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Strategic Reflections

Operation *Iraqi Freedom*
July 2004–February 2007

George W. Casey, Jr.

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President George W. Bush addresses U.S. Army War College on Iraq, May 24, 2004
White House (Eric Draper)

1. PREPARING FOR THE MISSION (MAY–JUNE 2004)

I did not go to work on May 17, 2004, thinking I would be the commander of Multi-National Force–Iraq in 45 days. I knew that the Secretary of Defense was looking to increase the new MNF-I headquarters from a three-star to a four-star command to handle the wide range of strategic issues that a corps's headquarters is not equipped to deal with. But as the Army vice chief of staff, I was decisively involved in the multiyear reorganization of the Army. I had been asked by my boss, Army Chief of Staff Pete Schoomaker, to see that through.

Three days later, Pete told me that I had been selected by President George W. Bush to lead coalition forces in Iraq. With Pete's support, I immediately shifted gears and laid out a plan to take command. My

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General John P. Abizaid, Commander, U.S. Central Command, General Casey after he assumed command of Multi-National Force–Iraq, July 1, 2004, and outgoing commander Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, seated behind General Abizaid

2. ESTABLISHING THE MISSION AND PREPARING FOR THE FIRST ELECTIONS (JULY 2004–JANUARY 2005)

On June 28, as I was about to board a plane to the Middle East having been confirmed by the Senate 2 days prior, Ambassador Negroponte called to tell me that sovereignty had been passed to the Iraqis earlier that day. While he intended to head into Iraq later that day, I had planned stops at USCENTCOM forward headquarters in Qatar and at my supporting Army headquarters in Kuwait, Third Army, en route to Iraq. Despite the early transfer of sovereignty, I decided to stick with my travel plan as insights from my higher and supporting headquarters in theater would be important in framing my understanding of the mission. My change of command remained scheduled for July 1.

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Figure 2-1. Multi-National Force–Iraq, July 2004

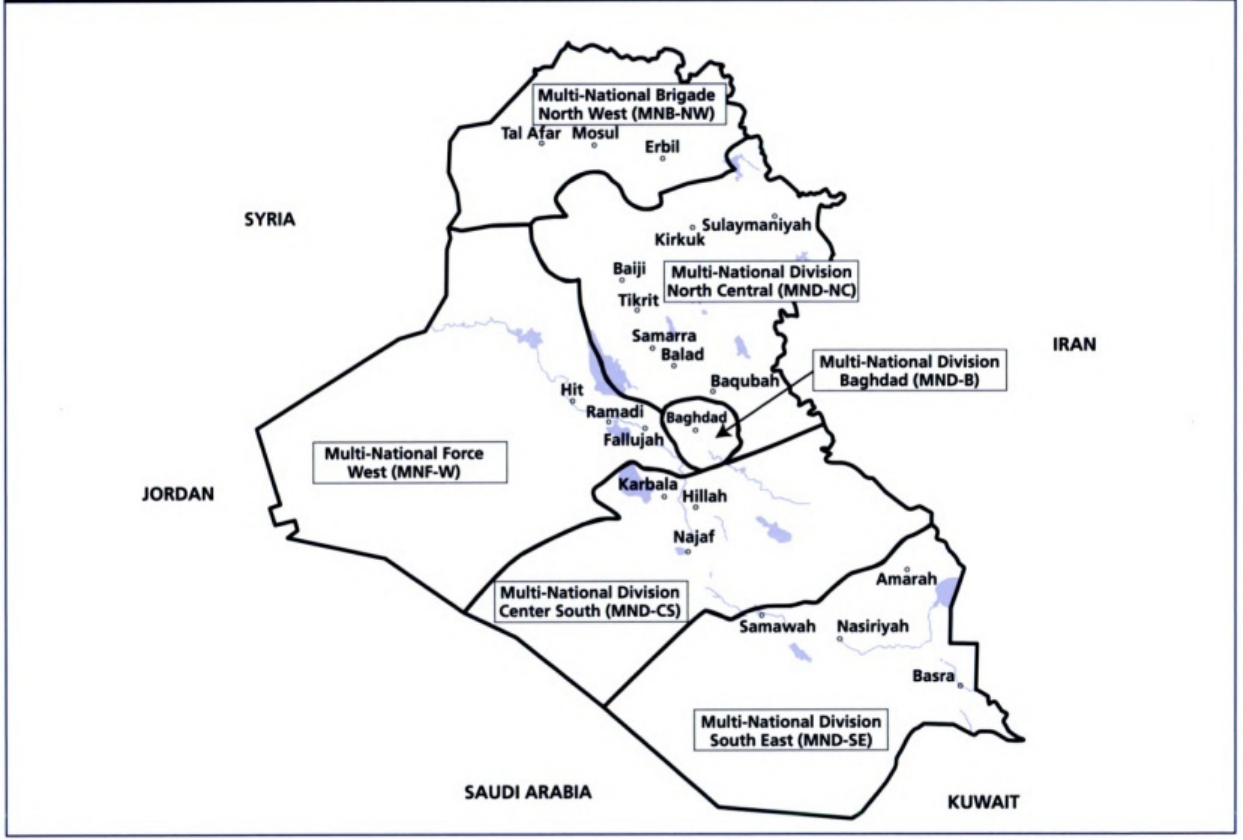

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Figure 2-2. View of the Threat, Summer 2004

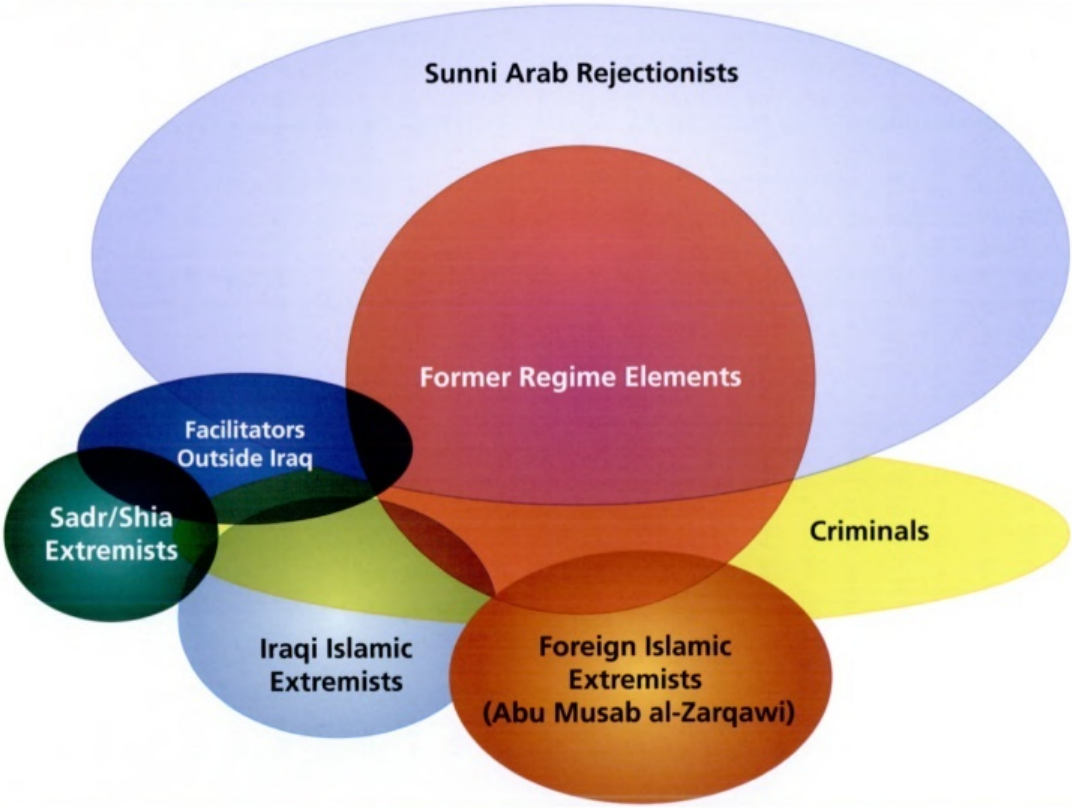

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Figure 2-3. Initial Campaign Framework

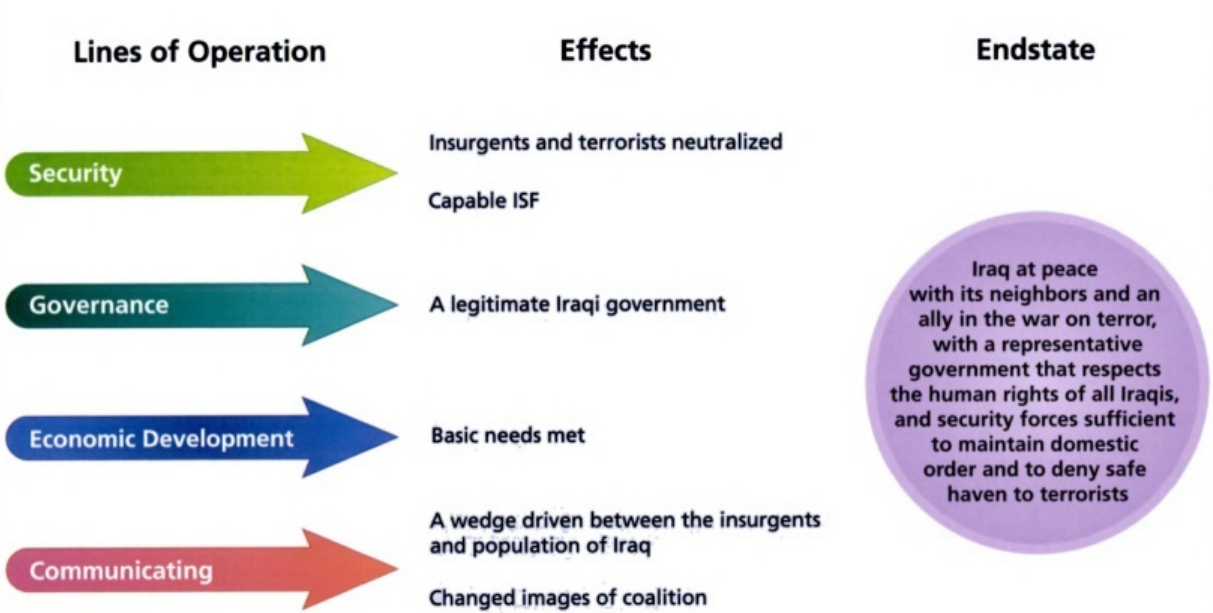
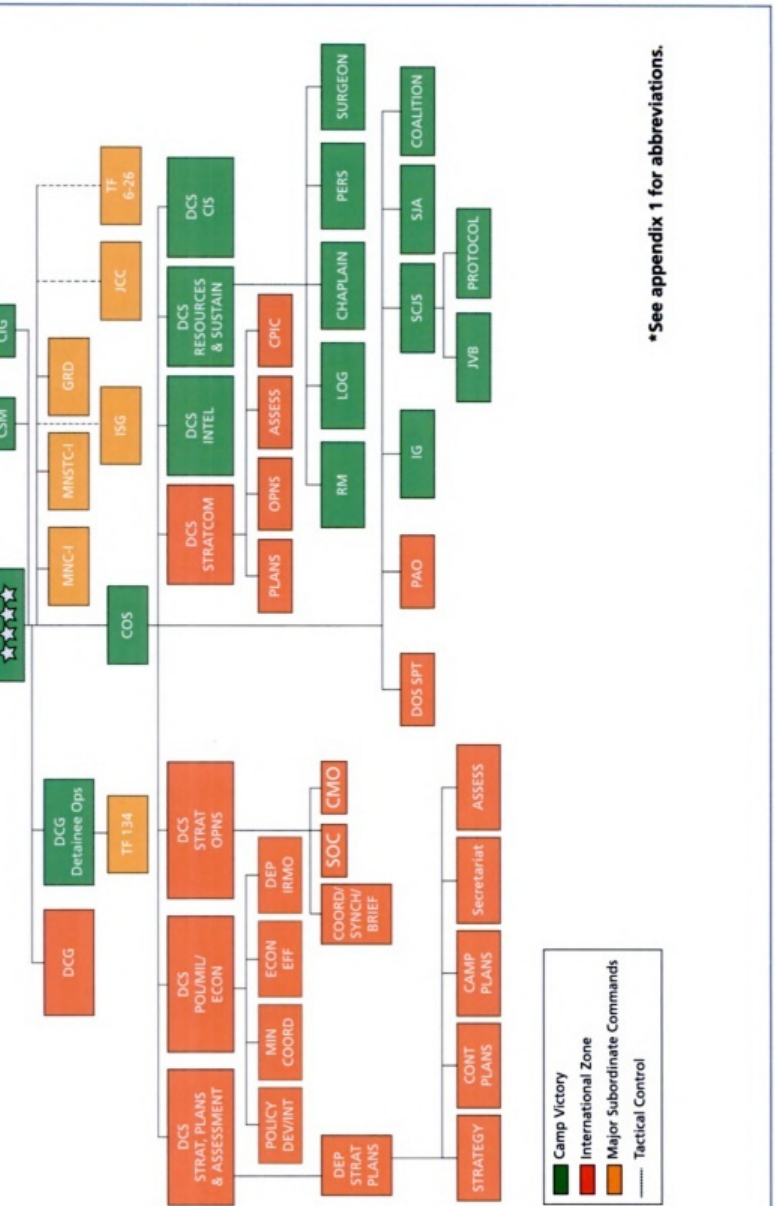


Figure 2-4. MNF-I Staff Organization*



*See appendix 1 for abbreviations.

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Figure 2-5. Counterinsurgency Practices	
SUCCESSFUL (average 9 years)	**UNSUCCESSFUL (average 13 years)**
Emphasis on intelligence	Inferior intelligence operations
Focus on population, their needs & security	Primacy of military direction of counterinsurgency
Secure areas established, expanded	Priority on "kill-capture" of enemy, not on engaging population
Insurgents isolated from population (population control)	Ineffective, minimal psychological operations campaigns
Unity of Effort on multiple lines of operations, local to national	Battalion-size operations as the norm
Resources (money, manpower, time)	Military units concentrated on large bases for protection
Effective, pervasive psychological operations campaigns	Special Forces focused on raiding
Amnesty & rehabilitation for insurgents	Advisor effort a low priority
Police in lead, military supports	Building, training indigenous army in image of own (foreign) force
Police force expanded, diversified	Peacetime government processes
Conventional military forces reoriented for counterinsurgency	Open borders, airspace, coastlines
Special Forces, advisers present with indigenous forces	
Insurgent sanctuaries denied	

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U.S. Ambassador to Iraq John Negroponte (left) greets Interim Iraqi Government Prime Minister Ayad Allawi

3. COMPLETING THE UN TIMELINE AND SETTING CONDITIONS FOR A NEW IRAQ (JANUARY–DECEMBER 2005)

Perhaps the best insight into what I was thinking as we entered 2005 can be gained from the first several paragraphs of an assessment I wrote to my boss, General Abizaid, on January 5, laying out my plans for 2005. I began that with the famous passage from T.E. Lawrence that provided advice on dealing with Arabs: "Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them."[1] It was a mindset that I had concluded we would need to instill in coalition forces if we were to be successful in Iraq. I told General Abizaid:

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Figure 3-2. Commanding General's FARs, February 2005

- Make security and safety your first priorities.
- Help the Iraqis win, don't win it for them.
- Treat the Iraqi people with dignity and respect. Learn and respect Iraqi customs and culture.
- Maintain strict standards and iron discipline every day. Risk assess every mission—no complacency!
- Information saves lives—share it and protect it.
- Maintain your situational awareness at all times—this can be an unforgiving environment.
- Take care of your equipment—it will take care of you.
- Innovate and adapt—situations here don't lend themselves to cookie-cutter solutions.
- Focus on the enemy and be opportunistic.
- Be patient. Don't rush to failure.
- Take care of yourself and take care of each other.

Implementing the new mission was not an easy task for the MNC-I commander, LTG John Vines. The U.S. military was still adapting to counterinsurgency operations and now he had a new mission to develop indigenous forces while keeping the pressure on the terrorists and insurgents. That he had to do this in a political vacuum as the new government was forming made his task even more difficult. While MNC-I was transitioning to the new mission, it was conducting counterinsurgency operations across the country to keep pressure

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Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafari addresses city leadership of Fallujah January 2006 as Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and General Casey look on

4. GOVERNMENT TRANSITION AND THE RISE OF SECTARIAN VIOLENCE (JANUARY–JUNE 2006)

We entered 2006 knowing that it was going to be a year of political transition as the Iraqis formed and seated a permanent government and this new government began to govern. We remained hopeful that we could continue to make progress during this period; however, based on our previous experience with Iraqi government transitions, we knew it was going to be hard work. That was the message that I carried to Washington shortly after the first of the year. I spent Christmas in Iraq visiting and congratulating soldiers on their accomplishments in 2005, and then departed for consultations in Washington.

I reported that, in general, we were pleased with the accomplishments of the last 18 months, but the elections had not yet

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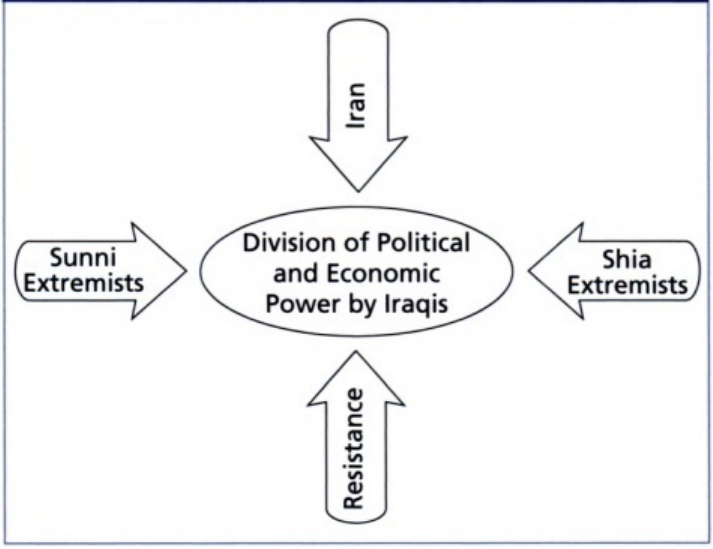
Figure 4-1. Post-Samarra Security Environment, March 2006



As I thought my way through this, I saw four major groups influencing the security situation to affect the outcome of the conflict: Sunni extremists, Shia extremists, the Sunni resistance (the insurgency), and Iran. I saw the main antagonists as the Sunni and Shia extremists, each heavily influenced by fear of the other and each motivated by fear of exclusion and retribution. The Sunni resistance, which was still active against the coalition in parts of the country, was losing relevance and influence. Finally, the Iranians were actively supporting Shia extremist groups and using political and economic influence to shape an outcome that would ensure that the new Iraq would be a benign neighbor. I graphically portrayed this as shown in figure 4-1. It was a far more complex environment than we had previously dealt with.

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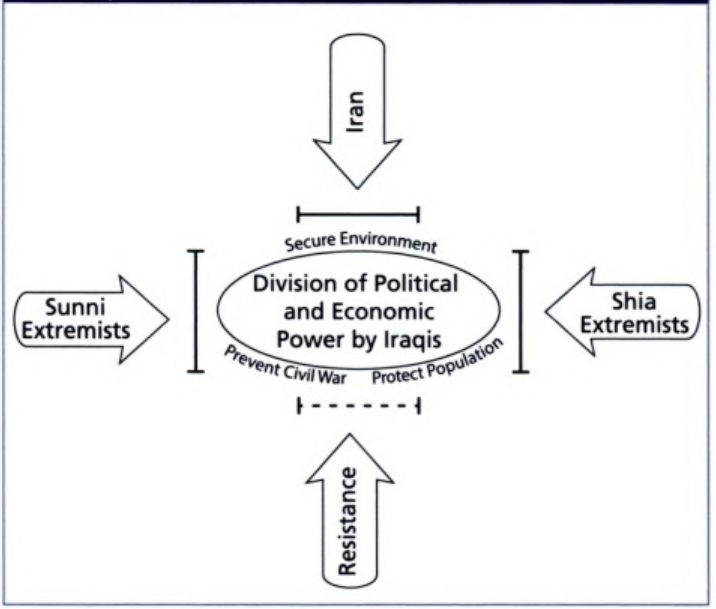
Figure 4-2. Strategy for Post-Samarra Security Environment



my thoughts on what to do if the violence did degenerate into civil war, I stated that we could leave, return to our bases and wait it out, intervene, or pick a side, but that doing anything but reinforcing and stopping the violence—intervening—would acknowledge strategic defeat.

We also got a number of questions during that time from Washington about how U.S. forces were operating and how we might shift our weight away from activities that caused casualties. We responded with a study that looked at whether having increased coalition presence in the streets actually improved security or if our higher visibility posture simply invited attacks and reduced the pressure on the Iraqis to step forward.

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Figure 4-3. Campaign Framework, April 2006–December 2009

(T) Tentative: At that time, we believed that it would be possible to hold provincial elections and the promised referendum to adjust the constitution in late 2006/early 2007.

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Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and General Casey sign documents returning operational control of Iraqi forces to government of Iraq, September 2006
AP Photo (Khalid Mohammed)

5. THE TOUGHEST DAYS (JULY 2006–FEBRUARY 2007)

As I returned to Iraq at the end of June, I weighed our challenges and opportunities. After two governments in 2 years and a protracted government formation period for the third, we finally had an Iraqi constitution and a permanent and democratically elected Iraqi government based on that constitution. It was, at least nominally, a government of national unity, and it would need some time to establish itself, particularly with the sectarian tensions that it faced in the aftermath of the Samarra attacks. We continued to make progress with the ISF. The Iraqi army had held together fairly well through the sectarian violence, although we were starting to see the impact of political influence—political leaders threatening military leaders who took action against members of their factions—on

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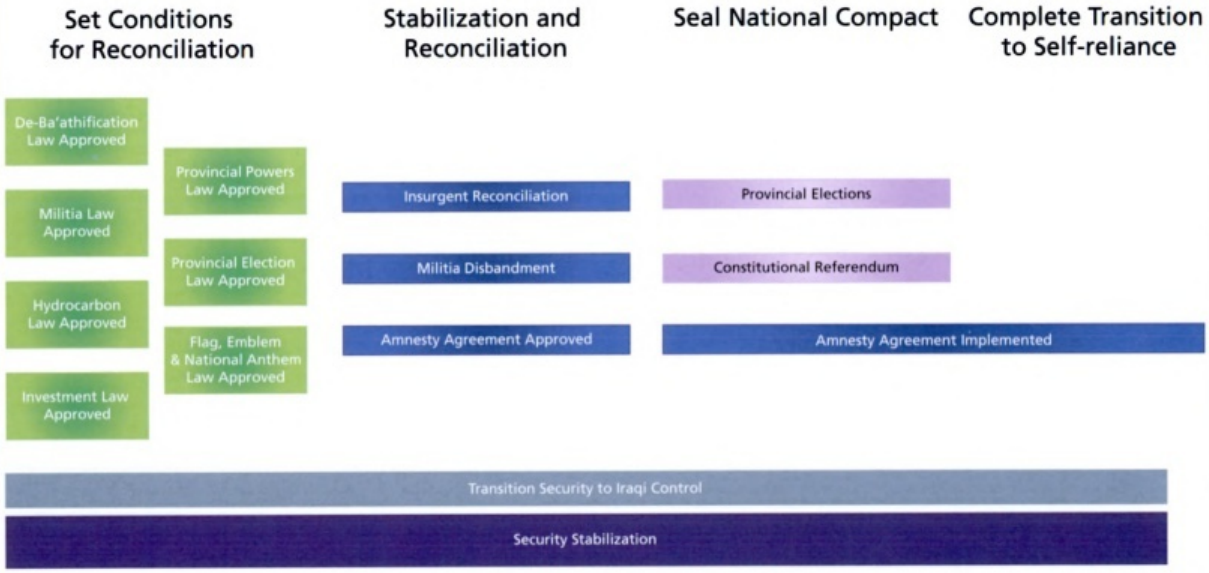
Figure 5-1. Framework for Integrating Political-Military Efforts, Fall 2006



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General Casey at Senate confirmation hearing for Army chief of staff, February 2007
AP Photo (Susan Walsh)

6. INSIGHTS FOR LEADERS

I have thought a great deal about my experiences in Iraq. I believe that some of the insights that I developed during that time can benefit future military leaders as they are thrust into senior leadership positions in new and different missions in this era of persistent conflict. As always, some lessons are new; others are old ones relearned. I began to share these insights with the Army general officer corps and joint flag officers attending CAPSTONE shortly after I assumed the position of Army chief of staff.

Perhaps the greatest lesson I took from my time in Iraq was that senior leaders are most effective when they stay at the right level and focus their time and intellectual energy in the areas that will yield the highest payoff for their organizations. That sounds easy, but it is not because the things with the highest payoff are

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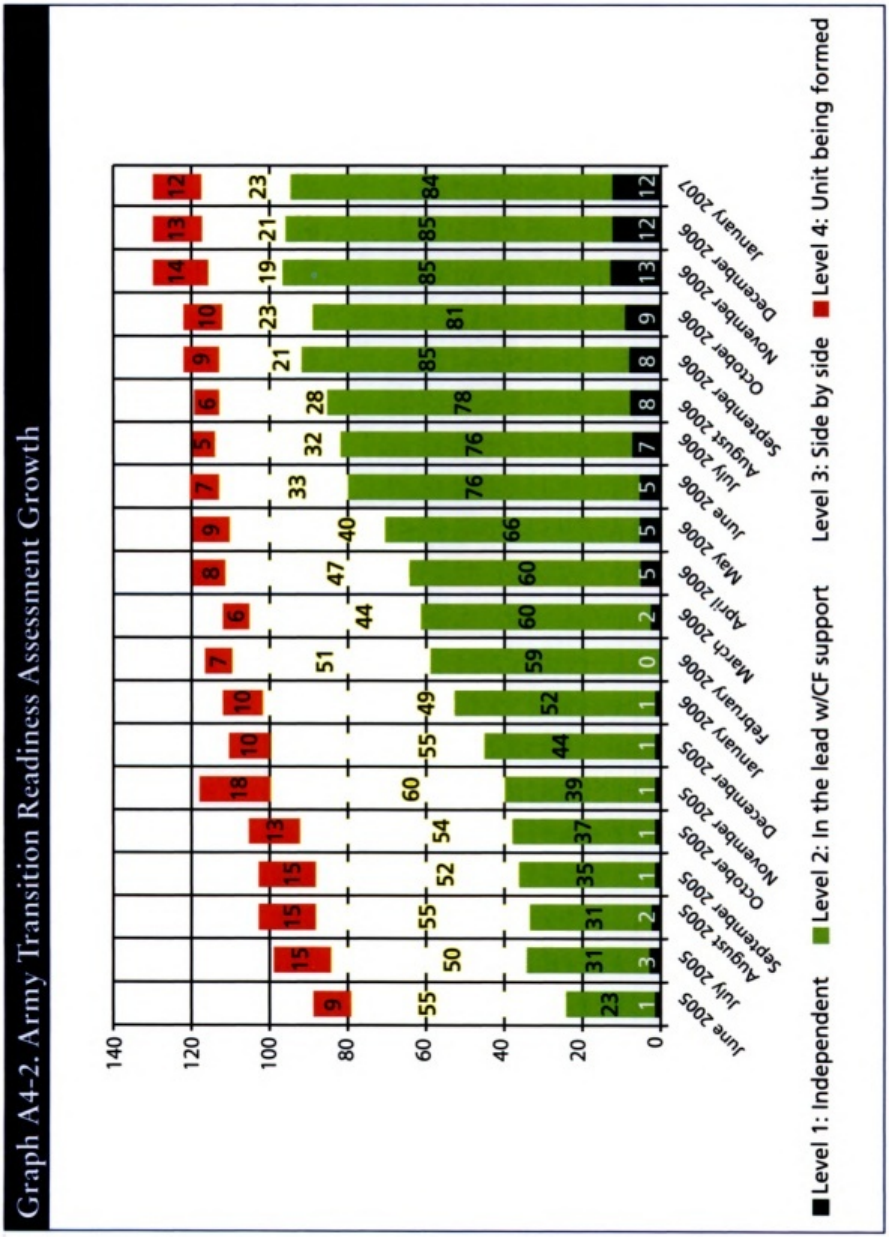

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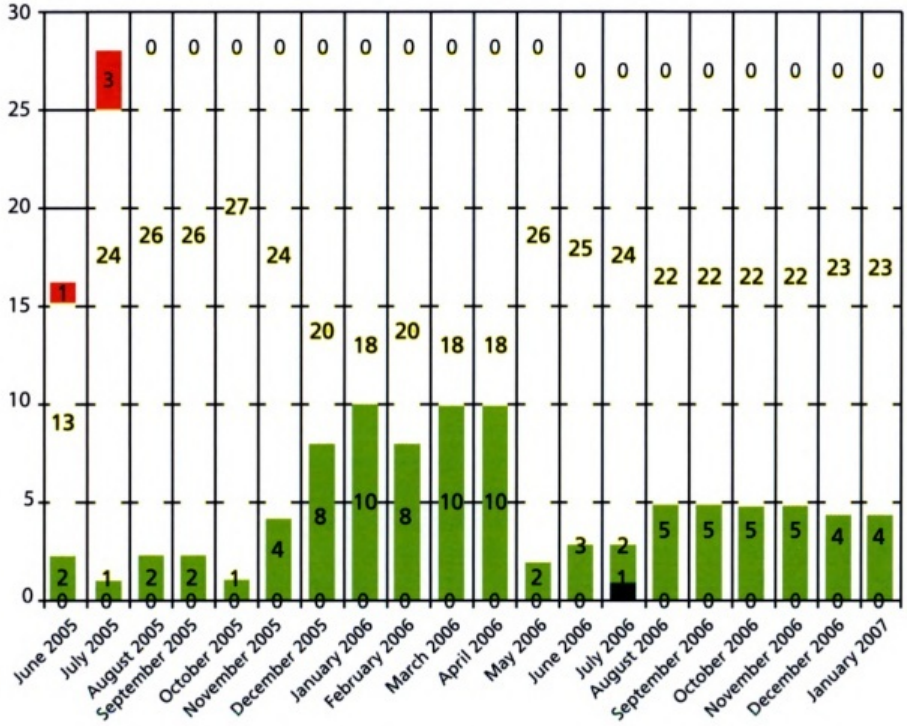
Graph A4-3. Special Police Transition Readiness Assessment Growth



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GEORGE WILLIAM CASEY, JR.

Chief of Staff
United States Army
April 2007–April 2011
Commander, Multi-National Force–Iraq
July 2004–February 2007

General George W. Casey, Jr., was born in Sendai, Japan, on July 22, 1948, into a military family. He was commissioned a Second Lieutenant of Infantry from the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in 1970. His father, Major General George William Casey, was killed in Vietnam that same year while commanding the 1st Cavalry Division.

Throughout his career, General Casey served in operational assignments in Germany, Italy, Egypt, Southwest Asia, and the United

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