

AFTER ACTION REPORT:



Dennis Steele

The Surge from Gen.

Gen. David H. Petraeus returned to the United States from his 19-month assignment as commander of Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) as an established icon—the architect of and, to most Americans, the human face behind the surge and its attributed triumph in pulling the situation in Iraq back from the edge of the violent and dismal precipice of civil war, where it teetered during the winter of 2006–07.

Gen. Petraeus said he had boarded the plane for home with “mixed feelings: the anticipation of coming home to my wife and family, from which I have been deployed for five of the last seven years; a degree of quiet pride, in reflecting on what our troopers accomplished in Iraq over the previous 19 months ... but also a reluctance to leave our soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, our Iraqi partners, our great civilians in a mission of such importance, when there’s still so much to be done.”

Soon after his return and shortly before he took command of U.S. Central Command, which is responsible for the theater campaign that includes Iraq and Afghanistan, Gen. Petraeus gave a presentation—rather like an after action report—on his MNF-I command tenure and the efforts and sacrifices of the troops who, he said, had turned his “theories” into hard-fought and incrementally won successes. (*The full transcript of Gen. Petraeus’ presentation during AUSA’s Annual Meeting can be found at AUSA’s web site—www.ousa.org—by clicking on the appropriate link in “Ar-*

tics from the 2008 Annual Meeting” under “Tuesday, October 7 Events.”)

Despite relentless invocation of his name by politicians and the laurels heaped upon him, Gen. Petraeus maintains a humble and deflecting demeanor and often credits work done by other individuals and smaller commands, repeatedly saying that the gratitude generally bestowed on him rightly belongs to the soldiers who did the work and turned the situation in Iraq around.

Armed with a measured tone and his trademark arsenal of slides to illustrate and quantify the matrices of what had been achieved in Iraq, Gen. Petraeus said, “Today what I’d like to talk about is developments in Iraq during the surge and beyond. I’d like to offer some thoughts on the counterinsurgency concepts that we’ve sought to execute in Iraq [and] provide an update on the situation there, and I’d like to provide a few observations on soldiering in that endeavor.”

He said there is “no question about the very substantial progress that has taken place in Iraq over the course of the last 15 or 18 months, in particular.” He noted that violent civilian deaths declined by 80 percent and that Iraqi army casualties and casualties among Coalition forces were also down by approximately 80 percent.

Gen. Petraeus and other leaders have repeatedly said during congressional hearings that progress in Iraq remains fragile. “But I have to say that the fragility is less than it was when Gen. [Raymond T.] Odierno and I testi-



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fied in May, and that with each passing day, there's a little bit less of that fragility as the progress takes on a slightly more enduring nature and as the people realize more and more that they do not want to return to the ethno-sectarian violence that had their country on the brink of a civil war in the winter of 2006 and 2007."

Gen. Petraeus added that it is important to understand that the surge involved more than the 30,000 additional U.S. troops who were deployed to Iraq, which included five Army brigade combat teams, two Marine battalions, a Marine expeditionary unit, an additional Army division headquarters, aviation assets and support assets.

"There was also a surge of Iraqi security forces," Gen. Petraeus told the audience. "During the period that we had the additional 30,000 on the ground, they built up by an additional 135,000 in the Iraqi army, police and border forces. And beyond that, we then over time hired ... over 100,000 of the so-called Sons of Iraq, who were the product of the Awakening movement and who would volunteer to help hold areas that we had cleared."

Gen. Petraeus said that holding the areas was extremely critical, explaining that it was "very important psychologically to Iraqi people and neighborhoods, particularly as we moved into those neighborhoods and, again, demonstrated our commitment by living with them to ensure their security."

"And that gets to the idea of additional counterinsurgency concepts that we employed in increasing amounts ... because along with the surge came a certain number of big ideas," he added. "These were, of course, institutionalized in the counterinsurgency field manual that was published in late 2006. A number of us had had quite a bit of time back in the States ... 12 or 15 months or so between tours [when] we were able to reflect, to research, to think

and then to capture ideas, best practices, lessons learned and so forth on counterinsurgency and to codify them in that field manual, and then, indeed, to put them into effect out in the field, where again, many of them [were] already

being practiced by some units or others, but now becoming the actual big ideas guiding the overall effort."

Gen. Petraeus said the biggest of those ideas was "the absolute imperative of securing the population." He explained that "in the winter of 2006-07, there were nearly 55 dead bodies every 24 hours just in Baghdad, just from sectarian violence, not including [violence by] al Qaeda on Sunnis who were trying to stand up to the Sunni extremists, nor [violence by] militia on Shia who were trying to stand up to the militia from their side of the sectarian divide. So the situation was horrific in many neighborhoods. It was, indeed, very, very hard. And again, we had to get with the population, secure it, and we had to do that by living with it. And that was the next big idea."

By Dennis Steele
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Gen. Petraeus continued, "The only way to secure a population is to share the hardship, the risk and to live with it. You cannot commute to this fight, as we talk about. You must move your forces where the violence is the greatest, with your Iraqi partners. And you have to establish patrol bases, combat outposts, joint security stations in those locations; gradually get the population to tell you who the bad guys are, identify the irreconcilables ... the truly hard-core extremists, insurgents, al Qaeda in Iraq or militia extremists—kill or capture those individuals while separating them from the rest of



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the population, trying to reconcile with all of those who are left, to make them part of the solution instead of a continuing part of the problem; employing population control measures like T-walls, gated communities ... in some of the most challenging cases, even issuing ID cards to every member of the population of a particular neighborhood or a particular town or city. You have to, again, live with those that are you are endeavoring to secure."

Gen. Petraeus went on to say, "Security is necessary, but [it is] not sufficient. Certainly it is the bedrock, it's the foundation for everything else," he said. "When there are 55 dead bodies every 24 hours in Baghdad, you're not going to get legislation. You're not going to see markets open. You're not going to see kids going to school. Everything stops except for survival."

"You have to achieve that security, but ... then it must be capitalized on," he added. "As you achieve a little bit more security, you begin a spiral upward instead of a spiral downward, where all of a sudden now you can ... get a market open, and then the people might provide you a little bit better intelligence, which means more effective raids and targeted operations, which means more bad guys off the streets, which means more local support, which means now you can get some Iraqi forces back on the streets. And you keep spiraling upward in a series of reinforcing activities, each of which capitalizes on the other."

Gen. Petraeus said that another key aspect was to promote reconciliation. "In other words, reach out to those who are willing to be part of the new Iraq," he explained. "And this is very important because this did very much coincide with a time when the Sunni part of the population realized they had made a huge error in boycotting the elections of 2005. And they realized that you can't win if you don't play. You can't participate. You can't enjoy the rewards of being part of a country that has officially the fourth-largest oil reserves in the world and may potentially have the second or first most reserves; has the land of the two rivers, unique quantities of water among Arab oil-producing countries, the most sulfur in the world, a good bit of hu-

man capital, infrastructure, agriculture and a variety of other blessings. ... And so we sought to reach out to them and then to provide the security that would allow them to raise their hand and, when they're willing to raise their hand, to protect them."

An emphasis during the entirety of the surge operations was engagement with the press, according to the general. "We emphasized it in a very clear way, and that was to be first with the truth, not to put lipstick on pigs, not to spin. I had people come over and tell me in the spring of 2007 that we had a messaging problem—that our strategic communications weren't working. And I said: 'With all due respect, sir, we have a *results* problem; and until we turn around the situation on the ground, this isn't about strategic communications, this is about reality, and we are going to report reality correctly.' And reality at that time was 180 attacks a day. And thankfully, it began to come down. And, particularly thankfully, it began to come down in nine of the 11 weeks before the September testimony," Gen. Petraeus noted.

"You have to carry out these enormously frustrating, challenging and difficult endeavors in accordance with our values," he added. "You cannot safeguard our values by violating them in another country in an endeavor like this. And we worked very, very hard at that and to try to ensure that the values for which we've fought so hard for so many decades—and indeed centuries—were honored out there by our troopers," he said.

He said it is crucial never to stop learning and adapting. "When you stop that, the enemy will outstrip you because this is a thinking enemy. It may be ... an enemy that carries out extremist activities, professes an extremist ideology, indiscriminate violence and oppressive practices, but nonetheless it is an enemy to be respected in the sense that it is a thinking, adapting and diabolically brutal enemy, and we must constantly adapt. What works in Baghdad today will not work in Baghdad tomorrow. What works in Baghdad today may not work in Fallujah today, and you must be sensitive to that."

"By the way," Gen. Petraeus added, "what worked in Iraq may not work in Afghanistan." ★