The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Daniel Serwer
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Executive Director of the Iraq Study Group, 2006

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[Begin Transcription]

SAYLE: Great. It's June 11, 2015. This is Timothy Sayle from the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University. And I'm joined by --

CRAWFORD: This is Aaron Crawford with Southern Methodist University's Center for Presidential History.

SAYLE: And we're with Dr. Daniel Serwer. Dr. Serwer, could you introduce yourself and explain your profession and knowledge of Iraq at the time of the Iraq Surge in about 2005-2006, please.

SERWER: My name is Daniel Serwer. I'm today a Professor of Conflict Management at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. At the time of the Surge, the Iraq Study Group Report, I was a vice president at the United States Institute of Peace, where I supervised USIP's first overseas office, which was in Baghdad, starting in early 2004, and made many trips into Iraq [01:00] through that period, though relatively lightly in 2006 because I was involved with the Iraq Study Group and because conditions on the ground were deteriorating very badly. I'm a former Foreign Service officer. I spent 21 years in the Foreign Service. I never dealt with the Middle East during that period. I was much more concerned with Europe and the Balkans in particular. But I have dealt with the Middle East now since 2003, when USIP first got interested.

SAYLE: Excellent. And, how did you come to take your role as the Executive Director of the Iraq Study Group?

SERWER: Well, the truth is that we determined that I was the Executive Director as the report was going to bed. I was never called the Executive Director during the process. What happened was that my boss, Dick Solomon, called me in [02:00]

and said he'd had a call from Frank Wolf – Congressman Frank Wolf, Republican of Virginia – suggesting that things weren't going great in Iraq. He had a constituency that was very skeptical of the war, skeptical of President Bush, and he wanted to do something that would get to the bottom of the question and fix it. That was about all that there was in that initiative, but that was an important initiative.

Solomon called me in and said, "What do you think?" And I said, "Well, you know, it's high risk. Can we really do this? Can we do it in a way that makes a difference but is high gain? And what we ought to be doing as the United States Institute of Peace is looking for a way out of this war. [03:00] Not to abandon it, but to fix it." At that point, a number of institutions were interested in co-sponsoring. The Center for the Study of the Presidency here in Washington was interested. Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars was interested. And, later on, the Baker Institute joined, and CSIS [Center for Strategic International Studies] kind of dropped out because they were less interested.

Baker and Hamilton were chosen as co-chairs in a process that I was not really privy to. I was asked my views. I made a couple of suggestions. I don't remember what they were. You know, Solomon, Congressman Wolf, the White House – I don't know who else was involved – determined [04:00] that it should be Baker and Hamilton. I think actually the first choice was Baker, and Baker said, "Yeah, Hamilton would be a good idea." Both of them were thought not to have

expressed strong public views on Iraq up until that point, and that was something we were – I was involved in defining some criteria for what we wanted. And that was one of the criteria, that we wouldn't sign somebody into the Iraq Study Group who had already made up his mind. We wanted to be a study group. In the end, Baker and Hamilton chose the other members of the study group. It was co-optation by them, not by the staff. And here's where I have to explain something fundamental about the Iraq Study Group.

The Iraq Study Group was very much a creature of Baker and Hamilton. [05:00] And their view – they didn't want experts who were mucking in the policy. They wanted experts who could enlighten the situation, and they wanted a good process. So, I became, as the sort of chair of the supporting organizations, because the money for the affair actually came to US Institute of Peace. So, that made us the natural chair of the effort, because otherwise how were we going to decide how the money was spent? And we would meet every few weeks at the expert level. Chris Kojm and Ben Rhodes for Hamilton. Djerejian often on the phone, not so often in Washington, for Baker, and not always participating. [06:00] Various people from the Center for the Study of the Presidency, various others. And several USIP people, who either worked for me or who were cooperating with the effort. We had a single administrative person.

I came to understand that Baker and Hamilton guarded very jealously their prerogative to choose the policy options. My job was to be the guardian of the

process and the substance: what data got fed into them, whom they talked to, that kind of thing. My job was not to tilt the policy in one direction or another. In the end, they did in fact ask the USIP staff, among others, what they thought [07:00] should be recommended. But the process – of the ten months, I would say I spent eight just being the guardian of the process and the substance. And there were, I think it's 27 reports prepared, and they are sitting somewhere here. [Points to bookshelf] There it is, Iraq Study Group Expert Papers. And Baker and Hamilton started that process by asking very specific questions, analytical questions, of the experts. And we had the experts, who had to be approved one by one by the co-chairs – we had them organized in four working groups. I want to say it was Security, Economics, Politics –

SAYLE: Politics and Governance.

SERWER: -- and Governance. OK. You know better than I do. And, you know, I made the mistake of not only trying to run the whole process, [08:00] I also chaired the Political group. So, I had enormous burdens, because each of these papers – they would come to me not in rough shape, but they would come to me not with the consistency and clarity that was required. So, I had to do a lot of the editing of the papers, which were then distributed to the experts. And I always asked myself, are they really reading this stuff? I mean, I'm sending them a lot of stuff. Are they really looking at it? So, I asked. I said something to that effect to Bob Gates one

day. And he looked at me, and he said, "I don't always like the message, but I read it all."

I've always regarded that as a great privilege, to have tutored the future Secretary of Defense on Iraq before he took his position as Secretary of Defense. Actually, I tutored two Secretaries of Defense [09:00] because both Gates and Panetta were members. Not that – look, there came a point in the process when the staffs to the co-chairs, Ben Rhodes and Chris Kojm said to us, "You know, the co-chairs are now really feeling that they are up to speed, so we're going to tone down a little bit the pace of the expert groups. They need to focus." And we did that. I mean, I was there to serve them. You've got to understand, I was also there to explain to the Board of the US Institute of Peace what we were doing, and why we were doing it, and how we would avoid getting stuck with the responsibility for whatever mistakes they made in the policy recommendations. So, it was actually quite convenient for me to be able to say, "I'm the guardian of the process and the substance. I am not making the policy choices." [10:00] And I think we genuinely tried to avoid making the policy choices, though in the end I think there were some policy options papers prepared. I'd have to look back to be sure.

We also did not draft the report, and that's something else I want to make clear. What happened was that the co-chairs wanted to draft the report themselves, which meant that Kojm, Djerejian, and Rhodes drafted the report. And I can't – I don't know in the first person exactly who did what. But I can be

pretty sure that Djerejian did all that Israel-Palestine stuff, and that it's there because Djerejian said that it had to be there, and Baker went along with him. That was almost not discussed in the Group. The Group, in fact, did not discuss policy options a whole lot, because there was staff in the room – [11:00] not many, but there was staff in the room. And they would discuss policy options behind closed doors.

I think Ben Rhodes played an important role, especially in drafting the first portion of the report, which is the analytical piece. That, to me, is the most important part of the report. The policy recommendations, frankly, are uneven. They were partly – I won't say dictated, but encouraged by the White House, especially the whole thing about reconciliation. It was very much on General Casey's mind and the White House's mind. So, I had the sense that a number of recommendations really came from the White House. [12:00] But the first part of the report was, from the first sentences onward, was shocking, because it said the truth, which was that things were going really badly. Remember, up until that year, Rumsfeld was still saying, "What insurgency?" I can't quite quote exactly what he said. But it was not recognized across the political spectrum how bad things were. And, to me, that was the real contribution of the report. Nobody, by the end of that year – probably because things deteriorated even further during the year – but nobody at the end of that year, with the publication of that report, could pretend that the war was going well for the United States. And that, to me, is vital.

SAYLE: May I ask – I take the point. [13:00] That's an excellent point, that the report said something new to the American people and across the spectrum. You had been in Iraq for years before this. Could you just sketch out for us, sort of generally, how you saw the situation in Iraq deteriorate or not in that 2004-2006 period?

SERWER: Well in 2004, when I first went – I think in January – we drove around Baghdad freely. I had a guy with a gun in the front seat, but it wasn't necessary. And we did cancel a meeting once. We were supposed to go out to Sadr City to meet one of the Ayatollahs, and there were demonstrations. And we decided, "We ain't going to Sadr City tonight." So, it wasn't that it was completely calm and cool, but it was manageable. [14:00] By late 2005, things were much, much worse. You just have to look at the statistics. They're really dramatic. And by 2006 – I think the peak was actually reached in late 2006.

SAYLE: That's the violent acts –

SERWER: Violent acts, yeah. And people killed. That coincides with the publication of the report. So in a way, we were riding that wave. And that analytical part of the report I'm very proud of. And we also identify very clearly what some of the issues were. And it seems to me we did that very well.

I never could quite swallow the big piece about Israel-Palestine. Not because I thought it was wrong to say those things – [15:00] I didn't think it was wrong to say those things. But I didn't see how it fit in this particular context. I didn't think it was the big issue driving insurgents in Iraq or anything like that.

But your interests are mostly in the Surge. And here I'm a little bit handicapped, because part of what I say to you is going to be hearsay. But my understanding at the time, and I think I heard some of this conversation, was that Chuck Robb was the driver behind the mention of the Surge in the Iraq Study Group report. He became convinced that we couldn't get out without doing more. And he pressed for that. What he pressed for, though, was on a timeline so quick that [16:00] who knows whether it would have worked or not, but probably not.

But this has a great deal to do with the President's reception of the report. You'll have to ask the principals, but I think they were shocked when the President essentially slammed the report. I think they thought they had incorporated a lot of things that the White House wanted. I think if you talk to Steve Hadley, he'll tell you that that was true. And the Surge was mentioned, so why did he have to slam the report? Well, I think that was a political choice, basically. He didn't want to be seen as being shoved around by Jim Baker. And he didn't want to be seen as shoved around by this peacenik report, either. So he chose to – [17:00] I've argued this with my good friend, *The New York Times* reporter Michael Gordon. I don't regard the fact that the timeline they suggested was faster than might have been effective as being all that important. They were trying to open up a possibility for the President that – so he could have come back and said, "Look, I accept this report. The situation is bad. I don't believe that we can do the Surge on the timeline they've recommended. What I'm going to do is the following." That

would have been a much less contentious way of receiving the report. But, frankly, in the end, because the President did what he did, the report became even more important. If he had accepted it, everybody would have nodded and said, "Well, that was a one-day story." [18:00] But it went on for – you've got to realize, the press attention to this thing was just gigantic.

SAYLE: What was your sense of the press reception of the report itself? There was a lot of reporting on it. Would you have described it as favorable, unfavorable?

SERWER: I would have described it as mostly favorable. And it was a very intense effort on publication – I meant to explain to you something about publication. So, the report got drafted, parts of it, I think, by Djerejian, parts by Kojm, parts by Rhodes. We became very concerned. We hadn't seen what they were doing, and my boss, Dick Solomon, was getting pressure from his board, saying, "What the hell is in this thing?" Well, they didn't want to show it to Solomon. [19:00] So, Solomon negotiated a deal in which I would read the report for substance – not for policy, again, but to make sure that they hadn't made any serious substantive errors.

To make a long story short, the one that I remember – I made a number of suggestions about the drafting. The one that I remember is that – it would've caused a big problem, because they recommended a "unitary" Iraq when they meant a "unified" Iraq. A "unitary" Iraq would be one without a Kurdistan region. A "unified" Iraq is one that can be federal. But in the parlance of the Middle East and of this kind of thing, generally, with which I was familiar because I had worked

in the Balkans, "unitary" means a unitary state, [20:00] no devolution of power, or very little. The Kurds hated the report anyway, because it wasn't kind to them. But that would have really been seen as an error. I mean, it really would have been a problem.

So, I felt useful having read the report on that issue and on a few others that I raised with the drafters. I was only too well aware of the sensitivities of Baker and Hamilton, that I not be mucking with their report. So I limited my comments rather drastically. And I was able to go back to Solomon and say, "Don't worry. It's fine. You may not agree with it, but it's not going to embarrass us in any way. We're not going to –" Even the recommendation for the Surge, which in a way could be interpreted as a recommendation for more war [21:00] was – and USIP can do almost anything except recommend more war – wasn't going to create problems, and I knew it. So, I was able to reassure my leadership. And I think the secrecy around the contents of the report was actually very well maintained. It didn't become public until the event.

SAYLE: Well, you mentioned the Kurdish reaction to the report. Were you following or aware of other Iraqi reactions, or regional reactions to the report? Did it signify something to people in the region?

SERWER: I have to remind myself sometimes of what's in it. [Thumbs through report.] [22:00]

SAYLE: There was a regional recommendation to be involved with Iran and Syria –

SERWER: Yeah, that's what I'm trying to dig out of my memory. Yeah, I think it was fairly forward-leaning in that direction.

SAYLE: Yes.

SERWER: That's my memory, and I think they were right, that you couldn't solve Iraq without some understanding with Iran and Syria. And the President did move in that direction. I forget whether he had actually moved in the direction of talking to Iran before the report was published or did it afterwards.

SAYLE: I know Ambassador Crocker spoke with the Iranians repeatedly in 2007, but I don't believe it was in 2006.

SERWER: Yeah. So, in that sense, they were doing – I think Ryan thinks that he didn't – it was useless. But it was the right thing to be doing, and I think you'd find that quite a few of the recommendations were actually [23:00] adopted, some of them even before they were made, because they were things that Casey and others were advocating.

SAYLE: Well, you mentioned that – I think it appears self-evident in hindsight that speaking with other actors in the region was critical to solving Iraq. Iraq was not an island. I'm not sure that everyone involved in the Surge decision-making would have agreed with that. Could you sketch out –

SERWER: Well, that's right. The guys who were promoting the Surge over at AEI, in particular – what's his name?

SAYLE: Dr. Fred Kagan and –

SERWER: Fred would never have agreed with that. And Fred and some of the others who were advocating it were very keen on making it an alternative to the Iraq Study Group, not a consequence of the Iraq Study Group. So, I always interpreted what the President did [24:00] as in part a means of satisfying those advisors who – he could have gone in the other direction, and he didn't. As I said, it didn't bother the report. The report was even more prominent because the President had rejected it.

SAYLE: During the interviews and the expert studies you were receiving and reading, did Iran and Syria show up quite a bit in the analysis that you were getting? I mean, how did that come to be in the report, do you remember by any chance? [Serwer gets up from desk to get Expert Reports binder from bookshelf and thumbs through it.] We're in the right place. We have the reports handy.

SERWER: Yes. I think the idea – look, among those of us who follow – it's coming back now, better than – I should have looked at this first. [25:00] Among those who follow stabilization issues, failed state issues, the notion that the neighboring states have a vote whether you want them to or not is absolutely – it's one of the few things you're sure of. I mean, everything else – a lot of other things are context dependent, but that's not. And Jim Dobbins has actually got a book out that looks at 20 or so stabilization efforts since the end of the Cold War. And there are only two things that all of them seem to have in common. One is, you need the cooperation of the neighboring states. And the other is, you need the

cooperation of the – what shall I say? – the hidden networks within the country itself. [26:00] Yeah, we did have policy papers towards the end. [Serwer is referring to binder of studies.]

SAYLE: Now, were the experts –

SERWER: Embedding US military trainers – well, that was an analytical paper. There was an options paper on national reconciliation. There was a recommendations paper on oil, on reconstruction funding. There were options papers on US policy goals. These ought to be published, is the truth of the matter.

SAYLE: Yes.

SERWER: But they would only be of historical interest. Now, they were all deposited with the National Archives, which would probably never be able to find them.

SAYLE: But we are historians, so that's our bread and butter.

SERWER: But I don't see one on talk with Iran and Syria. I think it arises in the [27:00] Strategic Environment paper.

SAYLE: I see. Were those analytic papers prepared by non-governmental officials, and academics, and –

SERWER: Yes, all of these papers, all of the participation in the working groups was by experts from outside the government who were personally approved by the co-chairs. I think they approved only one person who, in principle, had Iraqi citizenship. I think they avoided having Iraqis who were available in Washington.

They wanted balance, political balance. There was quite a bit of concern for political balance.

SAYLE: The American political balance, right?

SERWER: Yeah. Yeah. And they all served without compensation and wrote papers without compensation.

SAYLE: Were there inputs to the group from the government [28:00], from the Department of Defense or from the CIA, or anything like that?

SERWER: Yeah, there were. But they generally went directly to the members of the working group, I would say. I don't remember seeing – I mean, I knew that reconciliation, for example, had been pushed by the government. But I don't remember seeing the paper on that. It may be here. You know, memory – this is ten years ago, guys. I mean, nine years ago. You know, memory doesn't – I'm a historian by trade, and I can tell you I'm absolutely convinced that oral history doesn't work, and the only thing that counts is documents. But I may have seen some government papers handed to them. They met with a wide variety of people. I think you asked in your questions, "Why did they meet with Warren Christopher and Dick Holbrook?"

SAYLE: Yeah, the Clinton team. I was curious to know – [29:00]

SERWER: Was Bill Clinton himself there?

SAYLE: Yes, he was. Yes.

SERWER: Yeah. That's right. I was remembering, but I wasn't sure. Because they wanted to – it was generally bipartisan. They wanted to hear from the Democrats. Frankly, the Democrats argued that Iraq wasn't worth a dime and that they should go for Afghanistan. If that sounds like something that later happened, it's true, in a way. And they met up on the Hill with members of Congress, knowledgeable members of Congress: Senator Reed of Rhode Island. What's her name, who's head of Woodrow Wilson now?

CRAWFORD: Jane Harman.

SERWER: Jane Harman. She was on the Intelligence Committee. She was very, very good. [30:00] They met up with a number of other people who were just bags of wind. I never – it was just awful every once in a while. And then, they met with journalists. They met with some of the big name columnists. They were –

SAYLE: It was a long list. There were –

SERWER: They were a bag of wind, too.

SAYLE: Who was particularly impressive or important, besides those you mentioned? Does anyone stand out in your memory?

SERWER: Well, certainly Reed and Harman, Colin Powell.

SAYLE: Apparently he was quite pessimistic about the situation in Iraq. Does that ring –

SERWER: He was. And he said something – and this is funny, because it has come to my mind a lot recently. He said, "Look, this was a war designed by business school graduates. They wanted to know exactly how much resource they had to put in, in

order to get out a particular product. And they weren't going to go beyond investing that amount." He said, "That's not how you do war. [31:00] War is done by committing yourself completely," in accordance with the Powell Doctrine, as a matter of fact. The interesting thing to me is that Barack Obama, who is obviously trying to avoid all the mistakes of George W. Bush, is doing exactly the same thing. He's calculating what the minimum is he has to put in. This 450 guys – I mean, it's ridiculous, in a way, but all of us are praising him for it, because we want to encourage him a little bit more. Doug Feith talked to them.

SAYLE: What would his perspective have been?

SERWER: Doug was as I've always found him. He starts from false premises and derives absolutely firm conclusions. The trouble is, the premises were false.

SAYLE: Michael Hayden has been given a lot of attention [32:00] for providing quite a pessimistic analysis as the Director of the CIA. Does that – and I believe that his account of the ISG was later leaked to the newspapers. It had a lot of attention. Do you remember if it –

SERWER: I'd have to look at my notes to remember if I was there. You know, I've known Mike Hayden for a long time, actually, and I don't remember – I'm not recalling his – but most people who knew anything were pessimistic, profoundly pessimistic.

I'm friendly with the Kagans, so I don't say this out of animus in any sense. But the truth of the matter is that Fred Kagan asked for many more troops. He did talk to the Group. He asked for 100,000 troops and said it couldn't be done with

less. And of course the Surge was done with significantly less than that. Basically, he was advising, "If you don't do it with 100,000 troops [33:00], don't do it." And that had a big impact on the thinking of the experts – because I think he'd spoken to the experts. I don't think – I can't remember whether he – maybe he did both, experts and the Group itself. But the point was, among the experts, a number of people wanted to win the war. But when they heard that it would take 100,000 troops, and they knew the 100,000 troops didn't exist, they said, "Well, we can't do that." And actually, I believe there's an option in here that derives in part from that thinking. Option 3.5, I think, was a sort of – anyway, later the Kagans naturally celebrated their great success. But the truth of the matter is, the administration didn't do what they were asking [34:00] to be done, because it couldn't be done.

SAYLE: There was a whole range of Congress – representatives and senators – that the Group met with. Was there pessimism from that group, as well?

SERWER: Certainly from Senator Reed and Harman, you got a big dose of pessimism. They talked with Nancy Pelosi. I think she was more concerned with what she regarded as the out-of-order setting up of the Iraq Study Group than she was with the war itself. I mean, the Iraq Study Group – what Frank Wolf did was, he inserted a line into the appropriations that said, USIP gets a million dollars for Iraq. And he told us it was for the Iraq Study Group. But this was not the proper way to fund the Iraq Study Group, and she was really annoyed about it, really,

really annoyed. [35:00] Anyway, she'll probably be annoyed at my saying so, too. They'll all be annoyed. Because, from their point of view, this is all still secret.

CRAWFORD: What would be the proper way?

SERWER: Oh, it should have gone through the Appropriation Subcommittee. It was done at the last minute in a conference. It wasn't done through what in Congress they call "regular order."

CRAWFORD: No hearings or anything like that.

SERWER: No hearings. No nothing. It was just Frank Wolf putting in a – it's literally half a sentence that says, "A million dollars for Iraq for USIP." And we knew what that meant. It meant the Iraq Study Group.

SAYLE: Did the sense that the Group received from speaking to Congress shape the options that the Group thought were possible to put in the report? If that question makes any sense – it's a bit tortured. [36:00]

SERWER: You know, you ask me to remember conversations that are nine years old. And there may have been members who had ideas that got into the options papers. There could well be. But I'm not remembering a whole lot of them. The conversations with the members tended to be at a kind of high level of things going badly, things going well. But there may well have been more specific proposals that aren't coming to mind. I have very extensive notes on all of these meetings.

SAYLE: Are they in the archives? Or, do you know if they're here?

SERWER: I actually don't remember whether they're in the archives or here.

SAYLE: Well, I encourage you to put them in the archives someday.

SERWER: I think that's what we concluded, that I was obligated to put them in the archives. And I think I did. It was in a great big box. Yeah. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been such a big box. [37:00] What I kept was a copy, not of my notes, which would be just horrendously voluminous, but of these things. [Referring to a binder of study papers.]

SAYLE: The Group also met with a large number of Iraqi politicians and Iraqis. Do you remember them having any sort of effect on the Group, or how the Group responded to them?

SERWER: I'm handicapped in responding to that question, because I didn't go on the trip to Baghdad.

SAYLE: I see.

SERWER: They wanted only Paul Hughes, who worked for me and was a retired Colonel in Baghdad, because he would be useful to them in liaison with the military. But by the time they were going to Baghdad, they were starting to focus on policy options, and more and more kind of cutting out staff.

SAYLE: I see.

SERWER: They had – Baker, in particular, has tremendous disdain for staff and experts. [38:00]

CRAWFORD: That's sort of a question I have, is this notion – and it's something we deal with quite a bit these days – of the experts. What was the general response, while this was going on in Washington, to the experts getting involved in trying to understand what was going on there?

SERWER: What was the general reaction among whom?

CRAWFORD: Congress, the White House, --

SERWER: Well, you always have – in every country on earth where something happens, you have a group of experts in Washington. I just came from a meeting with kind of the rump of Iraq experts. Mark Kimmitt was there. Doug Ollivant was there. You know, Denise Natali, Judith Yaphe. And there was an Iraqi in town, and we were meeting with him. In every country on earth, there is a little group of experts that follows that country.

But by 2005-2006, [39:00] on Iraq you had hordes of people writing and thinking about Iraq. There were a few experts who refused to join the expert working groups. Their reasons varied. Some just said, "I don't like group-think exercises." Others said, "Oh, it's biased toward withdrawal." Everybody had their own reasons. But we had more than enough people who wanted to participate. And I did advise the co-chairs to – I thought the original list of experts – they were hearing rumblings that it was too heavily weighted against continuing the war. And I said to them, "OK, we'll give you some names [40:00] of people who point in

the other direction." And I basically agreed with them. By that time in Washington, everybody wanted out.

SAYLE: Is that toward the end of the report period? Is that – are we speaking about the fall of 2006?

SERWER: Even at the beginning. There was pretty strong sentiment for wanting out. And it was very difficult for me – this nice clean notion, now that I explain it to you, that I'm responsible for process and substance, and not for policy recommendations. But I'd say two things about that. That wasn't completely obvious to me from the very beginning, though it became obvious pretty quickly. More importantly, the experts don't like that. So, I had a hard time disciplining the experts to stop giving me policy recommendations. And they would get [41:00] a little ticked off about that and say, "We want to meet with the co-chairs." And I would arrange a meeting with the co-chairs. It's all sort of a negotiation among them all.

Hamilton and Baker, they – the other members of the Iraq Study Group had, I would say, a deep appreciation for getting the expertise. I thought Gates, when he told me he read it all, that he didn't always like what the message was but he read it all, I think he was being completely sincere. I think Vernon Jordan was sincere in that respect. I think Panetta was. Sandra Day O'Connor was. But Baker and Hamilton are people who don't much appreciate experts.

SAYLE: I know the President met with the Group – twice, at least, I believe.

SERWER: Yeah. I wasn't at either meeting. I can't help you on those.

SAYLE: Did you have any sense after those meetings if those meetings [42:00] had affected anything within the Group, or the process, or the policy?

SERWER: I think the second of those meetings, which occurred not long before the report went to bed, I think –

SAYLE: That's right. It was November 13th.

SERWER: -- gave them reasonable confidence that the President would be receptive to the report. [laughter] Go figure, huh? Go figure.

SAYLE: One issue you've referred to a few times is national reconciliation, and that phrase holds a key place in the Iraq Report. And I think certainly it makes sense. If there had been national reconciliation everyone would have been happy to take it. What did that mean to the Group, or to you, to the experts? How did they see national reconciliation occurring? Is that the laws that the Group puts out? Is it –

SERWER: Well, yeah. I think there are some very specific recommendations [43:00] on changing the De-Ba'athification law, on rehiring more Army officers. I've forgotten all that's actually in the report. But I think I can say without hesitation that, if more of those things had been done, that we wouldn't be in the situation we're in today. We were just discussing this with Sadiq al-Rikabi. I mean, the fact of the matter is that Al-Qaeda and Islamic State find haven in weak states, and states are weak when they're not inclusive. And Iraq had – the occupation had made profound errors. No matter what Jerry Bremer says, they were profound

errors. And they needed to be corrected. [44:00] And they still haven't been corrected. I mean, even the oil law, which was a big deal in the Iraq Study Group report, has never been really fixed. They are dividing oil revenue. Let's be clear about this. It's not that nothing is happening. They are dividing oil revenue. But they have never resolved all the issues related to ownership of oil. I think we recommended something about deciding the territorial disputes with Kurdistan.

SAYLE: Yes.

SERWER: There is something in there? Well, that was terribly important. And it's very important today. So, I think in that sense, the report was hitting the right notes. Whether it said exactly the right things or not, I'm not so sure. But I think it was fundamentally correct on the analytical side.

SAYLE: Secretary Rumsfeld, throughout the period before the report, was apparently fond of the phrase, "It's time to take our hand off the bicycle." [45:00] And there is an idea – and it's also in the report – that Iraqis had a responsibility to cooperate or contribute to this national reconciliation. During 2006, what did you see as either the capacity, the willingness, the capability, of Iraqis to do that?

SERWER: Very limited. Very, very limited. Willingness and capacity, and I should tell you that I continued to work on the "R" question after this. I went to Iraq many times in 2007-2011 on a project. It was actually funded by other people, but I was a USIP participant. We formed the Reconciliation Caucus in the Parliament. We're trying to work out specific things to do to fix the situation. It's a very difficult

process, reconciliation. The problem is, it was conceived [46:00] by the Iraqis – I remember going to Iraq, it was probably before the report was done, and talking to their reconciliation people. Because they had a reconciliation office in the prime minister's office. And basically, the concept of – I've forgotten the name of the woman who headed it – the concept was, we pay off the Sunnis. We give them pensions, and they get the hell out of the army. And, they have to be satisfied.

And, you know, we're still talking about exactly the same issue. Because that was a misconception of what reconciliation is about. I've written on reconciliation since. Reconciliation starts with something very difficult. It starts with mutual acknowledgement of harm done. And that is really hard when you feel that you have been mistreated for [47:00] decades. A Shiite guy just said to me, "I went to Mosul for university. The only Shia in Mosul were the people who clean the toilets." And he said, "To this day –" He says it with passion, and he's not the most Shia nationalist guy I've ever met. But he did work for Maliki. For years, he was close to Maliki. And these feelings run deep. And for him to acknowledge that, "Yes, that's true, but look what was done to the Sunnis in the aftermath of the occupation." I mean, very difficult. Very, very difficult.

SAYLE: Well, and then in 2006, the security situation of course amplifies that to an extraordinary level.

SERWER: Right. Because when your relatives have been killed, how are you going to reconcile with these people? I always tell people, "Look, reconciliation is a nice

thing. But not everybody can do it. [48:00] And there are some things that I personally would find it difficult to be reconciled."

SAYLE: Certainly. Yeah, that makes sense. But I want to press on the security element, because I wonder if then the other half of the national reconciliation argument would be an environment where that acknowledgement of harm could be done.

SERWER: Sure. And that's what we – I mean, we went a long way in 2006-2007 with the Surge, but not only because of the Surge. And Petraeus has been very clear about this. He wrote a long piece for *Foreign Policy* at one point, in which he goes into all the various aspects of what people call "the Surge." And the key aspect of the surge, in my thinking, apart from the Sahwa and that kind of thing, which actually started before the surge, before the Iraq Study Group – boy I remember [49:00] talking to Sunnis about how they wanted to come help us, and we wouldn't listen to them. And we eventually – I think it was General Allen who really listened to them and helped them find a way. But the Surge – and we discussed this one day at the Pentagon, before the report was written. The idea of the Surge – the numbers were a consequence of what they were trying to do. What they were trying to do was embed the soldiers with the population. It was this capillary distribution of the Americans, that they thought – because it was part of – the implementation was directly related to the counterinsurgency manual that Petraeus had just finished writing. And that, to me, [50:00] was the essence of the Surge. The 60,000 – was that the number?

SAYLE: It was 30,000.

SERWER: Thirty?

SAYLE: Yes.

SERWER: Thirty thousand. That's even less than I thought. That was a number that arises to fulfill an objective. And the objective was to distribute the Americans much more thoroughly into the population. And it was limited by the availability of soldiers. So, calling it the Surge is just a misnomer. It was the – I don't know. You can't call it the "rivulets," but that was what it amounted to.

SAYLE: Right, getting out of the Forward Operating Bases –

SERWER: Getting out of the – yeah, out of the FOB, into the communities, being there with the police, with the army, and protecting the people. And they went a long way to doing that. [51:00] If you look at the numbers, they're really remarkable. They really do come down pretty close to pre-civil war levels. Because there really was a civil war. I forget what we did with that in the Iraq Study Group report. I don't think we called it a civil war.

SAYLE: No, I don't think it was quite so bald.

SERWER: But it was. I mean, we all knew it was.

SAYLE: Do you remember when – would that have been at your time at USIP, when you started to assess it that way, as a civil war?

SERWER: I thought it was a civil war by 2005. I didn't have many doubts about that.

SAYLE: Because of the inter-ethnic killing? That's the –

SERWER: It was much, much worse than the newspapers were reporting. It's always been much worse. Even as it died down, it was worse than the newspapers [52:00] were reporting. What happened was, it became less visible, because they weren't doing car bombs so much, because that was difficult to do given the security measures. But there were a lot of assassinations, with pistols with silencers.

SAYLE: And, one thing we're asking everyone is, where they got their information about that type of violence? And, is that from your visits there, from –

SERWER: Yeah, talking to people.

SAYLE: Talking to people, that's the – an Iraqi –

SERWER: Talking to people, constantly talking to people, constantly going to see this one and that one, inside the government, outside the government, trying to get a three-dimensional fix on the situation. And you only get that if you talk to a lot of different people. Derek Harvey. I went out to a conference one day in Virginia someplace where Derek presented. Wow, was he impressive. Very pessimistic. [53:00] Very pessimistic. I don't remember the year for that, but it was probably during this process. That's how I know Derek.

SAYLE: In that same era, there was an argument occurring as to the role that the presence of American troops were having in the violence. There's this argument that the Iraqi society was developing antibodies against the American presence. There were other arguments that American troops were preventing a Srebrenica-type event. How did you assess that? Do you recall?

SERWER: It's hard to assess. I think there's no doubt, but that the more Americans in more vulnerable positions did create some target-rich environments for bad people. I don't think there's any doubt about it. I don't know. Later we – [54:00] that was more Afghanistan. We had green-on-green violence. You know, I mean – how do you sleep at night? Jesus. You're with these policemen out there and you can't trust them. I think there's no doubt – but I'd have to look at the numbers, whether they surged with the Surge or not. I imagine they did, that the American deaths surged during that period.

SAYLE: Yes, they did initially. And yes, that's right.

SERWER: Yeah. But those are the risks you have to take. That's why the President is paid the big bucks. And I wouldn't – to tell you the truth, I wouldn't deny President Bush a moment's credit for what he did. I think he did the right thing. The problem is that he did the wrong thing when he invaded. Nothing after that – you know, I've written two chapters for books about [55:00] the American occupation. And in both chapters, my sense was that the Americans lost the peace, they lost the stabilization period, in the first days and weeks. It's not that they didn't do the right things. They did do the right things, but they did them too late. And over and over, they did the right things.

When Ayatollah Sistani said, "We are not writing a constitution without an elected body," the Americans changed their minds and got something elected that could write a constitution. So they made a lot of corrections along the way. And a

lot of the corrections were good corrections, but they never caught up. And you never will catch up if you go in that unprepared. [56:00] Because they were totally unprepared for the post-war period, just totally unprepared. The only things they were prepared on were things that were handled fairly well or didn't happen. They were prepared for two things: the humanitarian crisis – George Ward was in charge of that for (ORHA) Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. And he was well-prepared, partly because we know how to do humanitarian crisis. And the flaring of the oil wells; they were afraid that they would destroy the oil wells. And those are the only two things they were prepared for, and those two things didn't happen.

They weren't prepared for law and order. I went to see Michael Mobbs, the Head of – ORHA was the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. But it had three pillars, and the pillar that was not named was Civilian Administration. [57:00] Michael Mobbs was Head of Civilian Administration. And we went to see him before they deployed to Kuwait – before the war, basically. And my colleagues and I from USIP went to see him, because we had been working on some papers for the administration, some thinking for the administration, all of which was ignored. And we asked him, "What are you planning to do about police?" And he said, "We're planning a 90-day assessment mission." And we walked out of that office just appalled. You don't have 90 days for an assessment mission. You have to go in knowing what you're going to do about police. Maybe

you still send an assessment mission. How much do you retrain? But you have to know what the police are going to do the day after you arrive in Baghdad.

And it was that, more than anything else, that really damaged the [58:00] whole enterprise. Because that destruction of the ministries and sending the police home was just first-rate stupid. They sent the police, as well as the military, home initially, then they called back the police. But that destruction of the ministries that occurred, with Rumsfeld essentially saying, "Boys will be boys, what can I do about it?" was a planned stay-behind operation. We know that. It's well-documented now. And we should have known that was going to happen, because we planned stay-behind operations during the Cold War to counter the Soviets. It was lunacy that they weren't prepared for that.

And, literally – you'll talk to Steve Hadley, presumably, or you already have. Well, I shouldn't say who said this to me. Somebody told me that they pestered [59:00] General Franks repeatedly about the question of the day after. And General Franks responded, "Why the hell are you bothering me with that? I'm about to go to war with – I don't know – the fourth largest army, or something like that. And you people are bothering me about rear area security," which is the military term for governance after a war. "Rear area security." He absolutely refused to think about it, he didn't know what ORHA was for, he didn't provide any support to ORHA at all. When they got to Baghdad, they didn't have cell

phones, they didn't have offices, they didn't have computers. They had absolutely nothing. So, that's when the war was lost.

SAYLE: I wonder – and that was a great historical summary [01:00:00] – if you could maybe put the Iraq Study Group report in a sort of a broader picture of the American experience in Iraq. How should we remember the Iraq Study Group report?

SERWER: I think we should remember it for having clearly analyzed how badly the war was going, as having made some useful suggestions for how to fix the situation, and as having been rejected by the President of the United States, who then did a lot of the things that were in it, but felt the political need to reject the report. But I'm just a little old professor. I am very proud of what we did. The quality was off the charts. [01:01:00] And the fact that it wasn't taken by the President is just part of the game.

SAYLE: Well, thank you very much professor.

SERWER: You're welcome.

CRAWFORD: Before we end, we always ask the participants if there's anything they want to say on camera that will be sealed or closed.

SAYLE: We have to stop the camera and then turn it back on and do that.

CRAWFORD: Yes, if you want to do that.

SAYLE: We just have to stop the camera first.

CRAWFORD: Hang on.

[After the interview was completed Dr. Serwer invited the interviewers to turn the camera back on so he could provide more information.]

SERWER: What the paper on lustration that was prepared by USIP said was, "Don't do it in one fell swoop."

SAYLE: That's the De-Ba'athification –

SERWER: "That's not the way you do it. The way this is done effectively is to do it once, do it again, do it again – you never get them all in the first go, and you don't want to destroy the institutions." And we had people who had experience with this in East Germany and other places. The other thing they said was, "Look, [01:02:00] you can't tell what so-and-so did during the Saddam Hussein regime on the first interview. So, you give them a piece of paper that says, 'Here are the illegal acts I performed. Here are the people I murdered.' And have them sign that paper. Nobody will admit to anything, of course. But have them sign that paper. Because then, when you discover that he did do some of those things, you can fire him right away based on the signature. Not based on what he did, but he lied on the form." The US Government does this with all its employees. US Government employment requires, I think even today, they require a signature that says,

"Everything I'm telling you is true. And if it's not true, you can fire me." And that's the right way to handle this.

SAYLE: So, the idea would be to start at the top level and then work your way down [01:03:00] as necessary? Is that the idea?

SERWER: Well, no. They thought – well, you ask me to remember a paper from nine years ago. It's probably still on my computer.

SAYLE: Right. But I'm just curious about the repetitions.

SERWER: Well, I'm not sure. Well, you certainly had to do the upper levels. And you couldn't do everyone all at once, so you were going to start at the upper levels. But there was no patience for that. There was just no patience for that. You've seen *No End in Sight*, the documentary film. I mean, you know that Paul Hughes was blindsided by the decision.

SAYLE: So, the common historical analogy is made to De-Nazification, but I think what you're telling us: there are many historical examples where old regimes have been sort of vetted in this way. And there are other examples to draw on, and that's what USIP was presenting?

SERWER: Yeah. I've forgotten the examples we were drawing on, but we had [01:04:00] experts from several countries. De-Nazification – there are a lot of myths about De-Nazification. It really hit only the very top people initially. And a lot of people were let off. A lot of people were let off. They're still finding them. So, it was nothing like what was done with De-Ba'athification in Iraq, which was a terrible,

terrible error. An error that Jerry Bremer insists the Kurds insisted on, and that may very well be right. But that doesn't mean we had to do it for them.

SAYLE: You have extensive experience in the Balkans. What lessons or practices from the Balkans worked for Iraq, in your understanding, or could have worked, and which didn't apply? How can we compare those two conflicts?

SERWER: Well, it's very difficult to compare, because the dimensions are so different. [01:05:00] Bosnia is a country of four million people, Kosovo fewer than two million people. Iraq is a country of – I've forgotten exactly what it is, 26 million, or something like that. It's a completely different order of magnitude. The scale of the problems in Iraq, both in terms of numbers of people, but also in terms of the level of violence involved – we never – in Bosnia we deployed, I think it was 60,000 peacekeepers. No peacekeeper has ever been killed in Bosnia by hostile fire. The warring parties accepted the outcome. The warring parties in Iraq weren't accepting the outcome. One thing I'll tell you, that I think is really quite important and not enough discussed [01:06:00] in the literature, and that is the failure of the Bush Administration – and this really was stupid – to obtain a surrender. Gulf War, an Iraqi general sat down and signed a surrender with General Schwarzkopf, and the war was over, and there was a withdrawal plan. No – the Bush Administration, both in Afghanistan and in Iraq, did not want to dignify their enemy by letting them sign a surrender. But I think the whole situation in Iraq would have been very, very different had a surrender been signed.

I think it's very hard to picture the stay-behind operation working as well as it did if there had been a surrender signed. I think you would have captured Saddam Hussein much more quickly. Big mistake [01:07:00] not to obtain a surrender. It didn't matter who the hell the guy was, if he had a general's uniform on. You set him up there, and he surrenders on behalf of the president. That's my way of ending a war. And it's a mistake not to end wars that way. Everybody's writing about how we no longer declare wars. The Bush Administration didn't end wars. And they didn't end. Maybe there's a connection between those two facts.

SAYLE: OK. Thank you very much for your time today, Professor.

SERWER: OK.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]