

Give Petraeus a Chance

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Introduction

Iraq is now the central front in the global fight against Al Qaeda and the hinge of our time. Iraqi democrats sometimes worry that this is understood rather better by the enemies of democracy than by its friends. Would that the international community had put aside old disputes and rushed to Iraq with the zeal of the poor deluded Islamists who cross the border seeking martyrdom but bring only death and misery. The tasks at hand are immense and require the wholehearted support of the international community. If democracy fails in Iraq the world may be picking up the pieces for the rest of our lifetimes. If some kind of democracy can succeed in Iraq then the prospects of democratisation will be enhanced throughout the region.

I do not here revisit the argument about the invasion. For the record I opposed it, arguing for a combination of coercive containment, smart sanctions, and a step-change in support to the Iraqi democratic opposition as means to prepare regime change from below – a policy mix that the Iraq experience has shown to be worthy of greater attention in future conflicts.

Like others who opposed the invasion I now find myself in the odd position of opposing calls for precipitate withdrawal (see Brent Scowcroft's evidence to Senate Foreign Relations Committee, February 1 2007). Some who best-cased the consequences of invasion while worst-casing the results of not invading (with such disastrous results – see Ricks, 2006 - are now compounding their error by best-casing the consequences of a precipitate withdrawal while worst-casing the consequences of supporting and extending the surge.

The submission is organised around five thoughts:

- stop best-casing withdrawal,
- give Petraeus a chance,
- the UK must not undermine the surge,
- it is politically important to support the new free trade unions in Iraq

- we need a 'combative democracy' at home, resisting any use of Iraq for political positioning.

1. Stop best-casing withdrawal

Precipitate withdrawal of coalition forces from Iraq, against the wishes of the elected Iraqi government, and without having achieved security on the ground, would likely result in:

- The collapse of the Iraqi state.
- Mass killing. A sharp increase in Jihadist Al-Qaeda attacks and revanchist Sunni sectarian attacks against the Shia will likely occur. The Shia will probably decide the Sunni are beyond the pale and begin a war of ethnic cleansing. The lessons from 2006, when towns were passed prematurely to Iraqi control, are not good. Falluja and the surrounding countryside have reverted to insurgent control. A premature handoff in Baqubah in 2006 produced an insurgent centre by 2007. In fact, premature handing off to Iraqis has been a large part of the problem in Iraq since the first days of the invasion when Rumsfeld badgered his commanders to promise large-scale draw-downs of troops within weeks or months (this, note, of a military force that was never remotely large enough for its task to begin with). The idea that a Grand Hand-Off (i.e. swift withdrawal) in late 2007 or early 2008 would bring peace to Iraq is wishful thinking at best, disingenuous at worst. It is a form of 'sexing up' withdrawal, so to speak.
- The Kurds may be forced to look at the option of independence, and Turkey may react, will potentially disastrous consequences.
- Iran's influence over the South will likely be increased.
- The standing of the West against its many potential enemies will be shattered, its ability to deter profoundly shaken. The Jihadists will be exultant.

2. Give Petraeus a chance

Yet, if Iraq really was definitively 'lost' as Democrat Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has it, then even the doleful consequences of a precipitate withdrawal would have to be faced and managed. But is it? There is evidence that the view of Gen. Petraeus, Commander of the Multinational Force – that the going in Iraq is 'hard' but not 'hopeless' – is more accurate. And we should give Petraeus a chance (see Petraeus, 2007).

Of course there is no room for sunlit optimism. It is entirely possible the coalition will be defeated in Iraq. The mistakes made, before 2003 and since, have been, as the military historian Anthony Beevor has written, 'almost beyond belief'. The security challenges from Al-Qaeda, Sunni sectarians and Shiite militias are immense. The infestation of the Iraqi government by corruption, sectarian hatreds, death-squads, not to mention its plain incompetence, and its desperately limited capacity for decent governance, is plain. The level of support in the US and UK for the effort is dangerously low and falling, for now at least. In combination, and feeding off each other, these factors may yet produce a defeat.

But the dominant media and anti-war frame (that the war is lost, our presence is counterproductive, the surge has failed, and swift withdrawal is the only option) is not wholly accurate. Evidence exists that the new counter-insurgency strategy - 'clear, hold and build' and only then transition to Iraqi control - initiated by President Bush in January 2007, led on the ground by General David Petraeus, and which will only see the full complement of surged troops arrive in Iraq by June-July 2007 - should be given a *chance* to work. If, having been given a shot at politics the Iraqis are unwilling to take it, the coalition can do little. All the coalition can do is help create a security environment in which that option remains open *for those Iraqis who do want to take it*. In 2006 that option was closing, rapidly. The new strategy and the surge is, just about, holding that option open. Given what is at stake in Iraq it is surely worth maintaining our commitment to keep it open and widen it if we can.

AQ's own 'surge' - the increase in spectacular suicide bombings, the destruction of Shia holy sites, the daily toll of barbarism - is winning the media airtime. But it is, arguably, a response to the very *success* of 'clear, hold and build' and a desperate effort to speed up the 'Washington clock' so that it outpaces the 'Baghdad clock'. (Unfortunately, some politicians, especially in the US, have fallen right into this trap.)

A balanced assessment of the new strategy must also attend to those underreported or unreported successes as the five new brigade combat teams have arrived in Iraq - one per month since January 2007 - alongside an additional division headquarters and an aviation brigade. The successes include:

- 'Clear and hold and build' - the essence of the new counter-insurgency strategy, and a sharp change from the failed Rumsfeld-Abazaid strategy - is working *enough* to give it longer.

Take Ramadi, capital of Anbar province, and until recently run by AQ. A fight to regain control, beginning in 2006, has been partially successful. Intense military operations (Murfreesboro February 10-March 10, Okinawa (March 9-20) and Call to Freedom (March 17-30) produced massive arms seizures, heavy AQ losses, and the dismantling of factories making IEDs. The level of attacks in Ramadi has fallen from 20-25 a day to 2-4 a day. Troops no longer retreat to fortified bases, allowing the insurgents to return. In Ramadi itself there are 4 bases and 40 Joint Security Stations and Observation Posts and 23 Police stations. Voice of Ramadi, run by Iraqis is on the air. Reconstruction can be planned. Ramadi has a new Mayor and city council – Sunni participation in the new institutions. Can the Ramadi example be repeated? It seems possible that it can. (It also gives a hint of what the 400,000 troops the Generals wanted could have achieved, had they been given them, and not Rumsfeld's skeleton force, in 2003)

- Troops no longer speed down Baghdad streets before retreating to secure bases, but live and work amongst Iraqis in the city. More joint foot patrols, more encounters with locals, more intelligence tips, more targeted raids, more confidence in the future.
- Realising what century we are in, the coalition is finally beginning to contest the 'information war' (see Newsweek Jan 15, 2007) – another change driven by Petraeus.
- The Iraqi army (at 136,000, still far too small) is playing an increasingly important role in counter-insurgency operations. More are deploying to Baghdad, with greater effectiveness. As the Iraqi army stands up, sectarianism is challenged. Max Boot, Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, reported from Iraq, 'One of the most encouraging sights I saw in Ramadi was an Iraqi army sergeant-major, a Shiite from Baghdad, supervising the rebuilding of a Sunni neighbourhood and chatting amiably with its residents. This is the kind of intercommunal cooperation that was once the norm in Iraq and can be again if Shiite and Sunni extremists are defeated at gunpoint'. (April 30 2007).
- Intelligence tips from Iraqis to coalition forces have increased sharply (80% of IED's are now defused before they detonate; it used to be 50%) The surge - by locating troops in communities (the 'hold' bit), and by challenging the perception that the coalition is about to cut and run - is partly responsible, alongside

the demonstration effect of AQ's excesses, such as its use of chlorine gas bombs against civilians.

- Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar province, led by Sheikh Abdul Sattar, have finally taken up arms against AQ, in contrast to the 2003-2006 period, when a de facto alliance between AQ and tribal elders held. Tribal leaders are now encouraging members to join the Iraqi security forces.
- The Badr Brigades and the Mahdi Army have been instructed by their leaders not to oppose the surge, not to kill Iraqis and – in face of severe AQ provocations – these instructions have been, on the whole, respected. (this is written before the reaction to the second destruction of the al-Askari shrine becomes clear)
- The Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, has distanced himself from Moktada al-Sadr, fired a Minister in the face of Al-Sadr's protests, allowed the US to sweep Shiite strongholds in Baghdad, overseen a clearing out of the Interior Ministry, and visited Sunni Ramadi (for the first time).
- Hundreds of the Mahdi Army have been killed or captured. Moktada al-Sadr has fled to Iran, waiting for the Washington clock to run out.
- Some progress (not nearly enough) has been made in discussions towards an oil-revenue sharing law.

Is there enough here to warrant the UK government continuing to send young British men and women to Iraq to risk their lives? On balance, yes. Yet, parts of the political class in the US are lining up to use the report from Gen. Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker in September to withdraw funding from the war, having all but announced their intention to do so. This despite the fact that some vital clear and hold operations in Baghdad will only begin in July and will be ongoing in September, their results unclear; despite the fact that the poison injected into Iraqi political culture after the sectarian killings of 2006, initiated by AQ's destruction of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra, a Shia holy site (repeated in June 2007), will take a long time to heal, and despite the fact that counter-insurgency strategies take years not months to work (Kagan, 2007).

3. The UK must not undermine the surge

The UK will not follow the US and surge troops into Iraq – politically unviable for the government, probably, and militarily impossible for an underfunded, overstretched and too-small military that currently

has difficulty properly supplying existing forces in Afghanistan let alone surging new forces into Iraq (The UK armed forces are clearly too small, and defence budgets too tight to project the kind of force the UK government seeks to project, and to meet the commitments it makes).

Nonetheless, the UK must do nothing to undermine the 'clear, hold and build' strategy of the US and Iraqi governments, around which the fate of Iraq hinges. A precipitate UK withdrawal that would compromise coalition supply lines from bringing food, fuel and ammunition from Kuwait to US bases in Baghdad and Anbar Province must be avoided at all costs, as must any threat to the key exporting port of Basra. The then U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad told the BBC, 'Our preference would be -- the longer we stay together here, the better.' Indeed.

3. Extend the surge to civil society: begin with the labour unions

The success of the security surge will ultimately depend on a political settlement. No doubt others will make submissions to the Iraq Commission concerning everything from the importance of an oil revenue-sharing law to the need for adequate funding for the 'build' part of the 'clear hold and build' strategy, from the revision of the constitution to the improvement of relations with neighbours in the region.

I want to focus the rest of my submission on the political importance of supporting the growth of the post-2003 free Iraqi trade unions. (For a detailed account of the history of trade unionism in Iraq, the growth of free trade unionism since 2003, its achievements and prospects, see Johnson and Muhsin, 2006, a copy of which has been sent to the Commission).

Even with a sharply reduced troop level the UK is perfectly placed to deploy soft power, and it could begin by a massive support effort aimed at the Iraq trade unions, building on the networks of trust and solidarity established 'from below' since 2003 (see Muhsin and Johnson, 2006, Ch. 7).

Since Iraq was created by Britain out of the dead body of the Ottoman Empire it has been 'a nation whose people do not form a natural political community – powerful centrifugal forces constantly threaten to pull it apart' (Mansfield, 1976). As a result Iraq has long been held together with an iron fist wielded in turn by the Hashemite Monarchists, military officers and, with most brutality, the totalitarianism of Saddam's Ba'athists. The coalition is wrestling

with this long-term history, as much as this or that short-term mistake, (as many warned it would). Iraqi's labour movement has long sought a different solution to Iraq's baleful colonial legacy: unity on the basis of equality, federal democracy, human rights and social justice.

Without imagining it to be a 'solution', a large, well-organised and democratic Iraqi trade union movement could do a great deal to bring Iraqis together regardless of their religious, ethnic or national origins, and so help shift Iraqi history onto new tracks. The Iraq unions, created since 2003, are not Arab, Shia, Kurd or Sunni, Assyrian or Christian, but brings all together to improve working conditions, pay and social provision. In a gruesome recognition of this, the so-called 'resistance' has conducted a campaign of intimidation and assassination against the free trade unions since 2003. Despite this the unions have grown to claim around one million members, organised across all of Iraq's provinces, with good relations with the Kurdish unions. They represent the best available base on which to build a civil society in Iraq today.

Trade unions are not the voice of an ideology or an 'absolute truth'. Trade unions promote the improvement of the social, economic and political condition of working people: social provision (housing, education and health), fair wages, better working conditions, full employment.

In conflict-ridden societies trade unions are a bridge across divides. Trade unions bring common folks together in organisations regardless of their race, nationality, religion or colour. Unions can help to construct a new identity: worker, citizen, Iraqi. It is in the DNA of trade unions to instil collective and non-sectarian identities and to pursue one collective advance not a series of sectarian advantages. Unions are the glue that binds together disparate identities and traditions on the basis of a collective striving for social justice, democracy and human rights.

Recall how bitter divisions between Catholics and Protestants in many European societies – divisions that frequently led to riots – were overcome in the 19th and 20th centuries. The trade unions played a major role by bringing the sectarian combatants into the same rooms, made them members of the same organisations, invited them to share common dreams: a better life for their children, dignity at work, a fair share of prosperity. Unions were a great balm for the sectarian poisons of European society.

It is, frankly, post-conflict resolution 101 that if you have an organisation that is not associated with the old tyranny, that is

good. If the organisation is spread geographically throughout the society, better. If it is potentially a mass organisation, marvellous. And if it transcends the sectarian divisions, religious and ethnic, rooted in the old tyranny and that threaten the transition to democracy, and brings women into participation on an equal basis, well, then you have gold-dust. Iraq had such an organisation but sadly this was not recognised by those charged with post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq. (see Muhsin and Johnson, 2006, Ch.6).

Free trade unions in Iraq could play a similar role in the 21st century to that played in 19th and 20th Europe. Other identities will remain, of course: Shia and Sunni, Turkoman, Assyrian Christian. But like streams meeting in a mighty river they can join together to create something quite new: worker, citizen, Iraqi. And as Shia and Sunni and Turkoman and Assyrian Christian unite in some spheres of their lives, then *the meaning* of their distinct historic identities can be transformed.

Trade unions are a society's egalitarian insurance policy against the self-defeating triumph of egoism. Unions are the embodiment of an idea (which some call egaliberte, or equaliberty) that equality and freedom advance best when they advance *together*.

And when democracies look after unions, unions look after democracies. Gaining tangible benefits *from* democratic politics, trade unions have been great defenders *of* democratic politics. After the Second World War the Stalinists were not too frightened of having President Eisenhower as their ideological enemy. But they didn't have answers when Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers took them on. The most effective opponents of totalitarians of whatever stripe have always been the progressive democrats.

5. We need a 'combative democracy' at home

Gen. Petraeus, who, literally, wrote the book on counter-insurgency warfare in Iraq (*Field Manual 3-24*) calls Iraq the 'post-graduate level of warfare'. We might say that Iraq is also the post-graduate level of politics. Yet parts of the political class are behaving like sophomores, viewing the crisis in Iraq as an opportunity for political positioning and poll bumps rather than the epicentre of an existential threat against which democracies must unite to defeat.

Our children are going to need to live in *combative democracies* marked by a political culture, a mass media and a political and intellectual class comfortable with the proactive defence of the liberal constitutional order and the open society and possessed of the will and the resolution to promote that order and that society as

non-negotiable normative ends. (I have set out some ideas on how democracies should fight terrorism in a speech to a conference in the French Senat in 2006. 'Camus' Catch: How Democracies Can Defeat Totalitarian Political Islam'.)

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