

# The Iraq War 'Surge' Myth Returns

**Exclusive:** To win Senate approval as Defense Secretary, former Sen. Chuck Hagel likely will be forced to bow before Official Washington's cherished myth of the Iraq War's "successful surge." To tell the more nuanced truth would open Hagel to another round of neocon attacks, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

At confirmation hearings for Defense Secretary-designate Chuck Hagel, Official Washington will reprise one of its favorite myths, the story of the "successful surge" in Iraq. Politicians and pundits have made clear that the Senate Armed Services Committee should hector Hagel over his opposition to President George W. Bush's 2007 "surge" of 30,000 troops into that failed war.

These "surge" lovers, who insist that Hagel be taken to task for his supposedly bad judgment over the "surge," include MSNBC's favorite neocon, Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, and conservative columnist George F. Will, who said Hagel should be asked, "If the surge had not happened, what would have happened in Iraq?"

Most likely, former Sen. Hagel, R-Nebraska, will judge that discretion is the better part of valor and admit his "mistake" rather than challenge such a deeply entrenched Washington myth. However, an honest answer to Will's question would be that the "surge" sacrificed nearly 1,000 additional U.S. military dead (and killed countless innocent Iraqis) while contributing very little to the war's outcome.

Any serious analysis of what happened in Iraq in 2007-08 would trace the decline in Iraqi sectarian violence mostly to strategies that predated the "surge" and were implemented by the U.S. commanding generals in 2006, George Casey and John Abizaid, who wanted as small a U.S. "footprint" as possible to tamp down Iraqi nationalism.

Among their initiatives, Casey and Abizaid ran a highly classified operation to eliminate key al-Qaeda leaders, most notably the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006. Casey and Abizaid also exploited growing Sunni animosities toward al-Qaeda extremists by paying off Sunni militants to join the so-called "Awakening" in Anbar Province.

And, as the Sunni-Shiite sectarian killings reached horrendous levels in 2006, the U.S. military assisted in the *de facto* ethnic cleansing of mixed neighborhoods by helping Sunnis and Shiites move into separate enclaves

protected by concrete barriers thus making the targeting of ethnic enemies more difficult. In other words, the flames of violence were likely to have abated whether Bush ordered the “surge” or not.

Radical Shiite leader Moktada al-Sadr also helped by issuing a unilateral cease-fire, reportedly at the urging of his patrons in Iran who were interested in cooling down regional tensions and speeding up the U.S. withdrawal. By 2008, another factor in the declining violence was the growing awareness among Iraqis that the U.S. military’s occupation indeed was coming to an end. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was demanding a firm timetable for American withdrawal from Bush, who finally capitulated.

### **Woodward’s Analysis**

Even author Bob Woodward, who had published best-sellers that praised Bush’s early war judgments, concluded that the “surge” was only one factor and possibly not even a major one in the declining violence.

In his book, *The War Within*, Woodward wrote, “In Washington, conventional wisdom translated these events into a simple view: The surge had worked. But the full story was more complicated. At least three other factors were as important as, or even more important than, the surge.”

Woodward, whose book drew heavily from Pentagon insiders, listed the Sunni rejection of al-Qaeda extremists in Anbar Province and the surprise decision of al-Sadr to order a cease-fire as two important factors. A third factor, which Woodward argued may have been the most significant, was the use of new highly classified U.S. intelligence tactics that allowed for rapid targeting and killing of insurgent leaders.

Beyond the dubious impact of the “surge” on the gradual reduction in violence, Bush’s escalation failed to achieve its other stated goals, particularly creating political space so the Sunni-Shiite divisions over issues like oil profits could be resolved. Despite the sacrifice of additional American and Iraqi blood, those compromises did not materialize.

And, if you’re wondering what the “surge” and its loosened rules of engagement meant for Iraqis, you should watch the WikiLeaks’ “Collateral Murder” video, which depicts a scene during the “surge” when U.S. firepower mowed down a group of Iraqi men, including two Reuters journalists, as they walked down a street in Baghdad. The U.S. attack helicopters then killed a father and wounded his two children when the man stopped his van in an effort to take survivors to the hospital.

However, in Washington, the still-influential neocons saw an opportunity in 2008

when the numbers of Iraq War casualties declined. The neocons credited themselves and the “successful surge” with the improvement as they polished up their tarnished reputations, badly stained by the blood of the long and disastrous conflict.

As the neocons pushed the “successful surge” myth, they were aided by the mainstream news media, which also had promoted the ill-fated war and was looking for a way to bolster its standing with the public. Typical of this new conventional wisdom, Newsweek published a cover story on the “surge” under the title, “victory at last.” To say otherwise brought you harsh criticism for not giving credit to “the troops.”

### **The Myth’s Consequences**

Thus, the myth grew that Bush’s “surge” had brought Iraqi violence under control and the United States to the brink of “victory.” Gen. David Petraeus, who took command of Iraq after Bush yanked Casey and Abizaid, was elevated into hero status as a military genius. Also, Defense Secretary Robert Gates received the encomium of “wise man” for implementing the “surge” after Bush fired Donald Rumsfeld in November 2006 for standing behind his field generals and suggesting a faster U.S. troop drawdown in Iraq.

With the new conventional wisdom firmly established in 2008, media stars pounded Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama for his heresy regarding the “surge.” In major televised interviews, CBS News’ Katie Couric and ABC News’ George Stephanopoulos demanded that Obama admit he was wrong to oppose the “surge” and that his Republican rival, Sen. John McCain, was right to support it.

For weeks, Obama held firm, insisting correctly that the issue was more complicated than his interviewers wanted to admit. He argued that there were many factors behind Iraq’s changed security environment. But ultimately he caved in while being interrogated on Sept. 4 by Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly.

“I think that the surge has succeeded in ways that nobody anticipated,” Obama confessed to O’Reilly. “It’s succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.”

Much as Hagel is likely to do, Obama judged that continued resistance to this Washington “group think” was futile. But candidate Obama’s surrender on the “successful surge” myth had long-term consequences.

For one, it gave Gen. Petraeus and Defense Secretary Gates inflated reputations inside Official Washington and greater leverage in 2009 to force President Obama into accepting a similar “surge” in Afghanistan, what some analysts now regard as Obama’s biggest national security blunder. [For details, see Robert

Parry's [America's Stolen Narrative.](#)]

The Iraq War's "surge" also did nothing to change the trajectory of an eventual American defeat there. Perhaps the only real accomplishment of the "surge" was to let President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney enjoy a decent interval between their departure from government in early 2009 and the unceremonious U.S. departure from Iraq in late 2011.

In the final accounting of the neocon adventure of conquering Iraq, nearly 4,500 American soldiers had died; some 30,000 were wounded; and an estimated \$1 trillion was squandered. What was ultimately left behind was not only a devastated Iraqi population but an authoritarian Shiite government (in place of Saddam Hussein's authoritarian Sunni government) and an Iraq that had become a regional ally of Iran (rather than a bulwark against Iran).

The hard truth is that this bloody folly was not "salvaged" by the "surge" despite what the likes of Michael O'Hanlon and George F. Will claim. The "surge" simply extended the killing for a few more years and bought Bush and Cheney their "decent interval."

But none of this reality has persuaded Official Washington to rethink its "successful surge" orthodoxy and more likely than not, Chuck Hagel will be forced to genuflect before this conventional wisdom to win his Senate confirmation.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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