

Surge to Nowhere

Don't buy the hawks' hype. The war may be off the front pages, but Iraq is broken beyond repair, and we still own it.

By Andrew J. Bacevich
Sunday, January 20, 2008; B01

As the fifth anniversary of Operation Iraqi Freedom nears, the fabulists are again trying to weave their own version of the war. The latest myth is that the "surge" is working.

In [President Bush's](#) pithy formulation, the United States is now "kicking ass" in [Iraq](#). The gallant Gen. [David Petraeus](#), having been given the right tools, has performed miracles, redeeming a situation that once appeared hopeless. Sen. [John McCain](#) has gone so far as to declare that "we are winning in Iraq." While few others express themselves quite so categorically, McCain's remark captures the essence of the emerging story line: Events have (yet again) reached a turning point. There, at the far end of the tunnel, light flickers. Despite the hand-wringing of the defeatists and naysayers, victory beckons.

From the hallowed halls of the [American Enterprise Institute](#) waft facile assurances that all will come out well. AEI's Reuel Marc Gerecht assures us that the moment to acknowledge "democracy's success in Iraq" has arrived. To his colleague Michael Ledeen, the explanation for the turnaround couldn't be clearer: "We were the stronger horse, and the Iraqis recognized it." In an essay entitled "Mission Accomplished" that is being touted by the AEI crowd, Bartle Bull, the foreign editor of the British magazine *Prospect*, instructs us that "Iraq's biggest questions have been resolved." Violence there "has ceased being political." As a result, whatever mayhem still lingers is "no longer nearly as important as it was." Meanwhile, Frederick W. Kagan, an AEI resident scholar and the arch-advocate of the surge, announces that the "credibility of the prophets of doom" has reached "a low ebb."

Presumably Kagan and his comrades would have us believe that recent events vindicate the prophets who in 2002-03 were promoting preventive war as a key instrument of U.S. policy. By shifting the conversation to tactics, they seek to divert attention from flagrant failures of basic strategy. Yet what exactly has the surge wrought? In substantive terms, the answer is: not much.

As the violence in [Baghdad](#) and [Anbar province](#) abates, the political and economic dysfunction enveloping Iraq has become all the more apparent. The recent agreement to rehabilitate some former [Baathists](#) notwithstanding, signs of lasting Sunni-Shiite reconciliation are scant. The United States has acquired a ramshackle, ungovernable and unresponsive dependency that is incapable of securing its own borders or managing its own affairs. More than three years after then-national security adviser [Condoleezza Rice](#) handed President Bush a note announcing that "Iraq is sovereign," that sovereignty remains a fiction.

A nation-building project launched in the confident expectation that the United States would repeat in Iraq the successes it had achieved in [Germany](#) and [Japan](#) after 1945 instead compares unfavorably with the U.S. response to Hurricane Katrina. Even today, Iraqi electrical generation meets barely half the daily national requirements. Baghdad households now receive power an average of 12 hours each day -- six hours fewer than when [Saddam Hussein](#) ruled. Oil production still has not returned to pre-invasion levels. Reports of widespread fraud, waste and sheer ineptitude in the administration of U.S. aid have become so commonplace that they barely last a news cycle. (Recall, for example, the 110,000 AK-47s, 80,000 pistols, 135,000 items of body armor and 115,000 helmets intended for Iraqi security forces that, according to the [Government Accountability Office](#), [the Pentagon](#) cannot account for.) U.S. officials repeatedly complain, to little avail, about the paralyzing squabbling inside the Iraqi parliament and the rampant corruption within Iraqi ministries. If a primary function of government is to provide services, then the government of Iraq can hardly be said to exist.

Moreover, recent evidence suggests that the United States is tacitly abandoning its efforts to create a truly functional government in Baghdad. By offering arms and bribes to Sunni insurgents -- an initiative that has been far more important to the temporary reduction in the level of violence than the influx of additional American troops -- U.S. forces have affirmed the fundamental irrelevance of the political apparatus bunkered inside the [Green Zone](#).

Rather than fostering political reconciliation, accommodating Sunni tribal leaders ratifies the ethnic cleansing that resulted from the civil war touched off by the February 2006 bombing of the Golden Mosque in [Samarra](#), a Shiite shrine. That conflict has shredded the fragile connective tissue linking the various elements of Iraqi society; the deals being cut with insurgent factions serve only to ratify that dismal outcome. First Sgt. Richard Meiers of the [Army's 3rd Infantry Division](#) got it exactly right: "We're paying them not to blow us up. It looks good right now, but what happens when the money stops?"

In short, the surge has done nothing to overturn former secretary of state [Colin Powell](#)'s now-famous "[Pottery Barn](#)" rule: Iraq is irretrievably broken, and we own it. To say that any amount of "kicking ass" will make Iraq whole once again is pure fantasy. The U.S. dilemma remains unchanged: continue to pour lives and money into Iraq with no end in sight, or cut our losses and deal with the consequences of failure.

In only one respect has the surge achieved undeniable success: It has ensured that U.S. troops won't be coming home anytime soon. This was one of the main points of the exercise in the first place. As AEI military analyst Thomas Donnelly has acknowledged with admirable candor, "part of the purpose of the surge was to redefine the Washington narrative," thereby deflecting calls for a complete withdrawal of U.S. combat forces. Hawks who had pooh-poohed the risks of invasion now portrayed the risks of withdrawal as too awful to contemplate. But a prerequisite to perpetuating the war -- and leaving it to the next president -- was to get Iraq off the front pages and out of the nightly news. At least in this context, the surge qualifies as a masterstroke. From his new perch as a [New](#)

[York Times](#) columnist, [William Kristol](#) has worried that feckless politicians just might "snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory." Not to worry: The "victory" gained in recent months all but guarantees that the United States will remain caught in the jaws of Iraq for the foreseeable future.

Such success comes at a cost. U.S. casualties in Iraq have recently declined. Yet since Petraeus famously testified before Congress last September, Iraqi insurgents have still managed to kill more than 100 Americans. Meanwhile, to fund the war, the Pentagon is burning through somewhere between \$2 billion and \$3 billion per week. Given that further changes in U.S. policy are unlikely between now and the time that the next administration can take office and get its bearings, the lavish expenditure of American lives and treasure is almost certain to continue indefinitely.

But how exactly do these sacrifices serve the national interest? What has the loss of nearly 4,000 U.S. troops and the commitment of about \$1 trillion -- with more to come -- actually gained the United States?

Bush had once counted on the U.S. invasion of Iraq to pay massive dividends. Iraq was central to his administration's game plan for eliminating jihadist terrorism. It would demonstrate how U.S. power and beneficence could transform the Muslim world. Just months after the fall of Baghdad, the president declared, "The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the [Middle East](#) will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution." Democracy's triumph in Baghdad, he announced, "will send forth the news, from [Damascus](#) to [Tehran](#) -- that freedom can be the future of every nation." In short, the administration saw Baghdad not as a final destination but as a way station en route to even greater successes.

In reality, the war's effects are precisely the inverse of those that Bush and his lieutenants expected. Baghdad has become a strategic cul-de-sac. Only the truly blinkered will imagine at this late date that Iraq has shown the United States to be the "stronger horse." In fact, the war has revealed the very real *limits* of U.S. power. And for good measure, it has boosted anti-Americanism to record levels, recruited untold numbers of new jihadists, enhanced the standing of adversaries such as [Iran](#) and diverted resources and attention from [Afghanistan](#), a theater of war far more directly relevant to the threat posed by [al-Qaeda](#). Instead of draining the jihadist swamp, the Iraq war is continuously replenishing it.

Look beyond the spin, the wishful thinking, the intellectual bullying and the myth-making. The real legacy of the surge is that it will enable Bush to bequeath the Iraq war to his successor -- no doubt cause for celebration at AEI, although perhaps less so for the families of U.S. troops. Yet the stubborn insistence that the war must continue also ensures that Bush's successor will, upon taking office, discover that the post-9/11 United States is strategically adrift. Washington no longer has a coherent approach to dealing with Islamic radicalism. Certainly, the next president will not find in Iraq a useful template to be applied in [Iran](#) or [Syria](#) or [Pakistan](#).

According to the war's most fervent proponents, Bush's critics have become so "invested in defeat" that they cannot see the progress being made on the ground. Yet something similar might be said of those who remain so passionately invested in a futile war's perpetuation. They are unable to see that, surge or no surge, the Iraq war remains an egregious strategic blunder that persistence will only compound.

Andrew J. Bacevich is a professor of history and international relations at Boston University. His new book, "The Limits of Power," will be published later this year.

