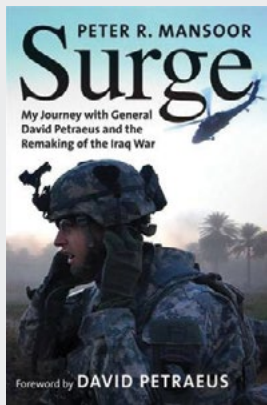


The Lessons of “The Surge”



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Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War

Peter R. Mansoor, Yale University Press, 2013, 324 pages, \$28.00

ON 10 JANUARY 2007, President George W. Bush announced that 20,000 additional American troops would deploy to Iraq. The military purpose of this move, now known simply as “the Surge,” would be to secure Baghdad, reinforce success in al Anbar province, and give the fledgling Iraqi government time to solve the political problems tearing Iraq apart. Its greater strategic purpose—unspoken by senior U.S. leaders but clear to everyone—was to prevent the blow to national prestige that would occur if, as appeared imminent, the U.S. military were defeated in Iraq.

Using the additional forces and the counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine that he had helped develop, Gen. David Petraeus led Multi-National Forces-Iraq (MNF-I) to achieve success that exceeded the expectations of even the most diehard COIN advocates. By the time the Surge was finished, the capability and reach of Al-Qaeda in Iraq had greatly diminished; the Jaish al-Mahdi, the militia of the rebel Shi’a cleric Muctadr Sadr, had begun to lay down its arms; violence had decreased to levels not seen since early 2004; and the Iraqi government had implemented some of the political compromises necessary for a stable Iraq.

Future historians will no doubt consider the Surge to be the most convincing and unexpectedly successful campaign that the U.S. military waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. Attesting to this future judgment is the growing number of impressive books that analyze this success, to include Tom Ricks’ *The Gamble*, Bing West’s *The Strongest Tribe*, Bob Woodward’s *The War Within*, Linda Robinson’s *Tell Me How This Ends*, and Michael Gordon and Gen. Bernard Trainor’s *Endgame*.

However, within this campaign’s already resplendent historiography, Dr. Peter Mansoor’s *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*, stands apart. It is no wonder that it does. Mansoor possesses unique credentials for writing it.

Lt. Col. Douglas Pryer has held numerous command and staff positions in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He currently serves as a division chief for the Electronic Proving Ground, Fort Huachuca, Arizona. He has an M.M.A.S. (military history) from CGSC and is the author of The Fight for the High Ground: The U.S. Army and Interrogation during Operation Iraqi Freedom May 2003-April 2004.

In 2000, Mansoor's *The GI Offensive in Europe* won the Society for Military History and the Army Historical Society's distinguished book awards. His 2008 memoir describing his time in Iraq as commander of the 1st Brigade of the 1st Armored Division, *Baghdad at Sunrise*, also received critical acclaim. During the Surge itself, Mansoor served as Petraeus's executive officer. As this campaign wound down, Mansoor left Iraq to retire and take the position of General Raymond E. Mason Jr. Chair of Military History at his graduate alma mater, Ohio State University, where he remains today.

Mansoor is, in short, an accomplished military historian and proven combat leader. What is more, his position as Petraeus's executive officer gave him almost unique access to the story of the Surge. Mansoor had Petraeus's staff assemble an archive of primary source documents, which he was later able to get declassified and to reference as he wrote the book. If Petraeus himself were to write a memoir of MNF-I's role in this campaign, it is possible that historians would consider Petraeus's account no more authoritative.

If Petraeus were to write such a book, the reader gets an excellent sense of what he would say in his long Foreword to *Surge*. Here, Petraeus declares that the "surge of ideas" was even more important than the "surge of forces." Two of these ideas were that the most important terrain in Iraq was the human terrain and that the most important mission of coalition forces was to protect Iraqis. Other "big ideas" included a comprehensive civil-military approach, the need to support and grow the Sunni Awakening, the aggressive use of targeted special operations, the education of detainees and other programs to reduce recidivism, and the importance of being "first with the truth" in the media. Some readers will consider this insightful Foreword alone worth the book's price.

Mansoor's chapters add the flesh of details to the bones of this Foreword. These details are enhanced by analysis informed by much experience, study, and reflection.

Mansoor begins with an incisive narrative of the post-invasion events that led to a "war almost lost." This narrative is most original, authentic, and important when told from his perspective as a brigade commander in Baghdad. After all, it was during this crucial period that poor political

decisions, a lack of a coherent military plan, and often awful military tactics enflamed the Sunni insurgency and radicalized the Sadrist movement.

In his second chapter, "Designing the Surge," he gives an insider's view of the process by which the Surge was designed and the rise of COIN theory, doctrine, and training. He discusses the COIN Center that he established at Fort Leavenworth, the writing and staffing of our military's COIN manual, and the famous "Council of Colonels" that he and then-Col. H.R. McMaster took part in as two of the Army's representatives.

The narrative then moves to Baghdad and the implementation of the Surge. The reader is given access to such details as Petraeus's battle rhythm (to include Petraeus's weekly video teleconferences with President Bush), Petraeus's working relationships with Ambassador Ryan Crocker and Gen. Raymond Odierno, and the eccentric, highly educated personalities (often referred to as the "COINDistas") with whom Petraeus surrounded himself.

This stage-setting discussion evolves into chapters largely devoted to specific events, including the Sunni Awakening; Petraeus's and Crocker's testimony to Congress; and the "Charge of the Knights," the critical battle for Basrah that proved just as important as the Sunni Awakening to reducing Iraq's level of violence.

Throughout it all, the reader realizes just how much the success of the Surge was due to an almost miraculous alignment of the stars. Mansoor points out, for example, that the Sunnis had to be brutalized for years by Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Shi'a death squads before they could stop fighting and start working with U.S. forces, the one ally who might prevent their becoming a persecuted minority in the new Iraq. He relates how Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's prime minister, had to learn to view the Jaish al-Mahdi as a personal threat before he could lead the Iraqi Army against this militia in Karbala and Basrah. And he describes the virtuoso performances that Petraeus and Crocker gave on Capitol Hill that galvanized Republican support and ensured Congress would grant the Surge just enough time to succeed—masterful performances that few other leaders could have pulled off.

Thus, although Mansoor's faith in COIN is evident, his perspective is a nuanced one. He suggests

that there was a window of opportunity during the first two months after the invasion when a politically aware, COIN-like occupation plan—properly led, resourced, and executed—may have prevented a strong insurgency from rising. But, such poor U.S. decisions as the de-Baathification decree, the disbanding of the Iraqi Army, and the establishment of a sectarian and illegitimate Iraqi Governing Council caused Sunnis to feel disenfranchised from their government and paved the path to civil war. There was yet another moment of opportunity in early 2004 to reach out to the Sunnis after the capture of Saddam Hussein, but the moment was lost when Coalition Provisional Authority leader L. Paul Bremer III failed to take advantage of it.

COIN theory and practice, Mansoor argues, could not have triumphed until the stars were aligned properly. That is, the Surge was “the right strategy at the right time.” As Sheikh Sattar, one of the Sunni leaders of the Awakening, said, “You Americans couldn’t convince us [to fight Al-Qaeda]. We Sunnis had to convince ourselves.”

Mansoor ends the book by concluding that the surge of ideas and forces “salvaged a war almost lost, but only by the slimmest of margins.” But, is Mansoor’s conclusion one that future historians will hold?

In recent months, Iraqis have witnessed levels of internecine violence not seen since the early days of the Surge. If Iraq’s current instability deepens and its government falls or the country breaks apart, future historians are unlikely to judge that the Surge salvaged the war. They would believe this no more than they conclude that the Christmas Bombings of 1972 prevented U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War. Instead, they would say that the Surge, like the Christmas Bombings, helped bring the right parties to the negotiating table but failed to secure a lasting, favorable peace. Instead of victory, they would say, the Surge salvaged opportunity—an opportunity that the United States then squandered with the way it left Iraq.

This begs another question: if events prove that the Surge failed to salvage final victory, what will future military professionals say about today’s COIN theory?

Two noisy, discordant narratives have already emerged. The narrative on the decline is that this theory simply works, when properly understood,

resourced, and applied. It argues that the validity of this approach was proven spectacularly at the operational level by the Surge and at the tactical level in Mosul from 2003-2004, Tal Afar from 2005-2006, and Ramadi from 2006-2007. It also contends that any other enduring successes on the ground in Iraq or Afghanistan were COIN-driven, while any failures were due to inadequate resources or the inability of leaders to fully appreciate and apply COIN theory.

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But this narrative is untenable. It applies the certainty of empirical science to the human domain of war—a domain much less predictable than that ruled by the laws of matter and physics. Human beings (counterinsurgents) can certainly influence other human beings (insurgents and their supporters) to change their opinions and to alter their behavior, but no theoretical approach—no matter how well applied—can guarantee such effects. Mansoor’s *Surge* thus serves as a necessary and salutary corrective to this overweening narrative, one that highlights the degree to which the success of counterinsurgents (particularly foreign counterinsurgents) is dependent upon conditions that they may influence but can never fully control.

The opposing narrative is even more untenable. Those who advance it argue that, due to their great cost in blood and treasure, COIN conflicts abroad can achieve at best Pyrrhic victories. The reason for this, they contend, is that foreigners will never be accepted by a local population.

However, this narrative ignores the scores if not hundreds of foreign occupations in history that, after employing facets of modern COIN theory, obtained successful conclusions at acceptable

costs. These include America's own occupations of the Philippines, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Germany, and Japan during the first half of the 20th century.

This narrative's proponents also typically contend that COIN achieved no meaningful success—not even at the tactical level—in either Iraq or Afghanistan. When assessing the Surge, for example, they claim that Iraq's Sunnis had already turned against Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Petraeus, COIN, and the surge of forces, they say, were not needed to end the Sunni insurgency. Or, they contend, it was really technologically enhanced kill-capture operations that resulted in a veneer of stability in Iraq.

As Mansoor thoroughly documents and explains in *Surge*, this view is counter-factual. The Sunni Awakening, for instance, would neither have lasted nor spread without Petraeus's strong support.

Mansoor's robust rebuttal of the anti-COIN narrative is one of the greatest services *Surge* performs. True, as Mansoor admits, this narrative contains some truth: U.S. political leaders should accurately gauge the potential risks and costs of implementing COIN before conducting regime-change operations. But, those who equate the implementation of COIN theory with large-scale occupations abroad or who argue that such occupations never work are clearly seeing only what they want to see.

When U.S. politicians, some day, again send troops to a place where some version of today's COIN theory must be employed, U.S. military leaders will need to be open-eyed and ready. Thankfully, they now have *Surge* as a practical guide. Mansoor's book is more than a first-rate history and memoir; it is an instant COIN classic to rank with David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, Stu Herrington's *Stalking the Vietcong*, John Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife*, and David Kilcullen's *The Accidental Guerrilla*.

This does not mean that *Surge* will not receive some criticism. It will. For instance, some readers may find Mansoor's writing style to be a bit academic, though he is an exceptional, accessible writer. This is because, unlike such authors as Tom Ricks and Bing West, he expends little effort painting vivid scenes and relating dialogue. But, his choice of clear, largely analytical prose was no doubt deliberate. After all, this style lends scholarly authority to a book that is part-memoir—something very difficult to achieve but pulled off well in this case.

What will probably be most criticized is Mansoor's affixing few if any foibles to Petraeus or to members of Petraeus's inner circle. Some may contend that, in such matters, the loyalty of Mansoor the friend won out over the duty of Mansoor the historian. However, in light of the remarkable things Petraeus and his "COINdistas" did in service to our country, it also can be argued that Mansoor's focus on their positive qualities is only right and proper.

Whatever the weaknesses of this book, its strengths far outweigh them. It is much more than a "second draft" of history, as Mansoor in his "Preface" modestly declares it. *Surge* is the definitive account of the campaign it describes and probably will remain so for some time to come. Most importantly, it contains a profound lesson that America's policymakers and service members need to hear: in the information age, military success is still possible, if conditions are favorable and battlefield problems are treated as having both political and military components—that is, as problems requiring both brains and brawn to solve.

The publication of *Surge* is a literary event that lives up to expectations. College instructors cannot do better than to choose *Surge* as a textbook for classes on COIN or the Iraq War, and it deserves a spot on the bookshelves of every politician, diplomat, military leader, and serious student of modern war. **MR**