



The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Robert Gates

Secretary of Defense, 2006-2011

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[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

ENGEL: [00:00:00] So just to refresh so we're on the same page, we're looking exclusively at the Surge. The real fundamental question that's driving the entire project is trying



to understand the evolution of President Bush's thinking about the Surge, and focusing really hard on how it is he came to make the decision, when he made the decision, and then how he decided to roll out the decision. Obviously, these are things that you cover extensively in your book, but one of the things I want to mention is that we'll touch on things you already talked about in the book, of course, because the entire project is designed to present information for future historians. So on one hand, we're going to ask things that need a little bit more explanation for the person who doesn't know from 2007, who didn't live through 2007, but the other point is that we're probably going to ask some questions where you're going to say, "Shouldn't you guys know that?" and the answer is we hopefully do, but we're not [00:01:00] sure that necessarily the Ph.D. student 20 years from now is going to know that information. So we're trying to do a service to future generations. We're all going to be engaged in the conversation, and we just want to make it a conversation. As we always say, our goal here is to help you tell your story to the future. We're all about just helping you describe what you want to say.

GATES: OK.

ENGEL: Any questions before we get going?

GATES: No.

ENGEL: Great. Will, I think we'd like you to kick us off.

INBODEN: OK, sure thing. Mr. Secretary, when you first agreed to serve as secretary of defense, answering President Bush's call, did you think there was any way that Iraq



could be salvaged? Or did you believe that your focus as SecDef was going to be on just extricating the US from a failed war?

GATES: I think that I was greatly advantaged when I was asked to become secretary by having served [00:02:00] on the Iraq Study Group. This group, led by Lee Hamilton and former Secretary of State Jim Baker, spent seven months talking to every expert in the government and out of government, and field commanders as well as members of the Joint Chiefs, and Colin Powell and a variety of others, about the situation in Iraq. We had half a dozen meetings, all-day meetings, in Washington. So when we went to Iraq in September of 2006, I think we were pretty well up to speed. We'd also met with the President and his senior team. [00:03:00] So I think we probably were as aware of what was going on in Iraq and the challenges facing the United States as anybody in or out of government at that point. And as I write in the book, seeing it firsthand added a lot of color, but also brought home some of the points that were really important.

So my belief, by the time we ended our session in September in Baghdad, I believed that there was the opportunity to stabilize Iraq and to bring it to a place where the United States' eventual departure would not be seen as a strategic defeat with either regional or global consequences. So I thought [00:04:00] it was about extricating the US, but it was extricating the US under the most favorable possible circumstances so that this long war had not had a dramatically negative effect on the U.S., in the region or elsewhere.

INBODEN: To follow up on that, when you got the call in October from the President to become secretary of defense, of course you had already done the Baker-Hamilton meetings. What did you see as the range of possibilities at the time for US strategy, for a new approach?

GATES: About literally a week before National Security Advisor Steve Hadley called me and asked me -- the President asked me to become secretary, would I do it -- about a week before that call, I had sent an email [00:05:00] to both Baker and Hamilton, recommending a surge. I had been persuaded by our visits to Baghdad, by the conversations we'd had with everybody, that we had to improve the security situation, particularly in Baghdad, before we could begin to think about transition to Iraqi security responsibility and making any kind of political progress. So I had recommended a surge in this email in mid-October. Interestingly enough, so had two other members of the Iraq Study Group, just in our internal communications, Chuck Robb and Bill Perry. We each had a little different approach to it. Perry thought you could just [00:06:00] take reserves from Kuwait and elsewhere to augment. Robb, I think, thought we would have to bring troops from Europe. I didn't really address that. I just said I thought we would need 25,000 to 40,000 troops. So I had a pretty good feeling that the only way we could improve the security situation was through an increase in US troops.

ENGEL: Can I ask two questions on that point? The first is, you make the point in the book that that recommendation from those three emails did not become a highlight



of the final report. I think you said it wound up being on page 93. Can you walk us through that process, why the surge idea did not make it into a higher order of magnitude?

GATES: Well, because I wasn't there, because I resigned from the group as soon as I accepted the position, and they had not finalized their recommendations.

[00:07:00] So my views on that are entirely speculative. I don't know, and to be honest, I've never talked to anybody about it. But I think that the major thing that happened was the November 2006 elections, and the feeling on the part of the Democratic members of the group that they absolutely did not want to highlight or recommend a big troop increase, because the message of the electorate had been, Get the hell out of Iraq.

ENGEL: One more on this point. Because you mentioned that there are different people writing, when you're still on the Iraq Study Group, about the idea of a surge, what did you think at that particular moment -- I'm talking about before you began talking with Hadley about the possibility of moving on -- what did you think that the Surge was designed to accomplish? What was the 25,000-40,000 more troops going to do? [00:08:00] This obviously becomes a very big question later on in your memoir about how long they're going to be there or what they're going to be there. What was your thinking, if you recall, in this October period on this point?

GATES: I think you have to roll the calendar back to the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque and the dramatic deterioration in the security situation in Iraq after that. Things



had been going marginally well enough that until the bombing of that mosque, General Casey's plan was still to draw down from 15 to 10 brigade combat teams by the end of the year. The situation got so bad even he decided that wasn't possible. So my view [00:09:00] was that this was a surge -- I mean, the whole semantics of a surge is a temporary, kind of major infusion of capability until the situation stabilized, and then we would withdraw. Gradually, I hoped, and as the situation got better.

Now, in my recommendations in the Iraq Study Group, I said the duration of the surge should also be directly connected to certain benchmarks for the Iraqi government in terms of things they had to do, like not interfering in the arrests of Shi'a who might be prominent politicians, were involved in the militias and worsening the security situation. By the very nature of the term "surge," I saw it as a temporary thing [00:10:00] that would be required. This was really the advice and what we were hearing from most of the experts. You really just need to stabilize the security situation, because you can't make progress on anything else, including transfer of security responsibilities, until the downward spiral that began with the bombing of the mosque had been reversed.

SAYLE: May I ask about your meeting with the President in your early November at Crawford? Your account in your book is one of the first on public record to reveal the President thinking about or talking about a surge, when he mentioned to you he was thinking about a surge. Did you discuss that idea in detail, or what did you take



the President's description of the Surge to mean? Did he describe it? What did he speak about as far as a surge?

GATES: Not in any detail. I don't think that his -- I came to believe that [00:11:00] the President had begun to have doubts about the strategy that we were then pursuing by late spring or early summer. That's when you begin to get some churn in the interagency. Independent agencies beginning to decide, well, maybe we ought to take a look at this. I think he had concluded by the time -- well, he said in our meeting, "Our strategy isn't working, and I think we're going to need to have a surge." He didn't elaborate on what the Surge would be, how long it would be, how many troops were involved, just that we needed to change course, that what we were doing wasn't working.

ENGEL: If I could follow up on that. I hate to do this. I want to do a close reading of your book. [00:12:00] I'll remind you that I loved you when I was one of your faculty members. You enabled us to do this. Let me read you just one quick passage from page 39, which is elaborating on this point, but from a somewhat different moment. Not the Crawford moment, but later on, in December, the second week of December when you meet with the President, you had written --

GATES: This is when?

ENGEL: The second week of December, right before the President went down to the tank with you and also Secretary Rumsfeld. "We had been discussing when Bush might make a speech if he decided to change the strategy and order a surge. He had



decided to hold off until I was sworn in and could go to Iraq as secretary and return with my recommendations. I urged that he not let events drive the date of the speech. If he was not ready, then he should delay. Better a tactical delay than a strategic mistake." I think I want to hand you, if you want --

GATES: No, I remember.

ENGEL: I just want to try to nail down when the President had made his decision.

[00:13:00] The tense that you're using there, the subjective tense you're using there, is that he has already decided by December that he's going to surge, and you're really just deciding whether or not you're going to announce it at what particular moment. Is that a fair reading of --

GATES: I think he had decided. My opinion is he had decided on the Surge. But again, very much in the same terms, I think, that we had discussed it at Crawford in my interview with him before I was nominated. That is, he knew he was going to surge, but he didn't have any idea how much, how long. I don't think any of those details were clear in his mind at that point. He just knew that this was the only way forward. And so on the timing, when I was talking about strategic mistake, it was not whether or not to do the Surge. It was, If, to get the ducks in a row, including [00:14:00] Maliki, required taking a little more time, that that was better than rushing it before the cake was fully baked, if you will.

INBODEN: In the same time when you're stepping in, transitioning to the Pentagon job, we're trying to get a better sense for the state of thinking at the Pentagon, if you will.



Two-part question. First, in your transition conversations with outgoing Secretary Rumsfeld, what seemed to be his assessment of Iraq and his thinking on the possibility of a surge? Then, second, what was the rest of the building thinking about in terms of was there a fairly uniform Pentagon position that you inherited and then had to work with, or was it [inaudible]?

GATES: First of all, before I became secretary, other than what I observed in the tank on the 13th, I had no idea what the feeling inside the building was, because until I was sworn in, I stayed out of the building. [00:15:00] I don't recall that Secretary Rumsfeld and I discussed Iraq in any detail at all. I didn't make any notes. We met. I think he came to see me once, maybe twice, in the old EOB, and it was more about big issues at the Pentagon that really were unrelated to the war, as best I can recall.

ENGEL: Can you recall what those issues were?

GATES: I'm sure it had to do with the budget, with the Congress, the usual suspects.

SAYLE: In this interregnum period, there was this sort of remarkable situation. There's an interagency strategy review, led by JD Crouch. DoD is represented on that, first by Stephen Cambone, and then Eric Edelman. I'm wondering if you were briefed on that at all, if you gave Eric Edelman any directions [00:16:00] on the review, or were you totally arm's length for that?

GATES: I don't think I ever met Eric Edelman until after I was sworn in.

SAYLE: And what about the Council of Colonels study that's going on? Were you briefed on that at all?

GATES: No.

SAYLE: OK, great. So maybe we should --

GATES: During that period, until I was sworn in, other than the meetings in the White House, and the one meeting with the President in the tank, I had no interaction with the Department of Defense at all, except through Gordon England and Robert Rangel, which was basically briefing me on, here's what the Pentagon looks like; here's the organization. They gave me this org chart for the Pentagon that looked like an AT&T telephone diagram. It was incomprehensible. About issues that I was going to face right away, [00:17:00] but they were not Iraq-type issues. They were the budget and various other things like that. But mainly it was -- and in fact, my guidance to Rangel was, I don't want to know too much about too much, because then I'm in a position in my hearings to say, "I don't know. I'll follow up. I'll look into that," etc., etc. If I know too much, I'm going to get into trouble, and particularly on things like weapon systems and so on where they made it clear that -- for example, in the Senate Armed Services Committee, I had members who favored a particular weapon system, and I had members who opposed it on the same committee, so best not to get into it at all. That was basically the only interaction I had with the department until I became secretary.

ENGEL: As a historian and a person who obviously has government experience before this current post that we're talking, were you surprised by the size of that org chart? By the [00:18:00] complexity of that org chart? Obviously, we all know that the Cold



War bureaucracy is a big thing, but from 1992 until 2007, had you been surprised by the evolution of it? Had you realized that [inaudible]?

GATES: No. First of all, I had never worked in DoD. I had a pretty good idea of sort of what the E-ring looked like, but I didn't have any idea of the intricate structure. Rumsfeld once gave a speech that said between him and an action officer, there are like 15 layers. I was told when I became secretary, it was like 25. I don't think I had any full appreciation of how complicated the department was. What became especially important was [00:19:00] the early dawning revelation to me, or recognition, that all these parts were independent, and the only person in the department who could tell them all what to do was the secretary.

SAYLE: You mentioned that you weren't speaking with the department as much in that period before you became secretary, but there were the meetings at the White House. Were those meetings dealing with the possibility of a surge? Were you thinking about Iraq strategy in that period, or discussing with --

GATES: Yeah, that was almost entirely what it was. As I recall, there really was only the meeting on the 12th that I participated in, and that was about Iraq.

ENGEL: Just to return to this broader point of when the President was deciding the evolution of his thinking, [00:20:00] is that the first meeting that you recall where you discussed size and numbers and duration of a surge?

GATES: I don't think we discussed any of that on the 12th. I don't think we discussed any of those details.

ENGEL: So in both the Crawford meeting and the subsequent meeting on the 12th, it's basically an analog conversation? Are we going to surge or not?

GATES: Yes. And no, because I think that that question, he'd already answered in his own mind. Then he was talking about kind of how do we do it, politically how do we handle it, how do I get the Chiefs on board? It was more, how do I bring this government together to move in this direction at this point? This was one of the things that I admired about the guy. It was clear that his decision to go for the Surge [00:21:00] was contrary to the recommendations of every one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to his central command commander and the field commander. His Secretary of Defense had only recently come around to the notion that maybe it was necessary. His secretary of state didn't think it was a very good idea. This is a period during which -- and I think this is important from your standpoint, or from a historian's standpoint. This is a point at which the President of the United States is basically taking this whole thing onto his shoulders. Doing something that a couple of military people he respects think he should do, but his own instincts.

ENGEL: This is actually something I want to ask you, especially as a historian. One is immediately drawn to the counter-analogy, [00:22:00] or the counter-argument that the President should not get involved in too far down the strategic decision-making level. We do not want the President picking bomb targets in the basement of the White House is the hyperbolic description of this.

GATES: And he never did that.

ENGEL: So where do we draw the line? Where do you draw the line? Because here we have the President, who is going against all of his military advice, and we're told that that is a positive story, but this is also from a President who himself has said, in earlier iterations, "I follow my commanders advice on strategy in the field."

GATES: Up to a point. The thing not to lose sight of is that he did what every wartime president of the United States has done. You go back and look at the decisions that Roosevelt made in 1941 and 1942. Directly contrary to the recommendations [00:23:00] of Marshall and the other service leaders. Directly in contrast to the joint committee with the Brits, of their generals as well. Lincoln. Bush 41, in terms of the left hook, and actually deciding to liberate Kuwait in the first place. This was contrary to what his generals were recommending. They wanted to sit tight in Saudi Arabia. They'd protected the Saudi oil fields. Let's forget it. From my vantage point, both having sat through this experience with Bush 41, but also having read the history of Marshall. Look at Truman firing MacArthur. This is not atypical in the American political system for a president [00:24:00] to override his generals and do what he thinks is the right strategy.

ENGEL: Let's delve down into the analogy for a second. Because when Roosevelt makes his decision to -- let's take one example -- to override Marshall on the decision to invade North Africa, Operation Torch is something that Marshall did not want to do. Roosevelt's response is, we need to do this for political reasons at home. People need to feel that we're fighting, as much as for anything militarily. Do you think



that that is why President Bush -- we're trying to understand, is President Bush's decision --

GATES: I think that oversimplifies. I think Roosevelt also was very concerned that American troops needed to be blooded before trying to cross the channel and attacking the western wall. There was a very real military purpose to what he wanted to do. He also believed that if you could drive Rommel, drive the Germans [00:25:00] out of North Africa, then you would first of all show that the Nazi gains could -- by attacking Germany on the periphery, where it was less able to -- had bad lines of supply and so on -- that first of all you could show that the war was reversing, that the Nazis could be beaten, and you gave our own troops and generals some experience before they took on the real challenge.

I think I know where you were driving. I think Bush's decision had almost nothing to do with domestic politics. Because in every respect, as subsequent events would show, it was unpopular. He did it because he believed it was necessary to salvage Iraq, period.

INBODEN: To follow up on this, [00:26:00] particularly the President's relationship with the military, tell us a little bit more about the December 13th meeting with the Joint Chiefs in the tank, and especially the concerns that were voiced there about the health of the force.

GATES: The Chiefs basically were all aligned in opposition to the Surge, and basically arguing that the force was exhausted. By that time, they had been at war in



Afghanistan six years, three years in Iraq. And they were worried, as they would repeat over and over again, that he was going to break the force. As has been written about, as I wrote about, he says at [00:27:00] the end, "I think the surest way to break the force is to lose a war." I agreed with that. The concerns they expressed were real, and I would address those almost immediately on becoming secretary. But I thought, strategically, he had the better argument.

SAYLE: In that meeting with the president, he's almost spring-loaded, as Stephen Hadley put it.

GATES: But the key about that meeting was that the president was actually -- it was not a confrontational meeting. The president was there to try and bring these guys on board, not to confront them or to sort of challenge them. He was there to explain his thinking about why this was necessary and why they had to find the resources to be able to do it.

ENGEL: [00:28:00] Let me just ask about this then again, because we're trying to get in our mind not only when the president has made the decision, which obviously he has, in your interpretation -- in your sense, at this point, the president has made the decision to surge. What did you understand the Chiefs to understand the President's position at that time, in that was he there to tell them, "This is what I'm doing"? Or, officially at least, is it still an open question?

GATES: Officially, it's still an open question.

ENGEL: And how big would you say that official is?



GATES: Pretty big. First of all, because of his concern about leaks, the president had been very careful about with whom he discussed his feelings and his sense of what had to be done. So at this point, [00:29:00] for people outside of his inner circle, he is still debating this. This debate is still going on, and it's still an open question whether to do this, and not so much how. I think that was the atmosphere of the meeting in the tank, and it was also him trying to explain why he was leaning in the direction of a surge, and why he thought that the American military could do it, rather than sort of facing off with these guys. That was not his purpose in the meeting. And he did, I would say, on the civilian side, even though Rumsfeld and Cheney and Hadley and I were all there, I would say that the President[00:30:00] did 95% of the talking.

ENGEL: What -- I'm sorry --

GATES: Cheney made a few interventions, and Rumsfeld was basically silent, and I didn't say anything, and neither did Hadley.

ENGEL: How would you characterize -- and I ask this because we've had many descriptions of this meeting, so we'd like to get yours on tape. How would you characterize the president's statements, those 95% of his doing the talking? Was he asking questions? Was he putting forward, here's why this would be a good idea? Is he asking leading questions to get them to come to his side of the table? How would you characterize what he was saying?

GATES: I think the honest answer to that question is I don't remember the specifics that well.



SAYLE: The President goes into that meeting spring-loaded to offer an increase in end strength to the ground forces. [00:31:00] Is that critical to bringing the Chiefs along? Is that the draw here?

GATES: First of all, I don't remember him raising that. Others might, but I don't. That was first raised in my interview with him, where I said that I thought that particularly the Army and the Marine Corps were being given too much to do for the size. As I make clear in the book, as early as January 3rd, I tell him what I'm going to do. Twenty-seven thousand more Marines, 65,000 more troops, and cost of up to \$20 billion. I had been in the job two weeks. He was totally on board with that. I honestly don't remember him raising end strength in the meeting. It may have come up as kind of a generality: well, maybe we need to think about that, or something like that. And he may not even have [00:32:00] remembered at that point that I had raised it in my interview with him when he asked me what my issues were, and that was one of the four or five issues that I raised with him.

SAYLE: Another issue -- I believe the Chiefs raised this at the meeting, the Council of Colonels, some of those members raised, and Chiefs raised it at other points -- is vulnerability, creating risk in places like North Korea and elsewhere around the world if more troops are sent to Iraq. What did you make of that?

GATES: I thought it was -- you're jogging my memory -- it seemed like a legitimate concern. But for the same reason I was prepared to nominate an Air Force officer to be the commander in Korea, we were not going to put a big land army in Korea to



fight the north. It was going to be the Navy and the Air Force that fought that fight.

ENGEL: This just occurred to me, and I'll give you a chance here to [00:33:00] plug your forthcoming book. When you took on a position at Texas --

GATES: Twenty years from now, it won't matter. For those Ph.D. students. [laughs]

ENGEL: When you took up the position at Texas A&M, subsequently there's an enlargement of the faculty. You get more, to do more. You come to the Pentagon and are able to enlarge the Marine Corps and the Army. Is there anything to be drawn from that, from your experience of a person who comes in and is given the opportunity to do more with more? Do you think that if it had not been possible, for budgetary reasons, to expand in any way, that that would have -- how would you handle that?

GATES: First of all, my view was in both instances that the two institutions had [00:34:00] stunted on making the improvements that they should have made long ago. So class sizes at A&M were getting out of hand. It was a limitation on our ability to offer new programs. It was a limitation on our ability to improve the ones we had. At the Pentagon, it was basically the force is under too much stress, and we have to do something to relieve this. Just as I would, within a couple of weeks after telling the president about the troop decision, I would make a major change in the way the National Guard was deployed. That was another point that I had raised with him in my interview. I didn't know jack about the Pentagon. But instinctively and from my reading, I knew we didn't have enough troops, and I knew that we had pulled a



bait-and-switch on the National Guard. That [00:35:00] most of these people had signed up thinking they were going to do summer camp and a meeting a month, and be called out for floods and tornadoes and hurricanes, and only go into combat in a great national emergency, and all of a sudden they were serving year-long tours in Iraq. Totally different than what their families had expected, their employers, and so on. So I just felt, in both that case and the case of the end strength, that we were asking too much of the people that we had in the military. I think that the circumstances in each of the institutions were very different.

SAYLE: I wanted to ask one more question --

GATES: The first was more about how do you improve. The second was how do you cope.

ENGEL: I guess my -- [00:36:00] again, this is why I say in terms of the book, as I understand what it's going to be. I haven't read it. I'm sure I will, for the record. In both those instances, you recognize a problem that needs to be solved. You ask for more resources, and the resources are ultimately -- not easily, but ultimately -- forthcoming. What would your reaction have been as a leader of an institution if you had gone and asked for those additional troops, asked for the change in the National Guard, and found that it was not within your capability, with the resources you had, with the resources you could get, to make those changes?

GATES: At that juncture, the thought of not succeeding never occurred to me. It never occurred to me that I might not be able to get those additional troops.

SAYLE: This is actually quite remarkable, because in the [00:37:00] October/November



period, going --

GATES: And partly it was because of the credibility that I had with the Hill at that point. It would turn out not only to be accurate, but it would come true in spades when they came forward with \$40 billion for MRAPs [Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles]. The one thing to understand about the Congress is if the secretary of defense goes public and says, "We need this to protect the lives of our men and women in uniform," there is no way the Congress is going to vote no. Especially if you're in the middle of a war.

SAYLE: In the fall period during the strategy review, the interagency review --

GATES: In other words, I had no plan B.

ENGEL: And that's one of the problems I'm trying to draw out, that because of the political tenor of the time, because of the real crisis atmosphere, if you will, in Washington, that you felt that [00:38:00] you could -- I don't want to say write a blank check for what you needed, but the check was almost blank, if you will. Did you ever fear that you were going to ask for something of a financial commitment, ultimately from Congress, that they were going to say no to in regards to the troops? Any concern whatsoever?

GATES: Not really. And partly because there were voices on the Hill already saying we needed more troops. Just like there were voices on the Hill prior to my proposing the MRAP that were supportive of the MRAP. People forget, and I've got it in the book, that six or eight months before I asked for the money, made the decision on



MRAPs and asked for the money, Joe Biden had gotten money put in the budget, forward funding if we wanted to buy some of these vehicles. So there were [00:39:00] some important voices on the Hill that were already there. So I knew I had allies, and important allies, in trying to get these things done. So the idea of not getting them, frankly, just never crossed my mind. And I think part of it was the extraordinary advantage I had, both with the Congress and with the president. I didn't ask for the job. I'd been given the job. I'd been brought in when we were basically losing two wars, and nobody -- I just had the feeling, first of all, nobody wanted me to quit. [laughs] People knew we were in trouble.

SAYLE: In that fall period, the joint staff was arguing strenuously in the strategy review that there are no more troops [00:40:00] available for Iraq, and the line is, "We're out of Schlitz." To put that with what you were just saying, did you ever hear such an argument from the joint staff? Would anyone say to the secretary of defense, "There are no more troops?" Would you have heard anything like that?

GATES: Oh, yeah. They were always telling me, "We're out of Schlitz."

ENGEL: Why Schlitz?

GATES: [laughs] Go figure. I think they just like the sound of it. "We're out of Schlitz."

And the truth is, that's what led to the decision to extend the tours to fifteen months, because we really were out of Schlitz. The reality of expanding the end strength in the near term was all about morale. That the cavalry was coming. But the reality was, the cavalry wasn't going to be there for a year or two. [00:41:00] So



the reality was, we were out of Schlitz with the Surge, and the only way to make it work was either to cut the amount of time at home or extend the deployment. The Army's recommendation, which I agreed with, was it was better to extend the tours than to cut short the time at home. We either went to 15-month deployments or 9 months at home. There was just no alternative. That's what we had to do, because as the Chiefs were saying, we were out of Schlitz, particularly in terms of the Army and the Marine Corps.

SAYLE: Finally on this period, up to December 13th, he had made the case that the president is bringing along various parts of the government, especially the Chiefs. For those future historians, why can't the president just order the military [00:42:00] to do what he wishes? Why this, not Kabuki theatre, but this exercise in --

GATES: At the end of the day, the president can do that. But then the newspapers and the Congress will be filled with people talking about how the president overrode the advice of his chiefs, how he rode roughshod over them, how he ignored their experienced military advice.

ENGEL: All of which you're telling us he did, but in a different tone.

GATES: But the key is, how do you bring them along? How do you try and persuade them? At a minimum, it's how do you get them to a point where they at least acquiesce and don't actively resist? And I think he did that. The chiefs will, if they're consulted and brought in and [00:43:00] have a chance to make their case, secretary and the president give them all kinds of time to make that case, access to make that case,

they will almost always fall into line and be disciplined. But when a secretary, for example, overrides them, pays no attention to them, you have the same kind of relationship that existed between McNamara and the Chiefs, where the chiefs went to the hill and McNamara was stymied, time and time again. Because the Chiefs would galvanize support on the Hill. So on all the weapon systems that I cut -- most of my predecessors, if they were lucky, could get away with cutting one or two. I cut 33, 35, and not once did the Chiefs go around me to the Hill. So it's how you deal with these people [00:44:00] and the respect you give them, treating them with respect and dignity, listening to them, that you bring them on board. Which doesn't mean that they agree with your decisions, but it means that they're willing to go along. And that's where I think the Chiefs got to.

INBODEN: I'm going to shift gears a second here. Something else that you talk about in your book we'd like you to elaborate on if you can is your trip to Baghdad in December of 2006. Can you describe how that affected your thinking on everything from timing and conditionality and the nature of the Surge, the right people to be carrying it out, things like that?

GATES: I had been secretary for, I think, 36 hours when I went to Baghdad. I think one of the things that -- first of all, Casey and Abizaid made the pitch to me about [00:45:00] maybe two brigade combat teams. But the thing that troubled me the most was Maliki's resistance to the idea of a surge. This was something that I wasn't sure the President had figured on. Maliki really didn't want anybody. He felt the



Iraqi people were assuming America's troop presence was going to diminish, rather steadily. He thought that the American troops were a target, and created more violence because they were a target. He felt this was contrary to the trends that Iraqis were expecting. He was very resistant to the [00:46:00] idea of any surge at all, anybody. Abizaid and Casey told me they thought they could work him around to maybe accepting one BCT, one brigade combat team, early on, and then maybe a second later. And I don't know the extent to which their thinking was influenced by Maliki's resistance. Never had that discussion. But that was the biggest takeaway for me, was the position of Maliki.

INBODEN: When you returned and reported back into the President, how did you share the Maliki factor, Maliki --

GATES: I reported to him what I had heard from Maliki, and he acknowledged that that was going to be a challenge. And I told him what Casey's and Abizaid's recommendation was, and [00:47:00] that I agreed with it. As I write in the book, I think he probably was very disappointed. In the ensuing few days, as I talked to people like Petraeus, General Petraeus, and others, I very quickly tipped to the argument: if you start with two and then have to ask for the other three, it will send the signal we're failing - that if you have to ask for reinforcements. If you start with five, you may not need all five. You don't necessarily have to deploy all five. But if you start with five, then you don't have that problem. And that just seemed eminently logical to me. So I quickly embraced that.



SAYLE: Would that have been discussed at the December 28th meeting in Crawford? Do you recall?

GATES: Yeah, I'm sure it was.

SAYLE: And was that decided on at that [00:48:00] meeting? The five --

INBODEN: The full five.

GATES: I think so. My recollection is that -- I honestly can't remember the details, whether it was then or in a subsequent, early January meeting. But that's certainly where we were headed. And I think it was in the meeting of the 28th.

SAYLE: The published accounts, the secondary sources, suggest that the President -- it was suggested to the President that he ask Chairman Pace at that meeting, is two brigades a decisive force, and Pace said no. General Pace said no, and then that led to the five brigades. Before the Crawford meeting, are you planning or meeting with Pace on how the Surge might unfold at that point? What's the chairman's relationship with the secretary of defense going into the meeting?

GATES: Pete went with me to Baghdad, and I'm sure we were having conversations every day [00:49:00] about it. I just don't remember the particulars.

SAYLE: Last one. You mentioned in the book that you weren't quite ready to overrule your commanders at that point. You took the commanders advice from the field.

GATES: And then I added, but that would quickly change. [laughter]

SAYLE: And that quickly changed.

GATES: Like in five days.



SAYLE: Can you talk about that? It is a burden of responsibility, to overrule commanders.

Can you explain that, just that process?

GATES: I think it's very simple. There's nothing deep about it. I was brand-new to the job.

I'd been secretary of defense, like I said, for 36 hours. And here I've got two four-

stars, one of them who's longtime expert in the Middle East, out there in Baghdad.

I've also got Maliki saying he doesn't want anybody. [00:50:00] So I accepted what

they told me. I came back. Pace and I probably talked all the way back. And within

a few days, I realized that the argument that I had just talked about was quite

persuasive.

SAYLE: Is that a formative experience for you going forward as secretary of defense? We

have this long story of the President not overruling commanders. Over this whole

period, he goes about it in a different process. Does this set you up for the rest of

your secretaryship in a way?

GATES: I think his willingness to challenge them did send me a pretty clear message, that

when the occasion arose, that would be my job as well. [00:51:00] And I don't think I

was ever reluctant to do that for the next four-and-a-half years. When I relieved

General McKiernan, after all the disasters in Vietnam and all the disasters in Iraq

and Afghanistan to that point, I was reminded that that was the first time a field

commander had been relieved by a civilian since Truman fired MacArthur.

Somebody reminded me of that. I said, "Holy shit." [laughs]

ENGEL: I'm simply reminded of the phrase, "The tree of liberty is [inaudible] with the



blood of” -- What’s the phrase? Look it up. We’ll edit it back in. Is that something that you think is overdue, frankly? Besides that, one doesn’t want to just create an instance to fire [00:52:00] a field commander, but frankly --

GATES: No.

ENGEL: -- is 70 years too long?

GATES: I think what happened was, somewhere along the way, the Army lost its way in terms of accountability. General Marshall fired colonels and generals left and right. When a general would be fired or relieved in World War II, it didn’t mean he was a bad person, or even that he’d failed. It was just that General Marshall didn’t think he was the right guy for that job. They would often end up in other jobs where they were very successful. It wasn’t a career-ending experience. But somehow, we got to a point where the idea of firing a general, or relieving somebody because they’re not doing their job very well, or they’re not the right person for the job, became anathema. As I write in the book, when it came to McKiernan, Casey went to the President [00:53:00] to disagree with me. I hand-delivered Casey’s letter to the President. I said, “Sure, George, I’ll deliver it.” This was a problem that I had, and have with government as a whole, and it’s part of one of the things in this new book, is that people get fired all the time in Washington for scandals and stealing money and sexual affairs and things like that. But what was different, what I brought, for the first time in anybody’s memory, was being willing to fire somebody for not doing their job very well, and it started with the secretary of the Army, three months



in. That's what we lost, is this accountability for doing your job competently. So anyway.

ENGEL: Now, did you give -- in the instances which I'm thinking of off the top of my head, which you've already mentioned a couple [00:54:00] -- but also I'm thinking about the Walter Reed experience. Apropos of your analogy of General Marshall, did you give much thought beforehand to where you were going to put these people after they were fired, as Marshall did in your discussion, or was that just something that you didn't have time for?

GATES: First of all, most of the people that I relieved or fired, several of them were civilians, so there's no question they were going out. On the military side, they were very senior. I think all but one person that I fired was a four-star, so there was no question they were going to retire.

ENGEL: That's what -- I was going through the list --

GATES: Yeah, they're going to retire. The only guy that I fired below that rank was the two-star program manager for the F35, and I didn't do that. That was sort of was one of these indirect things. I [00:55:00] just let it be known he should be fired. [laughs] And I don't know what happened to him, to tell you the truth.

INBODEN: Bringing this back around to relieving people of positions of authority in the Surge, tell us more about your decision to tap General Petraeus to replace General Casey. Both, how influential was Petraeus on your thinking about the Surge before you formally asked him to take command, and then when and why exactly did you



sign up for the move?

GATES: First of all, in my interview with the President, he had mentioned Petraeus, and said, “You need to look very closely at him,” because he was already of a mind that he needed to change commanders. And frankly, George Casey had been in Iraq for 30 months. It was way past time, even if everything had been working. But the President said, “You really need to [00:56:00] take a look at this guy.” But that was all he said. I talked to Petraeus just before I went to Iraq, so like my first day on the job, and he basically said, “There are two missions. There’s security and transition. And you can’t do transition unless you’ve improved security, and the only way to do security is for a surge.” So Petraeus was pretty straightforward and kind of boom, boom, this is the way you need to think about this. The question, you, Mr. Secretary, need to ask in Baghdad is, can you transition without improving the security situation first? That was obviously the main theme of the conversation. Then I’m sure I had further conversations with others, including the President, before I called Petraeus and offered him the job. [00:57:00]

ENGEL: Can I ask about a different --

GATES: I never made a senior military appointment without a lot of discussion with the chairman, under both Pace and Admiral Mullen.

ENGEL: I want to ask about a different personality that you alluded to earlier, and that is Secretary Rice, who, of course, her counsel is extremely important to the president. Her counsel is, shall we say, uncertain on the question of the Surge, perhaps



uncertain leaning towards negative throughout most of the period that we're looking at. Can you recall your discussions with her about the question of the Surge, or even the question of Iraq? If you could walk us through the chronology, say, before you get the call from Hadley to say the president wants to meet with you? Had you talked to her about these questions in the interim period before you become secretary, after [00:58:00] secretary? Where did you have discussions with her, if you did, about the question of surging?

GATES: I don't think that I ever discussed this subject with Condi before I was offered the job as secretary. We were good friends, but she was secretary of state, and I was a president of a university, and we just didn't talk very often. My memory is kind of vague, but I think during the interregnum, somewhere in there, she and I had dinner together, and we probably talked about this. But I think Condi's major concern: she opposed a surge for the sake of a surge. My recollection of her line was, "I'm opposed to sending a bunch of troops in there to do what we're already doing. To do the same thing." So I think what finally brought Condi across the line [00:59:00] was coming to the conclusion that these troops were going to do something different. That we're going to have a different mission than what George Casey had been pursuing. And I think that led Condi to change her view and become, actually, as it turned out, a strong supporter of the Surge. But her concern, I think, was just taking the political heat of adding more troops without any change in strategy or mission.



ENGEL: To ask you to put yourself in somebody else's thinking for a moment -- but again, you two do have a history -- do you have a sense of when she made that transition in her own mind and came around to thinking that the new strategy was actually worth justifying the Surge?

GATES: [01:00:00] Well, I don't know. I don't specifically recall, but my recollection is that she was still expressing these concerns as of the 12th or 13th of December, and I think it was only as the discussions proceeded, particularly at Camp David, that she was persuaded that this was a different kind of mission. So my guess is that it was probably around the end of December.

ENGEL: And absent the dinner, which you detail, at the Watergate Hotel, in the book, do you recall a specific conversation in this period that you had with her about --

GATES: No.

SAYLE: A lot of the secondary literature talks about a study done at the American Enterprise Institute, and also the interventions of retired General Jack Keane in December. Did he or the AEI report play a role in your --

GATES: No. [01:01:00] Keane's major point of entree was the Vice President, and the same way with Fred --

INBODEN: Kagan?

SAYLE: Kagan?

GATES: Kagan. I sort of had the impression Keane had walk-in privileges to the Vice President. So I'm sure he shaped the Vice President's thinking on this, and I'm

assuming the Vice President got them in to see the President, to express their views.

But I never met or had any conversation with Keane at this point, and I don't think I ever read the AEI paper.

SAYLE: Did you have a sense of where the V President stood on the Surge?

GATES: Oh, there was never any doubt where the Vice President stood.

ENGEL: Could you articulate that here?

GATES: [01:02:00] Huh?

ENGEL: Could you articulate that for us?

GATES: I think the Vice President, because of the influence of particularly General Keane, was very much in favor of the Surge, and thought we needed a new strategy, and be more aggressive. The Vice president's instinct, in almost every situation like this, is be more aggressive. To push harder.

SAYLE: Just before your confirmation, the Iraq Study Group presents its final report to the President. What role did the ISG's report have in December, in that December period?

GATES: I think the President was basically dismissive of the report. He basically saw the Iraq Study Group report as a path to get out of the war, rather than to be successful. So he gave it very little. It had, I would say, virtually [01:03:00] no impact on our deliberations.

INBODEN: Then, in *Duty*, you talk about the Baghdad clock and the Washington clock, and you talked about your hearings and concern for getting support from Congress



for increasing the DOD budget to have end strength and everything. Once you became convinced of the policy merits of the Surge policy, how concerned were you about lack of public support, especially lack of congressional support, even if it was the right policy? Did you worry that that could actually hamstring it?

GATES: I think we all knew instinctively that this would not be popular. I think we all underestimated the magnitude of the backlash. As I wrote in the book, the President made his decision and then all hell broke loose. There were a lot of Republicans that were as unhappy as the Democrats about the decision. [01:04:00] And so it became quite clear from early on that a big challenge I was going to have was doing what I could to prevent the Congress -- the whole motive of the Democrats in Congress, both in the House and in the Senate, which they now controlled both houses -- was to pass legislation that, in effect, would gut the Surge, that would prevent us from sending the troops, that would deny funding for the troops, and then, later, try and impose time limits on how long the troops could stay. That became a huge battle -- [01:05:00] and I write about that extensively in the book -- that for me, dominated most of what I was doing in Washington between January and September. My objective -- and I detail this in the book -- I actually had developed a strategy on how to try and make this work, and it was a strategy that sometimes made the White House unhappy. Because we started feeding the troops in pretty quickly, and even as we were getting the Surge underway, I was talking about when we might begin to end it. That really ticked off



people like the Vice President, and probably the President at times. But it seemed to me that only by signaling that we weren't going to be there forever, [01:06:00] and that this was of limited duration, could we buy the time to let the Surge work. I asked Petraeus, "How long do you need?" He said, "I need the Surge for a year." Ultimately, I would get him, I think, 18 to 20 months. But the other aspect of my strategy in the spring was to ask Petraeus and Crocker for a report on the progress of the Surge, because that then gave me something to go to the Republicans with and say, "Look, we don't even have all the troops there yet. How can you limit this thing? Can't you wait a few weeks? Can't you wait six or eight weeks to their report on September 10th, when they're going to come before the Congress and report?"

We nearly lost [01:07:00] the 40-senator barrier to an override in July. In fact, I canceled a trip to stay back and lobby. That was my most powerful argument. "These guys are going to be in front of you in six weeks. You can't wait six weeks when we've got the fate of a war at risk?" And ultimately, it worked. But I spent a lot of time working this during that period. It was a part of the job I had never anticipated, and left me with all those warm and fuzzy feelings about the Congress that I express in the book.

ENGEL: Sir, I'm cognizant of the time that we promised you that we would end. I have, if you don't mind, just one more -- actually two more. One small question and one big question. The first is, the title of the chapter of your book that details this most directly is "Iraq, Iraq, Iraq." But you also point out that of course there's another war



going on. Could you just give us a sense -- [01:08:00] and this is, again, for the future historians -- how much time during this period you're spending thinking about Afghanistan?

GATES: I went to Afghanistan in January of '07, and it was clear to me, that our strategy was too ambitious, and that we didn't have enough forces to hold our own until we could get more forces there, either through the increase in end strength or through a drawdown in Iraq. I was able to cobble together -- I extended a brigade of the 10th Mountain Division for an extra three months, and I had one other brigade that I sent, the idea being to try and counter the Taliban's [01:09:00] spring and summer offensive in 2007, so to get another few thousand US troops in there. But as I told the President at the time, we really were out of Schlitz at that point. Once I sent those additional forces into Afghanistan, we had nothing anywhere. So the best I could do was to give them something additional to try and hold the Taliban at bay until there was an opportunity to try and get some additional forces there one way or another. And I knew that that was months away. Then, of course, it also involved getting them more intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance, trying to get them some additional equipment that at least could help them.

ENGEL: One last sort of broad, philosophical, put-your-historian-cap-on question. We're coming up, of course, on the 10-year anniversary of the decision to surge. It's the whole purpose of this project. [01:10:00] What is your assessment, looking back as a historian, of not only the process, but also, how well do you think it worked, and

how well do you think it worked both for Iraq, subsequently the language being used for Afghanistan, and as a model for potentially future conflicts?

GATES: First of all, I think the process was, in some ways, nearly textbook. There were senior people studying this at the State Department, at the NSC, at the Defense Department. You had a lot of smart people working this issue for weeks and weeks before it began to crystalize as a decision. You had lot of interagency discussion. You had a lot of presidential interaction [01:11:00] with the Chiefs and with military leaders. And then you had the President making a tough decision. And, frankly, everybody pulling together to implement it. So I think in terms of process, that it worked pretty well. The one piece that we probably didn't focus on enough at the time was how difficult it was going to be with the Congress. I think we recovered pretty well, but it was a near-run thing, into -- I believe the Surge worked. I believe that -- we literally by June of '07 saw the number of civilian murders in Baghdad beginning to decline. By the time Petraeus and Crocker testified [01:12:00] in September, they were able to -- I mean, things hadn't fully turned around. We hadn't been successful, but all the trend lines were favorable by the time they testified. I would say by the summer of '08, the end of 2008, the situation in Baghdad had stabilized. The security situation was dramatically better. The convening authority of our generals and of Ryan Crocker was able to keep the Iraqi government together, because every time these guys would get into one of their snits with each other, which was frequently, our generals could get them over to



dinner and make them talk to each other, and so on. Our influence was such that we had a lot of say in the choice of Iraqi senior officers, and they were competent and, more or less, honest. [01:13:00] So I think that by 2009, the situation in Iraq was as good as it was going to get, and that we handed over to the Iraqis a pretty good situation. Certainly better than we had had, I think, since probably 2004, maybe. I think the Surge actually was very successful. It was sort of embarrassing watching some of the Democrats on the Hill sort of go through hoops trying to simultaneously acknowledge that the Surge had been successful, but that the whole war was all wrong.

ENGEL: Is there anything else that you'd like to add for the record on this subject?

GATES: I don't think so.

SAYLE: Thank you.

INBODEN: Thank you very much.

ENGEL: Thank you sir. Appreciate it.

GATES: Yeah, you bet. [01:14:00]

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]