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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

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## THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

### MILITARY STRATEGY FOR DEMOCRATS: THE REALITY BEHIND MCCAIN'S CLAIM THAT THE SURGE HAS SUCCEEDED

BY JAMES VEGA

In recent days the press has clearly noted one major misunderstanding John McCain has regarding the "surge"—his mistaken belief that it made possible alliances with Sunni tribal leaders in western Iraq when those arrangements actually preceded the surge by some time.

But in the same period McCain expressed an even more profoundly and shockingly mistaken notion—that we have now actually achieved "success" in Iraq.

In a July 22nd town meeting in New Hampshire, McCain said:

"We have succeeded. Sadr city is safe. Basra is safe. Mosul is safe. The people of Iraq are now leading normal lives."

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This is an absolutely extraordinary claim. In fact, it could very easily be dismissed as just another of McCain's increasingly frequent "gaffes" or "blunders" except that it has actually become a critical pillar of the basic Republican "party line"—one that is particularly emphasized by the *Wall Street Journal* and other Rupert Murdoch-owned media.

Until a few weeks ago the standard way this was expressed was that the US was "*on the verge of success or victory*". In the last 10 days, however, the rhetoric has actually been ratcheted up to an even higher level. In a major *Wall Street Journal* op-ed commentary on July 16<sup>th</sup>—one titled "*The New Reality in Iraq*"<sup>1</sup>—Frederick Kagan, Kimberly Kagan and Jack Keane, all major military analysts, made the following quite breathtaking assertion:

All of the most important objectives of the surge have been accomplished in Iraq. The sectarian civil war is ended.

They then elaborated:

The fighters have not simply hidden their weapons and gone to ground to await the next opportunity to kill each other. The Sunni insurgency, as well as AQI, has been severely disrupted. Coalition and Iraqi forces have killed or detained many key leaders, driven the militants out of every one of Iraq's major cities (including Mosul), and are pursuing the remnants vigorously in rural areas and the desert. The Shiite militias have also been broken apart, sending thousands of their leaders scurrying for safety in Iran.

This conclusion was echoed in a July 18<sup>th</sup> editorial in a the *New York Sun*:

"A fair-minded person could say with reasonable certainty that the war has ended. A new and better nation is growing legs. What's left is messy politics that likely will be punctuated by low-level violence and the occasional spectacular attack... [But] the Iraq war is over. We won."

These are remarkably bold assertions. Yet only three days earlier one of the three authors of the *Wall Street Journal* piece—Kimberly Kagan—wrote a commentary that was also published in the *Wall Street Journal*. Titled "*Moving Forward in Iraq*,"<sup>2</sup> it presented a radically different picture.

[Since June 15<sup>th</sup>] Gens. David Petraeus and Raymond Odierno have encircled Baghdad with a double cordon of U.S. and Iraqi forces... U.S. forces have begun blocking major road, river, and transportation routes around Baghdad. They are also deployed in critical neighborhoods around the outskirts and the interior of the city...

"*Phantom Thunder*" is the largest operation in Iraq since 2003, and a milestone in the counterinsurgency strategy. For the first time, U.S. forces are

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working systematically throughout central Iraq to secure Baghdad by clearing its rural “belts” and its interior, so that the enemy cannot move from one safe haven to another.

This hardly seems compatible with McCain’s assertion that “success” has already been achieved, that the major cities are at peace or, in fact, with the assertions Kagan herself makes in the article she co-authored or at least co-signed three days later. The US military leadership would hardly be launching the largest military operation since the invasion if all of the most important objectives of the surge had already been accomplished

The notion that the surge has successfully produced something resembling “normal life” becomes even more grotesque when one reviews the on-the-scene description of conditions within Baghdad itself. In an article entitled *“Baghdad’s Walls Keep Peace but Feel like Prison,”*<sup>3</sup> AP writer Hamza Hendawi describes conditions as follows:

Rows after rows of barrier walls divide the city into smaller and smaller areas that protect people from bombings, sniper fire and kidnappings. They also lead to gridlock, rising prices for food and homes, and complaints about living in what feels like a prison.

Baghdad’s walls are everywhere, turning a riverside capital of leafy neighborhoods and palm-lined boulevards where Shiites and Sunnis once mingled into a city of shadows separating the two Muslim sects.

The walls block access to schools, mosques, churches, hotels, homes, markets and even entire neighborhoods—almost anything that could be attacked. For many Iraqis, they have become the iconic symbol of the war...

Dora, a one-time stronghold of Sunni insurgents in southern Baghdad, has so many walls and observation towers that some parts resemble a maze.

The district’s notorious Moalimeen area, which until a year ago had been among the most dangerous places in the capital, is now accessible to pedestrians through revolving iron doors guarded by security troops.

“The walls have stopped gunmen from coming into the neighborhood,” said Salim Ahmed, a 29-year-old oil refinery worker who lives and works in Dora. “But we also feel that we are in a prison and isolated from the rest of the city.”

The U.S. military defends the walls, crediting them with disrupting the movement and supply routes of the Sunni militants of al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Shiite militiamen of the so-called special groups. It also disagrees with the

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notion that the walls are dividing the city alongside sectarian lines.

First introduced by the Americans in 2003 to protect their Green Zone headquarters, walls became much more widespread with the launch early last year of a major security campaign in Baghdad. In some walled-off neighborhoods, access was granted only on proof of residence or special ID cards.

Nowadays there's hardly a street in Baghdad without a wall—or a cheaper substitute like barbed wire, palm tree trunks, mounds of dirt or piles of rocks. They're even used to control pedestrian and vehicular traffic in risky areas.

This extensive and massive use of walls and barriers is not an ad hoc or spur of the moment improvisation. It is, on the contrary, one of the fundamental elements of the official counterinsurgency strategy of the US forces under Gen Petraeus.

In FM 3-24, the new *US Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, written by General Petraeus, this doctrine is defined as a core counterinsurgency operation called “**Clear and Hold**”. On page 182, operations in the Iraqi province of Tal Afar in 2005 are offered as a key practical example of the strategy.

### **1. Destruction or Expulsion of Insurgent Forces (Clear)**

In August 2005, the 3d ACR and Iraqi forces began the process of destroying the insurgency in Tal Afar.... Iraqi security forces and U.S. Soldiers isolated the insurgents from external support by controlling nearby border areas and creating an eight-foot-high berm [barrier wall] around the city.

The berm's purpose was to deny the enemy freedom of movement and safe haven in outlying communities. The berm prevented free movement of fighters and weapons and forced all traffic to go through security checkpoints manned by U.S. and Iraqi forces. Multinational checkpoints frequently included informants who could identify insurgents. Multinational forces supervised the movement of civilians out of contentious areas.

Forces conducted house-to-house searches. When they met violent resistance, they used precision fires from artillery and aviation. Targets were chosen through area reconnaissance operations, interaction with the local populace, and information from U.S. and Iraqi sources. Hundreds of insurgents were killed or captured during the encirclement and clearing of the city. Carefully controlled application of violence limited the cost to residents.

### **2. Deployment of Security Forces (Hold)**

In this section of the Field Manual, there is a major sub-section somewhat ominously entitled

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“Population Control Measures.” It states the following:

Population control includes determining who lives in an area and what they do. This task requires determining societal relationships—family, clan, tribe, interpersonal, and professional. Establishing control normally begins with conducting a census and issuing identification cards. Census tasks include establishing who resides in which building and each household’s family head. Those heads of households are required to report any changes to the appropriate agencies

The following section—titled “Additional Population Control Measures”—lists the following:

- a. Curfews.
- b. A pass system (for example, one using travel permits or registration cards) administered by security forces or civil authorities.
- c. Limits on the length of time people can travel.
- d. Limits on the number of visitors from outside the area combined with a requirement to register them with local security forces or civil authorities.

The truth is that to most Americans this sounds more like life under a foreign military occupation than what anyone—other than perhaps John McCain—would consider “normal life”

Press reports are, of course, consistent in reporting that sectarian violence has dramatically declined in recent months and that this is a source of genuine and universal relief among Iraqis. Virtually every first-hand report notes the reopening of stores that had been closed and the return of street life in areas where it had virtually disappeared and this increase in safety is generally credited to the Population Control Measures. But, along with these significant improvements there are two consequences of the Population Control Measures that are less frequently mentioned:

First, As CNN correspondent [Michael Ware has noted](#):<sup>4</sup>

It’s certainly true that we’re not finding the dozens of bodies on the streets tortured and mutilated each morning that we once were. There are a number of factors, but the [sectarian] cleansing of Baghdad [that occurred during 2006-7] is definitely a part of it.

Baghdad has been divided; segregated into Sunni and Shia enclaves. The days of mixed neighborhoods are gone. The neighborhoods are protected by either Iranian backed or U.S. backed militias who night and day guard those neighborhoods to prevent rival death squads coming in and taking victims. They are also walled off—LITERALLY—by massive concrete blast barriers that

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the U.S. forces put in place.

Second, for many Iraqis life under the Population Control Measures is one of severe social and economic distress. In these strictly controlled and confined sectors, economic activity is a fraction of what it was. Many jobs have disappeared, many businesses have closed and commerce has dramatically contracted. Food, medicine and medical care are scarce and expensive, much of the water is contaminated and electricity is only available a few hours a day.

A July 14<sup>th</sup> Washington Post article titled *Desperate for Army Aid in Baghdad*<sup>5</sup> by Andrea Bruce brings these conditions dramatically into focus.

The aid truck is an unexpected but familiar sight in this conservative Shiite neighborhood. People stumble sleepily from their homes, then break into a run, racing to get to the school. Children, experts at this game, are the first to reach it. Older men push each other out of the way. Women are the last to arrive. They trip over their billowing black abayas, thrown on hastily like housecoats.

The crowd gathers impatiently. Iraqi army Capt. Qiauce Frijohn uses a stick to push women back and smack the feet of teenagers, turning the line into sport. Pushing each other out of line, people sneak onto the truck, reaching out of turn and climbing onto the bumper before the soldiers get a chance to hand out the food.

"This is how it always goes," says Iraqi army Lt. Col. Haithem Hosham. The Iraqi army delivers aid in Baghdad three to five times a week. Today, more than 500 local residents have shown up.

Lamyia, a medical volunteer waiting at the makeshift clinic...says of the waiting women: "They are most desperate. This war leaves them without fathers, husbands. No way to buy food or medicine. Except for this."

Women [at the makeshift clinic] shyly whisper their problems to Lamyia. Across the room, men meet with a male medical volunteer. Most cases involve heart problems or pregnancy. Also blood pressure, diabetes, anemia, asthma, malnutrition, vomiting, diarrhea and an outbreak of chicken pox.

"In the harder cases, where surgery is needed, there is nothing we can do," Lamyia says.

No exams are given, only advice, antibiotics and supplements. She would like to recommend local hospitals but usually doesn't.

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“Most real doctors are gone,” she says.

Many of the first-hand reports say these conditions have led to very substantial anger and widespread, smoldering discontent, particularly among the followers of Muqtada al Sadr who remain numerous in many areas of Baghdad, although no longer in control of the local communities since the operations of Iraqi government troops in April and May. For example, a July 18<sup>th</sup> article titled *Sadr Backers Seethe over Iraq Army but Avoid Violence*<sup>6</sup> by Nancy A Youssef of the McClatchy *Washington Bureau* reported the following:

Under sweltering heat Friday, the prayer leader urged the crowd of thousands to show forbearance and not to retaliate for what he called daily humiliations at the hands of the Iraqi army.

The plea has become a weekly ritual. Baghdad’s Sadr City district after Friday prayers is a massive slum seething with unrest, which backers of firebrand cleric Muqtada al Sadr are managing to control, but only just.

The Friday sermon is the key to keeping the peace. After prayers, hundreds of young men began demonstrating Friday in front of nearby government forces. Some men began lunging at the Iraqi troops; most held them back...

“There is anger inside our people. There is a volcano that wants to erupt. But we are obedient to Sayed Muqtada,” said Nadhil al Sudani, a Sadr City resident and the chief of security for the women’s section of Friday prayers, referring to Sadr with an honorific.

“We respect the army if they respect themselves. Many don’t. They push the doors and enter homes without due respect to our privacy. Through these confrontations, they try to trigger some violent reaction from the Sadrist trend.”

Sadr’s order not to fight fellow Iraqis, no matter what, has prevailed so far over hotheaded youths seeking revenge. But residents said they were always fighting the urge to lash out at what they describe as abusive soldiers.

“It is only Muqtada’s orders that are stopping us. The Iraqi army knows that they would become hostages within hours,” one worshipper told a McClatchy reporter after Friday’s sermon.

Between the speeches and prayer, people exchange tales in which they say that the Iraqi army has mistreated residents.

Such tales abound. Sudani said she’d heard of troops bursting into a woman’s

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home and arresting her four sons, as a soldier threw the mother to the ground and put his boot on her head. Iraqi troops are said to have seized gasoline canisters from a Sadr City resident and distributed them to others, claiming they were from the government.

Ali Jassim, 30, another resident, said his cousin's phone rang at a checkpoint with a ringtone containing a chant about Sadr. When soldiers heard it, they slapped him, he said.

The three first-hand reports above do not portray "normal life" or "peace" or "victory" or "success" of any description. The situation is so far from these pleasant things, in fact, that it is actually a repulsive act of dishonesty to describe conditions in these terms. In truth, the on-the-ground press reports paint a portrait of a desperately unstable situation—a social time bomb. Studying the extensive press photographs of the concrete walls and barriers, barbed wire, checkpoints and searches, one cannot help being forcefully reminded of similar images of the occupied territories of the West Bank.

In fact, among Iraqis, this comparison of their situation with the occupied territories is already becoming common. Various reporters (including several of those above) quote residents of Baghdad saying "we are like Palestinians now" even as they applaud the decline in violence and this image and metaphor are already being widely disseminated on *al Jazeera* and other mass media across the Middle East.

For anyone who genuinely identifies with the sacrifices the American troops have made, this is profoundly sad—our troops did not fight and suffer for this result. They were and are genuinely idealistic—they wished with total honesty and decency to protect the American people from terrorists and to help the ordinary people of Iraq defeat a handful of fanatics who, they were told, were all that stood between the Iraqi people and a decent life. For these goals they made huge sacrifices, not just in brief moments of heroism but in long periods of repeated rotations, patrols with inadequate protective equipment and substandard medical care on their return.

The neo-conservative planners of the Iraq invasion, on the other hand, knew perfectly well that conditions similar to those described above were the far more likely outcome of an extended occupation of Iraq than a country transformed into a Jeffersonian democracy or capitalist paradise in the space of three or four years. As we now know from the spate of "Tell-All" books, not a single respected Middle-Eastern scholar or major military planner ever provided the Administration with any intellectually serious empirical or historical evidence that the wildly optimistic outcome they were promising our men and women in uniform might actually be possible.

One Democrat who very clearly warned from the very beginning that the real neo-conservative agenda was a prolonged military occupation and not a quick and easy "liberation" was Senator Jim Webb. In September 2002, six months before the invasion, he wrote a very prescient article for the *Washington Post* entitled "*Do we really want to occupy Iraq for the*

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next 30 years?” In it he said:

The issue before us is not simply whether the United States should end the regime of Saddam Hussein but whether we as a nation are prepared to physically occupy territory in the Middle East for the next 30 to 50 years. Those who are pushing for a unilateral war in Iraq know full well that there is no exit strategy if we invade and stay.

More recently, in his book, *A Time to Fight*, he lays out his perspective very clearly.

The governing structure of Lebanon in the 1980’s closely resembled that of Iraq today: a weak central government surrounded by powerful armed militias engaged in a many sided civil war...various Sunni, Shia, Christian, and Druze militias and submilitias and factions and subfactions were slugging it out with a vicious randomness...

...I came away from that experience with a strong feeling that the United States should never give up its military or diplomatic maneuverability by occupying territory in a region so fraught with multi-layered conflicts.

The goal of those who pushed for war in Iraq was to achieve their own long-term objective of having American troops on the ground in that part of the world for the indefinite future. They had a variety of political and strategic goals that were part and parcel of the [conservative] think-tank discussions but were never articulated by the political leaders who were making the case for the war

...The [2003 Iraq] war, in military terms, was quickly over after our invasion. What followed was an occupation that took on an ugly life of its own.

...At the tactical level our military has done everything that was asked of it and they have done it well. What our military could not do was reshape the historic ethnic and political landscape of Mesopotamia. Nor should it ever have been asked to occupy territory in the most volatile region in the world.

The extraordinary events that have occurred during Barak Obama’s foreign trip—specifically the very clear Iraqi rejection of an open-ended US military presence in the country—has dramatically reshaped the US political debate and offers America a unique opportunity to honorably extricate itself from the danger of becoming trapped in a long-term occupation of Iraq.

In this new environment it becomes particularly vital that the profoundly false image of Iraq that John McCain and the Murdock controlled media presents—that “*Sadr city is safe. Basra is safe. Mosul is safe. The people of Iraq are now leading normal lives*”—should not

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go unchallenged.

This image is false, it is dishonest and it is profoundly damaging to the best interests of the American people. Its blatant mendacity dishonors the sacrifices of the men and women of our armed forces. By serving as a specious justification for a prolonged US military presence, it threatens to condemn our armed forces to play the same profoundly unjust role as the French and British colonial forces who attempted—without success—to occupy and dominate the countries of the Middle East at various times during the last century.

John McCain may be sincerely deluded about conditions in Iraq but the Murdoch media has no such excuse. It is time to demand that the debate on Iraq be based on the truth.

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Sources:

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