

The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Peter Feaver

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[Begin Transcription]

SAYLE: [00:00] We have Peter Feaver here with us to discuss the Iraq Surge decision. I'm Tim Sayle, one of the interviewers and I'm joined by --

BRANDS: Hal Brands, another interviewer.

SAYLE: Peter, would you introduce yourself and explain your role in government, your general responsibilities, and those pertaining to Iraq, in particular.

FEAVER: My name is Peter Feaver and from June '05 to July '07 I was Special Advisor for Strategic Planning and Institutional Reform on the National Security Council staff. I stood up a new office that Steve Hadley created when he took over from Condi to be National Security Advisor. An office that would do strategic planning over the horizon, longer range, bigger picture kinds of strategic planning issues. It was me and then Will Inboden, who was the senior director working for me, and Rebecca Rine was our office. [00:01:00]

SAYLE: If you were to tell us the history of the Surge decision, where would you begin?

FEAVER: In this new office, I did not own any issue. Our office was responsible for the National Security Strategy, but other than that, most of the issues that we would work on were owned by one of the other regional or functional directorates. That said, there were some issues that were priorities for the President, or priorities for Steve Hadley, or areas where I had expertise or background that could be brought to bear, and Iraq was one of them.

Early on when I got to the NSC, I made a point of reaching out to Meghan O'Sullivan, who I didn't know, but she was the head of the Iraq office and made a point of seeing what I could do to be of help. Basically, the way our office [00:02:00] would function is, we would offer to be additional labor on various projects, usually the strategy review kinds of projects that their directorate might want some help with. That's how Will and I would get our work done.

Now, my Surge story, I would begin it with the Aspen Strategy Group in August of 2005. I went representing the Strategy Office from the White House. The conference was four or five days of blistering critique of the Administration, the failed Iraq policy, failed this, that, and the other. But then when they recommended back to us what we should do, what I kept hearing were the main elements of what I knew to be the strategy that the Administration thought it was implementing. So, strong critique, but then [00:03:00] when it came to recommending what to be done, it sounded very much like what we were trying to do.

I return from that, and I talked to Meghan and Steve Hadley about it, and I said, there is a bipartisan consensus on what should be done in Iraq. That bipartisan consensus, at least at the Aspen Strategy Group kind of expert level, tracks pretty closely to what we're trying to do -- what the formal papers describing our strategy are. I said, I think we could capture that bipartisan

consensus, maybe even re-launch a little bit of it, if we could better explain what our strategy was.

Now I knew there were other voices inside the government that thought we had a strategy problem, but at that time I thought, we didn't have a strategy problem; we had a failure to explain our strategy problem. There was a coherent strategy we were trying to follow. There might be resource issues, there certainly were implementation issues, [00:04:00] but at the strategic level there was a logic to it, and it resonated with what experts outside were asking us to do. They just didn't know about it, or we weren't doing a good job of explaining.

So, I suggested that we release an unclassified version of the underlying classified documents. That effort eventually became National Strategy for Victory in Iraq [NSVI], which was released in the end of November. That's a separate story. I begin the Surge story there because by the end of that fall, November, December, at least in the interactions that I had with the senior White House people, it seemed that we thought we had a strategy that was working and that was finally showing success.

It was a strategy that was premised on getting political momentum which would create a political home for [00:05:00]the Sunnis who were the natural supporters of the insurgency. They would see that they had a future in the new Iraq. This would siphon off the support that they were otherwise giving to this

insurgency. That over time this would lead to a decrease in the sectarian violence that was fueling the insurgency.

This was the theory, and we thought that the strategy as outlined in NSVI was finally beginning to show fruit with all of the political milestones that were achieved in 2015. We had a large public messaging push that came out of it as part of the release of the white paper, and the President gave three, four big speeches. We had a follow-up series of engagements planned, bringing together all of the former Secretaries of State, [00:05:00] Secretaries of Defense. A series of meetings with members of the Hill, and outside experts, in a way of hearing their critiques of the strategy, but also explaining to them what we were trying to do.

The theory was, over time this would gradually take the domestic political sting out of Iraq. As progress was shown on the ground, we would be able to have enough political support to continue the mission. Indeed, in December '05 the President says to Steven Hadley, he thinks that we've got the Iraq strategy basically well-launched. Now, where he's concerned is Iran, and that the Iran effort was reaching the end of its strategic -- the previous policy lines were reaching the end of their utility. We were going to have to [00:07:00] have a new strategy in Iran.

In December sort of go off the Iraq issue and more onto the Iran issue.

SAYLE: We're back with Peter Feaver, and now Hal Brands and Tim Sayle are joined by -

INBODEN: Will Inboden.

BRANDS: Peter, you mentioned that in late 2005 the belief was that the Iraq strategy was on the right path. What was it that led you to revisit that assumption, and when did that happen?

FEAVER: Let me just emphasize, that was my belief. I think there were internal critics who were saying that it wasn't on the right path, or it was inadequately resourced. My sense was, and I think I was reflecting the sense of many people at the White House was that, we had finally gotten in place after too many years of, and being too slow to adjust to the 2003, 2004 [00:08:00] growth of the insurgency, that we finally had a strategy with Casey, and with Zal Khalilzad and we finally had a way forward. We had in place, still, all of this outreach effort that had been laid down from NSVI in meeting with experts, so I'm hearing the criticisms.

What happens over the spring of 2006 is that, the two pistons that were firing our strategy freeze up. The first of the pistons was the belief that we could have political progress and that a steady drumbeat, really, a drumbeat of hitting political milestone after political milestone would propel Iraq forward and create the political momentum that would bring along the Sunnis, and that piston freezes. We have an election, but we can't seat the parliamentary [00:09:00] leader because it's hung.

That process goes on for months and months and months. As part of the NSVI effort there had been an elaborate 100-day plan that was going to be kicked in place as soon as the new Iraqi leader is in place. We'll implement this 100-day

plan, and it will allow us to get political momentum, security momentum, economic momentum, etc. We can't implement it, because we don't have a leader.

That's the one piston that's frozen. The other one is, the idea that we would be buying off Sunni anger, the opposite is happening because of the growing spiral of sectarian violence, and in particular the Golden Mosque. It's not just that. It's a steady drumbeat. As part of my job, I'm reading the [00:10:00] nightly notes that Meghan O'Sullivan -- we called them the POTUS note. It was a nightly summary of things going on in Iraq with graphs, and a review of all the lines of action: security, political, economic, and diplomatic, and so forth. It's a pretty dismal picture.

As the spring is going on, it's becoming clearer and clearer to me that Iraq is not going well, but it's not clear to me what we should do about it. Again, as part of my job, I talk to a lot of outsiders. One of the lanes that we do have in this office is outreach. Outreach to intellectuals, to think tankers, to political people across the aisle. I had a pretty free rein to speak to a wide range of people, and I'm hearing credible, persuasive critiques of our strategy. [00:11:00]

It's in that context that I go back to Meghan and probe her on how she thinks it's going, and it's clear that she thinks it is not going well. She and her directorate have a pretty exhaustive critique of our current strategy, and what needs to be done. The challenge is, how can we get this out of the directorate and

Meghan O'Sullivan level and get principals to wrestle with this question? That's the challenge that she and I are discussing in the May timeframe.

SAYLE: In June 2006, the President and other principals in the Administration met at Camp David. Can you explain what role you played in preparing this meeting -- how you prepared for it, and what the purpose of this meeting was? [00:12:00]

FEAVER: Right. It followed on a little bit with what I was just saying about Meghan and me discussing ways to try to tee up a more thorough going review of our Iraq strategy. I don't know if I suggested, or Meghan suggested, that we take advantage of a couple things that were already in the works. One of them was a pretty intermittent, but not regularly scheduled, but every several weeks, a month or so, the President would meet with outsiders. Sometimes it was on Asia policy; sometimes it was on economic policy. I suggested we should suggest some of these in Iraq and bring in critical voices that we thought the President needed to hear directly, straight from the horse's mouth. [00:13:00]

There was one of these, I think on the Global War on Terror, I believe was the topic, but that had Mike Vickers in the meeting. Mike was one of the outside critics of our strategy that I'd found most persuasive. He and I would meet at regular intervals, and he would give me a pretty exhaustive analysis of why what we were doing in Iraq was not working. His recommendation was that, we had to move even more quickly to a light footprint approach, one that would remove the occupational sting, the occupation narrative of large US forces. The large US

forces had sort of created their own antibodies -- so resistance to US. His argument was, you've got to go to a light footprint, special forces training the Iraqis to do the counterinsurgency mission, etc. It was a strong critique of what we were currently doing, and an intriguing policy proposal. [00:14:00]

Anyway, he was in one of these meetings with the President. I told Meghan, why don't we tee up a debate between Mike Vickers, who's sort of the, we have too many troops; with someone who says we have too few troops. This would be a way of surfacing the issues that there's a growing consensus that our strategy - - outside consensus -- a growing consensus that our strategy is not working, although there's no consensus about, what's the right way to do it.

Meghan liked that idea and we pitched it to Steve Hadley and suggested this Camp David meeting. We had Mike Vickers already for the "go light." The obvious person for the "go heavy" was Fred Kagan who had been arguing [00:15:00] this for quite some time. I was concerned that in that debate that, Mike Vickers, who had already met the President and really connected with him well, might have an unfair advantage over Fred. I said, we need to stack the deck a little bit to even it up. I suggested bringing in Eliot Cohen, who was Mike Vickers' dissertation advisor. I knew that he could keep Mike Vickers under control. I also knew that he tilted in the direction of pro-Surge, so I thought that would even it up and I felt we could get a vigorous debate between these two positions.

The hope was that this would persuade the President and the National Security team that they needed to authorize a more thorough going in-house review. We knew what was said by the outsiders and one single meeting wouldn't be [00:16:00] adequate, but it could trigger, catalyze, a review, a debate -- sorry, not a debate. Catalyze an internal review.

This was very sensitive to do this, though, because it was a critique of our existing strategy. This is happening within six weeks or so of the famous "Revolt of the Generals," when you have retired generals calling for Rumsfeld to resign. There was some concern in the White House that if we do something like this, particularly in front of the National Security cabinet, it will look like we're ambushing Secretary Rumsfeld, so there was an effort to add another voice, Robert Kaplan, to kind of blur it. He was not known as such a harsh critic of Rumsfeld. What Vickers and Kagan and Cohen [00:17:00] had in common is they had all strongly criticized Rumsfeld, and we didn't want it to look like an ambush of Rumsfeld, so we added Kaplan. That had the effect of diluting a little bit, perhaps, the sharpness of the analytical debate.

But, as part of this effort, Meghan and her team teed-up a full terms of reference for a follow-on review. The expectation was, this was the paperwork that was coming out of the Camp David meeting. Our expectation was, the President would say, I'm not sure which of these guys is right, but we've got to do a thorough review. Meghan, go do a thorough review. Then, the paperwork for that review

was already all planned, and Meghan had a pretty elaborate series of review efforts that we thought would be launched right on the cusp of, or on the heels, I should say, of the Camp David meeting. [00:18:00]

It didn't happen that way for several reasons. The reason that gets the most attention in the histories, is that the President surprised us, surprised me. I didn't know he was going to do this. I think it surprised Meghan, as well, that he arranged to go to Baghdad. And so he was not there. He was there for the first day, he was then there by SVTS [Secure Video Teleconference System] for the second day. That changed the dynamic. That's part of it. The President's absence was part of it, but I think more importantly was, in the interval from when we set it up to when it actually took place, or when we conceived of this, the two pistons seemed to have unstuck. First, we get an Iraqi government. It's Maliki, not who we had wanted or expected, but nevertheless we got an [00:19:00] Iraqi government so we could finally implement the 100-day plan, which we'd been waiting on a rolling basis to implement.

The other is, we kill Zarqawi, the leader of the AQI [al-Qaeda in Iraq]. In the AQI had played a critical role as an accelerant of the sectarian violence. The theory was, maybe now we can be making progress against AQI, which will dampen down the accelerants for violence, and you also now have the political piston firing again. With our 100-day plan, maybe we can finally re-launch the existing strategy. That, of course, was General Casey's strong recommendation

and he proposed a new effort to regain control of Baghdad called Together Forward that was a push, a mini-push, inside Baghdad to get ahead of the [00:20:00] sectarian violence, the bombs, and the suicide attacks that were really bedeviling security in Baghdad.

The President authorized that, rather than the strategy review. What we had was, instead of launching a review premised on the notion that perhaps our strategy wasn't working, we had a recommitment to try harder to implement the existing strategy. That's where things left in middle-June at the end of the Camp David.

INBODEN: Can I ask a clarifying question here? When you and Meghan were working on teeing-up the outside experts, was your goal to prompt a debate and a review, or was your goal already at that point to nudge along what became the position more advocated by Kagan and Cohen? Did you already have the outlines of a policy goal [00:21:00] in mind, or was it just, this isn't working right now? Something else needs to be done.

FEAVER: I think by May, Meghan was already there for the Surge, but I wasn't. I thought Mike Vickers had a compelling argument, and so I wasn't sure that the Surge was the right thing. I was sure that we needed to do a thoroughgoing review of our strategy -- one that didn't presume that we had to continue with what we were doing, but accepted the possibility of a pretty dramatic change. I was not, as of May or June, in the pro-Surge camp. I wanted to make sure that the Surge voice

was heard before the President. One of the challenges, and indeed this has been a challenge, this will be the backstory challenge to the entire Surge review is, we were operating under the [00:22:00] Brent Scowcroft rules of how the NSC should operate, which is the NSC is the evenhanded guardian of the process, but not the advocate --

INBODEN: Honest broker.

FEAVER: -- Honest broker. And that the departments and agencies who were responsible for implementing the strategy would be the ones to make a policy advocacy. If State had a policy advocacy, then we would tee that up for the President's decision. If DoD [Department of Defense] had one, tee that up, JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff], etc., but not NSC. There was no senior advocate for the Surge inside the interagency. We now know that Phil Zelikow had been pushing for something like this maybe even in 2005, but that was not the concerted position of the State Department. [00:22:00] The Surge was sort of an orphan in May. It was backed by Meghan and the Iraq office, but there wasn't an interagency advocate for it.

When we did arrange for the staffing -- well, not the staffing, but the outside experts, I wanted to make sure that the Surge had a strong voice so that the President heard a strong argument for the Surge. It doesn't happen and it's the end of June, and we have Together Forward. It does not work. In the late July timeframe, and I'm a little bit unclear on the exact date, but there was a military incident where they tried to move Iraqi units to come to the [00:24:00] aid of a

particular battle. The Iraqi units didn't show up, or didn't show up in force. It dramatized the idea that we don't have enough reliable Iraqi forces to provide adequate population security.

That event, whenever that was -- I'm thinking it was late July; it might have been August -- that was catalytic in my mind because that validated all of the arguments that I had been hearing Meghan and the other NSC directorate-level folks making for, we don't have enough forces. Vividly on display in a failure of Baghdad, Together Forward I.

During this time, Meghan hasn't given up on the idea of a [00:25:00] thorough going review, but instead of launching it in a formal interagency way, she hits on the idea of teeing up the questions that had been the terms of reference questions for the review, giving those to the President for him to ask Casey directly in his weekly SVTS. And that, over the course of July the questions get a little bit sharper, more pointed, probing Casey on getting to the logic of the existing strategy, and questions that invited Casey to think that the President's doubting whether this strategy is going to work. That produces a change.

The change is, Casey revises Together Forward and we have Together Forward II. [00:26:00] It's re-launched in August with slightly different modalities, but this, too, doesn't seem to work. In fact, here we have an incident, and I'm blanking on the details, but where Maliki orders the units and the activities that they're involved in, the Iraqi units, are less helpful. They seem to be sectarian in

motivation, or at least in effect, further antagonizing the Sunnis rather than providing nonsectarian population security. And so that also seemed to undermine the logic of the existing strategy—that the Iraqi troops would show up and do the fighting and that they could be trusted to fight in a nonsectarian way. The combo of that convinced me that we really had to move forward on a more thorough going review. [00:27:00]

BRANDS: Could I just ask two clarifying questions. One, you mentioned the Revolt of the Generals and the impact that had on the way you set up the Camp David meeting. Did that have an impact on the broader Iraq debate within the Administration, at the time that happened?

FEAVER: Right. Around the time of NSVI's launch, one of the discussions that's taking place at the staff level in the White House is, if we're going to really re-launch the Iraqi effort in fall of '05, maybe there should be a change of personnel, as well. Great confidence in Casey, great confidence in Zal, but perhaps it was time for Secretary Rumsfeld to move on. This was at a staff level, obviously. The President wasn't talking like this.

There was some discussion [00:28:00] among the White House staff of, could we replace Rumsfeld with a strong Secretary of Defense? Who would be a good person? We came up with a list of names. I'll admit that Gates wasn't on that list, so it shows you that we didn't do a very good job of thinking exhaustively through the list of possible people.

But one of the things that the Revolt of the Generals did, one of the minor consequences is, it brought that whole discussion temporarily to a halt. That effort so politicized the question of Rumsfeld's replacement that it meant the President wasn't going to replace Rumsfeld, even if he had been inclined to do so before, and I don't think he necessarily had. But now he definitely wasn't because it would have been done in a hyper-partisan way -- I'm sorry, it would have been done in a hyper-partisan climate, not a way, but a hyper-partisan climate.

[00:29:00] That bought Rumsfeld another six months or so of tenure. Had we brought in a new Sec-Def, that might have been a time for a fresh look at the strategy. I think it probably had a slight effect in delaying the strategy review. As I said, there were other, more factors on the ground in Iraq that I think were more consequential, mainly this belief that with Maliki we could finally really try to implement the existing strategy.

BRANDS: And a second question. You mentioned that one of the purposes behind NSVI was to re-center the domestic debate on Iraq in the United States. Did you continue to have an eye on that debate during this period in early, mid-2006 when things were going sideways, and did that have an impact on your calculations?

FEAVER: Yes. [00:30:00] That effort seemed to bear some fruit in December, '05, but not as much fruit as we hoped, in part because the debate shifted. Right as we were finishing up the white paper, Jack Murtha, a member of Congress from

Pennsylvania, came out with a press conference where he basically called for the US to get out of Iraq within six months, or some very, very rapid timetable.

He's no lefty. He's a Vietnam vet and was known sort of as a blue dog Democrat, hawkish on defense. Here he was calling for basically, I think his words even said, "The troops have done everything that could be asked of them. It's time to bring them home." Words to that effect. That dramatically moved the Iraq debate leftward, because it created safe political space for a [00:31:00] "get out of Iraq now" wing which previously had been just the hard left, but now there's political cover.

The NSVI which was sort of in the center of where the hawkish Dems had been in the summer, the hawkish Dems had moved by December. That's one thing that happened. Then, frankly, the situation in Iraq, it becomes clear as '06 goes on that we don't have a message problem; we have a policy problem. We don't have a failure to explain our strategy problem; we have the failure of strategy problem.

That was dramatized for me in the March, April, May timeframe again. I'm not exactly sure of the dates, but the President does another series of big speeches on Iraq, but that gets almost no attention -- no penetration, no movement in public attitudes, or public sentiment. It's as if the President [00:32:00] is losing his ability to connect with the American people on this Iraq question. The facts on

the ground are just drowning out any other argument that could be made. That, too, contributes to my sense in April, May that we need to launch the review.

This brings us back to August. Now, one of the challenges for me is that I'm not working Iraq 24/7. Meghan O'Sullivan's working Iraq 24/7, so she is on this issue and pushing, I would say, inexorably or incessantly pushing on Steve Hadley, pushing on the interagency. I'm [00:33:00] dipping in and out with other things that are on my plate. We released the National Security Strategy in March of '06. There's a big Iran strategy review that I'm a part of in the spring of '06. In August of '06 there's a brief flurry when Fidel Castro takes ill, and it looks like that we might finally have a post-Castro regime in Cuba. That swings into motion a full review of options and reconsidering a possible Cuba policy for a couple weeks in August of '06.

When that winds down, I go back to Meghan and say, where are we on this effort to launch a review? She says, Well, the Iraq office has teed up a whole lot of stuff, but we haven't been able to get it elevated in part because [00:34:00] JCS and DoD are strongly committed to the existing strategy. The State Department seems to be moving in a different direction. So the question in the August, September timeframe is, how do we gin up, how do we launch the review of our strategy that we tried to launch in May, June. How do we do it? Meghan and I make the decision that, we're just going to start it under our own authority. We'll start building terms of reference, and start the analytics that we can do, and then seek

top cover from, or authorization, from Steve Hadley to actually do something bigger.

And so we do. One of the first things we do is take the National Security Strategy [00:35:00] for Victory in Iraq, NSVI, take it and go through all of the assumptions. Part of the thing we had done in the NSVI is make explicit the assumptions of our strategy. This was an effort to try to be more persuasive to an academic elite audience. It was helpful for us at this timeframe, so it was August, September '06, because as we listed all of the assumptions of the strategy and then assessed, do we still believe them? One by one it was clear that none of us in this little group -- and this was Meghan, me, Kevin Bergner, and Brett McGurk -- none of us believed those assumptions anymore. We couldn't credibly defend those assumptions. That suggested that, well then, on our own terms, we must not believe that the existing strategy is going to work, [00:36:00] because they're the premises for the strategy. That was a very clarifying moment. I had already been moving in that direction, but that dramatized it for me.

But, what to do about it was another question. The Iraq office had concluded that a surge was what was needed. Brett McGurk would talk about this battle, I think it was in Gazaliyah, where repeatedly we would do clear, and then we couldn't hold. Then we would leave and the terrorists or insurgents would come back and kill off all the people who had helped us during the clearing process. Then we'd come back and clear, but of course there was less help for us

the second time around. Repeatedly, we needed enough troops that we could hold. We needed more reliable troops and, as we learned from [00:37:00] Together Forward I and II, we couldn't count on Iraqi troops being there. In the long run, yes, but in the near-term we couldn't count on them.

The question was, where can we get the troops? At this stage there's a sense, the sense we're getting from DoD is that there are no more troops. The phrase was, "we're out of Schlitz," which is an old beer commercial. "When you're out of Schlitz, you're out of beer." The message we were getting from DoD is that, there are no more troops to be had. In early September I went to my office mate, who was Lisa Disbrow, who was a detailee from the Joint Staff, and she was in charge of programs, implementation, and execution. She was my counterpart. She and her deputy, [00:38:00] and me and Will, we were sort of the four "team special" advisors.

I asked Lisa, I said, how would we find out what is the true amount of available troops, because I'm hearing from Meghan and her office, we need more troops. We are hearing from DoD, there are no more troops. I asked Lisa, I said, do you know how to answer that question? Find out if there are more. Lisa says, "Actually, yes." That was her job when she had been in Joint Staff. I said, can you figure out for me what is, for us, for me and Meghan, very, very quietly, can you figure out what is the number? If we were to send more troops, what's the maximum number we could even send?

She started to do this. She did a, basically it's a [00:39:00] force generation bit of analysis and she was very quiet, because first of all, we had no authorization from the suite to do this study. Second of all, this was certainly not where Secretary Rumsfeld and the Joint Staff were. But we just wanted to get an independent assessment. What is that number, and what are the assumptions for generating that number? Assumptions have to do with dwell times, how long you would keep a unit in theater, how short would be their turnaround time, mobilizing key reserve units that would have to be mobilized to sustain this, and so forth.

She comes back to me with the number five. That we could, with great pain, mobilize five Brigades Combat Teams [BCTs]. Now, shortly after this time, [00:40:00] so in early October, Bill Luti gets the authorization to do this study. Bill Luti was the Senior Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control. He is tasked with doing the force generation study, but the person on his staff who can do this is a guy named Mark Gunzinger, Gonzo, and Gonzo knows that actually the person who knows how to do this at the White House is Lisa Disbrow. Gonzo comes to Lisa Disbrow and says, "Do you think you could help me figure out this question?" Lisa says, "Well, as a matter of fact, yes. Here's the answer." She had already done the analysis that said, five.

That convinced me in September that if the President authorized a surge, that there were five combat brigade teams that we could do. The information was

kept very, very [00:41:00] compartmented, though, in part because it was very sensitive and this kind of planning from the White House was probably leaning forward or maybe falling too far forward of our skins. Also, we hadn't been authorized yet to do a full-up review. We don't migrate that information into the rest of the strategy review process until we get the authorization that comes from Steve through Bill Luti to do that study.

However, the result of Lisa's analysis is, yes, you can do this but this is going to be very, very, very painful. Very painful to the ground forces, because of the stress on the purse tempo. [00:42:00] Lisa and I talk about, what could we do, what can be done to alleviate that. She says, "There's only one way, and that is to raise the top line of forces."

So this is when I went to Josh Bolten, who was the Chief of Staff, and I told him, this is the situation. There's belief that the Iraq strategy is not working, and we're going to have to do something. There's a belief that the best solution is the Surge, but surge is going to be very, very painful. When the time comes, the President is probably going to want to have the ability to raise the top line, and thus alleviate some of the pressure. Otherwise, it's going to be a very hard sell with the military. I said, we have someone on the White House Staff who can do the analysis, [00:43:00] but that's traditionally done in DoD and this would cause a lot of heartache if it was done at the White House. Do you want me to do this? And Bolten authorized it.

Lisa does that follow-on study of, if you're going to surge, you need to expand the size -- one way to alleviate the pain is to expand the size of the Army, and she does that study for Bolten. That's probably in the late September or early October timeframe. In the midst of this, though, Meghan and I, and Kevin Bergner, and Brett are still doing our own strategy review, and after about a week or two of that, [00:44:00] we explain to Steve Hadley what we're doing, and don't you think this is a good idea? He says, "Yes, that's a good idea. I want you to do it, but I want you to bring in John Hannah." And he says, I want you to just have these people: I want you to have John Hannah, Bill Luti, Kevin Bergner, Meghan, and me. We say, well, okay. At least we've got top cover authorization.

We left the room feeling a little bit miffed because that meant no Brett McGurk, which meant one of our key staff persons to do the work was not included. We met the first time for a week without Brett McGurk, and then we went back and said, it really would help if we could bring in Brett McGurk, who was one of the Directors on Iraq and had been doing some of the work for us in this strategy already, so we got permission to add [00:45:00] Brett McGurk. Then a week later, or very shortly thereafter, he says, "I've talked to Condi about it. I want you to bring in Satterfield who is Condi's Iraq coordinator."

This is the phase of the project, September or probably October by this point, when we're taking the options that the Iraq group had developed. The Iraq directorate had already developed some: surge, you could go light, there were

different alternatives to the existing strategy. And we had different names for them. The Surge was, I think we gave it the name, “Double-Down.” The idea was, think that you could actually, [00:46:00] “gamble for resurrection” is the academic phrase for it, but see if you can’t send surge troops and reverse the security trajectory.

There was another one that was, we called “Bet on Maliki,” because it was assessing that Maliki really would be the leader of a nonsectarian Iraq, rather than a Shia sectarian leader. There’s a whole series of things you would do to empower Maliki; empowering him to get the job done. And a couple other options, I can’t remember the names that we had. Meghan and Brett will remember their names.

We were vetting these, discussing these, Satterfield was, I think, fresh from Iraq and so he had a very [00:47:00] skeptical view about the Iraq project, and particularly the reliability of the Iraqi government, and so negative on some of the options that required getting more from the Iraqis. It became clear that a critical piece of this was Maliki, and our uncertainty about Maliki. That if Maliki was one kind of leader, then some strategies had no hope of success. If he was another kind of leader, then other strategies had no hope of success, but we were unsure of Maliki.

Out of that assessment came the idea of [00:48:00] going to Iraq, or taking Steve Hadley to Iraq, for him to take the assessment of Maliki on the President’s behalf. It’s one thing to talk to him by SVTS, and of course we knew what Zal was

saying, and Casey who were with him on a daily basis. They were also strongly vested in the existing strategy. So, taking a skeptical set of eyes to Iraq, meeting with Maliki, and taking a judgment. That's where the Iraq trip that Hadley led, Meghan went on, I went on, and I can't remember who else from the NSC. Maybe Bergner might have gone and then we had a stop in Afghanistan and a stop in Europe.

SAYLE: Before we talk about that trip, maybe we could ask a question to wrap up what's happening in August, September, and October. I think what comes out here is that there is a [00:49:00] disconnect between what the NSC staff working on Iraq is seeing, and seemingly what the commanders in Iraq are seeing. The NSC staff has come to this conclusion, it seems, almost in isolation. What is the NSC staff seeing differently, thinking about differently? How did you get so far ahead on this issue in this period?

FEAVER: I think that Casey, who's reviewing the strategy on it on a daily basis, is seeing that Together Forward I doesn't work, so he changes it to try Together Forward II. I don't think that there's a fundamental difference in our assessment of the current situation. I think the difference is that, Casey was arguing: Well, it's a long, hard slog. War is tough, and as long as we tough it out and stick with this, [00:50:00] we can see this through. And the best way out is to stand up Iraqi forces so we can stand down, because the US forces are themselves producing resistance. They're reinforcing the occupation narrative, and they're reinforcing the Iraqi dependence.

It's the hand-on-the-bicycle argument. They are seeing those downsides, and I think we're seeing those downsides, too. That was a plausible argument. Indeed, it was the one that we had endorsed even a year before.

I think that the difference is that, we're coming to the conclusion that this is no longer a case of long, hard slog, just tough it out. That if we continue on this path we will have strategic defeat in Iraq. We have a closing window to change that narrative. [00:51:00] There's basically one chance to do something big, and we need to seize that chance now. That would be the difference between what the NSC view was, I think, and the MNF-I [Multi-National Force-Iraq] view.

SAYLE: Is the NSC staff giving up its "honest broker" role in that period?

FEAVER: I think we're starting to, and this is the challenge, right? We're exploring options that are not being generated by the interagency. We're trying to create those options, we're trying to call forth those options from the interagency, but we're not succeeding in that. We're doing some of the analytic work, at least the preliminary analytic work, for those options. Yes, I do think that there's -- [00:52:00] the NSC role is starting to shift out of that honest broker mode, just a little bit.

SAYLE: Is there a cost in that period to the privacy with which that informal review is conducted? We've heard from others, like Philip Zelikow, who suggested maybe he could have been an ally with the NSC staff in this period. Was that a possibility?

FEAVER: One of the challenges was, just take the five BCTs availability question. Very, very sensitive piece of information, because it was generated inside the White House from a JCS detailee that was basically going around what the JCS would have wanted a JCS detailee to do. Yes, that was very sensitive, so I couldn't share that information widely. [00:53:00] Once Bill Luti did the study that showed it, that gave it a little bit more top cover. Of course, Hadley had authorized that. Even so, Hadley hands that to the JCS to say, okay, can you flesh that out, and it causes heartburn over there. Rumsfeld was concerned why is the NSC doing military planning, basically. That's not what the NSC's job is. Yes, it's very sensitive that it's happening, and it complicates a little bit the formation of alliances. As I mentioned, Meghan didn't know about the Luti line until late in the game. There is some - that makes it hard.

On the other hand, there [00:54:00] are no leaks that are emerging. What you're buying with compartmented information is, no leaks. This particular White House did not leak. We were doing some very, very sensitive analyses premised on doubts about our existing strategy at a very delicate time, and we were able to do so without leaks. That's the upside of it.

INBODEN: If I can ask a follow-up to this. At what point did you become aware of other reviews that were going on outside: Kagan, Keane, to perhaps the American Enterprise Institute [AEI], the "Council of Colonels"?

FEAVER: I knew about the two most important ones. We knew well about one. One was Baker-Hamilton, which had been launched a year before and we'd been tracking that for a while. There's a misunderstanding [00:55:00] about Baker-Hamilton. When Baker-Hamilton was launched it was in the same zeitgeist of where I was in the summer of '05; namely, that there is a bipartisan consensus and if we could just get someone other than President Bush to talk about it, we could perhaps re-launch it.

When Frank Wolf was trying to sell the White House on the idea, he explained how every member of Congress who goes to Iraq comes back, hears Casey, hears Zal talk about it, comes back more convinced that maybe we can win finally. He says, "Well, we what we need to do is send a commission of people who will have the respect of the American people to go to Iraq, hear about the existing strategy, turn it around, explain to the American people this is the right strategy." That's what the Baker-Hamilton Commission will do.

That's why he populated it with people like Vernon Jordan, [00:56:00] Sandra Day O'Connor, Leon Panetta, who at the time was not a national security guy. People who were not national security people; not the people who would do a strategy review, but who would be trusted on both sides of the aisle. The problem was, in the interval from when it was launched to when they finished, the Iraq situation unravels, so by the time it finishes, it's a very different beast.

But, the Baker-Hamilton, we know, is coming due sometime this fall, and so one of the drivers of, we want to make sure we know where we are internally for when this hits, because this will get a lot of attention. If we don't know for sure where we want to be strategically, then this one will drive it, and we want to be driving it. That helped propel forward our strategy. [00:57:00] The Council of Colonels, that had been leaked and was known that the JCS was doing this. That gave further impetus for a fresh look, zero-based study of it. That was it.

I knew about the AEI. One, I had been, through a friend at the AEI asked me to participate in that, and I just couldn't because I was already fully engaged in the Iraq strategy review, but I knew about that. That had an important role to play, which plays much later in the game.

SAYLE: Let's pick up again with your trip to Baghdad in October 29th that you described with National Security Advisor Hadley. The published accounts have made quite a big deal of this trip. Can you describe the trip: what you saw, what the team saw, and its impact on policy going forward?

FEAVER: It was my first trip to Iraq, [00:58:00] my only trip to Iraq. I believe it was Steve Hadley's first trip. At least, his first trip as National Security Advisor. And so it was an important moment. There were various levels to it. The most important piece was the one-on-one with Maliki where Hadley spent an extended period of time with Maliki, basically taking the measure of the man.

But then there was important sidebar meetings with the other political leaders. Part of what we were trying to assess is, could the leaders of the other factions in Iraq work with Maliki. Could Maliki win their trust. We had, of course, Zal's assessment of that question, but we wanted to take our own. There was an important meeting with Chiarelli and his team. [00:59:00] Then we met with Major and Captain-level, more junior officers, the people right out there in the deployment and heard their argument.

What we heard from them was largely what we had already been reading in the dispatches, and in the intel. It was confirming our assessment of what was wrong with the existing strategy. What we heard from the operational level troops confirmed to us the need to do the Surge. That's not what we were hearing from the topmost commanders.

There was a trip to Fallujah that got canceled because of weather. We were going to go visit a PRT out in Fallujah. [00:60:00] We heard from them about the difficulty of security for PRTs, and that became a big issue in the Iraq strategy review was, providing the security for PRTs. That was it. The most important piece from the Iraq strategy review point of view was, we're wrestling with Steve Hadley on, what is Maliki -- what kind of leader might he be, what kind of leader did we need him to be. I remember sitting in the Silver Bullet on the way back, just wrestling with, discussing with Hadley and with Meghan O'Sullivan what were

the different interpretations of who Maliki might be, [00:61:00] and what the implication of that were.

The fruits of that are in a memo that he wrote to the President, went to the President I think within 24 hours or so of getting back. He then did a version of that for the interagency and sent it around to all the other principals. Someone who received that second version of it leaked it to Michael Gordon, and it shows up in the *New York Times*.

That was one of the scarier moments of my political career, because I thought it was the version of the memo that only Hadley, Meghan, and me had a copy of. I knew I hadn't leaked it, but I was afraid that no one would believe me that I hadn't leaked it. I was very relieved when I realized it was the version of it sent out to the interagency, so any number of people could have leaked it. That was a very, very sensitive memo at the time, [00:62:00] because it was basically asking the question, how viable is the Iraq effort?

SAYLE: Two weeks after that trip the formal interagency review, the Crouch review begins. In the period in between there are the November midterm elections, and also Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld resigns his position. Should we understand that those two events opened the floodgates for a formal review in some way? How should we place those two events in the process?

FEAVER: No. In hindsight now it's clear to me that Steve was teeing up a formal review to be launched after the midterm elections. What he was going to want us to do,

or the things that Meghan and I were doing for him -- Meghan and her team, I should say, and I were doing for him -- was building the terms of reference for this large review. I think she got tasked with it in the third week in October, or something, do the terms of reference for a formal review that would be launched, no matter what happens in the midterm elections.

I'm not sure that I was fully sure that, that was going to be acting September and October. I know that there was great reluctance to do anything formal, because it could leak. The concern was, once you start second guessing your strategy, you cannot go back to that strategy. This is one reason why it had to be kept so compartmented. You can't then turn around and tell the troops, "Oh, yeah. No, we still think -- Yes, last week we told you we're doing a zero-based review, because we have no confidence in the strategy, but guess what? We've decided this is the best one anyway, so go back and fight for this one." It was a point of no return. You had to do something different. It wasn't sure that we wanted to do something different [01:04:00] in the September, October timeframe, so that's why -- we weren't sure the President wanted to do something different. That's why we had to keep it so quiet.

What the election does and the replacement of Rumsfeld is, it allows for this sort of exogenous factor to trigger a formal review. That brings into a full interagency process what had already been going on in -- at the White House. It also pulls together some of the strands. The State Department's been doing their

own review, JCS has been doing their own review; this is a chance to pull it together.

But by this point, we already have three clearly articulated and firmly opposed views. There was the NSC staff view that says, we need a surge. There's the State Department view [01:05:00] that says, it's too late for a surge. That might have been a good idea before, but it's too late. The sectarian violence has reached a level, and we have to hunker down, so it was basically a hunker down approach. Then there's the JCS position which is, the existing strategy is the best strategy we've got, and let's accelerate our movement along the next phases of the existing strategy, but otherwise let's not change it.

Those views were pretty well-known and articulated inside our little team by the time of the election. I remember vividly a meeting in Steve Hadley's office on Saturday after the election, so that would have been November 11. I [01:06:00] remember vividly because it was one of those moments when I told myself, you might be a professor at Duke tomorrow, again. Because it was Hadley and Secretary Rice, Phil Zelikow, Satterfield, and then the rest of the NSC team; Hannah, Meghan O'Sullivan, Brett McGurk, and me.

Secretary Rice was arguing forcefully that the Surge was not a viable strategy. It wasn't viable politically. The American people wouldn't put up with it, especially after the recent election, and it had these other problems with it. I looked around the room and I said, well, who is going to argue against Secretary

Rice? She's a formidable intellect, [01:07:00] and also a formidable figure in the Administration. Then I thought, well, I actually have tenure, so if I'm fired today I can go back in, register courses, and start teaching in January. Whereas everyone else around the table, they don't have another job, so it's up to me.

I, in that meeting, challenged her on one or two of the points. Most especially I remember challenging her on the public opinion piece. That's an area of academic research for me. More importantly, because Will and my office plugged into the rest of the West Wing in a way that's a little different than the NSC normally does. We had access to the rest of the West Wing, wider access to the West Wing, [01:08:00] including to the political side of the house. Over the previous several months I had had numerous discussions with the key people on that side of the President's team; so, Dan Bartlett, Karl Rove, and Mike Gerson was still there, Pete Wehner was Mike Gerson's -- I'm not sure if he was still there, but we were still talking to him on the outside.

So I knew the way the political team would advise the President on this question. I remember, because I had heard this sort of argument from the State before, so I remember going to Karl Rove and saying, if the President were asked this, what would be your political advice to him? This would be, if the President were told that the best course of action was a surge, would you tell him it was politically possible [01:09:00] to do a surge; or would you tell him it's too late. That we missed our chance. Would you tell him that and this strategy or that? I just

described in very broad terms what the kinds of alternatives that were out there in the press, which of those do you think is the most viable from the point of view of: we could sustain it politically.

I knew Karl's answer. Karl's answer was, the Surge was the one that would be the easiest politically to sustain. It would be very, very hard to sustain, but the other ones would be even harder because you would lose Republicans who thought we had given up on Iraq. Once you've lost the Republicans, then you would have no governing coalition for support for the Iraq war.

I knew what his answer was, so when Secretary Rice was arguing [01:10:00] that it might be easier to do X, I said, no. That is not likely to be the advice the President's going to get from his political staff. I remember she came back to me something like, Peter, I disagree with every single one of the claims you just made. It was an intense academic exchange, except that we weren't in academia anymore. But obviously, she did not fire me, or have me fired at that moment, and I was able to continue.

So, there is a J. D. Crouch meeting -- our interagency group starts. That's basically all day long Deputies Committee meeting from that point on for the next month. Almost every day, morning session, afternoon session, just cycling through papers, and reports, and assessments.

The two that I remember most, [01:11:00] I remember three vividly. One was Hannah's paper on the Shia, but the other two that I remember quite vividly

was the State Department -- when Phil Zelikow and Satterfield submitted the State paper, which was a more fleshed-out, very carefully-argued argument that we had to hunker down and then selectively engage. Go unit by unit, not every unit in the Iraq army could be trusted, but we would just work with this brigade, and not that brigade; and this battalion, but not that battalion. We would ride out the sectarian violence and thus emerge after the violence has abated, and still be in a position of leverage, but if we didn't do that we would lose our positioning vis-a-vis Iran. [01:12:00] This paper's been described in Woodward and elsewhere, I think pretty accurately.

Again, it was one of those moments where having a tenured job meant that I was the sacrificial lamb. Meghan asks, "OK, who wants to go and critique this paper?" I said, "I'll do it." I circulated a, "here's the State paper and here are the implicit assumptions of the State paper that are not made explicit in the paper, but have to be true for the State paper to make sense." Then I said, "and if these assumptions are true -- if you believe these assumptions -- what does that mean for other alternatives, like the Surge, or other strategies?"

I showed to my satisfaction, but not to Philip's satisfaction, I showed that under all of those conditions, the Surge strategy performed better. [01:13:00] So that if these assumptions were true, then State Department strategy might work, but if those assumptions were true, the Surge would work better. Under these assumptions the State Department strategy doesn't work; under those assumptions

the Surge doesn't perform as poorly. So that dominated in a strategic sense, the Surge dominated the State Department paper. I remember Philip not liking that analysis of his paper. But it was a useful exchange in the terms of fleshing out the logic.

The other paper that I remember vividly was the JCS paper, because we had been avidly waiting for the JCS report which we thought was going to be the Council of Colonels' report. We had seen a version of that. Pete Pace had briefed it to me [01:14:00] and Meghan and Steve Hadley, so we knew what it was and we knew that it had these different options including a surge option. That would be finally a paper that had a surge option that we could then -- it wouldn't be an NSC option, it would be a JCS option that we could explore.

General Pace gave us a version of that. He said, "I haven't taken this into the Tank yet, but this is what the Council of Colonels have put forward." The day of the actual, JCS was scheduled to present their paper, it leaks and I think Tom Ricks had the version of the study, the early draft of the Council of Colonels. It's in *The Washington Post* and there it is, go big, go long, go home. Those were several of the options.

We were eagerly awaiting the JCS paper. When Doug Lute [01:15:00] presented the actual JCS paper, it was the existing strategy. It was Casey's next phase of his existing strategy. In other words, the Council of Colonels' study had

gone through the tank, been washed out, and came out from MNF-I as, keep doing what we've been doing, only do it faster.

I remember Meghan and I were looking at each other saying, we just lost our surge option, because the JCS was no longer even entertaining that as an option.

SAYLE: The NSC staff had been talking about a surge option throughout the fall. I think one of the questions Secretary of State Rice asked in this period was, whether it would just simply be adding more troops, or if those troops would have a new purpose and function in Iraq. How did that develop, and how was the NSC staff aware of the development of the counterinsurgency manual, etc. Was that going to play a role? [01:16:00]

FEAVER: Throughout this period, the papers that Brett McGurk had written, and all the things that Meghan O'Sullivan had developed in her office were all about putting population security first and with the associated changes in our approach, heavily influenced by Dave Petraeus' COIN manual. Our view was, that it wasn't just surging more resources, but it was changing fundamentally. In fact, this was a crucial part of the thing -- changing fundamentally what was priority one. Was priority one, train up the Iraqi forces so we could transition? Or was priority one population security?

This turned out to be [01:17:00] the first and most consequential decision of the Surge review, although at the time we didn't realize just how consequential it

was. We had this debate: do we provide population security? Is that the mission, or is the mission train and transition? NSC staff wanted population security to be the mission, but the MNF-I was saying, understandably, that the train and transition was the first priority mission.

We teed that up as a separate decision and finally President Bush -- and this would have been in either late November or early December -- decided it's going to be population security, but no decision on the Surge. What that did is, it made the Surge inevitable. At the time, Meghan and I didn't fully appreciate that, because there's no way you can do population security without the Surge.

[01:18:00] What we were afraid is, that we had just gotten a decision to increase the mission without increasing the resources. In other words, exacerbate this ends-means gap that we were already struggling with. We were worried about it at the time, but in retrospect, that proved to be a pivotal decision and made the decision to surge a little bit easier down the road.

SAYLE: There was a large or an important meeting on November 26th in the solarium.

Was that the culmination of the review, or what did that --

FEAVER: No, no, that was -- you'll have to ask Meghan about that. I was not in that meeting. At that point, it still wasn't clear to us that the President was going to decide for a surge. There was no strong consensus that was emerging from the interagency review. There was consensus on some smaller issues. [01:19:00] The very first issue we resolved, I remember this, was that the combat brigades would

provide organic security for the PRTs. They had tried all year to get that resolved, and JCS, or MNF-I, had been reluctant to do it, because it was a very major mission. But without it, PRTs were unable to do their job.

I remember General Lute saying, “OK. We can do that.” That was sort of a psychological ah-ha! We have our final first decision from this long, long process where we finally have consensus. That was one area of consensus. There were small areas of consensus, but not on the big issues. Out of that meeting -- either going into that meeting, or coming out of that meeting -- the instructions from Hadley were, produce [01:20:00] an emerging consensus document that would bring together all the different pieces. At that point, we still didn’t have a consensus, because we had State view, a JCS view, and there was no consensus.

I wasn’t in the meeting. I’ve heard Meghan’s description of it, but it would be best to get her description on the record.

INBODEN: Can I ask another follow-up on this. You mentioned the JCS view, which was channeling General Casey in-theater. Was General Abizaid weighing in at all? Did CENTCOM have much of a voice in this?

FEAVER: Both of them were represented by Sattler and Lute, who were the JCS reps. We didn’t have separate MNF-I or CENTCOM reps. Their views were well-known. Abizaid in particular was a very eloquent [01:21:00] explainer of the view that American troops over time would produce their own resistance. The longer you delayed, the longer you stayed, the more the insurgency will grow. He was very

articulate on that point. We knew what his view was, and JCS reps would articulate that view.

But one of the challenges here is, we still don't have a formal surge option. We have all of the NSC work; we have the staff work that we've done that tells us we could do a surge, it's physically possible, whether it's impossible or not. And we had other ideas of how to use them, but we did not have an interagency defender of that option. [01:22:00] This was, from Meghan's point of view and J. D.'s point of view, this was a challenge. How could we play our honest broker role without -- and yet present the President with a surge option, when no one is producing the Surge option; and how are we going to get the President to overrule the military?

This was one of those times where our separate pattern of bringing in outside experts to meet with the President gave us an option. We said, let's bring to the President a series of experts who will tell him, yes, you can overrule the generals in wartime. That is a responsible thing to do. I proposed that we bring in Eliot Cohen who would make that argument; [01:23:00] Steve Biddle who would make that argument; Wayne Downing who had been an advocate of the "go light" approach, but, I knew, believed that you could and should overrule generals in wartime; and Jack Keane who was similarly doing that and advocating for the Surge.

We arranged a meeting for the President to meet with these experts. The focus of that meeting was, and I pre-briefed them -- I said, you can say whatever

you want to the President, but I want you to say is, talk about how a strategic leader interacts with the military in wartime on decision where he might disagree with the military. That's the grand strategy question. Speak to the President about that issue, based on your research, based on your expertise.

Each one of them did that. I think maybe Barry McCaffrey was the other one. [01:24:00]

SAYLE: Yes.

FEAVER: Yeah. They each hit that point in a different way. They all had their own Iraq hobby horse which they presented, but they all hit that point and said: Yeah. If you need to, that's the responsible thing to do. We also knew, of course, that Jack Keane had been part of the AEI group that was advocating the Surge, and a well-developed surge approach. From the NSC staff point of view, the value of that proposal was, it allowed us to go to the Joint Staff and say: Hey, we've just seen this briefing. This was just in over here in the West Wing. What do you guys think about this? Give us your feedback.

It was a stalking horse that allowed, rather than forcing the JCS to come up with a surge option, it was asking the JCS to comment on a surge option [01:25:00] that had already been briefed at high levels, and was getting some attention around town. That, I think, was an important catalyst for getting through the civil-military challenge of overruling generals on a strategic issue -- overruling the ground force commanding generals.

SAYLE: Jack Keane, General Jack Keane's points and the NSC staff points were obviously complementary. How much coordination or concert was there between, or was it a happy coincidence? How did that develop?

FEAVER: I said they had asked me to participate. I couldn't participate. We were talking to the same people they were talking to in terms of the mid-level officers, and thought-leaders in the military, some of the same ones. Of course, Jack Keane was over talking to Meghan, [01:26:00] talking to Vice President Cheney. I believe December 11th was his first time talking to the President, so he hadn't been -- and at that time I don't believe he mentioned his surge strategy effort. He might have. I don't remember. That wasn't the focus of the meeting. It was more about strategic decision-making.

Beyond that there wasn't a lot of direct coordination. I will say, though, that when the President, two days later, goes to the Tank to meet with the Chiefs, I think we see some of the fruits of the effort that Lisa Disbrow had done, because he goes in with sweeteners. [01:27:00] Some of his sweeteners are the increased troops. Coming out of that meeting is when we start to get a sense that the President really is leaning towards the Surge option. While some people saw earlier than I did that that's where the President was going to end up, I don't think I was sure where the process would end up until mid-December. I thought that's what the President would want, but I could also imagine the process of: generals

strongly opposed; Secretary of State strongly opposed; we might not end up with a surge option.

From that point on, mid-December on, then two other issues become the remaining sticking points. One is, when are we going to release this. [01:28:00] There was an effort to release it before Christmas so that this issue wouldn't fester over Christmas. Then we actually had a big speech block scheduled late December; December 21 or something like that.

I remember talking to Meghan and to Dan Bartlett saying, "There's no way." We are not going to be ready, because there's still a whole lot of issues to be resolved. By the way, we don't have a Secretary of Defense throughout this process. One of the things that I was worried about, I think I was the only one worrying about it, but Secretary Gates had delayed the start of his time as Sec Def, so as to finish his term as Chancellor [President] of Texas A&M, and wait until their graduation which was December 17th, or something like that.

I remember thinking, we need you as Sec Def now. We're in this interregnum [01:29:00] and this is when we're making all the crucial decisions. There's no way we can do an announcement of this strategy without having everything lined up. At some point, Dan Bartlett makes the right call to delay it until January, even though politically we thought that's leaving a lot of time for this to fester. We had tried originally to be done in time so that when the Baker-Hamilton Commission report got out, we could report out. We failed in getting

that done. That was the issue of timing, but then by far and away the most important remaining issue was this question of, how many. The President's now leaning towards a surge. OK, how many troops will we surge in.

This is [01:30:00] where the capacity of my office to interact with the rest of the White House was helpful, because there was an argument from inside the National Security team, not from the NSC, but from the interagency saying, OK, the way to compromise on the Surge is, we'll do a surge, but we'll do a mini-surge and that will compromise us with the difference with JCS. Interagencies often go for split-the-difference solutions. I think that's where Gates was, that's where JCS was, I think the State Department was -- I'm not sure where State Department was at this point.

We seemed to be moving in that direction. Meghan and I, John Hannah, we thought that would be a disaster. It would be the wrong answer in policy terms. [01:31:00] I remember talking to someone, that's just enough to fail, just like we've done up until now. But, the other piece was, that would be politically a disaster, because the version of that strategy was, we'll send in two and then if we still need more, we'll send in the third. Then if that doesn't work, we'll send in the fourth. In other words, that required us to keep on going back to the American people and saying, "Guess what? It's still not working. We're going to try a little bit more. It's still not working." That would be politically so much harder.

I was able to talk to the political side of the House and say, “Do you think you could manage that strategy, or would you prefer to have to swallow the whole pill all at once?” For them it was a no-brainer. They want to swallow the whole pill all at once, so [they’d be] able to then inject that back into the discussion saying, “This would be a disaster politically.” [01:32:00]

SAYLE: Maybe you can move to the domestic political scene in Baghdad, just quickly. In the fall, in October, there had been questions about Maliki. In December when the Surge, there’s momentum building for the Surge, has there been a decision made on Maliki? Is he going to be a willing partner?

FEAVER: Two of the options that had been presented as alternatives, “Bet on Maliki,” and “Double-Down.” The actual Surge strategy ends up being the blending of those two. The elements that were bet on Maliki, empower Maliki, and also we’re going to send the Surge. You need to do both. Yes, the decision in that emerging consensus paper that became the Surge strategy, we had this judgment that we’re going to bet on Maliki, we’re going to bet that he is -- that the deficiencies [01:33:00] we’ve seen are not because he’s a sectarian at heart, but because he is either poorly advised, or poorly informed, or poorly equipped. We’re going to solve those other three problems for him -- not solve but try to work on addressing these other three problems, but bet on him. That piece does get locked in.

SAYLE: Could you pinpoint a time, is it possible to nail down when the President had decided on a surge? How early did that decision happen in your mind?

FEAVER: I wasn't sure that's where we were going to end up. In hindsight, the decision to elevate population security to be co-equal with train and transition, and actually first among equals, that decision was critical, because that required the Surge. I think that meeting in the Tank [01:34:00] was critical. It was clear that the President went into the Tank leaning towards the Surge, and came out of the tank believing that he could do the Surge without provoking a revolt of the generals. That was also critical.

But, I know from reading, I didn't know it at the time, but when he interviewed Gates for the job, he asked Gates whether he would support the Surge. The President was obviously thinking about a surge much, much earlier. The President was reading the POTUS Note every night. The logical inference of those accumulated papers was, we don't have enough troops. He probably reached that judgment much, much earlier than I perceived it.

SAYLE: Did the President have other options besides the Surge? After looking at all the options that came across your desk, and in all of these meetings, [01:35:00] was there another acceptable choice strategically or politically for the President?

FEAVER: Yes. I don't think it would have been good for the country, but the President had an option to just embrace the Baker-Hamilton report. When Baker-Hamilton came out, what it basically did was tell us to do the current strategy. Do it a little faster, but basically do the current strategy. The guts of Baker-Hamilton's recommendations were, do the Casey-Zal strategy. Then they also said, there's all

this other stuff having to do with Palestinian peace, Syria, and all that stuff which is largely unrelated to the Iraq central piece.

The Iraq central piece was, “continue doing what you’ve been doing; just do it the next phase and do it faster.” If the President had wanted to stick with the existing strategy, he could have said, well, we’re just going to follow the lead of Baker-Hamilton [01:36:00] and then throw me into the briar patch. I think that’s what it was teed up to do. It was designed at a time when we thought that was the right strategy, and it recommended back to us to do that strategy.

By that the time, I’m glad the President didn’t choose that, because by that time almost none of his advisors believed that strategy would work. The folks in the field still believed it would, but none of the DC-based people thought it would. That would have been hard to have the team rally behind that one, because we thought that strategy would not work.

SAYLE: How would you characterize the President’s decision to surge troops into Iraq overall?

FEAVER: I think it was a remarkably courageous decision that played out [01:37:00] in a much slower way than I would have liked. I arrived with an academic conceit that, “Oh, all you need to do this pitch -- have the advocates duke it out in front of the President.” I remember several times recommending to Steve and Meghan, “Why don’t we just assign each one of us on the NSC staff to argue before the President, Surge, the different options in a pitch piece battle and let’s use expendable

members of the NSC; me and Will can be expendable. We'll argue for each one of these positions, and the President can then say, 'I'm persuaded.' The rest of the team will point out all the flaws and then the President will make a decision." That's sort of an academic way of thinking about it. The President and Steve Hadley wisely did not do that, because that would have created real losers [01:38:00] in a very abrupt way that would have potentially fractured his national security team.

The Surge worked, but the Surge worked because we were able to maintain the political support for the Surge long enough for the Surge to work. That was a huge effort in itself; a very close-run thing. We came within one or two Republican Senators of losing the Surge, the political support for the Surge. If we had had a fractured national security team going into it, then I think it would have made it impossible to hold the political support long enough for the Surge to work.

So, in the end, the messier way and slower, and more incremental way that we arrived at the Surge decision turned out to be better than the version, the way that I had wanted it to go. [01:39:00] But at the time, I remember fearing that we were moving too slowly and too incrementally, and I wasn't sure we were going to end up in a good place.

INBODEN: Since you mentioned Congress to follow up on that, throughout 2006 there had been diminishing Republican congressional support for the entire Iraq enterprise. Then you had voices like Senator McCain and Graham who, for a long

time they'd been calling for more troops; maybe not a whole other strategy. What role did Congress play in the November, December, January timeframe? Were there any influential congressional voices that helped shape the strategy like McCain and Graham, or was it just, the president decides the strategy, now how do we go sell it to Congress, or at least persuade Congress not to tank the thing.

FEAVER: No. We knew what the congressional voices were. Beyond what was in the public record, [01:40:00] there wasn't a lot of behind-the-scenes influence. This was one of the cases where I made a fatally flawed analysis. One of the arguments I used in favor of the Surge at this time, in hindsight, looks absurd. I made the argument that there was a chance we could get political breathing room to implement the Surge, because in talking to Jack Keane, who was talking to Senator Clinton, it was our belief -- it was his belief that Senator Clinton was open to the idea [01:41:00] of a surge. She, of course, was going to be the next president, and everyone knew that in the fall of '06, she would see the wisdom of having this solved on our watch so that when she was president, she wouldn't have to deal with this mess. While she wouldn't praise Bush, I thought it was possible that she would be tepid in her criticism of the Surge.

One of the minor arguments about the -- obviously, it wasn't an important one in the House, but it was another potential benefit of doing it was, we might buy a little bit of respite from the criticism. What I had missed was that, that may have been where Senator Clinton was in October-November but by November-

December already she was under extreme pressure from her left flank with the rise of Senator Obama, and that drove her to the left. [01:42:00]

And so when the President asked the Surge he was roundly denounced by Senator Clinton, Senator Obama, and all of the Democrats. Of course, after the midterm elections it was no surprise, they had been elected on denouncing Iraq, so it's no surprise really that they criticized it. I was probably alone inside thinking that this might buy us a little bit of bipartisan respite. But, in any case, it didn't.

BRANDS: Peter, you've written a little bit about the relationship between history and policy in the Bush White House. Were there particular historical echoes that you were hearing as you were doing your work on the Iraq project in 2006?

FEAVER: That's a good question. I know that there was one question [01:43:00] which had historical resonance was, how often can you reboot a war? How many chances do you get? The historical record is not filled with lots of examples of full reboots. One of my big takeaways in the fall was, we're going to get one chance at this. There's not a lot of historical examples of multiple, multiple changes. It's kind of a negative historical example.

So when we were getting recommendations for incremental changes, or split the difference kind of stuff, I was -- we are well past that. We get one last chance, so it's all in. Whatever you want to do, whatever you think you need to do, do it now. That would be the one that I would draw attention to. [01:44:00] The other one, more modest, was remembering that the first Iraq war effort, the

2003 invasion, was criticized for inadequate contingency planning. What if things went wrong? So one of my hobby horses in the Iraq strategy review, which was, we were going to do better at contingency planning this time around. I came up with a list of 15 things, you know, a parade of horrors. What could happen that -- critical vulnerabilities, assumptions that were critical in this strategy. I remember it was like 15. Then try to task the interagency to develop contingency plans for, if this happens, what are we going to do? The State Department said, well, we don't have [01:45:00] anyone to do contingency planning, so do you want me to take desk officers off the line to do this? No. The MNF-I said, thank you for your interest in national security, but we do contingency planning. Don't worry about it. This effort did not receive full enthusiastic support from the interagency.

And, as the next six months progressed, we hit four or five of the things that I'd identified as fatal to the mission, happened anyway, and they turned out not to be fatal. They triggered before we had developed good contingency plans for reacting to it. Of course, Petraeus and Crocker adapted and muddled through. That was my other contribution to the Surge was that effort, which was a modest contribution.

INBODEN: Can I ask one more question. [01:46:00] At what point in the review and planning for the Surge does General Petraeus pop on the NSC staff's radar screen as potentially an important player?

FEAVER: He was a major figure intellectually because of the COIN theory, which suffused the Surge strategy, but the idea of him as the new commander, MNF-I commander, that comes quite late; at least my awareness of it comes quite late in December. If there was discussion before that, I didn't know about it.

SAYLE: Well we're coming to an end and we're not going to talk about the implementation of the Surge. But as we get closer to the date of the announcement of the Surge in January, 2007, how long was the Surge going to last? What was the planning? [01:47:00]

FEAVER: This was a crucial piece of it was, I argued and others argued, we have to give it as much time as possible because it's going to take a while to actually flow the troops in. One of the little known facts, one of the things we were worried about is, we're going to announce the Surge on January 10 but we're not going to have all the troops in until June. What if the Surge is strangled in the cradle? What if the Shia rise up, what if Sadr and the Shia's militias rise up and try to strangle the Surge before it's had a chance to actually take place?

We've got to buy as long as possible. I advocated for, I believe, for a year. Let's promise a review in a year. What we're hearing back from the Hill is: way too long, way too long. I said, "OK, what about we'll do a mid-course update [01:48:00] in September. It's not a full year, but midway through." They said that thing -- that's the Petraeus-Crocker report -- that went from being a midcourse update to being: you're going to do an assessment in September, up or down, and we're

going to vote on whether this is working. We thought this was way too soon to show results.

I remember fearing that we had sort of planted this birth defect into the Surge, that we were going to do a review so soon before it could take place. As it turns out, it was just long enough to see some results, and the Crocker-Petraeus testimony in September proved crucial in taking the political sting out of the Surge. I remember arguing that we needed even longer than that before we could commit to it. [01:49:00] Not commit to it. Before we could assess whether it had succeeded or failed.

SAYLE: Is there any else that you think you should share with us before we wrap up?

FEAVER: Yes. The Surge is misunderstood in -- there's one crucial aspect of the Surge. It was largely a bottom-up reconciliation approach. It was changing some of the theory of the previous strategy about how you get top-down reconciliation. If you look at the January 10th -- there's a PowerPoint or a paper, fact sheet, that describes the changes in thinking that are connecting the Surge. That clarity is lost because at the very last moment, just as we were about to announce it, we hear from Zal [01:50:00] that he thinks he's finally gotten agreement on one of the top-down compacts that he was pushing.

We said, well, we've been here before. This is like Lucy and the football. We've always been just a couple weeks away. He says: "No, no, no. We're really, really just a couple weeks away. We said: "Well, that will give us an early success.

Why don't we just add that as part of the Surge strategy so that we can show an early success within two or three weeks out of the thing. Already, see? The new strategy's working."

We add that in even though the logic of it is really from the old strategy, we add that in, and sure enough we don't get that. For the next six months, the failure to get that is proof that the Surge is not working, even though the Surge strategy was very different in its conception. Some of the [01:51:00] last-minute compromises and changes that we did complicated the politics of it, if not the implementation of it. That would be one other thing I'd add.

SAYLE: OK. Thanks very much for meeting with us today.

FEAVER: Thank you.

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