

# H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXII-7

Timothy Andrews Sayle, Jeffrey A. Engel, Hal Brands, and William Inboden (eds.). *The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush's Decision to Surge in Iraq*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781501715181 (hardcover, \$34.95).

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INTRODUCTION BY JAMES LEBOVIC, THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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**T**he *Last Card* provides an important look at a controversial, and unusual, policy decision: the Bush administration's bold ("surge") decision, in late 2006, to send thirty-thousand additional combat troops to Iraq to implement a counterinsurgency strategy. The book selects from transcripts of interviews that were conducted with almost all the key participants, President George W. Bush included. It complements these first-person accounts with the comments and insights of top academic analysts. They reflect on the revelations in light of what we know (or think we know) about decision-making, civil-military relations, military strategy, and bureaucratic politics. The book nicely illuminates the complexities and challenges—the interests, resistance, deference, and uncertainties—that confound national-security decision-making, especially in crises.

The book is most unusual, however, due to the subject itself—a big decision, with a number of twists. Presidential advisors gathered information, explored options, acquired allies, and swayed opinion, overcoming presidential hesitancy and the deep reservations of the military, Congress, and public at large, to rescue a failing war strategy. Indeed, the individual narratives are especially useful, here, given the secretiveness and compartmentalization of the process that convinced Bush to change war strategy and send the additional troops to Iraq. The revelations offer a compelling retort to the many Iraq-war critics who see all Iraq war decision-making as serving the flawed initial decision to invade that country. To be sure, we have more than sufficient reason to assail the folly and hubris behind the invasion decision. But the book compels the reader to consider the 2006 case for military intervention, i.e., to save Iraq from the consequences of U.S. intervention, and to appreciate the professionalism, sensibilities, and capabilities of key participants who helped engineer the surge.

Much like works on the Cuban Missile Crisis, the book highlights decisions that yielded success, at least in the short term. As with that momentous crisis, the book also provokes nagging questions that impugn the apparent success. First, given the available resources and the information at hand, was the surge decision more a 'gamble,' than a reasoned response to deteriorating conditions in Iraq? After all, as Roger Petersen observes, the President acted against the wishes, and wisdom, of his key defense advisers. Their concerns were hardly misplaced. The U.S. military had failed over the years to end the violence. It would need to succeed with: only a slightly augmented force, in a short period of time; troop morale that had been reduced through stop-loss orders and multiple tours; and untested Iraqi troops. Ultimately, the larger U.S. force could have tried, and failed, to reduce the violence in Iraq. The U.S. military, and Iraq, would then be in even worse shape, with fewer options (as the book's title suggests).

Second, how much did the accomplishments of the U.S. military depend on the Awakening Movement, when Sunnis in Anbar province switched sides and turned against their former allies in al-Qaeda. It was a key contributor to the ultimate reduction in violence, as some of the authors (and interviewees) observe. Yet, it is oddly missing from most of the narrative. Is it fair to say then that the Bush administration basically 'got lucky' from what amounted to a perfect convergence of conditions—additional U.S. combat troops, to be sure, but also a local force that knew the enemy well and was best positioned to combat it? If so, might we too easily draw lessons from the surge about the likelihood of imposing peace through military intervention or overstate the value of making 'bold' decisions that forgo caution or play against the collective wisdom?

Third, how much power do presidents actually possess to end wars or dramatically change wartime policy? The book still offers reason to wonder how much the surge decision followed from Bush's own sense of the job to be done, or unwillingness to accept failure, and thus whether presidential advisers took their cues and direction from the president when seeming to act on their own volition. Yet the book also raises questions about the limits of power of all those who have held that high office since all presidents must deal with the civilian and military bureaucracy from an informational and political disadvantage. Even the fact that U.S. troops were available for a surge became apparent only through backchannel sleuthing given strong military resistance to increasing the U.S. investment in Iraq.

Finally, how much did the surge actually contribute to longer-term stability in Iraq? For that matter, did the surge, in some respects, make conditions worse? Petersen suggests that the surge papered over, sidelined, reinforced, and perhaps even

rewarded dysfunctional Iraqi institutions. Thus, the book's readers can "naturally wonder how much the present instability in Iraq is a result of the surge policy." On this point Jacqueline Hazelton notes that U.S. decision-makers focused on what the U.S. military could do and seldom, and then belatedly, considered the role and conduct of Iraqi officials. As she puts it, "It is only slowly that the policy review processes that these officials describe began to include consideration of the possibility that the Iraqis were not the agents of the United States as the principal actor in Iraq, but were themselves actors with a variety of interests facing a variety of opportunities and constraints within Iraq and the region." She further observes that such interventions inevitably produce local winners and losers.

Although U.S. troops helped reduce the violence, Iraq remained a tinderbox, dependent on U.S. troops to solve the country's problems. How much leverage did the administration actually have, then, to induce the Iraqi government to reform? Would any success realized by the surge have freed the Iraqi government to pursue its own short-term interests to recreate the very conditions that required the reintroduction of U.S. forces? What role would U.S. forces play, then, should the Iraqi government, and its security forces, prove to be partisan, venal, incompetent, and unwilling to reform? Answers of a sort were provided by the events that soon followed. As violence in Iraq subsided, a stalemate in the Iraqi government, excesses out of the prime minister's office, and the corrosive effects of sectarianism and corruption helped create an environment in which the Islamic State could prosper.

Critics are not entirely wrong, then, to downplay the virtues of the surge decision. It propped up a mission that from the start was destined to end badly.

#### Participants:

**Timothy Andrews Sayle** is Assistant Professor of History and Director of the International Relations Program at the University of Toronto. He is the editor, with Jeffrey A. Engel, Hal Brands, and William Inboden, of *The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush's Decisions to Surge in Iraq* (Cornell, 2019). He is the author of *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Cornell, 2019) and editor, with Susan Colbourn, of *The Nuclear North: Histories of Canada in the Atomic Age* (University of British Columbia Press, 2020).

**James H. Lebovic** is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at The George Washington University. From spring 2015-2017, he served as chair of the International Security Studies Section of the International Studies Association. He is the author of six books, including *Planning to Fail: The US Wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan*, *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama*, *The Limits of US Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq*, and *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: US National Security Policy after 9/11*.

**Jacqueline L. Hazelton** is an assistant professor in the department of strategy and policy at the U.S. Naval War College. Hazelton previously worked as an international journalist with The Associated Press. She received her Ph.D. in Politics from Brandeis University in 2011 after receiving a BA and MA in English literature from the University of Chicago and an MA in international relations, also from Chicago. Her first book, *Governing by Violence: Military Intervention, Elite Accommodation, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare*, is due out this year with the Cornell Studies in Security Affairs series. Her second book project, *No Such Thing as A Little War: Military Intervention, Liberal Politics, and the Search for Security*, examines great power efforts to enhance their own security by forcefully shaping the domestic politics of smaller, weaker states.

**Roger Petersen** holds BA, MA, and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Chicago. He has taught at MIT since 2001 and is the Arthur and Ruth Sloan Professor of Political Science. Petersen focuses on within-state conflict and violence. He has written three books: *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, Resentment in Twentieth Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), and *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict* (Cambridge University Press,

2011). He is currently working on a manuscript entitled “War and State-Building in the Twenty-First Century: Lessons from Iraq.” He teaches classes on military intervention, conflict and violence, and emotions in politics.

## REVIEW BY JACQUELINE HAZELTON, U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

This book belongs on the desk of anyone studying or teaching U.S. foreign policy, great power military interventions, the presidency, national-security decision-making, civilian-military relations, U.S. history, or strategic studies. *The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush's Decision to Surge in Iraq*, edited by Timothy Andrews Sayle, Jeffrey A. Engel, Hal Brands, and William Inboden, is unlikely to change any minds on the outcome of the 'surge' in Iraq as a success or failure. It provides food for thought, however, on the processes, mindsets, and choices of those shaping the field for the 'decider,' President Bush, ahead of his gamble for resurrection, Hail Mary pass, or last throw of the dice regarding the U.S. occupation in Iraq and his reputation as a wartime president. The interviews in the first half of the volume are rich with interesting perspectives, though, as Robert Jervis points out in his essay in the second half of the book, there are good reasons to not take recollection for fact.<sup>1</sup>

What is most striking in these interviews is the absence of Iraqis. Iraqi actors, groups, interests, and agency are almost entirely lacking in the analyses and calculations of the U.S. officials who were interviewed. The policymakers consider neither the structures nor the individual choices driving the multiple Iraqi sides of the equation. Their discussions and predictions presume the full or nearly full U.S. ability to achieve its goals, although over time Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her department become less sure of how much U.S. power can achieve,<sup>2</sup> and from the beginning U.S. Army General John Abazaïd, commander of U.S. Central Command, overseeing the Middle East, expresses doubts about the extent of U.S. power and concern about the costs of a continued U.S. presence.<sup>3</sup> At one point Rice considers the possibility that the Iraqis cannot carry out U.S. wishes (158), but in the text included she does not pursue this point to one logical extension, that Iraqis may not want to carry out U.S. wishes.<sup>4</sup> It is only slowly that the policy review processes that these officials describe began to include consideration of the possibility that the Iraqis were not the agents of the United States as the principal actor in Iraq, but were themselves actors with a variety of interests facing a variety of opportunities and constraints within Iraq and the region. The possibility that the great power patron and its client in its military intervention do not share the same interests does not arise in U.S. minds, as is often the case.<sup>5</sup>

The U.S. belief that its interests and its ability to control events are paramount infuses the debate over what to do about Iraq, which in this book stretched from January 2006 to January 2007. The options which the officials advanced focused on U.S. policy objectives, most often on U.S. military operational objectives, as Joshua Rovner points out.<sup>6</sup> There was little consideration of how U.S. choices might mesh or clash with Iraqi choices. Instead, the focus was on U.S. inputs in isolation,

<sup>1</sup> Robert Jervis, "Decisions and Politics," in Timothy Andrews Sayle, Jeffrey A. Engel, Hal Brands, and William Inboden, eds., *The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush's Decision to Surge in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019) [Hereafter *The Last Card*]: 260-276.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *The Last Card*, Chapter 6: "A Sweeping Internal Review: Mid-Late November 2006," 130-152; Rice, 133-134, 144; and Chapter 8: "What Kind of Surge?: Late December 2006-January 2007," 182-206, Rice, 188.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Andrews Sayle and Hal Brands, "Introduction: The American Occupation of Iraq by 2006 and the Search for a New Strategy," *The Last Card*, 1-21; Abazaïd, 10, and Chapter 8: "What Kind of Surge?: Late December 2006-January 2007," 182-206; Abazaïd, 193.

<sup>4</sup> It is not evident whether her concern is 'ancient hatreds,' as for President Bill Clinton in the Balkans, or more recent political science research on the role of political entrepreneurs in fomenting sectarian or ethnic violence to achieve political ends.

<sup>5</sup> Jacqueline L. Hazelton, *Governing by Violence: Military Intervention, Elite Accommodation, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Joshua Rovner, "Strategy and the Surge," *The Last Card*: 296-313.

as seen in comments from Douglas Lute, the retired Army lieutenant general serving as director of operations for the Joint Staff; Stephen Hadley, assistant to the president for national security affairs; and Rice.<sup>7</sup> As Rovner underlines, the lack of a U.S. strategy for Iraq, and the lack of achievable U.S. political objectives, is breathtaking. The fantastical U.S. goal of a strong democratic Iraqi state remained the same throughout the process, as President Bush himself pointed out (190).

The U.S. focus initially examined ways of continuing to try to build an effective, professional Iraqi military to replace the U.S. military presence. Deciders did not, apparently, consider that effective, professional civilian institutions are a prerequisite for a professional military. Nor did they consider that Iraqi leaders might have their own agendas.<sup>8</sup> The Bush administration considered several alternatives to staying the course of Iraqization, which was similar to President Richard Nixon's policy of Vietnamization (as Andrew Preston writes in his essay comparing inflection points in Iraq and Vietnam).<sup>9</sup> Staying in Iraq for decades, until the United States achieved a stable democratic Iraq, was an option if U.S. domestic support would permit, noted White House Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten.<sup>10</sup> Redefining the U.S. goal to something achievable, such as a stable government and a long-term reduction in political violence, was not on the table, according to David M. Satterfield, coordinator for Iraq and senior advisor to the secretary of state (e.g., Satterfield, 85).<sup>11</sup> Options included pulling out, though this was apparently a choice that no one was willing to seriously consider. The president himself argued that leaving would damage military morale, noting that "I can't think of anything more dispiriting than – to a kid risking his or her life than to see decisions made based upon politics" (Bush, 89).<sup>12</sup> This view is another demonstration of how scholarship has little influence on policymakers. Bush is decidedly not a Clausewitzian: Carl von Clausewitz insists that the use of military force unguided by an achievable political objective is mere barbarity.<sup>13</sup>

Bush himself disbelieves that a U.S. presence in Iraq contributed to the violence (155). His "belief system," as he calls it, and his reading of post-World War Two history tell him that democracy creates peaceful states, peaceful states create a peaceful world, and "there's only one force that can enable these recovering societies, and that's us." (191-192). Here is another example of the limits of scholarly influence on policymakers. Not only Bush, but many other supporters of the surge and a continued U.S. military role in Iraq as well as Afghanistan and elsewhere, have argued that the long-term U.S. military presence in Germany, Japan, and South Korea provides a positive example for today's military interventions. As Richard Betts points out in his essay, one of the strongest in the volume, the situation of a state experiencing a raging civil war (or

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<sup>7</sup> *The Last Card*, Chapter 3: "Together Forward? June-August 2006," 74-88. Lute, 80; Hadley 81-82; Rice, 84.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this subject, see, for example, Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), and Jacqueline L. Hazelton, *Take the Money and Run: Stubborn Elites, Limited Reforms, Violence, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center, International Security Program, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Preston, "Iraq, Vietnam, and the Meaning of Victory," *The Last Card*: 239-259.

<sup>10</sup> *The Last Card*, Chapter 4: "Silos and Stovepipes: September-October 2006," 89-112, here, 108.

<sup>11</sup> *The Last Card*, Chapter 3: "Together Forward?" 85.

<sup>12</sup> *The Last Card*, Chapter 4: "Silos and Stovepipes," 89.

<sup>13</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, for example, "The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose," and "war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object," 87, 92.

multiple insurgencies) is nothing like that of states that have been decisively defeated by a global partnership, destroyed militarily, and occupied by hundreds of thousands of troops.<sup>14</sup>

It is striking how long it took policymakers to recognize that Iraq was experiencing sectarian violence. Generally speaking, the administration saw the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari mosque in Samarra as when it began. Rice recalls raising concerns about sectarian violence in November 2006 (122). But the U.S. media had been noting sectarian violence, including by security forces that were part of the Iraqi state, as early as the May 2005 elections, when *The Washington Post's* Ellen Knickmeyer reported on continuing Sunni-Shia killings and what came to be one signature of the Shia security forces, torture with an electric drill.<sup>15</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, then U.S. ambassador to Iraq, said that in early November 2006 he thought the media made the situation in Iraq look worse than it was. Members of the administration who were considering a policy change agreed that the Iraqis themselves could not quell the sectarian violence and thus additional U.S. forces had to do it, as Meghan O'Sullivan recounts from her position as deputy assistant to the president and deputy national security advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan. (O'Sullivan, 156).<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately policymakers did not pursue this line of thought further to consider the possibility that Iraqis who held political and military power were not quelling the violence because they thought they were gaining by it.

What is most revealing in this book, which cuts directly to the heart of the failed U.S. adventure in Iraq, is the deciders' lack of interest in Iraqis. The humiliating metaphor of the United States as the parent helping the child, Iraq, learn to ride a bicycle appears again and again without the slightest indication that it might be inappropriate or even distasteful. The Iraqis already knew what they needed to know about the exercise of organized violence and political power. They were fighting to gain, regain, or retain power. Discussions about the need for a civilian surge to accompany the military surge (e.g., 160) assume, as the United States did in Vietnam, El Salvador, the Philippines, Greece, and other military interventions, that the locals in charge were simply ignorant of modern, professionalized good governance processes and goals, rather than recognizing that Iraqis were behaving in ways that served their own interests. It ignores the fact that no military intervention is impartial because it will inevitably serve some local interests and stymie others.<sup>17</sup> Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki agreed to the surge, and agreed to publicly parrot the promises that Bush extracted from him (161), but continued to serve the interests he identified as important for himself and his party, as with continued Shia government security force violence against Sunnis and later insisting on a U.S. military withdrawal. Great power patrons can exact verbal tribute from their clients. It is more difficult to enforce compliance.<sup>18</sup> President Bush was right to ask if the United States could "fix" Iraq (148).

The United States could not and cannot fix Iraq. The surge had tactical effects, as predicted (e.g., Lute 136) but did not lead to the hoped-for Iraqi political reconciliation and unity (159-160). It still has not done so. The surge was based on the U.S. political clock. That is an appropriate factor for U.S. policymakers to consider, but these policymakers failed to consider the

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<sup>14</sup> Richard K. Betts, "Blood, Treasure, and Time: Strategy-Making for the Surge," *The Last Card*, 277-295. Also see David Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," *International Security* 29:1 (Summer 2004): 49-91.

<sup>15</sup> Ellen Knickmeyer, "Sunni Moves toward Participation Welcomed," 24 May 2005, *LA Times-Washington Post News Service*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/sunni-moves-towards-participation-welcomed-1.446052>

<sup>16</sup> *The Last Card*, Chapter 6: Choosing to Surge: December 2006," 153-181, O'Sullivan, 156.

<sup>17</sup> Richard K. Betts, "The Delusion of Impartial Intervention," in Chester A. Crocker, ed., *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2001), 285-295.

<sup>18</sup> Jacqueline L. Hazelton, "The Client Gets a Vote: Counterinsurgency Warfare and the U.S. Advisory Mission in South Vietnam, 1954-1965," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 43:1 (2020): 126-153.

ripeness of the conflict from the Iraqis' perspective.<sup>19</sup> An Iraqi political solution was impossible as long as Iraqis believed they had more to gain than lose by use of force. A surge could only buy time for the United States (Abazaïd, 193, 201). It could kick the can down the road in "war maintenance," (282) as Betts calls it. It could not solve Iraqi political problems or resolve the United States' political problem of being stuck in a war it could not win and refused to end. The president was correct in assessing that the uses of force can attain political goals (182), but his administration failed him by not considering how Iraqi actors and interests interacted with U.S. choices. The interviews in this book show why the surge signified only sound and fury.

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<sup>19</sup> William I. Zartman, "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments," *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1:1 (September 2001): 8-18.



## REVIEW BY ROGER PETERSEN, MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

*The Last Card* is not a standard text. Part I contains over 175 pages of interview material gleaned from the Center for Presidential History's "Collective Memory Project," a program that collects a broad range of oral histories connected to the George W. Bush presidency. The editors state that the material in *The Last Card* has been selected only to produce a manageable length rather than for substantive reasons. The full transcripts are online. Part II of the book begins with a chapter by three of the interviewees (Stephen Hadley, Meghan O'Sullivan, and Peter Feaver) who provide a summary and logic to many of the major issues arising out of the interview material. They explicitly use headings to mark off the following basic questions: why was the surge needed? How was the surge developed? What were the results of the surge? Could the surge have come sooner? What happened to the gains of the surge? In effect, this chapter allows the interviewees an opportunity to anticipate and pre-empt criticisms and problems of clarity that could arise from the interview material itself. The authors also use the chapter to reiterate and emphasize their conclusion about President Bush's decision to surge. In the last paragraph, the authors conclude, "In hindsight, his decision has been largely vindicated . . . (I)n choosing the surge, President Bush changed the trajectory of the Iraq War and created a real possibility for enduring success (238)." The next seven chapters of Part II allow political scientists and historians a chance to analyze the interview material from their own perspectives. These chapters present a counterweight to the Hadley/O'Sullivan/Feaver chapter.

Is the book a success? The editors lay out their purpose in the Introduction: "But we cannot begin to grapple with the history of the surge without understanding how it came to be in the first place. Telling that story is the purpose of this book, and this project (6)."<sup>20</sup> When put in these terms, the book does indeed meet its goal. Its success comes from two major factors. First and foremost, almost all the relevant players agreed to be interviewed on the record. Unfortunately, and unsurprisingly, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and General George Casey declined. Despite this absence, the material is more than sufficient to allow readers to better understand the interactions across individuals and, just as importantly, the interplay among security institutions. The interviews provide an understanding of civil-military relations, the relative importance of the National Security Council versus the State Department, and the personal role of the president. Undoubtedly, this high level of participation (as well as going on the record) resulted from the fact that the 'surge' is generally considered a successful policy. Still, many of the interviewees were quite frank, and occasionally critical, on the process and its results.

A second major source of success can be found in the selection of the chapter authors in Part II. It's a good set both in terms of quality and its range of expertise. The reader will likely learn something from each chapter. Some authors built on their own field or historical expertise to provide context to the surge decision. Other authors focused on one element of the process. Andrew Preston's chapter, in its focus on the role of Vietnam as a precedent and its use as an analogy, does some of both.<sup>21</sup> Many students of modern U.S. war draw from the Vietnam experience to make sense of Iraq. Did Iraq experience a 'Tet offensive' moment? Did the failure of the Together Forward I and II operations in Iraq have their equivalents in Vietnam? Was there a lesson from Vietnam on when to stay and fight, when to withdraw 'with honor,' or when to just cut and run? Many of the interviews indicate that the players themselves had Vietnam in the back, and often the front, of their minds. Preston's chapter offers comparisons between Vietnam and Iraq that expand and enrich our thinking about the relationship between political and military goals, the ability to turn over war operations to partner forces, and the problems of escalation during insurgency. Robert Jervis, one of the foremost experts on decision-making in foreign policy, follows

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Andrews Sayle and Hal Brands, "Introduction," in Timothy Andrews Sayle, Jeffrey A. Engel, Hal Brands, and William Inboden, eds., *The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush's Decision to Surge in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019) [Hereafter *The Last Card*]: 1-21.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Preston, "Iraq, Vietnam, and the Meaning of Victory," *The Last Card*: 239-259.

Preston with a wide-ranging discussion integrating psychology with the study of bureaucracy.<sup>22</sup> Going through the interviews, readers will see that the key policymakers came to an apparent binary decision—surge or withdraw. Jervis points out that we should not lose sight of previous decisions that led to that point. As with the surge, the decision to invade Iraq in the first place was made over objections of the State and Defense Departments. Jervis also points out that we must ask why it took so long to abandon the unsuccessful pre-surge strategy. Richard Betts’s chapter brings out aspects of the military’s role in the surge decision.<sup>23</sup> He points out that civilians, rather than the military leadership, were most reluctant to escalate. Joshua Rovner, an expert on intelligence and decision-making, emphasizes the strategic ambiguity of the situation in Iraq.<sup>24</sup> Rather than providing a coherent theory of victory, Rovner argues that the surge might more accurately be seen as a way to reduce uncertainty in a flailing, murky war. In their respective chapters, Kori Schake and Richard Immerman lay out competing assessments of the decision process.<sup>25</sup> Schake sees “messy virtuosity (327)” while Immerman, with reference to President Dwight Eisenhower, sees something “more idiosyncratic than textbook (343).” Finally, historian Colin Dueck, drawing on John Kingdon’s model of policy entrepreneurship, focuses on the personal role of President Bush.<sup>26</sup> Because each chapter takes on multiple issues from the interviews, none of them possesses a single guiding thesis statement; there is a tendency to ramble. But such was the task at hand. Readers are likely to gain specific insights from these chapters rather than come away with entirely new thinking on the surge. The book will certainly challenge many people’s views of Bush’s capabilities as a leader.

*The Last Card* does open up several important issues that are worthy of more mention in the book and certainly worthy of more attention going forward. One such issue is the growing power of the U.S. president to control foreign policy, the matter of the ‘imperial presidency.’ On the essential question of whether to surge or not, the interviews show us a president who relied mainly on his own instincts. We do not see a president carefully considering all the consequences of action. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates states about the status of decision-making before the critical Pentagon meeting with the Joint Chiefs on December 13, “He knew he was going to surge, but he didn’t have any idea how much, how long. I don’t think any of those details were clear in his mind at that point. He just knew this was the only way forward (171).” Bush went against the recommendations of the entire Joint Chiefs of Staff as well as the field commander. He was equal opportunity in his contrariness, not only going against military opinion but also Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Most of the interviews address Bush’s consensus-building on a decision already made. It is not clear in the interviews, or in the analytical chapters, what would or could have deterred the president from acting on his instinct. What could have persuaded Bush to accept being the ‘loser’ in Iraq? The fact that Bush went through such an elaborate consensus-building process, with assurances and side-payments to the military, may suggest the limits of the ‘imperial’ nature of foreign policy making. The book may have done more to address how the particular decision-making process with the surge fits into the larger trends on executive power on how that power might be limited.

Current readers of the book will naturally wonder how much the present instability in Iraq is a result of the surge policy. Rovner asks this question most directly, but others bring it up. The pre-surge policy was based on propping up independent Iraq security forces, keeping a low U.S military presence, and building legitimate and stable political institutions to establish a fully sovereign Iraqi state. On May 24, 2004, Bush laid out a Five Step Plan for Democracy in Iraq in a speech delivered at

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Jervis, “Decisions and Politics,” *The Last Card*: 260-276.

<sup>23</sup> Richard K. Betts, “Blood, Treasure, and Time: Strategy-Making for the Surge,” *The Last Card*: 277-295.

<sup>24</sup> Joshua Rovner, “Strategy and the Surge,” *The Last Card*: 296-313.

<sup>25</sup> Kori Schake, “Civil-Military Relations and the 2006 Iraq Surge,” *The Last Card*: 314-327; Richard H. Immerman, “The Bush Administration’s Decision to Surge in Iraq: A Long and Winding Road,” in *The Last Card*: 328-343.

<sup>26</sup> Colin Dueck, “The President as Policy Entrepreneur: George W. Bush and the 2006 Strategy Review,” *The Last Card*: 344-359; John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (New York: Longman Classic, 2003).

the U.S. Army War College. He stated, “There are five steps in our plan to help Iraq achieve democracy and freedom. We will hand over authority to a sovereign Iraqi government, help establish security, continue rebuilding Iraq’s infrastructure, encourage more international support, and move toward a national election that will bring forward new leaders empowered by the Iraqi people.”<sup>27</sup> In 2014, the Iraqi military crumbled in the face of a relatively small terrorist group leading to the Iraqi State’s loss of control of one-third of its territory. Moqtada al-Sadr’s Sairoon coalition won the most votes in Iraq’s 2018 election. In 2019, United States forces executed an Iranian military leader and an Iranian-supported militia leader on Iraqi soil. So much for Iraqi sovereignty, let alone security. Iraq does hold democratic elections, but al-Sadr, who recently called for the expulsion of U.S. troops from Iraq, was clearly not the democratic leader the president had in mind. Bush laid out goals and five steps to reaching them in 2004. In 2020, we see a failure to reach those goals. How much is the surge responsible for this outcome? The surge policy clearly took responsibility out of the hands of Iraqi actors, relied on non-state and quasi-state actors in the form of Awakening Groups, involved deal-making with militia leaders like al-Sadr, and relied on the promises of Prime Minister Maliki. As Rovner concludes, “what began as an operational stopgap created a host of new strategic problems. Most importantly, it reinforced the political and institutional pathologies in Iraq that were partly responsible for the civil war in the first place (312).” Given the situation as it stood in 2006, any policy that created even the possibility for longer term success should be judged a success in its own right. Given that Iraq has become a playground in the shadowy competition between the U.S. and Iran, the question of how the United States got there is not likely to go away.

I will conclude with one observation based on my own work and methods. I study civil war processes at local levels. On and off since 2011, I have been interviewing military personnel about their own service in Iraq. I had the good fortune to supervise a dissertation by LTC Timothy Wright based on his experience as company commander in the Bayaa neighborhood in Baghdad during the surge (“From Predator to Provider: The Role of Violence and Rules in Establishing Social Control (2018).”<sup>28</sup> When reading through the interviews in *The Last Card*, one comes across some vague words about inclusion, hopes about the impact of elections, statements by Bush that “mothers want to raise their child in a peaceful world, no matter who you are (135).” My own interviewees and students talk about how the Sadr-based groups established control over local judicial functions, the different ways Shia and Sunni communicate with their constituencies, how to identify Iranian munitions, the strategic logic of families deciding whether to flee ethnic cleansing or stay and fight, and the impact of symbolic forms of violence. Reading through *The Last Card*, one may wonder how, and if, the reality of the Iraq War experienced on the ground made it into President Bush’s daily four-page summaries. The book describes the American Enterprise Institute’s neighborhood-level war games and how those exercises affected the pro-surge positions of the highly influential Fred Kagan and (ret.) General Jack Keane (166-170). I would like to think that the U.S. military’s own local-level information collection and war-gaming had as much influence as that of the American Enterprise Institute. Although the information is undoubtedly classified, the book might have given some information on the flows of information going up and down the military hierarchy and whether this information made an impact at the highest levels on the single most important military decision of the Iraq War.

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<sup>27</sup> President Bush, Five Step Plan for Democracy in Iraq, delivered at Army War College, 24 May 2004, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Pennsylvania.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy Flynn Wright, “From Predators to Providers: The Role of Violence and Rules in Establishing Social Control,” Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Political Science, 2018.

## RESPONSE BY TIMOTHY SAYLE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

All four of the editors of *The Last Card* are grateful to Professor Lebovic for his introduction, Professors Jacqueline Hazelton and Robert Petersen for their thoughtful engagement with the both the oral history and scholarly sections of our volume, and to H-Diplo for publishing this roundtable. The thanks are from all of us, but the response below is from me alone.

Petersen deems the book a success and writes that the “book will certainly challenge many people’s views of Bush’s capabilities as a leader.” This is a rewarding comment, not because we sought to change how people view President George W. Bush, but rather because we wanted to know more about the decision to Surge. We sought to interrogate a particular moment in history with the firm belief that the more we know about that history the better; more detail, more description, more analysis (even when competing analyses are present) cannot help but shake us from our early assumptions and force us to reconsider the past. This is especially true of the recent past, in that period of yesterday, when we watched the news and read the papers and ‘knew’ what was happening. What I hope we have done is to provide more evidence about the Surge decision-making process - evidence that different scholars, from various disciplines, will use to both better understand past policy and better make future policy. As an example, Petersen notes further studies examining the president’s power to control foreign policy. Hazelton offers some exciting glimpses, via the example of how her own forthcoming research on great power patron-and-client relationships, of the important connections to be made between theory and practice.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, I think the volume provides evidence for rethinking both Bush’s capability for leadership but also offers a window into the complexity of his - of any - presidential administration. Where Hazelton was struck by “how long it took policymakers to recognize that Iraq was experiencing sectarian violence,” I recall being struck, when conducting the oral histories, of the tensions within the administration on this point. Was it a “civil war? When? Why? What are the political and policy costs of those two words?

I appreciate Petersen pointing out that a very few obvious candidates for interviews are not included because they declined to participate, not because they were not invited. In one case, a potential interviewee simply made clear he would not participate. Fair enough. Another agreed to participate, and three separate times we arranged trips to conduct the interview and each time the trip was cancelled at the last minute, (The third time, I had already printed out my boarding pass.) While the ink has dried on the book, the Collective Memory Project at Southern Methodist University’s Center for Presidential History (the online repository of interview transcripts) lives and will grow.<sup>30</sup> Since the book’s publication, we have had individuals reach out to schedule interviews. In fact, if any reader would like to recommend that the Center interview someone, please send your suggestion to [CPHinfo@smu.edu](mailto:CPHinfo@smu.edu).

It is more than likely that some elements of the history will develop further as the documents are declassified. One interviewee has cautioned us that the oral histories tend to emphasize fate, chance, caprice; that a careful read through of the documentary record, especially the papers distributed to the National Security Council in December 2006 will show a more methodical process contrary to the notion of a gamble, a chance, or a last card being played.<sup>31</sup> While this is plausible, even convincing, these records are currently denied to researchers. On some issues we can only get a sense; a feeling. For instance, I

<sup>29</sup> Jacqueline L. Hazelton, *Governing by Violence: Military Intervention, Elite Accommodation, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Southern Methodist University, Center for Presidential History, Collective Memory Project, “The Last Card in the Deck”: The Surge in Iraq (web page), n.d., <https://www.smu.edu/Dedman/Research/Institutes-and-Centers/Center-for-Presidential-History/CMP/The-Surge-in-Iraq>.

<sup>31</sup> See Dr. Meghan O’Sullivan’s comments in discussion with me, “George W. Bush and the Iraq Surge,” Part of “The Presidency: George W. Bush & The Iraq Debate,” C-SPAN, October 22, 2019, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?465468-1/george-w-bush-iraq-surge&event=465468&playEvent>.

think that the oral history interviews do, firmly, rebuke the idea that the Surge idea was made at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). But where Petersen wonders if the “U.S. military’s own local-level information collection and war-gaming had as much influence as that of the American Enterprise Institute,” the answer, at least based on our research, is that it did not. This might have been the result of a bottleneck in the military apparatus - witness, for instance, the divergence between the ‘Council of Colonels’ report and the Joint Chiefs of Staff position that was presented to the policy review group. Instead, there is evidence that NSC staffers were doing their own local-level information collection that was feeding into the President’s policymaking process.

Petersen asks what is, I think, one of the crucial questions of the period: “What could have persuaded Bush to accept being the ‘loser’ in Iraq?” On its face, it seems so difficult to imagine a scenario by which any President whose political and historical legacy seemed so closely tied to the war could have simply walked away from Iraq.<sup>32</sup> And yet, the President seems to have grappled with this matter: Bush said to a number of his advisors: “I’m looking to you to tell me how we can fix the situation in Iraq, but I’m also looking to you to tell me if we can’t” (148). This is obviously not a magic formula for accepting loss in war. But the President and his advisors recall that they took this seriously — very seriously. This matter weighed on them. They were looking, or knew they were supposed to be looking, for indicators that the war was irredeemably lost, and what is most crucial is that they had license from the President to consider such a scenario.

Hazelton’s observation about the “absence of Iraqis” is crucial. We did not interview any Iraqis. An oral history that included the views of Iraqis would, it is an understatement to say, enrich the history of this period. But Hazelton’s critique goes further, as a critique of the policymaking process. She notes that “Iraqi actors, groups, interests, and agency are almost entirely lacking in the analysis and calculations of the U.S. officials who were interviewed.” I certainly understand Hazelton’s criticism of the “bicycle” metaphor. And some of the interviewees clearly – and explicitly – formulated their policy recommendations based on what they describe as a “realpolitik” interpretation of American, not Iraqi, interests.

And yet I think the oral histories might be read differently on this point. There were lengthy discussions and debates about sectarian interests and their effect on constitutional, economic, and security policy. Particular Iraqi leaders’ personal histories, qualities, and motives were the subject of sustained intelligence analysis and debate. More generally, some of those officials tasked with the policy review argued, in retrospect, that their review focused too much on Iraq to the exclusion of the broader region. But let me offer three points in the trajectory of the volume that point to Bush’s thinking about Iraqis. Iraqis were not an addendum to the President’s thinking about a new approach to Iraq; I think they were central. The first is a well-reported moment in which Deputy National Security Advisor Meghan O’Sullivan told the President that her Iraqi friends had “never been so scared.” The national security team insists that this observation, coming as it did directly from O’Sullivan’s close contacts in Iraq, had a significant effect on the President (224). Perhaps an informal mention of individual Iraqis and their fears struck him differently than more formal briefings on the war – or perhaps the moment is just reflective of a larger change in the information presented to Bush.

The second is the President’s conscious decision to build a mentoring relationship with Iraq Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Some have faulted him for this effort, but that he took it cannot be denied. The third, and perhaps the most striking for me, was Bush’s explanation as to why he became uneasy with the existing strategy in Iraq. “It was violence,” he said. “The casualties, the violence, the stories of refugees - the papers were full of horror, you know. ... Twenty people beheaded - there’s a lot of brutal violence.” (54). He pointed to other factors, too, including intelligence reports of Iranian moves in Iraq. And he was concerned about the suffering of U.S. troops. But the answer in Bush’s transcript was striking for me because I had heard various interviewees explore and debate possible political, strategic, and other motivations for the Surge. But Bush’s first answer was: “It was violence,” and he meant the violent deaths of Iraqis. Several of the chapter writers engage with the President’s rationale for his action, some critique it. But it is important to recall that there was another, less Iraqi-centric view on offer at the time. Some within the administration suggested letting the violence burn itself out. From outside the

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<sup>32</sup> I use the weasel words “seemed so closely tied” because we have seen Presidential wartime legacies change and evolve over time; witness for instance the shifting public memory and association between Lyndon B. Johnson with the Vietnam War.

administration, former President Bill Clinton, (at least according to Bob Woodward), told the Iraq Study Group that if he was trying to convince Bush to change strategy, he would say: “They may fight it out for two, three, four or seven years before they grow weary and reach a settlement. ... So let them fight it out. You cannot stop them from killing each other.”<sup>33</sup> The President acted in 2006 because he believed it necessary to stanch the violence in Iraq, and because his advisors convinced him a new approach could achieve that .

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<sup>33</sup> Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History, 2006-2008* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 226.