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Why Debating the Surge is Important

Posted by Michael Cohen

Over at the [Majlis blog](#), [Greg Carlstrom](#) asks about the back and forth yesterday between myself, [Andrew Exum](#) and [others](#) on the "success" of the surge, "Haven't we already had this argument a few dozen times in the blogosphere?"

Of course we've had the debate many times - but we need to keep having it over and over again; because the debate over the "success" of the surge is, in my view, the single most important foreign policy debate in this country. I make this argument for two reasons.

First, the surge is inextricably tied to the larger debate about counter-insurgency, because many of those who claim that the surge "worked" in Iraq argue that it was more than just the influx of troops that turned the tide, but also the shift in tactics to population centric counter-insurgency. This argument, while offering lip service to other factors like ethnic cleansing in Baghdad, the Mahdi Army cease fire etc, give the lion's share of credit to the US military. Now of course I think this is completely wrong - and in fact it was the decisions made by Iraqis themselves (both good and bad) that led to a decline in civilian casualties. (This is not to mention the fact that making the decline in civilian casualties the metric for success in Iraq - rather than President Bush's actual goal of political reconciliation - is a pretty good example of moving the goalposts to fit a preconceived narrative. In fact last Spring General McChrystal actually made a decline in civilian casualties the metric for success in Afghanistan - the quintessential example of how drawing the wrong lessons from one war can wrongly drive policy-making in another war.)

But that notwithstanding, the implications of the pro-surge narrative is far more dangerous because it presupposes that the US "gets" counter-insurgency; that it can be fought in a manner that minimizes civilian casualties (which didn't happen in Iraq); and above all the US military has the capability to successfully wage counter-insurgencies and that this core competency can be replicated elsewhere . . . like Afghanistan.

As I noted yesterday, the fetishization of COIN in the military is precisely what has led to the embrace of COIN in Afghanistan even though the two environments are 180 degrees different. When you have the US military commander for Afghanistan declaring that COIN is the only approach that will stabilize the situation and the Pentagon is unable to even come up with a counter-terrorism strategy for Afghanistan. . . well you get some sense what I am talking about.

So when many people say the surge worked in Iraq (and I'm excluding Andrew here); they are implicitly arguing that counter-insurgency worked in Iraq and the policy outcome is that COIN is seen as a feasible means of waging war by the United States. But if in fact Iraq's emerging political stability was the result of a multitude of indigenous and exogenous factors of which the United States only played one role among many - then one would draw very different conclusions about not only the surge, but also the US military's effectiveness in waging counter-insurgency. That is a pretty important debate to be having.

The second implication of saying the surge worked is that it obscures the far more important lesson that should be drawn about the Iraq War. As I wrote last month:

The focus for policy-makers shouldn't be what America got right after digging itself out of a hole, but how the U.S. found itself in such a big hole in the first place.

Focusing mainly on military tactics masks far more important conclusions about the strategic flaws, faulty assumptions and dubious judgments that underpinned the pre-war planning for Iraq.

What should instead be clear from the Iraq war is that the United States is ill-equipped to do effective and long-term

nation-building; that military incursions not limited or combined with a clear and realistic political objective have a tendency to take on a life of their own; and that the unintended consequences of war must never be far from the minds of policymakers.

As even GOP Congressman [Dana Rohrbacher](#) noted last month at an event at the [Cato Institute](#), everyone (including most Republicans on the Hill) agree the Iraq War was a "horrible mistake" - and it was a horrible mistake for so many of the reasons why American military interventions are occasionally horrible mistakes; we misjudge our national interests, we overestimate our political influence, we inflate the efficacy of the use of force; we shunt aside other means of maximizing our interests and we ignore the full consequences of going to war . . . and I could go on.

From a strategic and not tactical context whether the surge "worked" or didn't work should be irrelevant to civilian policy-makers - the real issue is whether the war was a mistake and in that sense I don't think anyone seriously argues otherwise. And considering what a complete and unmitigated disaster the Iraq War was it's a lesson that needs to be driven over and over again into the heads of policy-makers.

Of course, this matters in a substantive way, because throughout American history the lessons derived from the "last war" have played a crucial role in determining the future direction of US national security policy.

After World War II, the lessons of Munich convinced policymakers they could never again risk appeasing totalitarian and dictatorial regimes, a view that informed US Cold War policy. After the Korean War, the military was witness to a raging debate between advocates of limited war, who argued that the US must be prepared for "smaller conflicts" and "Never Againers," who believed that the US must focus the military on large-scale conventional conflicts that directly threatened the national interest. The fallout from Vietnam, which adhered to the limited war lesson, led to the Weinberger and Powell Doctrine's constraints on the use of military force.

Each of these debates, in their own unique way, has informed the conduct and direction of US military and security policy. Indeed, if there is one lesson to be derived from these "lessons" it is that the historical interpretation of past conflicts can have an enormous impact on future wars.

Indeed, if you need any more evidence look to Afghanistan where the COINdinstas "lessons" from Iraq are being used to support military escalation and a dubious political/military strategy. So yeah, debating the surge matters and all of us who care about national security policy need to keep engaging in this conversation.

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