

Professor Petraeus and his protestors

General Petraeus and his student protesters at the City University of New York, confront the Vietnam Syndrome.

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"One suspects that what CUNY is interested in is making use of Petraeus' presence for fundraising purposes," writes Barkawi [AFP]

In scenes reminiscent of protests against the Vietnam War, retired General David Petraeus has been hounded by students at City University New York (CUNY). While Petraeus leads seminars on the US and the global economy, disciplined student protesters march and chant "War Criminal Petraeus out of CUNY Now" and "One, Two, Three, Four, Defeat US Imperial War".

In another encounter, students confronted Petraeus on his way to teach his first class. Again the charge of "War Criminal", along with "Fascist". One student says, "you have blood all over you, I can smell it!"

It is a strange replay of civil-military relations from the Vietnam era. Managing a display of strained stoicism, Petraeus walks on under the students' verbal barrage as if playing the part of the soldier spat on by hippies.

Meanwhile, the protesters seem to think that Petraeus and his hokey course represent some kind of "US government" and "CUNY administration" project to "turn the university into an infamous 'war college'". However laudable their desire to protest the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the protestors' rhetoric is confused and overblown.

The charge of war criminal is based on Petraeus' service as commander of Coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and his stint as Director of the CIA. Students, faculty and others signed a statement indicting Petraeus for "continued involvement" in "US foreign policy".

One can almost hear the Vietnam-era chant in the background, haranguing US president Lyndon Baines Johnson: "Hey, Hey, LBJ, How Many Kids Did You Kill Today?" Mere service alone in the US War Machine/Military Industrial Complex amounts to a "criminal", i.e. immoral, act. Maybe there are even a few old salts from the SDS circulating around the edges of the protests at CUNY.

There are many ironies in these events. One of them is that Petraeus is a thoughtful analyst of the supposed lessons of the Vietnam War and their influence on US policy and politics since. One of his points is that US officers were so deeply scared by the experience of losing popular support at home, that they later made bad use of Vietnam War analogies in offering military advice to presidents.

Perhaps the protesters at CUNY are making a similar mistake, reading off a historical script that no longer offers an

effective guide to political action. For one thing, "US Imperial War"—at least of the kind General Petraeus fought in Iraq and Afghanistan—has already been defeated. Afghan Taliban, Iraqi insurgents and assorted foreign fighters have taken care of that, just like the Vietnamese did in their day.

The charge of CUNY being turned into a "war college" rings hollow, while that of "war criminal" is forced at best. Legally speaking, Petraeus has not committed war crimes. He offered long and loyal service in a law-governed, democratically-controlled military.

There is a deeper problem for the protesters. The "crimes" of Iraq and Afghanistan were the responsibility of elected US officials, not the soldiers who followed their orders. The Bush administration was re-elected—with a bigger margin—*after* it was discovered that there were no weapons of mass destruction and after Abu Ghraib. The Obama administration was re-elected after doubling down on Afghanistan, failing to close Guantanamo, and while continuing its global drone and special forces war.

The problem the protesters have is not with officers who have sworn allegiance to the US Constitution but with American voters. Even worse for the protesters, their methods and tactics have been repeatedly tried in the years since 9/11. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been the subject of many protests and marches, big and small, among them numerous creative efforts to embarrass and flummox officials, such as those of Code Pink. The brute political reality is that these protests and the politics on which they are based have not gained traction with the US public.

Maybe it is time for a period of study and reflection for the protesters, like Petraeus underwent in the 1980s while earning his MPA and PhD at Princeton. Among other things, he argued in his PhD thesis that the US military should not seek autonomy from political "interference" in wars like Vietnam and Iraq, which could only be won by judicious combinations of politics and force. That is, Petraeus was arguing for clear and direct political leadership of military operations.

When he wrote this, he probably did not have G.W. Bush in mind.

The irony of having lost his wars despite his astute analyses and his victories probably has occurred to Petraeus. This makes him all the more qualified to participate in university life as a retired soldier and statesman of vast experience and ability. No doubt it is only the feigned prudishness of the Ivy League over the circumstances of his departure from the CIA that has prevented him landing a post at Harvard, Columbia, or his alma mater. He certainly has the qualifications required to teach and write at university level, far more so than many former officials who populate various public policy institutes at major universities.

If the protestors have missed their mark, their university bears a greater responsibility for this affair. Far from being a "war college", CUNY's Macaulay Honors College has Petraeus teaching a course oddly titled "The Coming (North) American Decade(s)". The course concerns developments in the global economy—such as "revolutions" in information technology and the life sciences—and the prospects for US recovery from the Great Recession. The syllabus consists of op-ed pieces, management consultant and think tank reports, *Economist* articles and the like. It not only lacks academic rigour—partaking of the worst that fields like "public affairs" have to offer—it is simply *not* what Petraeus is qualified to teach.

One suspects that what CUNY is interested in is making use of Petraeus' presence for fundraising purposes. In a university worthy of the name, the protestors should not be shouting slogans at Petraeus but asking him questions and engaging in dialogue and argument.

One of the issues such a seminar might consider is why the US left is so hostile to the military. For the protestors, military service alone constitutes a crime. Yet, many US officers knew that Iraq was a bad mistake. Unlike the protestors, they had to serve there, lose friends there, and will forever bear the burden of having killed there. But they followed the lawful orders they were given by their constitutionally authorised superiors, and they did so as members of an ancient and honourable profession.

No US citizen should want to get into a position where the military *decides* which orders to follow on a political basis. Perhaps Petraeus can be reproved for not resigning his commission rather than go to Iraq. But even had he done so, the result would have been a less capable commander sent in his stead.

It is the elected political leadership that committed the country to the wars, not the military. The protestors are not only missing their target, they are missing the opportunity to engage Iraq and Afghan war veterans as potential *allies* in ending the insanity of the War on Terror and rebuilding a humane society in the US.

The protestors need to let go of their Vietnam syndrome and CUNY needs to turn this affair into a teachable moment.

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