

# Resurgence of the 'Surge' Myth

**Exclusive:** Official Washington loves the story the Iraq War was failing until President George W. Bush bravely ordered a "surge" in 2007 that won the war, but President Obama squandered the victory, requiring a new "surge" now. Except the narrative is dangerous make-believe, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

As American politicians and editorial writers resume their tough talk about sending more U.S. troops into Iraq, they are resurrecting the "successful surge" myth, the claim that President George W. Bush's dispatch of 30,000 more soldiers in 2007 somehow "won" the war a storyline that is beloved by the neocons because it somewhat lets them off the hook for starting the disaster in the first place.

But just because Official Washington embraces a narrative doesn't make it true. Bush's "surge" was, in reality, a dismal – an unconscionable – failure. It did not achieve its ostensible aim – the rationale Bush eventually decided to give it – namely, to buy time for Iraq's Sunnis and Shiites to reconcile.

Rather, it did just the opposite, greatly exacerbating antagonisms between them. That result was clearly predicted before the "surge" by none other than Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, top U.S. military leaders, and even the Washington Establishment-heavy Iraq Study Group, all of which were pressing for less – not more – military involvement.

In one very important sense, however, the "surge" into Iraq was wildly successful in achieving what was almost certainly its primary aim. It bought President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney a "decent interval" so they could leave office without an explicit military defeat sully their legacy and for the "acceptable" price of "only" 1,000 more U.S. dead.

At the time there were other options and indeed many of the "achievements" credited to the "surge" had already happened or at least had begun. The hyper-violent Al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in June 2006; ethnic cleansing was separating Sunni and Shiite communities; and the Sunni Awakening the buying off of some tribal leaders was being implemented.

Yet, by fall 2006 it also was unavoidably clear that a new course had to be chosen and implemented in Iraq, and virtually every sober thinker seemed opposed to sending more troops. The senior military, especially CENTCOM commander Gen. John Abizaid and his man on the ground in Iraq, Gen. George Casey, emphasized that sending still more U.S. troops to Iraq would simply reassure leading Iraqi politicians that they could relax and continue to take forever to get their act

together.

Here, for example, is Gen. Abizaid's answer at the Senate Armed Services Committee on Nov. 15, 2006, to Sen. John McCain, who had long been pressing vigorously for sending 20,000 more troops to Iraq:

"Senator McCain, I met with every divisional commander, General Casey, the corps commander, General Dempsey, we all talked together. And I said, 'in your professional opinion, if we were to bring in more American troops now, does it add considerably to our ability to achieve success in Iraq?' And they all said no. And the reason is because we want the Iraqis to do more. It is easy for the Iraqis to rely upon us do this work. I believe that more American forces prevent the Iraqis from doing more, from taking more responsibility for their own future."

The U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, sent a classified cable to Washington warning that "proposals to send more U.S. forces to Iraq would not produce a long-term solution and would make our policy less, not more, sustainable," according to a New York Times retrospective on the "surge" by Michael R. Gordon published on Aug. 31, 2008. Khalilzad was arguing, unsuccessfully, for authority to negotiate a political solution with the Iraqis.

There was also the establishment-heavy Iraq Study Group, created by Congress and led by Republican stalwart James Baker and Democrat Lee Hamilton. After months of policy review during 2006 with former CIA Director Robert Gates as a member it issued a final report on Dec. 6, 2006, that began with the ominous sentence "The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating."

It called for: "A change in the primary mission of U.S. Forces in Iraq that will enable the United States to begin to move its combat forces out of Iraq responsibly By the first quarter of 2008 all combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be out of Iraq." Though a member of the Iraq Study Group, Gates quietly disassociated himself from its findings when Bush was dangling the position of Defense Secretary in front of the always ambitious Gates. After Nov. 8, 2006 when Bush announced Gates's nomination, Gates quit the ISG.

Gates would do what he needed to do to become secretary of defense. At his confirmation hearing on Dec. 5, he obscured his opinions by telling the Senate Armed Services only "all options are on the table in terms of Iraq." The Democrats, including then-Sen. Hillary Clinton, swooned over Gates's supposed thoughtfulness and wisdom.

Many Democrats assumed that Gates would help persuade Bush to implement the ISG's plan for a troop drawdown, but they were in for a surprise. With unanimous

Democratic support and only two conservative Republicans opposed, Gates was confirmed by the full Senate on Dec. 6, the same day the ISG report was formally released. But the Democrats and much of the mainstream media had completely misread the behind-the-scenes story.

### **Gates to the Rescue**

The little-understood reality behind Bush's decision to catapult Robert Gates into his Pentagon perch was the astonishing fact that previous Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, of all people, was pulling a Robert McNamara; he was going wobbly on a war based largely on his own hubris-laden, misguided advice. In the fall of 2006 Rumsfeld was having a reality attack. In Rumsfeld-speak, he came face to face with a "known known."

On Nov. 6, 2006, a day before the mid-term elections, Rumsfeld sent a memo to the White House, in which he acknowledged, "Clearly, what U.S. forces are currently doing in Iraq is not working well enough or fast enough."

The rest of his memo sounded very much like the emerging troop-drawdown conclusions of the Iraq Study Group. The first 80 percent of Rumsfeld's memo addressed "Illustrative Options," including his preferred or "above the line" options such as "an accelerated drawdown of U.S. bases to five by July 2007" and withdrawal of U.S. forces "from vulnerable positions, cities, patrolling, etc. so the Iraqis know they have to pull up their socks, step up and take responsibility for their country."

Finally, Rumsfeld had begun to listen to his generals and others who knew which end was up. The hurdle? Bush and Cheney were not about to follow Rumsfeld's example in "going wobbly." Like Robert McNamara at a similar juncture during Vietnam, Rumsfeld had to be let go before he caused a U.S. president to "lose a war."

Waiting in the wings, though, was Robert Gates, who had been dispatched into a political purgatory after coming under suspicion of lying during the Iran-Contra scandal as Ronald Reagan's deputy CIA director. Though President George H. W. Bush pushed through Gates's nomination to be CIA director in 1991, Gates was sent packing by President Bill Clinton in 1993.

The elder Bush bailed Gates out again by getting him appointed as president of Texas A&M in College Station, Texas, the site of Bush's presidential library. But Gates began his Washington rehabilitation with a spot on the Iraq Study Group. While on the ISG, he evidenced no disagreement with its emerging conclusions at least not until Bush asked him to become Secretary of Defense in early November 2006. Rumsfeld had outlived his usefulness.

And, because of Official Washington's famous forgetfulness, Gates was remembered not as a conniving and deceptive CIA bureaucrat, but as a "wise man" who was seen as a restraining emissary sent by the senior George Bush to rein in his impetuous son.

### **Rumsfeld's 'Known Knowns'**

Easing the going-wobbly Rumsfeld off the stage was awkward. Right up to the week before the mid-term elections on Nov. 7, 2006, President Bush insisted that he intended to keep Rumsfeld in place for the next two years. Suddenly, however, the President had to confront Rumsfeld's apostasy favoring a drawdown of U.S. troops from Iraq.

Rumsfeld had let reality get to him, together with the very strong anti-surge protestations by all senior uniformed officers save one, the ambitious Gen. David Petraeus, who had jumped on board for the "surge" escalation following the advice of his favorite neocon theorists, including Frederick Kagan.

With the bemedaled Petraeus in the wings and pro-surge guidance from Kagan and retired Gen. Jack Keane, all the White House needed was a new Pentagon chief who could be counted on to take Rumsfeld's place and do the White House's bidding. (If the names Kagan and Keane sound somewhat familiar, would you believe that they are now playing on President Barack Obama's Bush-like aversion to losing a war on his watch, and are loudly and unashamedly promoting the idea of yet another "surge" into Iraq?)

On Nov. 5, 2006, Bush had a one-on-one with Gates in Crawford, Texas, and the deal was struck. Forget the torturously hammered-out recommendations of the Iraq Study Group; forget what the military commanders and even Rumsfeld were saying. Gates suddenly found the "surge" an outstanding idea. Well, not really. That's just what he let Bush believe. (While "chameleon" is the word most often used for Gates by those who knew him at the CIA, Melvin Goodman, who worked with Gates in the branch I led on Soviet Foreign Policy uses the best label – "windsock.")

Gates is second to none, not even Petraeus, in ambition and self-promotion. It is a safe bet he wanted desperately to be Secretary of Defense, to be back at center stage in Washington after nearly 14 years in exile from the big show.

He quickly agreed to tell Gen. Abizaid to retire; offer Gen. Casey a sinecure as Army chief of staff, providing he kept his mouth shut; and to eagle-scout his way through Senate confirmation with the help of pundits like David Ignatius composing panegyrics in honor of Gates, the "realist."

So relieved were the senators to be rid of the hated-but-feared Rumsfeld that

the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Dec. 5, 2006, on Gates's nomination had the aura of a pajama party (I was there). Gates told the senators bedtime stories and vowed to show "great deference to the judgment of generals."

That "deference" included Gates dumping Abizaid and Casey. But the administration faltered embarrassingly in coming up with a reasonable rationale to "justify" the surge, especially in the face of so much on-the-ground advice opposing the troop increase. And, the truth wouldn't work either. You couldn't really say: "We're trading the lives of U.S. troops for a politically useful 'decent interval.'"

On Dec. 20, 2006, President Bush told the Washington Post that he was "inclined to believe we do need to increase our troops, the Army and Marines." He added, tellingly, "There's got to be a specific mission that can be accomplished with the addition of more troops," adding that he would look to Gates, just back from a quick trip to Baghdad, to help explain.

### **Searching for a Rationale**

By way of preliminary explanation for the "surge," President Bush wandered back and forth between "ideological struggle" to "sectarian violence." He told the Post, "I'm going to keep repeating this over and over again, that I believe we're in an ideological struggle" and, besides, "sectarian violence [is] obviously the real problem we face."

When it became clear that those dogs wouldn't hunt, the White House justified the "surge" as necessary to give Iraqi government leaders "breathing space" to work out their differences. That was the rationale offered by Bush in a major address on Jan 10, 2007. Pulling out all the stops, he also raised the specter of another 9/11 and, of course, spoke of the "decisive ideological struggle of our time."

Taking a slap at his previous generals, the ISG and the wobbly Rumsfeld, Bush dismissed those who "are concerned that the Iraqis are becoming too dependent on the United States" and those whose "solution is to scale back America's efforts in Baghdad, or announce a phased withdrawal of our combat forces."

The President did warn that the year ahead would be "bloody and violent, even if our strategy works." He got that part right. One would be tempted to laugh at Bush's self-absorption – and Gates's ambition – were we not talking about the completely unnecessary killing of over 1,000 U.S. troops and the brutalization of other U.S. soldiers – not to mention the slaughter of thousands of Iraqis.

In reality, by throwing 30,000 additional troops into Iraq, Bush and Cheney got two years of breathing room as they wound down their administration and some

political space to snipe at their successors who inherited the Iraq mess.

But what about the thousand-plus U.S. troops killed during the “surge”? The tens of thousand of Iraqis? The hundreds of thousands displaced from their homes in the Baghdad area alone? I fear the attitude was this: Nobody would get killed, just a bunch of Iraqis and GIs mostly from small-town and inner-city America. And, anyway, our soldiers and Marines all volunteered, didn’t they?

Bush, Cheney and Gates apparently deemed it a small price to pay for enabling them to blame a successor administration for the inevitable withdrawal from America’s first large-scale war of aggression. I have known Gates for 45 years; he has always been transparently ambitious, but he is also bright. He knew better; and he did it anyway.

While those tactical machinations and political calculations were underway, Col. W. Patrick Lang, USA (retired), and I wrote a piece on Dec. 20, 2006, in which we exposed the chicanery and branded such a “surge” strategy “nothing short of immoral, in view of the predictable troop losses and the huge number of Iraqis who would meet violent injury and death.”

Surprisingly, we were joined by Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Oregon, who explained to ABC’s George Stephanopoulos why Smith said on the Senate floor that U.S. policy on Iraq may be “criminal.” “You can use any adjective you want, George. But I have long believed that in a military context, when you do the same thing over and over again without a clear strategy for victory, at the expense of your young people in arms, that is dereliction. That is deeply immoral.”

**Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, the publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. In the 1960s he served as an Army infantry/intelligence officer and later as a CIA analyst. Full disclosure: In the 1970s, he was chief of CIA’s Soviet Foreign Policy Branch, in which Gates worked as a junior analyst. On his annual Fitness Report, Gates was formally counseled regarding the disruptive effects of his unbridled ambition – as were managers up the line. Later, when Reagan’s CIA Director William Casey picked Gates to head CIA’s analysis directorate, there was considerable regret that no one listened.**

---