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Outmaneuvered And Outranked, Military Chiefs Became Outsiders

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By Bob Woodward
Washington Post Staff Writer
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At the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#) in late November 2006, Gen. [Peter Pace](#) was facing every chairman's nightmare: a potential revolt of the other chiefs. Two months earlier, the JCS had convened a special team of colonels to recommend options for reversing the deteriorating situation in [Iraq](#). Now, it appeared that the chiefs' and colonels' advice was being marginalized, if not ignored, by the [White House](#).

During a JCS meeting with the colonels Nov. 20, Chairman Pace dropped a bomb: The White House was considering a "surge" of additional troops to quell the violence in Iraq. "Would it be a good idea?" Pace asked the group. "If so, what would you do with five more brigades?" That amounted to 20,000 to 30,000 more troops, depending on the number of support personnel.

Pace's question caught the chiefs and colonels off guard. The JCS hadn't recommended a surge, and [Gen. George W. Casey Jr.](#), the Iraq commander, was opposed to one of that magnitude. Where had this come from? Was it a serious option? Was it already a done deal?

Pace said he had another White House meeting in two days. "I want to be able to give the president a recommendation on what's doable," he said.

A rift had been growing between the country's military and civilian leadership, and in several JCS meetings that November, the chiefs' frustrations burst into the open. They had all but dismissed the surge option, worried that the armed forces were already stretched to the breaking point. They favored a renewed effort to train and build up the Iraqi security forces so that U.S. troops could begin to leave.

"Why isn't this getting any traction over there, Pete?" [Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker](#), the Army chief, asked at one session inside the "tank," the military's secure conference room for candid and secret debates. Was the president being briefed?

"I can only get part of it before him," Pace said, "and I'm not getting any feedback."

Pace, Schoomaker and Casey found themselves badly out of sync with the White House in the fall of 2006, finally losing control of the war strategy altogether after the midterm elections. Schoomaker was outraged when he saw news coverage that retired Gen. Jack Keane, the former Army vice chief of staff, had briefed the president Dec. 11 about a new Iraq strategy being proposed by the [American Enterprise Institute](#), the conservative think tank.

"When does AEI start trumping the Joint Chiefs of Staff on this stuff?" Schoomaker asked at the next chiefs' meeting.

Pace, normally given to concealing his opinions, let down the veil slightly and gave a little sigh. But he didn't answer. Schoomaker thought Pace was too much of a gentleman to be effective in a business where forcefulness and a willingness to get in people's faces were survival skills. "They weren't listening to what Pete [Pace] was saying," Schoomaker said later in private. "Or Pete wasn't carrying the mail, or he was carrying it incompletely."

In several tank meetings, [Adm. Michael Mullen](#), chief of naval operations, voiced concern that the politicians were going to find a way to place the blame for Iraq on the military. "They're orchestrating this to dump in our laps," Mullen said. He raised the point so many times that Schoomaker thought the Navy leader sounded "almost paranoid."

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The atmosphere in the tank was tense Monday, Nov. 27, 2006, as Pace briefed the chiefs and the colonels on a White House meeting about Iraq the day before. J.D. Crouch, a deputy to national security adviser [Stephen J. Hadley](#), had presented the results of a secret strategy review on how to respond to the escalating violence. "I walked out happy because I got my views on the table," Pace said, making it clear that this was not always the case.

The president, Pace told the group, is "leaning into announcing a new phase in the war that will help us achieve our original end state. . . . By April 1, 2007, we would have five more brigades in Iraq."

Schoomaker was dismayed. Suppose the surge didn't work? "What is our fallback plan?" he asked.

There was no fallback, Pace replied.

"Are people engaged on this," Schoomaker asked almost defiantly of the surge proponents, "or is this politics?"

"They are engaged," Pace replied. But if progress is still lacking "after we surge five brigades," Pace said, "then you are forced to conscription, which no one wants to talk about." To mention a draft was to invite the ghosts of Vietnam into the tank.

"Folks keep talking about the readiness of U.S. forces. Ready to do what?" Schoomaker growled. "We need to look at our strategic depth for handling other threats. How do we get bigger? And how do we make what we have today more ready? This is not just about Iraq!"

Part of the chiefs' job was to figure out how to accelerate the military's overall global readiness and capacity, Schoomaker said. "I sometimes feel like it is hope against hope," he said. "I feel like Nero did when Rome was burning. It just worries the hell out of me."

Several colonels wanted to applaud. It worried them, too. Others disagreed, feeling it was more important to focus on the current war. But they all maintained their poker faces.

"Look, no one is whistling 'Dixie' here," Pace told the group. "The president and the White House understand the resource constraints."

It was not clear that anyone believed what the chairman was saying, or whether even Pace believed it.

"We need to position ourselves properly for the decision likely to come," Pace said. "The sense of urgency is over Iraq, but not over the other issues."

Mullen said the all-volunteer force might break under the strain of extended and repeated deployments. "I am still searching for the grand strategy here," Mullen said. "How does a five-brigade surge over the next few months fit into the larger picture? We have so many other issues and challenges: [Afghanistan](#), [Pakistan](#), [North Korea](#) and places we are not even thinking about today."

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In Baghdad, Gen. Casey realized that he had lost a basic, necessary ingredient for a commanding general in wartime. He had lost the confidence of the president, a stunning and devastating realization.

He wasn't alone. The president was not listening to Casey's boss, [Gen. John P. Abizaid](#) at Central Command, anymore, either.

"Yeah, I know," the president said to Abizaid at a [National Security Council](#) session in December, "you're going to tell me you're against the surge."

Yes, Abizaid replied, and then presented his argument that U.S. forces needed to get out of Iraq in order to win.

"The U.S. presence helps to keep a lid on," Bush responded. There were other benefits. A surge would "also help here at home, since for many the measure of success is reduction in violence," Bush said. "And it'll help [Iraq Prime Minister Nouri al-] Maliki to get control of the situation. A heavier presence will buy time for his government."

The rest of Iraq wasn't as tenuous as Baghdad, Abizaid said. "But it's the capital city that looks chaotic," Bush said. "And when your capital city looks chaotic, it's hard to sustain your position, whether at home or abroad."

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The chiefs' frustration grew so intense that Pace told Bush, "You need to sit down with them, Mr. President, and hear from them directly."

Hadley saw it as an opportunity. He arranged for Bush and [Vice President Cheney](#) to visit the JCS in the tank Dec. 13, 2006. The president would come armed with what Hadley called "sweeteners" -- more budget money and a promise to increase the size of the active-duty Army and [Marine Corps](#). It would also be a symbolic visit, important to the chiefs because the president would be on their territory.

"Mr. President," Schoomaker began, "you know that five brigades is really 15."

Schoomaker was in charge of generating the force for the Army. Sending five new brigades to Iraq meant another five would have to take their place in line, and to sustain the surge, another five behind them. This could not be done, Schoomaker said, without either calling up the [National Guard](#) and Reserves or extending the 12-month tours in Iraq. The Army had hoped to go in the other direction

and cut tours to nine months.

Would a surge transform the situation? Schoomaker asked. If not, why do it? "I don't think that you have the time to surge and generate enough forces for this thing to continue to go," he said.

"Pete, I'm the president," Bush said. "And I've got the time."

"Fine, Mr. President," Schoomaker said. "You're the president."

Several of the chiefs noted that the five brigades were effectively the strategic reserve of the [U.S. military](#), the forces on hand in case of flare-ups elsewhere in the world. Surprise was a way of international life, the chiefs were saying. For years, Bush had been making the point that it was a dangerous world. Did he want to leave the United States in the position of not being able to deal with the next manifestation of that danger?

Bush told the chiefs that they had to win the war at hand. He turned again to Schoomaker. "Pete, you don't agree with me, do you?"

"No," Schoomaker said. "I just don't see it. I just don't. But I know right now that it's going to be 15 brigades. And how we're going to get those 15 brigades, I don't know. This is going to require more than we can generate. You're stressing the force, Mr. President, and these kids just see deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan for the indefinite future."

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"The tank meeting was a very important meeting," Bush told me during a May 2008 interview. "In my own mind, I'm sure I didn't want to walk in with my mind made up and not give these military leaders the benefit of a discussion about a big decision."

The president said that if he were just pretending to be open-minded, "you get sniffed out. . . . I might have been leaning, but my mind was open enough to be able to absorb their advice."

I told him that, based on my reporting, some of the chiefs thought he had already decided, that they had sniffed him out.

"They may have thought I was leaning, and I probably was," Bush said, noting that the chiefs had felt free to express themselves. "But the door wasn't shut."

Still, Bush fully understood the power of his office.

"Generally," he said, "when the commander-in-chief walks in and says, done deal, they say, 'Yes sir, Mr. President.' "

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Just after Christmas, while in the United States, Casey got an e-mail from one of his contacts. "Hey, you need to know that the White House is throwing you under the bus," it read.

A couple of days later, Abizaid phoned Casey with a warning. "Look," Abizaid said, "the surge is coming. Get out of the way." Casey was soon offered a promotion to Army chief of staff, and in February 2007, he left Iraq, replaced by [Gen. David H. Petraeus](#).

The president said later in an interview, "The military, I can remember well, said, 'Okay, fine. More troops. Two brigades.' And I turned to Steve [Hadley] and said, 'Steve, from your analysis, what do you think?' He, being the cautious and thorough man he is, went back, checked, came back to me and said, 'Mr. President, I would recommend that you consider five. Not two.' And I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Because it is the considered judgment of people who I trust and you trust that we need five in order to be able to clear, hold and build.' "

The views of those trusted people came largely through back channels, rather than through the president's established set of military advisers -- Casey's deputy saying that a surge wouldn't work with fewer than five brigades and Jack Keane making the same case to Hadley and Vice President Cheney.

Hadley maintained that the number "comes out of my discussions with Pete Pace."

"Okay, I don't know this," Bush said, interrupting. "I'm not in these meetings, you'll be happy to hear, because I got other things to do."

So the president did not know what his principal military adviser, Gen. Pace, had recommended. Pace, however, had told the chiefs Nov. 20, 2006, that the White House had asked what could be done with five extra brigades.

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The president announced the surge decision Jan. 10, 2007. Five more brigades would go to Baghdad; 4,000 Marines would head to Anbar province.

The next morning, he went to [Fort Benning](#), Ga., to address military personnel and their families. His decision had been opposed by Casey and Abizaid, his military commanders in Iraq. Pace and the Joint Chiefs, his top military advisers, had suggested a smaller increase, if any at all. Schoomaker, the Army chief, had made it clear that the five brigades didn't really exist under the Army's current policy of 12-month rotations. But on this morning, the president delivered his own version of history.

"The commanders on the ground in Iraq, people who I listen to -- by the way, that's what you want your commander-in-chief to do. You don't want decisions being made based upon politics or focus groups or political polls. You want your military decisions being made by military experts. They analyzed the plan, and they said to me and to the Iraqi government: 'This won't work unless we help them. There needs to be a bigger presence.' "

Bush went on, "And so our commanders looked at the plan and said, 'Mr. President, it's not going to work until -- unless we support -- provide more troops.' "

Brady Dennis and Evelyn Duffy contributed to this report.

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