



Going Dark: As CIA Boss, Petraeus Is Less Visible--By Design

Petraeus Following Long Precedent of 'Working Behind the Scenes'

By **John T. Bennett**

May 11, 2012

Things change when one leaves the often-brash U.S. military to run the Central Intelligence Agency, a secretive organization populated by silent professionals. That includes how often one talks to reporters when charged with keeping the lone global superpower's deepest secrets.

Gen. David Petraeus was one of the U.S. military's most-visible leaders from 2007 until 2011, a span during which he commanded U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and also headed the U.S. Central Command. But CIA Director Petraeus has largely gone dark--and, like most things with the decorated war commander, that is very much a calculated change.

"As for Petraeus's curious absence from the spotlight," says Christopher Preble of the CATO Institute, "he has been--especially by David Petraeus standards--notably quiet."

[\[Gallery: New Wave of Violence Hits Afghanistan\]](#)

Data prepared for *U.S. News & World Report* by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism shows a significant decline in the number of times Petraeus conducted interviews or was the subject of a news article. The agency, since he took office in October, has released eight press releases or statements bearing Petraeus's name; two were for the public, and six were memos to CIA employees that were released to the press.

"Director Petraeus heads a clandestine organization, so naturally--as the American people would expect--his outside engagement will be different than when he commanded forces in Iraq and Afghanistan," says Preston Golson, a CIA spokesman. "He's given about a dozen public speeches, and he regularly engages in multiple ways with private citizens, the military, members of the media, think tanks, academia, and the private sector. There is nothing preventing him from doing media interviews, if it makes sense to do so."

During his 20 months as the top U.S. general in Iraq, Petraeus conducted over 350 media interviews, briefings or other engagements, says Steve Boylan, a retired Army colonel who was Petraeus's public affairs officer in Iraq in 2007 and 2008.

"His personal and professional feelings on the media were this: Someone in his position, a uniformed senior leader, has a duty and responsibility to talk to the media to inform the public of what's going with their husbands, sons, daughters," Boylan says. "It's the public's military, not his. He felt a responsibility to report our goals and keep the public informed."

The U.S. military rumbles through the streets in 14-ton blast-resistant vehicles and tears through the skies in noisy helicopters and supersonic jets. The CIA quietly deploys its operatives around the globe with fake identities, and its analysts toil in rural northern Virginia's relatively anonymity.

As soon as the war hero was confirmed by the Senate last fall, "the landscape changed," Boylan says. "What comes out of the duty description is the informing part because of the highly classified nature of what he does now, and of what that organization does."

"I don't think it would be possible, nor should it be expected, that he would have the same level of media engagements as when he was in uniform," Boylan says. "Anyone who expects that he would doesn't appreciate the role that he has now."

National security experts and senior lawmakers applaud Petraeus's lower profile.

"I think Gen. Petraeus is doing the right thing. I just don't think a CIA director best serves the country by saying a lot," says Sen. John Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat who heads the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "A CIA director is much better served being quiet and working behind the scenes, given the nature of that organization."

Sen. Bob Corker, a Republican from Tennessee--where Petraeus is a "real hero"--says Petraeus is "one of those folks who wakes up in the morning and just does his job. He doesn't worry about or go looking for cameras."

Larry Korb, a former Pentagon official now with the Center for American Progress, says the former general is merely following a long precedent. "CIA directors normally don't speak out," says Korb. "It's very, very rare unless an administration asks you to."

Also at play, Washington insiders say, is the sometimes-tense relationship between Petraeus and the White House's national security brass, including President Obama.

"He and the Obama team really got off to a bad start [in 2009] with the run up to increasing troops in Afghanistan," says Korb, referring to a disagreement that became public between the then-commander and the White House over how many additional U.S. troops were needed.

A White House spokesman referred a reporter's inquiry to the CIA.

[\[Obama Keeps al Qaeda at Bay, but Handcuffs the CIA as Well\]](#)

"A few years later, he wanted to stay part of the action," Korb says. "He wanted to be Joint Chiefs chairman, but that wasn't going to happen. But to stay as CIA director, you have to agree that you won't speak out."

When Petraeus speaks to media members, or gives public remarks, these days he generally "talks in broad-brush strokes, not in the much more detailed informative interviews he did in uniform," says Boylan. "There is simply no easy way to talk in an unclassified manner about what the CIA does."

Petraeus has remained mostly silent as several major national security milestones have passed since October, including the first anniversary of the U.S. commando raid that killed al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden just this month, nor the senior official dispatched by the White House to talk about a foiled al Qaeda plot to use an underwear bomb to blow up an airliner.

Corker says marking such milestones is a presidential task, and Petraeus was right to focus on running the nation's main intelligence-gathering outfit.

"I would have found it odd if he had spoken out about the anniversary," Boylan says. "That's really White House-level stuff."

John T. Bennett covers national security and foreign policy for U.S. News & World Report via the [DOTMIL](#) blog. You can contact him at jbennett@usnews.com or follow him on Twitter.