The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Douglas Lute

Lieutenant General, retired
Director of Operations (J-3), The Joint Staff, Pentagon, 2006-2007
Director of Operations (J-3), US Central Command, 2004-2006

Interviewers:

Hal Brands
Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (

Timothy Sayle
Assistant Professor of History, University of Toronto

Date of Interview:
May 28, 2015

Editorial Note and Disclaimer:
This transcription has undergone a verification process for accuracy, according to the strictest practices of the academic and transcription communities. It offers the CPH's best good-faith effort at reproducing in text the subject's spoken words. In all cases, however, the video of the interview represents the definitive version of the words spoken by interviewees.

Normal speech habits—false starts, incomplete words, and crutch words (e.g. "you know") have been removed for purposes of clarity. Final transcriptions will conform to standard oral history practices. Editors will conform all transcription quotations to the Center for Presidential History's final edition.

Please contact the editors at cphinfo@smu.edu with any corrections, suggestions, or questions.

Citation:
Douglas Lute, interview by Hal Brands and Tim Sayle, 28 May 2015. "The Surge" Collective Memory Project, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University.

[Begin Transcription]

SAYLE: Hello, this is Tim Sayle from Southern Methodist University, and I'm joined by --

BRANDS: Hal Brands, Duke University.

SAYLE: And we're joined by Ambassador Douglas Lute. Ambassador Lute, can you describe your role in government, both your responsibilities in general and those relating to Iraq in 2006?

LUTE: Sure. So 2006 for me was a transition year, because I'd left, after two years, the CENTCOM [United States Central Command]staff, where I'd been John Abizaid's operations officer, so from the summer of '04 to the summer of '06. And then in the summer of '06 I moved to the Joint Staff and essentially had the same role but from a global perspective on the Joint Staff. I became the Joint Staff J3, or Operations Officer.

SAYLE: Excellent. So this project on the Surge, the timing is unclear, both in the journalistic accounts and in our interviews on when the Surge actually began, when reviews of the Surge began. When does the story of the Surge [00:01:00] start for you?

LUTE: Before I came to Washington, because I was in CENTCOM for two years, and dealing with Iraq, literally, an hour-by-hour basis, it probably began for me, by way of deep context, with my assignment to CENTCOM in the summer of '04. But I think it really may be the genesis, the original genesis, that things were not going well, and maybe slipping out of our control came with the bombing of the Samarra mosque in what was, so early'06.

So I think by then it became increasingly clear that we weren't dealing only with the Sunni insurgency but we are dealing with a combination of factors that were approaching the point of being overwhelming. So we had the Sunni insurgency, we had Al-Qaeda in Iraq, sort of the extreme end of that [00:02:00] insurgency. We had the rise of Shia militia, Jaish al-Mahdi -- or JAM, as we referred to it -- led by Muqtada al-Sadr, which represented the most virulent part of the Iranian influence on Shia militias.

And then we had a very unhelpful neighborhood, with Syria being essentially the highway through which foreign fighters flowed to Al-Qaeda in Iraq, unimpeded, and sometimes even, perhaps, assisted. so that was Syria to the west - to the east, we had a very uncooperative, destabilizing Iran with the provision of support and training to the Shia militia, and very telling in the course of 2006 the rise of what we called explosively formed projectiles, EFPs, which were these [00:03:00] shape-charged roadside bombs, which were especially lethal, even to our armored vehicles. So, by way of Iran's support to the Shia militia, but also by way of providing these very dangerous munitions, Iran was playing a very unhelpful role, as well.

So you had all these destabilizing influences, and on the Iraqi side you had an emerging Iraqi security force in the Army and the police. I think it was, at this point, about 300,000 strong, but it was still being trained, leaders were being developed, and so forth. It was only just emerging. And you had a government

under Maliki, which showed promise, in terms of what it was committed to doing, but really was not able to cross the sectarian divide, and take some very tough steps that would've maybe given the Sunnis hope that they were part of the future of Iraq. [00:04:00]

So a very emergent Iraqi security force, a very sort of promising in rhetoric but not yet delivering Iraqi government, confronting an overwhelming set of security challenges, and we probably at that time had maybe 150 or 160,000 Americans on the battlefield. So that was the context such that when the Samarra mosque was bombed -- and I believe the record shows that that was an Al-Qaeda in Iraq attack, specifically against one of the holiest Shia sites in Iraq -- that really set off and really sparked in a major way sectarian violence, which then raged throughout the rest of 2006 and led into the review process here in Washington that suggested that the current process wasn't working, the current approach wasn't working, and we needed a [00:05:00] fresh look.

BRANDS: So there was an effort to regain momentum in Iraq over the summer with Operations Together Forward I and II. Could you give us --

LUTE: Right.

BRANDS: -- your assessment of those operations, and what [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]

LUTE: Well, both of those efforts to stabilize Baghdad focused on increased Iraqi security force presence in Baghdad, and the problem was that it was, perhaps, too little too

late, because the sectarian violence, the sectarian cleansing, if you will, of Baghdad neighborhoods, was so far advanced, and in some cases promoted by the Iraqi security forces -- I mean, in particular the Iraqi Police -- that just adding more Iraqis to the mix, I think, just was insufficient, and witness that we'd tried it once, then we tried it again. In fact, there was even at one point a Baghdad Security Plan III under consideration. [00:06:00] Now, I also remember that we had a hard time -- General Casey, I believe, had a hard time generating the Iraqi forces that were promised for these Baghdad Security Plans. My belief is that the problem was beyond the Iraqi capacity to deal with it, but even if they had a chance, under-resourcing the Iraqi forces committed to this very tough task just proved too little too late.

BRANDS: So in late 2005 and early 2006, our strategy was often described as "as the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down."

LUTE: Right.

BRANDS: What happened over the summer, and Together Forward, did that, for you, undercut the assumptions of the broader US strategy in Iraq?

LUTE: Well, in a real strategic sense, that had to be our approach, because we weren't going to colonize Iraq. We weren't going to stay there forever. It had to be eventually a strategy of transition to Iraqi security forces. That was the only thing that was going to be [00:07:00] authentic and durable. The challenge is that I think in '06 it became clear that they were not standing up fast enough to allow us

to stand down fast enough, both for domestic political reasons, but also because over time the tolerance of the Iraqi people to our presence of 150,000 American troops was waning. Some described this as "the clock," you know, the clock was running against our presence in Iraq. And I think that that's generally right. So the thing that's very hard to escape is this underlying appreciation that our time was limited. And when you describe that by way of a running clock, or a closing window of opportunity, there's this sense that at some point, certainly by '05 [00:08:00] and '06, our presence was generating part of the problem, and was feeding the insurgency, the Sunni -- certainly the Sunni and -- I think both sides of the insurgency, both the Sunni insurgency and the Shia dimension of the insurgency. So we were fighting a losing game by, I think, '06. And when the sectarian violence sparked in the way it did and sort of spread, almost without bounds, it became clear we needed a new look.

SAYLE: If I could just --

LUTE: But the underlying premise that this had to be more about the Iraqis than it did about us I think still plays true. And sometimes the Surge debate loses the point that in the long term of course we were going to transition. It was a question of how fast in the face -- and what were the odds of successful transition given the challenges we faced.

SAYLE: [00:09:00] I wanted to follow up on the issue of the Washington clock. Some people have compared the Washington clock to the Baghdad clock. I wanted to

ask about your time on the CENTCOM staff, if the CENTCOM staff was thinking about this Washington clock, if it was in the back of your mind, or if you were focused on Iraq hour by hour. Is CENTCOM thinking about what's happening in Washington?

LUTE: I wouldn't say that CENTCOM was primarily, or even in a main way, focused on Washington. We were very much the operational headquarters. We were very much focused on what was going on in theater, doing our best to support General Casey, and MNF-I, Multinational Forces Iraq. And CENTCOM was a resource provider. So there were theater resources that General Abizaid could move across his, I think at that time, 25 countries, and Iraq was clearly the biggest demand signal that [00:10:00] CENTCOM had. But there were other things. I mean, Afghanistan is still happening. We had activities in the Horn of Africa. We had maritime and the air activities across this 25-country region. So CENTCOM was very much the manager of theater-wide resources, and the headquarters which put additional demand signals on the bigger military. So we were pulling resources from global assets to include the services, but also the other combatant commands, and then, once brought into the CENTCOM area, parceling them out, portioning them to the fights inside CENTCOM.

To some extent, we always had an eye on Washington, because General Abizaid, as a combatant commander, was always, maybe weekly in sessions with Secretary of Defense by video, typically from our forward headquarters outside

Doha, Qatar, but also, I would say on a daily basis,[00:11:00] talking to General Casey, and making monthly trips to the region. We typically spent three weeks out of the month in the region, at the forward headquarters, and when we were there during that three weeks maybe one or two trips to Iraq. So it was a very heavy period of engagement, a very heavy period of managing big, strategic resources, theater-level resources, and doing whatever we can to help the guys on the ground, basically General Casey and his staff.

BRANDS: So just picking up briefly on a point you mentioned, so the relationship between CENTCOM and then OSD[Office of the Secretary of Defense], essentially, so the civilian defense leadership, during the period -- say the spring and summer of 2006 -- did you have a sense that OSD and CENTCOM had essentially the same assessment of what was going on in Iraq, they were essentially on the same page with respect to the trends, with respect to US strategy? Were there disconnects between those two pieces of the puzzle?

LUTE: [00:12:00] My recollection is it basically had coherence between OSD and the Joint Staff. So when General Abizaid would VTC [video teleconference] back to -- teleconference back to Washington, it would almost without exception -- General Pace, the chairman, and Secretary Rumsfeld would be sitting side by side. There may have been some sort of tactical differences, but generally they were on a pace. And generally, we were relatively well centered on the MNF-I plan that gradually, and in a very deliberate way, based on conditions on the ground, programmed the

transition of Iraqi provinces from coalition control to Iraqi control. So this was called, I think, PIC, the Provincial Iraqi Control process. So we would, if you will, pick [00:13:00] one province after another, and obviously the ones that were in more permissive settings, so typically in the north and in the south, transition formally to Iraqi control first, leaving the core of the fight, so in/around Baghdad and Anbar and Diyala and Saladin provinces until later. But there was a deliberate program whereby the, I think, 18 provinces of Iraq would be focused on, would undergo this transition process, would literally have a ceremony which passed transition, or passed control to Iraqi security forces, Army and Police, with multinational US-led forces sort of standing down. So the "as you stand up, we'll stand down" process was never imagined countrywide as one fell swoop, but rather in 18 steps, across the 18 provinces. So that general [00:14:00] concept was very much kind of the centerpiece of OSD/Joint Staff/CENTCOM deliberations, because we were managing that process: which province is next; were they ready; were we going too fast; were we going too slow; and so forth.

BRANDS: So sticking just in the summer of 2006 for a moment, we now know that there were rumblings of a strategy review going on in various places around town here at this point, so at State and on the NSC staff, that sort of thing. So did you at CENTCOM, A, have any inkling that there was the beginning of a strategy review process? And then, B, were there any similar impulses within CENTCOM to take a new look at US strategy?

LUTE: I don't recall. I don't recall sort of a stimulus for, or a call for a CENTCOM-based review. As I said, we were sort of day to day managing the [00:15:00] approved concept, the agreed concept. I do remember in the summer of '06, spring and summer of '06, that there were debates about the pace of transition, and whether, as a result of transition, we could go from 15 brigades to 14 or 13, whether some brigades would stay a little longer, but that's management of the process on the margins. Is it one or two brigades that leave and don't get replaced, or do we replace this brigade now? So that's the kind of normal exchange that we were having with MNF-I, and with Pentagon, who ultimately were the brigade providers, the resource providers. But I don't recall an internal push inside CENTCOM to do sort of a fresh look review.

SAYLE: Maybe we can move the same question then to September, when you joined the Joint Staff. Are you then [00:16:00] aware that there are some informal reviews or rumblings in Washington, ideas for a new review, and when do you get a sense of that?

LUTE: So I'm aware that there are discussions by -- September, October of '06, I'm aware that there are discussions of a fresh look, a different look. At one point, retired General Jack Keane came over and made a presentation to the Chairman. Chairman shared it with me, and maybe with John Sattler, who I've referred you to, which called for, which posed the situation in very stark terms, and I think really confronted the question of are we losing this, and what can we do about it.

That was in, [00:17:00] as I recall, early in the fall, maybe October of 2006. By November, by mid-November of 2006, the interagency review was inaugurated, and John Sattler and I were sent by General Pace, the chairman, to represent the joint staff in the J.D. Crouch-led process.

SAYLE: What did you think of General Keane's argument? After just coming from CENTCOM, you're familiar with the region.

LUTE: Yeah, it was a pretty stark reversal of the course, right? Because we were very much -- because we had this view from CENTCOM that our time was waning, and the clock was running, the window was closing, whichever metaphor you're attracted to, it seemed rather a stark recommendation to essentially reverse course, dramatically reverse course, and rather than working with a 15-brigade start point, [00:18:00] imagine how you would gradually decrease that US presence as you handed off responsibility to the Iraqis. But to go from that basic concept, which we had worked on every day -- that had been sort of the lifeblood, the main conceptual guiding light for the campaign for two years -- to a sense of, well, no, let's reverse course 180 degrees and let's add five brigades. So it was a pretty stark change. I think initially it served a very important purpose in the Washington discussion, and that was that -- and General Keane's very persuasive, makes a very persuasive presentation. But it served the purpose of shaking up the thinking, and presenting a very stark assessment that we're losing. And that in itself, I think, was very, very helpful.

SAYLE: [00:19:00] In September and October, part of the fresh look, and obviously what General Keane is talking about, a fresh look means in some ways more troops, as well as perhaps a new strategy. In your role on the Joint Staff, how do you assess the possibility of sending more brigades to Iraq in that September/October period? Was that a possibility for the United States military?

LUTE: Well, it's always a possibility, right? Because on one extreme of the range of options is the World War II model where you go to combat and you don't come home until the war's over, but that was not an all-volunteer force. And one of the things that loomed for the Joint Staff was, yes, the national importance, the national interest in succeeding in Iraq, but looming just behind that was the strategic interest in holding together the all-volunteer force. And at this point, the force had been into successive years of combat, and we were rotating [00:20:00] divisions back for second and third combat tours in Iraq. So what that meant is to sustain the 15 brigades in Iraq (and I think at that point we had two in Afghanistan), and to meet other global commitments, if you were in the US Army you were in combat for 12 months, you were home for 12 months, and then you were going back to combat.

So we were in what we called a dwell ratio of one-to-one: months in combat, months out of combat. And it's revealing to remember that inside the 12 months of off time, or dwell time, at home, you didn't really have 12 months of dwell time. What you had was you came back, you reassociated with your families

and so forth, but probably six months into that 12-month break, if you will, you started gearing up for the next rotation, which in many cases, [00:21:00] took you away from your families for months at a time as you went to training centers and went through live fire gunnery processes and so forth. So it's a little bit artificial, unless you were inside that actual rotation, it's a little bit artificial to say you had a year on and a year off. It was really more like a year and a half on and six months off, and this was beginning to show -- there were signs of stress beginning to show on the force, so family problems, substance abuse, and so forth.

Frankly, what surprised me in the all-volunteer force is we never suffered a retention problem. I would've thought that at some point in this labor market of the all-volunteer force that you might see signs of soldiers voting with their feet, right, and just taking their lives in a different path. But frankly, the services, in particular the ground services, sustained their retention quite well. [00:22:00] But I do think that there were health considerations, mental health considerations, and certainly family health considerations that suggested that this pattern of year on/year off was not indefinitely sustainable.

SAYLE: At the same time --

LUTE: So the health of the force -- right, we referred to this as the health of the force -- was an issue.

SAYLE: And on the other hand, you mentioned there are global commitments, of course, beyond Iraq for the United States forces. How do possible global contingencies play into this? Is that a concern, that the United States needs to have capabilities?

LUTE: Yeah, when we have 15 brigades in Iraq, that wasn't the whole Army. So, I mean, we still had forces deployed forward in Europe. We still had forces deployed forward in Korea. But by '05 and '06 we were drawing on the European forces as part of the rotation scheme to Iraq and Afghanistan. I have [00:23:00] sort of a poignant memory of going as the CENTCOM Operations Officer to a global conference with all my combatant command counterparts, so all the J3s of the US military system would come together, and we essentially had an auction, or a bidding conference, for the forces available for deployment. CENTCOM always went first, and basically the conference was over quarter after quarter after quarter when CENTCOM was done, because we were out of forces. And it wasn't the most pleasant thing for the Joint Staff, or for the CENTCOM J3 to go to these conferences, because essentially, we needed everything, and everybody else viewed themselves as bill-payers for the fight in CENTCOM. So there were global commitments, but they all paled in comparison to the demands in CENTCOM.

SAYLE: I just have one more question on this force [00:24:00] generation. And we now know that in September and October, first Lisa Disbrow and then Bill Luti on the NSC staff are preparing force generation models. Are you aware of those?

LUTE: No.

SAYLE: Did you play a role in those at all?

LUTE: No, I didn't play a role in those. I know those now after the fact by just reading about it, but no.

BRANDS: So how did you, you personally, weigh these competing needs at the time, between the prospect of potentially needing more troops in Iraq versus the immense strain, additional strain, that was going to put on the force? Did you think that it was doable? Did you think that the cost was going to be too high? What was your sense?

LUTE: So initially, as the sort of fire brigade surge was being sort of exposed unofficially, initially I think, by General Keane and his effort, but then eventually by way of the decision by the President to do so, there wasn't, in my memory, a lot of concern about how we would generate these forces, because there were brigades. It didn't become apparent [00:25:00] in my recollection until afterwards exactly what the price would be in terms of deployment time.

And, of course, what we had to do was extend deployment times to eventually 15-month combat tours. So we actually further eroded the one-to-one balance, or one-to-one ratio, in the favor of combat tour times. And this was most telling because at the time of the decision of the Surge, just to keep the rotation stable so you could add five brigades and actually accumulate a surge, you had to stop the deployment of those who were already ready to leave, right? Because otherwise you wouldn't get the full effect of the five. It would only be a net effect.

And so you had units like the First Army Division, commanded by then Marty Dempsey as a two-star, commanding in Baghdad, and at the time [00:26:00] of the Surge decision, his brigade got extended, or his division got extended, even to the point that some soldiers who were in Kuwait ready to redeploy turned around and went back to Iraq. So there's a very heavy price to pay when you go from a 12-month combat tour to a 15. But I don't recall that math, that sort of deployment math being completed until after the decision. There was a general sense in the course of all the discussions that this was going to put an additional strain on the forces, but I don't remember quantifying it to a 15-month combat tour until after January of '07.

BRANDS: So, looking at the November/December of '06 period, a couple of important things happened, one of which is that Secretary Rumsfeld resigns. Did that transition have any impact on views of [00:27:00] Iraq strategy from your perspective within the Pentagon?

LUTE: I think equally prominent during that period was the Iraq Study Group, the publication of the Iraq Study Group. And, of course, when the next Secretary of Defense was part of the Iraq Study Group, everybody now read the Iraq Study Group very carefully, the product very carefully, because this was a preview to what then-Secretary Gates might be bringing to office. But I think the delivery of the ISG report, the resignation of Secretary Rumsfeld, and the moving into office of Secretary Gates all revealed that this was going to be a fundamental fresh look. I

mean, it added to this sense -- it added a Washington dimension to the imperative for a fresh look. So I would argue that before that, maybe at least dating back to the bombing in Samarra, there was a [00:28:00] theater imperative for a fresh look. It became obvious in Washington when you had ISG, Rumsfeld, Gates.

SAYLE: We'd like to talk about the Strategy Review led by J.D. Crouch, but just before that there was an exercise that's commonly known as the Council of Colonels studying options for Iraq. Were you aware of that study?

LUTE: Yeah.

SAYLE: And did you have any connection to it?

LUTE: First of all, I knew all these guys, so H.R. McMaster and Pete Mansoor and others. Some of them were assigned to the Joint Staff at the time, and they were sort of collected together. As I recall, they were down in the basement of the Pentagon, somewhere in sort of an ad hoc office space. And they began to huddle to consider alternatives. So yes, I was aware of it, I knew these guys, and on at least one or two occasions I talked to 'em. So yes.

SAYLE: In November, then, of 2006, there's a formal interagency strategy review, [00:29:00] led by J.D. Crouch. Can you tell us how you came to know about that review? You were on that review group. Can you tell us just sort of the nuts and bolts of how that happens, how you're invited to a review group?

LUTE: Yeah, the only insight I have is that as the J3, the chairman, General Pace, called John Sattler, my J5 counterpart, and I into his office, said, "Hey, you guys, change

of plans," starting, I think, maybe even that afternoon, "you two are going to represent the Joint Staff on this NSC review. That's your primary duty. Pass everything else to your deputies. This is all you're going to be doing until it's over." So that's the notice I got.

SAYLE: When you got that notice, what did you think the Strategy Review was designed to do? Did it seem like a precooked operation to confirm something? Did it seem like a nuts-to-bolts, [00:30:00] ground zero review of things? What did it appear to you at first to represent?

LUTE: It didn't seem precooked to me. I give J.D. Crouch credit for asking the hard questions, taking a very comprehensive view, taking a deliberate, time-consuming approach to hearing from the different perspectives around the table, asking for options, and giving the departments and agencies time to come back, and so forth. So no, it didn't seem predestined in any particular way. I think there was a common view around the table that it was time for a fresh look, and that we were certainly not winning, and we may have been losing, and time was running out. So there was a sense of urgency, this sense of what we're doing now [00:31:00] is unsatisfactory and we have to look for fresh ways. But I didn't have a sense that it was precooked.

BRANDS: So could you give us a sense of sort of what were the range of options or the range of positions that were considered within the review, and then where did your piece of that fit within that context?

LUTE: Well, sort of maybe classic Washington decision-making style, there was sort of the status quo, but maybe the status quo with minor adjustments on the margins. So maybe you could put more weight on PRTs, for example, or maybe there were different ways to leverage Maliki to try to do what we thought he needed to do to move towards Sunni/Shia reconciliation. So, political leverage tools and so forth, but that basically having tried-- We just had to try harder at doing the same approach, right? Or maybe do it better. [00:32:00] Quite frankly, that didn't ring very true, because I just spent two years of my life trying to work harder and do it better, and things were slipping out of control, right?

There was a sense, as I recall, an alternative that said, look, the ticket here is to cut our losses, that this is just not in the cards. We gave the Iraqis a try, we gave them an opportunity, and they failed to seize it. Now, over to them. So sort of move away from the deliberate transition process, and maybe accelerate it.

And then there was a sense, what I think eventually became the Surge, there's a sense of now this is the time to double down, and make a concerted, very prominent effort to reverse course, to reverse the security situation by way of additional US troops. [00:33:00] And that after maybe a week or so of sessions, five sessions, maybe, those three alternatives kind of seemed to--That's my memory of how the discussion then moved forward.

SAYLE: And I believe it was the State Department position that focused on the accelerated withdrawal. What did you make of this argument for an accelerated withdrawal?

LUTE: I don't remember any personal sort of reaction to it. I can remember thinking, well, at least they understand the urgency of this. They understand that the status quo is not going to work, because the Iraqi tolerance for our presence, at least in -- I think I can speak for CENTCOM, but you should ask General Abizaid -- the Iraqi tolerance was [00:34:00] diminishing, -- You've got to put this in the bigger context. I mean, Abu Ghraib had happened, had really been very, very damaging to the clock, because I think it sped up the Iraqi tolerance, or intolerance, for us. We were holding 25,000 largely Sunni detainees in not great conditions, and what we know -- what we knew then, and what we really know now is that we were breeding the insurgency inside the detention centers. And that was not ultimately sustainable. I mean, how was an outside power like the United States going to continue to hold these 25,000 Iraqis, largely Sunnis, indefinitely? And there was no rule of law system [00:35:00] to which we could, with comfort, pass these forces to Iraqi control.

We knew that politically, the sorts of things the Maliki government needed to do: de-Ba'athification, the oil law, the election law, all the things that might have -- and by de-Ba'athification, I mean revision of the sort of black and white de-Ba'athification law that was in place, reform of de-Ba'athification -- that all these

things were stillborn in the Iraqi political system, and there wasn't much prospect. I think there was an intelligence community product at the time, but very much, I think, the State Department's view, as I recall, was reconciliation is not in the cards for the foreseeable future -- several years maybe. So if you add that up, the sense of [00:36:00] the ticking clock really was very prominent, and there was at least a conceptual or sort of an academic attraction to the idea, well, maybe we should consider speeding it up, speeding up our part of this dynamic.

The challenge there is that if things are slipping out of our control with 15 brigades, what would speeding it up look like? And were we ready to face the very stark outcomes that that could present us with? You know, so what if Iraq fails? What if Iraq shatters into, or fractures into three parts? What does this do if AQI then is ascendant? What does this do for AQ globally? Because you would've had the Bin Laden-led AQ and the Mujahideen having defeated one superpower in Afghanistan, [00:37:00] and you could have its Iraq offshoot saying, "Well, we just defeated the second one." So do you inflame the global CT problem by way of sort of giving up in Iraq? So this had a lot of different dimensions to it, but my instinct was it was certainly worth looking at.

The one possible attraction is, could you create incentives for the Iraqis to do the hard things by demonstrating to them that we were not going to remain their crutch indefinitely, that our patience was wearing out, and that it was time for Maliki to lead politically, and take the hard steps that would at least have the

chance of [00:38:00] robbing the oxygen from the insurgency. So if you're willing to play this kind of high-stakes game of creating incentives for Maliki to do what probably politically was just not possible for him to do, then that would be worth a chance, but I would've labeled it, I think, a high risk.

SAYLE: I would like to follow up on Maliki a little bit. How did you assess Maliki as a partner in this period, and were you in the military concerned about the sectarian nature of the government at the time? Is that --

LUTE: Yeah, no question. Absolutely. So before the very prominent rise of the sectarian nature -- so, again, I kind of label it or mark it in my memory as Samarra -- we were sort of getting our arms around the Sunni insurgency, and beginning to understand it. It was [00:39:00] unanticipated. We didn't expect it. So from the summer of '03 to sort of the summer or fall of '05, the American forces, the multinational forces, were going through a major transition internally, from what we thought we were going to be doing in Iraq to what we were actually doing. This was not a counterinsurgency army; we didn't have a counterinsurgency army. We developed one on the fly, under fire, between the summer of '03 and the summer of '05, and that's not pretty, and there were a lot of mistakes made, and the transition was not smooth. But by, I would say '05, we began to get a handle on what counterinsurgency was going to be all about. We also simultaneously, by way of Stan McChrystal's leadership of JSOC [Joint Special Operations Command], began to put very meaningful pressure on AQI. JSOC got organized, JSOC got

focused, [00:40:00] Stan created fusion cells, and really like a laser beam focused in on the leadership of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. That began to take hold by '05 and '06. But when that all got trumped by the sectarian dimension of the fight, when you had the Shia militia now create half of the conflict, roughly equal proportions of the conflict, when you had elements of the Iraqi security forces contribute, and in some cases actively participate in this sectarian fight, and you had this sort of political stalemate under Maliki, it just became too much. And so there was a sense that Maliki might be able to do it, and there was actually this sense that -- so the elections are, what, December of '05, as I recall, Maliki comes into office, [00:41:00] but by June of '06 he still hadn't formed his government.

SAYLE: That's right, it's May or June.

LUTE: In May or June of '06. So there was this sense that, OK, we have an election, Maliki looks like this is going to be OK, they have the three-headed presidency with Talabani -- I think Adil Abdul-Mahdi was the -- no, that's not right—

SAYLE: Jaafari, perhaps? No, that was before.

LUTE: No, he was previous. Who was the Sunni? Anyway, I forget. But any rate, you had this sense that at the top, based on the late '05 elections, that there was promise for reconciliation. Maliki was saying the right things, but he couldn't deliver through the Parliament a cabinet, much less some of these very hard political decisions like the provincial powers law, for example, [00:42:00] which was supposed to distribute some of the powers from the central government out to the

provinces, the oil revenue law, which was supposed to parcel out how the revenues went out, and so forth, the reform of de-Ba'athification. These things were unimaginable, because he couldn't even get a cabinet formed. And in the top of that -- so that was the first six months or so after the election -- on top of that, you had the Samarra bombing.

I think the other thing that began in '06, in my recollection, is that we began to appreciate just what we were up against in forming the Iraqi Security Forces. And so this process, in my view, got started late. It was underfunded. We provided insufficient resources to the advisory effort. It was for years, advisors were sort of ad hoc teams that [00:43:00] came together in the States. They didn't know one another. They weren't trained to be advisors. They just kind of slapped together, assembled out, thrown into the mix with Iraqi battalions and brigades. In some cases they were advising the Iraqis on roles that they had never performed themselves. Many of these jobs went to the Reserve Component Forces. Why?

Because the Active Component Forces were busy in the one-to-one rotation of 15-- So the stress on the force began to play out, because we economized with the building of the Iraqi security forces. It was years after the invasion of Iraq that we actually got serious in terms of resources in the advisory effort. And I can remember throughout my time at CENTCOM one of the persistent demands on the system was for more capable, more coherent advisors, in teams that were serious and could actually propel or accelerate the development of the [00:44:00] -

- actually, it applies to Afghanistan, too -- the Iraqi security forces. But we economized for a couple years.

By '06, '05 and '06, I think we were beginning to understand the price that we paid for taking that economy early on, because they were not developing at the pace that we imagined, they were not absorbing the training as well as they should've, their leaders -- we began to appreciate just how hard the leader development part of force development was, and especially in the face of de-Ba'athification, where much of the military culture, the institutional knowledge of how to be an army, had been legislated away by way of de-Ba'athification. So this really became apparent when complete units of especially the police just loaded in and piled on the sectarian violence, [00:45:00] and actually became, in some ways, some of the worst perpetrators of sectarian violence. So there's this underlying appreciation, growing appreciation, that the vehicle, which was supposed to take us from stand up/stand down, was flawed at its core.

You know, my memory of this is very recent, because over the course of last year I've just wondered, what is it that we could have done different in '03 to '05 in Iraq that maybe would have spelled a different Iraqi security force than the one we saw crumble, that we're still seeing -- I mean, what, two weeks ago it crumbled in Ramadi. A year ago it crumbled in Mosul. It says something about how we build these indigenous forces, and how much confidence we can have in them, and the, in my view, long-term effort that it takes to actually create something [00:46:00]

that's durable, and authentic, and attached to a meaningful political structure. We did not have that. In fact, I think it's quite obvious now, we don't have it today in Iraq.

SAYLE: So clearly --

LUTE: So, sorry, all that's happening at the same time.

SAYLE: Right. Well, and that clearly the Strategy Review is dealing with an incredibly complex problem here. What is the Joint Staff's position on the review group?

LUTE: The Joint Staff just -- it simply represented Casey's position, and the theater commander, General Abizaid's position, and that was essentially holding to the current concept, which was stand up/stand down, holding to the provincial Iraqi control transition process. And supporting General Casey's position he didn't need more troops, and in fact, [00:47:00] Maliki might not accept more troops. So --

SAYLE: So was the Joint Staff position, then, for the status quo of the three we've sketched out?

LUTE: It was closest to the status quo, yes. Now, we would have -- and here, I don't have precise recollection, but I imagine we probably tacked on top of the military status quo calls for increased civilian manning support, increased civilian funding support on a very flexible basis, to rival the kind of flexible funding we had on the military support. So if you went to a provincial reconstruction team, a PRT at that time -- and I went to probably, over the course of my time, visited nearly all of them -- they would feature ten or fifteen Americans, two thirds of which were

military, all working with, trying to empower the provincial government, and so forth. So you had an [00:48:00] overreliance on military personnel, and an overreliance on military funding resources, and maybe you were lucky, you had one or two civilian professionals who did development assistance for a living, teamed up with an Army major or a captain who was probably a really good officer but had never even read about this. And that's what a PRT looks like. So there's a sense that the military effort and the strain of one-to-one deployments that I've described and so forth wasn't being matched on the civilian side, either in terms of manpower/personnel resources, or in terms of funding resources. So I'm sure that going into the Crouch review, that John Sattler and I were charged to emphasize that this was not just a military fight.

BRANDS: So you described your perspective on sort of the accelerated transition approach, and the status quo plus approach. What was your view of the [00:49:00] go big, the double down approach at this point? Did you think that it was a realistic path to success, or something approximating success in Iraq in the November period?

LUTE: It's hard to remember one's thoughts, you know, what is this now, seven years ago, right?

BRANDS: More than that.

LUTE: Yeah, yeah, yeah, you're right, eight years ago. But I believe that, my instincts are, that I would have considered a add five brigade option as an accelerant to the

clock, that it would speed the clock up, that greater US presence would result in greater Iraqi intolerance, and eventually speed the whole thing up. As the J3, I had some sense of this is going to be really hard to find these brigades, (laughs) and I don't recall doing the math, as I said earlier, but [00:50:00] I knew that the force was stressed, I knew that we were actually encroaching on one-to-one, because the dwell one year was not really a year off. The service Chiefs were telling us that was really a stress, and we didn't want to break the all-volunteer force.

I believed that -- and I still believe -- that the burden here ultimately had to fall on the Iraqis, and if the Iraqis weren't going to do this, then that's a pretty fundamental strategic assessment. And adding five more brigades -- arguably, from the outset we knew that wasn't going to be a long-term proposition. It was going to be hard to do once. It was going to be very hard to do if we were to sustain 20 brigades over, say, a couple years. It turns out we didn't do that, but that was going to be almost mission impossible. [00:51:00] And so the notion of adding five very much, I think, came across as a kind of a quick fix, a temporary fix, a Band-Aid, if you will, and it wasn't clear to me that a temporary US surge -- which even the term implies in and out, right -- would help things, as opposed to having a neutral effect or having even a negative effect. And it really comes down to who's going to be responsible for this fight. I mean, ultimately, are the Iraqis going to be responsible for this? Or are we going to essentially go all in with the Surge -- because there aren't any more forces behind that, right? -- and further

Americanize the efforts in a way that my time at CENTCOM [00:52:00] taught me was unlikely to be successful.

So I didn't think it was going to be successful, and I was not an advocate, and it was basically because of my belief that it would at most have a temporary, localized, even maybe tactical impact. Now, that debate rages. I mean, this is probably why you're doing the oral history, right? [laughs] I mean, was it a stroke of strategic brilliance that reversed the course in a war that was failing, or did it, in a temporary way, sort of mask the fundamental flaws of the Iraqi government and the Iraqi security forces, giving us more time -- giving them more time, and giving us an opportunity to exit with our heads up, and sort of with things intact? [00:53:00] And I think that's really, that's the debate, between those who say it was a success and those who say, it wasn't, and we shouldn't have expected it to be.

BRANDS: I'd like to drill down on one thing that you just mentioned. So you mentioned that one of the attractions of the accelerated transition was that it might create the right incentives for the Iraqi government to do what we had hoped they would do. Was one of the concerns about the Surge option that it might create the reverse, it might create negative incentives for the Iraqis to—?

LUTE: Yeah, disincentives. And this is this notion of if we send in five brigades, then we kind of take the Iraqi security forces off the hook -- and we Americanize the fight. There was a discussion at the time, as I recall, that whatever we do in Baghdad, the Iraqis ought to match. So there was this sense that if we send five brigades we

ought to get five more Iraqi brigades, but that we shouldn't do this all ourselves. [00:54:00] But the problem is we were calling on an Iraqi force that was incapable, in plan number one Baghdad Security Plan number one, same in number two. How was this going to be any different? Ultimately it bought some time, but I don't think it was really, I don't think it proved strategically durable. And this is fundamentally to do with the flaws in the Iraqi political structure, and fundamentally flaws -- partly our responsibility -- flaws in the development of Iraqi security forces.

SAYLE: Did the joint staff officials, either you or General Sattler, did you coordinate with the DoD [Department of Defense] before these meetings, and did you coordinate with the Council of Colonels at all before these meetings, or how did the Council of Colonels' ideas make its way in, if at all?

LUTE: Yeah, so as I recall, on the Council of Colonels, these were pretty much concurrent projects, [00:55:00] and not connected. I don't remember getting feedback from the Council of Colonels. You'd have to rely on your interviews of the guys who were in the midst of that. I think the Council of Colonels eventually fed a JCS session, so the service Chiefs -- so the JCS and the conference description of the JCS. So the service Chiefs, the Chairman, the Vice Chairman, and so forth. Maybe the Council of Colonels' findings went to OSD as well, but they didn't really feed John and me as we went across the river and went to the J.D. Crouch. As I recall, maybe they lagged the Crouch effort in time. We were aware of it, but there was

never a clean connection that said, Here's the Council of Colonels. They briefed the Chiefs, the Joint Chiefs, and this now is your position [00:56:00] to take to the Crouch review. It wasn't. That didn't happen, in my memory.

SAYLE: I wanted to ask about regional politics, Middle Eastern regional politics, in the Strategy Review. Does that come up? Are the reviewers thinking about the impact of a withdrawal or a surge on Iran, on Saudi Arabia, on other allies, in countries in the region?

LUTE: My memory of this is that we persistently, to include through the Surge decision process, and to a fault, considered Iraq in isolation of much of the regional context. So I don't remember the regional context playing a big role. As I look back on the Surge, I ask, OK, so let's get this straight: [00:57:00] Iraq's not an island in the Pacific somewhere; it actually has neighbors, and the neighbors it has are all being unhelpful. And again, I've talked about Syria and the foreign fighters; I've talked about Iran, and the Shia militia, and the EFPs, and so forth. The Surge wasn't going to do much of anything against that strategic set. Those regional challenges were not going to be impacted at all. And so one of the concerns was that if we take this U.S. step to send in five more brigades, how does it change the regional dynamics in a way that suggests that maybe this big effort -- I mean this doubling down by the U.S. -- is going to have a durable impact. And to this day I can't cite much promise that adding five brigades would have [00:58:00] any impact at all on this very detrimental regional set. In fact, if anything it may have-

- I don't know. I won't conjecture. But it didn't -- there's no telling impact from my perspective.

SAYLE: What about coalition allies? Was there any sense that there would be allies who would assist in the Surge, if allies would be unhappy with the Surge? Was that taken into consideration?

LUTE: Yeah, I think by '06 we had essentially expended our goodwill with allies. The Brits were with us from the outset in '03, but they were on a path to draw down. They were sort of sequestered in Basra. They would later suffer some of the problems with the rise of Shia militia in Basra. And at one point Maliki [00:59:00] jumps in his armored car and drives down there. I forget when that was. That was '07, I think, the Charge of the Knights, or something glorious. But yeah, there was no sense that we could go out and find coalition augmentation for the Surge. This is going to be a U.S. effort.

BRANDS: So was there a point in the context of the Strategy Review where you started to sense that the Surge was going to be the option selected, or there was momentum coalescing around the idea of a Surge? When did you get a sense that sort of this was going to be the route that we were going to go?

LUTE: Only gradually. So the J.D. Crouch sitting around a conference room table format, with all the agencies represented, produced a, as I recall, PowerPoint slide set, which then fed [01:00:00] a series of sessions of principals meetings and NSC meetings chaired by the President, typically with Generals Abizaid and Casey

piping in by video. And so, in a way, the Crouch effort sort of just framed the problem. As I recall, a lot of effort went into just that: context. What's the current situation? What's happening? What's not happening? What can we do about it? And so forth.

And it was only in the course of these decision-making sessions -- so by the time you get to the principals, and in particular the sessions with the President -- we began to sense that he's not going to stick with the status quo, that it just wasn't satisfactory. I don't remember the accelerating option as getting serious mention, and [01:01:00] so by process of elimination it became pretty clear. It was quite clear early on that the status quo option, in some sort of elaboration or augmentation of the status quo, wasn't going to be sufficient. But that only came later. It didn't actually come from the Crouch effort. The Crouch effort, in my memory, sort of set the stage for these principals and NSC meetings.

SAYLE: I wanted to ask about the Washington clock during the Strategy Review. Now, domestic politics in Washington are clearly the background against which a lot of these conversations are happening, but do they ever come up baldly in the conversations within the Strategy Review?

LUTE: Well, I think they're kind of looming in the background, because again, as we've already said, you've got the Iraq Study Group that's published its report, you've got the Congressional elections, you've got Rumsfeld's departure, Gates' arrival. So it's [01:02:00] pretty obvious what's going on here: that the nation and the body

politic is pretty firm in its assessment that we're losing, and that things needed to change. Now, not to the extent of, let's find five more brigades. That only came out by way of the policy process. But the dissatisfaction with the status quo was always there, and it was clear this wasn't just a Washington problem. This was broader than that. And I think the elections represented that. I think Rumsfeld's departure made it pretty clear. So something had to happen, I think, is the backdrop.

SAYLE: And what about concerns of the health of the force now, moving into November and December, the idea that more troops will be sent to Iraq? What do you make of that, compared against [01:03:00] your assessments in the fall of 2006? Is that a concern, a growing concern?

LUTE: I don't recall-- I mean, look: the first thing that happens when the President of the United States makes a decision as bold as this is for the Pentagon to say, "OK, we've got a new mission, we're going to do this." So you burn the midnight oil, you find out where these five brigades are going to come from, which ones can be extended, which ones can be accelerated, so that you get this cumulative net effect of plus five. So there was a lot of sort of the mechanics of force movements and force generation that went on. I don't recall until maybe a month or so after the President's speech that we really got the refined, quantitative assessments that said, "Look, [01:04:00] the net effect of this is it's going to move us to 15-month

combat tours." There was a general sense, as represented in JCS meetings and so forth, that the force was really under stress.

I remember one session with the President. So the President went to the Tank, which is the Joint Chiefs' conference room. I don't know why they call it the Tank, but they do. So you had all the Service Chiefs there, you had the Secretary of Defense there, and so forth. And I think this was after the Surge speech, so maybe this doesn't inform your study, but the Service Chiefs, in particular the Army and the Marine Chief, made the case that, you know, the force is really under stress and beginning to see fraying of the force -- so substance abuse, family problems, and so forth, health problems. And [01:05:00] they were just essentially making the case, "Hey, we're really under stress, and this is -- we could break the force." And President Bush listened to all this, and at one point he said something like, "Well, if we lose we will really break the force. The one thing that will break this force is if we lose." That sort of stopped the debate. (laughs)

SAYLE: I believe that was in December of 2006, and so before the speech. And when the President went to that meeting, it's been described as he brought along sweeteners, this idea that he would raise --

LUTE: Increase the size, increased the end strength. Yeah, that's true, he did.

SAYLE: Can you just speak to that, and that's impact or effect?

LUTE: Well, it didn't have any immediate impact. I mean, it was, maybe it's well described as a sweetener, because, look, we can't just turn the faucet on and

increase the size of these ground forces. People have to be recruited. They then have to be trained through just the basic training. Then they have to be formed into units. So this was going to have a downstream impact, [01:06:00] but it was going to have no impact on the Surge itself. So it was certainly a welcome move, especially to the Army and the Marines, but there was no disguising this is going to be any sort of near term impact. And it was, perhaps, a bit of a sweetener.

Look, the President understood the stresses. Both presidents that I've worked with were regular visitors to Walter Reed and Bethesda, they're in contact with families, they are feeling this in a very personal way. But, again, I think ultimately, my memory of this is it was quite a sharp -- it was a very telling conversation. And when it turned to the President and he said, "Look, the one thing that'll break this force is if we lose [01:07:00] in Iraq," that actually kind of put a strategic period at the end of the paragraph. (laughter) It's pretty telling.

BRANDS: And just one more question about sort of the force generation issue. There was a pretty strong sense there was going to be a surge of some sort by December 2006, but it wasn't clear whether it was going to be five BCTs all at once, whether it was going to be two BCTs, two BCTs, plus two, or something like that. Was that an issue that you were involved in looking at during this period?

LUTE: I don't have any recollection of sort of gaming out those different options. My sense is, just by way of the way we normally did business, is that as soon as we got an inkling that there might be a change in posture, we probably set the planners to

work to try to figure out, OK, how can we actually do this? [01:08:00] But I don't have any sort of pointed memory of that.

SAYLE: I wonder if we could come towards an end by getting your views on the President's decision. First, when did you learn that the Surge was going to happen, and how did you assess the President's decision at that time?

LUTE: I don't remember exactly how I learned it. I don't quite remember. I was back-benching most of the time for the chairmen in these principals committee and NSC meetings and so forth. And again, the options began to narrow just by the tone of the conversations in these meetings. You could conclude that some options were being discarded or marginalized, and others were sort of rising in prominence. [01:09:00] So I don't remember a decision point where somebody said, "OK, we're going to surge." I remember listening to the President's speech in January, and saying, "OK, that follows the review process." This wasn't sort of made up overnight in a smoky room, and it was a logical extension of, conclusion to what we had done in November and December. I remember personally just believing that, OK, it'll have an effect, but it's not clear to me it'll have the effect intended.

I think, as I look back on it, it was a very bold move in a situation that bordered on desperate, because I do think there's a real risk that [01:10:00] things were spinning out of control. I'm still unpacking for myself, how do these factors assemble into where we are today? And the best way I can describe that is that I

think the Surge was one factor in a set of factors that resulted in decreased violence over the next 12 or 18 months, and a set of factors which gave the Iraqis a renewed opportunity to move forward with Maliki, probably gave us the political window to, in 2008, conclude the agreement -- I'll call it the status of forces agreement; it was, in effect, that, but it had a torturous name -- that allowed us to stay from '08 through [01:11:00] December of '11. I think if we had not stem the violence in '07, we never would have been in a position to negotiate that in '08, and we probably would've been gone a lot earlier than December of '11.

But it was only one factor. There are a number of others. And so in the Awakening, actually, which robbed oxygen from the insurgency and flipped it to us, actually predates by quite a time, maybe as much as a year, the Surge decision. I think the Surge decision reinforced the Awakening, but some people confuse it with, the Iraqis only came to our side when we decided to surge. That's not quite right. Another factor that I think should be remembered is the cumulative impact of JSOC's campaign against AQI. I mean, by '07 they are hammering [01:12:00] AQI, and they're taking the most violent, most destructive element of the fight off the battlefield, and AQI's in survival mode. So that should be counted.

Another factor, I believe, is if you look at the demographics of the Baghdad neighborhoods, the sectarian conflicts of '06 had cleansed, made homogeneous, a lot of those neighborhoods, so that the natural friction points, Sunni and Shia, had been sort of -- they'd been spent. They'd been expended. So, to some extent,

ethnic cleansing, ethnic conflict, it sort of was beginning to burn itself out. Now, that's not to say that without the Surge that everything would be OK, but I think we had passed the peak of the [01:13:00] ethnic conflict -- the sectarian conflict, not ethnic -- somewhat just because of the process of killing and displacement had somewhat made homogeneous these areas which were otherwise mixed and natural friction points. So, all those factors -- you know, by what was it, is it August of '07 -- Sadr takes the militia off the battlefield. So, now, can you say, well, that was done in the face of the Surge, and so he wanted to avoid the Surge, so he simply put himself on sabbatical, waiting for the Surge to -- who knows. But when you add these things up, the Surge was a factor, but I don't attribute to the Surge the complete impact [01:14:00] of what we saw in '07. I think it's a combination of factors. And these factors are interlaced, so it's very hard to sort of pull one string up and conclude that this was decisive. I think that's probably my lasting sort of memory on this. I don't think the serious history on the Surge and its impact has been done yet, so maybe,

SAYLE: Book number two.

LUTE: Yeah, maybe the successor book is, you go from the speech forward and try to unpack it. Very difficult, though, because it's a multivariate equation, and the shiny object here, if you will, the one that captures everyone's attention is the one you were working on. But there are other factors which are probably less well known, less American, so they may be less interesting to us, right, that are more

genuinely Iraqi factors that maybe [01:15:00] spelled at least as great an influence on the decrease in violence in '07. But it did give us a window. It gave the Iraqis a window, which, unfortunately, I don't think Maliki made much of. It gave the Iraqi security forces a window, several more years to develop, which unfortunately, maybe that hasn't turned out like we wanted it. And it gave us enough space to negotiate the '08 agreement. And those are meaningful factors, so in that way the Surge had an impact.

BRANDS: So I have one last broad question. So there's obviously been a ton written on the Surge, and we've asked you a ton of questions about the Surge. Is there a piece of the story about how we get to the Surge, or a piece of your story about how we get to the Surge, that's not as well understood as it should be? Is there some piece of it that's been overlooked that we should be aware of?

LUTE:[01:16:00] Let me just check -- I took a few notes, myself. Let's see-- We've talked about most of these. So maybe a couple things. One is that end strategy -- if you consider strategy the connection of ends, ways, and means--- what you're trying to achieve, your objectives, how you go about doing that -- and, by the way, the Surge would be a how, a way -- and then the resources required, so in this case five brigades. So you can trace the military line of the US strategy in Iraq, and you can sort of connect the ends, ways, and means. Another approach, though, rather than holding ends, [01:17:00] which is what we did -- we essentially held constant our ends, and we adjusted our ways and means to try to bring these into alignment.

Another way to approach it from the outset would've been to say, do we have the right ends? Or should we adjust our ambitions, our goals? In this case, since we weren't doing well, narrowing our goals and then aligning ways and means. One of the premises, I think, was that we were going to hold constant our goals. That then confined the strategic conversation to the second and third parts of the strategy equation.– And I say this only in retrospect, because in Afghanistan, by comparison, this administration has over time consistently narrowed its goals, partly because I think there's a realization of what's possible in a [01:18:00] tough case like Afghanistan. And this experience for me, over the last four or five years in Afghanistan, has suggested there's another fundamental approach here, and that is: maybe in the first session of the J.D. Crouch format we should've said, "Are the goals right, and are we ready to do whatever it takes to achieve those goals? Have we got those right?" Or, in 2006 -- what, three and a half years into this -- is it time to adjust our goals, and then flow ways and means? We never really-- I don't recall fundamentally doing that assessment of the top line.

SAYLE: Was the top line articulated in the Strategy Review [overlapping dialogue; inaudible] democratic [overlapping dialogue; inaudible] --

LUTE: Yeah, yeah, there's this. One of these slides is democratic-- Unitary, so, democratic, able to secure itself, [01:19:00] govern itself, probably fund itself, and partner of the War on Terror, or something like that. That basically held constant. But once you did that, you really narrowed down your strategic options, because if

you hold that constant then you have to adjust the other two, and that fundamentally pushed us in the direction of Americanizing this -- because we had the capacity to do that -- and (unclear)] may have led us to the Surge. So one strategic approach is: should we have started with a reexamination of our goals, and consider a narrowing of the goals, as opposed to, as I recall, my memory is we held the goals and adjusted ways and means. I also don't remember much of a conversation at the time about sort of the downstream effects. [01:20:00] I remember there was a very firm focus on the immediate impact we wanted to have, which was reverse this tide of violence, reduce in particular sectarian violence, and stabilize things sufficiently to give Maliki a chance. But it was very much stop the bleeding. It wasn't if we do this then, for example, by'08, before Bush leaves office, we can imagine that we'll get a security agreement, which would potentially extend the clock for three years, until December of '11, and that wasn't all clear. It was a very, in my view, compressed timeframe in which we needed to have effects. Now, of course, by the summer -- so we flow the five brigades in, beginning in February, as I recall, a brigade a month for five months, February through whatever that turns out to be, May or whatever. [01:21:00] May of '07 is the most violent month of the Iraq War: 120 killed, in my memory. It was bad. So as this plays out, by September of -- no, by August of '07, it's not clear at all that this is working, and Congress is actually discussing the idea of defunding, of removing appropriations for the war. And it wasn't until after Labor Day that

Petraeus and Crocker come back and begin to reveal that hey, maybe the tide is turning. So this immediacy of the problem, this fixation on the next six to 12 months, was also, as I look back on it, kind of telling. We weren't thinking beyond, in my view, the next year or so. And we certainly weren't imagining that Barack Obama was going to get elected president [01:22:00] on the campaign of "I'll be out of there in 15 months, and I'm going to end the war, and I'm going to focus on the right war," which is-- all that was not yet apparent. So it had a very-- sort of short, temporary timespan in mind, so that's an issue. And maybe that makes sense, because it was pretty much crisis mode. And I think that pretty much captures it.

SAYLE: Great, well, thank you very much for your time today.

LUTE: OK. OK, not at all. Thanks for reaching out, and here's your pen.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]