NEARLY EIGHT YEARS AFTER PETRAEUS' "TANGIBLE PROGRESS" WASHPO OP-ED, IRAQ SECURITY TRAINING STILL A FAILURE



Petraeus likes pineapple, but only if it's fresh. (Kyle McDonald photo, Creative Commons license)

One of the topics I seem to find myself posting on the most frequently is the remarkable lack of accountability for the spectacular failure of David Petraeus' efforts to train the Iraqi security apparatus. Petraeus has repeatedly touted how wonderfully his training work went and yet whenever the failures of this training actually make it into corporate journalism, Petraeus' name is nowhere to be found.

Such is the case again today. An article titled "U.S. May Scrap Costly Efforts to Train Iraqi Police" appears on the front page of today's New York Times and it shows, once again, that the tremendous amounts of money and effort that have gone into "training" in Iraq are a complete waste (and since training is shown to be a failure in this article, Petraeus' name does not appear):

> In the face of spiraling costs and Iraqi

> officials who say they never wanted it in the first place, the State Department has slashed — and may jettison entirely by the end of the year — a multibillion-dollar police training program that was to have been the centerpiece of a hugely expanded civilian mission here.

But wait, this is the State Department. How did the effort get in their hands? It turns out that they started it originally, turned it over to Petraeus and then recently took it back:

> Since 2003, the American government has spent nearly $8 billion training the Iraqi police. The program was first under the State Department, but it was transferred to the Department of Defense in 2004 as the insurgency intensified. Yet the force that the American military left behind was trained to fight a counterinsurgency, not to act as a traditional law enforcement organization. Police officers here, for example, do not pull over speeding drivers or respond to calls about cats stuck in trees.

Petraeus burst onto the scene politically in September of 2004, when he penned an op-ed in the Washington Post in which he praised himself for his wonderful work in training Iraqi security forces:

> Helping organize, train and equip nearly a quarter-million of Iraq's security forces is a daunting task. Doing so in the middle of a tough insurgency increases the challenge enormously, making the mission akin to repairing an aircraft while in flight — and while being shot at. Now, however, 18 months after entering Iraq, I see tangible progress. Iraqi security elements are being rebuilt from the ground up.

This was a nearly unprecedented move by an active military officer, jumping into a political discussion just before a critical presidential election. Petraeus' actions could be seen in no other light than as an endorsement of Bush's war and an attempt to help Bush get re-elected by painting a rosy picture of "progress" at a time when citizens were beginning to think the war effort had been a waste.

Petraeus threw some big numbers around in the op-ed:

> Nonetheless, there are reasons for optimism. Today approximately 164,000 Iraqi police and soldiers (of which about 100,000 are trained and equipped) and an additional 74,000 facility protection forces are performing a wide variety of security missions. Equipment is being delivered. Training is on track and increasing in capacity. Infrastructure is being repaired. Command and control structures and institutions are being reestablished.

And yet, when we hit the review of war progress three years later in September of 2007, Petraeus was not held accountable for the fact that his claims on training had been false. In their "fact-checking" of the Move-On.org "General Betray Us" ad, the Washington Post (while awarding three Pincchios to Move-On and undoubtedly earning a number of their own) wrung their hands over the training claims:

> With hindsight, Petraeus was overly optimistic in his 2004 assessment. But does this statement support MoveOn.org's indictment against him?
>
> A claim of "tangible progress" was not totally unreasonable in 2004. The more important question is whether that progress was sufficient to stabilize Iraq. Obviously, it wasn't.

Yup, Petraeus clearly claimed in 2004 that his training had everything on track to stabilize Iraq in short order. That turned out not to be true, but the Post merely decided to describe that as "not totally unreasonable" so that they could award Pincchios to Move-On for pointing out where Petraeus lied. The Post had a clearly marked roadmap showing where and how Petraeus lied, and they chose to shield him against his failures.

Sadly, this indirect reference in the "fact checker" is about the only place the issue of training came up during the 2007 debate, and yet the misleading statements about training were clearly an area in which Petraeus should have been most vulnerable at the time. Petraeus was allowed to wipe the slate clean of his previous failures and lead the "new, improved" effort in Iraq.

Going back to today's Times article, a bit of reading between the lines shows that as we approach eight years after Petraeus' claim of "tangible progress", the entire concept of training has been a sham from the start. Recall that we read earlier that "the force that the American military left behind was trained to fight a counterinsurgency", but the Times tells us in another part of their article:

> The Iraqis have also insisted that the training sessions be held at their own facilities, rather than American ones. But reflecting the mistrust that remains between Iraqi and American officials, the State Department's security guards will not allow the trainers to establish set meeting times at Iraqi facilities, so as not to set a pattern for insurgents, who still sometimes infiltrate Iraq's military and police.

Although we have avoided traditional police training to train Iraq's police in counterinsurgency, that force is still infiltrated by…insurgents. We have poured

billions of dollars down the training rathole and accomplished nothing.

Despite these spectacular failures, the most visible leader of training in Iraq, David Petraeus, has never been called to task for his actions claiming success. Instead, we have the same group that was instrumental in getting unrepentant torturer Allen West elected to Congress agitating last January to get Petraeus a fifth star, presumably as an attempt to bolster his chances for an eventual Presidential run. And in the meantime, Petraeus is happily running the CIA and eating his pineapple.