

PETRAEUS POUTS ABOUT HIS SMALL DRONE FLEET, BUT DID HE HIDE BENGHAZI INTELLIGENCE?



Is Petraeus still an untouchable Washington darling?

CIA Chief David Petraeus wants to expand his drone fleet by about one third, according to the Washington Post. We learn from the Post that the CIA now has a fleet of about 30 to 35 drones capable of use in attacks and Petraeus would like to increase that number by about ten.

An expansion of this offensive capability gets at the heart of what the role of the CIA should be:

The CIA is urging the White House to approve a significant expansion of the agency's fleet of armed drones, a move that would extend the spy service's decade-long transformation into a paramilitary force, U.S. officials said.

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The outcome has broad implications for counterterrorism policy and whether the CIA gradually returns to being an organization focused mainly on gathering intelligence, or remains a central player in the targeted killing of

terrorism suspects abroad.

Paramilitary activity seems to be quite a stretch for an agency whose name describes its role as intelligence rather than fighting.

With a former Pentagon darling now running the CIA, we see that the CIA now may be seen as more friendly territory by DoD:

In the past, officials from the Pentagon and other departments have raised concerns about the CIA's expanding arsenal and involvement in lethal operations, but a senior Defense official said that the Pentagon had not opposed the agency's current plan.

It would appear that this time, as usual, Petraeus has found the proper location for applying more of his charms and has aligned the political forces to favor his objectives.

And speaking of Petraeus' actions in the political realm, the timing of his speaking up for more drones is very "convenient" for him, because the issue of the CIA, what it knew, when it knew it and, most importantly, when it shared what it knew, seems to be at the heart of the political shitstorm brewing over the September 11 Benghazi incident. Marcy has been covering the incident (see her post on its prominent role in the second Presidential Debate for the latest in the series), but I want to hit on just the aspect of it that applies to Petraeus. In comments for the most recent post on Benghazi, eCAHNomics provided a link to a PressTV opinion piece that suggested that Petraeus and the CIA significantly undercut the Obama administration in this incident.

Leaving aside some of the more sensational claims in the PressTV piece with regard to security and whether it was provided, there is a new article today from Kimberly Dozier in which many details emerge that could be construed as Petraeus and the CIA significantly delaying the

sharing of vital intelligence on the source of the Benghazi attack:

The CIA station chief in Libya reported to Washington within 24 hours of last month's deadly attack on the U.S. Consulate that there was evidence it was carried out by militants, not a spontaneous mob upset about an American-made video ridiculing Islam's Prophet Muhammad, U.S. officials have told The Associated Press.

It is unclear who, if anyone, saw the cable outside the CIA at that point and how high up in the agency the information went. The Obama administration maintained publicly for a week that the attack on the diplomatic mission in Benghazi that killed U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans was a result of the mobs that staged less-deadly protests across the Muslim world around the 11th anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks on the U.S.

So did Petraeus see the cable from the station chief? It's hard to see how he wouldn't have had it almost immediately. In fact, part of the Post article is aimed at framing Petraeus as working wonders with very few assets at CIA:

"He's not used to the small budget over there," a U.S. congressional official said. In briefings on Capitol Hill, Petraeus often marvels at the agency's role relative to its resources, saying, "We do so well with so little money we have."

If Petraeus has so few resources, it's hard to see how he would not devour every bit of information from the station chief at the site where the world was focusing much of its attention. After all, the CIA had a key briefing to deliver:

The two U.S. officials said the CIA station chief in Libya compiled intelligence reports from eyewitnesses within 24 hours of the assault on the consulate that indicated militants launched the violence, using the pretext of demonstrations against U.S. facilities in Egypt against the film to cover their intent. The report from the station chief was written late Wednesday, Sept. 12, and reached intelligence agencies in Washington the next day, intelligence officials said.

Yet, on Saturday of that week, briefing points sent by the CIA to Congress said “demonstrations in Benghazi were spontaneously inspired by the protests at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and evolved into a direct assault.”

The briefing points, obtained by the AP, added: “There are indications that extremists participated in the violent demonstrations” but did not mention eyewitness accounts that blamed militants alone.

But those weren't just briefing points sent to Congress. Petraeus did a briefing himself:

Two officials who witnessed Petraeus' closed-door testimony to lawmakers in the week after the attack said that during questioning he acknowledged that there were some intelligence analysts who disagreed with the conclusion that an unruly mob angry over the video had initiated the violence. But those officials said Petraeus did not mention the CIA's early eyewitness reports. He did warn legislators that the account could change as more intelligence was uncovered, they said, speaking on condition of anonymity because the hearing was closed.

Would Petraeus withhold vital intelligence from the Obama administration to create a political opportunity for Obama's opponent in the election? No, after all, we have already learned that Petraeus has no political ambitions of his own and there are no efforts to prepare him for office.

One last aspect of the political side of Petraeus should be considered in the context of the thoughts above. Recall that he penned an op-ed for the Washington Post in September of 2004 that many feel played a role in helping George W. Bush win re-election. That op-ed provided an overly optimistic account from Petraeus of his prowess in training Iraqi forces to take over security responsibility. Petraeus was given a clean slate by the Beltway in 2007 to argue for renewed efforts (including training efforts) in Iraq. Petraeus then took over Afghanistan for Obama after McChrystal was fired. Petraeus' vaunted counterinsurgency strategy and training programs again were slated to be the winning combination for Afghanistan's surge. As Afghanistan now decays into a putrid mess that nobody in Washington wants to touch, not a single person inside the Beltway has come forward to highlight Petraeus' role in this catastrophe and how it echoes his Iraq failures.

It would appear, though, that Petraeus does stand at risk for the Benghazi debacle. If any Washington figures step forward to connect the dots that Dozier has lined up, Petraeus may finally be forced to wear his own failings (and his political machinations) publicly, and that is a development that is nearly a decade overdue.

Pass the pineapple, this could get entertaining.