

PETRAEUS' CHALLENGE TO OBAMA

As I noted in this post, the front page NYT story putting Petraeus in charge of the paramilitary groups I will call "JUnc-WTF," which are deployed in allied countries, reminded me of Eric Massa's allegations that Dick Cheney and Petraeus were plotting a coup (though, as Massa describes it, it sounds more like an "election challenge").

- Earlier in the year, long before the allegations had been made public, Massa had called me with a potentially huge story: Four retired generals – three four-stars and one three-star – had informed him, he said, that General David Petraeus, the head of U.S. Central Command, had met twice in secret with former vice president Dick Cheney. In those meetings, the generals said, Cheney had attempted to recruit Petraeus to run for president as a Republican in 2012.

- The generals had told him, and Massa had agreed, that if someone didn't act immediately to reveal this plot, American constitutional democracy itself was at risk. Massa and I had had several conversation on the topic, each more urgent than the last. He had gone to the Pentagon, he told me, demanding answers. He knew the powerful forces that he was dealing with, he told me. They'd stop at nothing to prevent the truth from coming out, he said, including destroying him. "I told the official, 'If I have to get up at a committee hearing and go public with this, it will cause the mother of all shitstorms and your life will be hell. So I need a meeting. *Now.*'"

The Esquire has a follow-up noting it would only

be a problem if Petraeus starting running while still on active duty and Politico has a denial from Petraeus' people.

Then there's Jonathan Alter's report of the tensions last year between Obama and Joe Biden on one side, and Bob Gates, Mike Mullen, David Petraeus, and Stanley McChrystal on the other. Alter describes the span of this confrontation as starting on September 13, two weeks before Petraeus signed the directive for JUnc-WTF, until November 11. The confrontation arose when the Generals kept publicizing their demands for a bigger, indefinite surge in Afghanistan.

Mullen dug himself in especially deep at his reconfirmation hearings for chairman of the Joint Chiefs when he made an aggressive case for a long-term commitment in Afghanistan. White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel was enraged at Mullen's public testimony and let the Pentagon know it. When Petraeus gave an interview to *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson on Sept. 4 calling for a "fully resourced, comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign," the chief of staff was even angrier.

From the start, the potential of a Petraeus presidential run was in the background.

Some aides worried at least briefly that Petraeus was politically ambitious and was making an implied threat: decide Afghanistan my way or I just might resign my command and run for president in 2012. It wasn't a crazy thought. Rep. Peter King and various blogs were promoting him for high office.

Ultimately, presented with the choice of deferring to the Generals or undercutting them, Obama chose a third option: surging in Afghanistan, but sternly scolding them to make sure they would back a withdrawal in 18 months.

Obama was perfectly aware of the box he was now in. He could defer entirely to his generals, as President Bush had done, which he considered an abdication of responsibility. Or he could overrule them, which would weaken their effectiveness, with negative consequences for soldiers in the field, relations with allies, and the president's own political position. There had to be a third way, he figured.

In the meantime it was important to remind the brass who was in charge. Inside the National Security Council, advisers considered what happened next historic, a presidential dressing-down unlike any in the United States in more than half a century. In the first week of October, Gates and Mullen were summoned to the Oval Office, where the president told them that he was "exceedingly unhappy" with the Pentagon's conduct. He said the leaks and positioning in advance of a decision were "disrespectful of the process" and "damaging to the men and women in uniform and to the country." In a cold fury Obama said he wanted to know "here and now" if the Pentagon would be on board with any presidential decision and could faithfully implement it.

In other words, Obama was trying to impress his authority over Petraeus at the same time as Petraeus was codifying JUnc-WTF, which implemented paramilitary units that were only subjected to NSC oversight if DOD felt like allowing that oversight.

In March, Petraeus made a much-noticed trip to New Hampshire.

Then, as Digby notes, Petraeus recently did the rounds at Cheney's old ~~lair~~ stomping grounds, AEI. In his speech thanking the AEI for giving him the Irving Kristol Award, Petraeus injected

a seeming total non-sequitur about Julius Caesar (?!?!) and then paid special tribute to the role the Kagans had in the Iraq surge.

Earlier today, as I was talking with my wife about tonight's speech, she reminded me of a story about a young school boy's report on Julius Caesar. "Julius Caesar was born a long time ago," the little boy explained. "He was a great general. He won some important battles. He made a long speech. They killed him..." I'll try to avoid Caesar's fate. But this is the Irving Kristol lecture—and I do need to say something meaningful.

Well, needless to say, it's an enormous honor to be with you this evening especially given the many distinguished guests here this evening—Vice President Cheney, Governor Allen, Members of Congress, Ambassadors, serving and former cabinet officials, and many, many others—including a number of wounded warriors as well.

Indeed, I'm particularly pleased to have this opportunity because it gives me a chance to express my respect for AEI, an organization whose work I know not just by reputation—but also through first-hand experience.

One recent AEI effort, of course, stands out in particular. In the fall of 2006, AEI scholars helped develop the concept for what came to be known as "the surge." Fred and Kim Kagan and their team, which included retired General Jack Keane, prepared a report that made the case for additional troops in Iraq. As all here know, it became one of those rare think tank products that had a truly strategic impact.

Petraeus described the development and

implementation his counterinsurgency approach—including this description of the kind of oversight required by it.

Now, careful oversight should not be taken to imply micromanagement. Indeed, micromanagement is impossible when one is leading large organizations with many subordinate elements, as was the case in which I found myself in 2006. Instead, what we sought were leaders at all levels who understood the big ideas and then exercised the initiative needed to make changes in how their organizations helped prepare units getting ready to deploy. And so, the only sensible approach was to have a light hand on the reins and to encourage everyone involved to get on with it and do what they thought was necessary given the intent we'd mapped out.

Petraeus he ended by saying he hoped he had given a speech the father of Neoconservatism, Irving Kristol, would love, then giving a tribute to the call he was hearing from his country.

Well, my goal tonight was two-fold: first, to explain the changes we made in our Army in 2006; and, second, to give a speech that I'd like to think Irving Kristol might have enjoyed.

[snip]

Our first president once captured very eloquently the feelings of those who serve our nation: "I was summoned by my country," he said, "whose voice I can never hear but with veneration and love."

And so it has been my great privilege this evening to accept the Irving Kristol Award on behalf of all those deployed in the CENTCOM area of responsibility—individuals who likewise

have been summoned by their country, whose voice they can never hear but with veneration and love.

Which brings us back to JUnc-WTF, to today's news that Petraeus was the one who put this entity—which evades Congressional oversight—into place in the middle of a big pissing match with the Administration over Afghanistan policy. And to a detail Jeremy Scahill pointed out via Twitter this morning.

interesting that the Petraeus directive for Junc-WTF is exactly what Erik Prince discussed in January

Scahill's talking, of course, of the big Vanity Fair piece in which Prince revealed that Blackwater had been tasked with just the kind of mission that JUnc-WTF envisions. Update: Actually, Scahill was talking about this tape, which was January and not December like Prince's Vanity Fair piece. Here's Scahill's description:

In the speech, Prince proposed that the US government deploy armed private contractors to fight "terrorists" in Nigeria, Yemen, Somalia and Saudi Arabia, specifically to target Iranian influence.

[snip]

Prince painted a global picture in which Iran is "at the absolute dead center... of badness." The Iranians, he said, "want that nuke so that it is again a Persian Gulf and they very much have an attitude of when Darius ran most of the Middle East back in 1000 BC. That's very much what the Iranians are after." [NOTE: Darius of Persia actually ruled from 522 BC-486 BC]. Iran, Prince charged, has a "master plan to stir up and organize a Shia revolt through the whole region." Prince proposed that armed private soldiers from companies like Blackwater

be deployed in countries throughout the region to target Iranian influence, specifically in Yemen, Somalia and Saudi Arabia. "The Iranians have a very sinister hand in these places," Prince said. "You're not going to solve it by putting a lot of uniformed soldiers in all these countries. It's way too politically sensitive. The private sector can operate there with a very, very small, very light footprint." In addition to concerns of political expediency, Prince suggested that using private contractors to conduct such operations would be cost-effective. "The overall defense budget is going to have to be cut and they're going to look for ways, they're going to have to have ways to become more efficient," he said. "And there's a lot of ways that the private sector can operate with a much smaller, much lighter footprint."

That's the background, then, against which the military continues to build permanent prisons—at which we continue the abuse Cheney instituted—in Afghanistan and Obama prepares to ask Congress for more money to support the seemingly endless war there.