



## Interview: Students, Faculty Protest Presence of David Petraeus at CUNY Honors College

By: Steve Horn Tuesday September 10, 2013 1:30 pm

On September 9, former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director David Petraeus — who also formerly headed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) International Security Assistance Force for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and co-wrote the Counterinsurgency Field Manual — began a new job as an adjunct professor at City University of New York (CUNY) Macaulay Honors College.

Petraeus was welcomed with jeers (to put it mildly) by student and faculty activists for his first day on-campus, just days after he endorsed a bombing campaign of Syria.

Departing from his CIA slot as a result of word getting out about his extramarital sexual affair with his

biographer Paula Broadwell, the disgraced General didn't rest for too long before landing new lucrative gigs: two adjunct professorships at CUNY Honors College and University of Southern California, respectively; a non-resident Fellowship at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Public Policy (where all the trouble began for Petraeus with Broadwell to begin with); a Senior Vice-Presidency at the UK's Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies and a Directorship at Wall Street investment firm Kohlberg, Kravis & Roberts (KKR)'s Global Institute.

While all of the other gigs have largely flown under the radar, it's Petraeus' adjunct hiring in April by CUNY Honors College that's caught fire with activists and academics. That scandal originally centered around Petraeus' salary of \$200,000 to teach a once a week, three hours per week seminar to students. Catching media attention and flack nationwide, Petraeus conceded a \$1 salary to teach the course — and a still-undisclosed amount from a still-undisclosed private donor.

Beyond Petraeus' hire in April, CUNY announced Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) would have a space back on its campuses beginning this fall in May. ROTC had been ousted from CUNY campuses due to anti-Vietnam War resistance in the 1960s, ousted in 1971.

When CUNY Honors College announced Petraeus' "coming to campus," CUNY students, faculty and staff formed the Ad Hoc Committee Against the Militarization of CUNY to protest his presence on-campus as a symbol of the militarization of academia at CUNY and beyond.

An umbrella under which sits many activist groups, the Ad Hoc Committee Against the Militarization of CUNY has two main demands, as conveyed to me in an interview: 1.) "CUNY Must Not be a War College!"

2.) "Petraeus, ROTC, Military Recruiters and Military Contracts: Out of CUNY!" The final goal of the activists: mobilize mass protest and exposure to drive out Petraeus and ROTC.

While much media attention has honed in on the intrigue of Petraeus' new gigs and how he will handle the "rehabilitation" phase of his career, precious little ink has been spent talking to students and faculty opposed to Petraeus' presence at CUNY.

Given that premise, I contacted the Ad Hoc Committee Against the Militarization of CUNY and did an email interview with CUNY Hunter College Adjunct Professor of Latin American History, S. Sándor John. Author of the book "Bolivia's Radical Tradition: Permanent Revolution in the Andes," we discussed why he got involved in this movement, what the goals of the Committee are, why Petraeus in particular, his "death squad" program in Iraq facilitated by his close aide and former architect of the "dirty wars" (Col. James Steele) in Central America and much more.

Below is a transcript of the interview I conducted:



Protest against David Petraeus at CUNY

**Steve Horn:** How many people were at the protest and was it mostly students? Faculty? What types of students (grad school students, undergrads, etc)?

**S. Sándor John:** About 100 people came to today's protest against the first class given by David "Death Squad" Petraeus at the Macaulay Honors College of the City University of New York.

The majority were undergraduate students from City College, Hunter College, Queens College and other campuses of the CUNY system. There were also faculty members from Baruch, Bronx Community College, Hunter and elsewhere; a Macaulay Honors College student speaker, and a number of CUNY Graduate Center students; activists from labor, immigrant rights and left organizations, as well as NYC school teachers.

**SH:** When did the ad-hoc committee begin to protest the hiring of David Petraeus? Why?

**SSJ:** The day after CUNY announced Petraeus's appointment in late April 2013, a leaflet titled "War Criminal Petraeus, Out of CUNY!" was issued.

Accompanied by a petition demanding the appointment be rescinded, it was widely circulated within CUNY. These materials tapped into widespread outrage among students and faculty alike (including many members of the faculty/staff union). Club members raised the proposal for united-front protests to be undertaken in the fall, when Petraeus was scheduled to start his class.

Activists asked questions like: "So what is he slated to teach — 'enhanced interrogation,' waterboarding, how to organize death squads and drone attacks...?" The Guardian (UK) exposés on Petraeus's role in bringing Col. James Steele — who organized death squads in Central America during the 1980s — to Iraq to exercise his macabre expertise there reproduced and circulated massively.

The reinstatement of ROTC — which was ousted from CUNY in 1971 through mass protests against its role in the Vietnam War — heightened concerns over the increasing militarization of the City University by the administration and Board of Trustees, which goes together with their drive towards privatization and elitization of the country's largest urban public university. Many faculty members expressed outrage, as did a wide range of student activist groups.

Over the course of the summer, members of the CUNY Internationalists, the Revolutionary Student Coordinating Committee, Class Struggle Education Workers, a group called IGNITE, Students Without Borders and others talked about initiating such protest actions. The Ad Hoc Committee Against the Militarization of CUNY was established for this purpose shortly before the fall semester began.

**SH:** What are the goals of the movement as it pertains to Petraeus and how do you plan to achieve them other than protests the day of class? What's your strategy to achieve your final goals as a movement?

**SSJ:** The Ad Hoc Committee is just that — a united front of different groups which have joined together for the purpose of organizing these protests on the basis of two demands: "CUNY Must Not be a War College!" and "War Criminal Petraeus, ROTC, Military Recruiters and Military Contracts: Out of CUNY!" The goal is to mobilize mass protest and exposure to drive out "Death Squad" Petraeus and ROTC.

Beyond that, different participants have a range of views about overall strategy. Most would agree that the administration's appointment of Petraeus is just the latest example of how CUNY management is, in a literal sense, an enemy of those who work and study at CUNY.

Moreover, a great many CUNY students' families come from countries directly targeted by the death squads, military coups, drones, spying and mass bombing organized by the likes of Petraeus, "his man Steele," and the U.S. military as a whole, now under the command of Obama who is pushing to open a new war front, this time in Syria.

**SH:** Why Petraeus in particular? Do you have any idea who the private donor is that's endowing his spot at CUNY Honors College?

**SSJ:** Apparently the CUNY Board and administration thought bringing a big name ex-general and former CIA head would be a publicity coup — "Look Who's teaching at CUNY" writ large. It is writ large in letters of blood; this is a certified war criminal in the most literal sense.

In addition to Petraeus's role as former commander of the Iraq/Afghanistan wars, and former head of the CIA, his close associate Col. James Steele was closely connected to the Atlacatl Battalion in El Salvador,

which carried out one of the most notorious mass extermination missions of Central America's dirty wars: the El Mozote Massacre.

In Guatemala, military and paramilitary death squads trained, equipped and "advised" by U.S. officers waged a genocidal campaign of extermination against large numbers of Maya indigenous people. This was the legacy deployed by Petraeus in Iraq and Afghanistan. And it goes on; he has been a key architect for the present drive for a U.S. attack on Syria.

With regard to your financial question, such information does not seem available at this time. Some people were especially outraged that Petraeus was initially slated to receive \$200,000 for "teaching" a few hours a week. In response, the amount was cut (publicly) to \$1. But we do not care if it's one penny: we demand this war criminal's ouster from CUNY.

**SH:** Do you know any students in his class? Why'd they decide to take a class w/ the same guy you guys are protesting and what type of students would you suspect – as an adjunct professor – does a guy like Petraeus attract to his class?

**SSJ:** I do not personally know any students in his class, and thus could only speculate. There are some Macaulay students among those protesting, however.

Members of the Ad Hoc Committee have carried out considerable work to help educate CUNY students and faculty about the reality behind what CUNY management apparently views as some kind of big name cachet.

If they are banking on people not knowing the truth of what Petraeus represents, they will find some formidable opponents amongst very determined, well-informed and energetic students and faculty as well as others around the country and internationally. The voice of the victims of these crimes will not and cannot be silenced.

**SH:** What motivated you as an individual to join this protest movement against Petraeus' presence at CUNY?

**SSJ:** Most of our students at CUNY are from the working class and from oppressed communities, specifically from families whose roots are in countries where the effects of U.S. imperialism and militarism have been experienced in the most unspeakable and horrific ways.

The history of Latin America, the subject I teach, resounds with names and dates of massacres, conquest and mass campaigns of "disappearance" and terror — but also of the inspiring resistance to this devastation that working people in particular have carried out throughout the hemisphere.

Together with many others at CUNY and elsewhere who oppose militarism and imperialism, I am indignant at the idea that our university would become in effect a branch of the Army War College or the infamous School of the Americas. That is something we are determined to prevent.

**SH:** What was it like to shout down Petraeus like that, as seen in the YouTube video? Was it kind of creepy to see such a powerful figure like that in the flesh?

**SSJ:** Like a great many other faculty, students and staff at CUNY, I am sure, while not personally present at that moment I salute the very courageous young people who gave voice to the widespread indignation against the Petraeus appointment that you see in that video. I am quite sure that this widespread indignation is not going away.

Activists throughout the university and beyond are determined to mobilize for the ouster of “Death Squad” Petraeus, and ROTC, through massive protest and exposure.

*<http://dissenter.firedoglake.com/2013/09/10/interview-students-faculty-protest-presence-of-david-petraeus-at-cuny-honors-college/>*