

By Ray McGovern

From CommonDreams.org | Original Article

One thing that comes through clearly in Bob Woodward's new book, *Obama's Wars*, is the contempt felt by Gen. David Petraeus, commander of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, toward President Barack Obama.

One of Woodward's more telling vignettes has Petraeus, after quaffing a glass of wine during a flight in May, telling some of his staff that the administration was "[expletive] with the wrong guy."

No need to divine precisely what may be the "expletive deleted." Petraeus's Douglas-MacArthur-style contempt for the commander-in-chief comes through clearly enough. But Obama is no Harry Truman, facing down a popular general who may fancy himself a future president.

Pity poor Obama. Journalists favored with an advance peek at Woodward's new book, like Peter Baker of the *New York Times*, report that Obama last year pressed his advisers to come up with ways to avoid a major escalation in Afghanistan.

Baker notes that at one meeting the President "implored" them. "I want an exit strategy," Obama said.

Obama implored in vain. Petraeus, then the head of Central Command, and the other generals refused to come up with an exit strategy from Afghanistan. What does that tell you? Among other things that Barack Obama is "no Jack Kennedy," either.

This Time: No Profile in Courage

The young Kennedy faced very similar pressures from an even more unreconstructed military brass. Then, as now, senior military officers were experts at "slow-rolling" politicians who favored a course of action that the Pentagon didn't like. When in May 1962 Kennedy ordered preparation of an exit plan from Vietnam, it took more than a year for the brass to draw one up.

But Kennedy knew where the buck stopped and was above "imploring." Rather, he concluded that there was no responsible course other than to order a phased withdrawal from Vietnam, despite strong opposition from the Joint Chiefs and others. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Obama's Profile in Courage Moment."] Kennedy showed he had the courage and the cleverness to outmaneuver them.

Then-Defense Secretary Robert McNamara later wrote that there was "a total lack of consensus" regarding Kennedy's plan to pull out 1,000 troops by the end of 1963 and the bulk of the rest by 1965. Yet, Kennedy had the courage to step up to the plate; he issued an executive order anyway, bypassing the majority of his advisers who remained strongly opposed.

McNamara summed up the situation in terms that seem eerily applicable to Afghanistan today:

"The President nonetheless authorized the beginning of withdrawal, believing that either our training and logistical support led to the progress claimed or, if it had not, additional training would not change the situation and, in either, case, we should plan to withdraw."

Of course, Kennedy's Vietnam withdrawal plan did not survive his assassination. Soon after his death on Nov. 22, 1963, the Joint Chiefs convinced President Lyndon Johnson to escalate the war in Vietnam.

'Bristling,' Then Caving

Drawing from Woodward's book, Peter Baker reports that Obama "bristled" at what he saw as attempts by the senior military to force him into a decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan.

However, in the end, Obama tilted toward the position of Petraeus and the other generals in a too-smart-by-half, hybrid decision. He ordered 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, while setting a "condition-based" date for beginning a withdrawal next July. As if anyone really thought then, or thinks now, that "conditions" are going to allow a significant withdrawal next summer!

Obama's critics are right about one thing. Setting that kind of deadline was worse than feckless from a military point of view - for reasons that have been adduced time and time again. Cynics are correct in describing the compromise decision as transparently political and, in the end, utterly naïve.

Conservative columnist Michael Gerson happens to be correct, for once, in suggesting, in his Washington Post op-ed on Friday, that Obama's decisions have been heavily influenced by "political calculations ... only loosely related to actual need or analysis."

"The more we know of Obama's views of the Afghan war, the less confidence he inspires," writes Gerson. Again, correct. Woodward's portrait of President Obama shows him possessed of an unusual admixture of hubris, inexperience, and naïveté.

The mix not only is Obama's personal Achilles heel; it is getting a lot of people killed and maimed. It is also lengthening the lines at "insurgent" recruiting stations and increasing the danger of terrorist attacks here at home.

Michael Gerson will not be the only one to see through Obama's obvious attempt to square a circle.

Woodward paints a personal portrait of presidential cynicism by describing a conversation between Obama and Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, during which Graham asks if the July deadline is firm.

Obama is quoted in reply, "I have to say that." He then explains, "I can't let this be a war without end, and I can't lose the whole Democratic Party."

There is little doubt in my mind that Obama knows full well that the Afghanistan war is a fool's errand, and that the only way to end it is to disengage, rather than escalate. Yet he is convinced - wrongly, I believe - that he has no real political alternative but to kowtow to the generals.

Earning Disdain

Predictably, this behavior earns Obama disdain rather than respect from the top brass, who believe the President feels "intimidated" in their presence, as Gen. Stanley McChrystal is quoted as saying, according to Rolling Stone magazine earlier this year. Generals generally know there is a huge difference between being a mere politician and a real leader.

In Obama, they see a politician first and foremost, and have concluded that his overweening determination to appear strong on defense has the result of making him putty in their hands.

The generals are helped by the Fawning Corporate Media's (FCM) abnegation of its responsibility to explore and report critically on the occupation of Afghanistan. Instead, the FCM promotes almost sickening adulation of those senior officers who "wear the uniform," with row upon row of ribbons and medals, many of whom should be sacked for sending young troops into a war they know to be unwinnable.

Petraeus Surges

Gen. Petraeus is Exhibit A. In 2006, virtually all other generals, backed by then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group, favored shrinking the U.S. "footprint" in Iraq as the best route to reduce the death toll and to extricate American forces. They agreed that sending more U.S. troops to Iraq would do little good.

However, in late 2006, President George W. Bush feared losing a war on his watch. So, he dumped Rumsfeld, recruited the malleable Robert Gates as the new Defense secretary, and picked out the ambitious Petraeus to implement a "surge" of troops into Iraq.

Though the death toll for both Americans and Iraqis spiked in 2007, with about one thousand U.S. soldiers dying along with tens of thousands of Iraqis, eventually the violence abated, at least somewhat.

Well-informed military analysts credited a number of factors for bringing down the violence, including many that predated the surge. For instance, the Sunni disenchantment with al-Qaeda extremists - and the U.S. military's decision to put many Sunni insurgents on the payroll - occurred earlier in 2006.

So did the killing of al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and much of the de facto ethnic cleansing of the country as many Sunnis fled their former neighborhoods, turning Baghdad from a predominantly Sunni into a mostly Shia city. Despite the personal tragedies for individual Iraqis, the forced separation did cause the Sunni-vs.-Shiite violence to decline.

Also, as the U.S. occupation came under greater military pressure, American troops were given permissive "rules of engagement" that led to a number of atrocities, including the killing of civilians over the slightest suspicion that they might represent a threat.

The slaughter escalated during the "surge" with Apache helicopters unleashing 50-caliber cannon fire on "military-age males," as happened in the incident on July 12, 2007, that was captured on gun-barrel video and posted on WikiLeaks on April 5, 2010.

Grabbing Credit

Despite the variety of factors that contributed to a drop-off of violence by 2008, Washington's influential neoconservatives insisted on an explanation that credited solely the "surge" of over

20,000 U.S. troops sent to Iraq in 2007. And the FCM readily went along with the neocon spin, judging Republican John McCain as "right" on the surge and Obama as "wrong" to oppose it.

So effective was the media panegyric to the surge that Obama decided to get in step by reversing himself and offering his own gratuitous praise just two months before the election in 2008. Providing a hint of his later willingness to show "flexibility" on such issues, candidate Obama reversed himself and told Bill O'Reilly the surge had "succeeded beyond our wildest dreams."

The misleading, neo-con-driven narrative of the surge - and the media's brain-dead depiction of it as a smashing success - had consequences that went far beyond the presidential campaign. The myth of the "successful surge" elevated Petraeus to the hero status that he now enjoys.

The stage was set for pushing for another surge-this time in Afghanistan. And President Obama, still remembering the stinging attacks on him for his original criticism of the Iraq surge, bent to the political pressures from the neocons and the military brass.

The President tripled the number of U.S. troops there, hoping that would appease Petraeus and his Pentagon allies, including Secretary Gates who had been retained by Obama in a gesture of bipartisanship toward the Republicans.

Despite all that, the top brass still doesn't like Obama much. Nor do they hesitate to differ with him openly on such key issues as the anticipated duration of the war.

Obama and the irrepressible Vice President Joe Biden would have us focus on the July 2011 date set by Obama for the start of withdrawal. According to Woodward, in October 2009 the President told Secretary of State Clinton and Defense Secretary Gates, "I'm not doing ten years. ... I'm not doing long-term nation building. I am not spending a trillion dollars."

Petraeus, on the other hand, makes clear that he is a devotee of the Long War favored by his close neoconservative friends. Woodward quotes Petraeus:

"You have to recognize also that I don't think you win this war. I think you keep fighting. ... This is the kind of fight we're in for the rest of our lives and probably our kids' lives."

Blunt Resistance

Petraeus's surrogates have been blunter. After visiting with Petraeus in Afghanistan in August, outspoken Marine Commandant Gen. James Conway held a press conference at which he joined several of his colleagues in expressing disdain for the July 2011 target date, claiming it is "probably giving our enemy sustenance."

At the same time, the Marine general hastened to reassure supporters of the war that such "sustenance" is sure to be short-lived, and that any improvement in Taliban morale is likely to drop when "come the fall [of 2011] we're still there hammering them like we have been."

Conway warned that considerable time will be required before Afghan forces can take over from U.S. troops, saying, "I honestly think it will be a few years before conditions on the ground are such that turnover will be possible for us."

And Obama's date for beginning the withdrawal? Conway struck a condescending tone: "When some American unit somewhere in Afghanistan will turn over responsibilities to Afghan forces in 2011, I do not think they will be Marines."

Rather, it is likely that Petraeus and Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen will be asking for still more troops before many more months go by. They would almost certainly calculate that Obama would see little option but to acquiesce once again - or face the combined wrath of the military brass and the neocon opinion-shapers.

But didn't the generals, including Petraeus, promise Obama last November not to ask for still more? The generals probably had a good laugh, seeing the President as naïve enough to have thought he could eke leverage out of an implicit threat to cry foul if they backtracked on their

assurances.

Did Obama really expect to be able to shout: "But don't you remember? You promised me last fall not to ask for any more; I've got it on tape."

Wooden-headedness

More troops will never be the answer to the Afghan quagmire. And yet politics, together with what historian Barbara Tuchman called "wooden-headedness," prevail. Tuchman pointed to what flows from "not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts":

"Once a policy has been adopted and implemented, all subsequent activity becomes an effort to justify it. ... Adjustment is painful. For the ruler it is easier, once he had entered the policy box, to stay inside. For the lesser official it is better not to make any waves, not to press evidence that the chief will find painful to accept. Psychologists call the process of screening out discordant information 'cognitive dissonance,' an academic disguise for 'Don't confuse me with the facts.'"

No one should be surprised that Barbara Tuchman's daughter, Carnegie Foundation President Jessica Tuchman Mathews, has been inoculated against "cognitive dissonance." A January 2009 Carnegie report on Afghanistan concluded:

"The only meaningful way to halt the insurgency's momentum is to start withdrawing troops. The presence of foreign troops is the most important element driving the resurgence of the Taliban."

Obama is smart enough to know that, but he lacks the courage of his convictions. Teaching law or speed-reading a teleprompter does not a president make.

Eight hundred years ago, Thomas Aquinas observed that courage is the precondition of all

virtue. In other words, you can be smart and well intentioned as all get-out; but you cannot be a real leader if you have no guts.

Sure it's hard; and no one is going to make it any easier for Obama to avoid caving in to the military once again. Afghan Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak complained to the BBC on Monday that NATO has neither provided enough troops, nor trained Afghan forces quickly enough. Adding salt to NATO/U.S. wounds, Wardak said, "We have never had enough forces that were required by the principles of counterinsurgency warfare."

To reach those multiples would require a major escalation, which privately is what many generals are hoping for. And remember, it was Gen. Petraeus, who "wrote" the update to the counterinsurgency manual.

Yet, wooden-headedness prevails. On Thursday, Adm. Mullen attempted to reassure the press about Afghanistan, stating that although "this is a very, very difficult year, we've got the inputs right" and "we're starting to move forward."

For his part, Defense Secretary Gates expressed full confidence in the current approach and predicted only "some adjustments and tweaks" during a planned December war review "to try and enhance what's going on."

God help us; doesn't he know what's going on?