

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!

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