The Surge – Collective Memory Project

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[Begin Transcription]

SAYLE: Hello, this is Tim Sayle from the Southern Methodist University Center for Presidential History. It's June 26, 2015, and I'm joined by --

CRAWFORD: This is Aaron Crawford, also from Southern Methodist University.

SAYLE: And we're interviewing Dr. Kimberly Kagan today. Dr. Kagan, could you introduce yourself, and tell us about your profession in 2006?

KAGAN: My name is Kimberly Kagan. I am the founder and President of the Institute for the Study of War, which is a nonprofit organization in Washington, DC, that seeks to educate policymakers, civilian and military, about important defense issues, so that they can make better decisions on national security policy. But I founded that institute in 2007. In 2006, I was a professor at Georgetown, an adjunct professor at Georgetown, teaching in the Security Studies Program. I taught military history and advised Masters theses in Securities [00:01:00] Studies, having taught previously at the US Military Academy at West Point, which was my first job as a historian after graduating from Yale as a PhD.

SAYLE: That's great. I wonder if you could tell us what drew you to thinking about Iraq in 2006, or perhaps before, and also secondarily, how you would characterize the conflict in Iraq in 2006?

KAGAN: I had a very personal experience with Iraq because I taught cadets at the Military Academy at West Point. The first class of cadets that I graduated, graduated in 2001, and many of those grads, in the spring of 2003, were in Iraq as part of the initial invasion of Iraq. And of course, over time, many more of them were deployed in successive cadres of military units who were [00:02:00] forward

stationed. So in 2006, very interestingly, of course I had a lot of former students in Iraq, and I was following events in a very interesting way. On the one hand, I would read major newspapers and news stories, and then on the other hand, I would get emails from my former cadets telling me about the situation and the places that they were. And in particular, by late 2006, I actually had some of those first cadets inside of Iraq commanding companies; one in Dora, Baghdad, another former student of Fred's, but one whom we mentored was up in Baiji City. And so we had these very interesting spot reports that we could compare to the readings that we were doing. So in 2006, I had this very generalist [00:03:00] approach to what was happening in Iraq, and then this hyper-specific human-centric story that was unfolding.

SAYLE: And how did those two lenses on Iraq compare? What did you think of the news that Americans were receiving about Iraq as compared to what you were hearing in finer detail from some of your former students?

KAGAN: Well, I think one of the challenges that news media has when reporting a conflict is actually making sense of the conflict, making sense of the violence. And I certainly think that as we watched the events of 2006, there were some, of course, that seemed to have great significance, and some explanatory power. So, for example, the bombing of the Samarra mosque in February of 2006 was a landmark event; a watershed event that I think we all had that creeping feeling at the time was very, very important, even if we couldn't foresee why. But it's also difficult

[00:04:00] for folks on the ground actually to make sense of events, because they have a hyper-local sense of what is going on. And so the kinds of reporting that I was getting later on in the October-November 2006 timeframe was actually strikingly different in kind, but not actually explanatory. So what I knew is that I had cadets who were in really bad neighborhoods in Baghdad or in Tikrit who were encountering a degree of sectarian violence and Sunni-on-Sunni violence that they had never seen before, even though they had deployed to the theater before. And so it was really quite amazing, on the one hand, to read about these tremendous violent events, also [00:05:00] to read the official statements that things were going fine, and then to contrast that with the sentiment that my former cadets had of what was going on in the ground in the worst of the worst places.

SAYLE: You mentioned this sort of positive view of the war. What did you make of that analysis? And did you have a counter-analysis? Did you think things were going well in Iraq in 2006?

KAGAN: I do not think that things were going well in 2006, and I did not have the sense in 2006 that they were going well. But I want to think about why it was that we were receiving the analysis that we were getting, because on the one hand, there was a campaign plan, there was a framework, there was a policy plan that had a formula by [00:06:00] which it was going to measure success; and the theory of victory in 2006 was that the United States would help stand up the Iraqi security

forces. As they stood up, we'd stand down, and that as that happened, the geographical spaces in Iraq would be transferred from this combined control to Iraqi control, the Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) province, the provincial Iraqi control province, and then the Iraqis would be responsible for the security of those provinces. And that was a theory that had metrics associated with it. You could color areas from red to yellow to green on a PowerPoint chart as they proceeded through these stages of PIC, of this PIC process, but unfortunately, they were not the right measure of success. They were a measure of input, not a measure [00:07:00] of actual effect on the ground, because what was happening, of course, was that the Iraqi security forces were getting responsibility for areas, but they were not up to the challenge of the threat in those areas. And we could start to see this, I think, with the launch and failure of Operation Together Forward I (OTF-1), which began after Prime Minister Maliki was named, after he took office, after Zarqawi was killed, and involved a security plan for Baghdad that was very dependent on the Iraqi security forces. And sadly, that operation did not achieve sustained effects. Rather we saw the Iraqi security forces kind of go out and violence rise anyway. Even if you're not an expert in military history, you might say, hmm, there might be a difference between what the assessments [00:08:00] are and what we're seeing on the ground. So by the conclusion of OTF-1, I was pretty sure that things were not going well on the ground. And that was corroborated from the people who I knew who were serving.

SAYLE: Excellent. Well, we know also that in the summer, there were some debates within the United States military as to the effect American -- the presence of American troops was having on conflict in Iraq. There was the idea of the antibody issue, that Iraq was forming antibodies to a foreign presence. Do you recall that argument, and what did you make of this?

KAGAN: I know that General Abizaid really very firmly believed that US forces would cause antibodies among Iraqis, and I believe that he thought that since 2003. I've never spoken to him about it, but those who were around him began to articulate that argument in the summer or early fall of 2003. And I think there was some [00:09:00] merit to that argument, at least as it was articulated early on, the idea that perhaps the US would create a dependency on itself, or that the real presence of US forces could actually be the trigger for insurgency, or for the nationalist movements, such as the Sadrist movement, that emerged over the course of 2004 and 2005. So it was not an unreasonable framework, it was just an incorrect framework, and one that I think was proven incorrect by the events of 2005, 2006.

SAYLE: You mentioned some flags raised for you in between Operation Together Forward I, perhaps, and Operation Together Forward II. There were also flags raised inside the government at this time; there were some NSC efforts and other efforts underway. Were you aware, as a close observer of the issues that there [00:10:00] was ferment within the government in the summer of 2006? These efforts were kept secret. We don't know how secret they were.

KAGAN: Well, I had a personal, as well as professional, window onto that particular era. I don't think I would have known what was going on inside the US government without -- if Fred had not been invited to Camp David. And that was such an odd and fascinating window. Fred Kagan, my husband, was invited to Camp David in June of 2006, and it was rather last-minute and surprising phone call, and one that I think really profoundly changed both of our involvement in things to do with Iraq. But that was actually the first sense that I had gotten. I hadn't [00:11:00] gotten it from press or media, until, of course, the Camp David event formed, and it became major headline news, until it was, of course, overtaken by the event of President Bush showing up in Baghdad while he was supposed to be in Camp David.

SAYLE: Some have made the argument that if the United States troops on the ground were to know that their commander in chief were considering an alternate strategy, it might have an effect on the morale of the troops; that it might be difficult for them to continue their mission if that mission was being reviewed. Just generally, your experience with cadets, and as a military historian, what do you make of that relationship between the strategy being reviewed and its effect on troops in the field?

KAGAN: I have had a very interesting window on the relationship between the formation of strategy in Washington and the perception of that formation of strategy by troops on the ground. [00:12:00] That is something that I experienced really

indirectly in Iraq, and quite directly when I was serving in Afghanistan as a volunteer for 15 months for General Petraeus, and for General Allen while the Obama administration was conducting its strategy review of Afghanistan. And I think that there is a great deal of trust that the US military has and places in its commander in chief. And there is actually sometimes more trust that can come in the right circumstances, when a commander in chief actually evaluates whether some strategy is actually effective. I don't actually think that that undercuts morale. I actually think because we have such a thoughtful force, it can strengthen morale, unless the President [00:13:00] of the United States is fundamentally questioning the assumptions on the basis of which our troops are there, or unless they feel that the President is going to take away resources that they need to do their job. And so I remember having a very profound sensation of the latter in Afghanistan. That said, one of the things that transpired as I became more involved in the Choosing Victory report and other components of The Surge from the outside, one of the things that I did was write to my cadets to solicit from them their estimations of whether things could work. They were not universally full of warmth and friendliness toward the Surge idea. They [00:14:00] didn't necessarily think that it could work, that there were going to be sufficient resources, that they could be used effectively. And so whereas they were not averse to serving under the new mission, they were not buying the new mission right away simply because it had come from the Commander in Chief.

SAYLE: I see.

CRAWFORD: I'm curious about -- and you're getting involved in a fairly early stage at this point, and eventually, by the time we get to a decision, we've had hundreds of experts in this town involved in assessing this. And there seemed to be a real kind of dichotomy between the people in the government and the experts, this relationship. And I'm wondering as a historian coming in at this point, how would you assess the government's ability to understand what's going on? Specifically, I'm thinking about this debate about the insurgency versus civil war. How would you assess [00:15:00] the government's ability to, say, understand military history?

KAGAN: I think that the US government, and in particular senior folks in the US government, are always going to have a challenge understanding what is transpiring on the battlefield, and that kind of difficulty perceiving change, and understanding when that change really signifies that your strategy isn't working, as opposed to when that change signifies that you're not executing that strategy properly, or when it signifies that you have the wrong leadership -- those are really hard calls. And to me, as a historian, in some respects, they're the most challenging things that, in particular, the President of the United States, as Commander in Chief, can do, or the Secretary of Defense in his civilian [00:16:00] oversight role. I think that the US government has a lot of momentum that goes behind decisions, and there are a lot of people collecting a lot of information toward a lot of priority intelligence requirements, and toward a lot of different

ends; that can constrain the way policymakers think of or perceive events that are ongoing. It's harder to detect anomalies when you're within the government. It's easier to detect them outside. That's one of the reasons why I choose to work on the outside. I love the fact that I do open source intelligence analysis, because I do actually think it's a way of looking at a sea of information with blinders off. I don't think that the two are incompatible; I think that they are mutually reinforcing. And one of the things that I actually think became interesting over [00:17:00] the course of 2006 was the degree to which entities of the United States government were formally reaching out to civilians on the outside and younger generations of military members in order to assess the situation and see whether with different groups of people who were less part of the policy process, who were less focused or blinded by the fact that information was being filtered to them, whether they saw a different approach. And it's one of the characteristics of 2006 that I find impressive, in retrospect.

SAYLE: Great, well, let's pick up on that a little bit, because you became very involved in these. You spoke about it generally, but you became one of these experts that weighed in publicly and privately. I'm wondering, from that period at Camp David in June 2006 through until the real heavy lifting down in AEI in December, [00:18:00] how did you work to make your concerns or ideas known, and who were you working with, and how did that sort of develop, I guess, generally?

KAGAN: I think very interestingly, the concerns that I had remained largely personal concerns that I was sharing with my former students, with some of my former colleagues. And it was a network of people who had served, or who were serving, who were talking to one another, thinking out loud to one another what we wouldn't necessarily say in public: This is not working. We have a real strategic problem. Is there actually a solution to this problem? [00:19:00] What could it be, and why? So I really feel that a lot of what I did in the September-October-November timeframe really was the kind of semi-professional, yet socially-networked discussion of what was happening. The exceptions were interesting. I mean, there was some news reporting that was coming out about the Council of Colonels that was meeting in roughly the September to December timeframe. There -- there was obviously the effort underway to do doctrinal revision out at Fort Leavenworth. Those are the kinds of things that captains and majors knew about well, and in some respects, through that point, I had a very captain and major view of the war -- not a four-star, a three-star, or a senior policymaker view.

SAYLE: [00:20:00] Then how do we move to the work at AEI that's done later in the fall? What's the genesis of AEI's project, and your involvement in that?

KAGAN: AEI conducted the surging victory war game, planning exercise. Because of a suggestion that, of all things, General Dave Barno, General Retired Dave Barno, made to Danny Pletka, the Vice President of Foreign Policy at AEI. And I remember hearing this, of course, because Danny tasked Fred, my husband, with

figuring out whether this was a good thing to do. And, of course, since it was really one of his first years at AEI, highly suggesting that he might do it, which he was not resistant to at all. But one of the things that transpired at that time [00:21:00] was a real discussion within this social network, within this human network, and among folks here in DC about how to construct such a study; what is it that we actually needed to study? What were the questions that were blinders, that were really, yes, the blinders that were making it difficult for policymakers actually to adapt their strategy? One of the chief problems was the question of, should there be more troops, and if so, what would they do, and how would you use them? But I think the real blinder was, there was an assumption in Washington that there weren't any more troops to be had, that the forces could not be generated for a surge. Therefore the [00:22:00] option was not viable; therefore, it was not worth considering. And so one of the things that the small group started to think about was first, what forces are there available? What capabilities do they have? What is the actual problem that is transpiring in Iraq? Have we mis-defined the problem in Iraq? Are we saying that the problem is that the Iraqis lack the will to fight, or that we haven't handed enough over to the Iraqis, when, in fact, the problem is one of having our wrong strategic approach. So we opened a wide aperture in these discussions for considering the nature of the problem first, then the ways to solve the problem, then the means available. And the whole point was, [00:23:00] have everything on the table; don't assume

that you have to rule things out. And that actually produced a really interesting research effort that I started to find very interesting, because it really meant, among other things, that some of Fred's interns at AEI started to collect data on where the violent events had been transpiring in Iraq. And they started mapping them. And I didn't know very much about the military operations ongoing in Iraq. I mean, I had a very general sense of where they were transpiring and what was happening. But when we started to look at that high fidelity, certain patterns started to emerge. And that, to me, became the first window, the real thread that I had, a real inspiring thread [00:24:00] that, "Wow, this is not just random violence. There is a pattern to this violence. If we discern what the pattern is, if we can disambiguate the signal from the noise, then actually, we might be able to come to a specific definition of the problem, and a specific discussion of different courses of action that could be taken to solve it." Let me pause there to see if I'm answering your question, or if I'm running off track.

SAYLE: No, absolutely. I wonder if you'd pick up a little bit on the information that was available, even to these interns, where they were getting them. Is this news stories? Do you have some sort of secret backchannel? Or was it --

KAGAN: We did not have a secret backchannel, our secret backchannel was everybody's secret backchannel: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*. And really literally, It took a little bit of help to perceive the battle space in Baghdad. In fact, every attack that was being reported was usually reported in a quadrant of

Baghdad, and once you had anybody who had deployed to Baghdad say, Well yeah, there's a river, it runs through the middle, there is a highway, it bisects it -- so if it's happening northwest of Baghdad, they actually mean northwest Baghdad. And then you could aggregate those attacks generally. Then from there, specific neighborhoods would be mentioned in attacks, and the demographic characteristics of those neighborhoods were actually discernable entirely from open sources. So it was painful and painstaking, and something that I expect the intelligence community could have told us, and we would have saved ourselves quite a lot of work, except [00:26:00] they're the intelligence community, they're not supposed to tell us. So we had to derive the insight from openly available sources. So I remember these interns sitting around just month by month for the whole of 2006, mapping out these attacks. And poof, Baghdad came alive.

SAYLE: I wanted to take something of a sidebar here, to talk about this phenomenon of information made available to think tanks because of technology -- it seems that that's a pretty incredible river that's been forded there. But now, private citizens have access to an incredible amount of information. Did it feel like you were doing something new at the time? Something new and exciting?

KAGAN: When I founded ISW [Institute for the Study of War]in early 2007, I did so for a couple of reasons: one was the overall driving mission that, in fact, if I, a civilian, [00:27:00] could understand with fidelity the military operations that were ongoing in Iraq, if I could use the language of war, if I could understand, at least in

an abstracted way, tactical actions and their operational and strategic consequences, well, I'm just a girl from New York who grew up in New Jersey, other people can learn this, too. So a part of what motivated me was that passionate mission on education.

[P]art of what motivated me was the awareness that with the information sources that we had on hand, even then in 2007, we could actually, with a little bit of knowledge and analysis, start constructing a very sophisticated picture of what was happening on the battlefield. And I wanted to do this, because I wanted to be able to critique independently the military operations that constituted the surge. I didn't want to take anybody's word for it that [00:28:00] it was succeeding. And I didn't want to go use very civilian and bureaucratic milestones, like congressional milestones, to evaluate success. What I will tell you is that the information environment has transformed again many times. And what we now do at ISW is follow multiple conflicts through entirely openly available sources. Iraq, Syria, ISIS, Afghanistan -- these are really rich information environments, and I think they have fundamentally changed how we should do intelligence. There is room for the secret squirrel classified information, and that has a very special place. But I think our picture of what's happening in conflict zones and in zones that may turn into conflict zones can really best be baselined through [00:29:00] openly available information that we can gather and collect through public-private partnerships, and that we can then enrich with the classified information that no

private citizen can get access to, or have the resources to recreate. So I think it's a fundamental transformation in the way that we should do our work. I don't know that we have yet as a US government transformed how we do our work. In general, we still tend to have a problem for a variety of reasons. Creating the baseline of information from the open sources, I think we saw this a lot in the rise of the Islamic State, and I think one of the reasons why my team at ISW was so successful at forecasting the rise of the Islamic State in 2012 and 2013 is that it was looking at a very [00:30:00] different set of signals that came from open source, social media, local media, that a lot of folks in the US government didn't have access to.

SAYLE: So we see sort of a blurring of lines, really, and I think you're suggesting, the possibility to blur those lines even further. Back to 2006, however, there were some recently retired military officers involved in AEI's work, and General Keane played a big role. And there were some suggestions that maybe it was inappropriate for former military commanders to be making a military case, or briefing the President directly. What do you make of that idea?

KAGAN: Well, I think that American citizens, when they are private American citizens and no longer regulated by the uniform code of military justice actually can speak their minds publicly. Whether they do and whether they do it as forces for good, depends on the person. I think it's [00:31:00] really important that we as American citizens and American policymakers do not simply believe folks who have retired

from the military because they have worn a uniform, that they don't simply say, well, this person must know the truth. But I do actually think that military service can give senior people, junior people an incredible perspective that should be voiced in the public arena -- again, as long as they are no longer wearing the uniform, and as long as they're following the rules that they have been given. So I think, for example, that General Keane, who was really not that recently retired, was working in a really interesting way behind the scenes in 2006, but in a way that, to [00:32:00] me, seemed respectful of the institutions and respectful of those who were still in the uniform.

SAYLE: Now, that planning weekend at AEI, and then more work done at AEI resulted in the Choosing Victory report. In a moment I'd like you to talk about the report itself, but before, I'd like you to maybe sketch out what you saw the purpose and what your hopes were for that report. We've had various suggestions it was designed as a campaign plan to be wholly adopted by the government, it was designed to spur public conversation. What did you think the plan would do or could do?

KAGAN: Certainly I thought that the surging victory discussion and report could shape public discussion, if it were actually successful, but I never imagined sitting there that weekend, [00:33:00] or even later on, that it might even be sufficiently successful at changing the public conversation to have the impact that some have said that it had. I don't really understand what impact it had. All I know is that

we were together for a weekend. We were studiously looking at these maps, these graphics. One of my roles within the group was to ask stupid questions, such as, "Why is it so important that this violence is occurring in mixed neighborhoods, could you please tell me what that means?" And, "I'm sorry, when you say a company clears an area, what does it actually do?" And sometimes it's really important to ask those questions, because I think one of the reasons why the report conveyed so much to such a wide audience was that it really was quite specific in terms of what [00:34:00] would be different, if the recommendations of the report were followed. But genuinely, I really thought that at most, it would shape a public conversation.

SAYLE: What were the key recommendations, what were the main headlines of the report? What were the most important suggestions and elements, in your view?

KAGAN: The Choosing Victory report, first and foremost, stated that the problem in Iraq was a problem of ethno-sectarian violence that was being exacerbated by the Iraqi security forces, and that that problem actually could be addressed through the deployment of additional US forces under [00:35:00] a new vision of how force would be used, a counterinsurgency strategy. And so the report made the case that the United States had misdefined the problem; that the United States could come up with a solution; that that solution could involve military force; that that military force needed to be engaged in certain kinds of tasks in certain kinds of locations; and that that entire effort could lead to circumstances, if successful,

which the report predicted as being not entirely likely, that violence would fall in Baghdad and Iraq as a whole, giving time and space to political leaders so that they could actually make the kinds of accommodations that were needed to repair [00:36:00] Iraqi society. Without the security, nothing would happen. And all of the efforts that were being placed on political reconciliation or security force development were not going to succeed.

SAYLE: I'd like to pick up on about a million things there, but I'll leave it to three. I wonder if you could talk to us a little bit about, first, the exacerbation of the situation by the Iraqi security forces; second, you mentioned the tasks, and how they would be defined, and at the same time, of course, there's a new counterinsurgency field manual, and if that plays in thinking at AEI; and then finally on locations, and if you mean within Baghdad in particular, or Baghdad versus the rest of the country -- Anbar, etc. So there's three things there, I can go through them again as we go.

KAGAN: Great. Super.

SAYLE: OK.

KAGAN: Let's do that. All right, Re-ask the first question, and I'll answer the first question.

SAYLE: That's the exacerbation by the Iraqi security forces.

KAGAN: Yes. So the [00:37:00] Iraqi security forces were in Operation Together Forward I and Together Forward II, going into the some of the most dangerous neighborhoods, particularly in Baghdad. And what would happen in those neighborhoods is that the Iraqis would go in and they would be indiscriminate in their fire. So, they would shoot a lot. They would not shoot only bad people, and they would, in some cases, actually facilitate the movement of some of the Shia militias, including the Iranian-backed Shia militias that were engaged in extrajudicial killings, executions, in some of the Sunni neighborhoods of Baghdad. So I [00:38:00] had the window on this kind of exacerbation from several different sources. On the one hand, my good friend *The New York Times*. On the other hand, of course the US military was briefing regularly on the progress of Operation Together Forward I and II, and I remember a briefing in probably about October of 2006 when Bill Caldwell, General Caldwell, he was then the spokesperson for MNF-I [Multi-National Force in Iraq], briefed what was essentially a failed operation, and lost words for describing whether it was successful, why he thought it was successful, anything like that. And then the operation was abandoned. So, I mean, I have a lot of respect for Bill Caldwell, a whole lot. But I had a third window into this. One of my former cadets in command [00:39:00] of a company was in command of a company in Dora, which is a neighborhood in southern Baghdad that was actually the worst of the worst. So it was cleared in OTF I [Operation Together Forward I] and in OTF II [Operation Together Forward II],

and then he showed up in command of the company. And the reports that I was getting from him were terrible: that he had a terrified population, that there were people getting killed extrajudicially on a regular basis, that there was a lot of al Qaida big booms going on in the area. And he was really afraid for the population in the area in a way that actually spurred me to ask him, "Hey, is there something we can do just as humans to help them?" So he was, at that time, paired with Iraqi security forces. They weren't partnered up, right, but he had Iraqi [00:40:00] security forces in his area that were going into neighborhoods in Dora. And on one, in one, the Iraqi security forces kind of came to a playground where there were children playing, and one of them took a shot at a school girl in the face, killed her, in this playground, only full of children. And it was that kind of heartbreaking thing that wasn't reported in the news in that way, that gave a texture to really what it meant for the Iraqi security forces to be exacerbating the security situation in the neighborhood. Everybody was terrified. We can come back to that neighborhood in 2008, if you want, now or later.

CRAWFORD: I want to clarify something. By this point, are the Iraqi forces, are they under the command of the Iraqis? Or are they still under the [00:41:00] command of the US? Because we've heard Prime Minister Maliki put pressure on the US government to get command of those in order, as he would say, to quell the balance. So at this point, when you hear these things, who's commanding?

KAGAN: That's a great question. What I would say is that the discussions that were had at the four-star level and the Prime Ministerial level were not entirely reflected on the ground at the company level. So at the level of a company in Baghdad, these Iraqi security forces were not under the control of the company commander, or the battalion commander, or the brigade commander, or any really responsible US adult. Whether they were technically under the command of the US, or whether they were technically under the command of the Iraqi government, they were not [00:42:00] a partnered force, and they were not, at the tactical level, being pointed in particular directions. So certainly not by at least the company commanders that I got to see in action. Now, that might not have been true universally, and obviously, there was a really big problem in Dora. So I don't know to what extent we can generalize from that. But actually, it was one of the constant sources of friction between my former students and me, particularly on my first battlefield circulation in May, 2007, I got to go around as a guest of General Petraeus. I went to visit my former cadet and his company in their headquarters in Dora, and we had no US military grownups with us, it was just he came to pick us up, we went and we talked. We had a very testy three-hour exchange on [00:43:00] that headquarters as he was saying, "The Surge hasn't come, the Surge hasn't come to this place, it's not going to work. These Iraqi forces that we're supposed to partner with, they're just bad guys. We can't partner with them, we have to send the message out that we can't partner with them." And it was a very different hyper-

local tactical perspective. And it changed, actually, very shortly after we departed, as Surge forces got to his neighborhood, as leadership changes took place at the Iraqi security forces at a higher echelon that finally worked their way down. But it really means that this disconnect between when a decision was made in Washington, or at MNF-I headquarters, and when it actually was implemented on the ground was a consistent problem throughout all of 2006 and all of 2007.

SAYLE: And now what about the doctrinal change, the field manual, if that played a role?

KAGAN: Certainly. I think that of course, the development [00:44:00] of a doctrinal field manual, something into which many junior and senior officers provide inputs. And so the revision of the doctrine was something that was being discussed fairly widely within the US Army, and certainly within the thoughtful sections of the officer corps in 2006. So certainly the ideas of what counterinsurgency consisted of, although not formally codified and published in doctrine I think until about November of 2006, if I'm right on the publication date, were nevertheless very influential in the thinking of the active duty, and recently retired Majors and Colonels and Lieutenant Colonels who were participating in discussions. And the whole idea, of course, was [00:45:00] you have got to protect the population. And to do that, you need to get out of the big bases, out onto the ground in sufficient number and with sufficient and sustained presence that the population begins to trust you, that they start reporting on bad guys in the area, and that through a sea of interactions between your forces and the population, the tide of violence

actually changes in your neighborhood, and then accrues in a tapestry or a mosaic across the battlefield.

SAYLE: And I guess that leads to my next question, which is sort of which battlefield? There's so many interactives, this is such a diverse country and a diverse problem at this time. Is AEI focusing on Baghdad, is AEI focusing in Iraq, where is the emphasis?

KAGAN: At AEI, during the [00:46:00] Choosing Victory report discussions, we had a vigorous conversation about whether to focus on Baghdad, whether to focus on areas around Baghdad, such as Anbar and Diyala, or whether to focus in different places within the country. Different places within the country, quickly ruled out, because when you actually looked at the violence, the violence was concentrated in Baghdad and around Baghdad in about a 35- to 50-mile radius. Now, I do remember when the President said something like that on television, it didn't really have very much meaning to me. When we actually plotted it out on a map, [00:47:00] in fact, the concentrations of violence were dramatic, they were fixed and they were moving. And you could see that Baghdad was the epicenter of the problem, you could see that, in fact, the amount of violence that was transpiring in Baghdad was, in fact, an accelerant to political failure rather than political success among the Iraqis. But I think one of the things I'd learned as we worked through the exercise that weekend was that of course the support zones for these attacks were not necessarily in Baghdad. Just because the attack went off in Baghdad

didn't mean that it originated in Baghdad. It might have originated in Diyala or it might have originated in Garma [Al-Karmah] in northwest Baghdad, right before you get to Anbar [00:48:00] province. So it was a sense that the Baghdad area was working as a system that I found really interesting, and that made it more interesting to talk about how to generate effects on the battlefield. That said, the conversation that we had over that weekend is nothing like, I think, the sophisticated conversation that Multi-National Corps-Iraq [MNC-I] had about how to allocate forces to secure Baghdad, which really looked at the connectivities between these different areas; unique capabilities that US forces could bring, how to sequence the entrance of different brigades and their components into Baghdad, all sorts of rich nuance that belongs rightly to military planners.

SAYLE: I wonder if you recall with any specificity, or perhaps [00:49:00] in a range, the number of troops that AEI talked about as -- you know, in the planning of the private, and then in public, should be sent, or would be required to be effective.

KAGAN: The workshop that we did at AEI focused on brigades rather than boots on the ground. And I actually think one of the very interesting things about the surge, as President Bush announced it in January of 2007, was that he also spoke about brigades rather than troop numbers. And through the AEI weekend we, after defining the problem -- going through a formal military planning process, right, you define the problem, you evaluate the different actors, then you start estimating what you need to do to achieve your mission, then you set forces

against it, I mean, it's a really rigorous process [00:50:00] that I had seen in action a couple of times as an observer before, but it was really well done, really very interesting. And when we got to that part of the military planning exercise, where we talked about Troop-to-Task, the discussion circled in on five brigades, five brigades as what was needed to handle the degree of violence that we saw in Baghdad itself, as well as perhaps some of the changes that might -- some of the changes or some of the touch point areas outside of Baghdad, in Eastern Anbar or in Diyala.

[T]he issue is Baghdad itself. Go back to the fact that Baghdad is a circle divided into quadrants. In some respects, the [00:51:00] thickness of forces required was determined by the urban terrain, and the need to focus forces on that terrain. I don't remember what force level we had in Baghdad prior to the Surge, but it might have been one brigade, it might have been two in the whole Baghdad area. And so what became clear was that in order to have forward operating bases that were properly situated, and then all of these combat outposts, these hubs and spokes whereby forces could disperse from their headquarters, we actually needed to be in about four places in Baghdad, and we needed to have headquarters in about four places in Baghdad.

And again, I don't think we really predicted where that fifth brigade would go, except that there were some spots, particularly [00:52:00] in Diyala (I think we evaluated Diyala as the biggest problem) where these attacks were originating.

And that if you could put a brigade on one of those spots and kind of squish it down, you would actually take the pressure off of Baghdad itself. So we came up with five brigades, and it turned out that they were available. We knew this because there is a model of force generation that the Army has. It has the wonderful Army acronym of R4GEN. And as we were trying to figure out what units would be available, we went ahead and did research and found on Wikipedia, the R4GEN model with the units available, those that were in rotation, those that were being rebuilt. This was not good, and I recall faintly that when General Keane and Fred went to talk to some senior Army leaders, they were not entirely thrilled that R4GEN was posted on Wikipedia, and I don't think that's happened since. [00:53:00] But there it was, and we could just harvest that information and actually look at force availability. And what came clear from that force availability was that if the length of deployments were extended from 12 to 15 months, then one could actually have a surge of essentially five brigades for -- I don't remember if it was all 12 months. And in addition, that there would be a little mini surge that would come in the August or September window, when all of the forces were in and none of the forces were going out. And that was not an early decision that the President made, right, to extend those deployments, but he did so in the implementation [00:54:00] period in the spring.

SAYLE: We know that in late 2006, there was concern amongst senior military officers about the health of the force and breaking the force. I wonder if over this whole

period, if you had any feedback from your students about the impact of these longer deployments?

KAGAN: Certainly. The long deployments were hard, and I think always will be hard for American soldiers. But there's a big difference between a long deployment in which you're losing and a long deployment in which you're making change, and in which you're actually winning. And the truth is that, I think the saddest fact is that there are a lot of folks who served in Iraq in an early period who never got to see the changes on the ground that transpired in late 2007 and early 2008. I was privileged enough to go back to Dora in February of [00:55:00] 2008 -- my cadet had left, my Captain had left -- and flew in, and where we had effectively been IED'd back in the June -- the May 2007 timeframe, we were actually walking through a neighborhood, there were kids out everywhere. The grownups were out everywhere. They were playing on a playground, they came running up to the truck. We dismounted the vehicles, they were not asking for candy, they were just kind of high-fiving and having fun in the way the kids do, and the parents came close, it wasn't just the kids, which is one of the things that you look for, right? It's not just kids being kids, it's adults trusting adults. And we actually spent the whole day in that neighborhood in Dora. And we walked through the streets, we went to the electricity station that they had set up, which was where the bodies of those who had been executed had been dumped [00:56:00] in the past. We stayed out after dark. And when I got back in a helicopter at the end of this long day, at

the end of this dinner, I was in tears because the area was liberated. I mean, you could actually palpably feel the sense of liberation and relief in an area where, you know, really not even a year before you had Iraqi security forces executing girls on a playground. It was a profound difference. And I'm sorriest, of course, that that profound difference has not proven to be lasting, but I'm also really sorry for the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who never really got to see, wow, what a change they made. So if you win, if you win, if there's a narrative -- not a narrative. If [00:57:00] there's a reality that you have made a change, that is something that can sustain a mission-focused human -- most of the time. And it's really profound. It's been exceptional to see that.

SAYLE: We know after the release of the report, General Keane and Dr. Fred Kagan presented their ideas in various forms within the White House. Do you know what other steps AEI was taking to get the word out about the report, or --

KAGAN: I remember that AEI, of course, did the usual think tank things, so of course there was media release, and some circulation of the report. But in particular, I remember that some of that occurred closer to Crawford, possibly in early January right before the President made his announcement. So there was a window, a period between when -- [00:58:00], at the end of the weekend, we did a military planning process. What did we have? We had slides. They were lovely. They were a PowerPoint deck, and I believe that General Keane brought them in to the White House for a meeting either with the President or with the Vice President. But

converting that into a report that could be released was a difficult labor. Fred did a lot of that hard work, and it was not the happiest Christmas in the world from a writing and an editing perspective. But it was -- so the distribution of the report really came in that early January window, the distribution of the slides preceded it.

SAYLE: Do you have any sense as to whether AEI sought to take the report in any way, distribute it to Iraqis, or if you have any sense [00:59:00] of how Iraqis viewed the report?

KAGAN: I do not, actually. It's a really interesting question, and I'd like to know the answer, so if in your interviews you find one, I would love to know. But at that time, I think the only -- I really don't recall any Iraqi reaction, per se.

SAYLE: Yeah, I'm not sure if it was public, but certainly there were Iraqis who were reading it. Also in December, however, there were Iraqis -- and Americans reading the report of the Iraq Study Group (ISG). So very interestingly, there is the AEI report and the ISG report. They came out at approximately -- well, the report from AEI, the full report, comes later. But how did you view the ISG's report? Did you focus on it at the time? Did you compare it to your own work?

KAGAN: Certainly. Of course. I think part of the idea that the AEI working group had was [01:00:00] generated or inspired by the different efforts that were going on in Washington, D.C. On the one hand, there were those that were undertaken by the government or inside the military, on the other hand there was the semi-

governmental, semi-independent study that I suppose USIP was shepherding through. And I think one of the things that became generally known in Washington, and the way that things always become generally known in Washington, in the mid-November timeframe was that the Baker-Hamilton report, as it was referred to at the time, was recommending some pretty constrained options. And again, I don't think that we came together the weekend of, that first weekend in December with an intent to say we absolutely need to add more forces. The question [01:01:00] was, what if we had the freedom as people outside of government and outside of the policy limelight -- because frankly, we're outside of policy limelight -- just to study and recommend. Shouldn't we, as responsible citizens, do that? Figure it out, put out a recommendation and at least say we gave it our best shot, the old college try. So that's one of the reasons why we're so surprised that the old college try actually resonated with anybody when in point of fact, it hadn't in past old college tries.

SAYLE: I want to ask a general question then that connects your writing with sort of what you saw in Washington in December in 2006. In your book on the surge, you talk about the difficulty for the American public to really grasp the nature of military operations. They are complicated, [01:02:00] and it seems like AEI was doing some of its own learning on the spot. How, in your view, did Americans view US operations in Iraq in 2006? I'll leave it there, a very broad question.

KAGAN: That's a really interesting question, and one I haven't gone back to think of for a while.

CRAWFORD: I would say especially in comparison to the first year with the embedded journalists who created this real deep impression the first year of the war. So by year five, it's very different.

KAGAN: I think that one of the challenges that we saw in 2006 was that violence was so high, and it appeared to be random. And then secondly, that it was difficult to discern what relationship -- what [01:03:00] causal relationship there was between what US forces and Iraqi forces were doing, and the violence that was ongoing. Now, violence is an endemic part of war, and so in some respects, it's not very interesting to report when a bomb goes off. If we narrated World War II from the perspective of artillery and air strikes and small arms fire, we would have absolutely no cognition of command and control of the fight. Now, there are places and circumstances in which you should be focused on that real palpable exchange of gunfire at the sub-tactical level, but in point of fact, we try to understand war in part against the strategic objectives that our leaders set. And we do not do that exclusively by [01:04:00] looking at tactical engagements. We are trained to look at how those tactical engagements fit together into operations to achieve objectives.

I think that, for several reasons, Americans could not perceive in 2006 that US forces were making changes on the battlefield. For one thing, it was actually

not policy for US forces to change the situation on the battlefield. It was policy for US forces to train and equip the Iraqi security forces so they could change the battlefield. Secondly, the volume and frequency of violence had mushroomed, and so the kinds of spectacular attacks, car bombs and things that were occurring on a regular basis, made it look really disorderly. And then thirdly, there were real [01:05:00] limits to what the Iraqis were actually achieving. So, you know, you can try to turn on the engine and get the car going, but the car is dead, it's not going to go. But the Iraqis, I don't want to compare them to a car, they're actually really good, really hard-working people. But, you know, they were not having the effects that they meant to be generating. And so we lost the command and control perspective of the war. And, in fact, we in some respects ceased doing some of the things that we do as Americans to command and control the battle space.

One of the things that I think really changed in 2007 with the Surge with a new commander, with a new strategy, is that US forces actually took a shaping role on the battlefield again. It was highly kinetic, it was really contested, it was a really rocky early implementation. But simply actually having a concept of operations that [01:06:00] shaped the battlefield in some respect that could be articulated to the American public actually helped to change, a little bit, the narrative that the media was putting out. Now frankly, the media was right. The Surge wasn't working in February. The Surge wasn't working in March. Components of the campaign plan were being executed in the series that they were

supposed to be executed in, and having some effects on the battlefield. And the outcome of those effects, we couldn't tell at the time. So I think, reporters learned a different way of reporting between 2003 and 2007. It became really hard for them in 2007 to readjust to the fact that the US was shaping the battlefield, but they did. And I have a lot of faith in American journalists, particularly those who do go forward and who do take a look at what's going on on the ground. [01:07:00] They'll get there because they will find the -- they will sense the turning in the battlefield that goes on for good or for ill.

SAYLE: Now we know that through December 2006, it seemed to most -- even those within the policymaking circles, that the Surge was no sure thing, not necessarily going to happen. And the President was advised, according to some journalistic accounts, that a surge would be a fool's errand. I'm wondering what you thought was the most compelling argument against the surge? If you found any arguments against the AEI position that you found intellectually compelling, and how you dealt with them.

KAGAN: Well, certainly, of course. I mean, I think when we are talking about military decision-making, frankly, in some respects, we're always talking about momentous decisions, because lives are at stake. And therefore, [01:08:00] it is actually very, very important, truly, to weigh the different courses of action that people are recommending in order to be able to have the confidence, the moral confidence, in the course of action that you're recommending. And at least to me, that is an

important -- that is important to me. And I want to be intellectually honest, and I want to be doing right by people. So I think there were important arguments against the Surge. One certainly was that we were not going to be able to buy sufficient time and space for the Surge actually to work. And I think that that's, you know, that time-space relationship, can you accomplish [01:09:00] the mission in the time available with the resources available? I don't think that was a foregone conclusion in January of 2007 that we would actually achieve objectives in the window available, with forces available.

I think a second very important issue is that there was a real risk that the US could create dependency of Iraq on US forces. Now, I would just say that I think that dependency already existed, and therefore it wasn't, to me, something that I was afraid of creating. I was afraid that the fact that there was a dependency of a certain kind was actually a problem, mainly that if the Iraqi security forces couldn't actually secure their own country, then we would have a huge strategic mission failure. And then [01:10:00] I think lastly, something that worried me all throughout the Surge and something that continued to worry me in subsequent years is that this was but one part of the problem. Whether you looked at the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias, or whether you looked at the real political challenges that the Iraqis faced, I think every problem this complicated is like an onion; you pull off one layer and then you get to the next layer. And we did solve -- I don't want to say "solve" -- we did remedy the security situation sufficiently in

2007, but the next set of problems emerged in 2008. They were problems of legislation, problems of political participation, and problems of Iranian-backed Shia militias that we could then tackle. So the idea that we might be focusing on the wrong thing was [01:11:00] something that concerned me, or that we wouldn't do enough certainly concerned me. But I think in military operations, you have to go phase by phase, and you have to tackle one problem at a time. You try to tackle all the problems at once, you're sure to fail. So I think these were reasonable arguments, and I would be -- and I do think that people had real objections based on weighty thoughts. But I also think that there were people who just had objections based on preconceived notions of what would or would not be accepted in policy circles, and those kinds of constraints are the ones that I hate to see influence political leaders at the highest levels.

SAYLE: [01:12:00] I'd like to pick up on one thing that will take us on a big of a jog backwards, and I'm sorry, but that's the issue of Iranian-backed militias. From your open sources and your understanding of the situation in 2006, how apparent was Iran as a player? And was that a part of the conversation at AEI?

KAGAN: Certainly it was obvious that there were Shia militia actors on the battlefield that were not -- they were not organized and trained by Iraqis. They had some unusual capabilities, and in particular, they had a signature weapon, the explosively formed penetrator, or EFP. Now, it probably took me until the weekend of our gathering really to understand that the two opposing forces had two signature weapons; that

al Qaida's signature weapon was a suicide [01:13:00] attack, particularly a suicide vehicle-born IED, or a suicide vest, and that the signature attack of especially an Iranian-backed militia was an EFP, and that the signature attack of an Iraqi militia was the extrajudicial killing. But then you go to that map of violence, and if you bin and sort by the kind of event, you could actually all of a sudden see that you could assign an actor, a likely agent, to each kind of violent event. But I would say that I really think that the role that Iran was playing on the ground remained difficult to find in open sources, with the exception of the EFP [explosively formed penetrator] as being a signature Iranian device, until [01:14:00] US Special Forces captured Qais al-Khazali and his brother, Laith, and the person known as, I think it was Abu Musa Daqduq in 2007, maybe in the March-April-May timeframe. And once these folks were taken into custody and detained, US forces started releasing different kinds of information. And by June of 2007, it was clear that the Iranians were commanding and controlling elements on the battlefield, and that you could find the signatures of these Iranian-backed elements through open sources, not just through spooky secret squirrel stuff.

SAYLE: I have one more general question, and then I'll see if Aaron has anything, and then I'll finish off with a final question, [01:15:00] if that works. Although we won't spend a lot of time on implementation today, you watched the implementation of the Surge in 2007. I wonder if you can connect your observations in 2007 to your

expectations, hopes, plans, ideas of what the Surge meant in 2006, late 2006. Perhaps you could talk about that a little bit.

KAGAN: I think in some respects, even when President Bush announced the Surge in January of 2007, what that Surge would be had not yet fully been determined. And so there was an idea that additional forces would be sent. The President specified the number of brigades that could be made available for the operation, and he said that they would be doing [01:16:00] different kinds of missions on the battlefield. But how many forces? How many brigades? Where were they going to go? How would they be used? All of that had not yet been fully determined in January. In fact, there was a debate about the number of brigades that would be sent forward. And I think that initially, if I recall correctly, three brigades were designated to go forward to Iraq, and the other two were essentially in reserve; they were in the chute, they might be deployed, but they were not actually forward deploying. And so really, until, I think it was even maybe the March timeframe, it wasn't clear that there would be five brigades on the ground. [01:17:00] And from the interviews that I did subsequently with brigade commanders, I learned that there was a lot of debate and discussion about where these forces would go, what they could do -- and a lot of communication between particularly multinational corps Iraq, General Odierno, his brigade commanders, about how to use these forces. The person I think who -- the group of people who made the decision, or really developed the plan for where to put the Surge forces, they were an element of multinational core

Iraq, the three core headquarters with General Odierno. And in particular, there were two planners that I would single out as being super geniuses who do great work. But then-Colonel Jim Hickey and then-Major [01:18:00] Jim Powell really were very important and instrumental in the campaign design that General Odierno actually implemented. And I learned that subsequently, actually, through the three core after-action review to which General Odierno graciously invited me. But it was really interesting to see how differently some of those planners thought, compared to others who said, "Hey, put everything in Baghdad, and we don't need the extra brigades because we'll have enough to do what we need to do with three brigades in Baghdad." I think it was kind of a bold move, and I think it was actually the campaign design that really made the Surge effective.

CRAWFORD: I also have a final general question, and it's in essence [01:19:00] about presidential decision-making, in that what we hear, what we read in this period is, why did this take so long? And actually, as I've been kind of revisiting some of the newspaper headlines and stories, we see a real erosion of faith in the government to actually solve these types of problems. And one of those things is: How can the President actually get his information? Where is he getting it? Why does he -- why is it taking so long? And I'm very curious from the point of view where you're coming from, on the outside, trying to influence the inside, how would you characterize all of this?

KAGAN: I think it is really difficult for a decision-maker to get information. I mean, of course, every decision-maker, every executive sets up a system which is meant to convey [01:20:00] information to him. And the US government consists of multiple such systems serving the principals who run agencies, and the military commanders and the President and the cabinet members. All of these people have great organisms that provide them with information. The issue is that, I think one of the things that fewer people do is institutionalize ways of getting information from outside that filtered view, because as we discussed earlier, policy and policy implementation has a momentum of its own. It drives the intelligence we collect, how we process it, what framework we put it in, how we are evaluating [01:21:00] what it is that we're doing. All of those things should be the case, but it's very hard to step back from that and say, whoa, wait a minute, did we make the right decision in the first place? I think on the one hand, I've seen really good commanders, such as General Petraeus, General McChrystal, General Odierno, and General Allen really try to find ways to make sure that they always had contrary sources of information that could inform their decision-making at any given time. It's just that I'm not entirely sure that a President of the United States can quite generate that effect. That may be the case, that he can or she can. But there are kinds of people who have an aura that makes it really hard -- you know, you can't be the President of the United States and talk [01:22:00] to some graduate of the Military Academy at West Point sitting in Baghdad and get an answer that is

different from what the chain of command's answer is. Now, one of the things that I think is so particularly complex about the decision-making around the Surge is that the President's senior military folks, his CENTCOM commander, his MNF-I commander, Generals Abizaid and Casey, were giving him a set of information and analysis that informed his decision-making about what was happening on the ground. And it was not really possible for a junior officer actually to get information into [01:23:00] the senior echelons in the government, let alone the President, above this chain of command. You know, in some respects, you'd want your chain of command actually to be filtering up information. It makes certain kinds of decision-making easy. But I have a lot of sympathy for the question of, "When should a President know that the problem is the information that his commanders are giving him, or the commanders themselves? And when it is that the execution is just not working, or the political environment just doesn't let it happen?" I don't think this is a uniquely President George Bush problem. I think this is a problem that Lincoln faces with McClellan, I think it is a really interesting constant tension where you have civilian control over the military.

CRAWFORD: Well, I would [01:24:00] say that some see it almost as an institutional failure and that the President does have these military commanders giving him information. But like you, he has access to *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* or the BBC, and they're telling a very different story at this point.

And so I think that's some of the -- sort of the dissonance with the public understanding of why it took so long to get to this point.

KAGAN: Sure. And I think my sense is that journalism raises good questions. And if there's a disparity between what kinds of information the President is receiving and the kinds of ordinary things that he can read in the [01:25:00] morning in his roll-up, then that ought to ask the President to ask a question. How do you get from that to getting an answer? That I actually think is a more complicated problem. Now, I do think it took a little bit longer than it should have, in 2006 in particular. And I think that there were earlier warnings and indicators of change and of problems. But you don't -- you can't just change a policy, and have the new policy be effective. You actually need to start asking the questions, you need to figure out how to collect information about what's going on, try to make an informed judgement about where the problems are, then figure out who you're going to bring together to get a solution, and [01:26:00] then how you're actually going to implement that solution, and can you resource it? All of these are real questions in war, and I think they're real questions in policy. And so just as you can't literally pick up a brigade and move it on the map in the way that we hope we can when we're kids playing with G. I. Joe figures, you can't just pick up a policy and move it. So the question is, how do we, as the United States, living in a really difficult time with a lot of national security challenges now, make sure that we retain the capability to know when the indicators and early warnings are coming

in, that the world isn't the way we think it is? And how do we make sure that we as a government, we as people, as citizens make sure that we can start considering [01:27:00] alternate hypotheses and alternate policies early enough that we actually can react in a period of time that allows us to continue to shape events? And I think that's a question that's very relevant to us now as we wrestle with the Islamic State and the threat that it poses. And I don't think that that's the lone question of the moment that requires that kind of analysis.

SAYLE: Before I ask our final question, we always give interviewees a chance to let us know what we've missed. Do you think there's anything that we should have covered today that you'd like to speak about before we end?

KAGAN: Oh, I think you did a terrific job with the interviews! So I would only say that I certainly hope that you talk to people who were on the ground in '06 and '07 [01:28:00] and get a sense of what was transpiring at the brigade level or higher, because I don't entirely know what it looked like from that perspective. But I actually think that it would truly enrich the kind of interviewing you're doing of policymakers and help to answer some of the questions that you've raised.

SAYLE: Excellent. So then, and just a final, when we ask this question of everyone, and you're in a particularly interesting position to answer, being both a historian, an observer at the time and since of Iraq. How do you characterize the President's decision to surge troops into Iraq in the overall sort of history of the war, or in

your view of Presidential leadership in history? How should we look back on this decision?

KAGAN: I think that it was clearly, as an observer, a hard decision for the President to make. And I think that because it took him a lot of time to make the decision, and [01:29:00] because there were so many different efforts, coming up with so many different answers over the course of 2006 that I expect it was difficult. I think as a historian, I think that presidents of the United States have a really keen sense of moral responsibility for men and women in uniform, and for the way in which their decisions affect human lives, as well as the strategic objectives of our country. It's a brave decision, I think, for a president to set aside the advice that he's getting from his senior military commanders, and instead go with a different set of advisors and advice. [01:30:00] And I think that that takes a fair bit of courage, and I think that President Bush made a tough decision, and it could have proved wrong. There was no reason to know that The Surge would have the impact that it did on the battlefield. And there are circumstances in which presidents of the United States overrule their commanders, and do so at the extraordinary peril and to the detriment of the nation. So I don't think that there's one right solution to that. I think that's the extraordinary burden of decision-making for a senior leader, president of the United States, for any commander in chief. And I have a huge amount of sympathy for people who have to [01:31:00] make those kinds of decisions and have to account for them forever, because there's no person who's

higher in the chain of command on whom that decision can be blamed, or for whom that credit can go. And it was a tough call. And I admire it.

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

KAGAN: Thank you.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]