

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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Guest: Army General David Petraeus (Ret.), Commander, Multi-National Force – Iraq,
Commander, International Security Assistance Force – Afghanistan

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I: How America Can Lead (00:15 – 33:38)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS, and I'm very pleased to have back General David Petraeus to continue our conversation from a couple of months ago.

PETRAEUS: Good to be back with you.

KRISTOL: Thanks for taking the time. I was thinking of you the other day when I heard Donald Trump – we're speaking in April 2016, and he's, I guess, the leading Republican presidential candidate right now – saying, "We never win wars anymore, we don't win wars anymore." That's clearly resonated a little bit. What's the answer?

PETRAEUS: I think it's somewhat understandable. Iraq and Afghanistan, in particular, have been very frustrating experiences that cost enormous amounts of money and, obviously, blood, and seriously wounded great young American men and women. Afghanistan, we're still achieving the mission, in other words, of keeping Al Qaeda from having a sanctuary on the soil there as they did when the 9/11 attacks were planned there, but it's been very difficult and it appears as if the results are eroding somewhat right now.

Iraq seemed to be in the very good spot several years after the Surge. It continued in a good place, and then the Prime Minister pursued highly sectarian policies that basically undid the progress that we'd achieved there. You see other places that are just plain incredibly complex conundrums. Syria. Libya, we helped with the takedown, and obviously, it collapsed after the takedown of that. Again, I think it's understandable that there's an examination of these and saying, "What did we get for our money?" This terrible loss in lives and seriously wounded Americans and coalition members and, indeed, the host nation, as well. Having said that, I have to say that I'm still persuaded that there is place for a thoughtful, pragmatic approach to international issues.

And in fact, that American leadership is an imperative. I've looked very hard at the post-Arab Spring era, and in a very simplistic way, I lay out five lessons that I think we should take from this. The first is ungoverned spaces in the Islamic world – particularly West and North Africa, Middle East, Central Asia – these are going to be exploded by Islamic extremists. It has happened in virtually every single case.

The second is the effects of these – in other words, the implications and the ramifications – are unlikely to be contained in these areas. Even if you try to contain them, I think it might not be possible, and certainly, Syria is the worst of these examples of a veritable, political Chernobyl, spilling violence and extremism. And a tsunami of refugees, not just into neighboring countries and the greater region, but

obviously, into our European allies' soil as well, causing the greatest crises there in many decades, greater than the Euro crisis.

Third, in responding to these situations, there is no substitute for American leadership. I think it's imperative. It's for a whole variety of reasons, not the least of which is we can bring to bear more assets – militarily, diplomatically, with development assistance and all the rest – more than all of the others put together by several factors. Particularly when it comes to the armada of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and precision-strike assets that we have that are proving so very, very important in Iraq, for example, to a degree in Syria and some other locations, as well.

Doesn't mean we should go it alone. Winston Churchill was right, the only thing worse than fighting with allies is fighting without them, and in particular, we should have Islamic countries as part of the coalition. This is not primarily a clash between civilizations, it's a clash within civilizations. Far more Muslims are being killed by Islamic extremists than are non-Muslims. So we want those countries; they understand it, and the stakes for them are the highest of all.

Number four – and a critical lesson, I think – is that the response has to be more than a narrow counterterrorism approach. This requires more than precision strikes, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, drone efforts, and so on. It requires an all-of-the-above approach. That does not mean that we have to do all of this. It does mean that the approach, the overall concept has to be comprehensive, not just again precision strikes, but also conventional military operations. It has to have politics, reconciliation among the different factions, there are nation-building aspects, reconstruction and all the rest. Rule of law. We don't have to and shouldn't do all that whenever we can avoid it. In many cases, if not most, I think we actually can by enabling the host-nation forces or partner forces or again, those who are trying to achieve aims that we believe should be supported.

And we do that, indeed, with these ISR platforms, with again our strike assets and all the other elements that we can bring to bear militarily but also diplomatically, politically in other respects. But it's these nations that should provide the ground forces because if they can't, the results aren't sustainable. It's the host nation – Iraq, let's say – that should do the political reconciliation. We cannot do it for them this time. We are no longer the strongest tribe in Iraq as we were during the Surge.

It has to be Iraqis, and again, if they can't do it, we certainly help, encourage, facilitate, but if they can't do it, the results will not be sustainable. So that's a huge issue right there, and then finally, I think we have to just acknowledge that this is going to be a generational struggle. It is not just a marathon much less a sprint, as we used to say, this is an ultra-marathon. It's going to be with us for decades in many respects. Undoubtedly, we'll make progress in certain areas, see some backsliding in others, but again, given that the effects aren't going to be contained and given that our leadership is required, I think it is essential that the United States provide pragmatic, thoughtful, prudent leadership, and engagement in these efforts.

KRISTOL: You laid out – convinced me, sober and optimistic vision, really, of what we can accomplish.

PETRAEUS: Realistic, not optimistic.

KRISTOL: Optimistically realistic.

PETRAEUS: We're asked in Iraq always, "Are you an optimist or a pessimist?" I'm a realist, and the reality is it's all hard all the time. But that I think we can make progress in that that progress matters for our country and for, indeed, our partners and allies around the world.

KRISTOL: You've obviously been giving a lot of speeches and interviews and interacting with all kinds of people here –

PETRAEUS: In the region, as well.

KRISTOL: Here, I'm just curious, do you think the American people – I mean, how responsive do you think they would be to the message you just have given in a sober and realistic way? I'm struck in the current presidential campaign, I would say – a superficial observer might say, that maybe, correct, General Petraeus, but that's not where the American public is. Do you find that people when you give a talk on a college campus, or do a seminar somewhere that people will understand if you walk them through it?

PETRAEUS: I think certainly some will. There are some who were reluctant to accept it. Again, that's understandable. I absolutely accept that the frustration of these very lengthy and very costly engagements leaves one to be predisposed. Indeed, I would contend that our national leadership has reflected this that we swung quite a ways against being involved, we tried not to be involved in Iraq. We quote, "Responsibly ended the war in Iraq." Tragically, the war continued, it was reignited by actions of the Iraqi leadership, and lo and behold, we've had to go back in and have now, apparently, about as many as 5,000 people on the ground at a given time.

Again, very difficult to see how the achievements in Afghanistan – again, we went there for a reason. That's where the 9/11 attacks were planned by Al Qaeda, by the Taliban rule of Afghanistan. We have kept that from happening so far, but it's quite clear that we're going to have to continue to engage, and it may be advocated that we should provide close air support for the Afghan forces in the way that we did when we are fighting shoulder to shoulder with them against the Taliban, which is not being provided routinely for them now.

KRISTOL: I am struck – aren't you? – in the current public discourse, there seems to be an awful lot of reluctance to understand that it's going to be tough, and it's going to be hard, but the alternatives are much worse. Even though you'd think with Syria, especially the Syria-Iraq catastrophe, that it wouldn't be that hard to make the case that, you know, for the difficulties for engagement and the mistakes that were made – and we can debate those – but the consequences of non-engagement can be pretty catastrophic, too.

PETRAEUS: I think again that case can be made, I'd like to think in a thoughtful, reasonable manner, but it's understandable that there is reaction. I mean, our history has been one of "No more Koreas" even. Korea, we see as a bit of a success at this point, decades and decades removed from that. But at the time it was not seen as that. It was seen as at best a draw. Vietnam, obviously, it's very difficult to categorize that other than as a defeat, however many tactical victories we may have had, and however good shape it may have been when we pulled out. Then, some of these others.

To be sure, we've also had the Panamas and the Desert Storm, Granada, the Balkans – frankly, I think we played a very constructive role, obviously, in stopping what was an absolute civil war ongoing in Bosnia and, obviously, ethnic and sectarian conflict in Kosovo. Again, a number of other places where we've provided assistance also. The Philippines. El Salvador, which was in a pretty good way and has backslid. Colombia, which could be on the eve of a peace agreement. Several decades into a very bloody insurgency there.

We've been engaged in a number of these places, and in many cases, I would contend that support and engagement was constructive. But again, this is difficult warfare. This is not the kind, again, it's not Desert Storm where it's just conventional force and conventional force, which we're going to win inevitably you'd think against virtually anybody out there that wants to go head to head with us. Especially out in the open in the desert. In fact, I'm asked, "Do you support carpet-bombing?" I'm all for carpet-bombing if the enemy accommodates us by laying himself out in the desert. And has no civilians around him and no infrastructure that would be collateral damage, then by all means, run the B-52s and open the bomb bay doors with whatever falls out. Otherwise, the enemy is not so accommodating, the enemy hugs the civilian population. Now, they're actually underground in many cases in civilian cities and villages, very careful about moving when we have good visibility and so on.

Again, these aren't the kinds of wars or battles where you take the hill, plant the flag, and go home to the post-Desert Storm victory parade that we all remember so well. These are long, frustrating, and difficult endeavors. But I do believe we have the capability to do this. More importantly, we have the capability to do it without the kind of vast expense, frankly, that we did have to commit during the height of the Surge in Iraq and Afghanistan.

KRISTOL: Let's talk about that because I think one objection you'll sometimes hear is in the old days wars were fought where our assets were very useful, aircraft, etc. As you say, tanks battles or whatever. People say this, of course, Korea and Vietnam were extremely difficult wars, and we took terrible casualties and much more than anything since. But somehow the modern wars don't lend themselves to victory, and why even try? Is modern technology and our abilities, our capabilities, which you know so much about and which the rest of us don't, except for occasionally, get a glimpse of? Has it made it more realistic to think this kind of counterinsurgency and using, combining all our assets in a way that doesn't require a huge expenditure or huge commitment and ground forces, is it more doable than it was 10 or 20 years ago?

PETRAEUS: I think it is. If you contrast when we went into Iraq, I was a Division Commander at the time, a two-star general, great 101 Airborne Division, 254 helicopters, 15-20,000 troops all told and our formation. And by the way, that was initially a conventional war; that's what we were ready for and that's what we did, and that was pretty straightforward work. But supporting us we literally had one so-called line of Predators. Now a line is a 24-hour capability that means you typically have three platforms. There's one that's overhead, there's one flying out because they're very slow to replace it, there's another one flying back or being maintained. We now have somewhere north of 60 lines of Predators and Reapers – these are the really substantial unmanned aerial vehicles, remotely piloted vehicles, as the Air Force terms it. Then, there are many, many others that are lower flying and a little bit less capable and can't carry quite the same payload.

These are extraordinary, and again, we're the only country who probably have more of those than all the other countries put together again, times some factor. Because it's not about the platform, it's not however many tens of millions. These are inexpensive compared to a single Joint Strike Fighter or some other platform like that. What costs the money and what is difficult is roughly 150 per line for 24-hour coverage, the unblinking eye as it's termed. Keep in mind that these are individuals that are flying it 24-hours a day, and you have a crew that takes it off and lands it out in the theater, you have another crew that's back in the United States – this is publicly known – a signal bounces off a satellite or two going back there. Again, all 24-hours a day so you've got to have at least three crews typically. You have individuals that maintain the aircraft, you have those that fuel it, that arm it. Those that do the communications for it. The whole communications architecture itself is very, very substantial because you're pushing full-motion video literally around the world, and it take wideband tactical satellite channels and other means or lots of fiber or whatever it is you have to convey this.

You have also people who are the imagery experts. Again, they can look at what the cameras are sending back and see stuff that you and I wouldn't. This is the trained eye. You have individuals that might be translating, perhaps if there are signals intelligence devices on board. Others that are picking big data off the various other collection instruments on this. Others that are again, analyzing all of it because you have to fuse all of the intelligence that is coming from one of these platforms, keeping in mind that there are many different optics and other devices on it. Beyond that, they're also fusing it with all of the other intelligence, whether it's human signals, imagery, measurement signals as it's termed, pulling it all together and interpreting what it is we're seeing and ultimately at some point, perhaps say, and this is a valid target and then handing it off to the operators to make a decision on whether that should be strike or not in the course of the campaigns that we're engaged in.

This has enabled us to support host-nation ground forces in the case of Iraq. Certainly, they have to be constituted, so we have an advise-and-assist team as its termed, to help them with their planning, to advise them and to assist them in using the assets that we can bring to bear and that they can bring to

bear. There are train-and-equip elements as well that are helping reconstitute forces that got beat up and collapsed in the face of the Islamic State.

Again, this is an extraordinary capability that we are bringing to bear. We can also augment on a case-by-case basis with ground tactical air controllers, perhaps Special Forces with their Special Forces, maybe in the conduct of raids, as we've seen in the conduct of the high-valued target hunt. And on and on. But this does not expose our ground forces anywhere remotely near the numbers that we had engaged before, and, thankfully, touch wood, the casualty rates have been relatively low. Certainly, we've lost some great young men and women and for their families, obviously, this is a significant, significant war going on, but again – compared to what we suffered during the Surge in Iraq or the Surge in Afghanistan, compared with the cost of that overall – very, very different magnitude and makes this, I think, more doable.

Now, we have to keep in mind this is against an enemy who doesn't have considerable air defenses, although they do knock down some Russian helicopters from time to time. It's an enemy that can't counter these unmanned aerial vehicles that are overhead, can't take out our precision-strike ammunition, at least, again – touch wood – so far. And it's a raid as a conventional army in many respects right now. Now, we know that they're already conducting terrorist activities. Traditional terrorism in the cities of Iraq and Syria and so forth, including suicide bombers, and they're using those as a tactical endeavor as well. An actually tactical asset for them to just run suicide bombers in very heavily armored vehicles with massive amounts of explosives at our Iraqi partners.

Again, we can deal with a conventional force with our assets, with the Iraqis and in support of them, and I think this is truly charting something quite new. Again, we have to be careful to remember that there are other opponents, would-be opponents out there who could present a much more formidable threat, particularly when it comes to anti-aircraft, anti-ballistic missiles, cyber capabilities, you name it. The hybrid warfare that we have seen the Russians, for example, demonstrate is quite interesting and would be quite challenging for many countries. We can't think that this is always going to be this kind of situation, but in many of these cases that we're discussing here this is actually quite capable and quite important as an advance.

KRISTOL: When did the advance sort of hit a tipping point of being really –?

PETRAEUS: I think it probably started during the Surge in Iraq perhaps, because you had Secretary Gates –

KRISTOL: So when you went in in '03, with the 121st.

PETRAEUS: We had one Predator line, we had three divisions in the Army side, all fighting for one Predator line. And so –

KRISTOL: Otherwise, it was the 18 or whatever the standard –

PETRAEUS: We had attack helicopters, we had a variety of other assets. Nothing like this, and of course, not the lower flying ones either, which are not resident in many tactical units. This is really a significant advance, but you started to really see the impact of this probably in that '06, '07, definitely during the Surge in fact. Then in 2008 about a year in the Surge, the Battle of Sadr City, we put more of these assets under a single brigade commander, a colonel then, I think we had in the entire theater when we launched into Iraq from Kuwait.

Again, a lot of this, Secretary Bob Gates, who just pushed the bureaucracy, pushed the services, drove the acquisition of many of these additional systems, frankly, responding to the battlefield requests from those of us who were out there. The same with the mine-resistant armored protected vehicle, the so-

called MWRAPS. The same with the whole host of optics, towers with optics, blimps with optics, and above all, remotely piloted vehicles with objects as well.

KRISTOL: And how far down does the ability to deploy or control these assets go?

PETRAEUS: It can go all the way down to tactical units. It's not unheard of for companies to have these when they went out. The problem is that some of these are nothing like what you have. In fact, our son who is fighting in Afghanistan, when I was privileged to be the commander, would say they were actually reluctant to use some of these because in high winds they'd go down and of course, they'd go down over the enemy, which is where they are and they have to go out and retrieve them. There was some occasional reluctance. Now, that's several years ago, they're more advanced than that now – I mean we've got everything from gnat-size on up to really quite substantial, but it's really varies in the capability and the advances now are so rapid. Really unmanned, I think –

KRISTOL: This is big moment in front of modern military history?

PETRAEUS: It is. I mean, you also saw just the other day unveiled publicly the first remotely piloted submarine hunter. This ship – nobody wanted it at all – all kinds of centers optics, it's got little catamaran sides on it for stability, and it's clocked at 30 knots or something like that so it can really move along. Lots of different capabilities that enable it to track and stay at sea a long time, and it doesn't have to be replenished with food, water, or anything else other than what fuels it and enables the production of electricity to operate all these different systems.

I think you'll see a day where a manned aircraft might have unmanned wingmen autonomously linked to it. Certainly intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance already link to attack helicopters. They're the ones taking the early risk, the unmanned and then you bring in the manned systems as required. There will always be a place, certainly, for the man in the loop, and very likely for the man still in cockpits or at the helms of a number, but I think we're increasingly going to see – as we will someday on the streets of America – unmanned or, you know, piloted by robots or artificial-intelligence cars and other items as well.

KRISTOL: It's sort of ironic, but it seems to me – maybe, I'm little wrong about this, but you and many others – correctly, it seemed to me – 15 years ago warned about the notion that you could just win wars from the air that ultimately you need to take full – ground troops are fundamental, and of course, there was criticism from Secretary Rumsfeld for believing in such a light footprint. He didn't want to actually deploy enough ground troops to Iraq and obviously, the Surge was a surge of ground troops. You have a lot of credibility, it seems to me, in not having been a sort of believer in everything can be done very on the cheap by high-tech.

PETRAEUS: It still can't be done on the cheap. There are ground forces. Again, especially if it's an unconventional enemy. That enemy has to be forced to mass. And what making it mass right now are Iraqi ground forces. Syrian Kurds, Syrian Sunnis. And you do obviously. You can't engage the humans. By no means. In fact, if you look out right now, you'll find that almost every division headquarters in the Army is engaged in some fashion. It's actually deployed, or preparing to deploy, or recovering from deployment. And a number of the brigade headquarters are also very, very – so headquarters still matter as well.

It's these brigade headquarters along with Special Forces, but Special Forces are nowhere near enough for these very robust train-and-equip and advise-and-assist missions. You've got to have the tailorability of these, if you will, and if you will, one of the lessons that I've taken from all that we've been engaged in during the period since 9/11 is that however much we may wish it, we're not going to go back to the kind of war that was Desert Storm, although we need to be capable of that because if we're ever seen as not being capable then you might actually be confronted by this. As we came out of Iraq, as we have reduced in Afghanistan, you can almost hear a sigh of relief in the corners in the Pentagon saying, "Good, let's get back to what real soldiers and what real military guys do." Which is fight the enemy's conventional forces.

And certainly we do have to be prepared for that, but I think the real lesson is you've got to have military forces that have enormous flexibility, we can't consign the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan to the dustbin of history. We've learned a great deal, and even if we're not the ones applying all of it, our partners, our host-nation elements are going to be doing just that. And the construct, the campaign, if you will, still has to include all of these elements. So we're still going to be engaged in offensive, defensive, and stability operations. And that stability operations, always as much by the host-nation as possible, but there are going to be times when we will, at the very least, will have to be engaged in supporting it, advising it, and assisting it.

KRISTOL: And the US military and the US government are broadly, you think is doing very good, pretty good, adequate job of adjusting to and incorporating these technological breakthroughs? They're not perfect, but I mean as these things go?

PETRAEUS: I think these – our military is learning organization, many of these are new greater capability assets, as that happens the military continues to learn how to exploit their capabilities fully. And I'm very impressed indeed in what is evolving, again in Iraq, what's evolving to some degree in Syria. Again, there should be undoubtedly additional organizational architecture assets, some changes in some of the application of rules of engagement and so forth.

But again, what's evolving, I think, is really enormously impressive and a compliment, again, to leaders and soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, who are incredibly adaptable, innovative and show enormous initiative.

KRISTOL: General, the argument one hears apparently out on the campaign trail and elsewhere kind of, "Oh, the Pentagon, takes forever to procure anything." Takes forever. It's very bureaucratic, the military itself is so hierarchical. Organized in a 20th century or a 19th century –

PETRAEUS: It is all of that. But still it produces – I mean, it's a little bit like conversations about democracy and its shortcomings, and Winston Churchill's wonderful quote that it's the worst of all systems except for all the others. Again, it's incredible when you have someone like Secretary Gates at the helm for the amount of time that he was and just driving programs in a way that was not always the case. I mean, it took us far too long to get vehicles with V-shaped hulls given all the improvised explosive devices we were encountering on roads and off-road. He pushed that, he pushed the unmanned aerial vehicles. He pushed a number of other initiatives.

I think Ash Carter, the Secretary of Defense – but of course, has a much shorter amount of time, he really only has one full budgetary cycle, I think, as you look at what he'll have. It certainly is driving a lot of this and now pushing a lot of innovation much closer – partnerships with Silicon Valley, with the other hubs at various university research sites, and with businesses, and so forth, again to exploit innovation and take advantage of it.

KRISTOL: Let me ask one more thing about this. Cyber, you've studied this and you've thought about this and one reads about it – also people speak about it – as this whole new horizon in war. Is that over or under –?

PETRAEUS: It's hugely serious.

KRISTOL: Ten years, will cyber be a major part of the fighting landscape capability?

PETRAEUS: Sure. And I hope that one of the results of the ongoing discussions of Goldwater–Nichols will be finally the elevation of cyber command to a full-fledged combatant command on an equal basis with Central Command and Pacific and all the others.

And it will be a hybrid because it should have the ability to actually recruit, train, equip, educate, develop, retain, and employ. The employ is a geographic combatant command – and I'll come to that – but those initial tasks are all the tasks of a service of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines. They'll have their cyber, but I think cyber in itself should probably have some of those capabilities directly to ensure it can get the really top-notch elite cyber capabilities that it needs in the human capital, in the same way a little bit that Special Operations Command does.

And then like SOCOM, it will be a force provider. SOCOM provides Special Operations Forces of various types to the combatant commanders, the geographic combatant commanders, when I was a Central Command commander. But cyber command – although they'll do that also because the combatant commanders need them – I think cyber command also should be a geographic combatant commander and its geography will be cyberspace. That will be its area of responsibility.

Because I think you now have – we had ground, then we had sea, then we air, its subsea, space, and now I think, we actually think, we have cyberspace. I think this is a brave new world, there are extraordinary threats out there to our infrastructure, to our financial institutions, to individuals, to businesses, and these are really quite vast. Again, cyber command will play an enormous role in this regard for US military with respect, because there's also dual hat with the National Security Agency Director, with respect to international intelligence collection, in partnership very closely with the CIA and the other intelligence agencies. Also, has a very key defensive role for the US military and the information systems that it has. And I think in some respects will be throwing things across the transom to the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and the law enforcement agencies as well.

KRISTOL: Brave new world.

PETRAEUS: It is a brave new world. And again, the sooner it happens the better we are.

KRISTOL: The safer, the brave new world. But still full of nuts –

PETRAEUS: Not preventing them, but again, why it still needs to be a sub-combatant commander, under another combatant commander, when this is the resident expertise it needs to be at that level, and I'm pretty confident that that's going to happen.

II: Education and Counter-Insurgency (33:38 – 1:09:14)

KRISTOL: I think in his World War II memoir Winston Churchill says when he became Prime Minister in May of 1940, he felt as if his experiences for life had prepared him uniquely for this moment. Churchill had a deservedly high view of himself, and he thought he was ready to do this amazing task. He was fortunate to have all this experience.

It seems to me that you said somewhere that you felt fortunate to have had some, I think, unique, in the military, set of experiences, both intellectual and practical in terms of your assignments. Assignments you were assigned to and assignments you volunteered for that enabled you to take over and have the success you had in Iraq and then in Afghanistan. Let's talk a little bit about that. People know of you as the commander of the Surge, but they don't know the backstory, so to speak.

PETRAEUS: I was very fortunate, I think to, first of all, have a degree of fascination with what at various times were called small wars, low-intensity conflicts, counterinsurgency, whatever the description. I went to French jump school as a young lieutenant when I was a paratrooper over in Europe. And got enamored of the French experience, and Indochine, as they said – they were fighting the northern part of Vietnam. Of course, it ended with Dien Bien Phu, quite a very significant defeat. Algeria stumbled into the British in Oman, of course, in Malaya. Our experience in Vietnam. And a number of others of these.

And then over time ended up serving in a summer, to be sure, but a summer temporary duty stint as a Special Assistant to the Commander and Chief of US Southern Command, headquartered in Panama. I will never forget going into, and this is an individual, General Jack Galvin for whom I'd worked before. I had been his aide when he was a division commander, and frankly, we really had a wonderful relationship, he was the best mentor I ever had, and we had this terrific correspondence over the years. So he brought me down there and I remember going in –

KRISTOL: When is this?

PETRAEUS: This would be mid-1986, the summer of '86, I think. I remember going into the first morning update, and I realized, "My God, this is a theater of war." Americans, yes, it's only 55 trainers or at least that are in there all month, in El Salvador, executing a national campaign plan, a comprehensive plan largely prepared with the assistance of a General Fred Woerner when he was down there with a previous tour. Hugely instructive. Colombia, of course, was already engaged with the FARC at that time, we were helping them. Not as robustly as we ultimately did. Peru was fighting against the Sendero Luminoso. And then, of course, we were supporting insurgents, not the military now, it is more publicly known now as a CIA effort, but out of a military base in Honduras supporting the Contras against the Nicaragua regime that was tied, of course, to the Soviet Union.

Everywhere you looked there were small wars, they weren't small to the countries in which they were going on –

KRISTOL: Nor in their consequences.

PETRAEUS: I traveled with him to a number of these countries, in particular a couple of trips to El Salvador that were truly eye-opening. This is a very dangerous place at that time. I remember going into a meeting with President Duarte, and I realized I'd forgotten that I had sort of a canvas map case, but it actually had a loaded MP5 sub-machine gun in it. I was thinking, "My God, I'm in the equivalent of the Oval Office in El Salvador with a loaded sub-machine gun." And then I looked around the room and every time anybody's coat opened there was a big – we called it a hog leg – a big pistol hanging out so it was welcome in El Salvador. It was an extraordinary experience, and I continued to study, and I helped him write a piece – it was called "Uncomfortable Wars" – it is still quoted on some points – in *Parameters Magazine*.

I went back to West Point and was engaged in some of this kind of activity, and of course, finished my dissertation at that time, which was on the impact of Vietnam, on the military thinking on the use of force. Now, looked mostly at the big decisions where a President is considering the use of force. You have to go back and look if you say that Vietnam had an impact, compared to what, so it gave me license to look at really everything from about Korea onward. The "No more Koreas" period. I interviewed General Ridgeway at one time about his advice, and he said, "It would take us eight divisions and eight years to do Dien Bien Phu, but we're happy to do it." I asked him if he had, very respectfully, had he priced this out of the realm of the doable, and he drew himself up and said, "Captain, it would not have been within the province of the military man to do such a thing." I thought very nicely put, but I think he clearly had intended to do just that.

And looked at all these, and then in the wake of Vietnam, something we wanted to put in the rearview mirror as quickly as we could, happily we could refocus on the NATO Warsaw Pact, this was a big war, big units, but of course, we never had to fight so it was almost sent from central casting. You could have big units, big forces, big exercises, big headquarters, everything, and certainly on a knife's edge a couple times and very serious stuff, but deterred and ultimately prevailed in the Cold War. Some years later then – we probably should come back to that because one of the lessons was, we just don't want to do this kind of fight. We shouldn't even be configured for it, don't train for it, and it was almost a sense if we're not prepared or configured that we won't have to do it. But of course, it brings to mind a paraphrase –

something from Soviet days – you may not be interested in counterinsurgency, but it may be interested in you.

KRISTOL: I'm struck as a total civilian, kind of ignorant of anything in detail about the military, that the conventional wisdom that I had – Korea was a very difficult and painful stalemate, Vietnam ended up as a loss and total failure for everyone – no appreciation of the fact of the military success both in Korea, and I guess that's General Ridgeway, right?

PETRAEUS: He retrieved that.

KRISTOL: Then, I guess in Vietnam where, I guess, General Abrams especially, the successful turn, finally, to counterinsurgency that was then given way, you might say, after the relative success he had. That must have been something, I'm sure that's something. You seemed to be more cognizant of that than the typical "Vietnam, Korea, we don't even want to think about it. Those were difficult and painful."

PETRAEUS: Vietnam, when it was a small war, it might have been dealt with as a counterinsurgency, and in fact, some individuals recommended that. There's a retired three-star, General Cushman, at the time a Lieutenant Colonel or Colonel, strongly recommended this at the very beginning. And instead the bureaucracy – as, in fact, was said famously, bureaucracy does its thing – and we turned into a big war. And of course, you had situations where you really created more enemies than you took off the battlefield with your actions, these challenges. Beyond all of that, we had some very big challenges with some of our host-nation partners. That is one you take away from this.

There are people that say if the civilians would have just hung in there with us, they stabbed the military in the back and all this. I don't buy that. Clearly, the drawdown and then ultimately just completely taking away all the assistance for the South Vietnamese forces consigned them to defeat when here came the main divisions tanks rolling from North into South. There was a deficiency in that later shift, and we've seen that play out more recently. Again, there are limits to what you can do for another country. You can't want it more than they do. If they can't embody good governance, you've got a real handicap on your hands.

But again, we did toward the end, seem to come up with a strategy that achieved progress and perhaps again, drew it down too fast. It was an imperative because of the lack of support in the United States and from this came these very famous Weinberger's and Powell's rules, of course. And General Powell himself is far more nuanced about this, but what it comes down to is we should have very clear aims, the public has to be with us, it's all in and you win. Quick, decisive, and get out. It's again, Desert Storm, which, of course, is just sent from central casting for the US military.

At the end of the day, countries have seen that – they're not going to engage us head to head, and we're going to end up fighting people who are among the people, and now, of course, with megacities and all the other developments around the world, the likelihood that we're going to get another situation like that is substantially lower, I think, than it was before it took place. So what the military took from this, again, was actually, again, a reluctance to get engaged in something and a very high degree of caution. Which I think is reasonable. It's certainly reasonable given the experience we'd had. The challenge is that there are times when you still have to do something, and it may not be the preferred enemy and the preferred location and terrain and all the rest.

You've got to be sufficiently flexible and capable to deal with that. And you know, I was very fortunate again to have some other experiences over the years. I actually deliberately went to the fellowship, in lieu of the War College, at Georgetown so that first I could study Haiti and the interagency process that led up to it.

KRISTOL: This is '93, '94?

PETRAEUS: This is '94, '95. So in '94, we went in – I think it was '94, remember we threatened –

KRISTOL: First we didn't go in, right?

PETRAEUS: We threatened invasion, and then they capitulated so then we occupied instead of having to fight our way in. But there were still various security challenges and, more importantly, there were huge nation-building issues with trying to get a police force stood up and dealing with prisons and all kinds of basic service issues and everything else, after years of their predatory governance that had characterized the government.

We're on the ground, and there's a UN force going to come in to really augment and in some respects backfill some of the US forces, and lo and behold, I got a call from the UN force commander saying he needed to replace the U3 position – that's the Chief of Operations and Plans as well – for the UN force that was going to be established that would take control of all the US forces.

KRISTOL: You were then what? A Lieutenant Colonel? Colonel?

PETRAEUS: I was a Lieutenant Colonel promotable actually, so I was already on the Colonel's list. In fact, I was promoted during the end of my time in Haiti.

KRISTOL: You said you got a call – how does that really work? Why does he call some promotable colonel?

PETRAEUS: First of all, I knew him. I'd just come from being the G3 Chief of Operations, Plans, and Training for the 101st Airborne Division, as a Lieutenant Colonel, having commanded a battalion prior to that. It had been a great year in a lot of ways for the division. He was an old 101st guy and an 82nd guy. Which is where I was going next. 82nd Airborne. And he knew that I studying the Haiti process.

I'd been very fortunate that Strobe Talbott, that I'd established a relationship with him, had taken him to a trip to West Point. He was the Deputy Secretary of State. He wanted to give me an interview for this research that I was doing, and he couldn't because he had to do a speech on short notice and that X'd the speech at that time. And he said, "Why you don't just come with me to the Deputy's Committee Meeting on Saturday at the White House Conference Center where we're going to spend four to six hours just discussing the future and the transition to the UN force?" So a Lieutenant Colonel in civilian clothes as the plus-one for the Deputy of Secretary of State. It was quite extraordinary.

General Kisner, the Commander-designate, knew that I was engaged in this process, and he called up and said, "How would you like to do Haiti instead of study Haiti?" And I said, "If you can get me out of the fellowship – which is not that easy to do, it's going to have to go to the Chief of Staff for the Army – I'm your man." And he did. And so sometime in January of 1995, I had began the work for that couple weeks in the States and then deployed to Haiti. Spent a little over four months actually on the ground. Two months developing it, several months executing it. That's where we actually made the decision to live among the people, which is something that was featured again in the 101st day in the first year in Iraq, and certainly, during the Surge was the biggest of the big ideas. The idea that the only way to secure and serve the people is to live with them 24-hours a day.

We'd not done that actually during the USJTF days when the conventional forces had only been in Port-au-Prince, the capital, and Cap-Haitien, the major city to the north. We had US Special Forces out, but they were small teams. Again, 10-, 12-man teams with some augmentation. So what we did is as the international contingents came in we literally went out – very tiny staff, I would literally fly in the helicopter myself with the Chief of the Engineers, our contracting officer, and a lawyer, and somebody that had money, a class-A agent it's called. We would land, we would find a big field that was near the community that we wanted to locate our forces and we'd land, we'd wait until the owner came up to us, and there'd be a dispute sometimes, but you'd generally sort out who it was. We'd do a contract on the spot, and

we'd move the bulldozers in the next day. They'd berm up these bases, they had to have ablution units, water, chow halls, everything. And of course, protection.

We just started pushing these international forces out into the countryside near the major population areas beyond the two cities where our forces were and then Special Forces could go out even farther. It was a great experience. We ended up doing an enormous amount in terms of restoring basic services, you learned about bureaucracies. One time I kept chasing why the particular water generation – there was a huge dam, and we were waiting, the spring rains finally came, the water's filling up, and I keep looking at the electrical production, and it's still being produced by diesel generators, at considerable expense to the US taxpayer. So I went to the electrical company of Haiti and they said, "Massive technical difficulties, Colonel." I followed it to the province the same thing. I finally literally went to the dam itself – it was a good flight down there – and arrived, and here's the guy – he's maintained it the last 20-30 years. He's proud of it, he's struck with it all through the different regimes.

I said, "Looks fantastic, congratulations on your wonderful maintenance. Why haven't you thrown the switch and let the water fly over and generate electricity?" He said, "You don't understand. If I do that, I don't get diesel." I said, "Well, that's the idea. That diesel is costing a huge amount of money, we want to save that for the seasons when there isn't the rain behind this." He says, "If I don't get diesel, I can't run my truck." And welcome to the Third World, frankly. You had to work your way through that kind of issue, and it was very, very instructive. We got into detention facilities because there was a huge prison break and we had to learn about – it was completely out of control. The families had to feed the prisoners so they're drifting in and out. It was something out of a few centuries ago.

Again, a tremendous learning experience, and we did have a quick reaction force, and it did deploy on a number of occasions against criminal activities that were very serious, not necessarily military stuff. Finally, we were also heavily engaged in the training of the police. In fact, there was a Royal Canadian Mounted Police Contingent that was doing this. And although it was the focus of some others, we still had to get engaged in supporting it. And lo and behold, a lot of these activities proved to be of considerable value later on in terms of experience.

KRISTOL: Am I wrong in thinking that you were – and you can be modest and deny this – but unusual among Army officers to think this an important assignment and worthwhile one as opposed to a more standard – this was such a messy, dealing with civilians in a Third World country. Did your generation of Army officers think this could be the future?

PETRAEUS: It was the only war we had. At that time we didn't – I'd missed Panama; I missed the Gulf War. I was stuck as the aide to the Chief of Staff of the Army who wouldn't release me so this was a great deployment, frankly. It was a great experience, and I really treasured it.

KRISTOL: You always had an interest in small wars.

PETRAEUS: It was, again, a laboratory. It was keenly interesting. And then a few years later, brigade commander, served for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs for a couple years as his executive officer and then back to Fort Bragg, number two in the 82nd Airborne Division, Corps Chief of Staff. Big plans, by the way, planning the invasion of Iraq. And then go off for a year to Bosnia. And that was an incredible learning experience. It was a peacekeeping operation. I was again the Chief of Operations, the Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations was the title. It was a one-star.

And the peacekeeping was pretty straightforward. Every now and then, you'd have some kind of very serious development or riot or some kind of challenge, but by and large, it was pretty straightforward. This was several years, a number of years into this. It's now 2001 to 2002. But there was another mission that I had and the US only had – it's now all publicly known that we were chasing war criminals – and I was the Deputy Commander on what was called Joint Task Force Justice Assured Forward, the

forward attachment of this. And the three-star who commanded this stabilization force in Bosnia was also the commander that also US.

That was actually very, very exciting work because we had a huge deployment of Special Mission units. Not just Special Operations, but the operators, their Tier One as we call them. And intelligence assets that were just really quite extraordinary. That was all being pulled together in fusion cells, and we got more war criminals in that one year than we'd gotten, I think, in the whole time leading up to it because Secretary Rumsfeld really unleashed us and let us take more risks than had been in the case before, which was very, very doable. I mean, most of these were pretty straightforward. Taking down Karadžić, which we tried a couple times – we didn't actually, turned out he wasn't actually there. We tried everything. I even had coffee with Mrs. Karadžić one time. I mean, anything to try to stimulate intelligence.

We'd go out in the middle of the night, give letters to people and see how they react, who we knew were supporting war criminals. It was very, very interesting work. Then, we had 9/11 and in the wake of 9/11, we conducted counterterrorism operations in Bosnia. In fact, the very first one was not in Afghanistan, it was actually there because this turned out to be a pipeline from Pakistan into Sarajevo and into Tuzla Air Base, which was out of the US control, the airbase, and it turned out that individuals were coming in on a first-class ticket round trip, cashing in the other end of the ticket, and disappearing into Europe in the Schengen Zone. There were facilitators in Sarajevo. We went after four nongovernment organizations, raided them, with the host-nation authorities after providing intelligence that was evidentiary, shut down the Red Crescent of all things, Saudi High Commission for Relief, and the Benevolence International Foundation whose leaders were put behind bars, by what we found, in fact, in the US, by what we found out there and provided to the FBI.

We had FBI, we had CIA, we had every intelligence agency represented, and it was really very, very interesting, stimulating, challenging, and educational work. We also had a multi-year roadmap. A very comprehensive plan for the overall reestablishment of all the different elements of Bosnia. Now, we had lots of international organizations. The UN Mission in Bosnia did the police training and equipping. You had the High Rep was the interface with the Bosnian senior leadership. OSCE was doing the rule of law or human rights. The military was generally doing fairly military types of tasks, and that, of course, was very different when it came to Iraq. The overall approach, the concept, the construct, was very familiar and very similar to what we implemented very early in Iraq in the 101st with lines of operation and then came to adopt more broadly. The difference was that when it came to Iraq, and I actually told the plans officer – remember I went home from Bosnia the 101st Airborne Division and had about six months and we deployed. Did the invasion, took down Baghdad, and then we were moved up to the northern part of the country to Mosul. Mosul was the capital.

I was looking for anything that planners could take as a model, and I said, "Go download the multi-year roadmap from the Bosnia Stabilization Force website." And just recognize that we're going to have to do that because there are no international organizations since, tragically, the UN compound in Bagdad along with an incredibly talented international diplomat, Sergio de Mello, the Special Representative to the Secretary General. We ended up doing virtually all of that. Ultimately, we assigned units to every single military activity in that province and helped stand them back up. Some more natural. The Sigma Battalion got the Ministry of Telecommunications, and we had international satellite shot in there within weeks that made money for the local government.

We had then others that were not quite as logical, the University of Mosul, we had a small civil affairs detachment, which had a several-man team that were expert on education, but that's nowhere near big enough to rebuild a university of 18 or 19 colleges, 30,000 students. So we took an entire aviation brigade headquarters that was not involved in the attack operations – there was a separate one for that – and they laid on top of this thing and did a magnificent job. Again, American ingenuity. There turned out there were some warrant officers that knew how to wire up, fiber up places. You just – all of the sudden,

all these people with incredible skills emerged and were able then, with the help of contractors and the host-nation expertise, to reestablish all of these different institutions and facilities.

That was a great, great learning experience as well, but then, of course, the insurgency develops, and now, we start using exactly what we did going after terrorist and war criminals in Bosnia, pulling together Special Mission units. You may recall that we killed Uday, Qusay in an operation at Mosul, the sons of Saddam Hussein, number two and three in the deck of cards. And then a number of other individuals who decided to turn against the new Iraq rather than support it. One night conducting as many as 43 separate precision raids simultaneously.

This was quite extraordinary. And the intelligence fusion, again, that we'd learned in Bosnia was the key. In fact, we'd actually brought a young intelligence officer to help us with this, knowing that she had experienced what it was there and knew how to guide the others.

KRISTOL: That seems to me – maybe because of your personal experience in Haiti and Bosnia, El Salvador – that you were unusual in perhaps appreciating this complexity of tasks and the necessity of stability operations. There was a difference from simply fighting the war or simply occupying and then leaving. Do you feel that the military now – I mean, would more people do what you did as a –

PETRAEUS: We have lots of people that are experienced with this now. After all these years of Iraq and Afghanistan. Sure, the general officers that are doing this now, even the Colonels, the Lieutenant Colonels, all had multiple tours in Iraq and or Afghanistan. Now, we're using that yet again. I think for a while we thought – and don't get me wrong – we do need to be prepared for the top, against those near-peer competitors around the world, without question. And we've got to train for that, and we've got to be equipped and ready for that.

In the meantime, the wars in which we're actually engaged are calling on a variety of these other skills, albeit now with others providing the ground forces, which is, again, as it should be. Because if they can't, the results won't be sustainable.

KRISTOL: Other parts of the US government – and I come back to that because I remember having friends in the Bush White House, and they were all complimentary and had questions about particular military and, obviously, commanders and their judgments and all, but the military they viewed as a learning institution and one that was willing to assume these responsibilities. The government was not well set up – my sense was – to send people over from agencies, from the Justice Department, or from the Agriculture Department. I think a lot of individuals volunteered, but I don't know that it was really set up well for this kind to really deploy people to do the kinds of things that were useful.

PETRAEUS: I think that is a fair assessment but having said that, the Secretaries of the Departments of the agencies were more than ready to do this. The limit was, first of all, there's just not a lot of extra hands hanging around that aren't doing something else important so you're going to take from other missions, tasks, and so forth, and provide them. It's unlike the military when you're not at war, you're training and all the rest of that. These are generally always engaged. Certainly, we were over-engaged during the Surge, which is why we had to extend the tours to 15 months.

Beyond that, they didn't have the authorization and the appropriation to enable them to do this. They had a very limited amount of actual appropriated funds to help them do this, and that was often a limiting factor. Some of them sent people that were just spectacular. I remember when I was the three-star in Iraq doing the train-and-equip mission, we were desperately trying to find expertise in border operations, particularly border-entry control points, and we went to Customs and the Department of Homeland Security, and Tom Ridge and others wanted to help, and they sent as many as they could. Some of these are what they call BORTACs, Border Tactical Officers, and they're basically sort of the rangers of what we have on the border.

And these guys – so we told them, “So you’re going to go to Al Qa’im, it’s way out in the Western Anbar Province, you get your way to Baghdad, and we’ll get you out there somehow. It’s going to be austere, it’s going to be limited security.” And they were all ready. And lo and behold, I get a call literally that comes in, it’s a satellite phone call, and it said, “Hey, we’re the BORTACs, and we’re out here at Al Qa’im.” And I said, “How did you do that?” And they said, “Well, we kept looking at the problem, and we just decided to come through Jordan rather than go through Baghdad.” Talk about expertise and initiative.

That’s exactly the kind of approach that you really needed. Our young men and women demonstrated that on a daily basis as well. It was best captured by – there was sign on a Company Commander’s door. I went on a patrol with this company one time and what used to be a very, very dangerous part of Iraq, and this company is Battalion Brigade, done a magnificent job, and I actually remember walking around no body armor, no Kevlar, watched a soccer game, walked through the market, and made a few purchases. We go back to his command post, which is a plywood door and some little makeshift office, and there’s this sign on it that says, “In the absence of guidance or orders, figure out what they should have been and execute aggressively.” That’s exactly what we’re trying to promote.

I think those that are now leading at the higher levels have had an enormous amount of this kind of experience. And the key is, again, to retain the lessons that we did learn that hard way and at enormous cost, while certainly also being ready for others kinds of contingencies that could include very high-end operations against an enemy where we can’t fly unimpeded overhead with manned and unmanned aerial vehicles.

KRISTOL: Any advice for young men and women considering joining the military? Or young officers or cadets? Or others?

PETRAEUS: You get this question. And I often respond –

KRISTOL: Give them a piece of unconventional advice.

PETRAEUS: That’s what it is. It’s to look for and take advantage of what you might term “out-of-your-intellectual-comfort-zone experiences.” Get out of the normal assignment. I had a choice one time to go to a really very great Special Operations unit or go to grad school, and it was General Galvin who said, “You’re pretty decent in infantry stuff. This would be a great assignment, you’d certainly learn a lot from it, and it would be exciting and fun. This other one is going to raise your sights.” He said, “Wouldn’t you like to raise your sights beyond the maximum effective range of an M60 machine gun?” I jokingly said, “Well, why would I want to do that if I can’t touch it with that?” But I got the point.

So I went to grad school, and it was an extraordinary experience. It was intellectually humbling, it was intellectually developing, it was intellectually exciting, and from that, I’d like to think I took some of the capital and, I guess, the intellectual development on which we could draw when we were conducting what were quite unfamiliar operations. In Northern Iraq, as throughout Iraq in that early period, we were an occupying force, and therefore the commander of an occupying force owned that area. He was responsible for anything in it. There was no host-nation government until we got something interim stood up, and they still did not have authority, funding, and a lot of other things.

People ask, “What was it that enabled you to figure out what to do?” Obviously, it was the experience, it was the military education, the leader development, and all the rest. It was also out-of-my-intellectual-comfort-zone experiences. Haiti would be another one, El Salvador was another one.

KRISTOL: Did you look for these and intrigue a little bit to get these assignments? People on the outside have this image of the military that’s very cut and dry, and this and then this, but my sense when talking to actual officers about their careers is there is a fair amount of give-and-take and flexibility and the ability, if you get lucky especially –

PETRAEUS: First of all, you have to be willing to jump on something. It would have been pretty easy to stay at Georgetown for the spring semester instead of doing the spring semester abroad in Haiti. Especially after tough years and all the rest of that.

But no, I think you have, you do have to be willing to do it. People have to want you to do it. The other thing is, of course, to me one of the great pieces of advice somebody gave me is, "Never have to ask your assignment officer for an assignment." In other words, have somebody out there asking for you. When there is thinking about where to send you that somebody says, "I want him over there." Why do they do that? Presumably, because the individual has a reasonable work ethic and organizational ability, perhaps the ability to do this or that. Again, what I've found is that it's the off-the-wall experiences that have been the most developing. When asked, "What would I advise?" Do off-the-wall stuff.

KRISTOL: I think that's a great piece of advice to end on, and one that I hope people take to heart. Thank you so much, Dave, for taking the time here. And thank you, obviously, for your service. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]