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## 'You're Not Accountable, Jack'

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How a Retired Officer Gained Influence at the White House and in Baghdad

By Bob Woodward  
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Retired Army Gen. Jack Keane came to the [White House](#) on Thursday, Sept. 13, 2007, to deliver a strong and sober message. The military chain of command, he told [Vice President Cheney](#), wasn't on the same page as the current U.S. commander in [Iraq](#), [Gen. David H. Petraeus](#). The tension threatened to undermine Petraeus's chances of continued success, Keane said.

Keane, a former vice chief of the Army, was 63, 6-foot-3 and 240 pounds, with a boxer's face framed by tightly cropped hair. As far as Cheney was concerned, Keane was outstanding -- an experienced soldier who had maintained great Pentagon contacts, had no ax to grind and had been a mentor to Petraeus. Keane was all meat and potatoes; he didn't inflate expectations or waste Cheney's time.

By the late summer of 2007, Keane had established an unusual back-channel relationship with the president and vice president, a kind of shadow general advising them on the Iraq war. This September visit was the fifth back-channel briefing that Keane had given the vice president that year.

As Keane was laying out his view, [President Bush](#) walked in.

"I know you're talking to Dave," Bush said to Keane. "I know that the Joint Chiefs and [the Pentagon](#) have some concerns." The JCS had not favored the surge of 30,000 troops that Bush had decided was essential to quell the escalating violence in Iraq; the chiefs were deeply worried that the surge left no strategic reserve for an unexpected crisis elsewhere.

Keane repeated what he had just told Cheney: The JCS and [Adm. William J. Fallon](#), Petraeus's boss at Central Command, were insisting on studies and reports to justify even the smallest request for more resources for Iraq. Their persistent pressure, pushing Petraeus for a faster drawdown, was taking its toll.

"There is very little preparation," Keane said, "for somebody who grows up in a military culture to have an unsupportive chain of command above you and still be succeeding. You normally get fired." The result, he said, is that Petraeus "starts to look for ways to get rid of this pressure, which means some kind of accommodation."

Bush said he wanted Keane to deliver a personal message to Petraeus from his commander-in-chief. After Bush laid out his thoughts, Keane went to the large West Wing lobby, sat among the couches and chairs and wrote out the president's words.

Then he called Petraeus and said they had to meet.

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On Saturday, Sept. 15, Keane went to Quarters 12-A at [Fort Myer](#) in Arlington, where Petraeus and his wife, Holly, maintained Army housing while he was stationed in Iraq. Ever since Petraeus had taken over as the Iraq commander, Keane had been making regular visits to Baghdad to see his protégé. Upon his return to Washington, Keane would come to the White House or the vice president's residence, establishing a line of communication -- Petraeus to Keane to Cheney and Bush -- around the official chain of command.

Earlier in the week, Petraeus had testified before Congress. After two days in the national spotlight -- cautiously reporting progress in the war but warning that conditions were "fragile and reversible" -- he was about to head back to Baghdad.

The two men sat alone. Keane took out the piece of paper and read the president's message, verbatim, aloud to Petraeus:

"I respect the chain of command. I know that the Joint Chiefs and the Pentagon have some concerns. One is about the Army and [Marine Corps](#) and the impact of the war on them. And the second is about other contingencies and the lack of strategic response to those contingencies.

"I want Dave to know that I want him to win. That's the mission. He will have as much force as he needs for as long as he needs it.

"When he feels he wants to make further reductions, he should only make those reductions based on the conditions in Iraq that he believes justify those reductions. These two concerns that we are discussing back here in Washington -- about contingency operations and the needs of the Army and the Marine Corps -- they are not your concerns. They are my concerns.

"I do not want to change the strategy until the strategy has succeeded. I waited over three years for a successful strategy. And I'm not giving up on it prematurely. I am not reducing further unless you are convinced that we should reduce further."

It was a message of total support. No ground commander could ask for more. That Bush had sent it through this back channel, or even at all, revealed the depth and intensity of disagreements between the president and the military establishment in Washington.

After hearing the president's message, Petraeus told Keane, "I wish he'd tell CentCom and the Pentagon that." These were the people he had to deal with every day, and they had a very different perspective.

National security adviser Steven J. Hadley and [Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates](#) did not know of the president's back-channel contact with Petraeus. When I asked the president in May 2008 about his message, Bush explained why he had felt a need to send it.

"I just want Dave to know that I want to win," he said. "And whatever he needs, obviously within capabilities, he'll have. I don't want my commander to think that they're dealing with a president who's so overly concerned about the latest [Gallup poll](#) or politics that he is worried about making a decision or recommendation that will make me feel uncomfortable."

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The senior military leadership in Washington, though unaware of the extent of Keane's role, was uncomfortable with his frequent visits to Iraq and his influence at the White House.

[Gen. George W. Casey Jr.](#) was one of them. After serving as Iraq commander for two years, he had handed over the job to Petraeus in early 2007. Casey was now Army chief of staff and a member of the Joint Chiefs. It was a promotion and a kind of soft landing, but he had left Iraq feeling he had lost Bush's confidence.

In the summer of 2007, Casey was at [Walter Reed Army Medical Center](#) in Northwest Washington, waiting for a routine physical, when he spotted Keane standing in line at the radiology desk.

The two generals locked eyes for a moment, then Keane turned away, as if he hadn't recognized Casey.

"Hi Jack, how are you?" Casey said, extending his hand. He had been waiting for a moment like this. "Has the chairman called you yet?"

"No, why?" Keane asked.

"Because we feel -- the chiefs feel -- that you are way too out in front advocating a policy for which you're not accountable. We're accountable. You're not accountable, Jack. And that's a problem."

Keane said he had taken action as a member of the secretary of defense's policy board, whose members were supposed to offer their independent advice. All he was trying to do was help Petraeus, he said. "I supported this strategy for three years when a lot of other guys didn't," Keane said, referring to Casey's strategy to build up the Iraqi security forces in hopes of a speedier withdrawal of U.S. troops. "And at some point, I no longer could support it. I'm not operating as some kind of Lone Ranger."

"It's not appropriate for a retired general to be so far forward advocating a policy that he is not responsible or accountable for," Casey said again.

"I'll take your counsel," said Keane, but he didn't suggest he would act any differently.

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The following month, Keane heard through the Pentagon grapevine that [Adm. Michael Mullen](#), who had replaced Gen. [Peter Pace](#) as JCS chairman, had told colleagues that one of his first plans was to "get Keane back in the box."

Keane arranged an appointment with Mullen.

"This is a difficult session for me," Mullen said, "but I don't want you going to Iraq anymore and helping Petraeus."

"What the hell? What are you talking about?" Keane asked.

"You've diminished the office of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs," Mullen said. It wasn't clear to the American people who was actually in charge of the military, he said.

"C'mon, stop it," Keane said. "The American people don't even know who the hell I am. This is Washington, D.C., stuff. You can't be serious."

"Yeah, I am," Mullen said.

Keane tried to tell Mullen how his contacts with the White House had begun, how he had gone to Pace and Defense Secretary [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#) in late 2006 with his complaints about the Iraq war strategy and had wound up meeting with the president because Pace and the vice president had recommended that Bush hear from Keane directly.

Mullen, formerly chief of naval operations, had not favored the surge; Keane had, publicly and vocally. Mullen told Keane he had become acutely aware of the strains on the Army and the Marine Corps. Military families were shouldering the strain, and the military was losing quality officers.

"Mike, all of that's true," Keane said. "But this is true every time we fight a war of any consequence." Wars break armies, and they have to be put back together, he said. That's the price of war. But the price was worth it. "You've not talked one time about winning here, Mike. Not one time have you mentioned 'I want to win in Iraq.' I mean, do you?"

It was an insulting question to put to a fellow military man.

"Of course I want to win," Mullen said.

"I assume you do," Keane replied, "but to the degree that you're putting pressure on Petraeus to reduce forces, you're taking far too much risk, and that risk is in losing and not winning."

"Well," Mullen said, "we're just going to disagree."

"You really don't want me to help Petraeus?" Keane asked. "Dave Petraeus, no matter who he wants to talk to over there, no matter what size he is, shape he is, what his views are, given Petraeus's responsibility -- he's got the toughest job anybody in uniform has -- why wouldn't you let him have that?"

"No," Mullen said, "I don't want to take the chance. I don't want you to do it."

End of meeting.

Afterward, when Keane found that he couldn't get clearance to go to Iraq, he called John Hannah, Cheney's national security adviser, to report what had happened. Shortly afterward, Keane received a call from Army Lt. Gen. Skip Sharp on Mullen's staff.

"We have an unusual request," Sharp said. "We have a request from the White House to provide assurances that General Keane will be able to visit Iraq and assist General Petraeus as he has been doing in the past." Sharp was apparently doing some staff work before passing the request to Mullen. "This is really bizarre. Do you have any idea why this would be happening?"

"Yeah, of course," Keane said. "I've been told I can't go."

"Who told you that?"

"The chairman." There was a long silence. Finally, Keane said, "Skip, are you there?"

"I'm trying to figure out what the hell is going on," Sharp said.

Keane later spoke with Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, senior military assistant to Defense Secretary Gates.

"The secretary has received some notes," Chiarelli said, so now the secretary and his office were telling everyone, "General Keane, as in the past, as well as in the future, can go into Iraq to assist General Petraeus whenever they want it to happen. We have no problem with any of that."

Who sent the notes?

There were two, said Chiarelli -- one from the vice president and another from the president.

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In early March 2008, [Esquire magazine](#) published a long article by Thomas P.M. Barnett, a former professor at the Naval War College who had traveled with Fallon to the Middle East. Headlined, "The Man Between War and Peace," the 7,500-word article was mostly laudatory but portrayed Fallon as "brazenly challenging" Bush and Cheney on [Iran](#) policy.

Fallon, who was in Baghdad, realized instantly the uproar it would cause. He called Gates.

"I think I need to be gone," Fallon said.

"Okay," Gates said.

Later that afternoon, Gates went before the television cameras. "I have approved Admiral Fallon's request to retire with reluctance and regret," he said. "Admiral Fallon reached this difficult decision entirely on his own. I believe it was the right thing to do even though I do not believe there are, in fact, significant differences between his views and administration policy."

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Keane, in Baghdad for another visit, saw an opening. At 3:27 p.m. the next day, March 12, he sent an e-mail to Chiarelli.

"Subject: Food for Thought

"Pete, a way ahead after Fox Fallon: Announce Petraeus as replacement but do not assign till fall or early winter. . . . Assign Odierno, who will have had six months back in states, to replace Petraeus." [Gen. Raymond T. Odierno](#), a towering Army officer, had previously been the corps commander in Baghdad. "Believe this provides the strongest team we have to the key vacancies. For what it's worth. Best, JK."

Chiarelli e-mailed back 20 minutes later.

"Sir -- do you want me to pass to the SD?" SD was shorthand for the secretary of defense.

By all means, Keane said.

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While in Iraq, Keane talked to Petraeus about his future. Petraeus's next assignment -- commander of [NATO](#) -- seemed set.

NATO was important, Keane said, but its time had passed. The international center of gravity had moved to the Middle East. "We're going to be here for 50 years minimum, most of the time hopefully preventing wars, and on occasion having to fight one, dealing with radical Islam, our economic interests in the region and trying to achieve stability," Keane said.

This shift would have huge implications for how the [U.S. military](#) would be educated and trained. "We're going to do it anyway because we don't have a choice," Keane said. "So the issue is: Get over it. Come to grips with it." The Army didn't want that. "It wants to end a war and go home. But that's not going to happen."

Petraeus seemed to agree but waxed nostalgic about NATO.

The phone rang. It was Chiarelli.

"Three o'clock, okay, I've got it," Petraeus said into the phone. He hung up and turned to Keane. "Secretary of defense wants to talk to me at three o'clock."

"You know what this is, don't you?" Keane asked.

"I suspect I know."

"Hopefully, you'll give him the right answer."

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On April 7, 2008, Gates invited Keane to brief him at the Pentagon.

"Assign Petraeus to CentCom," Keane urged. Delay the assignment until the fall. Make Odierno the new Iraq commander. Odierno was an unsung hero with intellect and moral courage, Keane said.

"Let's be frank about what's happening here," Keane told Gates. "We are going to have a new administration. Do we want these policies continued or not? Do we want the best guys in there who were involved in these policies, who were advocates for them? Let's assume we have a Democratic administration and they want to pull this thing out quickly, and now they have to deal with General Petraeus and General Odierno. There will be a price to be paid to override them."

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Gates knew that Petraeus was the natural choice to replace Fallon. Two weeks later, on April 23, Gates called a news conference.

"With the concurrence of the chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#)," Gates said, "I have recommended and the president has approved and will nominate General David Petraeus as the new commander of Central Command." Odierno would be nominated to return to Baghdad as the new Iraq commander, replacing Petraeus sometime in the late summer or fall.

Asked by a reporter whether the move marked a "stay-the-course approach," Gates replied, "I think that the course, certainly, that General Petraeus has set has been a successful course. So frankly, I think staying that course is not a bad idea."

*Brady Dennis and Evelyn Duffy contributed to this report.*

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