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Few issues are more important to America's future than reducing the threat of future terrorist attacks, which not only risk killing Americans but also provoking a U.S. government response that could destroy our democracy. As Bob Woodward has warned: "Another 9-11 ... could happen, and if it does, we will become a police state." It could thus be a matter of the survival of American freedom that the media, instead of continuing to simply record official claims of militants killed by ground and drone assassinations, also report on the compelling evidence that these killings are weakening our overall national security.

Congress, the mass media and public are overlooking evidence that the current U.S. "counter-terror strategy" of global assassination by drones and special operations commandoes, isn't working. No small part of the problem is the lack of critical thinking about former Gen. David Petraeus, perhaps the most important architect of this strategy, and now the director of the CIA.

This week's [assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki](#), a U.S. citizen and Muslim cleric, alleged to have orchestrated attacks on Americans, will no doubt be touted as another victory for Petraeus.

But such victories have a way of proving elusive. The killing of various "al-Qaida leaders" is not heroically "turning the tide" in the war on terror, as unnamed U.S. officials are no doubt explaining to credulous columnists right now. In fact, most of the data from the drone war theater indicates that the Petraeus assassination strategy is increasing the numbers, motivation and geographic scope of America's foes. It is making our allies weaker. We face more potential suicide-bombers. And we have managed to increase — not decrease — the danger of nuclear materials falling into terrorist hands.

Yemen, in fact, is a useful case-study of how the Petraeus assassination strategy is creating more new anti-American enemies for every Awlaki it illegally kills. Last May, the Washington Post reported that U.S. drone and air strikes in the country have depressed the local economy, increased support for anti-U.S. groups and demonstrated “the potential for U.S. policies to have harmful, if unintended, consequences in this politically brittle nation.” Despite the air strike campaign,” reported the New York Times, “the leadership of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula survives, and there is little sign the group is much weaker.”

The Petraeus record is not pretty.

It is a strategic and military failure. The issue is critical. For if Gen. Petraeus' policies are backfiring and, God forbid, there is another domestic terror attack committed by Muslims, like the Times Square bomber, angered by U.S. murder in the Muslim world since 9/11, the present U.S. “counter-terror” strategy will be largely responsible.

If Pakistani nuclear materials fall into the hands of anti-U.S. terrorists, or there is a coup by pro-Islamist Pakistani military officers, Petraeus' misguided policy toward Pakistan will bear much of the blame. If Yemen becomes a new center of anti-U.S. terrorism, it will be at least partly because U.S. drone strikes and ground assassinations have increased, not decreased, anti-U.S. sentiment.

### **Assassination as policy**

Petraeus began focusing on widespread assassination of suspected terrorist during his time in Iraq.

“Beginning in about May 2006,” Bob Woodward reported in his book “The War Within,” “the U.S. military and the U.S. intelligence agencies launched a series of top secret operations that enabled them to locate, target and kill key individuals in extremist groups. A number of authoritative sources say these covert activities had a far-reaching effect on the violence and were very possibly the biggest factor in reducing it.”

When Petraeus took over Central Command in 2008, he expanded his assassination strategy throughout the region. As the New York Times [reported](#) on May 2010, Petraeus had “ordered a broad expansion of clandestine military activity ... sending of American Special Operations troops to both friendly and hostile nations in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Horn of Africa.”

In August 2010, the Times reported that “in roughly a dozen countries” from the deserts of North Africa, to the mountains of Pakistan, to former Soviet republics crippled by ethnic and religious strife, the United States has significantly increased military and intelligence operations, pursuing the enemy using robotic drones and commando teams, paying contractors to spy and training local operatives to chase terrorists.”

The 7,000 Special Operations commandoes Petraeus brought into Afghanistan and the 3,000 conducting assassinations in Iraq, are today the nucleus of a global force of “60,000 operating in 75 countries. As CIA director, Petraeus will now integrate this force with the CIA drone program as part of the new “National Strategy on Counterterrorism.” Unveiled on June 29, 2011, the policy commits the United States to “disrupt, dismantle and eventually defeat al-Qaida and its affiliates and adherents” in the following “areas of focus”: “The Homeland, South Asia, Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, Europe, Iraq, Maghreb and Sahel, Southeast Asia (and) Central Asia.”

Retired Col. John Nagl, a confidante of Petraeus, has aptly described the new U.S. assassination apparatus as an “industrial-sized counterterror killing machine.”

### **Is it working?**

Petraeus claimed success for his “surge” strategy in Iraq on the grounds that violence decreased dramatically after U.S. troops were bolstered and redeployed. Whether the calm that followed was the result the U.S. troop buildup or the result of payment of massive bribes to Sunni militia leaders — or both — is still disputed. But there is no question the country became less violent after the surge.

If the reduction of violence, however, is the criterion on which Petraeus deserves to be judged, his record since the Iraq surge is poor. During his tenure at CentComm in 2008-2010, the

violence in the region grew and spread — including a fourfold increase in Pakistan alone. In Afghanistan, the U.N. has reported violence rose 51 percent while he led NATO forces there for the past year.

Petraeus' perceived success in Iraq has blinded the Congress, and much of the media to the reality of his accomplishments. But not Adm. Dennis Blair, the former director of National Intelligence.

Last month, the New York Times published Blair's careful assessment of the U.S. drone war. While "drone attacks did help reduce the Qaeda leadership in Pakistan," he wrote, "they also increased 'hatred of America'." He said the drone has also damaged "our ability to work with Pakistan [in] eliminating Taliban sanctuaries, encouraging Indian-Pakistani dialogue, and making Pakistan's nuclear arsenal more secure."

Blair is hardly alone. Petraeus' colleagues in the intelligence community have also criticized the strategy he did so much to shape. Former counterinsurgency adviser Col. David Kilcullen, has written that drone strikes "increase the number and radicalism of Pakistanis who support extremism," and that "it would be in our best interests, and those of the Pakistani people, to declare a moratorium on drone strikes into Pakistan." Robert Grenier, former CIA counterterrorism chief, said the drone war has motivated militants so "they now see themselves as part of a global jihad."

"We have helped to bring about the situation that we most fear," he said.

Foreign observers have grave doubts. Muhammed Daudzai, chief of staff for Afghan president Hamid Karzai, said "when we do those night raids the enemy will get stronger and stronger in numbers." Sherard Cowper-Coles, Britain's former special representative to Afghanistan, said "for every dead Pashtun warrior, there will be 10 pledged to revenge."

In Pakistan, violence is surging, with attacks up from an average of 470 in 2004-2008 to an annual average of 1,722 in 2009-2010.. Wajid Shamsul Hasan, Pakistan's High Commissioner to London for the past 16 years, [said](#) U.S. drone and gunship attacks in Pakistan have "set the country on fire."

And the effects on the battlefield are visible. McClatchy News, one of the last independent news gathering networks, reported recently, "In Valley Where SEALs Died, U.S. Raids Boost Taliban Support":

"Residents of the Tangi Valley issued complaints about the night raids in their vicinity, charging that they have killed civilians, disrupted their lives and fueled popular support for the Taliban ... 'The Americans are committing barbaric acts in the area and this is the reason that the Taliban have influence,' [a doctor] said.

Ambassador Cowper-Coles has said that "Petraeus should be ashamed of himself."

"He has increased the violence, trebled the number of special forces raids ... and there has been a lot more rather regrettable boasting from the military about the body count," he said.

### **The return of the body count**

Last spring, the Washington Post reported that U.S. and Afghan officials had given reporters statistics showing [2,448 insurgents](#) have been killed over the past eight months." "Team Petraeus Brings Body Counts Back," wrote Spencer Ackerman of [Wired](#)

After all, it's the easiest statistic to understand: a dead fighter. The trouble is, the militants never seem to run out of 'em. The insurgents have between 25,000 and 35,000 fighters, according to a guess by the Afghan Ministry of Defense. As Joshua Foust of the American Security Project notes, that's been the estimated total for years, suggesting that the insurgency is a) very large and b) opaque to the U.S. and its allies. Clearly the insurgency can replenish its ranks, discrediting the suggestion that NATO can kill its way to victory.

Using a “body count” as a criterion of military success was discredited by the U.S. experience in Vietnam. In that war, North Vietnam, with a population of 16 million, was able to defeat U.S. forces that numbered more than 550,000 men, largely because it could more than replace the than 1 million soldiers whom the U.S. claimed to have killed.

How could U.S. military leaders be so foolish as to repeat this failed experience in the 1.8 billion-strong Muslim world? Why does the American public acquiesce? In the 1960s, at least, there were senior legislators like Sen. William Fulbright and independent journalists like David Halberstam who challenged claims of success based on body counts in Vietnam. Why are so few challenging Petraeus and the military today?

One factor is the psychological phenomenon of projection: deep unconscious drives that project our primal desires to be protected onto military leaders such as Petraeus. To challenge such military leaders may be a rational exercise, but it also risks triggering fear and anger from those looking to a Petraeus for protection. We need to get beyond the Petraeus projection to the reality of our situation.

Nations have often suffered irreparable harm when they allowed military leaders' early successes to blind them to subsequent failure. So it was with Napoleon, whose early successes in stabilizing revolutionary France and subduing Europe were followed by his reckless invasion of Russia and defeat at Waterloo. The French WWI heroes who designed the Maginot Line which fell so quickly in the early days of WWII, and the previously distinguished Gen. Henri Navarre who designed the French strategy that proved disastrous at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

So it was with Gen. William Westmoreland, who stood out in the Korean War but then in the 1960s instituted a “body count” strategy that proved largely responsible for the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. Westmoreland, like Petraeus, once graced the covers of news magazines which reported his claims that that he was winning the war. In November 1967, he said, “The enemy is running out of men.” The U.S. forces, Westmoreland insisted, had killed some 453,000 to date. The total enemy strength was 299,000, a figure he lowered to 248,000 a few months later.

Sam Adams, an analyst assigned by the CIA to assess enemy strength, concluded that the more accurate figure was 600,000. In early 1968, the Tet offensive dealt a powerful blow to the U.S. and its local allies. “There was just no way they could have pulled it off with only 248,000 men,” Adams said.

Then as now, the issue was not how many enemy are killed, but how many remain. When Petraeus rose in the ranks of the U.S. military, he seemed to know this fundamental truth. He seems to have forgotten it.

### **The nuclear danger**

At the same time, the record shows that the Petraeus' policy has increased the risk of Pakistani nuclear materials falling into anti-American hands. As U.S. Ambassador Anne Patterson wrote in a February 2009 cable released by Wikileaks, "our major concern has been ... the chance someone working in [Pakistani government] facilities could gradually smuggle enough fissile material out to eventually make a weapon and the vulnerability of weapons in transit."

In May 2009, Patterson explained that the Pakistanis were refusing to return nuclear fuel to the U.S. as previously agreed because "if the local media got word of the fuel removal, they certainly would portray it as the United States taking Pakistan's nuclear weapons."

This in a country where the drone war has made the U.S. government widely reviled. One recent poll found that 69 percent of Pakistan's 120 million people — some of whom undoubtedly work in Pakistan's nuclear weapons facilities — now regard the U.S. as their "enemy."

So, as the U.S. influence on those controlling Pakistan's nuclear arsenal grows weaker, the pro-war [Long War Journal](#), reports that U.S. strikes have killed 56 known al-Qaida and Taliban leaders since 2004, the vast majority of them in recent years.. Thus in total, we have killed less than five dozen alleged jihadists at the cost of spreading regional violence and a growing a risk of nuclear proliferation.

Is that a wise or prudent choice? In much of the U.S. media and Congress, the Petraeus projection prevails. That question is rarely asked and our situation is barely understood. An "industrial-sized counterterror killing machine" may sound impressive to some. So did Gen. Westmoreland's body counts in Vietnam. But if the Petraeus killing machine isn't turned off, it will achieve the same result: strategic defeat for the United States.

