

A Conversation with General David H. Petraeus on Strategic Military Leadership in Modern Warfare

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October 25, 2024

General David H. Petraeus is a retired four-star U.S. Army general and former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (2011–2012). A highly decorated military leader, Petraeus gained prominence as the Commander of the Multi-National Forces during the Iraq War (2007–2008), where he led efforts during the U.S. troop surge. He then served as the Commander of U.S. Central Command (2008–2010), overseeing operations across the Middle East and Central Asia. Later, he served as Commander of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces in Afghanistan (2010–2011), spearheading counterinsurgency operations. Following these military positions, he was nominated by President Barack Obama in 2011 to serve in the Cabinet as the fourth Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Today, he is the Chairman of the KKR Global Institute and co-author of his recent book titled ‘Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine.’

Jackson School Journal: Thank you for joining us today, General Petraeus. Given the resurgence of armed conflicts across the globe, understanding how strategic leadership—the directing of the operational and tactical levels to achieve broader policy objectives—is critical. Drawing from your experience as a former four-star Army General and Director of the CIA, what do you consider the most essential principles or qualities of an effective strategic leader?

General Petraeus: You may recall that the intellectual construct for the exercise of strategic leadership that I developed between my three and four-star tours in Iraq consists of four tasks: First, get the big ideas right; second, communicate them effectively throughout the breadth and depth of the organization and all those who have a stake in the outcome of the endeavor; third, oversee their implementation; and fourth, determine how they need to be refined to repeat the process again, and again.

Far and away, the most important task of a strategic leader, the leader at the very top, is to get the big ideas right—to craft the right strategy. If this task is not performed well, the chances of success are slim. In essence, then, while there are many desirable qualities in leaders at any level, the quality that is most critical is judgment, and that is particularly critical at the very top, where the quality of the strategic leader’s judgment is absolutely central to success. So, again, there are many qualities one seeks in a leader, and lists of them abound. If impressive strategic judgment is not present at the very top, the other qualities are irrelevant.

Jackson School Journal: With the rapid technological developments in the past decade, such as artificial intelligence and unmanned vehicles, how will the integration of these technologies in military operations affect the tempo of modern warfare regarding the speed and adaptability of forces on the battlefield?

General Petraeus: Artificial intelligence, machine learning, big data fusion applications, advanced positioning, navigation, and many other technological advances are all revolutionizing warfare. One only has to look at the incredible innovations on the battlefields of the Ukraine War, especially on the Ukrainian side. Ukraine is the first country, to my knowledge, that has not just an Army, Navy, and Air Force but also an Unmanned Systems Force that is equivalent to the other military services. The combination of all the technologies I highlighted, along with those in the unmanned systems arena, is introducing breathtaking advances in how the wars of the future—and the war in Ukraine already—will be fought. Given the increasing prominence of unmanned systems that are not remotely piloted but algorithmically piloted, one can get a sense of what that future will be.

There obviously are numerous operational and ethical concerns raised by these developments. But warfare of the future will be so fast that keeping humans in the loop in many operations will be a major disadvantage for the side that does so. This is already the case with many air and ballistic missile systems, which have to operate so rapidly – often to “hit a bullet with a bullet” – that the machine is allowed to carry out the engagement once the human clears it to do so. In fact, the U.S. needs to be learning much more than appears to be the case from what Ukraine is doing. The relationship between the designers, manufacturers, and employers of the unmanned systems in Ukraine is incredibly close and they are iterating on a weekly basis. In essence, the material development and procurement system in Ukraine is producing tomorrow’s technology for today’s war. By contrast, the corresponding U.S. system has been described as producing yesterday’s technology for tomorrow’s wars.

Jackson School Journal: The Israel Defense Forces' military operations for the past year have transformed Gaza into a dense combat area, recalling the urban warfare of the recent Iraq war. Given your experience as the commanding general of U.S. forces in Iraq from 2007 to 2008, what strategies should the Israel Defense Force employ to mitigate civilian casualties in Gaza?

General Patraeus: The IDF has done a very impressive job degrading Hamas' capabilities, decimating its leadership, rendering its units largely ineffective, and denying the smuggling of arms, ammunition, and material into Gaza. They did the latter by taking control of Rafah, the southern border crossing between the Sinai and Gaza, and also the Philadelphi Corridor along the border under which tunnels used to be operated.

However, the "Clear and Leave" operations the IDF is conducting repeatedly leave a vacuum, and remnants of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad thus can reconstitute their personnel, even in the absence of replacement weaponry, ammunition, explosives, etc. Clear and Leave operations also cannot achieve the security needed to prevent the activities of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the territory and to provide a better future for the Palestinian people in Gaza, which should be announced as an objective of Israel.

From the outset, I have advocated conducting the kind of "Clear, Hold, and Build" operations that were the major focus of U.S. operations during the Surge in Iraq – during which we also worked very hard to minimize loss of civilian life and damage to infrastructure. But we did not, of course, have to contend with the vast underground infrastructure with which Israel has had to deal, making the war in Gaza the most challenging urban combat in modern history.

While there are many challenges for operations such as those we conducted during the Surge in Iraq, the comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign that we conducted ultimately drove violence in Iraq down by well over 85% and enabled further reductions in the subsequent three and a half years. This campaign led to much better lives for the Iraqi people who had lived in areas occupied by Al Qaeda, the major Sunni insurgent groups, and the Shia militia elements supported by Iran.

Furthermore, if security is not established in Gaza, there is little prospect for the organized delivery of humanitarian assistance by non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations, for the introduction of Palestinian security forces trained and equipped in Jordan by the U.S., for the employment of Arab forces and contractors, for the

restoration of basic services and reconstruction, and for the establishment of local governance, and so on. An iconic figure of the Vietnam War observed that "Security may be 10% of the problem or 90% of the problem. Whatever it is, it is the first 10% or the first 90%." The same is true in any such conflict, as it was in Iraq, where Clear and Leave operations did not achieve the necessary security for the people and for all the other initiatives that needed to be pursued to make the lives of the people better and to solidify the security foundation.

In sum, the current IDF approach will not achieve the overall objectives stated by Israel at the outset of the conflict – destroying Hamas, preventing Hamas from governing Gaza again and recovering all of the hostages held by Hamas. Only a painstaking, sequential—from north to south—clear, hold, and build operation that creates numerous "gated communities" and can be cleared of extremists—and then kept clear, including by the use of biometric identification cards and careful access control—only that kind of operation can accomplish those objectives and also establish the security necessary for the organized provision of humanitarian assistance, restoration of basic services, and the reconstruction of homes and damaged infrastructure.

Jackson School Journal: In Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, Putin has led from a distance while Zelensky continues to wear military fatigues and remains close to the frontlines. From your perspective, what impact did Putin and Zelensky's respective leadership styles have on the course of the war?

General Patraeus: President Zelensky has been a brilliant strategic leader, performing the four tasks I described in the first question very impressively. His first big idea came very early on, of course, when he stated, "I need ammunition, not a ride." Then came the decision to stay in Kyiv, to keep his family there, to fight for the capital and the other areas of the country, and to keep men in the country. And, of course, his communication of the big ideas and other messages has been so brilliant that he has been described as "Churchill with an iPhone." He is, after all, a former actor and comedian who played the Ukrainian President so superbly on TV that he got elected to be the President. His oversight of the execution of the big ideas, including his example of donning a uniform instead of a suit, his energy, his inspiration, his various activities, tough personnel decisions, and how he allocates his time, have all been very impressive. And he has repeatedly made refinements to the big ideas and repeated the process.

All that notwithstanding, and all of Putin's flaws and miscalculations as Russia's strategic leader to the contrary, the reality is that Russia has some four times the manpower of Ukraine and an economy that is ten to fifteen times larger, as well. Moreover, Putin is seemingly unconcerned by the massive casualties the Russian forces have taken and has no reservations about hammering Ukraine's civilian infrastructure in addition to legitimate military targets.

Jackson School Journal: Based on your experience with post-conflict recovery efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, what are some lessons from these experiences that U.S. military leaders should follow in terms of facilitating a stable transition to a peacetime government following a prolonged conflict?

General Patraeus: The biggest of the big ideas in this arena is, once again, that no sustainable reconstruction or recovery effort is possible without security. That doesn't mean that constant repairs and reconstruction cannot be pursued during a war. Indeed, such activities are imperative, especially in Ukraine, given that Russia has damaged or destroyed virtually all of Ukraine's thermal and hydroelectric power generation plants and is now also targeting the transformer and transmission infrastructure around Ukraine's nuclear power generation facilities. But, without security, it is obviously hard to perform all of the reconstruction that is so desperately needed, especially the closer one gets to the front lines. Beyond that, it is awfully hard to attract sizable outside investment during a war.

In truth, this reality highlights yet another reason why the U.S. and the Western world should be doing everything humanly possible to enable Ukraine to change the dynamic in this war and to convince Putin that Russia cannot make additional gains at an acceptable cost. Only then might meaningful talks be held on bringing the war to an end. A critical component of any sustainable agreement will be an ironclad security guarantee by NATO or by a U.S.-led coalition of the willing, ideally with boots on the ground as is the case in the Baltic States.