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How the Surge Was Won

America's longest-serving general in Iraq says that when they realized the U.S. presence in their communities was permanent, allies came 'out of the woodwork.'

By DAVID FEITH

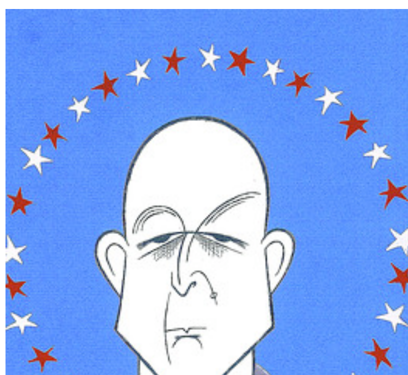
On Sept. 10, 2007, Gen. David Petraeus climbed the steps of the U.S. Capitol to testify that the surge in Iraq was succeeding. Already derided by MoveOn.org as "General Betray Us," he was lambasted by then-Sen. Hillary Clinton for his testimony's "willing suspension of disbelief."

On Sept. 10, 2010, Gen. Raymond Odierno—Gen. Petraeus's main partner throughout the surge—sits in a New York hotel room and reports matter-of-factly that in today's Iraq "sectarian violence is almost zero."

What a difference three years makes.

"Yes, there's still some terrorism but it's not insurgents anymore," says Gen. Odierno. "In 2004, '05 [and] '06 you had an open insurgency against Iraq as a whole. It was many different groups fighting to really decide what Iraq's future will be. We're beyond that now—I think people know where Iraq is moving."

Gen. Odierno has served in Iraq longer than any other general—including 40 of the past 46 months. He recently completed his tour as U.S. commander in Iraq, where his final task was to draw down U.S. forces to 50,000 troops and hand nationwide security responsibility over to the Iraqis. On Sept. 1 the general ceded command of the remaining U.S. troops—six brigades whose mission is "advise and assist," rather than combat—to Gen. Lloyd Austin.



There was no ticker-tape parade, but Gen. Odierno departed having engineered one of the greatest military turnarounds in American history.

Now on leave from the Army, the general will become commander in mid-October of the Joint Forces Command in Norfolk, Va. So in his midtown Manhattan hotel suite, he's wearing his "civvies" (civilian clothes): running sneakers, plaid shorts and an Under Armour polo shirt. At six-foot-five with a bald, bullet-shaped head, he's an imposing

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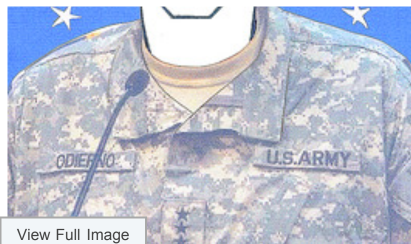

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figure—if somewhat less so than when he appears on television with four stars on his shoulders and 35 years of decorations on his chest.

In typically reserved military fashion, he doesn't talk of U.S. "victory" even as he readily elaborates on Iraq's great promise. Gen. Odierno served his first tour in northern Iraq's so-called Sunni Triangle, as commander of the Fourth Infantry Division from March 2003 to April 2004. The high point came in December 2003, when soldiers from the division captured Saddam Hussein hiding in a spider hole near his hometown of Tikrit.

There were low points, though: The Sunni Triangle had a high volume of Saddam loyalists, so Gen. Odierno's division faced fierce resistance. It earned a reputation for aggressive tactics including indiscriminate arrests and abuse of detainees. In an extreme case, some soldiers from the division allegedly handcuffed two detainees together and forced them into the Tigris River, reportedly causing one to drown. The goal, soldiers said, was to establish authority and gain control.

By the time the surge was devised in 2006, the U.S. military considered such behavior a potent—and avoidable—recruiting tool for the insurgency. The surge "shows we learned to adapt, to change. We changed our organization, we changed how we were equipped, and we changed how we did our operations—all while in contact [with the enemy]. That's an incredible feat," says Gen. Odierno.

A key principle of the surge was that the soldier's task is ultimately to protect the Iraqi population, not to hunt the enemy at all costs. Such thinking derived from counterinsurgency pioneers like the French colonel David Galula and was synthesized for the modern U.S. military in a field manual authored primarily by Gen. Petraeus in 2006.

"In 2007 I would go out and Americans would show up in a community where they hadn't been in a while. For the first three days, no one would talk to any of the Americans," he recalls. "But as soon as they started setting up their base—usually meaning they put T-walls around a couple buildings—[Iraqis] would come out of the woodwork. Why? Because when they saw the T-walls go up they knew it was gonna be somewhat permanent, that [the Americans] were going to stay . . . not just gonna come through here for a few days and leave us and we'll be slaughtered."

So how should the U.S. determine when is best to withdraw forces—and what does the surge suggest about the effectiveness of setting withdrawal deadlines? "I think," says the general before a long pause, that making deadlines "conditions-based is important because you really do have to constantly assess to determine what really is going on on the ground."

Asked how the experience in Iraq bears on U.S. policy in Afghanistan, he adds: "With Iraq it was a little different. We actually had a signed agreement that set up these deadlines." In the case of the Afghan surge, of course, the White House has unilaterally set a withdrawal timeline beginning in July 2011.

Iraq's surge was perhaps most crucial for successfully allowing national politics to take hold. Today, as Gen. Odierno tells it, Iraq's remaining violence is far less significant than the democratic, nationalistic consensus that has emerged nationwide. "Every Iraqi I talk to has a strong belief in democracy and how important it is for Iraq because of what they've been through."

What about the constant specter of foreign influence? "Everybody I talk to, I mean every political leader, every military leader, every citizen—and if you're there living and reading their newspapers and what they're saying—it's very clear they want to be their own country. They don't want anybody—the United States, Iran, anybody—telling them what to do." Eighty-five percent of Iraqis believe Iran is trying to harm their country, he says, citing polls commissioned regularly by the U.S. military and embassy.

Nonetheless, Iraq remains unable to form a government more than half a year after national elections didn't yield a clear winner. Gen. Odierno predicts a governing coalition will emerge

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by October because Ramadan has ended and Iraqi politicians are feeling that "it's really time to do this." He believes that Iraqis "have bought into the political process" and are waiting for their government to "start moving forward," but they remain at risk of becoming disillusioned.

It's a serious warning. Though it seems trifling compared to what Vice President Joe Biden offered the day before in a little-noticed interview with the New York Times. Asked about Iraq's political jockeying, Mr. Biden—the Obama administration's point-man on Iraq—volunteered that what troubles him is the prospect that if there's no new government in six months, the Iraqi military may decide to intervene: "My worry will be that generals in the [Iraqi] military will start saying: 'Wait a minute, which way is this going to go?' . . . I worry then that it goes from right now everybody saying, 'Salute Iraq' to 'Whoa, let's figure this out.' And what is now a unified command" would splinter.

"The worst-case scenario is that you have fracturing of the military," Gen. Odierno says in response. "That said, we've seen none of that so far. In fact the thing I've been most pleased with is how the military has remained neutral . . . although this is new to them, going through this democratic process."

A moment later, the general returns to the positive. "I think sometimes we don't realize the importance of Iraq in the Middle East as a whole," he says. "A strong, democratic Iraq with a developing economy could really be a game-changer in the Middle East."

But, he cautions, Iraq won't be transformational by December 2011—the month U.S. troops are due to leave the country, according to the U.S.-Iraqi status of forces agreement. "It's going to be three to five years [after 2011] for us to figure out if this is going right and if it's what we want," he says. "There's a real opportunity here that I don't think the citizens of the United States realize. I really truly believe there's an opportunity we might never get again."

So as the U.S. mission in Iraq moves forward, what should vigilant Americans watch for?

That specter again: foreign influence. But with a twist. In the future, says Gen. Odierno, "I think they'll try to do it economically more than through violence. What happens if Iran and others are able to impact economic development inside of Iraq through political and other connections?" Watch whether parliament gives the green light to private business investment, he advises.

For all our talk about Iran, though, Gen. Odierno is guarded and vague regarding the Islamic Republic's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. Has Tehran's ability to influence Baghdad over the past seven years risen and fallen together with the strength of its nuclear program and its stature on the international stage? The general answers that the mullahs' nuclear program actually "hurts them" since "it makes people want to do what they can to ensure that they don't get this capability"—hence closer U.S. relations with Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

As for how the possibility of Iran becoming a nuclear power affects U.S. and Iraqi defense planning, the general offers something of a nonresponse about the importance of developing the U.S.-Iraqi partnership "along several different lines—security, technology, education, economic development." It all sounds like confirmation—indirect, of course—that, notwithstanding the brilliance of the surge, an Iranian nuke would be a game-changer in the region and far beyond.

The general is more willing to discuss—and dispute—the common charge that the Iraq war was a victory for Iran because it removed Tehran's main counterweight. "The assumption that it was a good thing how Iran and Iraq balanced each other is not a good assumption," he says. "They might have balanced each other but how they balanced each other . . . [caused] significant instability in the region." Although Gen. Odierno doesn't say it, Saddam Hussein's rivalry with Iran led him to keep up the fiction of having active chemical and biological weapons programs—an approach that helped bring on a war that has cost scores of thousands of Iraqi lives and more than 4,100 American ones.

"We always forget that we did rid them of Saddam Hussein, and I think Saddam Hussein could have been a real danger down the road," says Gen. Odierno about how the Iraq war affected U.S. national security.

"Secondly, the fact that al Qaeda was targeting Iraq to be the center of their caliphate in order

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to carry forward terrorism around the world: They failed . . . Now Iraqis are rejecting al Qaeda. Now we have a very important Middle Eastern country who is rejecting terrorism."

Gen. Odierno says that the moment he first thought a surge could work was in December 2006, when he learned that seven of Anbar Province's 13 tribes had decided to fight al Qaeda and join the political process. Fitting, since counterinsurgency doctrine emphasizes the imperative of earning the trust and support of the local population.

But trust earned must become trust maintained. That's the challenge going forward. Already some senior Iraqi leaders are suggesting that the U.S. drawdown is overly hasty. Lt. Gen. Babakir Zebari, the chief of staff of the Iraqi joint forces, said last month that "the U.S. army must stay until the Iraqi army is fully ready in 2020." Ayad Allawi, the leading vote-getter in March's election, recently agreed: "It may well take another 10 years," he told Der Spiegel.

Gen. Odierno says he isn't surprised by such comments. He adds: "If the new [Iraqi] government comes on board and says we still think we need some assistance beyond 2011 . . . I think we'll listen."

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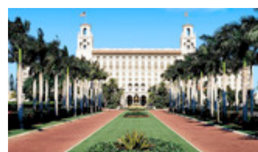

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