Joe Klein

When Bad Missions Happen to Good Generals

"YOU HAVE TO ACHIEVE VERY RAPID PROGRESS TO SHOW THE PEOple your intentions are good," U.S. Army Lieut. General David Petraeus told the Philadelphia *Inquirer* in October 2003, explaining how he and the 101st Airborne Division had brought peace and civility to the city of Mosul. It was one of the few early success stories of the war in Iraq—and then, within a year after Petraeus left, it all fell apart. What happened in Mosul, despite the best efforts of an enlightened U.S. general, is particularly instructive now that Petraeus has been given the far more difficult job of securing Baghdad in the midst of a civil war.

Petraeus did move rapidly in Mosul. With 20,000 troops at his disposal, he was able to establish an overwhelming presence in the streets. U.S. soldiers walked beats like police officers and were stationed in local patrol bases, the equivalent of precinct houses. They were instructed to treat the Iraqis with respect. Knocking down doors was replaced by knocking on doors. When force was used, the *Inquirer* reported, "A task force is sent into a neighborhood to clean up and take claims for any damages ... 'Will this take more bad guys off the streets than it creates?' is one of Petraeus' " guiding principles. The judicious use of force was effective: among the bad guys taken off the street were Saddam Hussein's sociopathic sons Uday and Qusay.

In May 2003, within weeks after he arrived, Petraeus staged elections for a city council and began to disburse funds to clean schools, reopen factories, fix potholes and establish recreation programs. He was, in effect, the mayor of Mosul. The tactics Petraeus used were well known to a tiny cadre of military intellectuals in the Pentagon: they were classic counterinsurgency methods, and they were scorned by most of the brass (and by U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld), who thought that nation building was a job for social workers, not soldiers. Even though counterinsurgency seemed to be working in Mosul, the Pentagon wasn't impressed.

In January 2004, Rumsfeld replaced the 101st Airborne in Mosul with a Stryker Brigade, one of his prized innovations. Instead of patrolling the streets on foot, the Strykers—about 5,000 strong, one-quarter the number of troops that Petraeus had at his disposal—dashed about in high-tech armored vehicles. They didn't do any of the local governance that Petraeus had done. They were occupiers, not builders, and put Iraqis in control of civic order. Within months, Mosul descended into chaos. "You win this thing with boots on the ground," a Stryker Brigade officer told a Knight-Ridder reporter in January 2005, "not by throwing more vehicles at the place."

And so it is important to be clear about what Petraeus is about to attempt in Baghdad: the "surge" is marketing spin for a last effort to apply counterinsurgency tactics to the civil war in Iraq. There are several ironies here. This escalation is favored by the Pentagon faction most closely aligned with the Democratic Party's national-security sensibility, the most sophisticated and cerebral officers: generals like Jack Keane and Petraeus; colonels like H.R. McMaster and Pete Mansoor, who served in the semisecret "Colonels Group" advising Joint Chiefs Chairman Peter Pace last autumn. The counterinsurgency doctrine—drafted by a group led by Petraeus and published by the Army in 2006—is a remarkable document. It has a Zen tinge, posing nine paradoxes of counterinsurgency warfare like "the more force used, the less effective it is" and "the more you protect your force, the less secure you are." It proposes radical new tactics, which resemble nothing so much as the community policing that transformed New York and other U.S. cities in the 1990s. This requires a revolution in military training, an emphasis on creative decision making rather than on merely following orders.

BRENT STIRTON—GETTY

The counterinsurgency manual Petraeus helped draft has a Zen quality

But by the very standards that Petraeus helped develop, it probably won't work in Baghdad. First of all, there aren't enough troops to do it. The counterinsurgency manual suggests a ratio of 20 troops per 1,000 residents, or 120,000 troops to secure Baghdad alone, but the largest "surge" being contemplated would increase the number of troops in the capital by 20,000, to about 35,000. Second, the troops we do have aren't trained to the task: they're tired and overextended, and it will take time to retrain them to knock on doors rather than kick them down. Third, this is no longer an insurgency; it's a civil war. Counterinsurgency tactics are designed to help a credible indigenous government fight a guerrilla opponent. The idea that Nouri al-Maliki's government is responsible is laughable: it's little more than a fig leaf for Shi'ite militias. Finally, as Mosul shows, these tactics require lots of time. I asked a leading active-duty Army counterinsurgency expert how long it would take before we knew if the surge had succeeded. "Ten years," he said. That's not a surge. It's a glacier.

I hope Petraeus succeeds, for the sake of the terrorized citizens of Baghdad. Most military experts fear that he won't. "If this is Plan B, we'd better start working on Plan C," says Andrew Krepinevich, a leading military thinker. Plan C has to be a smart, detailed withdrawal from Iraq that doesn't leave chaos and regional war in its wake. I wish Petraeus were working on that rather than on Bush's futile pipe dream. ■