

By Michael Hastings

From [The Rolling Stone](#) | Original Article

Petraeus has a new plan to finish the war: Double down on a failed strategy



General David Petraeus Sean Gallup/Getty On the morning of June 15th, 2010, Gen. David Petraeus skipped breakfast. He was jetlagged from a trip earlier in the week to the Middle East, and he was due at the Dirksen Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill at 9:30 a.m. to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee. A veteran at these things — he had testified at least half a dozen times over the past three years, most famously as commander of U.S. troops at the height of the Iraq War — he decided not to drink much water that morning. He knew, as others sitting in front of the senators had learned the hard way, that once the marathon session began, he wouldn't have a chance for a bathroom break. "No one wants to be sitting there with a full bladder," a senior military official close to Petraeus tells me. "Those who ask the questions get to go in and out — but if you're the one sitting there in front of the cameras, you have to stay there the entire time."

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The hearing started to get interesting after 45 minutes, when Sen. John McCain took the floor. McCain wanted Petraeus, the supreme commander of all U.S. forces in the Middle East and Central Asia, to say that the deadline President Obama had set for withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan — July 2011 — was a bad idea. But the general, while no fan of the deadline, was too shrewd to be drawn into such an obvious spat with his commander in chief. As he evaded McCain's badgering with an almost Clintonian ease, the senator grew increasingly frustrated.

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"Do you believe that we will begin a drawdown of forces in July 2011, given the situation as it exists today?" McCain prodded.

"It's not given as the situation exists today," Petraeus corrected. "It's given as projections are for that time."

"You believe we can begin a drawdown in July of 2011 under the projected plans that we have?" McCain persisted, rephrasing his question for the third time.

"That is the policy, and I support it," Petraeus answered, taking a sip of water.

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"I understand you're supporting the policy," McCain pressed. He again pushed Petraeus for an answer, and even resorted to quoting his old foe, Vice President Joe Biden: "In July of 2011, you're going to see a whole lot of people moving out — bet on it." But a minute later, McCain's expression suddenly changed from one of exasperation to befuddlement. Petraeus had fainted, slumping forward in his chair. "Oh my God," McCain gasped.

The general regained consciousness a few seconds later, and was escorted out of the hearing room with the help of his aides. After recovering from a combination of dehydration and jet lag, he returned under his own power a half-hour later. But the committee, shaken by the unexpected turn of events, decided to adjourn for the day.

[Revenge of the Puppet: Rolling Stone's 2010 Story on Hamid Karzai](#)

To those watching, it was shocking to see Petraeus in such a vulnerable state. As a soldier, he had survived being shot in the chest during a training accident in 1991, had broken his pelvis jumping out of an airplane in 2000, and was considered by many to be a hero for engineering the last-ditch "surge" in 2007 that enabled U.S. forces to stage a face-saving withdrawal from the disastrous war in Iraq. In reality, though, it had been a tough year for Petraeus. He had undergone two months of radiation treatment for prostate cancer — a fact he kept private for fear of giving the Taliban a propaganda edge. He had also fallen out of favor with the Obama administration, which was keeping him at arm's length. Under Bush, the general had enjoyed direct and regular access to the White House, speaking with the president once a week during the height of the Iraq War. But Obama and his top advisers were furious at Petraeus for working to "box in" the president during a strategic review the year before, effectively forcing Obama to send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. The White House was also worried about rumors that Petraeus planned to run for president in 2012. ("They saw him as a general on his white horse," another senior U.S. military official tells me.) Petraeus, the golden boy under Bush, found himself out of the loop for the first time. A month earlier, in a moment of frustration, he reportedly told his spokesman that the White House was "fucking with the wrong guy."

But all of that was about to change. Seven days after Petraeus collapsed during his Senate testimony, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of the war in Afghanistan, was summoned

back to Washington. McChrystal and his top advisers had been quoted making a host of critical comments about the White House in a profile published in Rolling Stone, and the general's career was suddenly on the line. No one knew whether McChrystal would keep his job; NATO officials had prepared two press releases — one for if he stayed, another for if he was fired. Even the military's top brass was kept out of the loop: Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell, viewed as particularly untrustworthy by the Obama administration, was frantically calling NATO headquarters in Brussels to find out what was happening across the Potomac at the White House.

On June 23rd, McChrystal entered the Oval Office. According to a source familiar with the conversation, Obama told the general, "You've done a very good job, but . . ." and then informed McChrystal that he would accept his resignation. Afterward, the president held a meeting of the National Security Council. "I've accepted Stan McChrystal's resignation," Obama told those gathered in the room, according to a senior administration official who attended the session. There was a shocked silence. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had all lobbied hard to keep McChrystal onboard. In the end, it was the president himself, heeding the advice of Biden and National Security Adviser James Jones, who had decided that the general had to go.

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Then Obama made an equally startling announcement: He was placing Petraeus, the commander who had so skillfully undermined him during the strategic review the year before, in charge of the war in Afghanistan. Petraeus had arrived at the White House that morning "with no indication at all" that he was about to get tapped to replace McChrystal, according to a senior military official close to the general. "He walked into a more or less regular NSC meeting," the official says, "and walked out with a new job." The question that Petraeus had been trying to avoid when he collapsed at the Senate hearing a week earlier — When are we getting out of Afghanistan? — was suddenly one he would be forced to answer, and quickly.

Obama and Petraeus met for 40 minutes. A press conference was scheduled in the Rose Garden to break the news — but the announcement couldn't be made public until Obama allowed the general to fulfill one simple request.

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"Before we announce this," Petraeus told the president, "I better call my wife."

For a brief moment, the appointment of Petraeus united civilian and military leaders in Washington, who had been at war with each other over the unfolding disaster in Afghanistan. Within the Obama administration, doubts about McChrystal's ability to lead had been festering

privately for months. In May, a month before the blowup, one White House official had told me that Petraeus was "the one who should really be in charge." The general was widely seen as having enough clout in Washington to alter the course of the war, as he had done in Iraq. If Petraeus can't do it, the thinking went, then no one can — and no one back home could blame Obama for losing with Petraeus in charge.

[Photos: Embedded With the Taliban](#)

The irony is that Petraeus had literally written the book on counterinsurgency, the strategy that was failing so miserably in Afghanistan. After serving two years in Iraq, where he oversaw training of the Iraqi army and police, Petraeus returned to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in 2005. Fed up with what he saw as the Pentagon's outdated, Cold War mentality, he took it upon himself to assemble a handful of the military's most dynamic thinkers and to develop a new field manual, called FM 3-24, which became the basis for America's policy in Iraq. "Counterinsurgency is not just thinking man's warfare," the manual grandly declares of the doctrine now known as COIN. "It is the graduate level of war."

[The Insurgent's Tale: Rolling Stone's 2005 Profile of a Soldier Reconsidering Jihad](#)

As McChrystal's boss, Petraeus had also been intimately involved in applying COIN to Afghanistan. During the summer of 2009, he met secretly with McChrystal in Belgium while his subordinate penned an assessment that declared the war on the brink of "mission failure." Petraeus, who graduated two years ahead of McChrystal at West Point, was both a friend and rival to the younger general. Serving under Petraeus in Iraq, McChrystal had overseen the lethal Special Forces operations that had made the surge a tactical success. But once he took charge in Afghanistan, he had struggled to implement the strategy pioneered by his boss. The Taliban, it seemed, were far less cowed by counterinsurgency than Iraq's fractious opposition.

Taking over from McChrystal, Petraeus moved quickly to institute his own, more aggressive version of COIN — one that calls for lots of killing, lots of cash and lots of spin. He loosened the restrictions McChrystal had placed on the rules of engagement, giving U.S. soldiers the green light to use artillery, destroy property and defend themselves more vigorously. He drastically upped the number of airstrikes, launching more than 3,450 between July and November, the most since the invasion in 2001. He introduced U.S. tanks into the battle, unleashed Apache and Kiowa attack helicopters, and tripled the number of night raids by Special Forces. The fighting was calculated to force the Taliban to the bargaining table and reduce NATO casualties, which soared to 711 last year — the highest of the war.

On the political front, Petraeus knew that his primary weapon was money. Unlike McChrystal, who had bent over backward to appease President Hamid Karzai, Petraeus had no qualms about hurting Afghan feelings. Within weeks of assuming command, he went toe-to-toe with Karzai, pushing through a controversial initiative to arm and fund Afghan militias that effectively

operate as local gangs, outside the control of the Afghan army and police. He also doled out cash to jump-start reconciliation talks with the Taliban, which had gone nowhere over the past nine years. "Petraeus is big enough," says a senior U.S. official involved in Afghanistan policy. "When Karzai pushes, he pushes right back."

Above all, Petraeus launched a full-scale offensive to reshape how Congress and the American people view the war. One lesson he learned during the surge in Iraq is that it's not what's happening on the battlefield that counts — it's what people in Washington think is happening. As Petraeus wrote in *The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam*, his 1987 doctoral dissertation at Princeton, "What policymakers believe to have taken place in any particular case is what matters — more than what actually occurred." Success lies in finding the right metrics, telling the right story, convincing the right people we're not losing. The key to victory, Petraeus concluded, is "perception."

After taking over in Afghanistan, the general sat down for interviews with virtually all of the major networks, and his staff is currently grappling with another 130 interview requests. (Petraeus declined to be interviewed for this story.) He also began quietly maneuvering to ditch what he viewed as a major obstacle to success in Afghanistan: the July 2011 deadline that President Obama had set to begin withdrawing U.S. troops.

The White House had announced the date in December 2009, slipping it into a major speech on the war that the president gave at West Point. According to U.S. military officials, who were angered by the announcement, Obama's advisers added the date to the speech without checking with them. The reason: The White House felt it needed to set a public benchmark so it wouldn't get boxed in again by the Pentagon, as it had been during the strategic review earlier that year. "They felt like they got jammed," says a senior U.S. official, "and they didn't want to get jammed again."

In public, Petraeus began walking back the 2011 deadline, saying it wasn't a "sure thing" that the war would be over by 2014. That put him directly at odds with the vice president, who was insisting that U.S. troops would be out of Afghanistan by 2014 "come hell or high water." In November, at a NATO summit in Lisbon, Petraeus also lobbied U.S. allies to support his plan for prolonged fighting and nation-building. By the end of the conference, NATO's secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, was telling reporters, "One thing must be very clear: NATO is in this for the long term." The Lisbon summit, says one U.S. official, "finally got everyone's mind off July 2011."

If Petraeus really wanted to extend the war, however, he knew he would have to derail the latest Afghanistan review, a declassified version of which was made public in December. The White House hoped the review, originally billed as a major event, would settle the primary sticking point it had with the Pentagon: How soon, and in what numbers, would U.S. troops begin to leave Afghanistan? As the review started over the summer and barreled forward through the fall, staffers at the National Security Council in Washington and at ISAF headquarters in Kabul pulled 14-hour days to put together a document they could agree on.

From the outside, the process appeared to lack the drama of the highly publicized 2009 review.

But behind the scenes, say U.S. officials familiar with the debate, the infighting was just as fierce. Petraeus and his staff squared off against a handful of key players in the White House, most of them closely aligned with Vice President Joe Biden, who has pressed for a faster withdrawal. It was "the optimists versus the pessimists," as one U.S. official who worked on the review puts it. Although the metrics used to judge progress in Afghanistan are classified, U.S. officials familiar with the review say Petraeus focused on a few key statistics to make his case: the growing number of Taliban commanders being killed and captured, evidence that the local population is becoming more receptive to U.S. troops, and signs that more Taliban fighters are joining the government. Military commanders in Afghanistan also stressed what they see as security gains in Kandahar and Helmand provinces. As Petraeus and his allies in the Pentagon sought to reshape the review to their liking, they had "daily battles with the White House," says one U.S. official.

During the review process, Petraeus also clashed with America's intelligence community over what is really going on in Afghanistan. The CIA wasn't buying the military's spin about progress, and the new National Intelligence Estimate — a document that distills the insights of the nation's 16 intelligence agencies — threatened to repeat the "grim" assessment it had offered two years earlier. So the general set out to remake the NIE to his liking. "Petraeus and his staff completely rewrote it," says a U.S. official with direct knowledge of the assessment, which remains classified. Every time the CIA or the NSC cited something negative, Petraeus pushed to include something positive. "There was much more back-and-forth between the military and the intelligence community than usual," says another official who has read the NIE. "The draft I saw reflected this debate."

Thanks to such internal maneuvering, the strategic review did little to clarify the timetable for withdrawal. The final report, in fact, says almost nothing. We are making progress, but that progress is fragile and reversible. We have broken the momentum of the Taliban, but there will still be heavy fighting next year. The troops will start coming home soon, but they won't start coming home soon. We aren't "nation-building," the president says, though we'll stay in Afghanistan past 2014 to build its nation. It was, in the end, a nonreview review, which suited Petraeus just fine, giving him more time to shape the outcome not just in Kabul, but in Washington. As the general had spelled out in his doctoral dissertation, winning the hearts and minds of Congress is what matters most. Or as one U.S. military official puts it, "If anyone can spin their way out of this war, it's Petraeus."

During his time in Iraq, Petraeus earned the nickname King David, for the imperious manner in which he ruled over the ancient city of Mosul. In Afghanistan, a more apt honorific might be the Godfather. To get America out of the war, Petraeus has turned to the network of warlords, drug runners and thieves known as the Afghan government, which the general himself has denounced as a "criminal syndicate." Within weeks of assuming command, Petraeus pushed through an ambitious program to create hundreds of local militias — essentially a neighborhood watch armed with AK-47s. Under Petraeus, the faltering operation has been expanded from 18 districts to more than 60, with plans to ramp it up from 10,000 men to 30,000.

In Afghanistan, however, arming local militias means, by definition, placing guns in the hands of some of the country's most ruthless thugs, who rule their territory with impunity. In the north,

Petraeus is relying on Atta Mohammed Noor, a notorious warlord-turned-governor considered to be one of the most powerful men in Afghanistan, to prepare militias for a long fight with the Taliban. Smaller militias in the region — which have been likened to an L.A. "gang" by their own American advisers — are also getting U.S. training. In the east, where violence has significantly increased, efforts to back local strongmen have already resulted in intertribal violence. And in the south, Petraeus has given near-unconditional support to Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president's brother and one of the country's most unsavory gangsters.

"The Americans have backed so many warlords in so many ways, it's very hard to see how you unscramble the egg now," says John Matisonn, a former top U.N. official who left Kabul last June. "There has never been a strategy to get rid of the warlords, who are the key problem. The average Afghan hates them, whether they're backed by the Taliban or the Americans. They see them as criminals. They know that the warlords are fundamentally undermining the rule of law."

The militia strategy that Petraeus is pursuing is essentially one of outsourcing — and no one better represents the plan's disdisturbing downside than Col. Abdul Razzik, who runs the border town of Spin Boldak in southern Afghanistan. Although Razzik's militia is not officially part of the new program being ramped up by Petraeus, the general has singled him out as a model ally in the region. Razzik played a key role during the recent U.S. offensive in Kandahar, and Petraeus himself paid a visit to the colonel last fall. According to Razzik — who, despite his lower rank, also refers to himself as a general — he and Petraeus hit it off, meeting for an hour and a half and exchanging ideas on how to win the war. "General Petraeus and I have very similar opinions," Razzik tells me during a recent interview in an office at his base a few miles from the Pakistani border. "I want to kill the Taliban, he wants to kill the Taliban."

At just under five feet nine, with a neatly trimmed beard and a sly smile, the 34-year-old Razzik is a bundle of charisma. A photo of President Karzai hangs above his desk, which is empty of papers, and his black desktop Dell computer is switched off. Razzik doesn't know how to read, so paper and the Internet would only get in the way of his work, which is basically kicking Taliban ass by any means necessary. By most accounts, he's been doing a pretty bang-up job of it, leading a series of operations in the country's most dangerous province. "We don't take prisoners," Razzik boasts. "If they are trying to kill me, I will try to kill them. That's how I order my men." He pauses, as if recalling the recent PR training he received from U.S. officials. "If they submit and say they made a mistake," he adds, "then, yes, we will take them prisoner."

Exactly how Razzik became the most powerful figure in his province is a bit blurry. By his account, he began fighting the Taliban in 1995, when the religious fundamentalists killed his uncle and took his 11-year-old brother prisoner. Hiding in the sandy mountains south of town, Razzik was taken in by shepherds of his own tribe. He then snuck north to Kabul and Herat, where he fought the Taliban for a few months before returning to Spin Boldak. In 2002, thanks in part to his tribal connections, he was named chief of the border police. With Hamid Karzai as his patron — along with the president's brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, the provincial chief of Kandahar and a suspected drug runner — Razzik consolidated his power, creating one of the most stable districts in Afghanistan. It was a vital district as well, and its proximity to Pakistan offered ample opportunities for self-enrichment for an ambitious young warlord. U.S. military and diplomatic officials soon came to believe that Razzik had become a central figure in a

large-scale drug ring, shipping opium over the border. More disturbing reports also started to filter up the chain of command concerning executions and "indiscriminate tactics against men, women and children," according to a human rights official who specializes in Afghanistan.

Razzik's reputation as a killer grew during a military offensive in 2006, when the young commander reportedly terrorized the population of a rival tribe. "People began to say he was here to kill every Noorzai he could find," according to a local elder, in a recent report from the New America Foundation. But the aggressive tactic backfired: "In our area," another elder reported, "the Taliban went from 40 to 400 in days." According to local reports, Razzik's men also stopped 16 civilians on their way to a New Year's celebration and summarily executed them. Razzik was briefly suspended while his men were investigated, but the results of the inquiry were never made public. As Razzik took a leading role in operations around Kandahar last year, more human rights abuses were reported, though eyewitness testimony was hard to come by. "We hear complaints about Razzik," another human rights official tells me, "but people are too afraid of retribution to come forward." A recent report by Human Rights Watch singled out Razzik, coming to the same conclusion. "In Afghanistan, an ordinary person can't do anything," one Afghan civilian told the human rights group. "But a government person can do what he wants — killing, stealing, anything."

The swirling allegations of graft and criminality did give NATO pause. Last February, a deputy to U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry met with a number of U.S. officials charged with combating corruption in Afghanistan, including Maj. Gen. Michael Flynn, then serving as McChrystal's intelligence chief. According to a leaked State Department cable, the meeting was intended to figure out how to handle "prominent Afghan malign actors" or "corrupt/criminal Afghan officials." Three Afghan officials — including Razzik and Ahmed Wali Karzai — were specifically discussed based on information from "intel and law-enforcement files." By embracing Razzik, U.S. officials acknowledged, they were undercutting any chance for legitimate governance. "By ascribing unaccountable authority to Razzik," another cable noted, "the coalition unintentionally reinforces his position through its direct and near-exclusive dealings with him on all major issues in Spin Boldak."

U.S. officials briefly considered ways to sideline Razzik and Karzai. Capture them? Take them out? Charge them with corruption? At a minimum, according to a leaked cable, officials thought they should give them a slap on the wrist by limiting their public appearances and cutting off high-profile visits from congressional delegations. That, the cable concluded, would "help change perceptions held by parts of the Afghan public that the U.S. supports, explicitly or implicitly, known corrupt officials."

Once Petraeus assumed command, however, any pretense of even the most minimal punishment became a joke. Razzik received a high-profile visit not only from Petraeus but from Eikenberry as well — which included a photo op. He was also rewarded with more funding and military support, including a dedicated Special Forces team to personally advise him. "Sometimes I travel in the American helicopters," he says with pride. By supporting Razzik, Petraeus is pushing the limits of American law: A condition in the supplemental spending bill passed last year to fund the war explicitly states that no taxpayer money can go to units where there is "credible" evidence of human rights violations. Yet instead of holding Razzik

accountable for his crimes, U.S. officials have gone into overdrive to refurbish his image. In October, an American commander in Spin Boldak told *The Washington Post* that Razzik is a modern-day "Robin Hood." The following month, another U.S. commander gushed to *The Wall Street Journal* that the young warlord is a "folk hero." In perhaps the most honest assessment, Maj. Gen. Nick Carter endorsed Razzik as "Afghan good enough" — a play on a phrase imported from the Iraq War, "Iraq good enough," which basically suggests a high-grade level of shittiness.

When it comes to American strategy, Razzik represents a trade-off. "On one side," a U.S. official in Kabul tells me, "you have State, DEA, FBI saying, 'Hey, this guy is a smuggler, a criminal, he's letting drugs in over the border.' On the other side, there's the CIA and the military, who are saying, 'This guy is giving us good intel in Panjwai or Zabul, or wherever else.' " At best, arming known gangsters like Razzik is a short-term fix, designed to give Petraeus a way to gradually lower U.S. casualties and convince the media to go along with the narrative of success. "It's a shortcut to get out," says Thomas Ruttig, a former U.N. official who now runs the Afghan Analyst Network. "Behind us, the flood. Most of what's happening now is driven by an American policy to get out of Afghanistan."

The problem is that the militia program undercuts what is supposed to be a central tenet of counterinsurgency — which, according to a memo issued by Petraeus in August, requires drawing the local population away from the enemy by providing them with "accountable governance." Razzik and his ilk, by contrast, are essentially warlords-in-training, a specter that terrifies Afghans, conjuring up memories of the bad old days when the warlords raped, ruled and pillaged at will. "It reminds me of Soviet times," says Gardesh Saheb, a prominent Afghan journalist. "The militias are a very bad experience for the Afghans. All of the people, all the analysts, all the political groups are against this process. It looks like the end of the communist regime. It's a big mistake."

Arming local warlords also fuels existing rivalries and sets the stage for another Afghan civil war: One of the most high-profile cases from last year ended in disaster when a militia outside Jalalabad, emboldened by an influx of U.S. aid, killed 13 members of another tribe. In dozens of interviews, the only Afghans I met who fully support the militia program are members of the militias. "Americans are always choosing stupid friends here," says Izzatullah Wasifi, a former governor and anti-corruption chief. "Razzik has killed hundreds of people, and Karzai and the rest are all crooked. They're seeking a weak and fragmented state for their own self-interest. We are heading to another civil war. To get stuck in this shit? That's a shame."

There is no question that Petraeus has succeeded, at least for now, in calming the chaos in southern Afghanistan. Over the past few weeks, the fighting in and around Kandahar has subsided somewhat. Afghan officials credit the lull to NATO's ongoing operations around the city, the help of Abdul Razzik and the arrival of winter. Even the Taliban admit that the U.S. crackdown has forced them to flee to Pakistan, although sources close to the insurgents tell me that many are simply hiding in Kandahar, waiting for their next opportunity to strike.

But if the "clear" part of the U.S. operation is succeeding, the "hold and build" aspect of the plan still worries Afghan and American officials. The only way to prevent a return of the Taliban,

according to counterinsurgency theory, is to establish a legitimate government. But during the summer, as the U.S. ramped up its offensive, the city was devastated by a Taliban campaign of assassinations that targeted anyone who worked for the government or its allies. At least one high-level killing was occurring every day, an astonishing and unprecedented leap in violence. In the time I was there in December — a slow week — there were two targeted assassinations and one major bombing.

The killings mean it will be harder for Petraeus to implement his counterinsurgency strategy, since there are fewer friendly Afghans left to counter the insurgency. I was shown a list of 515 tribal elders and religious figures who have been assassinated over the past nine years, gutting the ranks of the Afghans whom Petraeus hopes to rely on. A media adviser for the mayor of Kandahar, Ghulam Hayder Hamidi, dismisses the notion that things are better now. "Better?" he scoffs. "I didn't say better. I said there have been only two targeted killings this week. This calm will not last forever. We have had military operations again and again, and this is not a solution to the problem."

The mayor's office is in a dark, dank building, one of those office complexes in conflict zones that seem to be permanently under construction. "This has been the worst year," Hamidi tells me. After two of his deputy mayors were gunned down last year, and he was almost killed in a bombing right outside his office, nearly a third of his staff of 76 quit. (He also had to fire 10 other staffers for corruption.) He hasn't had any luck filling the vacant slots — partly, he says, because he can only pay his employees 3,500 Afghanis a month, or about \$80 — half of what they can earn in a local militia. The central government in Kabul, he says, has promised to give his staff raises, but it's been months and he hasn't received the extra funds. Kabul has also been slow to fund his police force, he adds. It's this reality that prompts a U.S. official to tell me, "There's talk of transition next year. But in Kandahar, there's not going to be anything to transition to in a year."

I ask the mayor, who is close to Ahmed Wali Karzai, what he thinks of the corruption accusations against the president's brother. He responds indignantly. Karzai is a victim of "propaganda," he says, and Razzik is a "hero." The real corruption, he insists, is elsewhere — among other Afghan officials and Western reconstruction agencies. "There are killers, enemies of society, sitting in our peace jirga," he says, referring to a government-organized conference that was held in Kandahar earlier that week. He also has few kind words for the \$250 million in reconstruction funds being poured into the city: He accuses a Canadian firm of blowing \$1.9 million on a solar-power system that doesn't work, and a large development firm, IRD, of wasting millions on a program to harvest grapes.

The mayor is of two minds regarding the prospects of success in Afghanistan. The Taliban, he concedes, still have deep roots in the police force and plenty of funding from Pakistan and Iran. On the other hand, his public spiritedness prompts him to insist that this coming summer will be more peaceful than the last. He has even come up with a new slogan he wants to promote for Kandahar: "Tourism, not terrorism."

Petraeus has never been a man to lack confidence. He once sent an autographed picture of himself to a reporter he went jogging with, and signed copies of his photos go for up to \$825 on

eBay. After his speedy approval by Congress last summer, Petraeus returned to CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa, Florida, to pack his bags and thank his staff. He sounded "psyched" and looked like "a man on a mission, not dreading Afghanistan at all," according to a source close to Petraeus. Those who know him say privately that he would never have run for president in 2012, but that hasn't stopped speculation that he'll be in the mix in 2016. He joked at a right-wing think tank about running for president, and "Petraeus for President" T-shirts are already available online.

Petraeus is fond of citing his experience during the Bush administration; in meetings, the general "mentions Iraq every five minutes," as one Afghan official puts it. But it didn't take long after Petraeus arrived in Kabul for him to get something of a shock: This war, it quickly became clear, is nothing like the last one he fought. "It's taken him a few months," says one U.S. official involved in the Afghan strategy, "but I think he's finally realized that Afghanistan is not Iraq. Afghanistan is much, much harder."

In Iraq, Petraeus had a tough-minded and brave leader in Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, and a reliable diplomatic partner in Ryan Crocker, the U.S. ambassador. But in Afghanistan, both President Karzai and Ambassador Eikenberry have been standing in the way of the narrative the general is trying to sell. Petraeus has responded by pressuring Karzai to beef up local militias and negotiate with the Taliban, straining the relationship almost to the breaking point. At a meeting in October attended by Petraeus and other senior U.S. officials, Karzai stormed out of the room after an intense back-and-forth over whether Western security companies should be banned from Afghanistan, which would effectively shut down all development projects. According to an Afghan official with knowledge of the meeting, Karzai told him that "he didn't care if Petraeus took his projects or his troops home." (The president also threatened, yet again, to join the Taliban.) A few weeks later, according to an Afghan official, Karzai refused to fly with Petraeus to the NATO summit in Lisbon.

"Karzai is crazy — or crazy like a fox," says Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the leading opposition figure. "He's too skillful at playing games and too retarded when it comes to the rationale. He can't play the role the people of Afghanistan and the international community expect him to play. He will get deeper and deeper into this problem and drag us down as well."

Petraeus has kept his distance from Eikenberry, who has been among the administration's strongest critics of the military's plan in Afghanistan. An embassy spokesman says the ambassador and the general are "very close," but U.S. officials familiar with their relationship describe it as "lukewarm" and "so-so." Eikenberry has been rendered increasingly ineffective in recent months, following the release of WikiLeaks cables in which he criticized Karzai, as well as comments he made to Bob Woodward in Obama's Wars saying Karzai was "off his meds." One State Department official in Kabul describes the atmosphere at the U.S. Embassy as "rudderless," with many of Eikenberry's top deputies operating in a "micromanaged culture of fear." Even Eikenberry's own people have been telling the White House he's useless: In October, a senior official from the embassy met in Washington with Gen. Doug Lute, a top player at the National Security Council, and told him that Eikenberry's relationship with Karzai is "completely destroyed."

Throughout the strategic review last year, all Eikenberry did "was whine," according to a senior U.S. official involved in the process. In recent weeks, military officials have started to do some whining of their own, complaining to the media that the ambassador isn't doing enough to back counterinsurgency. U.S. officials describe Eikenberry's tenure as one of the great tragedies of the war — that a man widely respected for his knowledge of Afghanistan was unable to stop a military strategy he foresaw was doomed to fail. In Kabul, rumors of his imminent departure abound; a former U.S. ambassador recently came just short of publicly calling for his resignation, a sentiment that Afghan officials express privately. Insiders speculate that only McChrystal's sudden firing, followed by Richard Holbrooke's untimely death in December, have kept Eikenberry in the job.

With the death of Holbrooke, the president's special envoy, the administration lost one of its best diplomatic weapons to put pressure on the Pakistanis — seen as key to shutting down Taliban safe havens and orchestrating peace talks in Afghanistan. More than any other top U.S. official, Holbrooke had been "chipping away" in Pakistan, as one State Department official puts it, making at least a dozen trips to the region in the past two years and slowly building the relationships needed to resolve the most daunting diplomatic challenge of the entire U.S. policy in Afghanistan. Petraeus called Holbrooke his "wingman" — a term of endearment that amused Holbrooke. But as a U.S. official told me a few weeks before the envoy's death, Holbrooke believed that diplomacy, not war, should take center stage in foreign policy. "Since when did the diplomat become the general's wingman?" Holbrooke was reported as saying. "It's supposed to be the other way around!"

At the start of the Iraq war, Petraeus famously offered a prescient observation about the impending military disaster. Speaking to a reporter during the early days of the invasion, the general noted that the Bush administration had no real exit strategy in place. "Tell me how this ends," he said.

So far, Petraeus has failed to answer that question in Afghanistan, even while he has tripled the scope of the fighting, essentially creating a new war of his own. Both the U.N. and the Red Cross say that violence is the worst it's been in nine years, and security across the country is deteriorating. In December, a group of highly respected Afghanistan experts published an open letter to President Obama, saying that negotiations, not an increase in military operations, are the only way out. "We are losing the battle for hearts and minds in the Pashtun countryside," they wrote. "What was supposed to be a population-centered strategy is now a full-scale military campaign causing civilian casualties and property damage." In the most shocking incident, a U.S. unit destroyed an entire Afghan village last fall, obliterating it with 42,900 pounds of bombs.

Political pressure to get out is building. Polls now show that two-thirds of Americans — a record level — don't think the war is worth fighting. In Congress, 102 Democrats voted against funding for the war last year, up from 32 in 2009. A host of think tanks are expressing serious doubts: The left-leaning Center for American Progress calls for an "accelerated withdrawal," and the bipartisan Council on Foreign Relations concludes that "at best, the margin for U.S. victory is likely to be slim."

Inside the White House, according to officials familiar with the debate, Obama is prepared to go

head-to-head with the military to get his way. At the end of last year, he replaced his national security adviser, Gen. James Jones — who had failed to keep the president from being steamrolled by the Pentagon during the strategic review — with Tom Donilon, a trusted friend who is said to have serious doubts about the war. Donilon is closely tied to Joe Biden; his brother is a top aide to the vice president, and his wife is Jill Biden's chief of staff. His appointment was a clear signal to the Pentagon about Obama's determination to begin winding down the war — which is why Defense Secretary Gates reportedly said that Donilon's selection would be a "disaster."

In Washington, the internal debate now centers on how many troops are actually going to leave. Too low, and the number won't satisfy the Democratic base. Too high, and it will provide ammunition to Petraeus and his GOP allies. In the past few weeks, two high-profile Republican delegations have visited Afghanistan — including four Tea Party senators and GOP presidential contender Mitt Romney. Both delegations received the royal treatment — Petraeus' media operation distributed photos of Romney's visit, and ISAF announced his arrival on Twitter — and both returned insisting that Obama must keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan until Petraeus gives the OK to withdraw.

But despite its "stay the course" rhetoric, even the Pentagon is studying ways to get out. Last summer, Rolling Stone has learned, the Defense Department commissioned a report from U.S. military officials and diplomatic advisers looking at various "end states" in Afghanistan — in short, what the country will look like when we leave. A U.S. official who was asked for input on the document says that "it was an attempt to get the withdrawal strategies." A draft of one paper, obtained by Rolling Stone, describes a plan to split Afghanistan into seven regions, each centered around a major city, with both "insurgents" and "local strongmen" in the new governments. "This is not to sanction warlordism," the paper states, "but an acknowledgment that local strongmen have a part to play in the initial stage of rebalancing the state." A Pentagon spokesman insists that "no such scenario is being contemplated by senior leadership," but sources close to Gates say he reacted "positively" to the plan.

Warlordism certainly seems to be the way America is heading in Afghanistan. If, as Obama insists, we are not engaged in "nation-building," then it doesn't really matter what kind of government we leave behind in Kabul, as long as they let us use their country as a base for killing Al Qaeda. Robert Grenier, a former CIA station chief in Islamabad, recently called for balancing a "small but capable Afghan army" with local militias "sometimes disparaged as warlords" — all to provide "a platform for U.S.-led counterterror operations." In the end, despite the counterinsurgency doctrine's emphasis on good governance, the conclusion of every occupation ultimately comes down to the conqueror's desire for stability, rather than the human rights of the conquered.

Which raises the question: Why risk the lives of 150,000 troops and waste another \$120 billion to get there? "America promised us democracy and human rights," says Ahmad Berkazai, who serves as media adviser to the mayor of Kandahar. "If America is fighting for that, they should stay. If they are not — if they are going to leave behind militias and warlords — then they should leave now."

Either way suits Col. Abdul Razzik. Back in Spin Boldak, our interview over, I pose for a picture with him. I admire his watch — a black, diamond-encrusted Concord — and he takes me outside to show off his base. The parking lot is full of Humvees and armored SUVs, all provided by the Americans. Razzik points out a fort on top of a small, rocky hill behind his headquarters. "That's an old British castle," he says. "It's about 90 years old." We stare at the ruins, a remnant of the last Western power to see its visions of empire end in the graveyard of Afghanistan.

I ask Razzik what his plans for the future are. "It is the happiest time in my life," he says. "I am the police chief here, and I am in my own country." Then he asks if I need an escort for the trip back. I politely decline, and thank him for his time. A few minutes later, as we are driving back to Kandahar, my translator notices that we're being followed by two green Ford Rangers, courtesy of Col. Razzik. It's his job, after all, to offer us a semblance of security as we find our way out.