



The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Joshua Bolten

White House Chief of Staff, 2006-2009

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[Begin Transcription]

BOLTEN: Would you like me to sing the Tar Heels song?

FEAVER: No.

ENGEL: I would actually like that very much. Thank you for joining us. It is May 15th, in the afternoon. We're in Washington, D.C., conducting another interview for our Surge project. My name is Jeffrey Engel, Director of the Center for Presidential History at SMU.

FEAVER: And I am Peter Feaver, a professor of political science at Duke University.

SAYLE: And I'm Tim Sayle from the Center for Presidential History.

ENGEL: And you are, sir?

BOLTEN: I'm Joshua Bolten. I served in the Bush 43 Administration as Deputy Chief of Staff, budget director, and beginning in April of 2006, as Chief of Staff.

ENGEL: Thank you. Obviously, we're here to talk about The Surge, so the first question we like to ask is, when does the history of The Surge begin for you?

BOLTEN: Well, for me the history of the surge begins really, [00:01:00] when I became Chief of Staff, or more accurately, when the President told me that I was going to be the Chief of Staff. That was in mid-March of 2006. I didn't actually take over from Andy Card until mid-April of 2006. We had a very smooth and fulsome transition. But I began focusing on the problems in Iraq, what was clearly at that point, a very bad situation, as soon as the President told me that I would be Chief of Staff. And Andy had emphasized to me that that was problems number one,



two, and three for the administration, in the job I was going to be going into. He didn't need to tell me that, I watch TV, [00:02:00] and I had been, for the last three years, the budget director, having, persistently, to go back to Congress for more and more money to fund our efforts there, that were seemingly not taking hold.

ENGEL: Well tell us, if you would, in that period where you've taken over as Chief of Staff, you mentioned obviously, that things in Iraq are not in a good place. What did you perceive at that time to be the central problem? What was keeping things from getting better and/or were things getting worse? From your perspective.

BOLTEN: From my original vantage point as the budget director and as just a newspaper reader and TV watcher, which is often a very helpful thing in the midst of other people who have been steeped in these issues for years, my perspective was that we had gotten ourselves [00:03:00] stuck in the middle of a civil war. The President and all the national security people were very careful, I think quite properly, not to use that terminology. But my perception was that if we were not at that point, we were getting somewhere close to it.

There were periodic up-ticks of good news during that period. The successful, what seemed to be a successful, election, seemed like really good news and seemed like the corner that everybody was saying we were going to be turning pretty soon. But each time we turned one of those corners, we had another disappointment and we turned another corner, headed back in the other direction. That was the perception that I had going in, as Chief of Staff, and my recollection



was that when I became Chief of Staff, there was another good [00:04:00] corner turn with finally, the selection of Prime Minister Maliki as the designation of somebody, finally after several months, to be the prime minister. Maybe you can refresh me on what month that was.

FEAVER: May.

BOLTEN: It was in May, so it was right after I became Chief of Staff, that we had that good development that caused a modest upsurge in optimism.

FEAVER: Can you describe how the President wanted your role as Chief of Staff to intersect with the National Security Advisor's role, who was also working Iraq as issue one, two, and three, four.

BOLTEN: You know, I don't recall a specific conversation with the President about my role in national [00:05:00] security issues, but I think it was an unspoken understanding between us that it would be relatively similar to the role that Andy Card played, which is to hear everything, see everything that the President did, to offer my separate and quiet counsel as a non-national security expert on what was going on, and most important, to make sure that the process was running well, so that he was receiving the advice that he needed, the information that he needed to make good decisions, and once made, that those decisions were executed. That was our clear understanding, that that was my main role overall as Chief of Staff, which is to make sure that the President was in the best possible position to make good decisions on the presidential issues of the day, keep the non-presidential



issues off his desk, [00:06:00] and then once he made a decision, see to it that the decision was effectively implemented.

FEAVER: And was the sense that while Iraq was not going well in this March/April timeframe, was the sense that the Iraq process was not going well, that the decision-making process was also stuck in the same way that you said the strategy in Iraq was stuck.

BOLTEN: Let me go back for one second and directly answer the question you posed about my relationship with the National Security Advisor. My relationship with Steve Hadley was fantastic, because I could tell that he had the full confidence and respect of the President, and he had my full confidence and respect, and you could not ask for a more congenial colleague than Steve Hadley. So, our relationship was cooperative, warm.

In many administrations there's been a tension between the Chief of Staff [00:07:00] and the National Security Advisor, because the National Security Advisor tends to view him or herself as the Chief of Staff for non-domestic things. There was, I think a good understanding in the Bush White House, that the Chief of Staff was the Chief of Staff for everything, but wasn't an expert on national security and wasn't expected to, or even particularly welcome to exercise decision-making or important judgments, but just be there as a counselor to the President, as an aide to the principals in the national security process, and most important as an aide to the President, to make sure that the process was serving the President



well. In many cases that meant making sure that all the other stuff that a President has to do, did not interfere [00:08:00] with the most important thing that he had to do, which is manage a very difficult conflict in Iraq. So, now pose for me, the follow-up. So that's the relationship between the --

FEAVER: Right.

BOLTEN: -- Chief of Staff, and the National Security Advisor, when I was Chief of Staff. I cannot think of a single situation where either Steve or I kept anything from each other, where -- we always talked, sometimes before we would go see the President. We were always together, visiting with the President first thing in the morning. Typically, I would go in. The President would arrive in the Oval Office at about six forty-five. I would give him about five minutes to get settled. So I'd spend about ten minutes with him alone, and then Steve Hadley would wander in about seven, and we would talk together until about seven-thirty, when I would leave to go run the senior staff meeting. [00:09:00] That was a typical and pretty consistently typical day, and there was no competition and no secrets among us.

FEAVER: I was asking not just of the White House process, but was it the sense that the problems in Iraq required a change in process, in the Iraq strategy process, policymaking side, or just you had to get more progress in Iraq? Sometimes when a new Chief of Staff comes in they say we're going to have to take a top to bottom look at this--everything.



BOLTEN: Well, that certainly is true, that the President brought me in, in part, just to take a fresh look at everything. We'd had a terrific crew, led by Andy, but they had been in for over five years by the time I came in, which is --

ENGEL: A record. [00:10:00]

BOLTEN: Close. Close to a record.

ENGEL: It's not?

BOLTEN: No. Andy is the second longest serving Chief of Staff in history.

ENGEL: I did not know that.

BOLTEN: I think only Sherman Adams --

ENGEL: I was going to say, it must be Sherman Adams.

BOLTEN: -- had a longer tenure. So, there was an extraordinarily long tenure and it was time to refresh. Most presidents would do it at the reelect, and in fact Andy urged the President to do it at the reelect, but the President wasn't willing to. The President, at that point, wanted just a fresh look at the White House, how it was running. I don't think he was thinking particularly about Iraq, but as I came in, I was aware that Iraq was not going well. I didn't have a good sense of whether, that there was a process problem involved, or just that the problem was the problem. [00:11:00] I'm sure overwhelmingly, it must have been the latter, at least I certainly felt so then, and I do today. But I did notice something when I came in, and noticed it from, for the first time, being privy to all of the President's briefings; the security briefings in the morning, the meetings with the Secretaries of State and



Defense, and the National Security Advisor, and in particular, his usually-- videoconference meeting with the military, with the combatant commanders and things like that.

And I remember in particular, very early in my tenure, a videoconference that the President had with -- it must have been General Casey, but there were others on the screen. [00:12:00] Maybe somebody -- maybe the Joint Chiefs.

FEAVER: Zal Khalizad maybe?

BOLTEN: Zal might have been on the screen.

FEAVER: Or Abizaid.

BOLTEN: Abizaid might have been. It was in the Roosevelt Room, because I guess the Situation Room had not yet been completed. That may help identify the date. I remember coming away from that a little bit startled that the President that I saw in every other context, that is to say non-Iraq issues, was a different person than the one that I saw in the Iraq meeting. The Bush that I had become accustomed to in domestic policy, budget, all that other stuff, and as deputy Chief of Staff and as budget director, [00:13:00] you know I got to see almost everything, except the real strategy sessions, the real war cabinet type of meetings. Those I didn't typically participate in. The President I saw at those war meetings was, to me, noticeably different from the one I saw in every other context, where he was in charge, he was challenging everything. He was keeping people on their toes; they had to satisfy him. And in this meeting, I remember thinking he's in this meeting to encourage



and satisfy them, that he's viewing his role as supporting the military, because they are the ones sacrificing, they're the ones with this very hard job. My thought at the time was [00:14:00] that I should, in my role as Chief of Staff, in my role as the new set of eyes, that I should try to help bring the guy that I knew as President in all those other contexts, into this context as well. I talked to Steve about it. He basically agreed, I mean we didn't -- I don't think we ever saw things differently that way. I encouraged what Steve was already doing, which was trying to ventilate the process, trying to give the President more avenues of information, trying to make sure that he was hearing more directly and with more force, the bad news, that everybody who was watching TV and reading the newspaper was seeing, rather than [00:15:00] doing everything he could to support the commanders who were saying, "We're not doing great, but we're just about to turn the corner; we think we've got the right strategy here," and exercise his own judgment, which I trusted enormously from all the other contexts I had seen, and I know Steve did too.

ENGEL: Can I -- I'm sorry. I've got a million questions on this now, two on this specific point. The first is to what do you ascribe that -- if you go deeper into what do you ascribe that different personality for the President. You mentioned supporting the troops, but if you could say more about what you thought he was perceiving and why he was acting that way. And second, have you ever -- you mentioned you were not in the room in earlier parts of the administration. Have you ever talked



to people who were, to ask them if this is the way he was with the military in 2003 to 2004?

BOLTEN: To the last question, no, [00:16:00] I didn't. That probably would have been a smart question to ask, but I don't remember asking it. On the first, I didn't at the time think, and even now don't really think, it's a lot more complicated than I just said, which is that he took his role as Commander in Chief so seriously. He felt the pain of every family's loss, when he signed the letters or met with the families of the fallen, and he had such respect for the people who were in uniform and doing this incredibly hard job of trying to manage this unmanageable conflict, that I think he did not want to interpose his own judgment ahead of theirs nearly as aggressively [00:17:00] as I saw him do in almost every other context. Has no one else said that to you?

ENGEL: No, not to me.

FEAVER: Yeah, we've heard that.

ENGEL: OK, they say it to them.

FEAVER: At the same time that you come onboard is the so-called Revolt of the Generals.

BOLTEN: Yeah. That was my first week, I think, as chief. It could have been my first day, official day as Chief of Staff. What was the date of the revolt?

FEAVER: I don't have it off the top of my head, but it was in the April timeframe. Were you aware of -- was there an effort or discussions about possibly replacing Secretary Rumsfeld, and were you involved in those? What came of that?



BOLTEN: I was. I had several conversations with President Bush during [00:18:00] my transition, the month-long transition from budget director to Chief of Staff. I had several conversations with President Bush about refreshing the personnel in the White House and the Cabinet, and we made a number of significant changes. We changed press secretary, I was on the hunt for a new treasury secretary. It wasn't just the national security community we were focused on. He wanted a fresh look. He wanted a new and invigorated administration, and it was partly my job to help deliver that. So, yes, we did have conversations about replacing Secretary Rumsfeld. Like Andy, he had been there from the beginning, so I don't know whether his tenure was the longest for a Secretary of Defense in history at that point, but it must have been among the longest, [00:19:00] to have been there over five years. And I was among those who felt that both for political and substantive reasons--although my judgment should not have been accorded much weight on the substantive, I think I did have good political instincts about it--but that for both good political and substantive reasons, it would be useful to make a change in the Sec Def role, and so I did advocate for that with President Bush. He said that he had had that in mind, but that he had enormous respect for Secretary Rumsfeld, as I did, and that he was unwilling to make a change or even suggest that he was willing to make a change, until there was [00:20:00] a more effective successor. In other words, if there was somebody who, at this point, could step up and do more of the job that was needed at that time than Secretary Rumsfeld



would be able to. So, that's the background to the Revolt of the Generals, and the President and I had had that conversation very seriously, I know, and Steve had been involved, Steve Hadley had been involved in those conversations as well. On my first day as Chief of Staff, the generals came out with -- it was retired generals, right?

ENGEL: Right.

BOLTEN: They came out with a sharp critique of Secretary Rumsfeld, which didn't surprise me but did shock me. I remember I spoke to the President. I remember speaking to him by phone, I don't know why by phone, he must have been out of town or something. [00:21:00] I remembering saying to him, "Well, first of all, there's no choice. You have to give Secretary Rumsfeld 100 percent support. And number two, what this means is that any consideration of replacing him at this point has to be put on hold, that you cannot be seen to allow the politics of the day or some people in uniform to try to -- or people who were formerly in uniform, to try to dictate what the President does in his civilian role as Commander in Chief. The President was way ahead of me, he said, "Yeah, yeah, I got that." He said, "Go execute that," and we put out the word of full confidence, etc., etc. I called Rumsfeld to assure him and so on. So that basically put into [00:22:00] the, if not into the freezer, into the fridge, any serious consideration of replacing Secretary Rumsfeld at that point.

FEAVER: Just one last question about this initial time period. You came in but you didn't direct or work with Steve, to launch a thorough Iraq strategy review of this sort of thing eventually came about. Why not, if you thought the Iraq War was in such bad shape?

BOLTEN: Well, I knew that I did not know. I was a known unknown at that point, and I knew that I had no expertise on it. I was a careful newspaper reader and listener to sort of public type of briefings, but I knew that I did not have anywhere near the experience or the knowledge of those who had been working these issues for months. [00:23:00] So I didn't presume to come in and say, "Yeah, this is wrong, it has to be rethought immediately." What I did presume to conclude pretty rapidly was that the process we had in place wasn't serving the President particularly well, because it was set up in a way in which his instinct to defer to the people in uniform was encouraged, rather than discouraged. So the only thing I did early on, was to begin a conversation with Steve, whose competence and responsibility for this I respected completely, just begin a conversation with Steve to say, I don't think the process is serving the President as well as it should, and my [00:24:00] perspective is we need to ventilate it a bit, and Steve agreed.

ENGEL: Now, you've mentioned this before and also highlighted the knowledge that you brought in and the utility of the knowledge that you brought in as a general --

BOLTEN: You mean being an ignoramus.

ENGEL: Of being a news consumer. And one of the things you suggested was a solution to this quandary that you noticed about the President's reaction to the uniform military is give him more information such as the kind that you were getting as a consumer. How did your sense of what was going on in Iraq differ than the President's, when you showed up as Chief of Staff, and does this suggest the President was not seeing, not so much a full picture, but a full and accurate picture of what was going on in Iraq?

BOLTEN: You know, I don't know. I mean, I could only infer what he was thinking and seeing. It's possible [00:25:00] we had conversations, which we would have had with Steve present, about what are you thinking and seeing about this. I wouldn't say that information was intentionally hidden from the President.

ENGEL: Oh, no, no.

BOLTEN: That's not what I'm suggesting at all. But what I am saying is that what I saw being briefed to him by the military commanders, was what you always get from people who are in the field, which is an optimistic shade on what it is they are doing currently, on current trajectory, which is completely natural because you've got to believe in what you're doing, especially if you're putting people's lives at risk, in order to sustain doing it and doing it in the best possible way. [00:26:00] So I did perceive early on, that that's what he was getting from the military commanders, was a realistic view, from their standpoint, but their standpoint is very much colored by the imperative to make the strategy that they were in



succeed. The reaction I had to that was, he just needs to be -- he needs to have a broader aperture on the kind of information he's getting about how it's going, and it's hard to do.

ENGEL: Well, I was about to ask, how does one do that?

BOLTEN: It's very hard to do because, you know, in any time in the military and especially in a war, you don't want to escape from the chain of command, and so I knew that that was quite delicate. I think Steve was very [00:27:00] adept at figuring out ways to broaden the aperture for the President without offending or undermining either the Sec Def or the folks in uniform on the ground.

FEAVER: Were you aware that at this time, some who were junior on the NSC staff were hoping to try to gin up a thoroughgoing review of this sort?

BOLTEN: Yes. I mean, I knew that you, Peter Feaver, that Meghan O'Sullivan, that Brett McGurk, and a couple of the other people I talked to who were full-time on Iraq, felt that some thoroughgoing reconsideration of the strategy was warranted. So I was aware of that. I don't remember when that started or exactly how, [00:28:00] but as Chief of Staff, I always tried to listen to the Peter Feavers of the world, who are one or two levels below the people from whom the President usually hears directly every day, just to inform my own perspective on it and to try to counter bias in the system, which happens not just in national security but in every other endeavor that the President has to supervise.

FEAVER: Were you aware that they were hoping to use one of the techniques that you had expanded, as a way of catalyzing that review? To further ventilate, you brought in outsiders to the President.

BOLTEN: Right.

FEAVER: And there was this effort at Camp David to do that. Are you familiar with the background to that, where we took the President, [00:29:00] brought his National Security Cabinet to Camp David.

BOLTEN: Yeah.

FEAVER: And then you brought some outsiders.

BOLTEN: No, I remember it well. We had Eliot Cohen and Kaplan and Kagan, I think were both there.

FEAVER: Yes.

BOLTEN: And the colonel.

FEAVER: Mike Vickers.

BOLTEN: Vickers.

FEAVER: Mike Vickers, yeah.

BOLTEN: Who was also a spook, I guess.

FEAVER: Yes.

BOLTEN: Can we say that? I don't know.

FEAVER: Yes.

SAYLE: Yes.



BOLTEN: If it's OK.

ENGEL: I don't know, we'll find out.

BOLTEN: Yeah. And that was August?

FEAVER: No, June, that was June.

BOLTEN: So that was pretty early on.

FEAVER: That was late May, June. They began planning in May and then it happened in June.

BOLTEN: Yeah, that was -- and then that was early on in my tenure, and I think that was a product of -- I don't want to claim credit for it myself, because Steve Hadley was headed that way himself, and I think that was just a product of me [00:30:00] supporting him in saying, Let's bring in some of these other voices. You know, in addition to your voice [pointing to Peter Feaver] and the voice of some of the other more junior people on the NSC staff, when I came in as Chief of Staff, I started hearing, almost immediately, from the folks in the intelligentsia community, at the think tanks and things like that.

One person whose expertise and thoughtfulness I always respected was Bill Kristol, who contacted me and said, "I really think you should talk to—" and he listed a few people; General Keane was one of them, and at some point, I visited with folks, including General Keane, that Bill brought in to the Chief of Staff's office. [00:31:00] I alerted Steve Hadley I was doing it, but I said I'm doing this on my own, this ain't part of your process. I'm just trying to educate. You know, as



we were trying to ventilate the President, I was trying to ventilate myself as to what folks, you know smart folks on the outside, were saying. I don't know when that meeting was, but it was certainly influential in helping form my opinions.

FEAVER: Back to the Camp David meeting. Was there resistance in the interagency that you saw, or resistance in the White House, to using that to launch a big review?

BOLTEN: I don't remember resistance and I don't think there would have been resistance in the White House, of any substantial sort. The Vice President was always a strong defender of the Secretary of Defense, which I thought was appropriate, [00:32:00] but the Vice President was never one to say, you know, Let's hear from fewer people. He was a voracious consumer of information and perspective. So it doesn't ring a bell with me that there would have been resistance interagency. We certainly thought that there would be some level of resistance and maybe offense from the Secretary of Defense's office. I don't remember whether there was, because I remember that the Secretary was there and participated pretty congenially, I thought, but that can't have gone over well. I mean nobody who's in charge of something, likes to have the feeling that Oh, we'd better bring in some other experts because this ain't going well."

SAYLE: The Camp David meeting has been portrayed in some of the journalistic accounts almost [00:33:00] as a missed opportunity to change strategy in Iraq. I wonder what you think of that characterization, or if you see it as sort of an early stage in this ventilation process. Is that maybe a better way to understand that?

BOLTEN: I see it as an early stage in the ventilation process but also as almost a middle stage in the President's process. I mean, we've dwelled on the ventilation process, but I mean the President was getting there on his own. I think the efforts that Hadley, supported by me, was making, was where the President was going anyway. I don't think, in the history of the evolution of the President's thinking about Iraq, I have had read newspaper accounts where there were sort of sudden dramatic moments and things like that. I think to me, I saw a pretty clear continuum, [00:34:00] where there would be moments of optimism, like the appointment of Maliki, with the selection of Maliki, like the appointment of his cabinet, where we thought okay finally, now this will be -- he's promised and put together an inclusive cabinet. We made a trip over to visit with the cabinet; one of the great planning coups of all time.

FEAVER: That coincided with the Camp David, because the --

BOLTEN: It did?

FEAVER: Yeah, the President --

BOLTEN: It was the same meeting?

FEAVER: Yes. The President was at Camp David for the first day and the second day the team walks in and they see the President.

BOLTEN: I have them in my memory as two different things; two different Camp David meetings, but they were the same?

FEAVER: Yes.



BOLTEN: Okay, well, then I would have been much more concerned at that meeting, not listening, not so much about the conversation that was going on, which was an important conversation, [00:35:00] a lot of which happened around the dinner table at Camp David, but I also would have been very concerned with the logistics of what I think was an extraordinarily clever plan, to get the President into Baghdad, meeting with the new Maliki cabinet, without blowing our cover and letting everybody know that the President of the United States was coming in there. There's a dispute about who thought of that.

FEAVER: Did you resolve that dispute?

BOLTEN: Yes, I did. Although in my memory I did, I think Joe Hagin's memory is that he did. I think Steve's memory is probably that he did. I'm guessing that one of them is probably righter than I, but I'm very proud of that whole gambit. Back to the -- back to the point about the development of [00:36:00] the President's views on this. It was a pretty steady continuum as far as I saw, interrupted by moments of optimism, that would sort of, I think cause the President to pause a bit in the development of his thinking, saying "Okay, maybe we are on the right path here." But it did not take many weeks at all, either after the election or after the appointment of the cabinet, for, I think the President to come back to awareness that the strategy that was in place was not working as well as it should have.

FEAVER: How would you describe the efforts then, over the summer, so post-Camp David, as the President's thinking is evolving, how would you describe the efforts



over the summer to sort of launch the reviews or rethink the strategy during that period; [00:37:00] summer to September timeframe.

BOLTEN: I have limited recollection of that and my guess is that by the summer, it was firmly in Steve's hands, with the President's support, to do a very serious rethink and possible dramatic change of direction. I was privy to those conversations and supportive of them, but I think at that point it was really Steve, I think very expertly, managing the system, with a strong staff, to try to change, or at least to try to give the President the option to change course, when the people actually manning [00:38:00] the tower on the ship, were highly resistant to it. So, it required some very skillful work within the system, by Steve and others, to try to start to build, if not a consensus, at least some critical mass of support for a dramatic change in strategy.

FEAVER: Some in the interagency that we've interviewed have criticized the high level of compartmentalization. They felt like they didn't have visibility into this level of thinking. How would you describe that aspect of the process, and what's the rationale for it? Do you agree with their critique, or did you feel like you saw everything you needed to see?

BOLTEN: Yeah, well, I certainly could have seen everything I needed to see, and Steve could as well, obviously. [00:39:00] I don't draw any distinction between what I could see and what Steve was seeing and/or showing the President. I'm now reflecting back to the exceptionally good working relationship that I had with



Steve. So I agree with the critique, it was highly compartmentalized, and I think it was exactly the right thing to do.

FEAVER: Why was it -- why is that?

BOLTEN: Because had it been more widely known early on, the nature of the shift in strategy that Steve was beginning to build critical mass for, I think it would have been badly undermined and resisted, and I think would have caused a rift in the national [00:40:00] security team and apparatus, in the midst of trying to fight a war, that the President would have found not just disappointing but dysfunctional, to the continuing operation of the war. So I think the shift in strategy had to be done, because the war was ongoing, that it had to be done in a way, in a fairly contained fashion, and then when it was ready to go, build support among those who needed to support it.

FEAVER: Many people would say, "But the President is the Commander in Chief, he can just order it, right? Why couldn't he have just ordered up the review and demanded to see the options type thing?" What are they missing, those critics, what are they missing?

BOLTEN: I think they're missing that there was a war ongoing, that the [00:41:00] executors of which would have been at a minimum deflected, and probably demoralized, by the existence of this major review, and would have detracted from their ability to prosecute the war, at least on the strategy that we were then pursuing. It's like the little wisdom I brought to that process was the wisdom I've



got from having been around for many attempts at reorganization in government. And if you care about what is being done at the moment within a particular agency, the last thing you want to do is put out word that there's a reorganization coming, because all the blood then flows to the reorganization process and away from whatever the mission is. I think it would have been a big disservice to the President and to the country, [00:42:00] to have the blood flow away from a focus on trying to make the then strategy work, in order to focus on what should the new strategy be. I am completely supportive of the compartmentalized and very constrained group that was actually involved in the calculation behind the shift to a strategy in the surge. And that said, my sense was, you know, you all were talking to a lot of people [referring to Peter Feaver] and getting inputs from a lot of people who would have had sound advice to give. You just weren't involving them as much in the back and forth as they would have liked, and you can appreciate their disappointment, but I think that's a small price to pay.

SAYLE: I wanted to follow up on that. I understand the possibility of a rift [00:43:00] within the administration, if it was known a strategy review was underway. What about the public angle? Was there worry about this issue?

BOLTEN: The public angle would have been terrible as well. There was little enough support for what was going on in Iraq as it was. It was very important to us that we maintained at least a baseline minimum of support for prosecuting the war in Iraq, within the Congress, because we were always at risk of having the money just



cut off and having the Congress step in and make it impossible for the President to actually execute in a way. This is the way in which politics was important. Politics was otherwise irrelevant to President Bush. He was oblivious to concerns about how he might be seen, [00:44:00] how his party might be seen. He was aware of them, he knew how damaging what was going on was to both him and his party, but he was very consistent in not allowing those considerations to color his judgment about what was best for the prosecution of the war and the national security of the United States.

ENGEL: Let me ask you a question about that though, and this is a question that I'm imagining somebody thinking 30 years from now, which is: Given the great concern that the President had for the uniform troops and the sacrifices they were making, and given the tension and arguably dwindling support among the American people for the war effort, that seemed to be ongoing without end--

BOLTEN: Not arguably. It was collapsing.

ENGEL: -- Why wasn't the rationale within the White House that we need to embrace, with both hands, the notion that we're going to change direction, [00:45:00] because that will demonstrate to the people, how much we really care about getting this right, and not allow, what I recall from the summer of '06, the lingering concern that was vocalized by the President's critics, that there was not enough imagination going on here, there was not enough concern in a sense, to change strategy? Couldn't this have been a politically useful thing?

BOLTEN: It would have been a politically useful thing and it would have been demoralizing and disruptive to the people who were in the field, and as confronted with that choice, the President, in my experience, never hesitated to choose the people on the ground who were fighting the war and putting their lives at risk, over the whiners and complainers in the United States, in the political process. I think, as you suggested, if this was a question 30 years from now, I think 30 [00:46:00] years from now, folks should look back and see an important example of true presidential leadership in an extraordinarily difficult situation, that put the interests of the country and the fighting men and women, and the national security of the United States, well above considerations of personal or partisan politics.

ENGEL: Okay, so I need to push on this for the person 30 years from now. What I am hearing you say is that the President was concerned about demoralizing the troops in the field, but the people who he's interacting with are the ones who have created the strategy. Wouldn't the troops in the field, you know the non-coms [non-commissioned officers] down, say to themselves, "Boy my President cares enough about me to really interrogate my commanders, as opposed to just [00:47:00] following what the commanders are saying, which I'm in the field for a year and I see it's not getting any better for me."

BOLTEN: Yeah, yeah. A fair point, but I think where the President would have been focusing, I think correctly, is that that same person in the field just lost a buddy,



and to have the President of the United States say, "Oops, by the way keep doing what you're doing," but I'm thinking this is like totally messed up, having lost the buddy in the field and continuing to do what you're doing, without the new strategy in place, I think the Commander in Chief has got to recognize that that's potentially very demoralizing to the guy in the field. When you've got the new strategy and you've got agreement on the new strategy, all in.

FEAVER: Another explanation that's offered for delays, [00:48:00] in that thorough review, or a more public review, was other things that were on the President's plate. Woodward's book has the stem cell controversy and decision which was coming out around this time, as a significant distraction of White House principal attention. There's the Cuba -- Castro getting sick, remember, in August of 2006, and that spins up an effort to rethink Cuba policy. How much were those other distractions distracting?

BOLTEN: Oh, gees, I mean anybody who says the President was distracted from Iraq by Cuba or stem cell has no idea what was going on inside the White House. I mean, if that's in Woodward's book, he's relying on horrible sources or imagination. I mean look, the President's got to [00:49:00] chew gum and walk straight all the time, and President Bush did, and you have to deal with everything else that's going on. Other than in sort of the daily morning intelligence briefing, I don't remember Cuba even being a particularly important issue on the President's plate. The CIA would come in periodically and say, "He's almost dead." And the



President would ask about two weeks later, "So?"; and they'd say, "Sometime in the next month." And then he'd ask a month later, he'd say, "So?"

ENGEL: How'd that work out?

BOLTEN: Yeah. So, no, absolutely not, I don't think. Maybe for half a day, you have a distraction of a stem cell veto fight, or an NSC meeting on Cuba, but the President's focus throughout that period, beginning at six forty-five every morning, [00:50:00] when he read the blue sheet, was making sure that he was doing his best for the troops in the field and making sure that the Iraq conflict came out right. And if something was going to interfere with his ability to do that, it was only going to interfere momentarily, and neither the President nor I, as his Chief of Staff, would have allowed it to interfere comprehensively.

SAYLE: Can you remind us what the blue sheet is?

BOLTEN: The President got a blue sheet every morning, and I think it was already, it had already been instituted when I became Chief of Staff in April. He got a blue sheet every morning that was an overnight report from Baghdad, about what had happened in the conflict, and either the first line or one of the early lines was the casualties. Most mornings, I would be in the room while the President was reading that report, [00:51:00] because like I said, I would arrive maybe five minutes after he got in, so I'd often be there when he got to that on his desk. It was on the top of his pile of papers. He would take his Sharpie and he would circle the casualties. I never saw President Bush despondent, I never saw him



pessimistic, but I saw him deeply moved and concerned, and it weighed on him every morning, and whatever else was happening that day, I think after the blue sheet, would be put in the context of people dying, and the U.S. not succeeding.

FEAVER: You mentioned the blue sheet. [00:52:00] Every night, he would get an Iraq note.

BOLTEN: Right.

FEAVER: Which he also read. What role did that play in informing you, and were you satisfied with the candor of it? Did you feel like you were getting accurate information?

BOLTEN: Yeah, but it was pretty granular. It was helpful in getting a flavor of what was going on day-to-day, but I didn't find that note all that helpful, at least to me, in stepping back and seeing the bigger picture. It seemed to me, to be a pretty candid note, so I didn't have concern that news was being filtered for the President. In fact, I was encouraged that it seemed relatively unfiltered. I don't know what the President made of it. It was in his night book, which he would get at -- I can't remember, shocking that I can't remember, but the staff secretary would send that book up to the Residence at about seven or seven-thirty in the evening. [00:53:00] You probably had to prepare this thing.[pointing to Peter Feaver] What time did you have to prepare it by?

FEAVER: Meghan's office prepared it, so it was due at six.



BOLTEN: Due at six, so yeah, the book probably went up at seven or seven-thirty, right after the President had dinner, and I know he read that book every night. It was not a piece of paper that went into the President's book and he didn't see. He read that every night and he read the blue sheet every morning.

SAYLE: You mentioned the bigger picture, and how you were able to get that bigger picture, it seems, before your role as Chief of Staff, from the newspaper and watching the news. As Chief of Staff, what did you rely on?

BOLTEN: And as budget director.

SAYLE: And as budget director, yes.

BOLTEN: Because I had to argue for the funds to do all of this.

SAYLE: As Chief of Staff then, what do you rely on for your big picture and what tools do you have to make sure the President is getting a bigger picture, beyond these sort of granular notes and reports?

BOLTEN: I found the most useful thing were the kinds of conversations I've already described, [00:54:00] with NSC staff, a couple of rungs below Steve Hadley. I had a couple of friends who had served in Iraq and I would invite them in for lunch when they got back from Iraq -- you know, a lieutenant colonel, and say, "Tell me. Give me the perspective that you won't hear from somebody with multiple stars on their shoulders." And I relied on the process of ventilation that Steve had undertaken, and conversations like the one that Bill Kristol set up for me with General Keane.



FEAVER: Was there concern from Steve Hadley about you sort of dipping into his staff?

BOLTEN: No. I certainly didn't keep it from him. I usually told him when I was doing that. [00:55:00] I think if he thought I was going to try to run a separate agenda, that would have been a concern, but as between us, there was never any concern about that. He knew that I was just trying to educate myself, so that I could be a good contributor to the process that he was running, and facilitate the process that he was running, not do something separate from him.

ENGEL: I want to ask one more question about, from the summer of '06, and I think we need to move the chronology on. This question is this: You've mentioned several times that the President's sense of the problem, the President has an evolving sense of what's going on, which is causing everything else to occur. What exactly is evolving, and by that I mean: is his sense that the strategy is not working evolving, or his sense that the problem is different than he thought it was earlier? [00:56:00] You mentioned at the very beginning, the sense of the civil war being something which is perhaps something that he cannot utter, for political reasons.

BOLTEN: Yeah.

ENGEL: Is he changing the way that he sees the conflict at this time, which is causing the change in strategy? Give us a greater sense of what you think was going on there.

BOLTEN: It's hard for me to even remember what I was thinking, much less what the President was thinking. I don't think he held anything back from me, but that's pretty hard to assess. My instinct is, it was both, that he could see the results of



the strategy were not working, and he had, I think an evolving view, that maybe the reason it's not working is that, in fact, we are not successfully preventing these people from killing each other while we're [00:57:00] withdrawing as rapidly as we can. It's kind of a chicken and egg. I think both were happening at the same time.

FEAVER: Can you move the story forward now, to September-October, getting closer into the fall. These compartmentalized reviews start to take on more life at this time. What's your visibility into that? How would you describe them in that timeframe? This is before the election.

BOLTEN: Before the election, I certainly had all the visibility that I would have wanted to have, but I had full confidence that Steve was managing that as effectively as could possibly be done, so I didn't insert myself very much into it. I certainly didn't think of myself then, or now, as an expert on the situation, and I didn't really try to become [00:58:00] the deep expert that would have suggested some different judgment from what was coming out of the process. I knew it was going on; I didn't intervene in it. I encouraged Steve, I supported Steve, and at the same time, I saw a President who was basically making up his mind over that period in a way that in reality was probably ahead of the process. The review was extremely important, but I think a fair reading of the review, if anything, was Steve Hadley, other folks, helping to lead the rest of the government, which is an important element, toward a conclusion that the President had already reached on his own.



FEAVER: Can you give us a sense of when you think [00:59:00] the President -- but you think it was in the September/October timeframe?

BOLTEN: Maybe even earlier than that, that he was coming around to the view that of the options, the only one that had a reasonable prospect of the kind of success that the U.S. needed from this, in this situation, was something like the surge. I mean, I did hear him, over the summer, struggling with, you know, we can -- actually, I don't remember the terminology.

FEAVER: We can "clear."

BOLTEN: But there was go long. Tell me what --

FEAVER: Go long, go big, go home.

BOLTEN: Go long, go big, go home. There was plenty of political impetus on "go home" and there was a not insubstantial element of thought in that way, [01:00:00] within both the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom. Go long was kind of the track we were on and it was not working; it was basically failing slowly, is what he saw. I think he was -- I saw a President who was coming around by the process of elimination, to go big, and recognize that it was a big risk. But he also, I think understood, again, in the way that people 30 years from now should understand about presidential decision-making, that sometimes you have to take a big risk, because the even bigger risk is doing the less risky things, the things that seem at the moment to be less risky.

FEAVER: So if he's coming -- if they're moving in that direction, to "go big," one of the big questions is how many troops are available. [01:01:00] Could you describe the effort to find that piece? Did you have visibility into that or should we ask other people about that?

BOLTEN: You should probably ask other people. I did hear about this regularly, both in my role as Chief of Staff and as a former budget director. I mean, I knew there was consideration going on to, Well, if we go big, how big is needed to really make this effective, and do we have the manpower for it and do we have the money for it? I always kind of had an instinct, from my days as budget director, that there's a lot more elasticity in the system than people think, if it's really a priority. I always felt like, if you can get people bought-in, [01:02:00] or enough people bought-in to the underlying strategy, there will be a way to find the sufficient manpower, there will be a way to stretch the force, and there will be a way to persuade the Congress to put the money in. You can't do that with many things, but if it's really the top issue, then you can succeed in doing that. And so, from the political side, I always tried to be supportive and optimistic of, you know, you guys [gestures to Feaver] decide what needs to happen and then leave the politics to the President and others, to make it happen. Do not censor yourself on the strategy based on what you think the rest of the political system will let you do.



FEAVER: So we get to the election and the day after Secretary Rumsfeld resigns, or submits his resignation, [01:03:00] what effect did that have on this process you've been describing?

BOLTEN: I think the President, by that point, was pretty far down the track and on a new strategy. It actually coincided well with a changeover in Secretary of Defense, to implement a new strategy that was going to be easier on everybody; on the military, on the Pentagon, on the political system, to put a new face on a new strategy. So, I thought it all dovetailed pretty well. On the specific timing of Secretary Rumsfeld's departure, President Bush decided on that basically, really almost a month before the election, if I'm recalling right. When did he meet with Secretary Gates [01:04:00] in Crawford?

ENGEL: It was in October.

FEAVER: Mid-October.

BOLTEN: Mid-October, okay, so three weeks before the election. Joe Hagin and I were involved in the clandestine operation, which I thought very entertainingly, Bob Gates referred to as the only real covert operation he'd been involved in, in his entire career, was us getting him into the President's ranch outside Crawford, Texas. He drove up from College Station.

ENGEL: Yeah, we have that actually in November.

SAYLE: November fourth.

ENGEL: November fourth.



BOLTEN: The meeting was November fourth?

SAYLE: Or maybe they had another one.

BOLTEN: That doesn't sound right, because the election would have been --

ENGEL: The seventh.

BOLTEN: Yeah, no, no, no, no. Yeah. Now, the President, it's possible that it was on November fourth, that the President advised the Vice President [01:05:00] that he was planning to make a change, because the President held this very close. We got Gates into the ranch secretly, we got him out secretly, even from most of the rest of the government.

FEAVER: From Hadley?

BOLTEN: No, no, Hadley was definitely in on it, yeah. In fact, it was Hadley who first called Gates, to explore his interest in doing this.

FEAVER: From Secretary Rice?

BOLTEN: She was probably informed as well, but again, it would have been a very small circle and probably kept from the Vice President. I don't think the President would have kept from the Vice President that he was thinking about making a change. But that he had actually decided, I think he probably would have kept from the Vice President, [01:06:00] only because he knew of his very close friendship and relationship, ongoing relationship, with Secretary Rumsfeld. So, I bet it was on November fourth, that the President apprised the Vice President that he wanted to make a change. And I think I was in on that conversation. I said,

"Would you like me to speak with Secretary Rumsfeld," and the Vice President said, "No, I'd like to do it." So, the Vice President placed the call to Secretary Rumsfeld, to tell him that his resignation would be accepted if he were to tender it. [W]e had in mind, and the President was very determined about this, we had in mind to make the announcement after the election. I remember Dan Bartlett, the communications director, and I, thought that this was very clever [01:07:00] political strategy and so on, so that it would be clear what the President intended: that he was not allowing politics to infect his decisions. It certainly would have been very popular with Republicans scrambling for reelection in 2006, and having enormous difficulty, many of them, because of the headwind of the unpopularity of the Iraq War. They surely thought it would have been very helpful to them to dump Rumsfeld overboard in September or October.

We wanted to make a demonstration that the President wasn't going to let politics infect it, and the President was adamant about that. He said he didn't want anybody in the field to think that he was making his decisions about the command because of anything having to do with partisan politics. And so Dan Bartlett and I concocted the scheme where we would announce [01:08:00] it literally the day after the election, so that it would be clear that the President didn't want that to infect the politics, but it would also be clear that we had made, the President had made, the decision before the election, and wasn't blaming Rumsfeld for the defeat in the election, which we knew was coming.

We just got wiped out in the congressional elections of 2006, so we thought that that was an incredibly clever, thoughtful way to do it, you know certainly not before the election but the day after, because that would make clear that the President had already made that decision and wasn't blaming Rumsfeld. It was a complete lead balloon; everybody was mad at us. In particular, the Republicans, who had suffered these big defeats, you know, the leadership in the House was just, [01:09:00] they couldn't have been madder. So it was, I mean, we succeeded in the President's objective of communicating with the troops. We didn't succeed very well politically.

FEAVER: You haven't mentioned Karl Rove's name yet in this. Did Karl have any role in any of the Iraq strategy, thinking, or even the timing? Was he advising something different from what was decided, or what was decided, did he reinforce it?

BOLTEN: You know, I mean Karl, I always felt was probably the smartest guy in the White House. You can't say anybody's smarter than the President, but the smartest, and really one of the most thoughtful people around, but he was also viewed, in the outside world, as the President's chief political advisor, which he also was. I think the President was always very careful not to [01:10:00] give anybody on the outside the impression that his political advisors were having an effect on his decisions on national security strategy. So, Karl probably was not invited to any of the national security meetings. I don't remember him being there and in fact, I think that was, the President's general dictum was: the people who



were seen as political advisors don't come to the national security meetings. He may have weighed in at some point or other, with the President, based on information that was generally available. He was certainly advising the President on what the Iraq War meant for the politics and the likelihood of success in the 2006 midterm elections, but I do not recall any substantial role that Karl played in this.

FEAVER: So, the election is over, Secretary Rumsfeld departs, [01:11:00] and the President also directs Steve Hadley to do a formal review that is publicly announced. This is the one under J.D. Crouch. Were you aware of the positions of the departments and agencies at the start of that review, and did you know sort of the lay of the land?

BOLTEN: I probably did and don't remember it.

FEAVER: Were you aware that State had a different position? You had mentioned before, that you thought Foggy Bottom reacted negatively.

BOLTEN: Yeah. Yeah, I was aware that the -- well, I was aware that the Pentagon was, and in particular in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was very worried about the strain on the military. I was aware that the State Department at least, [01:12:00] and our very able Secretary of State, was concerned about the efficacy of this effort and recognized that it was a pretty big gamble, and was skeptical that it could be resourced and supported in a way that it would ultimately be successful. So I do remember that from the State Department, there was skepticism about whether



this could succeed, but I don't remember the State Department really digging its heels in and saying, "No, no, no." I mean, I took it to be more of a "Wow, this is you know, this is a pretty big gamble and we wouldn't bet on its success."

ENGEL: Well, let me ask you that, because there has been suggestion in the literature and in some other interviews, that the State Department's position was somewhat of a straw man, [01:13:00] in the sense that the Pentagon did not want to change direction dramatically. The decision had essentially already been made to go bigger and therefore, we're going to put up another option of complete pullout yesterday, because no one's really going to go for that. So that would actually make it more likely that we get the position that we want, which is the surge.

BOLTEN: I don't remember that. I don't know whether that's well supported in the documentation, in the history, but I'd be surprised if anybody was running this with straw man positions. I think if that had actually been intended, either from the State Department or from Steve running the process, I think you would have had a much stronger view coming out of the State Department. I did not take the State Department's view to be, you know, Hell no, we've got to get out now. It was, [01:14:00] Wow, this is -- nothing has worked so far and we're pretty skeptical that this can work, was the tenor of the advice, at least that I heard, coming from the State Department. But there could well have been a lot else going on that I either wasn't aware of or have certainly forgotten by now.



FEAVER: One of the challenges was the NSC seeking to add a role as honest broker, and not advocating a position but managing a fair debate between different departments, but none of the departments or agencies were putting forth the surge as their recommendation. So, can you speak to that?

BOLTEN: Not really. That speaks to the adroitness of Steve Hadley, in being perceived as honest broker while pushing the most radical option that nobody else supported, [01:15:00] but he was doing that on -- he knew he was doing that on behalf of the President, and he had what I understood even at the time, to be a courageous and loyal ally in Pete Pace, whose own views, I think may even have differed. His own views may have comported more with those of the rest of the Chiefs, but he also knew where the President was going, he knew where Steve Hadley was going, and I think Pete was a very loyal and effective facilitator of making it possible for the President to have that option presented in a serious way, so that he could check that box and get some support from the military for it.

FEAVER: One of the important meetings with that, in that respect, was when the President and Vice President went to the Pentagon, [01:16:00] the Tank. Did you go along on that trip?

BOLTEN: I did.

FEAVER: And in that -- I want you to speak about that meeting, but also, one of the things the President took to that meeting was what he called a sweetener; the offer

to lift the end strength, the ground forces. Can you speak to where that proposal came from?

BOLTEN: Well, first, yes I was in on that meeting. I think it was I who called Secretary Rumsfeld, to let him know that the President -- this was after Secretary Designate Gates had been announced, I think.

FEAVER: Right, but he wasn't confirmed.

BOLTEN: He had not yet been, he was still going through the confirmation process.

Rumsfeld was still in place, still in very, by the way, dignified and commendable fashion, doing a really professional job at the Defense Department. [01:17:00] And I called him to say that the President wanted to meet with the Chiefs, to talk about a new way forward on Iraq, and he wanted to hear from them directly, and Rumsfeld said, "Okay, I'll set it up in my office." I said, "No. The President wants to go to the Tank," and I think Rumsfeld said, "But the protocol is that the Secretary of Defense sits between the President and the Chiefs, and those meetings are held in the Secretary's office," and I said, "He wants to send a message that he's hearing directly from the Chiefs, that he's going to their turf to hear from them," and Rumsfeld said, "I got it. It will be in the tank."

That was a remarkable meeting. I'm sure others have better notes or recollections of it than I do, [01:18:00] but I do remember the President -- flanked by both Rumsfeld and incoming Secretary Gates, and the Vice President -- making sure that the Chiefs felt like that they had really been heard, that they were going



to give their unvarnished advice. A pivotal moment that I remember, that I don't know if I've seen in any of the histories, it may be in there, is that one of the Chiefs said to the President, "Candidly, Mr. President, we're worried that this will break the military."

FEAVER: Schoomaker.

BOLTEN: It was Schoomaker, yeah, who was at that time?

FEAVER: Army. Army Chief of Staff.

BOLTEN: Oh, yeah, because Casey had not yet come back.

FEAVER: Right.

BOLTEN: So it was still Schoomaker, [01:19:00] and Schoomaker said we're worried that this is going to break the military. Or he may even have said break the Army. And the President paused and then he leaned forward in a really -- it wasn't aggressive, but it was a definitive way, and he didn't raise his voice or anything, he said, "Let me tell you what I think is going to break the military: a defeat like we had in Vietnam that broke the military for a generation, will break the military. We've got to do everything we can to prevent that." You could almost see the Chiefs all sort of sit back at that moment, and they saw where the President was going. I think they genuinely appreciated the conversation that they had had with them, unmediated by the Sec Def or by the Chairman of the Chiefs, that he had come [01:20:00] to the Chiefs individually and heard from each of them, and I think they respected where he came from. He also came with assurances about all that we

would do to try to get the resources, so that the military would be able to flex and bend and survive what was likely to be the most difficult operation, at least in postwar, post-Vietnam, maybe postwar history.

FEAVER: Can you talk about where that came from, from the process, do you know?

BOLTEN: You know, I don't. I remember being a strong advocate for: we can get this done, that if we really put our backs to it. Nobody on the Hill, I mean there's plenty of politics on the Hill and there's plenty of people who opposed this war from the beginning and would like to see us just cut and withdraw immediately, but there's enough people of goodwill [01:21:00] up there who want us to succeed, that we can get what we want if we really put our backs into it. For that, I was drawing from my experience as budget director, which is an understanding that the Congress will usually, on a matter of national security, the Congress will usually, at some point step back and say "Okay, we've got a Commander in Chief. He's in charge." I also knew, as a former budget director, that it was going to cost us even more, because the price that the Democrats would extract from us would be more spending elsewhere. I'd had candid conversations, even as budget director, and then again as Chief of Staff, that we're going to end up paying not just for this war, but for whatever domestic priorities Democrats want at the same time, [01:22:00] and you just have to be prepared that that is the price. The President said, "Yeah, we can tolerate somewhat higher deficits for a while." By the way, this was all before the financial crisis, and in fact we could tolerate higher



deficits. Our deficits peaked around 2005, I think, were starting to come back down, and were large, but nothing like the size that the Obama Administration experienced in its first term, largely as a result of the financial crisis, and we survived that. So the President had a sense, we can survive higher deficits, we cannot survive a defeat in Iraq.

FEAVER: Was that proposal, did that come out of the formal process or the informal?

BOLTEN: I do not remember.

FEAVER: You just don't remember. Right before the President went to the Tank session, he had a meeting with outside -- [01:23:00] part of the ventilation process, including with Jack Keane.

BOLTEN: Oh yeah, in the Oval, I remember.

FEAVER: In the Oval. Do you remember what the gist of that conversation was, what the purpose of that was?

BOLTEN: The purpose was part ventilation, part sending a signal that the President was interested in ventilation, that he was listening to different views. Because we did have, in that room, we had a variety of views in that room, if I remember. I mean, I don't remember the specifics of the conversation, but at that point we were prepared to start sending the signal that change is coming, the President is listening. What was the date of that meeting?

ENGEL: The 11th of December.

FEAVER: Some published reports were saying this was to [01:24:00] reinforce the importance of the Commander in Chief overruling generals in wartime.

BOLTEN: That wouldn't have been the President's instinct.

FEAVER: Some of the people in the room, that was what they were recommending.

BOLTEN: Oh, I see.

FEAVER: Some of the outside experts that was there.

BOLTEN: Say, "Overrule your Chiefs"?

FEAVER: Well, that you may have to overrule the ground commander who is saying one thing, and you want to do the other.

BOLTEN: Yeah, which I think was okay. That's not the message that President Bush would have wanted to send, I mean he very much wanted his decision, which he knew was at a minimum, not fully supported by the Chiefs, but he wanted very much to avoid any impression that he was just overruling them and disregarding them. He wanted them very much to be [01:25:00] bought into it, which is why he went to the Tank in the first place. He was not trying to achieve any kind of political or personal victory. He just wanted as much support as he could get for the policy that he thought was the only one that could successfully be pursued at that point.

FEAVER: There are two more meetings that have gotten a lot of attention on the outside. I want to see if they were as significant on the inside. One was the meeting in the Solarium, which would have been around this time, midway through the formal



review, to determine what would be the chief priority of the missions. Do you remember that meeting, what was accomplished in that?

BOLTEN: I do remember the meeting.

FEAVER: Was it significant?

BOLTEN: Its significance probably [01:26:00] would be exaggerated by historians. I think at that point, the President had basically made up his mind that he was fine-tuning and that part of the purpose of the meeting was to try to help build a consensus for where he was headed at that point, because that meeting was pretty late in the year.

FEAVER: Late November.

SAYLE: November 26th.

BOLTEN: Yeah, so you know at that point, I don't think the President wanted to communicate at that point, that he had decided, but in my recollection and in my view, he basically had decided.

FEAVER: The other meeting is the Crawford meeting in-between Christmas and New Years, where the size of The Surge is debated. Can you speak to that meeting? Do you remember that meeting?

BOLTEN: I don't even remember that meeting, to be honest, I'm sorry.

FEAVER: So the issue was, do we do two brigades or the full five brigades, or do we do two and then two, or then two and then one, one, one.

BOLTEN: Yeah.



FEAVER: Do you remember that?

BOLTEN: I remember that debate. [01:27:00] I remember thinking, this is kind of a hard thing for the President to decide, I mean it's kind of like when the car mechanic says, do you want the overhead flange or the this? I think he felt like, that we should go to the outer limits of our ability to resource this thing, that he did not want to come away with any regrets about having under-resourced this effort in any way, because he knew it was all in.

FEAVER: The last question on this and then I'll turn it to you. If the President decided so early, what was happening in November, December? What was the function of those staff efforts and what was slowing it down? What was slowing the rest of the team from landing on the same page that the President is on? [01:28:00]

BOLTEN: Here's where I think politics may have played a role, and it's not very clear in my recollection, but it makes sense to me that the President was not saying, Snap, two days after the election, Here's where we're going. Again, not because he thought it would have been politically unpopular, which it certainly would have been and was, but because he thought that would then undermine political support for the effort, that he wanted to bring along as many people within the Pentagon, within the interagency process, so that there would be better support for the mission and so that there was a better chance of having the Congress give us the resources, [01:29:00] and not block an effort that he knew would be deeply unpopular. When he went to give that speech in early January, announcing The



Surge, he was well aware of how very unpopular this was going to be, even within his own party, which was still smarting and blaming him for a very bad defeat in the midterms, which by the way, could have been -- it was dramatically contributed to by the party's own problems, not just Iraq, but the members and the leadership were focused on what a big drag the Iraq War had been on their political prospects.

FEAVER: So who was the last to get on the lily pad, do you know?

BOLTEN: I don't, I don't, but I'll be interested to view the results of your inquiry and find out, as you fill in other elements of the picture.

ENGEL: [01:30:00] With that late December meeting in mind, take us back, if you would.

BOLTEN: This was in the Solarium?

ENGEL: No, actually the --

SAYLE: Crawford.

BOLTEN: The Crawford meeting, yeah, because the Solarium was late November.

SAYLE: November 26th.

ENGEL: Where, I love the image that you gave us, of trying to talk to the auto mechanic, because we've all been there. Compare that, if you would, from when you first became Chief of Staff, and saw the President speaking to the commanders, and as you put it, you needed to get him to be the same person that he was when he was dealing with education and dealing with tax policy and environmental issues, to dealing with the military. Were you successful in the recalibration, if you will, of

the President? Had he changed his persona by December, in how he dealt with the military, [01:31:00] or was there something else going on in this discussion?

BOLTEN: Yeah. I wouldn't say that either I or Steve was successful. I would say the President was successful, that as I perceived it, his mindset changed in the year, beginning in early '06, to the end of '06 and early '07, to the point where he still had enormous respect, affection and deference for the people in the military, but I think he had seen that there's only one President and there's only one person that can step in and really redirect. And he had a higher comfort level doing that at the beginning of '07, than I think he did at the beginning of '06, and that was -- I think that was his own evolution, not something that Steve or I engineered. [01:32:00]
We just facilitated it.

FEAVER: The one other big issue we haven't talked about is the Baker-Hamilton Commission report, which came out in early December, but was in the backdrop all Fall.

BOLTEN: Yeah.

FEAVER: Can you speak to that issue, what role that played and how that affected your thinking?

BOLTEN: I know in the histories, it will sort of play large. It was a very distinguished group doing hard work. They did not have much influence, in my opinion, on the President's thinking. I think I certainly viewed it as a commendable effort that was designed like the commissions I remembered from the Reagan era, to help



generate national consensus around controversial issues, in a way that would actually give the President more freedom, rather than restrict the freedom. I took the best of that, [01:33:00] of what the Baker-Hamilton Commission to be about, was about that. But I think in the end, you know they were ambiguous, I guess, in what they were actually recommending, but were probably pushing for a “go long,” or somewhere between a “go long” and a “get out” strategy, but had left -- in their language, had left plenty of leeway for the President to do other things. I remember Jim Baker calling me up and pointing me to whatever paragraph it was, that could be used to support the notion of a surge, and so we kind of seized on that, but I think in all candor, I don't think the President paid much attention to the commission. As much respect as he had [01:34:00] for many of the individuals involved, I don't think he found that exercise to be particularly useful.

SAYLE: Another relationship that comes up quite a bit in the literature, that I wanted to ask you about, is the President's relationship with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki. I'm wondering if you observed their relationship in the teleconferences and meetings, and if you can give us a general sense. And then more particularly, how important that relationship was towards the end of 2006 in getting Iraqi agreement for the surge, whether that played a big role in the President's decision-making.

BOLTEN: I think that relationship was important. I saw President Bush work really hard at that relationship, I think in a way that would surprise most Americans. But we



ended up with a regular video teleconference with -- well, first with the ambassador and the combatant commander, I think every week, was it? [01:35:00]

Peter, do you remember?

FEAVER: I don't know if it was weekly.

BOLTEN: It might have been weekly, but then Maliki would be brought in every other week, something like that. That's a lot of airtime for a foreign leader, and in fact probably unusual for a President to have a video teleconference with a foreign leader almost any time, other than sort of an ad hoc, we need to do this. Bush was the one --

FEAVER: Except for the Blair.

BOLTEN: Yeah, except for Blair, and they had a regular conversation that often focused a lot on Iraq, but I was thinking, Peter, for other Presidents to have done that. I don't think many have or have done since then. And that was very much an impetus from the President himself, who he, as I watched him as Commander in Chief, he was consistently putting himself [01:36:00] in the shoes of the other leader and saying, what am I thinking? Am I tired, am I discouraged, and what's going to help coming from, in the way of a personal relationship, coming from the President of the United States. And so he had very much that focus. Everybody had some level of skepticism about Maliki. It ranged pretty widely, if I recall, among the advisors to the President, from sort of slight to extreme skepticism, about both his motivations and his capabilities. But the President's attitude, at



least during that period and when I was Chief of Staff was: He's our guy and none of this can succeed unless he's a good partner in it, so I'm going to do everything I can to support him, to maneuver him, to pressure him, [01:37:00] but to do that from the standpoint of making him feel like he has a friend in the White House. Because we did understand that Maliki himself was often deeply discouraged, probably deeply afraid, and probably way over his head in the job that he was trying to do, and I say that without intending to disparage the prime minister, because I think anybody would find themselves in very difficult straits in that situation.

So he would get on that conference call and he would talk with staff first, about what's the most important thing I can do with Maliki this morning, but he was trying -- you know, it was all part of a process. Even if there was no big objective on that particular day, it was part of a process, to make Maliki a friend and therefore [01:38:00] a true ally, in what we were trying to accomplish. And, you know, what I saw was pretty successful. He, the President, could actually move Maliki. He could get him to be more cooperative. He could get him to be more inclusive. Sadly, in the history it turns out that that wasn't his primary motivation, or that effort wasn't sustained, but while we were doing it, it was very helpful, and it was very helpful to have Maliki onboard as something of a partner in the implementation of the surge.

FEAVER: One of the journalistic accounts has the President, after he's made his final decision to go for The Surge, saying, "Now I have to explain it or sell it, to Condi," suggesting that there was some [01:39:00] friction or resistance on that dimension. Did you see that?

BOLTEN: I don't remember that. I mean, I could well imagine the President joking about that, but the President and Condi had the kind of relationship where, you know, they would have been completely upfront with each other for weeks before the decision was made. I mean, Condi would have known what was coming, the President would have known exactly what her views were, how her views evolved over time. Condi was the Cabinet Officer who probably, every other morning, when I was in there at six-fifty, seven, seven-ten, would just call up to chat with the President. There aren't many Cabinet Officers who just call the President to chat, but she, having been National Security Advisor, having been so close to the President, she knew that he had this free time, when just [01:40:00] Steve and I would be in there, between six-fifty and seven-thirty, and that you know, she could just call and they could gas, and it would be whatever was on her mind, whatever was on his mind. So I could see the President making a joke about it, but I can't see there being much reality about him feeling like he had to explain something to the Secretary of State, or bring her along. That clearly would not have been necessary.



ENGEL: If this were a different President and a different Secretary of State, and you told that story, let's picture Nixon and Kissinger in this situation, it would be --

BOLTEN: I don't see Condi as Kissinger.

ENGEL: Well, no, I'm saying we would interpret that as saying, "Wow, the Secretary of State knows that the President is meeting one-on-one with the National Security Advisor, and that's when she chooses to call." In other words, to make sure that she's talking to him, instead of the National Security Advisor at that time.

BOLTEN: Yeah, it wouldn't be instead of, [01:41:00] it would be in addition to.

ENGEL: So was it a conference call, was it a speaker call?

BOLTEN: No, no, no, but she knew Steve and I were standing right there listening to the President's end of it, and if there was something that she said, that we wouldn't have heard or understood, the President would repeat it for us. Steve was rarely surprised by what Condi said, because she would have told him the same thing the night before. So I think that relationship was actually much like the relationship I had with Steve, where we didn't agree on everything, but there was no artifice, there was full transparency, and there was complete support for full communication with the President. And the President understood that, and that's the way he wanted his team to operate. I often think when Presidents are confronted with teams that don't operate that way, it's often because they haven't made it clear to their team that that's the way they want them to operate. There's another lesson for 30 years from now.

FEAVER: [01:42:00] Was there anything about this whole process that you think did not go well, that disappointed you?

BOLTEN: Well, the lead balloon that Bartlett and I launched with our clever calibration of when to announce.

FEAVER: Beyond that.

ENGEL: So given the opportunity, would you have done something -- what would you have done differently?

BOLTEN: Yeah. Well, we could not have done it before the election. I think we should have waited for at least a couple of days, when the Republicans were not still smarting and people clearing out their offices, the Speaker moving down to the Minority Leader's office kind of thing. You know, I'm sure, I'm sure there were major imperfections in it. It probably did take longer than it should have, under the circumstances. [01:43:00] But I can't point to any individual decision that I think should have been rethought, and you can't argue with the result. The President came to what is manifestly the right decision, in a circumstance where most people were telling him, "You can't do that."

FEAVER: Is there anything we haven't asked you that we should have? Was there anything you wanted to say, that we haven't raised?

BOLTEN: No. Thank you. I think I've told you more than I actually know.

ENGEL: Actually, I have one more question, actually two more. I'm still fascinated by this very wonderful insight you've given us, into the evolution of the President's

thinking. This is kind of a counterfactual. Do you think that things would have been any different if the President Bush [01:44:00] of December of '06, had been President in January of '06 or in January of '05, would the policies have been different, would the result have been different? It's an impossible question.

BOLTEN: Yeah, impossible to answer. It was the same guy in both circumstances. At both ends of '06, the circumstances were different. I think the only thing I would say is that maybe the process of '06 would have happened faster, had the President had more of the mindset at the beginning of '06, that he had at the end of '06.

ENGEL: One final question. The blue sheet that the President took his Sharpie out and marked the U.S. casualties, did it also include Iraqi deaths?

BOLTEN: Yes.

ENGEL: Yes?

BOLTEN: Yeah, it had civilian deaths as well.

FEAVER: Okay, so we'll stop [01:45:00] the --

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]