

The Surge – Collective Memory Project

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[Begin Transcription]

Feaver: Thank you. Thank you, Philip, for being here. Can you tell us what was your position in the government and what, in that position, was your responsibilities for Iraq?



Zelikow: Sure. I was Counselor of the Department of State from the beginning of 2005 to the beginning of 2007. It's worth explaining: the Counselor of the Department of State is not, as some people might think, a legal advisor's job. It's a very – it's a pretty old job with the State Department. It goes back – in its modern form – it was created in 1937. It's traditionally [00:01:00] been a place where the Secretary of State has a deputy who has no formal portfolio, except whatever the Secretary of State wants that deputy to do. That's actually the way it was originally created, and that's actually the way it existed when I held the job.

When I took the job, I was not taking the place of a predecessor. Colin Powell had not filled the position, and – but Condi, the Secretary of State, revived the job and had me fill it at the beginning of '05, and I stayed there for a couple of years. The responsibility she gave me was to be her formal deputy in all matters related to intelligence and all matters related to terrorism and homeland security, so I would represent the department in all the Deputies' meetings on those subjects. [00:02:00] Then, in addition, she would deputize me on various policy issues that came up. Probably the ones that occupied most of my time during those two years were the Iraq War, North Korea and Northeast Asia, and India, and South Asia, also the Middle East, including the Middle East peace process, Iran, and other wonderful, easy-to-solve problems. I accompanied Secretary Rice on all of her trips to just about any place in the Northern Hemisphere. Steve



Krasner tended to go on all the trips to the Southern Hemisphere, like Africa and Latin America. [00:03:00]

So, to turn to the subject of today's session, on Iraq, just take a moment to explain the organization of the State Department during this period on Iraq policy. Iraq, by the beginning of 2005, was obviously a very large portfolio, so you had the Near Eastern Bureau, which had a swollen Iraq office. The acronym would be NEA/I. But then, in addition, to kind of coordinate and look over all the various State Department roles with respect to Iraq, there was kind of a special representative of the Secretary for Iraq, basically a job above the Bureau that was lodged in the Office of the Secretary. The acronym for this would usually be S/I. And –

Feaver: And that was?

Zelikow: And different people held that job [00:04:00] over those two years, most notably – I'm actually struggling to recall who had the S/I job in '05. And that – not immediately coming to me. For a significant period – for a period of time in '06, it seems like Jim Jeffrey had the job. He had been the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] in Iraq for John Negroponte and then had come back. And then David Satterfield was the S/I person during the period in which the key decisions were made about the Surge in late 2006 and into 2007.

Now, it's worth explaining that here I am, I'm the deputy of the Secretary for all these different issues; on none of these issues, maybe with the exception of

perhaps the intelligence and terrorism issues, in none of these issues on which I worked [00:05:00] did I have the line responsibility, so it's potentially an awkward situation in which I'm always being asked, essentially, to intervene on behalf of the Secretary in the portfolio of one of her line managers, and that was certainly true in the case of Iraq, and, to some degree. It turns out in general my personal relations, however, with most of the State Department officials were good, and with a notable exception in East Asia, but with respect to Iraq, not a – this was not a significant problem.

So the ordinary routine would be that in the many, many interagency meetings on Iraq, if the Secretary did not go herself, usually her representative of those meetings at the sub-Cabinet level would be the Iraq coordinator, the S/I person. I would rarely go to such meetings. [00:06:00] But if the meeting was especially important, I might then go as the Secretary's deputy. And there are some important occasions. And then, for instance, when the Surge meetings got going in November 2006, those were very important, and then I went as the Secretary's deputy, usually accompanied by the Iraq coordinator, and then after those meetings I would write notes to the Secretary on what I thought had happened.

Feaver: On – you –

Zelikow: Oh, let me just clarify one more thing to just help explain my role and my job that's important. One of the advantages of my not having the line portfolio on



Iraq is greater bureaucratic agility and freedom to move. So the way she used me, to borrow an expression, is almost a kind of directed searchlight. So I [00:07:00] traveled to Iraq at least a dozen times during these two years, some of the trips quite lengthy and wide-ranging, where I would crisscross the country. Because, you see, I wasn't kind of the formal line manager, I wasn't encumbered by the same responsibilities to meet all the Iraqi officials and conduct all the ordinary business. I was free just kind of to work on broader policy review. So in these trips, for instance, I would typically be only accompanied by one staffer, two soldiers as a personal detail, the commander would put a helicopter at our disposal, we'd create a schedule, and I would hop around, and it gave me a lot of flexibility to go to places and meet with more ordinary soldiers and groups of diplomats and teams of people outside of Baghdad.

Feaver: Just two more [00:08:00] org chart questions. One is: did PM play much of a role in this – in the Iraq story, and what was that role? And secondly, did you have your own staff, and did you have someone on your own staff with Iraq as their portfolio?

Zelikow: PM is the acronym for the Bureau of Political Military Affairs at the State Department. And actually, on the Iraq War they did not play an important part. They – I worked with PM on other issues, but – including Iran, and Persian Gulf security to some degree – but in general, no, they did not play an important part. My personal staff was quite small, really consisting, aside from my secretary, one



or two staffers, one or two special assistants. [00:09:00] And I was blessed in having extremely capable special assistants in both years. The first year my special assistant was Celeste Ward, now Celeste Gventer, who left my employ at the beginning of '06 to become the political advisor to the corps commander in Iraq, and she had prior experience in Iraq before she went to work for me. And then my special assistant the second year was David Aidekman but he didn't work so much on Iraq.

Feaver: So one has to begin the Surge story somewhere. Fall of 2006 is too late to begin the story. When would you begin the Surge story and your involvement in that?

Zelikow: Sure. Reflecting back on the war, [00:10:00] partly as a historian – I wear these different hats – it does seem to me that looking back on the war, there's almost a cyclical pattern now of what I would call catastrophes and rescues. I believe we are now in the third such cycle. After the invasion, there was a slow slide to catastrophe, with the violent climax occurring in the second half of 2004, in which the US position in Iraq, I think, was genuinely imperiled, and it was – there were some desperate times, and a lot of people were killed. There were very bloody, big-unit fights in several parts of Iraq during the second half of 2004. [00:11:00] By the beginning of 2005, there was a sense that we've pulled ourselves back from the brink, we've just held elections, and, people breathing a sigh of relief, we can kind of now begin to get this back on track.

But when I come in, this is after a period of acute crisis, and so there's a sense of, We've pulled it out, though some of that was illusory, because what begins in 2005 is another slow slide, again, back into chaos, violent chaos, which was already pretty intense by the fall of 2005, and then became so extreme no one could ignore it by the middle of 2006, and finally, perhaps belatedly, leads then to another rescue phase, [00:12:00] which people often call the Surge, in 2007 and 2008, and then the sense of, OK, we've saved Iraq, which is palpable by the summer of 2008, and with some justice.

I went back to Iraq on behalf – at the request of General Petraeus, and also reporting to the Deputies' Committee, it turns out, though as a private citizen in 2008. And perhaps we might touch on that briefly. And then you can argue, then, that basically from the end of 2008, really, until maybe 2013, another long, slow slide, again, back into catastrophe. And we are now in the midst of endeavoring another rescue, which, as we're speaking here in – at the end of March 2015, [00:13:00] Pauline has not yet been rescued, but is – there is a rescue process underway.

Feaver: So –

Zelikow: So then that framework,

Feaver: Right.

Zelikow: So I'm coming in at a period in which people think they've pulled it back from the brink, and so there's basically a process of deterioration, and discovery that no,



actually, the equilibrium is not stable. It's actually deteriorating, and beginning to deteriorate fairly rapidly. And then a series of efforts that begin in the fall of 2005 to try to advocate that the US government should make a massive effort of some kind to turn this around. Actually, and in that particular story, [00:14:00] the Surge effort was the fourth wave of attempts to turn US policy around and redouble our efforts in Iraq, and the one – I guess in this case the fourth time was a charm, though by that time the situation was so extreme the President was faced with very stark choices. And so the background and context for the Surge, then, it's very important to understand, and is not really well visible from the literature, is it's the kind of, if you would, the fourth in a series of efforts to change the strategy with a massively redoubled effort, with increasing – and in each case more and more articulated what that redoubled effort ought to look like. So – and the [00:15:00] Surge actually represents the final implementation of such a vision. So if it would help, perhaps, I can try to briefly recapitulate kind of the context of these efforts and the seeds that they plant –

Feaver: Please.

Zelikow: -- for the debates that then occur in the fall of 2006. If at any point there's some particular subtopic that you'd like me to dive into, I'll be glad to do that. As another prefatory matter, it's useful for people considering this in the future to understand that there really was not one Iraq War. In my view, there were five or six different wars going on in Iraq, and the oversimplification of this leads to a lot



of confusion, and it [00:16:00] also tends to identify the war in Baghdad with the war in Iraq, the battle for Baghdad. By five or six different wars, I don't just mean that it was decentralized and often tactical, that it was a war of battalion and brigade commanders, though that is true. It was a war very much fought at the community level. I don't mean that. I actually mean literally different wars in the sense of different combatants, with different issues in play, different strategies required.

So just to briefly recapitulate this, because a lot of this is very easily lost now, if you were to go from north to south, you have one war that is concentrated Mosul and points west, towards the Syrian border, though actually – one of the current focal points of struggle now. Mosul doesn't get enough attention.

[00:17:00] It's the second largest city in Iraq, very important, but at the beginning of 2005 we had had a bloody fight for Mosul, and that was urban fighting, and very difficult urban fighting, quite different – had some analogies to what was going on in Fallujah, for example, but different. So in the battle in Mosul and points west, your basic combatants are Sunna versus Sunna and Sunna versus Kurd, and you're working Syrian infiltration routes, and a principal combatant is Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

If you go a little further east and south, there is a complex of fights that you could say generally revolve around the axis of Kirkuk to Tikrit [00:18:00] that are trilateral in some respects – Kurds, Sunnas, and Shias, but also Sunna versus Sunna. There's actually not much urban fighting in Kirkuk itself, which was

basically secure, but then a lot of fighting – near Kirkuk, around control of the energy and transportation routes that were vital to Baghdad, coming down from the Baiji oil field and going south, and then in Tikrit more Sunna versus Sunna. Again, the Kirkuk-Tikrit axis is another principal battlefield today. And again, that had a dynamic of its own, different players on the battlefield, different strategies involved.

Then you have a third battle area, which is metro Baghdad. Baghdad has, if my memory is right, at least one fourth of the whole population of Iraq. And you can define [00:19:00] Baghdad narrowly or to define it to include what we would call the Baghdad belts, which are kind of the gateway points surrounding the main transport arteries in and out of Baghdad, which were predominantly Sunna communities, mainly to the west, and sometimes that was the responsibility of the people in Anbar. It would kind of shift back and forth. The battle for Baghdad, which was much more of an interethnic civil conflict, Sunna on Shia, but then also with the dimension of Shia versus Shia, which would become especially important in the bloody fights of '07, 2007, principally Shia versus Shia fights, in a way.

And if that's a third area, then a fourth area would be to the west in Anbar province, entirely Sunna versus Sunna. And again, [00:20:00] concentrated among this kind of chain of cities along the Euphrates River Valley, from Fallujah, Ramadi, all the way out to Rawa in the west. And then if you go south – then if you go south there is a battle space centered on Basra, but also including Najaf, and where

there is a proxy struggle for control of the great oil resources that are concentrated in the south, the absolutely vital transport arteries for the entire US presence, which go right through that bottleneck. And that's a Shia versus Shia fight entirely, in which your main enemy are Iranian supported militias fighting against various local leaders of varying legitimacy. And so different – [00:21:00] five or six different fights, different dynamics, and this becomes important also later in assessing the Surge, and what the Surge accomplished, where it accomplished it, which we should circle back to later on.

So then to cycle back to the story and return to a narrative, the basic idea to start with is when I made my first trip to Iraq, which was in February of '05 – actually before I'd even formally started work as Counselor and settled into my office, I spent a week and a half in Iraq on what was then called the Jones team. This was an effort – as Secretary of State took office, the President approved an interagency effort to review how things were going in Iraq. It was nominally led by an ambassador named [00:22:00] Dick Jones, who had worked for the Coalition Provisional Authority, but I wrote the report for the group, and Ray Odierno was the military member of the team, which also included representatives from AID and so on. This report was later given to Bob Woodward, so you can read excerpts from it in his book. This is the one where I said that Iraq is a failed state, and that, again, making some recommendations as to how to get it back on track.



I'll note that at the time I wrote that I was not attempting to be sensational, and did not think that I was saying anything inflammatory. It was read later as kind of wild waving of hands. I thought it was just a very matter-of-fact statement of things that would be obvious to anyone who spent a lot of time going around Iraq. But – [00:23:00] I, at the time, was not conscious of the fact that as folks had come out of the crisis and thought, OK, we pulled ourselves back, and there was a sense of we've had the elections, we're on track, that to some people it would be jarring to read a report that kind of opens up matter-of-factly saying this is a failed state, and we've – you've got to now try to rebuild some sort of administrative capacities in this state on a whole series of fronts, including some of these security issues, including an effort – we've got to get a lot of administrative capacity out of the central government apparatus in Baghdad and out into the field, where it's going to make a difference in the war.

At this time, I was new to Iraq. I was not myself a subject matter expert in Iraq. I had worked on Iraq a lot in the White House during the first Gulf War of 1990, 1991, and I'd been a member of the NSC staff, [00:24:00] and had worked on coalition management during that war and had later written a case study on US policy toward Iraq during this period, which was later published. But I wouldn't regard myself as a regional expert. I didn't speak Arabic. My regional background, my language – foreign language was German, and my regional background had been in European security. But I'd gotten involved in some of these issues. So



when I went to Iraq in February, I did not by any means think that I knew it all, or figured everything out.

What happens then, at least for me, and I think to some degree for Condi, as well, and certainly for Condi's inner circle, the five or six people who she would routinely look to every day in informal discussions, is an increasing sense of [00:25:00] disillusionment and almost bewilderment in a search for what is our strategy in Iraq. I came in assuming that we had some kind of strategy for Iraq, and I just needed to figure out what it was. And I would say probably not until the summer did I actually finally begin coming to the conclusion that there is no there there, that there really was no strategy.

Now, I can imagine people sitting in a chair talking to you who would violently object to that statement—Well, of course we had a strategy. So let me just explain what the way I would think of a strategy is. The way it looked to me is we're training Iraqis and we're going to get out. And Iraqis are going to take over. We're [00:26:00] building up the Iraqis so that we can get out; that's the strategy. To me, though, that's not a strategy for the war. In the war, what are your operational objectives for military operations, and then the political things that would go with that? I mean, what are you actually trying to do substantively in the war? You couldn't say, "Well, we don't have a strategy for the war; the Iraqis have a strategy for the war, because we're training the Iraqis to fight." OK, well, what's the Iraqi strategy for the war? But actually, that's a silly question to ask because



the Iraqi army had no strategic capability. That is, we had amputated the higher order functions of the Iraqi army. We were training field combat units, but all the higher order functions of where to deploy units and what their goals would be and all of that [00:27:00] were being performed in the American command by the – in the coalition command at Camp Victory.

So a substantive question would then be, OK, like, what's the strategy – what's the campaign strategy? A strategy would – a proper strategy would have operational objectives, which are ways of saying we define success by doing the following things that we – and these are things we will know if we have done them. See, if you have operational objectives of some kind, then you can do what a military planner would call troop-to-task analysis. And so, OK, we're going to try to perform the following tasks, and these tasks require this many soldiers and airmen and Marines. And the struggle I was having I kept looking for with the troop-to-task analysis, because one of the issues from the start had been do we have enough soldiers. [00:28:00]

In my very first trip to Iraq, I remember having a private conversation with Jim Jeffrey, who was then the DCM to John Negroponte, who was the ambassador but was going to be leaving soon to become the DNI. And Jeffrey–I was still trying to piece together kind of what actually happened here in '03 and '04, because I'm kind of jumping into this job, and we're already in a six-foot-deep hole, and I was just trying to – how did we get in this hole? And Jeffrey – and I heard this later



from Bob Blackwill, who knows the '03-04 period well – that very quietly and, “Well, most of the problems here just need a couple more divisions.” It’s just like never – were never enough troops. And so one of the issues, then, is do we have enough troops. And then it’s like, [00:29:00] OK, what’s the analysis? So here are our tasks. Here’s the way we’ve analyzed how many troops we require to perform these tasks. And I never found a broad troop-to-task analysis for the campaign. See, if you don’t have a strategy that has military objectives, then it’s very – then you don’t really need a troop-to-task analysis, because you haven’t really defined any tasks, except things like, well, we’re going to train X number of Iraqi units; we need so on, such and such many trainers; we’re going to hold various combat posts. But that’s not really what we think of as a strategy.

Feaver: So just to clarify, the – what was called then the Casey Campaign Plan you’re saying was not a strategy –

Zelikow: Correct.

Feaver: -- at least in '05.

Zelikow: That is – that was the conclusion I eventually came to, but for a while I assumed that I’m just still so new here [00:30:00] and clueless that I haven’t figured it out. And I kept – I would meet, actually – I would wait – in Camp Victory, I’d meet with Casey’s strategy team. It was just led by a two-star, eight officers, and we’d spend two hours discussing this stuff, and I got to see the papers, talks about the campaign plan, and then I read all the annexes to the campaign plan, which were

like A through J. And I just kept digging and digging, and I just couldn't find it. It was a strategy that was almost like talking points. It was like, Here. Basically, here are goals, like train Iraqis, electricity, you know, broad goals, and then, Here is what we are doing.

So the context is important because all the different struggles that would come [00:31:00] culminating in the Surge argument, at some level, is not so much an argument about how to change the strategy; it's an argument to have a strategy. Unless your strategy was simply to get out. How do you get out? But in that case, like, what even then was the strategy to get out? There's an interesting question that I mulled over a lot as this became clear, kind of why this void.

Eventually, I came to conclude that the void was rooted in dysfunctions that went further back. And I've lately – I've since come to conclude that rooted in dysfunctions that date mainly from the spring and summer of 2003, because if I may just kind of – [00:32:00] It really, actually, is essential to understand the Rumsfeld approach to Iraq as the context for everything, and how strangely the US government was working during this period, because actually the Surge episode itself is an extremely strange policy making episode, and the strangeness of it becomes more understandable against the context of dysfunction at the top of the US government during the war in the preceding years.

And I was not there, and I'm still trying to fully understand what happened in '03, but my rough-and-ready version of this is that the usual criticism of



Rumsfeld and the Defense Department – You idiots, you didn’t prepare to occupy Iraq – completely misunderstands them. And their memoirs, actually – especially Feith’s memoir -- they’re very clear about this: [00:33:00] We didn’t prepare to occupy Iraq because we didn’t plan to occupy Iraq. Why would we prepare to do something we don’t plan to do? In fact, we don’t wish to occupy Iraq. In fact, if we prepare to occupy Iraq, someone might ask us to do it. They might think we are able to do it, and then they’d be tempted to ask us to do it. And so by – you definitely don’t want to prepare to do it.

Rumsfeld was so outspoken on this point, and Rumsfeld was completely in charge of preparations for the campaign and its aftermath by the White House, that a month before the invasion, in February of ’03, Rumsfeld gave a speech, – public speech entitled “Beyond Nation Building” – in which he almost brags that, we’re not going to do nation building in Iraq. We’re past that. So it’s not so much: “I’m learning [00:34:00] from experience in the ’90s in the Balkans. And it’s a way of answering the critics: You don’t – you just don’t understand us. We’re not planning to do this. So then the puzzle then is if, OK, we’re not planning to occupy Iraq, we’re not preparing to do it, we’re not going to do it, and we did it, despite being wholly unprepared, consciously, to do it. Now, that’s a kind of a straw premise, and people can push back.

So then I tried to understand how did that happen. And the Surge – I believe this is a first-class puzzle, by the way, which the solution to which is not



obvious, even to people who are close to it. But I believe that, in effect, during between about April and May and maybe into June the President, in effect, did a 180-degree turn and decided [00:35:00] we had to occupy Iraq. Now, I'm not sure the President knew, at the time, or was told that you are doing a 180-degree turn. I think the President said, We've knocked this thing down, and we have some sense of responsibility for this. We have to discharge our responsibilities. And then all the stuff about the way Bremer's role changed all flows from that.

I can't figure out when or how or if Secretary Rumsfeld and the President – where did the conversation happen which the Secretary says, Mr. President, we didn't prepare for this. We don't have the capability to do this. But I think partly, [00:36:00] for a while, too, they didn't think it would be so hard. So a combination, I'm going to do a 180 but I can do the 180 because it may not be all that hard, and this was influenced in part by the experience they had just had in Afghanistan, where it hadn't turned out to be that hard. Now, I'm not going to linger much longer on this, but the main point is that as this began to deteriorate in the spring and into the summer of '03, in effect, Rumsfeld, I think, never actually left his default position.

His default position had been we're going to go in, we're going to knock down Saddam Hussein, and get right out. That – by the way, in explaining him, I am not defending that position. I'm not saying that that was a prudent and [00:37:00] prescient approach. There were very acute dilemmas that were going to



arise, or even issues as to whether or not we even had enough forces to secure WMD, had the WMD been there, or even to secure the little fragments of WMD, like the chemical munitions we stumbled across, which we didn't have the resources to secure. So his plans can be faulted on a variety of grounds, but it's very important to understand his world and their argument, because there's a sense in which really from Rumsfeld's basic approach, which I think also was reinforced by Abizaid's basic approach – and it's not even worth discussing Franks; forgive me for saying so. It never changed, this, We should get in and get out as fast as we can. And [00:38:00] the whole goal here is to somehow get the Iraqis in charge of this and get us out of it. I sometimes think that it's ironic that Carl Levin and Don Rumsfeld detested each other; their fundamental premises about the Iraq intervention were the same.

But, so in a way you don't want – the strategic void that I'm discovering is, in part, a reluctance to have a strategy, it's reluctant to have any affirmative mission for US forces in Iraq at all, because you just wanted to get them out as fast as you can. But Rumsfeld probably is trying to reconcile that: yes, but the president is the Commander in Chief, so I have to at least do the minimum. But he's on this autopilot mode. And meanwhile, the responsibility for having active strategy to kind of run the damn thing in Iraq has shifted to Condi Rice at the White House. [00:39:00]



So if you do the history – like, the huge thing we do in '03 is this fantasy– because we're on our back foot. From April/May '03, we're on the back foot and never get off it, really. Maybe by the middle of '07. And we get this huge Iraq reconstruction fund money from the Congress, and this frantic effort, more than \$20 billion worth of assistance appropriated by the Congress, but if you then dig into that it's pretty much almost completely done by the White House, leading that, in this really kind of heroic effort of improvisation. It's like, OK, we're going to do this. NSC staff is cobbling together this enormous exertion to get this thing going, working. And the White House ends up running CPA [Coalition Provisional Authority], though CPA is still nominally reporting to DoD. [00:40:00] And then Condi's hiring Bob Blackwill to be her deputy, and manage relations with Bremer, who Bob knows from way back. So here I am, to move this back forward into '05, I'm just kind of discovering – I'm kind of slowly figuring out some of the absence of the strategy, but it's rooted in all of this.

And also, this underlying dysfunction in which at some level the President and the Secretary of Defense are not – though they are meeting constantly – are never really talking directly about this fundamental difference in premises. Because – and one of the things that makes this so hard to understand, but is very important to stress, it's not like President Bush was inattentive to what was going on in Iraq. President Bush was passionately interested in what was going on in Iraq, cared deeply about it. [00:41:00] He would chair NSC meetings on Iraq



virtually every single week, without fail. He was asking Meghan to write him, like, daily notes, like what happened in Iraq every day. He's intensely curious about what's going on, But despite scores of presidential meetings on Iraq, these readings – these meetings, by '05, had acquired a stylized, routine quality, and maybe you – Peter, you attended one or more of these – in which how can you meet on Iraq 40 or 50 times and not discuss these basic issues? And then you have to kind of understand the stylized and routinized way the process was working then, in which kind of you do the briefing on all the things we're doing, and all the little tactical things that go with that, which can easily burn up all your time. And the dog barks [00:42:00] and the caravan moves on.

Feaver: So we need to bring you up to 2006, but the last sort of scene setter is the NSSI in the late fall of 2005, which is –

Zelikow: NSVI?

Feaver: Yes, yes, yes, sorry, NSVI, drawing from the NSSI.

Zelikow: Yeah.

Feaver: So describe that and how that leads into 2006, but then we do need to get to 2006.

Zelikow: Right. So basically in '05, we come to the conclusion that the situation for the President is becoming desperate, the absence of a strategy. And the communications people are really intense about this, because the President is just visibly just getting beaten up as '05 goes on. The President keeps giving speeches



essentially saying why Iraq is important, but he's been giving those speeches for years, and he's made those arguments, [00:43:00] and actually, the American people are willing to concede Iraq may be important; they just want to know what's your story for where this is going. And we don't even have a story to tell. The President can't describe the strategy.

And so we – the Secretary – Rice is very reluctant to step out to offer a strategy, not because she's shy but because fundamentally ascribing a military strategy for Iraq, or a political-military strategy, should principally be led by the Defense Department, or by the Command—it has to come somewhere from the Commanders. And she's reluctant, as a Secretary of State, to basically step in and say, "Well, since you can't do it, I'm going to do it." But we decide that we actually do need to do that. Now, this is preceded by a fairly important trip that I made in [00:44:00] September of '05, after which I write a fairly lengthy paper with a number of recommendations, including recommendations to begin confronting Iranians directly and violently on the battlefield, as the Iranian problem is becoming really quite dangerous by September of '05. And in addition to the paper, which, if you read the paper, the paper doesn't say we need more troops – it says, I think, that Casey doesn't want more troops – but it's very hard to read through the recommendations and not think. It clearly calls for a redoubled effort without doing troop-to-task analysis, which I was reluctant to do. But then Condi asked me to brief that paper around town, and asked people to see me. And so



doors were opened for me, and I developed a set of slides, which were more forthcoming [00:45:00] than the paper, and which were not given to Bob Woodward, which just – which plainly called – we need to have a massively redoubled effort in Iraq, we need to plan it now in the fall of '05 so that it is ready to go and launches in March of '06, in conjunction with the election. The time to make these decisions are now if you want something ready by the spring. And that's briefed to Steve Hadley, to the Pentagon, to Gordon England and Pete Pace, Scooter – I discussed it with Scooter Libby, to the DNI, others. Then, Condi decides that she's going to go ahead and make a statement about strategy in the testimony she's been invited to give in October of '05. I draft that testimony.

That's the testimony that then has the “clear, hold, and build” phrase, which I drafted. [00:46:00] Actually, I drafted initially “clear and hold,” and when I was sending the draft around in the darkened airplane in which this was being done, Ray Odierno said, “No, you have to add ‘build.’” So I put in “build,” so it's “clear, hold, and build.” And that was a deliberate effort to find some way of synthesizing an easy catchphrase to describe a positive, affirmative military strategy. It was not a deeply original and creative concept, to have a strategy for counterinsurgency of “clear, hold, and build.” I was synthesizing both some things that had come out of a red team exercise that had been done in Iraq by a group of colonels, which you may know [gestures to Feaver] – I think you know about – which I had seen. Now, I'm not sure if I was supposed to, but I had. I talked to the colonels. Tony Blair

had seen it. And though they had an oil spot strategy, which I did not agree with, [00:47:00] which is like one oil spot spread outward – if you understand my point about five or six different wars, you have to have at least five or six different oil spots, to borrow that metaphor. And my approach was structured that way, and then you had to – but you still had to pick your spots with this “clear, hold, and build” approach in all these different major sectors.

So the key struggle then is – so “clear, hold, and build” is announced, and, as Woodward’s book describes, there is this violent reaction from Secretary Rumsfeld, and from General Casey, more privately, to the State Department’s articulation of the strategy. The White House backs – essentially, the White House backs [00:48:00] Condi up and says, “Yep, ‘clear, hold, and build,’ and we’re going to incorporate that now into the NSVI, the National Strategy Victory in Iraq, documents.” And then Rumsfeld has this amazing press conference¹ where he – you just really have to read to believe – in which he says – he denounces this saying this is all Iraqi strategy. We’re two and a half years into the war, and he thinks the Iraqis are doing the military strategy in the field? That is so weird that we need different kinds of specialists to understand this. But the consequences are significant. Because it means that rhetorically we’ve now moved to an affirmative statement of this strategy, with White House endorsement.

¹ Press conference currently unidentified.



It doesn't translate into action in the field. [00:49:00] Rumsfeld and Casey basically, to a significant practice, ignore this and do nothing concrete about it. So this – I'm not telling this, really, as a success story. This is isn't – kind of a failure story. This is really the first concerted effort to get a big, massive, redoubled effort going in Iraq, and it kind of fails, because Rumsfeld and Casey.

And Casey believes, by the way, that I, Philip Zelikow, have personally betrayed him by not having informed him ahead of time of my views, and that this was coming. I, in turn, since the representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had been with me at every stage in formulation of this, I kind of thought that the military was being informed. And, in fact, Condi's testimony [00:50:00] had been circulated for clearance in advance, and had been cleared by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And there was no response from the Secretary of Defense's Office, but the Chairman had cleared it. So the notion that the Chairman has cleared it, his representative is fully cognizant of this from the get-go, and George Casey doesn't know about it, this surprised me. I had not intended to dish George, but very awkward and difficult for me in that bureaucratic environment to have private conversations on the QT on matters like this between me and George. And – but it's important because he reacts to this in a way that blocks it. And then we move into '06.

Feaver: And so that effort, you say, fails. When is the next effort starting?



Zelikow: The next effort starts in early '06, and it's designed to, [00:51:00] OK, let's try to use the period surrounding the election and the installation of a new Iraqi government for a concerted political-military effort to turn the corner in Iraq. Now, I want to comment here that there is a widespread view in the literature that oh Samarra, there's the –

Feaver: Golden mosque.

Zelikow: -- February '06, I think, the attack on the mosque in Samarra, and then the equilibrium we had in Iraq was shattered. I think this is significantly mistaken. The civil war had already begun by September of '05. I wrote in my report and I briefed very candidly, and everyone in Baghdad knew, that there was already widespread interethnic killings going on in Baghdad in September of '05, that Interior Ministry death squads were picking up people in vans. [00:52:00] We were discovering there's lots of pretty gruesome stuff. I was close to some of this, and really gruesome stuff was being done to people, torture, kind of laboratories and stuff in which we knew the Interior Ministry was deeply involved. And I used the term "death squads" are going around killing people in Baghdad with Steve Hadley in September of '05 when I briefed him on this, because I remember it because when I used that he reacted with some – he was startled. And I sensed that he had not heard that. But that's five months before Samarra.

So the – by early '06 we had this notion we need to have like – this is a time we thought of a 180-day plan. Maybe you even remember. And this was the time



in which we then had this notion, and we worked with the White House communications people on this, who, again, were very interested in getting some [00:53:00] propulsive story going, that Condi and Rumsfeld would join together, common plan, Condi and Don would go to Baghdad together. That's the origin of that ill-fated trip of Condi and Don traveling together to Baghdad, and the plan would have these – it was all written out. There were these three phases. And my sense is the White House bought this, and in the first phase political, military – it fizzled. Really, it looked good on paper in Washington, but it never really translated into what we hoped it would translate into in the field that really meant much, and there was, yeah, an Operation Together Forward, but –

Feaver: In that timeframe, the fizzling phase is when?

Zelikow: [00:54:00] I would say spring – late winter, early spring of '06, like February, March, April. Now, a lot of Washington energy is being expended now on the new government and Iraqi politics. But meanwhile, everything else on security and stabilization, which is a complex political-military effort, is stalling. There are a few exceptions here and there. I'm actually kind of proud about the PRT effort. I drafted the cable to establish PRTs in Iraq in September of '05. Odierno worked with me on this, and I must say that Ambassador Khalilzad was not especially helpful in this process. And these PRTs were quite different from what had been done in Afghanistan, were designed in a much more substantial. [00:55:00]



And at the same time, Secretary Rice was really going out on the limb to shake up the State Department and get State Department people much more onto the field, get more officers to volunteer for service in Iraq and Afghanistan, and this is all of a piece. And some of that was going forward. The PRTs were launching. Some of that was positive. But I'd say that that second, then, effort surrounding the concerted State-DoD effort fizzled by early-mid spring, and then there was a third effort. The third effort, I think, really gets going sometime in the late spring. And a couple of signposts – the culmination of that effort was going to be a war council in early July of '06 – maybe it was supposed to be in June. I think it ended up occurring close to the Fourth of July. [00:56:00]

Feaver: The one at Camp David, are you talking about?

Zelikow: Yeah, yeah.

Feaver: Yeah, that that's June.

Zelikow: OK.

Feaver: June '06, yeah.

Zelikow: But the kind of the thinking behind why are you having that meeting, the thinking behind that was – goes back to the spring, is we need to set up a meeting in which the strategy will be pulled up by its roots, and we're really going to have the heart-to-heart. The President and his advisors are going to get together for days out in Camp David, and they are really going to have the blunt, all-out conversation that they have long needed to have so this strategy can be pulled up



and thoroughly reexamined. We believed that NSC staff was on board for this, and kind of gets this.

During this, I'm urging Condi to talk to the Vice President, because I couldn't believe that the Vice President, given his involvement in these issues [00:57:00] back in '02, was still kind of so indifferent to what – and I've said, because people talk about the role of the Vice President, the Vice President's Office was a nonfactor in all the discussions and debates about Iraq in 2005. And by spring of '06, I'm actually lobbying to get the bureaucratic clout of the Vice President to help get a strategic review, because I figure remembering Dick Cheney from when he was Secretary of Defense; he gets what strategy is. It's like, how can he be content with this? And we need his bureaucratic clout to help, because this is a really hard problem now. But the two big signposts of this that are still lingering with me is one – and I don't think you know this, but Josh Bolten asked to see me. Josh had just become Chief of Staff. I don't remember exactly when, but recently.

Feaver: Spring of '06, yeah.

Zelikow: [00:58:00] And just one-on-one, long meeting. I knew Josh from working on some domestic issues we had worked on together back in '01, especially on election reform. And I went to his office, and we must've spent at least an hour and a half or more, Josh lying down on his sofa, and we just talked, and only two topics. The only two topics were Iraq and the interrogation/torture issues, which I was also



very involved in at that time. And just those two subjects. And I believe this was in May. And Josh, of course, is very careful about describing his own views, and certainly doing nothing to try to indicate where the President was. But Josh is smart, and I'm confident Josh understood what I was saying. [00:59:00] Also, at this time, I was desperate enough about the need to articulate a strategy that Jim – I actually sat down and drafted a paper and then got Jim Jeffrey to look over it and join me in sending it to the Secretary. That actually wrote out – OK, here is a strong military strategy, and we'll just write it out. And we actually broke it out into here's an all-out counterinsurgency approach, an all-out clear, hold, and build; here is what we call the selective clear, hold, and build approach, and by selective – in this case, you only pick three to five major sectors in which you're going to make a ramped-up effort to really hold them. And then we identified what we thought if you did that, and here they are, and listed them, and kind of then listed the requisites that went with that. And then there would be a third approach as kind of a more minimalist approach.

Feaver: And what time period was this?

Zelikow: May.

Feaver: May, OK.

Zelikow: [01:00:00] And we made it clear, and wrote it –

Feaver: May '06.

Zelikow: May '06. We wrote in the paper, if you want to do either of the first two options you're going to need – and I don't remember the exact word, but you're going to need a significant increase in troops. I think the key phrase is quoted in Condi's memoir. I think she has a paragraph recounting this memo in her memoir. And we sent this when like we did with all my papers, we gave it to Meghan and the NSC staff. No particular response to this. And then the – but – because we were thinking this is stuff now for the War Council. Like, it'd be fair for people at the White House to say, OK, State Department, you keep advocating this strategy. Pentagon's not writing one up. Write up what you mean. OK, here's a straw paper. If you want us to flesh this out even more, invite us to do so. No answer. [01:01:00] I could've imagined that this paper would've developed into something that would be a paper for discussion at the War Council meeting at Camp David. No.

And then we find out what's happening at the great War Council? A series of briefings, some of them interesting briefings. Meghan was recruiting some people who were doing some truth telling, like Eliot Cohen and some others who were kind of – but in effect, instead of them getting together and deciding among, and tearing this up, they're basically back in passive mode again, where they're sitting back and being briefed.

Feaver: Why do you suppose that effort fizzles, then?

Zelikow: I don't know. I know Condi said she had talked to the Vice President. I haven't referred much to Condi's attitudes, but you should understand that everything I do is enabled by Condi Rice, and [01:02:00] she understands everything I'm doing. Now, I often will say things in much more unvarnished ways, or blunter ways, but there's kind of roles. There's a role she plays, and there's a role I play. But at no time am I kind of doing things she doesn't want me to do, or saying things she doesn't want me to say. And so she's working in her way, I'm working in my way, but I actually don't know a lot of what's happening in the White House during this period to this day is a mystery to me.

And very frustrating, because I can remember I have these constant calls, as often as I could, with Meghan, which mainly consisted of my press, pressuring Meghan, pushing, pushing, pushing, and Meghan being always very polite, defensive, but not defensive in a bristly way, [01:03:00] just taking it in, listening. And sometimes, on a – as I mentioned at the rhetorical levels – and that's why we would – even on the 180-day thing, or even on the NSVI, we sometimes – our communications people felt they got quicker and more positive responses from the communications people at the White House than we did from Meghan. But I'm not faulting Meghan so much as I just don't understand, and I didn't understand at the time. There are other people in our circle, on the communications side, like Jim Wilkinson and Sean McCormick, who are important, who – Jim would leave in the summer of '06 to go work for Hank Paulson – but who were very down on



Meghan from prior experiences with her, very down. I was not, but I just didn't understand. [01:04:00]

And then there'd be the Friday NSC meeting, and briefings, and you'd just be tearing your hair out. I didn't even want to go to any of these meetings. They're just waste – I regarded them as wastes of – as poor uses of my time to even attend them, if I could. Then that's a bust. The President then makes his trip that then seemed to just turn into a communications and photo op. But I didn't understand why.

And I should stress that Condi isn't kind of saying why because either she doesn't know, but I should say that Condi is very careful about protecting the discretion of her conversations with the President, even with her closest staff. At no time has Condi kind of come back and aired the dirty linen. [01:05:00] To her credit, she was never bitching about her colleagues, even Rumsfeld. Occasionally, fairly straightforward – because at one point in maybe it was '05, or early '06, I just said point blank to Condi, I said, "The strategy we have in mind, we will not be able to execute this with Don Rumsfeld as the Secretary of Defense. You understand this. It's just not going to happen." And I think she could not deny that, but there we were.

Feaver: So this War Council effort fizzles.

Zelikow: Right.

Feaver: What's the next effort that –



[break in video]

Zelikow: It almost felt like a cabal, frankly, with Pete Pace, as to getting the military to move. And for the first time, I then get clearance following some sort of Condi discussion with Pace [01:06:00] to go directly and sit with the J3 and the J5.

Feaver: Who are, at this point?

Zelikow: The J3 is Doug Lute, and the J5 was a Marine general whose –

Feaver: Sattler.

Zelikow: Sattler, I think. Thank you. And just the three of us, OK, no staff, and kind of going through the arguments. And this is actually the point at which for the first time they are really candid back with me, OK. And this is the point at which Lute – and this maybe is in October of '06 – they're doing – Pace is doing his own review, the so-called Colonel's Review [Council of Colonels], for which we had hoped that there – this would produce something really important, but also apparently turned out to be a fizzle, and not very conclusive. But at the time, we thought that maybe that would be good. Maybe it would be even as – [01:07:00] at least as good as the red team was in the summer of '05, which had also involved some bright colonels. Because even though I was critical of the red team's substantive recommendation, the diagnosis in their report was excellent.

And this is when Lute – and Lute's role as the J3 is very important. You understand this, but more important to me than the J5 role, because he really understands what's available, and he says two key things to me which is, one, to do



Baghdad and control the violence in Baghdad will require – and I think the number he used, which I repeated later to – including to Steve – was four to six brigades. Maybe it was three to five brigades, but I think he said we need an additional four to six brigades for Baghdad. And then he just said flatly to me, “Philip, we’re out of Schlitz.” I remember that phrase. It was a vivid phrase. Just, “We don’t have troops.”

Feaver: [01:08:00] This is October.

Zelikow: I think this is October. It could be as early as September. But it’s this period of time in which we’re trying – this is also the period – we had been encouraging Frank Wolf to do the Strategy Review. The way that turned out was unfortunate. Actually, the basic diagnostics part of the review – that is, the survey of the situation in the review, was trenchant, was good. The substance of the recommendations that came out of the review were poor. But I met with – at Condi’s request, I met with the review group, with Panetta and others. I think it was Panetta, Panetta and Gates, who I knew well, and I was really blunt with them, too, because we wanted them to help light the fire, because we thought we were doing all of this– to basically persuade the President [01:09:00] from every quarter that a radical change was needed.

Feaver: Sometime around this period, Satterfield starts to meet with the White House.

What – did you have visibility into that, or can you give any –



Zelikow: I did not have visibility into that. And I think some interesting things are happening in this phase internally in the State Department. I think before that I felt fairly confident that I was representing Condi's views to the bureaucracy, and I still think that that's true, but by this stage David, I think, was more skeptical of the possibilities to do fruitful things in Iraq now at this point than I was. I think he was more profoundly disillusioned about what the US could do than I was.

[01:10:00] But we did not have a direct clash and argument. The disagreements didn't surface frontally. In some of the discussions with her, even going back to, I think, months earlier, he'd just been more skeptical, but was not really putting forward an articulated alternative view. And Satterfield and I got along, and I had a lot of respect for his views, but I sensed that there was some differential there, but I don't know how much. But I was not aware of – was not plugged into his discussions with Meghan. And then, when we actually began preparing strategy documents for this, I held the pen for those.

Feaver: Was there disagreement – can you describe the substance of the State position [01:11:00] by October/November, and was there disagreement inside State on what that position should be?

Zelikow: Yeah. No – there was – “tension” would be too strong, but at some point, then, I felt it was time for me – I had to write yet another strategy paper. Just, no one – who else would? Forgive me for saying so. I wish someone else would. Apparent– and actually, later, I gather that other people were, but I just wasn't aware of it,



because man, were we looking for allies. I would have loved to have known that I had allies, and that Condi had allies to help kind of work with us on this – on a paper like this. So I began crafting a paper that is kind of starting from where we had been in May, but now beginning to scale back [01:12:00] what was possible. And Satterfield is wary, and I'm actually a little disillusioned by this point, too. I've now taken a run at this three times. I've failed three – to some degree, I have failed three times. And now I've been told flatly by the J3 that we have no troops, and we cannot do.

So here's my point: I've got to write a strategy, and if I write a strategy that the Pentagon says they cannot do – and by the way, which I know they will not do – I'm not being very helpful to the President in basically writing yet another quixotic strategy paper that I know is unimplementable. So then I feel like my job is to be practical and write a strategy paper that this government, as constituted, is able to implement and will implement. [01:13:00] Again – later I would discover that there was another guerilla warfare operation on strategy that was going on, that was actually developing out of the box approaches to use more troops, but I wasn't clued into that at the time, and thus could not ally myself with that and run with that.

So I'm trying to write a paper inside the parameters I think I now have after these efforts, and so then that paper essentially said we do not have the troops to – we can add to police Baghdad internally, and control the violence inside the city.



What I did not want to do is destroy what we were accomplishing elsewhere in the country, in the other wars, in order to police Baghdad. So then the only alternative I could come up with is we've got to basically cordon the violence in Baghdad, [01:14:00] which is just going to burn itself out, and our goal is to try to keep a lid on it and keep it from spilling over.

There was going to be an amount of ethnic cleansing we could not stop. It was already well underway, and had been underway, for a year, and people were dying at the rate of hundreds per week, and had been dying at the rate of hundreds per week for a year. So we needed to close off the violence inside Baghdad, hold all of our troop strength in Tikrit, Kirkuk, Mosul, Anbar, bolster the British as well as we could in Basra. And then the key also was hold the Baghdad belts, because the Baghdad belts were the big conduits to escalate, to stoke the fires in Baghdad, for infiltration. And so hold the Baghdad belts is [01:15:00] also the key to holding Baghdad, while you basically try to keep a lid on – let this burn out, because we don't have the four to six brigades that would be needed to go in and police Baghdad, and if you tried to do that by stripping the country you'll just make other things worse again.

So that's kind of the tenor of the paper that I'm drafting, and I don't remember the timeframe, but it would've been around this period of late October, early November. This is being discussed – I'm drafting it, Satterfield is editing it,



it's being discussed with Condi, among different approaches. And I would say that

David was strongly in favor of taking a more cautious, less ambitious set of object-

Feaver: Less ambitious than the State paper, or the State paper –

Zelikow: No, I think –

Feaver: -- representing the less ambitious?

Zelikow: [01:16:00] He was a factor, he was a factor pulling me towards, "You've got to kind of be less ambitious and more realistic about this." And he helped pull the paper in the direction it came out. But I'm not kind of saying that I didn't agree. It was a dynamic process. I listened to what he had to say. And I could tell, too, that Condi was becoming – was also somewhat skeptical and disillusioned about what was possible.

I should say meanwhile, in addition, of course, we would've loved to see changes in command. We were also in need – we needed a different ambassador. We had been unsatisfied with Zal Khalilzad for some time, and I had wanted Zal replaced for some time, and I had already suggested Chet Crocker, [01:17:00] who I admired from his work in Pakistan. I'm not sure – I don't know if my suggestion had any role in it or not, but thinking about the change in the ambassador was already in the works. We thought the whole team needed to be changed, it wasn't just the military side, that we needed a completely different team in Baghdad to be able to do anything really significant and new.

Feaver: Did the departure of Secretary Rumsfeld affect the shaping of the State memo?



Zelikow: No. The memo, – by the time I heard Rumsfeld’s leaving – and maybe I had rumblings that something might happen, but Condi didn’t. Condi kept the President’s secrets. And by the time I heard about it, these ideas were pretty well advanced. I do have a vivid memory, [01:18:00] then, of this meeting that you attended,[gestures toward Feaver] which was on a Saturday morning, November 11th, I believe, and I think – did we know by then that Rumsfeld was gone? OK. It had just been announced a few days earlier. And really spinning about that, because what’s it going to mean? It’s interesting. But by that point, our views were pretty well developed.

Feaver: So describe that meeting –

Zelikow: Yeah.

Feaver: -- the purpose of it, and what was accomplished.

Zelikow: That was a very interesting and, I thought, constructive meeting. It’s not the first such meeting we had had – maybe second or third – where just senior State people, senior White House, senior NSC people sitting together with someone from OVP. So this is a meeting that lasted maybe at least a couple of hours on a Saturday. Condi, me, [01:19:00] Satterfield – I’m not sure if there was anyone else there from State. From the White House, Hadley, Meghan, I guess you [gestures toward Feaver] were there, and maybe Hannah from OVP, but I don’t think Hannah. I think Steve what’s-his-name. I forget.

Feaver: Brett McGurk.

Zelikow: I'm sorry?

Feaver: And also Brett McGurk.

Zelikow: Oh yes, and McGurk, who was the note-taker. And actually, McGurk thought the meeting was important enough, he wrote up pretty good notes for it, which he sent over to me, and which I edited with care, because I thought it was an important historical record. And if anyone will find the McGurk notes that I have – with my edits, that's a very valuable historical snapshot. In this meeting, [01:20:00] the NSC staff – actually, I wouldn't say the NSC staff; we kind of reviewed the different – we spent a lot of time discussing the Iraq Strategy Review, and I spent some time talking about that from my own experience with such things, and how –

Feaver: The external review.

Zelikow: The external, the-

Feaver: Baker-Hamilton.

Zelikow: Yeah, the Baker-Hamilton review, and ways to try to help that be useful, be constructive. And so I remember a significant discussion of that. On the substance of what to do in Iraq, this seemed like a positive sense the White House now agrees we ought to have a new strategy, and is now ready to really – we're having this meeting because we're now really ready to sit down and talk about this, and talk about what we could do.



And I think – this was the meeting where I actually [01:21:00] went through these parameters. I don't think I outed Lute as the source, but I said, "We understand from the Pentagon that we require this many brigades to do Baghdad, to police Baghdad, and that they don't have the troops. And so here's – these are – this is a problem." I do remember that at this meeting I think maybe McGurk spoke up, or someone, but somehow I associate in my mind with McGurk as speaking up in favor of a significant troop increase. And my immediate response to that was that they say they can't. Though intellectually, I really liked what McGurk was saying. As you can tell. We've been here for [01:22:00] a long time, but kind of, "We're out of Schlitz."

Feaver: Did Condi present any State views at that meeting?

Zelikow: I don't think she tabled – I'm not sure our paper was done at that point; I'm pretty sure she didn't table it. But I think she certainly advocated as, you know, an overhaul of strategy. I'm having trouble remembering now whether – how fully she articulated a strategic approach. We clearly wanted to do some selective – we clearly wanted to do "clear, hold, and build" to some degree in the country. Really, the issue was not do we do "clear, hold, and build" right at last. The issue is how ambitious can you be in what you wish to "clear, hold, and build," given your available capabilities. [01:23:00] And so in that sense, we were moving more toward a consensus, and I think one of the big upshots of that meeting was almost instant – if it had not already – almost instantly the White House does the formal



strategy review. Maybe the announcements are almost on the following Monday or something.

Feaver: It starts the following Monday.

Zelikow: OK.

Feaver: We announced it the days before, yeah.

Zelikow: Yeah. And then we start going to our meetings on the Strategy Review that would extend through the next five or six weeks. I went to those meetings as Condi's deputy. I think Satterfield would usually go with me as the number two, and then after those meetings I would almost invariably write an informal report to Condi [01:24:00] on what happened in those meetings that I sent to her, which are in the State archives.

Feaver: What was the State position in those formal meetings, and how was it received?

Zelikow: So the State position in those – we did, then, table – and I think we circulated our paper, and we wished everybody else would also circulate their papers. Some things were circulated, some not. The approach was the one, as I described to you, which was selective “clear, hold, and build,” basically holding what we were holding, especially Mosul, Anbar, Basra, hold Baghdad, but protect the Baghdad belts, [01:25:00] and then some of the ethnic cleansing was going to burn out; some of it we would attempt to limit. We also advocated a significant acceleration of the PR—we also advocated a significant ramp-up of the PRTs.

I forgot to mention that one of the constructive things that had happened in the weeks just before this is Hadley and Crouch had gone to Iraq, and kind of came back like, Whoa, things are bad. And then we had gotten a copy, I guess, of the paper that I think Steve had written. I don't know if J.D. wrote a paper or not. And I thought, Steve, in his very careful way, [01:26:00] had written a good paper, and there was some good stuff in that.

And the issue, then, is kind of where do we go. And so we made our argument basically for an affirmative effort, but one setting more modest objectives to just try to stabilize the country, within our limited means. My memory of this is that, in effect, the Pentagon did not play in this review, in effect.

Feaver: The Pentagon or OSD, or both?

Zelikow: Actually both, which is, in itself, an astonishing statement. The command did not play. Peter Rodman came to the meetings, who had never been an important player on Iraq issues, in my experience, and had really nothing to say. [01:27:00] That's maybe a harsh way of putting it, and my notes to Condi would've described it more fully than that, and that what I was hoping for was that Lute and Sattler came to the meetings. And there I was hoping to hear something. And Lute – basically, though, he kind of stuck to the position of we don't have any troops available, or it would be very difficult to make more troops available. And – but they didn't really come in with a strong, affirmative strategy view of their own that



would've come out of this colonels' review or something, and that just – that was deflating.

The Vice President's Office then came in with this paper of take sides with the Shia, which I [01:28:00] thought would be kind of disastrous. I had been working all during this year on Iran, too, and we had a significant Shia danger, with respect to Iran. And by the way, in the following year Americans would mainly be killing and – would be mainly killing Shia, not Sunni. And their big, bloodiest battles were against Iranian backed militias in '07, that turned out, in order to make this work. So the policy of backing the Shia we didn't think was the way to kind of stabilize Iraq.

And then the NSC staff was taking this interesting view of here, aside from being the umpire of this process, is we want to be sure the idea of a significant troop increase is on the table. But I don't remember that Meghan or Brett [01:29:00] would really do like a, alright, here's a full-throated advocacy of how that option would work. If you did the additional troops, here's what they would do, here's what the strategy would look like. I don't remember that at all, but I do remember and the option of doing more needs to be kind of held open, and then people would react to that. And my notes back to Condi would essentially say the White House wants to do more but won't really go into detail about what they would do.



And I think Condi's reaction, even more than mine, was we can't put the President in the position of basically doing this incredible high-stakes play unless we can – we know where it's going to go. And see, at that point we weren't sure that anybody was willing to do what needed to be done to make something like that work. See, we now knew Gates, but everybody else in the chain of command [01:30:00] is opposed to this, and the Iraqi Prime Minister is opposed to it, too. These are fairly significant obstacles! So you're trying to develop a new military strategy, but all the entities that are supposed to carry out your strategy -- See, we didn't know yet – I didn't know yet about Petraeus and Odierno coming back.

Feaver: Well, Odierno was already –

Zelikow: Slotted to take the Corps?

Feaver: -- slotted, yes.

Zelikow: OK. But I had not. And that's good news, but I didn't know where he was, and I guess I didn't know about Petraeus. And by the way, had I known about Petraeus, I would've found that very interesting, because I knew about this ferment with the counterinsurgency manual, but I don't – I wouldn't have – I didn't know that Petraeus may have been talking to Jack Keane or any of that, didn't know about any of that, had never myself talked with Keane. And when I had [01:31:00] dealt with Petraeus in '05 – and I think – and I dealt with Petraeus then when he was commanding MNSTC-I, I believe, the Multinational Training Command for Iraq; that's an acronym. He was not, at the time, a change agent, but maybe all of that



was just under the surface, I think maybe a lot of it germinated later after he came back and began reflecting on it all.

Feaver: So how is the State paper received in the process, and the State position? And does it evolve as the process unfolds?

Zelikow: Everyone's respectful of the fact that at least we've written a paper, and they're grateful for that. Beyond that, I'd say the reactions were neutral. [01:32:00] There was no one in the meeting who said, "This is good, we ought to do this." There was some, "Well, what about Baghdad?" Well, yeah, there's the problem. And we'd have these lengthy and rather frustratingly inconclusive discussions. Say, OK, here's this paper. So our paper wasn't carrying the day, but no one was really tabling a comparably weighty alternative paper. And so we just kept cycling around on this, really, I think, through the end of November.

Feaver: what's the next pivot point, from your point of view?

Zelikow: Actually, the next pivot point begins to occur [01:33:00] outside of my view, and it seemed to me that a key breakthrough happened in December. The NSC staff kind of began writing up conclusions from the strategy review in a series of slides, a lot of them very good. There was some stuff on the diagnostic side that was very good, and there was some interesting material there. And unfortunately, I no longer retain the memory of the detailed arguments about – there were a few particular slides that seemed kind of catalytic, potentially, and that we were engaging with and discussing. And then there is – maybe this meeting occurs in



Texas in December. My memory of this is hazy; I just know I wasn't there, and I don't think anyone else from State was there. I'm not sure anyone else was there.

Feaver: Condi?

Zelikow: Yeah, Condi, but I'm not sure if Satterfield was there.

Feaver: Right.

Zelikow: [01:34:00] But for the first time Gates takes part, my memory – or is beginning to take part. No one, either Gates or anyone representing Gates had been involved in the process I'd been involved in. And I get word the ice is really beginning to break, and that the White House is now really open to considering a major troop increase. And then Condi and I are having the discussion, OK, but what's the story? What are they gonna do? And I think she voices questions like this.

But the President, I think, is increasingly committed – and this is quite admirable, I think – in a way, you could have an approach that says double down. [01:35:00] We're going to redouble our effort. We're certainly not going to quit. And then our – we had developed an approach in which we're not going to quit, but we're going to try to basically hold the ring, and try to stabilize things with what we have. And the President wants to really try to turn the corner on this. And intellectually and emotionally, I really admired this, and I admired his courage. I was puzzled by it, because I couldn't figure out where is this – kind of what the substance was going to be under that, and where it was going to come from, and who was going to do it. And so this is an emotionally challenging period



for me. I have these torn views, because I kind of – from this context, you can see, I’m very – I empathize deeply, but I’m just trying to puzzle through how this could go. [01:36:00]

And I don’t want Condi to be caught in the position where the President has something really constructive and she’s not helping, being helpful. Because our approach – we felt like our approach all along is we were the ones really trying to help the President come up with a constructive solution for all of this, that we had done more in this regard, maybe, than anybody else. At least, that was our conceit.

And then – and one of the positive things out of this is yes, everyone wants to redouble the PRT effort, and I was asked to do some more work on that. And so I wrote more on how to double down on PRTs, and did some work with Barbara Stevenson in the State Department, and others, to develop a paper which we then discussed, and it seemed like that was at a meeting back in the Sit Room now, maybe, in late December, maybe in early January, where Gates was present, [01:37:00] where the PRT issue did come up and our approach was endorsed on that front. I did, then, sense that the corner had been turned, and the President was going to do this.

At this point, I’m phasing out of the State Department for the decision I’d made back at the end of October, and going to be returning to Virginia after being on leave for two years, again, after having been on leave to do the 9/11 Commission



before that. But I get a flattering and unusual request. I'm asked, that Steve Hadley would like you to take a cut at drafting the portion of the President's speech that would announce this, which I then did. And so I produced draft language for the President's speech. [01:38:00] And I think that maybe he asked two or three people to do something like this, and then they just take all these different versions and then synthesize them. And so anyway, my cut at how to write that – because I think someone knew that I was empathetic enough to what we were trying to do that it was worth asking me to write up the President's statement. I wrote up a draft, and it's probably sitting in the archives somewhere, that is very candid, in which the President would be very candid about where we had been and where we now needed to go. But it is, as a way of, - it was bracing. It was not the tone that the President ended up choosing to adopt in his speech.

Feaver: Was there a moment, then – [01:39:00] that's the January 10th speech, but somewhere between – what's the moment between that and the late November when State is still backing the original backing State position, when does State change its mind and what –

Zelikow: Probably around Christmas Eve.

Feaver: And what's – can you describe the factors that caused State to change its position?

Zelikow: My memory of this – and I wasn't at all the meetings, -- is that this broke very late. And see, then one of the things that was potentially confusing in this is there wasn't, like, just kind of one surge option. There was, well, here's this kind of the



State approach, which is now becoming seen as a middle of the road approach, maybe, in early December, and then there are grades of surges. There's, well, you can add a brigade, add three brigades. And then I remember the maximum one [01:40:00] was maybe you add five brigades. It was something like that. And I did think that these temporizing approaches – I didn't like the temporizing approaches. I thought, OK, if you're – if you're going to throw a Hail Mary pass then go for a touchdown. You don't do that kind of pass to kind of just move the ball down the field 15 yards. And I also thought it was very important that we not draw down the other efforts in order to do what we needed to do in Baghdad. Folks wanted to address that.

And – but I had the sense that – basically Condi made her argument that, Don't do this, I'm worried about you doing this if you don't have a plan for what's going to happen after you throw the ball. [01:41:00] She didn't use those metaphors at the time; these are my metaphors. But I think at the point she saw the President was really firmly resolved, and that he really wanted to do this. Well, then, [claps hands] snap. And my sense is that, OK, we're lining up, going to – we're going to execute this play. My sense that that doesn't really occur until, like, just before Christmas, and I'm not even sure it was decided even then that the maximum surge option was going to be chosen. And see, this is one of the things that made us uncertain as to how to evaluate the NSC staff's position, because the NSC staff is – well, you could do a little, more. And partly, too, is well, what do you want to



do? And then you would need a paper to flesh that out, which wasn't there, though I now believe that there were other papers being written that I didn't see.

Feaver: What [01:42:00] do you believe was the purpose of the Surge? Was it a change in strategy? Was it a change in resources? Did it change the goals? How would you characterize –

Zelikow: Oh, the purpose of the Surge was really finally to do “clear, hold, and build,” and finally to do “clear, hold, and build” with – properly, with a real effort. And that meant you needed to maintain, if not increase, your efforts in all the other wars, some of which were going well. We were doing very well against Al-Qaeda in Iraq, in some respects, and I had visited the folks at Balad, who were running that effort, and there had been a lot of concern about Anbar earlier in '06, but there were some positive signs. Question: do you need another brigade in Anbar? Or maybe you need more folks in the Baghdad belts to release Marines to do more stuff in Anbar. But clearly you needed a significant concentration of effort into Baghdad, [01:43:01] but then no economy of force missions anywhere else; you sustain everything else while you add more to Baghdad, to pour water on the fires, if the fires were not already burning themselves out. There's a controversy about that that is more historical than what I was involved in. So that's – our understanding was that the purpose of the Surge was to really do, in a way, what we had hoped to do back in the fall of '05, is to do massive effort to really have an affirmative military strategy to “clear, hold, and build,” secure key centers of Iraq, and allow



the Iraqi state to get back on its feet, combine that with a strong PRT effort to get some stuff going out in the field, and other things that we would be doing in the capital itself, and the Maliki government could get back on its feet, stabilize the country, manage the civil war, and then the [01:44:00] United States could get out.

Feaver: Some have described that official Surge review as a series of smaller decisions, rather than as a one, fully formed decision, and is that a fair description of that official Surge review?

Zelikow: I –

Feaver: Where they do incremental decisions that then have the cumulative effect of –

Zelikow: I have to tell you, and it's probably already evident: there are so many mysteries about what was going on in the White House during these years to which I do not have the answers. And it's frustrating, because I was fairly close to this policy, and I didn't think it was helpful for the White House to keep its cards so close. But I think it, for interpersonal reasons, I think I can understand some of it, but it [01:45:00] made things hard. That was one reason why having meetings like that Saturday morning meeting helped really clear the air a lot, because we could really just talk to each other, and have a real straight discussion. We should've been having a dozen of those. But I don't know – my impression during those meetings is that no decisions were being made. I was frustrated with them. And then, in effect, we began discussing ways of summarizing the process in these slides, which I think maybe you and Brett were involved in crafting. And then, in effect,

discussing what we were deciding became a discussion of what to put in the slides and take out of the slides. And if you could call those decisions about the slides little decisions, then those were little decisions.

Feaver: One of those little decisions I had in mind was the decision to provide – to task the BCTs with [01:46:00] organic security for PRTs, which was crucial for augmenting the PRTs. Do you remember that decision? Can you speak to that at all?

Zelikow: Sure, I do remember that issue. There was a long running issue of how to provide security for the PRTs, and whether or not to use the Army to do it. This was a key issue for the PRTs. There are a number of particular subjects we could spend a lot of time on, and one of them has to do with PRTs, and I've been very involved in this issue. In effect, one of the things that made the PRTs very hard is if the Army didn't commit to providing them with security then we had to hire contractors, like Triple Canopy and others – to send 50 or 60 people out to protect four or five people in the field. So we'd have a whole PRT set up with 50 or 60 people there, of whom maybe four or five people would be substantive officers, and all the rest would be civilian security contractors, [01:47:00] by and large, working in shifts. So this would be a much better effort if we could then look to the military to provide this security, and then the PRT, it would tighten the military relationship with the PRT. Because my goal all along – and this became important in the interagency discussion – is I wanted a marriage between PRT



commanders and brigade commanders. I wanted a PRT at least with every single brigade, and I wanted that command co-located together and working together and integrated in the field. And we – and yes, we did make headway on that issue, which, from my point of view on PRTs, was a big breakthrough. And then we followed up in the paper effort that I described, consolidating where the PRTs are going to go.

Feaver: Two more questions. I know we're running out of time. Can you talk at all about the [01:48:00] release of the Baker-Hamilton report, and its impact on this process that you just described? Not the construction of the report, but the release, which comes in December.

Zelikow: Unfortunately, as a number of people I know were involved in the Baker-Hamilton effort, this ended up not being constructive. The arguments in the report, the trenchant part of it critiquing where the status quo—which was very good, and very right, was an argument that actually now was more or less sold. We didn't need the report anymore to persuade the President that we needed a dramatic change by mid-December, or by December, I think. It helped maybe with some public momentum, but that wasn't key. And all the substantive part – the recommendations part of the report [01:49:00] was just very weak. And ironically, after critiquing the status quo, because they didn't understand the substance well enough on the policy side, they end–without knowing it, they parroted George Casey's strategy as their recommendations. So they have this



whole report that devastates that strategy, and then have a set of recommendations which kind of unknowingly, in effect, replicates it. And there's this stuff – well, we had a phrase that maybe if you need something more. No, that's not good enough. And so you can see the kind of – the almost the irony, and even sort of almost the tragicomedy of the Baker-Hamilton study, from our perspective, since we'd actually fomented the creation of that study months earlier in the hope that it would help move the rock.

Feaver: Last question: [01:50:00] is there anything that you would like to say about the story that we haven't asked you or that hasn't come up already?

Zelikow: Yeah, I would. A couple of things. Number one is there are a number of aspects of my account that could be directly or implicitly critical of the President's leadership, and some of those criticisms are fair, but I do recall believing that what the President was doing was an extraordinary act, unlike any I had ever seen in government. I had never seen a President defy so much of the institutional establishment in his own government to promulgate a what I thought was courageous and instinctually correct strategy. As an episode in civil/military relations, [01:51:00] it was remarkable.

He may not know it, but there is a distant echo of an experience I had during the Gulf War, in October 1990, which is not well known, when the elder President Bush and Brent Scowcroft, in effect, really challenged the military strategy, and forced a radical change, and came very close to firing Norm



Schwarzkopf, though this did not come out. But this reminded me of that. And it was such a contrast with what had gone before, but it spoke very well to the character of the President, and to his – and the fact that he went for the maximalist approach. I still to this day have the sense that this – at the time he made the decision at the beginning of January, it was a Hail Mary pass, and he was hoping the [01:52:00] receivers would be downfield, that, in effect, he was trusting that Petraeus and Odierno would fill in the details of what it was going to do, which they did, and the particular roles that they played. So, but point one has to be a tribute to the President, and making a highly unusual decision under very difficult circumstances in this way, but I think turned out to be enormously important and positive, whatever happened to Iraq after 2008, and enormously important and positive, frankly, for the heritage and legacy of the Armed Forces of the United States, and the way they think about their own record of performance. Because if we had quit at that point, the damage it would've done to those institutions would have not been remediable for at least a [01:53:00] generation, and that would've been unfort–really sad and bad.

Second point is a sense of personal regret on my behalf, and also Condi's, is the sense of I wish we could – that we were out of the loop on so much of this, and therefore could not form a coalition to better help the President, because of the compartmented way – perhaps because of how eccentric and unusual this decision-making process was. It was handled in such an eccentric way that we



actually – we were kind of in these interagency meetings working with people who, aside from the NSC staff with their own constraints, we couldn't work with, in making our ideas better. See, like, we write a paper – in an ideal world, we'd write a paper and the military people would sit with us, and they'd help edit it, and they'd mark it up, and we'd tear it up, and it'd go through five drafts, [01:54:00] and get a lot better. But see, that never – none of that ever happened, and that's what I missed. And that's actually what I was so envious of in the subsequent years, when it's, in some ways, too late for the President, when you actually have a healthy environment, when people can actually work together on papers and make them better. And I regret that the material we contributed in kind of this fourth and final effort could not have had more of that kind of collegial contribution that would've made our own work better and more useful for the President, though I think the story ended up turning out OK, maybe better than OK, certainly better than many people expected at the time.

And I certainly supported the President's decision, and continued to support it in '07, during those embattled months. I supported it very strongly, and [01:55:00] supported the confront–very strongly – another thing that you haven't discussed, another little decision is at some point during this process we made the decision to stand up to the Iranians, which I'd been lobbying for for nearly a year and a half. And that was essential that we do that. And so I was very supportive, and controversial, because remember all the doubts in the papers about were



Iranians really responsible for all those killings of our soldiers. And I had seen this evidence close up, including the vehicles soaked in blood, and people going through the forensics of these munitions with me right out there in Baghdad. And this was a very constructive move, too, that turned out to be salutary.

So the first thing, tribute to the President. Second thing, some regret, personal regret about the process and the eccentricity of it that kept us from being able to participate as fruitfully, perhaps, [01:56:00] as we would've liked, although we supported the way it came out. I think a third point would be – I won't get into the exceptional qualities of the civil/military relations here, since you [gestures to Feaver] can speak to those better than I can, but that I want to say something about the controversy surrounding was the Surge effective and was the Surge important, because I think some of the controversies might be partly rooted in this misunderstanding I started with about the war. See, if you've been following my analysis, like, you remember the argument that says we've already won – we were already winning in Anbar without the Surge. Yes, maybe, and later, though it was not evident in the middle of '06, later I began to see evidence that that had been happening in '06, [01:57:00] that we were not getting – it was not apparent at the moment that it was happening. But here's the thing is that the whole idea was how do you pacify Baghdad, and then what turned out to be the big fight against Shia militias, and the Iranian-backed militias, how do you do that while not – while holding your gains everywhere else, and that's where you had to have the

Surge. And maybe even string -- And also what the Surge did is it gave a tremendous sense of any strategy -- we have a strategy. We believe in it. We're doing real, strategic things now. And we're being really serious and professional about it as a military. And that's just -- the galvanizing, energizing effect that this had on people, and a sense of initiative and renewed momentum and vigor it gave to our effort, and that was palpable even in Iraq, which I continued to stay involved with in '07 and '08, [01:58:00] was very important. So while I think you can overstate what the Surge did, say, in Mosul or in Ramadi. And then eventually one of the things we did is we took over the battle space from the British in Basra, and then were able to enable the re-conquest of Basra, which we effected, actually, in the spring-summer of 2008, which was a big deal. Even though it was Iraqi led, it was enabled by American airpower and by Americans taking over that battle space, which is another fruit of the Surge. See, it allows you to engage in all these -- in all these wars.

I was so impressed with the way it was implemented with all the combat outposts around Baghdad. I visited, actually, in '08 one of those outposts, just me and the captain and his troops, in their little bunks, just out there in the neighborhood. [01:59:00] And it was such a realization of what we had hoped for. That was very powerful. So I think the Surge had an important effect. I don't know where credit is due between how much is Petraeus and how much is Odierno and how much other officers -- not -- and as the histories are written, I

hope we'll learn a lot more about that. My impression is that the PRT effort also – which was a mixed bag but had some really positive shining examples, some terrific young people, that that became better, and began getting closer to reaching its potential. They will always vary, if you have 15 or 20 of these, but a number of them were really beginning to work pretty well. So, again, all of that. So [02:00:00] you don't have to say that the Surge was vital on everything everywhere to say that overall this decision turned out to be an absolutely vital decision in the story of this war.

Feaver: Great, and we'll leave it there. Thank you.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]