

THE SURGE'S VIRGIN BIRTH

Man, Jack Keane is working overtime to spin the history of the surge, isn't he? Last week we saw Keane's attempt to force Obama to adopt the insubordinate position of Generals Odierno and Petraeus. And today we see the product of a two-year plan to mythologize the origin of the surge: Thomas Ricks' story describing Ray Odierno as the "dissident General" who birthed the surge.

Using the language of paternity, Ricks assigns ownership of this to Petraeus and—above all—Odierno.

The most prominent advocates of maintaining that commitment are the two generals who implemented the surge and changed the direction of the war: Odierno and David H. Petraeus, who replaced Casey in 2007 as the top U.S. commander in Iraq and became the figure most identified with the new strategy. But if Petraeus, now the head of U.S. Central Command, was the public face of the troop buildup, he was only its adoptive parent. It was Odierno, since September the U.S. commander in Iraq, who was the surge's true father.

But there are problems with Ricks' story. First of all, at least in this excerpt from his larger book, he mentions neither the Iraq Study Group nor the AEI-Kagan plan for the surge. Silence about the former leaves out the entire context of the decision to push a surge—not least Saudi pressure not to adopt the ISG's recommendations. And silence about the latter leaves out a critical force in the generation of the plan; plus, Ricks describes the decision as happening shortly after December 19, after the AEI-Kagan plan was already released.

Ricks also offers no explanation for the

critical motivating factor needed to claim Odierno was the father of the surge: how he came to reject his former strategic approach and adopt a radically different one.

Retired Army Col. Stuart Herrington, a veteran intelligence officer, concluded that the approach that many U.S. commanders used in the early days of the Iraq war effectively made them recruiters for the insurgency, and he was especially bothered by the actions of Odierno's division. "Some divisions are conducting operations with rigorous detention criteria, while some – the 4th ID is the negative example – are sweeping up large numbers of people and dumping them at the door of Abu Ghraib," Herrington wrote in a 2003 report to Brig. Gen. Barbara Fast, the top Army intelligence officer in Iraq.

Odierno was determined to operate differently on his second tour of duty, but he will not talk about how his transformation occurred. "I think everyone's changed," he said, brushing aside the question in one of a series of interviews in Iraq over the past two years. "We've all learned."

But one impetus, Odierno agreed, was the severe wounding of his son in August 2004. Lt. Anthony Odierno, then in the 1st Cavalry Division, had been leading a patrol near Baghdad's airport when a rocket-propelled grenade punched through the door of his Humvee, severing his left arm.

"It didn't affect me as a military officer, I mean that," Odierno said one evening in Baghdad much later. "It affected me as a person. I hold no grudges. My son and I talked a lot about this. He was doing what he wanted to do, and liked what he was doing."

But he said it did deepen his determination. "I was going to see this through – I felt an obligation to see this through. That drives me, frankly. I feel an obligation to mothers and fathers. Maybe I understand it better because it happened to me."

The most important factor in his change in thinking, however, was probably his growing belief, as he prepared to redeploy to Iraq, that the United States was heading toward defeat. [my emphasis]

Remember, we are trying to explain why Odierno went from being an overly aggressive general to one basically following Petraeus' admittedly smarter approach to counter-insurgency. Odierno refuses to explain what brought about this change of thinking! He won't say, for example, who persuaded him his earlier strategy was making insurgents, not defeating them. He simply says he learned—a virgin birth of knowledge akin to the virgin birth of the surge itself. And, to cover up for the fact that we're talking a really radical transformation of thought that he can't explain, Ricks seems to offer up reasons for Odierno to agree with. "Odierno agreed" apparently in response to Ricks' prompting, "one impetus ... was the severe wounding of his son." But that doesn't explain his change of thinking, it explains only Odierno's change in determination. Likewise Odierno's change of determination as he came to believe we were losing (though Ricks doesn't even attribute that explanation to Odierno directly); that's not the same as a change in strategic philosophy.

There's another problem with the story Ricks tells. Its chronology doesn't entirely make sense and in key ways completely contradicts the narrative Woodward told in his book on the same subject. Ricks places Odierno's conception of the surge to fall 2006 (Odierno didn't get back to Iraq until December 2006).

So that fall, he became the lone senior

officer in the active-duty military to advocate a buildup of American troops in Iraq, a strategy rejected by the full chain of command above him, including Gen. George W. Casey Jr., then the top commander in Iraq and Odierno's immediate superior.

Communicating almost daily by phone with retired Gen. Jack Keane, an influential former Army vice chief of staff and his most important ally in Washington, Odierno launched a guerrilla campaign for a change in direction in Iraq, conducting his own strategic review and bypassing his superiors to talk through Keane to White House staff members and key figures in the military. It would prove one of the most audacious moves of the Iraq war, and one that eventually reversed almost every tenet of U.S. strategy. [my emphasis]

Odierno's decision to push for a surge probably post-dates Keane's lobbying for it. Not only does Woodward describe Keane—having already discussed the issue with Newt Gingrich and written up a fully-developed plan on a yellow legal pad—presenting his concerns to Rummy on September 19. But Ricks suggests that Keane already had well-developed doubts about US strategy by the time Odierno spoke to him.

In Washington, Keane had his own doubts about U.S. policy and was not shy about expressing them. More influential in retirement than most generals in active service, he allied himself with Odierno, advising him to ask for five new brigades. But when Odierno raised that number with Casey, his commander dismissed the notion. "He said, 'You can do it with two brigades,' " Odierno recalled. "I said, 'I don't know.' "

Plotting with Odierno, Keane bypassed the Pentagon and called the White House,

which he had already been lobbying for a troop surge. "Just think about what's going to happen," he told national security adviser Stephen J. Hadley. "You are not going to be effective in bringing down the violence with only two additional brigades, therefore you will call for an additional brigade three separate times, each time because we do not have sufficient troops. The media will be all over you for failing three more times. Meanwhile, the president is going to bite this bullet; he should only bite it once. He shouldn't bite it one time and then three more times."

Throughout that fall, Keane recalled, he had "a continuous dialogue" with Odierno. "He knows he needs more troops; he knows the strategy has got to change. His problem is General Casey."

The way Woodward tells it is, Bush—and Stephen Hadley—were thinking of a surge before Odierno suggested it. They "had already concluded that a surge was the way to go" at least by October 2006 (my emphasis) at a time when Ricks describes Odierno—a "dissident General" who just happens to espouse the policy his Commander-in-Chief has already decided upon—was still lobbying for the decision. Rather than Odierno's (and the every-present Keane's) lobbying, it just took months of work from Hadley to bring everyone around to Bush's thinking.

Hadley was more satisfied. He had figured out where the president wanted to go and had brought everyone around to that view. Bush had not adopted the stepping back suggested by Rice and her colleagues. He had rejected the pessimism of the CIA and various versions of a drawdown favored by Rumsfeld, Casey, the chiefs, the Iraq Study Group and most Democrats. Forcing consensus was an art form, Hadley believed, and he had worked it.

A more clear contradiction, Woodward describes Bush decided in favor of a surge by mid-December, certainly before Ricks describes Gates deciding it sometime after December 19.

According to Hadley, that moment [when Bush decided in favor of a surge] had come when the president called him in mid-December 2006 and said, "I'm getting comfortable with my decision, but I don't want to give a speech yet."

So Woodward places a preference for a surge to before Odierno was lobbying for it, a decision on it for the same time his lobbying hit high gear (and still before he went back to Iraq), and a final decision before Ricks describes a final decision.

The contradiction between Woodward's account and Ricks' account is one Ricks acknowledges.

In a recent interview, Odierno expressed surprise that a book by The Washington Post's Bob Woodward, published just as Odierno took command in Iraq, credited White House aides and others in Washington with developing the surge. From Odierno's perspective – and that of many other senior officers in Iraq – the new strategy had been more or less conceived and executed by himself in Baghdad, with some crucial coaching from Keane in Washington.

"We thought we needed it, and we asked for it and we got it," he said, referring to the strategy. "You know, General Petraeus and I think . . . I did it here, [and] he picked it up. That's how we see it. And so it's very interesting when people back there see it very differently."

Of course, Odierno said, ultimately Bush had to make the policy decision, and some White House aides encouraged that step. But, he continued, "they had

nothing to do with developing" the way it was done. "Where to go, what [the soldiers] would do. I mean, I *know* I made all those decisions."

Of course, deciding where to go and what soldiers would do (decisions which Woodward describes Keane as having in hand on September 19) is different from deciding that a surge is the way to go.

Mind you, I don't think Woodward's story is accurate either; as I've pointed out Woodward presents the utterly implausible claim that Cheney was not involved in any of these discussions until December 2006, even at a time we know the Saudis were kicking his ass to push a certain policy, and in an Administration where Cheney always, in unseen fashion, directed the overall strategy. And since Woodward's description of Hadley's and Bush's thinking relies on an interview that post-dates the surge, I think it likely that they were owning a policy that looked reasonably successful after the fact. So I don't think Woodward's story is any more believable than Ricks' story. Rather, I think both are propaganda pieces designed to hide the true mother of the surge strategy—the story that explains how Keane turned into the champion for this strategy.

And as propaganda, Ricks' story bears an important structural similarity to Woodward's work: his willingness to report "news" as history at such a time when a new narrative is needed.

This account of the military's internal struggle over the direction of the Iraq war is based on dozens of interviews with Odierno, Petraeus and other U.S. officials conducted in 2007 and 2008. In many cases, the interviews were embargoed for use until 2009.

Which ones, Ricks? Which ones were embargoed

until after a new President took over? Respectability demands that you reveal that, at least. If you're going to take on Woodward's role of chief propaganda outlet, with all the rules Woodward acceded to, then you ought to at least tell us who demanded this timing, the release of an implausible hagiography of Odierno and Petraeus just as they start a Keane-led campaign to undercut the new Commander-in-Chief's strategy.

Which brings us back to Jack Keane—the guy seemingly orchestrating both Woodward's narrative and Ricks'. As I've said, I don't think Keane is the one ultimately driving all this propaganda, at least not all by himself. But it's clear that, thus far, Keane is the author of the surge's virgin birth.