

IF THE NSA “WON” THE WAR IN IRAQ, WHY ARE WE STILL LOSING IT?

To Shane Harris’ misfortune, his book, *@War*, out today, came out on the same day that General Daniel Bolger’s book, *Why We Lost*, came out.

That means Harris’ first excerpt, initially titled “How the NSA Sorta Won the Last Iraq War,” came out just days before [Bolger’s op-ed today](#), mourning another Veteran’s Day to contemplate the 80 men he lost. Bolger wants us to stop telling the lie that the surge won the Iraq War.

Here’s a legend that’s going around these days. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and toppled a dictator. We botched the follow-through, and a vicious insurgency erupted. Four years later, we surged in fresh troops, adopted improved counterinsurgency tactics and won the war. And then dithering American politicians squandered the gains. It’s a compelling story. But it’s just that – a story.

The surge in Iraq did not “win” anything. It bought time. It allowed us to kill some more bad guys and feel better about ourselves. But in the end, shackled to a corrupt, sectarian government in Baghdad and hobbled by our fellow Americans’ unwillingness to commit to a fight lasting decades, the surge just forestalled today’s stalemate. Like a handful of aspirin gobbled by a fevered patient, the surge cooled the symptoms. But the underlying disease didn’t go away. The remnants of Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Sunni insurgents we battled for more than eight years simply re-emerged this year as the Islamic State, also known as

ISIS.

Harris's story, which explains how network analysis and then hacking of Iraqi insurgents – including Al Qaeda in Iraq – helped us to win the surge, relies on that legend.

TAO hackers zeroed in on the leaders of the al Qaeda group. Centering their operations in Baghdad, they scooped up e-mail messages that the terrorists had left in draft form in their personal accounts, where they could be picked up by fellow fighters without having to be sent over the Internet. This was a common trick terrorists used to avoid detection. TAO had been on to it for years.

For TAO, hacking into the communications network of the senior al Qaeda leaders in Iraq helped break the terrorist group's hold on the neighborhoods around Baghdad. By one account, it aided U.S. troops in capturing or killing at least ten of those senior leaders from the battlefield.

[snip]

For the first time in the now four-year-old Iraq War, the United States could point to a strategy that was actually working. The overall success of the surge, which finally allowed U.S. forces to leave Iraq, has been attributed to three major factors by historians and the commanders and soldiers who served there. First, the additional troops on the ground helped to secure the most violent neighborhoods, kill or capture insurgents, and protect Iraq's civilians. The cities became less violent, and the people felt safer and more inclined to help the U.S. occupation. Second, insurgent groups who were outraged by al Qaeda's brutal,

heavyhanded tactics and the imposition of religious law turned against the terrorists, or were paid by U.S. forces to switch their allegiances and fight with the Americans. This so-called Sunni Awakening included 80,000 fighters, whose leaders publicly denounced al Qaeda and credited the U.S. military with trying to improve the lives of Iraqi citizens.

But the third and arguably the most pivotal element of the surge was the series of intelligence operations undertaken by the NSA and soldiers such as Stasio. Former intelligence analysts, military officers, and senior Bush administration officials say that the cyber operations opened the door to a new way of obtaining intelligence, and then integrating it into combat operations on the ground. The information about enemy movements and plans that U.S. spies swiped from computers and phones gave troops a road map to find the fighters, sometimes leading right to their doorsteps. This was the most sophisticated global tracking system ever devised, and it worked with lethal efficiency.

Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of all coalition forces in Iraq, credited this new cyber warfare “with being a prime reason for the significant progress made by U.S. troops” in the surge, which lasted into the summer of 2008, “directly enabling the removal of almost 4,000 insurgents from the battlefield.” The tide of the war in Iraq finally turned in the United States’ favor.

I didn't get a review copy of Harris' book, so I'll have to let you know whether he grapples with the fact that this victory lap instead led us to where we are now, escalating the war in

Iraq again, with ISIL even more powerful for having combined Saddam's officers with terrorist methods. I'll also have to let you know why Harris claims this started in 2007, when we know NSA was even wiretapping Iraqi targets in the US as early as 2004, a program that got shut down in the hospital confrontation.

Harris would have done well to consider Bolger's call for an assessment of this failure.

That said, those who served deserve an accounting from the generals. What happened? How? And, especially, why? It has to be a public assessment, nonpartisan and not left to the military. (We tend to grade ourselves on the curve.) Something along the lines of the 9/11 Commission is in order. We owe that to our veterans and our fellow citizens.

Such an accounting couldn't be more timely. Today we are hearing some, including those in uniform, argue for a robust ground offensive against the Islamic State in Iraq. Air attacks aren't enough, we're told. Our Kurdish and Iraqi Army allies are weak and incompetent. Only another surge can win the fight against this dire threat. Really? If insanity is defined as doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, I think we're there.

That is, if this network analysis and hacking is so superb, then why didn't it work? Did we not understand the networks that our spectacular tech exposed? Or did we do the wrong thing with it, try to kill it rather than try to win it over? Not to mention, did we account for the necessarily temporary value of all these techniques, given that targets will figure out that their cell phones, the RFID tags, their laptops, or whatever new targeting means we devise are serving as a beacon.

And there's one more lesson in Harris' excerpt, one I doubt he admits.

Earlier in the excerpt, he explains in giddy language how the NSA's hackers broke an insurgent method of leaving draft unsent emails.

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Even while he provides David Petraeus opportunity to do a victory lap for the surge that in fact did not win the war, he doesn't mention that Petraeus adopted this insurgent technique to communicate with his mistress, Paula Broadwell. Harris also doesn't mention that the FBI, like the NSA before it, easily broke the technique.

More important still, Harris doesn't mention that FBI found reason to do so. These techniques – described with such glee – were turned back on even the man declaring victory over them. They didn't win the war in either Iraq or Afghanistan, but they sure made it easy for President Obama to take out Petraeus when he became inconvenient.

I have no sympathy for Petraeus, don't get me wrong. But he is an object lesson in how these techniques have not brought victory to the US. And it's time to start admitting that fact, and asking why not.

Update: In a [post](#) I could have written (though probably not as well), Stephen Walt engages in a counterfactual asking if we didn't have the dragnet we might be doing better at fighting terrorism. Go read the whole thing, but here's part of it:

Second, if we didn't have all these expensive high-tech capabilities, we might spend a lot more time thinking about how to discredit and delegitimize the terrorists' message, instead of repeatedly doing things that help them make their case and recruit new followers. Every time the United States goes and pummels another Muslim country – or sends a drone to conduct a “signature strike” – it reinforces the jihadis' claim that the West has an insatiable desire to dominate the Arab and Islamic world and no respect for Muslim life. It doesn't matter if U.S. leaders have the best of intentions, if they genuinely want to help these societies, or if they are responding to a legitimate threat; the crude message that drones, cruise missiles, and targeted killings send is rather different.

If we didn't have all these cool high-tech hammers, in short, we'd have to stop treating places like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria as if they were nails that just needed another pounding, and we might work harder at marginalizing our enemies *within* their own societies. To do that, we would have to be building more effective partnerships with authoritative sources of legitimacy within these societies, including religious leaders. Our failure to do more to discredit these movements is perhaps the single biggest shortcoming of the entire war on terror, and until that failure is recognized and corrected, the war will never end.