



The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Stephen Cambone

Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, 2003-2006

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[Begin Transcription]

ENGEL: Ready?

CAMBONE: Take two.

ENGEL: Take two, all right. Good morning. It is May 15, 2015, and we are in Washington, D.C., for another interview on the Surge project. My name is Jeffrey Engel, Director of the Center for Presidential History. I will ask my colleagues to introduce themselves.

FEAVER: I'm Peter Feaver, a professor at Duke University.

SAYLE: And I'm Tim Sayle from the Center for Presidential History.

ENGEL: And this morning we are speaking with?

CAMBONE: Steve Cambone.

ENGEL: Sir, would you mind telling us your role in the Bush Administration at the time of the Surge, but also the broader experience in government.

CAMBONE: I had served in the first Bush Administration, and then came in, in 2001, in January, with the Secretary, as his special assistant. He and I were the only two Bush Administration personnel in the building at the time and probably well into February. During that time, I was responsible for the Quadrennial Defense Review. [00:01:00] The Secretary then asked me to go up and be the principal deputy undersecretary for policy, which is the number two job there, with the purpose of reviewing and revising all of the contingency plans as a result of what we did in the Quadrennial Defense Review, to include, by the way, the strategic

plans and the missile defense plans. From there, he asked me then to go over to be the director of PA&E, with the purpose then, of finding the programs and constructing the budget.

ENGEL: For the help of future historians, PA&E?

CAMBONE: I'm sorry, for Program Analysis and Evaluation, which is the office that reviews individual programs. He also charged me with overseeing the development of the FY04 budget and the FY04-09 Program Plan for the department, which is the way of implementing what we had done in the QDR and what the [00:02:00] war plans called for and then the budgets, that was how that was done. And then he said ok, now I'd like you go to up and be the undersecretary of defense for intelligence, because I want you to do a number of things there, but among them is to assure that we have the intelligence capabilities that will support the programs, that will support the war plans, that will support the strategy. And, to be certain that I, as the secretary of defense, am fulfilling my both fiduciary and statutory responsibilities with respect to the enormous amount of intelligence capability and activity that was in the department. So at the time of the Surge, the conversations, which late '06, I was the undersecretary of defense for intelligence and left at the end of December of '06.

ENGEL: When does the history of the Surge begin for you?

CAMBONE: It's an interesting question. [00:03:00] In certain respects, it begins back in the '03, '04 timeframe, when we go through the first Fallujah battle, which is, I think '04, is that right?

FEAVER: Yes.

CAMBONE: And then we have the bombing down in Samarra, is it?

FEAVER: That would have been '06.

CAMBONE: That was '06, so it was the other one, down in Najaf. We're looking to find a way to get our arms around what is clearly a burgeoning problem. That is more than the insurgency and al-Qaeda side of it, but there's also the underlying set of civil concerns and unrest that you can see, as early as '04-ish, [00:04:00] late '03, early '04. And so there is a concerted effort on the part of the department, to adjust the force, its activities, relationships with the Maliki government, work the problems with the State Department. And the PRTs get them -- what were they, provincial -- Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which were designed to go out into the communities, to bring funds, to stand up the civil structure and infrastructures of those places, along with some of the military teams, who then went out doing the same thing. So there's clearly a push to get all of that done, with less than happy results, for a wide variety of reasons, not the least of which was the difficulty [00:05:00] of bringing the State and Defense machinery into some kind of alignment to accomplish these things. And, the fact that the State Department itself was not structured to do that kind of work. They didn't have training



programs for people to do that kind of work and they didn't have any money to do that kind of work. So they were disadvantaged in a way that was really terrible, I mean it wasn't their fault. They found themselves in a circumstance that they were not structured, nor had they thought they would need to begin to undertake.

Now, as a result, I don't remember when it was, but somewhere in that '04-ish timeframe, '05-ish timeframe, I think the Secretary did make a concerted effort to get an increase in State Department budget allocation, and in fact I think, [00:06:00] thinking back on it, I think even offered up, not that it was his to give, obviously the Congress appropriates, but he was willing to see some top line come out of the defense budget, to go over to the State Department, to be able to give them more in the way of capability to do what he's doing.

Now, having said all that, I've got to remind you and those who are viewing this, that I was not central to these things. I observed primarily from the side, and as a member of the Secretary's senior team, but I didn't have responsibility for managing, executing or overseeing hardly any of this, until such time as we get up to the actual Surge period itself. That's sort of a caveat.

Now, somewhere again, the dates all sort of run together and the events [00:07:00] are such that you struggle with them sometimes, but among the other things that needed doing, was the standing up of a reasonably competent security force and Iraqi army, which was being undertaken by the -- I wish I could remember the name. Dave Petraeus had them first.



FEAVER: MNSTC-I?

CAMBONE: MNSTC-I, thank you. Yeah, so okay now, the Multi-National Iraq, something, something. [Multi-National Security Transition Command - Iraq]

FEAVER: Training or?

CAMBONE: So you all are going to -- yeah, you all are going to have to take care of that acronym. Dave Petraeus had it first, and then --

FEAVER: Marty Dempsey.

CAMBONE: Dempsey follows him, and that's got to be late '04?

FEAVER: [00:08:00] Late '04, '05.

CAMBONE: '05, right. I accompanied the Secretary to Iraq and Afghanistan, I think before Marty took the job. So I think he was still division or a sector commander. I think he was wearing two stars at the time. We had seen George Casey; he was the commander there. He understood that this was now devolving to this struggle, not just against, as I say, the insurgency in al-Qaeda, but there's this underlying problem of the political and civil relationships. He understood that and he was looking for more help and support out of [00:09:00] what became the ISAF, the Iraqi Security Forces. The Secretary wanted to talk about what Marty Dempsey would do in that position, and so Marty flew back with the Secretary, to Washington, and had what I still to this day think was the most thorough brief on any subject that any general officer or flag officer ever gave the Secretary. He walked bit-by-bit through what it was going to take to bring the ISAF forces up to



a level where they could indeed be the supported force, as opposed to be supporting to the U.S. forces.

ENGEL: Can I just jump in here? Can you give us a sense of when that meeting was, for the record, as far as you know, or we can get that—

CAMBONE: Well, if you can tell me when Marty takes over, it's a week [00:10:00] to ten days before that.

ENGEL: Great.

CAMBONE: So I'm thinking— I'm looking at Peter here, but I'm thinking that it's late '04, but it's probably '05-ish.

FEAVER: I think it's '05.

CAMBONE: I think it's '05, because we're through the election and we're now having to adjust. So Marty takes the job and as best I can tell, again, looking from the side, there is an improvement in the training and the capability of the ISAF forces. There's also an effort underway to begin what becomes the awakening in Anbar, which is more than well underway by the time we get to the Surge business. So by the [00:11:00] late '05-ish timeframe, into '06, this is beginning to gather some momentum. There is a sense of things beginning to shift, and that's all to the good. The second Fallujah is --

FEAVER: The second Fallujah is usually referred to, the November '04. The first battle is March, when they kick us out. Second is November '04, when we -- when the Marines retake it.

CAMBONE: So the first time, and the reason I say you can see it, it's beginning to become necessary to make a shift, was in my view a lost strategic opportunity. And it was taken for, what as I recall, were not unreasonable grounds, and it had to do with trying to not allow, [00:12:00] or not force apart, the tribal and religious arrangements that on the political side were thought to be promising. At least that's my recollection of that decision. But it didn't work, and so clearly, there was a misapprehension of the politics of what's taking place out there, because the Defense Department, to a man and woman, were prepared to finish Fallujah in March. So it's November before that happens, and when it happens it's very expensive in terms of lives and damage, and [00:13:00] lost lives on their side. But that makes it plain that you've reached another plateau in this war, and then it really did get difficult.

So, George Casey, through '05 now, is trying to hold all that together. Maliki and his guys take over from --

FEAVER: Allawi.

CAMBONE: Allawi did what he could, which wasn't enough, as it turns out. Maliki did more than he should have, which didn't help. And the tension between and among the various factions and sects are becoming more apparent, although not yet emergent [00:14:00] in a way that everyone says, aha, this is now a sectarian conflict. The mission is to prevent that from happening, right? So you're sort of stuck there.



ENGEL: But looking at it from the side, which is actually a very, very useful perspective for us. Was there a moment, and if so when, that you recognized that this was actually becoming a full-fledged sectarian problem, and by the same token, what was your sense of the overall direction of the strategy at that point? Were these dips in the roads towards an eventual success, or when did you --

CAMBONE: Yeah. I think the view inside was, that's exactly right. I mean, it is a war, you're going to have setbacks. You set yourself a set of objectives. So that part of it, I think it was understood, and I never sensed that that [00:15:00] was the issue -- how to put it? -- that the reality of military campaigns was not the issue. As it finally came back to us, it was the political question and it was twofold: What was taking place in Iraq -- and I'll come back to that -- and what was taking place here at home? That military campaign, again now looking back on it, but even at the time, was running out of time.

So while you might see a path, and I think General Casey was the view that he could see a path, because there was a success in Anbar. That was being damped down, Zarqawi was gone, there were other kinds of things that were taking place. The JSOC forces were getting their jobs done. [00:16:00] Some of that pacification effort that we talked about a few moments ago was beginning to have some effect. But was it enough? Was it fast enough, and did it meet the need both there and here? That's how that question finally comes back into the department. But again, George Casey -- and I don't know if you've talked to George but you really



should -- George had a view. He thought he could see where this would go, and that he did not feel an urgent need to change course.

FEAVER: I supplied you with the wrong name. You were looking for Jaafari as the name, and I gave you Allawi.

CAMBONE: It's Jaafari, that's right.

FEAVER: Jaafari was the leader. Then they have the elections.

CAMBONE: Right.

FEAVER: We're hoping that maybe Allawi gets seated.

CAMBONE: Right.

FEAVER: But it's not. [00:17:00]

CAMBONE: And it ends up being Maliki.

FEAVER: And it ends up being Maliki.

CAMBONE: And so there's a whole story there too isn't there, so you might want to bring to your readers, the recent work that's been done by the woman who was Ray Odierno's --

FEAVER: Right, Emma Sky.

CAMBONE: I thought her essay was very helpful, and that essay went to the political side of this, and the role for the State Department and ultimately for the White House, and how it managed the setting up of that coalition government in the aftermath of the election in '04.

FEAVER: It was '05, but it doesn't seat until May of '06.



CAMBONE: Right.

FEAVER: You've mentioned before, the golden dome bombing in Samarra.

CAMBONE: Yeah.

FEAVER: Was that a pivot point in DoD's, or in your thinking about the trajectory that the war was on?

CAMBONE: I don't know about everybody else. I thought that that was a moment that said, [00:18:00] to me at least, that the willingness to go after a secular -- I'm sorry, a holy site -- was not good news, and particularly the way that it was done. To this day, I don't know that I could tell you who was responsible for it, but it certainly did set off a great deal of internecine warfare.

ENGEL: Is that what you mean by "in particular," the way it was done?

CAMBONE: I mean, they lined the explosives around the top and just collapsed the thing. It was designed to send a message, at least in my view. This wasn't a truck bomb drove up. Somebody went into that building, in order for them to have done what they did.

FEAVER: [00:19:00] And did that trigger, to the extent you know about, any rethinking inside DoD, about a need to second-guess the existing strategy, or to --

CAMBONE: No, I don't think it was to second-guess it so much as, you know, it's funny -- I mean, it's more an affirmation of the nature of the struggle you're in, rather than a sign that you're losing, which I think is -- and I don't think, I don't recall it coming through that way, into the counsels in the department, but it certainly

caused folks to understand that this was still a very serious conflict, and there was still a lot of hard fighting to go.

ENGEL: Can I probe you on that for a moment? The notion that this is good for recognizing -- good's the wrong word -- but that this helps people recognize [00:20:00] the nature of the conflict. Do you refer to people within the Pentagon or beyond the Pentagon?

CAMBONE: I don't know what was going on on the outside; I can't say. It's not so much recognize as punctuate, would probably be the better word. It just punctuates the fact that this is -- we're into a very, very, very tough fight here.

FEAVER: The contemporary histories, journalistic accounts, draw a lot of attention to an event that came a couple months later: the Camp David national security team meeting, when Secretary, the President and his cabinet, his war cabinet, all went to Camp David to look at Iraq strategy. Were you at all involved in the DoD --

CAMBONE: No.

FEAVER: Okay.

CAMBONE: That would have been by then, was Doug still there or had Eric come in?

FEAVER: Eric.

CAMBONE: Yeah, Eric and Paul, I suppose, would have, or -- [00:21:00] no, by then Paul was gone, I think, so it would have been the Secretary and Eric.

FEAVER: Okay. Coming out of that was, as you mentioned before, they had killed Zarqawi and we now had Maliki, so we had a chance to implement George Casey's

strategy more fully than we had before. Do you recall your sense of how that was going during the summer, the evolution of that?

CAMBONE: Not in detail. Again, only that the joint staff, George Casey in the field, and some of his subordinate commanders, Eric, the Secretary -- they are working to make certain that George Casey has what he needs to get his job done. [00:22:00] There is an appreciation for the growing impatience -- I mean, that's hard to miss, particularly since the White House availed itself of modern communications and managed to talk directly to the people in the field, conveying that sense of urgency, which again, I attribute as much to the politics there and here, as to whether or not there was an appreciation for the stickiness of the military campaign. I don't think that was ever -- I never detected that as an issue.

FEAVER: Just a follow-up. The other event from this time period, political event that is, that gets a lot of attention is the so-called Revolt of the Generals. Do you remember that, in the spring of '06, [00:23:00] and did you have any visibility into that?

CAMBONE: No, only again --

FEAVER: And how that may have affected the Iraq—

CAMBONE: First, I don't know that I -- Revolt of the Generals, yeah. That's what it was called.

FEAVER: That's what it was called, yes.



CAMBONE: It was difficult to find. As I recall, it was made manifest by a retired Marine three-star.

FEAVER: Newbold.

CAMBONE: Greg Newbold. It was as much about -- those who engaged in this, it was, as I recall, as much about the way the Secretary managed things as it was about the details of the military [00:24:00] campaign, and I think those two things got interspersed. And the argument was, as you recall, that he was micromanaging the military operations and he didn't manage all the other things very well, and so he's not doing this very well. First, I think the charge was untrue. I don't think his management style was as described. That not everyone found it congenial, certainly true, so I don't want to take that away from anybody. He could be difficult, as we all can. So let's put that to the side for the moment.

There's a second issue that's worth mentioning here, and that is there were sensitivities about certain military operations, and there were rules of engagement and they were quite [00:25:00] clear, relative to the use, particularly of artillery and air strikes, in which civilian casualties might be implicated, and a question as to whether or not the designated target was a sufficiently high military importance, that the risk, whatever it might be, high-medium-low, of civilian casualties, was or was not acceptable. The Secretary did manage that. There was a process where those kinds of targets had to be nominated and approved. But what's not known or may not be known, is he had two processes for that. There was the deliberate



planning process, so in a drive [00:26:00] north, east, south, there will be these suspected targets, so on and so forth. And then there was an expedited one, which was commander-on-spot, to George Casey or his designee, to the Secretary. I mean, this was not a complicated nor long process. It was as quickly as you can make a phone call, you can get an answer, and what that implied was a depth of understanding on his part, about what was taking place, because he wanted to be able to give them an answer quickly.

So you could see where there starts to build up, this sense that he is involved in tactical operations. Moreover, on the planning side, he was insistent on reviewing the deployment orders for the various units and even for some [00:27:00] individuals, to try to assure that neither the regular force, nor the Guard and Reserve forces, were being overworked, and that they had a reasonable set of so-called dwell times, that is time away from combat, which clearly was -- what's the right word? The process that exists for doing that wasn't familiar with a secretary of defense leaning in and wanting to do this in a way that was actually designed to look after the troops. And to help the system come up with a better way [00:28:00] of executing what indeed the services were looking for, which was a rotational policy that would not so abuse the force, in a sense of bringing down its readiness, its combat capabilities and all the rest, because there were other potential contingencies in the world, and you just simply couldn't put everything all at once, into one place. A, it wouldn't serve for that purpose in any case, back



to our point about military campaigns and they're sticky and they go up and down. So it wasn't obvious that putting more in at any given moment was going to make a difference. Not having enough certainly was going to make a difference, but you had to find that happy medium, so that you also had forces that could go elsewhere. So if you go back and look, you will see that there was a re-basing program that was done, on a global scale, [00:29:00] and it was designed to go find where we had people deployed who didn't need to be where they were, and the purpose of that was not only to save the taxpayers money, and his well-known aversion to leaving people abroad when they didn't need to be there, but it was also to see if you couldn't find ways to free-up some of the force. Now that's a long way of talking about why there were some frictions in the department, but there were as much about that as almost anything else.

ENGEL: Let me respond to something you just asked, because there's two parallel problems in a sense, there's frictions going on. The first that you described is this notion that the Secretary and his office is too involved on the ground.

CAMBONE: That's the charge.

ENGEL: I'm saying, there was that charge. [00:30:00] But then a few months ago you mentioned that there was some frustration with the White House using all the communications at its disposal, to communicate also, to the ground. Could you speak to this?



CAMBONE: Oh yeah, that's an easy one. It's a chain of command, and you can only have one, and this is a bigger issue than the Surge or anything else, and it's best illustrated by the story he told, the Secretary told, about President Ford, when he, I think the Secretary was the Chief of Staff. I don't think he was the Sec Def, I think he was Chief of Staff. It was -- Mayaguez, and they were in the Sit Room, and President Ford was asked -- because they were listening to the radio traffic, [00:31:00] and there was a ship that the pilot was looking for permission to fire on, and for some reason they're in this radio loop. I think it was Secretary Schlesinger at the time, according to the story, and again, that's a fact that can be checked, but I think it was Schlesinger. I think out of a sheer sense of deference, he turned to the President, in the expectation that the President would have something to say. Well, of course the moment passed, but that's a tough spot and circumstance to create for the Commander in Chief, and it's a difficult decision for the people on the ground, because there can't be any question that there's some [00:32:00] skip-echelon process that's going to take place here, unless it's already been agreed to. Secondly, it injects into the military side of the campaign a set of political calculations that are not within the remit or purview of the operational forces to manage. There's not much they can do about it, other than be affected by it.

So I think the question of how the Commander in Chief and his staff deal with the people in the field is a terribly important one, and only becomes more



vivid when you see the photographs of the Sit Room at the time of the strike on bin Laden.

FEAVER: Right. [00:33:00]

CAMBONE: What was the President going to do or say if the guy on the ground comes up on the net and says we've got trouble here? That's very difficult. So, as just a general proposition, that's taking place on the side, and as another element of the relationships that has to get managed.

ENGEL: Well, let me ask you to take a broader view.

CAMBONE: But it also -- just to finish the thought. It also opens up another channel for influence.

ENGEL: That's exactly what I was going to ask you.

CAMBONE: From the outside, into the people either in the field or here in town.

ENGEL: I was actually going to suggest, actually to speak to the other direction, which is one of the questions that we have circulating throughout this entire process is, you know, jokingly, when did the President know, [00:34:00] and what did he know? It also opens up an avenue for the President to get information that does not come up through the channels.

CAMBONE: Yeah.

ENGEL: So I was wondering if you could speak to that and, also, if you have an illustration of what you recall people within your circles on the side at that point, or within the Pentagon, an illustration of them hearing about the President or the White House



going around the chain of command, or getting information from beyond the chain of command, which was particularly illustrative or frustrating.

CAMBONE: That's hard for me to do because I wasn't affected by it, so nobody from either direction was going around me, in my capacity, or my support role, but there was enough comment about it to know that it was not an occasional thing.

ENGEL: Okay. [00:35:00]

CAMBONE: Okay, first, so let me just leave that there. So then the question is did the President get something that he would not have otherwise gotten, is your other question. I can't answer that, you'd have to ask the President. I suspect that what the Secretary will tell you is there wasn't any question that the President ever asked him, and he certainly did not intercede between General Casey or General Pace, I guess it was by this time, in any question that the President would have put to them, under any set of circumstances.

FEAVER: Can we bring the Surge story forward now in time, to -- I guess we're at the summer, August '06 timeframe, August-September timeframe. [00:36:00] And, according to journalistic reports, this is when there's a growing sense among some in the interagency that we might have to do a bigger review, zero-based review of the strategy. From DoD's point of view, were you aware of these rumblings? When did you become aware of that?

CAMBONE: Yeah, they were rumbling around, but I did not become involved with it until the first set of meetings are decided upon, so until Crouch holds those meetings, I'm not involved.

FEAVER: Okay, we'll get to that in a second. In-between then, the summer and the Crouch meetings, Secretary Rumsfeld resigns. Can you shed any light on that, and any link that had to the Iraq story. How would you link that up? And again, from your perspective.

ENGEL: From your perspective.

FEAVER: [00:37:00] We will be asking Secretary Rumsfeld.

CAMBONE: Oh, no, of course you will and you know I'm always happy to let him tell his own story. Look, there wasn't any surprise that he resigned after the election, because clearly, the President is in need -- back to my point earlier about the politics of this. The politics of it had gotten to the point where I think that he had come to the conclusion that he couldn't -- whatever he may have thought about how well or badly the war was going, and even if it were going well, I suspect his view will be that it wasn't going as badly as it was said.

ENGEL: And "he" is?

CAMBONE: The Secretary. But I don't know that, you'd have to ask him. What I suspect is that he came to the [00:38:00] conclusion that he was becoming a drag on the President's ability to get done what he, the President, needed and wanted to do, and at the point at which he believed -- I know this as an abstract principal, so I'm



applying it. At any time, when he thought that he would have been a hindrance as opposed to a help to the President, or that he was becoming a bigger story than that which the President was trying accomplish, then it was time for him to step out of the way.

FEAVER: So, that brings us to the Crouch, the J.D. Crouch chaired meetings. What was your understanding of the purpose of those meetings? What were your marching orders? What was your remit there?

CAMBONE: Remind me when they get started, because I think it's earlier than the -- I remember being there before the Secretary resigns, because I wouldn't have been there otherwise, so he had to [00:39:00] have sent me over there to be part of something.

FEAVER: Well, he resigns, and Secretary Gates is nominated.

CAMBONE: So he's there for some--

FEAVER: Secretary Gates doesn't take office until December 17th, 18th, somewhere around there, because he's finishing his term at Texas A&M.

CAMBONE: Right.

FEAVER: So there's an interregnum period where Secretary Rumsfeld stays on.

CAMBONE: He stayed on.

FEAVER: Yes.

CAMBONE: That's right, yeah, he stayed on, so maybe it is. So the meetings don't start until?

FEAVER: Until the Monday after the elections.

CAMBONE: Monday, after the elections.

FEAVER: Monday or Tuesday, Wednesday, after the elections.

SAYLE: November 15th is the first meeting.

FEAVER: Okay, so we're saying it's the Wednesday after, a week Wednesday.

CAMBONE: So what do you want to -- so the question?

FEAVER: What was your role in those meetings, but also, what was your understanding about the purpose of those meetings? What did you think was trying to be done in those meetings?

CAMBONE: Well, the impression -- [00:40:00] well, impression. It was clear that the idea was to review where we were, and you don't do that unless you're going to make a change, given the circumstances we found ourselves in. Again, given the politics of what was taking place, it's getting more intense in Iraq, business with Maliki isn't going very well, the [U.S.] election was brutal, in terms of the criticisms of the President and the way things were going, and so forth. So clearly, it was about making a change. So the question was what kind of change was it going to be.

ENGEL: And again, this is for the sake of people 30 years from now. None of those factors, with the exception of the election results, changed the week after or the week before the election. There's still a lot of criticism before; there's still difficulties. [00:41:00] With the exception of that one critical change, why was the review not begun three weeks before, or explored three months before?



CAMBONE: I think you'll have to ask Peter and Meghan and the President. Again, from the point of view of General Casey, he didn't -- he was not of the view that it was time to change course in a substantial way. A little left, a little right, a little faster, a little slower, sure, but I don't think he was of the view that this needed to be scrubbed, top to bottom, with a wholesale change. And moreover, as I recall, I think from his point of view, it was also a distraction. I mean, he's got a war on his hands, and now he's sitting in meetings going over people grading his homework. And while everyone said that's not what the purpose of the exercise was, [00:42:00] you can't help but look, I mean I've been doing this now for a period of time and here we are, looking to see if we ought to make a substantial change. So I think, as I recall, my instructions were more to -- were less to be an impediment to progress; that wasn't why he sent me over there. Bureaucratically, things like that have been known to happen. That wasn't the purpose of it. It was more to be certain that as this thing unfolded, the people who were involved and were making determinations understood what the interests and equities of the department were.

FEAVER: And what were they?

CAMBONE: He was in a situation where, of course, he was gone, and it wasn't the case then, of trying to close off [00:43:00] options for Secretary Gates, because clearly the President -- the Secretary knew that he had spoken to Gates. This wasn't like it



was mysteries here, so it was just: look after the equities of the department and make sure that this just doesn't get off the rails in that sense.

ENGEL: I'm going to get to Peter's question in a second, but let me ask you one question again, so we can get a general sense of the texture. After Secretary Rumsfeld resigns, with Secretary Gates coming in, and you are tasked to participate in this way, what did you think was personally going to happen to you at that time?

CAMBONE: Well, I knew what was going to happen. I had already told the Secretary I would leave at the end of December, and when Secretary Gates came in to visit, and I know it was somewhere in the mid-November timeframe, I told him that I would be leaving at the end of the month, and he acknowledged that. [00:44:00] Secretary Gates is not one of the more loquacious people, so he acknowledged it. We had met before, when he and Robb and Panetta and the other folks who were doing the --

FEAVER: Baker-Hamilton, right.

CAMBONE: -- review, so.

ENGEL: Let me pose one more question. Again, this is to help people understand how life in Washington works. At what point did you decide that you were going to be leaving, because as you've just mentioned a few moments ago, people knew before the Secretary resigned, that he was going to resign? So at what point do you start planning your departure? Is it going to be timed with him, or you're going to leave at that time?

CAMBONE: I decided to leave when he resigned.

ENGEL: You hadn't thought about it before?

CAMBONE: Oh, surely, but when he announced that he was going to resign, that's when I told him [00:45:00] I would as well, and the reason for that is, from my point of view, twofold. I was as much associated with him as anybody in that building, and to the extent that his leaving was meant to clear the deck, then you had to finish clearing the deck, and I was part of the furniture. And so that just seemed, to me, I owed that to the President and to the Secretary, and I owed it secondly to Secretary Gates, to provide him with the opportunity to put someone in that position, the Undersecretary for Intelligence, which I considered then and still consider to be one that requires a level of intimacy between the secretary and that person, the undersecretary. That's a bit different than the other undersecretary positions, [00:46:00] because of the sensitivity of things that, matters that the undersecretary for intelligence will find him or herself involved in. A policy that goes badly is a policy that goes badly. There are lots of people who can share that. A personnel issue that doesn't turn out so well, those things are repaired, right? But if something related to the intelligence side of the business goes badly, it's going to have a larger effect. So the level of intimacy needs to be there, it seems to me, and trust, that the person in the undersecretary's job knows what the intent is in all of its nuances of the Secretary. So I thought he needed that opportunity.

FEAVER: So, back to the Surge. You have your instructions to look after [00:47:00] DoD equities. Those instructions are from Secretary Rumsfeld.

CAMBONE: Yes.

FEAVER: Does Secretary Nominee Gates give you any?

CAMBONE: No, he never did.

FEAVER: What did you see as the DoD equities?

CAMBONE: Well, I think we've already touched on them. So, one is: if we're going to make an adjustment, it has to be one that is going to lead to success, defined as the original set of aims, which was to get a functioning government in place, that you get the kind of support for the Iraqi forces - all of those sorts of wartime things, which, if you want to sum it up, it's keeping faith with the people who had fought this war, and making certain that what was gained wasn't lost as a result [00:48:00] of making the adjustments. Second, if it was going to entail a surge, it couldn't, in the vernacular, break the force. So back to the point we were making earlier: the forces were pretty hard-pressed, and while some came to the conclusion that a five-brigade surge could be sustained without there being substantial harm to the force, I mean that was a sporting proposition. That was something to be proved, not something that was confidently proposed. And for how long and who was going to do it, and all those other things. Thirdly, this was as much implied as stated: [00:49:00] the department can't be pressed to do things that are beyond its remit. So it can't solve the sectarian violence. It's not going to solve the

differences politically. It hasn't the wherewithal to do that, and if that kind of burden is going to be put on the department, it has to be politely said that that's not what we're capable of doing.

FEAVER: Why were you sent and not the undersecretary for policy? Do you remember?

CAMBONE: You know, I don't remember, in the sense that I don't know that I was ever told. I think it goes to -- I'll ask the Secretary, I'll ask him when I see him. But I think that this was going to be a carve-out in a discussion about [00:50:00] a very narrow and what could be in the end, a divisive issue. I'm guessing that he wanted to be certain that Eric was able to do all the other things he needed to do, without having to get caught up in that affair. I'm supposing that was the case.

FEAVER: Did DoD come with a paper, with a position, with a recommendation, and do you remember what the other papers and positions were?

CAMBONE: No. The Secretary -- he had a paper. It was called the plan, and it was being done, and that's what it was. So this was a question about what did other people have to say and what is it that they thought they wanted to do, and [00:51:00] more to digest that and bring it home and allow him to do what he needed to do, relative to both State and the White House.

FEAVER: What were the other positions that you remember, and how did you assess them?

CAMBONE: Well, again, my memory is, I told you earlier, in terms of the details of this, is not very good. I can't remember the sequence in which it happened, but what it



boiled down to in the end was a position offered by State, which would have had essentially, a withdrawal from the active combat operations and a pullback into the [00:52:00] urban centers, and wait out, sort of, the outcome. I wasn't sure then and I'm not sure now, that that wasn't just offered as the right-hand side of the spectrum.

FEAVER: Meaning? Can you explain what you mean by that?

CAMBONE: Well, I don't know how deeply felt that policy prescription was held, how deeply it was held. It's hard to say. It was argued forcibly, but it always struck me more as a contingent kind of argument than as a preferred outcome. Put the other way: this is where we're going to end up if we don't do something. I was never sure [00:53:00] where all that worked, because to be quite honest, we at Defense were not in that flow of conversation. This conversation about the Surge was taking place between the State Department, the White House, and people on the outside.

FEAVER: Speak to that. Was it your sense, in those early days of the meetings, that the Surge was a viable option, that that's one of the options that was on the table?

CAMBONE: Yeah, well we didn't get to that. The other was you need to bring in more. The Vice President's aide?

FEAVER: John Hannah.

CAMBONE: John, John Hannah, a nice guy. What's he doing? I'm sorry. John made that case very strongly, I thought, as I recall. I could be wrong but I thought he did, as did others, primarily on the White House staff. [00:54:00] Crouch tried to keep

the conversation neutral in that sense. In other words, he wasn't advocating one or the other. He was allowing the people who were at the table to have the argument. As I recall, Doug Lute, Doug was the joint staff representative.

FEAVER: The J3.

CAMBONE: Was reserved. In other words, he was there, I think, to lend a uniformed military perspective on the implications of one choice or another. But it wasn't long before it was clear it was either more, or you're going to end up doing this contraction, and the contraction [00:55:00] was not attractive. It wasn't in keeping with what was thought to be the whole purpose of the war in the first place. So it was nearly a default on a surge of some kind, and so then the question was, how big, how long, to what end, and those kinds of things. And again, my sense is that those were not things that might traditionally be done - an order sent over to the Pentagon, to come back with a plan. This was a decision that was made in that process, and it was taken to the President.

FEAVER: You said that there seemed to be discussions going on between the White House, State, that was not including DoD.

CAMBONE: It was an impression. I don't know.

FEAVER: Was that your sense at the time, [00:56:00] or is that in hindsight now?

CAMBONE: No, no, at the time, at the time.

FEAVER: What was your reaction to that?



CAMBONE: Look, my reaction at the time was, that was perfectly understandable. I had a principal who did not find the subject or the process congenial, and was making plain that he was not going to be an active participant in that undertaking because he, as I said, had a plan, and they were following it and doing what needed to be done. So, yeah, not surprising.

ENGEL: A couple things. The first is, you laid out what your principal's position was. What was your position? Were you completely comfortable with that or [00:57:00] if you had been secretary, or if the Secretary had asked you -- "Okay, what should we do?" -- were you comfortable with the direction that the policy was taking?

CAMBONE: I didn't see it as my place to have a position or a view independent of the Secretary. That wasn't my -- that's not what he asked me to do, and that certainly wasn't my role in the process.

ENGEL: Can I ask you the question in a different way then? Recognizing that you didn't see it as your role, did you nonetheless have a private opinion?

CAMBONE: Probably one of the other reasons why he sent me over there was that I had not been so deeply enmeshed in this, that I had a -- what's the right word?

FEAVER: Hobbyhorse.

CAMBONE: A hobbyhorse, that will do, that I was going to ride in that meeting, [00:58:00] nor a view to which I had come as a result of whatever: some trip to Iraq, or a conversation with Jack Keane, or whatever. So I was not the expert in all of this. Now again, I think the task, as I recall my task, was to just be certain, as



this thing unfolded, that no more damage was done to the department in that sense, as a result of the decision, than it could withstand.

FEAVER: How was that perspective received in the Crouch debate?

CAMBONE: Well, again, I mean you'll have to ask the other people who were there.

FEAVER: What was your sense of how it was received?

CAMBONE: I think it was understood.

FEAVER: How well do you think that the deliberations did at adhering to those equities, [00:59:00] in serving those equities, do you think that the process adequately took those into consideration?

CAMBONE: Yeah, I think so. Again, I think the big issue -- look, the President had a strategic problem of the first order. He wasn't losing the war in Iraq. He was losing the war here at home, in the sense that the political support for what was being done was leaking out and it was near to gone. So he had to make a change. So, whether you thought what was being done at the time was adequate to the need was immaterial. I mean, this was a presidential level strategic decision about changing the course of that war, and the Secretary understood that. I understood that. So the notion of saying "No, no, no, no, you can't make a change," [01:00:00] that was not only strategically a misapprehension. It was not helpful to the President, it wasn't helpful to the country, it wasn't helpful to the people on the ground in Iraq.

ENGEL: But you put the onus for the need to change on the domestic front, as opposed to what's going on in Iraq. So, from the Secretary's perspective, the policy in Iraq, in isolation, did not need to change.

CAMBONE: You'll have to ask him that question. What I'm saying is that as -- back to the point earlier about military campaigns. The military was doing its job in terms of its combat operations, all those things, training the troops and doing all that. Where was the problem? [01:01:00] Was it a problem with performance on the military side or was the problem with respect to the political implementation of all of the things that needed to be done in Iraq. Now, are the two intimately connected to one another? Yes. Therefore, is the notion that you want to go from a counter-terrorism to counterinsurgency, we can go into those kinds of questions. Petraeus is making the case that this is really about protecting populations, and so you've got to change the focus of what you're trying to do. Those are plausible arguments to be made.

But back to my point earlier, that time had run out on the current plan, I mean just time had run out. And if the situation was going to be reserved, conserved, then the President had to make a choice and a big one. [01:02:00]

FEAVER: One of the options that was discussed was to accelerate the transition. As I recall, there was a DoD paper.

CAMBONE: There may have been.

FEAVER: I thought you and Peter presented that, Peter Rodman. That was basically, let's accelerate the transition. We're on -- the Casey plan might be going too slow.

CAMBONE: Too slowly.

FEAVER: To accelerate it to get ahead of the D.C. clock. Do you remember that and can you speak to that?

CAMBONE: Vaguely, vaguely.

FEAVER: Related, were you still in the --

CAMBONE: But that would make sense with what I just said.

FEAVER: Right, exactly.

CAMBONE: Right? I mean, that's consistent with... yeah.

FEAVER: That is pretty close to a description of the Baker-Hamilton Report, what came out. Do you remember, were you still in the process when the Baker-Hamilton...?

CAMBONE: That probably -- I don't remember, but that probably would have been coincidental more than...

FEAVER: No, but the [01:03:00] question is, why do you think the President didn't seize the Baker-Hamilton recommendation?

CAMBONE: Again, I can't answer that. I never had a conversation with the President about it.

SAYLE: I'd like to just ask a few more questions to flesh out the strategy review meetings that you had. You mentioned American domestic politics, what some people have



called the Washington clock. Is that an elephant in the room during the strategy review or is that actively discussed in the meetings?

CAMBONE: It wasn't an elephant -- I mean in the sense that that term is meant. It was a recognized fact of the decision. So let me, just one more time, try to stitch this. When I say it's a strategic decision, I don't mean about whether or not another brigade goes. What I mean is the President had a set of circumstances [01:04:00] that he had to address simultaneously, and they were not all coincident with one another. So, if we were going to have any chance of winning in Iraq, he had to address domestic issues here, he had to address the military situation on the ground. He had to deal with the issues having to do with the political situation inside Iraq and oh, by the way, sometimes lost in all this are coalition partners who are getting a little uneasy too, about whether this is turning into a morass that they're never going to get out of. Plus, there's all the domestic politics in the region, where assurances have been given to the local governments, the regional governments. So when I say strategic, it's taking all of those things and pulling them together with an approach then, that's going to be best suited [01:05:00] to bring each of them to a successful -- either a successful conclusion, or changing the nature of the debate.

SAYLE: Right. And that's at the presidential level. Now at the level of the strategy review, however, I'm wondering if American domestic politics are included in the conversation.



CAMBONE: Well, I don't know what you mean by the question, but the reality was that domestically, support for the war was waning. That I recall as being an important element of the conversation. I don't recall there being conversation that if we colored it green, it will have this domestic political effect, or if we color it red, it will have -- That I do not recall as being a subject of discussion. Does that answer your question?

SAYLE: Exactly, that's what I'm curious, if it's directly addressed or not. [01:06:00] But then you mentioned coalition partners, and then also the regional politics. We've talked about Iraq, we've talked about the United States. Was the strategy review taking a regional perspective on the issue of Iraq?

CAMBONE: Yeah, it did. There was concern about the Iranians, and what they were up to, and how this would affect them one way or the other. Lost in a lot of things that are written about the time is the active role that the Iranians were playing inside of Iraq -- and the danger that that portended. And the longer the unsettled state of affairs continued, the more likely it would be that the Iranians would have an advantage, more advantage than they already did. Meanwhile, we were losing people in what appeared to be [01:07:00] circumstances that somehow or another, if you kept pulling the string, you'd find yourself back, worrying about whether the Iranians had been involved. So there was worry about it. You also had the Saudis you needed to worry about. Syria was an issue at the time, because we had the so-called ratlines running back and forth across Syria. How did it affect the

Jordanians? And all of that was on the table. It wasn't that those things were not in people's minds.

SAYLE: And then the last one on this. The coalition allies, the British for example. Was there a sense that the United States was going to be in this alone from here on out, or if the coalition allies were prepared to stick it through?

CAMBONE: I don't recall that very well. I don't remember.

FEAVER: So, [01:08:00] as the question of the Surge becomes more debated in the Crouch meetings, what was your sense of the role of the military advice? Where were the numbers of surge proposals coming from? Was that coming from the military? Where did you think it was coming from, the analysis for that?

CAMBONE: I think in the first instance, they did not come out of the military side of the house, but they ended up going back into the military side of the house to get vetted. Doug was there, Doug Lute was there as the three.

FEAVER: Sattler was the five.

CAMBONE: John Sattler, right, was the five. As I recall, John didn't have a lot to say. Again, I don't mean to gainsay the process, but it was clear that it was going to be one or the other, that is to say the retrenchment or the Surge, [01:09:00] and there really wasn't much enthusiasm around the table to include, inside the Department of Defense, either on the civilian or uniform side, for retrenchment. So then the question is okay, so how do you manage this Surge business, and that fell more



into Doug's bailiwick, as the three would have to do the analysis. He'd go back and talk to the J8. I don't remember, by that time, who the J8 was.

FEAVER: And, at some point, Eric Edelman comes to replace you on the Crouch committee. Do you remember when that was and how the handoff from you to Eric?

CAMBONE: It was probably in the mid-December-ish timeframe, and when we come back, I mean we'd go through, Eric would be there, this is where we are. So he knew what was taking place.

FEAVER: And as you looked -- is there anything we're missing about the Crouch meetings [01:10:00] that you think is not on the historical record that should be, or your assessment of it, your impressions of it?

CAMBONE: Look, it was under a very difficult set of circumstances. I thought that Crouch did a remarkable job in making certain that the interested parties had the opportunity to put on the table things that they thought were important. He allowed the exchanges to continue to their natural end, but never permitted them life beyond that (laughs). So, you only got to go back on a subject once at best, because otherwise, we would have just been going in circles. And so he managed to keep pushing that process forward, [01:11:00] under what were clearly difficult circumstances and time constraints and all the rest. I never faulted the process at the table at all. In fact, as I say, I thought it was done very well.

FEAVER: I want to ask you about two events that happened in this early December period that get a lot of attention in the press.

CAMBONE: It's good that you have a better memory than me.

FEAVER: One of them is the involvement of Jack Keane and Fred Kagan and AEI. Can you speak to that at all?

CAMBONE: No, not really, other than --

FEAVER: Or how it looked from the DoD side?

CAMBONE: You know there it was. Now, at some point -- I believe this is true and this is where it's dangerous when you start doing these things -- but didn't the Secretary ask General Keane, [01:12:00] after he'd retired, to go back over?

FEAVER: He had at one point, yes.

CAMBONE: He did, yeah he did. The Secretary had a lot of confidence in General Keane, so I don't know what his reaction to the report was. From my point of view, it was another piece of the input that's coming into this process from the outside.

FEAVER: But some have criticized that as being a jumping of the chain of command or the regular order.

CAMBONE: He wasn't in the military at the time.

FEAVER: Right, right.

CAMBONE: He was a private citizen. So now the question is, Was that improper on his part? I don't think so. Would that it had been different and all the rest, sure, but did he do something for which he should be criticized? I don't think so.

FEAVER: The other event is when [01:13:00] President Bush and Vice President Cheney travel to the tank session to meet with the Chiefs, and I believe the Secretary was probably in that session.

CAMBONE: I don't remember when it was.

FEAVER: Do you remember that or were you--?

CAMBONE: No, no.

CAMBONE: No, other than they did it, and it was another case of -- the Secretary, Rumsfeld is still there, right?

FEAVER: Right.

CAMBONE: Yeah. This is another case, back earlier to the Revolt of the Generals. The Secretary was perfectly content in that sense and would want the President to take the views of his Service Chiefs.

FEAVER: One of the things that the President brought was what is described by Woodward as the sweetener, of raising the top line of the number of end strength. [01:14:00] Do you recall any discussions around that, was that a surprise at DoD?

CAMBONE: No. No, I don't remember.

FEAVER: No?

CAMBONE: Yeah, I don't remember.

FEAVER: That's something squarely in the Defense Department's domain.

CAMBONE: Oh sure, but that would have been a conversation he'd have with the Service Chiefs, the President would have, and by that point, that's between the President



and those Service Chiefs at that moment. The Secretary has again, by this time, already tendered his resignation. He's not going to be there to execute it. When you think about some of the things that are swirling around here at the time, end strength is an interesting [01:15:00] thing to look at. The problem with end strength numbers -- back up. There is a distinction between how many people are in uniform and what the end strength numbers are. You can have any number above the end strength numbers that the President says he needs to have, simply by virtue of his authorizing them under the wartime circumstances. So the issue of end strength is an interesting problem for the department, in that it is in essence a mortgage. Once you say I'm going to take the end strength from 50 people to 100 people, now you've got to pay for that and you've got to pay for it out of a budget which is, at that point now, being squeezed. Because remember, we actually [01:16:00] reduced the '06 budget, the wartime accounts are going up, but you can only live with that for so long, and you know eventually that those end strength numbers are going to have to be brought back.

So when you talk about, how do you manage the department over against the strategic requirement of the President? When the people who view this 30 years from now sort of think about this problem again, that's another one of those issues that on its face you don't think about. You think it's actually a help: so we'll jack the numbers up on the end strength and that will be good. And they're statutory by the way, so rolling them back is not that easy to do.



FEAVER: You may have already answered this, but I just wanted to make sure we have it clearly on the record. When was it your sense that the President had decided on a surge? [01:17:00] When you handed over to Eric, did you feel like -- okay, this is what's going to happen?

CAMBONE: The day we showed up and started going through the exercise. Now, did he - - had he made the decision? I doubt it, but I don't know, maybe he did. But as I say, you had two choices, one of which was unpalatable to everyone, I think, and the other, which was thought to be, by that point, a way to remediate the set of problems I talked about earlier.

ENGEL: Could you just give us a sense -- really on a granular level -- when you are in those meetings and you've got those two options, one of which is unpalatable, one of which seems to be the way the train is going, and you're there to protect the department's interests. What's an example of what that means in terms of what is at issue, where you feel like you have to stand up and say...?

CAMBONE: Well, as I said, are you going -- is part of the decision [01:18:00] to assign to the Department of Defense, the responsibility for the building up of civil institutions in -- pick your place -- Ramadi. Well, no, I mean we can't do that. We want ten brigades. Can't do that. You need to do it inside of, you need to have completed this mission inside of 60 days; not possible. You have to get them there in 15 days; it's not possible. Those are the kinds of things that --

FEAVER: Were any of those -- those are hypotheticals, or do you feel like those are --

CAMBONE: No, no, no, you asked what would they be. It would be that kind of thing.

FEAVER: Without -- were any of those particularly -- no.

CAMBONE: But that didn't emerge, no, no.

FEAVER: The one that [01:19:00] might have emerged was protecting the PRTs. Do you remember that issue?

CAMBONE: Yeah.

FEAVER: Of organic protection. Who would be responsible for security for --

CAMBONE: And that was one of them, because the State Department, I think, was responsible at the time, right? And they had their diplomatic security service guys and then other contractors who were doing it. I don't remember was it left that way or did it -- no.

FEAVER: No.

CAMBONE: The department had to take that on. And again, I know you want to stay focused there, but that has a history, and that history goes all the way back to '01, about whether or not the Department of Defense is going to provide, essentially, personal security details, not only to our own people, but to the Iraqis as well. Well, send over the Special Forces guys, they're pretty good at that. Ah-huh? They're busy. Well, you can take some of these guys. Well, okay, [01:20:00] but who's going to do the other peace part. So that again, how about contractors? Well, we've already had the incident. Did we already have the incident with the bridge by this point?

SAYLE: Yes.

CAMBONE: Yeah, right. That doesn't seem to be sitting well with people. So we're going to divert how many battalions, guys, to be essentially guards? So you end up, you want to see the PRTs done, they need to be protected, the State Department says we can't protect them. Pretty straightforward.

FEAVER: We're coming to the end of the time. Is there anything that we haven't asked you about this process that you think we should, and if not, stepping back, what's your 30,000-foot at 12 years removed? [01:21:00]

CAMBONE: It was undoubtedly a success, and the President deserves a great deal of credit for having done what he did. It's good that you're doing this, because I think it is one of the model instances of presidential leadership in wartime. He, the President, knew that he had to make this decision, and he took it and put in place a process to bring him what he needed to make that decision and then he made it. That's pretty good stuff and the sort of thing that those of us who have served or will serve in government, need to appreciate about the responsibility of a president.

ENGEL: That was a wonderful [01:22:00] way to end, but I have one more question, and that's to go back to your very helpful list of hypotheticals a moment ago, because I notice that each of those hypotheticals is essentially you are standing up and saying no, saying we can't do that, that's too difficult, that's too fast, that's more than we can handle at this moment. Can you recall instances where you said not



only "yes," but "yes" with an asterisk? We can do more; you're not asking us enough in this instance?

CAMBONE: Please, may I have some more. That's worth thinking about but nothing [01:23:00] comes to mind. I can think of one or two instances where the department may have wanted to do something and was told that it couldn't.

ENGEL: Can you give us what those were?

CAMBONE: Or shouldn't. Part of it, and again, it's interesting, this thing is one big loop.

If we go all the way back to the beginning of the planning for the war, there is the question about where the responsibility for the postwar thing is going to rest, and tug-of-war between the policy guys in Defense and folks over at State. [01:24:00] And then we end up with a direction from the President on that, which puts the responsibility over in Defense. But then it just never unfolds in a way that is thought to be effective by anybody involved. I mean, it was very funny in the way - - no, it wasn't funny, it was quite sad -- in the way that that unfolded. Fallujah, the first Fallujah, I mean as I said earlier, the people on the ground wanted to finish it. They hated leaving it half undone. I think some of the training issues, there were differences about how that might get done. [01:25:00] Do you worry about the back-end logistics guys, or do you worry about the front-end helicopters and all that kind of stuff?

But a lot of that is the enthusiasm of uniformed folks, particularly in the field, for getting the job done, and I think I mean enthusiasm. In other words,



they want to get it done. They don't want to be there any longer than they have to be there and they'd like to get it finished, and they grow impatient then. As impatient, oh by the way, with the Secretary of Defense, as they might with the Secretary of State or the National Security Advisor, when they're unable to get it finished, because they can see so clearly, what they would do. Now, again, they're looking at a very small [01:26:00] slice of it, right? Which is why there is a chain of command and you have all of that guidance and oversight for.

So there were any number of those cases where that kind of desire to push on through would be there, and there were other cases. Can I sit here and honestly tell you that we never dragged our feet on anything? Well, no, I mean that's just -- you know, life is that way.

FEAVER: So, we will stop there?

ENGEL: Yeah, let's turn off the camera for a second.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]