

Reflections by General David Petraeus, USA (ret.) on the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

Can you tell us how your view of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan evolved during your various leadership assignments?

GEN Petraeus: When we were getting ready for what became the invasion of Iraq, the prevailing wisdom was that we were going to have a long, hard fight to Baghdad, and it was really going to be hard to take Baghdad. The road to deployment, which was a very compressed road for the 101st Airborne Division, started with a seminar on military operations in urban terrain, because that was viewed as the decisive event in the takedown of the regime in Iraq—that and finding and destroying the weapons of mass destruction.

There was the expectation of those who were presumably thinking about the Phase IV plan, after-hostilities, that the invasion would lop off the top level of the Saddamists, and then we would relatively expeditiously be able to hand off the responsibilities of governance to some new governing entity, which would exercise governance through the existing institutions of the state, albeit without the Saddamists. By Saddamists, I mean the true loyalists—this would not go down to Ba’ath party level four. It would be Saddam, level one, level two, perhaps some of the level three. But the professionals, if you will, the governing class, would largely remain in place, and there would be functioning governmental institutions that would resume their respective tasks.

When I was in Kuwait, we had a final gathering of commanders on the eve of battle. At the end of this discussion, they asked for questions. I raised my hand and said, “Excuse me, I got it about the fight to Baghdad and taking down Baghdad, but can you go into a little more detail on what happens after that?” And one of the ORHA [Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance] guys stood up and replied, “Dave, don’t you worry about that. You

This interview was conducted by Dr. Joseph Collins and Mr. Nathan White for Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War, which was published by NDU Press in November 2015.

just get us to Baghdad, and we'll take it from there." And I reflected on that many times subsequently.

In fact, when we got to Najaf (about half way to Baghdad), which the 101st eventually liberated, cleared, and then occupied, we got into a really tough fight. It was a sustained, 72-hour fight, and then all of a sudden it collapsed. I called Lieutenant General (LTG) Wallace, the V Corps Commander, and said, "Hey boss, there's good news and bad news. The good news is we own Najaf." And he responded, "Great, congratulations!" In fact, we had convinced him that we needed Najaf; I had argued that we needed to take it down rather than just contain it, because you could not contain these places forever. We needed to give it a shot and learn from this for when we get to Baghdad. The 3rd Infantry Division (3ID) was in the lead and bypassing all these places, as you recall. Then LTG Wallace asked, "So, what's the bad news?" And I explained, "The bad news is the same as the good news: we own Najaf. What do you want us to do with it? I've got a whole brigade combat team tied up securing it, and we're already focusing on the fight to liberate Karbala" (the next city that 3ID had bypassed).

And so I asked, "Where are these [ORHA] guys? Why don't we get them to practice here in Najaf?" And he answered, "You've got to wait a bit, as they're still getting organized down in Kuwait." So instead of being able to immediately open the airfield, immediately bring in civil affairs, and bring in people who were going to take over the administrative functions—we had to do it all ourselves, tying down nearly one third of our ground combat power. Because of that—being spread so thin—and because of a number of other factors that kept us

from having sufficient forces in Baghdad, the looting ended up being as bad as it was. If you do not impose order right away and don't maintain it, and you do not get functions being performed right away, people realize the situation, and they start to take advantage of it as only mobs can. Ultimately, when Baghdad fell, the mobs were in the hundreds of thousands of people on the streets. Not only was the situation out of our control, we could hardly drive down the streets it was so chaotic.

The 3ID took down Baghdad in a really high-risk, gutsy, and courageous thunder run that ultimately unhinged the place and precipitated the regime's collapse. In the meantime, the 101st Airborne had liberated Karbala and then Hillah along Route 1. We then moved into Baghdad, and that's when this orgy of looting really was ongoing. It was also when I realized that the whole concept of Phase IV had really been invalidated. Then the ORHA guys came in, and of course, they had nothing [to work with]—very little of their own assets and few if any Iraqi partners from the institutions that had just collapsed.

I will offer this as one key lesson—that you should always use existing organizations as the foundation for the elements that are going to carry on a mission in a situation like Iraq. Instead of inventing the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), we should have gone right to an embassy structure.¹ And if you want to have multiple countries' embassies, coalition embassies, you can bring them together as we did, ultimately, with the United States in the lead. Establishing an embassy means that you have existing standard operating procedures, regulations, laws, funding, lawyers, contracting teams, development experts, etc.—all tied to an

existing structure from which to get policy guidance, support, and so on. If you want to do engineering, do not create a CPA engineering group, whose head is going to rotate every three months. Bring in the [Army] Corps of Engineers; or bring in the Air Force—they also have an engineering program; [just] bring in something that exists... Do the same for contracting. Build the train and equip mission and headquarters for other efforts around existing units, too. Frankly, we created a lot of one-offs.

Some of these were reasonably successful because you could create them over time. One arguably was the Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF–I), which evolved from the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF)–7, which was built on the basis of the V Corps. Still you had to bring in a Corps headquarters to ultimately be the Multi-National Corps–Iraq (MNC–I), over time.² Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq (MNSTC–I), though, was very painful to build.³ We built it basically around a handful of individuals. We were slapping more and more people onto it, and in a sense making it up as we went along. The challenge was that we did not have an organization that was really ideal for that. If you did, you could have given it and that mission to a division commander. That is one of the five strategic lessons that I will detail later.

In Baghdad, we realized that the whole of what had been briefed down in Kuwait—that the Iraqi Army would stay intact, it would surrender in the barracks, and it would be around you if you want to use it [along with other institutions]—all that just collapsed. People stayed in some cases, so you had some people from the institutions, but the damage to the infrastructure was so

substantial that even if we had the people, say, from the Ministry of Finance—we had no unlooted Ministry building left. That was a massive setback in the sense that the state no longer existed. And the social contract, which really is the essence of an organized society, a law-abiding society, went out the window, too. There was nobody to honor that contract anymore, and everyone in a sense almost reverted to primal behavior. You see a case of the so-called Hobbesian world without the Leviathan to impose order.

It started to become very clear that establishing a harmonious assembly of Iraqi leaders, many of them, of course, who had been exiles, was wishful thinking. We had a huge number that came back, not just [Ahmed] Chalabi, but [Ayad] Allawi, and of course the Kurdish leaders who hadn't been fixtures in Baghdad; all of them had been somewhere other than in Iraq proper. That's when we started to see what Pete Mansoor describes well in his book, *The Surge*, as the struggle for power and resources—that continues, I might add. It was a struggle between ethnic and sectarian groupings; between Sunni and Shia; between Arabs and Kurds. It was a struggle within those groupings. It was a struggle even within political parties, and certainly between them as well. So all of that was very problematic. And of course, in our case, after bringing order to an area of Baghdad, we were then ordered north to Mosul on very short notice.

What month was that?

GEN Petraeus: It was around April 20th, as I recall, and we had the first election up there, on May 5th. Within two weeks of arriving, we had a caucus. We ensured to the

best of our ability that every element of society was represented: every district; every tribe; and every ethnic and sectarian grouping. And keep in mind that it's a real melting pot up there... We actually had representatives for retired military officers, for the university, and we had the business community, and so on.

They started to pull together, and under our guidance, sometimes very direct steering guidance, all of a sudden we had some Iraqi helpers who actually understood Nineveh Province, (which no American I could ever find could teach me anything about, including the CPA representatives—nobody had ever actually set foot in Nineveh). Then we got hit by a double whammy; first, firing the entire military without telling them what their future is—and that was the key. The issue was not really disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). It was about not telling them what their future was, as they needed to know what they were going to have to do to feed their families, etc. Now, let me be clear—the Saddam military had to be demobilized at some point, but do you have to do it without telling them what their future is? That was a terrible idea, and we then had five weeks of increasingly violent demonstrations to the point that, by the fifth week, you have people being killed in riots outside Baghdad.

Second, we had de-Ba'athification without an agreed process for reconciliation. De-Ba'athification also had to be done. The two big questions were: why go below level three to level four—because you now have introduced tens of thousands of additional people. And second, why do it if you do not have an agreed process of reconciliation? The level four members were exactly the kind of

people we needed to run the country. That was where the Western-educated people were. They apparently had to be Ba'ath party members to go to college or grad school in the United States. We had 120 tenured professors in Mosul University alone who were level four members, and they were our kind of people. They were generally progressive and somewhat secular. And what replaced them, ultimately, after *our* effort at reconciliation in Mosul (approved by Ambassador Paul Bremer, as an experiment)—that went well for a period, but was ultimately not supported in Baghdad—is what now we would call the Muslim Brothers, a very heavily Islamist grouping for whom religion was much more central to their existence than it was for most of those they replaced.

That is another strategic lesson—before you decide to conduct an initiative, an operation, or a policy, ask whether that policy or initiative will take more bad guys off the streets than it creates by its conduct. If the answer to that is no, you should not do it. Clearly, firing the military without telling them what their future was, until five weeks later when we pressed CPA to announce a stipend program (that was equal parts humiliating in its execution and slightly reassuring), and de-Ba'athification without an agreed reconciliation process created hundreds of thousands of individuals who not only had no incentive to support the new Iraq, they actually had every incentive to oppose it. We created hundreds of thousands of enemies in the end with those two policies. Now, you do have to be nuanced about this. There had to be de-Ba'athification. The question is, should it have gone to level four? And the bigger

question is, should you do it at all if you do not have a reconciliation process already agreed, recognizing in hindsight how difficult it was going to be to get that done, especially with Chalabi being given that portfolio?

De-Ba'athification, disbanding the Army, and ending the search for an interim Iraqi Government; Lieutenant General Jay Garner, USA (ret.), the OHRA chief, briefed Rumsfeld, and said those were three tragic decisions.

GEN Petraeus: It's just perplexing. That actually created the seeds that grew into the insurgency, and created fertile soil for the planting of those seeds. Now, what we were able to do in Mosul, as you will recall, was get approval from Ambassador Bremer for a process of reconciliation that would be run by Iraqis who were non-Ba'athist, supported by the U.S. staff judge advocate, other teams, intel folks, etc. That process went very well. We started with 120 professors at Mosul University. They could not become a college President again, but they could have tenure. You had to give them incentives to support Iraq or else they would oppose it. You can not throw somebody out of his job, his retirement, his house, his car, his administrative assistant, his guy to make tea, everything, take away his dignity and expect him to support you.

Or even tolerate you in some cases.

GEN Petraeus: Yes, that's right. We were able to do that, and with a considerable degree of success. It's a major reason why Mosul went so well for as long as it did. We had some pretty skilled guys. We had a lot of

people who were veterans of Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and stability operations writ large.

How long were you in Mosul—from April 2003 until when?

GEN Petraeus: I left in February 2004. We stayed on for a while after all the 101st units departed to get the Task Force Olympia that came in behind us; a reinforced Stryker brigade under the I Corps Tactical Command Post. People say it was one-third of what we had, but I think it was a good bit more than that. I think they started with at least 10,000 while we had 20–22,000 total. But then they also cut them down a bit, which was not wise.

By the time we left, we had been training Iraqi security forces, had rebuilt the police academy, and rebuilt the police stations. We established a multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian "Army;" I think we called it the ICDC [Iraq Civilian Defense Corps]. We built all this and things began going pretty well. But then these policies [from CPA] came down and though we were able to get exceptions to run reconciliation, eventually it began to be clear that Baghdad [Dr. Chalabi] would not support the results of our process, and the air began to go out of the tires even in our area.

It was in the wake of the firing of the military without telling them their future, and also de-Ba'athification without reconciliation, that the insurgency started. You saw it in Anbar Province, you saw it in Salah-ad-Din and Tikrit, and it gradually crept up into Mosul as well. Especially when it was clear that the reconciliation process was not going to be honored by Dr. Chalabi, even though we flew him up and he said he was fully with us, and that he supported it.⁴ We flew a

Chinook helicopter full of files to Baghdad in the fall of 2003, but he took no action. It was very clear, when I came back as a three-star the next year, perhaps even by February before we left, that Chalabi was not going to do that. And people sensed that and started to lose hope. They lost their incentive to support the new Iraq.

I went home in February 2004, but came back on very short notice two months later; General Abizaid, then Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), asked me to come back in mid-April, and I returned for a couple of weeks to do an assessment of the Iraqi security forces, which had generally performed very poorly during the Sadr uprising in March. The only place that they had done reasonably well was Mosul, where we had employed a completely different concept from the rest of Iraq—we treated them like soldiers, it was not military daycare. They did not commute to work, they were on bases, with us or right next to our bases, they operated with us, and we had a process where they had to gradually take on more tasks from us, and we'd gradually give up more, but we were always there. So, we linked arms. We had uniforms for them, good food, we had scrounged up decent weapons somewhere.

Anyway, after two weeks traveling around Iraq and assessing what had transpired in March, we debriefed General Abizaid and then Secretary Rumsfeld, and my reward for that was to be told to change command, return to Iraq, and implement our recommendations—largely based on the approach the 101st had employed—nationwide.

So I returned in very early June 2004 and we established MNSTC-I. Shortly thereafter, General George Casey took over from

Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez as the overall commander, and he built what ultimately became the kind of organizational architecture we actually needed. We had a strategic level headquarters [MNF-I], an operational level headquarters [MNC-I], and the multi-national division headquarters. He built the detainee task force—Task Force 134, I think it was. We ultimately developed a Corps of Engineers organization, because engineering is critical. We were spending billions of dollars on reconstruction, rebuilding entire industries—electrical, the oil industry, everything. We established a contracting command that was very important for the billions of dollars' worth of contracts. There was the Rule of Law Task Force which we should have had earlier. We put together MNSTC-I and, generally, I think the concepts guiding the overall campaign were fairly sound from there until, probably, early 2006 in hindsight.

The effects of the February 22, 2006 bombing of the Samarra Mosque were devastating and manifested themselves in the growing sectarian civil war, or what could have escalated into a full-blown civil war. There was enormous sectarian violence. By this time, as the CAC [the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center] Commander back at Fort Leavenworth, we were working on the U.S. *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* and completely overhauling the road to deployment.⁵ We had this whole endeavor ongoing, but I was watching the campaigns very carefully, Iraq in particular, because I had been told, "This is your breather, but you're going to be back in the fight." I thought I would be going back in the summer of 2007; ultimately, it was early February 2007.

Somewhere in there, in the late summer of 2006, I started to realize that the concepts [in Iraq] were no longer valid, yet those concepts were still guiding the effort. In fact, the concepts continued throughout the year. In fact, if you look at the Amman agreement, in Jordan, in mid-to-late-November, after the U.S. elections in November, Bush went to Amman, Jordan, met with [then Iraq Prime Minister] Maliki, and they agreed, basically, to do faster what they'd been doing, which clearly was failing. They agreed to have the U.S. forces hand off faster to the Iraqi security forces, who had shown that they could not handle the levels of violence, and had actually been getting worse—sheer degradation. We had agreed to get out of the cities, and consolidate on big bases; to get out of the face of the people. Again, I believe there was a conviction by CENTCOM and the MNF-I that we were the sand in the oyster,

but that oyster wasn't producing a pearl. They wanted to accelerate the development of the Iraqi Security Force and a handful of other actions, like releasing detainees faster, clearing and then handing off, and so on. Every single one of those concepts, we ultimately reversed as part of the Surge.

The Surge should be understood as the surge of *ideas*, not the surge of *forces*. We added basically 25–30,000 U.S. troops to an existing roughly 140,000; we went up to about 165,000 at the high-water mark. The additional troops enabled us to implement the new approach more rapidly, but what really made the difference was the change in strategy. We had been living with the people in some cases: the 101st in Mosul, we saw it with H.R. McMaster, we saw it with select Marine units, and other brigades.⁶ But even though living with the people was taught at the counterinsurgency center, it was never



U.S. Army/Sean A. Foley

In 2007, U.S. soldiers take cover during a firefight with guerilla forces in the al-Doura section of Baghdad.

actually implemented, because of the decision to get out of the cities, to consolidate on big bases.

I should back up a little bit and note that I remember reading an article in the late summer, early fall of 2006 in the *New York Times* that was titled, "Driving Around Baghdad, Waiting to get Blown Up." It was by a sergeant saying that this is what we're doing—"We just go out and drive around in the neighborhood a couple of times every day and sooner or later we get blown up." It was very clear that he recognized the futility of this approach. Remember *Operations Together Forward 1* and *Together Forward 2*? Major General Peter Chiarelli had an offensive into Baghdad, violence goes down quite dramatically, especially in that neighborhood; but within a few weeks, you hand off to the Iraqis, you leave the neighborhood, and the violence goes up, even worse than before. That was what some of the troops called, "clear and leave," or, "clear and handoff," as opposed to "clear, hold with Iraqis, build, and then transition," which is what we ultimately went to. And then, there was the reconciliation component of this, which was very important. Certainly there were examples of reconciliation beforehand starting with the 101st and a number of other places in 2003. In Anbar in 2004 and 2005, again with H.R. [McMaster] and others, but none of them ever took [hold] because we never had support in Baghdad. But now, [in 2007], I was in Baghdad, so I could do that.

When I went back as the commander of the Multi-National Force, the violence was far worse than I thought it was, and I thought it was very bad. In December 2006, there had been 53 dead civilians because of the violence every 24 hours; horrific levels of

violence, in the capital of the country. The NGOs had largely gone home. Even the UN temporarily closed. The damage was just staggering. We went to certain neighborhoods that I knew very well from either my 101st or MNSTC-I days, and it was just breathtaking to see how bad the situation had become. We had already been talking to the people who had created the concepts behind the Joint Security Stations, and very quickly we spread those concepts throughout the whole theater; frankly, what [General] Ray [Odierno] and I did was push it faster.⁷

We had to go faster because we had to cap the violence; we had to separate the warring sectarian factions. We had to drive down the level of violence for a whole variety of reasons. First of all, just to reduce the loss of innocent life. Also because the institutions were once again getting damaged. The third reason was that Ambassador Ryan Crocker and I had to have demonstrable progress by the time we returned to Washington in September 2007 to testify [before Congress]. Otherwise, it was going to be game over, lights out.⁸

People forget how narrowly we averted a congressional cessation of funding, or some other action that would have severely circumscribed what we were able to do. We were very, very low on support on Capitol Hill for Iraq, and even for the Surge, until it started to show progress. I think we had a sense of what was needed and how things could move forward, how to achieve reconciliation between the sects and agreements between the ethnic groups—between Baghdad and Erbil. If we could keep Iraq together and drive the violence down, we could get the oil infrastructure going again, electricity and all the rest of that. And you

can see how this could end ultimately with us gradually transitioning tasks to the Iraqis across the board, with a very comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign concept guiding what we were doing. That's what ultimately happened and the level of violence was reduced by some 85 percent.

When did you leave Iraq?

GEN Petraeus: September 2008—a 19 and a half month tour. The issue for Iraq then was to make sure that the haste of the drawdown was not so rapid that it unhinged the recent progress. President Obama showed himself to be quite pragmatic, eventually deciding on a slower drawdown than he had proposed during the campaign. In fact, when I met with him in Baghdad when he was the candidate, my advice to him was to preserve as much flexibility as he could because he might find that useful.

At this point though, the challenge in Afghanistan was emerging very quickly. Even before the U.S. election in 2008, Afghanistan was going seriously south. I had conducted an assessment in Afghanistan in September 2005 on the way home from my second tour in Iraq. It was ostensibly a look at the train and equip mission, having come from one that was seemingly doing quite well—MNSTC-I. There were all kinds of challenges, frankly. You had situations that were just forehead-smacking.

For example, in one of the multi-week police training courses, the training schedule had marching in the morning and in the afternoon, but didn't actually have time for shooting practice. I said, "I'll concede that marching can be physical training, but we're not going to out-march the enemy, the

Taliban. They're not going to be impressed by our drill and ceremony." They would be more impressed by marksmanship. And yet these were the policemen who would be dealing with the insurgency. This is not normal policing, but what was stunning wasn't just that they were doing it—rather, what was astonishing was that it was actually on the written documents from the training schedule and no one in the chain had objected. That just jumped off the page for me—why are they marching for two or two and a half hours each day! It was just staggering.

In my report, the first slide in the briefing was titled, "Afghanistan does not equal Iraq." I then laid out ten or so factors and showed how Afghanistan was arguably more challenging in a number of them at the very least: a lack of revenue generation; the major export crop was illegal; the effects on rule of law; the corruption problems; illiteracy; lack of infrastructure, etc. But the biggest factor was that the leaders of the Taliban and the other insurgent elements had sanctuaries in Pakistan that put them largely beyond our reach. These were issues that really did have to be dealt with.

In part, of course, I was to blame for Afghanistan a bit because I had kept asking for everything for Iraq. You know that Admiral Mullen quote about Afghanistan: "In Iraq we do what we must; in Afghanistan we do what we can." Iraq was first priority. But by this time, late 2008 and early 2009, we had to start to shift to Afghanistan. Even before President Bush left office, he commissioned the Lute study, which resulted in a few thousand additional troops.⁹ It was a start.

Keep in mind, you could not do in Afghanistan what we did in Iraq. In fact, as

CENTCOM Commander and in my confirmation hearing to be commander in Afghanistan, I said we would not be able to “flip” Afghanistan as we had been able to do with Iraq. Even if we had the commitment, we could not rapidly deploy tens of thousands of additional troops. For starters, there was no infrastructure to support them. Every time we did something we had to build more infrastructure. And we did not have the Afghan infrastructure to house more Afghan Security Forces. We were constantly scrambling just to stay ahead in terms of where we were going to base them, how to bed them down when they’re on a base, how to feed them, provide water, resupply them.

We enter a pretty intensive period in 2009. Again, President Obama was quite pragmatic on Iraq. That process there was going quite well. Maliki seemed to be, still, an imperfect, but not unreasonable partner. (Keep in mind that it was Maliki who ordered the operation, however impulsively, that resulted in the destruction of the Shia militia in March–April 2008, which is ironic, considering that he later played to the Shia base.)

The Charge of the Knights?

GEN Petraeus: Yes. Into Basrah, and then the Battle of Sadr City as well. And the Battle of Kadhimiya, and a variety of others.

But back to Afghanistan, early in the Obama Administration, we contributed to the study led by Brookings’ Bruce Riedel.¹⁰ As CENTCOM Commander, I participated fairly regularly in that. That resulted in another 20,000 troops.

That became an issue because the Obama Administration approved 17,000 and then, when the final memos and orders came up, there were 21,000, and the people in the White House felt like they were getting played.

GEN Petraeus: Yes, well, “welcome to the real world.” And then [General] McKiernan left Afghanistan in the early summer of 2009 and [General] Stan McChrystal took over, and did his analysis. That started quite a lengthy process; it was really quite impressive. There were eight or nine full National Security Council (NSC) sessions, in addition to however many Principal Committee and Deputy Committee meetings prior to them.¹¹ The President was present at each of them, and the result was that he ultimately decided to send an additional 30,000. [Defense Secretary] Gates had an additional 10 percent authority—another 3,000—to him if he needed it; he wouldn’t have to go back to the President. There was also a commitment to get the rest of the minimal amount that Stan felt was needed—the balance of the 40,000—from NATO and coalition forces.

I want to talk a bit here about what I think should guide the big ideas of military advice to civilian leaders. During that period there was concern that Admiral Mullen, Stan [McChrystal], and I were attempting to shape the debate through public remarks—to box in the President... Shortly before the study commenced, Mullen testified on Capitol Hill and said essentially that progress in Afghanistan would require a comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign. The way this played out was that the President had made the decision on the Riedel report back in May or June. It then

took the NSC staff something like three months to issue the promulgating instructions—I think it was July or August of 2009.

The NSC signed out the memo that went first to the Pentagon, and ultimately came to CENTCOM. We were still studying this memo at this point in order to correctly execute it. The NSC memo called for, “a fully resourced civil-military counterinsurgency campaign.” That was in the back of Mullen’s mind when he testified, and that was in the back of my mind when I gave an interview to the *Washington Post*’s Michael Gerson, who I did not know was one of Bush’s former speechwriters. To be truthful, I also thought it was “on-background.” Anyway, this ended up in an “on-the-record” interview. Mullen testified on the Wednesday or Thursday. The day after that, I did the interview. Frankly we were a little surprised because again we had just received the NSC memo. We later realized that the President was unaware of the NSC memo. He presumably thought a memo was sent out right after the Riedel report. Instead it took three months for [National Security Advisor] Jones to sign it out, and the President was already leaping ahead to the review process, which had been announced, I think, but had not yet begun.¹²

We, the military were sort of looking a little bit back. The President was looking forward, already thinking in his own mind that he did not want to do a “fully-resourced civil-military campaign.” We had to constrain the campaign somehow—as there was a sense that “fully-resourced” meant trying to turn Afghanistan into Switzerland in ten years or less, which was not our intent at all. Anyway, do not get me wrong, I did think this was going to require a comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign

that was reasonably well resourced, albeit not necessarily fully resourced, which is what I recall the NSC memo having said.

I felt the approach that Stan brought in was the right one. I have also said, though, that, through no fault of his [McChrystal], it still took us until late 2010 before we had the inputs right in Afghanistan. And by inputs, I mean the different concepts and strategy, the right organizational architecture, and most of the elements to carry out that strategy. Remember we didn’t even have a U.S. forces headquarters in Afghanistan. The U.S. forces functions were dual hatted to the RC–East commander, and thus he, in theory, should have been running Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) operations. The Commander, International Security Assistance Forces (COMISAF) was a NATO commander and in theory, had no legal authority over JSOC, although he was a four-star U.S. officer. We did not have a reintegration/reconciliation program. We did not have the concepts, process, and organization for transition, which is a pretty complicated endeavor. You have to have an intellectual endeavor. You have to have metrics. To these three I would add the anti-corruption task force, and the Afghan Local Police program, as well. We should have done all that much earlier.

All of this, in Iraq, got solved very quickly.

GEN Petraeus: Generally correct. There were a couple of pieces that we had to build in Iraq when we commenced the surge but, other than the reconciliation policies, structures, and processes (which were hugely significant), they were not the big pieces. We just didn’t have the big pieces right in

Afghanistan. Lines of authority were confused in some cases. When I was the CENTCOM commander, having served with CENTCOM in several different roles, I said: “a fighting combatant command like ours, a command at war, has two huge tasks that it must get right. First is getting the mission statement right, and understanding that mission statement correctly. Second is identifying the proper tasks and purposes of each of the subordinate commands.” And that must be done in a way that understands which elements can actually war fight and which cannot. Then you have to get the organizational architecture right to enable conduct of those tasks. And that does not hit you on the head fully formed, like Newton’s apple. You really have to marinate in it. After I got to Afghanistan, it took another three months before we finally had a wire diagram that actually captured OPCON, COCOM, NATO relations, TACON, the national command lines, and all the organizations in the theater. It was a very complex theater.¹³

And then there was Helmand province—“Marineistan.” We had to create some additional elements there. We had to tweak the application of the rules of engagement. But the bottom line was that it’s not until late 2010 that we even had the inputs roughly right. Because I don’t think we really still had all the forces we arguably needed. We did have a lot more resources, but then we started the drawdown process in July of the subsequent year.

I thought then, and I still think now, that Afghanistan was doable. I thought we’d lost a huge amount of time, and therefore a huge amount of momentum. And frankly, the relationship with President Karzai had eroded dramatically. It was not ever just one

commander. In the end, Karzai was at a point where the accumulated blows and strains made his behavior inexplicable at times. And you just have to work your way through that. The whole reason we went into Afghanistan was to ensure it never again would become a sanctuary for al-Qaeda or other transnational extremist organizations, the way it had been under the Taliban when the 9/11 attacks were planned there. We were accomplishing that mission, and I think we still can—and must. In my view, there is only one way to accomplish that mission—to enable the Afghans to secure themselves and to govern themselves in an “Afghan good enough” fashion. That did not mean getting Afghanistan to be like Switzerland in a decade or less; rather, it meant rule of law in an Afghan context.

I generally felt before I went over there, and even after being there a year, that this was an endeavor in which we could achieve our objectives, but it was going to take a sustained commitment, albeit one that could be reduced quite considerably from the surge period. And by the way, another huge strategic lesson—perhaps the top one—is that a counterinsurgency campaign is inordinately more difficult if the host nation leadership is less than cooperative, and if the enemy enjoys significant sanctuary outside areas in which you can operate.

In fact, I will diverge now and give you the final lesson. I have given you four already: Before you invade a country, you have to truly understand the country in a granular and nuanced way, and need to have thought through all of the conceivable outcomes—“how does it end?” Existing organizations ought to be used, whenever possible, at a minimum as a foundation [during stage IV operations]. And you have to ask,

“Will this operation or policy take more bad guys off the street than it creates by its conduct?” And the last one is: the art of coalition command involves enormous amounts of coalition sustainment and management, sensitivity to national sentiments as well as national caveats. And it requires the commander to organize the force in a way that capitalizes most effectively on what each coalition member provides, and, perhaps most importantly, uses U.S. resources to compensate for shortcomings that virtually every coalition partner has. I might note that there was no country in Afghanistan that did not have caveats, British protestations notwithstanding.

At the end of your command, there was that famous incident where the President said, “Okay, we’re on schedule, we’re going to pull the surge forces back.” You had recommended an extension at the time. Can you talk about that?

GEN Petraeus: I had not recommended an extension, and this is where we will get into my views on what a senior leader should base military advice to civilian leaders on. We were asked to develop several options and a recommendation for the President for the initial drawdown of forces that would commence in July, and then for the pace of the full drawdown of the 30,000 surge forces during the subsequent 18 months or so.

At the first meeting, we offered several options, and the President said, “No, that’s too small upfront, and it’s too long overall. I would like you to analyze the following.” And he gave us a scenario that was much more significant upfront. It would have begun in the current fighting season, which

started in July, and it would have ended in the late spring of the next year when we were right in the middle of the fighting season.

The President chaired a second meeting a few days later, and we evaluated his proposal against all the missions and tasks that we had been assigned by the President and our chain of command. I said that, if we did that, we would not be able to accomplish our mission. I laid out why in a fair amount of detail. He said, “Ok, let me think on that, and we’ll come back.” In the third meeting, he announced his decision and split the difference; it was more troops coming out than I recommended in the first period of months, and the period before the final drawdown didn’t go as long as I recommended. I think the phrase ultimately was, “late summer.” It could be extended, perhaps, was the implication. In other words, you are almost through the fighting season, but it would not get us all the way through it.

The President asked if I was okay with it and I responded, “My advice to you is based on my understanding of the mission you’ve assigned to us, given the facts on the ground, informed by an awareness of all the other issues which you have to deal with that are beyond my purview. In fact, I acknowledge that at every level above me the perspective is broader until it ultimately gets to you, where you have to understandably be concerned about domestic politics, coalition politics, fiscal deficits, strain on the force, programs, you name it.” But, I said, “My advice is only informed by that, but it is driven by the facts on the ground. And, with great respect, there has been no change in the facts on the ground during the past week while we have been deliberating this; so, my recommendation remains the same.” I added, “I will fully

support your decision, when announced, but my recommendation remains the same.”

That was an interesting moment. You could feel the oxygen go out of the situation room pretty quickly. I said, “By the way, you know, your Congressional liaison team set up my confirmation hearing to be the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which happens to be tomorrow, and the ex-officio members of the SSCI [U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence] are the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC). And the SASC Chairman—and likely the ranking [Republican] member of the SSCI, undoubtedly will ask me to provide what my best professional military advice was in this case, and I will have to answer.” (Mullen prepped things on the Hill a bit by doing a hearing for the next morning, where he sort of put out the facts.) What I told the President I would do was, “When I am asked about my best professional military advice, I will be obliged to say that, ‘I fully support the President’s decision. The force and I will do everything we can to implement it successfully and appropriately. But it does represent a more aggressive formulation of the drawdown than what I recommended.’” And that’s indeed what I said the next day when Senator Chambliss from Georgia and Senator McCain asked me about this.

That’s also where I had a spirited discussion with Senator Levin, who sat through the entire hearing so he could observe, “But of course you didn’t think about resigning over this.” I said, “No, Senator, but I’ve been waiting 37 years for someone to ask me about the concept of resigning, and I’d like to actually talk a little bit about that.” I explained that, “In a case

like this, I don’t think it’s appropriate to resign. This is a more aggressive formulation than I recommended, but the troops don’t get to quit if they get a mission that they don’t whole-heartedly embrace, and I don’t think I should get to quit either. Nor should I even contemplate it.” We had a very interesting back and forth if you want to look at it. But I do think that it is very important for military leaders to have guiding principles for the advice they’re going to give, because if you are one of those who says, “We should consider all the political ramifications and everything else,” and allow that to begin driving your recommendations, rather than informing them, you’re on a slippery slope.

I think it’s hugely important that you have in your mind, again, the concept that will guide the advice that you will provide to these guys. I generally think that it’s this notion that I’ve talked about where you want thinking driven by the facts on the ground, informed by an awareness of the factors beyond you, to guide your recommendations.

During my early months at the CIA, I generally still thought that Iraq was okay, although some issues were starting to emerge in early fall 2011.¹⁴ It was not until mid-December 2011 that Prime Minister Maliki influenced the Judiciary to press charges against Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi. I was there at the time, in mid-to-late-December; I was out seeing our officers at the Station in Baghdad, and trying to consummate an agreement with Prime Minister Maliki that had been supported by the President and that would have provided certain assets to the Prime Minister that would not have required a SOFA [Status of Force Agreement] or uniforms or anything

else. It would have been very helpful, but it never materialized. It was slow-rolled by Maliki for fear that people would find out he still needed help from the Americans despite all of his pronouncements about Iraq being on its own two feet.

We then saw the beginnings of his policy to play to the Shia base (in advance of parliamentary elections) by taking action against the senior Sunni political leaders, thus consolidating his power with the Shia base. That then unhinged Iraq—that story, tragically, is known. Beyond that, Maliki replaced good commanders with sectarian loyalists, many of whom I had insisted be fired and put on the sidelines during the Surge before we would reconstitute their units. All of the police special operations division leaders—the three-star, both two-stars, and every brigadier—were replaced before we agreed to reconstitute the force. Many of these guys reappeared in late 2011 and early 2012, and they replaced good, competent Iraqi leaders, Shia as well as Sunni, with whom we had fought side-by-side, and who ultimately ended up in the United States or Europe. And then on top of that, he inserted the office of the Commander in Chief into the chain of command in a way that almost rendered it dysfunctional.

What Iraq most needed in the face of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was a chain of command that could respond rapidly with orders to counter the ISIS offensive; however, what we had instead was one that was just not functioning. Tragically, the initial unit did fight for 24 hours or so, but ultimately when the troops saw the commander fly off to a “meeting with higher headquarters,” they decided to follow him

out the back door. Then it became infectious, and we saw the collapse of the Iraqi Army in northern Iraq, having not done all that well in Anbar either.

Prior to that, we also saw Maliki’s forces violently putting down Sunni Arab peaceful protests and using the judiciary to go after their opponents. So the Sunni Arab community was once again alienated and feeling that they needed to oppose the new Iraq, rather than to continue to support it. Maliki’s highly inflammatory sectarian activities enabled the resistance, almost similar to what happened to the CPA when it alienated so many Iraqis as well. Maliki was fostering the establishment of fertile ground for the planting of the seeds of extremism, not unlike what CPA did with its catastrophic decisions to disband the army and the Ba’ath Party. We had to invest an enormous amount to overcome that; and contemporary Iraq has had to do likewise, with considerable support from U.S. advisors, trainers, and enablers in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; precision strike; and fusion of intelligence.

One former senior official said that the real problem with Iraq was not that we didn’t leave enough forces. The real problem was that people stopped watching those details you just mentioned—we took our eye off the ball.

GEN Petraeus: I am not sure I buy that totally, as I think we saw the threat of ISIS gathering; however, it is accurate to observe that there was much less attention to and emphasis on Iraq—vastly less, e.g. than the attention given to it during the final years of the Bush Administration. I did observe in an interview the other day that I would have

liked to have seen 10,000 troops left behind to test the proposition that the troops would have given us influence to keep Maliki from taking the actions he took, though I'm not absolutely certain that numbers of troops would have provided that. But what was cut out of the interview was that I was confident that 10,000 troops would have enabled us to much more rapidly help the Iraqi forces launch counteroffensive operations against ISIS. But, at the end of the day, this was about influencing Maliki, and I am not at all certain that he could have been influenced.

The bigger issues comes back to, "Should we have allowed Maliki to be the Prime Minister in the 2010 election when he finished one delegate behind the Allawi collation?"—and that is a very, very tough question to answer. Even Ambassador Jim Jeffries—no Maliki fan—has explained how it was inevitable that Maliki would again be Prime Minister.

I remember you and I once talked generals and statesmen—particularly the narrow view which has strong support in the United States—that the military should give advice, shut up, and salute.

GEN Petraeus: As a practitioner, I think the Commander of the MNF-I, or the Commander of ISAF in Afghanistan, has to have the skills to be both a statesman and general. As a commander, he has to be a warfighter. He has to have confidence in that—you cannot do that as on the job training. The truth is, at a certain point, there are only a handful of officers who have the attributes and experience for something like this. Having said that, there is no question that the individual also has to have skills of a

statesman. After all, the general has to understand his role, the Ambassador's, and the roles of all of the different civilians he will encounter.

The Commander has to focus on providing military advice based on the facts on the ground, as I have discussed, and informed by an awareness of the realities with which the President has to deal. But again, driven by the facts on the ground and his understanding of the mission and the troops available—the usual factors. If one allows political considerations to drive a recommendation, I think you erode the integrity of your military advice. What the President wants is military advice; he can do the political analysis. And I say this having been the only general who commanded two wars and then was the Combatant Commander who had those two wars under his command.

The War on Terror, how will it end?

GEN Petraeus: The big idea here is that the War on Terror is not going to end with a bang. What will happen is what happened during the Surge, about a year or so in, where one day the nightly news in the United States said "the news today from Iraq is that there is no news." Gradually more days of no news will follow.

I think one of the lines we may have to use is that war is not a problem to be solved but more a condition to be endured and managed, because at the root of what we are all involved in is a tremendous war inside the Islamic peoples.

GEN Petraeus: I think you are accurate to say that this is not only a clash of civilizations, if it is indeed even that. It is more accurately a clash *within* a civilization, and this is within Islam, and you are right that elements of that clash can only be resolved by those of the Muslim faith. But, having said that, we nonetheless have a mission to make sure that violence does not visit itself on our homeland, or our allies, or our citizens around the world. In other words, it does not so destabilize parts of the world that the global economy is also destabilized. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ The CPA in Iraq was established in 2003 to serve as the transition government after the destruction of the Ba'athist government.

² V Corps helped carry out Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. CJTF-7 directed the U.S. effort in Iraq from June 2003–May 2004. Multi-National Forces–Iraq (MNF–I) took over command for CJTF-7 in May 2004 to handle all strategic level operations for coalition forces contributing to Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. Multi-National Corps–Iraq (MNC–I) was also established that May as the operational-level headquarters overseeing multinational divisions and forces in Iraq.

³ In June 2004, Multi-National Security and Transition Command–Iraq (MNSTC–I) was established to assist in forming Army and police battalions throughout the country.

⁴ Dr. Chalabi served as Interim Minister of Oil in Iraq in 2005 and then Deputy Prime Minister from May 2005–May 2006.

⁵ General Petraeus here is referring to his efforts while serving as the Commander, U.S. Army

Combined Arms Center (CAC), to transform the Battle Command Training Program (BCTP).

⁶ Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster is now the Special Assistant to the U.S. President for National Security Affairs. McMaster's Iraq experience includes Commander, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq from June 2004–06, and as special assistant to Commander, MNF–I from February 2007–08.

⁷ General Raymond Odierno, USA (ret.) assumed command of MNF–I from General Petraeus in September, 2008—less than seven months after completing a 15-month deployment to Iraq, during which he served as Commander, MNC–I.

⁸ Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker served as the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq from 2007–09.

⁹ Lieutenant General Douglas Lute served as the Deputy National Security Advisor in President Bush's National Security Council as an overseeing director for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

¹⁰ Bruce Riedel served various roles in the CIA including that of Special Assistant to the U.S. President until his retirement in 2006, where he then served as a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He has published on the effects of the Iran–Iraq War and terrorism in the Middle East and the United States.

¹¹ The NSC meets at the direction of the President. The Principal's Committee *generally* includes the President and Vice President; Secretaries of Defense, Energy, and State; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Director of National Intelligence; National Security Advisor; Attorney General; as well as the President's Chief of Staff. The Deputies Committee, established under President George H.W. Bush, *generally* was comprised of the deputies or undersecretaries to the senior Cabinet Members.

¹² General James L. Jones, USMC (ret.) served as the Commander, U.S. European Command and as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe from 2003–06. General Jones from 2009–10 also served as the U.S. National Security Advisor to President Obama.

¹³ TACON refers to tasking authority over limited missions (tactical control).

¹⁴ General David Petraeus, USA (ret.) served as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency from 2011–12.