



The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Frederick Kagan

Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute, 2005

Interviewers:

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[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

SAYLE: This is Tim Sayle from Southern Methodist University, and I'm joined by—

INBODEN: Will Inboden from the University of Texas, Austin.



SAYLE: We're joined by Fred Kagan today. Dr. Kagan, could you introduce yourself and explain your occupation at the time of the Iraq Surge decision process, and how your work related to Iraq?

KAGAN: So, I'm Fred Kagan. I was Professor of Military History at West Point until 2005, and then I came down and joined the American Enterprise Institute as a resident scholar, and was in that job in 2006 and '07, working on Iraq and related issues, but focused heavily on Iraq as my primary subject.

INBODEN: When and why did you first develop concerns about conditions in Iraq and the way the war was going, because while a lot of what [00:01:00] we're focused on here is 2006, we understand that there were concerns predating that. So when did this pop onto your radar screen in a significant way?

KAGAN: Two-thousand-two, and I'm not kidding. I published an article, I think it was in *Commentary*, in 2002, when a lot of people were talking about applying the Afghanistan model to Iraq, because my view at the time was that the Afghanistan model was flawed, and that Afghanistan was not going as well as people thought it was going, and that an attempt to apply that model to Iraq would have devastating consequences. So, from the very beginning, with the discussions about what the strategy was going to be and what the troop levels were going to be, and all of that sort of stuff, I was deeply skeptical about the prospects for success in the war. I observed it as closely as I could -- I was at West Point at the time -- and it became clear to me very [00:02:00] early that problems were developing as I had expected



them to. Including when Secretary Rumsfeld, talking about the looting of the museum flippantly, I think I wrote up something for the *Daily Standard* or something at the time, making the point that it actually was a significant indicator of the fact that we were not in control of the capital, was a significant indicator of problems, and then we just watched it pretty much unravel from that point forward. So there was no point at which I thought that the war was going well particularly, and I was just very concerned about the approach we'd taken from the outset.

INBODEN: So, if I can follow up on that. Given that your concerns predated the actual launch of the invasion, even going to the war plan from 2002, tell us a little bit more about, in the 2004/2005 window, [00:03:00] were there any ways that you tried to influence the policies on this and the public debate? Did you do more writings drawing attention to this? We want to understand more, your record up until 2006, when you engage more intensively.

KAGAN: I'd have to go back and look at my CV. I don't remember exactly what I published when. Remember, in 2004-2005, I was still at West Point, and so my time to devote to this was limited, because that's a very intensive teaching undertaking. And my ability to comment on policy was also somewhat complicated. I'm pretty sure that I voiced some of my concerns in that period, but I'd have to go back and look at my record. I don't remember exactly.



INBODEN: Okay. And then one more follow-up on this if I can, before I turn it back over to Tim. In the, say 2003 to 2005 window, who else among your professional colleagues and [00:04:00] community of interlocutors, shared the concerns that you had been voicing early on, about the deficiencies of a light footprint.

KAGAN: I was at West Point with a lot of people, and increasingly, as time went on, people who would serve in Iraq and come back and so forth. I got to know a lot of officers who were at the company command level or had been at the company command level or on battalion or brigade staffs, and over time, I did start to pick up a definite sense that people didn't feel like -- or some of my colleagues didn't feel like things were being done right. H.R. McMaster was my first office mate at West Point in 1995 and one of my best friends, and taught me an enormous amount about war, and so I [00:05:00] watched, with keen attention, his efforts at Tal Afar, and the relative success of those efforts. Spoke to him some about the applicability of those to other parts of the conflict, and there were other people; I mean, it was mixed. The military was split, and there were people who thought that it was going okay, and there were people who thought we shouldn't be there, and there were people who thought that we, you know. But in general, I think most of the people that I spoke with seriously about this, by '04 and especially into '05, were not feeling like this was going very well.

INBODEN: And was David Petraeus at all part of these discussions with you?



KAGAN: Not with me, not with me. I met him after I came to AEI, once briefly, right when he was done being MNSTC-I Commander, I just went to a talk, but I had never really met him seriously or personally until he had been nominated to take over [00:06:00] in Iraq.

INBODEN: To replace Casey.

KAGAN: So, in 2007, I didn't meet him until January, 2007.

SAYLE: In June of 2006, you met with the President at Camp David. The President held a war council to discuss the war. Can you talk to us about your invitation to attend that meeting, what you hoped to achieve at that meeting, and what views you wished to present there?

KAGAN: Well, the invitation surprised me, since I had not been in Washington very long. I didn't regard myself as being particularly prominent. I assumed that it was related to an article that I had published a couple of months before in the *Weekly Standard*, recommending an increase in forces and a counterinsurgency strategy that actually turned out to be the opposite of the one that the surge exercise recommended. [00:07:00] So I was a bit surprised to have been invited to that. I assumed that the intent -- I was aware that there were people on the national security staff who were also not comfortable with how things were going and wanted to present alternative ideas to the President. I was thrilled at the opportunity to be able to present a recommendation for a more robust



counterinsurgency strategy and an argument for how to -- why to do that and how to go about doing it.

SAYLE: Now at that meeting, other experts and advisors presented a range of options.

Mike Vickers is reported as presenting a plan for a lighter footprint, with a focus on Special Operations Forces and so on. What did you make of that argument and why were you two coming at the issue from such a divergent point of view?

KAGAN: Well, I don't want to speak to why Mike came at it from his perspective. This was what I had criticized in 2002. [00:08:00] I mean, this was my concern all along, and then it goes back to more theoretical writings that I put out in the '90s, that the desire for war on the cheap, and a light footprint and manipulating things from a distance, doesn't mesh with the reality of human beings in actual conflict. And so I learned that in the study of military history, I wrote about it in the '90s. It's what concerned me in Afghanistan, that's what caused me to write, with concern, about Iraq in 2002, and it's what I saw playing out. So, I'm very happy -- I'm eager to talk about sort of what the -- how to characterize what I think the President's policy was, or what General Abizaid's policy or strategy was, or what General Casey's strategy was, because I think it was very complicated and I think it was a lot more nuanced than what Mike was presenting. [00:09:00]

I think we've proven that the notion that you can get after even terrorist groups, let alone insurgencies, with Special Forces leading decapitation raids, has been about as thoroughly disproven as it's possible to disprove any theory, and I



refer anyone who has questions about that to Stan McChrystal's memoir, in which he describes with amazing detail, fidelity to reality, and honesty, the phenomenal damage that he and his team did to AQI senior leadership, and concludes that we were nevertheless losing at the end of all of that. Mike was proposing something that was a lot less intense than what McChrystal actually did, and I didn't think what McChrystal was doing was going to work either. It was brilliant, I mean, don't get me wrong, and I'm thrilled, it was an important component of success, but as a thing in itself, I didn't think it would work. [00:10:00]

So, I think that the -- for me, the more interesting question is how do -- because I've been called upon to do this periodically, or I've called upon myself to do this periodically. How do I make the case for pursuing the strategy that I was attacking, because I had tremendous respect for General Abizaid. He was the best commandant who had been at the academy while I was there. He knew the region, he was a brilliant guy, thoughtful. I'm never lightly happy to be on the other side of a strategic issue from him. George Casey was a professional officer, he was trying to do -- I mean, nobody had any sort of ill-will or malignant. I mean these guys were trying to win the war, and I knew that the President was committed to trying to win the war. So, the question in my mind was always, how do I explain the fact that there is this strategy and policy being executed that I think is going to fail, but these are smart people with a lot more experience [00:11:00] than I have. And the conclusion I came to was that it was two-thirds of a



strategy, that General Abizaid, from the outset, was emphatic that if we put too many forces, we have too much of a presence, we're going to create antibodies, we're going to create hostility, which is true. That is a phenomenon observable throughout counterinsurgency. It's not arguable that that happens. And he was also concerned that if we did too much, we would create a perennial dependency on our forces and the Iraqis would be stunted in their development and they would never be able to take over, and that's also true and has been demonstrated repeatedly in the history of counterinsurgency. So, we started with two premises that I absolutely agreed with, but my study of counterinsurgencies told me that there was a missing third component, which is that if [00:12:00] the counterinsurgent is not providing security, then the whole thing will go off the rails even if you avoid those other two traps, and that in fact, the real art is in balancing these three mutually contradictory requirements of providing security, without having too heavy a footprint that you create too many antibodies, without creating dependency, but without allowing stability and security to collapse. So on the military side, I felt like there was a very sophisticated approach that was just missing a piece or overemphasizing two pieces.

From the White House perspective, or from my understanding of how the White House or how the President seemed to be understanding this; there was in some respects, an even more sophisticated theory of the case, that was that this is fundamentally a political problem, and that when we've had a constitution, when



we've had elections, when Iraqis see that we are [00:13:00] actually going to turn the country back over to them and so forth, these insurgents will dry up and the people will come over to the side of the governance. And when you lay that on top of the other two theories, it all works logically and congruently. And, being very, very fair to the administration -- you know I've made this point to people, it's not until May of 2006 that you actually can say that-- if I'm characterizing the President's theory of the case correctly-- is tested, because May 2006 is the first time that you have a prime minister elected under the new constitution take power freely in Baghdad. So if your theory is that that's the turning point, that doesn't happen until May, 2006.

So in my mind, looking at what was wrong with the strategy is an exercise in looking -- it's the inverse from the way most critics have portrayed the situation and the problem. [00:14:00] It's not that people were not thinking about it, it's not that we had simplistic, naïve interpretations of what was going on. I think on the contrary, we had hyper-sophisticated, in some respects, theories of the case, and they were -- we over-thought it in a certain sense, too much. Now, stepping back from the effort to be as generous to the administration that I was attacking at the time as possible: all of the indicators were in the other direction, and you could see the violence expanding, you could see, especially in 2006, the sectarian violence and the emergence of a sectarian civil war. All of that was visible from open source. All of that should have been driving everyone involved fundamentally, to

reassess their approaches, because when you have a theory, how ever artful it is, how ever logically consistent it is, and the indicators on the ground [00:15:00] are contravening it, then you should recognize a bit sooner, that you maybe have a problem with your theory.

SAYLE: So was that meeting in June, 2006, a possible turning point? Was this an opportunity missed there? How do you characterize that meeting?

KAGAN: I would say that I have no idea. Let me put it that way, because I actually have no idea what the President was thinking coming into the meeting and whether his mind was changeable or what. I have to say, especially with the experiences that I've had subsequently, if the situation were such than an hour and a half meeting with four outside experts could change the course of the strategy of the war, with nothing else going on, we would have been in a really weird world. So, I didn't have that expectation at the time, and I don't think that was a reasonable expectation. I think fate and a somewhat [00:16:00] unfortunate decision by the President, conspired to make that meeting pretty meaningless. The fate was that we killed Zarqawi a couple of days, at most, before the meeting, and thrilled as I was and am, that we offed Zarqawi, I think it did -- I had the impression that the President felt that that was a very positive moment and a potential turning point, and so his openness to believing that things were really fundamentally off the rails was relatively lessened, because Zarqawi was in fact a real bogey, and no one, certainly no one outside of maybe a handful of people in the intelligence



community, if that, knew that in fact, Abu Ayyub al-Masri would be a much more dangerous and effective foe. So that, I think reduced the intellectual valiance of it a little bit [00:17:00] for the President. But then there was the fact that he had decided to pull a whizzer on everybody by leaving at the end of the first day and turning up in Baghdad. It was pretty apparent to me, after I saw that happen, that there was a certain giddiness in his demeanor that was driven by the fact that he was pulling a whizzer over on his team, and I think that was an unfortunate decision. As is so often the case with this President, there were very admirable attributes in that decision. But from the standpoint of, if the President going to decide to devote two full days to really sitting down and talking strategy, that was not a good use of that time. And so I think those two things together conspired to reduce any real possible significance that that meeting could have had.

One thing, I've [00:18:00] almost never spoken about this meeting, because I actually really do try to respect the confidences of private meetings that I go into, and I talk about this one because now all of the participants have talked about it, it's out, I mean there's no point. But one of the things that really struck me was that after the meeting was over, the President came over and shook our hands, and stood talking with -- I think he was mainly talking with Eliot Cohen, and I think the rest of us were mainly straphangers on that conversation. I think Eliot was the one that he was most interested in talking to, and one of the questions that he asked really struck home, and it was, "How do I know? How do I find out what's



really going on?" There was nothing disloyal in it, there was no indication that he was saying he didn't trust his subordinates or anything. It was just, "How do I, as President [00:19:00] of the United States and Commander in Chief, how can I really dig beyond what I'm getting? How can I really understand what's going on, on the ground?" And that really struck me, because it was evidence of a thoughtful guy who understood the limitations of his power, understood the weight, the burden -- I mean I think anybody who knows him, knows that he always felt that -- but was frustrated, coming up against the limitations of his office, in terms of his own ability to know what was happening. And of course there was implicit in that, the sense that he didn't feel like he was getting the full story. So even then, after Zarqawi, getting ready to fly over Baghdad, it was clear that his mind was open to the possibility that he didn't fully understand what was happening in Iraq.

INBODEN: If I can follow up on that. Is there anything else you can tell us about the meeting itself; how the conversation [00:20:00] unfolded, the kind of questions the President asked, perhaps how you and the other outside experts interacted with each other.

KAGAN: We each had a certain period of time to make our pitch and we did it, and it was, as I recall it, it was very respectful and professional and oriented on the principals, because of course it wasn't just the President, as you know, I mean it was the whole War Cabinet there. Honestly, to be honest, I don't recall it in that much detail, partly I think, because I didn't come away from that feeling like we'd



done anything particularly remarkable in terms of shaping the way that people were thinking about this.

SAYLE: Some journalists have portrayed that meeting [00:21:00] on the outside experts as a stacked deck, ready to make the case for the President that a change in strategy was required. As a participant, did you feel like you were part of a stacked deck, and did that come across in the meeting did you think?

KAGAN: Well, I mean you had Mike Vickers there recommending the exact opposite, and vociferously. I would say I was on one end. I think Eliot was generally pretty close to where I was at, I think. Mike was on the other end and Kaplan was moderate, sort of. So I mean, it was very far, I think, from being a clarion call for a massive surge. I mean a number of different perspectives were offered, as would be appropriate in that environment. I certainly did not walk in there feeling that I had a phalanx at my back, [00:22:00] to go make the case for the surge, and we were going to get the -- I mean, that was not the vibe at all. [laughs]

INBODEN: [Aside: We've covered some of that--]. You've covered a little bit of this, so I don't mean this as a repetitive question, but if you can add any more texture to it. What was your understanding of what the current American strategy was, in the summer of 2006, and as a follow-up, how did you regard Operation Together Forward and its successor?

KAGAN: I think the strategy, in general terms, was to get the Iraqi government seated and to build up the Iraqi Security Forces in preparation for a handover, which was



the logical culmination of what the strategy had been all along, suitably not adjusted [00:23:00] but just further along in time. That's where the strategy was headed, so now was the time to head there. It seemed to me that that strategy was being pursued regardless of indicators on the ground. And then of course we also started to see the PIC process take off, the Provincial Iraqi Control process, whereby publicly anyway, the command started to measure success by how many hectares had been turned over to the Iraqis, which I found very distressing, because that's a -- I mean, I had another bite at this apple from another perspective, with the time that I spent in Kabul with General Petraeus and General Allen, looking at how metrics are done and how measures of effectiveness are looked at. Any time the measure of effectiveness is measuring something that you control, you should be highly skeptical that it's actually a measure of effectiveness. My problem with PIC was that we determined what we handed over to the Iraqis. [00:24:00] So it wasn't a measure of anything, unless you had a religious-like belief in the inherent integrity of the process by which we decided how we were going to pick provinces, which is silly. It was a measure of our willingness to hand over to the Iraqis; it wasn't a measure of progress on the ground. And so when we started to see that being offered as an alternative to violence statistics, as evidence of progress, that to me was a real indication that we had a serious cognitive dissidence that was going on, a command that did not want to recognize to itself, what the situation actually was.



Together Forward was an unmitigated catastrophe, and Together Forward II was even worse, would have been even worse especially, if General Chiarelli hadn't stopped it, I think about three weeks into its course, because it reflected another failure of the strategy and of the strategic approach, that continued to bedevil us and continues to bedevil us to this day, [00:25:00] which is: we were so fixated on the insurgency and we were so fixated on al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in Iraq, that we did not recognize the role that the Iranian-backed Shia sectarian militias, many of whom, in 2006, were actually in the security forces, were playing in driving the sectarian conflict. Now at the time, without the full context, I, like many others, largely thought that the sectarianism, the real bad sectarianism that we saw, was driven by the destruction of the al-Askari mosque in February of 2006, and so forth. I now understand that that's not the case, that we'd had really serious sectarian actors in the force from early on, avenging themselves, avenging the Shia on Sunni populations, which was driving the sectarian conflict, so that it was even deeper than I thought it was at the time.

The problem with Together Forward [00:26:00] is that it didn't recognize that at all. I mean, the premise of that operation was that the Iraqis are blue, the Iraqi Security Forces are blue, and they're fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq, which is red, and we're backing blue against red, period, full stop. What we're actually doing was backing Iranian-backed-and-controlled sectarian Shia militias that were engaged in vicious sectarian cleansing of Sunni neighborhoods that looked like an



existential threat to the inhabitants of those neighborhoods, who then allowed al-Qaeda-in-Iraq to come in to defend them, because it was the only force that could defend them, and in some cases replace them. One of the problems, of course, is that as we were not, as our troops were not living out with the population and were not engaging regularly enough with who was there, we didn't have a sense for who actually belonged in the neighborhood. And so in areas [00:27:00] south of the Karrada Peninsula, in East Rasheed, you had neighborhoods that were fundamentally depopulated, and then they were repopulated by various extremists and so forth. So you would go in and you'd think that you would be talking to the population, but you're actually talking to terrorist squatters. And the Iraqi Security Forces were not helpful because they were ready to tell us, especially the sectarian elements among them, that any particular Sunni that they were looking at was an al-Qaeda terrorist and we needed to kill him. Together Forward just enabled this on a grand scale, and it basically drove off the military age males in the Sunni communities, established Iraqi police units, including the Wolf Brigade basically, the Badr core sectarian cleansing machine, in Sunni heartland areas, where they began to do unspeakable things, and drive things even worse.

[00:28:00] It was absolutely a counterproductive operation that was driven by a, at this point, I've got to say, pretty blind acceptance of our own theories of what was going on, not enough in touch with what was actually going on.



SAYLE: Could you speak about that blindness for a moment and perhaps recall what information you were drawing on in the summer of 2006 to make your analysis, and whether information was available to either outside analysts or policymakers, to understand what was actually happening in Iraq in the summer of 2006.

KAGAN: We were observing at the time, from outside, this phenomenon, that we were having sectarian cleansing going on, that we had militias. That was certainly knowable, and it was known. There are people inside the military at the time that you can talk to, who certainly knew about this. I'm not going to name them on camera for you, but yeah, [00:29:00] I mean, that information was available. When it made it to which decision maker, I don't know, but you could see it from open sources, you could see what was going on. We were able to track pretty well, from open sources actually, where the fault lines, where the fighting was, where the sectarian fighting was, because there was report -- I mean, if you read into the reporting, if you read into what the media narratives are, about what's going on, on the street, you can draw some conclusions that did not make sense in the context of the theory that was driving these operations. So, yeah, I think it was knowable.

INBODEN: Following up on that, were you aware of any efforts inside the government, in the summer and fall of 2006, to reevaluate the Iraq strategy?

KAGAN: Sure. There was the never-ending wait for the Baker-Hamilton Commission report, which we all knew was out there. [00:30:00] I actually spoke to their

expert panel at some point. I think I spoke to their expert panel and to the seniors at some point, separately, so knew that was going on. I knew something about the review that then Colonel McMaster was involved in. Not much, but I knew that he was doing it and that that was going on. And I had a strong sense, from my various interactions relating to the June 6th -- I forget what the date was, June 9th maybe.

INBODEN: June of 2006.

KAGAN: June, 2006, Camp David meeting, that there was, shall we say, a certain amount of turmoil on the NSS, regarding the strategy, and people trying to get the President to re-look it. I don't think I was aware of more specifics than that. But being in Washington, involved in Iraq at the time, you had the general sense that there were a lot of reviews going on, without being [00:31:00] very clear, necessarily, what they were doing.

SAYLE: Maybe we can move to discuss AEI's review of the situation in Iraq, and eventually recommendations AEI made. There's a weekend that began December 8, 2006, a planning weekend. Tom Ricks has called this "one weekend at AEI that changes the war." Can you talk about the fall at AEI, leading up to that weekend, and then tell us about that weekend.

KAGAN: At some point in the fall, my boss at AEI, Danielle Pletka, who's the Vice President for Foreign Defense Policy, came to me with an idea and said, "Hey Fred, why don't we run a war game on Iraq?" Because we had all been saying that it was



going very badly and let's do something. I mean let's do more than say it's going badly, let's sort of try to figure this out. A big part of the motivation for that, [00:32:00] that I was aware of, was simply incredible frustration at the level of discourse in Washington about the war. You just had a lot of huge hand-waving about how many troops it would take, and you had people get up -- I had people get up, when we presented the surge paper, and say. "This is ridiculous. Who takes 600,000 troops to do Iraq?" And you would say, "How does that work?," and they'd say, "Well, a one-to-twenty counterinsurgency ratio is 30 million Iraqis, so it's 600,000." Sort of start doing the finger math and saying, "Yeah, I get the math, but that's not the way that it works." What we really wanted to do was put out a serious report that would force other people to raise the level of their discourse. We wanted to raise the bar to entry to the discussion. Certainly, I had no expectation that we were going to put out a report [00:33:00] that was going to affect policy in any meaningful way, I mean, it absolutely would never have occurred to me that we could write a report at a think-tank and have it have the influence it's reported to have, which I still don't know how much influence it actually had, because I could only see from my foxhole, and I don't know. It never occurred to us that we would be able to play a role like that. We just wanted to raise the level of the discussion.

So, Dani came to me and said, "Let's do a war game," and I said, "Well, I don't really want to do a war game, because that's a sort of red on blue thing, and I



don't think that's what's interesting here. Let's do a planning exercise, and let me convene some of my friends and other experts who have had experience in Iraq, who are professional military planners, who can help take us through a deliberate planning process, so that we can apply some rigor to [00:34:00] coming up with a recommendation, and then we're going to show all of the work." This has been a hallmark of what I've tried to do at AEI all the time that I've been there, and that AEI has been very supportive of, which is always -- I don't ask anyone to take my word for anything. This was always intended to be an exercise where we're going to show you exactly how we got to where we got to, what the assumptions were, what the data was, what the process was, and if you don't like the way we did any part of that, then argue with it. But you're not going to be able to say, "Well, I think you're not -- I'm questioning your motives," or whatever. My motives don't make any difference. Here's how we did it, you either like that or you don't. So, we set about doing that, and we set about calling together, figuring out who would the right people be to participate in this, and what was the structure going to be. And we settled on this date fortuitously [00:35:00] because we had originally been thinking about doing it the following weekend, except that I was scheduled to go to present a paper at a conference that weekend, and so I said, "Okay, well, I think we can't push it further than that. Releasing something basically on Christmas is not -- you don't do that. So we have to push it earlier." So we had to crunch



ourselves to meet a timeline that was driven by when I was going to go to a conference.

It turns to have been incredibly fortuitous, because it could not have had the effect that it did if it had come out the week after that, but that was entirely accidental. People have all kinds of conspiracy theories about how we knew exactly when to release it, and of course it was that that specific timing was fortuitous. And then we -- Shall I take you through the exercise?

SAYLE: Yes, please.

INBODEN: Yes. That's what the next question is. [00:36:00]

KAGAN: Yeah, so -- I need a drink for this.

INBODEN: This is his Marco Rubio moment.

KAGAN: Fortunately, I'm not running for anything. So, we broke the exercise into two parts. The first day, we brought in all of the regional experts that we could lay our hands on, and the question was: Let's look at the regional politics, let's look at the Iraqi politics, let's look at this from every perspective, okay? This isn't just about writing a military plan. We need to understand what are the problems and what are the constraints. We had some great sessions, and people came in, and they shared a lot of great thoughts with us, and we took all of that down, and a lot of that was actually reflected in the report, although nobody paid attention to it. But the bulk of the weekend was devoted to a military planning exercise, and the guy who played a large role in that, [00:37:00] who has dropped out of a lot of the



histories is Lieutenant General Retired Dave Barno, who actually was there for a considerable chunk of the exercise, and helped us ensure that we were thinking at a strategic level, because the people who were doing the planning -- so it brought in Colonel Retired Joel Armstrong, who had been the deputy commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment when H.R. McMaster had it, in Tal Afar, and Major Retired Dan Dwyer, who had been, I think the S3 or something on the staff there. So we brought in these really outstanding officers who had the experience of Tal Afar, but they'd also had experience in other parts of Iraq. Joel had actually been in Baghdad, in Southern Baghdad for a time, so he knew something about what that terrain looked like [00:38:00] and so forth. We got these guys in and we got in a few others, including a couple of active duty officers.

But the problem was, they had been operating at a tactical, maybe operational level, and so we were conscious from the outset, that we needed to have somebody who'd commanded a theater -- look at this, because I have never commanded a theater. So, Dave Barno was in it from the outset, and Jack Keane was involved from the outset and came in on Saturday morning and gave us sort of an introduction, and then we out-briefed both of them on Sunday night, I think, so that they could do these reality checks. But we had both of them involved in this, and that was super-important, because they just brought a perspective to it that none of us really had.



So, we started off and of course the process -- [00:39:00] the weekend was the culmination of a lot of effort, a lot of intelligence-gathering effort, and there were a couple of different kinds of intelligence that we needed to gather. One was, what's the situation in Baghdad, what's the situation in Iraq. We derived that from open sources, we derived that from media reporting. We would use our networks to try to get a yes, no, maybe so, from people who were there or had been there recently. Don't give us any classified information, don't want that, just if we're way off course, tell us, kind of thing. But mostly, it was a very granular look at the violence from open sources, identifying where we could, street by street, or at least mahallah by mahallah, where this violence was going down, which gave us a pretty good view of where the sectarian fault lines were, because that's mostly where it was happening. [00:40:00] And I'm very proud to say that when we actually had the opportunity to lay that against some classified assessments subsequently, we did pretty darn well in laying out where those fault lines were and where the violence was.

We worked to collect data on the sectarian composition of neighborhoods and so forth, which was very hard. It was always -- it's still hard. It's never easy to get that kind of information and particularly as we were doing it, so we did the best we could on that, to try to find ways to make estimates of population and look at density, and look at those kinds of things. But we also had to try to understand what the U.S. military capability would be. Here's where I'm always very happy to



correct the record, because certain retired general officers named Dave, periodically, I'm going to say joke, but I'm not sure if he thinks it's a joke, that we happened to come up with a number that happened to be exactly what the Army could surge, suggesting that we rigged it [00:41:00] that way, which is actually absolutely not the case. We were very fortunate in that, for reasons that I don't understand, someone had posted the patch chart of which Army units were going to deploy when, to Wikipedia, I think. No one involved with our exercise that I'm aware of, I mean it's just that Dan Dwyer came to me at a certain point and said, "Look what I found. This was on Wikipedia." And it was the actual patch chart. To this day, I have no idea who posted it or why. I don't know why it was out there. We made a couple of inquiries to confirm that it was accurate, more or less, and that allowed us to be very specific in recommendations for what kinds of forces would be available, under what kinds of scenarios and circumstances, but that was a fortuitous piece of information that someone just posted, Lord knows why.

[00:42:00]

So we gathered all of this up in advance of the exercise, and then we laid it out and we went through it. I let our retired officers, especially Joel and Dan, who were planners, take us through a planning process. We were looking at Google Earth maps of neighborhoods and, "This is where the violence is." "Okay, well, what would it take to clear this neighborhood, based on your Tal Afar experience, based on your experience in Baghdad?. How many BUBs, where do they need to



go, how long?" This kind of stuff. And we went neighborhood by neighborhood, and laid out - we're going to have to control these road junctions, we're going to have to -- I mean, it was a very serious undertaking by people who did this professionally. We went through all of that and we came up with a requirement for [00:43:00] five Brigade Combat Teams, additional, into Baghdad. We also looked outside of Baghdad a little bit, and we thought we probably needed two additional brigades, although in reality they were going to be Marine Regimental Combat Teams, in Anbar. And so that was our initial, first blush, going through, putting the toy soldiers on the map, what does it work out to?: five brigades and two regiments, with enablers and all that. And we were thinking in terms -- I want to be clear about this too. We were not thinking in terms of numbers at that point. We were actually looking, from the standpoint of guys who had done planning for a brigade size unit: This is going to be a brigade. Okay, well this is a brigade, you're going to have a battalion over here, you're going to have a battalion over there -- so doing it unit by unit, and not numbers, and we came to five brigades and two regiments, which [00:44:00] I then looked at our patch chart and basically we did the: Okay well, if we go to 15-month deployments and stuff what can we get? And the answer is: you get five brigades and two regiments pretty much. I almost fell off my chair. I have to tell you, it seriously never occurred to me that we would come up with an answer that was going to be militarily feasible from the standpoint of available forces. That was a contingency that I had not



expected. Because we'd had this -- I had to put a certain amount of effort into saying, "We're going to do this unconstrained. We're not going to say this is how many troops we have, so what can we do with them. We're going to say, 'What is the actual requirement?'" And I really did not expect that was going to match up, so I thought in my head going into this, that we were going to have to go through the drill of saying, Well the actual requirement is X, but we can only make Y available, and so this is what we would do with Y and this is the risk that would be accepted, and all that kind of stuff. It did not occur to me we'd be able to say, the requirement is X, and we can do X, under this scenario. I was so suspicious of it, that I insisted [00:45:00] that we then actually reverse engineer it and do the math another way and say, okay, let's do the one-to-twenty. What are our estimates of the populations in these neighborhoods? And now let's do the one-to-twenty calculation. And what does that come up with? Five brigades and two regiments. I said, "Okay, that's good enough for me. I'm going to take yes for an answer when it's verified through a completely different methodology also, that this is a reasonable thing to do." And so that's what we wrote up.

Now, we did not recommend what actually happened. We recommended five brigades in Baghdad, boom. We weren't talking about the Baghdad belts, with the degree of seriousness and complexity with which Ray Odierno, at the time, had already evolved his thoughts for what he would do with additional troops, and what he actually did with them, which was to send two brigades at least, [00:46:00]

into the belts, because he'd identified those as being -- we didn't get that. We knew the belts were important. I don't think we conceived of them as belts in the same way. We knew those outskirts were important and we were -- I think if you go back and look at our maps and where we put the icons, we had a unit toward Taji and a unit down toward Babel somewhere, but we weren't thinking about belts the way that he was. We were going to put more force into the city than actually happened. We wanted two regiments for Anbar and we thought that that might be able to barely hold, and we thought that all of this was going to generate no meaningful progress in the north. And so we identified a requirement for a surge that would last two years, so "surge" wasn't the right term for us ever.

[00:47:00] We thought this was going to be a two-year requirement, because we articulated the requirement for a series of follow-on operations, after we stabilized Baghdad. Then, you have to turn to Anbar. Then, you have to go to Diyala. Then, you have to go North, up the Tigris, into Saladin. Ultimately, you're going to have to deal with Nineveh. We thought those were going to be successive operations that were going to evolve over a long period of time, and so we were saying, this is five brigades and two regimental combat teams additional, for two years, and that this is going to continue over that timeline.

Obviously, we didn't see the Anbar Awakening coming with the force that it ultimately had, and that transformed the situation, and we didn't know what Ray Odierno knew, and I'm not as brilliant as he is anyway, to have known what to do



with it. So he put the troops where they needed to go, which is what we wanted, because we didn't think we were writing a war plan. We didn't think we were writing [00:48:00] a campaign plan. I'm not an idiot. You don't get a civilian and a bunch of retired officers sitting around a bunch of tables in a think tank, to write an operational war plan. That's not the way these things work. This was a concept. This was a concept of operations and it was a rough estimate of a troop-to-task analysis, which was inadequate for military planning purposes, the whole purpose of which was to be able to say to the rest of the people in town, look, if you don't like this, then go through your own exercise with this level of rigor, and tell me what you do want, and why you think it's going to work, and what the enemy courses of action are. Because we went through all of that. And then we can have a reason -- the American people can make a reasoned decision about what they want to support, but at least meet us at this level of discourse. That was all we were trying to achieve, and the fact that we seemed to have had an effect beyond that was stunning. [00:49:00]

INBODEN: Well, if we can follow up on this, and you touched on this a little bit earlier, but I want to give you a chance to elaborate. What were the strategic assumptions under which the AEI study and planning process were based?

KAGAN: I know I should have brought a copy of it with me, because we laid out our planning assumptions explicitly in there, and that's basically what I'm about to tell you, is that I'd have to go back and look at it. We articulated -- as part of a military

planning process -- one of the things you have to do is articulate what are the planning assumptions -- and we went through a full-out drill of identifying those and laying them out. I don't actually really want to try to shoot from the hip on that.

INBODEN: Submit it for the record.

KAGAN: I'll submit it for the record.

INBODEN: Okay, great.

SAYLE: You mentioned that this was a concept and that perhaps various concepts could compete within the political discourse in Washington, that there was room in the American body politic to discuss Iraq. [00:50:00] Were you confident that that was possible in the fall of 2006, or did it seem that domestic politics would allow for such a conversation? Had the American people shut down on Iraq did you think, or no?

KAGAN: Well, there was an active conversation that was being had. It's not as if there was no one saying that we should send more forces. It's not as if there were lots of people who were questioning the strategy. There were lots of people who were saying that we should maybe send more force into a counterinsurgency strategy, and I knew that there were people in the White House who were saying that. And so you know, it certainly didn't look like the conversation was over when we were doing this. I mean, I guess if I had really felt like the conversation was over, I don't

know if I would have gone to the trouble to do this. No, I mean it didn't feel that way, it wasn't.

SAYLE: Maybe we could move to the next step then. Once the planning process is done, you meet with the Vice President on December 11, 2006. [00:51:00] Was that meeting designed to sell the AEI concept, or just to inject it into the process?

INBODEN: And, just to follow up, can you tell us how that meeting came about. When was it scheduled?

KAGAN: No, I don't remember. What we learned, at some point before the exercise, was that General Keane was going to go in, I think it was the morning of the Monday the 11th, with four other retired four-stars, to the President, and so that became our objective. We were going to send him in with a PowerPoint, and so that was our timetable. We were going to make sure that General Keane had a full PowerPoint, laying all of this out, to hand to the President if nothing else, when he did it. So that was what we were focused on.

I don't recall when the meeting with Cheney was scheduled; I think it was pretty shortly before it happened. [00:52:00] And I can't even speak to the purposes of it, because I didn't schedule it. It became possible and I'm a pretty young, junior guy at a think tank. I'm saying, "The Vice President wants to take our briefing? Awesome! I'd love to brief the Vice President." So that came on. I don't know to this day, exactly who set that up or how, or what the purpose was, from their perspective.

SAYLE: And it was in this meeting then that you briefed the Vice President on your, on AEI's plan. Is that right?

KAGAN: Right. Jack Keane and I were there, and we took the Vice President through the slides, which was an amazing experience. It was in his office in the White House, and it was me and Jack and the Vice President, and I think John Hannah, [00:53:00] and possibly someone, one other person, but a very small group, sitting around in the chairs in that beautiful office, going through the slide deck with him. I think we spent about 90 minutes at it. And he was very thoughtful, asking questions: "How do you know this, why do you think that, how does this work, how would you deal with that?" Wonderful to brief, really wonderful to brief. Very quiet, very calm, very intellectually engaged, really serious, and I came away from that feeling like this wasn't just a, Cool, I got to brief the Vice President. This was a very solid conversation where I felt like we were able to lay out exactly what we thought and why, and he made sure that he understood it. [00:54:00]

SAYLE: This meeting has been presented as a chance to introduce the idea of population security in a big way, into the Vice President's office or into the government. Is that right? Is this when population security, is that the focus of this meeting, would that be fair to sum up?

KAGAN: Well, it was the focus of the plan. The focus of the exercise was, how do we stop the sectarian violence from driving Iraq off the cliff? And what that meant was establishing security for the people, because the thing that really -- and I should



have mentioned this before, but I mean the thing that really alarmed us, actually almost panicked us as we were getting into November and December, was that as we were collecting on what was going on in Iraq, we started to see communal mobilizations along sectarian lines. So now it's not just militias and al-Qaeda [00:55:00] in Iraq, but it's this sub-neighborhood taking up arms and attacking this other sub-neighborhood along sectarian lines. To us, that was just, from there, the abyss. Once you get to the point where communities are just taking up arms against other communities, you are in the nightmare Hobbesian world and you're not getting out of it. That was the, if we don't stop that now, every other conversation we have about Iraq is going to be academic. And so that was the arterial bleeding that we were looking at, that this needs to stop. Well, that's a population-centric security requirement, is you've got to reestablish basic security in those neighborhoods to stop this communal mobilization. So that was always a core thrust of the plan. I mean, it certainly wasn't new in the sense that I'd briefed something like that in June and written about it earlier, [00:56:00] and people had been writing about it all along. I don't know if it was new to the Vice President. I'd have to say, it didn't seem to be particularly new to the Vice President, but then he's rather sphinx-like when you are briefing him, so I don't know. And I absolutely don't know whether that was a specific focus of the people on the national security staff who were supporting all of this.

SAYLE: Was there a follow-up to that meeting in December, or what was your next steps?

KAGAN: There were a couple of things that emerged from this. I then was able to go into a meeting on that Thursday, I believe, with Bill Kristol. He might have been standing in for -- no, I think General Keane was there, with Steve Hadley and Meghan O'Sullivan, Brett McGurk, and Josh Bolten, [00:57:00] the White House Chief of Staff, actually was in that meeting on Thursday for -- I think he stayed there for about 40-some-odd minutes. The whole thing was about a 90-minute meeting, and he stayed, and that really surprised me, because I really didn't expect to see the White House Chief of Staff involved in a briefing of this variety. I don't recall that he said anything, but he was very attentive, and as I said, for him to devote 45 minutes of his day to something like this, I really was surprised.

That was a very good meeting and we laid it out, and of course that was hardly a hostile audience at this point in time, and that was important. And then Jack Keane and I went in and briefed General Pace. It might have been over the weekend, it might have been over that weekend, and went in and presented the plan to him [00:58:00] as well, which caused me to miss the conference for which I had scheduled the exercise in the first place, and I've been hearing about it from the conference organizer ever since.

INBODEN: Can we ask, because you've mentioned a number of times, General Keane's role, Retired General Barno's role, the colonels. There have been some criticisms voiced before, about retired brass being involved in briefings to the President, Vice President, raising any issues with the chain of command and the civil mill stuff. I



mean, how did -- were those on your mind at all? Do you have any response to that? Was that a part of the discussion?

KAGAN: I thought it was nonsense at the time, and I think it's nonsense now. I think it's a fundamental misunderstanding of civil-military relations and the chain of command, to imagine that anybody's -- any uniformed officer's position is compromised by having retired officers involved in these discussions. First of all, the notion that the best thing [00:59:00] to do with retired military officers is to ensure that no one among America's political leadership, or the American people, benefit from their expertise in war, and that that's a good thing somehow, is ridiculous. The notion that the President of the United States doesn't have the right to ask for advice, anyone whom he or she wishes to ask for advice, is also nonsensical. It's not like General Keane went to the door -- well, shall I say jumped over the fence, busted down the door of the White House and said, "Mister President, you need to hear my plan." The President chooses whom he or she sees, and so this notion that there's a jumping of the chain of command here is bizarre. And I also think that there was a misreading of the role of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who originated some of these complaints subsequently. [01:00:00] Not General Pace, but I know that Admiral Mullen was aggravated about this ex post facto. You can point to the statute in Goldwater-Nichols, it says that the Chairman is the principal military advisor of the President. That doesn't mean

that he's the exclusive military advisor of the President. I think that there was a misreading, in my view, of what that chairmanship role actually is.

Lastly, I would say, going back to the conversation that I was at, with the President, in June, where the President was asking: How do I understand what's going on?; I can't imagine a circumstance in which you would want to deny the President access to anybody who could help him understand a problem of this magnitude, or access to any recommendation that might be a possible solution to a crisis. So, I've always found this to be just a misreading of the constitutional situation, a misreading of the chain of command, and something that I really can't imagine [01:01:00] that even the officers involved in making these arguments really think, if they go all the way down the line, that they really want the consequences of that, which is that only the people who happen to be in uniform at the moment will ever be allowed to render any advice on military matters to anyone. I just, I can't imagine that anyone actually thinks that that's a good place to be.

INBODEN: Pivoting back around, when you mentioned your briefing to General Pace, what was his response?

KAGAN: Not exactly enthusiastic. Thoughtful. I felt very positive, in general terms, with all of the interactions that we had with people, even when I was talking to people that I knew weren't enthusiastic about it or agreeing with it. We came in with what I think was a well-developed and well-argued case, and we were prepared to go chapter and verse, and what do you want to talk about, and people received it



in that way, and it was, [01:02:00] okay, let's talk about it. People trying to understand why exactly we were saying this, why we're confident in this, why we think it will work, what are the risks, reasonable questions, and so I felt like we had a very good discussion with General Pace, as we did in all of these encounters.

SAYLE: Moving towards the end of December, there's some consideration given to sending two BCTs to Iraq, and then other BCTs could follow on as necessary. What did you think about such a plan?

KAGAN: My understanding was that that was General Casey's position, and at the time, we read that as an attempt to ensure that the Surge plan was not put into operation, that it was an attempt to buy down pressure for a surge, by accepting two brigades, and then having units on standby, which he would then choose not to call up. That was how we read it at the time. [01:03:00] The bottom line was, he wasn't intending to change the strategy. That was -- and of course this is what happened, right? What we put out was: we need to change the strategy, we need to change the approach, we need to do population-centric counterinsurgency, we need to get out among the population, we need to do what they did in Tal Afar, we need all of this kind of stuff. In order to do that, we need five additional brigades and two RCTs. Of course the discussion publicly rapidly became about: Should we send five brigades or not? And so my problem with the pushback on that theory was that it was not going to be a change to population-centric counterinsurgency. It was not going to be a change to living among, it was not going to do Tal Afar or

anything. It was just going to be throw two more brigades at the situation. And by the way, given the strategy that General Casey was pursuing, as I understand it, it didn't make any sense to send more troops in. I don't think that he was under-resourced for the strategy that he was pursuing. He was under-resourced for the strategy we thought he should be pursuing. [01:04:00] So, it was never really an argument about more troops. It was an argument about what's the strategy, and it was very clear that that, 2-1-2 thing was about not changing the strategy, and so the numbers were the least of our problem there.

INBODEN: When did you learn that President Bush had decided to adopt a new counterinsurgency strategy and surge the new troops that he did?

KAGAN: It was January 10, 2007, with the rest of the world. We watched the speech eagerly and nervously, and without knowing what he was going to say, and I thought it was one of the most important and courageous and worst delivered speeches that I've ever seen a President give. It was remarkable. And we watched it, Kim, my wife, and I watched it -- and Kim, of course, who also gets no credit for this, which aggravates me, because she [01:05:00] was fully participating in this whole exercise and was a key part of it -- We watched that, people have asked, "Did you celebrate, did you whatever? No. We were terrified, because first of all, he didn't announce five brigades and two RCTs. He announced five brigades and two battalions, two Marine battalions, I think, and it was done in a way that was sort of hedgy and it wasn't clear how long they were going to stay and so forth.

We didn't feel like we'd won," except in the sense that more troops were going in and we had a new commander, and we had a lot of confidence that Petraeus was going to execute a counterinsurgency strategy, but we didn't feel like the fight was over at all, and nor was it, and 2007 turned out to be a year that I hope never to relive, in terms of having to fight the rearguard action in Washington, to make it possible for [01:06:00] the President and General Petraeus to execute the strategy that had been adopted. But that was -- we didn't know until the speech, what it was going to be.

INBODEN: Looking back now, based on subsequent conversations, what's in the public record, but also even what you understood at the time, how would you summarize the relationship between AEI's efforts to change U.S. strategy in Iraq, and then the efforts of some of those inside the U.S. Government at the time?

KAGAN: I think that as best I understand it now, we had a situation where the President had come to believe that his strategy, the strategy that was being pursued, was failing, and had come to believe that he needed to have a new strategy. His immediate military subordinates and Secretary of Defense did not agree, and so did not present him with a meaningful alternative [01:07:00] to the strategy that they preferred. So, the role that we played, and I think the role that we were called upon to play, because I think that there were various forces all along, who were sort of maneuvering us into this role to do this, was to offer a fleshed-out articulation of what an alternative strategy would be, so that it could be presented

to the President by people who believed that something like that needed to happen, and that there could be something concrete, rather than a sort of ethereal, we need to do something different kind of thing, which was just going to get crushed by the military, and you can't give it general orders like that. So I think that the role that we played was to flesh out an idea and a concept, as an alternative to what was being recommended and implemented, which is frankly, I think, exactly the role that think tanks should play. It's a team B exercise, it's a red team, [01:08:00] it's an alternative view, because it's never going to be reasonable to ask a command that is busy executing a strategy, "Now stop what you're doing. Down tools. I want you to write a completely different strategy that you don't believe in, that you don't think that you should be called upon to execute, and don't worry about the war in the meantime." This is ridiculous, so of course that can't happen.

So I think that -- I mean, I feel very comfortable that we played exactly the role that's appropriate for a think tank to play, which is to tee-up a fully fleshed-out idea, as much as a bunch of civilians and retired officers can flesh out an idea, and say, Here is a real alternative, Mister President, do you want to look at this? And that became -- I think that helped facilitate a conversation between the President and his commanders, that led him -- and his advisors -- that led him to make a series of decisions that ended up allowing General Odierno and his fantastic team, to develop the plans that they were developing [01:09:00]

completely independently of us, of course, having nothing to do with our exercise, and that ended up allowing General Petraeus to go in and execute what he was going to do, again, completely independent of us. So I think our role was in giving form and substance to a concept, so that it could be seriously considered.

SAYLE: Thank you very much for your time today, Dr. Kagan.

KAGAN: Pleasure.

INBODEN: Thank you, Dr. Kagan.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]