

The Right to Be Right

Peter D. Feaver

Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision

On January 10, 2007, President George W. Bush announced in a televised prime-time address to the nation a bold, even risky, new strategy in the Iraq War. The United States' military and political fortunes in the war had eroded so sharply over the preceding year that President Bush had authorized a thorough internal review to determine why the current strategy was not succeeding and what, if anything, could be done about it. The review had concluded that the United States was on a trajectory that would end in defeat unless the president authorized a new strategy and committed new resources to it. Bush used the televised address to describe in broad strokes the results of the review and the new strategy, which the media quickly dubbed the "surge strategy," because its most controversial provision involved sending five new brigade combat teams (BCTs) to Iraq, a commitment that grew to a total of nearly 30,000 additional troops—this at a time when public support for the Iraq War was strained to the breaking point.

The speech was somber. President Bush opened with a candid admission that the war in Iraq had not gone the way he had expected over the previous year. He acknowledged that his old strategy—dubbed by the media the "stand-up/stand-down" strategy—had failed even after being tweaked over the preceding year. In addition, he outlined the new strategy, including key features such as prioritizing the population security mission over the train-and-transition mission, focusing on bottom-up accommodation rather than top-down reconciliation, and complementing the military surge with a civilian surge of additional political and development resources.

Peter D. Feaver is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at Duke University.

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President Bush also made a passing reference to the views of his civilian and military advisers and their support for the new strategy: "Our military commanders reviewed the new Iraqi plan to ensure that it addressed these mistakes [which doomed the earlier effort]. They report that it does. They also report that this plan can work."¹ In follow-up briefings, the Bush national security team emphasized that all the relevant senior military commanders—the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the chiefs of the services, the Central Command (CENTCOM) combatant commander, and the multinational force (MNF)-I commander with day-to-day responsibility for running the war—had agreed to the new strategy.

Over the next nine months, the new Democratic leadership in Congress tried numerous gambits to shut down the surge, leading one observer to label their efforts a "slow bleed" strategy designed to kill the surge by a thousand cuts.² President Bush and his dwindling Republican allies in Congress mounted a vigorous counteroffensive to buy time for the new strategy to yield results. By the summer of 2007, it seemed possible that the surge would not produce positive results soon enough to satisfy congressional opponents. News accounts told of Bush administration concerns that faltering Republican allies in the Senate would fold, thus ending the surge.³ It was not until September 2007, when the new MNF-I commander, Gen. David Petraeus, and the new ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, electrified the country with dramatic congressional testimony on the surge's progress that the tide of battle inside Washington turned perceptibly in favor of the strategy. Critics still registered their opposition, but the surge was allowed to continue. As of this writing, history's final verdict on success or failure in the Iraq War remains uncertain, but it is clear that the new surge strategy changed, at least for a time, the trajectory of the war. At minimum, the surge opened up the possibility that the war would end successfully, achieving some recognizable version of the war aims President Bush outlined in his January 10 speech: that is, an Iraq that is a "functioning democracy that polices its territory, upholds the rule of law, respects fundamental human liberties, and answers to its people . . . a country that fights terrorists instead of harboring them."⁴

1. George W. Bush, "President's Address to the Nation," January 10, 2007, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/print/20070110-7.html>.

2. John Bresnahan, "House Democrats' New Strategy: Force Slow End to War," *Politico*, February 13, 2007.

3. David E. Sanger, "In White House, Debate Is Rising on Iraq Pullback," *New York Times*, July 9, 2007.

4. Bush, "President's Address to the Nation."

This article uses the lens of civil-military relations theory to explore one aspect of the surge: President Bush's decision to opt for this strategy. My starting point is the president's oblique reference to his military advisers in his 2007 speech. Put simply: in opting for the surge, President Bush overruled some of his most important military advisers, most notably, the two senior combatant commanders: Gen. George Casey, who was responsible for running the Iraq War, and Gen. John Abizaid, who was responsible for the overall theater of operations. Although all of the senior military had "signed off" on the strategy, many had done so grudgingly. It is true that Bush's principal military adviser, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Peter Pace, came to endorse the surge idea midway through the review process, and that Pace was instrumental in bringing along the other chiefs. During the several months of review, however, some of the military leaders with formal responsibility for advising the president had recommended against key aspects of the surge—for example, the prioritization of population security and the additional military reinforcements—and, perhaps excepting General Pace, they reconciled themselves to the surge option only when it became evident that President Bush had settled on it as his choice. Not every senior military officer opposed the surge decision from the outset, but it was clearly a case where civilian opinion prevailed over key military views.

The case of the U.S. surge in Iraq raises afresh a canonical question for civil-military relations theory: What is the proper division of labor for strategic supreme command decisions during war? The existing literature can be grouped into two broad camps, each with a different description of how relations between the senior civilian and military leaders during wartime generally are and ought to be. The "professional supremacists" argue that the primary problem for civil-military relations in wartime is ensuring the military an adequate voice and keeping civilians from micromanaging and mismanaging matters.⁵ "Civilian supremacists," in contrast, argue that the primary problem is ensuring that well-informed civilian strategic guidance is authoritatively di-

5. The recognized leader of this camp is Samuel P. Huntington, who outlined this view in Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957). I would also include Michael C. Desch, "Bush and the Generals," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (May/June 2007), pp. 97–108; Christopher P. Gibson, *Securing the State: Reforming the National Security Decisionmaking Process at the Civil-Military Nexus* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2008); Dale R. Herspring, *Rumsfeld's Wars: The Arrogance of Power* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Andrew R. Milburn, "Breaking Ranks: Dissent and the Military Professional," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 59 (October 2010), pp. 101–107; and Paul Yingling, "A Failure in Generalship," *Armed Forces Journal*, May 2007, <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198>. Many critics of the Bush administration embraced a similar view; therefore the belief that the difficulties faced in Iraq could be traced to civilian med-

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recting key decisions, even when the military disagrees with that direction.⁶ Of course, it is theoretically possible for both camps to be aligned on the same side of a debate, perhaps combining in shared criticism of pathological cases where there is neither adequate provision for military advice nor adequate military compliance with civilian strategic guidance. Usually, however, the camps are pitched in opposition to each other, and the prescriptions that flow from each tend to emphasize different, if not contradictory, steps. In fact, each camp tends to identify as the current problem (i.e., intrusive civilian direction or military autonomy) the very thing that the other camp identifies as a practical solution to the real problem.

My thesis is that the surge case poses problems for both the professional supremacist and civilian supremacist camps and is an unabashed vindication of neither. Ultimately, the Bush administration did not follow the prescriptions of either camp exactly and, in the process, arrived at a better result than if it had hewed rigidly to one or the other. If the administration had followed the professional supremacist school precepts to the letter, at least from 2005 on, then the surge never would have happened. Conversely, if the administration had followed the precepts of the civilian supremacists to the letter, the surge might have been stillborn; the decision might even have provoked another “revolt of the generals” that would have strengthened the hands of congressional partisan opponents seeking to block implementation of the new strategy.⁷

I believe the available evidence strongly supports this thesis, but I concede I am not an impartial observer in this debate. My earlier research put me squarely in the “civilian supremacy” school, and more pointedly, I was directly

dling is something of a staple of punditry and can be considered the conventional wisdom on what went wrong in Iraq.

6. In this camp I would include Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002); Richard H. Kohn, “The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Summer 2002), pp. 8–59; Suzanne C. Nielsen, *Political Control over the Use of Force: A Clausewitzian Perspective* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2001); Mackubin Thomas Owens, “Failure’s Many Fathers,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 5 (September/October 2007), p. 152; and Frank G. Hoffman, “Dereliction of Duty Redux? Post-Iraq American Civil-Military Relations,” *Orbis*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (March 2008), pp. 217–235.

7. During the spring of 2006, several senior retired generals who had served under Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld gave media interviews criticizing Rumsfeld’s leadership and calling for his dismissal. The media dubbed this the “revolt of the generals,” a reference to the 1949 “revolt of the admirals” over President Harry Truman’s decision to cancel a new aircraft carrier. For more on the Rumsfeld revolt, see the sympathetic coverage of the generals’ views in David Margolick, “The Night of the Generals,” *Vanity Fair*, April 2007, pp. 246–251. For more on the Truman-era revolt, see Keith D. McFarland, “The 1949 Revolt of the Admirals,” *Parameters*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (June 1981), pp. 53–63.

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involved in Bush administration Iraq policy from 2005 to 2007, in particular, in the internal review that led to the surge decision.⁸ With new books being published on Bush administration policymaking almost every month, the public record is also expanding rapidly, and even those of us with intimate insider knowledge learn new information from these accounts. Thus, my conclusion here is somewhat proprietary and definitely provisional. Yet, enough information concerning this period is now available in the public record to make an interim assessment worthwhile.

One further caveat concerning the scope of the argument: this article does not seek to prove that the surge “worked” or that the Bush administration achieved irreversible success in Iraq. Nor does it seek to prove which aspects of the new strategy—the surge of military forces, the surge of civilian forces, the prioritization of population protection, the emphasis on the bottom-up political accommodation that harnessed the so-called Tribal Awakening of Sunni tribes in al-Anbar Province that had begun to fight back against al-Qaida in Iraq’s predations, the increased special operations attacks on al-Qaida in Iraq and on rogue Shiite militias, the greater decentralization and diversification of efforts beyond the Green Zone, and so on—deserve the lion’s share of the credit for any good the surge strategy achieved. Reasonable people can debate how to parse the credit among the various components of the surge strategy, but that debate is beyond the scope of this article.⁹

My thesis rests instead on two narrow assertions, which I do not prove but

8. For more on the internal review, see Peter D. Feaver, “The Anatomy of the Surge,” *Commentary*, April 2008, pp. 24–28. See also Peter D. Feaver and William Inboden, “A Strategic Planning Cell on National Security at the White House,” in Daniel W. Drezner, ed., *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), pp. 98–112.

9. For examples of arguments denying credit to the surge, see Patrick Cockburn, “Iraq: Violence Is Down—But Not Because of America’s ‘Surge,’” *Independent*, September 14, 2008; and John Agnew, Thomas W. Gillespie, Jorge Gonzalez, and Brian Min, “Baghdad Nights: Evaluating the U.S. Military ‘Surge’ Using Nighttime Light Signatures,” *Environment and Planning A*, Vol. 40, No. 10 (December 2008), pp. 2285–2295. Defenders of the surge’s role include John McCain and Joe Lieberman, “The Surge Worked,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 2008; Peter Mansoor, “How the Surge Worked,” *Washington Post*, August 10, 2008; Stephen Biddle, Michael E. O’Hanlon, and Kenneth M. Pollack, “How to Leave a Stable Iraq: Building on Progress,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 5 (September/October 2008), pp. 40–58; Stephen Biddle, “Afghanistan, Iraq, and U.S. Strategy in 2009,” testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Armed Services, 111th Cong., 1st sess., February 12, 2009, http://www.cfr.org/publication/18545/us_strategy_in_afghanistan_and_iraq.html; and Steven Metz, *Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Strategic Shift of 2007* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, May 2010). Falling somewhere in between is Thomas E. Ricks’s argument that the surge was a “tactical success” and a “strategic failure,” meaning that it achieved most of its operational goals but did not result in a permanent, irreversible reconciliation among Iraqi combatants. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

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which have sufficient prima facie plausibility to justify the rest of my argument. First, the surge strategy worked better than opponents expected and at least as well as any of the alternatives available at the time. In other words, President Bush's decision was not, in hindsight, a strategic blunder and it did not result in a fiasco. It was the right decision, or at the very least a right decision. Second, the additional U.S. forces, which were the most controversial part of the strategy and the focal point for mobilizing domestic opposition, were a necessary component; without the surge in troops, the other contributing factors would not have yielded an equivalent positive result.¹⁰ The new strategy (explicitly including both the new reinforcements along with all of the other changes) has produced tangible benefits commensurate with the costs that would not have been achieved if President Bush had chosen a different course—for instance, if he had simply accelerated the transition to Iraqi-led operations, as General Casey and the Baker-Hamilton report advocated.¹¹ The surge created the opportunity for a wider and more optimistic range of out-

10. Some surge opponents have tried to rebut even this minimal claim by arguing that the surge was epiphenomenal—for example, that all of the security improvements resulted from the Tribal Awakening or from the decline in sectarian violence because the ethnic cleansing was complete, or from the Sadrist forces standing down rather than fighting. For an illustration of this line of argument, see Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History, 2006–2008* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), pp. 379–381. None of these alternative explanations is very persuasive. Ironically, they implicitly suggest that the 2005–06 Iraq strategy was working and that the spiral in sectarian violence would soon ebb, if only the administration stayed the course. As Kevin Drum put it, “The security situation in Iraq was on the cusp of something potentially dramatic, and it was possible that a small nudge might make an outsized difference. The surge was that nudge.” Drum, post on the *Washington Monthly* blog “Political Animal,” August 11, 2008, http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2008_08/014269.php. Steven Metz makes a similar point when he emphasizes the importance of the fortuitous timing of the strategic shift, which was able to capitalize on developments that made the surge uniquely effective and that culminated in late 2006. Metz, *Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom*, pp. 38–42. Few if any of the critics making this claim now were making it in the fall of 2006, a point that Drum himself concedes. At that time, the consensus view was stark, captured well by the Baker-Hamilton Commission report's opening sentence: “The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating.” James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward—A New Approach* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006), p. 1. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that any of these other factors would have continued to have a positive effect without the reinforcement, both material and psychological, of the surge. The Tribal Awakening had roots outside of the surge, but needed the surge to culminate. Sectarian violence, far from running out of fuel, increased after the surge was announced and before the new strategy and the new reinforcements could take effect. Furthermore, Moqtada al-Sadr directed his Shiite militias to stand down and not escalate their attacks on U.S. forces precisely because of the surge—if the United States had accelerated its departure from Iraq in 2007, it is highly implausible that al-Sadr would have stood idly by. For a more convincing assessment of how the troop surge was a necessary contribution to empowering these other factors, see Biddle, “Afghanistan, Iraq, and U.S. Strategy in 2009,” pp. 5–6. Metz argues for the importance of one additional factor: luck. See Metz, *Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom*, p. 64.

11. Baker and Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, p. 7.

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comes in Iraq than were achievable in late 2006 by other means. These assertions are sound enough to convince one important audience: those Democratic critics of the surge who currently have responsibility for running the Iraq War. It is surely significant that the claim the surge failed or was a fiasco or was epiphenomenal has little traction inside President Barack Obama's administration, despite the strong opposition of Democratic critics (including Obama himself) to the surge back in 2007.¹²

The article proceeds as follows. I review briefly the core arguments advanced by the professional supremacist and civilian supremacist camps. I next discuss the civil-military context for the surge debate and give a bare-bones narrative of the evolution of the surge decision, clarifying one or two points that have been muddled in the public understanding. I then interpret this narrative through the lens of civil-military relations theory, before closing with some brief implications.

Professional Supremacists versus Civilian Supremacists

The academic debate on civil-military relations emphasizes finely drawn and narrow distinctions (and this article follows in that noble tradition), but there are some important areas of consensus. Scholars agree that democratic theory requires civilians to be in charge and the military to be subordinate. Samuel Huntington argued explicitly that the purpose of carving out zones for professional supremacy (he called it "autonomy") was that it was the best way to secure overall military subordination to civilians.¹³ Likewise, scholars agree that military professionals possess (or ought to possess) expert knowledge that civilian leaders must tap if they are to make wise decisions, especially about strategy and operations in wartime. Everyone recommends some sort of give and take between the military and the civilians, at least at the intellectual and advisory levels. What distinguishes different theorists from one another is where they position themselves along this mushy middle ground of who should be giving more and taking less and, crucially for this article, what is the prevailing bias in the system against which the participants should lean.

The professional supremacists say that the bias, at least in the modern U.S. system, tilts against giving the military adequate space and voice in the policy-

12. Of course, it may also be significant that they have tried to pretend that their earlier opposition to the surge was not because they doubted its efficacy. See Peter Wehner, "Obama, Democrats, and the Surge," *Weekly Standard*, July 29, 2008, pp. 16–18; and Peter Wehner, "Liberals and the Surge," *Commentary*, November 2008, pp. 19–23.

13. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, pp. 83–85.

making process; as a consequence, professional supremacists are prescriptively focused on empowering military officers to speak more candidly and forcefully to their civilian superiors, even to the extent of carving out large zones of professional autonomy where the presumption is that military preferences should trump civilian preferences. Professional supremacists believe that civilian leaders have ample incentives to ignore military advice and do so when it suits their interests; thus the military must be vigilant and vigorous in pressing its case. Professional supremacists trace strategic disasters back to tragic moments when the wiser counsel of military leaders was ignored by headstrong civilians. Michael Desch put it this way, “Given the parlous situation in Iraq today [the spring of 2007]—the direct result of willful disregard for military advice—Bush’s legacy in civil-military relations is likely to be precisely the opposite of what his team expected: the discrediting of the whole notion of civilian control of the military.”¹⁴

Some professional supremacists take the logic a step further: not only should civilians defer to the military; the military should insist that they do so—and take dramatic action to ensure that the military voice is heard and heeded. This extreme variant warrants a label all of its own: “McMasterism,” denoting its origin as a caricature drawn from the influential *Dereliction of Duty* book by H.R. McMaster.¹⁵ McMasterism lays the blame for wartime failures at the feet of generals, but in a curious way: he blames them for going along with civilian preferences rather than blocking those preferences. Thus, in a scathing review of the performance of U.S. Army generals in the Iraq War, Paul Yingling also manages to chastise the generals for not making “their objections public” and calls on the generals to “find their voices.”¹⁶ McMasterism often

14. Desch, “Bush and the Generals,” p. 107.

15. I call it “McMasterism” to distinguish it from McMaster’s own, more nuanced, argument. McMaster argued that during the Vietnam escalation debate, senior military officers were derelict in two respects. First, they lied to their civilian superiors—to Congress, to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and to President Lyndon Johnson—about their true views concerning the military wisdom of various options. Second, they stood silent when executive branch civilians mischaracterized their views to the public and to Congress. McMaster did not argue that the military view was right and the civilian view was wrong, or that the former should have trumped the latter; he argued only that the latter should have had the benefit of fully hearing the former (although his own evidence suggests that McNamara and Johnson probably surmised the true views and were happy not to hear them). McMasterism argues that (1) in these matters, civilians are actively trying to suppress military opinion; (2) military opinion is right, or more right, than civilian opinion; and (3) the military should ensure not only that its voices are heard but also that its voices are heeded. The purest expression of McMasterism can be found in Milburn, “Breaking Ranks,” pp. 101–107. Richard Kohn and Martin L. Cook identify the ubiquitous misreading of McMaster in Kohn, “The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today,” pp. 31–32; and Cook, “Revolt of the Generals: A Case Study in Professional Ethics,” *Parameters*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 4–15.

16. Yingling, “A Failure in Generalship.” He also faults the generals for not having “explained

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reduces to a debate over two options—resign in protest or go over the heads of the president to the American people, the Congress, or both—because even hard-bitten professional supremacists would agree that the military should not use physical coercion to resist civilian authorities. A key feature of the professional supremacist school is this purported military obligation to speak out in public. In a way, professional supremacists expand the “civilian” of “civilian control” to include the body politic. The public, professional supremacists claim, has a right to know military views about policy, even or perhaps especially when those views run counter to what the commander in chief has directed as policy. McMasterism claims the military has an obligation to surface this information however it can.

Tantalizing, albeit scattered, data suggest that McMasterism may be an emerging norm among the professional U.S. military. For instance, the Triangle Institute for Security Studies civil-military gap study of the late 1990s found that clear majorities of elite officers embraced the view that the proper military role in decisions for the use of force went beyond “advise” to include “advocate” and even “insist” on such decisions as setting rules of engagement, ensuring that clear political and military goals exist, and deciding what kinds of units should be used.¹⁷ A more recent survey of a larger sample of U.S. Army officers showed similar results, with significant majorities of officers endorsing the “advocate or insist” norm on these matters.¹⁸ In addition, a survey of active-duty enlisted personnel found that fully one-third disagreed somewhat or strongly with the statement, “Members of the military should not publicly criticize senior members of the civilian branch”; only 16 percent of the (smaller sample of) officers likewise disagreed, so the norm’s power should not be overstated.¹⁹ Yet the prominence of McMaster’s book on official military reading lists and the celebrated reception given Yingling’s article suggest that influential members of the military elite believe that the military voice needs to be louder and more insistent.²⁰ Thoughtful military ethicists have wrestled

clearly the larger strategic risks of committing so large a portion of the nation’s deployable land power to a single theater of operations.” In the context of my article, this amounts to a complaint that the generals did not do more to block the surge.

17. Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, “Conclusion: The Gap and What It Means for American National Security,” in Feaver and Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 465.

18. Heidi Urben, “Civil-Military Relations in a Time of War,” Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 2010.

19. Donald S. Inbody, “Grand Army of the Republic or Grand Army of the Republicans: Political Party and Ideological Preferences of American Enlisted Personnel,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas–Austin, 2009.

20. Thomas E. Ricks, “Army Office Accuses Generals of ‘Intellectual and Moral Failures,’” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2007. McMaster’s book is on several U.S. Army and Air Force reading lists

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with this issue and identified norms that should govern “knowing when to salute.”²¹ Although their treatments constitute an improvement over crude McMasterism, many strike the balance somewhere on the “professional supremacist” side of the divide.²²

By contrast, the civilian supremacists say that the bias, at least in the modern U.S. system, tilts toward excessive civilian deference to military professionals when the subject concerns wartime decisions on strategy and operations; as a consequence, civilian supremacists are prescriptively focused on empowering civilian leaders to involve themselves more forcefully and directly in the business of war making, even to the extent of pressing military officers on matters that the military might consider as being squarely within their zone of professional autonomy. Civilian supremacists are not encouraging civilian leaders to run roughshod over their military subordinates, ignoring advice and clinging to foolhardy schemes. They are, however, encouraging civilian leaders to probe more deeply and even more critically the grounds of military advice: Why do you recommend this course of action? What are the assumptions underlying your recommendation? Why can we not do it another way? What would happen if we tried this alternative? Moreover, civilian supremacists discourage civilian leaders from reflexively deferring to military expertise on important decisions where the civilians’ strategic judgment differs from the military. Eliot Cohen put it succinctly, “Both [civilians and the military] must expect a running conversation in which, although civilian opinion will not dictate, it must dominate; that that conversation will include not only ends and policies, but ways and means.”²³

recommended for officers seeking promotion to senior ranks. See, for example, http://www.history.army.mil/html/reference/reading_list/list4.html; and http://www.militaryreadinglist.com/CSAF/csaf_officer_list.htm.

21. The term is from Leonard Wong and Douglas Lovelace, “Knowing When to Salute,” *Orbis*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (March 2008), pp. 278–288.

22. Those tilting (albeit slightly) toward the professional supremacy side include George M. Clifford III, “Duty at All Costs,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter 2007), pp. 103–128; Cook, “Revolt of the Generals,” pp. 4–15; and Wong and Lovelace, “Knowing When to Salute.” Don M. Snider, *Dissent and Strategic Leadership of the Military Professions* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute Series, U.S. Army War College, February 2008), is in the middle of the spectrum because the author’s model raises far more barriers to military dissent than McMasterism does, although Snider puts the military’s obligation to its profession on an equal footing with its obligation to civilian society. James Burk, “Responsible Obedience by Military Professionals: The Discretion to Do What Is Wrong,” in Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, eds., *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), is more difficult to classify because Burk does not distinguish between policy disagreement and battlefield operations disagreement, though he appears to focus on the latter. Mark J. Osiel, *Obedying Orders: Atrocity, Military Discipline, and the Law of War* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1999), does not fit in my taxonomy because Osiel focuses more narrowly on legal versus illegal orders, whereas McMasterism focuses on prudent versus imprudent policies.

23. Cohen, *Supreme Command*, p. 458.

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Civilian supremacists do not demand the military stands mute when policy matters are being debated, but they do demand its senior officers participate only within the chain of command, speaking to civilian superiors candidly and privately, without leaking to the public. Because Congress has a constitutional oversight role, civilian supremacists agree that military officers must respond truthfully and candidly to direct congressional queries. Contrary to McMasterism, once military advisers have given senior civilian leaders their candid views, the military obligation to speak up has been satisfied; there is no corresponding duty to speak out if civilian leaders decide on a course of action contrary to what the military advised. Instead, once a policy has been decided, the military is obligated to salute, obey, and implement.

To civilian supremacists, it is not a matter of professional expertise so much as a matter of political competence. Military professional expertise is still only one (albeit very important) factor that belongs in the strategic calculus. The military might be able to offer expert assessments on the probability of success or failure for a given course of action, but it is the civilian leader who has the authority to determine whether that probability is an acceptable risk. The military adviser can offer expert insight into the risks involved in shifting resources from one military conflict to another, but it is the civilian leader who has the authority to determine which conflict should have priority.²⁴

Furthermore, civilian supremacists recognize that senior military officers often disagree among themselves, so the maxim of the professional supremacists to “heed the advice of the generals” raises the obvious question, “Which generals”?²⁵ Professional supremacists rarely address the inconvenient truth of intra-military disputes, but such disputes are ubiquitous in real-world decisionmaking. And, as I shall demonstrate, they were at the heart of the civil-military challenge the Bush administration confronted in the surge decision.

Origins of the Surge

The U.S. surge in Iraq came against the backdrop of considerable civil-military tension within the Bush administration, most of it centered on the stormy tenure of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Like many of his predecessors, Secretary Rumsfeld came into office thinking he would have to establish control over an unruly Pentagon.²⁶ His initial few weeks at the Pentagon before his civilian staff had fully arrived led him to believe that the military would ac-

24. Feaver, *Armed Servants*, pp. 58–68, 298–302.

25. Hoffman, “Dereliction of Duty *Redux*,” pp. 227–228.

26. See Feaver, *Armed Servants*, pp. 288–292.

tively thwart his access to information unless he was vigilant.²⁷ This perception led Rumsfeld to make what might be called an overcorrection, repeatedly badgering senior military officers, privately and on occasion publicly, resulting in rafts of news stories complaining about his rough treatment.²⁸ Some of the complaints may have come from thin-skinned generals who themselves might be prone to treating subordinates with toughness.²⁹ Yet it seems clear that Rumsfeld, at a minimum, contributed to the creation of a perception of a hostile work environment.³⁰

At least in the popular telling of civil-military relations in the early period of the administration, President Bush looms less large than does Secretary Rumsfeld. By his own account, Bush arrived in office not expecting national security and the commander-in-chief function to be so prominent in his tenure.³¹ Moreover, although he had served in the Air National Guard during the Vietnam years, and despite offering a strong national security critique of Bill Clinton's presidency, he did not run on his military credentials, and national security was not the centerpiece of his campaign. Bush did assemble one of the most experienced and high-powered national security cabinets in recent history, but this perhaps had the effect of somewhat eclipsing his own role as commander in chief. Of course, national security became his unambiguous top priority with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent in-

27. See Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 14.

28. See Thom Shanker, "Rumsfeld Sees Discord on Size of Military," *New York Times*, July 19, 2001; and "The Bush Merry-Go-Round," *New York Times*, September 8, 2001.

29. Eliot A. Cohen, "Honor in Discretion: Conduct Unbecoming from Retired Generals," *Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2006.

30. As Bradley Graham drily put it in his biography of the secretary of defense, "Rumsfeld's style was a factor." Graham, *By His Own Rules: The Ambitions, Successes, and Ultimate Failures of Donald Rumsfeld* (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2009), p. 221. Space constraints preclude a longer analysis of civil-military relations during the early years of the Iraq War. Desch, in "Bush and the Generals," argues that the events of this period amount to a decisive repudiation of the civilian supremacy school. In his telling, Rumsfeld and Bush were the quintessential civilian supremacists who ignored wiser military counsel and plunged the country into a military fiasco. My view is that the situation is considerably more complex than that. Rumsfeld had an assertive style, but his assertions do not correlate closely with military failures; the parts of the war plan he focused on—phases I, II, and III—went well, whereas the part that he did not scrutinize—phase IV—had the most serious flaws. Arguably, what was needed was more civilian supremacy, not less. See Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, pp. 213–214; Douglas J. Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008); Joseph Collins, "Choosing War: The Decision to Invade Iraq and Its Aftermath," Occasional Paper, No. 5 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University Press, April 2008); and Bruce Berkowitz, "The Numbers Racket," *American Interest*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (September/October 2006), pp. 129–138. Robert Draper, "And He Shall Be Judged," *Gentleman's Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 6 (June 2009), p. 84, argues that Rumsfeld's core weakness was indecisiveness, not domineering intrusion.

31. See George W. Bush, remarks by the president at "Ask President Bush" event in Lima, Ohio, August 28, 2004.

vasions of Afghanistan and then Iraq. Yet it is hard to label President Bush during this period as either a professional or a civilian supremacist. On the professional supremacy side, one could point to the frequency with which President Bush emphasized that he had learned from Vietnam not to micromanage the military; in both scripted speeches and informal remarks, President Bush repeatedly stressed the importance of delegating to the military and heeding military advice.³² On the civilian supremacy side, one could point to President Bush's famous self-reference as "the decider" in response to a reporter's critical question about Secretary Rumsfeld.³³ Moreover, President Bush and his team certainly intended to signal sympathy for the civilian supremacy side during the lead-up to the Iraq War in the summer of 2002, when they arranged for reporters to see that the president was reading Eliot Cohen's *Supreme Command*.³⁴ Perhaps the best way to describe the president on this issue is to say that his views evolved from ones more sympathetic to the professional supremacy school toward the direction of the civilian supremacy school, and that the surge decision played a key role in that evolution.³⁵

The story of the surge begins in the fall of 2005, when the Bush administration launched a major communications effort to explain the then-operative stand-up/stand-down strategy.³⁶ After years of struggling in vain to defeat the insurgency, U.S. military commanders in Iraq settled on a strategy in mid-2005 that they believed showed the promise of addressing the country's myriad security, political, and economic challenges. The strategy incorporated many of the critiques leveled at earlier efforts, with one prominent exception: it did not accept the charge made by an influential minority headed by Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman that the international coalition lacked sufficient troops in Iraq.³⁷ On the contrary, the strategy prioritized reducing the U.S. role (stand down) as fast as security conditions allowed and as fast as new Iraqi security forces could be trained and equipped (stand up). The strategy had ambitious political and economic lines of action to further bolster Iraqi authorities

32. One study notes that President Bush mentioned delegating the decision on troop levels to his ground commanders in 2006 more than thirty times in that year alone. See Heidi Urben, "'Decider' vs. 'Commander Guy': Presidential Power, Persuasion, and the Surge in Iraq," unpublished manuscript, May 12, 2008.

33. Office of the Press Secretary, "President Bush Nominates Rob Portman as OMB Director and Susan Schwab for USTR," Rose Garden, Washington, D.C., April 18 2006, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/04/20060418-1.html>.

34. David Rennie, "New History Book Read by All the President's Men," *Daily Telegraph*, August 29, 2002.

35. Background interview with a firsthand source by author.

36. For more detail on this story, see Feaver, "The Anatomy of the Surge," pp. 24–28.

37. John McCain and Joe Lieberman, "What Must Come Next," *Washington Post*, May 16, 2004.

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who would, the Bush administration believed, eventually be the ones to vanquish the insurgency (albeit with substantial coalition support). The Bush administration believed that this strategy would work, if the American people would give it time to work—hence the extraordinary effort late in 2005 to explain it in a white paper entitled “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq” (NSVI), five set-piece presidential speeches, and extensive outreach to elites on both sides of the partisan aisle.³⁸

To be sure, the NSVI was not merely a communications exercise. The process of reviewing the underlying classified documents in preparation for an unclassified version identified numerous opportunities to tweak the strategy and to streamline and reenergize interagency support for the war effort. On the Bush team, there were differing degrees of optimism about whether this strategy would work, including confidence in the theater, guarded optimism at the White House, and real skepticism, particularly in the State Department.³⁹ In comparison to the strategy review that led to the surge a year later, however, the review effort that produced the NSVI was more of a tactical adjustment to an overall strategy that the Bush administration believed to be fundamentally sound rather than a thoroughgoing reformulation—Iraq Strategy 1.4 or 1.5 rather than 2.0.

Over the course of 2006, however, the two key pistons driving this strategy froze up. The political piston involved progress propelled by a steady tempo of political milestones—referenda and elections—that would create more political space in the new Iraq for all but the most hardened opponents of a democratic Iraq. Instead, the successful election of December 2005 was followed by six months of political paralysis, as the community of Iraqi groups (Sunni, Shiite, and Kurd) struggled to form a government that could achieve cross-community validation and cooperation; indeed the government was not formed until five months after the election. The security piston involved handing over responsibility for confronting a steadily diminishing security threat to a steadily improving Iraqi security force. Instead, the late-February 2006 bombing of the Golden Mosque set off (after a brief delay) an escalating spiral of sectarian violence that became self-sustaining. Such sectarian violence had been plaguing Iraq for a long time and had fueled doubts inside the Bush ad-

38. George W. Bush, “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” White Paper (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2005), http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/iraq_strategy_nov2005.html.

39. The process of preparing the NSVI also surfaced lingering disputes between Secretary Rumsfeld and Secretary Rice over the key elements of the strategy. Background interviews with firsthand sources by author.

ministration about the viability of the strategy outlined in the NSVI. But after the Golden Mosque bombing, sectarian violence reached a level that overtaxed the capacity of even coalition troops, let alone the less capable Iraqi forces. In short, over 2006 the Iraqi situation slowly deteriorated to the point where it came to correspond to the seemingly hopeless situation that critics had long claimed it to be. More important, the senior civilian leadership of the Bush administration, including the president, came to see Iraq in this same light and, as a result, began a quiet top-to-bottom strategy review.

The evolution in Bush administration thinking was gradual and, until more official memoirs are published (and maybe not even then), we cannot determine a precise chronology. Senior civilians on the National Security Council (NSC) staff (myself included) believed the situation warranted launching a top-to-bottom reassessment of the strategy by late May 2006.⁴⁰ Indeed, the staff pushed for an unusual session involving the president and his senior-most advisers at Camp David to hear outside experts engage in a quasi debate between dramatically different recommendations—the increase troops options advocated by Frederick Kagan and Eliot Cohen versus the accelerate the train-and-transition option advocated by Michael Vickers.⁴¹ The NSC staff hoped this would lead to an authorized internal review after the fashion of the Eisenhower-era Solarium exercise that pitted starkly opposed strategies against one another for presidential deliberation. In the Solarium effort, President Dwight Eisenhower directed his staff to prepare and then debate before him three different approaches for dealing with the Soviet Union.⁴² Instead of authorizing a formal review along these lines, President Bush accepted General Casey's recommendation that the existing strategy should be given more time to work.⁴³

General Casey held to this recommendation throughout the rest of 2006 and insisted the existing strategy was bearing fruit and needed to be revised only at the margins. Even as the security situation in Baghdad and elsewhere seemed to indicate that a more fundamental strategic review was needed, the

40. President Bush likewise flags this period as a potential pivot point in his memoirs. See George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010), pp. 363–364.

41. Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 42–45.

42. H.W. Brands, "The Age of Vulnerability: Eisenhower and the National Insecurity State," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 95, No. 4 (October 1989), pp. 963–989.

43. Bush, *Decision Points*, pp. 364–367; and Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 44. Ricks recounts that immediately after the Camp David meeting, Bush went on a secret trip to Baghdad, which reinforced the president's confidence that the current strategy still had potential for success. After that trip, Bush told the press, "I sense something different happening in Iraq. The progress will be steady toward a goal that has clearly been defined." *Ibid.*

battlefield commanders continued to argue that the new Iraqi leaders just needed more time to implement the existing strategy.⁴⁴ National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley and the NSC staff tried to elicit a strategy review from the field with a series of long video conferences featuring tough questioning from President Bush, but the responses to those questions generally reinforced the existing strategy.⁴⁵ By September 2006, however, other parts of the national security establishment had launched their own quiet and somewhat independent reviews. Hadley directed a small team of senior NSC staff, led by Deputy National Security Adviser Meghan O'Sullivan, to begin an internal assessment by reviewing the "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq" white paper and determining which of the core assumptions undergirding that strategy remained plausible; the staff determined that distressingly few assumptions passed that test.⁴⁶ Within the JCS, General Pace and the other chiefs convened a small group dubbed the Council of Colonels, which conducted its own bottom-up review.⁴⁷ Gen. Ray Odierno conducted a separate review prior to assuming command of ground forces in Iraq in November 2006, which convinced him that a surge strategy should be tried.⁴⁸ And at the State Department, two of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's senior advisers, Counselor Philip Zelikow and Coordinator for Iraq David Satterfield, began an internal reassessment covering all aspects of the Iraq strategy.

General Casey, of course, conducted daily assessments of the war and so in some sense was continually reviewing the strategy.⁴⁹ Over the summer of 2006, General Pace asked Casey to broaden those assessments to develop

44. Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 52, 54; and Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 109.

45. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 73. President Bush, however, reports in his memoirs that these exchanges led him to lean even more in the direction of a big change, one that would be led from the White House. Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 371.

46. Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 176–179, sets the date for this review too late—it began in September, not October—and wrongly claims that there were no military officers involved. In fact, Brig. Gen. Kevin Bergner, who was a senior director under O'Sullivan, fully participated. There was no official liaison, however, with either the JCS or MNF-I. The other participants included myself, Brett McGurk, and John Hannah, the senior national security adviser to Vice President Cheney. Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 371.

47. Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 90.

48. Background interview with a firsthand source. See also Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 91–92.

49. Indeed, all of the members of the interagency working on Iraq were continually reviewing the strategy. The NSC led a systematic and continual evaluation of the situation in Iraq, complete with elaborate tracking metrics that yielded "green light" (progress on track), "yellow light" (progress not on track, but policy does not require adjustment), and "red light" (progress is blocked, and policy needs to be rethought) assessments. The metrics were compiled, and many were publicly released in quarterly reports known as the "Section 9010 Reports." The difference between these assessments and the new reviews begun in the summer and early fall of 2006 is that the former accepted the existing strategy as given and the latter reassessed the fundamental premises of that strategy.

and consider alternative courses to the current strategy; he separately asked CENTCOM Commander Abizaid also to consider alternatives.⁵⁰ In response to repeated tactical setbacks in the effort to secure Baghdad, MNF-I was continually revising tactics and these new tactics did garner attention as a “new plan to secure Baghdad.” General Casey, however, repeatedly insisted that the overall strategy was fundamentally sound, and he was not directly involved in any of these other nascent strategic reviews that contemplated more radical departures from the current course.

Over the fall of 2006, these separate internal reviews gradually coalesced into an official, publicly announced review led by the NSC. In October, Hadley merged the NSC staff review with the State Department effort. This small team developed stylized options, one of which included a surge. Shortly thereafter, Hadley launched another separate NSC assessment, this time by Senior Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control William Luti, who examined the surge capacity of the total ground force, specifically, the number of troops available for deployment to Iraq if President Bush chose to surge new forces into the country. The study concluded that up to five BCTs could be surged into theater and recommended doing so, along with other tactical changes.⁵¹ Hadley shared this study quietly with General Pace as a way of gently prodding the JCS to consider the surge alternative without having it be a formal NSC tasking.⁵²

As part of their NSC review, Hadley and a small group of NSC staffers made an unusual trip to Baghdad in late October to meet with the Iraqi prime minister and to discuss the deteriorating situation with General Casey and his team.⁵³ Shortly after that trip, the JCS briefed the NSC/State Department team on the preliminary results of the JCS study (the one that had started out as the Council of Colonels study), which at that stage consisted of a range of options not unlike the range developed by the NSC team, but it did not conclude with a specific recommendation. Hadley’s deputy, J.D. Crouch, also conducted a quiet trip to Iraq and came back convinced that some military activity, particu-

50. General Pace wanted three separate military reviews—by the Council of Colonels, by Casey, and by Abizaid—so that they could think through the problem independently. Background interview with a firsthand source.

51. Michael R. Gordon, “Troop ‘Surge’ in Iraq Took Place amid Doubt and Intense Debate,” *New York Times*, August 31, 2008; and Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 170–171.

52. General Pace, however, told others that he did not need “prodding” and that he was already considering a surge option independent of the NSC effort. Background interview with a firsthand source.

53. David E. Sanger and John F. Burns, “U.S. Envoy Arrives in Iraq as Tough Options Loom,” *New York Times*, October 31, 2006. See also Michael R. Gordon, “Bush Aide’s Memo Doubts Iraqi Leader,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2006.

larly the special operations efforts aimed at al-Qaida in Iraq and Shiite extremists along with the outreach in Anbar Province, should be accelerated if additional resources were available.⁵⁴ The behind-the-scenes NSC review came into public view on the heels of Secretary Rumsfeld's departure, itself coming on the heels of the outcome of the 2006 congressional elections: President Bush authorized a formal deputy-level Iraq strategy review led by Deputy National Security Adviser Crouch and involving senior participants from all the key departments and agencies, including the Departments of State and Defense, the JCS, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Treasury, Vice President Dick Cheney's office, and the NSC staff. MNF-I was not represented separately in the review; MNF-I views were conveyed by the JCS representatives and by written contributions.

From the point of view of many participants, the review had two purposes: first, to determine whether the current strategy was working and, if not, convince President Bush that it was broken; and second, to devise an alternative strategy that would work better. It was easier to reach near consensus on the first objective than it was on the second. The Iraq Strategy Review team developed and debated a range of options, from one end of the spectrum—accelerate the train-and-transition strategy even faster—to the other—surge additional forces and shift to a fully resourced counterinsurgency strategy—with many ancillary options in between. Published reports indicate that initially only the NSC staff and Vice President Cheney's staff favored the counterinsurgency-with-more-troops option, what became the kernel of the surge strategy. The State Department favored an option that dramatically downscaled U.S. involvement in population security and redeployed coalition troops away from population centers and onto more easily defended forward operating bases. The Defense Department, the JCS, MNF-I, and the U.S. embassy in Baghdad favored continuing with a slightly accelerated version of Casey's extant train-and-transition strategy, coupled with a redoubled push for a grand bargain among feuding Iraqi political leaders.⁵⁵

54. Background interviews with firsthand sources.

55. Frederic W. Barnes, "How Bush Decided on the Surge," *Weekly Standard*, February 4, 2008, pp. 20–27; Gordon, "Troop 'Surge' in Iraq Took Place amid Doubt and Intense Debate"; Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 101–104; and Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 230–239. The representatives of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) adopted a more pro-surge position, however, when Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman replaced Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence Stephen Cambone as the lead OSD representative. Also, whereas the JCS representatives to the NSC committee supported the MNF-I position, Chairman Pace believed that the Joint Chiefs as a whole were more sympathetic to the surge option, a position that Pace shared as statutory military adviser to the president. Background interviews with firsthand sources.

The actual positions of the participants and their respective departments are a bit more nuanced. For instance, John Hannah, the senior representative from Vice President Cheney's office presented a paper that argued the current political strategy had become too tilted toward the concerns of the minority Sunni and risked losing the majority Shiite. Hannah's paper was proposed not as an alternative to the surge, but as a refinement to the political approach that would accompany whatever change in strategy the Bush administration adopted.⁵⁶ Similarly, whereas some participants read the State Department position as an attempt to stop providing security to the Iraqi population, drafters of the review saw their key contribution as a proposal to "diversify and decentralize," stepping back from population security in Baghdad but remaining open to close collaboration on population security with units of the Iraqi security forces elsewhere. Zelikow, who drafted the State Department's paper along with Satterfield, had advocated something like a surge earlier in the spring of 2006. They had been told by the military, however, that additional troops were not available and that there was no viable strategy for how such additional military forces would be used. Accordingly, Zelikow and Satterfield determined to find a strategy that would work given the premise of no additional forces. Secretary of State Rice likewise believed that it did not make sense to commit new forces just to implement the prevailing Casey plan, and no one had produced a military plan that she found persuasive for how to use additional troops more effectively; therefore her opposition to the surge was provisional, as in "Show me the strategy and I might support a surge." Another large factor shaping views within the State Department was the desire to reposition the U.S. commitment in Iraq so as to regain leverage and options vis-à-vis Iran. Moreover, although Rice wanted the so-called State option debated and available to the president should he wish to go in this very different direction, it may not have reflected her personal views on what needed to be done.⁵⁷

The interagency team had originally planned to finish its review in time for President Bush to announce his decision in early December 2006, but the timeline was extended to the third week in December and then, finally, to

56. Woodward writes that Hannah's paper was called the "80 percent solution," referring to the percentage of Iraqis that were Shiite or Kurd, and claims it had the vice president's support. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 238. Internally it was dubbed the "bet on the Shiite" approach, and was not presented as the official position of the vice president, who did not even see it before it was announced. Background interviews with firsthand sources.

57. Subsequent offline exchanges with senior military officers who backed the surge gave Secretary Rice more confidence that new, plausible military ideas were being developed to use the "surge" forces effectively. Background interviews with firsthand sources.

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the early January deadline that was ultimately met. Over the course of the nearly two months of internal deliberation, the interagency team debated many aspects of what became the new strategy implemented by General Petraeus. Where the staffs could not agree, Hadley brought the issues to the NSC principals and to the president for decision.

The most important of these disagreements concerned whether population security would be made the first priority mission of U.S. forces or whether the train-and-transition mission would be made coequal (or even first among equals), as had been the case under the previous strategy. The State Department, in particular, argued for narrowing the military mission, but President Bush decided early on that population security in Baghdad would be the top priority.⁵⁸ In retrospect, this decision foreordained the final decision regarding additional troops because Baghdad could not be secured with the number of coalition troops at MNF-I's command. Moreover, prioritizing population security necessitated other changes, particularly those that Generals Petraeus and Odierno ultimately developed when they set out to refine and implement the strategy: moving troops out of the forward operating bases and into neighborhoods, moving troops out of the center of the city and into the "Baghdad belt," and so on. These operational and tactical refinements proved crucial, and the increased risk to U.S. forces that they entailed could be justified only by the presidential prioritization of securing the Iraqi population, beginning with the capital.

The interagency team gradually hammered out a complex range of decisions that pointed the way to an abrupt departure from the existing strategy. The new strategy recommitted the United States to supporting Iraq's democratically elected prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, and his efforts at forging a functioning political system. In lieu of an emphasis on top-down reconciliation, however, the new strategy would focus on bottom-up accommodation at the local level. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach directed from the Green Zone, the new strategy would treat Iraq as a mosaic and attempt different approaches tailored to the diverse conditions throughout the country. Taken together, these two changes paved the way for an expansion of the outreach to the tribes, which became known as the Tribal Awakening, and involved partnering with tribal militias that formed localized security forces fighting al-Qaida in Iraq extremists and thereby providing local population security and rudimentary law and order. Early on, the primary focus of the JCS representa-

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58. Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 246–247.

tives was the failure of the nonmilitary elements of the U.S. government—the diplomats tasked with local political outreach and the aid workers tasked with rebuilding the economy—to “show up” on the battlefield. Military objections to an expanded role for U.S. forces were partly couched in terms of strains on limited military personnel, but even more so in terms of the absence of adequate contributions from nonmilitary sectors—an enduring complaint from the military side, especially from General Casey. Accordingly, one of the first successes of the strategy review involved expanding civilian efforts and resolving thorny matters that had blocked the effectiveness of the provincial reconstruction teams (the teams of specialists drawn from both the military and civilian agencies focused on all the “nonkinetic” military aspects of the war, such as local development and local governance). In this way, the new surge represented a “more for more” bargain struck within the interagency team: civilian agencies would do more if the military did more, and the military would do more if civilian agencies did more. By early December, President Bush had reviewed and approved most of the aspects above, which became known as the surge strategy.⁵⁹

The surge of additional troops itself, however, was not yet decided, and this was by far the most controversial sticking point in the review. The views of the participants evolved generally in the direction of the surge option, but even as late as mid-December, General Casey was arguing that a full five-BCT surge was neither necessary nor desirable.⁶⁰ The pivotal moment came in a December 13 meeting at the Pentagon between President Bush and the Joint Chiefs. As Bob Woodward describes it, Bush entered this meeting undecided but perhaps leaning toward a surge option and viewed the session as an opportunity to win the chiefs’ endorsement of that view. He hoped to entice them with “sweeteners,” including a budget increase and an increase in the size of the active-duty Army and Marine Corps.⁶¹ Gen. Peter Schoomaker, the Army chief of staff, who had privately expressed frustration that President Bush

59. The strategic, operational, and tactical shifts directed by the president are summarized in fact sheets that accompanied his January 2007 address. See Office of the Press Secretary, “Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials,” January 10, 2007, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-1.html>.

60. Just how much the JCS supported Casey in this view is in dispute. Most journalistic accounts report that the JCS sided with Casey at this stage. See Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 283–290; and Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 112–114. That is also how senior civilian administration officials recall it. General Pace believed there was a clear divide between Casey’s preference for sticking with the train-and-transition strategy, or at most a two-BCT surge, and the views of the other chiefs, which inclined to the full five-BCT surge—a view that Pace shared. If so, none of the other participants discerned this at the time. Background interviews with firsthand sources.

61. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 286.

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seemed to be leaning against the advice of General Casey and the Joint Chiefs, made the case against the surge. He argued that it probably would not have a military effect—that it would not reduce the violence—but then he emphasized the collapsing public support for the war. According to Woodward, he said, “I don’t think that you have the time to surge and generate enough forces for this thing to continue to go.” Bush responded, “I am the President. And I’ve got the time.”⁶² The president’s response may even have been a bit more arch than that (and in so doing went to the heart of the civil-military issue) with words to the effect of, “I appreciate your political advice but assessing public support is the president’s problem not the chiefs and I will manage the domestic politics, thank you very much.”⁶³

Schoomaker went on to explain that the Joint Chiefs opposed the surge because it would impose an unacceptable strain on ground forces; sustaining a five-BCT surge would have the effect of indefinitely committing fifteen-BCTs, with five in the theater, five recovering from deployment, and five preparing to deploy. Such a schedule, the Army chief of staff warned the president, could break the force.⁶⁴ According to one source, President Bush challenged the Joint Chiefs to tell him which scenario would be more likely to break the force: sustaining the surge over the next several years or experiencing another humiliating defeat similar to Vietnam. The chiefs acknowledged that defeat in Iraq would be more damaging to military institutions than the strain of the surge.⁶⁵ The chiefs then pressed the president on whether it was wise to commit the full strategic reserve of the United States to a single conflict, Iraq, rather than holding some forces back in case another contingency flared elsewhere, such as North Korea; the president replied that the risks on the Korean Peninsula were manageable and that the priority had to be winning the war the United States was in rather than hedging for some hypothetical contingency.⁶⁶

Senior civilians in the Bush administration remember this episode much as Woodward has reported it. Senior civilian participants left the meeting believing that the chiefs had not indicated final and dispositive dissent or that they were persuaded by the president’s reasoning.⁶⁷ But at least one senior military official with firsthand knowledge remembers it rather differently, with the chiefs being far more sympathetic to the surge option—indeed, endorsing a

62. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

63. Background interview with a firsthand source.

64. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 289.

65. Background interview with a firsthand source.

66. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 288.

67. Background interviews with firsthand sources.

five-BCT surge in their discussions with the president.⁶⁸ President Bush's memoirs lend some support to this interpretation. He reports, "Two days before the meeting Pete [Pace] came to the Oval Office. He told me I would hear a number of concerns from the chiefs, but they were prepared to support the surge. He also gave Steve [Hadley] an estimate on how many troops might be needed to make a difference: five brigades, about twenty thousand Americans."⁶⁹ In any case, the Joint Chiefs may have been persuaded by the bargain the president offered: a commitment that the rest of the civilian branches of government would increase their contributions to the Iraq effort if the military surged more troops into the fight.⁷⁰

When President Bush indicated in late December that he favored the surge option, General Casey countered by suggesting only a "mini-surge"—one BCT with a second in reserve, plus additional battalions for Anbar—rather than the five BCTs that were ultimately chosen. Casey's reasoning was that Prime Minister al-Maliki would not, and perhaps politically could not, support a larger U.S. surge given the domestic challenges he was confronting.⁷¹ Once the president indicated his support for the full five-BCT surge, General Casey countered by suggesting that these be announced as deploying only "if needed," a determination that could be made at a later date.⁷² This proposal was rejected as unworkable for domestic political reasons—better to pay the expected political costs of authorizing the surge all at once rather than repeatedly on a month-by-month basis—and the JCS did not support Casey on this point.⁷³ Finally, the president decided the matter and General Casey dropped his objection. Thus, by January 10, 2007, President Bush could say truthfully that his senior military leadership endorsed the new strategy. But the senior generals had acquiesced slowly and in some cases reluctantly, and the final strategy was very different from what they had initially recommended.

Indeed, to see a proposal much closer to what the combatant commanders had recommended, one need only read the relevant sections of the Baker-Hamilton Commission report.⁷⁴ Congress had established the bipartisan commission to conduct an independent assessment of Iraq strategy, and the report

68. Background interview with a firsthand source.

69. Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 376.

70. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 288. Note also that the president may have avoided personalizing the dispute by having the vice president serve as the advocate of the surge and the cross-examiner of alternative options.

71. Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 112.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

73. Background interview with a firsthand source.

74. Baker and Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report*.

was heralded when it came out in early December 2006 as a bold indictment of the existing strategy. It was, in fact, sharply critical of the existing strategy, but its key military-political recommendations essentially mirrored the next phase of the existing Casey strategy.⁷⁵ By the time the report was issued, however, everyone inside the review process except the uniformed military had determined that the existing strategy was failing, and so civilian leaders were more enamored with a one-sentence pro-surge loophole in the report than they were with the general thrust of the recommendations. The sentence reads, “We could, however, support a short-term redeployment or surge of American combat forces to stabilize Baghdad, or to speed up the training and equipping mission, if the U.S. commander in Iraq determines that such steps would be effective.”⁷⁶ Consequently, the Baker-Hamilton report had very little influence in shaping the ultimate decision except insofar as it demonstrated that the existing Casey strategy could, if relabeled and remarketed as an anti-Bush proposal, claim to enjoy bipartisan support.

A separate outside review launched by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—indeed, an initiative launched explicitly to counter the anticipated recommendations from the Baker-Hamilton report—did have more influence in the evolution of the surge strategy. The AEI review was independent, but as with the Baker-Hamilton report, its recommendations could be anticipated and review participants interacted extensively with Bush administration figures. The report received a welcome audience among pro-surge advocates inside the internal review; the NSC staff had declined an invitation to participate officially in the AEI project, but they requested multiple briefings. Even though the AEI study was completed after some of the key decisions for the new strategy were settled, the White House staff recognized that it could be a

75. To be sure, there were novel aspects of their recommendation, such as tying the Iraq effort to a relaunched peace initiative in Israel-Palestine, but the core of the proposal simply accelerated the same train-and-transition strategy. The pro-surge civilian faction within the Bush administration viewed the Baker-Hamilton report as constituting a viable long-term strategy but as unworkable in the near term. The surge was needed as a “bridge” from the current chaos to future conditions that would, if the surge was successful, allow for the safe implementation of more parts of the Baker-Hamilton plan. See Feaver, “The Anatomy of the Surge”; and several blogposts on this topic, all by Peter Feaver, Shadow Government blog, *ForeignPolicy.com*, http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/03/01/obama_crosses_then_burns_the_bridge_bush_built_in_iraq; http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/03/02/debating_the_surge_that_is_bridge_strategy_with_tom_ricks; and http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/02/02/bipartisanship_in_substance_and_in_form_on_iraq.

76. Baker and Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, p. 50; and background interviews with firsthand sources.

useful contribution to the internal deliberations, especially in pushing along the critical proposal for a surge in troops.⁷⁷ In particular, AEI's recommendation for a surge, which was headlined by Gen. Jack Keane, a respected retired vice chief of the Army, and devised with input from experienced active-duty war planners, provided inside pro-surge advocates with a stalking horse (much like the earlier "Luti brief") to counter MNF-I objections to the surge. Accordingly, the NSC staff arranged for General Keane to brief President Bush and Vice President Cheney, and the JCS were encouraged to receive the briefing as well. The AEI study amounted to something of an existence proof of a coherent surge option that would pass muster with the uniformed military because individuals with bona fide military credentials, not merely civilian staffers, helped develop it. The study allowed the surge option to be debated within the internal review even though neither the military nor the key civilian departments were advocating the surge. According to published reports, however, some of the uniformed military resented AEI and Keane's involvement and viewed it as an unacceptable breach in civil-military protocol; the president, so the reasoning went, should be receiving military advice only from statutory military advisers, meaning the chairman, the JCS, and the combatant commanders.⁷⁸

Interpreting the Surge Decision

The surge decisionmaking process is noteworthy in three ways. First, although the various departments began with sharply opposing views that amounted to very different strategic alternatives, the full-blown alternate strategies were not presented to President Bush for an up or down decision on each one. To be sure, the crucial decision on defining the mission—whether the military should have as its priority providing security to the Iraqi population, or whether that should be second to the train-and-transition mission—was debated in front of and decided by the president.⁷⁹ Some other aspects of the opposing positions were also debated in the presence of the president, such as assumptions about what Prime Minister al-Maliki would accept and the competing risks of mission failure versus unbearable strains on the all-volunteer

77. Barnes, "How Bush Decided on the Surge."

78. See Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 282–286. The combatant commanders resented Keane's involvement, but General Pace claimed to have welcomed it, provided he was kept apprised. Background interview with a firsthand source.

79. Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 246–247.

force. Most of the other elements of the strategy, however, were worked out at lower levels until a blended, hybrid proposal that enjoyed something like a consensus could be brought forward. At no time did advocates of sharply differing approaches—say the NSC pro-surge, the State Department pro-hunker down, and the MNF-I pro-transition—debate fully articulated versions of the strategy in front of the president so that he could decisively pick the one he most preferred while rejecting the other two. Instead, as the president described the process to Woodward, the evolution was more “incremental.”⁸⁰ As extensive reporting documents, it was also an incremental process driven by the commander in chief and his White House staff, most notably Hadley, who nudged, cajoled, and gently hemmed in an initially skeptical military. In this effort, Hadley was aided by Chairman Pace, who from the beginning was more sympathetic to the surge option than other key military figures. Pace played a fundamental role in forging a supportive military consensus.⁸¹ The result was that the final strategy emerged somewhat piecemeal, with log-rolled hybrids from originally divergent proposals and even the occasional compromise bargain—for instance, the military would surge if the civilians also surged and if the size of the ground forces was expanded. The bargaining was messy, yet something like a civil-military consensus supporting the new strategy emerged by the end.⁸²

The second noteworthy aspect was President Bush’s decision to shake up his leadership team in Iraq, replacing General Casey with General Petraeus and Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad with Ambassador Crocker—but then to promote both Casey and Khalilzad to higher office. From these new posts, Casey as Army chief of staff and Khalilzad as ambassador to the United Nations, the old team would have key roles in supporting the very strategy they had opposed during the Iraq strategy review—a new strategy that took as its point of departure the failure of the Casey-Khalilzad strategy. The decision to promote Casey was controversial, especially among proponents of the surge beyond the administration.⁸³ The new commander, General Petraeus, found the arrange-

80. *Ibid.*, pp. 317, 300–301.

81. According to one participant, General Pace was especially effective in helping convince principals and the president that the current strategy was not working. Background interview with a firsthand source.

82. According to several senior participants, this was precisely how the president preferred to operate. As one put it, “The president’s style was not to confront subordinates when he disagreed with them. He didn’t mind debate and sharp conflict. But he made decisions in a way to let everyone save face. He did not want to create winners and losers.” Background interviews with firsthand sources.

83. Nadine Elsibai, “McCain, Graham May Oppose General Casey as Army Chief,” *Bloomberg.com*, January 21, 2007.

ment challenging, and the staffs of the outgoing and incoming battlefield commanders feuded in the early days, with some suspecting that General Casey carried his opposition to the surge into his new role as the service provider of the surging troops.⁸⁴ The president, however, defended the promotion as appropriate and, in a subsequent exit interview, explicitly rejected the efforts by some to analogize Petraeus to Gen. Ulysses Grant and thus Casey to Gen. George McClellan.⁸⁵ In the president's view, General Casey had neither failed in Iraq nor inappropriately defended a failed strategy. Bush had approved every key decision Casey made and had originally supported the Casey strategy as enthusiastically as had the general himself. When the president shifted his views on the war, he was determined to bring Casey along to his point of view to avoid creating damaging fissures within the team.

In this regard, the involvement of Chairman Pace was critical. He had to fill three roles that stood in tension with one another: principal military adviser to the president, principal military adviser and confidant to the secretary of defense, and principal advocate for the views of the Joint Chiefs and the combatant commanders. Pace did not oppose the surge in the same way that the chiefs and the combatant commanders did, but he was cautious and focused on devising a decisionmaking process that would bring the military along with the evolving views of his commander in chief. In this respect, Pace deserves far more credit than the prevailing conventional wisdom has yet given him for deftly navigating these waters and helping the president achieve a surge without provoking a civil-military crisis.

The third noteworthy aspect of the surge decision involves the extent to which the new strategy was conceived in Washington as opposed to in theater. As with any decision that events later seem to vindicate, there are plenty of candidates willing to claim paternity. Many of those claims have some warrant, because several different factions had been advocating for something like the surge for a number of years. The strategic-level decisions, however, were pushed and made in the White House. And importantly for civil-military relations theory, they were pushed by the vice president, the civilian national security adviser, and other senior civilian staff, and made by the president over and against the initial preferences of the military commanders in the field. Not every relevant military officer opposed the surge. Indeed, enthusiastic endorsements coming from such quarters as General Odierno, Casey's deputy in Baghdad, and General Petraeus (the author of the new U.S. Army manual on

84. Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 309–310.

85. Barnes, "How Bush Decided on the Surge."

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counterinsurgency), then-Colonel McMaster (one of the most respected strategists inside the army), and General Keane (the former Army vice chief of staff), all played a vital (perhaps even an essential) role in giving the pro-surge case military respectability. The views of these individuals blunted the charge that President Bush and his senior White House staffers were guilty of the modern-day equivalent of picking bombing targets from the basement of the White House. Those pro-surge military advocates, however—all of whom played further essential roles in refining and implementing the strategy—were incorporated into a civilian-led process.⁸⁶ The defining feature of this process involved the president rejecting the initial advice of his top field commanders and then directing Hadley to work out a process with Pace that would bring the military along to the president's point of view. To be sure, the president and Hadley modified the strategy as the process unfolded to address the initial concerns of the military and thus win its backing. Moreover, the new strategy outlined by the president sketched in broad terms the concepts and elements that Petraeus, Crocker, Odierno, and others would further adjust, refine, and implement. Nevertheless, it was the president's strategy.⁸⁷ President Bush, who for years had emphasized that he was relying on the advice of his senior military leaders to determine the way forward in Iraq, had decided that his military leaders were recommending the wrong course. The president shifted, and persuaded his military leaders to endorse the strategic shift.

From the point of view of the professional versus civilian supremacy theory debate, three main questions emerge. First, what should scholars make of the opposition to the surge registered by General Casey and skepticism, if not outright opposition, of the Joint Chiefs? Second, why did President Bush take so

86. An interesting counterfactual: Would civilians have insisted on the surge if there were not credible military voices such as those of Keane, Petraeus, Odierno, McMaster, and others available to ratify enthusiastically the decision? My view is that the availability of such credible pro-surge military voices was a necessary but insufficient condition to bolster the confidence of the civilian leaders to overrule other military advisers. These military voices, however, operated largely in accordance with the dictates of the civilian supremacy school, quietly advising the civilian chain of command rather than lobbying through the media.

87. In this way, by anointing Odierno the prime mover in the decision for the surge strategy, Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 91–92, commits two small errors in an otherwise valuable account. First, he overemphasizes where he did extensive reporting (in theater) and underemphasizes where he did not (in the interagency). Second, he confuses the strategic, the operational, and the tactical levels. Odierno, along with Petraeus, determined the operational and tactical implementation of the strategy, and thus they deserve the lion's share of credit for the surge's operational features. Neither Odierno nor Petraeus, however, devised a strategic shift and then convinced reluctant civilians and the president to adopt it. Rather, their views were leveraged by pro-surge civilians already determined to try another strategy and dissatisfied with the one being advocated by the top military leadership.

long and use so cumbersome a process to arrive at the surge decision? Third, what does the surge case say about the relative merits of the military professional supremacy and the civilian supremacy schools?

According to the professional supremacy school, civilians should defer to military professionals on matters within their professional expertise, because military judgments are likely to be better grounded in the harsh realities of the battlefield, whereas civilian judgments are likely to be contaminated by extraneous political factors. The central debate in this decision—Could additional forces produce a meaningful change in the security situation in Iraq?—is precisely the sort of question on which professional supremacists would stake their theory. Indeed, Michael Desch holds up the analogous debate between then-Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki and then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz—How many troops are needed to implement the mission?—as the iconic example of how wise military professionals are more likely to know better than civilian leaders what is needed.⁸⁸ Yet in this case, the civilian advocates of the surge (albeit reinforced by the expert judgment of other military professionals) better gauged the battlefield requirements. The surge case resembles less the stylized civil-versus-military confrontation of the professional supremacy school and more the messy pulling-and-hauling of the civilian supremacy school with the president obliged to pick from among divergent viewpoints, both civilian and military.

Further undermining the professional supremacists, it remains an open question how much of the military skepticism on the surge in the first place was based on narrow military considerations. It appears that the senior military leaders were also motivated by three other worries: (1) whether public support would last long enough for the surge to work; (2) whether the benefits of the surge were worth the risks the surge would pose to the viability of the all-volunteer force; and (3) whether committing all of the country's strategic reserve of ground forces raised U.S. strategic risks elsewhere around the globe to unacceptable levels.⁸⁹ None of these additional concerns falls within the scope of unique military expertise; on the contrary, each hinges on political or strategic considerations for which the professional competence resides at the presidential level. It is the president's job to generate public support, and it is the president's job to place the policy bet on how much the American people will tolerate. Although the institutional army can provide expert calibration of the risks that the additional lengthy and repeated deployments imposed by

88. Desch, "Bush and the Generals," p. 103.

89. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 288.

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the surge would put on an already strained all-volunteer force, only the president can determine where to cut that risk trade-off. And even though the military has expertise in measuring the relative risks to other global interests, only the president can determine whether accepting a higher risk in one theater to reduce risks in another is appropriate.⁹⁰ The professional supremacy school prescriptions collapse if the Joint Chiefs, let alone the battlefield commander in Iraq, shade their military advice according to such considerations. In this sense, the surge case strongly reaffirms the wisdom of the civilian supremacy school: military judgments must not be taken at face value but probed and interrogated to surface the assumptions on which they rest. In the end, the military advice may prove both expert and well grounded, but the commander in chief needs to understand how much of the advice rests on considerations within military expert competence and how much does not.⁹¹

Underlying all of the military opposition to the surge was the conviction by some military leaders that they understood the war better than President Bush and his pro-surge advisers. According to Woodward's account, General Casey was explicit on this point: "[F]or Casey," there were "sign[s] the president did not get it."⁹² In the end, the condescending attitude that the military held regarding the president and some of his civilian advisers—Meghan O'Sullivan, for instance, is invoked in the Woodward account as someone who misunderstood the war⁹³—turned out to be ill founded. O'Sullivan, an early proponent of the surge, proved to have a better grasp of what was needed to change the trajectory in Iraq than some battlefield commanders or many of her critics—as did, of course, her bosses, the president, the vice president, and Hadley. To be

90. One could add, of course, that Congress has a vote on each of these questions and, in the present case, Congress voted on all of them many times. It is up to the president and Congress, however, to sort this out.

91. Thus, I interpret the military's role in the surge decision differently from Metz, who asserts that President Bush was not "receptive" to military strategic advice during the review. Metz further claims that the military has a "more expansive strategic and time perspective than presidents," who are focused on the short term. Both of these assertions are problematic. President Bush was receptive to military advice; indeed his receptivity delayed the strategic shift. He ultimately chose an option that some of his key military advisers recommended against, but he did so precisely because he had a more expansive strategic and time perspective than his military advisers, who were overly focused on reducing near-term burdens and discounted how strategic defeat in Iraq would adversely affect all of the other goals of U.S. grand strategy. He is right, however, in attributing the civil-military debate to a difference in risk tolerances. Metz, *Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom*, pp. 45, 44.

92. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 91. The full statement reads, "Bush stated that the numbers were just for his personal comfort level, but for Casey it was another sign the president did not get it." What the president did not "get," apparently, were Casey's views about how difficult it was to fight a counterinsurgency and how much the war depended on Iraqi, not U.S., action. Background interview with a firsthand source.

93. Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 177, 192.

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sure, the views of White House supporters of the surge were as much shaped by pessimism about the alternative options as they were driven by bold optimism about what the surge could produce; nevertheless, the civilian judgment regarding the risk-reward calculation of the surge proved more accurate than did that of many military experts. White House judgments about what the American people would support or what the domestic political system could bear were more accurate than the contrary judgments emanating from the JCS or the State Department. Furthermore, as the civilian supremacy school argues, the Oval Office proved to be the only place where the myriad trade-offs could be managed. Civilian supremacy is premised on the notion that civilians have the right to be wrong—that civilian preferences should trump military preferences even if they are wrong on the policy. In the case of the surge, civilians had a right to be right.

At the same time, the second big question—Why did President Bush take such a long time and adopt such a cumbersome decisionmaking process?—produces an answer less favorable to the civilian supremacy school. Had President Bush followed a strict civilian supremacy checklist, he likely would have landed on the surge strategy earlier than November or December 2006, but he would have had to dispose of the objections of his senior civilian advisers (Rumsfeld and Rice) and most of his senior military advisers more summarily to do so.⁹⁴ To be sure, the president did ultimately overrule these powerful internal opponents, but he did so gradually, cajoling, and without the set-piece Solarium-style Oval Office confrontation that the civilian supremacy school would advocate. The president did not authorize a formal top-to-bottom reassessment as soon as doubts about the strategy began to gel within the White House in late spring 2006, but he did intensify his critical questioning of the strategy over the summer of 2006. As Woodward has reported, that questioning provoked the ire of General Casey, who considered the probing demeaning.⁹⁵ But, caught between a battlefield commander's optimism and his staff's pessimism, President Bush sided with his military commander longer than the civilian supremacy school would have required.⁹⁶

The president did not push the issue more forcefully over General Casey's

94. The 2006 election probably affected the timing as well, but in a double-edged way. The Democrats' decision to base their 2006 congressional campaigns on criticism of the Iraq War probably delayed the more public phase of the review. The sharp electoral defeat of the Republicans in 2006, however, paved the way for an accelerated shift to the public phase. Of course, the delay may also have been needed to bring the other key players—the al-Maliki government and the other Iraqi leaders—on board. Background interview with a firsthand source.

95. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 73.

96. See the dramatic contrast between the two streams of reporting as cited in Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 100–101.

objections out of respect and fear, I suspect. For starters, the president genuinely empathized with the general's day-to-day pressures and may have internalized Casey's viewpoint after numerous direct interactions—an unusual frequency and intensity of White House–combatant commander contact enabled by advances in secure video conferencing. This closeness may have led the president to pursue an indirect approach to strategic change. On the one hand, he gave General Casey the benefit of the doubt in launching multiple efforts over 2006 to confront the deteriorating security situation in Iraq within the confines of the existing strategy. On the other hand, he and his staff gave contrary military voices, especially General Keane, several prominent audiences to prod the system. Even though (according to Woodward) President Bush had begun to lean toward the surge option by mid-fall, he did not insist that the military provide him with such an option. Instead, Hadley used the NSC staff paper on the surge (the “Luti brief”), and then later the Keane version, as stalking horses to elicit JCS views gradually. In so doing, he kept strongly opposed senior military officers on the team and committed to a new strategy—with the key battlefield commander promoted and eventually formally responsible for providing the resources he had previously said were not needed. The downside of this approach, however, may have been to delay consideration of the surge and to limit the ability of other departments that lacked the resources to create their own military plans, notably the Department of State, to weigh in at an early stage on the surge option.

The other reason for the indirect approach may have been fear of another “revolt of the generals.” President Bush and his senior-most civilian advisers may have worried about how General Casey and other senior military figures would respond to a more heavy-handed approach from the civilian supremacy playbook. It is impossible to say for certain, but it is not implausible speculation to consider three scenarios. The most dire and least likely scenario is that some military officers might have responded with a gambit of their own taken from the McMasterism playbook—end runs around the president with coordinated leaks to Congress and the media and flirtations with resignation in protest. General Casey certainly would have had cause to resign in protest; as it was, the president's actions amounted to a vote of no confidence in Casey's military judgment. A more abrupt decision along these lines might have been sufficient provocation. Likewise, the Joint Chiefs, who were by all public accounts deeply disturbed with the way the Iraq Strategy Review was unfolding, might have similarly embraced the norm from the professional supremacy school—especially given the way the media and Democratic critics praised the retired generals who spoke out against Rumsfeld earlier in the year. Such a se-

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quence of events would have turned the surge decision from a fascinating case of civil-military bargaining into a full-blown civil-military crisis in the mold of the Korean War-era MacArthur episode. As with President Harry Truman's firing of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the crisis would have necessarily spilled over into the congressional branch—indeed, the new Democratic leadership of Congress was keen to follow the precedent set by Republicans in the Korean War and use their oversight powers in 2007 to investigate Bush "mismanagement" of the Iraq War.⁹⁷ In such an environment, testimony from disgruntled former battlefield commanders could have profoundly changed the political trajectory of the war.

A second, somewhat less dire and somewhat more likely possibility is that senior military opponents might have responded to a rapidly imposed surge by accelerating their own retirement. Not resignation in protest, but retiring on the grounds that the president had indicated a loss of confidence in their military judgment. This might be called the "Fogleman gambit," after the early retirement in 1997 of Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald Fogleman. As he explained in a subsequent interview, Fogleman believed retirement was the honorable course: his bosses, Secretary of Defense Bill Cohen and Secretary of the Air Force Sheila Widnall, had overruled him on a salient and controversial policy matter (how to hold officers accountable for the 1996 terrorist attack on the Khobar Towers) and, in so doing, seemed to indicate to the general that they had lost confidence in his professional judgment.⁹⁸ Fogleman retired, but hoped to avoid further controversy by leaving quietly and refusing to explain his decision publicly. Whatever the intentions, the move was widely seen as something akin to a "resignation in protest" and invoked, approvingly or disapprovingly, as an example of how a senior officer might respond when he disagrees with his civilian superiors' policies.⁹⁹ In the highly charged partisan environment of Washington in late 2006 and early 2007, it is likely that a similar "quiet departure" would have been politicized even more than Fogleman's retirement and thus be just as fraught for the Bush administration.

The third and most likely scenario would have involved surge opponents in Congress using their constitutional responsibilities of oversight to draw into

97. James Glanz, David Johnston, and Thom Shanker, "Democrats Aim to Save Inquiry on Work in Iraq," *New York Times*, November 12, 2006.

98. Richard H. Kohn, "The Early Retirement of Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, Chief of Staff, United States Air Force," *Aerospace Power Journal*, Vol. 15, No.1 (Spring 2001), pp. 6–23.

99. See, for example, "Accountability Fixed," *Washington Post*, August 3, 1997; Daniel Schorr, "When Resigning Is the Honorable Thing to Do," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 8, 1997; and Helle Bering, "Not-So-Tough Guy at the Pentagon," *Washington Times*, October 15, 1998.

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the public debate the internal military opposition and doubt about the surge—what might be called the “Shinseki gambit,” after General Shinseki’s testimony regarding troop levels and the original invasion plan.¹⁰⁰ Here, even if military opponents were trying to avoid being manipulated by the anti-surge faction, the obligation to give candid testimony to Congress when asked explicitly for one’s personal military professional opinion could have been problematic for surge advocates. The extensive efforts of Bush, Hadley, and Pace to bring Casey and the Joint Chiefs along to the point where the president could say, truthfully, that all of the senior military advisers have reviewed the plan and said “it will work,” was quite possibly of significant importance for solidifying the shaky political support for the surge.¹⁰¹ As Hadley is reported to have said to one of his staff members, “It had to come from the military.”¹⁰² Or as another former senior administration official put it, “You can’t cram it down your military for fear of creating schisms within the administration which would be exploited by the critics.”¹⁰³ In other words, concerns about any or all of these three scenarios shaped President Bush’s distinctive approach to the review.¹⁰⁴

Now for the third and final interpretative question: What does the surge case say about the relative merits of the professional supremacy versus the civilian supremacy school? My provisional answer (provisional on more of the historical record coming into public view) is that the surge case identifies problems with both schools. If President Bush had strictly followed the dictates of the professional supremacy school, it would have been a disaster. Desch approvingly cites those generals who opposed the surge, equates the Bush decision to overrule those generals with the earlier “dismissal” of Shinseki’s views on the number of troops needed for the Iraq War, and condemns the “willful disregard for military advice.”¹⁰⁵ Deferring to his top military command-

100. For contrasting views on this episode, see Matthew Moten, “A Broken Dialogue: Rumsfeld, Shinseki, and Civil-Military Tension,” in Nielsen and Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations*, pp. 42–71; and Damon Coletta, “Courage in the Service of Virtue: The Case of General Shinseki’s Testimony before the Iraq War,” *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (October 2007), pp. 109–121.

101. Whether General Casey was truly “brought around” remains in dispute. According to one view, Casey never agreed that the surge was necessary. He simply accepted the president’s decision. Background interview with a firsthand source.

102. Peter Rodman, *Presidential Command: Power, Leadership, and the Making of Foreign Policy from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p. 269.

103. Background interview with a firsthand source.

104. Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 375. Critics might argue that the dangers of military opposition to the surge were never very substantial. For instance, General Abizaid retired and never spoke out against it even though he opposed it from the inside. This counterargument is not very persuasive, however, because the context for Abizaid’s silence was the combination of extraordinary efforts the Bush administration took to keep military surge opponents invested in the new strategy.

105. Desch, “Bush and the Generals,” p. 107. Desch omits mention of generals who supported the surge, as well as generals who opposed Shinseki’s troop estimates (notably the combatant commander Gen. Tommy Franks).

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ers, the president never would have authorized the surge, and the likely alternative—some variant of the Casey-Abizaid-Rumsfeld-Baker-Hamilton strategy—would probably have sealed the Iraq War’s fate as a “fiasco.” On the other hand, had President Bush strictly followed the dictates of the civilian supremacy school, he might have provoked a “revolt of the generals” that would have put the surge effort itself in political jeopardy.¹⁰⁶ The president wanted to achieve the results of the civilian supremacy school but could not do so if he fully adopted its methods.

My thesis rests on a counterfactual: congressional opponents of the surge might have succeeded in blocking the strategy in 2007 if they had been able to leverage more effectively dissenting military opinion. It is possible, of course, that congressional opponents of the surge were not sincerely opposing it—that they were merely trying to exact as much partisan gain by hobbling the president, but ultimately, they would not have taken steps actually to block the surge. In this interpretation, the presence or absence of a surge-induced “revolt of the generals” could have been irrelevant. Opponents might have invoked the generals, but they would not have acted on the latter’s views. I cannot disprove this. It is theoretically possible and, as evidence for it, it is undeniable that the Democrats continued to fund the surge and did not use every possible option available to them to thwart the surge in other ways. They tried many gambits, however, and it was largely the efforts of Senate Republicans that kept the surge alive.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the Republican bulwark in the Senate was growing exceedingly wobbly over June and July of 2007.¹⁰⁸ Arguably it was only the late-July snippets of good reports—reports that were validated in surprising places such as favorable op-eds from longtime critics—that kept the Republicans on the president’s side until the Petraeus/Crocker hearings of September could solidify their wavering support.¹⁰⁹

In any case, the Bush White House believed the threat to the surge was real

106. In Bush’s words, “If I had acted sooner it would have created a rift that would have been exploited by war critics in Congress to cut off funding and prevent the surge from succeeding.” Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 393.

107. See, for example, S.A. Miller, “Pelosi Stalls on War Bill Conferees; Tests Patience of Lawmakers,” *Washington Post*, April 18, 2007; “How Pelosi ‘Supports the Troops,’” *Washington Times*, April 20, 2007; Gail Russell Chaddock, “Senate Seeks to Put Imprint on Iraq Policy,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 11, 2003; Kathy Kiely, “Senate Bill to Lock In Troops’ Time Off Falls Four Votes Shy,” *USA Today*, July 12, 2007; and Shailagh Murray, “Democrats Maneuver to Force Iraq Votes,” *Washington Post*, July 17, 2007.

108. Sanger, “In White House, Debate Is Rising on Iraq Pullback”; and Jeff Zeleny, “2 G.O.P. Senators Press to Change U.S Role in Iraq,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2007; and Shailagh Murray and Robin Wright, “Two GOP Senators Defy Bush on Iraq,” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2007.

109. The most influential such op-ed was probably that of Michael E. O’Hanlon and Kenneth M. Pollack, “A War We Just Might Win,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2007.

and exerted sustained lobbying to keep the surge going until September 2007.¹¹⁰ Prospects for the success of this lobbying effort would have been far bleaker if 2007 had begun with dramatic resignations in protest or some other form of a revolt from the generals who had opposed the surge. According to Senior Adviser Karl Rove, “If senior generals had resigned in protest over the surge, that might have been the straw that broke the camel’s back in Congress.”¹¹¹ A fortuitous consequence of the hybrid civil-military model that President Bush adopted in the late 2006–07 time period, then, was that he was able to impose a dramatic change in the strategy upon an initially skeptical military leadership against the backdrop of several years of stormy civil-military relations, yet without provoking serious public friction. In so doing, he was able to secure the political space General Petraeus and the troops on the ground needed to implement the surge.

The options between the professional supremacist and civilian supremacist schools may well have been this stark: follow the military supremacy purists and lose the war, or follow the civilian supremacy purists and provoke a military revolt that provides the opponents of the surge the political leverage they needed to hobble the surge before it could change the war’s trajectory—and thus lose the war anyway. The hybrid model that President Bush actually followed avoided both of these fates. Yet it may well have been decided by the slimmest of margins. It delayed the transition from the losing strategy. It left in place—in a key place where he could hamper the surge if he had chosen to do so—the strongest internal opponent to the surge. In addition, the strategy contained various compromises—for instance, the decision to keep the famous benchmarks for top-down reconciliation—which made it harder to set realistic standards for evaluation of the progress of the strategy. In the end, the hybrid model succeeded because the wavering Republican senators equivocated long enough for General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker to produce tangible results, but only just.

If this counterfactual line of reasoning is not persuasive, the default is to vindicate the civilian supremacist school unreservedly. If Bush administration concerns about how the military would react to having the surge “crammed down” its throat were overblown, or if concerns about how surge opponents in Congress could exploit military divisions were overblown, then President Bush should have pursued the more assertive civilian supremacist approach and imposed the surge much earlier. Regardless of whether the counterfactual

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110. Background interview with a firsthand source.

111. Karl Rove, interview by author, August 6, 2009.

is persuasive, the professional supremacist school fares poorly. Interestingly, support for the counterfactual can be found in an unlikely place: the lengths President Obama went to bring the military along when he conducted his Afghan strategy review in the fall of 2009. As recounted in Woodward's book, the roles and stances were different—in this case, the military favored the surge and President Obama and other civilians wanted to impose a lower-cost alternative—but some aspects of the civil-military dynamic were similar. President Obama worried about the same sort of military revolt, decided against imposing what he seemed to indicate was his most preferred solution, and instead went to extraordinary lengths to hem in the military and bring it along to a compromise that was markedly less than what it wanted.¹¹²

Conclusion

The civil-military theory debate needs to better address one key feature of the Iraq surge episode: how to handle generals when they disagree with civilian leaders. Civilian supremacists rightly expect this to be more the norm than the exception. Nevertheless, the civilian supremacy camp may need to be more finely attuned to the delicate politics involved when civilians pick and choose the “winners” among the dissenting generals.

Most of the problems in Iraq emerged neither from inadequate deference to military experts nor from the dereliction of generals in not more forcefully thwarting civilian leaders; most of the problems resulted from inaccurate judgments about how the Iraq War would unfold. Civilians and the military alike shared in those inaccurate judgments.¹¹³ Moreover, the debates and conflicts were, at least for the surge case, sincere and appropriate. Put plainly: the initial opposition of some senior military commanders to the surge was not intrinsically wrong in civil-military terms, and it was not a position taken for nefarious reasons. Even my evaluation that military advice was colored by political assessments more appropriately within the competence of the commander in chief needs caveats. The generals were all offering their best military opinion, sincerely felt, and forged under exemplary service in extraordinarily challenging times.¹¹⁴ Too much of the reporting and coverage of Iraq policymaking

112. Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), especially pp. 300–333.

113. John Garofano, “Effective Advice in Decisions for War: Beyond Objective Control,” *Orbis*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (March 2008), pp. 238–254, reaches a similar conclusion.

114. The best way to appreciate General Casey's reasoning, for example, is to read his opening statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee for his Army chief of staff confirmation hearings on February 1, 2007. He lays out how he developed the initial strategy and how he re-

trades in simplistic caricatures of duels between all-wise seers frustrated by bumbling, ideological idiots. No civil-military relations theory is going to make helpful prescriptions if it adopts that simplistic and inaccurate frame.

A similar embrace of nuance may explain why the commander in chief opted for compromise strategies rather than hewing to the exercise favored by academics: picking among ideal types. The phenomenon of a “decider” gamely trying to build consensus by splitting the difference may be more the norm than the exception. Arguably, that is precisely how President Eisenhower resolved the policy debate arising out of his Solarium exercise; he assigned groups to present competing (even mutually exclusive) strategies for confronting the Soviet Union and then chose a hybrid of all the proposals.¹¹⁵ President Obama took the same action in March 2009 when he opted for a mini-surge after his team conducted its review of the Afghan War.¹¹⁶ Indeed, when President Obama reopened the issue in the fall of 2009, he adopted yet another hybrid compromise that split the difference between civilian and military viewpoints.¹¹⁷ Such actions rarely decide an issue once and for all, and there are inherent downsides to such compromises, yet presidents as varied as Eisenhower, Bush, and Obama have all found recourse to do them.

Perhaps the most important implication of this reassessment is the need for humility on all sides of the civil-military nexus—civilian versus military, academic versus policymaker, and player versus Monday-morning quarterback—because the surge story shows that all sides have much to be humble about. The U.S. civil-military system performed poorly in multiple ways, and there is ample room for the modest reforms that show up at the end of every civil-military analysis: better education for military and especially civilian policy-

vised it over 2006, given the constraints under which he was operating; the constraint he found most vexing was the pace and development of strategic thinking among his Iraqi partners. These were not unreasonable concerns. “Senate Armed Services Committee Holds Hearings on Army Chief of Staff,” *Congressional Transcripts*, 110th Cong., 1st sess., February 1, 2007.

115. For varying perspectives on Project Solarium that underscore how even a formal process devolved into hybrid compromises, see Brands, “The Age of Vulnerability,” pp. 963–989; and William Stueck, “Reassessing U.S. Strategy in the Aftermath of the Korean War,” *Orbis*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (September 2009), pp. 571–590.

116. Peter D. Feaver, “Obama’s Afghan Policy Speech, Designed to Confound Domestic Opponents Is Confusing Pakistan,” Shadow Government blog, *ForeignPolicy.com*, December 15, 2009, http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/12/15/Obama_s_Afghan_policy_speech_designed_to_confound_domestic_opponents_is_confusing_pakistan. For a credulous, even fawning, treatment of such “decisiveness,” see Jonathan Alter, “Secrets from Inside the Obama War Room,” *Newsweek*, May 15, 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/05/15/secrets-from-inside-the-obama-war-room.html>; and Michael Crowley, “The Decider: Who Runs U.S. Foreign Policy?” *New Republic*, August 12, 2009, pp. 24–27. This episode is covered in a more critical fashion in Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, pp. 88–110.

117. Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*.

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makers, greater trust and greater trustworthiness from civilians and the military, more enlightened involvement of Congress, and so on. But the more radical proposals—turning the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff into a commanding general with command authority over all other officers,¹¹⁸ or abolishing the Office of the Secretary of Defense position¹¹⁹—are likely to be cures far worse than the malady they purport to address. In the case of the surge, the system worked.

118. Gibson, *Securing the State*.

119. John T. Kuehn, "Abolish the Office of the Secretary of Defense?" *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 47 (Fall 2007), pp. 114–116.