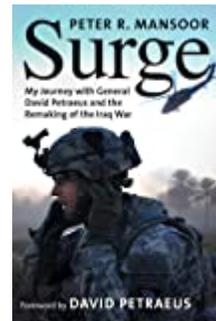


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Peter R. Mansoor.** *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War.* Yale Library of Military History Series. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. Illustrations. xxxii + 341 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-17235-5; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-20937-2.



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**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Peter R. Mansoor's latest work gives us the first deep and nuanced look at the surge during the Iraq War. Given Mansoor's assignment as General David Petraeus's executive officer and his prior combat tour in Iraq, he offers a unique and exceptionally useful set of insights regarding the genesis of the surge, its objectives, and the reasons for its ultimate success. As Mansoor notes, his is the first work on the surge not written by a journalist but rather by a soldier directly involved in the pivotal events of 2007-2008 and in daily contact with the general officer responsible for orchestrating and executing them. The book is something of a hybrid, addressing both the surge and Mansoor's own journey alongside Petraeus. Mansoor weaves his role in this effort into the larger events surrounding the surge and uses his perceptions as one of several lenses through which the reader can view key events.

Mansoor begins his book with a very useful and absolutely frank background chapter explaining how coalition and Iraqi fortunes reached their nadir just before the surge began in February 2007. The absence of a coherent—much less achievable—strategy for shaping Iraq's post-Saddam Hussein future, and an absence of post-hostilities planning, set the stage for disaster. Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, made three critical

errors that created the propellant for an insurgency and then ignited it. Bremer's de-Ba'athification decree created the political basis for the insurgency, his disbanding of all branches of the Iraqi military and Saddam's paramilitary organizations created its military basis, and his formation of the Iraqi Governing Council with its almost entirely Shi'a composition provided the igniter. A profound lack of cultural insight, insufficient troops to counter the growing insurgency, a failure to anticipate how quickly Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) would emerge as the primary adversary, premature efforts to turn the war over to Iraqi security forces, and an ineffective strategy that failed to provide security for Iraqis all brought coalition forces to the edge of defeat. Ethno-sectarian violence and a major insurgency were tearing apart Iraq and its people.

Having placed the blame for these grave errors squarely where they belong—with President George W. Bush and his senior advisors—Mansoor also notes that Bush was among the very first to intuit the need for a new strategy in Iraq. In fact, he applauds Bush's moral courage in undertaking the surge and choosing Petraeus in a bid to change the course of the war so Iraqis would have at least a chance at peace and prosperity within a stable country. Mansoor's frustration with the course of

events after the successes of the surge is evident throughout the book. He notes similarities to the abandonment of South Vietnam in 1974 and compares these sad chapters in American policymaking with the patient support of South Korea that has allowed it to flourish. One of the most important things Mansoor says and he does so repeatedly is that achieving policy objectives (in the case of the surge producing a sustainable state of peace based on the development of sound political institutions) is far preferable to walking away even when the reasons for going to war initially were less than compelling. In other words, it is better to start weak and finish strong in the policy arena than it is to do the opposite, or simply to start and end on a weak note. Mansoor's tie between this assertion and the surge is precisely that the surge gave American policymakers an opportunity to finish strong, whether or not they ultimately decided to do so.

Mansoor's analysis of the surge and its reasons for success is impressive. Beginning with the premise that providing security for Iraqis was the critical enabler for political progress and thus all further improvements within Iraq, Mansoor describes how Petraeus and his small group of close advisors developed the plans underlying the successful execution of the surge. Mansoor speaks of two related surges: the surge of troops and the even more important surge of ideas that allowed for the employment of the additional forces with maximum effectiveness. Fortunately, AQI and its Shi'a counterpart, the Jaish al-Mahdi with its Iranian Qods-Force-trained Special Groups, were so extreme in their behaviors that they gave coalition forces a number of openings, some serendipitous and some planned. One of the most important was the Sunni Awakening, which was in large part the result of AQI outrages committed against Sunni tribes and sheikhs in al-Anbar Province, and the sheikhs' courageous decision to rid themselves of this menace. Another was Nouri al-Maliki's, the prime minister, Charge of the Knights, which led (despite errors in planning and execution on Maliki's part and that of the Iraqi Security Forces, and despite a requirement for heavy coalition assistance) to the defeat of Jaish al-Mahdi and the Special Groups in Basra and Baghdad. Beyond these more spectacular successes, the surge produced hundreds of more mundane but collectively decisive ones. As coalition and Iraqi forces established a permanent presence in Iraq's contested cities, most of which were in the heart of contested provinces, the security situation improved. Once local Iraqis learned that the surge forces were there for the long haul, they began providing intelligence on AQI and other extremist and insurgent

groups. The cumulative effects of this dynamic were the defeat of these adversaries; reconciliation of the majority of Iraqis to the Maliki government and a commitment to make the political process work; and the opportunity (unfortunately missed by both sides) to develop a long-term cooperative U.S.-Iraqi security arrangement.

A key part of the victory occurred on the home front, when Petraeus appeared on two separate occasions before congressional committees to discuss the state of the surge; the prospects for success; and the requirement for continuing political, fiscal, logistical, and other kinds of support. Mansoor leaves the reader in no doubt about the crucial importance of Petraeus's testimony, delivered without any oversight or edits by the president or anyone else, to the ultimate success of the surge. Mansoor provides details regarding preparations for the hearings in 2007 and 2008, and the effort that went into giving Congress an accurate picture of conditions on the ground in Iraq, that very few other people could have provided.

Despite the missed opportunities on both sides after the surge to help secure Iraq's future, Mansoor's narrative and very effective argumentation leave the reader with a clear understanding that the surge achieved its objectives, and that Iraq did in fact have an opportunity to become increasingly stable, safe, and prosperous during the window from the summer of 2008 until the final withdrawal of American troops and the failure to achieve long-term security agreements in late 2011. Far from representing a tactical or operational adjustment, the surge was an entirely new strategy. It achieved its stated policy aims as a result of the very effective employment of coalition and Iraqi forces.

This book is exceptionally informative and a page-turner. Officers, noncommissioned officers, civilian officials, and military historians should read it. In my view, there are only two minor drawbacks. First, the book sometimes verges on hagiography. Petraeus was by all accounts a superb commander, but he is also human. Mansoor gives the reader a single example of a misstep on his boss's part (during one of the congressional hearings). Perhaps all the others were minor. Maybe Petraeus was as close to perfect as Mansoor implies, but this seems unlikely. I would have liked to see more of the man along with the commander. Second, while the surge was clearly a ground-centric operation, air and naval assets receive virtually no mention, and even the marines make only occasional appearances. The fire-support capabilities the navy and air force brought to bear (which do receive occasional mention) were just the tip of the iceberg.

From logistics (including a major and continuing navy role here along with new air force tactics, techniques, and procedures that involved flying larger numbers of troops from place to place rather than restricting them to vehicle convoys); to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (the air force worked hard to bring additional remotely piloted vehicles and other assets into place despite what we hear from some circles); to GPS and precision navigation, there were many contributing factors that enabled ground-force successes. The Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization is just one of many examples where the services worked together hard to turn the tide. It was a combined, joint, combined-arms, interagency, and multilateral effort in every sense of these terms, and the book could have reflected this

more accurately from the military standpoint without detracting from Petraeus's leading role or that of the army.

Whatever the book's minor shortcomings (and these are based on the reviewer's perception), Mansoor has produced a masterpiece. I trust that military personnel and government employees with intellectual acumen will read the book. More important, I hope that they will learn from it and apply this learning in contextually and operationally useful ways to deal with the challenges of a profoundly nonlinear and dangerous twenty-first-century world. As a fellow retired colonel turned professor, I commend Mansoor for sharing a vitally important set of insights with us—insights designed first and foremost to help the next generation of military professionals keep our country safe and prosperous.

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