



Sustaining the Surge. Bush has more options than people think

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When General David Petraeus reports to Washington next week, the most important question he'll have to answer is, What happens in Iraq after the surge? With all but the most die-hard defeatists--that is, the congressional Democratic leadership--convinced that the surge has improved the security situation in Iraq, there seems ever less chance that Congress will force an American withdrawal. Instead, the war will continue through at least the remainder of the Bush presidency.

As a result, U.S. policy in Iraq will enter into an extended "post-surge" period. The surge brigades began to arrive in Iraq in January. Therefore, around April the arithmetic of the Army's 15-month rotation policy will begin to kick in. And as NBC's

Tim Russert stated on *Meet the Press* on August 26, "We do not have the capacity to continue the surge because of the strain on our military." Or so the conventional wisdom in Washington goes.

But is it true? The fact is, even our overstretched U.S. land forces are capable of continuing the surge without extending the tour of units currently in Iraq beyond 15 months. As Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno, deputy commander in Iraq, pointed out in a news conference earlier this month, the current surge can be pushed until next August. And there are a number of ways to sustain a larger force even longer. To begin with, Marine rotations for combat forces, now seven months long, could be extended. Additional

forces are also available from the Army National Guard. Six full Army National Guard brigades have been on alert since July in anticipation of deployment in 2008; their deployment could be accelerated. To be sure, there would be questions about the wisdom of such decisions, but it is simply not the case that the capacity to extend the surge doesn't exist.

If General Petraeus wanted to extend the surge in Iraq at its present force level of 165,000, there are enough soldiers and Marines to take it through this time next year and possibly longer. Of course, the real question is, Should he request this? The answer is not simply a matter of stress on the force, but the strategic value of the potential gains in Iraq. And one clear fact worth considering is that the Petraeus surge has regained the initiative that was slowly and painfully lost from 2003 to 2006.

Militarily, the surge has three goals. The first is to drive a wedge between Al Qaeda In Iraq and the Sunni population. Though not complete, that effort has succeeded more rapidly and more decisively than anyone imagined to be possible, as the "Anbar Awakening" and similar movements have taken hold.

The second is to drive a similar wedge between the Shia extremists, particularly those in the Jaysh al-Mahdi militia of Moktada al-Sadr, and the broader Iraqi Shia community. There is now clear progress on that front, too; whatever Sadr means by his order to "suspend" Jaysh al-

Mahdi actions for six months, it's not a message of strength.

A third goal of the surge is to limit the influence of outside powers, especially Iran. This is where maintaining or increasing troop strength is crucial. The main lines for Iranian infiltration and supply are relatively few, but they pass through areas of Iraq, particularly south of Baghdad, where coalition forces have long been few and inactive. Only now is this problem being attacked seriously, not only by U.S. forces, but also, for example, by the newly deployed troops from the Republic of Georgia and, most crucially, by Iraqi army units.

This last point is yet another reason to reinforce success: The Petraeus surge is responsible for galvanizing the partnership between American and Iraqi units and a surge in Iraqi combat capabilities. Yes, there's a long way to go before "Iraqification" is complete, but as the recent National Intelligence Estimate reported, Iraqi security forces "involved in combined operations with Coalition forces have performed adequately, and some units have demonstrated increasing professional competence." The reason for the improvement is that Iraqi units are paired with American units.

All in all, then, there's a strong argument for building on these advances. At times--in fact, most of the time--commentators and politicians alike forget that the full complement of the surge has only been in place since July. And, even more important, it has been less than a year

since the new counterinsurgency strategy that the surge was intended to support began to be implemented. Even so, the progress on the ground is palpable to both the U.S. soldiers in the field and the Iraqis. The question has to be asked: Wouldn't it be worth "banking" even more success in Iraq while the momentum is on our side? Having a margin of safety in numbers and capabilities in any war--be it conventional or not--is hardly something a commander or, for that matter, a commander in chief should forsake if it is possible to do otherwise.

By all accounts, General Petraeus will not be asking for additional troops. Even so, the end of the surge cycle won't mean a precipitous decline in U.S. force levels. General George Casey, the Army chief of staff and Petraeus's predecessor in Iraq, recently suggested to the *Wall Street Journal* that, over the next year, 6 of the 21 brigades now deployed may be withdrawn. That's a return to the pre-surge level of about 135,000 troops. While the press insists upon portraying Casey and the rest of the general officer corps as unreconstructed surge opponents, the fact is that his numbers reduce the strain on the force "without significantly reducing the force level [that President] Bush and General Petraeus want to keep." When the Joint Chiefs of Staff offer a range of troop-level options for Iraq, they're simply doing what they're paid to

paid to do: offer professional risk assessments. When Casey declares that the Army is "unbalanced," he's right--the force is too small to meet its worldwide requirements. But the way to rebalance the Army is not to declare defeat in Iraq but to increase the size of U.S. land forces.

Until then--and President Bush ought to bring the same sense of urgency to the task of expanding the force as he does to fighting the war--the Army appears committed to doing what needs to be done to support Petraeus. Indeed, we are well into unit rotations that will keep force levels up even as the surge comes to an end: The 101st Airborne Division is in the midst of a deployment that should last until the end of 2008, followed by the 1st Armored and the 4th Infantry divisions, and ultimately the headquarters of the XVIII Airborne Corps as the lead ground command. The I Marine Expeditionary Force is slated to replace the II MEF in Multi-National Force-West.

Petraeus's bet is that a force of that size will be sufficient, although probably just sufficient, for expanding the counterinsurgency effort of "clear, control, and retain" in other areas of Iraq. Given the results of the surge thus far, it will be hard to gainsay his judgment--especially for Democrats in Congress. But rather than meeting Petraeus's minimum needs, we should be seeking ways to maximize his chances of success.