

CASE 5.1

A STRATEGY IS BORN

From the start of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, a small group of American officers thought the plan for prosecuting the war was counterproductive and that, with a better plan, the war still might be won. These officers believed that the U.S. military had forgotten the experiences of Vietnam and had been training for something resembling World War II—not counterinsurgency warfare or low-intensity warfare. The generals never expected to fight a guerrilla insurgency in Iraq; and once it began, they concentrated almost entirely on killing and capturing as many insurgents as possible. So, villages were surrounded, doors kicked down, and scores of suspects apprehended. These practices alienated Iraqi civilians and produced new recruits for the insurgency.

By the summer of 2006, Iraq was in a state of anarchy. In Baghdad, 50 people were being kidnapped every day, often by the police. Increasingly, the kidnappers' targets were children, fewer and fewer of whom were being allowed by their parents to venture outside. Once snatched, the victims were typically offered for sale to one of the many kidnapping gangs.

The violence in Iraq was not random but had specific purposes and specific causes. Al Qaeda sought to start a full-scale sectarian war between the Sunnis and Shiites, believing such a war was their only hope of victory. To this end, that terrorist group unleashed suicidal attacks on Shiite civilians, hoping to provoke a backlash and a wider conflict. Indeed, Al Qaeda was increasingly taking over all of Sunni society.

In the first two years of the war, the country's Shiite leadership had held its fire in the face of the Sunni onslaught. Then came the elections in December 2005 that brought to power a Shiite-dominated government. Now, Iraq's new leaders were determined to crush the Sunni insurrection at any cost. Police and paramilitary units were

turned loose in the Sunni neighborhoods, where they began massacring military-age men.

In the face of all this, the Americans decided to back away. From the summer of 2004 onward, the objective of the American strategy was less the defeat of the Sunni insurrection than the training and equipping of Iraqis to fight it for them. "As they stand up, we will stand down," President Bush was fond of saying. Iraq security forces had grown in quantity if not in quality and were taking over larger and larger pieces of the war. It was difficult in the summer of 2006 to drive around Baghdad and see any American soldiers. The trouble was that the strategy of Iraqification was manifestly failing, but the Bush administration kept pushing it anyway.

For all of the dramatic developments in Iraq, perhaps the greatest drama was taking place in Washington where very senior officers advocated a different strategy involving increasing U.S. presence and using U.S. forces to secure the population from insurgents rather than keeping them penned in and behind the blast-proof walls. Thomas D. Ricks, senior Pentagon correspondent for the *Washington Post*, chronicles the difficult birth of this "surge" strategy in Iraq and describes the personalities and events that reversed the U.S. strategy. There were three key players in the military establishment who brought about the difficult midcourse correction of U.S. strategy:

- General David Petraeus was the most prominent player. After returning from Iraq, where he had commanded the 101st Airborne Division during the invasion, he was sent to Leavenworth, Kansas, to command the U.S. Army's educational establishment and craft a new counterinsurgency manual. Drafted by a team familiar with the history of such conflicts, the manual prescribed a radical shift for the

U.S. military, away from the traditional focus on capturing and killing the enemy to one of recognizing that *the people are the prize*.

- General Jack Keane, a retired former Army vice chief of staff, was the motivating force. He launched what Ricks calls a “guerrilla campaign” in the defense establishment to get these new ideas accepted at the highest level.
- General Raymond Odierno, assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, worked with Keane—largely behind the scenes and often outside the chain of command—trying to sell their model of a workable strategy, even as the war was at its bleakest stage and calls for a pullout were mounting.

Translating ideas into plans is difficult. Surge advocates, for example, faced entrenched interests and inflated egos. Fortunately, Petraeus, Keane, and Odierno would get help from four key actors outside the military. In June 2006 President Bush met with sympathetic war critics at Camp David. Elliott Cohen, Michael Vickers, Fred Kagan, and Robert Kaplan—the first three men, respected national security experts; the last, an influential journalist—were generally supportive of the war but critical of current strategy. They were invited to tell Bush how it might be better run. The meeting didn’t sway Bush, but it set in motion a behind-the-scenes effort to change the course of the war. That effort began to take hold after the midterm elections in November, when strong gains by the Democrats led Bush to dismiss Donald Rumsfeld as defense secretary and replace him with Robert Gates.

In early December, Cohen, together with Keane and several others, again met with Bush, and this time the professor was determined to be clearer and more emphatic than he had been the previous June, stressing the need for a new strategy, a change in commanders, and more troops.

Meanwhile, General Odierno was doing the same from Baghdad. Taking over as the number two commander in Iraq, he became dissatisfied with the strategy being pursued by the then commanding officer. The chain of command is normally sacrosanct in the military, but Odierno, “making one of the most audacious moves of the entire war,” bypassed two levels of command

above him to talk to officials at the White House and aides to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In doing so, Ricks writes, he “was laying his career on the line.”

The efforts of Cohen, Keane, and Odierno paid off in January 2007: Petraeus became the new commander in Iraq with a promise of 30,000 extra troops to support the 126,000 already there. After Petraeus took over, his counterinsurgency field manual became the cornerstone of a strategy. To help carry out the plan, Petraeus assembled a team dominated by military officers who possessed doctorates from top-flight universities as well as combat experience. Also present were many dissidents, skeptics, and outsiders, some of them foreigners. For example, they included David Kilcullen, a freewheeling former Australian Army officer who enjoyed semi-mythical status as Petraeus’ counterinsurgency adviser and Emma Sky, a pacifist British expert in Middle East affairs. To her own surprise, Sky became an admirer of the U.S. military. “I love them,” she said, adding, “they’re better than the country they serve. That’s the way I feel about it—America doesn’t deserve its military.”

Petraeus took as his model for what he was trying to achieve the cowboy painting *The Stampede* by Frederic Remington. Iraq was never going to be a case study in democracy; everything would have to be pretty rough and ready. “Sustainable stability” was the minimalist objective. In Petraeus’ words: “We’re just trying to get the cattle to Cheyenne.”

The surge worked for a number of reasons, one of the biggest being luck. The insurgency had always been a many-headed beast, with no overarching leadership. As the war dragged on, it was the murderous members of Al Qaeda who gained the upper hand. Al Qaeda’s gunmen killed everyone—the traditional Sunni tribal leaders, for instance—who did not share their extreme goals.

But then, in late 2006 came the Sunni backlash. In Arabic, it was called the Awakening. Squeezed by Al Qaeda on the one side and the Shiite death squads on the other, the sheiks turned to the Americans to save them. Soon American officers were making deals with sheiks across the Sunni heartland and into western Baghdad. This was possible in large part because Sunni Iraq is

still a tribal society. Make a deal with the sheik—promise security, hand him a bag of money—and he can plausibly deliver the rest of his tribe.

Could the surge have worked without the Awakening? Ricks thinks that this question is somewhat irrelevant, because as things played out the two reinforced each other. The surge brought the security that allowed the sheiks to come forward, and the Awakening rapidly took thousands of potential enemies out of the war.

Case Questions

1. Which planning model do you think best represents the events described in this case—the rational planning model (pages 213–15) or logical incrementalism (214–15)?
2. Governmental planning takes many diverse forms. A very partial list of large-scale governmental planning activities would have to include at least the following: planning for

the conservation and use of natural resources, city planning, planning for full employment, planning for personal and family security, planning for agriculture, and planning for the improvement of government organization. What lessons do you see in this case that might be relevant to these other planning activities?

3. Ricks concludes that the surge, although successful on the tactical level, faltered on the strategic one. What do you think he means? Does Petraeus' group bear any responsibility?

Case References

Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter, 2009).