

An Interview with General David Petraeus 18 March 2011



Recent polling shows that 2/3 of Americans don't believe the war in Afghanistan is worth fighting anymore. What makes you think it is worth fighting?

Petraeus: 9/11. I think it is important to remember that the 9/11 attacks were planned in Afghanistan by al-Qaeda when the Taliban controlled the bulk of the country. That the initial training of the attackers was carried out in Afghanistan in al-Qaeda training camps prior to them moving on to Germany and then to US flight schools. And, it is a vital national security interest for our country that Afghanistan not once again become a sanctuary for al-Qaeda or other transnational extremists of that type.

In your prepared statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee you stated that the core objective is to ensure that Afghanistan doesn't again become a sanctuary for al-Qaeda. What makes you think that a Taliban-led Afghanistan would permit al-Qaeda to return?

Petraeus: First of all they did it before. Past history does show that there is a strong connection between the Afghan Taliban, or the Quetta Shura Taliban, and al-Qaeda. We know that there is a relationship that does continue and we think there is a strong likelihood, especially if al-Qaeda is under continued, very strong pressure in its sanctuaries in the tribal area of Pakistan, that it would be looking for other sanctuaries, and that Afghanistan will once again be attractive to it.

Beyond denying Afghanistan to al-Qaeda, what do you believe are our responsibilities to the Afghan people with respect to the kind of state we leave behind?

Petraeus: First of all, to achieve our core objective in Afghanistan, we need to enable Afghanistan to be able to secure itself and to govern itself. It is up to Afghanistan, needless to say, to determine how to operationalize those concepts, particularly with respect to governance but I think we can be reassured by developments in that regard, as reflected in their constitution. For example, the fact that there are ten percent more women in their Parliament than are in the US Congress; that thirty-seven percent of the 8.2 million students in Afghan schools this school year, this academic year, are female. By the way, that contrasts with virtually none during the Taliban time when there were less than a million in school overall. And in a number of areas in which again there are



progressive steps that have resulted from the new constitution and the new Afghanistan.

Do you believe that we have any ongoing commitment or responsibility to ensure that there is forward progress in democratic governance once we leave, militarily?

Petraeus: To be candid, I think that is probably a topic for the policymakers. Having said that, I do think that, needless to say, given our belief that stability comes from government that is representative of and responsive to the people, that we would like to see those characteristics resident in Afghan governance.

If counterinsurgency depends on legitimizing the host government, why do you think the Karzai government will endure our departure when it is largely perceived as corrupt, ineffective and unable to effectively protect the civilian population?

Petraeus: Well, first of all, again, the Afghan government is developing the capability to secure itself and it has made considerable strides in that regard over the course of the last year in particular. Although, again, it has been working at this for a number of years. As I mentioned on Capitol Hill, it is only in the last six or eight months that we've gotten the inputs right in Afghanistan to enable the conduct of the kind of



comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign that is necessary to help our Afghan partners develop the capability to secure and govern themselves. With respect to some of the other challenges that face the government, I believe that President Karzai is very focused on dealing with the issues of criminal patronage networks that threaten the very institutions to which we will need to transition tasks in the years

that lay ahead. I have seen steps already taken in that regard, such as with the firing of the Afghan Surgeon General, the relief of the military chain of command of the National Military Hospital, the replacement of governors, chiefs of police, and so forth.

With respect to those illicit connections and patronage networks, do you think that continued access to substantial revenues from the poppy crop will compromise the accountability of the security forces to the state and government, as it provides them an alternative income source?

Petraeus: In areas where there is Afghan governance and Afghan security, there has been considerably reduced poppy cultivation. The Afghan government is serious about reducing the poppy crop. It is serious about the illegal narcotics industry. It recognizes that there cannot be the establishment of rule of law if the major agricultural crop produces illegal export goods.

Can enduring stability and security be achieved in Afghanistan while the Taliban and Islamic extremists have relatively safe sanctuary in Pakistan?

Petraeus: Clearly, anything that Afghanistan's neighbors do to reduce the activities of groups causing problems for Afghanistan is beneficial for the country. Having said that, there can be considerable progress made in Afghanistan, especially if reintegration of reconcilable insurgent members develops critical mass and sets off a chain reaction through the country, so that the senior leaders sitting in Pakistani sanctuaries call up their cell phones and high frequency radios and don't get any answer from the fighters on the ground.

Do you think that you could do a better job in Afghanistan if you had the concurrence of Pakistani authorities to be able to engage in hot pursuit over the border?

Petraeus: I don't think anyone is seeking the ability to conduct ISAF ground operations or US only ground operations on Pakistani soil.

Unlike in Iraq, which has a reliable stream of revenue, do you see a need for long-term international financial support to maintain the Afghan security forces?

Petraeus: As the Australian Prime Minister noted when she was here in Washington, and as a number of other troop contributing nation leaders have noted, Afghanistan is going to require sustained support even beyond the 2014 goals established at the Lisbon summit. Having said that, the levels of support should be substantially reduced and the character of support should substantially change in the years that lay ahead.

What is needed in Washington and in the field to ensure unity of effort in a counter insurgency operation? Do you have that in Afghanistan?

Petraeus: I believe we do. What is needed is civil-military coordination. The achievement of unity of effort among all of those who are engaged in the effort, regardless of department or agency, or country for that matter, because of course we have forty-eight troop contributing nations active in Afghanistan, and then some other major donors like Japan. There is a Civil-Military Campaign Plan in Afghanistan now that helps enormously to coordinate the activities of civil and military elements, to synchronize the effects that they are seeking to achieve, and so forth.



And are you getting today what you need from the civilian agencies of the US government?

Petraeus: We are, although there has never been a military commander in history who would say that he wouldn't welcome additional civilian assistance, or frankly a variety of other augmentations and resources or funding authorities, bandwidth, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

Do you think that we are going to need the kind of interagency capacity that we have developed over the past couple of years, in the post Iraq/Afghanistan era?

Petraeus: I do. I can't envision necessarily where we will employ it. There may be periods during which we need less of it than we need right now with the two major operations ongoing, still, in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as some new endeavors unfolding. I definitely think that there will be a need for the kinds of partnerships between civil and military elements that we have forged over the course of the last ten years.

How do we ensure that the lessons that we've learned in Afghanistan and Iraq this last decade are preserved and institutionalized and internalized for the future.

Petraeus: You try to capture them by lessons learned organizations, in journals like PRISM, in books and edited volumes and conferences, in schoolhouses, in doctrinal revisions, in leader development courses and in the collective training centers – every component of the military terminology DOTLM, doctrine, organization, training, leader development, materiel, personnel, facilities, and so forth.

So, that's how to do it. Do you have any fear that we might not do that? That we might just recoil from this engagement the way that we did after Vietnam?

Petraeus: No I don't actually. I think there is a clear recognition that there will be a continuing need for capabilities to respond to efforts that require civil-military partnerships.

What impact does our ongoing commitment to Afghanistan have on our ability to respond to other challenges that may be of equal or even greater threat to our national security?

Petraeus: Well, I think that we've actually reconstituted reserves over time in the past year or so, as we've been able to draw down in Iraq, in particular, even as we have increased our forces in Afghanistan. We have expanded the pool of certain elements that are described as high-demand, low-density, as our forces have grown in end state as well.



In the positions that you've been in over the last decade, what would be your advice to the civilian agencies right now, as they are looking at their future? USAID, for example. Or the State Department or Department of Justice.

Petraeus: It would be to get to know the appropriations committees on Capitol Hill even better than they already know them.