



Petraeus Can't Heal the Iraq Divide

By Mark Thompson / Washington
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General David Petraeus came to Capitol Hill Monday with the weight of history on his four-starred shoulders. Not since April 29, 1967, when General William Westmoreland tried to sell the Vietnam War to a querulous Congress, has a military officer's testimony been so freighted with import for the nation's military, its foreign policy and its place in the world for the coming generation. And like Westmoreland before him — as one Democratic Congressman even noted during the hearing — Petraeus appeared as a marked-down commodity, his prescription for the [future in Iraq](#) already scrutinized — and discarded — by Democrats who see him increasingly as a shill for the White House.

In a six-hour-plus session before the House armed services and foreign affairs committees, even his call to begin pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq later this month was insufficient to quell Democratic anger over the war's prosecution. His uniform and beribboned chest offered scant protection from lawmakers who have concluded that the war is already lost, or at best, stalemated, and isn't worth more U.S. blood and treasure.

The hearing was a kaleidoscope of conflicting claims. Democrats warned of continued U.S. deaths, a continued drain on the Treasury, and a threadbare U.S. military if the war continued. Republicans raised the threat of a resurgent al-Qaeda and a loss of national honor and might if the U.S. withdraws before the job is done. Petraeus spoke of what a good customer Iraq has become for U.S. weapons, while Ryan Crocker, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq testifying alongside Petraeus, warned that Iran's power and influence would grow if the U.S. abandons Iraq prematurely. But the bottom line seemed clear: Majority Democrats haven't coalesced around a single option to brandish against the White House's conduct of the war. In the wake of Monday's hearing — and a pair slated before the Senate on Tuesday — it appears likely that there will be no major change in U.S. policy in Iraq until at least next spring.

But that didn't stop the Democrats from trying. "It seems to me that we're trying to be in the middle of a dysfunctional, violent family," Rep. Gary Ackerman, D-N.Y., said more than three hours into the session, speaking of Iraq's warring factions. "Can we afford to put a cop in every bad marriage, especially when the parties aren't even showing up for counseling?" Rep. Ike Skelton, the Missouri Democrat who heads the armed services panel, also complained about the lack of political progress: "It appears to this country lawyer that the leaders and parliamentarians in Iraq have been sitting on their thumbs while the young men and women of America are doing their best to bring security."

Skelton isn't alone. Even Crocker said he is "frustrated every day" by the slow pace of political change in Iraq. "These are extremely complex legislative endeavors, and Iraqis are engaging on them with fundamental issues concerning the nature of the state as yet unresolved among them," he said. "It is going to be difficult — it is going to take time." (He also noted that the government recently pocketed a cool \$3.75 billion for auctioning off its cell phone rights, which Iraq plans "to apply to its pressing investment and current expenditure needs.")

Republicans warned that Democrats have cried wolf on national-security issues before. Rep. Duncan Hunter, a California Republican who is running for President and whose son has fought in Iraq, said he sees the war in epochal terms. "I was here when the left in this body said that if we stood up to the Russians in central Europe that President Ronald Reagan was going to bring on World War III," he said. "Instead we stood tough and we brought down the Berlin Wall."

Still, for the most part the Democrats had the edge in rhetoric, while G.O.P. members seemed more muted in their defense of the Administration. "While the American people have great confidence in the troops and our brave men and women in uniform, they have totally lost confidence at the top of our national government," said Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Florida. "There's a complete lack of credibility coming from the White House." Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, said the war debate boils down to a "very simple yet heartbreaking fact — the rate and overall number of U.S. troops killed in Iraq has gone up, not down, from 2006 to 2007," going from 462 in the first eight months of last year to 720 over the same period in 2007.

Despite such a generally cool reception, it was incongruous to see the glad-handing and grins that greeted Petraeus' arrival on Capitol Hill. It seemed a curious mix of glam and grim that somehow seemed out of place when debating how much longer U.S. troops should continue to fight, and die, for an open-ended policy. Like clockwork, protesters, including Cindy Sheehan, made themselves heard. "Tell the truth, general!" they shouted as Petraeus made his way into the cavernous hearing room in the Cannon House Office Building. Armed services panel chairman Skelton repeatedly ordered Capitol police to escort hecklers from the session. Sheehan was arrested for shouting in the hearing room shortly after the session began and charged with disorderly conduct.

Skelton, a conservative Democrat, set the tone for the hearing when he called Petraeus "almost certainly the right man for the job in Iraq, but he's the right person three years too late and 250,000 troops short." After 45 minutes of opening statements from the four senior lawmakers present, in a metaphor moment that defied belief, an inoperative microphone delayed Petraeus' testimony for 13 minutes. "The military objectives of the surge are, in large measure, being met," Petraeus finally got to say. But both he and Crocker conceded the political progress the military surge was supposed to make possible has not occurred.

Petraeus said the U.S. could soon begin cutting its 160,000 troops in Iraq, starting with 2,000 Marines later this month and the pre-Christmas departure of about 4,000 soldiers.

The departure of an additional four brigades and their support personnel would bring the U.S. troop level in Iraq down to its pre-surge level of 130,000 by next summer's end. "None of us want to stay in Iraq forever," Petraeus said as the hearing neared an end. "But what we want to do is come home the right way, having added, I guess, to the heritage of our services, accomplished the mission that our country has laid out for us."

But many Democrats want deeper, quicker cuts. "Prime Minister Maliki and the Iraqi politicians need to know that the free ride is over and that American troops will not be party to their civil war," Rep. Tom Lantos of California, the Democratic chairman of the foreign affairs committee. "We need to get out of Iraq, for that country's sake and for our own. It is time to go — and to go now."

Several G.O.P. lawmakers blasted a full-page ad in Monday's *New York Times* the featured a half-page photograph of Petraeus. "GENERAL PETRAEUS OR GENERAL BETRAY US?" said the advertisement, placed by MoveOn.org, an antiwar group. It zinged Petraeus for writing an op-ed for the *Washington Post* shortly before the 2004 election lauding progress allegedly being made in Iraq. It also criticized Petraeus for recent optimistic assessments that clash with on-the-ground reports issued last week from congressional investigators and a panel of retired military officers. The general bridled at any suggestion that he would color his testimony to please his civilian masters. "This is my testimony," the 33-year veteran said. "Although I have briefed my assessment and recommendations to my chain of command, I wrote this testimony myself. It has not been cleared by, nor shared with, anyone in the Pentagon, the White House or the Congress."

The fact that his Petraeus' role has become so critical is, in itself, an indictment of the war's conduct. After all, the military only carries out the orders given to it by its civilian overseers, topped by the President. When the civilians prefer to defer to the words of an officer, it is an acknowledgement that the credibility of those civilians has been so battered that they're willing to abdicate to someone in uniform. Sometimes, that's called a coup. On Monday, it seemed the Bush Administration's last best chance to salvage what is left of its Iraq policy.