



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## The Emerging Trump Doctrine of Strategic Savvy

by Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 500, June 17, 2017

*"...if the campaign is protracted, the resources of the State will not be equal to the strain."  
– Sun Tzu*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** "America will not lead from behind. America First does not mean America alone. It is a commitment to protecting and advancing our vital interests..." So wrote President Donald Trump's NSA, General H.R. McMaster, with Gary Cohn, head of the National Economic Council, in the *Wall Street Journal*. What follows is a discussion of US leaders' failed strategies in several wars, Trump's team of generals, and the emerging Trump doctrine, which is here termed "strategic savvy".

### *1964 Vietnam War; "Lies that Led to Vietnam"*

Bullet-headed Lt. General H.R. McMaster, the US National Security Adviser, is not just a brave warrior. Like his mentor, General David Petraeus, he is a prominent military intellectual. Both men wrote their PhD dissertations on the lessons of Vietnam. In *The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam*, Petraeus concluded, "...significant emphasis should be given to counterinsurgency forces, equipment and doctrine." McMasters's thesis, *Dereliction of Duty*, addressed the roles of LBJ and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. His subtitle was "Lies that Led to Vietnam."

On August 4, 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was pushed through Congress authorizing military action against North Vietnam as "vital" to US national interests. It sought to punish Hanoi for an allegedly unprovoked attack by three torpedo boats on a US destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin. In fact, it had not been unprovoked; the US had made repeated prior attacks on the North Vietnamese coast.

The major reason for the American war against North Vietnam, asserts McMaster, was the then-upcoming 1964 presidential election. To Johnson, the prime enemy that

summer was not the North Vietnamese but his GOP opponent, Barry Goldwater, who had accused the president of being soft on communism. In response, LBJ and McNamara misrepresented the facts and the pretext for sending US ground forces to Vietnam, and deliberately concealed the costs of war. McNamara's thinking was shaped by his "whiz kids," DOD civilian nerds, who lacked combat experience and arrogantly believed quantitative statistical analysis could compensate for their deficits in geopolitics, history, and military strategy.

Boasting that he had won his election "bigger than anybody had won ever," LBJ endorsed McNamara's strategy of gradual pressure on Hanoi, seeking to wear it down by "attrition." To McMaster, this was "not a strategy but a lack of it ... reinforcing arrogance, weakness, lying in the pursuit of self-interest and above all dereliction of duty to the American people."

### *2001 War of Necessity in Afghanistan*

In this century, the one war the US won – at least in its initial stage – was Afghanistan. There, following the 9/11 attack on the US homeland, President George Bush defended America's vital national interests. Nor was this a regular DoD operation by the US army. US forces consisted of CIA operators, Special Forces, and an anti-Taliban Afghan resistance, the Northern Alliance. The 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Brigade was also involved, commanded by the current Defense Secretary, then Major General James Mattis, USMC. In addition, the US was given logistical help by Russian President Vladimir Putin, then Bush's strategic partner. Within three months, the US had defeated its foe, liberated Kabul, and changed the regime.

### *2003 War of Choice in Iraq*

But afterwards, as Paula Broadwell observed, the initial brilliant success in Afghanistan "was squandered when the US marched headlong into Iraq in early 2003." Instead of finishing the war of necessity in Afghanistan, Washington entered into a war of choice with Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein – who had had nothing to do with 9/11.

Why? In the words of historian Jean Edward Smith, the president tried to sell the war on the basis of "the flimsy notion that he was removing a potential threat to the United States" because Saddam might have WMD. That threat proved to be nonexistent. In addition, as a born-again Christian, Bush believed he was divinely guided to bring democracy to the Iraqi people.

On August 4, 2002, the 38<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Senator Chuck Hagel, a distinguished Vietnam veteran, told Congress, "We didn't ask any questions before we got into Vietnam ... this is why it's important to do so now." Two senior members of Bush's team did so: Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill, who questioned the costs of war in Iraq; and Secretary of State General (ret.) Colin Powell,

who prophesied ethnic divisions and insurgency. Both were subsequently marginalized by the Bush administration.

Like McNamara, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his two principal assistants, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, lacked the combat experience necessary to make sound military decisions. In the end, the one who did have it – Powell – was proven right. He and Bob Richer, then head of the CIA's Middle East Division, also blamed Bush's NSA, Condoleezza Rice, for the subsequent attempt at instant democratic nation-building. As Richer explained, "Rice's vision that Iraq had to look like us overnight was catastrophic." The president, he observed, "was a realist, but he listened to her and was swayed."

US forces were sufficient to topple Saddam following a major invasion. But instead of liberating the Iraqis, the Americans became hated occupiers. This gave rise to a Sunni insurgency, during which the US fired the Iraqi military without setting up a stipend program for the soldiers and their families (thus compelling them to subsist on nothing for five long weeks). The US then fired all Baath Party members down to Level 4 without any agreed reconciliation process. This gave tens of thousands of influential Iraqis – often Western-educated – an incentive to oppose the new Iraq rather than support it.

In the ensuing struggle over leadership, a virtual civil war erupted between Sunnis and Shiites, with Kurds in the mix as well – not to mention al-Qaeda, which was rising in the Sunni community in Iraq. The unfinished war in Afghanistan and the unending, Vietnam-like quagmire in Iraq produced two growing insurgencies.

### *The Surge of Petraeus and his "Shipmate" Mattis*

Before he became, in early February 2007, Commander of Multi-National Forces in Iraq, General David Petraeus worked with Mattis to lead a prominent team of US Army and Marine experts on an Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Referred to as "King David's Bible," this manual became an outstanding social science study of insurgencies and counter-insurgencies, as well as a guide to how to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis (and Afghans).

Those principles and techniques were applied by the forces under Petraeus in Iraq for over 19 months in 2007-08. The Surge, as the effort was known (due to the deployment of well over 25,000 additional American forces), ushered in a new strategy that was a 180-degree shift from the previous one, which had been assessed as failing in December 2006 by then-commander and ambassador Ryan Crocker.

The result was an 85% reduction in the level of violence and significant progress in a host of areas. President Bush deserves enormous credit for supporting the deployment of additional forces and for backing Petraeus and Crocker.

In late 2011, after some three years of further progress and additional reductions in violence, President Barack Obama decided to withdraw the remaining US combat forces and the last four-star US commander, leaving only a modest training mission. He reportedly was concerned that there would not be an Iraqi parliament-approved Status of Forces Agreement. Iraqi PM Maliki subsequently pursued ruinous sectarian measures – orchestrating legal charges against the Sunni Arab Vice President and his security detail, and later targeting the Sunni Arab Finance Minister and a prominent Sunni Arab parliamentarian. He returned to Iraqi military and police units abusive Iraqi leaders whom General Petraeus had insisted be removed before US support would be provided, then had those forces put down peaceful Sunni demonstrations very violently. He stopped honoring agreements to provide various forms of assistance to tens of thousands of former Sunni insurgents who had reconciled with the government during the Surge.

Tragically, these actions undid much of what coalition and Iraqi forces had sacrificed to achieve, and the Sunni insurgency in Iraq began to rise again. Islamic State arose out of the ashes of the defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq.

### ***2011: Obama's Leading from Behind in Libya***

In 2011, to make matters even worse, Obama and his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, began to militate for yet another war, this time in Libya at the height of the “Arab Spring.” They did not heed Defense Secretary Robert Gates’s strenuous objections that it did not encompass “our vital national interests,” especially amidst two ongoing wars in the Middle East. Nor did Obama consider the war’s costs. Once again, the naysayer was ignored. Nine days later, Gates resigned.

Like LBJ and McNamara in Vietnam and Bush and Rice in Iraq, Obama and Clinton engaged in deceit about the real purpose of the war. Clinton argued that a NATO intervention was urgently needed to avert a massacre of Libyan civilians by Muammar Qaddafi’s troops. But her subsequently hacked e-mails substantiated that the real objective was regime change in the service of democratic nation-building.

After the rebels murdered Qaddafi, Libya, like Iraq earlier, became a paradise for tribal fighters and jihadists, and there ensued a significant flow of migrants to Europe. None of this chastened Clinton. She began to support secretly arming the Syrian rebels in a proxy war with both its dictator Assad and his patron, Russia’s Vladimir Putin.

### ***Obama's Strategic Patience***

On June 11, 2011, Obama announced that he would withdraw 10,000 troops from Afghanistan by the end of December 2011 and the rest of the 30,000-member surge force by July 2012 (i.e., before the Democratic Party convention). Once again there arose a troublesome naysayer.

General David Petraeus objected to the premature withdrawal. Aware as he was of the actual situation on the ground, he was adamant that the projected timing of the draw-down would jeopardize the progress made in the previous year of the surge in Afghanistan. Obama was forced to compromise, but did not forget Petraeus.

Rahm Emmanuel, Obama's chief of staff and one of the president's loyalists, suspected that Petraeus was contemplating his own presidential run in 2016. It did not help that Petraeus emphatically told Emmanuel he wasn't. Two days after the 2012 presidential election, Petraeus resigned his post as CIA director because of an affair with his biographer, Paula Broadwell. (The mishandling of classified information did not surface until months later.) When historian Smith queried "whether the Obama administration had taken advantage of his affair to cut his head off," Petraeus smiled, but did not reply.

### *Towards Strategic Savvy*

If there is any solace for Washington's numerous follies in the Middle East, it is Donald Trump's selection of an outstanding national security team: Mattis, McMaster, and General John Kelly (Homeland Security). With Trump's election, America saw the dawn of a new doctrine to replace "strategic patience," leading from behind, and the absence of strategy. We call the new approach "strategic savvy," meaning the judicious use of military force, diplomacy, and economic instruments. Petraeus describes it as a "comprehensive and sustainable commitment" in defense of American vital national interests. The president and his security team seek to overturn policies that have produced only failed states, Islamist-fed chaos, growing terrorist attacks in Europe, and catastrophic debt.

We have witnessed the first actions defining this emerging doctrine. On April 7, 2017, US navy destroyers carried out a missile strike on a Syrian airfield in retribution for Assad's use of chemical weapons against his subjects. A tactical move, it bore profound strategic significance, since it used judicious force to accomplish what Obama had failed to do in 2013 despite his own declared red line. So did the dropping of the "Mother of All Bombs" (MOAB, or Massive Ordnance Air Blast), the largest conventional bomb in the US arsenal, on ISIS fighters in Afghanistan on April 14.

Facing what Mattis has called a "clear and present danger" from North Korea, Trump's team did not put the problem off in the manner of the past three US administrations. He is meeting it head on with an unprecedented deployment of three carrier groups with massive naval and air power. This is intended to send a clear message on the need to stop a maniacal leader from accomplishing a nuclear weaponization and delivery system that could eventually reach American shores. President Trump has communicated this need to Chinese President Xi very clearly as well. The era of Obama's "strategic patience" is finally over.

Future presidents should consider replicating Trump's placement of national security responsibilities in the hands of individuals with combat experience. America's future leaders should be men and women with such experience combined with intellectual prowess.

In the meantime, the saga continues. Americans are transfixed by Russo-gate, much as they were by Watergate. President Trump's political opponents seek to undo the results of the 2016 election by painting him as Putin's Manchurian candidate.

Trump should now do what Obama did not: pardon Petraeus, whom Gates called "one of the nation's great battle captains." As Senator Rand Paul observed, Petraeus showed his personal journals, which did contain classified material, to only one person, an Army reserve intelligence officer with a top secret clearance. Her book was thoroughly checked for classified information and any sensitive political items by the then head of West Point's Social Sciences Department, Colonel Mike Meese. The negligent Hillary Clinton, still unpunished, revealed classified material to the multitudes through her unsecured server.

Petraeus sympathizes with the beleaguered Trump's predicament, but only to a certain extent. Like the authors, he realizes that Trump, a novice at presidential politics, has made big mistakes and then repeated them, making things worse.

In his final address as a general, Petraeus quoted Teddy Roosevelt's 1910 *Men in the Arena* speech. The words are now surely applicable to both of them:

It is not the critic who counts ... the credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood ... who errs and comes up short again and again ... but who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotions, who spends himself for a triumph of high achievement and ... if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.

*The authors are indebted to General David Petraeus for his comments and suggestions.*

*Dr. Jiri Valenta and his wife, Leni, are the principals of The Institute of Post Communist Studies and Terrorism (jolv.net). They are authors of a forthcoming book on Russia and US interventions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A prominent author and speaker, Jiri served for decade as a professor and coordinator of Soviet and East European Studies at the US Naval Post-Graduate School and former consultant to senior members of Reagan administration.*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family