



Episode 415: Did the Surge Really Work?

Guest: Ray McGovern

WOODS: I have read your stuff and listened to interviews with you for years and years now, and I finally decided to invite you on, because I saw your article over the Memorial Day weekend. "How to Honor Memorial Day" was the title it was given on AntiWar.com. We will link to that on today's show notes page, TomWoods.com/415. And you begin very bluntly in traditional Ray McGovern style: "How best to show respect for the U.S. troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan and for their families on Memorial Day? Simple: Avoid euphemisms like 'the fallen' and expose the lies about what a great idea it was to start those wars and then to 'surge' tens of thousands of more troops into those fools' errands."

Well, no boring introductions for you for articles like this. That paragraph alone gives me a lot of things I want to ask you about, and I'd like to go out of chronological order and ask you, because it's been in the news, about the surge from years ago in the Iraq War. Because there's been some discussion in recent days when Jeb Bush was asked whether he favored the Iraq War, that came back up, and then Rand Paul weighed in, and he was against the war, but he said the surge worked, and that seems to be the conventional wisdom: Whether you favored the war or you didn't, the surge worked. Can you tell us what was the surge, and did it "work"?

MCGOVERN: Well, you have to go back nine years now to the spring and summer of 2006. Things were going very badly. It was a very, very harsh year for the war on both sides, and finally after three years -- we're talking from 2003 to 2006 -- after the invasion of the U.S., U.K., and other countries. So three years of experience, and the generals on the scene -- namely General Casey, who is now Army Chief of Staff, and General Abizaid, who was head of the so-called CENTCOM, which is the Central Command, having purview over that whole area -- had said that the strategy is not working. As soon as we send new troops in, the Shia government that we're supporting persecutes the Sunni, marginalizes them, and the reconciliation that is necessary, at least the modus vivendi between Shia and Sunni is made even less possible.

And so they came back in summer of 2006, testified before the Senate Armed Forces Committee and actually laid it all out. I have a quote from General Abizaid, who again, was the head of CENTCOM. In his testimony of November of 2006 to his answer to John McCain, when John McCain said, well, don't we need to surge? Don't we need to put more? This is General Abizaid -- again head of the whole campaign out there --

this is his answer to pressing vigorously for sending 20,000 at that time. We ended up sending 30,000. Here it is: "Senator McCain, I met with every divisional commander, with General Casey, with the corps commander, General Dempsey. We all talked together, and I said, in your professional opinion, if we were to bring in more American troops now, does it add considerably to our ability to achieve success in Iraq? And they all said no. And the reason is because we want the Iraqis to do more. It is easy for the Iraqis to rely upon us to do this work. I believe that more American forces prevent Iraqis from doing more, from taking more responsibility for their own future." What am I saying here? I'm saying that the military leaders responsible for the area were saying, please, whatever you do, don't send anymore U.S. troops. And this testimony was before the Senate Armed Forces Committee on November 15, 2006.

What happened next? Well, next, the ambassador out there, Khalilzad, sent in a classified cable to Washington, and he said, "Proposals to send more U.S. forces to Iraq would not produce a long-term solution. It would make our policy less not more sustainable." Okay, what else? Well, during the same time, a very establishment-heavy Iraq review group had convened, led by James Baker, who was Secretary of State for the first George Bush. And they led off their report by saying, "The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating. The U.S. must begin to move its combat forces out of Iraq responsibly. By the first quarter of 2008, all combat brigades not necessary for force protection should be out of Iraq." This is the so-called Baker-Hamilton Report Iraq Review Group, on which, I would add, Robert Gates was a member.

Now, what happens next? Well, the next is almost unbelievable. Donald Rumsfeld, who, like Robert McNamara before him with respect to Vietnam, is getting wobbly on a war based largely on Rumsfeld's own misguided advice. Now how do I know that? Well, a message that Rumsfeld sent to President Bush on November 6, 2006, in which he says, clearly, U.S. forces currently in Iraq are not working well or fast enough. We've got to get out with a regular small withdrawal first, and then we have to get the Iraqis "to know that they have to pull up their socks, step up, and take responsibility for their country."

Now, that was the day before the mid-term elections. It was really awkward, because just two weeks before, Bush had said, Rumsfeld is golden; we're going to keep him on forever -- okay, for the next two years. Well, what were Bush and Cheney going to do? Well, obviously, this is bad news for them. It looked like they might have to lose a war on their watch. So they went to the American Enterprise Institute, where Frederick Kagan, a neocon sort of strategist, and General Jack Keane, a neocon general who had been Vice Chief of Staff of the Army.

And Bush and Cheney said, well, what happens if we follow all these recommendations from Rumsfeld, from my generals, from the Iraq study group? And they said, well, Mr. President, we're sorry to tell you, but then you will lose a war on your watch. And he said, well, how can we prevent this? And Kagan and Keane and the others said, well, it's very simple, Mr. President. You could send in -- let's call it a surge -- you could surge 30,000 troops in there, and they could create peace by some ethnic cleansing and some other measures there in and around Baghdad, and that would give you

enough breathing space so that the things would quiet down, simply because of the carnage, simply because of the fatigue, simply because we had separated Shia from Sunni, and it would take another two years for it to get bad. And meanwhile, you could ride off into the western sunset, not having lost the war.

Now, Bush and Cheney said, wow, okay, let's see how we do this. They couldn't use Rumsfeld, could they? They had to fire him. And they needed a new Secretary of Defense. They couldn't use Casey or Abizaid, the highest generals. They were wobbly - wobbly is another word for realistic here. Oh, but there's this middle guy bedecked with not only battle medals, but I think every merit badge that he won as a scout, David Petraeus. He's on board with the surge. He's been talking to Jack Keane and Fred Kagan. Yeah, he'll do whatever is needed. But we still need a Secretary of Defense. And so Little Bush went to Big Bush, and he said, what do I do? And Big Bush said, oh, I know just the guy. His name is Bob Gates. He'll do it. If you make him Secretary of State, I guarantee he'll do it.

So on the 5th of October, Gates meets in Crawford with President Bush. And President Bush lays it all out. He says, you know, it's getting really hairy over there, and our generals are going wobbly. But Petraeus here is willing to do the work from the military side, but we need a Secretary of Defense. We need somebody to push this surge, to get rid of the generals that are there now. So would you do it? And I know Gates -- I've known him for 45 years. He worked for me when I was head of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch at CIA in the early '70s. So it was not a surprise to me when Gates said, well, you mean, Mr. President, that I would be, like, Secretary of Defense? And Bush said, yeah, it's a deal! All you have to do is go out to Iraq, and tell Casey he's retired, or tell him to come back and we'll make him Chief of Staff. Tell Abizaid he needs to retire. And Petraeus will do all the rest of the work. And Gates says, I'm in, I'm in.

That's the story. And we know the results. What happened was, first off, most important in my view, a thousand -- actually more than a thousand -- U.S. troops perished in that surge. What did the surge accomplish? Well, ethnic cleansing is the easiest way to describe it. It transformed a predominantly Sunni city called Baghdad into a predominantly Shia city, also called Baghdad. There were people at the University of California - Los Angeles -- they had a satellite program -- and they watched the lights go out in the Sunni neighborhoods. And so, what happened was, 30,000 U.S. troops formed a kind of cordon sanitaire around Baghdad, and the Shia militia were let into the city to do their dirty work.

It was at this time in July 2007 that Bradley Manning, now Chelsea Manning, observed what was going on on the ground. He was there. He was seeing what was happening behind U.S. troops -- Iraqi troops throwing kids into prison for writing critical term papers about al-Maliki. And so when he saw that terrible WikiLeaks-released helicopter gunship shooting up Iraqi civilians, that was when he decided he needed to tell the world what was going on.

So that too, in a curious way, was a direct result of the brutality of the surge. And I'm not speaking only of a brutalizing of Iraqis. If you just listen to the conversation of those young fellows in the helicopter gunship. It's brutal. And that's one of the prices we pay. We brutalize our own soldiers when we send them into missions like this. And when they come home, well, you know what often happens.

So, what was the effect of the surge? Well, aside from killing a thousand U.S. troops, aside from killing tens of thousands of Iraqis, the place sort of calmed down a little bit, and Bush and Cheney were able to leave two years later without having lost the war. So from their point of view, the surge was an amazing success.

From the point of view of Iraq, well, I rest my case by just saying, look at it now. Look at it now. Chaos. A far more dangerous breeding place for terrorism than ever existed before the invasion of Iraq.

And last but not least, what's the solution being proposed by the American Enterprise Institute? Guess what: a new surge. And guess who's promoting it. General Keane, Fred Kagan, and all the rest of those neocons who have never -- well, who want to make sure that they're not totally discredited -- well, in golf, we'd call it a mulligan. They're trying to get a mulligan.

Now, last thing I'll say on this for right now, is what about Obama? Now, Obama is incredibly naive, even today. During the campaign, you may recall, that after calling a spade a spade -- his first campaign, I'm talking about -- and saying the surge was not a good idea, he finally relented and listened to advisors like John Brennan, now head of the CIA, and he said, well, "The surge was a victory beyond all our expectations." Now, he's hoisted on his own petard. Is he going to not do a surge and not live up to the expectations of the neocons? Or is he finally going to act like an adult male and say, look, it was a fool's errand before. We wasted a thousand U.S. lives. I'm not going to waste anymore. I'm going to tell them, look, you get your act together there in Baghdad, and don't expect any help from us if you don't work out arrangements where you can power share between Shia and Sunni. That's what has to happen. And if Obama steps up this time, well, I'll be belatedly glad and also surprised. If he acquiesces in this drive by McCain and Lindsey Nelson and these guys at the American Enterprise Institute, I will not be surprised, but I'll be really, really angered.

WOODS: Well, I have to say, one thing that was a pleasant surprise for me was that he persisted in the Iranian negotiations, even with the neocons howling and screaming -- which was something. I mean, that's at least something he can point to after eight years, and I say that not as a supporter of his. Would you agree with that?

MCGOVERN: Well, I would agree, with one caveat. The deal is not done.

WOODS: Well, that's true.

MCGOVERN: They have till the end of June, I believe, and there's all manner of possibilities for Israel, for its supporters, for people who have animus against Iran and

this country, to put the kibosh on it. But your general point I agree with completely, and Iran in many respects, is a different story.

And I have to tell you that after my own former colleagues -- and I'm not talking about the operatives, the people who ran the black prisons and kidnapped people and tortured them; that was the operation -- I'm talking about my own fellow analysts, who allowed themselves to be corrupted, to be prostituted in manufacturing "evidence to justify" war on Iraq. When I saw that happen -- and please, for your listeners, the war on Iraq was not based on mistaken intelligence. It wasn't a mistake. It was out and out fraud, and I'm really embarrassed to admit that my former colleagues cooperated fully in ordering up forgeries -- all kinds of weird stories, with which they sold the war. So it was not a mistaken war, it was an out and out fraud on the American people and, of course, on the Iraqi people.

The reason I mention that is because I was just about to say, well, you ought to destroy, you ought to dismantle the CIA; it's not performing any useful function anymore, when the analysts themselves do not tell the truth anymore. And then guess what happened. Somebody had the presence of mind to say, hey, uh oh, Bush and Cheney have their sights on Iran now -- not Iraq, Iran. And what do we do?

And so somebody said, well, let's get somebody honest in to run a national intelligence estimate -- this is the *crème de la crème*, the supreme genre of intelligence analysis -- a national intelligence estimate on Iran. See how close they are to getting a nuclear weapon, which was, of course, the big issue.

They couldn't find anybody. They went to the State Department, to the head of the department's Intelligence and Research Group, Assistant Secretary Thomas Fingar. And they said, Tom, you were good at Iraq; you composed all kinds of footnotes to those erroneous judgments. Why don't you come in and do one now on Iran? And Fingar said, are you kidding? No way! That was a debacle. And they said, no, no, Tom, you have to do it, because you have the experience, and you have the reputation for honesty. Please, come in and do it. And Fingar said, if I can bring a couple of my specialists from the State Department, I'll do it, but I don't need any interference while I'm doing it.

Long story short: well, 2007 they did a bottom up assessment, discarding all the guesses that had been made in the past about Iran seeking a nuclear weapon. And in November of 2007, right after Bush had disgraced himself by saying, Iran is on the verge of getting a nuclear weapon; it's going to be terrible, and they're just about to get one. And one journalist asked, well, Mr. President, how do you know that? He said, what do you want, World War III? Is that what you want, World War III? Come on!

So two weeks after that, this national intelligence estimate came out, and it said, and I quote, "We assess with high confidence that Iran stopped working on a nuclear weapon at the end of 2003," -- at the end of 2003 -- "and has not resumed work on a nuclear weapon." Now, that was a judgment made in November 2007. It was

unanimous -- that means all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies -- and as I said, it was based on high confidence judgments.

Well, what happened? That estimate was given to Congress, and so, this gave Admiral Mike Mullen a really good chance to see that he wouldn't be ordered to make a war on Iran. What he did was he went to the White House, and he said, now, President Bush, this is really serious stuff, because it's going to leak. It's got to leak -- Congress has it - - it's going to leak. So I think what we need to do is put out a sanitized version of the key judgments, and we could put our own spin on it. (laughing) Pretty disingenuous of Mullen to say spin -- how are you going to spin a 180 degree reversal from a judgment that Iran is just about to get a nuclear weapon to a judgment that it stopped working on a nuclear weapon four years ago?

Well anyhow, it worked. Bush said, yeah, that sounds like a good idea. So in November, they put out a sanitized version which was reasonably accurate, and that put the kibosh on Bush and Cheney's wish and plan and intention to attack Iran with or without Israel.

The following year -- their last year in office, 2008 -- now your listeners might be saying, how can McGovern say that? Well, McGovern can refer you to *Decision Points*, the memoir of George W. Bush. And he must have written this part himself, because what he says is, this estimate was an eye popping surprise. It deprived me of the military option. And then this quote: "For how could I order U.S. forces to attack the nuclear facilities of a country that the intelligence community said had no active nuclear weapons program?"

WOODS: Best rhetorical question he ever asked.

MCGOVERN: (laughing) Well, yeah. It would be -- the thing that he would -- well, bummer, you know? Bummer! No more war in Iran! You know, if you were really interested or really concerned, as the Israelis really were, that Iran might be getting a nuclear weapon, why didn't he just say, hey, call up Israel here; we have great news!

WOODS: Yeah, because we're thrilled to hear this!

MCGOVERN: So that's how corrupt everything was. But what I'm saying here is that, whereas I was prepared to throw the baby out with the bathwater after the debacle on intelligence performance -- fraud -- before Iraq, I was reassured that there's still enough honest intelligence analysts there at CIA --

WOODS: But how do you account for that? How do you explain the difference?

MCGOVERN: Well, the difference really was Tom Fingar. In other words, here was a guy, he'd been around the intelligence community for 30 years -- PhD, Stanford -- incredible knowledge and experience. Most recently very woeful experience with the estimate on Iraq, which was fraud. And he knew his way around, and he stuck his neck out. He did get the chance to bring in some of his own experts.

And then, he was adroit enough to work underneath the limelight. Congress was pushing for this estimate all throughout 2007. So was I! We knew it was being composed. I didn't have the foggiest notion that Fingar was running this clandestine operation, really, where the analysts had been sworn to secrecy, and where he got the whole intelligence community, mind you -- the whole intelligence community, all 16 agencies, including those at the Pentagon, everywhere else -- behind this judgment.

And it did -- I'll just say this, I've been around U.S. intelligence estimates now for a half century -- never before and never since have I been able to say that one national intelligence estimate, honestly performed, played a huge role in preventing a disastrous war. You think Iraq was bad? War in Iran would have made Iraq look like a volley ball game between Mount St. Ursula and St. Helena's academy, all right? It would have been really, really terrible. Mullen knew that; everyone knew that.

The admiral -- what was his name, Admiral Fallon -- had said publicly two years before, we're not going to do Iran on my watch. And what happened to him? He was cashiered. He was retired. So, it was a lot of guts on the part of the analysts themselves, but analysts need thoughtful, courageous leadership. Tom Fingar was the fellow from the State Department who came in and provided that leadership, and in large measure, saved us from a terribly disastrous war on Iran.

WOODS: Well, Ray, I wanted to talk to you also about Afghanistan and also your career in the CIA, but I hope I can actually invite you back in the future; we'll do a whole separate episode on that. I'm glad we got all the information out on the surge. It's hard to get anything reliable on the surge from the media, because it's all the same song and dance. You certainly can't get it from the politicians, but I knew we could get it from Ray McGovern. But I would like to have you back to talk about the Afghanistan question, because there, you do have people who say, well, we had to go in and get bin Laden, so I can at least look the other way there. And I would love to get your take on that. But for now, I just want to say thank you, not only for your time today, but also for being such an outspoken truth teller, when it's often such a thankless and depressing job. Thanks so much.

MCGOVERN: You're most welcome, Tom.