

**THE GAMBLE: GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS AND THE
AMERICAN MILITARY ADVENTURE IN IRAQ, 2006–2008¹**

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*You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold
'em, know when to walk away, and know when to run.²*

*We were dealt a real shitty hand, but we've played it to
the best of our ability.³*

I. Introduction

Thomas Ricks's *The Gamble* is the sequel to his acclaimed *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*.⁴ *The Gamble* picks up where *Fiasco* left off, in 2005, and chronicles the dynamic period before, during, and after the great personnel turnover and “surge” that rendered the Iraqi Theater of Operations a securer, but still challenging, environment. This book is a recommended read for military officers, including judge advocates, for its insight into the fundamental cultural changes at the highest echelons of the U.S. military, as well as its illumination of effective leadership's profound effect on the modern battlefield. However, at the end of the book, readers must decide for themselves whether the United States succeeded in its gamble and whether Ricks succeeded in his *Gamble*, as both have their successes and failures.

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¹ THOMAS E. RICKS, *THE GAMBLE: GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS AND THE AMERICAN MILITARY ADVENTURE IN IRAQ* (2009).

² KENNY ROGERS, *The Gambler*, on *THE GAMBLER* (United Artists 1978).

³ RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 149 (quoting Colonel (COL) Peter Mansoor, General Petraeus's close advisor during his tenure as Commander, Multi-National Forces–Iraq).

⁴ THOMAS E. RICKS, *FIASCO: THE AMERICAN MILITARY ADVENTURE IN IRAQ* (2006). The book was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in the category of General Nonfiction in 2007. *General Nonfiction*, THE PULITZER PRIZES, <http://www.pulitzer.org/bycat/General-Nonfiction> (last visited Aug. 31, 2009). For differing viewpoints on the planning and early execution of Operation Iraqi Freedom, see generally BOB WOODWARD, *PLAN OF ATTACK* (2004) and RORY STEWART, *THE PRINCE OF THE MARSHES: AND OTHER OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS OF A YEAR IN IRAQ* (2006).

II. Going “All-In” with the Surge

Ricks begins the book with the alleged 19 November 2005 massacre of Iraqi civilians in Haditha, identifying it as the putative nadir of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).⁵ Although Haditha seemed to have limited strategic impact for U.S. forces, it spurred a changing of the guard at the highest levels of the U.S. military that would set conditions for implementation of a completely new strategy in Iraq: the surge. Within eighteen months, Donald Rumsfeld, Zalmay Khalilzad, General (GEN) Peter Pace, GEN John Abizaid, GEN George Casey, and Lieutenant General (LTG) Peter Chiarelli would be replaced with Robert Gates, Ryan Crocker, Admiral (ADM) Michael Mullen, ADM William “Fox” Fallon, GEN David Petraeus, and LTG Raymond Odierno.⁶

Throughout 2006, GEN (Ret.) Jack Keane and LTG Raymond Odierno waged a personal war to reverse the accelerating downward spiral of OIF through a wholesale overhaul of U.S. strategy. Lieutenant General Odierno realized as the incoming Multi-National Corps–Iraq (MNC–I) commander that he was being handed the game plan for a losing effort. With the assistance of a brain trust of civilian and military advisers in the United States and Iraq, GEN (Ret.) Keane and LTG Odierno developed the change in strategy now known as the surge.⁷

Ricks demonstrates that the surge was not simply the addition of five brigade combat teams in Iraq. Instead, it represented a complete change, focusing resources on protecting the populace (including marginalized Sunnis) and premised on new doctrine and successful counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns waged by the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tal Afar and the 1st Armored Division in Ramadi.⁸ This new strategy was borne of bright, powerful people at Washington, D.C. think tanks, at the Combined Arms Center in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the Corps

⁵ “What happened that day in Haditha was the disturbing but logical culmination of the shortsighted and misguided approach the U.S. military took in invading and occupying Iraq from 2003 through 2006.” RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 5. Despite the moral outrage Ricks reports, to date no Marines have been found guilty at court-martial for the alleged offenses. *Case Dropped Against Officer Accused of Killings*, N.Y. TIMES LATE ED., June 18, 2008, at A9.

⁶ RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 115, 128.

⁷ *Id.* at 91–24.

⁸ These units’ experience under COLs H.R. McMasters and Sean MacFarland, respectively, contributed two major points to Lieutenant General (LTG) Odierno’s strategy: secure the populace and use the Sunni population marginalized by the Maliki government to assist in security. RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 59–60.

Headquarters in Baghdad. Interestingly, Ricks highlights for the reader that two major elements of the chain of command—Multi-National Forces–Iraq (MNF–I) and Central Command (CENTCOM)—were obstinately opposed to the surge.⁹

With the correct team in place from Robert Gates down and the surge resourced, President Bush authorized its execution. Ricks relates the surge’s successes and pitfalls between 2007 and 2008 through the eyes of the generals running the war, as well as the junior leaders and enlisted Soldiers who executed it at the tactical level.¹⁰ In late 2008, with the surge’s goal of increased security attained, LTG Odierno and GEN Petraeus were promoted to new positions in the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility. Despite the increased stability at that time, Ricks reveals that U.S. military leaders and planners were still weary of a Baghdad government unwilling or unable to take necessary political steps to ensure long-term stability.¹¹ As in *Fiasco*, Ricks concludes the book with a myriad of U.S. leaders’ forecasts of OIF’s future, including a widely held estimate that U.S. forces would be in combat on Iraqi soil through 2015.¹² Ricks gives no prescient conclusions about how the war will end, but even military leaders strongly disagree over how and when the U.S. involvement should cease.¹³

III. Analysis: Does Ricks Understand Military No Limit Hold ’Em?

A. Ricks Knows the Betting Basics

The title of the book might suggest a relatively sterile account of one general’s military strategy. However, the extensive “Cast of Characters”¹⁴ immediately dispels that notion by highlighting the monumental effort to shift course on the counterinsurgency strategy. The surge was not merely one individual’s initiative but the culmination of work by a diverse collection of leaders at various organizations who came together to create a sea change in U.S. strategy. The manner in

⁹ *Id.* at 104.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 149–93.

¹¹ *Id.* at 296.

¹² *Id.* at 325.

¹³ Michael R. Gordon, *Declare Victory and Depart Iraq, U.S. Adviser Says*, N.Y. TIMES, July 31, 2009, at A1.

¹⁴ RICKS, *supra* note 1, at xv.

which Ricks consolidates this information in a “character-driven” book makes for an engaging and enlightening read.

Ricks’s strengths as a writer are also the hallmarks of a good human intelligence source: placement and access.¹⁵ As a correspondent for the *Washington Post*, Ricks attended relevant briefings in Baghdad and interviewed key characters in the book, including GEN Petraeus and LTG Odierno.¹⁶ Many interviews revealed stunning opinions held by other high-ranking military officers of both generals.¹⁷

The focus on characters involved with the surge—rather than on the substance of the policy—is not just a literary device; it is critical to understanding the surge’s success. As Ricks explains, the surge was a byproduct of a radical change in the culture of military leadership. He states, “For more than a decade, the Army had been led by post-Cold War officers Now a new generation of generals was emerging, the leaders of the post-9/11 Army.”¹⁸

Ricks’s observation that the surge’s success owed as much to leadership as it did to new doctrine is a key lesson for military readers. Any Soldier can read *Field Manual 3-24*¹⁹ and an operations order; however, only a commander with the right leadership traits²⁰ and

¹⁵ U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 2-22.3, HUMAN INTELLIGENCE COLLECTOR OPERATIONS para. 1-19 (6 Sept. 2006) [hereinafter FM 2-22.3].

¹⁶ “The foundation for this book, and the source of most of the quotations that appear in it, is a series of interviews I did in Baghdad and Washington, D.C. over the course of 2007 and 2008 with Gen. Petraeus, Gen. Odierno, and scores of their key staffers and commanders.” RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 373. Ricks incorporated into the book briefing materials obtained during his tenure in Iraq. *Id.* apps. A–D.

¹⁷ *See id.* at 22–23, 130. Ricks relates thoughts from Brigadier General “Smokin’ Joe” Anderson:

“Odierno is more loyal to his people,” he concluded. “Sometimes if you move on from Petraeus, he will forget you. . . . It’s a little bit more about Dave than it is about Ray.” He also thought Odierno better suited for combat. “Odierno is a better war fighter than Petraeus. Petraeus is more the statesman.”

Id. at 130.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 277.

¹⁹ U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY (15 Dec. 2006) [hereinafter FM 3-24]. This manual is the new Army doctrine on fighting a COIN campaign, and its tenets are the foundation of the surge.

²⁰ Ricks notes two of these: flexibility and force of will. RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 132–33. Field Manual 3-24 dedicates an entire chapter to leadership in COIN, emphasizing ethics and sound professional judgment. *See* FM 3-24, *supra* note 19, para. 7-1.

experience can successfully apply the doctrine and order to a dynamic battlefield.

A prevailing trait of the successful leaders described in the book was the collective ability to remain flexible and adapt to a dynamic battlefield.²¹ Ricks focuses on this trait with impressive acumen. As Ricks explains, leaders willing to plan and execute the new doctrine eventually replaced leaders generally content to wage conventional war on an asymmetrical battlefield.²² These new leaders were open to creative or unconventional solutions and did not merely surround themselves with like-minded sycophants. For example, GEN Petraeus and LTG Odierno recruited advisers who were, in many respects, outcasts or dissidents.²³ Commanders' openness to contrary views and their willingness to apply lessons learned across the battlefield ultimately aided their success.²⁴

Ricks's distinctive analysis of various commanders' leadership qualities is perhaps this book's greatest feature. *The Gamble's* real-world account of successful commanders leading in the field and the lessons they learned in battle provides critical insights that military officers at all levels and in all disciplines could benefit from studying. As Roger Nye writes, "[B]y focusing on command, the military student is encouraged to consider every aspect of military operations and strategy."²⁵

Judge advocates in particular can garner much from Ricks's analysis. The complex COIN fight has dictated that commanders depend

²¹ "[F]lexibility as applied to military leadership might be defined as being open to change as an opportunity and having a tolerance for ambiguity; adjusting rapidly to new or evolving situations; applying different methods to meet changing priorities." RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 132 (quoting COL H.R. McMaster) (internal quotation marks omitted).

²² Ricks provides an interesting case study on LTG Odierno, who adapted himself from a conventional thinker with an artillery background in 2004, to an exemplary counterinsurgent in 2007. *Id.* at 107–14.

²³ *Id.* at 140–48. One of LTG Odierno's most trusted advisers was Emma Sky, "a small, fiercely anti-war British expert on the Middle East." *Id.* at 140. He referred to her as his "insurgent." *Id.* at 147. General Petraeus had his own trusted "insurgents" in David Kilcullen and Sadi Othman. *Id.* at 140–45.

²⁴ *Id.* at 133–48.

²⁵ ROGER H. NYE, *THE CHALLENGE OF COMMAND 16* (First Perigree ed., 2002). Nye goes on to write, "It is in the mind of the commander that all specialization, personalities, doctrines, and missions must be integrated into some pattern of united effort. The study of command entails the study of all military life." *Id.*

increasingly on their judge advocates. In fact, *Field Manual 3-24* devotes an entire appendix to legal issues.²⁶ Command reliance on judge advocate support in the current environment is historically unmatched, and judge advocates must be attuned to the needs of military leadership and the constantly evolving battlefield.²⁷ Critically, while judge advocates must assist commanders in legally meeting their intent, legal advisors must often also act as the staff “dissident” or honest broker. *The Gamble* teaches that contrary viewpoints from staff members, while not always welcome on their face, are necessary for mission accomplishment.²⁸

B. But Ricks Overplays His Hand

Unfortunately, Ricks fails to give a balanced or complete account of the commanders whom the administration replaced through 2006 and 2007. This failure erodes the credibility of Ricks’s accounts of their incompetence and deprives readers of valuable lessons learned. Had Ricks interviewed a single high-ranking military leader from the 2005–2006 time span, his account might have had more journalistic integrity and been more accurate. However, a study of Ricks’s sources reveals that he failed to interview Gen Pace, GEN Abizaid, GEN Casey, or ADM Fallon for his book.²⁹ Considering their collective leadership experience and their apparent resistance to the surge, their points of view are an essential component of a balanced account of the strategy.

Interestingly, Ricks’s failure to interview these former commanders is symptomatic of a larger issue with *The Gamble*: an absolute failure to fairly evaluate the surge against the prior strategy. Ricks writes that GEN Casey’s campaign plan essentially focused on the protection of U.S. servicemembers at the expense of the civilian population. In doing so, Ricks mentions only one officer, a former battalion commander, who

²⁶ See FM 3-24, *supra* note 19, app. D.

²⁷ See generally U.S. DEP’T ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 1-04, LEGAL SUPPORT TO THE OPERATIONAL ARMY paras. 1-3, 1-4 (15 Apr. 2009) (“The judge advocate’s role in support of military operations . . . has changed dramatically. . . . Judge advocates serve at all levels in today’s operational environment and advise commanders on a wide variety of operational legal issues.”).

²⁸ See generally RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 146 (discussing a disagreement between Emma Sky and LTG Odierno’s staff on the release of gun camera footage).

²⁹ *Id.* at 373–82.

asserts the opposite.³⁰ Additionally, Ricks's own reporting during 2006 contradicts *The Gamble's* implication that U.S. forces at the time huddled in massive bases focused solely on self-preservation.³¹ This willful ignorance of counterinsurgency successes of years past severely undercuts his apparent endorsement of the surge and those who executed it.

IV. Conclusion: Ricks Breaks Even

“Tell me how this ends.”³² General Petraeus asked this question in 2003 regarding Iraq, and Thomas Ricks asks the same question at the end of *The Gamble*. But just as readers cannot fault GEN Petraeus for not having an answer, neither can they fault Ricks. Both of them achieved some of their goals, while others remained elusive. Ricks's access to the book's “Cast of Characters” is unparalleled and affords readers a window into exclusive military headquarters and civilian planning institutions at the highest levels. However, *The Gamble's* account of the surge and previous strategic failures is clearly biased, and it loses credibility because of it. Nevertheless, it is a recommended read for military officers, including judge advocates, for its insights into current military leaders and its descriptions of effective leadership techniques. One simply must forgive a subtle bias in the writing to enjoy this entertaining read.

³⁰ *Id.* at 217–18.

³¹ See Thomas E. Ricks, *In the Battle for Baghdad, U.S. Turns War on Insurgents*, WASH. POST, Feb. 26, 2006, at A1. Ricks wrote this article at a patrol base southwest of Baghdad, not at a major forward operating base such as Liberty or Victory, where troops were attempting to secure a “fault line between Sunni Iraq and Shiite Iraq . . . likely [to] be a flash point for a civil war.” *Id.* Referring to the forces fighting in this area, Ricks wrote, “Following counterinsurgency doctrine, [the Brigade Commander] doesn't want to take areas and then leave them. So he moves his forces slowly, first establishing a checkpoint, then conducting patrols to study the area and its people, and then, after a pause, pushing his front line half a mile forward and putting up another checkpoint.” *Id.*

³² RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 134.