

THE CAMPAIGN IN AFGHANISTAN: NEUTRALIZING PETRAEUS, THOUGH NOT THE TALIBAN?

Rolling Stone just published an excerpt from Michael Hastings' new book, *The Operators*.

Click through to read the whole thing (I expect Jim will weigh in as well). But for the moment, consider the irony of this passage, given all that has transpired.

I asked him about Petraeus. He said his relationship with Petraeus was “complex.” He’d replaced Dave three times in five years in jobs. “You know, I’ve been one step behind him.”

Petraeus had uncharacteristically kept a low profile over the past year. He didn’t seem to want to get publicly attached to the war in Afghanistan. He’d had his triumph in Iraq, and military officials speculated that he knew there was no way the Afghanistan war was going to turn out well. That it was a loser, and he was happy enough to let McChrystal be left holding the bag.

“He couldn’t command this,” McChrystal said. “Plus, he’s one and ‘oh.’ This one is very questionable.”

Petraeus had been “wonderfully supportive,” though, despite the competition between the two. Within military circles, there was a long-standing debate over who should get more credit for what was considered the success in Iraq—McChrystal running JSOC in the shadows, or Petraeus for instituting the overall

counterinsurgency strategy. After Obama took office, the White House had told Petraeus to stay out of the spotlight—they were worried about the general’s presidential ambitions and they were afraid he would overshadow the young president, McChrystal explained.

The White House told McChrystal, “‘We don’t want a man on horseback.’ I said I don’t even have a horse. They are very worried about Petraeus. They certainly don’t have to be worried about me,” McChrystal said. “But Petraeus, if he wanted to run, he’s had a lot of offers. He says he doesn’t want to, and I believe him.”

“I think he seems like a smart enough guy that in 2012, as a journalist, as someone who covered the campaign—” I started to say.

“Do you think he could win?” McChrystal asked me.

“Not in 2012,” I said. “I think in 2016 it would be a no-brainer. But I’ve seen it happen to these guys who get built up, built up, built up . . . If he steps into it in 2012, the narrative is ‘Oh, he shouldn’t have done that. Is that a dishonorable thing to do for an honorable general?’ And that is the narrative. That’s the first cover of *Time*.” [my emphasis]

McChrystal speculates to Hastings about the Obama Administration’s insecurity regarding David Petraeus (a speculation I agree with). That’s why, McChrystal claims, the showboat Petraeus had gotten so quiet.

But McChrystal offered another reason for Petraeus’ silence: Petraeus wanted to stay away from the taint of Afghanistan, which everyone seemed sure wasn’t going to work out so well.

So after Hastings' original article—revealing the frank comments of McChrystal's staffers came out, what happens? Petraeus has to follow McChrystal, commanding the war that everyone seems anxious to blame someone else for. Obama gets rid of McChrystal, but also taints Petraeus with precisely the stinker war he seems to want to avoid.

Mind you, Petraeus has since moved on, now commanding the purportedly secret drone campaigns in other countries.

Still, read now, against the background of Administration attempts (partly negotiated by Petraeus, I wonder?) to get a face-saving peace with the Taliban, it seems all the more sordid.

Afghanistan—where a purportedly broke America continues to dump billions of dollars—seemed to be treated more as a battleground for arrogant men to fight their own political battles than a war anyone aspired to winning.