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The Fall of the American Empire (Writ Small)

By Tom Engelhardt

November 20, 2012

History, it is said, arrives first as tragedy, then as farce. First as Karl Marx, then as the Marx Brothers. In the case of twenty-first century America, history arrived first as George W. Bush (and Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith and the Project for a New America — a shadow government masquerading as a think tank — and an assorted crew of ambitious neocons and neo-pundits); only later did David Petraeus make it onto the scene.

It couldn't be clearer now that, from the shirtless FBI agent to the "embedded" biographer and the "other other woman," the "fall" of David Petraeus is playing out as farce of the first order. What's less obvious is that Petraeus, America's military golden boy and Caesar of celebrity, was always smoke and mirrors, always the farce, even if the denizens of Washington didn't know it.

Until recently, here was the open secret of Petraeus's life: he may not have understood Iraqis or Afghans, but no military man in generations more intuitively grasped how to flatter and charm American reporters, pundits, and politicians into praising him. This was, after all, the general who got his first *Newsweek* cover ("Can This Man Save Iraq?") in 2004 while he was making a mess of a training program for Iraqi security forces, and two more before that magazine, too, took the fall. In 2007, he was a runner-up to Vladimir Putin for *Time*'s "Person of the Year." And long before Paula Broadwell's aptly named biography, *All In*, was published to hosannas from the usual elite crew, that was par for the course.

You didn't need special insider's access to know that Broadwell wasn't the only one with whom the general did calisthenics. The FBI didn't need to investigate. Even before she came on the scene, scads of columnists, pundits, reporters, and politicians were in bed with him. And weirdly enough, many of them still are. (Typical was NBC Nightly News anchor Brian Williams mournfully discussing the "painful" resignation of "Dave" — "the most prominent and best known general of the modern era.") Adoring media people treated him like the next military Messiah, a combination of Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and Ulysses S. Grant rolled into one fabulous piñata. It's a safe bet that no general of our era, perhaps of any American era, has had so many glowing adjectives attached to his name.

Perhaps Petraeus's single most insightful moment, capturing both the tragedy and the farce to come, occurred during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He was commanding the 101st Airborne on its drive to Baghdad, and even then was inviting reporters to spend time with him. At some point, he said to journalist Rick Atkinson, "Tell me how this ends." Now, of course, we know: in farce and not well.

For weeks, the news has been filled with his ever-expanding story, including private rivalries, pirate-themed parties, conspiracy theories run wild, and investigations inside investigations. It's lacked nothing an all-American twenty-first-century media needs to glue eyeballs. Jill Kelley, the Tampa socialite whose online life started the ball rolling and ended up embroiling two American four-star generals in Internet hell, evidently wrote enough emails a day to stagger the imagination. But she was a piker compared to the millions of words that followed from reporters, pundits, observers, retired military figures, everyone and anyone who had ever had an encounter with or a thought about Petraeus, his biographer-cum-lover Paula Broadwell, Afghan War Commander General John Allen, and the rest of an ever-expanding cast of characters. Think of it as the Fall of the House of Gusher.

Here was the odd thing: none of David Petraeus's "achievements" outlasted his presence on the scene. Still, give him credit. He was a prodigious campaigner and a thoroughly modern general. From Baghdad to Kabul, no one was better at rolling out a media blitzkrieg back in the U.S. in which he himself would guide Americans through the fine points of his own war-making.

Where, once upon a time, victorious commanders had to take an enemy capital or accept the surrender of an opposing army, David Petraeus conquered Washington, something even Robert E. Lee couldn't do. Until he made the mistake of recruiting his own "biographer" (and lover), he proved a PR prodigy. He was, in a sense, the real life military version of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay ("the Great") Gatsby, a man who made himself into the image of what he wanted to be and then convinced others that it was so.

In the field, his successes were transitory, his failures all too real, and because he proved infinitely adaptable, none of it really mattered or stanching the flood of adjectives from admirers of every political stripe. In Washington, at least, he seemed invincible, even immortal, until it all ended in a military version of *Dallas* or perhaps previews for *Revenge*, season three.

His “fall from grace,” as ABC’s nightly news labeled it, was a fall from Washington’s grace, and his tale, like that of the president who first fell in love with him, might be summarized as all-American to fall-American.

Turning the Lone Superpower Into the Lonely Superpower

David Petraeus was a Johnny-come-lately in respect to Petraeus-ism. He would pick up the basics of the imperial style of that moment from his models in and around the Bush administration and apply them to his own world. It was George W. and his guys (and gal) who first dreamed the dreams, spent a remarkable amount of time “conquering Washington,” and sold their particular set of fantasies to themselves and then to the American people.

They were the original smoke-and-mirrors crew. From the moment, just five hours after the 9/11 attacks, that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld — in the presence of a note-taking aide — urged planning to begin against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq (“Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not...”), the selling of an invasion and various other over-the-top fantasies was underway.

First, in the heat of 9/12, the president and top administration officials sold their “war” on terror. Then, after “liberating” Afghanistan and deciding to stay for the long run, they launched a massive publicity campaign to flog the idea that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and was linked to al-Qaeda. In doing so, they would push the image of mushroom clouds rising over American cities from the Iraqi dictator’s nonexistent nuclear program, and chemical or biological weapons being sprayed over the U.S. East Coast by phantasmal Iraqi drones.

Cheney and Rice, among others, would make the rounds of the talk shows, putting the heat on Congress. Administration figures leaked useful (mis)information, pressed the CIA to cherry-pick the intelligence they wanted, and even formed their own secret intel outfit to give them what they needed. They considered just when they should roll out their plans for their much-desired invasion and decided on September 2002. As White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card infamously explained, “From a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August.”

They were, by then, at war — in Washington. Initially, they hardly worried about the actual war to come. They were so confident of what the U.S. military could do that, like the premature Petraeuses they were, they concentrated their efforts on the homeland. Romantics about U.S. military power, convinced that it would trump any other kind of power on the planet, they assumed that Iraq would be, in the words of one of their supporters, a “cakewalk.” They convinced themselves and then others that the Iraqis would greet the advancing invaders as liberators, that the cost of the war (especially given Iraq’s oil wealth) would be next to nothing, and that there was no need to create a serious plan for a post-invasion occupation.

In all of this, they proved both masters of public relations and staggeringly wrong. As such, they would be the progenitors of an imperial tragedy — a deflating set of disasters that would take the pop out of American power and turn the planet’s “lone superpower” into a lonely superpower

presiding over an unraveling global system, especially in the Greater Middle East. Blinded by their fantasies, they would ensure a more precipitous than necessary American decline in the first decade of the new century.

Not that they cared, but they would also generate a set of wrenching human tragedies: first for the Iraqis, hundreds of thousands of whom became casualties of war, insurgency, and sectarian strife, while millions more fled into exile; then there were the Afghans, who died attending weddings, funerals, even baby-naming ceremonies; and, of course, tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers and contractors, who died or were injured, often grievously, in those dismal wars; and don't forget the inhabitants of post-Katrina New Orleans left to rot in their flooded city; or the millions of Americans who lost jobs, houses, even lives in the economic meltdown of 2008, a disaster that emerged from a set of globe-spanning financial fantasies and snow jobs that Bush and his crew encouraged and facilitated.

They were the ones, in other words, who took a mighty imperial power already in slow decline, grabbed the wheel of the car of state, put the peddle to the metal, and like a group of drunken revelers promptly headed for the nearest cliff. In the process — they were nothing if not great salesmen — they sold Americans a bill of goods, even as they fostered their own dreams of establishing a *Pax Americana* in the Greater Middle East and a *Pax Republican* at home. All now, of course, down in flames.

In his 1987 Princeton dissertation, David Petraeus wrote this on perception: “What policymakers believe to have taken place in any particular case is what matters — more than what actually occurred.” On this and other subjects, he was certainly no dope, but he was a huckster — for himself (given his particular version of self-love), and for a dream already going down in Iraq and Afghanistan. And he was just one of many promoters out there in those years pushing product (including himself): the top officials of the Bush administration, gaggles of neocons, gangs of military intellectuals, hordes of think tanks linked to serried ranks of pundits. All of them imagining Washington as a battlefield for the ages, all assuming that the struggle for “perception” was on the home front alone.

Producing a Bedside Manual

You could say that Petraeus fully arrived on the scene, in Washington at least, in that classic rollout month of September (2004). It was then that the three-star general, in charge of training Iraq's security forces, gave a president in a tight race for reelection a little extra firepower in the domestic perception wars. Stepping blithely across a classic no-no line for the military, he wrote a well-placed op-ed in the *Washington Post* as General Johnnie-on-the-spot, plugging “tangible progress” in Iraq and touting “reasons for optimism.”

Given George W. Bush's increasingly dismal and unpopular mission-unaccomplished war and occupation, it was like the cavalry riding to the rescue. It shouldn't have been surprising, then, that the general, backed and promoted in the years to come by various neocon warriors, would be the military man the president would fall for. Over the first half of the “surge” year of 2007, Bush would publicly cite the general more than 150 times, 53 in May alone. (And Petraeus, a

man particularly prone toward those who idolized him — see: Broadwell, Paula — returned the favor.)

But there was another step up the ladder of perception that would make him the perfect neocon warrior. While commanding general at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in 2005-2006, he also became the “face” of a new doctrine. Well, actually, a very old and particularly dead doctrine that went by the name of counterinsurgency or, acronymically, COIN. It had been part and parcel of the world of colonial and neocolonial wars and, in the 1960s, became the basis for the U.S. ground war and “pacification” program in South Vietnam — and we all know how that turned out.

Amid the greatest defeat the U.S. had suffered since the burning of Washington in 1814, counterinsurgency as a doctrine was left for dead in the rubble of Vietnam. With a sigh of relief, the military high command turned back to the task of stopping Soviet armies-that-never-would from pouring through Germany’s Fulda Gap. Even in the military academies they ceased to teach counterinsurgency — until Petraeus and his team disinterred it, dusted it off, polished it up, and turned it into the military’s latest war-fighting bible. Via a new Army and Marine field manual Petraeus helped to oversee, it would be presented as the missing formula for success in the Bush administration’s two flailing, failing invasions-cum-occupations on the Eurasian mainland.

It would gain such acclaim, in fact, that the University of Chicago Press would publish it as a trade paperback on July 4, 2007. Already back in Baghdad filling the role of Washington’s savior, the general, who had already written a foreword for that “paradigm shattering” manual, would flog it with this classic blurb: “Surely a manual that’s on the bedside table of the president, vice president, secretary of defense, 21 of 25 members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and many others deserves a place at your bedside too.”

And really, you know the rest. He would be sold (and, from Baghdad, sell himself) to the public the same way Saddam’s al-Qaeda links and weapons of mass destruction had been. He, too, would be rolled out as a product — our “surge commander” — and soon enough become the general of the hour, and Iraq a success story for the ages. Then, appointed CENTCOM commander, the military man in charge of Washington’s two wars, by Bush, he made it out of town before it became fully apparent that his successes in Iraq would leave the U.S. out on its ear a few years down the line.

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Afghanistan followed as he maneuvered to box a new president, Barack Obama, into a new “surge” in another country. Then, his handpicked war commander General Stanley McChrystal, newly minted COIN believer, “ascetic,” and “rising superstar” (who would undergo his own Petraeus-like media build-up), went down in shame over nasty comments made by associates about the Obama White House. In mid-2010, Petraeus would take McChrystal’s place to save another president by bringing COIN to bear in just the right way. The usual set of hosannas — and even less success than in Iraq — followed.

But as with Saddam Hussein’s mythical WMDs, it seemed scarcely to matter when there was no there there. Even though Afghanistan’s two COIN commanders had visibly failed in a war

against an under-armed, undermanned, none-too-popular minority insurgency, and even though the doctrine of counterinsurgency would soon be tossed off a moving drone and left to die in the Afghan rubble, Petraeus once again made it out in one piece. In Washington, he was still hailed as the soldier of his generation and President Obama, undoubtedly fearing him in 2012, either as a candidate or a supporter of another Republican candidate, promptly stashed him away at the CIA, sending him safely into the political shadows.

With that, Petraeus left his four stars behind, shed COIN-mode just as his doctrine was collapsing completely, and slipped into the directorship of a militarizing CIA and its drone wars. He remained widely known, in the words of Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution (praising Broadwell's biography), as "the finest general of this era and one of the greatest in modern American history." Unlike George W. Bush and crew who, despite pulling in staggering speaker's fees and writing memoirs for millions, now found themselves in a far different set of shadows, he looked like the ultimate survivor — until, of course, books and "bedsides" resurfaced in unexpected ways.

In the Iraq surge moment, the liberal advocacy group MoveOn.org unsuccessfully tried to label him "General Betray Us." Now, as his affair with Broadwell unraveled into the reality TV show of our moment, he became General Betray Himself, a figure of derision, an old man with a young babe, the "cloak-and-shag-her" guy (as one *New York Post* screaming headline put it).

So here you have it, the two paradigmatic figures of the closing of the "American Century": the president's son whose ambitions were stoked by Texas politics after years in the personal wilderness and the man who married the superintendent's daughter and rose like a meteor in a military that could never win a war. In the end, as the faces of American-disaster-masquerading-as-success, neither made it out of town before shame caught up with them. It's a measure of their importance, however, that Bush was finally put to flight by a global economic meltdown, Petraeus by the local sexual version of the same. Again, it's history vs. farce.

Or think of the Petraeus version of collapse as a tryout for the fall of the American empire, writ very small, with Jill Kelley and Paula Broadwell as our Gibbons and the volume of email, including military sexting, taking the place of his six volumes. A poster general for American decline, David Petraeus will be a footnote to history, a man out for himself who simply went a bridge or a book too far. George W. and crew were the real thing: genuine mad visionaries who simply mistook their dreams and fantasies for reality.

But wasn't it fun while it lasted? Wasn't it a blast to occupy Washington, be treated as a demi-god, go to Pirate-themed parties in Tampa with a 28-motorcycle police escort, and direct your own biography... even if it did end as *Fifty Shades of Khaki*?