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# Liberals and the Surge: Wrong From the Beginning

*Peter Webner*

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IN EARLY January 2007, 71 percent of Americans said the Iraq war was going moderately badly to very badly. Indeed, the war had been unpopular for much of the previous years, at times deeply so. But by this past September, a nationwide Pew survey found “a striking rise in public optimism about the situation in Iraq.” According to the poll, 58 percent of Americans now believe the war in Iraq is going well or very well, and the same percentage now also say that the U.S. will definitely or probably succeed in Iraq.

This news is encouraging—and not terribly surprising. After all, most Americans have assessed the situation in Iraq based on a reasonable interpretation of events on the ground. And since the January 2007 announcement of the “surge”—President Bush’s decision to deploy 30,000 additional troops to Iraq, armed with a fundamentally new counterinsurgency strategy—the situation on the ground has, by every conceivable measure, improved. In some cases, the progress has been stunning.

And yet, no matter what most Americans believe or what reality tells us is so, leading liberal observers and politicians, long in the vanguard of opposition to the war, have denounced the surge at every point. Even as some, in the face of overwhelming evidence, have been forced to concede a

modicum of American progress, they have done so reluctantly and have downplayed the role played by administration policy in achieving that progress. Others have denied that significant progress has been made at all.

Why they have responded in this way is a question worth exploring. But first it may be useful to establish the record.

THE FORMAL inauguration of the surge in January 2007—in announcing it, the President said it would “change America’s course in Iraq, and help us succeed in the fight against terror”—was met by liberal commentators with a skepticism bordering on derision.

Eugene Robinson of the *Washington Post* mocked Bush’s “fantasy-based escalation . . . which could only make sense in some parallel universe where pigs fly and fish commute on bicycles.” At *Time*, Joe Klein ridiculed “Bush’s futile pipe dream.” Jonathan Chait, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, found “something genuinely bizarre” about those Americans who actually supported the new strategy. “It is not just that they are wrong. . . . It’s that they are completely detached from reality.” The *New Republic*’s Peter Beinart predicted that, by 2008, American soldiers would “still be dying, and the catastrophe will still be deepening.” In sending more troops to Baghdad, Beinart wrote, “Bush is showing his commitment to win—except that the United States has already lost.”

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Liberal politicians were just as certain that the surge was a doomed and irresponsible policy. On the night of the announcement, Senator Barack Obama proclaimed: "I am not persuaded that 20,000 additional troops in Iraq are going to solve the sectarian violence there. In fact, I think it will do the reverse." Later in the month, Senator Joseph Biden declared: "If he surges another 20, 30 [thousand], or whatever number he's going to, into Baghdad, it'll be a tragic mistake." Senator Hillary Clinton similarly insisted that "I cannot support [the] proposed escalation of the war in Iraq," while Senator John Kerry said that sending in additional troops was not an "answer" but "a tragic mistake."

Throughout the spring, even though the full complement of additional troops had yet to arrive in Iraq, the drumbeat of opposition continued, and so did intimations of American defeat. To Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post*, "the [American] lives lost in Iraq were wasted." Former Ambassador Peter Galbraith, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, argued that Bush had embraced a plan that "has no chance of actually working. At this late stage, 21,500 additional troops cannot make a difference." On Capitol Hill, Senator Christopher Dodd asserted that "there is no military solution in Iraq. To insist upon a surge is wrong." Senate majority leader Harry Reid declared that "this surge is not accomplishing anything" and in April announced flatly that the Iraq war was "lost."

TWO MONTHS later, liberal critics of the war remained of the same mind, and were now demanding that we quit the field altogether. According to a July 8 *New York Times* editorial, the time had come "for the United States to leave Iraq, without any more delay than the Pentagon needs to organize an orderly exit." (This, despite the paper's acknowledgment in the same editorial that an American pullout was likely to yield "further ethnic cleansing, even genocide," not to mention regional chaos and more terrorism.) James Fallows of the *Atlantic*, a sharp critic of the surge from the outset, wrote that the expectations "being heaped" on it were "simply laughable."

In August, Michael Ignatieff, formerly of Harvard and now deputy leader of Canada's Liberal party, took to the pages of the *New York Times Magazine* with a *mea culpa* titled "Getting Iraq Wrong: What the War Has Taught Me About Political Judgment." Ignatieff wrote:

The unfolding catastrophe in Iraq has condemned the political judgment of a President. But it has also condemned the judgment of

many others, myself included, who as commentators supported the [2003] invasion. Many of us believed, as an Iraqi exile friend told me the night the war started, that it was the only chance the members of his generation would have to live in freedom in their own country. How distant a dream that now seems.

In fact, however, far from having turned into an "unfolding catastrophe," the dream was already getting closer to realization. By the summer of 2007, although Iraq was still in many ways a broken nation, evidence was mounting that the surge *was* working. In almost no time, sectarian violence had been sharply decreased in Baghdad, and the provinces of Anbar and Diyala were being reclaimed. Coalition forces were making huge headway in human intelligence, and Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was on the run.

In September, a full report on the situation was delivered by David Petraeus, the military architect of the surge and the new commanding general in Iraq, and Ryan Crocker, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq. Both men had traveled to Washington to provide two days of congressional testimony.

Petraeus and Crocker reported that civilian Iraqi deaths in all categories had declined by more than 45 percent since the height of sectarian violence the previous December. During the same period, the number of overall ethno-sectarian deaths had decreased by more than half in the country as a whole, and by about 70 percent in Baghdad. In Anbar province, thanks in large part to the turn against AQI by local Anbaris, car bombings and suicide attacks had declined in each of the previous five months. Likewise, the number of areas in which AQI enjoyed sanctuary had been considerably reduced. Even the political front showed advances, with heartening early signs of a bottom-up reconciliation of hitherto warring Iraqi factions.

While both Petraeus and Crocker were careful not to overstate the degree of progress in Iraq, and reminded everyone who would listen that the country remained a fragile place, they left no doubt of their belief that, in the words of Crocker, "a secure, stable, democratic Iraq at peace with its neighbors is attainable."

But none of this mattered to the administration's liberal critics, who to their earlier prognosis of failure were now adding charges of government cooking of the evidence. Even before the Petraeus-Crocker testimony, Senator Dick Durbin, the Democratic majority whip, warned Americans that "by carefully manipulating the statistics, the Bush-Petraeus report will try to persuade us that violence

in Iraq is decreasing and thus the surge is working.” After the hearing, Representative Edward Markey of Massachusetts said the general’s testimony was “just a façade to hide from view the continuing failure of the Bush administration’s strategy.” To Representative Rahm Emanuel, the general’s written report deserved to win “the Nobel Prize for creative statistics or the Pulitzer for fiction.”

Paul Krugman, an influential columnist for the *New York Times*, could not have agreed more. The administration, he flatly asserted, was intentionally misleading the public by “creating the perception that the ‘surge’ is succeeding, even though there’s not a shred of verifiable evidence to suggest that it is.” Others were even more reckless. A Democratic Senator complained to the website *Politico* that no one was willing to call Petraeus “a liar on national TV,” hoping instead that “outside groups will do this for us.” As if in response, MoveOn.org, the left-wing political-action committee, promptly took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* proposing, in giant type, a new name for General Petraeus: “General Betray Us.”

**I**N NOVEMBER 2007, two months *after* Petraeus and Crocker testified, Barack Obama was still arguing that the surge was having the opposite effect from the one they had described: “not only have we not seen improvements, but we’re actually worsening, potentially, a situation there.” Representative David Obey, asked if the surge strategy was working, offered the novel view that if violence was in fact decreasing, it might be because the insurgents were “running out of people to kill.”

True, such palterings were becoming a little harder to sustain. The *Washington Post*, for one, was ready to conclude in a mid-November editorial that “the ‘surge’ of U.S. military forces in Iraq this year has been, in purely military terms, a remarkable success.” And not only in military terms: “Markets in Baghdad are reopening, and the curfew is being eased; the huge refugee flow out of the country has begun to reverse itself.” By the end of 2007, there was no question that Iraq, which a year earlier had been on the brink of implosion, was now on the mend. Attacks against citizens in Baghdad had dropped by almost 80 percent since November 2006, murders in Baghdad province had decreased by 90 percent, and roadside bombings had declined by approximately 70 percent. In the Dura market in southern Baghdad, where fewer than a handful of shops had been open in January 2007 there were now 500 in operation. As Joseph Fil, commanding general of the multinational divi-

sion in Baghdad, reported, “many Iraqis now can shop without fearing for their lives.”

Nevertheless, in a January 2008 debate, the leading contenders for the Democratic nomination—Obama, Clinton, and John Edwards—still refused to reassess their stance on the surge. Instead, they silently dropped the subject in favor of re-emphasizing their commitment to withdraw all combat troops from Iraq and their unchanged opposition to the presence of any permanent bases there.

Others were not quite so ready to abandon their conviction that the surge itself had failed, even if that meant moving the goalposts on the definition of success. In February, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, questioned on her unbending insistence that American troops must begin an immediate and massive withdrawal from Iraq, was asked by the CNN correspondent Wolf Blitzer: “Are you not worried that all the gains that have been achieved over the past year might be lost?” Pelosi replied: “There haven’t been gains, Wolf. The gains have not produced the desired effect, which is the reconciliation of Iraq. This is a failure. This is a failure.” In the *Washington Post*, the writer Michael Kinsley rang an inventive change on the same motif: the surge was a failure, he reasoned, because even though violence was down, and even though political progress was being made, the number of American troops was still roughly where it was when the surge was announced—as if the achievements produced by those troops were somehow disconnected from their presence.

In early April of this year, Petraeus and Crocker made a return appearance on Capitol Hill. By then, some liberal politicians were reluctantly conceding security gains, but insisted they were evanescent and therefore unimportant—“very nice to have,” in the words of Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, “but essentially . . . meaningless.” To the columnist E.J. Dionne, Jr., the problem now was that “the administration and its supporters talk incessantly about winning but offer no strategy for victory.” In doing so, he continued, they “resemble their own parody of liberal do-gooders insisting on continuing flawed and foolish programs no matter how obvious it becomes that their efforts are doing more harm than good.”

**M**ORE HARM than good? In his April testimony, while stipulating that “the situation in certain areas is still unsatisfactory and innumerable challenges remain,” Petraeus presented an avalanche of statistics illustrating the degree to which “security in Iraq is better than it was when

Ambassador Crocker and I reported to you last September, and . . . significantly better than it was 15 months ago when Iraq was on the brink of civil war and the decision was made to deploy additional U.S. forces to Iraq.” To which Crocker added:

Last September, I said that the cumulative trajectory of political, economic, and diplomatic developments in Iraq was upward, although the slope of that line was not steep. Developments over the last seven months have strengthened my sense of a positive trend.

Which did not stop Barack Obama from taking to the op-ed page of the *New York Times* two months later to insist that “the same factors that led me to oppose the surge still hold true.” A week later, ABC’s Terry Moran asked Obama if, knowing what he knew now, would he support it? Obama’s answer was “No.” That is, he was still against the surge despite his own belated acknowledgment that it had, in fact, “succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.” In the effort to reconcile this blatant contradiction—akin to a diagnostician’s continuing to oppose the treatment that made the patient well—he twisted himself into an intellectual pretzel, asserting that the decrease in violence was the result not of any new American strategy but of “political factors inside Iraq that came right at the same time.” A similar counterfactual claim would later be made by Bob Woodward in his new book *The War Within* and by Peter Galbraith in the *New York Review*. In Galbraith’s summary judgment, “less violence . . . is not the same thing as success,” and in any case the surge “has not been the main reason for the decline in violence.”

And so it goes. By the time General Petraeus handed over the flag of his command to General Raymond Odierno in September, the situation in Iraq had been utterly transformed. Not only had overall violence in Iraq declined to almost “normal” levels,\* and not only were Iraqi security forces growing in numbers and effectiveness as threats from al-Qaeda and Shiite militias decreased, but Iraq’s political leaders had also reached comprehensive domestic accommodations, passing key laws in the areas of provincial elections, the distribution of resources, amnesty, pensions, investment, and de-Baathification. Also in September, Iraq’s parliament passed a crucial election law that, according to a story in the *New York Times*, “represents a significant achievement for a country that has more often resorted to violence than political negotiation in resolving its differences.”

Petraeus once described Iraq as “hard but not

hopeless.” Today, he says Iraq is “hard but hopeful.” That statement would seem beyond dispute.

Not, however, to the war’s liberal critics.

THOSE CRITICS, in the piercing phrase of Senator Joseph Lieberman, “hear no progress in Iraq, see no progress in Iraq, and most of all, speak of no progress in Iraq.” So hermetically sealed off from reality are they that even Charles Peters, the founder of the liberal *Washington Monthly*, was driven to write as long ago as last December:

I have been troubled by the reluctance of my fellow liberals to acknowledge the progress made in Iraq in the last six months, a reluctance I am embarrassed to admit that I have shared. . . . [T]he fact is that the situation in Iraq, though some violence persists, is much improved since the summer. Why do liberals not want to face this fact, let alone ponder its implications?

Why, indeed? And, if reluctant in December 2007, why are most still reluctant today?

A generous interpretation is that by the end of 2006, many liberals had made a definitive good-faith judgment that the Iraq war was irretrievably lost. This then became the filter through which they viewed all later developments. Once convinced of the impossibility of substantial progress, never mind a decent outcome or an actual victory, they could not help receiving good news as anomalous and/or inherently unsustainable.

But the generous interpretation may be too generous, and also condescending. Reasonable and responsible adults are expected to assess the solidity of their convictions against the available evidence and in light of changing circumstances. Even at the time of the surge’s announcement, when things were going quite badly, should responsible adults not have been able to entertain the possibility that, given the enormity of what was at stake in the war, a fundamentally new approach merited at least a *degree* of support, however hesitant or conditional?

Instead, many pronounced the new approach a failure even before it was tried. Still worse was that they continued to pronounce it a failure even as the evidence began to amass that it was succeeding. Even those few who (like Richard Cohen and Joe Klein) eventually admitted they were wrong about

\* According to the quarterly report submitted to Congress by the Department of Defense in September, “security incidents” in Iraq are at levels not seen since early 2004. Across Iraq, civilian deaths have declined by 77 percent since the same period in 2007, and ethno-sectarian-related deaths by 96 percent. Eleven of Iraq’s eighteen provinces are now under local Iraqi control.

the surge itself continued to insist they were right about the war. Others stuck more and more zealously to their original position the more it became falsified by reality. *They*, and not the President, were the ones who were truly “doubling down” on their bet—as if a decent outcome in Iraq threatened their entire worldview.

Nor was their blindness limited to the good news occurring in the lives of Iraqis. They seemed no less blind to the huge drop in American combat deaths. Those deaths, after all, had been said to be among the core concerns of the anti-surge critics, who along with their allies in the media had been focusing relentless attention on the numbers of American casualties in Iraq. Yet little was now made of the fact that—to take just one example—there were but five U.S. combat deaths in Iraq in July 2008. (The previous monthly low had been eight in May 2003, after the invasion.)

Nor, finally, has much if anything been made of the fact that coalition forces have drawn down significantly. All five of the U.S. combat brigades committed to the surge, as well as two Marine battalions and the Marine Expeditionary Unit, have withdrawn. One could not ask for a clearer sign that the surge has been achieving one of the key declared objectives of the anti-war critics themselves—namely, a reduction of American combat troops in Iraq. It is a sign that remains, for the critics, all but unnoticed.

**E**ENTER, IGNOMINIOUSLY, politics. For some liberals, hatred of the President was clearly so all-encompassing that they had developed a deep investment in the failure of what they habitually dismissed not as America’s war but as “Bush’s war.” To an extent, this passion was driven by merely partisan considerations: Iraq had become a superbly effective instrument with which to bludgeon Republicans. It had helped the Democrats take control of both the House and the Senate in 2006; might not a thorough “Republican” defeat in Iraq lastingly reshape the political landscape in their favor?

This is, admittedly, an unpleasant line of specu-

lation, and those foolhardy enough to venture upon it have been loudly condemned for questioning the patriotism of their political adversaries. But patriotism is not the issue—judgment is. When politicians acting in good faith misjudge a situation, nothing prevents them from acknowledging their error and explaining themselves. For the most part, we await such acknowledgments in vain.

In partial extenuation, it might be contended that politicians have an elementary obligation to be responsive to the opinions of their constituents; since Iraq had become a certifiably unpopular cause, stepping out of line on the issue was likely to be regarded as an offense punishable at the polls. But what, then, are we to say of the opinion shapers, the editorial writers of our great newspapers, the essayists and columnists and book authors who, unconstrained by petty interest, present themselves as stalwartly independent spirits willing to follow the truth wherever it may lead? What was at work in *them* when the evidence of American progress—which started as a trickle, and then became a river, and eventually became a flood—could no longer be denied? For not only did they continue to deny it, but they actively promoted an alternative policy of withdrawal and retreat that would have made an American defeat, and a jihadist and Iranian victory, inevitable. Is it not fair to say that what was at work in them was an ideological antipathy not just to an American President, but to America’s cause?

Fortunately, as I noted at the outset, Americans at large are not so ready to deny the evidence of their senses, and appear open to reasoned argument on the basis of that evidence. For a political leader in high office, this is a great blessing. Some eyes will refuse to open and some ears will refuse to hear and some voices will always be raised high in derision. To act rightly in such circumstances is difficult and often enormously costly; but it is the very essence of leadership. If a leader’s decision is wise, there are grounds for hoping that in time this wisdom will be vindicated and, perhaps, recognized—even in the case of a war once massively unpopular but now winnable.