

**THE BLOG**

When Generals Lie

By Marty Kaplan

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It took 30 years, and 9/11, for Americans' confidence in the military to climb out of the pit it had fallen into during the Vietnam War. Will Gen. David Petraeus' testimony to Congress be the tipping point that sends it back toward the cellar?

We are accustomed to used car salesmen lying. We expect politicians to be Pinocchios, and the media are routinely assumed to be untrustworthy. But since 2001, the great exception to Americans' mistrust of institutions has been our confidence in U.S. military leadership. Even the debacle in Iraq hasn't shaken our trust in the brass. At the start of this year, with support for Bush confined to canines, and with an overwhelming popular demand to get out of Iraq, 84% of Americans nevertheless had a favorable view of the military, and nearly half the country said they had a very favorable view.

As a Pew report points out, it was very different during Vietnam. The more that Americans thought Vietnam was a mistake, the more they took it out not only on Lyndon Johnson and the war's civilian architects, but also on the Pentagon, and on the commanders on the ground in Southeast Asia. Today, the chickenhawk right — led by the Revisionist-in-Chief, Mr. Texas Air National Guard himself, plus Mr. Six Deferments — claims that we lost Vietnam because a nation of dirty f-ing hippies spat on returning grunts. That, of course, is untrue. We didn't turn against our kids; we turned against the Gulf of Tonkin liars, and the Pentagon Papers censors, and the My Lai commanders, and the generals who played footsie with the facts about Vietcong troop strength.

It's already abundantly clear what conclusion President Bush is going to draw from the Congressional testimony of Gen. Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker: the surge is working. He will have amnesia about the benchmarks for surge success that he himself set at the start of the year. He will hold out the prospect of maybe withdrawing one brigade maybe by Christmas. He will proclaim the continuing vitality of his batshit-insane belief that 130,000 American troops can end 13 centuries of intra-Islamic strife. And he will hold fast to his plan to make his successor bear the blame for his own abysmal failure.

It's also abundantly clear what the Congress will do. Republicans will celebrate the Miracle of September, and will proclaim any deviation from Dear Leader's plan to be tantamount to treason. Democrats, with perhaps a handful of honorable exceptions, will be so fearful of being called bad names by Republicans that they will turn their backs on the 70-plus percent of Americans who want out of this nightmare and instead forge a pathetic consensus with the very

lickspittles whose asses they were elected to kick. Instead of forcing Republicans to mount ruinous weeks-long round-the-clock filibusters on behalf of policies the country hates, instead of making Bush wield the veto pen over and over, they will play to a Beltway common-ground constituency that exists nowhere else in the country, and they will cling to their vain tooth-fairy belief that being Wise and Centrist will prevent them from being called terrorist-coddlers and Osama stooges.

And so, come March of 2008, instead of there being the zero combat brigades in Iraq that the Baker-Hamilton Study Group called for, there will be the 19 that Bush wants there. The open question is whether America's rage against that outcome will extend to our military leaders.

Gen. Petraeus, whose highly unusual Washington Post op-ed six weeks before the 2004 election insisted that we were making "tangible progress in Iraq," is no stranger to Bush-fellating. Gen. Richard Sherlock and Gen. Ray Odierno are accomplished fact-fudgers about U.S. military successes. Gen. Kevin Bergner, dispatched from his White House post to be the American military spokesman in Iraq, is as adept as Tony Snow at statistical snow jobs. Whatever the private dissents of the departing Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Peter Pace, may have been, in public he was the perfect parrot for Pentagon policies.

When the Pentagon comes up with its own definitions of deaths in order to dispute the body counts coming from independent observers, you know you're in the Westmoreland Zone. When a 1982 CBS News documentary — do you remember when there used to be broadcast news documentaries? — said that Gen. William Westmoreland had fudged U.S. intelligence estimates of Vietcong strength in order to support his political bosses' contention that the Vietnam War was being won, Westy sued CBS for libel. Then, at the trial, two of his former intelligence officers, Major Gen. Joseph McChristian and Col. Gains Hawkins, testified that Westmoreland had indeed ordered changes in Communist troop strengths reports for political reasons. Westmoreland suddenly dropped his suit, in exchange for a CBS statement that it "never intended to assert, and does not believe, that General Westmoreland was unpatriotic or disloyal in performing his duties as he saw them." CBS retracted nothing.

I have no doubt that Gen. Petraeus, like Gens. Pace, Bergner, Odierno and Sherlock, and like Gen. Westmoreland, are patriotically performing their duties as they see them. The problem is how they see them. It was the politicization of military leadership that led Americans' confidence in the military to tank so precipitously during the Vietnam War. When Gen. Petraeus testifies to Congress, his dangerous desire to please his POTUS may be all that's needed to turn Americans' revulsion at Bush's war into Americans' distrust of Bush's brass.

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