The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: John Hannah
Assistant for National Security Affairs to the Vice President, 2005-2009

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[Begin Transcription]

FEAVER: Anything else?

SAYLE: I just would say maybe when we start, we can try and get everyone's names.

FEAVER: Okay, so this is an interview with John Hannah. This is Peter Feaver speaking.

SAYLE: And this is Tim Sayle.

FEAVER: And so John, thank you for joining us. Why don't you begin by stating your name and also, what was your role in government, and how your role related to the Iraq issue in general?

HANNAH: I'm John Hannah and at least during the Surge phase, I was the Vice President's National Security Advisor, I guess formally his assistant, the Vice President's Assistant for National Security Affairs, was the proper title. The Vice President, of course, was deeply involved in Iraq issues, from prewar planning, up through the war, and certainly through the Surge, was a major player, I think an important voice [00:01:00] in the Surge strategy. My job was to support him in trying to advance his arguments and his views, and provide him information about how the war was going and what might be done to try and improve the prospects for achieving America's goals and mission in Iraq.

FEAVER: And so you served from when to when in that position?

HANNAH: In that position, I took it over in October, the very end of October of 2005, and served through until the end of the administration, on January 20, 2009.

FEAVER: If you tell the story of the Iraq Surge, when would you begin that story, and just describe your role in that story moving forward. We'll just proceed chronologically, whenever you think is the right beginning point.

HANNAH: I guess as a formal matter, I think it begins some time in the summer, [00:02:00] perhaps late summer of 2006, in the sense that you feel a coming

together of some of the President's main advisors, into an open recognition that the strategy that we'd been pursuing in Iraq is not succeeding, that we are in fact in danger of losing the war, with potentially catastrophic consequences for the United States, and therefore, a more formal process begins, that Steve Hadley, at least to my recollection, calls together, to begin taking a look at whether that assumption about America losing this war was correct, and what steps might or could be taken, to try and turn things around. So, I have that sense of the late summer of 2006 being the point in time [00:03:00] where an overall unease in the administration, with where things are going, kind of congeals into a formal recognition inside the U.S. Government, that something needs to be done if this effort in Iraq is going to be salvaged, and a real disaster for American national security is going to be avoided. Now I'd say that that's different from that kind of unofficial unease that exists, I think throughout the U.S. Government, certainly by early 2006 that exists. In my own view, I distinctly recall in late 2003, certainly after the UN bombings in August of 2003, after the bombing of the head of the Supreme Council, his assassination by car-bombing in Najaf, [00:04:00] around that same time in 2003. One has a sense that things are not going well, that something is emerging here in terms of the insurgency that looks like it could be a strategic threat to the American effort in Iraq, if and only if, because by that time already, it seemed to me at least, that you had a steady drip, drip, drip of American casualties, virtually every single day or every other day -- one, two, three

Americans being killed, and that just seemed to be that over time, would be entirely corrosive of the effort. It wasn't what the American people had been prepared for and I didn't think you would be able to sustain that over time in terms of achieving our objectives in Iraq. I think that only sort of escalates, and that feeling of unease continues throughout 2004, 2005. [00:05:00] There's always a hope in that period, that the political progress that we are seeing being made, in terms of handing over sovereignty back to the Iraqis in 2004, in terms of the series of elections we held through the end of 2005, that that political process is going to be the thing that kind of staunches the insurgency and allows us to begin building that vision of a more representative, inclusive Iraq that is going to be an ally of the United States in the broader region and the broader war on terror. And yet, I think there's a lot of unease in the government, that as each of those milestones passes and the insurgency only appears to worsen, that that in fact is not the case, that there is a fundamental problem of first order, in getting on top of the security [00:06:00] situation in Iraq and understanding what the insurgency is and how it might be defeated. And until you can provide Iraqis, at least the vast majority of the population, that fundamental sense of security, our ability to marginalize the insurgency and really proceed forward to develop that model of a representative Iraq is not going to get very far. So that kind of unease, I think, certainly in the Vice President's office, whether or not the Vice President shares it or not, I think is at least two years in process, the basic sense that you have large parts of the Iraqi

public that are prepared to go along with, if not support, this effort, if their first order security, basic security concerns, [00:07:00] are taken care of. And it becomes evident in 2004, 2005, certainly 2006, with the bombing of The Golden Dome Mosque in Samarra, that the United States is failing at that first order job of fighting an insurgency and something needs to change.

FEAVER: One of the events that's salient in that period before late summer, and we'll get you up to late summer but before, is the so-called national security summit at Camp David in June. Were you involved in that and can you talk about that and its role to the Iraq strategy review?

HANNAH: Yes. That was certainly a date that was a target on our calendars and agendas. We saw it as a potentially important event, [00:08:00] perhaps even a key turning point in beginning to do what we thought was necessary in terms of turning American strategy in a more productive direction. So we did a tremendous -- I know within our office and I'm sure throughout the U.S. Government, we did a tremendous amount of preparation for the Vice President, put together some very serious, at least I think, two very large briefing books filled primarily with intelligence reports and assessments and analyses of just how bad things were going; the kinds of levels of violence that we were seeing, the fact that the approach being pursued by our forces in theater was not in fact working. We were not getting a handle on the insurgency and reducing levels of violence. On the

contrary; levels of violence were increasing quite dangerously and [00:09:00] dramatically.

We had had an ongoing conversation with a number of people who, I think, in some ways had a better understanding of what was happening, perhaps, than some of our commanders on the ground in Iraq. People like Colonel McMaster, like the intelligence, the DIA intelligence official, Derek Harvey, like Colonel John Nagl. These were a series of informal conversations that we'd had, at least since 2004, with people who had experience on the ground and understood how dire the situation was and how negative the trends were on the security front, despite the achievements we had achieved in the political realm. So, we kind of tried to compile all of that together before that Camp David meeting [00:10:00] in June of 2006. I attended that meeting and I guess have to say that we ended up being quite disappointed. My sense is other than the -- there was, I believe a videoconference with commanders in the field, with General Casey, perhaps with General Abizaid. I can't remember. I wasn't actually in on that videoconference, in which some things had gotten aired, was my understanding, about some of the concerns that were out there, but at least my impression was that there was still an awful lot of people dancing around the issue and just how severe things had gotten for our situation in Iraq.

There was a meeting with a group of experts, [00:11:00] a luncheon, that I attended. That was a pleasant enough conversation. I think a range of different

views. I'm not sure, it wasn't my impression there was any real theme that emerged from that lunch, nothing that sort of hit the President or the other principals in the head and said my God, we've got to do something and this is the thing that we've got to do, a range of views and sort of confirmation that things were not going as well as they needed to go, that there needed to be some corrections. But no real sense of urgency coming out of there that this is what we're going to do, that we're going to review these policies from A to Z, and figure out a new course ahead that would improve the situation on the ground in relatively short [00:12:00] order. That did not emerge from that session at Camp David, in part I think, because the President disappeared on the second day that was scheduled for that event and showed up in Baghdad and had what might have been an important PR event with the new Iraqi cabinet, the prime minister, that perhaps was important for the American people in trying to bolster support for the policy, but I felt that Camp David effort was -- I was disappointed in what emerged out of it in terms of results and new thinking in the U.S. Government, and at least I considered it to have been a lost opportunity.

FEAVER: What was preventing the principals from grasping the nettle of a full up review of the strategy? [00:13:00]

HANNAH: It's a very -- it's a good question. It's one that I have asked myself often. I'm not sure I have a good answer to it. I guess the thing that perplexes me more than anything else is probably just how long it took, when there was obviously, again,

this unspoken feeling amongst a lot of smart people inside of the U.S. Government, not to mention outside of the U.S. Government, who just knew in their bones that things were not going right in Iraq, in that 2004, 2005, early 2006 period, and yet it took at least two years, if not longer, to begin righting that ship of state and begin taking the decisions that led to the Surge and the necessary course correction. Figuring out why that took so long is, like I said, a bit of a mystery to me. I think [00:14:00] there was a strong -- if I had to guess and I'm speculating, but based on some knowledge, that there was, in the administration, and I think properly to some extent, a strong desire and urge to defer to our commanders in the field. In particular, somebody like General Abizaid was, I think, a really strongly respected figure who, if you asked any of those principals, John Abizaid understood the Middle East in general and probably understood Iraq specifically far better than anybody else sitting in that Situation Room. He was the man who had the responsibility of trying to carry out the President's orders and achieve the President's mission in Iraq. These guys were the experts at the art of warfare [00:15:00] and therefore, I think there was properly, a strong urge to give them a lot of authority and to stick with them and back them up. As it happens, I think that, my view is that that was the wrong strategy, and yet taking on the military commanders in that way, I think has got to be a difficult thing for a President to bring himself around to doing. Again, even as you have this track of the security situation deteriorating so steadily and dramatically over time, you did

have milestones being achieved at some level, on the political front, and that allowed you to kind of attach yourself to those things and always believe that just the next milestone -- get us through this [00:16:00] political transition to Iraq, to a permanently elected parliament and prime minister, and everything on the security situation will become much more manageable and we'll then begin to get on top of that because the politics will have moved to the place where it itself will begin to become a major factor undermining the insurgency and taking the energy out of the insurgency. And so it just took a matter of time. The U.S. Government is this huge bureaucracy and fighting a war is no different, perhaps even more intense, than any other sort of normal event, and trying to turn that around when you have that much at stake and that many people involved in the process, I just think became a very difficult thing to do.

FEAVER: Were there players that you thought saw it your way and were allies of yours [00:17:00] during this period, and were there ones who you thought didn't see it your way and were maybe blocking--you already mentioned General Abizaid, but are there others? How would you rack and stack some of the other key figures?

HANNAH: I think allies who -- I don't know, I mean they were probably few and far between, I mean the people we gravitated to naturally, were the people who saw things the same way we did and who had experience on the ground. That is there were obviously individual officers, mid-grade officers, captains, colonels, who had experience on the ground, who had the same sense that things were not going

right, had some experience with things that had worked reasonably well. We had intel analysts who were telling us that and confirming that sense that [00:18:00] things were spiraling out of control in certain areas.

FEAVER: Folks in the policy space?

HANNAH: Clearly, again, people, I think, who looked at Iraq on a day-to-day basis, I think, clearly people in the Iraq shop, in the NSC, understood that things were not going well. The extent to which people were arguing behind the scenes to their bosses to change things, and the need for dramatic change, is kind of opaque to me. I'm not sure what was happening inside of the NSC, inside of Steve Hadley's office. I know in our office, on the one hand, I always felt that there was a big open door to the Vice President in terms of just absorbing massive amounts of information, [00:19:00] meeting with all kinds of people offline who had, let's say slightly different views of how the war was going. And the Vice President, there were no doubt points in time where he appreciated that things weren't going well, but I'm not sure that I really got a sense of his sense of how badly things were going really crystallized until some time in early 2006, and that he was prepared to really begin making strong arguments and strong points in his own way, that the current strategy was not working.

FEAVER: But as early as early 2006, you were saying he was in that place?

HANNAH: Yeah, that was my --

FEAVER: Or was it more the summer? Okay.

HANNAH: That was my feeling, that by early 2006, I mean certainly in pushing -- I can't remember exactly when we started preparing for that [00:20:00] Camp David meeting, but it was relatively early in the process. Certainly by that time, he was completely convinced that something had to change. I believe we had -- again, we were providing him with an awful lot of information in 2005 and early 2006, that things on the security front were going badly. He was certainly willing to entertain ideas for how that all might change, but it's really some time in early 2006 that you get a sense that he's going to be prepared to really begin engaging the argument in a really serious way.

FEAVER: So, the Camp David meeting is a disappointment. In the public record, the next moment that gets attention is a series of Secure Video Teleconferences between the President and General Casey [00:21:00] in July, where the questions are quite sharp and pointed. Were you involved in that and can you speak to that at all?

HANNAH: I was involved in that and I attended that. I'm unsure on the dates, but if you tell me it's July that's possible. Clearly by that time, our forces in Iraq were engaged in a new effort to kind of try and secure Baghdad. Everybody had sort of come to the realization that the dramatic deterioration in security in the Iraqi capital, was going to be a make or break game for us, that we needed to get on top of that. We certainly saw that effort with General Casey, as kind of the next opportunity after that Camp David event, where we'd had enough of General Casey's [00:22:00] new battle plan for Iraq, we'd had enough experience with it and

the results were disappointing enough, that it was sort of the next big opportunity for the VP, from our point of view, and perhaps from other principals in the U.S. Government, to really begin to press and make clear to the command in Iraq that there was kind of a fundamental unease in Washington, with the current state of affairs, and that we really needed to begin thinking about new directions.

FEAVER: Did you have conversations with -- I'm sure you did have conversations with Steve Hadley during this time period, on Iraq. Can you speak to them at all, how you saw whether he was persuaded that there needed to be a review and review the strategy? Where would you put him in that constellation [00:23:00] during this period, the summer of 2006?

HANNAH: You know my guess, from observing Steve and watching him and talking to him, I think, like everybody, things were not going well. Whether or not he had in his mind at that point in time, the need for a dramatic shift away from the existing strategy is something new, that became the Surge, I don't think I really become aware of until that kind of August, September timeframe, that in fact, the President has given him the mandate that something needs to happen here. That's when Steve first begins convening the group, that I think that realization comes, but I think certainly, in those meetings with Casey in July, I recall the Vice President being [00:24:00] sort of the most pointed, but I think others are probably weighing in as well, that they're uneasy with it, and certainly, I would put Steve in that category.

FEAVER: What changed about August? Was it just the cumulated weight or were there catalytic events in August that crystallized the view that you described?

HANNAH: I don't remember any major events. I may just simply be forgetting them. I don't remember a lot of what happened in that August, September timeframe. So my guess is it might have been some crystallization of events. I can't remember for the life of me what the polling was at that point in time, amongst the American public, but clearly, I think there were at least two iterations of General Casey's effort to get control of the security situation in Iraq, and it became quite evident early on that those were not working. I think the people back [00:25:00] home, just the continuous rise in the level of violence, despite these efforts, and perhaps that had something to do with it. The impending elections and the sense that we had a very short amount of time to begin to try and get this right, to begin to try and turn things around. So that's my impression; there wasn't a single crystallizing event, but just again, not being privy to the conversations between the President and Steve Hadley and some other people, about the need for some kind of basic review of the strategy, to try something new. It's hard for me to say what was exactly going on in their minds and why they chose that particular point in time to launch this review.

FEAVER: Talk about what was launched, in how the late August, September timeframe, the formal, [00:26:00] publicly announced J.D. Crouch thing happened after the midterm elections in November. So this is still a quiet phase, if you will, of the --

what was happening and what was your role in what was happening during this phase?

HANNAH: At some point in time in that August, September time period, and again, I don't recall exactly when, I know the VP was coming to me, saying that there was a suggestion that this kind of conversation would begin, a very discrete, quiet conversation, I think primarily amongst people at the White House, to begin looking at whether or not we needed a different kind of strategy in Iraq. And so he had kind of prepped it for me and previewed it for me. I think he was quite enthusiastic if the President was moving in this direction. Shortly, very shortly [00:27:00] thereafter, I think, Steve Hadley convened a group of us over in the West Wing.

FEAVER: Who were those?

HANNAH: You would have to jog my memory. I believe you were there.

FEAVER: Yes. Meghan.

HANNAH: I believe Meghan O'Sullivan was there, Brett McGurk was there, Steve Hadley was there of course, I'm almost certain J.D. Crouch was there, Steve's deputy. I want to say that it was either that meeting or a subsequent meeting, that there were people from State involved as well. I believe Secretary Rice might have been involved in at least one of those sessions fairly early on, certainly David Satterfield, who I believe was her top assistant for Iraq at that time, probably her counselor, Phil Zelikow. But I don't remember DoD [Department of Defense] participation. I

do remember one other person I'd add to this is Bill Luti, who [00:28:00]had been at the Pentagon and was at the NSC by that time, as the President's special assistant for DoD-related issues. I actually recall conversations with Bill, I think even before that, and he may have previewed certain things for me, that he had a tasking to actually begin looking, if we were going to move towards a surge type of strategy of adding more forces in Iraq, that Bill had been given the task to actually look at force generation options. What exactly, if the President made that decision, what additional forces did we actually have available to bring to bear on the fight in Baghdad and perhaps in Anbar Province, in Western Iraq.

FEAVER: So that one is tasked in October, the Luti study. Any more [00:29:00] clarity on the September activities, or is it just memory hazy?

HANNAH: Memory hazy, again, conversations occurring. I personally have a very strong -- maybe it was just because the Vice President did, that we would have to move to a surge type of option. I have a strong feeling that whether or not Steve said it, certainly the people around him in the NSC, I think yourself, Meghan O'Sullivan, Brett McGurk, all knew that was the direction, if we were going to salvage this, that were needed to move in terms of providing security and protection to the Iraqi population. I certainly got a very strong vibe from Steve, that that was the President's strong inclination as well. Maybe, just because of what happened afterwards I'm assuming that, but that, I always thought [00:30:00] this was moving in that direction and figuring out how you got from there to actually

convincing the rest of the United States Government, our allies, and the Iraqi government, that that's the place they needed to be, that that's what a lot of this process was fundamentally about.

FEAVER: It's striking that there was no DoD representative in that mix. Why was that do you think, in the September, October timeframe?

HANNAH: It might have been discussed. I really don't -- I don't recall why they weren't there. I can sort of speculate, sitting here now, that there was a general view that the leadership at DoD and certainly the leadership of our command inside of Iraq, there was a view probably that they were not enthusiastic about a fundamental change in strategy in Iraq, from [00:31:00] one of kind of building up Iraqi forces and drawing down American forces, kind of handing over the security situation to Iraqis as quickly as we could. I think there was a sense that that was where the Pentagon was on this, as well as the command inside of Iraq, and that if we were going to convince them to change their views, there was a first order need for other people in the U.S. Government, who weren't necessarily as wedded to their particular view that DoD had, to kind of get our act together and get our arguments together on why you really did need a quite dramatic change, shift in strategy, in Iraq.

FEAVER: Were you part of -- moving the story forward, along now, to the end of October-- were you part of Steve Hadley's trip to Iraq and did you have a trip to [00:32:00] Iraq in this time period?

HANNAH: I was not part of Steve's trip. I did take a trip to Iraq. I can't remember now. I want to say it was some time in October of 2006, it could have been November, 2006, that I took with one of my aides, Robert Karem, to Baghdad.

FEAVER: Do we have the date for that?

SAYLE: I just have a December meeting with Secretary Gates, but that's clearly a later trip.

HANNAH: That's a later trip, yeah. No, I took a separate trip.

FEAVER: Did you go with J. D. Crouch on his trip?

HANNAH: No, no.

FEAVER: But a separate, right?

HANNAH: Yeah, I took my separate trip there.

FEAVER: Can you talk about the impact that had on your thinking?

HANNAH: I guess the only thing that I vividly remember is the kind of confirmation it gave me that we were failing in Iraq, that we were essentially losing everybody [00:33:00] in terms of the population of Iraq. We were losing people inside the Iraqi government, who were losing confidence in us, were looking at the American political situation and believing that our time remaining in Iraq was probably winding down. Sunnis, of course, were at that point in time, still appeared to be quite thick in terms of at least not opposing the insurgency, and everybody beginning to engage in all kinds of very destructive self-help. That was only leading to an escalading spiral of violence, that U.S. forces did not have control of, did not really have an effective answer to, and that in fact, the level of hostility

between our forces and the Iraqi population, as well as the Iraqi political class, was, [00:34:00] I think dangerously rising, in my sense. There was a possibility here for a rupture at some point in time. Once they believe that we were not capable of fighting the insurgency an effective way, and that we were probably on our way out of the country, that the politics in America was turning against us and we were losing breath in Iraq, that they were going to have to increasingly take matters into their own hands and do what was ever necessary to protect their own sectarian kind of enclaves and equities. So that's what I really came away with after that trip, just a confirmation that something needed to be done in terms of U.S. strategy and it needed to be done damn quickly.

FEAVER: So, moving forward, the next decision point is the American public's decision point of, the midterm elections. [00:35:00] Immediately thereafter, Secretary Rumsfeld departs government. Were you aware of that happening, and what was its role in the Iraq strategy review, Secretary Rumsfeld's departure?

HANNAH: I mean, it was certainly in the air that Secretary Rumsfeld was taking a lot of the blame, and he was in some sense the scapegoat for the failure, to actually begin to turn around the policy for the deteriorating situation that the public saw in Iraq, and that if in fact the elections went as badly as they could have gone, then Secretary Rumsfeld was probably going to, again, determine that he was ready to go, [00:36:00] and the President, at that point in time, clearly made a decision that he had to go. So I don't think it came as a surprise to anybody. I think -- you'll

have to ask the Vice President about his own relationship with Secretary Rumsfeld, which was very, very strong, and I still to this day, think that the Vice President had fought for Secretary Rumsfeld in the past, when there had been similar kinds of discussions, rumors in the public debate about Secretary Rumsfeld resigning. I think Secretary Rumsfeld even at times certainly told the Vice President that if that's what it took, if that's what was required, given the change of the overall public's and Congress's perception of how the war was going, that he was prepared to resign if that would assist the President. I think the Vice President always resisted that as far as I could tell. He thought Rumsfeld had been an outstanding [00:37:00] secretary of defense and that the problems with the policy perhaps lied elsewhere; other decisions that needed to be made by the U.S. government as an entire entity.

So, but once Secretary Rumsfeld went, I'm trying to think what kind of impact it had. I'm not sure because, institutionally, I think at the Pentagon, I think there continued to be, throughout that period in November and December, and certainly amongst our commanders in Iraq, a great deal of reticence to look at any kind of dramatic changes in policy and strategy in Iraq, particularly ones that required a significant addition of U.S. forces. Exactly where Secretary Gates stood at that point in time was unclear. He'd been part of the Iraq Study Group [00:38:00] of course. Elements of the Iraq Study Group, I think had been in favor of at least a short-term surge of forces to Iraq, but I don't think there was really

any indication that Secretary Gates himself had ever been in that camp, as a strong proponent that this is what we needed to do, actually add U.S. forces in Iraq. So I don't have a sense that his appointment or his nomination actually changed the dynamic within the review itself and the kinds of discussions we were having.

FEAVER: So the President announces that there's going to be a formal interagency review headed by J.D. Crouch. Can you describe your role in that review and how that moved the story along now, with the Crouch interagency review.

HANNAH: Well, I was the -- I guess the Vice President's principal representative [00:39:00] in that review that J.D. oversaw. I mean, a series of meetings, J.D. tasked out various papers, all of the agencies kind of made their arguments, both about how they understood the situation there, what might be done to begin turning it around. I guess my recollection of it is that there was never great enthusiasm amongst the Pentagon or the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for the Surge option, but that over time, they at some level got worn down, or else they were simply -- there were other conversations occurring outside of the review, that they were picking up messages from, that they were probably going to need to begin [00:40:00] accommodating themselves to this possibility and figuring out how they could in fact protect their equities, given that this may be where the President and the policy were heading.

FEAVER: Can you speak a bit more granular about that process itself, the wearing down and maybe the outside messaging. In particular, what were the different positions that were represented in the room -- policy positions?

HANNAH: Yeah. I recall that amongst people at the White House, both on the NSC staff and the Vice President's staff, there was an agreement that things were going very badly, that we needed a shift in strategy and that it needed to be basically an adoption of true counterinsurgency strategy of actually having sufficient forces that you could successful complete the first order [00:41:00] of mission, or providing protection to the population, in order then to begin having a serious opportunity to undermine the insurgency itself, by taking away its base of popular support. I think that was largely shared by people in the White House in general. I think we had differences more on the political front, in how we sort of pursued the political components of a counterinsurgency strategy, but on the basic need for an addition, a surge of U.S. forces, and a change in strategy to being population centric. I think the White House really operated more or less in consensus on that point of view.

FEAVER: Just to clarify, when you say the political side, what do you mean? Do you mean American domestic political or Iraqi political?

HANNAH: No, no, I'm sorry, the Iraqi political component of a counterinsurgency [00:42:00] strategy.

FEAVER: Can you speak to that? What were the different positions?

HANNAH: I think that to the extent that people inside most of the U.S. Government, thought that we had a political problem in Iraq, and they were right, that there was a political reconciliation problem in Iraq. They saw it as principally, almost entirely as a Sunni related problem, that Sunnis had been disenfranchised, that Sunnis were being oppressed by a new Shiite dominated government in Baghdad, that Sunnis were looking to have some of their basic rights and privileges as Iraqi citizens recognized by that government, and that if we were able to press hard enough on that component of reconciliation, [00:43:00] that could have a dramatic effect on the overall political picture inside of Iraq and cause a significant number of Sunnis to come over to the side of the government. So I thought it was a heavy Sunni-centric model of political reconciliation.

I think in the Vice President's office, we were virtually, I think, alone in believing that there was a serious Sunni problem in Iraq, but that it was a more complicated affair than simply Sunnis being put upon by a Shiite dominated government in Iraq, that the insurgency itself was in large part organized, run, and dominated by elements of the former regime, that there was a serious primacist theme to the leadership of the insurgency, that they just didn't want their piece of the pie [00:44:00] in Baghdad, but they were determined to actually overthrow the American sponsored new order in Baghdad politically, that that had begun as early as 2003, or even before the war, that there had been some level of organization put together to fight this kind of insurgency in Iraq, and that our fundamental security

failure in Iraq had been that failure to provide security to a majority Shiite and Kurdish population, but particularly Shiite population in Iraq, that had gone along with the invasion and the liberation and the subsequent occupation, but were eventually, over time, pushed off that cooperation [00:45:00] by the fact that they were so heavily targeted over a period of several years, by the Sunni insurgency. They then began engaging in very, very disruptive behaviors of their own, particularly the militias and the death squads that began to run rampant in 2006. But there was clearly a period of time between late 2003 and some time early in 2006, where the vast majority of the Iraqi population, the majority of that made up of Shiites, had been actually relatively cooperative with the American experiment in Iraq, but that we were losing them over time. And in fact, that Zarqawi, as we know now, and al-Qaeda in Iraq, and no doubt the former regime elements that were so instrumental [00:46:00] to the insurgency, that they in fact had the creation of this conflict between Sunnis and Shiites as kind of their first order objective, to kind of force the Shiites to get off of the fence and get into this fight in a major way that would essentially erupt into a civil war and lead the Americans to throw up their hands and get out of the country, at which point in time the insurgency might actually have a chance to achieve their true objective, which was to take Baghdad and restore some semblance of the old order.

So, I guess this is a longwinded way of saying that while we thought it was necessary to figure out a way, how to peel off some elements of the broader Sunni

population that was at least acquiescent to the insurgency. There was also a huge part [00:47:00] of business to be done in ensuring that our base in Iraq, the foundation of what actually had allowed us to operate inside of that country, that is the Shiite-Kurdish government that had actually supported our efforts, that we didn't lose them at the same time that we were losing the Sunni population, and that political reconciliation, to the extent it existed, an absolutely central component of that was reestablishing some level of fundamental trust between us and this Iraqi government that we had helped create, rather than I guess elevating that new Iraqi government as our fundamental problem in Iraq, who was preventing us from giving the Sunnis what they wanted. I just thought the story was a lot more complicated.

FEAVER: So what you're describing is the paper that sometimes is called "Bet on Shia," or "80 Percent," is that right? Just to clarify that for the record.

HANNAH: Yes. I can't remember what the name, how the paper was titled, [00:48:00] but yes, that was a paper where I tried to underscore the need to keep our base of support in Iraq as solid as possible. There needed to be a lot of work to rebuild that as well, because those were the people that we were going to, A, rely on to make these kinds of concessions to the Sunnis, and they were the guys who were going to have to join us in fighting this insurgency, not only with Sunnis, the Sunni insurgency, but within their own base of support amongst the Shiite militias as well.

FEAVER: And this was a paper for the --?

HANNAH: For the group, for the review group, that I can remember having this debate about what political reconciliation looks like and how you put your emphasis on the different communities in Iraq. And at some point in time, having expressed my point of view, I think fairly early on, J.D. Crouch, who was heading up the group, asked me, [00:49:00] can you get some of those thoughts down on paper, that we can circulate to the group and have another discussion about it.

FEAVER: And was this John Hannah's view or was this the Vice President's view?

HANNAH: This was largely -- this was almost entirely my view. I think the Vice President was sympathetic to the overall notion, because this had been a hobbyhorse of mine throughout the period, since 2003, that in fact whatever we did with Sunnis, we needed to keep that base of support among Shiites solid -- first and foremost by actually protecting that population and stop massive car bombings from going off every week at Shiite holy places and Shiite markets, et cetera. So the Vice President knew that we needed to have somebody at least that was allied with us in Iraq, and better that it be in the majority of the population than some minority of the population. [00:50:00] But in terms of the actual paper itself, that was entirely my writing, and I think I had to write it overnight, so was at the office late that night in order to deliver it up to J.D. and the group the next day, so did that and didn't really engage in any conversation with the Vice President, that was

going to happen, inside of the group. I wasn't necessarily briefing him on a day-to-day, minute-by-minute basis, about what the group was doing.

SAYLE: We are at an hour. We can take a short break for coffee and a rest break.

HANNAH: It's up to you guys. I'm fine, if you want to keep going.

FEAVER: Well, let's keep going then. What were the other views around the table that you remember? There were other papers. Do you remember the State paper?

HANNAH: I'm not sure I remember a paper. What I recall, I believe Philip Zelikow and David Satterfield were probably the main State [00:51:00] representatives at the meeting. I think they continued, over time, as far as I recall, and this is probably not doing justice to their views, but from early on, my impression of State, from the Secretary on down, that they had sort of begun to arrive at a conclusion that -- probably unfair to say that the situation in Iraq was lost, but the situation was pretty much lost as far as what the U.S. could do at the margins to actually turn it around, that this was something that Iraqis were going to have to do, that they were right now engaged in something that was pretty damn close to a civil war. It was certainly a sectarian bloodletting. That these different factions in Iraq, [00:52:00] particularly religiously, had kind of so far removed to their own corners that hopes of reconciliation at that point in time, or the U.S. sort of bringing them back together in any kind of agreement or comity, that that was not a particularly viable option, and while the U.S. couldn't get out of Iraq entirely, why we had a responsibility to continue conducting counter-terrorism missions and supporting

Iraqi forces where we could, in terms of building them up and empowering them to kind of conduct security operations. Actually getting at these key questions of stopping the violence and advancing political reconciliation between these different camps, that there wasn't going to be a lot of gain in terms of dramatic new American [00:53:00] investments in that effort. So it was a pessimistic overall kind of view about what could be accomplished, and whether or not it was outright against a surge in forces and a shift in strategy toward true protection of the population primarily by -- or with a major role by American forces. It may not have been outright opposition, but it was deep, profound skepticism was my impression, where they were coming from. And I think that was probably the case with DoD as well. Again, with DoD, it was unclear how much of the opposition was -- there was clearly concern about, and I think legitimate concern, about the health of the force. I mean, people call it big Army kinds of concerns, and no doubt the Marine Corps had it as well, that the stresses on the force by that time in Iraq were enormous. Adding new additional [00:54:00] burdens to this would really endanger the force and endanger perhaps, our ability to conduct operations in crises elsewhere in the world. So that was part of it.

But I think it also was in part a holdover that they just had a different view of the role of American forces in Iraq, was I think largely in their minds, not a particularly positive thing, that in fact the presence of American forces that had been labeled as occupiers, had fired up all kinds of antibodies in the Iraqi body

politic writ large, that were reacting against us, resisting us, fighting us, and that in fact the way to get control of that was to actually do as much as you could as quickly as you could, to hand over to Iraqis, even if they weren't going to do it as well as we could, [00:55:00] the political benefits in terms of potential reconciliation would be much greater in terms of getting the Iraqis to actually take responsibility for their own affairs and to do what was necessary to stabilize their own country, that the benefits would far outweigh the cost of drawing down our forces on a much more quicker timeframe. So I also had a -- for slightly different reasons that DoD and the Pentagon and the military in general, were not particularly enthusiastic about the course that we appeared headed toward.

FEAVER: I want to take you back to a meeting that actually predated the start of the J.D. Crouch review. The Saturday before, there was a meeting in Hadley's office with Secretary Rice, Phil Zelikow, Satterfield. [00:56:00] It's been reported in the histories. Do you remember that meeting and can you shed any light on that meeting?

HANNAH: I remember the meeting. I'm not sure I can shed more light on it than I have in terms of characterizing this profound skepticism that State had about the ability of the United States now, to jump in with more troops and more effort, to get between these warring Iraqi factions and actually get control of the violence, that things had regressed too far and deteriorated too much. I even remember talk, it might have been by David Satterfield, that essentially the Shiite community in Iraq

had entered its Hezbollah phase, that that's how far things had gone, and that the thought that America, [00:57:00] through almost any action, would now be able to begin reversing that or stopping it, was probably a bridge too far, and that we had to think about I guess less ambitious efforts and shifts in strategy that would kind of limit the risk, limit the damage that was almost inevitably going to be done, given how far things had gone along and how much they deteriorated already in Iraq.

FEAVER: Anything else on that meeting?

HANNAH: No, I don't think so.

FEAVER: Okay. Did the J. D. Crouch review proceed through a series of papers, and then people voted on the papers? How did the policy progress through this review?

HANNAH: There were certainly papers that were circulated and discussed. [00:58:00] I don't really remember much about any of them. There was a lot of discussion, there were a lot of meetings, and there were certainly, at some point, and end product that -- and I don't even remember at this point, if it presented at least two or three different options, whether it presented a single option of the Surge. My guess is that it tried to capture a range of views, knowing how the NSC worked at that time, which then was over a course of time, presented to the President and other members of the NSC, for their review and their feedback. I don't know how many iterations there might have been, of that process, before we got to some kind of final decision in December, but that's kind of how I remember it working.

FEAVER: There was a meeting [00:59:00] in the Solarium, late November, during which the -- sort of the mid-course, on the review, a report to the President on the review thus far. Do you remember that meeting?

HANNAH: I don't. I don't think I was in that. I kind of remember the meeting happening. Was it around Thanksgiving?

FEAVER: Yes.

HANNAH: Yeah, I do.

FEAVER: In connection with the trip to see Nouri al-Maliki in Jordan.

HANNAH: To see Maliki. I certainly remember something happening around that Thanksgiving timeframe. I can't remember if I had to be out of town at that point in time, but do remember it and some effort to -- I don't know if that was the first opportunity to actually begin briefing the President on what was coming, whether there had been a previous chance, I'm not sure, but I do remember that.

FEAVER: The [01:00:00] next meeting that gets a lot of attention that you were at, or perhaps you were at, was the President and the Vice President go to the tank. Were you part of that trip?

HANNAH: I was.

FEAVER: And can you -- what was the purpose of that trip and what's your memory of that trip?

HANNAH:I believe the purpose was to, maybe for the first time, although I'm not sure, for the President really to let the Chiefs know where he was headed, in a very

formal sense, and to try and convince them why that was the direction he was going. But equally as much, an opportunity for him to hear directly from them, about their concerns with what was happening in Iraq, their concerns with what might happen if we in fact surged forces to Iraq, the impact it would have [01:01:00] on the rest of our forces and our ability to respond elsewhere in the world. So it was both -- I think it was both an opportunity for the President to signal, in a much more straightforward and forthright way, where he was leaning, but also for him to actually really hear out the Joint Chiefs, about their concerns, and perhaps to begin figuring out ways that he could mitigate some of their concerns and really bring them on as enthusiastic participants in the strategy that he was going to begin laying out. That's kind of what I think the purpose, my impression of what the purpose of the meeting was. We certainly, I think, in the Vice President's office, wanted it [01:02:00] to be a definitive meeting in which the Chiefs were brought onboard, in which they were directed that this shift in strategy was going to happen, that the President was strongly leaning in favor of more forces, to explain to them why that was the case, why he believed that was necessary.

What I recall about that meeting is that that communication of the President, with an assist I think, from the Vice President, that communication and their determination to do whatever was necessary, including by surging forces to Iraq, that was done very effectively, that they were not going to lose this war and

they were not going to take any step, even if it was -- posed potential risk to the military as an institution, that they were not going to do anything [01:03:00] that they saw as undermining their ability to achieve victory in this war and to turn the situation around in Iraq, and that they were fully prepared, while taking that decision, to do other things that at least tried to address some of the concerns that the Chiefs had about their institutions and the health of their forces. I can only recall that the Vice President talked about a conversation that he and the President had in the limousine on the way over to the tank, about how they would handle that meeting, in which they were going to communicate that kind of view to the Chiefs and again, coming out of that meeting, my sense, it was a dramatic meeting, it was an important meeting. The President was very, very strong and forceful, although extremely respectful to the Chiefs and their concerns and their needs, but that we came out of that meeting [01:04:00] having advanced significantly down the road toward the Surge itself.

FEAVER: You mentioned what's been called the sweeteners that were offered. Was that discussed in the interagency review, the J.D. Crouch review, the sweeteners?

HANNAH: That is a good question and I frankly don't recall. I remember it distinctly from the tank, and the President's commitment that he was more than happy to look at that, of augmenting the Marines and the Army by a dramatic number and that should be part of it. He was willing to go out on the line and fight for that,

but I, frankly, with regard to the review, I may have been in there but I just don't recall.

FEAVER: Two days before the tank session, there was the meeting the Vice President had with General Keane and Fred Kagan from AEI. Can you talk a little bit about, did you set up that meeting, and the genesis of that meeting and its role in the Surge story?

HANNAH: Yes, I [01:05:00] set up the meeting. Of course, the Vice President knew Jack Keane very well by that point in time, from General Keane's prior service in the government, in the Army, thought extremely highly of Jack, liked him, they were on very good personal terms. I certainly had been in touch with both Fred and Jack in the months leading up to the AEI report that Fred authored, on the Surge. I'm trying to recall whether the Vice President had also had, perhaps multiple meetings with Jack prior to that, over the course of the fall. But certainly at that -- I believe at that meeting, we actually get the PowerPoint and the results in detail. We may have had it a day or two in advance of the meeting, but we got in detail, the results of the AEI report that Fred had authored, together with a bunch of retired colonels that had looked at the need for the Surge, [01:06:00] questions of force generation, how many forces did we have available. I think they eventually got the numbers pretty damn close to what the President ultimately decided. I don't know how much Fred, at that point in time, was talking about a shift in strategy, to a more population-centric strategy. My guess is that he was, but I just

don't exactly recall. Keane was certainly talking at that point in time, about the need to protect the population. You have to recall that from very early on in '06, if not slightly before '06, we were getting drafts of Petraeus's new counterinsurgency manual, and the Vice President was reading those materials, and they had been circulated to a fairly wide group of people inside of Washington, including people like Keane. So the COIN [counter-insurgency]concept, what might be required to perform a counterinsurgency strategy, was already pretty well-known [01:07:00] and pretty well bought into by a certain group of people in Washington, certainly in the VP's office at that point.

So that meeting in December with Keane and Kagan, was really an opportunity to go into detail about the strategy, to talk about the forces that it would require, that forces that were available, why those forces were sufficient for us to be able to make a real dent in the insurgency. I remember it being quite a detailed meeting, with a full-blown PowerPoint before us, in which both Keane and Kagan were very competent and aggressive advocates for the Surge, which of course we had been pursuing through the Iraq Strategy Review and elsewhere, in sort of parallel tracks, but [01:08:00] having someone particularly of Keane's stature and what he represented, come in and validate all of the things that bureaucrats and staffers in the U.S. government were working on, I think was a tremendous help, particularly at a time when you had a lot of people with a lot of stars on their shoulders, raising some significant skepticism and questions about

that kind of strategy, that Keane was a first order validator of the Surge, in a way that really had an important impact on the overall process, and certainly on the VP's level of confidence, that not only was this necessary but it was doable and therefore, very much worth arguing on behalf of.

FEAVER: That same day, General Keane met with President Bush [01:09:00] in the Oval Office. Were you in that meeting?

HANNAH: I wasn't in that meeting, no.

FEAVER: There was concern from, reports of concern from the JCS[Joint Chiefs of Staff], about Jack Keane's role. Can you speak to those concerns? Were they expressed to you or to the Vice President?

HANNAH: I don't recall any being expressed directly to me. I certainly heard about those concerns and I think General Keane clearly heard about those concerns as well, that his line to the White House was too direct, that it was somehow undermining the command, it was not being helpful, that it was unrealistic. I don't think anybody thought of it too keenly, particularly out of the Pentagon, and including in the uniform military, with some exceptions, but there was a view that General Keane's contributions were perhaps, I don't know, somehow [01:10:00] had been outside of his lane and not particularly helpful, which was obviously dramatically different from the way we viewed it in the White House; as a critical component and piece of information from a source who was situated in a place that we

wouldn't otherwise have gotten that kind of perspective in that direct and forthright a way.

FEAVER: Did it come up in the tank session?

HANNAH: No. I don't recall it coming up; I really don't. Jack's name may have been raised. I'm not sure whether the President or Vice President, or somebody else might have referred to the AEI study. That's entirely possible, but not in the sense that we're talking about here, no sense from the Chiefs, that they were somehow resentful or concerned about the role that Keane was playing.

FEAVER: Moving the story along, around this time the Baker-Hamilton Commission report came out. [01:11:00] Can you speak to your views on that and what role it played, if any, in the Iraq Surge review?

HANNAH: I guess, honestly, I think we were skeptics of the value of having that kind of group go over there and conduct their own review, that this was something that ought to be occurring in the U.S. Government, that we were perfectly capable and had enough serious people, that we could take an honest look at our own strategy and its failings. At some point in time, it seemed politically inevitable that it was going to happen, and I think the White House trying to adjust to that reality and accommodate it and shape it as best as they could. Alas, when the report came out, I think, fairly or unfairly, it was thought of [01:12:00] as kind of more or less reinforcing the approach that was already underway, that was oriented, as much as anything, to figuring out a way to get us out of Iraq, while doing the least amount

of damage, rather than figuring out a way to truly achieve the President's objectives in Iraq, which I'm not sure whether the study group said it, but my guess is they thought those were probably unrealistic and unachievable at that point in time, and that some of their other recommendations on the Palestinian peace process, that that somehow could affect the insurgency or affect the Arab world's attitude to actually assisting a Shiite dominated government of Iraq, or somehow bringing Iranians and Syrians that for several years by that point in time, [01:13:00] it clearly had been dedicated to a strategy to destroy the American project in Iraq, that somehow bringing them into the process and empowering them to become shapers of Iraq's future at that point in time, when it looked like America was on the run, that those were actually probably not particularly helpful. Those were not the ways we were actually going to achieve success in Iraq, and yet once the report came out of course, you had something of a political issue, of how do you deal with it in a country and in a Congress that is already predisposed to, let's figure out a way to get out of this place, because we sure as hell can't win in this place.

So, I think at least within our office, and my guess is in other places in the U.S. government, I'm not sure a lot of people saw real hope in Baker-Hamilton. By that time, it was more in the line [01:14:00] of being an issue that we had to figure out a way to manage, while we were doing something quite dramatically different, which was the Surge. In retrospect there was, I think Senator Robb, who was a

member of the Iraq Study Group, had included almost, I would say an offhanded line about a possible temporary surge of forces. As far as I could tell, he was a party of one. It wasn't included as a top-line recommendation, and I think nobody really believed that the bulk of the commission thought that was probably a particularly good idea, but in order to maintain some level of consensus in the group, to keep Robb onboard, they included a line in there, but the overall thrust of the report was, I would say contrary, by that time, to where the administration and the President in particular, were probably headed in terms of the Iraq strategy. [01:15:00]

FEAVER: You went on the trip to Baghdad with Secretary Gates, with his maiden inspection trip as Secretary. By that time, was the Surge already decided? How did that trip factor into the Surge decision? Had it already been decided, mostly baked? Where would you put it, and what was the impact of that trip?

HANNAH: Right, yeah. Again, my instinct, again, this entire period of several months, that at some level this was baked. The President could figure out a way to get from his desire for more troops and for getting on top of the situation, to bringing everybody else along, that he was going to do that. I think that only became more true as the process evolved and he spoke to more people, his advisors came up with concrete options, as that was validated by people, serious people on the outside, that the President was headed there and whenever the Secretary [01:16:00] went -- the new Secretary, went off to Baghdad in mid to late December, the

President was going to surge forces, it was a question of how many and whether you could both get the new Secretary of Defense, but particularly the commanders that were still on the ground in Iraq; Generals Casey and Abizaid, to also come along with that recommendation. That's kind of the way I saw the mission. Exactly how many you were going to surge and exactly how they would be used, for what functions and what purposes, I think that, not in the President's mind, but in the commander's mind and in perhaps Secretary Gates's mind, that was by no means assured. There were various ways that that mix of available forces potentially could be maneuvered into theater and brought to bear on the fight, and [01:17:00] whether or not they were still open questions in the President's mind, exactly how to do this, whether you were going to do it in the AEI way, by bringing everything to bear all at once, in a last ditch effort to turn this thing around by being all in, or whether you were going to do it in a slightly more incremental way, was still an open question in theater at least. People thought there was still something to argue about regarding that.

FEAVER: What was your view on that issue?

HANNAH: I thought we needed as much as we could. We needed to be all in. We weren't going to get a second bite of this apple, that too much of the policy to that point in time had been a lot of incremental steps of always wishing that this next incremental move was going to turn things around. I thought we'd had enough of that, we'd kind of run out of chances of going down that stream, with the risk of

continuing to pursue that kind of policy, even with a surge strategy, was not going to have [01:18:00] the kind of impact that we required, both on the security situation and politically in the United States, in terms of public support for the war effort. So I thought, from very early on, we probably needed to focus as much forces as we could at the problem, particularly in Baghdad, but also in Anbar.

FEAVER: Was that the issue of the Crawford meeting on December 28th, when the President makes the final decision? Can you speak to that? You were at that meeting. Can you describe --

HANNAH: I actually wasn't in Crawford. I had a family event that I had to be at. What I recall is that Secretary Gates, on the way home from Baghdad, right before Christmas, generated a recommendations memo in which he had, on the one hand successfully moved Abizaid and Casey to "welcome" a surge of some type, but it was in fact [01:19:00] going to be a phased surge over time. I can't remember the exact configuration, whether he was going to bring two brigades to bear immediately, or hold some in reserve in Kuwait. I remember having Secretary Gates previewing that for a group of us on the plane on the way home. I can remember being a very lonely voice in saying that I was afraid this was not going to work, it was too little too late, it was incrementalism, that we weren't going to get another bite of the apple. I remember getting back to Andrews, going directly to the White House, close to midnight, going to my office, getting on the phone with Jack Keane. Jack Keane had already heard, [01:20:00] I can't remember from

whom, whether it was from Ray Odierno or General Petraeus, but from his sources in the military and perhaps some in Baghdad, that this was the direction, this was what Gates was coming home with. Keane confirmed all my suspicions, that this was not going to get the job done, or at least at too high a risk of failing.

I immediately, that night, wrote a trip report to the Vice President, telling him that this was what was coming, and expressing all my concerns about it. I think we had a phone conversation the next day. He entirely agreed and exactly what preparation he might have done before Crawford, because Crawford was after Christmas, and all of my conversations were before Christmas. The Vice President may have talked to Jack Keane before that, but then at Crawford, my impression is by that time, [01:21:00] most of the President's civilian advisors were more or less on the same page, that we needed to go all in at this point in time, and I think Secretary Gates was willing to come on to that.

FEAVER: You mentioned General Petraeus. At this point, are you aware that he is going to be the new MNF-I?

HANNAH: I don't remember exactly when the President signs off on him. There is a lot of conversations already, I think, amongst the people who are talking about, we need a new strategy. We were going to get a new command, we needed a new command to actually implement this strategy. We couldn't do it with the existing commend, that was so heavily invested in the prior strategy, and in those conversations amongst people, the obvious candidate was Petraeus, if it was

doable, that he was the man who seemed [01:22:00] to have both invested the most time thinking about this and actually doing parts of it, and therefore would probably be in the best position, having already been exposed on two tours in Iraq, knew a lot of the players, knew the politics of the place, that he was probably the best figure to come in and actually implement the strategy as the new commander.

FEAVER: So, you've described a process where the President seemed to be moving in this direction months before, but it takes months to get there. Why didn't the President just decide it more quickly? What's your explanation for the incremental approach to the decision-making itself?

HANNAH: The explanation I heard was that [01:23:00] the President, particularly with regard to the military, if he was going to make this kind of dramatic shift in strategy, at a time when it would be so incredibly controversial, when he and the administration had been so weakened, when public support for the effort in Iraq was draining day-by-day, and for the President to make such an announcement without as much solid support from the military and the Pentagon as he could muster, might itself almost be a step too far politically and might actually damage and undermine the effort. He already knew, I'm sure, that this was going to be incredibly difficult, incredibly controversial, and his decision to surge forces was going to generate a huge domestic backlash, and in order to face that, he was going to need, as much as he could get it, [01:24:00] a unified government, particularly the people in uniform, that were going to have to actually implement

and carry out the strategy. So I think that was my understanding of the calculation of why this had to --

FEAVER: Was this your understanding at the time, or in retrospect now?

HANNAH: I think fairly early. Certainly at the time that Luti comes forward with his paper. I think Steve Hadley is articulating, A, a concern about going to the Pentagon too quickly, going to the generals too quickly. You need to be able to bring them along. There was a choreography, bureaucratically, within the U.S. Government, as much as conversations that we were having in the Iraq Review Group, were no doubt important. They were a good way to air out, to let people have their say, to put various options on the table. As much as that substance was important, there was an important [01:25:00] bureaucratic and political choreography; the way you did this, the way you presented it. The process itself became an important variable in actually trying to achieve the process. That was my understanding from Steve, I think fairly early on, and Steve, I think reflecting very much the President in that regard.

FEAVER: Sort of stepping back now. How would you characterize the President's decision, or how should we look at the President's decision, if you were setting it in a larger context?

HANNAH: I think it's a genuinely brave, consequential, and from my point of view, extremely positive decision. I think it's when people look back at great presidential decisions, whatever you think about how we got into this war,

whatever you think about the mistakes [01:26:00] we made conducting this war, that the decision that George Bush made in the fall and winter of 2006, is a genuine testament to presidential leadership and courage, that had big important positive consequences for the country and our national security. He made it against the inclinations of a lot of his top advisors, indeed some of his closest advisors you could argue. Had to make it against the inclinations of a lot of the U.S. Military, certainly against public opinion in the United States, certainly against the majority of people in the Congress, against the feelings of the international community. It was genuinely, in many ways, one of those singular, kind of lonely decisions that Presidents are sometimes [01:27:00] called on to make, and a lonely decision when, at least in terms of his political future and something genuinely important to the national security of the country, really seemed to hang in the balance. He seemed to really reach down and do what he thought was necessary and he thought was right, and I think, at least to some degree, history will prove that the correct thing to do. So, I think with some time and perspective, I think people will have to look back at that, again, regardless of what else they think about everything that came before the war and everything that came after, when George W. Bush made that decision about the Surge, he was genuinely a great President.

FEAVER: I want to give a chance to figure out some things that we may have dropped.

SAYLE: I'm curious if you have a sense, and perhaps on your December trip to Baghdad, what the Iraqi government thought [01:28:00] about the idea of surging troops to Iraq. If that was an easy sell, whether that was a difficult conversation to have with the Iraqi government. And then connected to that, whether you were hearing voices from other American allies in the region, or other states in the region, whether they thought a surge was a good idea or a bad idea. The reviews that the government, the U.S. Government was hearing from abroad on this.

HANNAH: Yeah, I don't remember that. Bringing the Iraqi government onboard was [a] particular part of Secretary Gates's mandate on that late December trip. There were no doubt meetings that he had with Iraqi officials, but I don't think he was giving much away to them in terms of where the President might end up with the ultimate decision on the Surge. The President, of course you remember several weeks before that, had met with Maliki in Jordan, and I think had talked, at least previewed a little bit, about the direction he was headed, which was quite different from the direction that Maliki and his national security team were [01:29:00] headed. But I also can't say -- I thought there may be some resistance from the Iraqis, in part just because I think there was a deep, deep skepticism, that America was going to have the political breath to actually see this through, and that potentially, by buying a few more American troops, they might just be buying themselves a whole new headache in terms of their own constituency, their own base, who were increasingly distrustful of the United States.

But I always thought myself personally, that in part, that's part of the reason why you needed to be all in. Not only was it important to the mission and the operation of achieving a greater level of security in Baghdad, in Iraq more generally, but it was also necessary as a political statement to the Iraqis and to the enemy, that this President was going to see this through, that he had in mind victory, rather than figuring out a way to get out of Iraq. And I thought if he did that, if he brought the full weight [01:30:00] of his office and his personality to bear on that, I thought, and I always thought we could bring the Iraqis along to a serious doubling down and American commitment to see Iraq through to success and to turn that situation around.

In terms of allies, you know there no doubt were people perhaps previewing this with some of our allies, and maybe talking to them about what needed to be done. I was sort of on the receiving end of a lot of complaints from friends internationally, about how bad the situation was and what we were going to do, and concerns that we were going to sort of vacate and get out of Iraq and leave it to its own devices, which I think a lot of people understood would be disastrous, particularly in the Middle East itself. I don't recall having any particular conversations with people about a dramatic new addition of American forces. And I can't say, at least amongst states in the region [01:31:00] that I was in closest contact with, even after the fact, I don't recall getting much pushback or resistance from them. Again, for them it was largely a question of, okay, you've really

screwed up here. Why should we believe you're going to be able to do, anything that you do is actually going to put the situation in order? It was that kind of skepticism about our own political commitment and will, to actually get on top of the situation, that they were most concerned about.

SAYLE: Great. I wanted to ask one more specific question about the 80 percent solution, or the bet on the Shiite paper, just because it's received a lot of analysis in what's been published so far, and that's the fact that several of the Shiite militias had Iranian backing. There were questions raised about the assumptions underlying this policy and the connection of Shiites in Iraq to Iran. How did those factors reconcile in the drafting of that paper?

HANNAH: Well, I think [01:32:00] Iranian interference in Iraq, in relationship to militias, was a big concern of ours always. I think the Vice President might have been the most aggressive and forward-leaning, in terms of Iranian and Syrian participation, and the things that might have been done earlier in the conflict, to try to get on top of that problem, which I think he saw as a strategic problem to our overall effort in Iraq.

In terms of that paper, I think it was more in lines of the logic that we had, A, that there were differences between Iraqi and Iranian Shiites, important differences; ones that we probably could have made much more of, in terms of exacerbating tensions between Iranian Shiites and Iraqi Shiites. We didn't do that, but that we did have a -- I guess, in part because they were in large part

beneficiaries of the invasion of Iraq [01:33:00] and the liberation of Iraq, that we had sort of built-in partners in the Shiite community, even within the Shiite Islamist community, who newly empowered with an American ally kind of supporting them and giving some kind of guarantor to that new representative government in Baghdad, that they were people who were willing to go along with us and try and assist us as much as possible in the effort. They were people who could be won over. They were reconcilables in the best sense of the term. However, as the situation deteriorated, as the security situation became more inflamed, as the Shiite populations were obviously specifically being targeted by the insurgency, and we seem to have no ability to do much about it, I think you saw a dramatic increase in the kind of strategic threat that those Iranian-backed militias began to pose to the overall effort, that the ability of other Iraqis and Iraqi Shiites, the government of Iraq [01:34:00] in particular, to resist that kind of effort, was decreasing as the security situation worsened. So, through the Surge, through getting control of the security situation, through reestablishing that kind of confidence with the Shiite government in Baghdad, I think part of it was to empower them not only to be more confident in taking necessary steps on reconciliation towards the Sunnis, but also eventually, in getting after their own problem inside of their own camp, in terms of those Iranian-backed militias, and actually confronting the Iranians, fighting the Jaysh al-Mahdi and Sadr and really beginning to take those people down a peg. So it was certainly part of the paper. I

don't think it had an unrealistic view of the danger posed by Iran and the militias, but it saw a much more direct correlation between our inability to get control of the security situation, both with Iran's rising influence and with the rising [01:35:00] influence of the Sunni insurgency. Both of those security problems were being magnified and kind of fueled by that fundamental inability of us to get control of the security situation.

FEAVER: Do you have anything else you want to say on the record?

HANNAH: I probably do, but I don't -- it's just not in my head.

FEAVER: Very good.

HANNAH: I think you've taxed me to the ends of my ability to recall anything.

FEAVER: Well, thank you very much for participating. This has been most illuminating.

HANNAH: All right, sure. I hope it's useful.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]