As regards the evolution of United States policy in Iraq, this departure indicates to us that the Bush Administration is thinking of heeding General Petraeus and imposing a pause on the process of reducing the American presence announced last September. This impression is reinforced by the recent turn taken by Robert Gates who has now said he is in favour of a halt in the reduction of American staff in Iraq.³⁴ Moreover, it is interesting to emphasise that,

³² Bruce Smith, 'McCain: Rumsfeld Was One of the Worst,' Associated Press, February 20, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/20/AR2007022000365.html>

³³ William M. Arkin, 'The Military and the Next President,' *The Washington Post*, March 6, 2008. http://blog.washingtonpost.com/earlywarning/2008/03/the_military_and_the_next_pres_1.html

³⁴ Amit R. Paley, Ann Scott Tyson, 'Defense Secretary Supports A Pause in Iraq Withdrawal,' *The Washington Post*, 12 février 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/02/11/ST2008021100749.html>

paradoxically, the victory of Petraeus over Fallon on the question of maintaining a large American presence in Iraq reduces somewhat the prospect of military action by Washington against Tehran. This decision concerning Iraq will also have consequences for the participation of the United States in the work of NATO in Afghanistan. American officials have not hidden the fact that they would like their allies in the Atlantic Alliance to increase their military effort.

From all the evidence, the decision that will soon be announced by President Bush concerning the 'pause' in the reduction of American personnel in Iraq will close the discussion of this question within the Bush Administration. This means that the question of the evolution of the American presence in Iraq will be handed over to the next occupant of the White House. Therefore, one can imagine that this question will occupy a central place in the American Presidential campaign.

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