

The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: David Gordon

Vice Chairman of the National Intelligence Council (NIC), 2004-2007

Interviewers:

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[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

SAYLE: [00:00:00] Good afternoon. It's May 28. This is Tim Sayle from Southern
Methodist University, and I'm joined by --

BRANDS: Hal Brands, Duke University.

SAYLE: And we're joined by Dr. David Gordon. Dr. Gordon, can you tell us your role in

government, both your responsibilities in general and those relating to Iraq?

GORDON: Sure. So in 2006 I was the vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council.

The National Intelligence Council is the body in the US intelligence community responsible for coordinating the national intelligence estimates and for representing the intelligence community in the National Security Council process in the White House. So I was the vice chairman at that time. The chairman of the Council, [00:01:00] Tom Fingar, also was the deputy director of national intelligence for analysis. So he was the head of the NIC, but I managed the National Intelligence Council on a day-to-day basis. It was my role to supervise the preparation of the National Intelligence Estimates, and I had been involved in Iraq and in watching Iraq really for a very, very long time, but had been quite actively involved in following the evolving Iraq story.

So in 2006, we were still very, very actively watching Iraq. [00:02:00] I was asked by Ambassador Negroponte, who was the Director of National Intelligence, if I would be the intelligence rep to the Iraq group that was set up in the White House in November of 2006. I made several trips to Iraq earlier in 2006, and had been corresponding, engaging quite directly, especially with Meghan O'Sullivan, and also I did a lot of work with some of the senior US military folks who were [00:03:00] very actively involved. The two officers who were represented in the working group, General Sattler and General Lute, were both very close colleagues of mine.

Ambassador Negroponte, I think, asked me to do this because it was

something very important. He knew I had been following Iraq, but I think he wanted somebody who wasn't so involved in Iraq intelligence work that they would bring a set of assumptions to it. My job was much more general than Iraq, but I think what he wanted was a set of [00:04:00] eyes on this that could bring an objective view. He and I were very close, and so I was engaged with him about Iraq, if not on a daily basis, certainly several times a week during the whole period, long before the Surge discussions began, but very much so during that time as well.

BRANDS: It's great that you mention that. One of the things we're trying to get a sense of is how people's assessment of the situation in Iraq evolved over time. So if we could take you back maybe to late 2005, did you have a sense of how the trends in Iraq were looking, say around the time of the December 2005 election?

GORDON: So the first time I went to Iraq [00:05:00] was literally in the period just when it became clear that things were really beginning to turn downhill, three or four months after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein [April-August 2003]. I got there at a time when people were still optimistic, but it was beginning to catch up. I was one, I think, of the last people who was able to go overland from the airport in Baghdad to the Green Zone in Baghdad. That was a pretty hairy drive. And then I was there doing -- with a colleague, [00:06:00] I was at that time the director of transnational issues in the CIA, we were doing an assessment of the status of the energy infrastructure. At one point we were in a UK helicopter, we actually had an RPG fired at us when we were flying fairly low, and a gunner began shooting. And it was

like “Ho-oooh!”

In retrospect it’s easy to say this was going to happen, but retrospect is always 20/20, and as historians, you guys know that. I followed this at a time -- in late 2005, we saw some [00:07:00] contradictory things happening, actually. Late 2005 was a time when the sectarian part of the conflict was really beginning to get a lot more intense. A lot more intense. But late 2005 was also a time when finally the efforts, particularly by the Agency, in Anbar Province and western Iraq to mobilize forces against AQI were beginning to gain some traction. So late 2005 was a funny time, because there were some interesting positive things going on. [00:08:00] They were basically not in the public domain, so the picture that most people were getting was one that was pretty negative. My view was that there were some very contradictory things going on. But it was a time of a lot of uncertain-- I think there was a lot of uncertainty about the military strategy in particular. A lot of uncertainty about the military strategy in particular.

BRANDS: So what pieces of the military strategy was there particular uncertainty --

GORDON: Every piece. So I went to Iraq twice in the first half of 2006, both times -- I believe both times, I’m pretty sure both times, I’m not absolutely sure. I’m quite -- if my memory holds, both times with General John Landry, who was the national intelligence officer for general purpose forces, and who was responsible on the NIC for following the military aspects of the war. So he had been in the first Gulf War as a tank commander, and was very well respected. And we got in, we saw everybody.

We were getting a lot of different views from the military on the ground on how things were going, what was going well, what was going less well. I think that the sort of engagement -- the sort of -- there was a broad view [00:10:00] that the engagement with the Iraqi military was simply not robust enough to generate the kinds of advancements that people thought were going to be necessary if you were really going to sustain a momentum.

Then there was a lot of concern, of course, about what was going on at the political level, particularly with the growing sectarian nature of the conflict. It's really interesting in retrospect that you -- in some of these letters that were captured from bin Laden's lair, [00:11:00] the debate that he was having with Zarqawi and all of this about strategy. But this was getting -- the tit-for-tat and the Shia -- it's interesting that the Shia were extraordinarily worried and sensitive, even at that time, about the return of the Sunni to power. At the time, I thought it was way overstated.

You know, almost 10 years of hindsight, it might not have been, because we're seeing it again, and we're seeing -- when I read the newspapers now, the sense of déjà vu all over again [00:12:00] between what's going on now and 2005-2006 was quite striking. But I think it was our view, and I'm not sure this was an accurate view, that there was perhaps a little too much complacency, particularly in General Casey. Now, I think that changed -- it changed in 2006 -- but I think our view in the early part of 2006 was that things were unwinding faster than some of the senior

leadership perceived them to be unwinding.

BRANDS: Were there particular events [00:13:00] or milestones in 2006 that you saw as sort of signposts in the unwinding? Were there certain things that really triggered a reassessment?

GORDON: There were a bunch of sectarian attacks on the Shia, I'm trying to remember the names of the places.

SAYLE: There was the mosque in Samarra.

BRANDS: Samarra.

GORDON: Yeah, exactly. The Samarra incident. Yeah. There was a bunch of that going on. So I was concerned that we were transitioning into something very different, that we were really transitioning from insurgency to a civil war, and that was definitely the [00:14:00] predominant view in the intelligence community, that we were in that transition from insurgency to civil war. I've never read a really strong account of the interplay between insurgency and civil war, because part of the strategy of the insurgents was to promote this kind of sectarian conflict. We were quite worried that we were -- we had a military strategy [00:15:00] that was counterinsurgency-based, to the extent that we had a defensive strategy. It was frankly about defending Sunnis from al-Qaeda, to the extent that there was a concept of public protection, and there was in this "Clear, Build, Hold." The civil protection in that was Sunnis against al-Qaeda, whereas we were now in the situation of tit-for-tat across that line, and I think certainly in retrospect that that

was [00:16:00] the AQI strategy.

SAYLE: In that same period, in early 2006, the election has occurred but the government has not been seated yet. Could you recall your assessment of the possibilities of a strong government being established, and how you assessed Nouri al-Maliki as a possible leader?

GORDON: So our assessment of Maliki was that he was a sort of crafty politician, but not really a decisive leader, not that he was playing overwhelmingly -- he was playing Shia politics. That Shia politics was [00:17:00] far and away the dominant politics he was playing here. He was also playing a very complicated game between engagement with the United States, with President Bush, all of this, and engagement with the Iranians. The name of Qassem Suleimani was already -- the Suleimani of a decade ago was not the selfies and the press statements and all of that, but he was already a force in Iraq. [00:18:00] So I think the intelligence community was quite skeptical about Maliki. Quite skeptical about Maliki.

BRANDS: There was one other piece that I'd like to ask about, in sort of the summer of 2006. So this was when there's an effort to regain security momentum with the Baghdad security plan, so this is Operation Together Forward. So to what extent did those register in your assessment of the ongoing conflict in Iraq?

GORDON: That's a great question. I don't recall. I was doing a lot of different things then, and I don't have a good recollection. I do have a recollection [00:19:00] of -- and I forget if it was after my first trip or my second, or probably both -- of going to see

Meghan and saying, I think things are really beginning to fall apart. I think that you need to go out there and you need to have Mr. Hadley go out there. It's really time for a rethink. And I wasn't the only person who went out and brought back that kind of a message.

But again, this whole situation was combined with, through the first half of 2006, actually a lot of momentum [00:20:00] in Anbar. A lot of momentum in Anbar in terms of essentially retaking territory from AQI.

I think one of the myths of the Iraq Surge was that it was the Iraq Surge that created the momentum in terms of the turn of the Sunni against AQI and the weakening hold of AQI over the Sunni triangle. I think that the Surge was very critical in sustaining it, but that had a lot of [00:21:00] momentum before the Surge. And indeed, to my mind, had that not had a lot of momentum, the Surge strategy would not have made sense. And that was part of the unusual discussions at the time, because my recollection, I haven't read it recently, but I don't believe the Iraq Study Group report gave any influence to that. And I believe they had access to intelligence reporting. But that was not there in that.

SAYLE: Just as a general question, we've been trying to understand [00:22:00] from different officials what sort of information they were working off of to assess the situation in Iraq, and you must have had all sorts of information, but how are you measuring something like sectarian violence? Do you measure it? Is it quantitative, qualitative?

GORDON: So it was, to use a technical term, a shitload of information. One of the things that I did during this time was, we had set up a quarterly analytic exchange on Iraq that included intelligence, military, and political, among the allies. And we had the meetings at either the Pentagon or at CIA [00:23:00] or someplace. DNI headquarters. But then we had all these different units represented on videos, and we had a half-day meeting about this every three months. I used to chair that meeting.

And one of the things that we struggled with there was that some of the flow of information that the operators felt was tactical information was not coming up. And this is partially why there was less aggregation of some of the positive momentum in the Sunni Triangle, [00:24:00] was that you had a lot of reporting about this that stayed in tactical military. Some of these things came out in these calls. So we did try. There was a ton of military reporting, and aggregating it was very, very hard.

Intelligence was very rich, and the intelligence reporting as you began to get a momentum in the Triangle got extremely rich. We also had reasonable reporting from clandestine sources on a very, very wide range of actors. Now, during [00:25:00] this period of time, I was doing fairly frequent rounds of briefings on the Hill, classified briefings, but not just to the Intelligence Committees; some to the Foreign Affairs Committees, Armed Services, and even broader groups. There was an intense political interest at this time. I think it was interesting, before the

creation of the Surge, what became the Surge working group and these other things that were [00:26:00] going on.

The momentum, the analytic momentum in terms of its policy implications, tended to be much more along the lines of the ISG. I think the ISG report was a good, not a great, report. Good report, but not great. I had been a former staffer for Mr. Hamilton, so I went back a long time with him. I don't think the 9/11 Commission findings were much stronger. I still think the 9/11 Commission recommendations were ill thought through, but the descriptive section of the 9/11 [00:27:00] Commission was really very, very good, about what happened on 9/11 and why. I think in retrospect the ISG report has not held through the test of time, frankly. But that was where a lot of people were thinking.

Of course this was a moment of grave concern, of grave concern in the military about overstretch. There was a huge concern on overstretch in the military, and this was the beginning of a concern about the balance between Iraq and Afghanistan, that became much more prominent later.

BRANDS: If I could just ask you to drill down a little bit [00:28:00] on one thing you mentioned. You told us that your assessment in general was that you had trends going in both directions in Iraq, but that the negative was starting to swamp the positive in a lot of respects, sort of on an overall basis. Did that parallel the view that was coming through the more formalized IC [Intelligence Community] products at this point? So National Intelligence Estimates, that sort of thing? Or

were you an outlier?

GORDON: No, I don't think I was an outlier. I think that there was increasing worry in the intelligence products about where this is heading. And this was reflected in some ongoing tensions, constructive tensions, between the military operators, the military intelligence folks, and other components in the intelligence [00:29:00] community. You're always going to have that. This is why you don't just have defense intelligence looking at military matters. You really want to have a view in that is somewhat more independent.

SAYLE: Maybe we can talk, then, about the strategy review, the official review that begins in November. You explained that Ambassador Negroponte requested that you be the intelligence community's representative. Can you take us back to the very beginning, what your sense was of a purpose of that strategy review?

GORDON: Yeah. This was always a little bit of an uncertainty and a moving target, frankly. And [00:30:00] part of this is that it was quite obvious to all of us involved that these weren't, by any stretch of the imagination, the only discussions going on, right? I think what the President wanted to do was to sort of both set up this formal structure and process, but then also do a lot of other stuff himself, or with a more political audience. So I think there were a number of things going on here. I think that what [00:31:00] we were told, I think accurately, You know, I mean, when I talked to Ambassador Negroponte about this, he said things -- and again, he had been the US ambassador there, so he had a very big interest in this still. He was

doing a lot of stuff on Iraq. Basically the mandate he gave me was, don't carry any kind of a policy presumption. Your job here is to represent intelligence and to [00:32:00] try to bring the best analytic view, and to give your judgments. So that was really what I was able to do during the deliberations. And again, I think I was chosen in part because I hadn't been in charge of Iraq analysis. I wasn't the National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East who was doing Iraq all the time.

SAYLE: I wonder if we could ask about your paper, or your contribution to the Review, and then --

GORDON: I had a bunch of contributions. There were many.

SAYLE: There was one paper that's been described publicly, and that's the one we know about, but we'd be happy to hear about --

GORDON: No, no. So, that's the one that's sort of the [00:33:00] existence of which -- and of course I'm probably more constrained than others here, because I can't talk in any great detail about classified information. So the paper that I did was a paper -- that we did, the intelligence community did under my direction -- was a paper that had been requested really looking at what might the options be moving ahead, and the consequences of those options. Options and consequences. So that paper was worked on [00:34:00] by a lot of people in the intelligence community, because I didn't want that to be David Gordon's views. That was not what was being requested. What was being requested was the intelligence community's views. But we talked about a number of different options.

I know the point has been made that this was the only one that talked about troop withdrawal. We were actually quite negative in what we thought the implications of a troop withdrawal were. So we were of the view at the time that things weren't going great, but a lot of people, particularly people who didn't know very much about Iraq, frankly, were of the view that -- things aren't [00:35:00] going great; therefore the source of things not going great must be the presence. We really didn't think that was the case. Earlier on, that was definitely part of why things went downhill in Iraq.

We had not prepared adequately at all for this. We were not prepared for insurgency, and we hadn't really thought out the parallel processes of creating effective administration and building up Iraqi political institu-- there had been very little thinking done, this was done on the fly, basically. [00:36:00] But we were of the view, at the time, that if you actually took the US military presence out, that the civil war element would become more unbridled. I think in retrospect that was right. I think that was right. And that in the absence of a US presence, sectarianism was likely to get worse, not better.

The interesting affirmation to my mind of that view was what happened in Iraq [00:37:00] after the final withdrawal of US forces, when the sectarian nature of the region really deepened at that time. In some ways this is always the role of intelligence. We were "no good options," "lots of risks no matter what we do," these kinds of things. And I think that was -- there was -- if there was a tenor in that

paper, I think that was the tenor of the paper.

SAYLE: Could we speak about some of the other options? I know partition, I think, was one of the options that you explored.

GORDON: Right. And we were also very skeptical about partition. We were particularly skeptical that [00:38:00] partition -- partition made sense and continues to make sense for the Kurds. Partition could also potentially make sense for the Shia. It didn't inherently make sense, but could potentially make sense for the Shia. For the Sunni, it was never going to make very much sense. And so it's not all that surprising that the Iraqi national concept has been most strongly held by the Sunni, for a very long time. And they did it in their way, they obviously were a minority regime that did not treat the other [00:39:00] sectarian components at all well. But I think that it was our view that getting from here to there, and we talked a lot about what it would mean and what it would take -- and particularly in Baghdad, in the urban areas generally, but particularly in Baghdad -- it would be very, very problematic, and it would be very problematic in terms of public expenditures and the fiscal dimension, given that the oil at that time was in the south. Now it's -- some in Kurdistan as well. There was a bit then, but I think a lot of that is new discovery. [00:40:00]

But I think there was also a concern, even at that time, and we reflected it in this, that any kind of a partition would totally call into question the boundaries issues more broadly in the Levant and the Fertile Crescent. I still believe that was

correct. Now, those boundaries have now been called into question, but at the time they weren't, and we thought, in particular, that the Kurdish question would create a really impossible situation with Turkey. [00:41:00] I mean, the great surprise of the aftermath of the Iraq War, and particularly after 2005-2006, was the growth of the strong ties between Turkey and the Kurdish entity, the KRG, nobody expected that. But it's still the case that if you move towards an actual partition in Iraq, that would really be very, very, very complicated for Turkey. The arguments against it in 2006 were much stronger than they are today.

SAYLE: So, and then another option, one that carried on, was an effort to create a strong national government in Iraq. Did your paper -- and it wasn't a policy prescription, necessarily -- [00:42:00] but how did you frame that in the paper and what assessments were done?

GORDON: I mean, one of the things that we talked about was sort of what were the options between partition and just a strong center? We talked about how to think about federalism. The partition was basically a -- the weak partition notion is sort of a strong confederal concept. So what we tried to explore was how to think about federal concepts there. [00:43:00] I frankly don't remember exactly what we said about them. But I think we thought that you would want to do this. That you would want to. This is a very American approach: you would want to combine federalism with a strong center. But the problem of Baghdad was very much on our minds whenever we talked about federal solutions. That was just -- how do you put that

into that, into the framework?

SAYLE: I wonder if you could describe how the DNI paper we've talked about, but also the other DNI contributions, were accepted and/or used by the group.

GORDON: [00:44:00] Sure. So there were quite different viewpoints in the group, some of them representing sort of bureaucratic tensions, some reflecting differences in prescriptive viewpoints. I think I was seen, and my colleagues were broadly seen, as someone who in some ways had less of a policy cross to bear. This was not a group of shy people, [00:45:00] so no one in this group ever deferred to me: . Sometimes they deferred to me after an argument or a discussion, but nobody sort of -- a lot of times when you're in government, sort of you'll give an intelligence briefing, everybody's, OK, so this is the assumptions, then we'll go from there. That's not how this worked. So I was not sort of laying out the analytic basis upon which these policy options were going to be discussed. But I think particularly when we were talking about analytic themes, especially on the non-mil ones, [00:46:00] I sort of had a major role to play in shaping the discussions. I went out of my way, as I saw my responsibility, to maintain very good relations, if at all possible, with everyone in the group because I did not want to have my personal relationships become any kind of an issue. That was how I interpreted the mandate that Ambassador Negroponte gave me.

SAYLE: Was there any sort of analytic baseline agreement in the strategy review group of what was happening in Iraq? Could the strategy review group agree that Iraq was in

civil war, or was that disagreed?

GORDON: Yeah. I think there came to be a fairly large amount of analytic agreement [00:47:00] and a lot of it is laid out in this sort of: how we used to look at it, and now, how we look at it, right? And a lot of that came from me, bits and pieces of it. So I think there was a fair amount, a fair amount. We were not having a big debate about what's going on in Iraq. That's not what this was. I think that the dominant view in the group was that we are not on a trajectory that [00:48:00] could be sustained to a positive end. And I think there was a fair amount of openness to various kinds of ways of thinking about what to do about that.

BRANDS: So just one additional question on how your paper was received. Would it be safe to read into it that your paper might have been read as being supportive of a surge option in the sense that the status quo clearly wasn't working, and your paper was negative on going the other way, so drawing down more quickly or partitioning the country, or something like that?

GORDON: I don't think so. I think this paper -- I think definitely the paper was very negative [00:49:00] in terms of the risks of any kind of a rapid draw-down, that's for sure. But the paper was also, I think -- really highlighted the risks involved in all of the options. So I don't think the paper was interpreted by the other participants in the room as basically leading towards the Surge. No. That's certainly not how I saw it. I don't think the other people in the room saw it that way. It was not inconsistent to it.

SAYLE: John Hannah from the Vice President's Office presented a paper, it's been called "Bet on Shiites" --

GORDON: Yeah, I remember that. [00:50:00]

SAYLE: Could you tell us about what you remember of it? Sort of a side question to this is Iran and the connection between the Iraqi Shiites and Iran.

GORDON: Yeah. So, John was of the view that basically you had to choose here, and that the people who we really had to reassure were the Shia. So Shia reassurance was at the center of what John Hannah's strategy -- and that's -- again, that gets to this point of protection, the protection that the military, the forces, [00:51:00] the Special Forces guys who had begun operating in Anbar along with the CIA guys. When they talked about protection, as I said earlier, it was protection of Sunni -- anti-al-Qaeda Sunnis from AQI.

What John Hannah put on the table was a quite different concept of protection, and it basically started from this point that the Shias do not believe that their ascendancy is at all ensured. In fact, their view is that they could very well lose this. And so [00:52:00] John's view was that you had to bet on the Shia. So I've got to say, I never bought that. I felt then, as I do now, that the US can't bet on one side or another in Iraq, and so that what we had to do was something in the middle.

I was actually quite supportive of the view of the operators and the intel guys in the Triangle [00:53:00] that we do need to do more there to protect the Sunnis. And so my view was that you had to create more space, you had to create more space

for the legitimacy of and the permanence of these forces that had begun to coalesce against al-Qaeda. Basically what we had done really successfully in the Triangle was a total divide and conquer strategy. It was – begun [sic] to work, and the coalitions that we had included [00:54:00] lots of guys we were not very comfortable with, but they were willing to be out there and to fight these guys.

But that leaves the issue of the rising civil war, and there was -- I mean, we had a long discussion, we had very intense discussions on -- this was our version of the R2P, Responsibility to Protect debate -- because it was clear that you had to do something. You had to do something to take the momentum [00:55:00] out of the rising civil war, or this was going to create just these really horrible outcomes. So I thought John Hannah's paper was useful for provoking a debate on a really serious question, but I think most people, virtually everybody in the group, at the end of the day was not of the view that you could double down on the Shia. And that was not even really talking very much about broader alliance issues in the region.

SAYLE: Could you speak to that? And did the strategy review group speak to that and consider regional politics?

GORDON: Yeah. We considered regional politics, I think probably not [00:56:00] as much as we might have. I mean, our main concern here was that basically, that the civil war continuing and rising was going to drive the Iraqis towards the Iranians, and that basically a context of rising sectarian conflict there was ironically something that was in the strategic interest of both AQI and Iran. And that was very much my

view point there. I mean, we had been burned in intel [00:57:00] earlier on in Iraq by underestimating the degree to which Iran was going to be willing to confront the United States in Iraq. I believe that. I was of the view that the Iranians were not going to ever be happy about our being there and all of this, but that the Shia ascendance was so significant to them that they would basically not really take us on in a huge way. And I thought that was especially the case given the lineup within Shia politics supportive of the presence of US forces, including the [00:58:00] Dawa, including the Hakim tendency, right? And so the forces that -- particularly the Hakim -- I forgot what their title was -- for the Revolution in Iraq.

BRANDS: SCIRI.S-C-I-R-I.

GORDON: Yeah, yeah. Supreme Council. Yeah, right, right. Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, that's right. So yeah, so those guys had really come -- even though they were a creation of the Iranians, they [00:59:00] basically went to Tehran and said, "No, we are not going to put people in the field." The Iranians, at the end of the day, were so desperate that they turned to what had been the most nationalist and anti-Iranian element of the Shia political movement, the Sadrists, for support. We did not think that things would go anywhere near that far. But we were very, very, very worried that as the Shia got more and more fearful about their future, that it was absolutely inevitable that they would turn to Iran. And there was a lot of intelligence [01:00:00] that I can't talk about the specifics of, of individual events and situations that showed that was happening. So while I don't think there

was ever this broad support for the notion of just being explicitly taking the side of the Shia, there was definitely the view that this thing was on a trajectory, unless something was happening, to give more oxygen to the AQI on the one side and to the Iranian, to the Quds force people and to the Sadrists [01:01:00] on the other.

And I think, frankly, my own view of the discussions of the group is that became a critical point in leading this group towards the Surge concept, because part of this was just -- I mean, the analytical continuity back to the paper I wrote was, if it's the case, as you say, that a rapid withdrawal would have these very, very negative options, [01:02:00] would a substantial increase have the obverse? Earlier on in the discussion, I don't think I was prepared to be so positive about this. But as the discussion went on, and as the situation deteriorated, I think it was this notion that the Iranians are really making headway here, and that the only chance of basically holding on to a policy that could offer a pathway forwards for both Sunni and Shia involved more, not less, resources.

BRANDS: If I could pick up on this, I wonder if you could [01:03:00] -- I have a three-part question. So A, coming into the review, did you think that the outcome that eventually came of the review -- so the Surge option -- did you think that was a likely outcome of the review? Part B would be, at what point during the review did you get the sense that the Surge option was really gaining momentum? And the third part would be what was your assessment of the prospects?

GORDON: That's great. So early on in the discussions, I think there was a lot of discussion

about just how stretched the US military was. So at that point in the discussion, when we were focusing on just how stretched the US military was and the impact of [01:04:00] this very intense going out, coming back, training, going out again, and the fact that that was going to have to shift from year-on, year-out to even more; that the ratio of time-in versus time-out was going to have to shift, was on a trajectory to need to shift, even under the current resource assumptions. It did not seem to me early on - I didn't think that the Surge was going to be the outcome. I think we talked about the challenges facing the military prior to some of these more [01:05:00] in-depth discussions of the situation on the ground, and just how bad it was getting. What was the second --

BRANDS: The second part was when did you start to get a sense that the group was moving in the direction, or that momentum was gathering behind the Surge option?

GORDON: That's a great question, and the answer gets back to the point I just made. I think in some ways it was this recognition that in order to have a chance at success, we had to try to do two things at once. And the two things were sustain the momentum in the Sunni Triangle and do [01:06:00] something that would reassure the Shia and balance the Iranians. And I think that the consensus around this was partially driven by the view that trying this was going to be something that was essential. I think not everybody, certainly not me, were optimistic that this was going to work, but I think there was a broader consensus around trying that.

Now, that was partially also due to [01:07:00] our broader understandings of the President's

views. So the President wasn't part of the group, but we met with the President on occasion, and the President was very clear to us that he still felt that success was possible, so even when we reported back some of our early, pretty negative views. I think the Commander in Chief's viewpoint here is a totally legitimate thing to take into account, and we did. [01:08:00] And he was very clear about this; he was very clear about this. And so I think that what there came to be a consensus about in the group was that the only pathway for success was this pathway. I think it would be an overstatement to say that there was a consensus on the likelihood of success, but I think that there was a consensus that success under the -- what would it take for success under the terms that President Bush was thinking about success? [01:09:00]

SAYLE: Could you speak a little bit about those meetings with the President? Did the whole strategy review group meet and then did someone brief him? And did he probe with questions? How did that work?

GORDON: There were a couple of formats for these meetings. There were a couple of meetings. So I think the President was getting briefed by some combination of Mr. Hadley, the deputy -- what was --

SAYLE: J.D. Crouch.

GORDON: J.D., Meghan, Peter to a lesser degree; I don't think he was as involved on a fairly frequent basis. Again, I didn't see it as my business, and that's the funny position of intel, you're both in, not in, and I didn't see it [01:10:00]. I know the President also talked with and met with Ambassador Negroponte during this time. So we met

with the President a couple of times, if I'm not mistaken, as a group. We also met with him a couple of times with other NSC principals, as he wanted to sort of have a larger discussion with the seniors there. And of course that was a little bit -- so having the seniors there was interesting for those of us who were representing seniors on the Surge. So a lot of the people on the NSC work [01:11:00] did not have people represented in the small group, but DNI did, SecDef, obviously, SecState, obviously. Mr. Hadley, obviously.

So those were very good discussions. The President was extremely engaged, extremely engaged. It was my view that at every meeting that the President attended, the quality of the discussions was heightened by his attendance, and this notion that was increasingly abroad at the time, that President Bush is way out of his depth and Iraq is the big example of that, I've never believed that. [01:12:00] I do believe that particularly in the aftermath of the Surge, the President later sort of lost his voice and lost his credibility on Iraq, and you see it in the degree to which presentations to the Congress about Iraq were given by General Petraeus. So that's not right. But that was a bit later, that was a bit later, and the President was very engaged.

And the President was also very willing to do his piece. Very, very willing. And particularly the President saw that a critical part of his piece as his one-on-one relationship with [01:13:00] Prime Minister Maliki. In my view, I think the history books are going to be charitable to President Bush on both his relationship with Prime Minister Maliki and his relationship with Karzai in Afghanistan. I think that

when I compare President Bush to President Obama, President Bush comes out a lot better. There were very serious consequences -- and the Obama decision to not engage nearly as heavily, that was not a crazy decision. But it was one of those in the context of the level of engagement that President Bush had, it just [01:14:00] really sent -- I mean, really, really, really wrong messages. So the President was very actively involved in this issue of reassurance, reassurance to Maliki, and at the same time challenging him on inclusion and on support for the Sunni CT forces in the triangle. With some results.

SAYLE: How crucial was Maliki and perhaps his agreement to solve the problem of the Shia militias, or at least to lean on the Shia militias, to the Surge? Did you assess that in late 2006, how important Maliki's buy-in --

GORDON: Oh yeah. We were definitely [01:15:00] skeptical on Maliki, although we agreed that probably the only strategy for handling Maliki was to approach him as a partner. We were asked that, How do you think I should deal with Maliki? -- and I think the answer was that gaining his confidence in you as a partner and sharing your concerns and your desires, while at the same time trying to shape those concerns and desires, was the only way to go. But we were skeptical. I believe the President [01:16:00] asked very directly, will this shift the balance in Maliki's mind away from the Iranians and to the United States? And our answer was it would shift it, but would it shift it fundamentally to being more oriented to the U.S.? And we went no. We definitely answered no to that. We did not think that was going to

happen, and of course it did not happen.

SAYLE: Throughout December, it's clear that there was no agreement on what a surge actually meant. There was discussion of 2 BCTs [Brigade Combat Teams] --

GORDON: Absolutely. Totally, totally.

SAYLE: Did you assess different options, whether a slow roll-out of BCTs --

GORDON: Yeah. So we did. On this, my role [01:17:00] was pretty limited. I was more of a listener and sort of tried to ask tough questions of the DoD guys in particular, on what that might look like. But there was a lot of discussion on what can be done. Again, a lot of this debate was in sort of DoD speak. Both General Sattler and General Lute had a lot of experience in mil planning stuff. So it was a lot of, [01:18:00] how much risk are we willing to absorb over here for that over there, and it was quite interesting.

Now I work in the political risk business since I've retired from government, and the institution in the US that really thinks in risk terms is the Defense Department. I mean, the CIA doesn't. The CIA works in terms of threats, not risks. State Department mumbo-jumbo. But DoD takes this risk assessment stuff very, very, very seriously. So a lot of that was trying to balance what can we put in, what will be the impact. So there was a lot of discussion about that. [01:19:00] A lot of discussion about that.

But again, by the time there was discussion about that, it was this thing had bled over -- we never sat and said the Surge is what we want. We began looking at

what might it look like, and that's how you got into these discussions. This was, OK, what might this look like? What might it look like? And I know that General Lute earlier on had been particularly skeptical about the possibility to do this. But I'm a great admirer of General Lute, and he -- like the best guys in the military, they're very open-minded about it, and he wanted to come up with options that [01:20:00] made sense. He was great. When I later became Policy Planning Director for Condi, I used to go out to the wars with General Lute every few months, and during the implementation phases of all these things was really interesting working with him. You interviewed him today, right?

SAYLE: This morning, yes.

GORDON: That must've been great.

BRANDS: It was. In fact, your interviews have dovetailed nicely. You've emphasized, actually, a number of the same points --

GORDON: So General -- so in many ways -- so the two people I was closest to in that group are Meghan O'Sullivan, who I had known for a long time, but then General Lute. General Lute and I were close before this, we became a lot closer during it, and we became a lot closer after it. [01:21:00] But he and I have always looked at things through pretty parallel lenses, I think. But just sort of watching him, watching him during this process -- I have great admiration both for General Lute and for General Sattler. They were fantastic. But General Lute in particular, he was a lot more skeptical at the beginning, and just sort of seeing him evolve on this --

SAYLE: Would you say there was a lot of evolution throughout this process of the review?

GORDON: There was a ton of evolution. There was a ton of evolution. Because again, I think at the beginning, at the beginning there was a lot of pessimism about any way out here, and I think a lot of worry on the military side. [01:22:00] The military guys, correctly, they take a big picture and a long-term picture, and there was a lot of worry about the force, a lot of worry about the force and what was happening to the force. So I think the group interactions -- it was very intense. I was exhausted. I had a day job still. I had a day job. And I handed over some of my responsibilities to my deputy, but I essentially could not stop being the vice chairman of the NIC. It was a bear for me. For a lot of the others, they were doing Iraq anyway, so [01:23:00] this was what they were doing. But I wasn't just doing Iraq, I was doing all this other stuff.

BRANDS: I have a broader question. There's been a ton written on the Surge, we've asked you lots of questions. Is there a piece of the history of the Surge decision, or a piece of your part of that history, that's not well understood?

GORDON: Yeah, I still don't think the relationship between the formal process in the NSC that I participated in, the interface between that and the informal discussions that were going on with guys like General Keane and others. I've never read anything really good on that interface, because [01:24:00] again, as I said at the very beginning, it was clear that this was not the only thing going on here on this issue. Fine, it's completely appropriate. But what we were doing among the participants,

it was pretty transparent, and we were reporting back to our principals and telling them. It was pretty transparent, and I don't think anybody around the table – the interesting guy around the table was the undersecretary -- the initial -- the guy who was undersecretary of defense.

SAYLE: Edelman?

GORDON: No, no, no. Before he --

SAYLE: Stephen Cambone?

GORDON: Cambone. So Cambone was there at this very unusual moment, where he was, [01:25:00] a foot out the door. So he was the one guy who I was never convinced was really talking with guidance and guidelines from above. Part of the guidance that I think almost all the members had was to have a lot of independence, and good on all of the principals for doing that. But the discussions improved, frankly, a bit when Mr. Edelman came on board. He was a much more effective communicator, he was much more bought in to the process, and I think his participation was very, very, very significant to the success of the process.

SAYLE: So was the DoD position before Edelman, did it maintain this [01:26:00] hand off a bicycle approach? Is that the approach?

GORDON: Cambone came in, he was a little -- came in one day with one thing, another day with another thing, and this was where I got the sense -- And I like Stephen, great, this is nothing personal. He was really exiting already and sort of knew that at the end of the day he wasn't going to be responsible for what the output of this

was going to be. But I think that Mr. Edelman came in; he was very, very, very good, and you got -- there had obviously not been any precooked coordination between the uniformed officers [01:27:00] and the DoD guys, which is appropriate. I mean, they were representing the Chairman, as well as the Secretary, but the Chairman. They were there as senior officers.

SAYLE: You've spoken about the President's engagement with the strategy review, but generally, looking back, how would you characterize the President's decision to surge troops to Iraq?

GORDON: I think the President -- I think my own view on this is that the President -- that succeeding in Iraq was extraordinarily important for the President. The President was uncomfortable, he was increasingly. So earlier on, [01:28:00] I briefed the President many times, and I often had to give the President bad news. I remember one time I had to brief the President on Fidel Castro's health, and the President looked up, we were in the Cabinet. "Are you telling me that when I walk out of this office, Fidel Castro might still be there?" I said, "I'm sorry, sir, yes. That's what I'm telling you." And he look at me, and his eyes rolled. But so the President was very committed to this, but I think certainly through 2006 he became much, much, [01:29:00] much more aware of the fact that this was not going well. And the more he engaged with people and thought about it and worried about it, I think the President concluded that we can still get a reasonable outcome, what he called victory, that it was by no means assured, but that he was absolutely committed to

trying to do so. That became stronger during the period of the formal [01:30:00]

Surge group discussions.

SAYLE: Thank you very much for your time today.

GORDON: Great. Good.

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