Brainiac Brigade

Some of the military's finest minds helped craft the strategy that has produced some signs of good news out of Iraq. But even they don't know if it will work.

Babak Dehghanpisheh and John Barry

Dripping with sweat in the Baghdad summer heat, surrounded by armed Sunnis who not long ago might gladly have killed him, Gen. David Petraeus smiled. He listened as a former insurgent leader, a onetime member of Saddam Hussein's security forces, listed the grievances that brought him over to the Americans' side against the jihadists—the senseless killings of garbagemen and shopkeepers, the booby-trapped corpses in the streets, the indiscriminate IED attacks. When the man finished, Petraeus invited him to air his complaints publicly; minutes later the ex-insurgent was being interviewed on an Arabic satellite channel, and the top U.S. officer in Iraq strode off through the dust while his entourage scrambled to keep up. "Now this is counterinsurgency, by God!" he later declared.

Is it? Petraeus should know, as the man who pulled together The Book on it: the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 4-23). There's just one problem—Iraq doesn't follow the book. The manual—highly touted as the basis upon which the surge of U.S. forces this year would be organized—deals with threats to a functioning government that enjoys broad-based legitimacy. That's scarcely what exists in Baghdad, says Sarah Sewall, director of Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights. A devout believer in winning hearts and minds, she worked closely with Petraeus on producing FM 4-23. "I would argue that Petraeus has done as good a job as humanly possible," she says. "But by the time he got to Iraq, I think the war was no longer fightable according to the counterinsurgency doctrine we drafted."

Instead, the likely centerpiece of Petraeus's testimony to Congress this week—the success of efforts to turn the Sunni tribes of Anbar province—is a marked departure from FM 4-23. Rather than solidifying loyalty to the central government, the new strategy concentrates on creating pockets of stability in the hopes that such loyalty will follow. Petraeus will admit that political progress in Baghdad is painfully slow. But his argument is that the Anbar strategy shows enough promise to justify delaying anything but token troop withdrawals until next spring. That many lawmakers seem inclined to give him the time is a sign of how much intellectual throw-weight Petraeus—a Princeton Ph.D.—carries. It also reflects a feeling that he, and the circle of close advisers he's gathered around him in Baghdad, are at least seeing Iraq for what it is, not what their plans and schemes tell them it should be.

Every general has a network, a family of younger officers who have worked with him in previous assignments. But the brain trust Petraeus has assembled is an intriguing mix of former colleagues and maverick volunteers, linked by their intellectual firepower. As he began putting his staff together late last year, the joke inside the Pentagon was that no one without a Ph.D. would be eligible. "Commanders haven't [traditionally] tried to reach out and just pick the best minds—not the guys on the fastest track for promotion, not the 'best' soldiers, but the best minds with relevant experience," says Fred Kagan, a West Point graduate and sometime teacher there, who's now at the American Enterprise Institute. "It was wonderful to see that."
For his "XO"—executive officer—Petraeus called on Col. Peter Mansoor, 47, whose doctoral dissertation in history at Ohio State became a pathbreaking book on World War II, "The GI Offensive in Europe." Mansoor, who did his first Iraq tour in 2003 with the First Armored Division in Baghdad, got to know Petraeus about a year ago, while Mansoor was completing a fellowship with the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. When Petraeus got his orders for Iraq, he persuaded Mansoor to come along. "You don't say no to a four-star," says Mansoor, a soft-spoken father of two. He helped put together the rest of the team, and now acts as Petraeus's consigliere and gatekeeper.

Two other colonels quickly signed up as well. One was Col. H. R. McMaster, 45, a courageous battlefield commander and another bright history Ph.D. His 1997 book, "Dereliction of Duty," is a merciless dissection of the Joint Chiefs' reluctance to tell truth to power in the Vietnam years. Another is Col. Michael Meese, 47, a West Point professor and head of the school's prestigious social-studies department. A Princeton graduate like Petraeus, he holds a Ph.D. in economics. (His father, former attorney general Ed Meese, served on the Iraq Study Group.) The colonel was Petraeus's XO in Bosnia in 2001. Two days after classes ended at West Point, he was on a plane to Iraq, where he stayed until school resumed. "This is my second summer vacation in Iraq," says Meese, who wants to help with reconstruction planning if the surge prevails.

What unites these officers are not just their ties to Petraeus but a penchant for outside-the-box thinking. That's most clearly on display in the case of two other Petraeus advisers, neither of whom is American. One, Australian Army Lt. Col. David Kilcullen, 40, was getting ready to head home from a stint in Washington with the U.S. State Department when Petraeus was chosen to take over in Iraq. Kilcullen, who holds a doctorate in anthropology and has a level of counterinsurgency expertise unequaled by any serving U.S. officer, immediately e-mailed the general to volunteer. ("He knows the most bizarre set of facts. And he's relentlessly optimistic," a former Pentagon official says of the Aussie.) The other, British Army Maj. Gen. Paul Newton, 56, is a veteran of eight tours in Northern Ireland. He and his wife were planning a vacation to Tuscany in May when he was called to Iraq. Has she forgiven him? "I'll let you know when she starts speaking to me," he says.

The group's work in Baghdad has been highly improvisational. "There's a sense that we are making our own luck," says Newton, who has been tasked with reaching out to tribal leaders. Much of the new strategy was developed over the course of a month early in the surge, when Petraeus pulled together an even broader and more diverse group of thinkers—including "a sitting U.S. ambassador, three or four people who've spent years working with Iraqi politicians, an economics expert from the State Department, an oil-industry executive, a couple of civilian academics, plus colonels who have commanded brigades, and folks who knew the intelligence," according to a source who did not want to be named discussing sensitive deliberations.

In mid-March, this 20-person Joint Strategic Assessment Team (JSAT) installed themselves in the once lavish, high-ceilinged ballroom of a Saddam-era palace, now divided into a warren of plywood cubicles. They worked 14 hours a day, halting briefly at the same time every night for a peculiar ritual, according to Stephen Biddle, a team member and military expert at the Council on Foreign Relations: "At exactly 9 p.m., someone would turn on a recording of the 'Chicken Dance' and people would throw all kinds of things into the air from their desks—stuffed SpongeBobs, rubber chickens, rubber hand grenades," he says. "At exactly 9:10 p.m., it would stop and people would go back to work."
Two camps quickly emerged: those who wanted to crush all the various insurgencies in Iraq, and those who thought that task impossible. The latter won out, and the resulting 100-page report argued that U.S. forces—while trying to galvanize the government in Baghdad—should meanwhile seek out local leaders and cut deals with them, hoping eventually to unite them under a common banner. "Recruit locally, train locally, deploy locally" has become Petraeus's favorite maxim, as exemplified by his efforts to build local police forces rather than waste more resources on the Shiite-militia-dominated national police.

Members of the brain trust freely admit that they are at some level simply trying to exploit events beyond their control. Meese says no one foresaw how quickly the tribes in Anbar province would flip. "There's a slide that describes this joint campaign plan, and it's got a picture of Iraq and it's weaving everything together," he says. "They didn't have a part of the weave over Anbar because they didn't think it would happen as well or as rapidly as it did happen." In an essay recently published in Small Wars Journal, Kilcullen notes that there is no way to know how deep the loyalties of America's new allies run, nor if they can be transferred to the Iraqi government in Baghdad. (In an effort to encourage the Sunni tribals, several top Iraqi officials flew to the Anbar city of Ramadi last week and pledged $120 million in reconstruction aid for the province.)

Newton, who has a stern look but a deep, rumbling laugh, says the pitch he makes to tribal leaders is simple: "What I say to them is, 'Who do you really want to be your friends or the friends of your kids in the future? Do you want to put yourself in the position of being an enemy of the United States of America? Why would you want to do that?' They go, 'Hmmm.'" But he's acutely aware that such a bottom-up strategy can go only so far without some progress at the top; otherwise America's newest friends could simply become Iraq's newest militias. He's pressured Iraqi officials to set up a committee to deal with the outreach effort. One of its members is Bassima Jadiri, a close adviser to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who has a reputation for fierce sectarianism. But Newton, like the other brain-trust members, is realistic. "If you're going to be doing this work," he says, "it's far better to be talking to people who are very close to the seat of power."

The question is how realistic Petraeus and his team will be if their efforts falter between now and next spring. The brain trust's great virtue so far, says one of Petraeus's staff officers who was not authorized to speak on the record, has been the frank and unvarnished advice they've been willing to give their boss. "It was a pretty scathing diagnosis of the situation," says a source involved in the JSAT report. "And there was no pushback from Petraeus. None." That kind of clear-eyed perspective has been sorely lacking in Iraq thus far. It will only be more valuable in the hard months ahead.

*With Dan Ephron In Washington*

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Brainiac is a fictional supervillain appearing in American comic books published by DC Comics, usually as an adversary of Superman, his second deadliest archenemy after Lex Luthor, and a frequent enemy of the Justice League. Brainiac is typically depicted as an extraterrestrial cyborg or android. He is one of Superman's primary enemies, and is responsible for shrinking and stealing Kandor, the capital city of Superman's home planet Krypton. In some continuities, he is also responsible for Krypton's Brainiac Jonesy is a Soldier Hero in Save the World. Passive bonus granted if this hero is slotted in a Hero Loadout. Replaces the Standard Perk if this hero is slotted as the commander. Brainiac Jonesy was available from Fortnitemares Llamas purchased from the Vindertech Store during the Fortnitemares event. Dripping with sweat in the Baghdad summer heat, surrounded by armed Sunnis who not long ago might gladly have killed him, Gen. David Petraeus smiled. He listened as a former insurgent leader, a onetime member of Saddam Hussein's security forces, listed the grievances that brought him over to the Americans' side against the jihadists—the senseless killings of garbagemen and shopkeepers, the booby-trapped corpses in the streets, the indiscriminate IED attacks.