

# 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 an 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](#)).**

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