

PROFILE OF

GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS

Commander of the US CENTRAL COMMAND

Giulio Brigante Colonna

December 2008

On the 31st of October 2008, General David Petraeus was appointed Head of the US Central Command (CENTCOM). With headquarters in Tampa (FL), CENTCOM is responsible for all military operations in the geopolitical area commonly known as the “broader Middle East” which spans from Egypt to Kazakhstan and includes countries such as Iraq, Syria, Israel, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. During the period in which Petraeus was Commander of the Multinational Force in Iraq (MNF-I), levels of violence dropped to a 4 year low and the country veered on the path to stability. There are two main reasons for these results: the surge of forces decided by President Bush in the latter part of 2006, and the change of strategy brought by General Petraeus in the first months of 2007. In his speech during the Change of Command Ceremony, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated that “history will regard him [Petraeus] as one of our nation’s great battle captains. He is the preeminent soldier-scholar-statesman of his generation and precisely the man we need in this command at this time.”¹

1.) Academic titles

In 1974 General Petraeus graduated from West Point and in 1983 he completed the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas as top of his class. He then went on to obtain a Master’s Degree in Public Affairs (1985) and a PhD in International Affairs (1987) from Princeton University. As Commander of the US Army Combined Arms Center (CAC) and the Command and General Staff College from 2005 to 2007, Petraeus was responsible for developing the Army’s doctrinal manuals as well as analyzing lessons learned from the field. During this time Petraeus and Lt General James F. Amos (Marine Corps) re-wrote the Army and Marine Corps’ Field Manual (FM 3-24) for counterinsurgency operations. This academic background has certainly influenced the General’s ability for strategic oversight and planning that have shaped the Administration’s change of strategy in Iraq.

Main staff assignments include: aide to General John Galvin, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR); aide to the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Carl Vuono and subsequently Executive Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Henry Shelton.

¹ <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1306>

2.) Involvement in military operations

In 1995 Petraeus took on his first international command assignment as Chief of Operations of the United Nations Force in Haiti. In 1999 he did his first tour in Kuwait as part of operation Desert Spring which provided the rotation of forces in the period following the first Gulf war. He was then deployed in Bosnia Herzegovina as NATO Stabilization Force Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations and as Deputy Commander of the U.S. Joint Interagency Counter-Terrorism Task Force, created after the 9/11 attacks.

3.) Iraq

Petraeus commanded the 101st Airborne Division during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. His troops were stationed in the area south of Mosul and close to the Syrian border. The General employed counterinsurgency measures to reach stability and security for the population and also supported the local economy and the reconstruction effort, the establishment of local elections, and the development of local security forces. This comprehensive nation building approach effectively marked the General's experiences in Iraq.

In 2004 the General was appointed Commander of the Multi National Security Transition Command Iraq; responsible for the training, equipping and mentoring of the Iraqi Army. By the end of 2006 terrorist attacks were alienating the Iraqi population and straining the reconstruction effort; the US had won the war but were losing the peace. In January 2007 President Bush appointed General Petraeus Commander of the Multi National Force Iraq to direct the surge (20,000 troops) and launch a new strategy that would become known as the "Petraeus Doctrine". As he stated to the Senate's Armed Forces Committee on the eve of his appointment:

"my broad priorities would [be to] support the development of an Iraqi state that is a stable, reasonably representative democracy that respects the rights of all Iraqis and can provide for its own security, with Iraqi security institutions that act professionally and according to the interests of all Iraqi people."²

In detail, Petraeus' new strategy was aimed at guaranteeing the security of the population through a constant military presence, to defeat the insurgents and reduce terrorist attacks, and support the development of Iraqi Security Forces. All of these goals were to be the prelude for a wider cooperation with the Iraqi Government for economic development in order to better the living conditions of the population. Key to this change of strategy is a comprehensive approach that, in his words, calls upon:

"Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation builders as well as warriors. They must be prepared to help reestablish institutions and local security forces and assist in rebuilding infrastructure and basic services. They must be able to facilitate establishing local governance and the rule of law. The

² <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2007/January/Petraeus%2001-23-07.pdf>

list of such tasks is long; performing them involves extensive coordination and cooperation with many intergovernmental, host-nation, and international agencies.”³

In his September 2007 testimony to Congress General Petraeus attested to a reduction in ethno-sectarian violence, an overall reduction in civilian deaths, and tribal rejection of al Qaida in Iraq. This process had been greatly helped by the US decision to finance, train and arm the so-called “awakening councils”: Sunni Tribes (initially in the Anbar Province) that were to maintain security in their respective areas and isolate the tribes affiliated with al Qaida in Iraq. The Iraqi Government has decided to gradually absorb the local militias into the National Security Forces. On a more negative note Petraeus’ testimony focused on the challenges faced by Iraqi Security Forces to shoulder more of the burden of providing security for their country.

In his recommendations Petraeus highlighted that “force reductions will continue beyond the pre-surge levels of brigade combat teams that we will reach by mid-July 2008; however, in my professional judgment, it would be premature to make recommendations on the pace of such reductions at this time,” the General further highlighted the “imperative of transitioning responsibilities to Iraqi institutions and Iraqi forces as quickly as possible, but without rushing to failure. It includes substantial support for the continuing development of Iraqi Security Forces.”⁴

The Iraqi scenario has further improved since September 2007, and today the number of security incidents has declined to a four year low. The recent US decision to withdraw troops from Iraq by 2011, within the broader Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) established with the Iraqi Government, seems to contrast with General Petraeus’ recommendations for caution based on evidence that the progress achieved since 2006 is still reversible.

³ <http://www.train.army.mil/>

⁴ <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Petraeus-Testimony20070910.pdf>