

## Book Reviews

### The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008<sup>1</sup>

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*The situation in Iraq is unacceptable to the American people, and it is unacceptable to me. Our troops in Iraq have fought bravely. They have done everything we have asked them to do. Where mistakes have been made, the responsibility rests with me. It is clear that we need to change our strategy in Iraq.*<sup>3</sup>

#### I. Introduction

Americans may have already forgotten that in late 2006 and early 2007, Iraq was on the verge of collapse into a civil war. Following a mid-term election in which Democrats, spurred to victory in part by an anti-war movement, seized control of Congress from the Republicans, many in America, even in Iraq, were expecting a withdrawal of troops from Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Instead, on the night of 10 January 2007, President George W. Bush addressed the world and stated that America would take a new course in the war: “a surge of more than 20,000 additional American troops to Iraq.”<sup>5</sup> President Bush stated that this effort would have “a well-defined mission: to help Iraqis clear and secure neighborhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security that Baghdad needs.”<sup>6</sup>

In *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008*, Thomas Ricks follows up his acclaimed novel, *Fiasco*,<sup>7</sup> with a comprehensive examination of the “surge” of U.S. military forces into Iraq in 2007–2008. Ricks takes a mostly

complimentary stance in *The Gamble*, stating that the surge “was the right step to take, or more precisely, the least wrong move in a misconceived war”<sup>8</sup> and that “the U.S. military had regained the strategic initiative.”<sup>9</sup> However, Ricks concludes that the surge “fell short strategically” because Iraqi officials did not seize the opportunity to move the country forward.<sup>10</sup> Thomas Ricks succeeds in providing a wealth of information and analysis on the successes and failures of the surge strategy, but his analysis falls short of perfection by manipulating chronologies and failing to adequately investigate the political failures of the Iraqi Government.

#### II. Background

Thomas Ricks has spent his career as a journalist covering the U.S. military. Ricks graduated from Yale University in 1977 and began covering the U.S. military as a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* in 1982.<sup>11</sup> Ricks reported for the *Wall Street Journal* until the end of 1999, moving to the same “beat” with the *Washington Post* from 2000 until 2008.<sup>12</sup> Ricks has authored several other books on the U.S. military, including *Making the Corps, A Soldier’s Duty*, and the aforementioned *Fiasco*.<sup>13</sup> Ricks currently is a senior fellow with the Center for a New American Security, a contributing editor to *Foreign Policy* magazine, and special military correspondent for the *Washington Post*.<sup>14</sup>

#### III. Analysis

General David Petraeus’s contributions to the surge are widely documented,<sup>15</sup> but one of the most interesting

<sup>1</sup> THOMAS E. RICKS, *THE GAMBLE: GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS AND THE AMERICAN MILITARY ADVENTURE IN IRAQ, 2006–2008* (2009).

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<sup>3</sup> President George W. Bush, Address to the Nation (Jan. 10, 2007), available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html> [hereinafter Address to the Nation].

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 74–77, 78–79, 111.

<sup>5</sup> Address to the Nation, *supra* note 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> THOMAS E. RICKS, *FIASCO: THE AMERICAN MILITARY ADVENTURE IN IRAQ* (2006). For those who have not read *Fiasco*, Michiko Kakutani’s book review notes that Ricks passes his judgment on the Bush Administration by serving up a “portrait of that war as a misguided exercise in hubris, incompetence and folly with a wealth of detail and evidence that is both staggeringly vivid and persuasive.” Michiko Kakutani, *From Planning to Warfare to Occupation, How Iraq Went Wrong*, N.Y. TIMES, July 25, 2006, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/25/books/25kaku.html>.

<sup>8</sup> RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 295.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 294.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 296.

<sup>11</sup> The Best Defense, About Thomas E. Ricks, [http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/About\\_Ricks](http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/About_Ricks) (last visited Sept. 5, 2009) [hereinafter About Thomas E. Ricks].

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> THOMAS E. RICKS, *MAKING THE CORPS* (1997); THOMAS E. RICKS, *A SOLDIER’S DUTY: A NOVEL* (2001); *FIASCO*, *supra* note 7.

<sup>14</sup> About Thomas E. Ricks, *supra* note 11.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 15–34, 121, 127–66, 237–54 (discussing General Petraeus’s involvement in developing Army counterinsurgency doctrine and his leadership of coalition forces in Iraq from 2007–2008).

subjects of *The Gamble* is the prominent role retired General Jack Keane played in the development and implementation of the surge strategy. Ricks's glowing portrayal of General Keane seems almost preposterous, but Ricks offers ample insider support for his contention that "[i]n the fall of 2006, Jack Keane effectively became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," helping to orchestrate a new strategy for the war in Iraq.<sup>16</sup> This change in strategy, opposed by a majority of Americans,<sup>17</sup> was a risk for President Bush as he "effectively had turned over the fate of his presidency"<sup>18</sup> to a war strategy largely opposed by the leadership of the "U.S. military in both Baghdad and Washington"<sup>19</sup> and "implemented by a group of dissidents, skeptics, and outsiders, some of them foreigners."<sup>20</sup>

Ricks's later accounts of General Keane underscores a consistent weakness in *The Gamble*: jumbled timelines and the intermingling of unrelated events to support a conclusion. For example, Ricks claims that "[b]etween Keane and [General] Odierno, a kind of guerrilla campaign was launched inside the U.S. military establishment."<sup>21</sup> Ricks believes General Odierno made one of the "most audacious moves of the entire war [by] . . . bypassing two levels of command above him to talk to officials at the White House and aides to the Joint Chiefs of Staff."<sup>22</sup> Ricks provides no support for this "epic end run around [General] Casey"<sup>23</sup> and, as is common in *The Gamble*, Ricks manipulates facts to support his assertions.

Ricks implies that beginning in November 2006, General Odierno began working covertly behind General Casey's back in the United States to change strategy in Iraq.<sup>24</sup> There are two weaknesses in this conclusion: It glosses over the ongoing movement to shift the strategy in Iraq,<sup>25</sup> and it blurs dates, twisting facts to support Ricks's positive views of General Odierno. As to the first, Ricks

inexplicably overlooks the dozens of pages he devotes to the growing support in 2006 for a surge in troops and change in strategy. For example, in June 2006, national security experts met with President Bush to discuss troop levels and strategy;<sup>26</sup> in September 2006, General Keane met with Defense Secretary Rumsfeld to recommend changing strategy in Iraq to focus on counterinsurgency.<sup>27</sup> Ricks never claims that General Odierno was a part of any of these discussions with the White House or the Pentagon.

As to timelines, General Odierno and his staff left Texas on 28 November 2006,<sup>28</sup> and General Odierno assumed command of Multi-National Corps–Iraq (MNC-I) on 14 December 2006.<sup>29</sup> For Ricks's assertion to be valid, one would have to believe that General Odierno's "guerilla campaign" occurred between 30 November 2006 (approximately when General Odierno would have arrived in Iraq) and 11 December 2006 when Keane lobbied President Bush for a troop increase during a meeting at the White House.<sup>30</sup>

Ricks's own writing demonstrates the fallacy of his conclusion. The first time General Odierno discusses any change in operations is during III Corps's flight to the Middle East on 28 November 2006.<sup>31</sup> Ricks's quotes General Odierno as saying: "When I got here, the situation was fairly desperate, frankly . . . [T]he only thing I thought would decisively change it was doing something in Baghdad, and the only way to do that was to increase forces."<sup>32</sup> On 4 December 2006, General Odierno was briefed on the "Transition Bridging Strategy," the Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF–I) and MNC–I plan to continue pulling the U.S. military back to large bases and transition control to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).<sup>33</sup> General Odierno was "very nervous" about this strategy and "decided he would formally oppose any additional troop cuts . . . . He wasn't even thinking about a surge, because '[h]e didn't think he could get more [troops].'"<sup>34</sup>

Ricks goes on to note that "after taking command"—14 December 2006—Odierno and his staff met constantly to try

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 79. For support on General Keane's active role in planning the surge, see *id.* at 79–85, 88–104.

<sup>17</sup> Jon Cohen & Dan Balz, *Poll: Most Americans Opposed to Bush's Iraq Plan*, WASH. POST, Jan. 11, 2007, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/11/AR2007011100282.html>.

<sup>18</sup> RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 123.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 107.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 134.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 91.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 92. The only evidence Ricks provides is a quote from General Keane: "'Odierno and I are having a continuous dialogue' at this time, Keane recalled. 'He knows he needs more troops, he knows the strategy has got to change. His problem is General Casey.'" *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* Interestingly enough, Ricks notes that General Casey "seemed puzzled" when told of General Odierno's actions. *Id.* General Casey said, "Ray [Odierno] never came to me and said, 'Look, I think you've got to do something fundamentally different here.'" *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 91–94.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 42–45.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 88–89.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 106.

<sup>29</sup> Frederick W. Kagan & Kimberly Kagan, *The Patton of Counterinsurgency*, WKLY. STANDARD, Mar. 10, 2008, available at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000%5C000%5C014%5C822vfpsz.asp>.

<sup>30</sup> RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 98–101.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 106–07. Ricks writes that during the flight from Fort Hood, Texas, to Iraq, General Odierno gave his key staff officers an order to "[c]ome up with a plan to retake Baghdad." *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 111–12.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 111. See also *id.* at 337–41.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 111.

to develop a different plan.<sup>35</sup> By the time General Odierno assumed command of MNC–I, President Bush had already received two briefings on implementing a surge: one on 11 December at the White House and one on 13 December at the Pentagon.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Ricks overlooks the fact that on 20 November 2006, just days before deploying to Iraq, General Odierno gave an interview to the *New York Times* and mentioned nothing about changing strategy or surging troops.<sup>37</sup>

While Ricks’s factual disparity seems nuanced and trivial, it has the effect of mixing General Odierno’s landmark development of a new strategy—and his moral courage to implement it—with a sense of duplicity and backstabbing. The facts support a conclusion that General Odierno consulted with Keane and others *after* deciding to shift the operational planning in Iraq. Unfortunately, Ricks’s version of events does disservice to the favorable image of Odierno that Ricks wants to create, a pattern repeated several times throughout *The Gamble*.

Later in *The Gamble*, Ricks describes the “foundation for strategy” and notes that the “biggest single strategic change in Iraq in 2007 . . . [was] a new sobriety in the mind-set of the U.S. military . . . . Finally it was ready to try something new.”<sup>38</sup> Ricks declares the mind-set changed from brute force and killing to “conducting slow, ambiguous operations that were built . . . around human interactions” and “began to rely on Iraq’s more communitarian values, which often revolve around showing and receiving respect.”<sup>39</sup>

To support this notion of a changed mind-set, Ricks provides examples of these new operations and a good deal of information on the various tactics employed and problems faced: moving into combat outposts (COP) and joint security stations (JSS); focusing the surge forces on the Baghdad “belts”; increased foot patrols; using cement barriers to divide neighborhoods; increased aerial surveillance assets; increased synchronization of intercepted signals intelligence; revised detention operations; removing corrupt commanders from the ISF; and growing the ISF.<sup>40</sup> Despite these useful illustrations, Ricks’s analysis is incomplete because it fails to even mention other critical operations during that time, including counter-Iranian operations;<sup>41</sup> the formation of “Economic Development

Zones” throughout Iraq;<sup>42</sup> and Operations Phantom Thunder, Phantom Strike, and Phantom Phoenix.<sup>43</sup>

At the end of *The Gamble*, Thomas Ricks concludes that “[t]he surge campaign was effective in many ways, but the best grade it can be given is a solid incomplete. It succeeded tactically, but fell short strategically.”<sup>44</sup> Ricks notes that the strategic purpose of the surge was “to create breathing space that would then enable Iraqi politicians to find a way forward and that hadn’t happened.”<sup>45</sup>

President Bush, in his speech announcing the surge, outlined several areas in which he expected the Government of Iraq (GOI) to make progress: reconciliation, transition to provincial control, the passage of oil revenue sharing laws, increased spending on reconstruction, the holding of provincial elections in 2007, and reformation of de-Baathification laws.<sup>46</sup> However, Ricks’s analysis lacks any material discussion of these political goals or the American plan to support the GOI’s political efforts.

In the last few chapters of *The Gamble*, Ricks quotes several sources as saying that the GOI made no political progress in 2007,<sup>47</sup> but he does not examine any of the major areas in which America had hoped to see progress. The only area Ricks gives any attention to is the failure of the GOI to reconcile at the national level, indicating that the tactical success of the surge actually reduced the necessity for national reconciliation,<sup>48</sup> but he fails to provide any real study of why reconciliation failed.

Ricks’s failure to substantively evaluate the GOI’s political failures during 2007–2008 is disappointing, especially given his view that the surge fell short strategically. Who is to blame for this shortcoming, the GOI or America? For example, President Bush said that America would double the number of Provincial Reconstruction

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<http://www.understandingwar.org/files/reports/IraqReport06.pdf> (summarizing Iranian involvement in Iraq and discussing increased American efforts in 2007 to counter such involvement).

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Defense Skirts State in Reviving Iraqi Industry*, WASH. POST, May 14, 2007, at A1 (discussing Department of Defense efforts to revitalize Iraqi industries).

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Institute for the Study of War, Operations, <http://www.understandingwar.org/iraq-project/operations> (last visited Sept. 6, 2009) (providing an overview of major named operations in Iraq and noting that Operation Phantom Thunder was the largest coordinated military operation since the 2003 invasion of Iraq).

<sup>44</sup> RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 296.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., Address to the Nation, *supra* note 3.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 261–67, 296–97.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 296 (quoting General Odierno in 2008 as saying “[s]ecurity is good enough where I worry about them going back . . . . They’re not going back to solve the old problems which we’ve pushed . . . [.] like the problem with the land up in the north with the Kurds, the problems with the Peshmerga, oil, Kirkuk”).

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 111–12.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 98–104.

<sup>37</sup> Thom Shanker, *General Discusses Goals of His Return to Iraq*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 20, 2006, at A15.

<sup>38</sup> RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 160.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 162–64.

<sup>40</sup> See *id.* at 162–74, 192–99.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., KIMBERLY KAGAN, IRAQ REPORT #6: IRAN’S PROXY WAR AGAINST THE UNITED STATES AND THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT (Aug. 29, 2007), [available at](#)

Teams in Iraq,<sup>49</sup> but did this happen? What efforts did the State Department or other civilian agencies make to help the GOI succeed? This lack of inquiry leaves the reader feeling that somehow the U.S. military is to blame for the GOI's failures, which inappropriately shifts blame for these letdowns to the military.

#### IV. Conclusion

*The Gamble* effectively summarizes the confluence of events that led to the development and implementation of new tactics and strategy in Iraq in 2007. Ricks's access to multiple levels of leadership, from Administration officials, defense experts, and military brass at the Pentagon, to generals and staff in Baghdad, to Soldiers fighting at the tactical level, provides well-rounded insight that will be valuable to most readers. Readers who were part of the surge will notice the weaknesses in some of Ricks's chronologies and conclusions. Readers looking for profound scholarly analysis will notice that *The Gamble* is largely a compilation of Ricks's *Washington Post* articles from 2006–2008, strung together by Ricks's observations and conclusions. However, in the absence of any other comprehensive books on the surge, *The Gamble* successfully captures the general—and most important—reasons for the failures of the Iraqi war until 2007 and the successes thereafter.

For judge advocates, there is a notable lack of discussion of legal issues in *The Gamble*. Ricks does not discuss the controversies surrounding the rules of engagement (ROE) at the beginning of the surge,<sup>50</sup> nor does he mention the important efforts in strengthening Iraq's rule of law.<sup>51</sup> *The Gamble* does discuss the rise of "Concerned Local Citizens" groups, but there is no mention of the possible legal implications associated with the U.S. military financing, arming, and conducting offensive operations with these civilian groups.

Judge advocates, like all readers, can pull several valuable leadership lessons from *The Gamble*. One of the most important is from Generals Odierno and Petraeus: the need to have the moral courage to implement essential change despite overwhelming institutional resistance. It is common in the military for succeeding leaders to believe they can accomplish the mission better than their predecessor, but it is truly exceptional for those leaders to gamble their careers, and more importantly, lives, on such unpopular and risky strategic change. During 2006–2008, that is exactly what Generals Odierno and Petraeus did in Iraq, and *The Gamble* does succeed in driving that leadership lesson home.

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<sup>49</sup> See Address to the Nation, *supra* note 3.

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<sup>50</sup> See James Lyons, *Untie Military Hands*, WASH. TIMES, Jan. 26, 2007, at A18 (stating that the current ROE in Iraq were too restrictive); Bill Gertz & Rowan Scarborough, *Inside the Ring*, WASH. TIMES, Jan. 26, 2007, at A5 (arguing that the ROE are ambiguous and confusing); Lieutenant Colonel James Hutton, *Rules of Engagement*, WASH. TIMES, Feb. 3, 2007, at A12 (responding that Admiral Lyons inaccurately described the ROE in Iraq); Major General William B. Caldwell, IV, *Not at All Vague: Rules of Engagement Strike Balance*, WASH. TIMES, Feb. 9, 2007, at A21 (asserting that the ROE in Iraq allow the use of necessary force in self-defense).

<sup>51</sup> See Michael R. Gordon, *Justice From Behind the Barricades in Baghdad*, N.Y. TIMES, July 30, 2007, at A1 (discussing the establishment of protected legal zones in Iraq).