The Surge – Collective Memory Project

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[Begin Transcription]

SAYLE: Hello, this is Timothy Sayle from the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University. It's June 12, 2015, and I'm joined by —

CRAWFORD: Aaron Crawford, also of the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University.

SAYLE: And we're joined by Colonel Mansoor today. Colonel, could you introduce yourself and tell us about your role in the government and your relationship with the Iraq war?

MANSOOR: Well, I'm Dr. Peter Mansoor, retired US Army Colonel, and currently the Raymond E. Mason, Jr. Chair of Military History at the Ohio State University. I assumed my position in the summer of 2008 after a 26-year career in the US Army, culminating in my service as Executive Officer to General David Petraeus during the Surge of US forces to Iraq in 2007 and 2008. I had one other tour in the Iraq war in 2003 and 2004; I was the Commander of the First Brigade, First Armored Division in Baghdad, in Karbala, and [01:00] we were there during that very important first year when the outline of the counterinsurgency war was becoming clearer. Other than that I was the Founding Director of the US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center in the summer of 2006 and I served on the counsel of colonels that helped the Joint Chiefs of Staff rethink the strategy for the Iraq war and re-conceptualize it.

SAYLE: Excellent. Thank you. Can you tell us about the counterinsurgency center -- its purpose and its connection to American strategy in Iraq in general, if any?

MANSOOR: Well, General Petraeus felt that he needed a small group of thinkers to focus more intensely on counterinsurgency issues at Fort Leavenworth. This was during his time there as the Commander of Fort Leavenworth, sort of the doctrinal home of the US Army, and so he brought me in along with a couple of other officers and we helped him

[02:00] in terms of looking through the doctrine that was being written on counterinsurgency; giving him ideas and giving the doctrinal group ideas on how it could be improved.

Working with training centers in a "train the trainer" type capacity because what we realized was that the observer controllers at various training centers in the Army, no one was telling them what counterinsurgency was all about and how to go about training units that were coming through and so it was the blind leading the blind to a certain extent. So we had just started to go out to the training centers to improve their capacity when I was pulled out of the group. I was only there for a short period of time, unfortunately, before I was pulled, first for the Council of Colonels and then to be General Petraeus's executive officer.

We also did outreach to the media and to think tanks -- people with like-minded interests in [03:00] counterinsurgency warfare -- started to work on how to improve the professional military education system and how it approached counterinsurgency. I got it off the ground but really it's the people who came after me, Dan Roper and others, who saw it through to its final form and did a lot of good work before the group was finally disbanded this past year.

SAYLE: The Army and Marine Corps Field Manual that was published in 2006 with quite a lot of press offered not a new, but a more nuanced understanding of counterinsurgency, can you tell us how that fit in the Army's thinking about counterinsurgency through the first few years of the war and whether that Field Manual marked a major change in the Army's thinking, where it stands?

MANSOOR: The problem the Army had was coming out of Vietnam it looked at what occurred and decided it was never going to fight that kind of war again. So it didn't really put a lot of [04:00] intellectual firepower into learning the lessons of Vietnam. In fact when a group from Fort Leavenworth went to the JFK School of Special Warfare in the 1980s to find out what they had done in terms of lessons learned in Vietnam to help them create a course at Fort Leavenworth on low intensity conflict, they were told there were no Vietnam files. They were told to throw them away because supposedly we would never fight that kind of war again. So the only doctrine that exists was a manual on counter-guerilla warfare that had been produced in 1986 or thereabouts, and that was it.

When we went into Iraq in 2003, everyone expected a short, sharp conflict using rapid decisive operations, precision guided weaponry, lots of high tech hardware, very precise [05:00] application of force, and no one was thinking, "Well, really when we collapse the government of Iraq we're going to be left holding a mess." They were even thinking less about "Well, what happens if the people who we depose fight back in another way?" So when we eventually did face an insurgency in Iraq we didn't really have a doctrinal basis to deal with it. That lead to the very rapid publication of an interim field manual on counterinsurgency in 2004, but it wasn't very well-conceived and it was clearly a stop gap measure until something better took its place. That occurred when General Petraeus got to Fort Leavenworth in 2006 -- late 2005 -- and really energized the system to produce a field manual on counterinsurgency, probably a land speed record on the publication of a doctrinal manual -- less than a year from the time of conception to publication. [06:00]

SAYLE: How did the Center -- you spoke about the Center's outreach -- how did it outreach to other elements of the government? Or was there a connection with any other elements of the government? Could you explain what the Army was capable of, or was going to become capable of?

MANSOOR: Not during my time there. I got there in late June of 2006 and I had three months to work a concept for the center. We had started to go out to the training centers. We went to the Joint Readiness Training Center in Louisiana. We had worked with some media people on articles and so forth but in late September I was pulled out of the group to go to Washington to serve on the Council of Colonels for three months and then almost immediately after I returned to Fort Leavenworth General Petraeus was nominated to be head of Multi-National Force—Iraq and he named me [07:00] to be the head of his transition team so I was working on congressional testimony. We had certainly the intention of reaching out to other parts of government but we hadn't done it by the time I was pulled out.

SAYLE: So overall looking back on this period, how essential was the work of the Counterinsurgency Center, the new manual, and other thinking in the military to align the groundwork for a future surge?

MANSOOR: The Counterinsurgency Center would have more impact later on as Dan Roper and others took it over. They eventually did create a seminar where every unit going through a training center rotation would come through Fort Leavenworth and get a seminar on counterinsurgency or they would export the seminar to other places. So there was a lot of great thinking done on counterinsurgency but it was done after my time there and really after the surge was decided on. So I would say that the counterinsurgency Center had

minimal [08:00] impact on that aspect. But the counterinsurgency field manual definitely had an enormous impact on the Surge because for the first time in the Iraq War it gave the forces a doctrinal basis on which to base their actions. If you read the histories of the Iraq War *On Point* and *On Point 2*, you can see that there were a lot of units learning by trial and error in Iraq. Some of them were doing really great stuff. H.R. McMaster in the Third Armory Calvary regiment up in Tal Afar, the marines out at Al Qaim, the first brigade, first armor division, ironically the unit I commanded and had turned over to Colonel Sean McFarland, who took it to Ramadi and did wonderful things with the Anbar Awakening there.

The problem was there wasn't an operational concept and a doctrinal construct to pull this all together [09:00] and to say that every unit in Iraq is going to do the same thing, this is what we're going to base it on and there will be no questions asked unless your specific situation in your area is so unique that you have to deviate. That finally occurred with the publication of Field Manual 3-24 in December 2006 but more importantly General Petraeus and General Ray Odierno going to Iraq in their positions, seeing eye-to-eye on what needed to happen and then making it uniform throughout the force.

SAYLE: You've written in your book, I believe, that you received an email shortly in your tenure at the Counterinsurgency Center calling you to Washington for the Council of Colonels. Can you tell us about your first introduction to this concept, what it meant to be joining the Council of Colonels, what this organization was for?

MANSOOR: Actually I was watching a football game on Saturday night; I'm a big college [10:00] football fan, and I get an email from General Petraeus basically saying, "You

need to be in DC on Monday, and I can't tell you anything about the group, but I've been told to nominate a couple of smart people to it." The other one he nominated was H.R. McMaster and said, "Pack your bags." When I got there and got together there were about 15 of us, plus or minus. It was a group that the Joint Chiefs had formed -- the chairman had formed it -- in order to help them re-conceptualize the long war against Islamic extremism world-wide and we can get into this later but very quickly the group's initial discussion necked down to, What do we do about Iraq? because the war was going south in a hurry on us and we couldn't really get to any other aspects of the long war without dealing with Iraq. [11:00] As I recall there were three Army colonels, there was an Army colonel from the joint staff who was considered a joint guy, there were three Marine colonels, three Navy captains and the Air Force being the Air Force sent five Air Force officers. Then there was a Navy captain, Mike Rogers, current head of the NSA who was the group's informal leader because he was the chairman's executive officer.

SAYLE: Excellent. Now was there a suggestion or an implicit suggestion early that this group would focus on Iraq? Or did that just develop as the group's work began?

MANSOOR: No. This is in reading other sources, but the origins of the group, I believe, were a meeting between General Peter Pace and General Jack Keane and Pace asked Keane to grade his performance as chairman, I think Keane gave him an [12:00] F and suggested that he form an outside group because the inside thinking that he was getting was clearly insufficient to energize what needed to happen at the strategic level, and so that was sort of the genesis of the group.

We were given a very broad mandate -- to just relook the war against Islamic extremism around the world -- and so we started on that, we brought in subject matter

experts from all over the place -- historians, intel officers, politicians, experts in Islamic jurisprudence. We cast our net pretty wide and I thought it was a really excellent group of people we brought in.

But as the weeks rolled by it became pretty clear to us that we just simply could not get over the argument about, "Well, what do we do about [13:00] Iraq?" It's fine that we're talking about world-wide Jihadism or we're talking about Afghanistan or what-not. Remember Afghanistan in '06 didn't look as bad as it did three years later, but what do we do about Iraq? So at some point I think in mid- to late-October we went to the chairman and we said, "We'd like to focus just on Iraq because we can't get over that discussion," and he agreed. So the group then shifted and focused very closely on what to do about Iraq.

SAYLE: You're a historian and you also have long experience in the military. Was this a totally unique grouping? Has there ever been anything like this before that you know of?

MANSOOR: I am not familiar with a group like this that's been formed. I applaud the chairman for doing it. He brought 15 people in to grade their homework, really, [14:00] to grade the joint staff's homework. And we would meet with them on a weekly basis. It was really quite extraordinary; the Chiefs would meet in the tank -- their conference room in the Pentagon -- and they'd all be around the table and we'd be on a platform in 15 chairs in three tiers off to the side like the jury and it was literally like a jury looking over the courtroom. And there were some really good rules about what went on in the tank. Anyone could speak. You didn't have to -- of course you needed to raise your hand and get recognized -- but you could do that at any time and of course you wanted to be intelligent about what you said -- but I found myself at one point in a one-on-one debate

with the chairman and no-holds-barred. So I applaud the chairman and the Joint Chiefs for doing what they did. [15:00]

There were some humorous aspects. I remember Buzz Moseley, the Air Force Chief of Staff at the time, he'd always come in and walk down to his seat at the end and look over at us and he would go, "Colleagues." [laughter] We'd all bust out laughing. But it was a very unique and good group, and one that I hope other chairmen in similar circumstances would use in the future. You can't do it unless you have the right people in the group -- people who aren't afraid to talk, people who are from outside the organization because of course if you formed a group like that on the joint staff, they would give you the joint staff opinion on everything, and because so many of us had come from outside, it was easier for us perhaps to -- I hate the term "out of the box thinking," but to give them other thinking other than what they were getting [16:00] inside the building.

SAYLE: And was that the goal then, were the services to nominate out of the box thinkers, or people with particular experience with Iraq or the long war --

MANSOOR: I think they wanted people with experience in Iraq but there were only a few of us in the group that actually had experience in Iraq -- H.R. commanded a regiment in Iraq, I commanded a brigade, Tom Greenwood commanded a MEW in Iraq and then John Medaris from the Air Force was an engineer who had worked in Iraq as an Air Force engineer and no one else to my recollection had Iraq experience, and it became pretty clear when we started debating Iraq who had been there on the ground and who had experience and who knew what was going on and people who were just front page deep.

SAYLE: Excellent. I know at one point the colonels sought to understand the operating environment in Iraq. I'm curious, [17:00] was there any consensus among the colonels as to what actually was happening in Iraq? Was there a lot of debate on that? Did you end up coming down in sort of the same place eventually?

MANSOOR: Eventually we came down in the same place. H.R. was really useful here because he had had the most recent Iraq experience and Iraq was changing so rapidly that his experience -- on 2005 is when he finally came back -- was much more recent than mine. I had come back only a year earlier than him. So that was useful and then we had access to all of the intelligence on the [inaudible] net, and then at the DSSCI level. We came to, I think, a consensus which we shared with the Chiefs -- much to their consternation -- that Iraq was in the midst of a civil war. I think this was the first time anyone had told them that. And they said, basically, [18:00] "Are you sure?" [laughter] And we were like, "Yeah, pretty much." And they said, "Is this the consensus of the group?" And we said, "Yes, pretty much." Then we told them "we are not winning; therefore we are losing, and time is not on our side." So General Pace shared that with the President and the President came out in a press conference and said, "I just talked to General Pace and he put it this way and I agree with him, 'We're not winning and we're not losing,'" and I was like "How about the last part about time not being on our side?"

SAYLE: Critical difference, absolutely. So the Chiefs were taken aback by this description of civil war. Was there an understanding, do you think, in the rest of the United States government, that Iraq was in a civil war? Did the country view Iraq in one way or another, do you think?

MANSOOR: You know, I can't tell you what the rest of the government thought. I do know that the country was just tired [19:00] of Iraq at that point and wanted out. That was one of the three options that we actually teed up for the Joint Chiefs -- go home. Get out; contain the conflict within the boundaries of Iraq. Keep U.S. forces in the region in case we had to fight Iran and contain the mess. I didn't agree with it. I don't think the Joint Chiefs, in the end, would have agreed with it either. But that certainly was one of the options we gave them.

SAYLE: When the council was considering events in Iraq, did you give attention to the regional politics and dynamics on Iraq's borders? How did that play a role in your analysis?

MANSOOR: Absolutely. I think the biggest conversations we had -- remember Syria at the time was stable, so there was no discussion of Syria collapsing -- Saudi Arabia seemed stable, Kuwait seemed stable, Turkey seemed stable. The nation we talked about the most was Iran. I think especially the [20:00] Navy and the Air Force officers said, "We have to get ready to fight Iran if it comes to that and we can't do that if we're embroiled in this messy war in Iraq." So I think there were more Navy and Air Force officers that skewed toward the "go home" vision of containing the mess in Iraq and getting ready to fight a more conventional conflict against Iran than the Army and Marine officers who said, "No, we need to fight the war we are waging right now and win it."

SAYLE: Were the Army and Marine officers concerned about Iranian activities in Iraq?

MANSOOR: Absolutely, yes. Of course the full scope of what Iran was doing in Iraq had not been uncovered at this point in time -- this was the fall of 2006 -- and it was just in November, December, January of that year that we started to figure out what was going on and then of course when the [21:00] British caught Qais al-Khazali in February or

March timeframe, and we interrogated him did we figure out that the Iranians were in Iraq using Hezbollah operators to train Jaysh al-Mahdi special groups and so forth. The full scope of Iranian involvement became clear, but we knew it was an issue at any rate.

SAYLE: As the colonels developed their different options -- we'll talk about them in more detail in a moment -- you've explained "go home" -- did the colonels consider the public opinion or domestic political constraints that might be put on the President's military options? Were the colonels thinking about American public opinion?

MANSOOR: We weren't thinking about public opinion but we were thinking about constraints on options. So we might as well talk about the three options. [22:00] We had debated a lot of different options -- more than just the three that have become public knowledge -- but basically in the end we said, "Here's three distinct options that we can present to the Joint Chiefs" -- and remember that we were not a decision group -- we weren't saying, "And this is our preferred option" -- we were just allowing them different options so they could discuss among themselves what was possible or desirable to do in Iraq.

As we were sort of putting the strategy in some sort of final form they said, "Well, how do we explain this?" and I got up to the white board with a marker and I said, "H.R. wants to mobilize the American people, mobilize the reserves, put another 250,000 troops in Iraq -- or put enough troops to raise it up to 250,000 [23:00] -- we'll call that 'Go big.'" That would've required mobilization of reserves. We had discussions about should we have a draft. In the end I don't think we thought we needed to but that was on the table. H.R., I think, was the proponent of -- we're in a war, we need to fight to win it and we need to mobilize the American people behind it and we need to mobilize our full capability -- I think a quarter million or more was what he had in mind.

There were those of us -- and I was sort of the leader of the middle group -- that said, "Well, that's probably not in the offing. I just don't think the administration is going to do it, nor are the American people going to do it." Counterinsurgency wars are usually fought and won over the long term, and so what we need to do is: a) get the situation under control, but then configure our involvement in Iraq for the long haul, [24:00] and I was thinking decades, not years -- or at least a decade. So I said, "We'll call that one 'go long,'" so it didn't rule out a surge to get things under control, but the long haul would've been staying in Iraq with tens of thousands of US forces or at least more than 10,000. The sort of interim structure was ten brigades and a huge advisory group until the counterinsurgency war had been won and then drawing down to a sustainable presence but staying there, not leaving at the end of 2011 like we did. So that was sort of "go long" and we've discussed "go home," which was let Iraq go where it will and contain it -- same kind of strategy -- a lot of people are advocating against ISIS now -- contain it, [25:00] contain the mess, and hold our fire for wars to come.

SAYLE: Did you find any of the arguments made against your position particularly compelling? Did you find any that you thought were very strong?

MANSOOR: Ironically no one said, "Well, you know the American people aren't going to put up with a multi-generational presence or multi-year presence in Iraq." We thought the American people would, given what we had done in South Korea -- we are still in South Korea today. We thought that actually if we could generate a bi-partisan consensus in Washington that the American people would eventually see the need to sustain our efforts there. No one really had an insight into what the Iraqi's were going to think about that. [26:00] We thought the Iraqi's would support a long-term American presence and of

course in the end, they didn't. But that's a different discussion. I think they would've, or could've, with different political decisions in the aftermath of the Surge.

SAYLE: You mentioned the subject matter experts you had come in. How much time did the group spend thinking about Iraqi politics, Iraqi personalities as opposed to military strategy or tactics?

MANSOOR: Our discussions were weighted towards the latter. There was discussion of the government, its role in fomenting sectarianism in Iraq. And we knew we had to deal with both sides of the equation. In 2006 we were much better at trying to combat the insurgency, the Sunni insurgency, and Al-Qaeda in Iraq than we were at battling the sectarianism [27:00] from the Shiite side. I was quite adamant -- I think the group agreed -- that we needed to combat extremism in any form. That was part of why the surge succeeded, because General Petraeus was much more even-handed in dealing with Shiite extremists as well as Sunni extremists. The people on the ground -- the Iraqis saw that -- and is part of what eventually brought the Sunnis back into the political framework, at least for a time.

SAYLE: So between the three options you sketched out -- and you mentioned there were more -- but of the three you mentioned, did you see a pattern among the colonels as to who supported which option? Was it by service, by experience?

MANSOOR: I think I mentioned before it was pretty much by service, the exception that anyone who served in Iraq was for either "go big" or "go long" or some combination thereof. But it was the Navy and the Air Force who wanted to institute some sort of containment strategy and prepare for a war against Iran, which they [28:00] thought might be coming.

SAYLE: Was there any changing of minds on the council? Did you see that as your role as a proponent of one option and if so how did you try to --?

MANSOOR: No, it wasn't necessary for the group to come to consensus because remember we were not advocating an option; we were simply teeing up options for the Joint Chiefs. That was sort of one of the refreshing things---that we didn't have to water down options in order to come to consensus.

SAYLE: During this time there were a number of other informal reviews occurring within the government, were you and the other colonels aware of these other reviews happening in the State Department, the NSC?

MANSOOR: We were made aware of them after the mid-term elections.

SAYLE: I see -- November?

MANSOOR: November. And it may be that Mike Rogers knew about them, being the chairmen's XO, but the rest of us didn't. This is one of the things that in researching the whole process for my book, [29:00] it became very clear to me that the Bush administration did not want to come out publically in saying, Yeah, we're re-thinking the strategy for the Iraq war. They kept talking publically about: Well, we can readjust tactics, if necessary. Of course that means a whole different thing and it wasn't until the elections were over until they said, yeah, we're looking at strategy. Had they done that before the mid-terms, they would have been open up to accusations that the war was lost and we should just get out. So I can see why they did that. But as a result, all the efforts were stove piped until sometime in November, when finally, I think, the State Department effort was folded into the NSC effort. The joint chief's effort eventually was disbanded after the Joint Chiefs briefed the President in December.

SAYLE: And of course the counsel of colonels was highly secret, as well, is that right? But it made its way into the newspapers. [30:00]

MANSOOR: It was secret I think for the same reason the administration didn't want to get out that we were rethinking strategy. That would be a good question to ask General Pace. But it got out -- it leaked to the newspapers -- I think Tom Ricks had an article in November, right around Thanksgiving time, and sort of sketched out the options we were considering. I didn't quite frankly didn't see any harm in that at the time. It caused a mini-stir in the tank as the Joint Chiefs looked over at us and told us to keep our mouths shut, but it blew over.

SAYLE: One of the arguments we have heard against initiating a formal and publically announced review was morale of military, especially troops serving in Iraq. Can you give me your assessment of that generally, of that argument that soldiers fighting would be either hurt or feel that [31:00] their efforts were brought into question by the fact that a strategic review as undergoing in Washington?

MANSOOR: I'm dumbfounded that we would even think that. The soldiers on the ground knew things weren't progressing very well in Iraq and in fact when we got there with a new strategy and a new doctrine, there were a bunch of troops who said, "This is great, we finally know what to do now in order to win." I don't find that argument very compelling, quite frankly.

SAYLE: After the mid-term elections it was publically announced that J.D. Crouch from the National Security Council would lead an interagency review. Was there any formal connection between the Council of Colonels and that review?

MANSOOR: Not that I'm aware of.

SAYLE: There were, however, representatives from the joint staff on that group, was there any connection between the colonels and the joint staff?

MANSOOR: I think we were sort of kept informed through Mike Rogers of what was happening, but I don't think there was a formal [32:00] connection.

SAYLE: I see, so you don't know of any way where the Council of Colonels' briefings would have been fed into that review in any way?

MANSOOR: Again, I don't know, that may have happened, but I'm not aware.

SAYLE: What was the final product -- or was there a final product -- to the Council of Colonels' effort?

MANSOOR: I think our series of briefings and discussions in the tank helped to crystalize the Joint Chiefs thinking. In the end I think they were very conservative in their guidance to the President, or their advice. I think the culmination was the President's visit to the tank in early December and the Chiefs laid out their thoughts but they didn't go very far in terms of changing the strategy. They pretty much were nibbling around the edges [33:00] and I think they were very supportive of the commander in the field, General George Casey, so their recommendations didn't go nearly far enough in terms of changing a strategy that I think was failing.

They also were very concerned about their Title 10 responsibilities, so they were very concerned -- especially the Army and Marine Corps -- about lack of troops and op tempo on the troops, strain on the troops -- and they wanted a commitment from the President to grow troop numbers -- end strength -- so that whatever happened they could field the forces necessary to execute the new strategy. I think that was pretty much the

end of it. Everything else in terms of the decision to surge came from outside the Joint Chiefs, at least.

SAYLE: Let's pick up on the health of the force issue that you mentioned. It was a concern for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. [34:00] What was your assessment of that argument that more troops to Iraq would put more strain on the force?

MANSOOR: Well it's true that the force was strained, but I didn't want to see a war lost on my watch if I had something to do with it so I thought it was important to get the strategy right and then if we needed more troops, take that case to the congress and get them authorized but I was dumbfounded by the suggestion that we should lose the war just because we didn't have enough troops. This was the whole reason H.R. said: No, we need to go big. We're America. We need to fight a war like we mean it rather than letting ourselves be constrained by the force structure that is in place. So I wanted to get the strategy right first and then we could look at if there was legislation needed, end strength increases needed to field [35:00] the forces necessary to win.

SAYLE: You mentioned that during the actual implementation of the Surge, General Petraeus was even-handed in tending to tamp down violence caused by different actors, not just Sunni actors. Did you share that assessment earlier in your understanding of the war? Did you see that as an issue in 2004 through 2006 - that there were different actors that needed to be sat on in essence?

MANSOOR: Absolutely. Now you have to realize my background as brigade commander. I was fighting one of the most virulent Sunni insurgencies in Adhamiya in Baghdad, the lower right-hand corner of the Sunni triangle is what I called it. And then at the end of that tour I fought the Jaish al-Mahdi in Karbala and so I got to see and fight both aspects of the

extremism in Iraq and I knew very well that we had to fight both. In fact at one point in the Surge -- it was right around [36:00] August of 2007 -- and we were getting a handle, finally, on Al-Qaeda in Iraq, the allowance was coming down, and I looked at General Petraeus -- I think this was before we went to Washington for the famous congressional hearings in September 2007 -- and I said, "You know at some point it's going to be time to pivot away from Al-Qaeda in Iraq which is on the road to defeat right now, and we're going to have to fight the Shiite extremists which in the longer term might be the more important danger for the Iraqi state," which has sort of panned out. And he acknowledged that, but he said, "Not yet." And in fact we never got around to completely dealing with the Shiite extremists. We got a handle on them, but of course they have come back in a big way today.

SAYLE: During the strategy review group, the inter-agency [37:00] group, at the same time as the Council of Colonels, there were some team members who were arguing that the United States should bet on the Shiite or put all of the American energies behind the Shiite. What did you make of that argument, or what do you make of that argument?

MANSOOR: The problem, of course, is that the Shiite were also -- Iran was also betting on the Shiite groups -- and if we had a Shiite group that was -- or a constellation of groups -- that was not necessarily in bed with Iran and could work with America, I would've said, "OK, we can think about that option." But quite frankly I didn't see what Shiite group we were going to work with. ISCI, the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq, which had spent the years under Saddam Hussein in Iran and had -- a lot of the key [38:00] leaders in the group had Iranian wives, or perhaps Jaish al-Mahdi who had already risen up against us once and was adamant that we were occupiers and they wanted to see all Americans out

of Iraq. I just don't see the group that was going to -- [Andowa?] which ended up being more sectarian than any other group in Iraq? Unfortunately as a strategy it just didn't work out politically because there wasn't a non-sectarian -- a secular Shiite group -- that we could work with. That's almost a contradiction in terms -- a secular Shiite group.

SAYLE: What was your assessment of the government of Iraq of the day? Were they to be a viable partner for the "go long" strategy?

MANSOOR: In 2006 as you remember [39:00] the government was very weak and we didn't really know anything about Maliki at that time. So we felt that over the long haul we could strengthen the Iraqi government, keep all the various groups, the Shiite Sunni Kurds and others in the tent, and create viable national institutions over the long-term. To this day I think that would've worked had we stayed and had we made better decisions after the presidential election of 2010, an election at which Ayad Allawi won and yet we backed his opponent Nouri al-Maliki, and ended up with a prime minister who became extremely sectarian and launched Iraq right back into civil war when we had finally tamped down the fires of civil war but not gotten rid of the embers. So [40:00] in 2006 the problem was not sectarianism in the Iraqi government although there certainly was that, it was a lack of capacity, and we felt that we needed to help the Iraqi government get better, gain more capacity and with capacity would come legitimacy as the security environment improved.

SAYLE: Also during this period of the simultaneous reviews, officials from the Department of Defense on the inter-agency group, were making an argument that first of all the civilian side of the United States government was not contributing enough to Iraq and a component of that would be that the United States military was being called upon to do

jobs that were not proper military jobs. What do you make of those arguments? And also I'd be curious how they connect to what the Council of Colonels were thinking about military options.

MANSOOR: Well it's true, I think the Department of Defense felt that the rest of the government wasn't pulling its weight but in part that's the military's own fault [41:00] -- or the Department of Defense's fault -- because remember it was Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld who wanted the reconstruction portfolio and sidelined the State Department going into the Iraq war so I don't think it's any coincidence the rest of the government is saying, OK, you wanted it, you have it. To a certain extent though, although getting more government support for the Surge and for the counterinsurgency conflict was important, I don't think it was the crucial thing. There was an American advisor in the Vietnam War, John Paul Vann, who was very famous and he once famously said, "I don't know if security is 20% of a counterinsurgency struggle or 80% of a counterinsurgency struggle, all I know is it's the first 20% or the first 80%." [42:00] We were very cognizant of that going into the Surge -- unless we got the security situation under control it didn't matter how many provincial reconstruction teams we had or treasury advisors or USAID personnel, they weren't going to be able to do anything in an environment which was chaos and violent.

SAYLE: Did the Council of Colonels discuss PRTs at all or did you have any visibility into the issue of PRTs in this period?

MANSOOR: I don't remember -- we might have. I know we discussed economic aid to Iraq -- one of the options I don't think we teed up to the Joint Chiefs. If we did it was quickly discarded to go full in on an economic plan for Iraq -- basically buy off the insurgency

through a Marshall Plan for Iraq -- and if everyone had jobs then they wouldn't be fighting. Of course that's not true, because the basis of the insurgency was not economic and so that [43:00] was pretty quickly discarded, so we did talk economics, but I'm not sure if we talked PRTs, per se.

SAYLE: In December 2006 there was discussion at the highest level of government as to how many brigades would form a surge. There was the idea that two brigades could be sent and others could follow on as necessary. They could all be scheduled to go in fairly short order. What do you make of those different options and how would they have affected the situation differently?

MANSOOR: Well, the two brigade option came from General Casey and that was bring two brigades to Baghdad because Together Forward One and Together Forward Two had failed. Everyone knew that. And so we're going to bring more troops into Baghdad and fight the most important fight, which was the battle of Baghdad. I agreed that that was the most important fight. The problem was that there wasn't enough force. It wasn't enough plus-up to change the facts on the ground. And so [44:00] in my discussions with General Petraeus -- and I had kept General Petraeus informed of what was going on throughout the fall of 2006 -- as I believe was Meghan O'Sullivan, so General Petraeus had good contacts inside the government. He said: We need as many brigades as we can get -- as much force as we can get -- and we need them there as soon as we can get them there. Otherwise, you can't have an incremental plus-up. It just won't do what we want to do in terms of getting the security situation under control.

I remember at one point -- this is actually when General Petraeus took command -- we had a terrible transition. I'm sorry to say we had a terrible transition with General

Casey's team and I don't know that General Casey was at fault but clearly the people underneath him [45:00] disliked us and looked at us as the people coming in to grade their homework. I know I had a terrible transition with his executive officer. Be that as it may, as soon as General Petraeus grabbed the colors of MNF-I, he's now in command, I went to the desk of the executive officer, called up the operations section and said, "What's the status of the Surge brigades?" and they said, "Same as it's always been, two brigades coming to Baghdad, one coming to Kuwait as a reserve and two on prepare to deploy orders in the United States," and I almost just flew through the roof. I actually interrupted the reception and pulled General Petraeus aside and told him that and he said, "Get all five brigades flowing to Iraq now."

What I didn't realize is he had already worked that out with General Pace so at the highest level supposedly [46:00] they were flowing. It had never been communicated within MNF-I to the staff which tells me that General Casey was never on board with the Surge. That's what it tells me. He may say something different, but he clearly -- there were people on his staff who believed it was two brigades to Iraq, one to Kuwait and two to remain in the United States.

The problem with that, by the way, is if you did it that way and every time you needed to call another brigade forward, it would be a front page story, "More reserves required for the Iraq war." "Yet another brigade called from the United States to deploy." And you'd get this series of deadly public relations articles that the American people would be going, "Oh my gosh, the place is falling apart." Well, indeed it was but you might as well get the bad news out of the way upfront and get them all flowing, which is what eventually happened.

SAYLE: When you arrived as [47:00] General Petraeus's executive officer and you were back in Iraq in 2007 were any of the assumptions that you held in late 2006 on the Council of Colonels challenged? Were they reinforced?

MANSOOR: The number one thing: we did not have good visibility into, on the Council of Colonels. And even at Fort Leavenworth, because we were trying to read all of the reports -- we were getting the various reports from MNF-I and whatnot -- we did not have good visibility into the Awakening. And General Petraeus's first trip after taking command that very first week -- actually his first trip the very next day was outside the wire into Ghazaliya and Dora and it looked like ghost towns. Buildings were pock-marked; the markets weren't opened. Palpable sense of fear in both communities and we got back to our desks that night and we were like, "Whoa, what did we get into?" [48:00] Because that sense of what had happened to Baghdad was just not coming through in the reports that we were reading.

But later that week he went to Ramadi to talk to Sean McFarland and saying: What's going on here? I'm hearing good things. And General Petraeus found out about the Awakening and really that was our first sense that this was not just something that was happening of importance to Anbar but it was of strategic importance to the entire war. And General Petraeus came back and basically told his subordinate commanders: We are going to support the Awakening, and whatever they need to help spread this movement across Iraq we are going to support that effort. So that was the one thing that we didn't really realize the extent of going in. Actually those two things, really -- how bad the situation in Baghdad had become, and [49:00] the Awakening and its import to the future of the conflict.

SAYLE: In addition to your military career, you are also an accomplished historian and military historian. What historical perspectives did you find useful both on the Council of Colonels and in your time in Iraq? And which did you find not useful? Were there any red herrings out there?

MANSOOR: I thought the western experience in counterinsurgency warfare in the twentieth century was valuable to me. I think it still is. There's people who say, "Oh, it doesn't matter because those were ideological conflicts or those were conflicts of colonialism and they have no relation to religious conflicts of today," and I disagree with that assessment. I think the history of counterinsurgency warfare in the 20th century is of importance to understand that context and the historical background to what was happening in Iraq. [50:00] And then of course you can add the other unique dimensions of what's happening today to that but historical grounding in counterinsurgency warfare, I think, was really crucial. I'm trying to remember the second part of your question.

SAYLE: That's if there were any historical analogies made that you thought were not useful or --

MANSOOR: The ones that were not useful -- yes -- there were people that basically said, "Oh, what we really need to do" -- and this wasn't necessarily on the Council of Colonels, but guys like Gian Gentile -- "we just need to go and we need to fight this as a military operation and we just need to find the enemy and kill them." And I just thought how simplistic that is. Or we need to read C.E. Caldwell, the British colonel who wrote about [51:00] British small wars in the 19th century as if they somehow had validity for what we were doing today. If you read some of the things that he discusses, he's talking about, "Well, poison their well water and go kidnap their tribal chieftains."

There's an environment today with globalization, with globalized communications, and with a focus on human rights, that you simply cannot do some of the things that various people did before the 20th century -- and even sometimes in the 20th century -- to tamp down rebellions. Like the Roman rulers who would send the reports back from Africa, "The rebellion of the 'umpteump' tribe is over because the 'umpteump' tribe no longer exists."

And my point was we cannot be kinetic and brutal enough to end the insurgencies with force. [52:00] Force is a component, obviously, of what we need, but we have to be more holistic than that in our approach. And there were some people in the military simply who didn't get it. And they would never agree to that. I think it was a military problem -- you know the old saw that, "Any good soldier can handle guerrillas, right?" Well, if the guerrillas wore uniforms we could probably get rid of them in a day because we could see them. But when they hide among the people it gets kind of hard to separate them from the population, and when you start to kill the population you lose the moral legitimacy to do what you are doing.

SAYLE: Well you make an interesting point about the constraints on the United State military from acting in a brutal fashion. The other side of the conflict, though, certainly did seem to be acting in a very brutal way. How could we reconcile that asymmetry and what problems does that create for the military?

MANSOOR: It actually created an opportunity, [53:00] because we hung their brutality around their necks and they wanted to publicize their brutality and so did we. So they behead someone or they do something terrible, we'd publicize it. We'd say, "Look. Look what they just did. Are those the people you want to side with or do you want to side with

us?" General Petraeus was very adamant about that. This is an opportunity. We should hang their brutality around their necks and make sure people are aware of exactly how vicious these people are. And it worked in that environment because there was already a rebellion working against Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was sort of the perfect enemy. They would screw up at every turn in alienating the population. I think ISIS is a little bit more nuanced in that regard.

SAYLE: Well, you were in a unique position. You were involved in the strategy reviews [54:00] with the Council of Colonels in 2006 and then you were on the implementation side in 2007. So looking back at this whole experience, how should we understand the connection between the Council of Colonels' work in 2006 and the decision and implementation of the Surge?

MANSOOR: I'm not sure the Council of Colonels had a great deal to do with the decision to surge. I write in my book, *Surge* -- creatively entitled *Surge* -- that the decision belongs to President George W. Bush who I think was very courageous in making a political decision that went against every current flowing against him. The Democratic Party wanted us out of Iraq, our allies wanted us out of Iraq, a lot of Iraqis wanted us out of Iraq, even a lot of his own party wanted us out of Iraq and yet he had the courage to say: No. I'm in this war to win it and it's my best judgment that we need to reinforce [55:00] and change what we are doing in order to win it, and I'm the President and we're going to do this. And for two years, he made it stick. Probably I think his most courageous decision in his eight years in office. So, I'm sorry I got off track.

Oh, the Council of Colonels, right -- so I don't think the Council of Colonels had anything to do with the decision other than I think maybe perhaps we intellectually

prepared the Joint Chiefs to accept it. Had they just been presented with a decision as a fait accompli without the background that we had given them, there might have been more resistance than their actually was to the decision to surge. Of course you don't want that kind of resistance inside the military and inside the government working against a decision the president has made. That's actually something I learned during my [56:00] 15 months with General Petraeus in Iraq. The President can make a decision on strategy and there's still people who disagree with it and will try to undermine it. And I just found that astonishing, but I guess that's life.

SAYLE: Well, I think that's the perfect place to leave it. Thanks for joining us today, Colonel Mansoor.

MANSOOR: My pleasure.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]