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JACK KEANE

Why the Surge Worked

By MATTHEW KAMINSKI

Washington

Earlier this week in Baghdad, Gen. David Petraeus took a final bow before leaving for his new job atop U.S. Central Command. Over the past 20 months, the outgoing military chief in Iraq oversaw a new strategy and "surge" of five brigades that turned American war fortunes around. Back in Washington, a retired four-star general little known outside the Beltway or the military could claim a chunk of credit for this success, too.

Not that Jack Keane would. Public attention, such as his front-page photograph in the Washington Post last week, makes him uneasy -- a sentiment that he expresses with a bluff New York accent and no sign of false modesty. A close friend and mentor to Gen. Petraeus, he talks down his contribution to the Iraq war effort: "Minimal," "just another set of eyes," "given more credit than I deserved in all of that."

Talk to others, however, and the unusual and critical role he played these past two years becomes clear. Gen. Keane helped conceive the new Iraq war strategy and then sell it to the White House. He advised on its implementation, visiting Iraq often and reporting back to the president and vice president. As recounted in Bob Woodward's new book, "The War Within," George W. Bush stiffed his Joint Chiefs of Staff, who opposed the surge, and made Gen. Keane his back channel to the Petraeus command in Baghdad. The Pentagon "almost presided over an American defeat in Iraq, and Jack Keane helped save the day," says Michael O'Hanlon, a scholar at the Brookings Institution.

Born into an English-Irish family in Manhattan, Gen. Keane was raised on the Yankees and went up to Fordham for college. In his 37 years in the military he served in Vietnam, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo. Iraq was another story. Soon after Baghdad fell he noted "a little bit of arrogance," and says he and other senior military leaders "let down" their political masters by failing to anticipate that Saddam Hussein's loyalists made preparations for the insurgency.

Three months into the war, Gen. Keane visited Iraq as the Army's deputy chief of staff. "I felt we had a low-level insurgency on our hands and I had a long plane ride home as a result of it, because I thought my Army was ill-prepared to fight that kind of war and it would take time for us to figure it out." His was a lonely view at the time. Gen. Keane passed on a promotion to Army chief for personal reasons but kept up with Iraq.

For the next three years, Donald Rumsfeld and the senior generals pushed a "short-war" scenario, "which was to get a political solution quickly, transition to the Iraqis security quickly, and get out," says Gen. Keane. "It didn't work. And why didn't it work? Because the enemy voted and they took advantage. The fact that we did not adjust to what the enemy was doing to us and the Iraqis were not capable of standing by themselves -- that was our major failure. . . . It took us all a while to understand the war and [that] we had the wrong strategy to fight it. Where I parted from those leaders [at the Pentagon] is when we knew the facts -- and the facts were pretty evident in 2005 and compelling in 2006 -- and those facts were simply that we could not protect the population and the levels of violence were just out of control."

In late 2006, after the midterm election debacle for Republicans, pressure rose for a quick if dishonorable exit from Iraq. Gen. Keane met Frederick Kagan, who was putting together a report on an alternative strategy for Iraq at the American Enterprise Institute. On Dec. 11, both men found themselves at the White House to push the plan. Congress, the Joint Chiefs, Iraq commander Gen. George Casey and the Iraq Study Group all wanted a fast drawdown. President Bush ignored their advice. Gen. Petraeus was sent out in February to oversee the new, risky and politically unpopular surge.

Even Gen. Keane didn't expect the new strategy to work so fast. "It's a stunning turnaround, and I think people will study it for years because it's unparalleled in counterinsurgency practice," he says. "All the gains we've achieved against al Qaeda, the Sunni insurgency, the Iranians in the south are sustainable" -- a slight pause here -- "if we're smart about it and not let them regroup and get back into it."

Gen. Keane wants to make sure people understand why the surge worked. "I have a theory" about the unexpectedly fast turnaround, he says. "Whether they be Sunni, Shia or Kurd, anyone who was being touched by that war after four years was fed up with it. And I think once a solution was being provided, once they saw the Americans were truly willing to take risks and die to protect their women and children and their way of life, they decided one, to protect the Americans, and two, to turn in the enemies that were around them who were intimidating and terrorizing them; that gave them the courage to do it."

He adds that the so-called Sunni Awakening, and the effective surrender of Shia radical Moqtada Sadr and his Mahdi Army, depended upon the surge. "I'm not

sure [the Sunni Awakening] would have spread to the other provinces without the U.S. [military] presence. We needed forces that we didn't previously have for the Sunnis to be able to rely on us to protect them." Sadr saw his lieutenants killed in the American push, and didn't want to share their fate.

Looking ahead, Gen. Keane still considers a robust American ground force "the secret to success" in Iraq. "It is a myth for people to assert that by pulling away from the Iraqis, by pulling away from the Iraqi political process, that somehow that becomes a catalyst to do things that they would not do because of our presence. That is fundamentally wrong. It is our presence that is helping Iraqis move forward."

In his view, the U.S. ought to focus on cementing recent gains. First comes helping the Sunnis back into the political system. The majority Shiite government hasn't yet agreed to hold provincial elections later this year, and until it does and those polls are held, the U.S. can't withdraw any more troops, he says.

Sectarian tensions remain a worry. Last month in the northeastern city of Baquba, government forces detained 1,000 Sunnis, mostly members of the Sons of Iraq, a nationwide militia funded by the U.S. and composed of many former Sunni insurgents. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki promised to vet and take a fifth of the 90,000-strong force into his security services, but as with the provincial elections, he hasn't yet delivered. "It appears that Maliki is using the guise of security to enhance his political base and to diminish his political opponents," says Gen. Keane, citing the Baquba incident. "That is a danger and that is something we should not tolerate."

Another potential threat looms from Iran. Though Tehran and its surrogates were hammered in the Maliki government's successful spring offensive on Basra, "we know they're coming back," says Gen. Keane. Iran wants a weak Iraqi central government unaligned with America. "We know that they intend to come back on the kinetic side, attack U.S. forces exclusively with less attacks, but more spectacular. I don't believe for a minute they're going to be able to resurge and be successful as long as we stay on top of it, keep our head in the game, maintain our force presence in the south."

The surge turned things around on another difficult front, Washington. "Despite the fact that President Bush did preside over a strategy that was failing for three plus years, and he has been criticized for that," says Gen. Keane, "he also deserves a significant amount of credit because all around him people were advocating a failed strategy, particularly key leaders around him, and he had the wherewithal to make a tough decision that flew certainly in the face of political opposition even in his own party."

Gen. Keane says he understands why there was resentment among the Joint

Chiefs at seeing the president change course against their wishes and follow a retired general's recommendations on strategy and staffing in a war zone. But he considers his role perfectly appropriate. "In my mind, I think a president has a right to seek advice and counsel any place he chooses," he says. "I certainly wasn't forcing myself on them."

The U.S. came "within weeks or months" of defeat in Iraq in 2006, he says. The consequences of that were "unacceptable" for the region, "not to speak of an institution that I loved." And what about the military chiefs who thought the extra battalions and extended service tours would be too much of a strain on American forces? "When people talk about stress and strain on a force, the stress and strain that would come from having to live with a humiliating defeat would be quite staggering."

As for any suggestions that he's the other general who saved the U.S. from such a failure in Iraq, Gen. Keane waves them away. "To be frank about it, given the talents of Gen. Petraeus and the talent that he had around him on his own staff, if I look back on it and am honest with myself, they would have accomplished all the same results if I had never gone to Iraq."

Mr. Kaminski is a member of the Journal's editorial board.

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