Counterinsurgency and collateral damage

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The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008
By Thomas E. Ricks
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"All armies get it wrong at the beginning," the great military historian Michael Howard once wrote. "The question is who adapts fastest."

The American occupation of Iraq, virtually all US officials now agree, was a disaster. After three years, defense analyst Fred Kagan, a supporter of the invasion, acknowledged that "Baghdad is burning, Iraq is about to explode and we are moving toward a primitive civil war. This is about to head off the cliff."

Amid calls for the withdrawal of American forces, a small group of military men and civilian planners led by Jack Keane, retired vice chief of staff of the army, and Eliot Cohen, a professor of strategy at Johns Hopkins University, persuaded president George W. Bush to increase the number of troops in Iraq and authorize Gen. David Petraeus to launch a counterinsurgency campaign. In The Gamble, Thomas Ricks, senior Pentagon correspondent of The Washington Post and the author of Fiasco (2006), a devastating portrait of the invasion of Iraq, draws on in-depth interviews with advisers and officers up and down the chain of command to provide a smart and sobering assessment of the "surge." Implemented brilliantly in 2007, the new approach reduced violence, enhanced security and routed al-Qaida in Iraq.

Nonetheless, Ricks suggests, provocatively and persuasively, Petraeus's tactical successes may have done little more than lengthen the war. Abandoning his vision of an Iraq that is democratic, respects human rights and is an ally of the United States, Bush in his last year in office sought only "sustainable security." He left to Barack Obama the task of reconciling Sunnis, Shi'ites and Kurds, and settling on a formula for sharing oil revenues. And he made it almost inevitable that American troops would remain in Iraq until 2011 "and probably much longer."

The cornerstone of counterinsurgency, Ricks reminds us, involved security for civilians, not killing terrorists. At times, he makes it sound easy. First in Anbar province, and then throughout the country, Ricks writes, Col. Sean McFarland, Gen. Ray Odierno and Petraeus made sure that US forces didn't hole up in big bases, abuse prisoners, take relatives of insurgents hostage or generate "collateral damage" that wasn't absolutely necessary. Establishing links with locals by putting their boots on the ground, soldiers gathered increasingly valuable information, exploited divisions between insurgents and began to get disaffected, greedy and opportunistic tribal leaders to change sides.
Petraeus's biggest gamble, of course, was the "so-called Sunni awakening," a series of agreements with insurgents (who opposed the foreign fighters of al-Qaida and the Shi'ite-dominated government of Nouri al-Maliki) to support "neighborhood watches" and "provisional security forces." By 2008, the Americans had concluded cease-fires with 779 local militias, ranging in size from 10 to 800 fighters. They equipped these private armies with small arms, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and howitzers. And they paid Iraqi foot soldiers 10 dollars a day, with considerably larger bonuses to sheikhs.

The turning of the Sunni insurgents (along with the decision of Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr to put a freeze on the military operations of his Mahdi Army), Ricks implies, was as significant or more significant than the surge in reducing violence in Iraq. Like feeding a baby crocodile, however, arming 103,000 local militiamen was a tactic that might well come back to bite the Americans. "Today, they are paid by the Americans," an aide to Maliki told the Associated Press. "Tomorrow they can be paid by al-Qaida." Even more ominously, when US troops depart, a more cohesive, better trained, better armed cadre of Sunni soldiers might use their weapons in a sectarian war on Shi'ites and the central government in Baghdad.

Although he's convinced that the surge was the least bad alternative available to the United States, Ricks acknowledges that to date it has altered the surface of Iraq but not its fundamentals. With all three sectarian groups armed to the teeth and no political solution in sight, every gain is potentially reversible. In the best case scenario, a relatively stable, mildly authoritarian Iraq, allied with Iran, would not threaten its neighbors.

But it's equally likely, or more likely, that as US influence wanes (and the patience of the American people has already worn thin), a Shi'ite general might engineer a military coup, suppress the Sunnis and seize oil-rich Kirkuk from the Kurds. Even worse, Iraq might resemble the dysfunctional state of Lebanon, fighting a low-level civil war - or come apart at the seams.

Asked how does it all end, one member of Petraeus's think tank confessed, "I don't think it does end. We are going to be in this centrally located Arab state for a long time." Candidate Obama did not agree, but President Obama appears to be hedging his bets by limiting his timetable of withdrawal to "combat troops." Does he agree with Ricks and former ambassador Ryan Crocker, one wonders, that we may be only halfway through the war in Iraq, with the most important developments yet to unfold?

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