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The General Who Would Be King

By [Jeff Huber](#)

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Forgive the smug self-congratulation, but you heard it here first, folks. I've been hinting since [February](#) that "King David" Petraeus, the "genius" of the surge in Iraq who is now in charge of all our weebegone Middle East wars as head of Central Command, was a leading candidate to be the [GOP's great white hope in 2012](#).

Lo and behold: a Sept. 4 article at [Politico.com](#), the online journal that [Glenn Greenwald](#) of Salon.com once described as a right-wing "cesspool," reports that GOP icon Bob Dole says he'd like to see Petraeus "run as a latter-day Ike."

Dave's like Ike? Yikes! That Dole would compare Petraeus to Dwight David Eisenhower suggests that the aging former senator has gone the cognitive way of fellow Republican Ronald Reagan. A signature symptom of the American Right's mental fragility is its inability to recognize (or its blithe willingness to accept) patently false analogies. As the theater-strategic commander of the European Theater of Operations during World War II, [Dwight Eisenhower](#) actually commanded an actual coalition that actually won an actual war. Petraeus hasn't met any of those criteria.

Petraeus' three tours in Iraq were noteworthy for their short-term theatrical successes and their dismal strategic failures.

He came to prominence when his hagiographer [Thomas E. Ricks](#) singled him out as the only two-star general who had done things right after the fall of Baghdad as commander of the Mosul area. What Petraeus actually did in Mosul was hand out a lot of bribes. When he left, Mosul slid to *scheiss* in a sleigh, and it continues to be a major trouble spot. During his next tour, in charge of training Iraq's security forces, Petraeus lost track of 190,000 AK-47 rifles and pistols that trickled their way into the hands of Shi'ite militants. As honcho of the surge, Petraeus handed guns out to Sunni militants and bribed them not to use the weapons on anybody but al-Qaeda in Iraq, the all but nonexistent group that at its zenith contained [fewer than 1,000 full-time fighters](#) and whose only real connection with the al-Qaeda that gave us

9/11 amounted to stealing its name. Al-Qaeda in Iraq is the equivalent of a Cleveland garage band calling itself The Beatles in Ohio ("We've pledged allegiance to Paul and Ringo," says lead vocalist).

As Ricks [artlessly admits](#), Petraeus duped the American people and Congress into thinking he was paving a way out of Iraq when he was in fact laying a yellow brick road to the "long war," an amorphous conflict with no imaginable end state or any purpose other than to justify America's seam-bursting defense budget.

Two years and change into the surge, Iraq's government and security forces are [corrupt and incompetent](#), and political reconciliation is turning fetid on an unlit back burner. None of the stated objectives of the surge have been met, and few informed observers think we'll actually adhere to the present status of forces agreement that demands we have all troops out of Iraq by the end of 2011.

Yet the world seems convinced that Petraeus is a military genius. Bush administration veteran Dan Senor says, "If he is as successful in Afghanistan as he was in Iraq, nothing else matters, and he will instantly be considered a top-tier candidate for president."

If Petraeus does in Afghanistan what he did in Iraq we'll never leave Afghanistan. It's unlikely, though, given his track record, that he'll be held accountable. You may have noticed that Petraeus is keeping a low profile these days. It's a safe bet he hasn't developed a case of camera shyness.

Things aren't all peace, love, and understanding in Iraq or the Bananastans* these days, and as head of U.S. Central Command, Petraeus is theoretically responsible for whatever goes wrong in either of those conflicts now. He isn't the defense establishment's spokesmodel for either conflict, however. We hear plenty from Defense Secretary [Bob Gates](#) (the picture in Afghanistan is "mixed," he says) and from Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman [Mike Mullen](#) (he advocates "a growing, sustained, and trusted partnership with Pakistan") and Bananastan commander [Stanley McChrystal](#) ("We're truly protecting the Afghan people from all threats," he says as he surveys Afghan people wounded and killed by his latest air strike) and from [Ray Odierno](#), our top banana in Iraq (he wants to delay troop withdrawals from his theater of war.)

From Petraeus, we hear [noncommittal, rear end-covering non sequiturs](#). "I don't think anyone can guarantee that it will work out even if we apply a lot more resources," he says of another Bananastan surge. "But it won't work out if we don't." When the second surge doesn't work out, don't blame the [Teflon General](#). He warned us!

Eisenhower, in contrast, was prepared to shoulder [full responsibility](#) in the event the invasion of Normandy failed.

The World War II general Petraeus most resembles is the self-aggrandizing and public-relations-savvy Douglas MacArthur, who took credit for winning the war in the Pacific that should have gone to Adm. Chester Nimitz. MacArthur was also Franklin Roosevelt's most dangerous political opponent. Some contend that Roosevelt kept MacArthur in the Pacific for the express purpose of keeping him from running for president.

We can't know for certain what President Obama was thinking when he retained Petraeus, along with Gates, Mullen, Odierno, and the rest of Petraeus' long war mafia, but Obama didn't become the first black president, one who whipped both the Clinton and GOP political machines, because he lacks political acumen. His decision calculus almost certainly included the realization that he could keep them under better control if they remained subordinate to him in the military chain of command.

Unfortunately, that decision also leaves him obliged to go along with their wishes. They want to establish a permanent military presence in Iraq, and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who dances on whatever lap offers him the most on any given day, will renegotiate the status of forces agreement when they make him the right offer. If Obama doesn't go along with the deal, it will be his fault we "lost" in Iraq. Candidate Obama deflected criticism of his senatorial vote against the Iraq surge by saying it had taken focus from the fight in Afghanistan, where he promised he would "finish the job" there. He'll be finished if he turns around now and doesn't give the generals the resources they need to accomplish the mission he gave them.

It would be nice to think our woebegone wars will die of natural causes when we can no longer afford them, but when it comes to the federal budget, war is like Jell-O: there's always room for it. We'll just add Iraq and the Bananastans to the tab. China will cover us.

Our Congress will never stand up to the war mafia; too many political careers and regional U.S. economies depend on defense spending. And our presidents will be the likes of Petraeus who are made guys, or the likes of Obama who quickly discover they were outmaneuvered before they made their first move.