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Interview: GEN David H. Petraeus (USA)

MNFI CG

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CG's Office, Embassy Annex, Baghdad

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Abstract

I use the Battle Update Assessment as a mechanism to get the word out. I use it to set the tone and communicate to leaders down to division and brigade level what my priorities are and my approach to issues. This helps them know how to approach various issues. Khanaqin reflects larger Arab-Kurd, KRG-GoI tensions. We have to be a calming influence and help Iraqis move toward their potential. The SoI issues likewise requires patience and persistence. Publicly, I leave the SOFA to the diplomats. All campaigns require IO, and IO requires us to engage the media. The officer corps is, arguably, the most experienced and professional we've ever known. Current operations have enhanced our overall capabilities. They have not degraded our capacity for high-intensity, large scale combat. The 'Whole of Government' approach means addressing everything associated with strengthening and developing the host government. The decisive event that shaped the history of MNFI from 2004 through 2006 was the Samarra mosque bombing of February 2006, because it sent violence spiraling out of control Casey's approach to COIN reflected an Army-wide recognition that our doctrine was insufficient. Working on the doctrine and the training base at Ft. Leavenworth was a great opportunity for me. The flattening of the organization (access to POTUS) came about because of POTUS's enormous interest in Iraq. As IT enabled media and the White House to focus on Brco bridge in 1996, it forces us to figure out how to solve slow chain of command reporting. During our headquarter's reduction and transition, we must stay focused on the task. 1.4b, 1.4d History has to show the reduction in violence here resulted from a comprehensive approach and multiple, intertwined factors (surge, new tactics, Sunni Awakening, Sadr freeze). Commanders must understand the details of the environment and their operations. The men and the women grinding out the mission deserve America's enduring thanks for what they've done here. 59:22

This is a nearly verbatim transcript for the first 32 minutes. The remainder is a close paraphrase.

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Interview

1. In this morning's BUA, you addressed the issue of Khanaqin and the recent GoI-KRG agreement for handling it. What is significant about the issue?

2:05 (~~S/REL ACGU~~) First off, it is important to realize that the BUA is a mechanism for getting the word out. If you've looked at something I did after the second tour here, on lessons from Iraq, there were fourteen lessons. The last, and in many respects the most important, was that the leader's first and foremost job is to set the right tone. Now, in certain respects, that means getting the big ideas right. You've heard me talk before about what a strategic leader has to do is get the big ideas right, communicate them to subordinate leaders, and then ensure their proper execution. When it comes to tone again, you're trying to do is get out substantive messages and also a sense of how to convey them, in other words whether we should be exercised about them, or calm about them, or we should convey congratulations, appreciation, or frustration, and vexation. And the BUA is very useful to me in that regard, in terms of getting the word out, setting the right tone, transmitting what I believe are the right messages, in a sense talking points, but I believe they're much more than talking points. They are substantive bits of guidance about the key challenges of any given day. And the BUA, as you know, the comments are transcribed and then distributed via the secure military internet, down to the division commanders and to brigade commanders. So they can review those comments. They have a sense of what is on my mind and what my views are on particular issues, and that can help them as they communicate with their subordinate leaders, as they engage their Iraqi counterparts, as they have interaction with the Iraqi, Pan-Arab, and western press, and so forth.

5:00. (~~S/REL ACGU~~) Now, Khanaqin is an interesting topic. It is a Kurd-Arab . . . obviously an ethnic . . . emotional subject, that really has to do with the extent of Iraqi Kurdish . . . a sense of expansionism, if you will, pushing down below the former Green Line. That is understandable, and from their perspective justifiable, but from the perspective of the central government of Iraq, and in some cases those Arabs who feel that they are being pushed around, perhaps out of what are historically Kurdish areas, but again, that is for Iraqis to determine, but the result is high emotions. What we need right now on those kinds of issues, and on those internally disputed boundary issues as well, is a degree of calm, an avoidance of . . . certainly of any kind of armed conflict or violence, and a willingness to get through today and this week and next month, and gradually resolve these a piece at a time, recognizing that there is enormous potential for prosperity and a much higher standard of living and quality of life for all Iraqis, Arabs as well as Kurds, Shia and Sunni, Yezidi, Christian, Shabat, Turkmen, and so forth, if they can, again, work together and compromise a bit on each sides goals and objectives, so that they can in fact exploit the enormous potential of blessings that are arguably beyond compare anywhere in the world. Iraq, like a number of other gulf states, has vast oil reserves. As you know, officially it has the 4th largest, or 3rd largest [oil reserves]. Arguably, it has the 1st or 2nd largest reserves, because no one really knows given the lack of exploration in recent decades, and given the assessments by some very important and reputable oil services firms, it also has virtually untapped natural gas resources that are

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quite extensive. It has the most sulfur in the world, and it has a blessing that very few other countries in the Arab world has, it has a substantial amount of water. It is the land of the Two Rivers, ancient Mesopotamia, and again that gives it some unique opportunities when it comes to agriculture, and to some other industries, and Iraq needs to focus on avoiding violence and conflict and making the most of the enormous assets that it has, and we've seen some signs of that. As the level of violence has gone from, say 180 attacks a day this past June, at its height, to roughly 25 or so attacks at present in recent weeks. The possibilities are much greater in terms of rebuilding the infrastructure, refurbishing schools and medical facilities, reviving local markets and commerce, establishing governance, reviving the rule of law and on and on and on. So this comes back again, in one sense, to the use of the BUA, and second, recognition of the importance of a senior leader trying to help establish the tone and transmit, if you will, the big ideas, on specific cases and on specific issues in addition to just broadcasting the general big ideas.

2. What about the SoI?

10:00 (U) The SoI is a long-running issue. Eighty percent of them are Sunni Arabs. Many of them, perhaps [formerly] part of insurgent or resistance groups, and who, understandably, the Iraqi government finds difficulty to integrate into the security services, but must be made part of the solution, instead of a continuing part of the problem, in order for the new Iraq to succeed. So again trying to transmit that idea, and it is something that we have done repeatedly, and in many more ways than just rhetorically in the BUA. And, again, with respect to Diyala and other issues, they're just long-running issues [in which] we're trying to avoid crises and emotions getting out of control, and just working through them patiently and persistently.

3. On the SOFA, you've noted that that is for us to leave to the diplomats.

11:30 (S/NF) Well, I say that publicly, but obviously I'm heavily engaged in ensuring that military and DOD equities are ensured. So the SJA for MNFI is intimately involved in every detail of the SOFA, [who] keeps me posted on all the negotiations. We have a member on the negotiating team out of the SJA office, an individual who happened to have negotiated the original SOFA back in the Pentagon when all this started. And then I participate with Ambassador Crocker and others in various assessments and discussions with folks all the way up to including the President back in Washington. But again, for the rest of MNFI, this is something to leave to the diplomats, to let them comment, and really a lot of this, I'm talking about leaving the public commentary to the diplomats, and again try to avoid being dragged into the public discussion of this, which has a number of minefields associated with it.

4. Could you name a couple?

12:50 (S/NF) Yes, obviously, again, you have to be very explicit with regard to Iraqi sovereignty. There are difficult issues in an election year, in Iraq, with their domestic politics at play, with respect to issues like jurisdiction of American forces, coordination of operations, so forth and so on.

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5. In all of these, information operations are very prominent. What does the larger military need to learn about information operations, not just the points you put forward and how you use the BUA, but is there . . . do see any resistance or the larger military accepting these concepts of what information operations are, of what we're doing and why?

13:45 (S/NF) I see pretty broad acceptance. I mean you can't treat the press like unexploded ordinance and sort of mark it and try to avoid it. You have to engage it. And by the way, back to earlier where I talked about sensational press, I wasn't talking about the mainstream western media. I was talking about various organs that are basically funded by political groups, and much of the pan-Arabic media, which has certain perspectives that are linked . . . they're unlike, if you will, the national or the commercial channels in the United States or the UK, or outlets like that. They are truly funded and linked to parties with established political positions, and they tend to represent those particular positions. Again, IO is a hugely important component of all operations, but particularly of long-running counter-insurgency operations. And, again, we've got some pretty succinct, but pretty clear guidance in the COIN guidance that I just updated and published in mid-July on the need to try to be first with the truth, to avoid spinning or putting lipstick on pigs, to avoid premature declarations of success, to also ensure that the press is aware when we feel that the press has not met the standards of accuracy, context, or proper characterization, and recognizing that bad news doesn't get better. You've got to address it. If you've had a bad day, you've got to acknowledge it, talk about how we'll endeavor to learn from it, and try to do better next time.

6. This morning you congratulated a number of BGs on their selection for promotion and the list reflected the value the service places in tactical and operational success. How would you assess the state of the officer corps?

16:15 (U) First, the officer corps encompasses all types of officers, the commissioned, warrant, and non-commissioned officer. In my view, the corps writ large has never been as experienced, professional, and competent in full-spectrum operations as it is now. We've never had a period where we've had such long involvement in a couple of different wars simultaneously, and I don't think we've ever had a period where we've had so many individuals who have spent as much time, in many cases, not all cases, across the Army, but for those who are serving here as company, battalion, brigade, and division commanders and their respective staffs, and their non-commissioned and warrant officer counterparts, again, there is a breadth and depth of experience in full-spectrum operations, that meaning a mix of offensive, defensive, and stability and support operations, which is what counter-insurgency consists of, that is unique in our military history. If you look at WWII, Korea, Vietnam, they were fought with draftee armies, and even the commissioned and non-commissioned officer corps tended to rotate through fairly rapidly. Certainly there was a cadre who rotated through doing multiple tours, but it's relatively rare to find someone who did two tours in Vietnam, even in the commissioned officer ranks. Again, there were those who did three and four, but they tended to be the exception rather than the norm. Here, we have a situation in which a number of those down range are in the 2nd and sometimes 3rd full year or longer tour. So, again, a degree of experience that is just absolutely unique.

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7. In adjusting its DOTML for current operations, is the military gaining flexibility or losing the ability to fight other types of conflicts?

18:50. (U) Well, what we are fighting again required full-spectrum operations, so by definition we are capable of conducting offense, defense, and support and stability types of operations. So to say that we're only doing quote "counter-insurgency" carries an implication that—by those who use that idea—that we're only doing the stability and support of it, that we're just doing the soft side of that rather than the hard edge. The fact is that our units are doing all of the above. Certainly the mix varies from place to place. The operations conducted in Anbar province now are much less lethal and much more in the stability and support range than they were . . . say 12 to 18 months ago. Having said that, they are still conducting a variety of different offensive and defensive operations in addition to the stability and support [missions]. Are we as capable of conducting large maneuver operations with massed artillery barrages and so forth? Perhaps not, although I think that is arguable, actually. I think that, because our forces are operation on a daily basis in a combat theater, even when they're conducting stability and support operations, predominantly in certain areas, and by no means are all units doing that. The bulk are probably conducting a substantial mix of offense and defense, but even in those cases, you're still conducting daily operations with all of your equipment and always making the contingency plans to employ enablers, to include close air support, attack helicopters, a variety of intelligence assets that just aren't available in training, using military networks, command and control systems, and all the rest of that, in a way that in peacetime you only did, arguably, at the National Training Center or the JRTC. It is probably true that artillery battalions are firing fewer rounds in Iraq, not necessarily in Afghanistan, but in Iraq, of 'dumb' artillery than they used to peacetime training operations. On the other hand, I'm not sure how big a deal that is. I think that we can still conduct indirect fire operations actually with a greater degree of precision now than before because of the advent of precision artillery munitions, precision rocket, the great integration of close air support and attack helicopter support here. I'm just not sure that I would be concerned about our 'lack' of ability to conduct large offensive operations, given that we have, in the past year alone, for example, conducted numerous large offensive operations. . . You tend to fight at the brigade-level anyway. In my experience, even in the fight to Baghdad, which was the biggest operation that any of us have done in recent decades . . . though in a sense there were two corps, the V Corps and the MEF, at their heart the operations tended to be brigade coordinated by divisions. In some cases multiple brigades, as when the 101st took down Najaf before 3ID started maneuvering on Baghdad. But, I mean, our brigades are very capable of doing those kinds of operations. And, if anything, I think the fact that we are conducting daily operations here, albeit at small-unit level, that we are far more capable of conducting larger operations just because of conducting them and using the brigade C2 network on a daily basis as opposed to just when you do an NTC rotation or the train-up for an NTC rotation.

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8. Why is the 'whole of government' approach important?¹

23:20. (S//ACGU) Because these are extra-ordinarily complex challenges, and they require very comprehensive strategies to address them. You can't kill or capture you're way out of an insurgency. You certainly do have to do a fair amount of killing or capturing or running off of bad guys, and not just in targeted precise operations but in large operations to take away from elements like Al Qaeda or militias the sanctuaries or safe havens that they may have established, and there were huge sanctuaries and safe havens that AQI established that we had to take away during the surge and during the surge of offensives that followed the deployment of all our forces. But the military piece, while necessary, is not sufficient, and we have the Anaconda slide that depicts our approach to AQI and its Sunni extremist allies as one example of the kind of comprehensive effort and plan that is required to take away what AQI needs, which includes weapons and explosives, foreign fighters flowing in, money, which is the oxygen of the movement, internal command and control, media and IO efforts, connection to AQ senior leadership, its ideology, and technical expertise. To take that away requires more than just military operations. It requires political activities to foster local reconciliation, to try to spur local rejection of extremism and its ideology and indiscriminate violence, to cement gains with national legislation, to bring disaffected parties into the process, to reconcile with as many as is possible so that you minimize those who have to be killed or captured, changes in how we conduct detainee operations, particularly in preparation for reintegration into society. Working with local government to improve their legitimacy by improving basic services, the economy, commerce, the infrastructure, education, medical care, and so forth, and then a whole host of activities that are designed to cut down on the whole flow of foreign fighters and reinforcements, to counter the ideological message and to discredit it, the message of Al Qaeda, to compete with extremists wherever they are, including in cyberspace, and so forth.

9. What is the key factor for understanding the history of MNFI from June 2004 through February 2007?

27:05 (U) I have always thought that the biggest factor that challenged, or unhinged, the strategy of MNFI—General General Casey's intent was to "reduce the level of violence" to one that developing Iraqi security forces could handle so that the transition could proceed—was the bombing in Samarra, this Shia shrine in a Sunni city. That was an enormous catalyst for ethno-sectarian violence. The escalation of violence after 22 Feb 06 was horrific. You can see it on the violence slides. We had a couple of downturns in violence due to OTF I or II, but afterward the areas got worse due to the difficulties we had holding the areas we had cleared. As the violence got worse, it undermined seriously Iraqi forces capability to conduct its mission. Sectarian pressured hijacked some of the security forces, notably the National Police. Militias took control of ministries and turned them to their purposes. The sky marshals were in the grip of the militia. PM Maliki asked me to detain MoH Deputy Minister and others. These were all indicators of

¹ When I prepared this question, I thought the "whole of government" approach, which I just heard of recently, was a reference to the need to mobilize and coordinate the cooperative efforts of the entire US federal government in war on terror initiatives. In fact, the "whole of government" approach is an outgrowth of the Anaconda strategy. It refers to the need to tackle all of the country's problems, it's 'whole government.'

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how out of control the situation had become. There were 50 bodies a day showing up in Baghdad in December 2006, due to horrific Sunni car bombs and then horrific retaliation. That cycle was unbreakable, unless we went to live in the neighborhoods. The only way to secure the population, which had to be our focus, was to live with the population. Iraqis hoped we would stay, but they couldn't trust and provide the community support needed until they saw that we would stay. Security of the population has to be your focus. You can't commute to the fight. You have to live with those you're trying to secure.

10. General Casey made counterinsurgency the centerpiece of his campaign plan, but he was not satisfied that he had the right doctrine or that the force understood counterinsurgency tactics. Did your work on COIN reflect to some degree his search for a solution?

32:00. (U) I don't know if it was his personal search. There was just a recognition across the Army that the Army lacked adequate COIN doctrine, and also lacked adequate preparation of leaders for COIN, adequate preparation of units in training for deployment, and lacked adequate sharing of lessons learned for COIN. He took steps to remedy the situation. He founded the Taji COIN academy and he put out MNFI doctrinal guidelines. In the states, at CAC and TRADOC, [and other hats P4 was wearing at the time], that gave [me] a wonderful position to ensure that we had the doctrine we needed, so we published the manual in less than a year, which is a record for a significant manual. We put out multiple manuals, including FM 3-0, under my . We then put out the detainee operations manual, and leadership manual, which stressed leaders must be pentathletes. We revamped our education systems and dealt with scenarios at the National Training Centers, reorienting them from fighting major tank armies to conducting full-spectrum operations. We revamped BCTP and did virtual training centers. We revised and created the Road to Deployment, the path to deployment. We worked through CALL to share and incorporate it all with Knowledge Management operations and battle knowledge systems, looking virtually over shoulders. There was a lot of effort for institutionalizing these reforms. There was also the facilities issue and getting SIPR into facilities that needed it.

(U) Leavenworth also worked on current force integrations, organizational structures, divisional headquarters, and FA 30 and EW.

11. What are the nuances of MNFI's command relationships to Central Command, JCS, and OSD?

~~(S/ACGU)~~ We have a straightforward chain of command to Central Command, JCS, SD, and POTUS. We have seen flattening of the organization due to POTUS's enormous interest in Iraq, as seen through the NSC VTC. POTUS has a degree of direct contact that may be unique. I used to have a weekly VTC with OSD as well. That has changed to bi-weekly since we already have the weekly NSC VTC.

12. How do current information and communications technologies impact command and control?

(U) VTC and press provide real time reporting. CNN has uplinks from locations directly through satellites. Email has changed reporting and command and control and has flattened and challenges organizations. As Executive Assistant to the CJCS [in 1996?], with Bosnia, CNN had a reporter in Bosnia at the Brco bridge, reporting on that standoff.

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Officials were seeing this confrontation live. At the same time, the chain of command was waiting on the report to come from the platoon, through the company, the battalion, on up through NATO and EUCOM. We had to find ways to compress.

13. MNFI currently faces a number of transitions, with the IZ transition, the 15% reduction, and then the headquarters' consolidation. What is important about how we do that?

(S/ACGU) The key to the transitions is we have to keep our eye on the task as we accomplish the reductions and consolidation. We have to look up and down the chain. At the appropriate moment, we will also consolidate the HQs.

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15. How should official history recount the last eighteen months?

(U) The thing to capture is the factors that have led to a reduction in violence. The reduction was the result of a comprehensive approach. The surge of forces—having more forces—has certainly been important, but more critical has been the tactical deployment of those forces, the move back into Iraqi communities and assuming responsibility for security. Also important has been the growth of the ISF in both quantity and quality. There is the Shia rejecting of the militia. Clear-eyed analysis is vital here. There is also Sunnis rejecting AQI. Ramadi was the 1st successful Awakening, though there were earlier efforts in Al Qaim, where five sheiks were beheaded for turning on AQI.

(S/ACGU) The IO effort has been central, in labeling AQI for their extremist ideology, indiscriminate violence, and oppressive practices. It is the same with the militia. They suffered enormous blows for their role in the August 2007 violence in Karbala and for their links to assassinations, kidnappings, extortion activities, displacement of civilians, and violent attacks. When the PM gave us clearance to go after them, we hammered them, and they were rocked by the events of April and May in the PL Gold battle, with all the HVIs we picked up and 75 rocket and mortar teams destroyed and senior leaders captured. Muqtada al-Sadr made a strategic decision to preserve the movement by eschewing violence. The non-kinetic piece is hugely important. The future solutions lie in local governance, markets, comers, basic service, and national level activities.

(U) This requires a nuanced appreciation of a host of factors. It also shows how counterinsurgency leaders must understand the details in their areas of operation. The enemy is not just barbaric, but resilient and adaptable.

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16. Is there anything you'd like to add?

(U) I always thing that the ultimate credit for this goes to the men and women in uniform on the street, who are grinding out the missions, who are turning the big ideas into sensible solutions. They are the heroes of this, and America can never thank them enough for what they've done. 59:22

PREPARED INTRODUCTION AND QUESTIONS:

Sir, I'd like you to address the questions as if your audience were a War College seminar or a historian 15 years from now trying to work through all the various accounts and controversies of the war to make sense of the mosaic.

In this morning's update, you spent a couple of minutes discussing key issues, including Khanaqin, the SoI, Diyala operations, and the SOFA. You mentioned sensational press, the importance of being a calming influence, specific engagements by generals with key Iraqi leaders, and the tone we should all take. These are examples of much larger policy issues, including the disputed internal boundaries, reconciliation, federal and provincial authority, and of course the status of American forces.

What is the state of those challenges today, to differentiate them from what the situation was last year or may be next year?

How well do MNFI engagements and your frequent calls for calm exemplify your concepts of information operations?

What does the larger military need to learn about information operations?

In this morning's BUA, you congratulated a number of officers on their selection for promotion from BG to MG. The list reflected the value the service places on success in the tactical and operational environment.

How would you assess the state of the officer corps and officer professional development? And of non-commissioned officers?

In adjusting its DOTML for current operations, is the military gaining flexibility for whatever conflict it may face or leaving itself vulnerable by only being able to fight one kind of conflict?

How would you assess the battles in Basra and Sadr City, tactically and strategically?

Why is the "whole of government" approach important?

Please discuss the state of communications and information technology, the capabilities it gives you and the limitations it imposes, from video-teleconferences to email to servers full of data. I ask this to differentiate today from analog maps, acetate, radios, field telephones, telegraphs, and dispatch riders, and from what may be developed tomorrow.

Other Questions:

1. What factors best explain MNFI from July 2004 through February 2007?
2. General Casey's campaign plan emphasized counterinsurgency, but he was not satisfied with the doctrine he had or its application. Did your efforts with the COIN manual reflect to some degree his search for solutions? What discussions did you have with General Casey about counterinsurgency?
3. What are the nuances of the command and support relationships (Central Command, Joint Chiefs, the Secretary of Defense) under which MNFI operates?
8. What relationships, processes, or guarantees are necessary to coax Iraqis down the path of compromise and reconciliation?
10. What changes do you anticipate in the relationships of Central Command to MNFI and the various commands in Afghanistan?
12. What impresses you, or what is important, about how we do IZ transition, personnel reduction, and headquarters' consolidation?
13. What contribution has the recent Red Team made on Iran?
14. In an interview with MG McHale, he mentioned TF 1.4a and MRAPS as instances of "inheriting the sins of the past." Does that theme resonate with some of the challenges you've faced? Does it resonate with certain challenges you're handing off to General Odierno?

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