

# Neocons Guided Petraeus on Afghan War

**From the Archive:** Before Gen. David Petraeus was caught giving secrets to his biographer-mistress, he was giving special favors and access to influential neocons, one reason why Official Washington was so happy that he received only a hand-slap for his crime, ties that Robert Parry examined in 2012.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on Dec. 19, 2012)

Even after the Iraq War disaster and Barack Obama's election in 2008, neoconservatives retained their influence over U.S. war policies in Afghanistan through their close ties to George W. Bush's national security holdovers, such as Gen. David Petraeus who partnered with neocon war hawks in escalating the Afghan War.

How tight Petraeus's relationship was with two neocons in particular, Frederick and Kimberly Kagan, was explored in [a Washington Post article](#) by war correspondent Rajiv Chandrasekaran who described how Petraeus installed the husband-and-wife team in U.S. offices in Kabul, granted them top-secret clearances and let them berate military officers about war strategy.

Though the Kagans received no pay from the U.S. government, they drew salaries from their respective think tanks which are supported by large corporations, including military contractors with interests in extending the Afghan War. Frederick Kagan works for the American Enterprise Institute, and [Kimberly Kagan](#) founded the Institute for the Study of War [ISW] in 2007 and is its current president.

According to ISW's [2011 annual report](#), its original supporters were mostly right-wing foundations, such as the Smith-Richardson Foundation and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, but it was later backed by national security contractors, including major ones like General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman and CACI, as well as lesser-known firms such as DynCorp International, which provides training for Afghan police, and Palantir, a technology company founded with the backing of the CIA's venture-capital arm, In-Q-Tel. Palantir supplies software to U.S. military intelligence in Afghanistan.

In her official bio at the ISW's Web site, Kimberly Kagan touts her work "in Kabul for fifteen months in 2010 and 2011 as a 'directed telescope' to General David H. Petraeus and subsequently General John Allen, working on special projects for these commanders of the International Security Assistance Force."

In the ISW's 2011 annual report, Petraeus praises Kagan as "a barracuda at some

times,” hails her leadership and poses with her for several photographs, including one in his dress uniform with the U.S. Capitol in the background.

The Post article noted that “For Kim Kagan, spending so many months away from research and advocacy work in Washington could have annoyed many donors to the Institute for the Study of War. But her major backers appear to have been pleased that she cultivated such close ties with Petraeus, who went from Kabul to head the CIA before resigning this fall over his affair with [biographer Paula] Broadwell.

“On Aug. 8, 2011, a month after he relinquished command in Afghanistan to take over at the CIA, Petraeus spoke at the institute’s first ‘President’s Circle’ dinner, where he accepted an award from Kim Kagan. ‘What the Kagans do is they grade my work on a daily basis,’ Petraeus said, prompting chortles from the audience. ‘There’s some suspicion that there’s a hand up my back, and it makes my lips talk, and it’s operated by one of the Doctors Kagan.’

“At the August 2011 dinner honoring Petraeus, Kagan thanked executives from two defense contractors who sit on her institute’s corporate council, DynCorp International and CACI International. The event was sponsored by General Dynamics. All three firms have business interests in the Afghan war.

“Kagan told the audience that their funding allowed her to assist Petraeus. ‘The ability to have a 15-month deployment essentially in the service of those who needed some help, and the ability to go at a moment’s notice, that’s something you all have sponsored,’ she said.”

### **Earlier Warning Signs**

Though the Post article provides new details about Petraeus’s coziness to Washington’s neocons, there have been warning signs about this relationship for several years. In 2010, I wrote articles describing how Petraeus and other holdovers from George W. Bush’s administration, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates, had trapped the inexperienced Obama into expanding the Afghan War.

On Sept. 27, 2010, I noted that “after his solid victory in November 2008, Obama rebuffed recommendations from some national security experts that he clean house by installing a team more in line with his campaign pledge of ‘change you can believe in.’ He accepted instead the counsel of Establishment Democrats who warned against any disruption to the war-fighting hierarchy and who were especially supportive of keeping Gates.

“Before Obama’s decision to dispatch [an additional] 30,000 troops [in an Afghan War ‘surge’ in 2009], the Bush holdovers sought to hem in the President’s choices by working with allies in the Washington news media and in think tanks.

“For instance, early in 2009, Petraeus personally arranged for Max Boot [a neocon on the Council on Foreign Relations], Frederick Kagan and Kimberly Kagan to get extraordinary access during a trip to Afghanistan. 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.

“‘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,’ the trio said.”

(Frederick Kagan is the brother of Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the neoconservative Project for the New American Century, which began the drive in 1998 for invading Iraq. Robert Kagan, now with the Brookings Institution and a columnist for the Washington Post, is married to Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who oversaw last year’s coup in Ukraine. For more on the outsized influence of the Kagans, see Consortiumnews.com’s “Obama’s True Foreign Policy ‘Weakness.’”)

## **Trapping the President**

How Obama was manipulated by Bush’s holdovers with the help of the neocons was chronicled, too, in Bob Woodward’s 2010 book, *Obama’s Wars*, which revealed that Bush’s old team made sure Obama was given no option other than to escalate troop levels in Afghanistan. The Bush holdovers also lobbied for the troop increase behind Obama’s back.

Woodward’s book notes that “in September 2009, Petraeus called a Washington Post columnist to say that the war would be unsuccessful if the president held back on troops. Later that month, [Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Adm. Mike] Mullen repeated much the same sentiment in Senate testimony, and in October, [Gen. Stanley] McChrystal asserted in a speech in London that a scaled-back effort against Afghan terrorists would not work.”

This back-door campaign infuriated Obama’s aides, including White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, Woodward reported. “Filling his rant with expletives, Emanuel said, ‘Between the chairman [Mullen] and Petraeus, everyone’s come out

and publicly endorsed the notion of more troops. The president hasn't even had a chance!" Woodward reported.

According to Woodward's book, Gates, Petraeus and 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.'"

Woodward identified Gates, Petraeus and Mullen as "unrelenting advocates for 40,000 more troops and an expanded mission that seemed to have no clear end."

The Bush holdovers even resisted passing along a "hybrid" plan that came from outside their group, from Vice President Joe Biden who had worked with JCS vice chairman, Gen. James Cartwright. The plan envisioned a 20,000 troop increase and a more limited mission of hunting Taliban insurgents and training Afghan government forces.

Woodward reported, "When Mullen learned of the hybrid option, he didn't want to take it to Obama. 'We're not providing that,' he told Cartwright, a Marine known around the White House as Obama's favorite general. Cartwright objected. 'I'm just not in the business of withholding options,' he told Mullen. 'I have an oath, and when asked for advice I'm going to provide it.'"

### **Rigged War Game**

Later, Obama told Gates and Mullen to present the hybrid option as one possibility, but instead the Bush holdovers sabotaged the idea by organizing a classified war game, code-named Poignant Vision, that some military insiders felt was rigged to discredit the hybrid option, Woodward reported.

According to Woodward's book, Petraeus cited the results of the war game to Obama at the Nov. 11, 2009, meeting as proof the hybrid option would fail, prompting a plaintive question from a disappointed President, "so, 20,000 is not really a viable option?" Without telling Obama about the limits of the war game, Mullen, Petraeus, Gates and then-field commander McChrystal asserted that the hybrid option would lead to mission failure.

"Okay," Obama said, "if you tell me that we can't do that, and you war-gamed it, I'll accept that," according to Woodward's book.

Faced with this resistance from the Bush holdovers and unaware that their war game may have been fixed Obama finally devised his own option that gave Gates, Petraeus and Mullen most of what they wanted 30,000 additional troops on top of the 21,000 that Obama had dispatched shortly after taking office.

Obama did try to bind the Pentagon to a more limited commitment to Afghanistan, including setting a date of July 2011 for the beginning of a U.S. drawdown. Though Obama required all the key participants to sign off on his compromise, it soon became clear that the Bush holdovers had no intention to comply, Woodward reported.

### **Backstabbing**

The incoming Obama administration was warned of this possibility of backstabbing by Gates, Petraeus and other Bush appointees when it was lining up personnel for national security jobs.

As I wrote in November 2008, “if Obama does keep Gates on, the new President will be employing someone who embodies many of the worst elements of U.S. national security policy over the past three decades, including responsibility for what Obama himself has fingered as a chief concern, ‘politicized intelligence.’ It was Gates as a senior CIA official in the 1980s who broke the back of the CIA analytical division’s commitment to objective intelligence.”

More than any CIA official, Gates was responsible for the agency’s failure to detect the collapse of the Soviet Union, in large part because Gates had ridden roughshod over the CIA analysts on behalf of the Reagan administration’s desire to justify a massive military buildup by stressing Soviet ascendance and ignoring evidence of its disintegration.

As chief of the CIA’s analytical division and then deputy CIA director, Gates promoted pliable CIA careerists to top positions, while analysts with an independent streak were sidelined or pushed out of the agency.

“In the mid-1980s, the three senior [Soviet division] office managers who actually anticipated the decline of the Soviet Union and Moscow’s interest in closer relations with the United States were demoted,” wrote longtime CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman in his book, *Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA.*

Instead of heeding these warnings, Obama’s team listened to Establishment Democrats like former Rep. Lee Hamilton and former Sen. David Boren, who were big fans of Gates. [For more on Gates’s role, see Robert Parry’s *America’s Stolen Narrative.*]

Petraeus was much the same story. A favorite of Official Washington and especially the influential neocons, he was credited with supposedly winning the war in Iraq by implementing the “surge” in 2007, which was advocated strongly by Frederick Kagan and other key neocons.

However, in reality, all Petraeus did was extend that misguided war for another few years at the cost of nearly 1,000 more U.S. dead and countless more dead Iraqis thus giving President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney time to get out of Washington before the ultimate failure of the mission became obvious. The last U.S. troops were forced to leave Iraq at the end of 2011.

### **Begging Boot**

Petraeus had such close ties to the neocons that he relied on them to pull him out of difficult political spots. In one embarrassing example in 2010, e-mails surfaced showing the four-star general groveling before Max Boot, seeking the neocon pundit’s help heading off a controversy over Petraeus’s prepared testimony to Congress which contained a mild criticism of Israel.

The e-mails from Petraeus to Boot revealed Petraeus renouncing his own congressional testimony in March 2010 because it 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.

Petraeus’s testimony continued, “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 was obviously true, many neocons regard any suggestion that Israeli intransigence on Palestinian peace talks contributed to the dangers faced by American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan or by the U.S. public from acts of terrorism at home as a “blood libel” against Israel.

So, when Petraeus’s testimony began getting traction on the Internet, the general turned to Boot at the high-powered Council on Foreign Relations, 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. “It’s in a written submission for the record.”

In other words, Petraeus was saying the comments were only in his formal testimony submitted to the Senate Armed Services Committee and were not repeated by him in his brief oral opening statement. However, written testimony 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](#)." He said he apparently got them by accident when he sent a March 19 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.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).**

---