

Pushing the Surge

By Eli Clifton | September 12, 2007

In anticipation of U.S. Gen. David Petraeus' final report on Iraq, supporters of the troop surge have been busily trying to set the stage for the report that they believe will refute their opponents. But the media blitz in Washington is unfolding under the backdrop of dwindling domestic and international support for the ongoing U.S. presence in Iraq.

In a worldwide poll released September 7 and conducted by the BBC World Service, GlobeScan, and the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), 67% of international respondents and 61% of U.S. citizens think the United States should withdraw within a year.

Progress in the troop surge has been slow, and Petraeus' July interim report found mixed results, with only 6 of 18 congressional benchmarks for success in Iraq being met.

Last Thursday, the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—which has generally supported the George W. Bush administration's decisions in Iraq—put on a marathon 3.5 hour series of panel discussions to promote AEI resident scholar Frederick Kagan's recent report, "No Middle Way: The Challenge of Exit Strategies From Iraq."

Kagan challenges another recent report by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), which proposes a phased withdrawal from Iraq and a shift from the current U.S. role of performing security operations to an advisory and support role for the Iraqi police and military.

Kagan believes that the CNAS report, "like most middle-way strategies, mistakes the conditions that would make such a transition successful: when basic security has been established. Instead, it suggests than an immediate transition to an advisory role—driven by hopes for bipartisanship in Washington but irrespective of the security situation in Iraq—would allow the United States to withdraw

most of its combat forces without compromising its interests."

"That conclusion is false," writes Kagan.

The "No Middle Way" kickoff included surge heavyweights such as Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon, retired U.S. Army Gen. Jack Keane, and AEI's Danielle Pletka and Gary Schmitt. "Middle Way" proponents, however, did get their say, with James N. Miller, the coauthor of the CNAS report, titled "Phased Transition: A Responsible Way Forward and Out of Iraq," defending his work in one of the two panel discussions.

The lead-up to the Petraeus report—which, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, "would actually be written by the White House, with inputs from officials throughout the government"—has fanned the flames of debate over whether the surge is actually having its desired effect.

All the speakers at the AEI event, minus Miller, painted a positive image of post-surge Iraq, citing a decrease in sectarian violence and the impossibility of starting an immediate phased withdrawal based on timelines instead of improvements on the ground, both political and security related, which, they claim, would only lead to failure in Iraq.

Meanwhile, public support for the U.S. military presence in Iraq is continuously dwindling. Proponents of the surge point to statistics showing decreases in sectarian bloodshed, but serious questions have been raised about the validity of this data.

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Petraeus, in his upcoming report, is expected to cite a 75% decrease in sectarian attacks and a 17% decline in civilian casualties from December 2006 to August 2007.

However, an Associated Press (AP) report last week said that 1,809 civilian deaths occurred in August, making it the highest monthly casualty count of 2007, with 27,564 civilians killed since the AP began its data collection in April 2005.

Furthermore, a General Accountability Office (GAO) report—criticized at the AEI event—found that the “average number of daily attacks against civilians have remained unchanged from February to July 2007.”

Kagan, Keane, and O’Hanlon discount such dire statistics as not being representative of the Iraq they have witnessed during week-long tours of the country.

Graham summed up the situation as one in which the United States either continues with the surge and emerges victorious, or chooses a middle ground and faces certain defeat.

“My last visit convinced me more than anything else that the biggest benefit from the surge is to take the men and women on the frontlines and change their attitudes about their mission,” said Graham. “They’ve gone from riding around waiting to be shot to feel like they’re kicking their ass. God bless,” Graham concluded.

But troop morale is likely far from being “sky high” or “through the roof,” as Graham claimed in his remarks last Thursday. According to a report in the August 25 *Los Angeles Times*: “The latest in a series of mental health surveys of troops in Iraq, released in May, says 45% of the 1,320 soldiers interviewed ranked morale in their unit as low or very low. Seven percent ranked it high or very high.”

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