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This oral history of the decision for “the surge” in Iraq in 2007 provides a valuable resource for scholars trying to grapple with the larger course of the Iraq War. This team of historians interviewed President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and numerous other high-level advisors and officials. The result is the best resource yet on understanding the surge decision.

The book is helpfully organized into one section with excerpts from the interviews and another section with essays from historians, political scientists, and some policymakers reflecting on the surge and placing it in historical context. This design gives the reader both the voices of decision-makers and a sense of how top scholars explain and debate the surge. Andrew Preston’s essay comparing the Iraq surge to the Vietnam War is particularly outstanding.

*The Last Card* shows that the surge was by no means inevitable, as Bush’s decision went against the advice of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the CENTCOM (US Central Command) commander and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, congressional leaders, and even US public opinion to some extent. In 2006, the bipartisan Iraq Study Group report captured a growing sense in the foreign policy establishment that the situation was hopeless and that the United States needed to pivot to a phased withdrawal and handover of responsibilities to the Iraqi government.

Bush, however, believed that the Iraq War needed to be salvaged. He contended that if the United States retreated and Iraq collapsed into civil war US credibility would be tarnished, the forces of global jihadism would be strengthened, and Iraq would become a new hotbed of terrorist recruiting and training that would ultimately threaten the US homeland. Even more than strategic objectives, however, notions of honor and personal accountability were central to Bush’s decision, according to interview participants. He thought he owed the troops that had already died or suffered wounds in Iraq a better outcome and
that Iraqis deserved a better future than a possible civil war.

Of course, oral histories must be taken with some skepticism. Policymakers have incentives to play up their own roles and play down their faults. In particular, the interviewees have a clear interest in bolstering Bush’s legacy, as the surge was in part a last-ditch effort to salvage a disastrous war.

These caveats aside, the sheer number of people pointing to Bush’s centrality in deciding the surge suggests that it was in fact his call. It is also striking how much more thorough Bush’s decision-making process was in this case, at least in contrast to the haphazard deliberations that led to the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Bush pulled advice from top military officers, scholars, the National Security Council, and other sources to rethink the Iraq conflict. He lowered the objectives of the Iraq War from sowing a flourishing democracy in Iraq to stabilizing the country and creating space for a political deal that would ameliorate Iraq’s raging sectarian tensions.

If anything, the surge decision unfolded too slowly, allowing US soldiers to fight and die in Iraq under a flawed strategy as the country burned. Bush permitted petty concerns about image to delay the decision. For instance, during the spring of 2006, a number of prominent retired military officers called out Rumsfeld’s incompetence and recommended a change in strategy. Bush did not want to seem like he was being pushed around by retired generals, so he postponed the process of revising Iraq strategy. Bush waited until the cover of the Democratic Party’s victories in the 2006 midterm elections to fire the feckless, arrogant Rumsfeld and replace him with Robert Gates. This was a long overdue change in strategy and personnel that showed Bush placing ego and loyalty to friends over his responsibilities as commander in chief. So, for better or worse, Bush was central to both the decision to surge and the way that decision unfolded.

Was the surge a success? The individuals in this volume do not fully agree. Most acknowledge that the surge achieved major tactical successes in reducing violence, isolating radical elements like Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and at least creating the opportunity for a political settlement between Shia and Sunni. However, such a settlement was never achieved, as Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki continued to pursue a relentlessly sectarian agenda while deploying the resources of the Iraqi state to persecute the Sunni. The United States under the Obama administration was somewhat aloof from Iraqi affairs in the early 2010s, preferring the faux stability offered by Maliki over trying to forge a more inclusive Iraqi political process. This failure to politically capitalize on the surge’s military gains helped set the conditions for the rise of the Islamic State.

While the surge demonstrated operational brilliance, it is less clear how significant it is in the larger sweep of US foreign policy in the war on terror. It was a medium-sized success born of massive failures of strategic leadership. It avoided the worse outcome of Iraq’s descent into civil war, but it did not fundamentally change the political dynamics of the country. Moreover, the United States had to reengage in Iraq and Syria under Operation Inherent Resolve to crush the hydra of the Islamic State that emerged after the failure of political reconciliation.

Whatever the murky status of the surge in history, this is an exemplary effort by this team of scholars to consider this event as history. It is also a fantastic resource for teachers who want to assign interviews or essays à la carte to help their students wrestle with the surge’s origins and impact.