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OPINION

The Politics of Petraeus

By John C. Hulsman

The report by the US military's top man in Iraq has a little bit for everyone. Still, Petraeus' highly political case will change very little. It is unlikely he can convince the Democrats to stay the course in Iraq, and support for Bush's Iraq policies will likely continue even amongst wavering Republicans.



AP

President George W. Bush (right) and Gen. David Petraeus: Cherry-picked facts to bolster a shaky case

On Monday night, after a very long day of assessing what the report from General David Petraeus to Congress might say, I had a decision to make. I could watch the keenly awaited Congressional testimony of our senior American commander in Iraq, or take time off to listen to a new Bob Dylan CD I had brought back from America.

With little hesitation I opted for Dylan.

For the Petraeus Report has nothing to do with Middle Eastern realities; it has everything to do with American politics. For this is a report that will be seen as all things to all people -- and it will change very little.

The White House

For the White House, current poll numbers on Iraq make for grim reading. The new Associated Press-Ipsos poll, published this past Sunday, finds that by 59 to 34 percent, those surveyed think the Iraq war will be judged a historical mistake. This large, two-to-one ratio holds across the board; 58 to 36 percent think the surge is a flop. These

numbers have barely moved in the past year. It is clear that the majority of Americans have made their minds up about the war, and think it is a catastrophe. Like a failed gambler coming to the end of his stake, the president is frantically looking around for someone to loan him some cash, or in this case public trust, so he can continue his spree. In desperation, the president has turned to General Petraeus.

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But this is a political, not a policy strategy. The general has already said, all facts to the contrary, that the surge is working, that the extra 30,000 troops have achieved most of their military goals and can probably leave Iraq by the summer of 2008. For an administration beset by almost constant bad news, this pronouncement amounts to manna from heaven.

It does not matter that the general has cherry-picked factoids to bolster his shaky case (for example, he has moved a large number of Iraqis killed from the sectarian war category to the common crime category, without explanation), or that the general clearly admitted that the prime goal of the surge -- that a military offensive would give all the segments of the Iraqi elite time to make the political compromises necessary for stability -- has met with scant progress. The president's political goal is simple; to use the general's testimony to reassure enough wavering Republicans to 'stay the course,' so he can continue with his last throw of the dice.

The Republicans in Congress

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For the Republicans in the Senate face a real problem. With Iraq consistently topping the list of people's concerns heading into the 2008 election, and with the war going so badly, even popular incumbents are getting very nervous. Moderate Republicans such as Susan Collins of Maine and Gordon Smith of Oregon, facing tough re-election

campaigns, are going home to a barrage of criticism about their votes to authorize the Iraq war in the first place. With 22 of the 34 Senate seats that are up for election in 2008 now in Republican hands, it was always going to be a difficult year for the party. With Iraq looming over everything, it could well become disastrous.

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The president's only hope is that the general's report is positive enough to keep these wavering Republicans on the reservation, with his infusion of good news. Any future cut-off of funding for Iraq would require a good deal of moderate Republican support. For they are the primary audience for the report, its terms underlying a political courting process undertaken by both the Democrats and the White House.

The Democrats

For the Democrats the Petraeus report is a danger. This well-regarded military leader, perhaps the finest serving officer in the American armed forces, has seemed set to contradict their position that the war is unwinnable. They must find a way to honor the man, while at the same time attacking his overly optimistic findings.

For the Democrats, ever since retaking both houses of Congress in November 2006, have a larger political problem. If they vote to end financial support for the war, they risk falling into the 'Vietnam Trap.' Following their cutting off of funding to South Vietnam in the 1970's, for 30 years Democrats have been viewed as weaker on national security issues than Republicans. While this might not be fair it is a political fact that the current Democratic leadership is well aware of. But if they continue to do nothing, they will be supporting the very war that they rose to power declaring they would bring to an end. This will enrage the left of the party, the very group that energized their victory in the mid-term elections of 2006.

What Will Happen

With his testimony to the House finished, General Petraeus will go before the Senate on Tuesday, stressing tactical military improvements in Anbar province and in portions of Baghdad. He will also continue to admit that, to put it mildly, there has been little to no political progress in the country, that the Iraqi leadership has not taken advantage of the breathing space the surge was designed to provide. There has been no agreement on sharing oil revenues, increasing Sunni participation in a Shia-dominated central government or in disbanding powerful militias. In terms of policy, as the German thinker Clausewitz stressed, military operations should be merely a tool to achieve political goals. By that standard the surge is undoubtedly a failure.

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But that is not what this carnival is truly about. The Petraeus report should be seen almost entirely in the context of Washington politics, if what is going on is to make sense. At the end of this, the president will say he is vindicated, declaring that the surge must go on. Democrats will rightly stress the avalanche of problems in Iraq, and remain unconvinced. Wavering Republicans will continue to waver, but not enough will defect to cut the president's funding for the war.

And this tragedy will go on.

Listening to Dylan is looking like a better and better decision.



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