An Interview with David Petraeus

Recent polling shows that two-thirds of Americans do not believe the war in Afghanistan is worth fighting anymore. What makes you think it is worth fighting?

General Petraeus: 9/11. I think it is important to remember that the 9/11 attacks were planned in Afghanistan by al Qaeda when the Taliban controlled the bulk of the country and that the initial training of the attackers was carried out in Afghanistan in al Qaeda camps prior to them moving on to Germany and then to U.S. flight schools. And it is a vital national security interest for our country that Afghanistan not once again become a sanctuary for al Qaeda or other transnational extremists of that type.

In your prepared statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, you said that the core objective is to ensure that Afghanistan does not again become a sanctuary for al Qaeda. What makes you think that a Taliban-led Afghanistan would permit al Qaeda to return?

General Petraeus: First of all, they did it before. History does show that there is a strong connection between the Afghan Taliban, or the Quetta Shura Taliban, and al Qaeda. We know that there is a continuing relationship, and we think there is a strong likelihood—especially if al Qaeda is under continued, very strong pressure in its sanctuaries in the tribal area of Pakistan—that it is looking for other sanctuaries and that Afghanistan will once again be attractive to it.

Beyond denying Afghanistan to al Qaeda, what do you believe are our responsibilities to the Afghan people with respect to the kind of state we leave behind?

General Petraeus: To achieve our core objective in Afghanistan, we need to enable it to secure itself and to govern itself. It is up to

General David Petraeus, USA, is Commander of U.S. Central Command.

Afghanistan to determine how to operationalize those concepts, particularly with respect to governance, and I think we can be reassured by developments in that regard as reflected in their constitution—for example, the fact that there are 10 percent more women in their parliament than there are in the U.S. Congress, and that 37 percent of the 8.2 million students in Afghan schools this school year, this academic year, are female. By the way, that contrasts with virtually none during the Taliban time when there were less than a million in school overall. There are also many other areas in which there are progressive steps that have resulted from the new constitution and the new Afghanistan.

Do you believe that we have any ongoing commitment or responsibility to ensure that there is forward progress in democratic governance once we leave militarily?

General Petraeus: To be candid, I think that is probably a topic for the policymakers. Having said that, I do think that since stability comes from a government that is representative of and responsive to the people, we would like to see those characteristics resident in Afghan governance.

If counterinsurgency depends on legitimizing the host government, why do you think the Karzai government will endure our departure when it is largely perceived as corrupt, ineffective, and unable to effectively protect the civilian population?

General Petraeus: The Afghan government is developing the capability to secure itself, and it has made considerable strides in that regard over the course of the last year in particular. But, again, it has been working at this for a number of years. As I mentioned on Capitol Hill, it is only in the last 6 or 8 months that we've gotten the inputs right in Afghanistan to conduct the kind of comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign necessary to help our Afghan partners develop the capability to secure and govern themselves. With respect to some of the other challenges that face the government, I believe that President Karzai is very focused on dealing with the issues of criminal patronage networks that threaten the institutions to which we will need to transition tasks in the years ahead. I have seen steps already taken in that regard, such as with the firing of the Afghan Surgeon General, the relief of the military chain of command of the National Military Hospital, the replacement of governors, chiefs of police, and so forth.

With respect to those illicit connections and patronage networks, do you think that continued access to substantial revenues from the poppy crop will compromise the accountability of the security forces to the state and government, as it provides them an alternative income source?

General Petraeus: In areas where there is Afghan governance and Afghan security, there has been considerably reduced poppy cultivation. The Afghan government is serious about reducing the poppy crop. It is serious about the illegal narcotics industry. It recognizes that there cannot be the establishment of rule of law if the major agricultural crop produces illegal export goods.

Can enduring stability and security be achieved in Afghanistan while the Taliban and Islamic extremists have relatively safe sanctuary in Pakistan?

General Petraeus: Clearly, anything that Afghanistan's neighbors do to reduce the activities of groups causing problems for Afghanistan is beneficial for the country. Having said that, there can be considerable progress made in Afghanistan, especially if reintegration of reconcilable insurgent members develops critical mass and sets off a chain reaction through the country, so that senior leaders sitting in Pakistani sanctuaries call up their cell phones and high frequency radios and don't get any answer from the fighters on the ground.

Do you think that you could do a better job in Afghanistan if you had the concurrence of Pakistani authorities to be able to engage in hot pursuit over the border?

General Petraeus: I don't think anyone is seeking the ability to conduct ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] ground operations or U.S.-only ground operations on Pakistani soil.

Unlike in Iraq, which has a reliable stream of revenue, do you see a need for long-term international financial support to maintain the Afghan security forces?

General Petraeus: As the Australian prime minister noted when she was in Washington, and as a number of other troop-contributing nation leaders have noted, Afghanistan is going to require sustained support even beyond the 2014 goals established at the Lisbon summit. Having said that, the levels of support should be substantially reduced and the character of support should substantially change in the years ahead.

What is needed in Washington and in the field to ensure unity of effort in a counterinsurgency operation? Do you have that in Afghanistan?

General Petraeus: I believe we do. What is needed is civil-military coordination, the achievement of unity of effort among all of those engaged in the effort, regardless of department or agency, or country for that matter. We have 48 troop-contributing nations active in Afghanistan, and some other major donors like Japan. There is a Civil-Military Campaign Plan in Afghanistan now that helps enormously to coordinate the activities of civil and military elements, to synchronize the effects that they are seeking to achieve, and so forth.

And are you getting today what you need from the civilian agencies of the U.S. Government?

General Petraeus: We are, although there has never been a military commander in history who would say that he wouldn't welcome additional civilian assistance, or frankly a variety of other augmentations and resources or funding authorities, bandwidth, as well as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

Do you think that we are going to need the kind of interagency capacity that we have developed over the past couple of years, in the post-Iraq/Afghanistan era?

General Petraeus: I do. I can't envision necessarily where we will employ it. There may be periods during which we need less of it than we need right now with the two major operations ongoing in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as some new endeavors unfolding. I definitely think that there will be a need for the kinds

of partnerships between civil and military elements that we have forged over the course of the last 10 years.

How do we ensure that the lessons learned in Afghanistan and Iraq this last decade are preserved and institutionalized and internalized for the future?

General Petraeus: You try to capture them by lessons learned organizations, in journals such as *PRISM*, in books and edited volumes and conferences, in schoolhouses, in doctrinal revisions, in leader development courses, and in the collective training centers—every component of the military term *DOTMLPF*: doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities.

So that's how to do it. Do you have any fear that we might not do that? That we might just recoil from this engagement the way that we did after Vietnam?

General Petraeus: No, I don't actually. I think there is a clear recognition that there will be a continuing need for capabilities to respond to efforts that require civil-military partnerships.

What impact does our ongoing commitment to Afghanistan have on our ability to respond to other challenges that may be of equal or even greater threat to our national security?

General Petraeus: I think that we've actually reconstituted reserves over time in the past year or so, as we've been able to draw down in Iraq, in particular, even as we have increased our forces in Afghanistan. We have expanded the pool of certain elements that are described as high-demand, low-density, as our forces have grown in endstate as well.

In the positions that you've been in over the last decade, what would be your advice to the civilian agencies right now, as they are looking at their future? The U.S. Agency for International Development, for example, or the State Department or Justice Department?

General Petraeus: It would be to get to know the appropriations committees on Capitol Hill even better than they already know them. PRISM