

DAVID PETRAEUS: A THRICE-FAILED TRAINER?

There's a critical sub-genre of reporting on the Petraeus scandal, noting that Petraeus' sins don't so much pertain to fucking a dissertation advisee under his desk, but sending lots of men and women to die in his pet failed military strategies.

Of course there's Michael Hastings' focus on Petraeus' successful spin of his failures.

Here's a brief summary: We can start with the persistent questions critics have raised about his Bronze Star for Valor. Or that, in 2004, during the middle of a presidential election, Petraeus wrote an op-ed in *The Washington Post* supporting President Bush and saying that the Iraq policy was working. The policy wasn't working, but Bush repaid the general's political advocacy by giving him the top job in the war three years later.

There's his war record in Iraq, starting when he headed up the Iraqi security force training program in 2004. He's more or less skated on that, including all the weapons he lost, the insane corruption, and the fact that he essentially armed and trained what later became known as "Iraqi death squads." On his final Iraq tour, during the so-called "surge," he pulled off what is perhaps the most impressive con job in recent American history. He convinced the entire Washington establishment that we won the war. [my emphasis]

There's Michael Cohen's examination of Petraeus' role in both the Iraqi and Afghan surge.

The greatest indictment of Petraeus's record is that, 18 months after announcing the surge, President Obama pulled the plug on a military campaign that had clearly failed to realize the ambitious goals of Petraeus and his merry team of COIN boosters. Today, the Afghanistan war is stalemated with little hope of resolution – either militarily or politically – any time soon. While that burden of failure falls hardest on President Obama, General Petraeus is scarcely blameless. Yet, to date, he has almost completely avoided examination for his conduct of the war in Afghanistan.

But I want to look at Petraeus booster David Ignatius' take. His post today is barely critical of Petraeus. But it acknowledges that Petraeus' CIA has been too focused on paramilitary ops to the detriment of human collection, which proved to be a fatal failure in Benghazi.

Petraeus was picked for the job, and eager to take it, partly because the White House believed that in an era of counterterrorism, the CIA's traditional mission of stealing secrets was morphing into a wider role that increasingly stressed paramilitary covert action. The retired general, with his matchless experience in running wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, was seen as well-suited to run an agency that combined the trench coat and the flak jacket.

But the Petraeus-era CIA had a hidden defect, quite apart from any errant e-mails, which was that the paramilitary covert-action function was swallowing alive the old-fashioned intelligence-gathering side of the house. This actually seems to me to be the central lesson of the disaster in Benghazi, Libya.

[snip]

Benghazi showed the reason the United States needs clandestine intelligence officers in dangerous countries such as Libya. They're in country, undercover, to collect the secrets that will keep U.S. citizens safe. That night, the United States needed to know what was going down in Benghazi, and in Cairo, Tunis and a half-dozen other capitals. It's hard to do this intelligence collection – recruiting and running clandestine agents – when you're operating from a quasi-public base, as seems to have been the case in Benghazi, and is certainly true in many other parts of the world.

[snip]

But one resolution for the post-Petraeus CIA should be to put intelligence collection back in the driver's seat at the agency. Maybe this will only be possible when the agency fully deploys a new network of deep-cover "platforms" that can hide CIA officers better than that embattled annex in Benghazi did.

[my emphasis]

I think Ignatius is totally right. Petraeus responded to Benghazi by asking for more drones, rather than reapplying CIA to collecting information on the militias who ended up attacking us. But one of the lessons of Benghazi is we need to know who we're dealing with—all the people, not just the people we've identified as bad guys, and not just the information we can collect from drones or (hahahaha!) email and social media.

There's an additional intriguing criticism of Petraeus Ignatius alludes to. He comes as close as anyone has to suggesting CIA—David Petraeus' CIA—was the entity training the militias to be more professional soldiers.

The CIA had a big base in Benghazi, with a half-dozen former military special forces assigned there as part of the "Global Response Staff." These were the muscle-bound security guys known to flippant earlier generations of CIA case officers as "knuckle-draggers." They were in Benghazi in such numbers in part because the CIA was trying to collect the shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles that had gone loose after the fall of Col. Moammar Gaddafi. They may also have been working with Libyan militias to help them become effective security forces. [my emphasis]

Given suggestions that the February 17 Brigade—one of the militia we would have been training—at least failed to prevent the attack if not allowed it to happen, the suggestion CIA conducted their training is really damning indeed.

After all, as Hastings notes, Petraeus' training program in Iraq effectively armed Iraqi death squads. As Jim has tracked forever, Petraeus' training program in Afghanistan ended up training those Afghan forces who are now killing NATO forces.

David Petraeus has a fairly consistent history of training sketchy men to be fairly dangerous troops. Increasingly of late, precisely those American-trained forces are the people killing Americans.

If, along with everything else, CIA trained some of the people who failed to protect and perhaps even attacked Americans in Benghazi, it would be the third time Petraeus' training has backfired. Couple that with the failure to collect HUMINT on people we didn't know were bad guys, and we got blindsided in Benghazi. And that's just hitting some of the problems.

Ignatius is right: Benghazi teaches us CIA needs to go back to collecting information on what

people—both identified enemies and relatively trusted friends—are doing. And until we get far better at doing that, we sure as hell better not be arming and training these people.

Because there's an increasing history of Petraeus' programs training the men who kill Americans.