

Correspondence

Civilians, Soldiers, and the Iraq Surge Decision

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To the Editors (Richard K. Betts writes):

In "The Right to Be Right," Peter Feaver slurs Samuel Huntington and other civil-military relations theorists whom he dubs "professional supremacists."¹ This is doubtless inadvertent, because everyone in the field knows that he reveres Huntington. Moreover, Feaver's version of the debate about prerogatives and limits in the interaction of soldiers and civilian policymakers is generally fair, even though I would assess it differently. My objection is to the label "professional supremacists." This is not pedantic quibbling, because even academics succumb to the vice of skimming and attributing according to the bumper sticker versions of complex arguments. If taken seriously, this catchy label will establish a flatly incorrect term of art that falsely discredits, a priori and almost by definition, the view it challenges.

The dictionary unambiguously defines "supremacist" as having a claim to dominance and control. Neither Huntington nor anyone I know in his camp challenges the norm of civilian supremacy, which Feaver nevertheless poses as the opposite of their arguments for certain degrees of military assertion. A few ignorant militarists aside, no one I know argues that, in determining policy, professionals should have even an equal vote, let alone supremacy. (Feaver makes much of the verb "insist" in how some describe the right of professionals to get their way, but insisting on one's view does not mean denying the right of higher authorities to act irresponsibly and overrule it.) The case for uninhibited debate within government—what I have called elsewhere "equal dialogue and unequal authority"²—and for allowing disagreements of military leaders about the effectiveness of proposed wars to be known by Congress and, at least after resignation, by the public, is not a brief for military control.

Peter Feaver is a conscientious scholar and an honorable public servant. He should keep his argument but retract the defamatory label "professional supremacist" before it catches on.

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1. Peter D. Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Spring 2011), pp. 87–125.

2. Richard K. Betts, *American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 225.

To the Editors (Michael C. Desch writes):

There are two ways to read Peter Feaver's "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision."¹ First, it is a straightforward assessment of the link between various forms of civilian control of the military and how militaries perform in wartime. This is an important issue for scholars and policy analysts to debate. Second, it is an account, from Feaver's perspective as a participant-observer, of how the George W. Bush administration made one of the most important national security decisions of its second term. If the decision to invade Iraq in March 2003 was the most significant (and controversial) national security decision of President Bush's first term, then the success of the "surge" of more forces to Iraq in 2007, in the face of considerable skepticism both inside and outside the U.S. government, represents the potential vindication of that initial decision, especially if it achieved the president's lofty objectives of creating a stable, democratic, and capable Iraq allied with the United States in the war against terror.

In a piece in *Foreign Affairs* about the early stages of the war in Iraq, I argued that it was the Bush administration's disdain for professional military expertise that was at the root of many of the United States' subsequent problems there.² In making this argument, I drew on Samuel Huntington's distinction between two forms of civilian control: (1) "subjective control," which is a strategy employed by intrusive civilian leaders to ensure their control by making the military look like civilian society; and (2) "objective control," which strikes a balance between domestic liberty and battlefield effectiveness by demarcating distinct "political" and "military" realms and then reaching a compromise in which the military acknowledges civilian supremacy in the former realm in return for substantial autonomy in the latter realm.³ Huntington argued that objective control was superior in reconciling these two important objectives in a democracy. I argued that it was the Bush administration's departure from objective control that led to many of the United States' difficulties in Iraq.

Feaver rejects what Eliot Cohen calls Huntington's "normal theory" of civilian control and leans toward what he calls the "civilian supremacist" position on two grounds.⁴ First, he argues that the "surge strategy changed, at least for a time, the trajectory of the war. At minimum, the surge opened up the possibility that the war would end successfully, achieving some recognizable version of the war aims President Bush outlined in his January 10 [2007] speech" (p. 88). Second, Feaver maintains that "in opt-

1. Peter D. Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Spring 2011), pp. 87–125. Subsequent references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. Michael C. Desch, "Bush and the Generals," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (May/June 2007), pp. 97–108.

3. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1957), pp. 80–97.

4. See Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002), pp. 230–233. Like Feaver, Cohen is more than just an academic analyst of these issues: his book, which argues for a more intrusive approach to civilian oversight, or civilian supremacy, was reportedly on President Bush's reading list before the Iraq War; he served on Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board; and he subsequently took a position on Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's staff.

ing for the surge, President Bush overruled some of his most important military advisers, most notably the two senior combatant commanders": Multinational Force–Iraq (MNF-I) Commander Gen. George Casey and his boss, Central Command (CENTCOM) Combatant Commander Gen. John Abizaid. The result, Feaver concludes in a related piece, was that President Bush's more assertive role in guiding military operations in Iraq in the fall of 2006 may have finally put the United States "on the path to a remarkable victory" after three years of steadily increasing violence and political instability.⁵

I challenge both of Feaver's claims. First, I maintain that the surge did not have the effect that Feaver posits in changing the situation in Iraq in 2007 and 2008. Second, I show that the portrait that he paints of an engaged and innovative civilian leadership in the White House prodding and probing a staid and hidebound military to embrace the surge and marry it with a counterinsurgency strategy is largely a caricature. To be sure, conditions in Iraq have improved since 2007. These changes, however, were not the result of the surge; in any case, the current situation can hardly be called a victory; and the results in no way vindicate the initially flawed decision to invade Iraq.

To make this case, I begin by exploring the problems with Feaver's article as a history of the surge given the generic challenges of writing instant history and doing so with participant bias. I then explore the related questions of whether the surge "worked" in reducing violence in Iraq and if the Bush White House can take credit for it. I conclude by arguing that U.S. involvement in Iraq leads to a much more mixed assessment of the influence of civilians on military strategy than Feaver presents.

LIMITATIONS OF "THE RIGHT TO BE RIGHT" AS HISTORY

One limitation on Feaver's perspective is that even midlevel National Security Council (NSC) officials such as himself, with direct involvement in major issues and access to the principals, may not have the whole story. For example, Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice served in roughly analogous NSC positions during President George H.W. Bush's administration and together played a role in shaping the Cold War's endgame in Europe. In a book that they subsequently cowrote based on their White House experiences, they concluded that President Bush approached the unification of Germany with "regard for the dignity of the Soviet Union."⁶

Nearly twenty years later, however, with access to documents recounting the discussions between the first President Bush and his national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, to which Zelikow and Rice were not privy, a very different picture emerges. According to historian Mary Sarotte, there was a marked difference between the rhetoric and the reality of the first Bush administration's attitudes toward the Soviet Union.⁷ As the former president put it privately, "The Soviets are not in a position to dictate Germany's relationship with NATO. . . . To hell with that. We prevailed and they didn't."⁸

5. Peter D. Feaver, "Anatomy of the Surge," *Commentary*, April 2008, p. 24.

6. Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 370.

7. Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 205–206.

8. George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), p. 253.

A second limitation of Feaver's perspective is that, by virtue of his service in the administration, he has more than an intellectual stake in this debate. On the one hand, his involvement with various aspects of Iraq policy from 2005 through 2007 gives his interpretation of events credibility—at one point, he touts his “intimate insider knowledge”—and it also provides him access to other administration officials who were more centrally involved in the surge decision (p. 91).⁹ On the other hand, whether the surge was a success or not is, in part, a verdict on his contribution to the administration's Iraq policies.

Feaver was reportedly brought into the Bush administration in June 2005 as a result of an earlier *International Security* piece he coauthored on public opinion in wartime.¹⁰ Challenging the long-standing view that, during wartime, initial high levels of public support quickly dissipate the longer the war lasts and the more casualties mount, Feaver and his colleagues purported to show that the key factor affecting public support is not time or casualties but a subjective expectation of the prospects for victory.¹¹ The clear policy implication of this argument was that declining public support for the war in Iraq was not inevitable, even as it dragged on and more body bags came home. Instead, Feaver and his colleagues argued that “expectations of future success are the key determinants of public casualty tolerance,” and they held out the possibility that rhetorical “leadership” by the Bush administration could affect these expectations.¹²

Given the situation in 2005—a policy that was not working and a president resistant to changing course—it is obvious why Feaver's argument would appeal to the Bush administration. As former *Washington Post* Pentagon correspondent Thomas Ricks explains, “The White House was in denial about the trend of the war. Officials around President Bush believed the problem wasn't their strategy in Iraq but a failure to adequately explain that approach.”¹³ Like the president and much of the rest of his administration, Feaver supported, or at least worked on behalf of, the pre-surge strategy in Iraq. The realization by the Bush administration that the loss of public support for the war could not be spun out of existence came relatively late.

This is not the place to relitigate Feaver and his coauthors' debate with Ohio State University wartime public opinion expert John Mueller on whether it is time and casualties or subjective assessment of the probability of victory that most influences public support for military operations.¹⁴ Two things are clear, however. First, the Bush administration's rhetorical “leadership”—including the president's use of the word “victory”

9. As evidence that there were limits to his direct knowledge, Feaver's article relies on twenty-two interviews, only one of which (with Karl Rove) was named; the rest are background interviews with firsthand sources.”

10. Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, “Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Winter 2005/06), pp. 7–46. For evidence of its role in his appointment, see Scott Shane, “Bush's Speech on Iraq War Echoes Voice of an Analyst,” *New York Times*, December 4, 2005.

11. John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley, 1973).

12. Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, “Success Matters,” pp. 24, 45.

13. Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 13.

14. For key elements of the debate, see John Mueller, “The Iraq Syndrome,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 6 (November/December 2005), pp. 44–54; Christopher Gelpi and John Mueller, “The Cost of War: How Many Casualties Will Americans Tolerate?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (January/

fifteen times in a December 2005 speech on Iraq at the Naval Academy while standing in front of a drape emblazoned with the phrase “Plan for Victory,” and guided by a new NSC document entitled “Our National Strategy for Victory in Iraq”—did not arrest the decline in public support for the war in Iraq.¹⁵ Second, Mueller predicted in 2005 that even if “good news” started to come in from Iraq, it would not produce a significant uptick in public support for the war.¹⁶ His pessimism has been vindicated: even though the public sensed that the situation in post-surge Iraq was improving, this did not produce a concomitant surge in public support for the U.S. commitment.¹⁷ A similar pattern seems to be playing out in public opinion in the United States about its military operations in Afghanistan today.¹⁸

DEFECTS IN STORY ABOUT CIVILIAN OVERSIGHT AND THE SURGE’S SUCCESS

Two key questions need to be answered about the surge to assess Feaver’s larger claim that it was President Bush’s decisive leadership that turned the tide in Iraq. First, did the surge—by which I mean the infusion of 30,000 new troops and their use of different tactics—work better than the alternatives in improving the security in Iraq as Feaver claims? Second, even if one concedes that an increase in U.S. forces and a change in strategy in Iraq played a major role in reducing casualties, was it the result of more direct engagement of the president and the White House staff?

SURGING TO VICTORY . . . It is unlikely that the addition of more U.S. forces alone made the difference in Iraq. After all, the surge represented only a 6 percent increase from the previous peak of troop levels. In fact, there were two slightly smaller surges of about 20,000 troops in 2005 that made little difference to the security situation.¹⁹ Moreover, as figure 1 demonstrates, the decline in the number of Iraqi civilian casualties began before the surge, rather than after. In other words, the sequencing of the decline in civilian casualties preceding the surge suggests that an increase in the numbers of U.S. troops had little to do with it.

Because numbers alone do not tell the whole story, it is necessary to consider alternative explanations for the decline in violence in Iraq. One such explanation focuses not on the increase in the absolute number of troops, but on the change in how U.S. forces were employed. The argument here is that the key change that Bush inaugurated was the implementation of a counterinsurgency strategy over the objections of the senior military leaderships in Baghdad and Washington.²⁰ This argument, however, does not support Feaver’s thesis either.

The first alternative explanation challenges the notion that the U.S. military needed

February 2006), pp. 139–144; and John Mueller, “The Iraq Syndrome Revisited: U.S. Intervention from Kosovo to Libya,” *Foreign Affairs.com*, March 28, 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67681/john-mueller/the-iraq-syndrome-revisited>.

15. For Feaver’s role in this public relations campaign, see Shane, “Bush’s Speech on Iraq War Echoes Voice of an Analyst.”

16. Mueller, “The Iraq Syndrome,” p. 49.

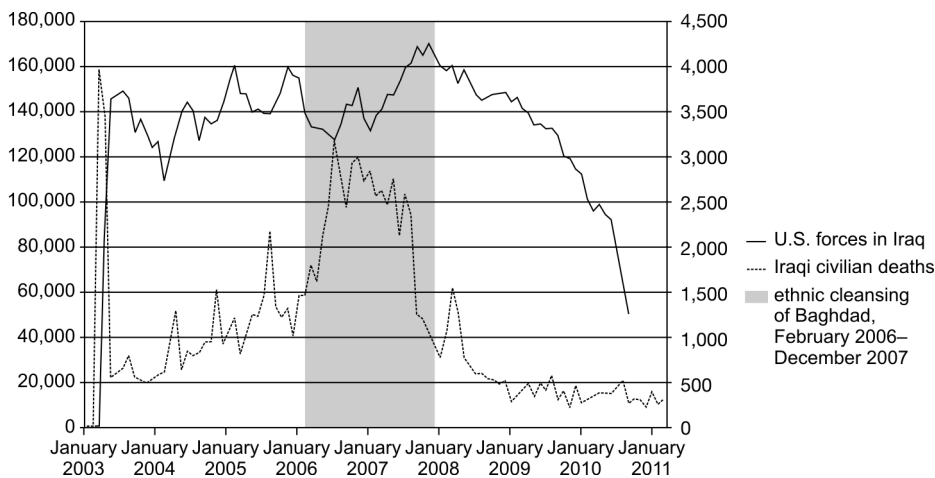
17. Mueller, “The Iraq Syndrome Revisited.”

18. Jon Cohen and Peyton M. Craighill, “More See Success in Afghanistan; Half Still Want U.S. Troops Home,” *Washington Post*, May 3, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/more-see-success-in-afghanistan-half-still-want-us-troops-home/2011/05/03/AFvASYhF_story.html.

19. Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), p. 716.

20. Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 165.

Figure 1. The Surge and Decline in Iraqi Civilian Casualties



outside prodding to explore counterinsurgency. As young officers, Gen. David Petraus and General Abizaid thought and wrote about counterinsurgency and operations other than war in the 1980s and 1990s without seriously hindering their careers in the army.²¹ Similarly, Col. H.R. McMaster's successful counterinsurgency campaign in Tal Afar took place in late 2005, at a time when the Bush administration line was that the war was going well under the current strategy. As *Washington Post* writer Bob Woodward puts it, "Tall [sic] Afar wasn't part of a broader strategy, but rather a free-lanced, almost rebellious undertaking by one Army colonel and his unit. It was further evidence that the greatest accomplishments in Iraq had come despite the administration's strategy, not because of it."²² In addition, Petraus began work on the new Army-Marine Counterinsurgency Manual in February of 2006 while he was commanding general of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, well before the Bush administration's epiphany about the deteriorating situation in Iraq.²³

Nor did MNF-I Commander Casey eschew counterinsurgency operations. Indeed, in the summer of 2005 he assembled his own counterinsurgency brain trust and, in the fall of 2005, he established a counterinsurgency academy to prepare incoming officers for operations in Iraq.²⁴ Again, this was at a time when Bush was still convinced that the old strategy was succeeding.

The real doctrinal change during this period was not away from counterinsurgency,

21. David Cloud and Greg Jaffe, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), pp. 66, 91.

22. Quoted in Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History, 2006–2008* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), pp. 37–38.

23. Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 24.

24. Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star*, pp. 201–205; and Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 12.

but a shift among different counterinsurgency strategies. Casey's philosophy of training Iraqi forces and trying to transfer responsibility to them as quickly as possible reflected T.E. Lawrence's classic guerrilla warfare adage that it is "'better to do it imperfectly with their own hands than to do it perfectly with your own.'"²⁵ Even visionary officers such as Petraeus supported this approach until 2006.²⁶ Despite subsequently adopting an alternative population protection counterinsurgency strategy, Petraeus still aimed ultimately to transfer responsibility to the Iraqis, which suggests a more evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, process of doctrinal development.²⁷

A second alternative explanation for the decline in violence in Iraq concerns the so-called Anbar Awakening in which Sunni tribes in Iraq that had previously supported anti-U.S. forces switched sides. Many analysts, including former CENTCOM General Abizaid and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, think that the Awakening was key to the reduction in violence.²⁸ Feaver cannot use the Awakening, however, to support his argument for two reasons. First, it began well before Bush admitted that the situation in Iraq was not going well and began seeking a new strategy. General Abizaid, for example, raised the idea of reaching out to the tribes with Rumsfeld in 2004.²⁹ By the following year, there was growing evidence that al-Qaida in Iraq and various tribal elements were increasingly coming into conflict.³⁰ Marine units in Anbar took advantage of this and, on their own initiative, cut deals with local tribes.³¹ In March 2006, General Casey had himself embraced the Awakening.³² And so, by the fall of 2006 it was in full swing, eventually producing militia forces numbering around 90,000 men.³³ Second, the Awakening provides little support for Feaver's argument inasmuch as President Bush was initially reluctant to support such outreach on the grounds that he did not think the United States should talk to the enemy. Reflecting the president's concern, Rumsfeld's deputy secretary of defense, Paul Wolfowitz, torpedoed early efforts to reach out to the Sunni tribes.³⁴

A third alternative explanation for the decline in violence was the victory of the Shiite over the Sunni in the battle of Baghdad.³⁵ As the shaded area in figure 1 shows, the spike in violence in Iraq coincided with a campaign of ethnic cleansing in the capital after the destruction of the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006. When Petraeus became MNF-I commander in February 2007, this campaign was almost over. As Ricks reports, "By the time [the surge] forces got there, the ethnic cleansing of Baghdad had been largely completed, with some neighborhoods that once were heavily Sunni becoming overwhelmingly Shia."³⁶

Systematic evidence supports Ricks's contention. A group of scholars at the

25. Quoted in Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 4–5.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 294–295.

27. Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, p. 717.

28. Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 203, 217, 264; and Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, p. 716.

29. Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, p. 535. See also Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star*, p. 183.

30. Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 62–63.

31. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 362.

32. Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, pp. 699–700.

33. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 282.

34. Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star*, p. 264; and Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 219.

35. Sabrina Tavernise, "District By District, Shiites Make Baghdad Their Own," *New York Times*, December 22, 2006.

36. Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 200, 128–129. See also Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 330.

University of California, Los Angeles, devised a clever test of the impact of the surge by using commercial satellite data to measure changing nighttime light levels in Iraq. "If the surge has truly 'worked,'" they posited, "we would expect to see a steady increase in nighttime light output over time, as electrical infrastructure is repaired and restored with little discrimination across neighborhoods."³⁷ Surveying imagery dating back to 2003, John Agnew and his colleagues identified two trends: first, an increase in light levels in Baghdad from 2003 to 2006 was followed by a sharp decline; and second, this decrease disproportionately affected Sunni areas, especially in Baghdad. From this, they concluded that ethnic cleansing "explains overall lowering of the level of violence. Locally, there is no one left to attack."³⁸ Obviously, the Bush administration would not take credit for this campaign of ethnic cleansing, which, in any case, began well before the president's change of heart in the fall of 2006. It represents, however, a plausible alternative explanation for both the rising and then falling pattern of violence in Iraq between February 2006 and December of 2007.

A fourth alternative explanation for the decline in violence involves the more aggressive counterterrorism operations against both al-Qaida and Shiite militias conducted mostly by U.S. Special Operations Forces.³⁹ Woodward concludes that these operations, rather than the counterinsurgency campaign, were the "biggest factor" in reducing the violence.⁴⁰

A fifth explanation is Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr's decision to declare a truce with Nouri al-Maliki's government in the summer of 2007.⁴¹ Although the special operations campaign against Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi no doubt played a role, Sadr also reportedly made this decision both to advance his political standing against the more extreme elements of his militia, who were proving difficult to control, and to increase his legitimacy among other Shiite political factions in Iraq.⁴²

A related issue in this discussion of whether the surge reduced violence in Iraq is how one assesses the situation in Iraq at its conclusion. The point to keep in mind is that by the time the surge began, the Bush administration's more lofty goals of transforming Iraq into a stable, multiethnic democracy had become largely rhetorical. In Iraq itself, success was defined downward. As Emma Sky, a senior political adviser to Petraeus's deputy, Gen. Ray Odierno, admitted, "We defined success in a much more modest way as 'sustainable stability,'" or what a U.S. official called 'a tolerable level of violence.'⁴³

Even if one uses this more modest standard of success, Feaver's judgment that the surge put the United States on the road to victory in Iraq is a stretch. Although the level

37. John Agnew, Thomas W. Gillespie, Jorge Gonzalez, and Brian Min, "Baghdad Nights: Evaluating the U.S. Military 'Surge' Using Nighttime Light Signatures," *Environment and Planning A*, Vol. 40, No. 10 (2008), p. 2886.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 2291.

39. For a cautionary tale about the ephemeral nature of counterterrorism success during the ill-fated French war in Algeria, see Gen. Paul Aussaresses, *The Battle of the Casbah: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Algeria, 1955-1957* (New York: Enigma, 2002).

40. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 380.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 381.

42. Ewen MacAskill, "Al-Sadr Declares Ceasefire in Iraq," *Guardian.co.uk*, August 29, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/aug/29/iraq.usa>.

43. Both quoted in Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 155; see also p. 215.

of mass violence there is lower than it was at the height of the battle of Baghdad, it is still intolerably high. Moreover, it is now taking on a more worrisome complexion of a targeted campaign of assassination against Iraqi government officials and members of the security forces.⁴⁴ In addition, the changing face of violence in Iraq is contributing to the continuing lack of political stability in the country. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, “[T]he sustainability of post-Ba’athist Iraq . . . remain[s] in some doubt.”⁴⁵ Former Petraeus counterinsurgency adviser David Kilcullen links this continuing political instability to the fact that many of the changes that contributed to the reduction of violence in Iraq did so by empowering the local, rather than national, levels government, which in turn fosters greater instability.⁴⁶ Finally, the big winner from the new political reality in Iraq is the Islamic Republic of Iran. To be sure, neither Maliki nor even Sadr are in any meaningful sense Iranian puppets. There is no doubt, however, that a Shiite-dominated Iraq, which was the result of the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, has dramatically changed the balance of power in the region. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia reportedly chided a U.S. State Department official for having “allowed the Persians, the Safavids, to take over Iraq.”⁴⁷

Given the downward definition of success in Iraq and the continuing violence and political instability, Ricks’s verdict on the surge seems indisputable: “In revising the U.S. approach to the Iraq War, Petraeus found tactical success—that is, improved security—but not the clear political breakthrough that would have meant unambiguous strategic success.”⁴⁸

THROUGH W’S STRATEGIC GENIUS? Feaver’s article downplays the support that President Bush and many of his White House advisers gave the Casey approach until the fall of 2006. But as the president noted, for three years his policy was, “[a]s the Iraqis stand-up, we will stand down,” and he cited with approval Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld’s adage that in Iraq “we have to take our hand off the bicycle seat.”⁴⁹ Both Bush and Rumsfeld approved Casey’s strategy in late 2005 and agreed to extend the general’s term to allow him to implement it.⁵⁰ Bush also explicitly supported the drawdown in U.S. forces in 2005.⁵¹ According to his memoirs, he did not decide to change strategy until the fall of 2006, and his decision that the changed strategy would include a surge came only in November 2006.⁵² In other words, as Feaver himself admits, the administration did not really have an alternative plan until January 2007.⁵³

Central to Feaver’s argument is the notion that Abizaid and especially Casey somehow hindered the president’s new strategy. This is not a claim that the former president

44. For example, in April of 2011, there were 117 deaths and 266 wounded among Iraqi government officials. See “April 2011 Shows That Deaths Have Hit a Plateau in Iraq,” in “Musings On Iraq,” <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2011/05/april-2011-shows-that-deaths-have-hit.html>.

45. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Strategic Survey, 2010: The Annual Review of World Affairs* (London: IISS, 2010), p. 231.

46. Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 383–384.

47. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 347.

48. Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 9, 261, 296.

49. George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010), p. 356. Rumsfeld quoted in *ibid.*

50. Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star*, p. 193.

51. Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, p. 679.

52. Bush, *Decision Points*, pp. 371, 374–375.

53. Feaver, “Anatomy of the Surge,” pp. 26–27. See also Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 50; and Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 7.

has endorsed: "Everything [Casey] did, I approved. I am not going to make him the fall guy for my strategy."⁵⁴ In a rare moment of candor, Rumsfeld went even further in defending the generals, writing that "some analysts and pundits cited Lincoln's decision to remove General McClellan as a template for President Bush. The analogy was flawed. Lincoln had given orders to McClellan that McClellan refused to obey. He was in-subordinate to the commander in chief. This was certainly not the case in Iraq. Abizaid and Casey were not defying President Bush. They were carrying out a policy that the President, General Pace, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and I had supported. The generals offered us their best advice and the President and I took it."⁵⁵

Moreover, the image that Feaver and other Bush partisans paint is of a president who listened too much to the bad advice of his generals, someone who consistently tried to reduce the number of U.S. forces and prematurely hand power to the Iraqi security forces. This image, however, depends on accepting at face value Bush's statements that he always listened to his generals, which is at variance with his behavior before and in the early stages of the war. As Ricks makes clear, although Bush was rhetorically committed to listening to the advice of his generals in the middle stages of the war, in reality he often ignored it.⁵⁶

Finally, Feaver and I have a major difference regarding the role of Rumsfeld in shaping U.S. strategy in Iraq until the fall of 2006. Feaver almost writes him out of the script or at best makes him a bit player in his White House–military drama. In contrast, I think that Rumsfeld was the central civilian figure driving the Bush administration's strategy in Iraq until 2006. As I pointed out in my *Foreign Affairs* article, Rumsfeld took over as secretary of defense concerned about two related issues. First, he had a deep aversion to nation-building and operations other than war, preferring instead to focus on the transformation of the U.S. military in line with the so-called revolution in military affairs.⁵⁷ Second, as *Wall Street Journal* defense correspondents David Cloud and Greg Jaffe wrote, Rumsfeld attributed what he regarded as the United States' overcommitment in the Balkans to a lack of civilian control of the military.⁵⁸ Both to reduce the United States' involvement in nation-building and to bring the U.S. military into the twenty-first century, Rumsfeld felt the need to reassert civilian control of the military.

Rumsfeld's intrusive form of civilian supremacy is by now infamous. Ironically, in his memoirs, Rumsfeld faults himself for taking too hands-off an approach with subordinates.⁵⁹ Elsewhere, however, he admits that his approach was anything but gentle: "I . . . made a practice of challenging my challengers. I wanted to be sure people disagreeing knew what they were talking about. When a challenger failed to support his views, I did not pretend to be impressed. But, in my view, no professional, let alone a three- or four-star military officer, should be intimidated into silence by a boss who asks questions and expects sensible answers."⁶⁰

Rumsfeld's version of civilian supremacy was not just stylistic. He was a hands-on

54. Quoted in Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star*, p. 247. See also Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 57–58, 67.

55. Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, p. 702, note.

56. Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 40.

57. Desch, "Bush and the Generals," pp. 102–103. See also Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, p. 482.

58. Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star*, p. 109.

59. Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, pp. 512, 705.

60. In *Known and Unknown*, page 432, Rumsfeld admits that he had stopped getting briefs from the

manager who played a direct role in some major decisions about the conduct of the Iraq War. For example, it was Rumsfeld's aide, Douglass Feith, who pushed hard for de-Baathification and disbanding of the Iraqi army against the prescient advice of Abizaid, who feared it would result in large numbers of armed, trained, and unemployed Iraqis.⁶¹ These decisions undoubtedly fanned the flames of the Sunni insurgency in the fall of 2003. In a send-off meeting with newly confirmed MNF-I Commander Casey in 2004, Rumsfeld issued marching orders to the general that, in David Cloud and Greg Jaffe's words, cautioned against "the temptation to do too much" there.⁶² Once Casey arrived in theater, Rumsfeld bombarded him with his trademark "snowflakes," urging him to keep down the numbers of U.S. troops in Iraq.⁶³ When Casey sought to reach out to the State Department in 2005 to better coordinate development efforts in Iraq, Rumsfeld reproached him for going outside his chain of command.⁶⁴ The contrast between Rumsfeld and his successor, Robert Gates, could not have been more stark. When Gates met with Petraeus before the general left to assume command in Iraq in early 2007, his message, in contrast to Rumsfeld's marching orders to Casey, was: "I expect your candor. I expect you to tell me exactly what you think and in very plain terms. I want to hear what you have to say."⁶⁵

Rumsfeld's most consistent policy guidance to Abizaid and Casey was to try to minimize the number of U.S. forces in Iraq and focus on handing power to Iraqi forces at the earliest moment possible. As Rumsfeld famously summarized his view, "I was concerned that U.S. and coalition forces might inadvertently discourage Iraqis from taking on increased responsibility for bringing order to their country. Having the United States as a crutch might delay the hard work required of them to build a safe and stable society appropriate to their circumstances. I sometimes used the analogy of teaching someone how to ride a bicycle. After you run down the street steadying the bicycle by holding the seat, you eventually have to take your hand off the seat. The person may fall once or twice, but it's the way he learns. If you're not willing to take your hand off the bicycle seat, the person will never learn to ride."⁶⁶ Rumsfeld maintained his commitment to this strategy almost until his resignation.⁶⁷

Of course, Rumsfeld was only one link in a longer chain of command that ended with President Bush. Although it is fair to contrast Bush's relative lack of engagement with Iraq in the period before the fall of 2006 with his subsequently greater activism, it would be wrong to absolve him from responsibility for Rumsfeld's policies. Even as it was becoming apparent to military officers in Iraq and to members of his administration that conditions in Iraq were deteriorating and that the root of the problem was his secretary of defense, Bush doggedly rejected calls for a change in April 2006 on the grounds that "I'm the decider, and I decide what is best. And what's best is for Don Rumsfeld to remain as the secretary of defense."⁶⁸

Central Intelligence Agency in 2004 because its briefers complained about his badgering as an effort to politicize their intelligence.

61. Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star*, pp. 113–114, 122.

62. See also Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 15.

63. Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star*, pp. 169, 171. See also Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 63.

64. Cloud and Jaffe, *The Fourth Star*, p. 191.

65. Quoted in Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 302.

66. Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, p. 667; see also pp. 505, 660.

67. Quoted in Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 16, 58.

68. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 40.

CONCLUSION

After reading “The Right to Be Right,” and the voluminous primary and secondary literature that has come out on this critical period in the war in Iraq from 2006 to 2008, I come to very different conclusions from Feaver on the conceptual and historical questions of whether civilian supremacy is a surer guide to better strategy than professional autonomy, and whether the results of the surge in Iraq provide evidence for that proposition. In my view, the problem was not President Bush’s excessive deference to military advice, but rather his mercurial leadership style. Bush’s approach was to set unrealistically ambitious goals for Iraq and then defer to his secretary of defense and later his national security adviser to implement them.⁶⁹ But as Woodward cautions, “A president must be able to get a clear-eyed, unbiased assessment of the war. The president must lead. For years, time and again, President Bush has displayed impatience, bravado, and unsettling personal certainty about his decisions. The result has too often been impulsiveness and carelessness and, perhaps most troubling, a delayed reaction to realities that run counter to his gut.”⁷⁰

President Bush chose for his agent of civilian control a secretary of defense who had a clear policy agenda that eschewed nation-building and mandated a small U.S. military footprint in country. He also believed in civilian supremacy on steroids. As an illustration of this, Woodward recounts that “as Casey was trying to quell the insurgency and al Qaeda in Iraq, Rumsfeld was in his third floor office, trying to control the world through snowflakes. One minute he’d expound on issues as large as the war strategy; the next might inspire a memo on grammar. No detail was too large, and none was too small.”⁷¹

To be sure, the senior military leadership—including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CENTCOM, and Casey—made mistakes in their planning and execution of operations in Iraq.⁷² There is a danger, however, in not also conceding that, on many issues, they correctly saw the problems with the current strategy and sought innovative solutions to them. Often they were unable to implement them because they were stifled by the secretary of defense and his civilian subordinates.

Many scholars and practitioners recognize that an important part of the story of the change of strategy in Iraq involves the actions of military mavericks such as McMaster, Odierno, and especially Petraeus. Their contributions are rightly recognized, but I do not think that the institutional obstacles they faced should be blown out of proportion. Although they no doubt faced frustrations in pushing institutional change, all three nonetheless had stellar careers in the U.S. Army. And in any case, White House-centric perspectives on the surge such as Feaver’s will no doubt come as a surprise to these officers, who began to rethink strategy in Iraq well before the Bush administration did.⁷³

Finally, other participants point to continuity in Bush administration policy from

69. Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 320.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 433.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

72. For a sharp indictment, see Lt. Col. Paul Yingling, “A Failure in Generalship,” *Armed Forces Journal*, Vol. 144, No. 10 (May 2007), <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198>.

73. Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 15, 303. On pp. 8–9 and 79, Ricks argues that the Bush administration’s push for the surge began with retired Army Chief of Staff Gen. Jack Keane, who convinced the president to change course.

2005 through 2007 by arguing that the net result of the change in strategy in Iraq was less important there than it was in the United States. Former Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, for example, concluded that “[u]ltimately, the true genius of the surge was the political effect it had in the United States, where the conflict’s true center of gravity had migrated. The surge began first and foremost with a major shift in the administration’s political strategy at home, by tempering the defeatist mood on Capitol Hill.”⁷⁴ General Casey echoed this assessment: “I’ve always felt that the surge was more to build domestic support than it was for success on the ground in Iraq.”⁷⁵ In addition to reading “The Right to Be Right” as an account of what happened in the battle for Baghdad, perhaps we should also see it as part of the continuing battle over the Bush legacy in the United States.

—Michael C. Desch
Notre Dame, Indiana

Peter D. Feaver Replies:

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the critiques of my recently published article from Richard Betts and Michael Desch, two friends and colleagues who have made important contributions to scholars’ understanding of political-military affairs over the years.¹

I do not have much to say in rebuttal to Betts’s letter because I am somewhat sympathetic to it—somewhat, but not entirely. Betts is right: I do revere Samuel Huntington, and I am grateful for the guidance he showed me over the years, even when I was trying to write a book that would challenge his influential study *The Soldier and the State*. I do not agree with Betts, however, that my term “professional supremacist” is a slur on Huntington or defamatory in any other way. Yes, Huntington believed that his approach to civil-military relations ultimately serves the goal of military subordination to civilians, but his approach is analytically distinct from another approach, which I call “civilian supremacist.” Huntington claims that civilians achieve control by creating zones of autonomy in which military preferences are allowed to prevail because civilians have decided not to intrude. In contrast, the “civilian supremacist” school prescribes a different pathway to civilian control of the military, one in which civilian preferences intrude and thus prevail far more extensively. Betts makes a good point, however, about the way the labels I use in the article might be misread. Perhaps the term “professional prerogative” versus “civilian prerogative” would work better? Or “deferentialists” versus “interventionists/intrusionists”? Or maybe my own “delegative” vs. “assertive” control label from earlier work?² If any of these labels wins Betts

74. Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, p. 716.

75. Quoted in Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 326.

1. Peter D. Feaver, “The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Spring 2011), pp. 87–125. Additional references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. Peter Douglas Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 7–12.

over, then it is a small price to pay, for he posits no other major substantive disagreement with my piece.

I find much to agree with in Desch's letter, too, primarily because he frequently posits as critiques of my argument the very facts and assertions that I make in advancing it. Desch and I apparently agree on the following points: (1) the old "stand-up, stand-down" strategy that Gen. George Casey followed prior to the surge was every bit the strategy of President George W. Bush (I would add, but apparently Desch would not: as was the new "surge" strategy adopted in 2007); (2) the 2007 strategic shift involved more than the surge of additional troops, and those other key aspects helped to improve the security situation in Iraq; (3) the new strategy prioritized population protection over transition to Iraqi control, which played a vital role in improving security in the country; (4) the strategy advocated reaching out to the tribes throughout Iraq, a policy that began as the Anbar Awakening, and whose early stirrings predated the president's 2007 announcement of a new strategy; (5) some senior U.S. military figures were sympathetic to the new strategy; (6) the new strategy drew heavily on the earlier counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine advanced by key U.S. military figures, especially Gen. David Petraeus, as well as on some innovations tested in theater by exceptionally able commanders such as then Col. H.R. McMaster; and (7) the president's role in deciding on the new strategy does not mean that he invented something that no one had ever thought of before. These points are all part of my argument, as most readers of my article probably surmised. Thus, Desch does not undermine my arguments when he restates them.

Beyond this, Desch's critique has four sets of critical defects. First, he fundamentally misunderstands how the new strategy worked and thus fails to credit the surge of troops with any change in the trajectory of the war in Iraq. Second, in attacking a straw man triumphalism centered on "victory," he mischaracterizes my claims about what the surge accomplished. Third, he brushes aside all of the evidence I present about how the surge decisionmaking process unfolded without presenting a plausible account of his own—a rhetorical move that allows him to ignore the crux of my challenge to his preferred civil-military paradigm. And fourth, he levies a number of flimsy secondary charges against my argument that are easily rebutted.

DEFECTS IN UNDERSTANDING OF HOW THE SURGE WORKED

The heart of Desch's critique involves the following claims, which are in logical tension, if not outright contradiction, with each other: the surge accomplished nothing either because the dramatic reversal in the trajectory of the war predated it or because all of the improvements in security should be credited to other-than-surge troops, such as Special Operations Forces; the surge was a strategic failure because Iraq remains a violent place; and, in any case, Bush does not deserve credit for the surge's accomplishments because he had little to do with making the decision, but at the same time, he deserves blame for the parts of the strategy that did not work.

By contrast, my claims about the surge are simple and internally consistent: the surge consisted of more than just the addition of forces, for example, the expansion of outreach to the tribes; the surge reversed the trajectory of the war, opening up the possibility but not the guarantee of a far more favorable outcome than the United States was on track to achieve before the president made his decision; the additional forces were not a sufficient cause of the changed trajectory, but they were a necessary cause, both for the kinetic contribution they made and for the way they changed the psychology on the

ground in Iraq; and the United States would not have adopted the surge strategy (and added more resources) if President Bush had followed Desch's preferred civil-military approach.

Desch now claims that the 2007 surge strategy and the concomitant surge in resources were irrelevant because the security situation in Iraq was improving without them, but this was not evident to most, if any, commentators at the time. Nor did it seem evident to Desch. Writing in May/June 2007 (months into the surge), Desch talked about the "parlous situation in Iraq today," describing it as a "quagmire" and quoting approvingly other military experts who argued that the surge was a flawed strategy.³ Desch's assessment of conditions in Iraq fits comfortably within the confines of the conventional wisdom, which was best summed up by the opening words of the Baker-Hamilton report from December 2006: "The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating."⁴ Nearly everyone, including President Bush, believed this at the time. Only after the dramatic improvements in the security trajectory became undeniable did people start to claim, as Desch does now, that the security situation at the end of 2006 was improving, thus making the additional troops irrelevant.⁵

Desch goes to extraordinary lengths to avoid giving the new strategy and the surge in military operations that the additional troops made possible any credit for the improved security situation. Thus, he treats the surge in aggressive counterterrorism operations as an "alternative" explanation for the improvement in security, rather than seeing this activity as integral to the overall surge. Likewise, he asserts that the surge did not contribute to Moqtada al-Sadr's decision to declare a truce in the summer of 2007, although he does allow that the surge in Special Operations attacks against Sadr forces "no doubt played a role" (Desch just wrongly thinks that the surge in these attacks was not part of the new surge strategy). Instead, he credits Sadr's political acumen and desire "to advance his own political standing against the more extreme elements of his militia, who were proving difficult to control, and to increase his legitimacy among other Shiite political factions in Iraq." Desch does not consider the obvious counterfactual: Would Sadr have pursued the truce if the surge had not shifted the psychological momentum in Iraq—if, instead of surging, U.S. forces were receding, heading for the exits as fast as they could? Few observers who have examined the matter closely believe, as Desch does, that the new surge strategy, and the renewed commitment to Iraq that it signaled, were irrelevant to Sadr's calculations. It is far more likely, as several policymakers in the Bush administration told me, that Sadr thought the surge was a sign that the United States was coming to liquidate him and the truce was an effort to ensure his survival.⁶

Common to all of these errors is Desch's misunderstanding of how the surge in

3. Michael Desch, "Bush and the Generals," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (May/June 2007), pp. 97, 104–105, 107.

4. James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton, "Iraq Study Group Report" (Houston, Tex: James A. Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, December 5, 2006), http://bakerinstitute.org/publications/iraqstudygroup_findings.pdf.

5. For that matter, a senior military intelligence officer declared the situation in Anbar Province "dire" in August 2006, which is about when the Desch of 2011 claims that the Awakening was in "full swing." Quoted in Thomas E. Ricks, "Situation Called Dire in West Iraq," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2006.

6. Indeed, when in 2011 the Obama administration seemingly signaled the opposite of the surge by committing to leave regardless of conditions on the ground, Sadr responded by escalating tensions. This pattern better fits the mainstream interpretation of Sadr's response to the 2007 surge

troops (and the renewed commitment of the United States that the surge signaled) made the other elements of the strategy work better. The surge strategy operated as an interaction model, whereas Desch treats its various elements as completely independent. Thus, he assigns more explanatory power to the Anbar Awakening than it warrants on its own. He is right that the tribal uprising happened before the surge, but he misunderstands the significance of the earlier failed attempts. The stirrings before the surge failed disastrously because al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) was able to counterattack, and at the same time, U.S. troops were not protecting the tribes; the surge was explicitly designed to support the tribes and expand this effort to other parts of the country.⁷

Stephen Biddle provides a convincing rebuttal to Desch's line of argument.⁸ Biddle is hardly an apologist for the Bush administration; on the contrary, he might be its most convincing critic.⁹ He has little patience, however, for the claim that the surge in troops was irrelevant to the change in the security trajectory in Iraq, and he bears quoting at length:

What the surge did was to provide the means for realigning Sunnis to survive realignment by protecting them from AQI counterattacks that had previously been decisive but now were not. In this role, the "surge" was only partly a troop increase—at least as important, it was also a systematic change in the way US forces operated, moving them away from reliance on large, defended bases and episodic mounted patrols and into the distributed, dismounted, persistent operations among the population called for by "population-centric" COIN doctrine. This was not literally unique to 2007—individual brigades had periodically experimented with such methods on a local, idiosyncratic basis starting at least as early as COL H.R. McMaster's operations in Tal Afar with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in 2005. Among these experiments were COL Sean McFarland's operations in Anbar in late 2006. The 2006 Anbar experiment coincided with the 2006 iteration of Sunni tribal disaffection with AQI, and together they created something new: a US military force that could provide persistent, distributed, dis-

than does Desch's revisionist version. Saad Sarhan and Aaron C. Davis, "Anti-U.S. Cleric Back in Iraq after Long Exile," *Washington Post*, January 6, 2011.

7. In internal discussions, Bush administration officials talked about sending additional troops to Anbar "to reinforce success" and to Baghdad "to shore up against failure." Curiously, Desch asserts that Bush's embrace of the Tribal Awakening during the 2006 review should not count in his favor given the president's initial reluctance (this presumably refers to some 2004-era reluctance). According to Desch, Bush doubted the reliability of tribes that had once been enemies of U.S. forces. But why should Bush be blamed for a decision he allegedly made in 2004, yet receive no credit for a decision he indubitably made in 2006?

8. See Stephen Biddle, "Stabilizing Iraq from the Bottom Up," testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, April 2, 2008; Stephen Biddle, "Patient Stabilized," *National Interest*, No. 94 (March/April 2008), pp. 19–25; Stephen Biddle, "Iraq's Lessons for Afghanistan," in Seyom Brown, ed., *U.S. Policy in Afghanistan and Iraq: Lessons and Legacies* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, forthcoming); and Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007," unpublished manuscript, 2011.

9. He is not, however, an infallible critic. Biddle is wrong, for instance, when he claims that the surge was only intended to produce space for top-down political reconciliation (which happened too slowly and insufficiently) rather than bottom-up political accommodation (which happened rapidly). See Biddle, "Patient Stabilized," p. 19. In fact, as the information that the White House released to accompany the president's surge speech makes clear, the bottom-up approach was an integral and intentional part of the surge. See Office of the Press Secretary, "Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials," January 10, 2007, <http://www.georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-1.html>.

mounted ground combat strength capable of using Sunni tribal knowledge of AQI cell membership and infrastructure to cripple AQI and protect realigning Sunnis from their counterattacks. The result was that Sunnis who wanted to realign could now do so and survive, and their knowledge and cooperation in turn increased the effectiveness of their newfound American allies. Petraeus insisted that McMaster/McFarland-style COIN tactics be employed on a systematic, consistent basis across the theater, rather than being the accidental outcome of local decisions by unusual leaders. And the surge provided a roughly one-third increase in combat brigades, enabling these methods to be extended across the most threatened sections of central Iraq (especially Baghdad and the Baghdad “belts”). This in turn caused the “Anbar model” to spread rapidly outside its Anbar origins over the course of 2007.¹⁰

Biddle also demolishes Desch’s “third alternative explanation,” namely, the notion that the level of violence dropped because the process of ethnic cleansing in the Iraqi capital had been completed:

[T]he relative incidence of mixed and pure, or Sunni and Shiite, neighborhoods in Baghdad correlates very poorly with the scale of sectarian violence. The killing has always been concentrated at the frontiers between Shiite and Sunni districts, where, typically, Shiite militia fought to expand their control and Sunni insurgents fought to hold them off. As this unfolded, Sunnis were often forced out and city blocks would fall under Shiite control, but this simply moved the frontier to the next block, where the battle continued unabated. Cleansing thus moved the violence, but it did not reduce it. This can be seen in the casualty statistics for 2006, which hardly fell as the city’s Sunni population shrank: all estimates show increasing civilian fatalities over the course of 2006, not the opposite. The only way this cleansing process could explain a radical drop in violence is if the frontiers disappeared as a result of Sunni extinction in Baghdad—but this has not occurred.¹¹

In sum, the surge in the number of U.S. troops was not sufficient to improve the security situation, but it was necessary, which is what I argue in “The Right to Be Right.”

DEFECTS IN STRAW MAN ACCOUNT OF THE SURGE’S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Alongside arguing that the surge was irrelevant to improving the security situation in Iraq, Desch makes a somewhat contrary assertion: that I have vastly overstated what the surge accomplished because there was no such improvement, or rather, any improvements were temporary and modest. In making this claim, Desch basically ignores what I say about the effects of the surge: “As of this writing, history’s final verdict on success or failure in the Iraq War remains uncertain, but it is clear that the new surge strategy changed, at least for a time, the trajectory of the war. At minimum, the surge opened up the possibility that the war would end successfully, achieving some recognizable version of the war aims President Bush outlined in his January 10 speech” (p. 88). Thus my claim is actually quite modest and lacks the sense of triumphalism contained in the “surging to victory” straw man that Desch attacks.¹²

The surge did not guarantee victory, but it did accomplish something quite impor-

10. Biddle, “Iraq’s Lessons for Afghanistan.”

11. Biddle, “Stabilizing Iraq from the Bottom Up,” p. 4.

12. I do not use the word “victory” to describe the likely outcome. Desch imports this term from an article I wrote some three years earlier: Peter Feaver, “Anatomy of the Surge,” *Commentary*, April 2008, pp. 24–28. Even there, however, I was careful to qualify the optimistic outcome as only

tant that Desch fails to adequately appreciate: it bought time for the United States and its Iraqi partners to accomplish objectives that were impossible to achieve when the security situation was spiraling out of control. The new commitment to population security and the new military resources necessary to fulfill this commitment bought time for U.S. and Iraqi partners to undertake the following objectives: suppress the accelerants of the sectarian violence through aggressive operations against rogue Jaish al-Mahdi and AQI fighters; pursue bottom-up political accommodation (seen as a far more modest/pragmatic objective than top-down political reconciliation); make the federal political activity in the Green Zone relevant to what was happening in the rest of Iraq by connecting national institutions to local development; and build up a bigger and more reliable Iraqi Security Force than the one that existed at the beginning of 2007.

Because the surge accomplished these objectives, President Barack Obama inherited options and possibilities in Iraq that he would not have otherwise had. He chose to spend this inheritance on a fairly single-minded effort to end U.S. involvement in Iraq, whatever the outcome. Had he become president, John McCain would probably have pursued more ambitious goals in Iraq, and he might have had a decent chance of achieving them. Either way, the surge prepared the ground so that whoever followed President Bush had the option of ending the war on his own terms—an outcome that would not have been possible without the surge. This alone, I think, makes the surge successful and vindicates President Bush's decision.

DEFECTS IN THE STORY OF HOW THE SURGE STRATEGY WAS DECIDED

Desch next advances the curious claim that President Bush played no role in deciding for the surge. In service of this claim, Desch misidentifies what is essential to my argument. Desch writes that “central to Feaver’s argument is the notion that [Gen. John] Abizaid and especially Casey somehow hindered the president’s new strategy.” Desch offers no evidence that I advance this “notion,” let alone that it is “central” to my argument. My argument is that the president, General Abizaid, and General Casey all believed that the “stand-up, stand-down” strategy was the right one before the summer of 2006, but that over the summer, the president started to doubt this strategy. Bush’s views evolved slowly, and even after he became convinced that a new strategy was needed, the process of developing one played out over the fall. During that period, Abizaid and Casey supported the old strategy longer than Bush did.¹³

Misidentifying my core claims allows Desch to avoid what is central to my argument: my observation that if the Bush administration had followed Desch’s advice of deferring to the combatant commander, there would not have been a surge in 2007. The surge happened because the president and his White House advisers acted in ways contrary to how Desch asserts that civil-military relations should unfold. I did not argue that Abizaid and Casey somehow hindered Bush. Rather, I argued that they advised against changing the strategy, and that if Bush followed Desch’s model of civil-

a possibility. In “The Right to Be Right,” I deliberately avoid the term because the upside in Iraq looks considerably more modest today than it did three years ago. This is not the place to rehearse all of the ways in which the Obama administration may have mishandled the Iraq file, but the combined mistakes lower my estimate of what is likely to unfold in the near-to-medium term. They do not, however, change my assessment of the success of the surge.

13. The block quote that Desch cites from Donald Rumsfeld’s memoirs supports my interpretation, not Desch’s.

military relations, it would have meant taking Abizaid and Casey's initial position on the surge, which was not to do it. Desch of 2007 is admirably clear on this point; no one can read his *Foreign Affairs* article and miss that he thought the surge was a bad idea, one more in a string of follies that could be laid at the feet of Bush's embrace of a more assertive civilian role.¹⁴ Desch of 2011 engages in a bit of misdirection and thus avoids confronting this, the central claim of my argument.

Instead of dealing with this inconvenient truth head-on, Desch dismisses President Bush and the White House as largely irrelevant to the shift in strategy. Desch does not address my evidence about the White House role in the surge strategy review—indeed, it is striking that he calls my account a “caricature” even though he fails to point to a single historical error in my description of the decisionmaking process. (I am fallible and I lack complete information, so there may be an error, but it is a certainty that Desch did not find one.) The reader is thus left struggling to imagine how Desch believes the decisionmaking process unfolded. The closest he comes to offering an account is his statement that “the Bush administration’s push for the surge began with retired Army Chief of Staff Gen. Jack Keane, who convinced the president to change course”—invoking Thomas Ricks as his authority.¹⁵ By contrast, in my article I relate many lines of action that Ricks does not cover in his reporting of this period in the Iraq War. Collectively, they indicate a very different decisionmaking process (one, by the way, that is more consonant with how President Bush describes the unfolding of his thinking in his memoirs than is Desch’s). Until Desch provides a more compelling description of how the surge decision unfolded, one grounded in new data, I suspect that fair-minded readers will find my account better supported by the available evidence than they will his.

Instead of detailing the White House’s role in the surge decision, Desch revives his critique of Secretary Donald Rumsfeld from an earlier period. This is not the place to debate Rumsfeld’s decisions from 2001 through the spring of 2006, which because of space constraint reasons I did not address in much detail in my article. But even if Desch is right that Rumsfeld was the “central civilian figure” during that earlier period, and that Rumsfeld mismanaged the war, this does not undermine my account of how the surge strategy was developed. Given how important Desch thought Rumsfeld to be, it is curious that he fails to engage my one point about the earlier Rumsfeld-ascendant period that the *International Security* editors did find space to include: the brief discussion in footnote 30 (p. 98). There I note that many of the problems with the conduct of the Iraq War arose in the “postconflict operations” phase of the war plan, which the secretary did not subject to the “Rumsfeld treatment.” In contrast, many of the aspects of the plan that did go well had been subject to precisely the sort of scrutiny that Desch assails. It is worthy of more research, but I suspect that a careful study would show a far more complex picture of the fruits of civilian “meddling” than Desch’s account seems to capture.

14. Desch, “Bush and the Generals.”

15. Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* (New York: Penguin, 2009), pp. 8–9, 79. Even Ricks gives a bit more of a nod to the rest of the decisionmaking process than Desch does, as when he writes: “[A] few insiders, led by Keane, managed to persuade President Bush to adopt a new more effective strategy.” *Ibid.*, p. 9. For that matter, Ricks goes beyond Desch in another way, too, crediting the new strategy as “more effective,” which Desch cannot bring himself to do.

DEFECTS IN CRITIQUES ABOUT "PARTICIPANT BIAS" AND PUBLIC OPINION

Desch's lesser charges also do not withstand scrutiny. He claims, for instance, that I have participant bias, but does not cite a single example where my first-hand experience led me to misunderstand/misstate Bush's decisionmaking process. Given that Desch was already prominent as a Bush critic, one might argue that he has every bit as much "bias" in evaluating Bush as I do. Indeed, because I make some critiques of the Bush administration, whereas Desch fails to credit the president in any way for any aspect of the surge, one might be tempted to conclude that my more balanced account indicates greater success in overcoming any supposed bias.

Desch also raises a tangentially related debate about how casualties affect support for war. The debate was between John Mueller, on the one hand, and me and my co-authors of another article published in *International Security*, Christopher Gelpi and Jason Reifler, on the other. We answered the Mueller critique to my satisfaction in a rejoinder and a subsequent book that Desch does not cite.¹⁶ But even if others are not persuaded by our "success matters" argument, surely Desch would concede that the way the Iraq War played in public opinion and U.S. domestic politics was very different from the fall of 2007 onward than it was during the three years preceding that pivot point. The Gelpi-Feaver-Reifler argument claimed that public support would be sufficient to continue a war that appeared to be headed toward a successful end. This captures rather well the dramatic reversal in the domestic political fortunes of Iraq since 2007. Perhaps Desch agrees because later in his letter, without apparently realizing how it contradicts his line of argument here, he approvingly references quotes from Rumsfeld and Casey claiming that the principal accomplishment of the surge was the way it changed the political situation in Washington.

WHERE TO TAKE THE DEBATE FROM HERE

In his letter, Desch does not address one of the more serious limitations of his approach to civil-military relations, one that the surge case dramatically highlights: What should the president do when military leaders disagree among themselves about how to fix a wartime strategy that appears to be failing? Desch's approach, which privileges military advice, seems to assume that the military will agree on what needs to be done, so the president must only decide whether to heed that advice. But what should the presi-

16. See Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), especially pp. 231–233. See also Christopher Gelpi's rejoinder to Mueller in "The Cost of War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (January/February 2006), pp. 139–142. Desch does, however, cite the sensationalized account of my alleged role in a "public relations campaign" as recounted in Scott Shane, "Bush's Speech on Iraq War Echoes Voice of an Analyst," *New York Times*, December 4, 2005. For the record, this account (and Desch's relating of it) misconstrues the reason Stephen Hadley added me to his staff (I was hired to stand up a new strategic planning cell and to work on the National Security Strategy as well as other strategic planning initiatives). Desch misstates my role in drafting the *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* (I only assisted the lead author, Meghan O'Sullivan). In addition, he misunderstands the way my research with Gelpi and Reifler contributed to the document (our research does not show, and I never believed, that using the word "victory" could rescue a strategy that failed to produce success on the ground). See Peter Feaver and William Inboden, "What Was the Point of SPIR? Strategic Planning in National Security at the White House," in Daniel Drezner, ed., *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), pp. 98–112.

dent do when the question becomes which military advice should I heed, rather than should I heed it? Perhaps in future work, Desch could explore the difficulties this poses for his preferred paradigm.

As a final note, I agree with Desch on one important matter. When the Bush administration's archives are open or when future memoirs are written, new information will be added to the historical record that will offer an opportunity to revisit these debates. Indeed, during my time in the Bush administration and later when conducting research for the "The Right to Be Right," I came across new information that I did not know when I wrote my earlier pieces on civil-military relations theory. This new information caused me to revise and update my thinking. In contrast, Desch's response to my article leaves the impression that his approach is impervious to new information. Despite all of the new reporting contained in the "The Right to Be Right," Desch seems unwilling to revise his argument about civil-military relations and the surge one iota from his 2007 stance. Nevertheless, I hope that he and others will read two forthcoming books, one by *New York Times* reporter Michael Gordon and the other by former Iraq policy insider Brett McGurk, which promise to be the most thoroughly reported books to date on this period in the Iraq story. Perhaps Desch and I can agree to reconsider our debate about civil-military relations and the surge decision in whatever new light Gordon and McGurk shine on the subject.

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