
RE-RETHINKING IRAQ

Anatomy of the Surge

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OVER THE past sixteen months, the United States has altered its trajectory in Iraq. We are no longer headed toward a catastrophic defeat and may be on the path to a remarkable victory. As a result, the next President, Democrat or Republican, may well find it easier to adopt the broad contours of this administration's current strategy than to jeopardize progress by changing course abruptly.

That would be an ironic, but satisfying, outcome to the tortuous journey on which the Bush administration's policy toward Iraq, and this nation's views of Iraq, have been traveling over the past three years.

The administration's description of the long-term American goal—a democratic Iraq that can defend itself, govern itself, and sustain itself, and will be an ally in the war on terror—has remained consistent from the time the war was launched in 2003 until now. What has shifted, due to sobering experience, is its sense of how long it might take to achieve this goal: a time frame that has stretched from months, to years, and even to decades.

I witnessed the shift first-hand. For two years, from June 2005 to July 2007, I left my teaching position at Duke to join the National Security Council staff as a special adviser for strategic planning,

and in that capacity I worked closely on Iraq policy. By the middle of 2005, it was painfully obvious to everyone involved that the only *decisive* outcome that could be achieved during President Bush's tenure was the triumph of our enemies, America's withdrawal, and Iraq's descent into a hellish chaos as yet undreamed of.

The challenge, therefore, was to develop and implement a workable strategy that could be handed over to Bush's successor. Although important progress could be made on that strategy during Bush's watch, ultimately it would be carried through by the next President. This was the reality behind the course followed by the administration in 2005-2006, and it remains the reality behind the new and different course the administration has been following since 2007.

This new and different strategy, now called the "surge" but at one point called by insiders the "bridge," emerged out of a growing recognition over 2006 that our critics were right about one thing: our Iraq policy was not working. At the same time, however, and whether knowingly or ignorantly, many of those same critics were insisting that the answer lay in pursuing precisely the same strategy we already had in place. That is, they were telling us that we needed (a) to push Iraqi government officials to come together politically and (b) to train Iraqi troops so that they could take over from American forces. We had been doing exactly these things for a year, and we had been driven to the brink.

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This was no solution at all. The results on the ground in Iraq made it clear that, without a dramatic change, the President would be leaving his successor with an untenable mess, if not the prospect of a catastrophic American rout. A review of administration policy was therefore launched that led to the dramatic course revision we have seen unfolding over the past year-and-a-half.

This month, the military leader of the surge, General David Petraeus, and America's chief diplomat in Iraq, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, will present their second report to Congress on the surge and its effects. Prudent and circumspect men, they will surely not advance bold claims on behalf of the policy the United States has been following under their leadership. But I expect they will speak more optimistically about the future than many thought possible eighteen months ago. Their testimony will demonstrate that, at last, the United States has a sustainable strategy for Iraq with a reasonable chance of success, and one that George W. Bush will be able to turn over with confidence to the next incumbent of the White House.

How we got here is a story in itself.

IN THE summer of 2005, General George Casey, the theater commander in Iraq, was pressing a military campaign whose primary goal was the training and maturing of Iraqi security forces. At the same time, Iraqis had designed a national constitution that would be the subject of a countrywide referendum in October, to be followed (assuming the constitution's ratification) by national elections in December.

Here at home, administration policy was inundated by criticisms on every front. Much of it was reckless, but not all of it. From "skeptical supporters" of the war like Senator John McCain and the military analyst Fred Kagan came the charge that the number of American "boots on the ground" was far from sufficient to accomplish the mission. Although our military commanders in Iraq kept assuring the White House that this was not the case, the criticism flitted like Banquo's ghost in the background of every internal discussion about the war.

Some Democrats in the "loyal opposition"—i.e., those who were not simply advocating an irresponsible strategy of defeat and withdrawal—made the same point, but more often they took a different tack. Charging that the administration had no strategy beyond "staying the course," they proposed instead that the United States pressure the Iraqis to bring the sullen and disaffected Sunni minority into the political sphere. This would siphon support

from the insurgency. In addition, the Pentagon needed to accelerate the training of Iraqi security forces to handle more of the load against the enemies of the new Iraq. And the State Department had to lean on Iraq's neighbors to do more to help.

This counsel seemed maddeningly sensible to us. It was, to the letter, the administration's strategy at that very moment. Still, exasperating though it may have been to be told that we should do what we were actually doing, this line of criticism also seemed to contain potentially good news. Perhaps, we thought, we could find common ground with these Democratic critics—their number included Senators Hillary Clinton, Joseph Biden, and Carl Levin—and forge a consensus on how to move forward.

That was the background to a decision in the fall of 2005 to release an unclassified version of General Casey's campaign plan, along with a document explaining how all elements of American power were being mobilized to assist in its realization. The full document was called the National Strategy for Supporting Iraq, the name of which changed somewhere along the way to the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (NSVI). There was nothing new here. The release of the NSVI, bolstered by a series of frank presidential addresses, was simply an attempt to make public a number of details about our approach and offer a reasonable response to our reasonable critics.

The effort was doomed. It was overtaken by political events or, rather, by one specific event: a press conference, on November 17, 2005, by John Murtha, a Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania.

Murtha was a veteran of the Vietnam war and a hawk on defense spending—someone generally thought to be at home with the old "Scoop" Jackson wing of the Democratic party. When it came to Iraq, he turned out to be something else. "Our military has accomplished its mission and done its duty," Murtha summarily declared at his press conference, and now it was time to bring the troops home—as soon as possible, but no later than in six months.

Murtha was not calling for a gradual transition to Iraqi control. To the contrary, he was advocating the wholesale abandonment of Iraq. As he well knew, moreover, six months would be the fastest possible withdrawal under the most optimistic timetable, with our forces working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to pull out all of the equipment and materiel we had brought in over the previous three years. This was not a brief for haste but rather a recipe for panic.

Unlike those critics who lambasted our policy and then commended it to our attention, Murtha was presenting an unambiguous alternative. The left wing of the Democratic party and its supporters in Moveon.org had finally found a spokesman with credentials on national security to make the most extreme case for the war's end.

The media lauded the Murtha plan, but they did not examine it closely. I spent hours with reporters in a futile effort to persuade them to show Murtha the respect of subjecting his scheme—including his bizarre notion of redeploying troops 5,000 miles away on the island of Okinawa in the Sea of Japan—to the same level of scrutiny they lavished upon administration policy. One key reporter told me, "We don't scrutinize Murtha's plan because none of us takes it seriously."

Inside the White House, we joked bitterly that the only way we could get people to see the flaws in Murtha's proposal would be to offer it as our own.

IN THE end, however, even if we had managed to secure some kind of bipartisan support for our strategy, it would have made little difference. Over the course of 2006, the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq collapsed.

We had assumed that steady political movement would drain Sunni support for the insurgency by giving Sunnis a stake in the new Iraq—and that such political progress could be completed before the safety of the Iraqi population had been secured. Alas, the stunningly successful constitutional referendum of October 2005 and the national election two months later were followed by a dreadful stalemate. It took Sunnis nearly six weeks to acknowledge that the vote had been free and fair, and then squabbling within the Shiite community paralyzed its politicians in turn. Month after month, the nascent Iraqi political class found itself unable to form and seat a government. Almost a half-year of political momentum was forgone.

No less worrisome was the discovery that the Iraqi security forces were not yet in any condition to shoulder an increasing portion of the burden—to "stand up" so that coalition forces could "stand down." At the same time, the security challenge became far grimmer. In February, al-Qaeda terrorists blew up the Golden Dome mosque in Samarra, one of the holiest Shiite shrines in Iraq. Shiite militia groups responded just as the terrorists had hoped, launching retaliatory strikes against Sunni citizens. A bloody pattern—sectarian atrocity, sectarian reprisal, sectarian counter-reprisal—took hold. Each week, attack levels reached new heights.

Since even the vastly more capable U.S. forces seemed unable to tamp down the violence, there was no chance that fledgling Iraqi security forces might do so any time soon.

With the situation deteriorating throughout the spring, the administration might have begun the full-fledged reconsideration of the National Strategy for Victory that it would conduct later in the year. But suddenly the existing strategy appeared to receive a boost. After months of wrangling, the Iraqis finally installed a unity government under the leadership of the little-known Nouri al-Maliki. And U.S. special forces killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the charismatic leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq and the mastermind behind its strategy of fomenting civil war between Sunnis and Shiites. Hope rekindled that the chaos could be brought under control.

But the boost proved illusory. General Casey launched a new effort to regain control of the capital, but within weeks it foundered when several of the Iraqi units on which it depended simply failed to show up for the fight. A revised version of the Casey plan likewise came a cropper when the new Maliki government interfered with efforts to go after rogue Shiite militias that were now rivaling al-Qaeda in Iraq in wreaking havoc.

Over the summer, doubts began to grow among White House officials working on Iraq; by September the NSC staff initiated a quiet but thorough review of strategy with an eye to developing a new way forward. The review, which soon expanded beyond the confines of the National Security Council, became a matter of public knowledge after Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's departure in November, the day after the landslide Democratic victory in the midterm elections. The election underscored the fact that, at a minimum, the administration would have to reposition the Iraq mission in the minds of the American people. Our review confirmed that it would take more than a change of face to rescue the possibility of victory—it would take an entirely new strategy.

The idea was for our proposed change in course to be completed in time to take advantage of the release of another document. This was the much-awaited report of the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan commission co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton. Inside the White House, we hoped that the report's recommendations would be palatable enough to blend with whatever new approach the President decided to adopt. The long-sought holy grail—a bipartisan consensus on the way forward in Iraq—seemed again within reach.

IT WAS not to be. While sharply criticizing the lack of progress thus far, the Baker-Hamilton commission essentially recommended back to us an accelerated version of the strategy envisioned by the NSVI: stand them up so we can stand down. While there was still some support inside the administration for continuing on that path, the interagency team on which I served was of a different mind. The situation in Iraq had eroded beyond the point envisioned by the Baker-Hamilton report; under the horrific conditions now at play, we concluded, Iraq's security forces were far more likely to crack under the strain than to "stand up." And those forces were the essential glue of a stable, unified future. If they went the way of Humpty Dumpty, neither they nor the new Iraq could ever be put back together again.

The Baker-Hamilton report did offer theoretical support for a short-term surge of military forces—something the President and the interagency team were also looking at very closely—but this was mentioned only in a brief passage and was far from the document's central thrust. The White House never succeeded in shifting the conventional wisdom in Washington that Baker-Hamilton provided an alternative to current policy. Nor, unfortunately, were we ready with our own genuine alternative when the Baker-Hamilton report was released on December 6, 2006. That put paid to the idea that we could use the occasion as a means of securing bipartisan support for a new approach. By the time the President announced the surge in January, the climate had turned frostier still.

By then, the leadership of the newly triumphant Democrats on Capitol Hill had already determined that the war was irretrievably lost and that the only responsible course was to get out as quickly as possible. Signaling the emphasis the Democrats meant to place on ending our involvement in Iraq quickly, Nancy Pelosi, the new speaker of the House, sought to make Jack Murtha her principal deputy.

As for the President's new strategy, the Democrats labeled it "an escalation"—no doubt because polls and focus groups showed that this would make it seem least palatable to the American public. The administration countered with the proposition that we were sending "reinforcements." The media settled on "surge." Each of these labels had the unfortunate side-effect of obscuring the many other changes contained in the new strategy and focusing attention exclusively on the increase in military troops—certainly the gutsiest element in terms of our domestic politics but by no means the only important one.

Week after week, the Democrats attempted to

use their control of Congress to suffocate the surge in its cradle. Various proposals were advanced to hobble General Petraeus and render implementation impossible. In April, just as the 30,000 new surge troops were entering the country, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid declared peremptorily: "This war is lost, and this surge is not accomplishing anything."

Reid was wrong. While the political standoff in Washington worsened, the situation in Iraq began to improve. Not right away or all at once, of course. In fact, to judge by the measures of greatest salience to the American media, the situation only eroded in the first half of 2007. Attacks rose in number, as did American fatalities. But Petraeus was steadily refining and adapting the new strategy, and his efforts became especially productive after the full complement of new forces was on the ground and the "surge in operations" could begin in earnest by the beginning of June.

By September 2007, when Petraeus and Crocker gave their first report to Congress, the trend line toward success was discernible. Still, the matter remained debatable—to the point where Senator Clinton felt confident enough to inform Petraeus and Crocker on national television that "the reports you provided to us require the willing suspension of disbelief" and to characterize the two men as "the de-facto spokesmen of what many of us consider to be a failed policy."

A FEW MONTHS after that showdown, however, the progress was all but indisputable. By now, indeed, we can see that the surge has bought precious time for the United States and the nascent Iraqi state to progress meaningfully toward five specific objectives.

First is extirpating the inciters of sectarian violence: al Qaeda in Iraq among the Sunnis and the rogue militias among the Shiites. Second is building up a larger, more capable, and more integrated Iraqi Security Force than existed in 2006.

At the same time, Iraqis are being given the opportunity to create the means of political accommodation locally and from the "bottom up," in ways that reflect the realities of life inside the highly complex mosaic of their country. The achievement of this third goal is the precursor to the fourth, which is to make the central, "top down" government in Baghdad more responsive to the nation's eighteen provinces by opening its pocketbook for projects that will improve the economic and living conditions of the country's citizenry at large.

The final goal is, perhaps, the trickiest: pushing

Iraqi politicians to pass legislation on a number of important measures, including the sharing of oil revenues, the funding of infrastructure projects, the reform of de-Baathification laws, and the like. These are the notorious “benchmarks” mentioned by the President in his January 2007 speech and subjected to much derision by skeptics.

A year after Bush first announced the new strategy, progress on the first three objectives has exceeded everyone’s expectations, even those who helped design the surge. Al Qaeda in Iraq has been gravely wounded. The rogue elements within the Shiite militias are being pruned away. The Iraq Security Force is growing in size and reliability. And, following the decision of Sunni tribes to turn on al Qaeda and throw in their lot with the United States and the new Iraq, local political accommodation is proceeding at a remarkable pace.

There has also been some movement toward linking the Iraqi parliament’s spending to the needs of localities, but so far this is less impressive. As for the benchmarks on political reconciliation from the top down, it is useful to recall that we once thought such political change should precede everything else. That approach did not work. Our new strategy was based on the contrary assumption that security came first, and that parliamentary progress would lag significantly behind other elements. Of course, this has hardly prevented the President’s critics from seizing on the failure of the Iraqi government to have completed all of its benchmarks as putative evidence of the surge’s overall failure. Even here, however, there has been a measure of progress on the ground: in February, for example, the Iraqi parliament passed legislation addressing several key benchmarks, notably including de-Baathification reform and the facilitation of provincial elections as well as of better relations between the provinces and the central government.

THE PETRAEUS-CROCKER report to Congress will no doubt offer further evidence that the new approach is working but is far from having completed its assigned task. No fair-minded observer could conclude otherwise. Petraeus has already indicated that the central military element of the surge—the increase of 30,000 troops—will end by summer 2008. At that point, U.S. forces in Iraq are set to decline to pre-surge levels, roughly 130,000. The question Petraeus will now have to answer is: how long will troop levels need to stay there, and when can they start moving down?

What Petraeus must have uppermost in his mind is the record compiled by his predecessors in try-

ing to produce results with just enough troops to come close but not enough to succeed. A premature drawdown would, by definition, cause the forfeiture of his hard-won gains. And the political reality is that once those troops left Iraq, they would not be coming back.

In a slide presentation that accompanied his September 2007 testimony to Congress, Petraeus gave a picture of what he considered an appropriate drawdown. In his reckoning, after remaining at 130,000 for some time, American troops could decline in number to approximately 115,000, then by slow and measured steps to around 100,000, then perhaps to 85,000, and so onward. The closer the troop levels came to 100,000 (or fewer) the more manageable the deployment would be militarily. At those levels, our ground forces would be able to return to a peacetime rotation schedule, which would put far less strain on the all-volunteer force.

In other words, a substantial American presence in Iraq is sustainable militarily over the long term. The great unknown is whether such a commitment would be sustainable politically here at home.

The evidence of the past sixteen months is that the American people are likely to support, or at least tolerate, a reduction in American numbers gradual enough to preserve the gains of the surge. A President McCain, for example, would probably have no trouble taking advantage of this sustainable strategy and bringing our mission in Iraq to the most successful end achievable.

What of a President Barack Obama or a President Hillary Clinton? If one were to attempt an answer to this question from the two candidates’ words and conduct during the long primary season, one would have reason to conclude that both, in promising a rapid “end” to the war with an equally rapid withdrawal of American forces, are bound and determined to snatch defeat from the jaws of at least partial victory.

But it is not impossible to imagine that these vital matters would appear differently to a Democratic President considering Iraq’s and America’s future from a seat at the desk in the Oval Office rather than from the stage of a college gymnasium filled with delirious Democratic primary voters. One might even permit oneself to hope that, while continuing to speak derogatorily of George Bush’s years as the shepherd of our Iraq policy, such a President would come to know, privately and in time, that he or she had been bequeathed something very different from a fiasco: the promise of a better outcome for Iraq, for the Middle East, and for the American people.