

DAVID PETRAEUS, WHOSE GREATEST APTITUDE LIES IN REWRITING HISTORY

As always in stories involving David Petraeus, this story about his plan to work with al Qaeda to defeat ISIS involves some rewriting or forgetting of history. There's the fiction that what is usually called the surge but here is at least called co-opting members of al Qaeda "worked."

The former commander of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan has been quietly urging U.S. officials to consider using so-called moderate members of al Qaeda's Nusra Front to fight ISIS in Syria, four sources familiar with the conversations, including one person who spoke to Petraeus directly, told The Daily Beast.

The heart of the idea stems from Petraeus' experience in Iraq in 2007, when as part of a broader strategy to defeat an Islamist insurgency the U.S. persuaded Sunni militias to stop fighting with al Qaeda and to work with the American military.

The tactic worked, at least temporarily. But al Qaeda in Iraq was later reborn as ISIS, and has become the sworn enemy of its parent organization. Now, Petraeus is returning to his old play, advocating a strategy of co-opting rank-and-file members of al Nusra, particularly those who don't necessarily share all of core al Qaeda's Islamist philosophy. [my emphasis]

To be fair to the Daily Beast, they call it a "tactic," not a strategy, which is correct and part of the problem with it – it provides no

path to lasting peace and can easily lead to the metastasis of new violent groups – as DB makes clear happened with the rise of al Qaeda in Iraq. The description of how Petraeus engaged the Sons of Iraq also neglects to mention the financial payoff, which seems important both to understand the play but also its limitations. Thus far, though, DB at least hints as why Petraeus' plan is so batshit crazy.

Then there's the silence in the story about how every attempt to train allied troops that Petraeus has been involved with has turned to shit: Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya. That seems worth mentioning.

But I'm most interested in this claim:

Petraeus was the CIA director in early 2011 when the Syrian civil war erupted. At the time, he along with then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta reportedly urged the Obama administration to work with moderate opposition forces. The U.S. didn't, and many of those groups have since steered toward jihadist groups like the Nusra Front, which are better equipped and have had more success on the battlefield.

While it is true that Obama did not systematically arm rebels in Syria in 2011, it is also a public fact that the CIA was watching (and at least once doing more than that) Qatar and Saudi Arabia move arms from Libya before Petraeus' departure in 2012, and Obama approved a covert finding to arm "moderate" rebels in April 2013, with CIA implementing that plan in June.

That's all public and confirmed.

So how is it that we once again are pretending that the CIA – the agency Petraeus led as it oversaw a disastrous intervention in Libya that contributed to radicalization both there and in

Syria – didn't arm purported moderates who turned out not to be?

In other words, the story here should be, "David Petraeus, after overseeing a series of failed training efforts and covert efforts that led to increased radicalization, wants to try again."

Which would make it even more clear how crazy this idea is.