Passing on Petraeus

Progressives should avoid claiming the surge in Iraq as a validation of their values. A response to Rachel Kleinfeld.

David Petraeus is the most respected general officer the U.S. Army has produced since Colin Powell, and possibly since Dwight Eisenhower. No one acquires such a reputation by accident. In Petraeus's case, much of his public esteem comes from his astounding contribution to improving security in Iraq as commander in 2007 and 2008, during the troop surge—at a time when many journalists, myself included, believed his efforts had no chance of success.

Petraeus, however, was famous long before he took overall command in Iraq in 2007. The rare general who understood the value of cultivating the press, as a division commander in Mosul in 2003 he irritated his colleagues by allowing film crews to accompany him on helicopter flights. When Petraeus commanded the training effort for Iraqi forces the following year, *Newsweek* ran the cover headline CAN THIS MAN SAVE IRAQ? That Petraeus has received such glowing press coverage during his time in Iraq and beyond is unsurprising:

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Not only does he have real results to present, he spent years seeding the bed for his own hagiography.

Rachel Kleinfeld may be a late entrant to the campaign to apotheosize a general who doesn't need hyperbole, but she proves herself to be an energetic booster ["Petraeus the Progressive," Issue #11]. Kleinfeld argues that Petraeus should be seen as a progressive hero for bringing down the level of violence in Iraq through a strategy of protecting the Iraqi population. "However progressives feel about the decision to enter the Iraq War," she writes, "we should own its success."

Kleinfeld's victory dance comes despite a lack of resolution to Iraq's political and sectarian conflicts. Residents of multiethnic cities like Kirkuk and Mosul, who live through sectarian bombings, kidnappings and assassinations, will be surprised to read that thanks to a Baghdad-and-Anbar-centric troop surge that largely didn't affect them, "Iraq metamorphosed from killing fields to a functioning society."

The most obvious explanation for her oversight of such details is that Kleinfeld is co-opting the popularity of a respected general. But to treat Kleinfeld's essay as an exercise in cynicism is to neglect the gravity of her contentions. Filled as it is with superficial truths—yes, both progressives and counterinsurgents wish to alleviate violence amongst civilian populations—her essay misunderstands both progressive national security principles, as well as the issues at stake with the ascendancy of counterinsurgency theory and practice.

First, progressivism. Kleinfeld's case for Petraeus as a progressive hero oozes contempt for actually existing progressives. She first applauds Petraeus for recognizing that military power alone was insufficient for a problem like Iraq and that political progress was the key—meaning that civilian U.S. agencies had crucial roles to play, which she calls "another long-held progressive belief." Add to that a population-centric focus, "just as progressives wished to do in Darfur, Rwanda and Tibet." From these premises, Kleinfeld treats the progressives who opposed the surge as apostates. "Despite its [progressive] provenance, Petraeus' strategy was rejected by MoveOn and other leading progressive voices," she writes. Those progressives "rationalized away their belief in principles such as preventing genocide" in order not to "grant Bush a political victory."

It's a curious approach. For one thing, you don't have to be a progressive to see that military power is an insufficient tool against an insurgency—realists of all stripes had been cautioning that since the occupation began—so it's difficult to know what Kleinfeld means when she talks about progressivism. More fundamentally, to talk about human rights while leaving aside the question of occupation,

as Kleinfeld does, is to misconstrue the human-rights revolution of the last two generations. If the promotion of human rights becomes synonymous with unilateral military occupation, the promise of what the international community is beginning to recognize as a global "responsibility to protect" will devolve into a pretext for invasion. The inevitable backlash would have disastrous implications for the people caught in the next Darfur, Rwanda, or Tibet.

Furthermore, using genocide as a bludgeon against progressives who want to withdraw from Iraq is risible. There was never a genocidal campaign in Iraq. The hypothetical specter of one was a fear tactic employed by the Bush Administration and the McCain campaign to defend the occupation. There was, however, a campaign of ethnic cleansing of Sunnis from Baghdad, conducted by America's Shiite allies. Kleinfeld is hardly the only commentator who fails to appreciate the full implication of that black mark on U.S. history, but in an essay that purports to treat MoveOn as a traitor to progressive goals, she ought to have grappled with it more fulsomely.

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If Kleinfeld wants to defend the occupation as the only thing standing between the Iraqi people and genocide, she needs to contend with the fact that since the occupation began, tens and possibly hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been killed. Millions have been displaced, both within Iraq and in neighboring Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Overwhelmingly, the Iraqi people want the United States out of Iraq. Kleinfeld misinterprets a quote from a parliamentarian loyal to radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr to suggest that what the Iraqi people really want is an occupation that better provides for their security. Yet against overwhelming pressure from the Bush Administration to codify an indefinite occupation, the government of Nouri al-Maliki insisted on a bilateral deal that demands the full departure of U.S. forces along a fixed timetable, precisely what the antiwar progressives Kleinfeld derides have always advocated. And even after Iraq experienced the decline in violence that Kleinfeld notes, an Iraqi journalist who threw his shoes at George W. Bush became a national hero.

Clearly, then, if the issue is responsiveness to the desire of the Iraqi people, it is the anti-occupation progressives who show greater solidarity. "Upholding our deepest values of human rights," Kleinfeld writes, "required that we side with the Iraqi people, whose country we had broken." Her statement is right, yet she draws the wrong conclusions. What the Iraqis have wanted in massive numbers since at least 2004 is, at a minimum, an orderly withdrawal of U.S.

troops from their country. In order to condemn antiwar progressives, Kleinfeld distinguishes between ending the war and "winning the war"—an empty term that she never bothers to define—which raises the question of why the war is worth "winning." The idea that progressives should champion a kinder, gentler occupation instead of heeding the clear wishes of a populace that never asked to be placed under the rule of a foreign power is many things, but it is certainly not progressive.

This, at bottom, was the progressive case against the surge: It represented an escalation of an immoral and foolish war. The success of the surge in contributing to the decline in violence—Kleinfeld recognizes in her essay that the U.S. change in troops and shift in tactics was not the only factor—does not change that calculus. Indeed, it is possible to acknowledge the successes Petraeus yielded and also recognize that the surge was a strategic mistake. Since Kleinfeld enjoys counterfactual conditionals like the "genocide" chimera, here's a different one: Given that the Maliki government forced the United States to accede to a three-year timetable for full withdrawal, would it not have been better to have simply embraced that approach two and a half years ago?

Kleinfeld makes a further argument about counterinsurgency, one that is becoming increasingly faddish. "With the bogeyman of George W. Bush out of the way," she writes, "progressives must re-embrace our own distinctive counterinsurgency strategy." Presuming a natural unity between progressivism and counterinsurgency is a category error. Counterinsurgency is, ideologically, value-neutral. There will be times when progressive goals dictate the application of counterinsurgency. There will also be times when counterinsurgency stands at cross purposes with progressivism. One quick example from the surge demonstrates the point.

In early 2007, with sectarian violence spilling across the increasingly homogenized neighborhoods of Baghdad, Petraeus' brain trust confronted the problem of how to provide an immediate tourniquet to the situation. Their answer was to construct concrete walls along the seams of the ethnic enclaves and to bolster the presence of security forces at the newly created access points. The creation of what they called "gated communities" followed counterinsurgency best practices: ensure the protection of the population by making that population more easily protectable. But Baghdadis, it turned out, did not want concrete perimeters enforcing sectarian divides. In Adhamiya, a Sunni neighborhood east of the Tigris that bordered the volatile, Shiite slum of Sadr City, residents protested in force. Maliki himself issued a statement that construction be halted. How progressive is enforced ethnic homogeneity, designed by a foreign occupier?

Counterinsurgency describes the blend of political, social, economic, and military activities used to confront a rebellion to a given authority. It is entirely neutral to the legitimacy of both that rebellion and that authority. As a result, counterinsurgency is coterminous with imperialism. It is, obviously, not synonymous with imperialism: There are and have been insurgencies against indigenous governments in Indonesia, Malalysia, and the Philippines, to say nothing of successful revolutions that began as insurgencies. But most often in history, counterinsurgency is practiced by imperial powers against challenges to their domination, as in Northern Ireland—occasionally cited by Petraeus as a template for success in Iraq—Malaya, the Philippines, and the colonial United States.

While counterinsurgency can afford to be agnostic to the legitimacy of a given insurgency and a given government, progressivism—insofar as it defines itself by a foundational commitment to justice—cannot be. Americans have to think hard about what sort of counterinsurgency capability they wish to truly build within both their military and their civilian national-security apparatus; progressives need to think hardest of all.

For the last several years, the Army in particular has tried to come to grips with whether counterinsurgency represents the future of war, and its answer has been appropriately equivocal. The recent Army field manual regarding stability operations (the umbrella term for warfighting measures that are neither purely offensive or defensive in nature, including counterinsurgency) says that neither Iraq nor Afghanistan are deviations from the norm of future combat, yet it also states that future stability operations won't be large-scale, U.S.-troop-enforced occupations. That lack of clarity reflects a debate occurring within the military about the proper role of counterinsurgency amid more traditional military functions. But that's a military debate, not a debate about grand strategy. Alas, there is no corresponding debate among policymakers, or among the public at large, over the prospect of being more deeply drawn in to morally ambiguous and strategically complex repressions of foreign rebellions.

That's where Kleinfeld's essay obscures more than it clarifies. It cannot be assumed that counterinsurgency always serves progressive purposes, nor can it be assumed that an increased focus on counterinsurgency is a net gain for U.S. national security. There is a valid argument that possessing a counterinsurgency capability within the U.S. military and civilian security structure is preferable to lacking one, since the Iraq and Afghanistan wars demonstrate that just because the military lacks such a capability doesn't mean it won't be tasked with using one.

But there is also a political temptation to misapply the lessons of particular successes. The U.S. military in Afghanistan, for instance, is recruiting tribal

militias in the hope that what worked among the Sunni tribes in Anbar will also work for the Pashtun tribes along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border—even though the circumstances that fueled an indigenous Sunni rebellion in Iraq are entirely absent in Afghanistan. Appropriating the surge for progressive messaging purposes without regard for broader questions of either long-term strategy or progressivism is an invitation to the foreign-policy debacles of the future, this time under a Democratic president. D