

August 1, 2008

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Matt Bennett, Sean Barney and Scott Payne
RE: Taking the Fight to Our Enemies II: Responding on the "Success" of the Surge

Overview

"He refuses to recognize the fact that [the surge] has succeeded and acknowledge that."

John McCain, July 28, 2008¹

John McCain and his allies are once again doubling down on Iraq, accusing those who opposed the surge of a failure of vision. To respond to questions regarding the "success of the surge," progressives must do two things:

First, they must acknowledge that violence is down in Iraq, but they should note that there are several reasons for the decline:

- » Adding 28,000 American troops
- » Shifting to a counterinsurgency strategy under General Petraeus
- » The Anbar Awakening (which began well before the surge)
- » The increasing effectiveness of the Iraqi Army
- » The stand-down of Sadr's Mahdi Army and the overall weakening of Shia militias

Second, they should make clear that while the surge has helped to improve Iraqi security, it was focused on the wrong mission and put extraordinary strain on the Army.

In judging the "success" of the surge, the proper metric is not violence in Iraq; it is the impact on U.S. national security. Viewed this way, the decision to devote 170,000 American troops to Iraq last year was a mistake and a failure. The Iraq surge kept more US troops out of Afghanistan, where we need reinforcements in the fight against our real enemies, who are gaining strength and planning new attacks against America. And because of the surge, our military is now dangerously overextended. The surge, like the original invasion of Iraq, was a mistake because it has made America less safe.

I. The surge was in the wrong place.

If the United States was going to "surge" forces into a war zone last year, the proper place would have been Afghanistan. There the fight is directly against

al Qaeda and their client fighters, the Taliban. Instead, as they did in 2003, the Bush administration devoted vast American resources to occupying and remaking Iraqi society, coming at the direct expense of the war in Afghanistan.

Indeed, the surge in Iraq was not so much a new national security strategy as a decision to take the existing strategy that had been in place since 2003 and pursue it to its logical extreme. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff described that Bush strategy in an interview in mid-July: "My priorities, again, given to me by the commander-in-chief, are focus on Iraq first. It's been that way for some time. Focus on Afghanistan second. And then look to build some dwell time, some time at home for our troops who've been on these many deployments."²

It is not surprising that committing more and more of our forces to Iraq at the expense of Afghanistan has led to a situation where things have gotten better in Iraq while they've gotten worse in Afghanistan. ***The question is whether devoting extraordinary U.S. resources and focus to Iraq while essentially ignoring the rising danger in Afghanistan was a smart strategy. The answer is clearly 'no.'***

The reduction in violence in Iraq cannot be viewed in isolation from developments in Afghanistan. The U.S. commander in Afghanistan during the surge in Iraq, General Dan McNeil, warned repeatedly that he had been left with "an under-resourced force."³ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has acknowledged the accuracy of General McNeil's analysis, stating bluntly, "we don't have enough forces [in Afghanistan] to hold in a classic counterinsurgency."⁴ The new Army/Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual that General Petraeus helped write underscores their point. The manual sets the minimum effective force requirement at twenty counterinsurgent troops per 1,000 residents.⁵ Adding together U.S., NATO, Afghan Army, and Afghan Police troops, the current counterinsurgency force in Afghanistan is less than a third of the minimum force prescribed by the Petraeus manual.⁶

No one can question that our troops are spread thin in Afghanistan. "The problem," Secretary of Defense Gates said recently, "is that while we were able to clear the Taliban in certain areas when we have an operation, we don't have enough force to be able to hold some of those areas ... It's the same kind of problem we encountered in Iraq."⁷ This Whack-A-Mole strategy in Afghanistan is generating the same poor results and danger to U.S. troops that it yielded in Iraq. Indeed, the monthly coalition death toll in Afghanistan is now actually *higher* than in Iraq, despite there being 120,000 more American troops in Iraq than in Afghanistan.⁸

The result has been a grave and growing threat to American national security. Al Qaeda has regrouped and entrenched itself in a new safe haven along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The director of the CIA has called al Qaeda operating in this safe haven a "clear and present danger to ... the West in general and the U.S. in particular."⁹ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has stated flatly that al Qaeda is currently planning attacks against the United States from this safe haven.¹⁰

It is not a mystery why we have not sent more troops to Afghanistan, despite all of the public statements from U.S. military leaders indicating more troops are needed there. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff put it plainly: "I don't have troops I can reach for, brigades I can reach, to send into Afghanistan until I have a reduced requirement in Iraq."¹¹

II. The surge put more strain on the Army.

Even before the surge, the U.S. had far more troops deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan than the Army and Marine Corps can maintain without severe morale, recruitment, retention, and readiness problems.¹² Indeed, at the height of the surge, the U.S. had roughly 90,000 more troops deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan than the military considers to be sustainable.¹³

The strain on U.S. ground forces—particularly the Army—already serious before the surge, has reached crisis proportions in the year and a half since the surge began. Beyond making it impossible for us to send more troops to Afghanistan, the strain the surge has placed on our military has threatened to unravel the force, jeopardizing our security now and in the future. It has also precluded us from keeping a “ready brigade” available to meet emerging challenges to U.S. security elsewhere in the world.

The Army’s deployment tempo is currently 15 months in theater for every 12 months of “dwell time” (rest, training and preparation for the next deployment). This 5:4 deployment: dwell ratio is far below the 3:1 ratio that the military believes is sustainable and provides for adequate rest and training before units are sent into combat.¹⁴ The results: a recruitment and retention crisis that threatens to unravel the Army, with junior and mid-level officers and high-quality enlisted troops leaving in record numbers and recruitment standards plummeting; chronic equipment shortages; training and preparation operations curtailed; a record number of troops kept on active duty against their wishes through the stop-loss program; and no “ready brigade” kept in reserve to respond to unforeseen contingencies elsewhere in the world.¹⁵ As many current and retired military leaders have warned, the Army is “out of balance,”¹⁶ with readiness “being consumed as fast as we can build it.”¹⁷

The surge has made a bad readiness situation much worse. Even now, however, surge proponents refuse to acknowledge the tradeoffs the surge entailed and continue to oppose a return to a sustainable deployment tempo, which would require reducing the number of troops deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan combined from 175,000 to around 100,000.¹⁸

Conclusion

The surge in Iraq was a factor—but only one factor—leading to a reduction in violence there. All patriotic Americans welcome this relative stability and applaud the valor of our troops who helped to bring it about. It is too soon to say whether this will lead to long-term stability or to the still-illusory political progress in Iraq. But even if it does, ***progressives must remind Americans that the surge was not free;***

it came with a substantial cost, not only in dollars and lives, but in American national security. And that cost has turned out to be too high.

Indeed, progressives should not shy away from a vigorous debate about either past or future policy decisions in Iraq or Afghanistan. It was a mistake in 2003 to invade and occupy Iraq and thereby to render the fight against al Qaeda in Afghanistan an afterthought. It was a further mistake in 2007 to skew the balance of America's priorities further in favor of a long-term occupation in Iraq to the detriment of the fight in Afghanistan and the health of our fighting force. It would be a particularly grievous mistake in 2009 if the new president were so recklessly preoccupied with the legacy of President Bush and so hopelessly out of touch with our core security interests that he did not finally change course and take the fight to our most dangerous enemies where they are strongest and where they pose "a clear and present danger to ... the U.S."¹⁹

Endnotes

¹ Juliet Eilperin, "At Town Hall in Sparks, Questions Run the Gamut," www.washingtonpost.com, July 29, 2008

² Interview with Admiral Michael Mullen, *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, July 22, 2008, transcript at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/july-dec08/mullen_07-22.html.

³ David Stout and Thom Shanker, "Next year's war costs estimated at \$170 billion or more," *The New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2008.

⁴ "Joint Chiefs Chairman Mullen says Basra fight does not indicate need for more U.S. troops in Iraq," AP, April, 3, 2008.

⁵ FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5/1-13

⁶ In a country of 32.7 million people (CIA, 2008 World Factbook) to achieve a ratio of 20 counterinsurgents for every 1,000 residents would require a total counterinsurgent force of roughly 650,000. Together with 34,500 U.S. troops, there are presently about 29,500 non-US NATO and other international troops, 40,000 members of the Afghan National Army on duty, and 75,300 members of the Afghan National police assigned (CRS, "Afghanistan: Post-War Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," June 6, 2008), for a total counterinsurgent force of 179,300.

⁷ Transcript of Media Roundtable with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates from Australia, <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4157>.

⁸ Mark Mazzetti, "Military Death Toll Rises in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2008.

⁹ Hope Yen, "CIA Director calls Afghan-Pakistan border region 'clear and present danger'," AP, Mar. 30, 2008.

¹⁰ Ann Scott Tyson and Robin Wright, "Mullen Urges Pakistan to Act on al Qaeda," *Washington Post*, June 11, 2008.

¹¹ Josh White, "A Shortage of Troops in Afghanistan: Iraq War Limits U.S. Options, Says Chairman of Joint Chiefs," *The Washington Post*, July 3, 2008.

¹² Philip Carter and Paul Glastris, "The Case for a Draft," *Washington Monthly*, March 2005 put the number troops that could be deployed to the two wars on a sustainable basis at 80,000. BG Kevin Ryan (USA ret), Senior Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, estimates that the Army and Marine Corps could reasonably deploy 10 brigades plus support units (roughly 100,000 troops) in Iraq and 2 brigades and support (about 20,000) in Afghanistan, for a sustainable deployment force of roughly 120,000. (Email from Ryan to Scott Payne, June 19, 2008) We use 100,000 troops here as an estimate that is comfortably within this range, allowing for a 3:1 dwell-to-deployment ratio and the maintenance of a ready brigade in reserve. The combined deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan in January 2007 exceeded this number by 49,616.

¹³ According to Congressional Research Service, "U.S. Forces in Iraq," May 8, 2008, p. 4, and Congressional Research Service, "U.S. Forces in Afghanistan," May 9, 2008, p. 4, there were 167,353 U.S. troops in Iraq in October 2007 and 24,615 in Afghanistan. The combined deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan exceeded the sustainable number estimated in note 12 above by 91,968.

¹⁴ Michelle Tan and Brendan McGarry, "General: More dwell time as growth goals are met," *Army Times*, April 23, 2008.

¹⁵ See Third Way, *The Blunted Spear III: The Iraq War and US War-Fighting Ability*, <http://thirdway.org/products/125> and *The Blunted Spear II: The Army at the Breaking Point*, <http://thirdway.org/products/117>.

¹⁶ Megan Scully, "Senate Armed Services chairman: Army funding requests might fall short," *Congress Daily*, February 26, 2008.

¹⁷ Bryce S. Dube, "Gen. Casey Addresses State of the Army", *The Pacific Stars and Stripes*, Dec. 18, 2007

¹⁸ See Note 12 above..

¹⁹ See Note 9 above.