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Petraeus's Tougher Fight

By David Ignatius

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It's a small irony of history that Gen. David Petraeus, attacked by the left for his role in revitalizing the Bush administration's effort in Iraq, is now being asked by a Democratic president to do much the same thing in Afghanistan. The Centcom commander intends to apply the same counterinsurgency tactics he developed in Iraq, but Afghanistan will be in many ways a tougher fight.

Petraeus isn't a man who likes to lose, and he's assembling an all-star team. [Gone](#) is Gen. David McKiernan, a solid but uninspired commander; he will be replaced by Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, a rising superstar who, like Petraeus, has helped reinvent the U.S. Army.

Petraeus has an asset in this new campaign that was sorely lacking in Iraq, which is strong diplomatic support, and this enables a regional approach to the war. Special envoy Richard Holbrooke and Petraeus are two headstrong bulls in a small paddock, but so far they are making this crucial partnership work.

To understand Petraeus's basic approach, try to imagine a horizontal line that charts the level of militancy of insurgent groups. On the left are the hard-core "irreconcilables" who could never be co-opted by the United States. But as you move right along the line, the groups become more pliable and join the "reconcilable" camp.

What Petraeus did in Iraq was move groups from one category to the other -- transforming hard-core insurgents into members of tribal militias on the U.S. payroll. The remaining fanatics became targets for Special Forces "capture or kill" operations, which were overseen in Iraq by McChrystal. It was a hard-and-soft strategy -- using firepower to clear an area, and then gentler counterinsurgency tools to hold it and build through economic development.

Petraeus's plan in Afghanistan is to hit the enemy very hard this year with the additional 21,000 troops President Obama [has approved](#) -- and then see if the Taliban coalition begins to crack. Much greater violence is ahead initially, as the United States attacks Taliban sanctuaries in the south. But if the strategy succeeds, the "chameleon insurgents," as Petraeus calls them, will begin to peel away.

As Petraeus envisages reconciliation with the Taliban, it will happen village by village, across Afghanistan's nearly 400 districts, rather than in a big sit-down with the group's leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar.

That's the campaign plan, but there are several problems. The first is that next door is the powder keg of Pakistan. Petraeus wants to coordinate with the Pakistani commander, Gen. Ashfaq Kiyani, so that retreating Taliban fighters will be cut off by Pakistani troops. But Kiyani remains wary of the American embrace.

A second problem is that the United States doesn't have good-enough intelligence to drive its Afghan strategy of local reconciliation. As commanders try to push an insurgent group into the reconcilable camp, they need to know its tribes and sub-tribes, its religious leaders and its paymasters. That was the kind of fine-grain intelligence that boosted the Iraq surge.

To get better information about Afghanistan, the director of national intelligence, retired Adm. Dennis Blair, has agreed to create a new high-level post for Afghanistan-Pakistan. And the Pentagon has named as a key strategist Col. Chris Kolenda, a man who became something of an amateur ethnologist during his last tour in Afghanistan. A year ago, I heard Kolenda give an unforgettable briefing that chronicled the local tribes and clans near his forward operating base in northeastern Afghanistan.

Kolenda and other commanders have learned the hard way what drives the insurgency: The social cohesion of Afghanistan collapsed during decades of war. The traditional tribal leaders lost sway to young men with money and guns, who were paid by al-Qaeda and the narco-traffickers. Petraeus wants to restore tribal authority, as he did in Iraq, and meld it with the power of the central government and a U.S.-trained army.

[Making this strategy work in Iraq was hard enough. But Afghanistan is bigger, poorer and tougher in almost every way. Obama knows the immense difficulty of trying to fix a broken Afghanistan and make it a functioning, modern country. But with his two bulls, Petraeus and Holbrooke, he's marching his presidency into the "graveyard of empires" anyway.](#)