

AFTER TRADING JOBS, PETRAEUS AND PANETTA HAVE TRADED SIDES IN MILITARY VS. INTELLIGENCE DIFFERENCES



Mid-trade photo of David Petraeus, left, and Leon Panetta in July, 2011 in Kabul when Petraeus headed ISAF/NATO and Panetta had just taken over as Defense Secretary. (Department of State photo via Flickr)

What a difference a year makes.

Here is the New York Times with some of the fallout from the Afghanistan National Intelligence Estimate prepared in December, 2010, in an article published about a week after the report was supplied to Congress:

American military commanders and senior Pentagon officials have already criticized the reports as out of date and say that the cut-off date for the Afghanistan report, Oct. 1, does not allow it to take into account what the military cites as tactical gains in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces in the south in the six weeks since. Pentagon and military officials also say the

reports were written by desk-bound Washington analysts who have spent limited time, if any, in Afghanistan and have no feel for the war.

“They are not on the ground living it day in and day out like our forces are, so they don’t have the proximity and perspective,” said a senior defense official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not want to be identified while criticizing the intelligence agencies. The official said that the 30,000 additional troops that Mr. Obama ordered to Afghanistan in December 2009 did not all arrive until September, meaning that the intelligence agencies had little time to judge the effects of the escalation. There are now about 100,000 American forces in Afghanistan.

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The dispute also reflects the longstanding cultural differences between intelligence analysts, whose job is to warn of potential bad news, and military commanders, who are trained to promote “can do” optimism.

A new National Intelligence Estimate for Afghanistan has been prepared and the Los Angeles Times yesterday reported on the estimate and its responses, including this:

The findings prompted a sharp response from Marine Corps Gen. John Allen, the U.S. commander of Western forces in the war, and Ryan Crocker, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, who filed their objections in a one-page written dissent. The comment was also signed by Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, commander of Central Command, and Adm. James Stavridis, supreme allied commander of the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization.

Military and Pentagon officials argued that assumptions used by intelligence agencies were flawed.

"It assumes a quicker drawdown of U.S. support to the Afghan government than a lot of people are projecting," said one U.S. official familiar with Pentagon thinking, speaking of the assessment.

Military officials also cited what they claim are gaps in the intelligence agencies' understanding of the Taliban leadership's thinking, the officials said.

Although the details differ, the response by the military to the intelligence community's assessment of Afghanistan is the same. In the face of sober doubts about progress from the intelligence community, the military's "can-do" attitude claims that things are better than presented in the intelligence estimate, especially in the more recent events that weren't included in the analysis or in anticipated events that the military sees as more positive than the intelligence community does.

What is remarkable about these two responses from the military (and the two analyses from the intelligence community) is that the two most visible heads of these communities have traded places between the two reports being issued. At the time of the 2010 report, Leon Panetta was Director of the CIA. He now is Secretary of Defense. David Petraeus headed US and NATO forces in Afghanistan at the time of the 2010 report and now has replaced Panetta as head of CIA.

As the Los Angeles Times article points out, Petraeus signed onto the 2010 dissent to the NIE and that fact came up during his confirmation hearings for the CIA position:

Army Gen. David H. Petraeus wrote a dissent to last year's NIE when he was U.S. commander in the war. He is now CIA director, and he pledged during his Senate confirmation hearings not to allow his personal views as a former commander to color the CIA's analysis.

My concerns when Petraeus was first suggested to head CIA went further than just relating to "his personal views as a former commander". I feared putting him in a position to influence intelligence conclusions and wondered if he would engage in a bit of "resume polishing" by claiming military successes from his command time that weren't warranted. After all, since there is such a behind the scenes push to prepare Petraeus for an eventual political career, as head of the CIA he would be in a position to make his own push in that direction.

That the new NIE doesn't come to a more positive conclusion than the previous one is encouraging in light of the concerns described above. However, it should be kept in mind that the NIE is the product of a large number of intelligence agencies and not just the CIA. It would be very interesting to compare the 2010 and 2011 CIA analyses by themselves without the other agencies' views being folded in.

Back when Petraeus was first being nominated to head CIA, Josh Rogin covered some of the concerns that were expressed about Petraeus being put into a role where he would be judging the outcome of his own previous work:

The leaked NIE caused a rift between the CIA and the Pentagon, with military officials claiming that the intelligence community was not up to date on progress in Afghanistan. With Petraeus now heading to the CIA, he will be charged with evaluating his own rosy assessments of the course of the war.

"The specific guy who was responsible

for producing a positive prognosis is now going to a job where he has to judge his own prognosis and grade his own work," said Stephen Biddle, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. "The institutional culture of the military is generally optimistic and can do. The institutional culture of the intelligence community is generally skeptical and pessimistic."

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Sen. Dianne Feinstein, the chairwoman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, also expressed some reservations about Petraeus becoming CIA director.

"In Iraq, at CENTCOM and in Afghanistan, Gen. Petraeus has been a consumer of intelligence and has commanded DoD intelligence resources. But that is a different role than leading the top civilian intelligence agency. I look forward to hearing his vision for the CIA and his plans to make sure the CIA is collecting the type of intelligence that policymakers need," she said in a statement e-mailed to *The Cable*.

At the same time, Leon Panetta now has assumed the role of saying we are winning instead of leading one of the agencies that points out the lack of measurable progress. From the Los Angeles Times article:

"We're moving in the right direction and we're winning this very tough conflict," Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta told troops on Dec. 14 at Forward Operating Base Sharana in the eastern province of Paktika.

Pentagon spokesman George Little said Wednesday that Panetta continues to believe there has been "substantial progress." The key, he said, is "to

strengthen Afghan security forces and to build toward a long-term relationship with Afghanistan.”

Isn't it nice how our government's movers and shakers can trade jobs with one another and quickly assume the required opposite sides of an argument from their previous positions? Was Panetta correct in 2010 or is he correct now? When was Petraeus right and when was he wrong? How can Congress and the American public make any sense of what Panetta and Petraeus say when they each have argued exactly opposite positions with only one year between changing sides of the argument? It would be very inviting to dismiss these differences as merely the result of Panetta and Petraeus being on opposite teams in a sport and being traded from one team to another between seasons. However, many lives and a huge amount of money are expended in Afghanistan, and the gaming merely serves to increase those losses. When the arguments are gamed, truth becomes yet another of the losses.