

By Fred Branfman

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“War is too important to be left to the generals,” said George Clemenceau, French prime minister during World War I — especially to former Gen. David Petraeus, the prime architect of American’s militarized foreign policy. Like Wall Street’s focus on boosting short-term profits at the expense of long-term economic health, Petraeus’ short-term tactical focus on expanding the drone war and ground assassinations throughout the Muslim world is [jeopardizing America’s long-term strategic position](#). Yet Petraeus’ sorry record, [as reviewed by Salon](#), has largely escaped scrutiny.

Congress seems uninterested. During his confirmation hearings to be CIA director last March, most senators genuflected to Petraeus. Only a few dared ask whether as CIA director he might shade his Afghanistan reporting to hide his failures. When he assured them he wouldn’t, they smiled gratefully. “Senators ... merely urged the war’s commander to recite once more the reasons why we’re fighting there,” observed [Slate](#). “None of them asked a single tough question.”

Reporters for the mass media seem equally credulous. The Washington Post’s normally perceptive Karen DeYoung, for example, recently [referred](#) to the “air strikes that have been proved so effective in Pakistan” — ignoring the many warning signs that Petraeus’ strategy has increased the strength of U.S. foes, undermined the Pakistani government, and increased the dangers of nuclear materials falling into anti-U.S. hands.

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, a Petraeus confidant who regularly calls him a “warrior-statesman,” recently [worried](#) that Petraeus’ top-down style might not work at the CIA. At the confirmation hearings, Ignatius was relieved when “Petraeus reassured the committee that he will be open to the work force ... and told the senators that he’d like to eat in the cafeteria some days.”

That sort of irrelevant personal detail has all but crowded out any sort of critical thinking about what Petraeus has actually done. Roger Cohen, columnist for the New York Times, [reported](#) that at Petraeus is “a soldier-scholar with an impish smile.” Cohen went on to say, “of course I asked about the presidency. The résumé will look good after the C.I.A.” Newsweek’s John Barry [told](#) his readers that “the dutiful soldier [is a] hard-as-a-rock, 5-foot-9, 150-pound-distance-running, push-up-pumping Petraeus.” And Barbara Walters [chose](#) Petraeus as “The Most Fascinating Person of the Year” in a 2010 program watched by more than 10 million viewers.

Petraeus has gone to extraordinary lengths to cultivate major journalists, as did the diplomat Richard Holbrooke before his sad death in December 2010. Time columnist Joe Klein, for example — an old political friend of mine, decent guy and domestic liberal — has [written](#) of his close friendship with Richard Holbrooke, “an extraordinary mentor and an even better friend,” and how Holbrooke “championed” his son’s State Department career after giving him a job on his U.N. staff. Klein also recently [wrote](#) a column describing how Petraeus invited him to a weeklong briefing when the general was developing counterinsurgency strategy at Fort Leavenworth, and a recent visit to the general’s home.

Klein’s column was titled “David Petraeus’ Brilliant Career,” as he explained to readers that “the general’s most important legacy may lie in the role he has played in transforming the Army from a blunt instrument, designed to fight tank battles on the plains of Europe, into a ‘learning institution’ that trains its troops for the flexibility and creativity necessary to fight guerrilla wars in the information age.” Klein did not mention that the core of this “learning institution” is an “industrial-sized killing machine” that has given the general a license to unilaterally kill unarmed suspects anywhere on earth without according them any human or legal rights whatsoever.

Petraeus, like Henry Kissinger before him, excels at the hidden game of cultivating journalists with personal attention. Had he hired a public relations firm to write a press release titled “David Petraeus’ Brilliant Career,” it would have been ignored. Klein’s column was much more effective at sending the same message. Since most readers do not realize that many journalists function as a virtual arm of government, however, they are far more influenced by what is considered “objective” reporting. The Joe Klein who today ignores Petraeus’ failure and shameful focus on assassination is not the admirable journalist I knew in the 1970s and 1980s, before access to the powerful fundamentally changed who he is as a person.

The psychological dimension

But even an understanding of the collusion between senior officials and journalists does not fully explain the extraordinary position Petraeus occupies in the American psyche. To understand why journalists and the public avert their eyes from Petraeus' record of failure since Iraq, one must turn to the realm of psychology, and particularly the phenomenon of projection, one of the most powerful forces driving human behavior.

While the technical definition of psychological projection is attributing one's own repressed negative traits to others, a "positive projection," whereby one projects desires for security, love, respect, understanding and other desirable traits onto others, is equally strong.

Anyone who has ever fallen in — and out — of love can understand the unconscious power of projection. As a therapist friend says, "You fall in love with a projection not a person, and the first task of building a relationship is to separate the two." When we first "fall in love" we inevitably project onto our love-object (whom we may not really know) our desires to love and be loved, valued, cared for and admired. It is only after time that we discover the person behind the projection, a process that often leads to primal bitterness at the failure of one's projections.

Unconscious projections are particularly strong in the case of powerful politicians and military leaders. Ernest Becker, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book "The Denial of Death," has theorized that the origin of hierarchy itself lies in our unconscious desires to be protected from death — the reason why for most of human history leaders, for example, claiming "the divine right of kings," have exercised both secular and sacred power.

People naturally project their desires to be protected onto military leaders like Petraeus, especially at this moment in our history. Americans were understandably terrified by the Sept. 11 attack and naturally looked to someone like Petraeus for protection. In addition, we live in a largely hero-less age. Presidents have launched war on false evidence or engaged in adultery. Popes have covered up child abuse. Baseball players have cheated with steroids. Bankers have grabbed huge bonuses after wrecking the economy. We have gone from Franklin Roosevelt to Bill Clinton, from Dwight Eisenhower to George W. Bush, from David Sarnoff to Rupert Murdoch, from Martin Luther King Jr. to Al Sharpton. It is thus understandable why so many Americans, lacking other heroes, have projected their deep desires to be safe and protected onto Petraeus.

Projection itself is not necessarily harmful, of course. Many have been inspired to noble and selfless needs by their projections about their leaders, nation or religion. People who project deep feelings onto actors, musicians or athletes are at worst engaged in harmless fantasy.

But projections can also be quite dangerous. Human history is replete with catastrophes caused by humans either projecting their own repressed negative traits onto hated “others.” In the cases of military leaders from Napoleon to Gen. Westmoreland, people have projected their positive desires onto once-heroic leaders whose subsequent lack of judgment brought ruin to their nations.

This tendency is especially dangerous in our time as war has become increasingly automated, as U.S. leaders employ machines to kill human beings thousands of miles away as if they were playing a video game. As Jane Mayer reported in [the New Yorker](#) : “Human beings running for cover (from U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan) are such a common sight that they have inspired a slang term: ‘squirters.’” Today, our special forces roam the globe, assassinating unarmed suspects (and inevitably killing innocent bystanders) so routinely that they refer to it as “mowing the lawn.”

If we once thought of warfare as “inhuman” activity in which enemies who genuinely hate each other commit all sorts of savage atrocities, we have today entered a new age of “ahumanity,” in which war is increasingly becoming a technical exercise, bereft of malice or rancor, an exercise in eliminating “squirters.” The ascent of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in the 1960s — the corporate executive turned national security technocrat — was one sign of the transformation of war. So too is Petraeus.

Here is a man described by his admirers as “intelligent, forceful, courageous, decent ... skill and perseverance, brilliance and selflessness ... taut, controlled, driving ... a man of force, moving, pushing, getting things done ... the body tense and driven, the mind mathematical, analytical, bringing order and reason out of chaos ... marvelous with charts and statistics ... good intentions, ability, almost ferocious sense of public service ... discipline, concentration, relentless work all day and night ... years later his teachers would remember him with pleasure, he was always well behaved, never pushy, his work always ready in case you called on him.”

In fact, these words were written about McNamara, the key architect of America’s failure in

Vietnam, by David Halberstam in his classic “The Best and the Brightest.” Halberstam explained that he had set out to understand “why men who were said to be the ablest to serve in government in this century had been the architects of what struck me as likely to be the worst tragedy since the Civil War.” His conclusion about McNamara? “If he was brilliant, he was not wise.”

Although Petraeus is commonly described as America’s greatest military hero since Dwight Eisenhower, it is McNamara whom he most closely resembles. McNamara too was the object of hero worship: “so impressive and loyal that it was hard to believe, in the halcyon days of 1963 when his reputation was at its height, that anything he took command of could go wrong,” Halberstam wrote.

Like Petraeus, “that McNamara had such a good reputation in Washington was not entirely incidental — he knew about the importance of public relations, and played that game with surprising skill.” His traits dated back to high school, where “Bob was always well behaved, never pushy, his work always ready in case you called on him.”

We hear the same story today. Mark Bowden has [written](#) in Vanity Fair that Petraeus in high school also “diligently tended to his lessons. His old friends remember a boy who kept meticulous notebooks, and who followed instructions.”

Steve Coll [reported](#) in the New Yorker that “the General leads the Iraq war in the style of a corporate chief executive ... Petraeus is a professional briefer, and with a PowerPoint slide before him he will slip into a salesman’s rapid-fire patter.” Like McNamara, Petraeus frequently [misstates](#) figures to give a false impression of progress.

But Newsweek’s John Barry has [described](#) perhaps the most important trait that Petraeus shares with McNamara. As Barry wrote this summer, “Petraeus describes his father as ‘at heart a crusty old Dutch sea captain,’ who taught him never to accept anything less than a win. Any deviation from that standard brought an icy-blue stare and a growl: ‘Results, boy, results!’ Those words have driven Petraeus ever since.”

In this single-minded focus on quantifiable results, Petraeus, like McNamara before him,

embodies a value-free technocratic mentality that is dangerously abstracted from political reality. At the same time, the public and the press look to him, consciously or subconsciously, for protection from that reality.

If we can detach ourselves from the impulse of hero worship, we can see the problem is not Petraeus' competence but his judgment. His emphasis on such short-term results has been accompanied by growth in the overall size and motivation of America's foes. Petraeus may be brilliant, but his role expanding U.S. assassination strategy throughout the Muslim world risks a long-term disaster that could well exceed McNamara's failure in Vietnam.

As a key former organizer of U.S. clandestine military operations, Petraeus is uniquely positioned to expand the militarization of U.S. intelligence. As CIA director he is now in charge of a dramatically growing fleet of thousands of CIA drone aircraft, and vast networks of U.S. and local assassins on the ground. It is no exaggeration to say that uncritically granting such clandestine power to one man violates the democratic principles America stands for and endangers the very hopes we project onto him. The Petraeus projection poses a growing threat to America.