

Trump Ponders Gen. David Petraeus for Senior Job. The Iraq “Surge,” which He Oversaw...

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The news that President-elect Donald Trump called in disgraced retired Gen. David Petraeus for a job interview as possible Secretary of State tests whether Trump’s experience in hosting “The Celebrity Apprentice” honed his skills for spotting an incompetent phony or not.

Does Trump need more data than the continuing bedlam in Iraq and Afghanistan to understand that one can earn a Princeton PhD by writing erudite-sounding drivel about “counterinsurgency” and still flunk war? Granted, the shambles in which Petraeus left Iraq and Afghanistan were probably more a result of his overweening careerism and political ambition than his misapplication of military strategy. But does that make it any more excusable?



Gen. David Petraeus in a photo with his biographer/mistress Paula Broadwell. (U.S. government photo)

In 2007, Adm. William Fallon, commander of CENTCOM with four decades of active-duty experience behind him, quickly took the measure of Petraeus, who was one of his subordinates while implementing a “surge” of over 30,000 U.S. troops into Iraq.

Several sources reported that Fallon was sickened by Petraeus’s unctuous pandering to ingratiate himself. Fallon is said to have been so turned off by all the accolades in the flowery introduction given him by Petraeus that he called him to his face “an ass-kissing little chickenshit,” adding, “I hate people like that.” Sadly, Petraeus’s sycophancy is not uncommon among general officers. Uncommon was Fallon’s outspoken candor.

The past decade has shown that obsequiousness to those above him and callousness toward

others are two of Petraeus's most notable character traits. They go along with his lack of military acumen and his dishonesty as revealed in his lying to the FBI about handing over top-secret notebooks to his biographer/lover, an "indiscretion" that would have landed a less well-connected person in jail but instead got him only a mild slap on the wrist (via a misdemeanor guilty plea).

Indeed, Petraeus, the epitome of a "political general," represents some of the slimiest depths of the Washington "swamp" that President-elect Trump has vowed to drain. Petraeus cares desperately about the feelings of his fellow elites but shows shocking disdain for the suffering of other human beings who are not so important.

In early 2011 in Afghanistan, Petraeus shocked aides to then-President Hamid Karzai after many children were burned to death in a "coalition" attack in northeastern Afghanistan by suggesting that Afghan parents may have burned their own children to exaggerate their claims of civilian casualties and discredit the U.S., [reported](#) The Washington Post, citing two participants at the meeting.

"Killing 60 people, and then blaming the killing on those same people, rather than apologizing for any deaths? This is inhuman," one Afghan official said. "This is a really terrible situation."

Yet, on other occasions, the politically savvy Petraeus can be a paragon of sensitivity – like when he is in danger of getting crosswise with the Israel Lobby.

Never did Petraeus's fawning shine through with more brilliance, than when an (unintentionally disclosed) email exchange [showed him groveling](#) before arch-neocon Max Boot, beseeching Boot's help in fending off charges that Petraeus was "anti-Israel" because his prepared testimony to a congressional committee included the no-brainer observations that Israeli-Palestinian hostility presents "distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests" and that "this conflict foment 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."

So, telling the truth (perhaps accidentally in prepared testimony) made Petraeus squirm with fear about offending the powerful Israel Lobby, but he apparently didn't hesitate to lie to FBI agents when he was caught in a tight spot for sharing highly sensitive intelligence with Paula Broadwell, his mistress/biographer. But, again, Petraeus realized that it helps to have influential friends. A court gave him a slap on the wrist with a sentence of two years probation and a fine of \$100,000 – which is less than he usually makes for a single speaking engagement.

Military Incompetent Without Parallel

And, if President-elect Trump isn't repulsed by the stench of hypocrisy – if he ignores Petraeus's reckless handling of classified material after Trump lambasted Hillary Clinton for her own careless behavior in that regard – there is also the grim truth behind Petraeus's glitzy image.



David Petraeus, a two-star general during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, with Lt. Gen. William S. Wallace.

As a military strategist or even a trainer of troops, Petraeus has been an unparalleled disaster. Yes, the corporate media always runs interference for Official Washington's favorite general. But that does not equate with genuine success.

The Iraq "surge," which Petraeus oversaw, was misrepresented in the corporate media as a huge victory – because it was credited with a brief dip in the level of violence at the cost of some 1,000 American lives (and those of many more Iraqis) – but the "surge" failed its principal goal of buying time to heal the rift between Shiites and Sunnis, a division that ultimately led to the emergence of the Islamic State (or ISIS).

Then, in early 2014, the crackerjack Iraqi troops whom Petraeus bragged about training ran away from Mosul, leaving their modern U.S.-provided weapons behind for the Islamic State's jihadists to play with.

In part because of that collapse – with Iraqi forces only now beginning to chip away at ISIS control of Mosul – the Obama administration was dragged into another Mideast war, spilling across Iraq and Syria and adding to the droves of refugees pouring into Europe, a crisis that is now destabilizing the European Union.

You might have thought that the combination of military failures and scandalous behavior would have ended David Petraeus's "government service," but he has never lost his skill at putting his finger to the wind.

During the presidential campaign, the windsock Petraeus was circumspect, which was understandable given the uncertainty regarding which way the wind was blowing.

However, on Sept. 1, 2015, amid calls from the mainstream U.S. media and establishment think tanks for President Obama to escalate the U.S. proxy war to overthrow the Syrian government, Petraeus spoke out in favor of giving more weapons to "moderate" Syrian rebels, despite the widespread recognition that U.S.-supplied guns and rockets were ending

up in the hands of Al Qaeda's Nusra Front.

The new harebrained scheme – favored by Petraeus and other neocons – fantasized about Al Qaeda possibly joining the fight against the Islamic State, although ISIS sprang from Al Qaeda and splintered largely over tactical issues, such as how quickly to declare a jihadist state, not over fundamental fundamentalist goals.

But more miscalculations in the Middle East would be right up Petraeus's alley. He played an important role in facilitating the emergence of the Islamic State by his too-clever-by-half policy of co-opting some Sunni tribes with promises of shared power in Baghdad and with lots of money, and then simply looking the other way as the U.S.-installed Shia government in Baghdad ditched the promises.

Surge? Or Splurge With Lives

The so-called “surges” of troops into Iraq and Afghanistan are particularly gross examples of the way American soldiers have been used as expendable pawns by ambitious generals like Petraeus and ambitious politicians like former Defense Secretary Robert Gates.



Former CIA Director (and later Defense Secretary) Robert Gates.

The problem is that overweening personal ambition can end up getting a lot of people killed. In the speciously glorified first “surge,” President George W. Bush sent more than 30,000 additional troops into Iraq in early 2007. During the period of the “surge,” about 1,000 U.S. troops died.

There was a similar American death toll during President Barack Obama's “surge” of another 30,000 troops into Afghanistan in early 2010, a shift toward a counterinsurgency strategy that had been pressed on Obama by Petraeus, Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Despite the loss of those 1,000 additional U.S. soldiers, the counterinsurgency “surge” had little effect on the course of the Afghan War.

The bloody chaos that continues in Iraq today and in the never-ending war in Afghanistan

was entirely predictable. Indeed, it was predicted by those of us able to spread some truth around via the Internet, while being blacklisted by the fawning corporate media, which cheered on the “surges” and their chief architect, David Petraeus.

But the truth is not something that thrives in either U.S. politics or media these days. Campaigning early this year in New Hampshire, then-presidential aspirant Jeb Bush gave a short partial-history lesson about his big brother’s attack on Iraq. Referring to the so-called Islamic State, Bush said, “ISIS didn’t exist when my brother was president. ‘Al Qaeda in Iraq’ was wiped out ... the surge created a fragile but stable Iraq. ...”

Jeb Bush is partially right about ISIS; it didn’t exist when his brother George attacked Iraq. Indeed, Al Qaeda didn’t exist in Iraq until *after* the U.S. invasion when it emerged as “Al Qaeda in Iraq” and it wasn’t eliminated by the “surge.”

With huge sums of U.S. cash going to Sunni tribes in Anbar province, Al Qaeda in Iraq just pulled back and regrouped. Its top leaders came from the ranks of angry Sunnis who had been officers in Saddam Hussein’s army and – when the “surge” failed to achieve reconciliation between Sunnis and Shiites – the U.S. cash proved useful in expanding Sunni resistance to Baghdad’s Shiite government. From the failed “surge” strategy emerged the rebranded “Al Qaeda in Iraq,” the Islamic State.

So, despite Jeb Bush’s attempted spin, the reality is that his brother’s aggressive war in Iraq created both “Al Qaeda in Iraq” and its new incarnation, Islamic State.

The mess was made worse by subsequent U.S. strategy – beginning under Bush and expanding under President Obama – of supporting insurgents in Syria. By supplying money, guns and rockets to “moderate” Sunni rebels, that strategy has allowed the materiel to quickly fall into the hands of Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Nusra Front, and its jihadist allies, Ahrar al-Sham.

In other words, U.S. strategy – much of it guided by David Petraeus – continues to strengthen Al Qaeda, which – through its Nusra affiliate and its Islamic State spin-off – now occupies large swaths of Iraq and Syria.

Escaping a ‘Lost War’

All this is among the fateful consequences of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq 13 years ago – made worse (not better) by the “surge” in 2007, which contributed significantly to this decade’s Sunni-Shia violence. The real reason for Bush’s “surge” seems to have been to buy time so that he and Vice President Dick Cheney could leave office without having a lost war on their résumés.



President George W. Bush pauses for applause during his State of the Union Address on Jan. 28, 2003, when he made a fraudulent case for invading Iraq. Seated behind him are Vice President Dick Cheney and House Speaker Dennis Hastert. (White House photo)

As author Steve Coll has put it, “The decision [to surge] at a minimum guaranteed that his [Bush’s] presidency would not end with a defeat in history’s eyes. By committing to the surge [the President] was certain to at least achieve a stalemate.”

According to Bob Woodward, Bush told key Republicans in late 2005 that he would not withdraw from Iraq, “even if Laura and [first-dog] Barney are the only ones supporting me.” Woodward made it clear that Bush was well aware in fall 2006 that the U.S. was losing.

Indeed, by fall 2006, it had become unavoidably clear that a new course had to be chosen and implemented in Iraq, and virtually every sober thinker seemed opposed to sending more troops.

The senior military, especially CENTCOM commander Gen. John Abizaid and his man on the ground in Iraq, Gen. George Casey, emphasized that sending still more U.S. troops to Iraq would simply reassure leading Iraqi politicians that they could relax and continue to take forever to get their act together.

Here, for example, is Gen. Abizaid’s answer at the Senate Armed Services Committee on Nov. 15, 2006, to Sen. John McCain, who had long been pressing vigorously for sending 20,000 more troops to Iraq:

“Senator McCain, I met with every divisional commander, General Casey, the corps commander, General Dempsey, we all talked together. And I said, ‘in your professional opinion, if we were to bring in more American troops now, does it add considerably to our ability to achieve success in Iraq?’ And they all said no.

“And the reason is because we want the Iraqis to do more. It is easy for the Iraqis to rely upon us do this work. I believe that more American forces prevent the Iraqis from doing more, from taking more responsibility for their own future.”

The U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, sent a classified cable to Washington warning that “proposals to send more U.S. forces to Iraq would not produce a long-term solution and would make our policy less, not more, sustainable,” according to a New York Times retrospective on the “surge” published on Aug. 31, 2008. Khalilzad was arguing, unsuccessfully, for authority to negotiate a political solution with the Iraqis.

There was also the establishment-heavy Iraq Study Group, created by Congress and led by Republican stalwart James Baker and Democrat Lee Hamilton (with Robert Gates as a member although he quit before the review was completed). After months of policy review, the Iraq Study Group issued a final report on Dec. 6, 2006, that began with the ominous sentence “The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating.”

It called for:

“A change in the primary mission of U.S. Forces in Iraq that will enable the United States to begin to move its combat forces out of Iraq responsibly... By the first quarter of 2008...all combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be out of Iraq.”

Rumsfeld’s Known-Knowns

The little-understood story behind Bush’s decision to catapult Robert Gates into the post of Defense Secretary was the astonishing fact that Donald Rumsfeld, of all people, was pulling a Robert McNamara; that is, he was going wobbly on a war based largely on his own hubris-laden, misguided advice.



Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at a press briefing with Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Richard Myers. (State Department photo)

In the fall of 2006 Rumsfeld was having a reality attack. In Rumsfeld-speak, he had come face to face with a “known known.”

On Nov. 6, 2006, a day before the mid-term elections, Rumsfeld sent a memo to the White House, in which he acknowledged, “Clearly, what U.S. forces are currently doing in Iraq is not working well enough or fast enough.” The rest of his memo sounded very much like the emerging troop-drawdown conclusions of the Iraq Study Group.

The first 80 percent of Rumsfeld's memo addressed "Illustrative Options," including his preferred – or "above the line" – options such as "an accelerated drawdown of U.S. bases ... to five by July 2007" and withdrawal of U.S. forces "from vulnerable positions — cities, patrolling, etc. ... so the Iraqis know they have to pull up their socks, step up and take responsibility for their country."

Finally, Rumsfeld had begun to listen to his generals and others who knew which end was up. The hurdle? Bush and Cheney were not about to follow Rumsfeld's example in "going wobbly." Like Robert McNamara at a similar juncture during Vietnam, Rumsfeld had to be let go before he caused a President to "lose a war."

Waiting in the wings, though, was Robert Gates, who had been CIA director under President George H. W. Bush, spent four years as president of Texas A&M, and had returned to the Washington stage as a member of the Iraq Study Group. While on the ISG, he evidenced no disagreement with its emerging conclusions – at least not until Bush asked him to become Secretary of Defense in early November 2006.

It was awkward. Right up to the week before the mid-term elections on Nov. 7, 2006, President Bush had insisted that he intended to keep Rumsfeld in place for the next two years. Suddenly, the President had to deal with Rumsfeld's apostasy on Iraq. Rumsfeld had let reality get to him, together with the very strong anti-surge protestations by all senior uniformed officers save one — the ambitious David Petraeus, who had jumped onboard for the "surge" escalation, which guaranteed another star on his lapel.

All Hail Petraeus

With the bemedaled Petraeus in the wings and guidance on strategy from arch-neocons, such as retired General Jack Keane and think-tank analyst Frederick Kagan, the White House completed the coup against the generals by replacing Rumsfeld with Gates and recalling Casey and Abizaid and elevating Petraeus.



Gen. David Petraeus posing before the U.S. Capitol with Kimberly Kagan, founder and president of the Institute for the

Study of War, the wife of Frederick Kagan. (Photo credit: ISW's 2011 Annual Report)

Amid the mainstream media's hosannas for Petraeus and Gates, the significance of the shakeup was widely misunderstood, with key senators, including Sen. Hillary Clinton, buying the false narrative that the changes presaged a drawdown in the war rather than an escalation.

So relieved were the senators to be rid of the hated-but-feared Rumsfeld that the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Dec. 5, 2006, on Gates's nomination had the feel of a pajama party (I was there). Gates told them bedtime stories – and vowed to show “great deference to the judgment of generals.”

With unanimous Democratic support and only two conservative Republicans opposed, Gates was confirmed by the full Senate on Dec. 6, 2006.

On Jan. 10, 2007, Bush formally unveiled the bait-and-switch, announcing the “surge” of 30,000 additional troops, a mission that would be overseen by Gates and Petraeus. Bush did acknowledge that there would be considerable loss of life in the year ahead as U.S. troops were assigned to create enough stability for Iraq's Shiite and Sunni factions to reach an accommodation.

At least, he got the loss-of-life part right. Around 1,000 U.S. troops died during the “surge” along with many more Iraqis. But Bush, Cheney, Petraeus, and Gates apparently deemed that cost a small price to pay for enabling them to blame a successor administration for the inevitable withdrawal from America's failed war of aggression.

The gambit worked especially well for Gates and Petraeus. Amid glowing mainstream media press clippings about the “successful surge” and “victory at last” in Iraq, Gates was hailed as a new “wise man” and Petraeus was the military genius who pulled victory from the jaws of defeat. Their reputations were such that President Obama concluded that he had no choice but to keep them on, Gates as Defense Secretary and Petraeus as Obama's top general in the Middle East.

Petraeus then oversaw the “surge” in Afghanistan and landed the job of CIA director, where Petraeus reportedly played a major role in arming up the Syrian rebels in pursuit of another “regime change,” this time in Syria.

Although Petraeus's CIA tenure ended in disgrace in November 2012 when his dangerous liaison with Paula Broadwell was disclosed, his many allies in Official Washington's powerful neocon community are now pushing him on President-elect Trump as the man to serve as Secretary of State.

Petraeus is known as a master of flattery, something that seemingly can turn Trump's head. But the President-elect should have learned from his days hosting “The Celebrity Apprentice” that the winning contender should not be the one most adept at sucking up to the boss.

(Now, with the whole Middle East in turmoil, I find some relief in [this brief parody](#) by comedienne Connie Bryan of Petraeus's performance in training Iraqi troops.)

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