

The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: John Abizaid

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Commander, US Central Command, 2003-2007

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[Begin Transcription]

CRAWFORD: I'm Aaron Crawford. I'm from Southern Methodist University.

BRANDS: Hal Brands, from Duke University.

ABIZAID: John Abizaid, former CENTCOM commander from 2003 until 2007, and prior to that, deputy commander of CENTCOM.

BRANDS: We are here to talk about the decision-making leading up to the Iraq Surge in 2007, so General, just as background, you were CENTCOM commander at the time --

ABIZAID: Right.

BRANDS: -- of this decision-making process. So could you just give us a brief sense of what were your general responsibilities as CENTCOM commander, and what were your responsibilities as regarded Iraq?

ABIZAID: As CENTCOM commander, I had an area of 27 different countries, stretching from East Africa up through Sudan and Egypt, over and across through what I would call the Levant, not including Israel. [00:01:00] It included Iran, Afghanistan, central Asia -- very, very broad, dynamic area.

I was the commander responsible for military operations in those areas, a combatant commander, and I did that job for pretty close to four years, and overall in the region I was there for five years, and of course I'd been involved in other military operations in the Middle East before that. So the commander in Iraq was one of my subordinate commanders. I use the term "subordinate" loosely. I mean, of course a four-star commander in a major military operation's always going to have direct access to the President and the Secretary and the Cabinet officials. The commander in Afghanistan, who at the time was not a four-star commander, he

also worked for me, the American commander. The ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] commander did not. [00:02:00]

The Horn of Africa operations were under my watch, the operations throughout the region. In 2006, the area that the -- period that I think you're interested in, we had a major earthquake in Pakistan, which CENTCOM had to muster forces and aircraft for to support it, and I spent a lot of time doing that. There was also a war between Hezbollah and Israel; that area, which was normally in the EUCOM area, was chopped to me, and we had to run the evacuation of that particular area. Things that happened in Turkey were of a lot of concern to me, and of course I was always traveling around in the region as the senior military representative in the region talking to the senior leaders. So I frequently spoke with heads of state and various people. I talked to the President quite a bit, our President. Certainly the Secretary of State. [00:03:00]

George Casey and I had served together in a lot of different places; we'd served together in Bosnia, Kosovo, Germany, and the Pentagon. So we knew each other very well. I'd talk to him, if not daily, close to daily. The commanders in Afghanistan, little bit less so. Even though my headquarters was in Tampa, Florida, I spent most of my time deployed in the forward headquarters in Qatar. But if you look at my schedule, I was probably traveling, in any given month, probably 75% of the time. And usually I'd spend a lot of time in Iraq, a lot of time

in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a lot of time in the garden spots of the world, and it was a fascinating job and a good job.

BRANDS: So you mentioned that MNF-I was subordinate to you, or the commander of MNF-I was subordinate for you. Can you give us a sense of what the strategy that CENTCOM and MNF-I were pursuing [00:04:00] in Iraq in the 2005, early 2006 time period?

ABIZAID: Yeah. Well, you have to actually go back a little bit further than that, because I think it's important for context. I was a deputy commander during the invasion of Iraq, and after the invasion of Iraq I became the CENTCOM commander, and this was about three months afterwards, and we were in the process of pulling forces out on the orders of the Secretary of Defense. We were going to leave a very small, residual force behind, and it was clear that that was not going to work, so we had to reorganize the force.

Originally envisioned was a three-star commander with the corps headquarters, and that was General Sanchez and the fifth US corps. And by about the eighth month into my command I went to Secretary Rumsfeld and the President, and I said, "We have to have a four-star command there. We have to significantly increase its intelligence capabilities, and [00:05:00] a lot of what I would call the enablers, we have to make sure that we resource those headquarters properly." And I told him it was my opinion that we were in a long war situation

and that there would be no early victory any time soon, that it was going to be a long, hard military slog, but the real work that had to be done was political work.

So General Casey came in. I recommended General Casey for the job. I personally went to the Secretary and the President and told them I thought he was the man, and they both interviewed him, as you might expect that they would. I think at the time he was a vice-chief of the Army. And they selected him for the job. So I think it's important to know that at that period, we're transitioning from "maybe we're in an insurgency" to "we're in an insurgency." And there was a lot of consternation about whether we called it "insurgency," not on my part, but on the part of many of the [00:06:00] political leaders. But I thought it was important to make sure the political leadership had an idea that was going on. I gave General Casey the instructions, both verbally and in writing, that he was to put his main effort in developing Iraqi security capacity, in order to enable our eventual drawdown and departure from the country. And of course, he would set the conditions for fair and free elections, transition to Iraqi sovereignty, and all of these things were very important. These were important political goals that were conveyed from the President, National Security Adviser, Secretary of Defense, etc.

In the previous period, when Ambassador Bremer was there, we were not building Iraqi security capacity. And I thought that that was a major problem. [00:07:00] And we then, when General Casey arrived and towards the end of General Sanchez's tenure, we said, "OK, we've got to do this as our main effort."



And so we started to do that. So the strategy was: transition both militarily and politically over time; increase Iraqi security capacity over time; and as conditions warranted it, to move towards an opportunity for drawdown of American forces, handover to Iraqi forces, but really the most important thing was handover to Iraqi political authorities. And I can continue on, or we can go to specific questions.

CRAWFORD: I'm going to stop for a second and go back here to the actual language and definition of insurgency, and using this language in public. And also [00:08:00] the context of this. Was this a surprise to Secretary Rumsfeld and the President when you tell them that it's going to be a long, difficult war, and that insurgency is breaking out? I mean, what exactly were --

ABIZOID: Was it a surprise to them? I don't think it was a surprise to them, they just didn't want to hear it. That's one of the great benefits of being a military commander; your job is to give military advice, and you have to tell them what you think. You try to do it privately, and Secretary Rumsfeld was very unhappy with me when at a press conference I used the term "insurgency." And then we went through a period of back-and-forth over whether it was an insurgency or not, and finally I said to him, "Look, Mr. Secretary, we're fighting an insurgency. A counter-insurgency. You can call it what you want to call it, but I have to fight it the way our troops know to fight it, and it's a counter-insurgency, and those are the tactics, techniques, and procedures we're using, and I'm not going to change how I talk about it." They were using terms like "dead-enders" [00:09:00] and this and that --

not the President. This was really not so much the President as it was Secretary Rumsfeld, and it created friction, but it was all workable. And over time they came to see that that's in fact where we were.

When I told the President I thought it was a long war, I laid out a briefing for why I thought that. I told them I thought there was a struggle here that just wasn't about Iraq; it was about the struggle against Islamic extremism. And he had me go to all of our allies and explain to them the long war strategy. No one liked it. [laughter] It's not that they disagreed with the premise, but they didn't like the idea of a long war. You can imagine why.

BRANDS: Now, you've been described as the author of the antibody theory of the insurgency. Could you tell us a little bit about that perspective?

ABIZAID: Look, the idea is in the Middle East -- in the Islamic Middle East, [00:10:00] the Arab Middle East in particular -- foreign forces are always rejected. They're like a disease that enters into the organism and then all the antibodies form and tries to reject it. And if you don't really have a very, very highly developed, well-coordinated, political, military, diplomatic, educational, informational intelligence program, and you just try to do it with military force alone, it's very unlikely to succeed. So it was my opinion, and George Casey agreed with me, and so did Secretary Rumsfeld, that we had to really move out as quickly as we could to make the transition to Iraqi security force capacity. The first chance we had to put Iraqi forces in the field, where they actually did some fighting, was the battle of Fallujah.

And some people call it the first battle of Fallujah, the second battle of Fallujah -- in reality [00:11:00] there's one long battle of Fallujah, and it wasn't really until George Casey employed Iraqi forces that we ended up getting some traction that allowed us to get that as under-control as it became.

Throughout this period and well into 2006 and 2007, there was a real problem with the Sunnis in particular. The Kurds were clearly on board; the Shia were not clearly on board. They had their own agendas. But the Sunnis in particular felt that they had been disenfranchised. It shouldn't have come as a surprise to us that the initial phase of the insurgency was a Sunni-led insurgency. Had a lot to do with cashiered officers and soldiers of the old Iraqi army and the Republican Guard in particular. And so during this period, [00:12:00] you have a goal to move towards elections, legitimizing the Iraqi government, and the idea would be that as you legitimize the Iraqi government and build up the Iraqi security forces, you're more and more able to start bringing forces home. And from time to time we tried to do that, but when we had emergencies we'd always bring in additional forces, and I think you look at troop figures, which you guys probably have done, you'll see that it spikes up and down over time. We have to extend forces out. At one point we had to keep the First Armored Division there under General Dempsey, had to bring half of them back from Germany to deal with problems in Baghdad and Fallujah.

So, again, the notion of insurgency wasn't one that anybody had hoped, but hope is not a method. We were fighting a war, and it was fairly clear [00:13:00] what we were doing. I don't think there was a single time, whenever I talked to either the President or the Secretary, that I said that I thought that we weren't doing enough to ensure that the Sunnis understood that we were going to try to elevate their status from being an unhappy minority to a minority that could participate in the future of the country. And I think all of us did that very poorly.

BRANDS: So looking at the late 2005 time period, there were a couple of significant events in American strategy toward Iraq. So there was the release of the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq, and then there was Secretary Rice's "clear, hold, and build" statement and Congressional testimony in October, I believe it was. Did you have insight into the processes leading up to those developments, [00:14:00] and what was your reaction to them?

ABIZAID: Yeah, I had insights, and I had input. But as you might imagine, when you're not in Washington, your insights and input are much less than when you're in the middle of it, so I wouldn't want to overstate the amount of input that General Casey and I had. We were very active players on course and the direction. And you also have to understand that as a strategic commander, Iraq wasn't my only issue. I had all sorts of major issues, and my problem was always one about the broader strategic problems in the region. And what I had a very difficult time doing, to get back to Aaron's point about insurgency, is convince people that there

was a broader Sunni Islamic extremist movement in the region that required urgent attention. And [00:15:00] so many of our resources were focused on Iraq, it was very, very difficult to get at it the way that we needed to. And I was constantly saying that to the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and the President.

Matter of fact, if you should find somewhere that there was an unclassified version of the long war strategy that was briefed to Congress, you should take a look at it.

BRANDS: Did you think that the concept of “clear, hold, and build” was feasible, realistic

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ABIZAID: Yes.

BRANDS: -- through late 2005?

ABIZAID: Yeah. First of all, any military commander, I think -- I don't want to characterize anything that General Casey would say; you need to talk to General Casey. He's the field commander. He's the field commander in Iraq, and other than strategic issues, I'm not trying to move his forces around for him. I'm trying to allocate forces to him. In particular, there's certain assets that I control for the whole theater. These are special operating [00:16:00] forces under General McChrystal, they are the ISR [Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance] assets, naval and air assets, etc. So I allocate those to the various commanders to deal with our various problems. It was also clear from the President that his number-one priority in my theater was Iraq. It wasn't Afghanistan, it wasn't Sunni Islamic extremism. So when at all possible, I would always allocate more to

General Casey than to the other commanders. But you should understand that this theater, at the height of 2006/2007, we have a huge amount of American forces and allied forces involved in the effort. And most, or a lot of, the allied effort was external to Iraq, [00:17:00] primarily because a lot of the allies didn't like fighting in Iraq, or wouldn't.

So, yeah, the notion of "clear, hold, build" was a legitimate notion, but I think it's important for you to understand, and I very rarely see it come out -- Secretary of Defense and the President and General Pace, and General Myers before him, all were very, very concerned about casualties. And the instructions that they conveyed to me and General Casey were to do whatever we could to minimize our casualties, for obvious reasons. Of course, every commander wants to minimize casualties, but it got to the point where I had to say something to all of them in the period -- especially after the Samarra bombings -- that you can't get at the problem and minimize casualties at the same time. I'm somewhat perplexed why I don't see this [00:18:00] in the discussions. I mean, both the President and the Secretary were both very, very engaged with the parents of the fallen and the loved ones of the fallen. They visited troops that were in the hospital. My own son-in-law was seriously wounded in Iraq; the President invited him and his family over to the White House once he had recovered enough. So they were very compassionate, they were very concerned, and the President in particular kept on saying, "Why aren't the Iraqis doing enough to defend their own country?"

So this notion that “clear, hold, build” would somehow or other minimize casualties was a problem. “Clear, hold, build” -- “build” was going to cause casualties [00:19:00] to increase, not decrease. Then, after the Samarra bombing, there’s the problems between the Sunnis and the Shias that become very, very severe, and we also had a major problem in Iraq with MNSTC-I [Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq] with regard to the politicization of the Iraqi police. Iraqi police essentially became Shia militia. And we were very unhappy with the way that the government, which was supposed to be non-sectarian, was moving towards the Shia side. When are the first elections? 2005? Yeah, we had hoped that that election would start to lead us to a period of decreased tensions, but because the political factions could not get along and the government that had been elected [00:20:00] became a Shia, essentially, governing body, very sectarian in nature, the situation started to deteriorate. Then the Samarra bombing happened, and it created a dynamic where we started to move, although I wouldn’t ever say we completely got to the point where I would call it civil war, but the sectarian conflict was very, very intense.

BRANDS: And so did the intensification of the conflict and the extent to which Iraqi security forces, police particularly, were involved in some of the sectarian violence -- did that cause you to reassess --

ABIZAID: Yes.

BRANDS: -- the stand up, stand down approach to --

ABIZAID: Yes.

BRANDS: -- conflict?

ABIZAID: 2006. Look, I don't want -- again, it's very important that you understand, I am not on the ground saying "put these forces here, go to --" [00:21:00] guys on the NSC [National Security Council] staff were doing that, and I wish they hadn't, but that's a different problem for a different day. In one of these big operations you have too many people who don't know what they're doing with their fingers in the pie, and that was certainly the case from the NSC, both under Condi Rice and under Steve Hadley. When they did know what they were doing, dealing with strategic political issues and diplomatic issues, they were excellent. But arguing with us over whether or not we had enough forces allocated to Dora district of downtown Baghdad was -- there was nothing, no insight that they had was any better than any other person in downtown Washington, DC. And I trusted our commanders on the spot to be able to know what was going on there.

So it was clear that we were entering into a period where we had to reassess [00:22:00] what we were doing and how we were doing it, and we were not satisfied with the performance of the Iraqi defense forces -- first and foremost the police, secondly the army, although the army was not nearly as bad as it subsequently turned out to be. But it was doing some good missions, particularly in the Sunni areas. And General Casey came to me and said we needed money, which of course was one of the things I could fight for in Washington, to be able to



start paying off Sunni tribes to work for us. That had come from the Marines in the Al Anbar district. This notion that somehow or other all this happened when General Petraeus got there is really not true. We then brought in General Dempsey to replace General Petraeus -- I think that's in MNSTC-I. General Dempsey stood down a lot of the police forces, [00:23:00] increased the capacity of the army, but it was clear then that we had a very broken system, and it was clear to me that the political system was broken. I would go to Baghdad -- of course I could speak Arabic, so I had a fairly good relationship with many of the different leaders, particularly the Kurds; I'd been in Kurdistan, and I knew Barzani and Talabani pretty well. And in the 2006 period, where the sectarian violence was really getting intense, particularly in the Samarra, Baghdad area -- and really I'd say what we were seeing was a Shia offensive to isolate Baghdad, to ethnically cleanse Baghdad -- the Kurds asked me to come up to Sulaimani and have a discussion about what they thought was going on, and they were of the opinion at that time that the government had become so sectarian that something different [00:24:00] had to be done.

I conveyed these concerns to -- and General Casey was with me -- I conveyed the concerns to the political leadership in Washington, and I think there was an effort made to address many of the Sunni concerns, but the deterioration of the situation -- we had gone from what was, I would characterize in 2004 and 2005, primarily a Baathist-led Sunni insurgency to, by mid-2006, it's a Islamic

extremist al-Qaeda/al-Qaeda in Iraq insurgency with a lot of Baathist participation. Today it's fairly clear that all of these things are successors, and when you look at ISIS today, ISIS is a successor of [00:25:00] Baathist, al-Qaeda, Zarqawi, and if I had a dollar for every military commander or politician who said "We've got them on the run," I'd be a rich man today. Now, the truth of the matter is we never really did have it under control.

So this is in -- so where are we up to now? What else do we need to talk about?

BRANDS: So this is sort of early spring 2006. You mentioned the civil/military dynamic, and one other thing -- as the situation in Iraq's deteriorating, you have the so-called "revolt of the generals" back in the US. Did that have any impact on --

ABIZAID: Well, "revolt" -- you should call it as it's supposed to be --

BRANDS: Revolt of the retired [overlapping dialogue; inaudible].

ABIZAID: Retired generals, right? Retired generals have no authority. Retired generals do have the ear of the President and various other people. I didn't really know that there was a group known as the retired generals.

BRANDS: So did that -- [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]

ABIZAID: Well, they would come out and see me. I knew them all. But did it impact? I didn't know that there was a revolt either. [00:26:00]

CRAWFORD: Did the effort to try to force the President to fire Don Rumsfeld, did you get a sense from any of the generals that this was a --

ABIZAID: No, I got that sense from the President, although he didn't tell me directly. But about October/November of 2006, it was clear to me that that's where the President's thinking was.

BRANDS: So we know that during this period, this was sort of the start of more intellectual ferment in DC about thinking about whether the strategy was working, and one of the reflection points was the so-called war council meeting at Camp David in June 2006.

ABIZAID: Right.

BRANDS: Can you describe what role you and CENTCOM might have had in that meeting and what the results were?

ABIZAID: Well, I was in the Middle East, and I sat next to Ambassador Khalilzad and General Casey on a number of VTCs from Baghdad. Sometimes they were VTCs from CENTCOM, dependent on where I was; maybe one time it was even in Afghanistan. But as usual [00:27:00] I was moving around the theater, making sure I understood what was going on. And so yeah, I participated, from the point of view of -- George did the primary amount of talking about what was going on in Iraq, and Ambassador Khalilzad, as you would expect, and I frequently interjected with, "By the way, there's other things going on out here that you need to understand. Any change in strategy in Iraq will have significant impact on the rest of what we're doing. And you need to help me in the prioritization of the effort."

BRANDS: So you were concerned that additional resources that might go to Iraq would detract from other efforts across the theater.

ABIZAID: Once we'd made the decision to rotate forces the way that we rotated forces, in the army and the Marine Corps in particular, [00:28:00] you were either in Iraq or Afghanistan, training to get ready to go back to Iraq or Afghanistan -- you were in the rotational cycle. And there was essentially no spare capacity in the armed forces unless we were to make a major call-up. We'd already called up the reserves and the National Guard. But unless we were to make an even more major call-up, that was the only place that there was spare capacity. So in Afghanistan, of course, we're trying to do the same thing, right? When I read about the Surge, I keep reading about the Surge, and you're looking through the soda straw at Iraq, right? And everything is "look in there," and all the people in Washington are concerned about it, and all this other stuff is going on, but, we're trying to get ourselves unencumbered [00:29:00] in Afghanistan as well. So throughout this whole period there's a major shift in emphasis to get NATO to take over more of the responsibility in Afghanistan, and that was primarily at my initiative and General Jim Jones's initiative, the EUCOM commander, so I could have more capacity to deal with the problems that were in Iraq, the Horn of Africa, and Pakistan and elsewhere. So it was a very, very dynamic period, and we were trying to build Afghan military capacity as well. And when we started to look at what was available in the army to do that work, it was really not available. So then we had to

activate National Guard units to do that, and that created some dynamics that delayed the ability to form Afghan units the way that we wanted to.

At the same time there was a clear movement [00:30:00] as we were squeezing Zarqawi, and eventually we killed Zarqawi during this period, which is another big mistake that people make. Decapitation does not work. If you think it works, look at the Middle East today. It just doesn't work. You have to have a long-term strategy and a long-term presence that allows you to be able to drain the swamp of the ideological fervor that moves it forward. And what I was seeing, because I looked at the whole theater, I was seeing a clear movement of fighters that were no longer able to operate the way they wanted to in Iraq to other places. In particular, they'd come on down into Somalia. And so we were opening up a new front in Somalia. We were seeing this from our outpost in Djibouti. We'd see it in northern Kenya. We'd also see it in the Sinai in Egypt. And I went to all these places to try to get some kind of judge on what was going on. So while General Casey's worried about the deteriorating [00:31:00] situation, which was true in Iraq, between Sunnis and Shias, I'm worried about the deteriorating situation in the broader Middle East about Islamic extremism in particular.

Final point I'd make on this is: in this period you have the Iranians actually killing American soldiers by proxy. This was new in 2006 and 2007. And so there was obvious need to prepare for the potential of conflict with Iran. We always were preparing for the conflict against the Iranians. And so I had my commanders



prepare for contingency operations against Iran, ranging from what I would call raids to send them the signal [00:32:00], to having to destroy their air and naval operations along the Persian Gulf. And it was a very, very major effort. And again, when I looked at what would be needed, should it come to that, that it would really have strained the armed forces without a mobilization. Nobody was going to mobilize. Not in the sense of World War II or Korea. So I was very concerned that as -- and I advocated to George and Ambassador Khalilzad and to the President and the secretary that we couldn't just apply force on the Sunnis. That we had to have some sort of incentives for the Sunnis to buy into the political future of the country, and it was my view that that had to be in the form of jobs, it had to be in the form of [00:33:00] money, it had to be in the form of changing the constitution in some way for better power-sharing. And it worked almost not at all. I mean, we just couldn't get at that because, first of all, we deferred to the Iraqis. And it's one of the few places where George and I would disagree. I'd say "we need to quit deferring to the Iraqis for their internal politics, and we need to start being much, much harder about this, because the situation is deteriorating." Of course, we're not in charge of the political future of the country, we're in charge of what's going on militarily.

So the prospect of the possibility of war with Iran, and then the way they talked about it in Washington -- again, I never see it really discussed kind of in the open discussions about this period, because it all focuses on what happened



around Baghdad, [00:34:00] Samarra, and down around various areas south of there. But the prospect that you could either miscalculate and go to war with the Iranians, or have to then have a campaign against the Iranians, was very real to me, and I had some very difficult discussions with people in the administration about the wisdom of provoking the Iranians. And I said, “Look, you can’t just put pressure --” I gave the President the diagram. I can’t remember exactly where this is, but somewhere in my notes I have it, or in my CENTCOM briefings, I have it. I said, “Look, here’s the middle,” – it’s a very simple diagram. “Here’s where most people want to be. Over here is the Shia-led extremists, and they’re inspired by the Iranians primarily, but also by Muqtada al-Şadr and all sorts of these other people. And over here is Zarqawi and the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Baathists, and people, now [00:35:00] that the sectarian violence is escalating, are leaving the middle and they’re moving there. And right now we have good military effort here, but we have no military effort here. And I need more authority from you to get out of this -- to get after this.” And there was antipathy about going after the Shia side of it because they thought it would upset the delicate balance within the government, and they wanted to keep Maliki, and before Maliki -- who was it, Ayad Allawi, etc. -- wanted to keep all those guys moving in a good direction. To me, one of the biggest problems in Iraq was moving towards power, towards Maliki. And who was it before Maliki?

CRAWFORD: Jaafari?

ABIZAID: Who?

CRAWFORD: Was it Jaafari?

ABIZAID: Jaafari. Jaafari was the first of a bad situation, and Maliki made it twice as bad.

[00:36:00] With regard to sectarianism. Is this what you guys want me to be talking about?

CRAWFORD: Yes, no, no, this is good stuff.

ABIZAID: OK.

CRAWFORD: I want to get also some context here, because you talked about the way things are talked about here in Washington and the possibility of mobilization. What can you say about your reaction to the political environment here? We were in the beginning of an election cycle, and you have Congress actually trying to get involved with what was happening in Iraq --

ABIZAID: They weren't trying to get involved. [laughter]

CRAWFORD: They did. Baker-Hamilton, the commission.

ABIZAID: Yeah.

CRAWFORD: What's your reaction to [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]?

ABIZAID: Well, the situation in Iraq was very, very difficult, and it was getting worse.

And it was the beginning of a possible active civil war. And the President and Secretary Rumsfeld in particular, and to a certain extent the secretary of state, were having difficulty understanding what our role should be [00:37:00] in the event of a civil war. Should we take an active role in helping the Shia-elected



government suppress the Sunni unelected minority, that's the insurgency, and then after that suppression takes place -- I mean, these are the big strategic issues that we're talking about. And then where were the Kurds in all this? And the Kurds were leaning more towards the support of the Sunni than the Shia. So that complicated the situation even more. And of course the Kurds always had the notion of eventual independence somewhere at the end of the rainbow anyway. So they were looking for the least intrusive central government possible. And we, politically, were pushing for a very strong central government, which just was not going to work. So what was your question again?

CRAWFORD: About the political situation here in Washington, and specifically --

ABIZAID: Look, I understood. [00:38:00] I'm a student of history; I read a lot of World War II. I'm trying to remember how often Bradley or Eisenhower or MacArthur or any of those guys came back to testify before Congress, and I can't tell you how many times I would get called back to testify. And part of that was -- I thought it was -- it's inappropriate to have a field commander come back and testify all the time, because a field commander's supposed to be in the field. And I thought that the chairman was not doing what he was supposed to be doing, which is handle the military equities back in the States, and worry about kind of the political dynamics that are going on. And I had some conversations with him about that -- this is General Pace in particular. So it was clear to me that when I would talk to the commanders [00:39:00] in the field, there's this notion -- and I would be really

interested to see how George Casey answers this question, or Pete Chiarelli, or Ray Odierno or some of these guys -- but none of us ever thought we were losing. But when I came back to Washington, everybody thought we were losing. And I came back, and I spoke to George about that, and Ambassador Khalilzad. I said, "Look, we think we're moving the ball down the road here, but that's not the impression in Washington." So this thing has become very, very politicized. Certain people want us to lose, certain people want us to win, and regardless, there's a political dynamic surrounding what we're doing and how we're doing it, and, you know, we really have to reevaluate what we're doing, especially in the period mid-2006 -- I took the Camp David [00:40:00] discussion -- there was a devil's advocate in the group, and it was the Vice President. And the Vice President in these discussions would always say, "What about more forces, many more forces?" And George was of the opinion, and me to a certain extent, that more forces only would allow the Iraqis to do less. And he wanted to put the burden on the Iraqis to do more. And I came out of that discussion that we had over -- I think it was about a period of four, five days, I can't really remember; I think the last one I saw was when I was in Afghanistan -- I came out of that with the impression that that's what the President and the secretary, that was the direction that we were headed.

BRANDS: As early as June [overlapping dialogue; inaudible] --

ABIZAID: As early as that, yeah. And on the other hand, it was clear to me when I'd go back to testify, and I'd probably go back once a quarter or so to testify, [00:41:00]



that there were voices calling for either leaving completely or reinforcing somewhere in the vicinity of twenty- or thirty-thousand more troops, something like that. When I was asked about that when I came back, either by the secretary or the President, I said, "I don't think that a five-brigade force is decisive. If we are going to apply military strength to change the situation, I think we need to think about a bigger force of two or three more divisions.

BRANDS: Are we still in the mid-2006 time period here, or is this later? Is this during --

ABIZAID: I think I would be treading on unsure ground with regard to my memory

[00:42:00] about when these discussions took place.

BRANDS: Sure.

ABIZAID: The important thing is a discussion like that did take place -- maybe it's closer to October, November. But George is reevaluating the situation. You know, there's all sorts of groups running around. You have the retired generals running around, they come in and tell George he's doing a good job, and then apparently they go back and tell the President he's doing a bad job. I thought that was completely unprofessional and inappropriate. If they had an opinion, they should have rendered it to him. They were out there at our invitation, generally at my invitation, because I valued their judgment, not as a group, but as individuals.

BRANDS: So getting at the subject, in the summer of 2006, you have Operation Together Forward and then its successor. So how did the results of those operations impact



your assessment, General Casey's assessment, of the prospects for a successful drawdown in Iraq over the coming months?

ABIZAID: Both of us came to [00:43:00] the conclusion, and I had been out there on the ground and I spent two or three days going to almost everywhere in Iraq, especially in the Baghdad area, where I would talk to commanders and I would talk to the Iraqi commanders, and I'd go talk to civilian Iraqis too. And I remember somewhere down around the southeastern part of Baghdad, here's the national police checkpoint -- and this is after we've had a -- it's not just a checkpoint, it's actually a fortress -- and plastered all over its positions were Shia slogans and pictures of Muqtada al-Sadr, and I came back and I said to George, I said, "I think we have not corrected the problems with the police. The police are operating out there not as an agent of a government that's going to protect the Sunnis, but as an oppressor of the Sunnis. That's my impression." [00:44:00]

And we had discussions about that sort of thing, and General Casey was very, very concerned that the amount of violence was going up; it wasn't going down. We had our various measurements. The amount of violence against Iraqi civilians was going up in particular. You had essentially what I would call a Shia offensive in the northern ring around Baghdad and the southern ring around Baghdad. I think it was Pete Chiarelli or maybe Fuzzy Webster, one of the two commanders in Baghdad, said to me they thought. What we clearly have here is a Shia offensive to isolate Baghdad. And so the question was, that George had to



deal with is, what's the best way to deal with that? Now, George also recognized that there was -- again I'm probably speculating too much on what George said, thought, etc. It's really not fair to him [00:45:00] -- you really need to talk to him. But during this period he also established a counterinsurgency academy, both for the Iraqis and for the US forces, so he was dealing with these issue, and the question about the disposition of troops came out and it revolved around force protection in particular. And I got a call from the Chairman, General Pace, probably in October, November period. He says, "Hey, our casualties are way too high. Put more Iraqis out there." I said, "Well, where is this coming from?" He said, "It's coming from the President." I'd heard the President say that before. I had no reason to doubt that Pace wasn't relaying accurately what the President thought. And George and I talked about it, and again, I went back to General Pace a day or so later and said, "Look, not going to work. [00:46:00] We either have to get out there and in the middle of it and increase our casualties, because that's obviously what's going to happen, or we're going to have to just go ahead and withdraw to remote bases on the periphery of the fighting and move forward in and out of the fighting when it gets too far out of control, and leave this to the Iraqi security forces to start getting under control." Those were the options in discussion points, and of course George's staff was working on him, my staff's working on him.

I think somewhere around November George comes to me and he says, “I think I’m going to need three more brigades.” I said, “Look, if you think you need three more brigades, you ought to be thinking about more than that. What is the maximum amount of brigades that you want?” And I was of the opinion [00:47:00] that we needed to put more capacity into the train-and-equip mission. More military manpower in there. And the services were having trouble finding people to do that, and at the same time maintain the strength of forces on the ground there. And at the same time, we’re dealing with all the issues in Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc. that I’ve talked about that we’re having to deal with.

So, yeah, I think there was a clear realization -- the guys in Washington, I understand, have the opinion that it was all their idea and that they fixed it. But I think it was a mutual sort of understanding of a deteriorating situation that had to be fixed, and that George Casey was coming up with many of the same ideas that were coming up in Washington. General Pace had told me that there was a [00:48:00] group of colonels that he’d put together to look at alternatives; he called me up, told me on the phone. H.R. McMaster was one of these guys, he was a good friend of mine and a subordinate for many years. He came and saw me on one of my few visits to CENTCOM headquarters and said, “This is what they’re thinking of, [unclear].” I conveyed that to George. So it wasn’t a complete surprise. What was a surprise to me was the extent that Jack Keane and Dave Petraeus and others who were in the middle of all this apparently have an entrée, somehow or

other -- you guys would probably know better than me. And I thought that the fact that they didn't call and tell me about that, or they didn't indicate it, Petraeus in particular, I still take great umbrage at that to this day. I thought it was very unprofessional.

CRAWFORD: So sort of piggybacking on that, at this point in Washington, [00:49:00] there seems to be this effort of everyone to rethink the strategy. Did you have any insight into any of the other things that were going on? Did you get the sense of the movement?

ABIZAID: I didn't have any insight as to what Keane and Petraeus were doing. I knew that there had been a meeting with Downing and others, because Downing had called me and told me about it. And maybe McCaffrey did too. That was in November. The President had talked to me in October-November, said he was getting concerned about the way things were going in Iraq, and it was really necessary to figure out how we're going to do things very differently. And I took that on board.

CRAWFORD: You testified before the Baker-Hamilton commission, somewhere in the September range. What did you make of that? What did you make of that effort to rethink things?

ABIZAID: Well, look, it's like I said. I knew that the people in Washington were not happy with the way things [00:50:00] were going. How could they be? I wasn't

happy with the way they were going. George Casey wasn't happy. But they didn't have the problem, right? [laughter]

CRAWFORD: Well, what did you --

ABIZAID: I mean, they had the problem, but it's easy to sit there and say, "Well, if we just do this, we're going to fix it." But it really was a tactical solution to a strategic problem, and today, as we look back on it, it did not achieve strategic results. It was well-handled tactically, but -- and I told the President back in November/December, he asked me my opinion, I said, "I don't think that this is going to work strategically. I think it is chasing down the path that will allow us to withdraw [00:51:00] a number of our forces, but I think ultimately it won't fix the basic problem, which is a political problem between Sunni, Shia, and Kurds. And matter of fact, I gave them about seven or eight reasons. First in a group in the Pentagon -- or not in the Pentagon -- first in a Cabinet-level meeting in Washington, and in the Situation Room, and then again privately with him.

BRANDS: So I'm looking at this period -- maybe it's useful to break it down into two periods. So the first would be after the formal inter-agency review is launched; I believe it's in early November, led by J.D. Crouch. And the second would be prior to that, when there were a series of essentially uncoordinated strategy reviews going on, with the Council of Colonels, at the NSC, so on and so forth. Prior to the launching of the formal review, did you have a sense that various people were

converging on [00:52:00] a recommendation that would lead to an increased effort in Iraq?

ABIZAID: Well, I was converging on that view, and so was George Casey. It was a view that we were converging on. It probably differed between me and George as to how the forces would be employed locally. My notion was we had to throw more manpower and capability into the training. And George was looking for more combat power that he could deploy locally in the hot spots. And George had talked throughout this period, from once the Samarra bombings happened, about moving forces around. And you see a lot of cross-border moves of him massing forces in particular areas that were having problems, and I got the impression that people in Washington had the impression that our troops were sitting around on their base camps, not moving around and fighting, [00:53:00] and that was crazy. Our casualties were going up, they weren't going down, and troops were out there fighting. But there was a hesitation, until we heard it from the national command leaders, and we didn't really hear it until the President made the decision about the Surge, that he would underwrite the additional casualties that would surely come from that.

BRANDS: Why do you think it is that General Casey is so often portrayed as being an opponent of the Surge, in light of what you've told us today?

ABIZAID: Well, the Surge is different things to different people. The first time I heard the Surge was at some testimony from John McCain. He said, "Are you in favor of a



surge or not?” I said, “I’m in favor of additional forces to Iraq.” So apparently, he knew a lot more about it than I did. And I’d also say it may be a reflection on me, [00:54:00] and less than George Casey. I was somewhat surprised by how developed some of these things were. General Pace came out to the region in either November or December. I said, “Since when does the American Heritage Institute, or whatever they’re called --” is that what they’re called?

BRANDS: AEI.

ABIZAID: AEI, American Enterprise Institute? I said, “Since when do they provide military advice to the President?” They said, “Well, what are you talking about?” I said, “Well, I hear that we’re going to execute a plan that they developed. How in the hell does that happen?” It’s a very interesting conversation.

CRAWFORD: What was the response to that?

ABIZAID: He said he was just taking advice from wherever he could get it.

BRANDS: Along the same lines, were you aware that during the September-October period, Bill Luti at the NSC was doing force-generation studies [00:55:00] to see what might be available to bring in additional capacity?

ABIZAID: No, look, I didn’t. Again, you guys have to forgive me, I’m not a Washington guy. I’m a field guy. I’m fighting a big war in a big part of the world and I’m in command of 500,000 US troops. And maybe I should have, but whatever was going on in Washington with Bill Luti and J.D. Crouch and Condi Rice, that wasn’t my problem.



CRAWFORD: Well, let me ask you a question that is related to this. We've heard a lot from people in civilian leadership here that all of these reviews were done in private to protect the morale of the troops.

ABIZAID: Oh what bullshit. The morale of the troops was just fine. The troops were fighting well, performing well. This whole [00:56:00] notion of this legend that's developed around this is just kind of crazy to me. Where was there any example of American morale anywhere in the theater, over 16 years, being at risk?

CRAWFORD: Well, the argument you often hear is you don't want the soldiers to think that they're fighting for a failing strategy.

ABIZAID: Well, that's the great thing about a professional army. You fight as long as the President tells you to fight. This wasn't World War II. Look, by the way, so we all are clear here -- it'll be interesting to see what you guys do with this, right -- but it's fairly clear from -- I don't know whether you know or not, but when I was the director of the Joint Staff [00:57:00] and the director of J5, I was very much against going into Iraq. And yet when it came time to go to Iraq, I threw my hand in the air and begged to go, because that's what soldiers do. And I thought it was fraught with very, very major problems, the greatest of which would be the expanding of Iranian influence into Iraq, which is unfortunately what happened. And I thought that previous operation in the '90s had been very skillfully handled and limited in a way that did not allow for the expansion of Iranian power, and I thought that those principles should still apply, and I said that. And I also told them that I

thought that the force structure was under-resourced, and that our ability to have the right forces on the ground after we had won -- we knew we would win, of course -- after the first stage of military [00:58:00] operations was woefully under-resourced as well. And I didn't get around to being able to correct those until I was a commander, but I did. But it took me a long time, like eight months.

By the way, I made plenty of mistakes myself, so let's not -- and if we're talking about mistakes, Aaron, this goes to your point, it's a very interesting point: why didn't I know more about what was going on? Were we purposely cut out of it? I felt like I had a very, very good relationship with the President. I had a contentious relationship with the Secretary, but it was professionally respectful. And I could say what I needed to say, and he would tell me what he needed to say, and when the President and the Secretary made decisions, big decisions, strategically, I would certainly follow my orders. That's what the Constitution says [00:59:00] we do.

Now, the other thing - both George and I chafed at the meddling from Washington. There were crazy things going on, where people from the NSC staff would call down to subordinate commanders in the field and ask them how this was going and that was going. And I thought that maybe they were worried about the morale to the force, but when you meddle in the chain of command, you have unintended consequences. And so if they had clearly delineated what they were thinking about and why they were thinking about it, through the chairman to me

and not to the American Enterprise Institute, I think you would be surprised how similar the solutions would have been. George was already arriving at them. Now, that doesn't take away from the great skill in which the Surge was handled tactically, and I thought it was brilliantly played [01:00:00] by Dave Petraeus. And I was still the commander in January, February, and March. And I thought that the way he disposed the forces, the way he used the forces, the way he eventually used the additional five brigades that really didn't arrive there in the way that people had envisioned, was also quite innovative and capable. And I really admired how he did all that, and at the same time, generally keeping the majority of people at home with the opinion that there was cause for optimism.

BRAND: So coming back a little bit to the DC dynamic, just to press a little bit on that issue, how closely did you track the formal interagency review in the November-December time period, the one led by J.D. Crouch?

CRAWFORD: After Secretary Rumsfeld, who's left --

ABIZAID: Yeah, I tracked them, [01:01:00] I followed them, I knew what the conclusions were. I knew that there were, in particular, real problems in the description of what was happening in Iraq between the military chain of command and the CIA. I was actually much more concerned about that. Policy guidance should flow from Washington. It's interesting how infrequently it actually did flow. And so I'm the wrong guy to ask about why that happened. I don't know. But I felt reasonably well-informed, and I felt like I was informing my bosses about what was happening

in my theater. And I felt that George was constantly talking to the President and the Secretary, and I thought he was making sure that information was flowing well as well.

BRANDS: Given what you've told us [01:02:00] about sort of a convergence of views in the summer and fall of 2006, did you have a sense when the formal strategy review began of where it would end up?

ABIZAID: No. No. All's I know is I was in Washington -- I think it was probably November. I had just testified, and I met with the President and many of the senior people, and it was clear to me that the President had come to the conclusion of how the Surge would go. And George reacted to it. George was not happy -- again, this is unfair for me to say what George thought or did -- but George was not happy with Zelikow's study in particular. I don't think it was [01:03:00] generally unappreciative, I think it was -- again, he is the commander in Iraq, responsible for all things, and he's getting so much help from guys that flit in and flit out that I can understand why he was unhappy about it. And substantively, there were things that we were doing, things that we weren't doing, but the guys that were making the decision or doing the policy reviews, I don't know what constraints they put on themselves. The casualty issue, again, was very, very important to George, because he had what he thought was directive from the senior leadership to keep them to the minimum. And any surge, it was obvious to everybody that it

would require a commitment to a lot more casualties, and it was a huge political decision.

BRANDS: It would also require additional resources. We know there were concerns expressed during this time from the, Joint Staff perspective [01:04:00] that a surge might break the force. From what you told us, it would have seemed reasonable that there might have been concerns about what a surge would do to other priorities across the region. How did you evaluate your options?

ABIZAID: I was very concerned about it. And so that's why it's so important for you to talk to George, and I will encourage George to come to talk to you. And I presume you're going to edit this, and however you do this, so that it becomes a little bit more succinct. I regard that we're in kind of a discovery/learning process here. George's views would be shaped on what's going on inside Iraq, and we would call it his area of influence, which is Syria, Turkey, etc., etc. But he couldn't spend much time there because things were so active inside Iraq. So he had a different view than I had. [01:05:00] And when I gave the President my evaluation of what five more brigades for an indefinite period of time would mean to me, I told them I thought five more brigades would allow American forces to be tactically successful, and maybe it would create a psychological opportunity for the Iraqis to do more, but I didn't think so. And I told them that five more brigades committed to that would put strain on what we're trying to do in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the theater, and that ultimately would start putting great strain on the force, on the

morale of the force, etc., etc. And that I didn't see where it would lead strategically to a reduction of Iranian violence, suppression of Islamic extremism, [01:06:00] ability to get the job done in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the region, and that I thought all of the external factors, from my point of view, did not give me reason to believe that there was military success inherent in the Surge. There would be tactical success, which I acknowledge, but I said politically: if we don't move the political ball forward, Iraq will not come together, and our sacrifice will be one that we're going to have to really consider what in the world we're doing. And I expressed that to him, and he took it on board.

And on the other hand, when [the President] said we were going to do the Surge, he asked me, and Hadley -- at various times, various people [01:07:00] would call me and George from Washington -- these are the guys that are dealing with all these policy reviews -- saying, "Do we support it or not support it?", like we're congressional delegates or something like that. And I said, "Look, you guys - - if you haven't figured this out by now, you're never going to figure out. Whatever decision the President makes, we're going to support. We're going to support it 100%." But I said, "There's a lot of different ways to look at this." It was clear to me that they had come to the conclusion that they were going to discount the view from the field. Because they thought that we were not moving the mission towards an outcome that they considered to be politically successful.

BRANDS: One of the alternative options that was discussed in the same kind of --



ABIZAID: Do people say that -- is this news to you, what I'm saying? Just out of curiosity?

CRAWFORD: It's -- [01:08:00]

ABIZAID: I mean, is it consistent with what people have told you?

CRAWFORD: It's a different perspective. I mean, it's --

ABIZAID: Yeah, of course it's a different perspective.

CRAWFORD: -- and that's the thing, with all the interviews. There's a real array of memories and opinion on this. I mean, you bring this up. Several people have said that that argument was made to the President about the morale of the force; he always would answer with, "Well, losing a war will be the worst thing for the morale of the force." So that makes me wonder what exactly it meant, or --

ABIZAID: I would like to know, did we win the war?

CRAWFORD: That's what I'm wondering. Does that mean enough coverage of simply withdrawal eventually, or --

ABIZAID: Look, this is one of the things that I said in these meetings. I said, "Look, if this is an effort to get us to leave, then I don't really think it's an effort that we should make. If this is an effort to achieve some sort of a [01:09:00] long-standing strategic victory, then it's going to take more time, more effort, more energy, and a lot more political action. So from my point of view -- and who am I? I'm a military commander -- from my point of view, the diplomatic, informational, intelligence, and economic forces necessary to bring Iraq into some degree of stability were not present on the battlefield. And I constantly said that from the time that I first

started. And interestingly enough, the guys in Washington were fixated on military forces being able to achieve some sort of an outcome that I said to the President, “Look, military forces will only buy you time. So we’ll buy you time. A five-brigade additional force that stays there for a year and a half or two years will [01:10:00] buy you time. But it will not allow you to have strategic success unless all the other things we’ve been talking about for four or five years are put into the equation.”

CRAWFORD: Well, that hasn’t been an issue, and even at the time, Secretary Rumsfeld argued about the fact that the rest of the government apparently isn’t buying into the mission, and what is your -- and some people have argued, well, he placed you outside of that when he took all these responsibilities into the Defense Department.

ABIZAID: Look, there were great State Department people, there were great CIA people, there were great USAID people. The people that were sent out there, they worked very hard to do what they needed to do, but they weren’t there in sufficient enough numbers. The agencies of the US government weren’t serious about filling those positions, [01:11:00] in particular in Iraq. We were supposed to have provisional reconstruction teams, and they almost ended up becoming 100% military when they were supposed to be inter-agency teams, because the rest of the inter-agency wouldn’t ante up. So I think that their effort was not nearly as serious as the effort of the military. And I think that was a mistake, and I was very



unhappy about it throughout my command tour, and I articulated those concerns to the President and the Secretary on numerous occasions. So I think that the issue -- I sensed that there was a desire to get out as quickly as possible and to start handing this mission over. And to me it was confirmed by our unwillingness to really push for a status-of-forces [01:12:00] agreement. We just let it lapse. And once we let it lapse it was clear to me we were going home, in any meaningful way. And so this notion that somehow or other there was a plan to keep forces longer for stability - that was not a serious part of whatever review the civilian leadership had done in Washington. I believe in order for this to have been successful strategically, you had to commit to that. And I didn't see that level of commitment in the plan.

So I was -- a lot of people said, "Well, you're against the Surge." I said, "Look, I'm not against anything the President decides to do. We'll do it." I said, "But I do not see where strategically --" and I told the President in particular some of my military problems. I said, "When we surge in Iraq, I'm going to have to divert special operating forces from Afghanistan, and I don't want to do that." [01:13:00] I said, "We're finally starting to have an impact on al-Qaeda cells on both sides of the border, between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and I'm going to have to divert resources that are having very good effect out there, that are helping with the transition of NATO forces, and I think it would be a big mistake. And I don't want to sacrifice progress in Iraq or sacrifice progress in Afghanistan for what I

don't think is a sustainable effort in Iraq." So these were kind of hard discussions that we had. I thought it was my duty to have those discussions. Throughout this period, it was kind of interesting, I was offered different opportunities to serve in different jobs, etc., and I said, "I'm not going anywhere until I retire." And that's the way it's got to be. I've got to be able to give my military advice. [01:14:00] And I have great respect for the President, so please don't get me wrong. I thought he, like any senior leader, may have made some mistakes, but he was forthright in his dealings with me, and I was forthright in my dealings with him. And I thought the same with General Casey.

BRANDS: So if I could ask you one more specific question, then maybe a couple of broader questions and we'll get you out of here. Once the decision was made in principle to pursue a surge option, one of the debating points was whether to do what was called sort of the full Surge, the five BCTs, or the mini-surge of two BCTs. Did you have a perspective on that particular debate?

ABIZAID: I was for five. I said once the decision was made that we're going to surge, I said we need to surge enough. I wasn't quite sure that there was enough. And I called Stan McChrystal in and told him he was going to have to surge his efforts into Iraq. [01:15:00] And he was -- I said, "In particular, your forces need to go after the Shia death squads out there." And he said, "Well, we haven't been operating against them with the same degree of capacity that we have against the Sunnis." I said, "Well, you're going to have to have to change that. You're going to have to

develop intel.” And so we started moving resources right away. And when Dave took command -- when was it, December? January?

BRANDS: I believe it was in early 2007.

CRAWFORD: Early 2007.

ABIZAID: Yeah. When Dave took command, we had a discussion about continuing to support his efforts. I was scheduled for retirement, I had been scheduled for retirement. I told the Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld that I was going to retire back in October, November. So, it was clear that I was headed out the door. Which was good. [01:16:00] I mean, which was good for, I think, the President and others, because I could give unencumbered military advice without having to worry about what I was going to do next.

BRANDS: So from your perspective, looking back at this whole process - the decision-making process leading up to the Surge - was it a healthy, fruitful process? Were there aspects of it that should have been done differently? What was your assessment --

ABIZAID: Look, the process was not healthy, because the process did not use the whole of government approach to include the chain of command in a way that could have resulted in a different outcome. I mean, the fact that I'd been in command for four years and George had been in command for two-plus years -- it's clear that you have to rotate commanders in and out, so it wasn't about whether or not the right commanders were in place. It was whether or not the right strategy was in place.



And I thought that we were politically reactive, [01:17:00] we weren't inclusive. And to be honest with you, if I had been on the joint staff as the director, I don't think I would have kept the commanders in the field so much in the dark as we were. It's not our job to read the minds of what's going on in Washington. It's a huge military establishment in Washington, and a collective body known as the combined -- known as the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You say the Surge is never what it was reported to be; the Surge was only what the army could handle. The army could field five brigades. And by the way, you know, most of the brigades, most of that force didn't get there until most of the action had been won. It's very, very interesting. So it wasn't necessarily the amount of troops, it was dedication [01:18:00] to an aggressive course of action where we would take more casualties, where we would change the balance from people flowing out from the center and trying to push them back into the middle, where they would join in the body politic. But the follow-through was a weakness. The follow-through was a failure. And we're living with that failure today. And I'm sorry for that. And I think had there been a more frank exchange of views with these various different groups, that we would have come to the conclusion that not only do you have to surge in your thinking about the force, but you have to surge in your thinking about Iraqi security forces and with a follow-on component that's well more than 10,000 forces. And then when it comes time to negotiate a status-of-forces agreement,



[01:19:00] you use your considerable diplomatic leverage to make the Iraqis do what you want to do. And we did not do that, and I was very disappointed in that.

BRANDS: So we've asked you a number of questions. What important aspects of this experience have we not asked about? Are there any other issues you would flag for us?

ABIZAID: Well look, it's funny -- from your perspective, you've been talking to all the guys in Washington, right? I imagine you've talked to some military commanders. There was clear discussion in General Casey's headquarters, in my headquarters, etc. about allocation of forces, and my perspective was a strategic one. I thought that the national command authority very much undervalued the threat of Islamic extremism. And I was very concerned about that. And I tried to convey that constantly. So I'm not sure that that [01:20:00] ever quite got through. The amount of time that we'd spent talking about tactical problems in Baghdad was incredible. Not the President, but more junior people. I think we had the beginnings of a good change in direction, and I thought General Petraeus in particular handled the forces extremely well. I thought, and I still think to this day, that I have a hard time thinking that -- and by the way, I recommended to the President that General Petraeus be the guy to go in to Secretary Gates, at the time, that General Petraeus go in to replace General Casey. Had I known what was going on, I would not have made that recommendation. Had I known that there was this activity going on where a military professional would inherit that particular job --

I'm shocked [01:21:00] that he didn't call me, Keane didn't call me, or George, or somebody and let us know what they were working on and why they were working on it. It was rational, and we were coming to that direction. And then in the subsequent selling of the story, to claim that somehow or other we avoided defeat -- we were never on the road to defeat. If you could think of the US military being defeated anywhere, please let me know where it is. It's not Iraq, it's not Afghanistan, it's not anywhere. It's all a matter of pain -- how much pain can you assume? And once we set the pain levels, I think probably with the Surge, we didn't set the pain levels high enough. Because the pain level, to maintain a bigger force over time, with more involvement with the Iraqis, and then more involvement with the political end of the spectrum, was what had to happen, and that did not happen. [01:22:00]

BRANDS: Anything else? [To Aaron Crawford]

CRAWFORD: No.

ABIZAID: Has this been entertaining for you guys?

BRANDS: It's been fantastic. Very enlightening.

CRAWFORD: Thank you very much.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]