Senate approves Petraeus nomination by 99-0

Bipartisan backing for US escalation in Afghanistan

Patrick Martin
2 July 2010

The US Senate voted by 99-0 to approve the nomination of Gen. David Petraeus as the top US-NATO commander in Afghanistan. The vote Wednesday demonstrates the complicity of both big business political parties in the war crimes being perpetrated in this imperialist war.

The swift confirmation of Petraeus demonstrates the priorities of the politicians of both the Democratic and Republican parties. The US Senate has failed to act for an entire month on the extension of unemployment benefits for the long-term unemployed. Extensions have been repeatedly blocked, sometimes by a single senator's objection.

But an appointment which signals a new and even more bloody escalation of the violence in Afghanistan, where tens of thousands of innocent civilians and more than a thousand American soldiers have been slaughtered, speeds through the Senate in barely 24 hours. Petraeus appeared before a Senate committee Tuesday morning, his nomination was rubber-stamped on Wednesday, and he was on a plane out of Washington before nightfall.

Not a single senator, Democrat or Republican, opposed the appointment, and every senator made sure that his or her vote was cast in favor of the general. Apparently, there was only one valid excuse for failing to endorse the selection—Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia could not record a vote for Petraeus because he died early Monday.

The White House issued a statement hailing the unanimous vote and declaring that President Obama had "full confidence" in Petraeus. "General Petraeus is a pivotal part of our effort to succeed in Afghanistan and in our broader effort to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaida," the statement said, adding that the general's "unrivaled experience will ensure we do not miss a beat in our strategy to break the Taliban's momentum and build Afghan capacity."

This language demonstrates the political cynicism of Obama and the Democrats. The "unrivaled experience" refers to the role Petraeus played in commanding the US military "surge" in Iraq in 2007-2008 under the Bush administration. At the time, Senate Democrats like Obama, Joseph Biden and Hillary Clinton were harshly critical of the surge and of Petraeus, as they appealed to antiwar sentiment in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election.

Once in power, however, President Obama, Vice President Biden and Secretary of State Clinton enthusiastically backed an Iraq-style escalation of the war in Afghanistan, and Obama has now installed as commander the same general selected for that role in Iraq by George W. Bush.

Republicans normally critical of Obama were fulsome in their praise of the appointment. Senator John McCain, Obama's Republican opponent in the 2008 presidential election, said, "For those who doubt the president's desire and commitment to succeed in Afghanistan, his nomination of Gen. Petraeus to run this war should cause them to think twice."

The Petraeus appointment has been hailed by the entire corporate-controlled US media, with liberal and conservative pundits alike depicting it as a political masterstroke. Obama selected Petraeus to replace Gen. Stanley McChrystal, using the pretext of an article in *Rolling Stone* magazine in which McChrystal and top aides made unflattering comments about US civilian officials, including the president himself and Vice President Biden.

The real significance of the firing of McChrystal was that he was losing the war. US-NATO casualty rates have shot up—hitting a record 102 deaths in the month of June, including 60 US soldiers. The initial offensive of the Afghan "surge," in the Marjah region of Helmand province, has proved a dismal failure, with Taliban guerrillas melting away and then returning in force, preventing any stabilization of the region. What was to have been the major summer offensive, around Kandahar, Afghanistan's second city and a Taliban stronghold, has been postponed at least until the fall.

While the official claim is that there were no policy

© World Socialist Web Site

differences involved in the firing, Petraeus's testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee Tuesday hinted otherwise. He said he would be reviewing the rules of engagement for US troops in Afghanistan, which have been criticized within the military and in Congress for setting limits on the use of US firepower, particularly air strikes and artillery, which have caused widespread civilian casualties.

Petraeus returned to this subject before a different audience Thursday morning, when he arrived in Brussels for a round of visits with NATO officials. According to press accounts, he reiterated the need to revisit the rules of engagement, claiming that he had "a moral imperative to bring all force to bear when our troops are in a tough position."

One British newspaper headlined its account of the visit as a pledge by Petraeus to end "red tape" that was hampering the use of air power in Afghanistan. He was quoted telling reporters, "there are concerns among the ranks of some of our troopers on the ground that some of the processes are becoming a bit too bureaucratic."

But in a sop to mounting opposition to the war in Europe, he tried to balance this call for greater use of force with a profession of concern for the Afghan population. "In counterinsurgency, the human terrain is the decisive terrain, and you must do everything possible to reduce civilian casualties," he said.

There is considerable tension within NATO over the deteriorating military position in Afghanistan and the deteriorating political position of pro-war governments in Europe. Norway, for example, suffered its largest one-day battlefield toll since the country was invaded by the Nazis in 1940, when four Norwegian soldiers were killed June 27 by a roadside bomb as they patrolled a previously quiet region in northern Afghanistan.

There are also inter-imperialist tensions. Petraeus will give orders to both the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, and there is reported resentment in European capitals that the Obama administration changed commanders without consulting them, when they have contributed a third of the troops and suffered 40 percent of the casualties.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen expressed support for McChrystal after the *Rolling Stone* article appeared, only to find himself—along with Afghan President Hamid Karzai—among McChrystal's last-ditch defenders.

Besides the rules of engagement, one other issue dominated the Senate confirmation hearing for Petraeus—Obama's supposed pledge to begin the drawdown of US troops in Afghanistan in July 2011, one year from now. Republican senators like McCain repeatedly pressed Petraeus on this point, and he emphasized the conditional nature of the so-called deadline, which was included in Obama's escalation plan only to deceive antiwar public opinion in the United States.

"July 2011 is the point at which we will begin a transition phase," the general said. "July 2011 is not a date when we will be rapidly withdrawing our forces and switching off the lights and closing the door behind us."

Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, a major US foreign policy think tank, cited this comment and observed, "Make no mistake, the thrust of the general's remarks in these confirmation hearings was to further lock Mr. Obama into the Afghan war and to protect his right flank against Republicans and conservatives who have begun charging that the president is about to cut and run from the war."

The upshot of the McChrystal affair is that the Obama administration and the Democratic Party are more committed than ever to a policy of endless intervention in Afghanistan, with all the consequences that must ensue, not only for the people of that war-ravaged country, but for the American people, who will see their living standards and social benefits attacked to feed the Pentagon.

Only hours after the confirmation of Petraeus, the Republican leader in the House of Representatives, John Boehner, was giving an interview to a friendly right-wing newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, in which he argued for increased funding for the war in Afghanistan and for cutting Social Security benefits for the elderly by raising the retirement age to 70.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site