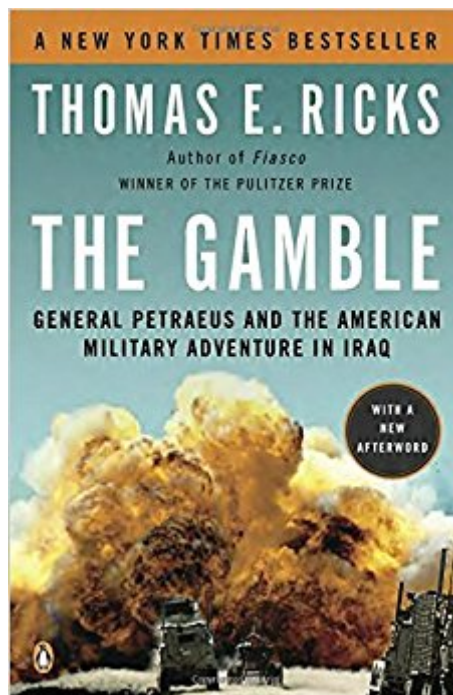




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The Gamble: General Petraeus And The American Military Adventure In Iraq



Synopsis

Thomas E. Ricks's news-breaking follow up to the #1 New York Times bestseller *Fiasco*. Now updated to fully document the inside story of the Iraq war since late 2005, *The Gamble* is the definitive account of the insurgency within the U.S. military that led to a radical shift in America's strategy. Based on unprecedented real-time access to the military's entire chain of command, Ricks examines the events that took place as the military was forced to reckon with itself, the surge was launched, and a very different war began. His stunning conclusion, stated in the last line of the book, is that "the events for which the Iraq war will be remembered probably have not yet happened."

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Customer Reviews

Best of the Month, February 2009: Anyone who read *Fiasco*, Thomas E. Ricks's superb, bestselling account of the Iraq War through 2005, and has followed the war since has likely noticed that many of the heroes of that devastating book, the officers and analysts who seemed to understand what was going wrong in the war when the rest of the political and military leadership didn't, have since been put in charge, starting with General David Petraeus, the cerebral officer who took command in Iraq and led what became known as "the surge." Ricks, the senior Pentagon correspondent at the Washington Post, has stayed on the story, and he returns with his second book on the war, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008*. As good (and influential) as *Fiasco* was, *The Gamble* may be even better, telling the remarkable story of how a few people inside and outside the Pentagon pushed the new strategy through against opposition

across the political spectrum and throughout the military top brass, and then, even more remarkably, how soldiers put the difficult plan into action on the ground and managed to sharply reduce the chaotic violence in Iraq. But the story doesn't end there, and Ricks's bracing conclusion--that the American military, like it or not, will still have a necessary role in Iraq for years to come--makes it likely that this may not be the last book we have from him on the subject. --Tom Nissley

Questions for Thomas E. Ricks

We exchanged emails with Tom Ricks for a few weeks before the publication of *The Gamble*, a time which saw, among other things, the inauguration of Barack Obama and regional elections in Iraq. You can read the full exchange on the [books blog](#), [Omnivoracious.com](#). Here are some highlights:

.com: *The Gamble* is the history of what has become known as "the surge." What do you think the public understands about the surge, and how does that compare with what you've seen from up close?

Thomas E. Ricks: I think there are two big misunderstandings about the surge. The first is that the surge "worked." Yes, it did, in that it improved security. But it was meant to do more than that. It was supposed to create a breathing space in which Iraqi political leaders could move forward. In fact, as General Odierno says in the book, some used the elbow room to move backward. The bottom line is that none of the basic problems facing Iraq have been addressed--the relationship between Shia, Sunni and Kurds, or who leads the Shias, or the status of the disputed city of Kirkuk, or the sharing of oil revenue. The second misunderstanding is just how difficult the surge was. People back here seem to think that 30,000 troops were added and everything calmed down. In fact, the first six months of the surge, from January through early July 2007, were the toughest months of the war. When troops moved out of their big bases and into little outposts across Baghdad, they got hammered by bombs and rockets. It took some time before being among the people began to lead to improved security, and during that time, a lot of top American officials in Iraq weren't sure the new approach was working. General Petraeus says in the book that he looks back on that time as a "horrific nightmare."

.com: Let's start with that second point. Because *The Gamble* is in many ways the story of a remarkable success: a minority of officers and analysts who pushed through a new plan for the war against opposition across the political spectrum and throughout the military leadership, and then, even more impressively, soldiers who put the plan into action on the ground and managed to stem a great deal of the violence in Iraq within a matter of months. The new counterinsurgency approach to the war was one you had argued for in *Fiasco*, but in the most violent days of early 2007, how did you think it was going to turn out?

Ricks: I was very skeptical back in early 2007 about the surge. I think there were two reasons for this. First, there was little evidence that the U.S. military was going to be able to operate differently, and more effectively. After all, they had been fighting there for longer than we

fought in World War II, and the only thing we had to show for it was that in 2006, Iraq was going straight to hell. Also, I didn't get out to Iraq in 2007 until May, on the first trip I did for this book. It was only then, five months into the surge, when I got on the ground there, that I sensed how different the American leadership was from earlier on. Everybody, and I mean everybody, in the U.S. military, was talking about counterinsurgency, and making protecting the Iraqi population their top priority. That was a huge change from earlier on in the war, when different units seemed pretty much to do their own thing--one outfit would be drinking tea with the sheikhs, another was banging heads. The new candor and understanding in the Americans was striking. One that May 2007 trip, I went into Green Zone and got from David Kilcullen a really thorough and insightful briefing into the state of play in the streets of Baghdad. That was a big change from earlier on, when officials inside the Zone had no idea what was happening out there. I remember also one general, David Fastabend, an advisor to Petraeus, beginning a conversation then by saying, "We have done some stupid shit" in Iraq. There clearly was a new gang in town. .com: And many of the people who had been put in charge, Gen. Petraeus first among them, were well known to readers of Fiasco as advocates for counterinsurgency. But one who wasn't turns out to be one of the crucial figures in your story: Gen. Ray Odierno, who early in the war was one of the ones banging heads. By the time 2007 rolls around, he's Petraeus's top commander in Iraq and he's a changed leader. What happened to him? Ricks: The change in General Odierno is one I wrestled with throughout the reporting of this book. He seemed so different, so in sync with Petraeus on the counterinsurgency plan. And he was of almost no help in figuring it out. "General Odierno, you strike me as so changed from the guy I wrote about in Fiasco. I can't figure out how that happened." "Hey Tom: Your problem, not mine." I think two major things happened to him between 2004, the end of his first tour in Iraq, and the end of 2006, when he came back for his second tour. First, his son was badly wounded in Baghdad, losing an arm to an RPG. Second, when he came back to Baghdad, he saw that the place was falling apart, and that the war could be lost on his watch. That has a way of concentrating the mind. What he did then was kind of astonishing: He went around his bosses and basically cooked up the surge. He was the only officer in the chain of command who was for it. (Petraeus also was for it, but he hadn't yet arrived in Iraq.) I think he showed genuine moral courage in what he did. It was a huge risk, going against all his bosses. As I say in the book, he was the natural father of the surge, and Petraeus was the adoptive father. I have no problem saying that General Odierno is one of the heroes of this book. .com: While we're talking about the surge, there's one basic thing to clarify: despite the name, as you say, "the surge was more about how to use troops than it was about the number of them." What did the new counterinsurgency tactics translate

into on the ground, and why do you think they worked to the extent they did? Ricks: This is a hugely important question, so I want to take some time on it. There were two key aspect to the different use of troops. First, they had a new top priority: protect Iraqis. (Until February 2007, the top priority of U.S. forces in Iraq was to transition to Iraqi control.) Second, to do that, they had to move out into the population. Before this point, they were doing a lot of patrols from big bases, usually in Humvees. They would be in a neighborhood maybe one hour a day, and the other 23 hours of the day belonged to the insurgents. Now, they were living in the neighborhoods, and constantly going out on short foot patrols. They got a lot more familiar with the people, often visiting every single family, and conducting a census. In military terms, they were mapping the sea in which the insurgent swam. Familiarity made them far more effective, and also constrained the movements of insurgents. For all that, there are other important factors in why Iraq changed, and they shouldn't be forgotten. First, by the time the U.S. military moved into the streets of Baghdad, the city was largely ethnically cleansed. Second, in the spring of 2007, in a huge policy shift, General Petraeus began putting the Sunni insurgency on the payroll--essentially paying them not to attack us. This split them off from al Qaeda in Iraq, and isolated the terrorist extremists. Once the Sunni insurgency was seen to be on our side, even temporarily, the Shiite fighters under Moqtadr al Sadr went to ground. Otherwise, Uncle Sam would have been training all his firepower on them. The problem is that all these arrangements are temporary, and could easily unravel. For example, the Sunni insurgents made a separate peace with the United States. They never have given up their objection to Shiite control of Iraq and of the Iraqi army. So what we may have done is simply delay that fight--and armed both sides in the meantime. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

By and large, critics were less eager to assess Ricks's work as an author and more interested in his opinions about the success of the "surge" and the future of Iraq. But this is perhaps the book's greatest endorsement; whether they were liberal or conservative, American or British, critics viewed Ricks's facts as unassailable and his analysis as strong. They were impressed not just with his unparalleled access to the main actors in Iraq but also with his ability to integrate two commonly held but seemingly irreconcilable views -- that the war was a mistake and a catastrophe (as expressed in Fiasco) and that Petraeus and the surge represented an amazing turnaround. Thus, many critics found that although Ricks seems to express a consensus view, *The Gamble* is counterintuitive and challenging, refreshing yet sobering. Copyright 2009 Bookmarks Publishing LLC --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As an Iraq vet I think Ricks put a lot of good info in the book. Good insight into Petraeus and Odierno and the Bush administration. Good bird's-eye view of the strategy in Iraq. He obviously did his homework. A little bit of an oversimplification of the human dimension at work in the psychology of the Iraqi. What did the Iraqi on the street think before and after the Coalition invasion? How did this influence the fiasco of squandering the victorious invasion? Why didn't they see us as liberators. I knew plenty of Iraqis that saw me as a liberator. I knew quite a few more that saw me as an infidel too. What needs did the surge satisfy in the Iraqi populace? He did touch briefly on some of the cultural aspects the surge addressed. But his book about the counterinsurgency skips over specifics on the ground that I know personally were transformational. Personal trust and honor transcends the Iraqi scene and that's what Petraeus wrote about in his Counterinsurgency Manual. Great book! People should know more about what he wrote. It's not what the press and politicians tell you about the Iraq war - whether left-leaning or right-leaning.

Very good summary of a subset of the Iraq War. Mr Ricks is definitely all-in with his sympathy toward some of the characters like Petraeus, Odierno and Crocker. He is entirely critical of others. He places a lot of validity in comments made by junior folks that support his assumptions. If read with a critical eye, this is a fantastic and well-organized book that lays out how the US military works in war time. As a current field-grade officer deployed in the Middle East, I would highly recommend the read.

I'm please to report The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008 by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Thomas E. Ricks did not cause me nearly the heartburn as his previous work on Iraq, Fiasco (my review). Don't misconstrue that as criticism of the author: it is the facts of the matter, not the teller of those facts that causes my blood pressure to rise. For many reasons I opposed the war in Iraq (hence the gastric distress), but after shattering the fabric of that country -- a tenuous fabric holding in check three distrustful and vengeful groups: Kurds, Shia and Sunni -- I felt we had an obligation to stay the course. My mother always said: you break it, you bought it. And boy, did we break Iraq. From shortly after the ill-conceived invasion in 2003 to the arrival of General David Petraeus in 2007, the U.S. floundered in Iraq. An insurgency was ignited, sectarian groups squared off in what for all intents was a civil war, and our military tactics only made things worse. Thousands of Americans and Iraqis died or were injured, with the numbers increasing month by month, while the futility of Washington's "strategy" was

revealed. Eschewing the heavy-handed tactics which were not working, Petraeus and his corps commander General Odierno, and their support staffs, used the hard-won surge of five brigades of additional troops to implement a classic counter-insurgency (COIN) approach whereby the people of Iraq were viewed as the prize to be won. Ricks rightly calls the surge a tactical success -- violence and deaths were radically reduced, but not eliminated -- but grades it as incomplete overall as the strategic goal of fostering political reconciliation between Iraq's religious and ethnic groups was not achieved. In fact, by paying former Sunni insurgents to stop fighting us and overlooking the ethnic cleansing of whole neighborhoods by Shia militias, the events of 2007 really represented a somewhat unsavory gamble that could have blown up in our face at any time, and still might. Realpolitik, indeed. It is interesting to note, too, that as the level of violence in Iraq began to come down, events in the U.S. began to overshadow public interest, notably the presidential election and financial meltdown. One shudders to think what would have happened if the shift to COIN operations had not worked and a wartime loss, divisive election and crippling recession occurred simultaneously. Some reviewers have noted the somewhat pessimistic view of many quoted in the book that US presence in Iraq would likely continue for decades is out of step with the reality of our withdrawal in 2011. Realize this book was published early in 2009 (although the Afterword appears to have been included later in the year), and therefore it is a point in time and doubtless those interviewed were giving their best estimate at the time. Ricks' prose is sharp and to the point, and I'd argue the point with those reviewers who think there was a "liberal bias" showing through. Facts are facts, and Ricks sticks to the facts in his reporting but through interviews with key persons and experts all sides of the political spectrum are aired. At the risk of producing groans, I'd say it is fair and balanced. The Gamble is an important addition to understanding the events of that period and I highly recommend it.

Well written and much research went into this book on how we are losing the war in Iraq, with many missed opportunities along the way. We should never have gotten into Iraq without solid clear long term goals and objectives and not just assumptions. Most of the experts were ignored by officials at almost all levels in government. A very honest straight forward book.

An excellent analysis of the surge by a very knowledgeable author. Highly recommend this one.

I'm a big fan of Ricks' books, and this is no exception. Many of his rather harsh criticisms have been validated by those who would know if he's wrong, and there have even been few criticisms

from those to whom he's been less than kind.

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