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Sycophant Savior

General Petraeus wins a battle in Washington—if not in Baghdad.

by Andrew J. Bacevich

In common parlance, the phrase “political general” is an epithet, the inverse of the warrior or frontline soldier. In any serious war, with big issues at stake, to assign command to a political general is to court disaster—so at least most Americans believe. But in fact, at the highest levels, successful command requires a sophisticated grasp of politics. At the summit, war and politics merge and become inextricably intertwined. A general in chief not fully attuned to the latter will not master the former.

George Washington, U.S. Grant, and Dwight D. Eisenhower were all “political generals” in the very best sense of the term. Their claims to immortality rest not on their battlefield exploits—Washington actually won few battles, and Grant achieved his victories through brute force rather than finesse, while Ike hardly qualifies as a field commander at all—but on the skill they demonstrated in translating military power into political advantage. Each of these three genuinely great soldiers possessed a sophisticated appreciation for war’s political dimension.

David Petraeus is a political general. Yet in presenting his recent assessment of the Iraq War and in describing the “way forward,” Petraeus demonstrated that he is a political general of the worst kind—one who indulges in the politics of accommodation that is Washington’s bread and butter but has thereby deferred a far more urgent political imperative, namely, bringing our military policies into harmony with our political purposes.

From the very beginning of the Iraq War, such harmony has been absent. The war’s military and political aspects have been badly out of synch. (In this regard, the hackneyed comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam are tragically apt.) The failure to plan for an occupation, the wildly inflated expectations of Iraq’s rapid transformation into a liberal democracy, Donald Rumsfeld’s stubborn refusal to acknowledge the insurgency’s existence until long after it had begun, the deeply flawed kick-down-the-door campaign that ensued once Rumsfeld could no longer deny reality: all of these meant that from the outset, the exertions of U.S. troops, however great, tended to be at odds with our stated political intentions. Our actions were counterproductive.

The Petraeus-Crocker hearings found Petraeus in a position to resolve that problem. Over the previous eight months, a discredited president had effectively abdicated responsibility for managing the war. “I trust David Petraeus” became George W. Bush’s mantra, suggesting an astonishing level of presidential deference. Sometime in early 2007, the task of formulating basic strategy for Iraq had effectively migrated from Washington to Baghdad, passing from the office of the commander in chief to the headquarters of the senior field commander. The president made it clear that he intended to take his cues from his general. Military judgment would inform, even determine, political decisions.

The general has now made his call, and President Bush has endorsed it: the surge having succeeded (so at least we are assured), it will now be curtailed. The war will continue, albeit on a marginally

smaller scale. As events develop, it just might become smaller still. Only time will tell.

Petraeus has chosen a middle course, carefully crafted to cause the least amount of consternation among various Washington constituencies he is eager to accommodate. This is the politics of give and take, of horse trading, of putting lipstick on a pig. Ultimately, it is the politics of avoidance.

A political general in the mold of Washington or Grant would have taken a different course, using his moment in the spotlight not to minimize consternation but to stir it up to the maximum extent. He would have capitalized on his status as man of the hour to oblige civilian leaders, both in Congress and in the executive branch, to do what they have not done since the Iraq War began—namely, their jobs. He would have insisted upon the president and the Congress making decisions that wartime summons them—and not military commanders—to make. Instead, Petraeus issued everyone a pass.

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In testifying before House and Senate committees about the current situation in Iraq, Petraeus told no outright lies. He made no blustery promises about “victory,” a word notably absent from his testimony. The tone of the presentation was sober and measured. It contained the requisite references to complexity and challenge. Petraeus acknowledged miscalculation and disappointment. In contrast to his commander in chief, he did not claim that U.S. troops were “kicking ass.”

Yet the essence of his message was this: after four years of futile blundering, the United States has identified the makings of a successful strategy in Iraq. The new doctrine that Petraeus had devised and implemented—the concept of securing the population and thereby fostering conditions conducive to reconstruction and reconciliation—has produced limited but real progress. This gives Petraeus cause for hope that further efforts along these lines may yet enable the United States to create an Iraq that is stable, unified, and not a haven for terrorists. In so many words, Petraeus told Congress that senior U.S. commanders in Iraq had finally found the right roadmap. The way ahead may be long and difficult—indeed, it will be. But Petraeus and his key subordinates know where they are. They know where they need to go. And above all, at long last, they know how to get there.

Critics have questioned the data that Petraeus offered to substantiate his case. They charge him with relying on dubious statistics, with ignoring facts that he finds inconvenient, and with discovering trends where none exist. They question whether to credit the much-touted progress in Anbar province to American shrewdness or to the vagaries of Iraqi sectarian and tribal politics. They cite the pathetic performance of the corrupt and dysfunctional Iraqi government. They note the disparity between the Petraeus assessment and those offered by the intelligence community, by the Government Accountability Office, and by congressionally appointed blue-ribbon commissions. They point out that other highly qualified and well-informed senior military officers—notably, Gen. George Casey, the army chief of staff, and Adm. William Fallon, commander of United States Central Command—have publicly expressed views notably at odds with those of General Petraeus.

The critics make a good case. Yet let us ignore them. Let us assume instead that Petraeus genuinely believes that he has broken the code in Iraq and that things are improving. Let’s assume further that he is correct in that assessment.

What then should he have recommended to the Congress and the president? That is, if the commitment of a modest increment of additional forces —the 30,000 troops comprising the surge, now employed in accordance with sound counterinsurgency doctrine —has begun to turn things

around, then what should the senior field commander be asking for next?

A single word suffices to answer that question: more. More time. More money. And above all, more troops.

It is one of the oldest principles of generalship: when you find an opportunity, exploit it. Where you gain success, reinforce it. When you have your opponent at a disadvantage, pile on. In a letter to the soldiers serving under his command, released just prior to the congressional hearings, Petraeus asserted that coalition forces had “achieved tactical momentum and wrestled the initiative from our enemies.” Does that reflect his actual view of the situation? If so, then surely the imperative of the moment is to redouble the current level of effort so as to preserve that initiative and to deny the enemy the slightest chance to adjust, adapt, or reconstitute.

Yet Petraeus has chosen to do just the opposite. Based on two or three months of (ostensibly) positive indicators, he has advised the president to ease the pressure, withdrawing the increment of troops that had (purportedly) enabled the coalition to seize the initiative in the first place.

This defies logic. It’s as if two weeks into the Wilderness Campaign, Grant had counseled Lincoln to reduce the size of the Army of the Potomac. Or as if once Allied forces had established the beachhead at Normandy, Eisenhower had started rotating divisions back stateside to ease the strain on the U.S. Army.

Petraeus likes to portray himself as a thinking soldier. Having devoted his

Ph.D. dissertation to the lessons of Vietnam, he qualifies as a serious student of counterinsurgencies. He knows that they require lots of troops—many more than the United States has in Iraq relative to the size of the population there. He knows, too, that they require lots of time—on average, nine or ten years by his own publicly expressed estimation. The counter-insurgency manual that Petraeus helped draft prior to taking up command in Baghdad makes these points explicitly.

If Petraeus actually believes that he can salvage something akin to success in Iraq and if he agrees with President Bush about the consequences of failure—genocidal violence, Iraq becoming a launching pad for terrorist attacks directed against the United States, the Middle East descending into chaos that consumes Israel, the oil-dependent global economy shattered beyond repair, all of this culminating in the emergence of a new Caliphate bent on destroying the West—then surely this moment of (supposed) promise is not a time for scrimping. Rather, now is the time to go all out—to insist upon a maximum effort.

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There is only one plausible explanation for Petraeus’s terminating a surge that has (he says) enabled coalition forces, however tentatively, to gain the upper hand. That explanation is politics—of the wrong kind.

Given the current situation as Petraeus describes it, an incremental reduction in U.S. troop strength makes sense only in one regard: it serves to placate each of the various Washington constituencies that Petraeus has a political interest in pleasing.

A modest drawdown responds to the concerns of Petraeus’s fellow four stars, especially the Joint

Chiefs, who view the stress being imposed on U.S. forces as intolerable. Ending the surge provides the Army and the Marine Corps with a modicum of relief.

A modest drawdown also comes as welcome news for moderate Republicans in Congress. Nervously eyeing the forthcoming elections, they have wanted to go before the electorate with something to offer other than being identified with Bush's disastrous war. Now they can point to signs of change—indeed, Petraeus's proposed withdrawal of one brigade before Christmas coincides precisely with a suggestion made just weeks ago by Sen. John Warner, the influential Republican from Virginia.

Although they won't say so openly, a modest drawdown comes as good news to Democrats as well. Accused with considerable justification of having done nothing to end the war since taking control of the Congress in January, they can now point to the drawdown as evidence that they are making headway. As *Newsweek's* Michael Hirsch observed, Petraeus "delivered an early Christmas present" to congressional Democrats.

Above all, a modest drawdown pleases President Bush. It gives him breathing room to continue the conflict in which he has so much invested. It all but guarantees that Iraq will be the principal gift that Bush bestows upon his successor when he leaves office in January 2009. Bush's war will outlive Bush: for reasons difficult to fathom, this has become an important goal for the president and his dwindling band of loyalists.

Granted, no one is completely happy. Yet neither does anyone go away empty-handed. The Petraeus plan offers a little something for everyone, not least of all for Petraeus himself, who takes back to Baghdad a smidgen of additional time (his next report is not due for another six months), lots more money (at least \$3 billion per week), and assurances that his tenure in command has been extended.

This outcome reflects the handiwork of someone skilled in the ways of Washington. Yet the ultimate result is to allow the contradiction between our military efforts in Iraq and our professed political purposes there to persist.

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Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli is one officer keen to confront rather than ignore that contradiction. In an article appearing in the current issue of the journal *Military Review*, General Chiarelli writes:

The U.S. as a Nation—and indeed most of the U.S. Government—has not gone to war since 9/11. Instead the departments of Defense and State (as much as their modern capabilities allow) and the Central Intelligence Agency are at war while the American people and most of the other institutions of national power have largely gone about their normal business.

Chiarelli is correct. His statement goes directly to the heart of the matter. After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, to sustained bipartisan applause, President Bush committed the United States to an open-ended global war on terror. Having made that fundamental decision, the president and Congress sent American soldiers off to fight that war while urging the American people to distract themselves with other pursuits. The American people have done as they were asked.

The result, six years later, is a massive and growing gap between the resources required to sustain that global war, in Iraq and elsewhere, and the resources actually available to do so. President Bush,

with the Joint Chiefs of Staff serving as enablers, has papered over that gap by sending soldiers back for a third or fourth combat tour and, most recently, by extending the length of those tours. In a country with a population that exceeds 300 million, one-half of one percent of our fellow citizens bear the burden of this global war. The other 99.5 percent of us have decided to chill out.

The president has made no serious effort to mobilize the wherewithal that his wars in Iraq and Afghanistan require. The Congress, liberal Democrats voting aye, has made itself complicit in this shameful policy by obligingly appropriating whatever sums of money the president has requested, all, of course, in the name of “supporting the troops.”

Petraeus has now given this charade a further lease on life. In effect, he is allowing the president and the Congress to continue dodging the main issue, which comes down to this: if the civilian leadership wants to wage a global war on terror and if that war entails pacifying Iraq, then let’s get serious about providing what’s needed to complete the mission—starting with lots more soldiers. Rather than curtailing the ostensibly successful surge, Petraeus should broaden and deepen it. That means sending more troops to Iraq, not bringing them home. And that probably implies doubling or tripling the size of the United States Army on a crash basis.

If the civilian leadership is unwilling to provide what’s needed, then all of the talk about waging a global war on terror—talk heard not only from the president but from most of those jockeying to replace him—amounts to so much hot air. Critics who think the concept of the global war on terror is fundamentally flawed will see this as a positive development. Once we recognize the global war on terror for the fraudulent enterprise that it has become, then we can get serious about designing a strategy to address the threat that we actually face, which is not terrorism but violent Islamic radicalism. The antidote to Islamic radicalism, if there is one, won’t involve invading and occupying places like Iraq.

This defines Petraeus’s failure. Instead of obliging the president and the Congress to confront this fundamental contradiction—*are we or are we not at war?*—he chose instead to let them off the hook.

Of course, if he had done otherwise—if he had asked, say, to expand the surge by adding yet another 50,000 troops—he would have distressed just about everyone back in Washington. He might have paid a considerable price career-wise. Certainly, he would have angered the JCS, antiwar Democrats, and waffling Republicans who want the war to go away. Even the president, Petraeus’s number-one fan, would have been surprised and embarrassed by such a request.

Yet the anger and embarrassment would have been salutary. A great political general doesn’t tell his masters what they want to hear. He tells them what they need to hear, thereby nudging them to make decisions that must be made if the nation’s interests are to be served. In this instance, Petraeus provided cover for them to evade their responsibilities.

Politically, it qualifies as a brilliant maneuver. The general’s relationships with official Washington remain intact. Yet he has broken faith with the soldiers he commands and the Army to which he has devoted his life. He has failed his country. History will not judge him kindly. ■

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