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“Tell Me How This Ends?”

David Petraeus Finally Answers His Own Question

By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

It took 14 years, but now we have an answer.

It was March 2003, the invasion of Iraq was underway, and Major General David Petraeus was in command of the 101st Airborne Division heading for the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. Rick Atkinson, *Washington Post* journalist and military historian, was accompanying him. Six days into a lightning campaign, his division suddenly found itself stopped 30 miles southwest of the city of Najaf by terrible weather, including a blinding dust storm, and the unexpectedly “fanatical” attacks of Iraqi irregulars. At that moment, Atkinson [reported](#),

“[Petraeus] hooked his thumbs into his flak vest and adjusted the weight on his shoulders. ‘Tell me how this ends,’ he said. ‘Eight years and eight divisions?’ The allusion was to advice supposedly given the White House in the early 1950s by a senior Army strategist upon being asked what it would take to prop up French forces in South Vietnam. Petraeus’s grin suggested the comment was more droll quip than historical assertion.”

Certainly, Petraeus knew his history when it came to American interventions in distant lands. He had entered West Point just as the American war in Vietnam was beginning to wind down and did his [doctoral dissertation](#) at Princeton in 1987 on that conflict (“The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era”). In it, he wrote,

“Vietnam cost the military dearly. It left America’s military leaders confounded, dismayed, and discouraged. Even worse, it devastated the armed forces, robbing them of dignity, money, and qualified people for a decade... Vietnam was an extremely painful reminder that when it comes to intervention, time and patience are not American virtues in abundant supply.”

So no wonder he was well acquainted with that 1954 [exchange](#) between President Dwight D. Eisenhower and former Korean War commander General Matthew Ridgeway about the French war in Vietnam. Perhaps, the “droll quip” aspect of his comment lay in his knowledge of just how badly Ridgeway underestimated both the years and the troop numbers that the American version of that war would eat up before it, too, ended in disaster and in a military as riddled with protest and as [close to collapse](#) as was imaginable for an American force of our era.

In his thesis, Petraeus called for the military high command to be granted a far freer hand in whatever interventions the future held. In that sense, in 1987, he was already mainlining into a twenty-first-century world in which the U.S. military continues to get everything it wants ([and more](#)) as it fights its wars without having to deal with either an obstreperous citizen army or too many politicians trying to impose their will on its actions.

And by the way, though his Najaf comments have regularly been cited as if they were *sui generis*, as the Ridgeway reference indicates, he was hardly the first American military commander or political figure to appropriate Joan of Arc’s question in Bernard Shaw’s play *Saint Joan*: “How long, oh Lord, how long?”

As Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Halberstam recounted in his history of the Vietnam years, *The Best and the Brightest*, for instance, President Lyndon Johnson turned to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Earle Wheeler in a June 1965 meeting and asked of the war in Vietnam, “What do you think it will take to do the job?”

Wheeler’s answer echoed Ridgeway’s 11 years earlier, though in the escalatory mode that was typical of Vietnam: “It all depends on what your definition of the job is, Mr. President. If you intend to drive the last Vietcong out of Vietnam it will take seven hundred, eight hundred thousand, a million men and about seven years. But if your definition of the job is to prevent the Communists from taking over the country, that is, stopping them from doing it, then you’re talking about different gradations and different levels. So tell us what the job is and we’ll answer it.”

A Generational Approach to America’s Wars

Not so long after that moment on the outskirts of Najaf, the 101st Airborne made its way to Baghdad just as the [burning and looting](#) began, and that would only be the prologue to David Petraeus’s war, to his version of eight years and eight divisions. When an insurgency (actually several) broke out in Iraq, he would be dispatched to the northern city of Mosul (now a [pile of rubble](#) after its 2017 “liberation” from the Islamic State in Washington’s third Iraq War). There, he would first experiment with bringing back from the Vietnam experience the very strategy the U.S. military had hoped to be rid of forever: “counterinsurgency,” or the winning of what in that war had regularly been called “hearts and minds.” In 2004, *Newsweek* was already hailing him on its cover with the dramatic [question](#): “Can This Man Save Iraq?” (Four months after Petraeus ended his stint in that city, the police chief he had trained there [went over](#) to the insurgents and it became a stronghold for them.)

By the time the occupation of Iraq turned into a full-scale disaster, he was back at Fort Leavenworth running the U.S. Army’s Combined Arms Center. During that period, he and another officer, Marine Lieutenant General James Mattis -- does that name ring any bells? -- joined forces to [oversee](#) the development and publication of *Field Service Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency Operations*. It would be the first official counterinsurgency (COIN) how-to book the military had produced since the Vietnam years. In the process, he [became](#) “the world’s leading expert in counterinsurgency warfare.” He would famously return to Iraq in 2007, that manual in hand, with five brigades, or 20,000 U.S. troops, for what would become known as “the surge,” or “the new way forward,” an attempt to bail the Bush administration out of its disastrous occupation of the country. His counterinsurgency operations would, like the initial invasion, be hailed by experts and pundits in Washington (including [Petraeus himself](#)) as a marvel and a success of the first order, as a true turning point in Iraq and in the war on terror.

A decade later, with America’s third Iraq War ongoing, you could be excused for viewing the “successes” of that surge [somewhat differently](#).

In the process, Petraeus (or “King David” as he was [supposedly nicknamed](#) by Iraqis during his stint in Mosul) would become America’s most celebrated, endlessly featured general, and go on in 2008 to head U.S. Central Command (overseeing America’s wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq). In 2010, he would become the U.S. Afghan commander, largely so that he could perform the counterinsurgency miracles in Afghanistan he had supposedly performed in Iraq. In 2011, he became Barack Obama’s CIA director only to crash and burn a year later in a [scandal](#) over a lover-cum-biographer and the misuse of classified documents, after which he morphed into a go-to expert on our wars and a partner at KKR, a global investment firm. In other words, as with the three generals of the surge generation now ascendant in Washington, including Petraeus’s former COIN pal James Mattis (who also headed U.S. Central Command), he presided over this country’s failing wars in the Greater Middle East.

And only recently, 14 years after he and Atkinson were briefly trapped outside Najaf, in his role as a pundit and prognosticator on his former wars, he [finally answered](#) -- and not quippingly either -- the question that plagued him then. Though his comments were certainly covered in the news (as anything he says is), in a sense no one noticed. [Asked](#) by Judy Woodruff of the *PBS News Hour* whether, in Donald Trump’s America, it was “smart” to once again send more U.S. troops surging into Afghanistan, he called the Pentagon’s decision “heartening,” even as he warned that it wasn’t a war that would end any time soon.

Instead, after so many years of involvement, experience, thought, and observation, in a studio without a grain of sand, no less a dust storm in sight, he offered this observation:

“But this is a generational struggle. This is not something that is going to be won in a few years. We’re not going to take a hill, plant a flag, [and] go home to a victory parade. And we need to be there for the long haul, but in a way that is, again, sustainable. We have been in Korea for 65-plus years because there is an important national interest for that. We were in Europe for a very long period of time, still there, of course, and actually with a renewed emphasis now, given Russia’s aggressive actions. And I think that’s the way we need to approach this.”

In proposing such a “generational struggle” to be handed on to our children, if not grandchildren, he’s in good company. In recent times, the Pentagon high command, too, has been adopting a “[generational approach](#)” to Afghanistan and assumedly our other wars across the Greater Middle East and Africa. Similarly, the scholars of the Brookings Institution have [urged](#) on Washington’s policymakers what they call “an enduring partnership” in Afghanistan: “The U.S.-Afghan partnership should be recognized as generational in duration, given the nature of the threat and the likely longevity of its future manifestations.”

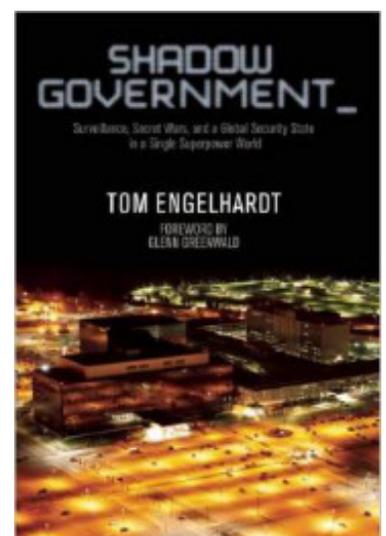
Even if, under further questioning by Woodruff, Petraeus wouldn’t quite cop to a 60-year Afghan war (that is, to a war lasting at least until 2061), his long-delayed answer to his own question of the 2003 invasion moment was now definitive. Such American wars won’t end. Not now. Maybe not ever. And in a way you can’t be much blunter or grimmer than that in your assessment of the “successes” of the war on terror.

A Military Success Story of the Strangest Sort

Until James “Mad Dog” Mattis hit Washington in 2017, no American general of our era was ever written about as much as, or in a more celebratory fashion, than David Petraeus. Adulatory (if not fawning) profiles of him are legion. Even today, in the wake of [barely avoided](#) felony and other charges (for, among other things, lying to the FBI) -- he pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor in the handling of classified documents and was sentenced to two years of probation and a fine -- he may still be this country’s most celebrated general.

But why exactly the celebration? The answer would have to be that he continues to be lauded and considered a must-quote expert because in Washington this country’s war on terror and the generalship that’s accompanied it are now beyond serious analysis or reconsideration. Sixteen years after the invasion of Afghanistan, as America’s wars continue to spread across the Greater Middle East and Africa, its generals -- thanks in part to Donald Trump and the need for “[adult day care](#)” in the White House -- are still treated like the only “[adults in the room](#)” in our nation’s capital, like, in short, American winners.

And yet consider recent events in the central African country of Niger, which already has an operating U.S. drone base, another [under construction](#), and about [800](#) American troops quietly but permanently stationed there. It’s also a country that, until this moment, not an American in a million would have been able to locate on a map. On October 4th, four Green Berets were killed and two others wounded during a “[routine training mission](#)” there. Patrolling with Nigerien troops, they were ambushed by Islamic militants -- whether from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or a [new branch of ISIS](#) remains unclear. That officially makes Niger at least the [eighth country](#), including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, and Libya, to be absorbed into Washington’s war on terror and, in case you hadn’t noticed, in none of them has that war ended and in none have U.S. forces



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triumphed.

And yet you could comb the recent mainstream coverage of the events in Niger without finding any indication that those deaths represented a modest new escalation in the never-ending, ever-spreading war on terror.

As was inevitable, in Iraq and Syria, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic "caliphate" is finally collapsing. The city of Mosul is back in Iraqi hands, as is [Tal Afar](#), and more recently the town of [Hawija](#) (with a rare [mass surrender](#) of ISIS militants). Those were the last significant urban areas controlled by ISIS in Iraq, while in Syria, the "apocalyptic ruins" of the Islamic State's "capital," Raqqa, are also largely in the hands of forces allied with and supported by the air power of the U.S. military. In what are now the ravaged ruins of Syria and Iraq, however, such "victories" will inevitably prove as hollow as were the "successful" invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq or the "successful" overthrow of Libyan autocrat Muammar Gaddafi. Meanwhile, the Islamic State may have spread its brand to another country with U.S. forces in it. And yet, across a vast swath of the planet, the wars of David Petraeus, James Mattis, and the other generals of this era simply go on and on in a region being fractured and devastated (and whose vast numbers of displaced refugees are, in turn, helping to [fracture](#) Europe).

Worse yet, it's a situation that can't be seriously discussed or debated in this country because, if it were, opposition to those wars might rise and alternatives to them and the by-now brain-dead decisions of those generals, including [newly heightened](#) air wars and the latest [mini-surge](#) in Afghanistan, might become part of an actual national debate.

So think of this as a military success story of the strangest sort -- success that can be traced directly back to a single decision, now decades old, made by a long-discredited American president, Richard Nixon. Without returning to that decision, there is simply no way to understand America's twenty-first-century wars. In its own way, it would prove an act of genius (if, at least, you wanted to fight never-ending wars until the end of time).

In any case, credit, when owed, must be given. Facing an antiwar movement that wouldn't go away and, by the early 1970s, included significant numbers of both active-duty servicemen and Vietnam veterans, the president and his secretary of defense, [Melvin Laird](#), decided to try to cut into its strength by eliminating the draft. Nixon suspected that young men not endangered by the possibility of being sent into the Vietnam War might be far less eager to demonstrate against it. The military high command was uncertain about such a move. They worried, with reason, that in the wake of Vietnam it would be hard to recruit for an all-volunteer military. Who in the world, they wondered, would want to be part of such a discredited force? That was, of course, a version of Nixon's thinking turned upside down, but the president moved ahead anyway and, on [January 27, 1973](#), conscription was ended. There would be no more draft calls and the citizen's army, the one that had fought World War II to victory and had raised such a ruckus about the grim and distasteful war in Vietnam, would be no more.

In that single stroke, before he himself fell prey to the Watergate scandal and resigned his presidency, Nixon functionally created a legacy for the ages, paving the way for the American military to fight its wars "generationally" and lose them until hell froze over with the guarantee that no one in this country would seem to [care a whit](#). Or put another way, can you truly imagine such silence in "the homeland" if an American draft were continually filling the ranks of a citizen's army to fight a 16-year-old war on terror, still spreading, and now considered "generational"? I doubt it.

So as American air power in places like Yemen, Somalia, and Afghanistan is ramped up yet again, as the latest mini-surge of troops arrives in Afghanistan, as Niger enters the war, it's time to put generals David Petraeus, James Mattis, H.R. McMaster, and John Kelly in context. It's time to call them what they truly are: Nixon's children.

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