



Daniel A. Sjursen. *Ghost Riders of Baghdad: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Myth of the Surge*. Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2015. xv+ 290 pp. \$22.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61168-781-1.

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Savior generals do not win wars. Indeed, a myriad of mechanisms are at play, all of which shape conflicts more than a lone individual. In Daniel A. Sjursen's *Ghost Riders of Baghdad: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Myth of the Surge*, readers have an account of the author's tour as a US Army lieutenant during the time straddling the "Surge," or increase in US combat strength. On the ground, Sjursen witnessed no surge. Instead, he saw his tour extended from twelve to fifteen months and a stop in civil unrest among the Iraqi people—the main factor contributing to the noticeable drop in violence. What unfolds in *Ghost Riders of Baghdad* is an account of where the rhetoric of the administration of President George W. Bush and the strategy to fight the war in Iraq did not translate to a noticeable shift in the war's course.

Ghost Riders of Baghdad is the author's reflection on his deployment to Iraq and the subsequent thoughts unleashed by his tour. Filled with accounts of losing men under his command and the futility of his mission, Sjursen offers a stark and informative narrative. From his words, readers see him connect the battlefield with the home front. He provides short biographies of the men he led and shares his grief over losing some to enemy explosive devices as well as one friend to post-traumatic stress disorder after returning

stateside. When he writes of their deaths, we feel a bit of his pain, and, like Sjursen, we question why. The author spends considerable time reinforcing his point of having insufficient men to effectively pacify his area of operations. Indeed, while in Salman Pak, his unit and other American forces hardly make a dent in peninsula area of the city—territory left largely to the whims of the Shia Mahdi Army.

Sjursen's work gets into the details of the sectarian violence that engulfed Iraq during his time in country. The author discusses the region's history back to ancient times, yet focuses more on the internal divisions within modern Iraq. In addressing the disdain between Shia and Sunni Iraqis, Sjursen relays the complexities of waging a war in a country being torn apart by multiple actors. The Surge, argues Sjursen, came after far more significant developments in Iraq. By the time of the Surge in 2007, the country's once mixed communities had reorganized along sectarian lines. As relayed by the author, "by the time of the Surge, much of the work of death and displacement was complete" (p. 165).

The emergence of al Qaida in Iraq, and its fundamentalist vision for the country, was viewed as a threat to the existence of Iraq by more moderate Sunnis. "This breakthrough long preceded the Surge and was not dependent on the thirty

thousand extra troops. The tribes didn't turn because of more troops—2006 was pre-Surge—and besides, most of these Sunni leaders hated and had once attacked Americans," Sjursen writes (p. 165). Sunnis temporarily allied themselves with the Americans to combat what they perceived as a far more dangerous threat in al Qaida.

Readers of *Ghost Riders of Baghdad* should consider reading Gian Gentile's *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (2013). Like Sjursen, Gentile served with the US Army in Baghdad during the so-called Surge, yet at a slightly higher command level. Gentile's book takes a trajectory deeper into history than Sjursen—nevertheless, both soldiers witnessed similar events and reached similar conclusions. Consequently, the two books complement one another quite well.

Ultimately, those interested in Operation Iraqi Freedom should read Sjursen's contribution to our collective understanding of the war from a tactical perspective. Scholars will find *Ghost Riders of Baghdad* a useful companion to more scholarly works on the war in Iraq. Yet most importantly, educators should use the book as an example for other veterans to follow. The experiences of soldiers shed ample light on the murkier parts of history—the areas where rhetoric and strategy are not always congruent—which future historians cherish when deliberating over soldier motivations, memory, and so on. Thus *Ghost Riders of Baghdad* ought to encourage other veterans to put their experiences to paper.

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