

# Perspectives on General David Petraeus's SHA FR Keynote Address

*Peter L. Hahn, Brian C. Etheridge, Aaron O'Connell, and Brian D'Haeseleer*

**Editor's note:** *The following essays address various perspectives on the controversy that arose in connection to the invitation that SHA FR President Peter L. Hahn extended to General David Petraeus to be a keynote speaker at the 2018 SHA FR conference in Philadelphia. Passport publishes these comments to provide context and detail about the situation, particularly for those who were either unable to attend the Petraeus talk or were unaware of the issues raised in the weeks leading up to the conference. AJ*

**Peter L. Hahn**

**Editor's note:** *The following essay was originally sent to the SHA FR membership via e-mail on 30 June 2018. AJ*

I am writing about the discussion in the SHA FR Council during its June 21 meeting in Philadelphia about the petition addressed to SHA FR Council protesting the luncheon address by General David Petraeus at the recent SHA FR conference.

Council passed a resolution stating: "Council approves the principle of presidential appointments of keynote speakers and affirms SHA FR's tradition of promoting scholarly engagement and exchange with all such speakers."

In the discussion that preceded the vote on the resolution, I explained my rationale for inviting General Petraeus and for settling on the nature of the presentation (moderated discussion with an interlocutor) and the method for asking questions (written questions carried forward to moderator by a SHA FR staff member). Council recommended that I share my thinking with the membership, which I am happy to do:

(1) SHA FR presidents have used their discretion to invite keynote speakers to SHA FR conferences for many years. Presidents commonly have exercised such other executive decision-making authority as naming the Program Committee co-chairs and members, setting topics and inviting speakers for "presidential sessions," setting the number and style of sessions, meals, and receptions, and selecting venues for social events.

(2) By my observation and experience, luncheons have been used for many years to invite an experienced official or non-governmental practitioner of US foreign relations to speak. In my experience, which I have come to believe that most members share, I have learned considerably from such speakers about the complications of policy-making that often are hard to discern in the archives, enabling me to write and analyze from a more informed, empathetic perspective. I heard General Petraeus speak in Columbus last year and immediately imagined that he would provide an interesting talk that members would appreciate and learn from. So I decided to invite him. The moderator was selected on the basis of his professional expertise in military history and his academic credentials, including a doctorate from Oxford.

(3) I offered General Petraeus the "moderated discussion" format and the written questions method, both of which were used effectively in his Columbus presentation. I have observed and participated in such moderated discussions previously; I believe that they are a valid means of framing a presentation and that the written question method is a valid means for channeling audience queries to a speaker.

In Council's discussion of the protest petition, Council members made the following observations:

(A) SHA FR is governed democratically. An elected Nominating Committee nominates candidates for Vice President/President to run in a competitive election. The membership elects the president. Serving as our constitution, the By-Laws stipulate the broad and specific duties of the Nominating Committee, the President, and the Council. In selecting a speaker, the President is acting within her/his By-Laws authority.

(B) Subjecting prospective selection of speakers to a membership referendum would prove extremely difficult given the logistics and timing of planning a conference, issuing invitations, negotiating fees, and confirming dates.

(C) The fee paid for the keynote speaker was nominal, and it was covered by sponsor contributions. All sponsors were reputable professional organizations. Consistent with usual practice for SHA FR meetings, they were invited to co-sponsor discrete events within the conference and did so generously. The moderator served without compensation.

(D) Members should be encouraged to convey concerns with any aspect of SHA FR governance directly to members of Council. The roster of all 14 members is posted on the SHA FR website, now including their e-mail addresses.

Given that the official minutes of the meeting remain unapproved and given my desire to send this message in timely manner, I shared a draft of this message with all members of Council, and they affirmed that it conveys the discussion that occurred. [Editor's note: *The minutes from the June 2018 SHA FR Council meeting have subsequently been approved and appear in this issue of Passport. AJ*]

**Brian C. Etheridge**

**Author's note:** *The following is an effort to capture the substance of the keynote conversation with David Petraeus at the SHA FR 2018 annual meeting for those who were unable or unwilling to attend. It is an attempt at reportage for the record; it does not offer any commentary or interpretation of Petraeus's remarks. Although I have shared it with other attendees to ensure accuracy, it does not reflect the perspective or view of any other person or institution. Any errors or omissions are solely mine. BE*

The keynote luncheon with David Petraeus took place from 12:30 to 2:30pm on Friday, June 22, 2018 at the Sheraton Philadelphia Society Hill Hotel in Philadelphia, PA.

Peter Hahn, the president of SHAFR, began the program by thanking everyone who made the conference a reality, including various committees, individuals, and sponsors. He thanked the Foreign Policy Research Institute last.

Hahn noted that the format for the keynote is a conversation. He pointed out the note cards on lunch tables were for submitting questions. He said that the moderator would strive to work as many questions into the conversation as he can.

Hahn then introduced Petraeus and John Nagl, the moderator. Petraeus and Nagl sat on chairs on the dais for the conversation.

Nagl started off by asking Petraeus to address the concern that some had about his coming to the conference to talk.

Petraeus joked that he was gratified to still be able to generate controversy after so much time out of government. He gave an anecdote in which he told the National Press Club that he was happy to have worn the uniform that protects the rights of people to criticize him.

Nagl asked Petraeus about the decision to invade Iraq.

Petraeus pointed out that he was a two-star general at the time and that he spent his time thinking about the military logistics of invasion. He said that his concern at the time was that the United States might be too light if the Iraqis fought and too light if they collapsed. He said that he has been asked several times since if the United States should have invaded, and he said he would never dishonor the sacrifice of the fallen soldiers by answering the question. He argued that American decisionmakers really did believe that there were weapons of mass destruction, and they were as surprised as anybody that they did not exist. He pointed out that some weapons were discovered later in a bunker, but they were so decayed that they did not warrant the initial appraisals. Petraeus said that the deployment was poorly carried out; people were moved out first and then the supplies followed later—the military was forced to improvise and buy what they could in the local markets.

Nagl observed that the postwar planning was even worse than the prewar planning.

Petraeus agreed, saying that the United States made three mistakes. First, it should not have invaded without a good understanding of the country that it was invading. Second, it built too many improvised units to try to stabilize the country after the invasion was successful. Petraeus said that he raised questions about what would be done after the invasion and he was told not to worry about it. Petraeus argued that the United States should have established an embassy, but he believed that Rumsfeld didn't want one because it would report to the Department of State. Third, the United States erred in dismissing Iraqi military personnel without giving them a plan for demobilization. Petraeus pointed out that there were tens of thousands of former military soldiers rioting within a few weeks. He pointed out that de-Ba'athification was poorly thought out in a similar way.

Nagl asked what Petraeus learned after the first year in Iraq.

Petraeus built on the three previous observations to say that the United States should have handed off to the Iraqis only when they were ready.

Petraeus then transitioned to a discussion of the surge and some of the criticisms of the counterinsurgency manual. He said that the manual was borne out of necessity for a comprehensive approach—counterterrorism was part of it, but the United States also needed to focus on building the host nation through reconciliation, restoration

of basic services, rebuilding schools, establishing the rule of law, etc. The manual looked toward history to try to understand what happened. Engaging the people and engaging the enemy were essential. What distinguished counterinsurgency was that it was not just offensive and defensive but also focused on stability operations.

Nagl then asked how Petraeus determined the effectiveness of the counterinsurgency program.

Petraeus talked about the need for metrics for determining success in achieving stability, and the range of individuals who would be needed to be involved in providing data. He noted that domestic partners can often be flawed actors in this endeavor.

Nagl commented that insurgencies tend not to break out in countries that are well-governed. He asked what Petraeus learned from the data after eighteen months.

Petraeus said that he learned that violence was down 80%. He said that the United States did not achieve all the legislation that they wanted but they did affect some reconciliation. He said that the results of the surge stayed with the country over the next three and a half years. He said that when he became director of the CIA he was dismayed to see Iraqis carry out vendettas against Sunni leaders. All of the hard work to bring Sunnis back in and reduce tension went out the window and began the descent that led to ISIS. He said that ISIS had been destroyed during the surge and suppressed for three and a half years. He was disappointed that Nouri al-Maliki broke his word and never signed the final agreement.

Petraeus said that what mattered most in the surge was ideas. Counterinsurgency was about learning from the past. He said that history was very important. He said his approach was very much about becoming a learning organization. He offered that whoever learns the fastest in counterinsurgency wins.

Nagl said that the most impressive thing he noticed in Baghdad after the surge was the presence of plate glass windows—a sign that security must have improved significantly. Nagl asked if Petraeus just copied David Galula's book on counterinsurgency.

Petraeus said that he was aware of it and mentions book by John Akehurst called *We Won a War*. He mentioned the French experience in Algeria specifically. Petraeus observed that one cannot directly translate experience from one place to another. He argued that you must approach the endeavor with some humility.

Referring to notecards collected from the audience, Nagl pointed out that a number of questions had been submitted about torture. He asked about the wisdom of learning from the French in Algeria when they relied so much on torture.

Petraeus said that after the first year he believed that the United States should not do anything not condoned by the Geneva conventions. After meeting with the lawyers, this was decided as the best course of action. If the government wanted information from a detainee, Petraeus argued that the best strategy was to understand the point of view of the detainee. He said that even if one obtains information through torture, it was not worth the damage done to US prestige internationally. He brought up one exception: the ticking time bomb scenario. What do you do if detainee has planted bomb that will go off in an hour? Such a scenario warrants doing anything to prevent it. Petraeus said that a perception of a ticking time bomb after 9/11 led to failure.

Petraeus sardonically noted that he was rewarded for success in Iraq with assignment to Afghanistan. One of the first things he did was to draw distinctions between Afghanistan and Iraq so facile comparisons were not made. Iraq benefited from high rates of literacy, good infrastructure, oil, etc. Afghanistan was not so lucky. All of which made Afghanistan more difficult. He shared his opinion that the United States would not be able to flip Afghanistan

in the same way as it did Iraq. He saw some chance for modest reconciliation, but the drawdown announcement undercut the ability to achieve reconciliation. He said the circumstances were very challenging; the leader of Afghanistan was flawed and difficult to manage. He said the United States went to Afghanistan because of 9/11. And for some reason ISIS and the Taliban keep trying to go back there. The United States has prevented that but cannot withdraw yet.

In response to question about Yemen and other hotspots, Petraeus cited the return of history, in contradistinction to Francis Fukuyama's famous declaration about the end of history following the end of the Cold War. He pointed out that the Chinese system is doing spectacularly well. He said the Belt and Road Initiative is a very aggressive effort by China to increase influence in the region by tying regional economies to China.

Nagl asked a question about Petraeus's directorship of the CIA. Why did the mission evolve from intelligence gathering?

Petraeus said it is founded on a legal basis. According to Title 50 of the US Code, every covert action is based in findings and authorized by the president. He argued that the president should have access to the option of covert action. He mentioned that Obama campaigned against the practice, but then jealously guarded it. The CIA exists to spy, recruit spies, avoid detection, and analyze intelligence.

Nagl said that Petraeus has worked with Bush and Obama, and interviewed with Trump. He asked for a comparison of the three.

Petraeus observed that Bush ran against nation-building; Obama wanted to do nation-building at home; and Trump wanted to pursue America First. But then events intervened for each. He argues that there were two George W. Bushes. During the first six years Bush let Rumsfeld handle everything, but then became very engaged in the last few years. He says that Obama inherited a losing situation in Afghanistan and hoped to use only counterterrorism forces, but had to do more. He said Trump did the right thing in increasing assets in Afghanistan. He pointed out that during the latter Obama years and the Trump era, the United States has been able to conduct operations in which Americans are not on the frontlines as much as they had been previously, thanks to technology like drones. Petraeus opined that the United States is in a generational struggle with Islamic extremists, and he said that campaign can only be sustained if cost in blood and treasure is not overwhelming.

Nagl asked Petraeus to talk about the role Russia is playing today.

Petraeus expressed concern about the destabilizing role Russia is playing in the world today. He argued that it seeks to restore as much of the Soviet Union and Imperial Russia as possible. He said Russia has overcome a period of malaise and engaged in aggressive action to get back to the world stage. He said the most aggressive work is in cyberspace, where it is destabilizing democracy by exacerbating tensions. He says that this is a very sensitive time for major elements of NATO. He said a successful Ukraine would be Putin's worst nightmare.

Nagl asked if Russia was the biggest threat.

Petraeus said that Russia is one of them. China is the biggest strategic competitor. He said that the Sino-American relationship is the most important in the world. He mentioned Graham Allison's *Destined for War*—he argued that it raises some very sound concerns. He contended China is acting in imperial ways.

Nagl asked Petraeus to assess America's withdrawal from the Iran deal and the Singapore Summit.

Petraeus said that the Iran deal had some strengths and weaknesses. He did not argue for leaving it because it would drive a wedge between the US and its allies, but

he wanted to see greater pressure on malign activities and missile program. Now, he said, the United States will be able to move forward to squeeze Iran, but he doesn't want to precipitate a broader Sunni Shia conflict. He believes the situation is very challenging.

Petraeus said that the summit resulted in some very vague statements. One of his hopes is that Kim's three visits to China will provide a model for the North Korean leader. He wished that Kim will see the extensive economic development in China and strive to emulate it. He said that the situation is better than it was a year ago. He conceded that the madman concept might have some merit in this case.

Nagl concluded by asking Petraeus how much sleep he gets. Is four hours the secret to success?

Petraeus said that he gets good sleep. He works out often. He said that he is able to get by on 4-6 hours for stretches of time, but it is not good for his long-term health.

After the last question, the event concluded.

### Brian D'Haeseleer

This essay does not presume to speak on behalf of all the signatories of the letter protesting the decision to select General David Petraeus as the keynote speaker for the annual SHAFR conference. It expresses the political, ethical, and moral dimensions of my opposition to the invitation—opposition that is based on policies Petraeus has both promoted and presided over.

Petraeus's reputation has rested on his credentials as a scholar-officer, his illusory success in "pacifying" Mosul in the early stages of the second war with Iraq, and a media blitz that he and his defenders launched. The general honed an image of himself as a savior and recruited politicians, journalists, and academics to support him, including Max Boot, Thomas Ricks, and Fred Kaplan. They fawned over his stamina, charisma, intellectual prowess, and seemingly sensible policy positions and popularized a portrait of him as a thoughtful soldier-intellectual that helped sell a seductive brand of militarism to the U.S. public.

Petraeus, along with John Nagl, a former lieutenant colonel, counterinsurgency advocate, and prominent defender of the general who moderated the keynote session of the annual SHAFR conference, hoped to change the way the U.S. military waged war in Iraq and to counteract the diminishing public support for the war. To this end, they appeared on the talk-show circuit to promote the latest U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, *FM 3-24*. Historically, the release of military doctrine is not a high-profile affair, and until this media blitz, such announcements did not lead to appearances on primetime television. The gambit paid off. Millions of people downloaded online versions of the manual within weeks.

Promoters of COIN portrayed the strategies contained within the pages of *FM 3-24* as a departure from the past, but many of the practices are derived from previous interventions, including the Philippines and Vietnam. The manual stresses the importance of protecting civilians (commonly known as population-centric COIN) and securing the allegiance of the "neutral and passive majority." COIN enthusiasts, including Nagl, depicted the tactics in *FM 3-24* as humane strategies that respected the lives and rights of civilians. Instead of using the heavy-handed actions that defined the first three years of the second war with Iraq—nighttime raids, for example—U.S. soldiers would protect Iraqis and win their affection.<sup>1</sup> Defenders of *FM 3-24* also touted the inclusion of Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy in the writing and revision process as evidence of the doctrine's supposed adherence to human rights. A former director of the Carr Center, Sarah Sewall, also authored the second edition of

the manual's introduction.

As the manual informs its readers, "some of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot."<sup>2</sup> According to the text, U.S. soldiers should focus less on killing insurgents and instead emphasize securing the support of the location population. Collecting trash, restoring electricity, and engaging in short-term development projects are all touted as means to this end. The international development agency, Oxfam, warned that the military's participation militarized aid and promoted less viable, politically motivated development projects that were the antithesis of sustainable development.<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing civilians and securing their allegiance also made them objects of competition between belligerents. They were more likely to be targeted and subjected to retribution. Population-centric COIN put them at greater risk.<sup>4</sup>

While *FM 3-24* emphasized the importance of the winning the affection of the local population, the emphasis is and always has been on using violence to control people. A U.S. soldier realized the centrality of coercion: "With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them."<sup>5</sup> The manual also stresses the importance of intelligence and information, which can be acquired through surveillance of the local population and understanding local customs, culture, language and tribal hierarchy. Counterinsurgents thus use information not simply to establish better relations but to surveil and control civilians.

Current and more recent military parlance uses technocratic language such as "kinetic operations" or "disaggregation" to portray violence as clean, orderly, precise, and "scientific." The U.S. military continues to assassinate mid-ranking and high-profile insurgents, generally in drone strikes that often hit and kill unintended civilian targets. The strikes nevertheless remain designated as "surgical." Petraeus, as head of Central Command and the United Nations International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, presided over a major escalation of drone warfare. The trend continues. A United Nations study reports that drone strikes "caused 590 civilian casualties in 2016, nearly double that recorded in 2015." The many innocent civilians killed in these attacks are called "collateral damage," and their needless, avoidable deaths sow further societal divisions.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the case studies used in both the manual and in other COIN publications, including Nagl's work on the "Malayan Emergency," reflect a highly instrumental reading of history that is being crafted to suit pre-existing pro-COIN agendas.<sup>7</sup> U.S. military writers, including Nagl, hold British COIN up as a model for the U.S. military because of its doctrinal flexibility, use of "minimum force," and respect for human rights. These explanations enable authors such as Nagl to whitewash history and portray COIN as respecting the lives and rights of citizens. But the systematic use of torture in Kenya and Northern Ireland belies the idea that "hearts and minds" are sacrosanct aspects of the British approach to combating insurgency.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the military historian David French summarizes it best: British COIN is "nasty not nice."<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, U.S. COIN doctrine resembles its British and French counterparts more than Nagl and Petraeus have publicly acknowledged. Neither London nor Paris used COIN to foster good governance or promote democratic reform or legitimacy. They used it to suppress independence movements. Essentially, U.S. COIN doctrine includes European policies that sanction the use of torture and human rights abuses to achieve desired ends. Moreover, as Alfred McCoy has revealed, U.S. COIN and internal defense efforts have created a series of surveillance states across the globe, beginning with the Philippines during the Philippine-American War. The surveillance state eventually

replicated itself in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

That Petraeus remains a celebrity is perplexing. Both Afghanistan and Iraq remain war-torn and dangerous to their people years after he retired from military service to run the CIA. Even his much touted "surge" in Iraq did not produce lasting peace and safety. He is just another general who has presided over one of Washington's futile, self-defeating, and winless wars since World War II. Without his well-orchestrated publicity campaign, he would probably remain relatively anonymous. In Andrew Bacevich's acerbic prose, he "is a political general of the worst kind—one who indulges in the politics of accommodation that is Washington's bread and butter."<sup>11</sup>

Why celebrate a failed architect of a war that endlessly grinds on? Why should we honor someone whose claim to expertise is presiding over state violence that has claimed the lives of many innocent civilians? What have any of the policies Petraeus advocated or presided over accomplished besides the further militarization of U.S. society, continued death and destruction in Iraq and Afghanistan, and perpetual war? Why not hire a keynote speaker who is a principled critic of U.S. policy? Such a selection would also reflect the prevailing trend within our discipline of focusing on non-elite and non-Western sources.

As a private citizen, Petraeus actively participates in an unseemly military-industrial-complex that includes a revolving door of officers and generals who translate their military service after retirement into lucrative careers either in think tanks, educational institutions, corporations with military contracts, or the lecture circuit. Their nefarious influence is felt across broad swaths of society and has reinforced a permanent state of war. Quite simply, despite what they claim, these people do not promote peace and security; they profit from war and death. By inviting Petraeus and letting Nagl stage-manage the event, SHAFR allowed itself to be enlisted in propaganda efforts on behalf of Petraeus and COIN rather than live up to its responsibility as a scholarly organization that asks critical, wide-ranging questions in pursuit of knowledge.

Selecting Petraeus as a keynote speaker also raises several procedural issues. To begin with, a true conversation would not involve a Q & A session that allowed only written questions. The decision not to let audience members ask questions except in writing all but eliminated the possibility of critically engaging the general in a principled conversation. He was allowed to dodge serious questions about the efficacy of his failed policies. That he and others continue to avoid sustained inquiry or any ramifications for their actions reinforces a sense that they can act with impunity, and, even more important, allows the perpetual war machine to continue. The journalist Nick Turse succinctly summed up the benefits of the lecture circuit for U.S. empire boosters. "Today, it seems, a robust Rolodex with the right global roster, a marquee name, and a cultivated geopolitical brand covers a multitude of sins."<sup>12</sup>

Previous experiences with former policymakers, including Michael Hayden and John Yoo, should have been instructive. They seem to have offered little beyond a defense of their actions. In the case of Yoo, that was a defense of torture. As John Prados noted about Hayden, his speech justified government secrecy to continue withholding classified information from historians.<sup>13</sup> Offering these militarists—particularly Yoo, whom some consider a war criminal—paid opportunities to defend or expound upon their views contributes little to SHAFR's intellectual growth and reputation. It also undermines and subverts the organization's central goal: asking probing questions about how U.S. foreign policy develops, including questions that past and present policymakers would prefer that we not ask.

The opposition to Petraeus' nomination shows that there is a significant amount of disapproval among SHAFR

members about the selection of managers of state violence to serve as keynote speakers. This is not simply a censorship issue. It is about giving money and honors to someone who undermines SHAFR's mission. If policymakers want to participate in a critical, thoughtful, and wide-ranging discussion, they should submit a proposal and be subject to the competitive review process.

Notes:

1. These raids continued in Afghanistan under Petraeus's leadership of Central Command and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). They also became the object of sustained criticism and inquiry, especially over a concern that they fueled anger and resentment toward the United States and foreign troops operating under ISAF. Azmat Khan, "Night Raids: Disrupting or Fueling the Afghan Insurgency?" *Frontline*, June 17, 2011. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/afghanistan-pakistan/kill-capture/night-raids-disrupting-or-fueli>.
2. U.S. Army and Marine Corps, *Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006).
3. Oxfam, "Quick Impact, Quick Collapse: The Dangers of Militarized Aid," January 27, 2010, <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/quick-impact-quick-collapse-the-dangers-of-militarized-aid-in-afghanistan-114999>; see also Oxfam, "Aid Agencies Sound the Alarm of Militarization of Aid in Afghanistan," January 27, 2010, <http://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressrelease/2010-01-27/aid-agencies-sound-alarm-militarization-aid-afghanistan>.
4. Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York, 2013).
5. Quoted in Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge, UK, 2013).
6. Quoted in "Anger in Kabul after U.S. Air Raid Wounds Civilians," *Al-Jazeera*, September 28, 2017.
7. John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, 2005).
8. Critics of the concept of minimum force include Andrew Mumford, *Puncturing the Counterinsurgency Myth: Britain and Irregular Warfare in the Past, Present, and Future* (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011); Bruno Reis, "The Myth of British Minimum Force in Counterinsurgency Campaigns During Decolonization," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34 (2011): 245–79; and Huw Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau: The British Army and Counter-Insurgency in the Kenya Emergency* (Cambridge, UK, 2012).
9. David French, "Nasty Not Nice: British Counter-Insurgency Doctrine and Practice, 1945–1967," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 23, nos. 4 & 5 (2012): 744–61.
10. Alfred McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Madison, WI, 2009).
11. Andrew Bacevich, "Sycophant Savior," *The American Conservative*, October 8, 2007.
12. Nick Turse, "Leaker, Speaker, Soldier, Spy: The Charmed Life of David Petraeus," *TomDispatch*, July 5, 2016.
13. John Prados, "More Fallout from SHAFR's Decision to Invite David Petraeus as Keynote Speaker," *History News Network*, June 18, 2017.

## Petraeus at SHAFR: A Different Kind of Diversity Problem?

Aaron O'Connell

In the summer of 2007, Marilyn Young and I were at a Washington History Seminar party in Washington, D.C., and the conversation turned to American military deaths in the war in Iraq. True to form, she opened with both guns blazing, arguing that "we must not valorize or ascribe any meaning to their deaths because that helps validate this illegal war." I disagreed and countered with questions. What makes the Iraq War illegal and by what standards? Should soldiers be able to pick the wars they will fight? If not, should their service—or indeed, their lives—be dismissed for choices they didn't make? We argued for thirty minutes and neither one of us changed positions.

Marilyn's claim wasn't a historical one—we were talking about what people should do rather than what they had done—but it motivated me to do some digging into the U.N. Security Council resolutions on Iraq and the history of the Law of Armed Conflict. A few years later, I told Marilyn about my research and conclusions, which were still quite different from hers. She looked at me, took a long pause, and said "maybe you should do more research." Then she asked me about military contractors and we both ordered another drink.

As I watched *L'Affaire Petraeus* unfold over the last two months, I thought of this exchange and of the sometimes-competing impulses between how we historians write about the past and act on our politics in the present. I've known for years that SHAFR is a thoughtful, vibrant, and generally welcoming community, but I believe we may have some diversity problems. What follows are my thoughts on the critics' arguments against inviting Petraeus, and the beginnings of an idea of how we can make our community more inclusive, specifically in regards to political ideology.

The first set of objections noted in the "Open Letter: Petraeus at SHAFR" and at the Friday meeting in Independence Park concerned SHAFR's governance: who paid Petraeus, how much, and with what funds? Who chose the format and how did it compare to previous keynotes? These are all valid questions and why they matter is self-evident for a community of scholars that prides itself on dialogue, inclusion, and democratic governance. Indeed, had the only objections to Petraeus' invitation concerned process, I would have had no substantial objections. All SHAFR members have a right to know where their dues go and to discuss actions that link their organization's reputation to public figures. We don't even need 277 signatures to start that conversation. Just 25 signatures are enough to call a membership meeting and propose a resolution.<sup>1</sup>

Both the letter and the park meeting began with process but neither stayed there. In fact, the justifications for the process concerns were historical arguments about Petraeus' legacy and scholarship—what he did in the past and wrote about the past. These actions were so outside the boundaries of acceptable conduct, his critics argued, that an invitation to speak at SHAFR's amounted to elevating "dangerous myths" that risk undermining "the very core of SHAFR's mission and accomplishments."

SHAFR's mission is "to promote the study, advancement and dissemination of a knowledge of American Foreign Relations through the sponsorship of research, annual meetings, and publications" and we do this using widely accepted professional standards.<sup>2</sup> No matter what our politics, all of us believe in fact-based assertions, source-based arguments, clear and specific writing, and a judicious weighing of evidence. *These are the principles binding us together as a community* - not the ideological or political leanings of our arguments. And sadly, I think Petraeus' critics too often got their facts wrong or speculated without evidence. I was also saddened to see that they declined the opportunity to discuss these issues in a roundtable, even though they had specifically asked "for a discussion and debate about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars more generally." If they were eager for that conversation with the General, why not welcome it with their colleagues as well?

The critics argue that it is "Petraeus' particular legacy we find most troubling" because he "played a major role in shaping the failed counterinsurgency wars of the post-9/11 era[.]" True, but so too did most of the senior policymakers on the last two presidents' national security councils: the National Security Advisors, the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and later, the U.S. Ambassadors to the United Nations.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, any condemnation of those who played a major role in Iraq and Afghanistan should apply as forcefully to them,

including Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton, and John Kerry, and Ambassadors Susan Rice and Samantha Power. Would a keynote from any of these four distinguished public servants have prompted a similar protest at SHAFR? If not, then the “playing a major role” threshold is not what made the Petraeus invitation controversial. Something else must have mattered more.

The critics then turn to Iraq and link Petraeus and counterinsurgency tactics to the killing of civilians in Fallujah, the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis, the decision to align with the Iraq’s Shiites, and aiding and abetting Iraq’s “pervasive system of sectarian control.” There are a series of factual errors here, some of which I noted in my original letter. To recap: the two battles of Fallujah were not counterinsurgency operations and Petraeus had no involvement in either of them—he was in the United States during the first one and supervising the training of Iraqi security forces in Baghdad during the second. No military officer made the decision to align with the Iraqi government that came to power after the December 2005 parliamentary elections; that was President Bush’s choice, and his military advisors probably didn’t even weigh in on it, let alone advocate for it.<sup>4</sup> Whether the United States “aided or abetted” the Iraqi government’s sectarianism or helped give rise to ISIS is a judgment call and a difficult one. It is important to note, however, that the key decisions on those topics mostly occurred in late 2010 and afterwards, a time when Petraeus had no role in Iraq policy decisions. Moreover, allegations like these—some of which border on accusing Petraeus of war crimes—need evidence, and the critics provided none.

On Afghanistan, the critics argue that Petraeus promised a softer form of warfare that would protect civilians but then delivered something else: night raids and air strikes, which they imply caused greater harm to civilians than another approach might have. But numbers matter and the numbers do not support the critics’ accusations.<sup>5</sup>

The United Nations Human Rights Unit in Afghanistan has been counting civilian deaths since 2007. Their reports show that in 2008, before Petraeus had any role in Afghanistan, “pro-government forces” (i.e. U.S., coalition, and Afghan forces) caused 828 civilian deaths—two-thirds of which were from air strikes.<sup>6</sup> In 2009, the United States implemented counterinsurgency tactics in Afghanistan and issued directives to better protect civilians. Civilian deaths by pro-government forces declined by 28 percent that year, even as U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan more than doubled.<sup>7</sup> In 2010, civilian deaths dropped by another 26 percent.<sup>8</sup> In 2011, Petraeus’ last year in Afghanistan, they dropped another 6 percent, to 410 deaths – less than half of the 2008 number.<sup>9</sup> That same year, civilian deaths from air strikes were one-third of what they had been in 2008, even though the number of strikes had increased dramatically over those three years.<sup>10</sup>

It is true that civilian deaths rose throughout the war and peaked in 2014.<sup>11</sup> But these deaths were overwhelmingly caused by the Taliban and associated movements that purposefully targeted civilians. Civilian deaths in warfare are a painful reality but we must not lose sight of who did the killing. Neither General Petraeus nor counterinsurgency tactics are responsible for the tragic rise in civilian deaths in Afghanistan after 2008. The Taliban are.

The last set of historical arguments against Petraeus concern his writings, which his critics believe “whitewash the history of U.S. imperial violence. From his 1987 graduate school thesis, ‘The American Military and Lessons of Vietnam,’ to the 2006 U.S. Counterinsurgency Manual, Petraeus has made a concerted effort to mute the devastation and atrocities of the Vietnam War and other counterinsurgencies past in order to revitalize counterinsurgency in the twenty-first century.”

These are serious charges but they do not stand up under scrutiny. In fact, Petraeus’ dissertation is not about counterinsurgency in Vietnam at all, as the full title—or a careful reading—makes clear.<sup>12</sup> It is primarily a study of eleven presidential decisions occurring after Vietnam, with detailed discussions of the Israeli Yom Kippur War (1973), the *Mayaguez* incident (1975), a skirmish along the Korean Demilitarized Zone (1976), a proposed show of force in the Horn of Africa (1978), the Iranian Hostage Crisis (1979-80), the Lebanon intervention (1982-1984), the invasion of Grenada (1983), military support to El Salvador and to the Contras (1981-1987), the *Achilles Lauro* hijacking (1985), and airstrikes in Libya (1986).

Petraeus’ conclusion is that when it came to recommending violence, the president’s military advisors were rarely “as aggressive as the president’s civilian advisors, and never more aggressive.”<sup>13</sup> The reason for this, he argues, was the unsatisfactory endings Korea and Vietnam, which produced a “never again” mentality among senior military leaders that influenced their recommendations to the President from 1973-1986. These were the military’s “lessons of Vietnam.” Where is the evidence that this work “mutes the devastation and atrocities of the Vietnam” or highlights positive examples of earlier counterinsurgencies? I found none.

The critics also believe the Counterinsurgency Field Manual that Petraeus co-wrote and edited “highlights positive examples of counterinsurgency from Malaya, Algeria, Vietnam, and El Salvador to be revitalized and emulated in the post 9/11 era.” Not really. The only major reference to Malaya—a section entitled “Building a Police Force in Malaya”—notes how poorly-trained police “abused the civilian population and fell into corrupt practices,” which undermined effort to locate insurgents.<sup>14</sup> The only discussion of Algeria—a vignette entitled “Lose Moral Legitimacy; Lose the War”—argues that the French military’s decision to employ torture emboldened the Algerian resistance, weakened the French military, and contributed to its eventual defeat and withdrawal.<sup>15</sup> These are not positive examples; they are warnings that every soldier attempting counterinsurgency operations should heed.

The manual’s discussions of Vietnam are admittedly more mixed. Both CORDS and the Marines’ Combined Action Program are presented as positive examples, and here, Petraeus and his co-authors repeated the Marines’ mythology about their ostensible expertise in counterinsurgency.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the principal points of the two vignettes are to insist on close coordination within the U.S. government and respect for host nation customs and culture, which are hardly offensive claims. The manual also details the numerous American errors that contributed to disaster in Vietnam: American heavy-handedness in advising, the body count metric, misguided assumptions about South Vietnamese military needs, supply system failures that exacerbated corruption, “inappropriate or indiscriminate use of air strikes,” and basic ignorance of Vietnamese culture and society.<sup>17</sup> How do any of these historical references constitute whitewashing imperial violence—U.S. or otherwise? How does instructing soldiers to avoid torture or indiscriminate bombing “sanitize” the violent histories of these conflicts?

Let me now move back to the present, because my purpose is not only to note the errors in the critics’ letter but to suggest a reason why they may have happened in the first place. I attended the critics’ Friday afternoon meeting in Independence Park and later had a constructive discussion with one of the original letter’s principal authors. Polite, thoughtful discourse was the hallmark of both meetings. We do not have a civility problem at SHAFR that I can see, even when discussing controversial topics.

But we do have a diversity problem, or, more correctly,

several of them. I agree with Petraeus' critics—I too want to add more voices to SHAFR and help it become “a more inclusive, independent-minded, and democratic organization.” If we want SHAFR to reflect the diversity of our students and the United States more broadly, we must work towards that goal, particularly in regards to gender, racial, and ethnic diversity. The Myrna F. Bernath fellowship is helping to move us in the right direction, as is SHAFR's conference committee, which has worked to improve accessibility to our annual meeting for people with disabilities, transgender members, and parents with young children. But is that enough? Are there steps SHAFR can take as a whole to improve the ideological diversity of our community?

Here's a way to test if there really is a problem: Last year, 35 percent of American adults and 22 percent of college freshmen identified as conservatives.<sup>18</sup> Ask yourself: do you know a single self-identified conservative at SHAFR? How long do you have to think before you land on one? Can you think of three? (Full disclosure: I'm not one of them.)

There is no place for ideological litmus tests in a scholarly community dedicated to the free exchange of ideas. We do not want to narrow the range of acceptable debates. But are there steps we could take to expand it? I think the decision to invite David Petraeus to SHAFR did just that—indeed, by my lights, the debates of the last weeks and these essays in *Passport* confirm it. One dear friend told me she signed the critics' letter because she wanted Muslim and non-white graduate students to feel welcome at SHAFR—a goal I share entirely. But I also want graduate students veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan to feel welcome as well, and some of the inaccuracies in the critics' letter did nothing good for us on that front. Is there a way to be welcoming to both communities—indeed to all who seek a greater understanding of the United States' foreign relations history?

I think there is, and as with most issues of diversity, it starts with being careful about assumptions. How often have you heard the term “a good lefty” applied approvingly in conversations at our annual meetings? Or heard “conservative” applied negatively? I cringe when hear such things, not because they offend my political tribe, but because they risk alienating others whose presence might enrich our debates. We might also hold a roundtable at a future annual meeting on ideology at SHAFR, perhaps with previous program committee members, to explore if there are limits to the types of panels or papers we've accepted in the past. Are there some historical arguments that have no place in our scholarly community, even if they are based on facts and evidence? If so, I'd like to know what they are.

One of the discussions I heard in Independence Park was how to move SHAFR towards greater and broader political activism on contemporary issues. I hope this does not happen. I believe collective political activism in SHAFR's name is appropriate when the issue at hand directly affects the writing and teaching of history, such as public funding for research, access to public documents, and perhaps even mishandling of classified materials. (Indeed, the last of these was perhaps the strongest argument for opposing General Petraeus' appearance at SHAFR, one that led several colleagues to sign the letter despite some of the problems noted above.) But otherwise, let's keep our society's focus where it belongs: on promoting excellence in the researching and teaching of the history of U.S. foreign relations.

I began with the story of my debate with Marilyn on Iraq to make clear that I am not opposed to politically-charged

debates. In fact, I welcome them, because they usually make me think more carefully about what I think, what I assume, and what I can prove. But we need not conform to Marilyn's politics or ask “what would Marilyn do?” to defend her legacy or protect SHAFR's reputation. No interpretation of U.S. foreign relations history will threaten “the very core of SHAFR's mission and accomplishments,” as long as we insist on evaluating historical arguments using the professional standards of historians. As we do so, we should also work to enlarge the scope of debate so that we are prepared to deal with the full range of ideological frameworks held by the students and citizens we serve as educators and scholars. That is how we will protect the health of our community and make it even stronger in the future.

#### Notes:

1. SHAFR's bylaws are available on the SHAFR website at <https://shafir.org/about/governance/by-laws>; accessed June 29, 2018.
2. See the “About SHAFR” page on the society's webpage: <https://www.shafir.org/about>; accessed June 29, 2018.
3. In 2009, President Obama elevated the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations to a cabinet position and made Ambassador Susan Rice a Principal on the U.S. National Security Council. Ambassador Samantha Power held the same position from 2013-2017.
4. The only NSC Principal who is also a military officer is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and he usually limits his inputs to evaluating military options. Petraeus left Iraq in September 2005 and did not return until 2007.
5. Much has been written about the dangers of body counts, but it is important to remember that those arguments concern the dangers of tracking success by counting *enemy* dead. Counting civilian casualties in war is something entirely different, not least because the U.S. has legal obligations under International Humanitarian Law to protect civilians in armed conflict.
6. United Nations Assistance Mission Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Afghanistan: Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2008* (Kabul: UNAMA Human Rights Unit, 2008), iii, 16. Reports are available by year at <https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>, accessed June 29, 2018.
7. UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Annual Report on Protection of Civilians, 2009*, 1-2.
8. UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Annual Report on Protection of Civilians, 2010*, 21, 23.
9. UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Annual Report on Protection of Civilians, 2011*, 21, 24.
10. *Ibid.*, 24.
11. UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Annual Report on Protection of Civilians, 2017*, 1.
12. David Howell Petraeus, “The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era,” Ph.D. Diss., Princeton University, 1987.
13. *Ibid.*, 135.
14. U.S. Army/Marine Corps, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*, (Washington DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2006), 6-21, available online at <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=468442>, accessed June 29, 2018.
15. *Ibid.*, 7-9.
16. For a more balanced discussion of Combined Action, see Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York, Vintage Books, 1994), 192-196.
17. U.S. Army/Marine Corps, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*, 1-154, 5-98, 6-31, 8-34, and Appendix E-6.
18. Lydia Saad, “Conservative Lead in Ideology is down to Single Digits,” Gallup.com, January 11, 2018, available at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/225074/conservative-lead-ideology-down-single-digits.aspx>. On college freshmen, see Hayley Glatter, “The Most Polarized Freshmen Class in Half a Century,” Atlantic.com, May 2, 2017, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/05/the-most-polarized-freshman-class-in-half-a-century/525135/>, both accessed June 28, 2018.