

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

**Guest:** Army General David Petraeus (ret.)

### Table of Contents

**I: A Surge of Ideas 0:15 – 18:32**

**II: Petraeus's Command in Iraq 18:32 – 47:04**

**III: Turning the Tide 47:04 – 1:07:04**

### **I: A Surge of Ideas (0:15 – 18:32)**

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to have with me today David Petraeus, retired General David Petraeus, who was in command, of course, in Iraq and then in Afghanistan. Such a long career, distinguished public service. I don't even know where to begin this conversation.

Maybe we can begin with Iraq. You famously took over there and turned it around – the surge. People thought it couldn't work, but it did work. I think people would be fascinated to know, how did it happen? Where were you? How do you suddenly go from – Where were you? You were in Leavenworth?

KRISTOL: I was a three star at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, overseeing the organization that, really, was in charge of all the leader development training: the Command General and Staff College, our majors' academy, the scenarios of the Combat Training Centers, doctrine, history, all these different activities. It was called the "Engine of Change for our Army." And it was quite a substantial lever at that time, in particular, because we knew that the Army had to make – overhaul, really, the whole process of preparing units – individuals and leaders – for deployment to Iraq and to Afghanistan.

That was the year in which we did the Counterinsurgency Field Manual. I was there for about 15 months, actually. We did the Counterinsurgency Field Manual. We really overhauled what was termed the "Road to Deployment." Overhauled all the courses that were taught to the lieutenants, the captains, the majors, and so forth. The sergeants major, the senior noncommissioned officers.

It was an exhilarating time, in many respects. It was very intellectually stimulating. It was a lot of challenging, intellectual discussion during that period because we knew that we had to change a lot of what it was that we were doing, not only to prepare our forces and to train them and so forth, but then how we were operating in the field, as well.

KRISTOL: Before we get to Iraq, do you feel like that worked? I mean, do you feel that you made the Army and the military, in general, sort of was able to change in accord with the new challenges?

PETRAEUS: We did. What was interesting is I went to the Chief of Staff of the Army. I got back from my second tour of Iraq, which was a 15-and-half-month tour, having served there a year or so as a division commander, two-star general in the very beginning, the fight to Baghdad in the first year. And then went back pretty quickly after that. First, to do an assessment, then went home, gave the results of the assessment to the Secretary of Defense. He said, "Get over there and implement it." This was the train-and-equip mission. Spent 15 and a half months doing that, and then as I said, went to Fort Leavenworth.

And on the way back, went to the Chief of Staff of the Army and said, "Chief, do you got any guidance for me?" And he looked at me and said, "Shake up the Army, Dave." And I said, "I can do that, Chief." It was an extraordinarily, really, a teams of teams effort where, again, we all knew – I was a three star at the time. The four star above me, certainly – in fact, I replaced him, he was in position before me – then, the two stars that were under us – all knew we had to overhaul all the different activities that we were pursuing, and we did.

But the most important, I think, at the end of the day was sort of the intellectual foundation on which we built when we went back to Iraq. A lot of us were home for – after a first or a second tour. I had almost two and a half years on the ground by the time I went back for the surge. And I mention often times that the surge that mattered most was not the surge of forces.

We added about 25,000, maybe, 30,000 forces, when it was all said and done, to an existing, somewhere almost, 140,000 US troops. And so that would not predict mathematically that you would do what we were able to do, which is drive the level of violence down by some 85 or more percent, and that it would then stay down for three years after the surge was over and as we drew down our forces and so forth, up until tragically it was undone by Prime Minister Maliki when he launched a series of highly sectarian and divisive activities in very late 2011 after our forces had left.

But the surge that mattered most was the surge of ideas. It was the change of strategy, and in many respects, this represented quite a significant change to what it was we were doing prior to the surge. We were in the process throughout 2006 of really consolidating, getting onto big bases, handing off to the Iraqi forces, and accelerating that process, even though the level of violence continued to rise and it was becoming very clear at a certain point that the Iraqi forces couldn't handle that level of violence. In fact, they were not only not unable to handle the level of violence where it was, much less the rising level, they were actually getting worse because they were getting increasingly beaten up, intimidated, corrupted, demoralized by the situation that they were facing.

There was a prevailing view that we needed to hand off to them, as late as November of 2006. The meeting after the election that President Bush had with Prime Minister Maliki of Iraq in Jordan actually endorsed an acceleration of what it was we were doing. So consolidate on big bases, get out of the neighborhoods. There was almost a sense that we were part of the problem, instead of part of the solution.

And we went in, and with the surge, we obviously – there were a series of big ideas. One was that number one, we had to provide security for the people. That was the foundation for all other progress. Without that, you could not achieve progress in any of the other areas.

And so you had to secure the people, and the only way you could do it – biggest of the big ideas – was by living with them. So we established – just in the divisional area that encompassed Baghdad alone – some 77 additional locations in which our forces were located. Most of which also had Iraqi forces co-located with them. Many of these, if not the majority, required serious fights to reestablish or establish these locations because we picked, frankly, the sectarian fault-lines. This was where the fighting was the most intense, and we literally had to position our forces between, on the one side, the Sunni Insurgents and Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and, then on the other side, the Shia Militia, supported by, increasingly by Iran.

Over time, that obviously, that did work. So that was the biggest of the big ideas. You've got to live with the people to secure them. Beyond that, we not only stopped the transition to Iraqi forces, we reversed it. We just took places back over to which we had transitioned control to Iraqis, and it was clearly not working. And then we had to reconstitute Iraqi forces. So we literally would have to take entire brigades offline, put them into training centers, beef them back up with people or equipment and so forth, and then train them for at least a month, and then put them back into the fight. And a very, very extended process required for that.

Beyond that, we then pursued very aggressively reconciliation. So this is really trying to get the Sunni Arabs back into the fabric of Iraqi society. Of course, a Shia majority society with a Shia Prime Minister,

understandably. And this fabric had been torn apart by a sense of the Sunni Arabs being alienated from this Shia-led government. And in a sense, because of the De-Ba'athification and firing the military without telling them what their future was, and de-Ba'athification again – this is, the firing of the members of the party down to a certain level, fairly medium level, without reconciliation.

Again, these were two policies that were catastrophic in their effects, and they took place in the first year – very early in the first year of the war – and we really never could fully recover from that until we were able to institute a policy of reconciliation, which, initially, we built on an instance that was already ongoing outside Ramada in Anbar Province in Western Iraq, Sunni Arab majority area. And we decided on our own we're going to build on this. There was very little Iraqi governmental presence because the insurgents were so dominant there. That was yet another big idea, and then there were a whole host of others.

But by the way, there's one other that's very important because folks at times have said, "Well, Petraeus, he brought the kinder, gentler face to this," and we did. We very much beefed up the so-called nation-building activities. All the local governance and jobs and schools and hospitals and all of the different services we tried to reestablish.

Again, you can't do that until you have security, and when you start to reconcile with the large numbers of what used to be mid- and lower-level insurgents, you now can identify the higher-level insurgents and Al-Qaeda leaders much more effectively. And General McChrystal, and then Admiral McRaven after him, led our Special Mission Unit forces, and we were very, very aggressive and really amped that up many times over, with the start of the surge as well, doing as many as 15 precise operations each night in what were called kill-or-capture raids.

We wanted to capture individuals, we wanted to detain them, we wanted to interrogate them, in accordance with the rule of law and so forth. We're firm believers that if you want information, reliable information, from a detainee, you become his best friend. You don't have to resort to other means. In fact, those will normally bite you in the backside because they're going to cost you more in the long term than any information you're going to get, by and large. And we had enormous success in that regard, as well. Our Special Operations forces were phenomenal in what they did. Then we had to overhaul a whole bunch of other areas and really to build on what General Casey and Ambassador Khalilzad had done, so Ambassador Crocker and I really increased even more the unity of effort.

You're not going to have unity of command. I reported to the Department of Defense or Central Command. He reported to the Department of State. But you had to have unity of effort, and we literally sat next to each other, shared the same waiting room, we were in each other's office. Any time either of us went to see Prime Minister Maliki, we would both go. And we would literally sit in the chair next to him, depending on whose meeting it was. So if it was my meeting with the Prime Minister, I'd sit there, interpreter between us, my interpreter, and the Ambassador over here. If it was his meeting, he'd sit there, his interpreter, and I'd be over here. And occasionally, we actually switched places just so the Prime Minister was clear who was now in charge of the American side of the meeting.

KRISTOL: That's good. And probably the term, "the surge," which I probably had a little part in publicizing – it was, in a way, unfortunate because it does make it seem that it was just quantity and not a really radical qualitative change in approach.

I've talked – I'm not an expert on this at all – I've talked to military historians and analysts who say it's one of the most impressive, sort of abrupt – I mean, you laid the conceptual groundwork for it, but operationally, making it happen as quickly and successfully as you and your colleagues did was really unusual.

PETRAEUS: The additional forces, obviously, what they did do was they enabled us to much more rapidly implement the new big ideas, if you will. Keep in mind, we'd spent the previous 15 months back in the states, a lot of us, developing this intellectual foundation, the Counterinsurgency Field Manual captured it and then began its process of institutionalization, even as we were overhauling the scenarios

through which our brigades and divisions and core headquarters went in the road of deployment. But now we're implementing it and these additional forces gave us enormous ability, again, to much more rapidly to do that and then that enabled us to report progress, frankly, when the Ambassador and I had to go back to Congress.

We had this staring us in the face. When I went through the confirmation hearing, I had to pledge that I would be back within six months or so, and I managed to stretch it to September – ironically, September 11. And a very, very emotional, explosive, and, you know, glare-of-the-spotlight hearing. But we were able to report significant progress.

KRISTOL: I remember that so well. They couldn't deny it. How did it work? Operationally, you're at Leavenworth, what happens when you take over command in a war and how does it just – how did you hear about it?

PETRAEUS: Actually, I mean – we were out – I had been told that I was very likely going to go back to Iraq and to replace General Casey when he came home. I think he was at the two-and-a-half-year mark at this point in time, roughly. I thought it would be the next summer, it turned out to be that they moved that up a little bit. My father was ailing, he was in an assisted living out near where my sister lives in Santa Clarita, California. So knowing, again, that I was likely going to head back to Iraq, I wanted to be sure to see him at least one more time. So my wife and son and I flew out to LA, and we're in a rental SUV headed up to the location – I was on leave.

It was New Year's – you do it over the weekend, always. On the way, all of the sudden, and I had my laptop out, and a cell phone out, and every single cell phone in the car went off simultaneously. I was literally watching my inbox, and it just starts scrolling with all the messages coming in. And it's from all the different press, and what had happened, it was starting to leak that – or at the very least, it was a lot of people trying to get a hold of me. I think that was the initial. They were trying every way they can because the Secretary of Defense wants to talk to me. So we pull over into a convenience store parking lot, and I'm taking what was, you know, one of the most important calls of my life, and Secretary says, "President intends to nominate you to be the Multinational Force Iraq Commander."

I wanted to have a little bit of a conversation and say, "You know, you need to understand who you're getting. I want you to understand I'm going to provide my best professional military advice, based on facts on the ground, informed by an awareness of the issues in which you and the President deal, but based by facts on the ground, sir."

KRISTOL: Did you know Gates, particularly, at this point?

PETRAEUS: Not particularly. Actually, what was interesting was that the day after he was sworn in, actually, the night he was sworn in. He was sworn in, I think, in late November or early December of 2006. And, you know, the level of violence was skyrocketing. He'd been on the Baker-Hamilton Commission, which had very sort of mixed, sort of recommendations that were a bit of a spectrum, shall we say.

I got a call that afternoon, I think – the afternoon he was sworn in late morning or early afternoon. I got a call right away, and it said, "Secretary wants to see you tomorrow morning in the Pentagon." So we rustled up a plane, I guess, or got some ticket and flew back to Washington. Early the next morning, I went in and saw him. And he said, "Look, I'm headed over to Iraq, and I just want to know what you think I should look for." And I said, "Well, you know, with great respect, I think you basically need to ask people, 'Is the strategy working?'" I mean, clearly, the level of violence had been skyrocketing; clearly, a lot of what we have been doing does not seem to have been working. I learned later, I found a document that was actually signed by the Commander and the Ambassador that said, "The strategy is failing to achieve its intended aims." So this is, really, the essence of the issue.

If it is not, are there any folks out there that have some sense of what ought to be done? I was very, very fortunate that Lieutenant General Ray Odierno had just taken over as the Multinational Core Iraq

Commander. So he was at the operational level; I was going to be, eventually, the four star, although I didn't know it at that time. And he knew what we need to do. He also had – there were Plans Officers there who knew that we needed to secure the people, we needed to live with them, and to be fair to General Casey as well, there was already an initiative that was just beginning, in fact, as I took over to establish the first Joint Security Station, that was the first of these locations in a neighborhood.

In fact, I remember visiting it, I think, right before it was established, or very quickly thereafter. The day after I took command when we went around Baghdad in various armored vehicles and helicopters, and I was just shocked, frankly, by what I saw. I knew Baghdad very well from when I had been there as a two star for a few weeks and then as a three star, the train-and-equip, we had built an awful lot of police stations and an awful lot of them were blown up, frankly. It was just horrific. I actually – that's the one I've confessed years later that I went back after that particular daylong visit to all these different units and put my head on the desk, and my hooch there in my room, had a table and a bunch of computers, comms gear, and everything else – I did a lot of work in there at night – And I thought, "What in the world was I thinking?"

KRISTOL: And this is January?

PETRAEUS: This is early February after I took over.

## **II: Petraeus's Command in Iraq (18:32 – 47:04)**

KRISTOL: How does it work, for those of us who haven't had the privilege of serving in the military, and probably don't know how it works at this level, even those who have? So you're put in command, you don't just get yourself plane and fly over with one assistant?

PETRAEUS: First, you have to get confirmed. And that was an explosive hearing as well, and that was in some point in January. So, you know, you get the word, you have to put together your opening statement. I tried to be pretty forthright and, you know, allow – there were a number of actions we were going to have to take. This is very, very hard, but hard is not hopeless and so forth. Was questioned very, very directly by a number, including, interestingly, Senator Clinton had seized, had read the Counterinsurgency Field Manual, which I had given to every one of the Senate Armed Service Committee members when we did the obligatory office call, which you always do before a confirmation hearing that's going to be pretty substantial.

And there was an argument when we put the manual together whether we should have a rule of thumb in there or not as to how many counterinsurgents – in other words, how many troops you need per members of the population. A lot of people had said, "Don't put that ratio in there. If you do, people are going to call you on it, if you end up going back as the Multinational Force Commander, in your confirmation hearing, because we're not going to have that number of troops."

And she, astutely, seized on it. I had to acknowledge that there would not be anywhere near that number of US troops per the population, but then did explain there were numerous provinces where you weren't engaged in a counterinsurgency. We had Iraqi forces, such as they were, and they were going to be better because we were going to embark on a process, and again, I had done the train-and-equip missions so I had a sense of what we would need to do there in the facilities and assets required. And then I said, "Don't forget, by the way, we have huge numbers of contractors." In fact, we ultimately had more contractors than we had US forces. And a lot of them doing fairly routine work and many, in fact, from third countries, if you will, that were doing very routine work on our bases so that our forces could be off the base doing what only they can do, which is engage the population and engage the enemy.

So sort of got through that particular question, but that was quite a – that was as reasonably tumultuous hearing, as well, because you'll recall there were very, very few members of the Senate Armed Services Committee who actually supported the surge, including a number from the President's party who opposed it. And we jokingly termed, you know, the staunchest of them were the so-called "Three

Amigos”: Senators McCain, Lieberman, an independent, and Graham, and they hung with us through the very tough times.

Remember, and I predicted this, I said, “When we fight the enemy to take back these neighborhoods and secure the people, it’s going to get worse before it gets better.” And it got very, very tough. We had the highest months of casualties, I think, during the entire time we were in Iraq in the months of May and June of 2006 before all of the sudden, we started seeing the violence go down quite dramatically.

It was down by, gosh, I think, 40 or 50 percent. This was very statistically significant by the time we went back for that hearing. Eight of the final 11 weeks prior to the hearing had significant drops in the level of violence.

KRISTOL: So how do you run a war? I think people would be interested as to what your day is like. How do you get the staff together?

PETRAEUS: First, you have to bring your team. I had to get different individuals.

KRISTOL: And you picked individuals?

PETRAEUS: I certainly did, and they were spectacular.

KRISTOL: I was very struck by that when I visited. You somehow think from the outside of the Army and having been in government, I know the rest of the government, how it works. Big bureaucratic organization, and this person’s the next in line so he gets promoted, but I was very struck when I visited you in that week, in the end of July in 2007, with Fred and Kim Kagan, how many of the people said to me, “Well, you know, General Petraeus asked me to come here,” or plucked me out of this place or that place, out of rotation —” Or whatever the right way to say it is, you know? And specially got me here. I guess that’s a very important part of it.

PETRAEUS: I had an eye on a lot of people in the Army over the years, and you know literally had a book with the names in it and knew where to find them. So I went out and found them. It helps if you are the Commander of the mission in the world on which the Commander-in-Chief, the President has gone all-in. In fact, we had a conversation in the Oval Office, as well after my confirmation hearing, before going to Iraq, and I’d met with President Bush in the Oval Office on several occasions before and had enormous respect for him, really impressed by this very, very determined decision that he took in the face of the advice to the contrary by many in the White House, not to mention virtually everybody in the military chain of command.

I remember we were talking, and he said, “Well, General we’re doubling down on this mission here.” And I said, “Mr. President, your military is going all-in. This is everything we have basically. The five and two-thirds brigade combat teams that you’ve committed, there’s nothing more. And I hope that all the rest of government is going to do likewise because we really need to augmentation from State Department, Department of Homeland Security, border forces, and all the rest of this. The Treasury Department, for the financial task force, the forensic that would go after the enemy’s money, and all these different activities that were required.”

Again, I assembled this team, and to give you an idea of the talent, my executive officer, if you will the Chief of Staff of my personal staff, which is quite considerable in an effort like this, he was number one in his class at WestPoint, he had a PhD in history, he had taught at WestPoint, and he had commanded a brigade combat team on the ground in Iraq in the first year in Baghdad. Extraordinary officer, and I brought him to Fort Leavenworth, in fact, prior to that to establish the Counterinsurgency Center that we built together with the Marine Corps, and he was also on the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Study Group as well.

And again, across the board, they were this quality. The Colonel who headed my Initiatives group had just come back from Iraq. I think he had been home only three or so months. Another brilliant, brilliant

officer, I think in the top five in his class, a PhD, taught at West Point, and again just back from commanding an engineer brigade in Iraq, and selflessly. Now is the head of the Army War College. A very, very talented wonderful officer. And that Initiatives group was full of – I think we had two or three Rhodes Scholars at any given time. You'd have several that were speechwriters; believe it or not, even in combat, you're endlessly doing remarks or something or the other. There was a whole team that did nothing but draft, do the initial draft for – I sent a memo back to the Secretary of Defense every Sunday night. You may recall the President of the United States had a video teleconference with the Ambassador and me 7:30 AM Eastern Standard Time every single week of the surge. He is in the chair, his whole national security team there. So if you are the Commander-in-Chief and you want to send a message to your national security team, what your top priority is?

KRISTOL: And those were real?

PETRAEUS: Those were real.

KRISTOL: They were not the typical government "check the box"?

PETRAEUS: It was a full hour. It started on time, it ended on time. He literally would get in there, there was nothing about "CI Director, tell me how things are going in Iraq." He'd go, "General, how's it going?" or "Ambassador, what's the latest on this?" And that was it. And we had – this was the ultimate lever. If you wanted to get something done in the bureaucracy and the bureaucracy was causing – was perhaps sluggish in responding – the ultimate dime-drop was right there at 7:30. Now, I very seldom did that, and if I did, I would couch it as, you know, "And Mr. President, we're really looking forward to confirming the excellence of your Treasury Department in sending additional financial forensics experts to flesh out the Joint Interagency Task Force in Counterterrorism Financing," or some aspect like that.

I would normally put them in the memo to the Secretary of Defense, and I sent that simultaneously to the Secretary of the Chairman and the Commander of Central Command. The chain of command, arguably, should have run CENTCOM through the Chairman to the Secretary. I sent it to all three simultaneously.

KRISTOL: Special case, I guess?

PETRAEUS: You could get away with a lot, again, if you were the Commander of the surge in Iraq.

KRISTOL: And again, this was serious, substantive –

PETRAEUS: I was there to win. I mean, this sounds – I was there, and I thought, actually, it was my last job in uniform. I occasionally acted that way as a sort of liberating influence. And these were very – this is a grinding, grinding, tough, tough experience. The casualties are very tough, you're dealing with, you know, in Washington would call up and say, "When are they going to start doing legislation?" And I'd say, "Man, these guys, they can't even send their kids to school. They can't get to work. We've got to get security going." And as we did, over time you started – I mean, we literally had to build gated communities for many of these neighborhoods.

We'd put massive cement walls called T-Walls, Texas barriers, that size, if you will, and you'd wire them all together so the insurgents couldn't pull them apart. You'd put about another 150, 200 meters every night. It was called the Concrete Caterpillar. Every night was a combat mission to do that because you had to control entry and exit from neighborhoods that were embattled. And once you did that, and we'd have ID card systems – I don't know if you remember when we made the entire city of Fallujah, became a no-drive zone. So if you owned a vehicle and you lived in Fallujah, you parked it in a massive parking lot outside the city, it stayed out there, and it was because there was so many car bombs, it was the only way we could get it under control.

To give you a sense again of just the sheer challenges, people forget that we had 28,000 Iraqi detainees at the height of the surge. And we had to overhaul that. The big idea there was you've got to get the extremists out of the population because you can't rehabilitate the rank and file, if you will, that are there

as long as they are corrupting it. So we had to have operations inside the wire to identify the most extreme, go in and take them out – and of course, you can't wear a weapon inside a detainee enclosure because they'll take it from you and kill you, or hold you and kidnap you – create a diversion, get the guy, snatch him, and then put him in maximum security facilities that we had to build for that purpose. And then we could rehabilitate the prisoners, the detainees. And this is in the face, again, of an Iraqi government that – yet one of the other practices was to release detainees faster because their tribal sheiks want them home, understandably. But we hadn't rehabilitated them. We hadn't helped them get reintegrated back into society, without a very high rate of recidivism.

So all of this was enormously complex. And you had to have a comprehensive, very, very comprehensive approach. We called it the “anaconda strategy” because we were trying to squeeze the life out of the insurgency with pressure from every different way. Only a couple of those sides were conventional military forces, Special Missions Units, the raids, Iraqi train-and-equip. All the rest was reconciliation politics, governance, basic services, other aspects of rule of law, communications, strategic information, and so forth. And then even a regional strategy, where we were helped by Central Command, the Department of State, and a number of others.

KRISTOL: What I was amazed by when I – I guess, I spent a week there with the Kagans, and you allowed us to sit in on your morning – I guess, it was seven o'clock in the morning – Battlefield Update Brief.

Again, I've been in government, I've been Chief of Staff for the Education Secretary, a small agency, but still. And we had, I thought, ran a decent – done a competent job of running it. What I had been sort of taught, not having much management experience, was delegate and so forth. I was just amazed at how much direct control you had and information you had and requested and insisted on. How much it was you running – you and your colleagues, and obviously, General Odierno and others – but I guess, running the war. I guess I just expected it to be much more bureaucratic and sort of you getting reports and stuff, and there you were at this meeting getting reports from, I think, individual colonels who were running the different –

PETRAEUS: Well, we had all of the direct units that were directly under us. First of all, let me just talk about – actually, let me back up and talk about the duties of a strategic leader. And a strategic leader I define as someone who's running a very large organization and is charting the strategy. At the end of the day, he or she is the individual responsible for direction. I got a lot of help with that. Again, it's a team of teams, you got large staffs and everything else and brilliant people, as I said, handpicked, as many as you could get. And you can get them all if you're commanding the surge in Iraq.

There are four tasks that I've always identified for a strategic leader. The first is get the big ideas right, the strategy right. And in my view, that's a very inclusive process. You don't get hit on the head by Newton's apple, fully formed. All the big ideas. You get a little kernel.

Now, here we were helped because, in truth, we had built those big ideas throughout the whole course of 2006. Counterinsurgency Field Manual, all the other studying of what was going on. The Center for Army Lessons Learned was under me, out there, as well. So we pretty much had, we knew what it was roughly that we needed to do. Then, you have to communicate the big ideas. And you do this with, you know, in the very first week. Right away, I changed the mission statement to reflect this 180-degree shift of focusing on securing the people by living with the people, not by consolidating on big bases.

KRISTOL: You think the statement makes a difference –

PETRAEUS: All the commanders need to know. They just need to know the basics, and then they can take it from there, but you've got to communicate. Ultimately, you've got to have very detailed big plans and everything else. That took us probably six months. We did an assessment. A brilliant colonel at that time, H R McMaster, now a three star, brilliant, brilliant officer, came in and worked with an Ambassador from the State Department, and put together this big study group.



To be truthful, that was partly to gain time because I knew everybody was breathing down our necks, and they wanted to see this and see that, and I said, "You know, we got the assessment still ongoing." And in the meantime, we were driving things. But again, you've got to communicate it, and that's all your policies, plans, programs, again, campaign plans, ultimately with all kinds for appendices for every different type of activity you're pursuing. Then, of course, you've got to oversee the execution.

Communicating is a big deal. So the very first day – first, you give your speech as you take command, and I laid out, "We're going to secure the people." I sent a letter that day, I had already written it, to the Soliders, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and civilians of the Multinational Force Iraq, intended for every single one of them, so they knew what I was thinking. "This is what we have to do; this is the importance of it. Hard is not hopeless." Then, met with all the commanders right after the change of command because they were all there for the change of command ceremony. Talked very briefly there with them for a bit of time. And then started getting to work with the planners right away to change the base document. So you have a huge campaign plan, but there's a base document to which all the rest is appendices. I think it was, maybe, 15 to 20 pages, and I made significant changes to that.

Interestingly, again, there was an urgency here. There was – I had been in power – you are the commander of the surge. I was not told, by the way, what we needed to do. I wasn't told you need to secure the people or do reconciliation or do this or that or – you're just told to get out there and reverse a failing situation. And, normally, you would change the mission, you'd refer that to your higher headquarters and so forth, but you know, we just needed to get on with it, and we did. And of course, my higher headquarters was changing anyway, that was also part of the change of people, if you will, that accompanied the decision to conduct the surge.

KRISTOL: So communication –

PETRAEUS: So this is a big deal. Now, you've got to oversee it. And the overseeing is what really made me think of the four tasks because this is how you use your own time as a commander. And make no mistake about it you'd like to convey that, you know, that you have such spectacular people and teams, and we did. Literally, the best I think we've ever fielded, in part, just because almost every one of us had had at least one tour there before, if not two, and the readiness levels and everything else were just extraordinary. And then assets and resources and all the rest of that.

But you still have to drive a campaign. If you're the commander of an enterprise like the surge in Iraq, you indeed drive that campaign. And you do that in large measure through events, if you will. And so we had a matrix. There were tasks we did every single day so, I mean, all the way to, you know, get up at 5:30 or 5:45, somebody hand me a cup of coffee, I'd get on a stationary bike, I'd peddle for a while while I went through an intel book that covered the night before. I'd have a quick breakfast, and then we'd go into that office, that big command post really, huge palace, where I had one of the offices, the other was at the US Embassy downtown. And we'd do that 7:30 to 8:30 battlefield update and analysis. We'd have people video-teleconferenced in – General Odierno was across the foyer there in his command post – all the other major commands are on there, and ultimately, we would actually, people would transcribe the guidance I gave and that others gave and send it to every single brigade combat team commander, of which we had dozens in the theater at that point in time. There was a lot of give and take, as you may recall.

KRISTOL: I was just struck by the granularity. "In this particular neighborhood, something's gone wrong."

PETRAEUS: You have to have an ability both to get the big picture. And again, you have to get the big ideas right, but you also have to be able to bore in and people have to know you're going to bore in because if the boss isn't going to bore in, I guess, maybe I don't have to bore in, too. Not that they wouldn't, but again, people are exhausted. This is a tough, brutal existence. It's 120 degrees in the afternoon with a 25 to 35 knot wind every afternoon. It's humid, it's not nice, dry heat.

KRISTOL: People are away from their families for a year.

PETRAEUS: It's very, very tough. And of course, we did 15-month tours for the surge. Everybody did 15 months. I ended up doing 19 and a half on that tour, having done 15 and a half the previous time, which was after a year in Bosnia and a year in Iraq. This is now well over, up in the five-year mark in the previous seven or so.

So we had a matrix, and 7:30, 8:30 was the Battlefield Update and Analysis. Then, we would actually have something that was called the Small Group, where we went – and I think it was the US and the four "I's", the UK and the others that we could now talk some more highly classified stuff, if we had to. And then we might have a smaller group for sensitive stuff, and occasionally, we would have what was called the small, small, small group, and this was General Odierno and me, and we'd look each other in the eye and I'd say, "Ray, what do you think? When's this baby going to turn?" I got four months, three months, two months until I have to go back to Congress.

I went back one time – what people didn't realize is I went back one time and actually testified in a closed hearing, and I did it by myself. And I was assigned, you know, you're always assigned civilians, and it was the entire Senate, by the way – 98 of them were there, it wasn't just the committee. And I was given the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, and the Deputy Secretary of the State as my – I don't know – wingmen so they could do the policy stuff, and I would do the battlefield.

The problem was I realized I understood their programs in Iraq in many cases better than they did. So when I went back to Baghdad, I said to Ryan, the Ambassador, "I think we have to go together this next time." And I know that means we will each have to do two additional committees, because I would normally have to do the House Armed Services and Senate Armed Services Committees. He would do the House Foreign Relations and Senate Foreign Relations Committees. If we go together, then we each have to do the other two committees, which was cruel. And he said, "You're right." I said, "There's just nonsense to have them assign somebody from Washington to be my civilian wingman. I need you, and you need me." So we did go back together. And it was extraordinary experience, which we can talk about later.

So again this matrix. And then we would have a lot of daily activities. Then, you had sometimes semi-weekly activities. We had a day each week that we would fence for going to the field. We'd do the battlefield analysis at least two days each week. So right from there we'd go and either get on a helicopter or on one of the heavily armed vehicles, and it would go downtown in Baghdad, link up with a small unit, battalion company or whatever, and go on patrol and experience it for ourselves because that's crucial. Sometimes, we'd do overnight trips to some of the longer distances places.

But of course, in there on that matrix is, you know, every Monday morning, 7:30 Eastern Standard Time, we had the video teleconference with the President. Every Tuesday morning, 7:30 Eastern Standard Time – so that's in our afternoon – I had a video teleconference with Secretary Gates, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and just a couple of the most senior people in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Office of the Chairmen. Then, we had one day a week, the Ambassador and I always met with the Prime Minister. Another day a week the Prime Minister chaired the Iraq National Security Council meeting, which the Ambassador and I both attended.

There was a Baghdad Security Council meeting that I attended all the way up until I basically ran out this really contrarian participant from the host nation, and then once he was gone, after showing the full range of emotions week after week after week, I think he decided that he was – I was showing the full range of emotions that perhaps he might avoid that meeting. And then I said, "Hey Ray, it's yours now. General Odierno, the impediment is gone."

And then a variety of other activities. I think it was at least once a week I met with the individual who's in the train-and-equip mission the one that I had stood up as a three star. I met with the core commander, did core sessions, met with my own planners, met with the operations guys. and again, on and on and on. We had a weekly meeting every Friday at lunch. we'd call all the three stars together – so General Odierno, the JSOC Special Operations commander, McChrystal or Admiral McRaven after him. There was a three star train-and-equip and there was a two star for detainee ops. There was a two star head of

engineering, which was a massive task. Two star contracting officer. And then the senior staff folks that we had as well from the Multinational Force. So it was quite a group and very, very important. And we'd all compare notes and work our way through issues.

And then you'd have, again, weekly or bi-weekly, monthly, all the way to the quarterly, which was the quarterly campaign plan and review that the Ambassador and I did, and it was excruciating. I mean, it was so painful because we'd sit there with all of our senior leaders and a number of the Coalition senior leaders and ambassadors as well, and we'd go through program by program by program by programs and were we winning or losing? And we had daily metrics, we had weekly metrics, we had monthly metrics, we had everything. And again, you'll remember, I mean we kept track of the number of megawatts of power, even down to the individual power stations. Which towers are still on their side? What's the status of the pipeline? We had to rebuild the oil infrastructure with our Iraqi partners. The myriad tasks, I think, are just almost incomprehensible unless you've actually lived it.

And then you just get so – you actually forget that everybody doesn't appreciate this because you're living it, and again, it's pretty nonstop. It does become, I mean, it is a grinding brutal experience. And candidly, if you're the commander of this enterprise, you have no peers. You know, there's nobody you can go, and you don't have a beer because you're under General Order Number One, which is you don't have alcohol in that theater, out of deference both for the fact that we're all heavily armed and that it's an Islamic country. So you know, it's not like you can unburden yourself on anybody. Occasionally, somebody like General Keane, a great mentor, or a Mike O'Hanlon from Brookings, or Fred, the Kagens or whatever. And even there though you can't – And so you know, you have a lot in there, and there's literally no one with whom you can fully share everything, and you're going to –

My command Major Sergeant and I he came back with me, by the way. He ultimately did five combat tours with me. Went on short notice to Afghanistan as well. We were at CENTCOM together, and he was with the 101st during the first year. Great, great, finest senior noncommissioned officer I've known. We generally went off, separately. My view is I don't need a guy riding back in my Humvee or in the back of my helicopter seeing roughly what I'm seeing. His whole inclination was he needed to expand my impact by doing something somewhere else. And he went on convoys. He got hit, probably, eight to 12 times. His convoy, not him personally. His vehicle did get hit. But we would be together for memorial ceremonies and for a number of other occasions like that. And you know there were units, there was one unit in Baghdad in particular that I think in something like three successive weeks or three out of four weeks lost five soldiers in a single incident. So a terribly powerful improvised explosive device blowing up an entire Bradley fighting vehicle, heavily armored. And again it eats at units, it eats at leaders, and it eats at their overall commander.

### **III: Turning the Tide (47:04 – 1:07:04)**

KRISTOL: And when did you think, or when did you feel pretty confident that you had turned the corner? You got there at the beginning of February.

PETRAEUS: Maybe in the fall. I knew, I honestly believed it would work. I truly – I had done nothing but think about Iraq for, really, close to four years, leading up to being the commander, plus being in theater for, you know, approaching two and a half, by the time I went back. I really did believe that – and we'd done a lot of this in the first year in the 101st Airborne Division. We lived with the people, we did reconciliation. Unfortunately, it was undone because Baghdad didn't support it. But now I was in Baghdad.

And so for Anbar Province, I didn't need the Iraqi government's approval. They weren't out there. It was a Sunni Arab Province, and they basically let us do what we wanted to do. When it got close to Baghdad and it got close to Shia areas, it became enormously sensitive, and I had to spend a huge amount of time with Prime Minister Maliki and members of the government, the ministers and so forth, working our way through the very issues that were so, so difficult. But in the fall, I started to have real confidence that it was sustainable. This is actually being sustained, and in fact, my violence levels are going down further.

It's interesting because when we went back for the hearing in September, I broke with the entire intelligence community on – they did an assessment to correspond with my appearance before Congress. To be fair to them, they had to cut their data off something like eight weeks prior to my testimony. And then did the editing and arguing and footnoting, all the rest of this stuff. In the meantime, violence levels are going down, but they're stuck with the data back here.

I hit the send key in the morning that I was testifying and I said, "Mr. President, I break with your intelligence committee. I think they are wrong, and we are right that there has been demonstrable progress. And again, to be fair to them, they had to cut off the data back here I went up to this morning." Interestingly, I broke with them again the following March, because we went back another six months later, and they, I thought, were too optimistic that time. In the meantime, they'd come out in large numbers, embedded analysts with us, had very good – the Director of the CIA and the Director of National Intelligence were both fantastic in saying, "Okay, look, we can't have this kind of difference. We understood why that took place. We'll shorten this, we'll get this –" But actually, I could feel that we were going to have problems with Shia militia the next spring, and we did.

We had the Battle of Basra and all these somewhat impulsive, to put it mildly, orders by the Prime Minister for two Iraqi divisions to just overnight to go to Basra where he said they would develop the situation and instead they got right into a fight immediately in a two-million-person city, and we had scramble, really, to provide the enablers any additional assets and the advisors and all the rest of this and logistics to not only avoid defeat, but ultimately, resoundly defeat the Shia militia. It worked but it was very –

KRISTOL: So much for all these fancy plans, you do have to adjust.

PETRAEUS: The Prime Minister, he was inside the city. He planted himself inside an old palace of Saddam's that we had vacated. His brigadier general in charge of his own security force got killed. There's stuff raining down on his location. And again, it was a narrowly run affair. And then that gave us the levers now to do the Battle of Sadr City, the Shia militia that were inside this two-million population neighborhood, densely populated, that we'd had such a tough time going into. Largely, not just for, because the geography and so forth, but because of political reasons as well.

That was the one decision I made every day that was a truly sort of tactical decision because it had strategic implications. Late in the afternoon each day, I'd either talk to McChrystal or Admiral McRaven, and my exec would come in and say, "What do you think? Thumbs up or thumbs down on Sadr City tonight?" It was so sensitive –

KRISTOL: Special operations?

PETRAEUS: On raids into Sadr City. If we got a trigger that one of the senior Shia militia leaders who was killing our soldiers, supported by Iran, that we could pinpoint him through various intelligence means. whether we could go in there and get him or not. It was easy to get into Sadr City, it was really hard to get out, and you could end up doing the so-called Mogadishu Mile very easily in there, and you'd have to fight your way out. When you fight your way out, a lot of people get killed, and the Shia militia, they had CNN speed-dialed in, and they'd say, "The Americans just committed these atrocities."

That was yet another. There's a big idea for working with the press. Our objective was be first with the truth. And we wanted to beat the bad guys to the headline because whoever captures the headline, everything else is a subtitle after that. But with the truth. And I said, "You can't put lipstick on a pig." If it's a horrible situation, say we have a horrible situation.

We actually had one pretty senior officer who on a very bad day in Baghdad went out for the afternoon briefing and started out by saying, "Well, we've had a number of good news stories here in Baghdad today. We reopened a hospital, the soccer league is about to start up, the amusement park is working again." And I said, "You know we had 150 Iraqis killed in two market bombings today, and you should have gone out to the podium and said, 'We had a horrible day in Baghdad. Barbaric extremists, Al-Qaeda

in Iraq, killed 150 innocent Iraqi civilians. This is what we have learned from this. This is what we are going to do to mitigate the risk in the future. Our thoughts go out to their families and to the Iraqi people.' And then if you want to you can talk about the hospital and the soccer team and the amusement park." You had to be forthright with this. And again, you couldn't – I said, "This is the no-spin zone," to use your network's mantra. It's Bill O'Reilly world, and, you know, let's not spin.

KRISTOL: It's really the no-spin zone, with all due respect to Bill O'Reilly. How hard is it, personally, to make that kind of decisions where, you know, these people have American blood on their hands and you've been at the memorial services, obviously, and know these troopers so well and then you have to say for broader strategic reasons we're not going to get this guy? That must be very –

PETRAEUS: Well, we'd get him eventually. Again, this is more about preserving your flexibility to fight another day, if you will. On some occasions, I would actually call the Prime Minister and say, "Prime Minister, we think we may get the trigger, we may pinpoint the location for this particular individual, the leader of such and such a group, Hezbollah or what have you, we'd like to go after him. You know what he's done in the past. It's going to be a tricky operation. People are going to get killed, undoubtedly. Can you and your coalition – because this is a Shia coalition, this is a Shia neighborhood – can you bear this if we do it tonight?" I didn't do it that often, but this is about keeping a country together, it's about supporting the Prime Minister, not making life more difficult for him. He knew we had to take tough actions.

Again, this is, you know, it's hard to believe what can happen in combat. One night we actually killed the bodyguard of his sister in sort of a freak encounter in another Special Operation in another city. These things, terrible, terrible actions happen. You know, the bridge that connects East and West Baghdad – one of the major bridges which has stood for 90 years, built by the British back in their colonial days – blown up just right in the center of the river. The Parliament building was blown up. The mosque, of course, the shrine that had touched off the violence in 2006 was hit again up in Samaria.

It was almost all day long you're getting – it's like being in a boxing ring. And you're getting pummeled, and of course, you've got folks coming from Washington who supposedly want to help. You know, "We're here to help." You've got a host nation that wants something, understandably. Everybody wanted something. And you know, it's interesting because, especially in that society – and I experienced that in the first year when I was in charge – truly, literally by law, an occupying commander, you are in charge, and if you're the Sheik of the tribe, if you will, which essentially you are, you're supposed to take care of the tribal members and they come to you with their concerns. It's the way it works.

And so you had an endless parade of people wanting something. To the point, that I never even held my own cell phone. I gave it to my translator who, obviously, spoke fluent Arabic. He actually would solve these problems for them without having to wake me up at three o'clock in the morning when these issues were mounting. But a very, very tough, tough, you know, existence and experience, and particularly frankly, when you're not sure if it's going to turn in time to go back and you could fear loss of the policy. It was not inconceivable that had there not been the results that we ultimately achieved in that first six-, seven-month period that support on Capitol Hill could have collapsed.

KRISTOL: It was close.

PETRAEUS: It was very close. And remember, of course, I – in fact, Senator McConnell recalls often that in the weeks leading up to the confirmation hearing – of course, the Republicans had been defeated in large measure on Iraq in that midterm election in 2006 and so they'd lost their committee chairmanships and everything else. He went from being Majority Leader to Minority Leader. And he called me up, and I'd known him because he was from Kentucky – obviously, the 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, when I was the commander there.

He said, "I need your help." And I said, "Okay." I went up to Capitol Hill, and I said, "What do you want me to do?" He said, "I want you to sit in this conference room, and I'm going to bring Senators in, and I want you to talk to them." And I realized as I'd talked to – these are the President's party Senators – that

we had a real problem on our hands. Again, except for the Three Amigos and a handful of others, this was – this policy was in serious trouble before it even launched. Had we not had those results, I think the policy could have literally collapsed.

KRISTOL: It's inspiring watching it from the outside and trying to help provide enough space and room for you guys to do what you did, and it's really an amazing accomplishment and a real tribute to our military, I think, and I guess to our government. We all say these days, and I think we're right to be frustrated about an awful lot in our government, but that was a case where things were going badly and people took serious action to reverse the situation.

PETRAEUS: Courageous, steadfast leadership. Obviously, it started with the President –

KRISTOL: But also operational. The ability to do it, that's what strikes me. For all the dysfunctions, I'm sure the military has its share and, God knows, the civilian side of government has its share. You were able to pull it off. That's –

PETRAEUS: If the President commits the nation, and you're privileged to command that particular effort, I mean, it's a pretty substantial base on which you're standing. Even though in truth those above me, and they tried to box me in actually at one point in time with recommendations to force a drawdown earlier than I wanted to do and all the rest of this. This is with my own tribe, if you will, back in Washington. It was never easy, to put it mildly.

But at a certain point, we did sense that it was going – The interesting dynamic here, though, is that, you'd think that you'd have high-five moments and you'd spike the ball or something like that. You don't. You get an achievement, and you'd just realize we've got to get some more. And I remember there was a moment – Keep in mind is what you're doing is you're either spiraling upward in a situation like this or you're spiraling downward. If you're spiraling upward, which is what we tried to achieve obviously as quickly as we could, you achieve a little bit more security. Then, they can reopen the market or a shop. That means people start spending a little money, that means now you get a little bit more support from the population, and they rat out the bad guys because they want them gone, and now you fence off the entire neighborhood with hundreds of thousands of people so you have better security. Now, the school reopens, you get the medical clinic going again, the streets are clean. You get people literally back to work. You get many more shops. All the sudden the neighborhood is thriving, and they don't want to let it deteriorate. You got power going again. Maybe the gas station is operating. Dozens and dozens of discreet activities just in a single neighborhood in a major city.

So you get that going, but again there's always something more. I never had a high-five moment. I never had a moment of "Yeah!" You know, even years later when I was the commander in Afghanistan and next door, if you will, in Pakistan – of course, Osama Bin Laden was killed, and I needed to monitor that very, very carefully that night because there were a number of contingencies that would involve US forces in Afghanistan taking action to respond to what might develop out of that.

There were some very close-run different activities. And of course, there was a helicopter crash to start it all off. These forces were under the Joint Special Operations Command commander going directly back to the Director of the CIA and the President, but these were my forces otherwise. And obviously, it's happening from a base in our, you know, the area for which I'm responsible. Even at that one. When we realized, you know, this is it and he's dead, I didn't – I said, "Okay, let's flip on all the other operations that were going on." Because that same night in Afghanistan, we did something like 12 kill-capture raids with Special Mission Unit forces, many of which, in many respects, technical respects, or even the enemy respects, were more challenging than what we did, albeit this is the most strategically important kill-capture operation in a decade. You don't have those kinds of great moments.

What you have – I remember when the hearings were done, Ambassador Crocker and I – the first night after the hearings were done, I remember doing something like 10 press interviews one after the other. I'd do this studio that's set up and then the other one, and I'd go right in there, then I'd come back here with a new group and just went back and forth, did every network, every show imaginable.

The next night, we did some more, and then finally we were going to do the *Jim Lehrer News Hour*, and it's over in Arlington, Virginia, and the two of us, we had driven over there together and we actually arrived about 10 minutes early and we both looked at each other and we said, "Could you guys just let us have a minute by ourselves?" So the driver and the security and others all left the vehicle and we each looked at each other and at the same moment said, "I am never going to do this again."

But of course, six months later, there we were again. So we're done with the hearings, but again we didn't go out and say, "Oh yeah, man." You're onto something else already. You just quietly, you know, you digest it, you absorb it. There's some degree – but, you know, actually this might capture it. Every now and then, there were certain things I did occasionally sort of on my own. One of these was every night if we were down at the embassy, because we couldn't drive that road, it was the most dangerous road in the world, the airport road, until about a year into it, and we did solve that one, too.

So I'd fly back and forth each night. It's only about an eight-minute flight or so from the embassy and where the headquarters was and where we had our hooch with a whole bunch of guys that I lived with there. On a number of nights that, particularly really tough days, I'd say, "Turn right." They actually had a code word I didn't know about – the pilots, because we always had a chase bird, too, with the whole security squad on it in case we went down – he'd call the pilot and say, "Purple rain," and that meant basically, we're not doing what we intended to do. The boss is calling the directions here. And I'd go and I'd look at the amusement park. I'd look at Sadr City and see the soccer fields. I just wanted to be reminded that the experiences on which I'd focused that day, which often involved suicide bombings or infrastructure attacks or casualties or whatever, that life was going on and was better for the Iraqi citizens in the capital city, which was a quarter of the population of the country.

Every now and then at night sort of late I'd say, "Hey Chief," to Chief Warren Officer – wonderful individual who actually went with me to CENTCOM and then to Afghanistan as well. I said, "Let's go for a stroll." And I just wanted to clear my head. We were in a pretty large, very secure compound. It was literally about six miles all around when we ran it. Around a lake, and I'd just sort of walk. He'd know sometimes I might want to talk, and sometimes I might just want to think. One of those nights we were out there, and we hadn't said anything and he said, "Sir, I'd been wondering you're getting toward the end of your time." And I had maybe another month or so to go, it was all announced. "You're getting to the home stretch. You've made enormous progress." And he said, "What's it like to command the surge in Iraq?" And I said, "Chief, it's the most awesomely awesome experience imaginable on a good day. But there aren't many good days." And there really were not. I mean, less than the fingers on this hand because by definition, it would be no fatalities, no serious injuries.

I do remember there was a day where one of the networks back in the United States led the news that night by saying, "The news from Iraq is that there is no news." And that would be a good day. But again, there were very, very few of those. Again, even when you had accomplishments, even when there was something really significant that took place, you're just onto the next thing. There's always so much that's undone that needs to be done. And again, just when you think it's all going great, they'll assassinate the sheik that led the reconciliation. They'll blow up bridges, I said, they'll hit the mosques, the shrine. They'll wound one of your commanders, kill him. It's always tough.

KRISTOL: You did what needed to be done, and the country owes you a debt for that.

PETRAEUS: It was a privilege to do it. It really was. The greatest of privileges.

KRISTOL: I much admire you for what you did, obviously. Anyway, thank you for coming to CONVERSATIONS today, and thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]