

# Pundit Tears for Petraeus's Fall

**Exclusive:** Much of Official Washington is in mourning after David Petraeus admitted to an extramarital affair and resigned as head of the CIA. Top pundits were as smitten by the former four-star general as his mistress was, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

A day after the surprise announcement that CIA Director David Petraeus was resigning because of marital infidelity, the pundits continue to miss the supreme irony. None other than the head of the CIA (and former bemedaled four-star general) has become the first really big fish netted by the intrusive monitoring of the communications of American citizens implemented after 9/11.

It is unclear whether it is true that, according to initial reports, Petraeus's alleged mistress and biographer, Paula Broadwell, was caught trying to hack into his e-mail. What does seem clear is that the FBI discovered that she had "unusual access" (to borrow the delicate wording of this morning's New York Times) to Petraeus during his time as commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan from July 2010 to July 2011. The potential for compromise of sensitive information is equally clear.

Not surprisingly, Establishment pundits are disconsolate that their beloved David Petraeus has been brought down in such a tawdry way. They are already at work trying to salvage his legacy as the implementer of George W. Bush's much-heralded "successful surge" in Iraq (even though the sacrifice of nearly 1,000 more dead U.S. soldiers did little more than provide a "decent interval" between Bush's departure from office in 2009 and the final U.S. withdrawal/defeat at the end of 2011).

Among those lionizing/eulogizing Petraeus on the morning after his resignation was Washington Post columnist (and longtime CIA apologist) David Ignatius, who argued that Petraeus "achieved genuinely great things." Ignatius's lamented Petraeus's admission of the extramarital affair with the poignancy you might find in a novel by Leo Tolstoy or Victor Hugo about an admirable but ill-fated hero.

Ignatius, too, was a writer who was embedded with Petraeus and was dazzled by his charm. Ignatius wrote that he "spent nearly three weeks traveling with [Petraeus] during his CENTOM assignment, and saw how he fused the political and military aspects of command, as he met with sheiks and presidents and intelligence chiefs, in a way that should have been captured in a textbook for

future commanders.”

But Ignatius inadvertently acknowledged the futility of Petraeus’s approach to Bush’s wars. The Post columnist wrote: “For all Petraeus’s counter-insurgency doctrine, his Afghanistan command often appeared to be the equivalent of building on quicksand. No sooner were the Afghan forces ‘stood up’ than they would begin to slip away, back into the culture that was deeply, stubbornly resistant to outside pressure. In his last month in Kabul, Petraeus had all the tools of victory in hand except one, the Afghan people and institutions.”

So much for Petraeus’s “brilliant” counter-insurgency doctrine. He had all the tools except the Afghan people and institutions, the two requisites for winning a counter-insurgency war!

### **So What’s the Big Idea?**

Ignatius adoringly adduces the following quote from Petraeus as proof of the ex-general’s acute vision: “As I see it, strategic leadership is fundamentally about big ideas, and, in particular, about four tasks connected with big ideas. First, of course, you have to get the big ideas right, you have to determine the right overarching concepts and intellectual underpinnings to accomplish your organization’s mission.

“Second, you have to communicate the big ideas effectively through the breadth and depth of the organization. Third, you have to oversee the implementation of the big ideas. And fourth, and finally, you have to capture lessons from the implementation of the big ideas, so that you can refine the overarching concepts and repeat the overall process.”

Got that? That’s probably right out of Petraeus’s PhD dissertation at Princeton, or from a how-to book that might be called “Management Rhetoric for Dummies.”

If only Petraeus and his colleague generals remembered the smaller but far more relevant ideas inculcated in all of us Army officers in Infantry School at Fort Benning in the early Sixties. This is what I recall from memory regarding what an infantry officer needed to do before launching an operation big or small division or squad size.

Corny (and gratuitous) as it may sound, we were taught that the absolute requirement was to do an “Estimate of the Situation” that included the following key factors: Enemy strength, numbers and weapons; Enemy disposition, where are they?; Terrain; Weather; and Lines of communication and supply (LOCS). In other words, we were trained to take into account those “little ideas,” like facts and feasibility that, if ignored, could turn the “big ideas” into a March of Folly that would get a lot of people killed for no good reason.

Could it be that they stopped teaching these fundamentals as Petraeus went through West Point and Benning several years later? Did military history no longer include the futile efforts of imperial armies to avoid falling into the “graveyard of empires” in Afghanistan?

What about those LOCS? When you can't get there from here, is it really a good idea to send troops and armaments the length of Pakistan and then over the Hindu Kush? And does anyone know how much that kind of adventure might end up costing?

To Army officers schooled in the basics, it was VERY hard to understand why the top Army leadership persuaded President Barack Obama to double down, twice, in reinforcing troops for a fool's errand. And let's face it, unless you posit that the generals and the neoconservative strategic “experts” at Brookings and AEI were clueless, the doubling down was not only dumb but unconscionable.

Small wonder all the talk about “long war” and Petraeus's glib prediction that our grandchildren will still be fighting the kind of wars in which he impressed the likes of David Ignatius.

As commander in Afghanistan, Petraeus was able to elbow the substantive intelligence analysts in Washington off to the sidelines. What might those analysts have said about LOCS, or about the key point of training the Afghan army and police? We don't know for sure, but it is a safe bet those analysts who know something about Afghanistan (and, better still, about Vietnam) would have rolled their eyes and wished Gen. Westmoreland oops, I mean Petraeus good luck.

As for winning hearts and minds, it was Petraeus who shocked Afghan President Hamid Karzai's aides by claiming that Afghan parents might have burned their own children in order to blame the casualties on U.S. military operations.

And the same Petraeus eagerly increased the incredibly myopic drone strikes in Pakistan, killing thousands of civilian “militants” and creating thousands more to contend with in the “long war” now alienating a nuclear-armed country of 185 million people.

### **Good Riddance**

If, by now, you get the idea that I think David Petraeus is a charlatan (and I am not referring to sexual escapades), you would be correct. The next question, however, is his replacement and whether the policies will change.

Mr. President, with the mandate you have just won, you have a golden chance to reverse the March of Folly in Afghanistan. You can select a person with a proven record of integrity and courage to speak truth, without fear or favor, and with savvy and experience in matters of State and Defense.

There are still some very good people with integrity and courage around former Ambassador Chas Freeman would be an excellent candidate. Go ahead, Mr. President. Show that you can stand up to the Israel lobby that succeeded in getting Freeman ousted on March 10, 2009, after just six hours on the job as Director of the National Intelligence Council.

And there are still some genuine experts around to help you enlist Afghanistan's neighbors in an effort to ease U.S. troop withdrawal well before the 2014 deadline. The faux experts the neocon specialists at Brookings, AEI and elsewhere have had their chance. For God's sake, take away their White House visiting badges at once.

Create White House badges for genuine experts like former National Intelligence Officer for the Near East Paul Pillar, former State Department Chief of Staff Lawrence Wilkerson, and military historian and practitioner Andrew Bacevich (Lt. Col., USA, ret.). These are straight-shooters; they have no interest in "long wars"; they will tell you the truth; all you need do is listen.

Do NOT listen this time to the likes of your counter-terrorism adviser, John Brennan, a former CIA functionary who was staff director for CIA Director George "slam-dunk" Tenet. Brennan will probably push for you to nominate Petraeus's deputy and now Acting CIA Director Michael Morell, who did the same dirty work for Tenet that Brennan did.

Morell is even more likely to take his cues from Brennan and tell you what he and Brennan want you to hear. At best, Morell is likely to let things drift until you move on Petraeus's replacement. And this is no time for drift.

There is absolutely no reason to prolong the agony in Afghanistan until the end of 2014. Doubling down on Afghanistan might have seemed a smart political move at the time, but you now should face the fact that it was a major blunder. Troops out now!

**Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served as an Army infantry/intelligence officer in the early Sixties, and then as a CIA analyst for 27 years. He now serves on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).**

---

## Behind Petraeus's Resignation

**Exclusive:** The resignation of CIA Director David Petraeus over an extramarital

affair marks a stunning reversal for the longtime media darling. But some in President Obama's inner circle are not displeased the neocon-friendly ex-general is gone, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The messy departure of CIA Director David Petraeus over an extramarital affair removes the last high-ranking neoconservative holdover from George W. Bush's administration and gives the reelected President Barack Obama more maneuvering room to negotiate a settlement over Iran's nuclear program.

Petraeus's resignation along with a public acknowledgement of an affair, reportedly with an admiring female biographer, raised eyebrows in Washington for reasons beyond the sudden and humiliating fall of the high-flying former four-star general. Normally, in such situations, a cover story is used to spare someone of Petraeus's stature embarrassment.

Especially in the days after a president's reelection, it would not be uncommon for a senior official to announce new career plans or a desire to spend more time with the family. Instead, Petraeus's resignation was accompanied by an admission of the affair. Press reports identified the woman as Paula Broadwell, who co-authored a biography of Petraeus, *All In: The Education of General David Petraeus*.

One person familiar with the Obama administration's thinking said President Obama was never close to Petraeus, who was viewed as a favorite of the neoconservatives and someone who had undercut a possible solution to Iran's nuclear program in 2011 by pushing a bizarre claim that Iranian intelligence was behind an assassination plot aimed at the Saudi ambassador to Washington.

As that case initially evolved, the White House and Justice Department were skeptical that the plot traced back to the Iranian government, but Petraeus pushed the alleged connection which was then made public in a high-profile indictment. The charges further strained relations with Iran, making a possible military confrontation more likely.

### **Petraeus's Input**

At the time, Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, a favored recipient of official CIA leaks, reported that "one big reason [top U.S. officials became convinced the plot was real] is that CIA and other intelligence agencies gathered information corroborating the informant's juicy allegations and showing that the plot had support from the top leadership of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, the covert action arm of the Iranian

government.”

Ignatius added that, “it was this intelligence collected in Iran” that swung the balance. But Ignatius offered no examples of what that intelligence was. Nor did Ignatius show any skepticism regarding Petraeus’s well-known hostility toward Iran and how that might have influenced the CIA’s judgment.

As it turned out, the case was based primarily on statements from an Iranian-American car dealer Mansour Arbabsiar, who clumsily tried to hire drug dealers to murder Saudi Ambassador Adel Al-Jubeir, though Arbabsiar was actually talking to a Drug Enforcement Agency informant. Arbabsiar pled guilty last month as his lawyers argued that their client suffers from a bipolar disorder. In other words, Petraeus and his CIA escalated an international crisis largely on the word of a person diagnosed by doctors of his own defense team as having a severe psychiatric disorder.

Despite the implausibility of the assassination story and the unreliability of the key source, the Washington press corps quickly accepted the Iranian assassination plot as real. That assessment reflected the continued influence of neoconservatives in Official Washington and Petraeus’s out-sized reputation among journalists.

The neocons, who directed much of President George W. Bush’s disastrous foreign policy and filled the ranks of Mitt Romney’s national security team, have favored a heightened confrontation with Iran in line with the hardline position of Israel’s Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In the post-election period, it is a top neocon goal to derail Obama’s efforts to work out a peaceful settlement of the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program. The neocons favor “regime change.”

### **Suspect Loyalties**

Petraeus’s ideological alignment with the neocons threatened to undercut the administration’s unity behind Obama’s peace initiative. Thus, according to the person familiar with the administration’s thinking, some key figures close to the President wanted Petraeus out and there was no sadness that his personal indiscretions contributed to his departure.

Regarding the facts behind Petraeus’s sudden resignation, the New York Times reported that the FBI had begun an investigation into a “potential criminal matter” several months ago that was not focused on Petraeus. It was in the course of their inquiry into whether a computer used by Petraeus had been compromised that agents discovered evidence of the relationship as well as other security concerns. About two weeks ago, FBI agents met with Petraeus to discuss

the investigation, the Times reported.

According to the Times, one congressional official who was briefed on the matter said Petraeus had been encouraged "to get out in front of the issue" and resign, and that he agreed.

Though held in high esteem by Official Washington for his role in advocating "surges" of U.S. troops in Iraq in 2007 and in Afghanistan in 2009, Petraeus actually has a less than sterling record of military success. He was in charge of a trouble-plagued effort to train a new Iraqi army after the U.S. invasion in 2003, and his supposedly successful "surge" in Iraq was more a public relations success than a change in the strategic trajectory toward ultimate U.S. failure there.

### **The Unsuccessful Surge**

The reality regarding the Iraq "surge" in 2007 was that much of the reduction in violence in Iraq derived from policies of Petraeus's predecessors, including the implementation of the so-called Sunni Awakening which involved paying off Sunni tribal leaders to turn against al-Qaeda extremists and the killing of al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Sectarian violence also had led to a *de facto* separation of Sunnis and Shiites and thus a natural burning-out of the civil strife. All these developments occurred in 2006 before President Bush ordered the "surge" in 2007 and put Petraeus in charge.

The "surge" actually led to a spike in violence in Iraq before the other factors contributed to a gradual reduction. Nevertheless, Official Washington's conventional wisdom was framed around the "successful surge" credited to President Bush, Gen. Petraeus and the neocons.

Though nearly 1,000 U.S. soldiers died during the "surge," its primary effect was to enable Bush and the other Iraq War architects to leave office without the legacy of a clear-cut military defeat hung around their necks. At the end of 2011, the U.S. military left Iraq with little to show for Bush's investment of blood and treasure.

Besides Bush, the chief beneficiaries of the "successful surge" myth were Gen. Petraeus and Bush's last Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Both remained as part of the high command after Barack Obama took office in 2009, as the young President didn't want an abrupt break with Bush's war policies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the "continuity" trapped Obama when he tried to steer the wars toward conclusions. While pursuing the drawdown of troops in Iraq, he asked for less aggressive options in the Afghan War, only to have Gates, Petraeus and other

Bush holdovers maneuver him into authorizing another “surge” for Afghanistan.

### **Behind the President’s Back**

As Bob Woodward reported in his book, *Obama’s Wars*, it was Bush’s old team that made sure Obama was given no option other than to escalate troop levels in Afghanistan substantially. The Bush holdovers also lobbied for the troop increase behind Obama’s back.

According to Woodward’s book, Gates, Petraeus and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, refused to even prepare an early-exit option that Obama had requested. Instead, they offered up only plans for their desired escalation of about 40,000 troops.

Woodward wrote: “For two exhausting months, [Obama] had been asking military advisers to give him a range of options for the war in Afghanistan. Instead, he felt that they were steering him toward one outcome and thwarting his search for an exit plan. He would later tell his White House aides that military leaders were ‘really cooking this thing in the direction they wanted.’”

In mid-2011, Obama finally eased Gates out of the Pentagon and replaced him with one of the President’s most trusted advisers, Leon Panetta, who had been serving as director of the CIA. At CIA, Panetta had overseen backchannel contacts between the White House and the Iranian leadership and other sensitive initiatives.

To complete the personnel shift and to keep the Republican-leaning Petraeus out of presidential politics in 2012 Obama put Petraeus in as CIA director. But Obama’s inner circle never trusted Petraeus who was known to have built political support for his military career by cultivating the loyalty of Washington’s top neoconservatives.

### **Friendly Neocons**

For instance, in 2009 when Obama was deciding what to do about Afghanistan, Gen. Petraeus personally arranged extraordinary access to U.S. field commanders for two of his influential neocon friends, Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations and Frederick Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute.

“Fears of impending disaster are hard to sustain if you actually spend some time in Afghanistan, as we did recently at the invitation of General David Petraeus, chief of U.S. Central Command,” they wrote upon their return.

“Using helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, and bone-jarring armored vehicles, we spent eight days traveling from the snow-capped peaks of Kunar province near the

border with Pakistan in the east to the wind-blown deserts of Farah province in the west near the border with Iran. Along the way we talked with countless coalition soldiers, ranging from privates to a four-star general," they said.

Their access paid dividends for Petraeus when they penned a glowing report in the Weekly Standard about the prospects for success in Afghanistan if only President Obama sent more troops and committed the United States to stay in the war for the long haul.

Besides getting neocons to put public pressure on the President, Petraeus turned to Boot in 2010 when Petraeus felt he had made a mistake in allowing his official congressional testimony to contain mild criticism of Israel. His written testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee had included the observation that "the enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests" in the Middle East and added:

"Israeli-Palestinian tensions often flare into violence and large-scale armed confrontations. The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support."

Though the testimony might strike some readers as a no-brainer, many neocons regard any suggestion that Israeli intransigence on Palestinian peace talks contributed to the dangers faced by American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan as a "blood libel" against Israel.

### **A Happy Face**

So, when Petraeus's testimony began getting traction on the Internet, the general quickly turned to Boot and began backtracking on the testimony. "As you know, I didn't say that," Petraeus said, according to one e-mail to Boot timed off at 2:27 p.m., March 18, 2010. "It's in a written submission for the record."

In other words, Petraeus was arguing that the comments were only in his formal testimony and were not repeated by him in his oral opening statement. However, in the real world, the written testimony of a witness is treated as part of the official record at congressional hearings with no meaningful distinction from oral testimony.

In another e-mail, as Petraeus solicited Boot's help in tamping down any controversy over the Israeli remarks, the general ended the message with a military "Roger" and a sideways happy face, made from a colon, a dash and a closed parenthesis, ":-)."

The e-mails were made public by James Morris, who runs a Web site called "[Neocon Zionist Threat to America](#)." Morris said he apparently got the Petraeus-Boot exchanges by accident when he sent a March 19, 2010, e-mail congratulating Petraeus for his testimony and Petraeus responded by forwarding one of Boot's blog posts that knocked down the story of the general's implicit criticism of Israel.

Petraeus forwarded Boot's blog item, entitled "A Lie: David Petraeus, Anti-Israel," which had been posted at the Commentary magazine site at 3:11 p.m. on March 18. However, Petraeus apparently forgot to delete some of the other exchanges between him and Boot at the bottom of the e-mail.

Morris sent me the e-mails at my request after [an article](#) by Philip Weiss appeared about them at Mondoweiss, a Web site that deals with Middle East issues. When I sought comment from Petraeus and Boot regarding the e-mails, neither responded.

Obama's decision to entrust a position as crucial as CIA director to Petraeus, an ambitious man with strong ties to the neocons, was always a risk. While Obama may have been thinking that he was keeping Petraeus out of a possible run for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, the President put Petraeus in a spot where he could manipulate the intelligence that drives government policies.

Finally, as Obama heads into a second term, he appears to be clearing the decks so he can move ahead more aggressively with his own foreign policy. Robert Gates departed in mid-2011; David Petraeus has now resigned in ignominy; and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who often sided with Gates and Petraeus in taking neocon-style policy positions, is expected to step down soon.

Belatedly, Obama seems to have learned a key lesson of modern Washington: surrounding yourself with ideological and political rivals may sound good but it is usually an invitation to have your policies sabotaged.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

---