

Petraeus beats the drums for endless war in Afghanistan

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In a series of interviews with the US media this weekend, General David Petraeus, the new US commander in Afghanistan, indicated that he is not compelled to withdraw any US troops in July 2011, despite the deadline set by President Obama last December.

Petraeus was clearly aiming his media blitz at the mounting domestic opposition to the US war in Afghanistan. He gave interviews to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and to several network television correspondents in Kabul, the Afghan capital, as well as making an extended appearance on the NBC television program “Meet the Press,” broadcast Sunday morning.

Each interview conveyed the same talking points, apparently worked out in advance with the Pentagon and White House. Petraeus claimed marginal “progress” in the Afghanistan war, praised the performance of the Afghan military and the government of President Hamid Karzai, and reiterated that the size and timing of future withdrawals of American troops would be “condition-based.”

In none of the interviews was Petraeus challenged about the goals of the US conquest and continued occupation of Afghanistan, or asked to address the revelations by the Internet-based WikiLeaks group about American military atrocities in that country. Instead, in each case, he was pressed for assurances that his military strategy was viable and that the war could be won, as though military success was the sole criterion for judging US policy in Afghanistan.

Referring to the fears voiced by many congressional Democrats that the war is being lost, Petraeus told his “Meet the Press” interviewer, David Gregory, that his goal was “to show those in Washington that there is progress being made, and to do that we’ve got to build on the progress that has been established so far.”

Asked by Gregory about the July 2011 date set by Obama for beginning troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, Petraeus emphasized that he would make no commitment about the size of such a withdrawal, and left open the possibility that he would recommend against the pullout of even a token number of troops.

Gregory asked for and obtained a categorical statement that Petraeus might veto any troop pullout whatsoever in July 2011. The exchange went as follows:

GREGORY: I just want to clarify this. Did—could you reach that point and say, “I know that the process is supposed to begin, but my assessment as the commander here is that it cannot begin now”?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Certainly, yeah. Again, the president and I sat down in the Oval Office, and he expressed very clearly that what he wants from me is my best professional military advice where I understand the mission that's been assigned, we have recommended the strategy and the resources that are required for that strategy, and as there are changes in any of that, that, obviously, I would communicate that to him, recognizing that he has some issues with which he has to deal that we don't have to worry about. But that, that's real life.

Gregory cited opinion polls showing mounting opposition to the war, although he presented this opposition—now as high as 70 percent—as solely the result of loss of confidence in a military victory, not as actual opposition to the bloody toll of a decade of war, regardless of the outcome.

Petraeus noted the expanded scale of the fighting, both in intensity and geographic spread, including regions like Herat province in the southwest, and areas of the northwest and north, where the Taliban had been previously inactive. He called this extension of the war “pockets of progress.”

He added that the US military force in Afghanistan has tripled in size over the past 18 months, at President Obama's direction, and said that this, combined with some increase in non-US NATO troops, represented an essentially new stage of the war. “What we've got to show is that these additional inputs can allow greater progress,” he said.

The US general did not rule out direct talks with the Taliban and other insurgent forces, including the Haqqani network, operating in eastern Afghanistan, and led by former clients of the CIA. Petraeus said there was “every possibility” for such talks, adding that “there can be low and midlevel reintegration and, indeed, some fracturing of the senior leadership that could be really defined as reconciliation.”

Petraeus repeated the basic falsehood that underlies the US war in Afghanistan—that it is an effort to defend the American people from a new round of terrorist attacks like those of September 11, 2001. None of his interviewers questioned this, despite the acknowledgement by US government sources that there are only 50 to 100 Al Qaeda loyalists remaining in Afghanistan.

The real goal of the US intervention in Afghanistan is to strengthen the position of American imperialism in a strategically vital and oil-rich region, Central Asia, placing American forces in a country that borders Iran, China and three former Soviet republics.

The general's comments to other US media questioners went along similar lines. “The president didn't send me over here to seek a graceful exit,” he told the *New York Times*. “My marching orders are to do all that is humanly possible to help us achieve our objectives.”

In comments to the *Washington Post*, he called the counterinsurgency strategy devised by his predecessor, General Stanley McChrystal, “fundamentally sound.” He added, “We are doing everything we can to achieve progress as rapidly as we can without rushing to failure.”

The Pentagon and White House were at pains to deny any difference in policy with the general in Kabul. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, in an interview Sunday with the *Los Angeles Times*, declared the July 2011 “withdrawal” deadline firm, while depriving it of any

real significance.

“There is no question in anybody’s mind that we are going to begin drawing down troops in July of 2011,” he said, but “there hasn’t even been a discussion of a steep decline quickly” among leading officials. “As the president has said, and Hillary [secretary of state Clinton] has said and I’ve said, the pace and the number are going to depend on the conditions on the ground.”

The newspaper called Gates’s comments “a pointed rebuttal to lower-level officials in Washington who have privately asserted that Obama will rapidly withdraw troops beginning next summer.”

White House spokesman Bill Burton said Monday that July 2011 was a “non-negotiable” deadline for starting a US withdrawal from Afghanistan, while claiming that Petraeus had said much the same thing. “He said very specifically that that deadline stands and there is no daylight between the president or his commanders on the ground when it comes to July 2011,” Burton argued.

There are no doubt behind-the-scenes tensions between the Pentagon brass and the White House, already revealed in the magazine interview that led to the firing of McChrystal in June. In selecting Petraeus as McChrystal’s replacement, Obama has effectively ceded control over the war to a general promoted by George W. Bush and lionized by the media as the architect of the supposed success of the Iraq “surge.”

Perhaps as a quid pro quo, Petraeus made his most categorical denial of any political ambitions at the close of his interview on “Meet the Press.” He went through an obviously rehearsed Q&A with David Gregory on the question of his possible presidential candidacy—promoted by sections of the Republican Party. He declared, “I’ll adopt what Sherman said and go back and look at what has come to be known as a Shermanesque answer on that particular question.” In response to a follow-up by Gregory on a future entry into politics, he reiterated, “No way, no how.”

Meanwhile, the war in Afghanistan reached another bloody milestone, with the icasualties.org web site reporting that its tally of the death toll for US and other occupation troops has topped 2,000 since the war began in October 2001. These fatalities include 1,226 American soldiers, 331 from Britain, and 445 from other countries with troops in the NATO contingent, including Canada, the Netherlands and Germany, as well as non-NATO countries like Australia.

The death toll among the occupation troops will set a new record this year, above the 521 killed in 2009. Some 434 US and NATO soldiers have been killed so far this year.

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