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Petraeus' negative tone at odds with Obama's optimism

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WASHINGTON — Gen. David Petraeus' meandering, lukewarm assessment of the path ahead in Afghanistan puts the war commander's tone at odds with a more optimistic message coming from the White House.

"No commander ever is going to come out and say, 'I'm confident that we can do this,'" Petraeus told ABC News this week when asked if Afghans will be ready to take over in 2014. "I think that you say that you assess that this is — you believe this is, you know, a reasonable prospect and knowing how important it is — that we have to do everything we can to increase the chances of that prospect. But again, I don't think there are any sure things in this kind of endeavor. And I wouldn't be honest with you and with the viewers if I didn't convey that."

The comments clouded more upbeat assessments from the White House and Pentagon officials about a possible end to the U.S. mission there. Last week, during his visit to Afghanistan, President Barack Obama rallied troops at Bagram Air Base with his assessment of the war effort, noting tough fighting ahead but labeling recent advances by U.S. and Afghan security forces "important progress" toward success.

"You are protecting your country," he said. "You're achieving your objectives. You will succeed in your mission."

Matthew Hoh, director of the Afghanistan Study Group — a collaboration of more than a dozen security policy think tanks — said Petraeus' comments to ABC are in line with other recent remarks he's made downplaying the timeline.

Still, he said, they're significant because of their negative tone in opposition to the administration's public message, and point to a disconnect between the spin from the White House and the reality on the ground.

Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, echoed that distance.

"It's a recognition that the mission and the goals are overreaching here," she said. "This seems to be a calculated attempt to undercut some of the positive rhetoric coming from other areas."

But retired Maj. Gen. Paul Eaton said the comments may be less about downplaying expectations and more about the reality that Petraeus sees in Afghanistan today.

"His goal could be preparing the public to hear that we're going to have to accept something less than the success that's been promised," he said. "He's obligated to give the president and secretary of defense his strongest analysis possible ... and I doubt he go on ABC and say something different."

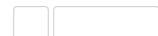
In the ABC interview, Petraeus also said that negative attitudes among the U.S. and Afghan public about the continuing mission there mean that defense officials need to do a better job explaining "why we're here, and what it is that we want to do."

A Gallup poll released in late November showed 54 percent of Americans think that military operations in Afghanistan are progressing poorly for U.S. troops, a view that's actually more optimistic than public opinion at any time in the last year. Meanwhile, a poll released this week — conducted by The Washington Post, ABC News, the British Broadcasting Corp. and ARD television of Germany — found that Afghans are losing faith in the ability of the United States to provide security to their country. More than half said the U.S. military should begin its withdrawal in 2011.

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