

The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Meghan O’Sullivan

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2005-2007

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[Begin Transcription]

O’SULLIVAN: [00:00:00] And so I’m looking at you, not...

FEAVER: OK, this is May 12, and we are talking with Dr. Meghan O’Sullivan. My name is
Peter Feaver.

O'SULLIVAN: And I'm Meghan O'Sullivan.

CRAWFORD: And I am Aaron Crawford.

O'SULLIVAN: So let's begin. Meghan, why don't you tell us, what was your position in the government, and what was its general responsibilities for Iraq policy?

O'SULLIVAN: Sure. During the time that I think we'll be discussing, I was Deputy National Security Adviser for Iraq and Afghanistan on the National Security Council. And I'd been at the White House for about two years, and previous to that I had been in Iraq for about 18 months during the period of the formal occupation and the Coalition Provisional Authority.

In my position as Deputy National Security Adviser for Iraq and Afghanistan, my primary responsibilities [00:01:00] included running the Inter-Agency. And over the time that I was there, we put a pretty formal structure in place from something that was a little bit more ad hoc to something that reflected the complexity of the policy process as it related to Iraq, and then we had a similar structure for Afghanistan. And that involved a series of working groups that were interagency working groups, chaired by my cohort, the directors in the office. And then there was an Iraq steering group which I chaired, which met on a weekly basis, which was sort of a sub-deputies group. And then of course, that level fed into the deputies to the principals in the National Security Council.

So the Inter-Agency was a big part of my time. I always said that was the least sexy part of the job. The other parts of the job were, as you all know, advising



the President, helping prepare him for meetings and briefings and trying to keep him up to speed on what's going on in Iraq and Afghanistan, [00:02:00] involved writing nightly memos for him and regular briefings to him in person. And then there was a component that related to just communicating with Iraqis on an informal basis. Not in a way to replace our State Department or embassy or anything of the like, but occasionally I would draw on my relationships from my time in Iraq to get additional sort of supplementary information about the situation there.

FEAVER: So let's begin the story in 2005. Your office was responsible for producing a document called -- it eventually became called the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq.

FEAVER: What was the thinking behind that document? Was that an early version of the Iraq Strategy Review? Talk about that.

O'SULLIVAN: Sure. That came about, as I remember it, primarily because the administration was under constant criticism that it didn't have a strategy. And those inside the administration felt pretty strongly that we did in fact have a strategy, and that we were executing the strategy. And so [00:03:00] there was a real need to communicate this to a broader public. The in-depth nature of the effort we called the NSVI [National Strategy for Victory in Iraq], as you well know, I think got a lot of its impetus over the summer.

FEAVER: Summer of --

O'SULLIVAN: Summer of 2005. I had a lot of meetings with Phil Zelikow over that period of time. And we were working together initially in the summer. And that led to the fall effort that was more NSC-driven, and you were a big part of trying to articulate our strategy. And I think it was my hope, and Phil's hope, and the hope of others that some of the inconsistencies, or where rhetoric and practice weren't actually matching, would come out in this process. So while I did see it as largely an effort to put together a document which could explain to the public what we were doing, I was hoping would also catalyze some real hard [00:04:00] thinking about where our strategy was.

And it was around exactly that time in the summer of 2005 that I made a request for Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, to be my deputy at the NSC. He was in Iraq at the time. He was up in Ninawa, and I could see that he was doing something somewhat unconventional. He was sort of doing counter-insurgency strategies at a time when that quite clearly was not our national strategy. And so I requested at the Pentagon, when he was done with his tour, if he come be my deputy. I got quite a bit of push-back. I needed to wait a full, I think, four or five, six months before he came. But it was clear that there were some disconnects between what we were doing and what we were talking about. And my hope was that the NSVI could expose those and lead to something more strategic and concrete in nature than just a communications effort.

FEAVER: So that was released in late November, [00:05:00] early December.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

FEAVER: Big push from the White House messaging that carried through into January 2006.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

FEAVER: But then January to June of 2006, describe what was your perspective in the White House of what was happening in Iraq and how that was affecting your thinking about the success of the strategy.

O'SULLIVAN: Sure. I remember that period quite well. It was quite a frustrating period for me and for many people. From my perspective, I became increasingly convinced that our strategy was failing during that period of time. I became very convinced that our strategy was based on a set of assumptions that were no longer true. And the assumptions that we had been building our strategy on really since 2004 was that the political process was going to be the driver of security gains, that this was a conflict about power and resources, [00:06:00] so we needed to focus on politics. And if we got the politics right, the security would flow.

We also assumed that the driver of the violence was primarily an objection to a foreign occupation. And finally, there was the assumption that whatever we could do, Iraqis could do it better. So all the effort was always to get Iraqis to do more and Americans to do less. And these assumptions had led to a strategy that fairly obviously was focused really heavily on the political process, was really focused on pulling back from cities and trying to distance the engagement

between Americans and Iraqis. And it was focused on transferring responsibility to Iraqis really whether or not they were ready for it.

And so my sense was, around this period you're talking about, that the situation had changed pretty dramatically in Iraq and we were still executing a strategy that might have been suited to some realities [00:07:00] back in 2004, but in 2006, it was totally out of whack. What was difficult about this time is I think there was a fairly widespread feeling of unease. In fact, I know there was a widespread feeling of unease among senior people in the administration and others about what was happening in Iraq. But I remember that period of time as being a little bit more of a period where people thought things were going badly but they didn't think our strategy was flawed.

And there's a reason for this. This makes sense. The critical part of the strategy that we were executing said politics will drive security gains. And since the election at the end of 2005, no government had been in place in Baghdad. So it was almost a full five or six months that the Iraqis were without a government. There was a huge tussle over trying to eject the former prime minister, Ibrahim Jaafari, and put in somebody new. [00:08:00] There was a lot of political turmoil, a lot of uncertainty. And so I think people who looked at the situation and said, It's a failing situation, but the missing piece is this government. And once this government gets in place, then everything's going to kind of click back.



My view was, this is bigger than just the politics not being in place. This is our assumptions not matching the realities on the ground any longer in Iraq, and really pointed to a need to re-formulate our strategy in a fundamental way. And a lot of this came from speaking with Iraqis that I had known over the course of my time in Iraq, and from a visit that I made in the spring -- I think early spring of 2006, when I went out to sort of help a little bit, or try to help really, with the formation of the government.

I got a feel for, just the sense that you couldn't expect politics to drive security gains, that almost every conversation [00:09:00] we were having with Iraqis about politics was interrupted by a bombing, someone being assassinated, a raid, somebody rushing in with news. Something about an insecure environment. And in that environment, I could see people were drawn more and more into their sectarian identities and their sectarian affiliations. And the idea of political compromise was much, much harder and seemed so irrelevant. And so I returned thinking, if we don't have a floor, the security level isn't at a certain minimum level, we can't expect people to make really hard compromises in the realm of politics.

FEAVER: Around this time was the Golden Mosque Dome, and many of the people we've interviewed flagged that as particularly pivotal in their thinking. Was it in yours?

O'SULLIVAN: I do. I remember that morning quite well. I remember that was the first thing I heard when my alarm went off. And I knew that this was something that



had the potential to really escalate what was already a [00:10:00] declining trajectory. And I think we all had the sense that this was a potentially really calamitous moment, the feeling that the Iraqis actually recovered from it initially quite well. But in retrospect, you could really see that this was a seminal moment, and that the violence really does go a lot further up in that direction after the bombing of the mosque. It is around this time.

FEAVER: Was your trip to Iraq before or after that?

O'SULLIVAN: It was after. It was after, I believe. I haven't been able to confirm it because I don't have notes, but I believe it was in April.

FEAVER: You were the senior director. You were in charge of Iraq. You ran this senior steering group.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

FEAVER: Couldn't you just on your own authority do a strategy review? What was keeping the process back from doing the strategy review that spring?

O'SULLIVAN: At the time, actually, General Kevin Bergner, was a senior director.

[00:11:00] He joined my office in January of 2006, and he stayed till May 2007. So he was a key military figure in our office. I know you [to Peter Feaver] know him well. I was thinking about the need for something much bigger than something I could do at my level in the steering group that I chaired. But this type of review had to do with changing our overall mission in Iraq, and to a mission which is potentially a lot more resource-intensive.



This is sort of what my former boss, Bob Blackwill, calls a big idea. And of course I'm not the only one who was thinking along these lines. But I thought maybe there are some other ways that we can get this review process going. So, I believe when I got back from my trip in April, I wrote a memo [00:12:00] just laying out my sense that our strategy is at fundamental odds with the realities on the ground. So we are exacerbating a failing situation rather than contributing to its improvement.

The next step I took was I was hoping, along with others like you [Feaver], that we could use a Camp David meeting that had been set for June as an opportunity to try to get some new thinking into the system, and use that as a moment in which we could really force a strategy review, rather than from the top down, from the bottom up. And for reasons we can discuss, mainly that the Iraqi government had just formed. And at that time, a lot of people in the administration felt like this had been the missing piece of the puzzle, the lack of an Iraqi government. And so when an Iraqi government came in, the sense was, Well, why would we change strategy now? This is the missing piece, so let's just see how things shake out.

And then, as you know, President Bush [00:13:00] went to Iraq rather than staying at Camp David. So that became less of a moment for strategic deliberations. In July, I think it was July 19, I wrote a memo advocating a strategy review and advocating, I think I called it an additive strategy, adding more troops.



So again, sort of trying to become increasingly bold about trying to get this idea into the mix. And I think in the summer, we can talk about what happened in the summer, but you started to see more traction around that time.

FEAVER: Let me just go back to the April-May timeframe.

O'SULLIVAN: Sure.

FEAVER: The other weapon in your arsenal, the other point of access you had, was your nightly notes to President Bush. Can you describe the kinds of things that would be included in there? [00:14:00] In particular, what you were saying at this time in those nightly notes.

O'SULLIVAN: Sure. Those nightly notes began because President Bush wanted to get a daily update. He used to read them first thing in the morning, as far as I could tell when the inquiries came, right after he read them. And he wanted to get a kind of a broader sense of what was happening on a daily basis in Iraq. And so Steve Hadley made it very clear that some of it would be reporting, drawing on the resources from other agencies: State Department cables, Pentagon reports, some intelligence briefings, those kinds of things.

So we tried to give the President and others who read the Iraq note a quick snapshot, a window into what was happening on the ground. Inevitably, the people who write it, our concerns and some of our thoughts for strategy, end up becoming [00:15:00] apparent in the note. And I think that when historians go back and read these hundreds and hundreds of notes, they'll really see that we



tried very hard not to sugarcoat anything. And I felt it was really important, and I know Hadley did and others like you and your office who contributed to the note - - we would take things from different offices if something relevant were happening elsewhere. But this was a really important effort, because it was the best effort we could come up with to give the President unvarnished information.

And I would say, with all due respect to everyone involved, I think there was a sense, particularly over this period of time, that the President wasn't getting unvarnished views of the situation on the ground in Iraq. So that was the real effort behind that. And so I think, to answer your question a little bit more simply, we were portraying [00:16:00] a very deteriorating situation on the political, economic, and military front.

FEAVER: You said there was some concern that he might not be getting an unvarnished view. Let's just pull on that thread a little bit. What concerns were you referring to, and who were the folks who had those concerns?

O'SULLIVAN: Well, especially on something so sensitive, I don't want to speak for other people. But I would say my best indication was that the President, and to some extent Steve, increasingly would ask me for my views after NSC meetings or other meetings where there would be briefings from the field. So from MNF-I, from our ambassador, but particularly on the state of the security situation.

And so, I'd say on more than one occasion, [00:17:00] I would find myself in the Oval Office after such a meeting. And I think there was this concern. As we



heard, the nightly notes were portraying a very dark situation. And that dark situation was not always reflected in the briefings that came from MNF-I. And so I think the sense was, if I were the president, I would be like, How do I reconcile these two things? And so I was feeling an increasing number of questions that tried to reconcile the quite dire picture that our note was painting with the assessments that came from the field.

FEAVER: As you looked across the Inter-Agency, I'm not thinking now of in Baghdad but in DC, what were the views? Were some offices more optimistic and others more pessimistic and the White House [00:18:00] was somewhere in between? How would you describe the spectrum of optimism to pessimism?

O'SULLIVAN: You're talking about the agencies or offices? The agencies?

FEVER: Yeah, departments-- yeah.

O'SULLIVAN: Departments, yeah. Do you want to move towards the formal review period or --

FEVER: I'm thinking in the spring, leading up to the Camp David.

O'SULLIVAN: In the spring, yeah. I think there was, to repeat myself a bit, there was definitely a sense that things were going badly. But again there wasn't a sense necessarily that this particular strategy was failing. So we're talking about the first six months of 2006. I think there really was a focus. And again, it's impossible to group everyone at the Pentagon into the Pentagon. But if my memory serves me right, people were mostly frustrated with the lack of the political progress.



And that was the real focus. The lens was on, Why can't you civilians get [00:19:00] a government in place, and then we can have some political stability, and this will have positive reverberations for the security realm. And of course that's true, but it's also a lot more complicated than that. So I think to the extent people were certainly not being Pollyanna-ish because this is a pretty negative time. And I think people were also beginning to realize that the character of the conflict was changing.

One of the assumptions I mentioned at the beginning was this idea that the violence in Iraq was a reaction to the American forces being there, primarily American forces. And I think if you're watching this conflict, not even closely, -- you don't have to be watching it closely -- to see that this is a different kind of conflict emerging. I would say there's an interesting thing that starts to emerge around this time. I felt it a little bit more in the summer and in the fall, particularly from my State Department colleagues. And that is a little bit [00:20:00] a feeling somewhat of despair about the sense that we can't actually do anything about this, at the moment in which we might have been able to stanch this wave of sectarian violence has passed.

This became, I think a very critical debate or kind of foundational point between -- not that there were only two camps per se, but I think there was a group of people who felt like US actions did or could have positive ramifications

on the situation in Iraq. And that group ended up being sort of the cornerstone of advocating the Surge.

And then I think our State Department colleagues felt a little bit more strongly that we could throw a lot of resources at this problem, but it was so much bigger than us, and that in fact, it became a question about, are Iraqis killing one another because this is a primordial [00:21:00] hatred question? Is this something that's been going on 1,000 years? We've all heard that. Sunni, Shia. Nothing we can do is going to influence the course of that conflict. Or is this a conflict that is fueled by extremist groups? And if you can inoculate the rest of the population from those extremist groups, you'll see a massive drop in violence. And so that was just two different diagnoses of the same situation which had vastly different prescriptions follow from them.

FEAVER: Just one last question about this May timeframe, April-May timeframe.

O'SULLIVAN: Sure.

FEAVER: You alluded to it, but I want to just draw you out on it. One of the criticisms we've heard in other reports was the complaint from MNF-I and DoD that they were in the fight but State had not shown up. Was that what you were referring to when the lack of progress on the political front was DoD pointing a finger saying, [00:22:00] Where's the rest of the government?

O'SULLIVAN: I think that definitely was a continuous theme, and I think it was a justified theme. I think there was a fair amount of concern and apprehension and maybe



even resentment that we had a lot of military people in the field doing what were essentially civilian jobs. And part of that isn't going back to just willingness of different people in the foreign service versus the military, just capabilities and size of institutions and ability to deploy and all of these things. But all of those institutional factors ended up in a situation where you did have a lot of military people doing jobs that they never thought they would be doing in the military. So that was a consistent theme.

I was talking about something slightly different, which is a frustration that civilians, our people in Baghdad, were not able to induce political progress [00:23:00] faster. And there used to be an ongoing friendly discussion where we would look at time lines in the Inter-Agency, and the time line for the military had to do with rotating troops and things of that nature, so inputs that the military had full control over.

But then the benchmarks on the civilian side had to do with the Iraqis passing certain laws or government formation or things that were actually not the State Department's to do, but they were the Iraqis' to do, and the State Department was trying to influence the Iraqis to do it. So on the one hand, we were measuring things in terms of inputs. On the other hand, we were measuring -- for the military, we were looking at inputs rather than when security was brought to Anbar or to Baghdad. And on the civilian side, we were looking at, well, when was governance?

So there were some tensions there. I wouldn't say those tensions were debilitating. I think in a lot of ways they're natural. Having [00:24:00] worked on Iraq in the run-up to the war and being out there in the early days, I think that the civilian-military relationship got a lot, lot better over time. So there were tensions, but I don't think they were the big source of our problem.

FEAVER: Let's go back to the Camp David. You explained why it didn't work out as you intended, but just be a little bit more detailed about what it is you intended. What did you think would happen, and how did you try to catalyze what you thought would happen?

O'SULLIVAN: This was something that we [to Feaver] were partners in doing this. I think we realized that, here's an opportunity. The President's going to sit down with his national security team for a day and a half and talk about Iraq, and do it away from Washington, so having everyone get focused on this. And the question was, Well, what's the content going to be? And so [00:25:00] the effort -- at least on my part and on your [Feaver] part from our different perspectives -- was to think about, well, how can we inject a few new things into the conversation so it's not a briefing, an update, but it's actually a look at some of the things that have created an impasse here or an impasse there?

I can't remember how long it was, but there was clearly enough run-up time that I had all these different groups in the Inter-Agency working on reviews of their particular sector, looking at the economic plan. What was working, what



wasn't working, what could we propose. The political plan. We tried to do it on the security front as well. And so there was a huge effort on the part of dozens or hundreds of people to come up with briefs that were hoping to spur conversation. This was going to be a bottom-up type of thing.

FEAVER: A conversation among whom?

O'SULLIVAN: Among the resident and the principals. And so, [00:26:00] as you well know, if you're trying to instigate a conversation that goes beyond the, What happened today? What happened yesterday? What can we expect next week? and you want somebody to say, Well, does this suggest that we're in fact moving in the wrong direction? or, Is this really the strategy that's going to get us to where we want to go? that you need to present somebody with something else. And you also need to actually try to tee up the conversation with all the people who are going to be in the room, not just the President.

There was a lot of effort that went into that. Many, many papers written, briefings done, conversations had among my counterparts, among their principals. And the hope was that this would be a moment where we could really take stock. I think the common answer why this didn't work is because the President went to Baghdad. But as I said, I also think it just wasn't the moment that people's minds were open to it, because [00:27:00] everyone was breathing a collective sigh of relief that there was in fact an Iraqi government in place.

You and I discussed this at great length, and I think one of the more successful parts of the Camp David meeting was the part that you were in charge of which was, Let's just get some outsiders in to talk to the President about completely different ways of looking at the situation in Iraq. That did occur, and again this was the idea of, Let's try to infuse some new ideas and new thinking and see if we can get a conversation started in that way.

FEAVER: For the sake of those who are reading this or watching this 20 years from now, they might have an obvious question in the back occurring to them. Why didn't you or someone else on the NSC staff just inject those questions directly? Why bring in outsiders? Why couldn't NSC staff just go and make the case for [00:28:00] radical alternative A versus radical alternative B?

O'SULLIVAN: Two ways to respond to that. One, we actually did inject a lot of hard questions through the channels that were open to us. As you know but our readers and watchers may not know, every time the President does a meeting, he receives a pre-brief. And that pre-brief is written by someone in the NSC, and it's cleared by the national security adviser and other people. And this pre-brief basically gives the President a sense of what's going to happen in this meeting, what to expect. And it often, at least in the case of my office, we would say, Here are some questions to ask.

And I think again, when the archives are open and people look at them, and certainly at least the initial drafts, we did try to take opportunities where we saw



them arise to ask questions that were not factual but really more strategic in nature. But then the second answer to your question is, that is sort of [00:29:00] exactly what we did. So I mentioned at the beginning that I had made a few attempts, first, sort of subtle attempts, and then kind of overt attempts and requests, for a strategic review. And that gets us sort of into the summer of 2006. And for reasons that I understood, there was a real reluctance to do a formal review.

FEAVER: Explain that.

O'SULLIVAN: I would say that it's important for me to note that this, in my presence, was never explicit. But there were two things on my mind that I think really kind of held back --- or three things -- the launch of a strategic review at the time. The first thing was that it was just the nature of President Bush and Steve Hadley to prefer that something comes from the field rather than comes from Washington. So even the initiation, the initiation of a soup-to-nuts [00:30:00] strategy review suggests the strategy is failing. And so Steve's first impulse was, Can we get the field to bring this to us? So that was the first, and we actually went down that road in the summer.

The second factor is you had the Baker-Hamilton report that was launched in the spring sometime. And so there was a sense, Hey, there's already a strategy review under way. And there was a sense in the White House and probably more generally in the government as well, Maybe we can make this into an opportunity.

I don't think there was huge excitement about it when it was launched, but then these are very serious people, and maybe this can be an opportunity.

And then, lastly, this is the summer before the midterm elections. And I think that it would have been potentially awkward for there to be a strategic review of our Iraq strategy publicly out there in the run-up to the elections. I think people might have thought that. I think in retrospect it might have been helpful. [00:31:00] But there is that moment you're doing a strategic review, it becomes public knowledge that you're doing the review. And then, I think, it makes it harder to defend it publicly if you're still trying to figure out where you're going.

So I think those were three reasons why in the summer, especially in July when I was writing memos saying, Here are the reasons why we really need to do a strategic review, that the response was, OK, let's try to elicit this through other means. And in the meantime, in my office, what we did, and you joined us, and David Satterfield joined us and the other directors in the Iraq office, is we did sort of -- it's not a mock strategic review but it was, in my mind, a review that was done as much to lay out the options [00:32:00] as it was to show to Steve Hadley, This is what a review might look like. Because I didn't think that this is the sort of thing that can be resolved just by one NSC office.

I didn't have any illusions that we could come up with an answer and effect change just within our office, but I thought, Maybe I can sort of flesh this out for



Steve in a way so he kind of visualizes what I'm talking about, what it might look like. So we presented him -- and he knew we were doing this -- we presented him with the results of a review that was done largely just within my NSC office. And that was of course very private, and that preceded the more formal reviews.

FEAVER: What time was that that you just described?

O'SULLIVAN: Again, not having access to my notes, I believe it's in the summer. I believe it might be in an August-September [00:33:00] time period.

FEAVER: August, September? Right.

O'SULLIVAN: I believe, yeah.

FEAVER: So let me go back to July then because we'll get to that one in a second.

O'SULLIVAN: Sure.

FEAVER: But in July, according to published reports, what happened was your terms of reference for review, what you were proposing be done after Camp David, it gets turned into a list of questions that the president and Steve Hadley ask of General Casey. Can you talk a little about that? Are those published reports what you remember happening?

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah. I'm a little hazy on just when exactly that meeting was, but I do remember the meeting quite clearly, the VTC. And I remember we put together these questions, which was quite a long list of questions. [00:34:00] And the idea was to ask some sort of fundamental questions about our strategy, slightly different than the kinds of questions that generally were asked in the weekly



meetings which were fantastic in so many ways but in other ways could feel routine because they happened every week.

So this was an effort to really ask more questions, more probing questions, and to do so in a much more private setting. So this is really Steve asking these questions on behalf of the president. And the hope and expectation was that this would trigger some thinking. At this point, I think Steve is feeling really uncomfortable with where things are going, and the president's feeling really uncomfortable. And we're looking to the field at this point to tell us, "OK --" I think we would have been thrilled to get an acknowledgment of a strategic impasse.

I had been in the field for quite [00:35:00] a long time before. So say a year and a half. And so I really knew how hard it is when you're there day to day, how hard it is to note you're in a strategic impasse. Because every day is consumed by things that are totally unexpected, and it's very hard to anticipate everything that's happening. And you can have a very clear vision of how what you're trying to do might work out, it just might require 12 or 13 things to happen. And it's harder, sometimes you need a little distance to say, "Well, what are the chances of those 12 or 13 things all happening to make it work out?"

I think the questions were really an effort to get an acknowledgment of a strategic impasse and to create kind of a very non-hostile strategic review. And they didn't achieve that. So what they did is they were part of an effort that



happened over the summer, Operation Together Forward I and II, [00:36:00] where General Casey made an effort -- two efforts -- to try to secure Baghdad with the resources we had and with the Iraqis as we had them.

And so I think that was the real focus of the summer was this kind of real, kind of last serious effort in Baghdad to make this current strategy work and this kind of increasing discomfort and frustration in Washington. Well, I'm sure there was frustration in Baghdad as well.

FEAVER: Do you remember why Together Forward I and then Together Forward II did not succeed? What was your sense from the White House why it failed the first time and why it failed the second time?

O'SULLIVAN: The thing that stands out most in my memory and I think was the most consequential reason was the Iraqis just didn't show up, that the Iraqi forces just did not appear to have the will or capability to do what they needed to do. And so General Casey [00:37:00] had plans that were utilizing American forces but also relied heavily on Iraqi components to the plan.

And I recall quite vividly that we were briefed as it happened that those forces were coming, those Iraqi forces were coming from parts of the country, other parts of the country. And they would leave, say, Basra, and never show up in Baghdad. And this happened, not a little bit here or there. It was a pretty massive non-showing-up. And so it was pretty clear that the Iraqis were not there in the capacity that we needed them to do this joint operation-- in my mind, this was



another lesson, like how far are we from actually reaching the stated goal of our strategy, which is to transition security and other factors to Iraqi forces?

FEAVER: The other thing I remember from [00:38:00] Together Forward I, the unit didn't show up. Together Forward II, it showed up but then operated in what was perceived to be a sectarian fashion. And so raising the idea that they're either not going to show up or they will show up and be unreliable for the plan.

O'SULLIVAN: Right. And this goes back to I was talking about these assumptions that we were operating on. And the third one I mentioned was that Iraqis, whatever we can do, they can do better, and they should be doing. And this was the idea of Secretary Rumsfeld's, Take your hand off the bicycle seat. Let them make mistakes. And at this point I think we're getting a much greater appreciation for the fact that actually, Iraqi forces are as much part of the problem as they are a solution to the problem as they're currently constituted. So as you said, there were significant parts of the Iraqi security establishment which were perpetuating acts of sectarian violence.

And we were increasingly getting this feeling that there was this,[00:39:00] I don't know if the right word is "mantra," but this idea of, Well, let the Iraqis fail, and then they'll learn from the failure. And at some point I think some of us started to say, "Look, there are certain things that are too important for us to let the Iraqis fail right now." There was a feeling, at least on my part and people that I was working with in my office, that we had just taken this transferring things to



Iraqis at all costs much too far much too fast, and that it risked destabilizing the entire effort.

FEAVER: Now we're into mid-August of 2006.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

FEAVER: And this is when, as you said, you convened your team to do a sketch-out of what an Iraq strategy review might look like.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

FEAVER: Do you remember what were analytical steps that you took, [00:40:00] and did you sketch out options?

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah. The two parts that I remember being most important or illuminating, the first was this issue of assumptions. I remember actually working with you [Feaver] on this to really try to lay out very clearly what the assumptions were that we'd been operating on and how valid were they in this current environment. And that was really useful, I thought it was really useful, in a couple of ways.

This had been in my mind. But I think if you put it down on paper, and it was very hard for people to look at that list of the assumptions that we used to have and say they all still held. And in fact, I don't know, what did we have, 20 assumptions? Look at that list of 20. It's like 17 of them, it was hard to argue they were true, right?

So that was the first thing. And I think, in my mind, it was very important because there was [00:41:00] resistance to the idea that our strategy was failing. There was still some resistance. And so this kind of, I thought, was a useful effort to get people to open their mind: We've got to look at things differently and sort of at a fundamental level.

FEAVER: Do you remember where those lists of assumptions came from?

O'SULLIVAN: We generated them. Yeah.

FEAVER: From the NSVI what we had --

O'SULLIVAN: Some of them were, yeah.

FEAVER: We had published them in the NSVI, and so we took those and said, "Here's what we've publicly stated," and then we added.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah. Right. I think we added to it as well, but that's right. We did do this exercise in the NSVI as well. That's right.

FEAVER: And then the second phase?

O'SULLIVAN: Is the options. And we put forward kind of four, I thought of them as stylized options.

FEAVER: Do you remember the labels you gave them?

O'SULLIVAN: You would think this was going to be emblazoned in my brain forever, but -- I think one was accelerating the transition, [00:42:00] which was essentially saying it's status quo, maybe with a little extra oomph behind it. And then I think there's one that was called A Step Back or Pull Back, which was basically saying



let's minimize the risks at the time and minimize our commitment. And that again more with the idea that we can only make so much of an impact. And that's partially a reflection of David Satterfield being part of this review.

Then there was the double-down strategy, which is what we were calling the Surge before it became the bridge and then the Surge, which was the idea of let's renew the commitment, and actually shift to a strategy where we're really focused first on providing the security and then hoping -- or not hoping, but with the emphasis that that security will help with the political realm.

And then there was one called Bet on Maliki. And [00:43:00] that was the idea of, let's relax this enormous effort that we've been making since 2003 to put an effort on a unity government, to really underscore the importance of a unity government and say instead, focusing on a unity government in divided society has created a situation in which you have inclusivity at the expense of any kind of efficacy. And so let's just say, Maliki, you're our guy, and how you want to govern, we're going to support you.

Those were four, if I'm doing them justice, four general kind of different approaches we could take. And of course those different approaches, as you may remember, had different tools associated with each of them. It wasn't just about a military footprint. This was about how do you combine political, military, and economic tools together to advance a different kind of strategy. [00:44:00]



And that's a key part -- and one that I think we'll get to -- is that what we were discussing throughout this whole period, I think, was not only about the military. That's a factor that gets the most attention and arguably was the most important, but it really wasn't the only factor. But I'll hold off on that in case you want to --

FEAVER: My memory of this timeframe is that you started this effort and got top cover from Steve Hadley to do it but in a very, very small group. Basically, you, Bergner, and me. Is that correct?

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

FEAVER: And then you said we need more analytic help. Can we add Brett McGurk?

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah, Brett, and David Satterfield. No, actually, I asked if we could bring in Brett. And then Steve talked to Condi and said we could bring in Satterfield.

FEAVER: Right. That was the sequence.

O'SULLIVAN: We had some military, some diplomacy, [00:45:00] some academic wonky.
[laughs]

FEAVER: Yes. Now, at this same time, according to other interviews that we've conducted, Pete Pace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was talking with General Casey, commander of MNF-I. And they themselves were thinking of standing up a review that was similar. What visibility did you have into that at the time?



O'SULLIVAN: This period that we're moving into is a great example of the maxim, You never know what you don't know. And so this obviously we now know was happening at the Pentagon at the time. But there was really very little, I would say no visibility in the NSC about what the Pentagon was doing at the time. And in fact I would have been thrilled to know about that review. [00:46:00] But, as you know, how the chain of command works is that things go up the chain of command and when they come over to the White House, they come over at the more senior level.

So we were getting inputs and assessments, but they were largely coming in from General Casey and MNF-I through the Joint Chiefs, and we didn't have any window into the review that they were doing. In fact, I don't think I heard the phrase "Council of Colonels" until well after the whole process was done. I could be wrong about that.

FEAVER: When you say, "After the process was done,"

O'SULLIVAN: After the whole surge review was done.

FEAVER: A-ha, OK.

O'SULLIVAN: I can't prove that, but I don't recall learning of this process inside the Pentagon. Do you want to move to the deputies part of it?

FEAVER: No. I want to still go with this --



O'SULLIVAN: But I'm not surprised. Here we are in a dire situation that's deeply tied to our national interests with [00:47:00] 100,000-plus American men and women over there. I'm not at all surprised that the Pentagon was doing something.

FEAVER: But I have a question that again might occur to people watching this. It made sense to add Satterfield. Why not add someone from DoD to this small team?

O'SULLIVAN: I think this was more Hadley's decision, and I didn't petition him to add someone because I felt I had -- at the time, I think Kevin was a one-star general at the time, and we had other military people in our office. So I felt that we did have some input from someone who had literally been in Iraq just previous to this effort. So six months ago he had been out in Iraq doing these [00:48:00] types of things. So the sense was this wasn't supposed to be an interagency effort; this was an effort that I was conducting in my office to try to give Steve a feel for what other options might look like, what a strategy review product might look like.

And so it wasn't supposed to be an interagency review. My sense is, and again I really shouldn't be speaking for other people, my sense is that Steve was interested in having Satterfield there just as a way of keeping Condi in the loop somehow.

FEAVER: And not OSD.

O'SULLIVAN: As I said, I don't think -- I don't know. It wasn't my decision. I didn't feel the gap because I had what I consider to be military expertise in the room of a small group of people.

FEAVER: So again we're in the August-September timeframe.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

FEAVER: Sometime around this, based on other [00:49:00] reporting, we know that Steve Hadley separately authorized Bill Luti, senior director for defense policy and arms control, to also take a look at Iraq. What was your understanding of that effort, and what was your visibility into that effort?

O'SULLIVAN: I didn't know about that effort at the time. I believe that happened after we had done our small review before it became the foundation for a larger formal interagency review. Do you know what's the date of the Luti?

FEAVER: That was in October.

O'SULLIVAN: OK, October. Yeah.

FEAVER: That's when it came out.

O'SULLIVAN: OK. Yeah. That would be consistent with my memory that we were doing this August-September. And then my understanding of it, which again I'm not the authoritative person on it because I wasn't aware that it was happening, was that Steve wanted to get a sense. We were advocating, we were putting forward these four options, [00:50:00] and we were clearly saying, "Look, this double-down option is the option that's actually -- these are the prescriptions that are consistent with our analysis of the problem. Right? So if you want a strategy that is likely to work, you need a strategy that's actually going to be related to what's actually happening on the ground."



So we're advocating this particular approach, the Surge approach, the double-down approach. And my memory is that Steve was understandably very nervous about this. This was a big deal, asking the President to go against basically the entire public opinion to take what some would perceive as a big gamble. And so I think Steve wanted to make sure that it was even possible to do this, that the forces existed. And so my understanding was that this effort was done as a way of --

FEAVER: What effort?

O'SULLIVAN: The [00:51:00] Luti effort. Was a way of trying to say, Is this a viable -- are there resources? Is it even conceivable if the president were to make this decision? I certainly wasn't in a position to say how many forces we had, how many forces could be contributed to it. I didn't even make an estimate about how many forces would be needed. I did not know these things, and I didn't pretend to know these things. Steve was trying to get a sense of, well, is there the capacity to do a surge? Are there forces that could be deployed if the President were to move in this direction?

FEAVER: You said that this mini review was recommending the double-down option.

Was that the view of all of the people? Was that Satterfield's view?

O'SULLIVAN: I don't remember all of the paper in terms of what everything said. As you [Feaver] remember, Steve liked a lot of sensitive things to be done [00:52:00] in person, verbally, not on paper. I do remember being -- I'm trying to figure out the



right way to put this. I do remember feeling that David, who is a fantastic colleague and I have enormous respect for him -- such a great person to work with all these years -- I do remember when he was advocating the State Department position, say two months later, that I was surprised at the strongness of his analysis which was quite counter to where our mini review had led within my office a few months later.

I don't remember David being a big supporter of the Surge idea, but I don't remember him objecting to it, either. Again, we're talking [00:53:00] three or four people. I don't know if that's because he was still kind of working through the analytics of it. If he hadn't internalized the views of other people like Phil Zelikow, Secretary Rice, other people or if in fact he had been given guidance, Look, just let me know what's happening over there at the White House. Don't try to shape this thing; just be there and take stock of what's happening. I don't know. It would be interesting to ask him. I've never asked him.

So yeah, I was a little surprised by the time we get to November where we're doing this in a formal way, that the NSC -- with not putting forward a formal option, and the State really have a very different analysis of the situation and a set of prescriptions to match it.

FEAVER: Several of the interviews describing this period, this is now the September-October timeframe, pointed to the stove-piped, [00:54:00] compartmented nature of the reviews as a problem, that information wasn't cross-fertilizing, cross-



pollenizing. What was your sense at the time, or what's your view looking back on it now of that problem from that time period?

O'SULLIVAN: I ended up thinking that the sequence of events worked pretty well in terms of things that were important to the ultimate success of the review in the sense that I think it was useful for different agencies to get their own thinking in order, then present it as people did in a formal fashion at the deputies level where we had a lot of major debate about it, which really exposed, I think -- that process was very important because it exposed how different not only our prescriptions were, but our [00:55:00] assessment of the situation was. And so that was useful, and then taking it up as we'll talk about hopefully shortly was very useful.

I feel that this structure was actually useful, that there was something to be said for letting the agencies really percolate, formulate, articulate rather than immediately defending agency equities in an interagency kind of meeting which, I think, might have happened. So I think it allowed for a little bit more creativity to flower and a little bit more deep thinking to occur.

That said, what's the counterfactual? What if I'd known about the Council of Colonels review and the options they put forward and the "go -long" strategy? I don't know, but knowing myself, I'd be trying to build some kind of bridge with the people who are advocating that. Maybe things might have happened more quickly. It's possible. Maybe it would have been squashed [00:56:00] more quickly. I don't know because, I think at the end of the day, Steve Hadley gets a lot



of credit for building consensus for this option. And perhaps if people had felt that they were being undermined at different points in the agency, this could have created antibodies which might have put the kibosh on the whole thing. So I think it's a little hard to say.

The downside of this approach was it was fairly slow, right? It's like you repeated the review three or four times. So there's clearly a downside, but I'm not yet willing to argue that there was unquestionably a better structural approach.

FEAVER: The other development that happens and, I believe, comes out of the internal mini review you've been describing is Steve Hadley's trip to Iraq.

O'SULLIVAN: Right.

FEAVER: Can you talk about the genesis of that and what you think it accomplished, if anything? [00:57:00]

O'SULLIVAN: Again, these are questions better posed to Steve, but I think it was a very valuable trip. It happened at the end of October, so this is before the election, before the strategy review was formalized. So I think there was the question -- at this point I wasn't yet confident that we were going to have a formal strategy review. I think that was still sort of up in the air. I don't know exactly what was in Steve's head at the time. I don't know exactly what was in the President's head.

But out of all the meetings that we had, and you [Feaver] of course were there, the one that struck me as potentially a really big turning point was one that



we had with commanders in Baghdad. And there was a certain point where I think that [00:58:00] we asked people who I seem to remember were generals to step out and just have the brigade commanders talk to Steve. And you and I and Kevin, I think, stayed on. I think even though Kevin had a star, we let him stay.

And at this point, I remember there was an active debate. We were hearing clearly and consistently from the leadership of MNF-I that the root of the violence was the American presence. And one thing that I have forgotten to mention up until this point was the request or the intention of General Casey in June of 2006 to bring home two brigades and how that really, I think, intensified this feeling of we've got very different views, there are very different views in the government about what's actually happening here and what's going to make sense.

And so even in October, at the end of October, that was still the view that was coming to the White House most consistently, which was the only way [00:59:00] you're going to bring down levels of violence is to bring down levels of US forces. And in that meeting, I don't know if you remember it this way or Steve remembers it this way, but in this meeting we asked, I think I asked them just to say, "Can you tell us how Iraqis react to you when you go into their neighborhoods or you leave them?" And to my memory, every single one of those commanders said that they were welcomed with open arms when they arrived and people begged them not to leave.

And this really ran in the face of the idea that we are the source of the violence. And what had happened over the period, the year or two, that we'd been implementing the strategy in that time was we had become the third force, the closest thing to a neutral force in these warring neighborhoods. Where you had Shia and Sunni [01:00:00] extremists fighting and killing one another, it was the US presence which was the one that had the most calming effect.

In my mind that was significant. Only Steve can tell us if that was really significant as in my mind. But I think that really challenged a really fundamental premise of keeping the strategy as it were.

FEAVER: The other piece that has come out in other interviews is the link from the Bet on Maliki option and Steve's desire to meet Maliki and to take the sounding of him first. Can you talk about that?

O'SULLIVAN: That, I would say, was the second really key part of this trip, and you'll remember the memo that Steve sent forward to the President upon our return which tried to make an assessment about Maliki as a potential partner. And this was very important because [01:01:00] another thing that we were hearing very clearly was that Maliki is a sectarian actor. And so if Maliki as prime minister is nothing more than an advocate for Shia interests and a suppressor of Sunnis, how are we going to throw more force and support behind this guy?

And so this was something that was really in people's heads, and it was a very important thing to sort out before we started proposing solutions that would



be empowering to Maliki. And so I think Steve felt that it was really important to get his own personal assessment of Maliki's character and his intentions and to bring it back to the President. And he came back saying. Look, there are still real questions about whether there's a lack of will here or a lack of capacity.

But I think the net assessment was this is actually someone who wants to improve the situation, is willing to work with us, and can be a partner. So I think it helped open the door [01:02:00] to Maliki as a potential partner, not unconditionally, but not to dismiss him entirely. And of course this laid the groundwork for President Bush meeting Maliki again at the end of November in Jordan. But by that time, we had started the formal process.

FEAVER: The other thing that happens upon the return is General Pace comes over to brief Steve Hadley and us on a pre-look at the Council of Colonels study. Do you remember that meeting?

O'SULLIVAN: I do remember it happening, but this may just be a failure of memory -- I do not remember him briefing a "go long" option. Do you remember him briefing that?

FEAVER: No. Go big, go long. Yeah.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah. I don't remember so much --

FEAVER: OK. Well, the other thing that happens is the [01:03:00] election?

O'SULLIVAN: Right.

FEAVER: Secretary Rumsfeld announces his resignation and the President announces a formal review to be led by JD Crouch, staffed by you. But before that group can convene, there's a separate meeting in Steve Hadley's office, the Saturday before that meeting officially confirms. Talk about that Saturday meeting. What happened, and was it a significant meeting?

O'SULLIVAN: I think it was a significant meeting. It was one of those meetings that tends to be unusual in government where you have a small group of reasonably senior people. It was Condi and Steve. So very senior people with you, me, John Hannah, Phil Zelikow, Brett McGurk with enough time to really talk about what's happening, what's going on. [01:04:00]

And I remember the meeting as being significant for two reasons. First was that's where it was decided, subject to the President's approval, to launch a formal review and to make it public. I think there were a few things, a few reasons why that was seen as being OK, but certainly I think it's not a coincidence that the election had happened and that people were now more comfortable with it potentially being public that we were doing a review. So that was announced, that decision was made in that meeting. At least that's my recollection.

Secondly, it was very interesting to get a window into what Secretary Rice was thinking at the time and assuming if she's thinking there are lots of senior people in our government who are still questioning the relationship between US forces and stability at the time. I think [01:05:00] this meeting is November 8 or 11,



so we're fairly far. We haven't really started the formal process, but certainly the churn has been going on awhile. I remember reasonably clearly that she said, "We don't really see any correlation between US force presence and levels of violence." And this was running very counter to what we had been not only noticing anecdotally but then our office had started to try to map because we wanted to be able to actually counter that with facts and with diagrams.

And we'd been mapping a neighborhood called Ghazaliya. And Brett McGurk was like the Ghazaliya overwatch committee. And this was a neighborhood that had seen US troops come in and out and things transition to Iraqis. And it was just dramatic how violence went down when the US force presence was there, and when it transferred over to Iraqis, [01:06:00] violence spiked. This was very, very clear, this kind of correlation. I remember I said to Brett, "Could you share with Condi your study of this?" And so I think there was still a sense, which I guess makes sense because they've continued it in the State Department's position for a while, that what we did was sort of irrelevant, that our efforts weren't really fundamental to the trajectory in Iraq whereas we're sitting on the other side of the table thinking, No, we actually know that it's possible to stabilize these areas, but we know it takes a different kind of commitment to do so, or at least we think.

FEAVER: Anything else from that week, that meeting that you wanted to --

O'SULLIVAN: Those are the two things that jump out at me.



FEAVER: OK. Let's move now to the first day, JD Crouch convening basically a permanent deputies committee meeting. [01:07:00] Several of the people we've interviewed suggested, Oh, the fix was in. We knew that there was going to be a surge outcome, and this was maybe kabuki theater. And others have suggested that it was a jump ball and we weren't sure where it would land. So on that spectrum, where was your head at the time? Did you think, this is a review that is definitely going to produce a surge op decision, or what?

O'SULLIVAN: My view at the time was that if there was any sort of inevitability to the Surge, I was completely unaware of it. In fact, I thought that the cards were dramatically stacked against that outcome for all the obvious reasons. And a few years later, Phil Zelikow and I were having a friendly drink or something and he said to me -- we were talking about this period -- and he said to me, "Meghan, [01:08:00] I felt sorry for you. I thought you were so out of touch that you thought it was possible to add more forces." And so it wasn't just me who thought that this was a long shot. I think here we may be getting into the territory of, is there a predisposition for a certain kind of outcome or is there a decision? There are a number of things that would suggest to me that no decisions had been made by that point. Certainly by the point where we're going into the deputies meeting, which begins in mid-November. And again, I would say, is it a predisposition or is it a decision and at what point does it come?



But a few things stand out in my mind, and these are just my own data points, and obviously other people have others and potentially better ones. But first it's just my own interaction with President Bush. And he said something to me that I believe he also said to J.D. and maybe others. He said, [01:09:00] "I'm looking to you to tell me how we can fix the situation in Iraq, but I'm also looking to you to tell me if we can't." I remember him saying that because I remember it weighed on me really heavily, because we were all very emotionally invested in this. I asked myself, Am I capable of coming to that conclusion?

I think I was spared that challenge because my analytical side as well as my emotional side led me to support the idea of a surge, but it would be a whole other challenge to go to President Bush and say, "Look, there's not actually a good outcome here, and so it is better to minimize our exposure." And certainly this is what a lot of people were telling him. But he made it clear to me, I think to J.D. and who knows how many others, that he was open -- maybe not wanting -- but open to us coming [01:10:00] to him with that. The other thing that really sticks in my mind is this meeting that we had in the solarium which is --

FEAVER: We'll get to that. Hold that.

O'SULLIVAN: OK. But that's another, just to bookmark it. That's another. Unless everybody was on some script that I wasn't given, [laughs]) there was nothing in that meeting that suggested to me that things were going in the direction of the Surge at that time.

FEAVER: The reason I want to hold that for a second is I want you to describe, if you would, the papers or positions that the different departments and agencies around the table presented. As we went around the table, people revealed their perspectives, and how would you characterize them?

O'SULLIVAN: I would say, and here's --

FEAVER: At the outset.

O'SULLIVAN: At the outset. Can I just make one tangential point? I think what was so interesting about [01:11:00] this process is there was this formal process which we're going to talk about and there was the informal process. And the two, I think, complemented each other and were both equally important.

And the formal process that we're starting to talk about -- the informal process, I think, was really lubricated by the fact that we had this pretty elaborate and pretty well functioning interagency structure that I described at the beginning. So there were a lot of close personal relationships because we spent a lot of time together. We hashed through a lot of difficult issues together. So there were lots of channels of daily communication.

On the formal side, beginning with the deputy's meetings, what I thought was so valuable about those meetings was, as I mentioned, it was an opportunity for people and agencies to put forward views that they had been thinking about and for us to see just how different our perspectives were. Because, as you know, there is a tendency in government and bureaucracies to try to move everything

[01:12:00] to the middle and find the compromise, and I'll talk about that in a minute. And here the differences were very stark.

So just briefly how I remember them, I would say on the one hand we've talked a little bit about, the State Department position, which was briefed by David Satterfield and Phil Zelikow, was based, I think, on the idea that our capabilities to effect change were quite limited and that we should really be focused on minimizing our exposure and maintaining our ability to tackle other problems in the world.

And there may have been a sense that there was going to be another effort at the Israel-Palestinian issue. There may have just been a sense that this is not where the administration should spend the last two years of its effort in political capital because it was very unlikely to work. So they had a proposal which focused on diffusing our engagement away from Baghdad. And, [01:13:00] most importantly, basically saying we're not going to try to quell the sectarian violence and that we're going to leave that to the Iraqis and that we will largely come in only -- and this actually was developed a little bit further -- only when there's Srebrenica-scale violence. So it was a much more kind of pull back, minimize your risk and exposure type of thing. DoD, their proposals -- we had the OSD and then the JCS proposal. I remember them as being essentially the status quo with more acceleration of transfer of responsibility to the Iraqis.

FEAVER: They being the JCS paper or the OSD paper?



O'SULLIVAN: This is definitely the JCS paper, and I don't remember the OSD paper being that different. But [01:14:00] since I don't remember it very well, I'm not going to comment on it. So we had three very different views. On the one hand, you had the JCS paper saying, the situation is really bad, but we're doing the right thing. And if anything, we have to get out to bring the violence down. So the faster we can do this, this transition, the better off we're all going to be. We have the State Department saying, look, this situation is not one we can fix, so let's not try to fix it. Let's try to manage it and minimize our exposure. There was a view from the Vice President's office which was a little bit more like the Bet on Maliki: this is democracy. These people won the election. Let's support them. And as you well know, the NSC staff doesn't have a position paper.

FEAVER: Explain that, because that's not obvious to people from the outside. What are you saying, then?

O'SULLIVAN: This is one of the very interesting [01:15:00] things about this whole review, which I'm sure people will focus on at some point, or they have already, is the NSC and people working in the NSC are supposed to play multiple roles. And the very important role is to make sure that the system works and make sure that everybody's at the table and everybody has an opportunity to put forward their views. And when those views cannot be reconciled that they're bumped up the chain and that ultimately the President is aware of the disagreements within his cabinet or those agencies. And so the NSC's real responsibility is to coordinate the



other agencies, and in this case there are many agencies who have equities in Iraq. So our job is not to put forward a particular view or viewpoint; it's to manage the process.

On the other hand, the most [01:16:00] senior people are direct hires of the President and that the President looks to us for our advice to him. And certainly this was a case where he wanted to know what people who work on these issues thought. And so he wanted to know, what would you do? What do you think is the best strategy? What are you advocating? And so there was this tension between those roles.

And how it was managed in this particular circumstance is that Steve Hadley let it be known to this group of deputies, we can formulate these options, but if we're presenting options, we're going to have a double-down option in there just because we want all the options to be in there. And I think this is a great example of how some strategy reviews, it's very easy to self-censor. You only put forward proposals that you think are in the political feasible category or resource feasible category. And I think Steve was just saying, look, the President's going to want [01:17:00] to see that this option has been considered. He wasn't saying, This is the President's option. He was saying, Look, this is a broad-based strategy. We need to consider all the options. That may reflect, Hey, there's a predisposition here. We want this to be a viable outcome. But that's different than saying it was a decision and so it was just injected in there.

FEAVER: Without Steve doing that, would there have been another department or agency around the table advocating for it?

O'SULLIVAN: There wasn't anyone else who was advocating for it. And again, I think the real interesting part was the fact that different agencies had very different diagnoses of the problem.

FEAVER: Do you remember the debate about the State Department paper when Phil Zelikow presented it? Do you remember the debate about that at the time, I mean in the meeting?

O'SULLIVAN: What exactly are you looking for?

FEAVER: JCS reaction or [01:18:00] NSC reaction to the paper.

O'SULLIVAN: I remember my reaction to the paper, which I saw as a fairly defeatist paper. I remember discussing this with them. Maybe not in that meeting, maybe in subsequent meetings. I don't remember exactly where, those views. But I think you're getting to potentially another conversation that didn't happen in that room but elsewhere, which is the overall military reaction to the State Department's proposal which, I think, came out most acutely, actually, in a conversation between Secretary Rice and Pete Pace in one of the NSC meetings that followed on the back of the deputy's meetings. I'll talk about that, but I do want to talk about the solarium as well.

FEAVER: We're going to get there, yeah.

O'SULLIVAN: That was a really interesting conversation, and that had to do with, is it feasible for our troops not to be engaged [01:19:00] in sectarian violence? The effort to kind of tamp down sectarian violence. That was part of the State Department proposal, which is: this sectarian violence is not something that we can affect. We should therefore not try. We should leave it to the Iraqis to manage the sectarian violence because they're going to be best positioned to do that. We should be a step back, and we should be focused on things that are more directly affected or more directly affect US interests like the fight against al-Qaeda, AQI. And only in a very extreme circumstance would we get involved in the sectarian piece.

And the reaction of General Pace and others was this is totally intolerable from a US military perspective, because U.S. forces are not going to sit by and watch hundreds of thousands of people being killed and just say that's not our mission. That this was going to be incredibly demoralizing [01:20:00] for our forces and it was not a position that he or any other military person would put our forces in. And when that debate got to President Bush, he immediately understood that. And this was, I think, one of several knocks against that proposal.

FEAVER: Let's discuss the solarium meeting, which I believe was November 26.

O'SULLIVAN: Yes. Right after Thanksgiving.

FEAVER: Talk about the solarium meeting and its significance in this story.

O'SULLIVAN: The solarium meeting happened after we'd been at this sort of endless deputies meeting for quite a while. I think we had done the deputies meeting for maybe ten days. And then this was the solarium meeting. And I remember Steve called me into his office and he said, "Could you draft a paper for the discussion in this meeting that we're going to have in the solarium? Call it [01:21:00] something like 'The Emerging Consensus' and just put forward what the view is that's emerging out of this deputies meeting."

I kind of grumbled a little. I went back and I started to write it. And I went back to Steve and I said, "Look, there is no emerging consensus. This is an impossible paper to write, because the interesting thing is that actually nobody agrees with anybody about even foundational issues." That said, Steve wanted something that would be the basis for a discussion. So I remember writing this paper which JD briefed to the group and I remember thinking it was absolutely the worst memo I've ever written in my life because to me it was not internally consistent.

In any case, the idea was to kind of let President Bush know where the strategy review was going. And it was held in the residence, in the solarium in the residence, on a Sunday afternoon after Thanksgiving. [01:22:00] And it was a small meeting of basically the cabinet, the National Security Council, without their deputies or plus-ones, with the exception of JD Crouch and me and I think that's



it. Dan Bartlett, I think, was there as well. It was a small group of people. It wasn't the normal kind of NSC process.

FEAVER: Dan Bartlett -- what was his position?

O'SULLIVAN: He was adviser to the President.

FEAVER: Communications.

O'SULLIVAN: Communications adviser, yeah. But he was more than a communications adviser. In any case, JD briefed the paper, and then there was a discussion. And I'll just tell you where my head and my mood was when I'd left that meeting. I felt completely dejected after that meeting because I felt that I saw happening [01:23:00] what I felt had happened on many occasions before, which is that everybody's differences had been obscured, all the sharpness of the debates had been papered over, and the net effect was an approach that was just an incremental change from what we'd already been doing.

There's no decision made. And to be fair, in retrospect, when I look at the meeting, I have no idea what was in the President's head at the time. The people I remember being most vocal and having the floor the most were Secretary Rumsfeld and Secretary Rice.

FEAVER: Secretary Rumsfeld, even though he had stepped down.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah. He was still involved. And I remember that there were a lot of the familiar arguments made, and Secretary Rice expressed her deep skepticism of our ability to do anything meaningful. And I remember feeling like a lot of the



momentum that I thought [01:24:00] had been building at least for a crisp, decisive conversation was really dissipated after that.

I remember I left. It was evening, I left. I was driving home. Dan Bartlett called me. He wanted to ask me what I thought of the meeting and how it went. And so I parked the car in the Whole Foods parking lot. It was cold, and I left my engine running. And I talked to him for maybe two hours to the point where my battery died. And I basically told him exactly what I thought, and exactly what I thought was happening, and exactly why I thought it was going to lead to a very poor outcome. I don't know what Dan did with that. I don't know that he'll be interviewed for this. To me, if there was a secret plan to endorse the Surge, that was a pretty [01:25:00] interesting meeting.

FEAVER: It was kept secret from you.

O'SULLIVAN: It was definitely kept secret from me. I think at that point there was still a lot of unanswered questions and a lot of debates that still needed to be had. And fortunately those debates, I really felt, were had in the subsequent weeks.

FEAVER: Talk about the subsequent weeks because there was almost daily NSCs. Talk about that.

O'SULLIVAN: Beginning in December, early December, I'd say the first couple of weeks of December, first we had some principal's meetings and then we had the NSC meetings with the President. And one thing that I walked away from the solarium thinking very strongly was, we can't just go to prescriptions. We can't just talk

about what we're going to do. We still need the President to clarify for people how he sees the situation and what he sees US responsibilities as being.

There were [01:26:00] dozens of papers that were written for those, I don't know, ten days or two weeks of NSCs, whatever they were. And those papers, to my memory, were all written on my computer and I was not allowed to email them to anyone. When they were circulated in the room, they all had numbers on the paper, and it was my job to collect them from everyone after the meeting was over. There was a real effort to make sure that nothing leaked and to have a conversation that was completely frank and valid and allowed for unfettered discussion.

And we didn't start with options. And in fact this wasn't about presenting options to the President. We started with a series of papers that basically, in my mind, we were going to try to move the conversation incrementally. And so the President would have a chance to hear people's views on various things, and then he would have a chance to say, "This is my decision" or "This is my assessment." And then we would [01:27:00] go from there.

I thought about it as a branch-in-tree kind of process. This wasn't a, Let's every day get together and hash out the same differences over options. This is, Let's all be on the same page about some very critical issues. And so the most important one in my mind was -- and I remember writing the paper for this -- was

basically to foment a conversation about what is our responsibility vis-à-vis sectarian violence in Iraq.

And we knew very well what Secretary Rice's position was, which was shared by a lot of people. We had a good sense of what Pete Pace's position was in the military, which is, We don't have the capability to address this problem. So when General Pace was saying -- very reluctant to say -- that we could in fact bring down sectarian violence, Secretary Rice saying, "This isn't the kind of problem that is ours to solve," and President Bush engaging in this [01:28:00] and asking all the relevant subsequent questions like, Well, if we don't do it, can the Iraqis do that?

And so rather than just somebody saying yes they can or no they can't, that led to the next meeting, where we in the interim got several people to make their assessments. It was the intelligence agencies, the military, I think we got an Iraqi assessment about can the Iraqis, do they have the capability to actually quell sectarian violence on their own? And everybody said absolutely not.

So then the President was like, Well, OK, so what does this look like? If we decide that's not our responsibility, they don't have the ability to do it, where does that leave us? And then subsequently he made a very clear decision, in my mind it was a decision, saying we're going to take responsibility for this.

And once he said that, that shifted the conversation. If you decide that we're actually going to take on the mission of quelling [01:29:00] sectarian violence because we see it as being fundamental to the larger mission of stabilizing Iraq,



then you get into this category, OK, how can you achieve that? What kind of mission should our forces have? And that's how we got into the counter-insurgency option.

Again, I think it was an interesting process in the sense that it wasn't people having the same conversation every day. It was a movement along first getting an agreement, or at least the President having the opportunity to hear people's assessments of the situation and making a decision about, we're going to believe this assumption is true. Our assessment is, to the best of my knowledge, this is true, and we're going to build our strategy based on that.

And so, again, that's how you get to the counter-insurgency piece. But even then in the counter-insurgency piece, we didn't talk that much in the formal process about troop numbers. There were a lot of conversations about troop numbers happening outside of that room, [01:30:00] but it was more about what is the mission, how are they going to achieve it? And if that is our military mission, what other components are required to make it successful? Because no one was talking about that the end goal is just to bring down violence in Baghdad. The whole idea was this is connected to a political reconciliation of some kind.

And so it was simply flipping our old strategy on its head, saying, We're going to focus on security with the expectation that this will be the foundation for political progress. So kind of a flip of where we had been for the previous two years. But then of course, in this review and in this conversation with the



President and his closest advisers, there were many, many different briefs that we put forward about, Well, what's the economic component of the strategy? What's the political component of the strategy? Is there a regional component to this? And we [01:31:00] actually tackled a lot of issues that had been lingering out there but had just not been resolved. And one of them, maybe the best example, was that for more than a year we had had an issue with State Department people and military people having different -- what's the word?

FEAVER: Security requirements.

O'SULLIVAN: Security requirements. And so they couldn't travel together and that the military could move more easily. The diplomats couldn't. And so there wasn't a lot of synergy between our civilian and military people in the field. And we tackled that in that setting and made a decision that on a military base, our civilian people were going to be subordinate to the authority of the commander. If they had been ambassadors or whatever, so what? On that base, they were under the control of that commander and they were going to be subject to those rules. [01:32:00] And they were going to move as military people moved.

And it just created the environment where we actually had civilians being embedded with the military, which provided all kinds of exponential or synergistic benefits. We talked a lot about the civilian component, how that was going to be enhanced, and tackled to some extent -- ultimately not successfully -- this whole idea of a civilian reserve corps, which is an idea that made it into the President's

state of the union that January. But again this idea that there has to be a big civilian component to this.

A lot of what we discussed in that room wasn't just about the Surge and the troop numbers. It was a lot about diagnosing the situation, considering other options, considering what the mission of our forces had to be, and then talking about what other components of the strategy had to be there to make that military mission ultimately [01:33:00] be successful.

FEAVER: When, in your judgment, was the decision for the Surge made in this process?

You've described a very evolutionary process. At what point would you say, "Ah, we've made the decision for the Surge"?

O'SULLIVAN: This is a question I can't answer because I don't know when. Ultimately, this was the President's decision, no one else's decision. And I don't know when he made it. At some point he went from being, I think, predispositioned to this option because it was the only option that held the prospects for success in Iraq rather than managing defeat. So I think he was just personally and personality-wise inclined to that, to actually deciding that that was a sensible option. That's a big journey, right? And he was on that journey throughout this entire process, I imagine. I don't know when his [01:34:00] decision was actually made.

FEAVER: When was it clear to you that the Surge is going to happen?

O'SULLIVAN: I think I was very cautious and skeptical in the sense that I was trying not to leave any stone unturned or any opportunity unexploited. So I did not feel



confident that it was going to happen until, I would say, the second part of December. To me, when I really felt like this was going to happen was when the conversation shifted to talking about resources, to talking about when, how we were going to resource this. And this was another big part of this overall strategy review which we spent all this time defining this new mission. And then we had the conversation about, so it was clear the President was going to do this. Let's talk about resources. [01:35:00]

FEAVER: By resources, do you mean dollars or do you mean soldiers?

O'SULLIVAN: I mean primarily forces. And so those conversations happened, in roughly the 15th through the 22nd of December, or the second half of December is when we're having those discussions. And that was, as probably you've discovered in some of your interviews, there was nothing inevitable about that either because others had ideas about this kind of strategy shift could be done with many fewer forces than were ultimately deployed and that many of us thought were necessary.

FEAVER: Let me ask you about some other things that have emerged from the --

O'SULLIVAN: Could I just say one thing that's, I think, important about the process that I just described in the NSC, which in addition to having the value that I just described, I think it also [01:36:00] allowed the President and Steve to get an appreciation -- maybe that's the wrong word -- but to really understand the roots of the discomfort of other agencies with an approach that would be like the Surge. And so rather than saying, "OK, they don't like this; they're nervous about that.



Therefore, this option is not feasible,” it was more a question of, “OK, they have this concern. It’s a legitimate concern. Can we address that concern?”

And so there were a number of initiatives, some of which I know you’re aware of or involved with, that try to address the issues behind the Surge that made people uncomfortable with it. And, just quickly, one of them is just the strain on the force. So there was the decision to expand the force that the President announced on December 13.

Two was the very real nervousness about Maliki and his sectarian orientation. And we worked that [01:37:00] actually very, very hard. The President personally worked that very hard with a lot of interaction personally with Maliki over the SVTS to the point where Maliki -- he did it twice -- said, “Look, I’m going to go after everyone regardless of their sectarian identity with the same force of the law.” And so there were things -- that was required, I think, for our military to be comfortable with that. And then there was the civilian component I mentioned, really putting more of a civilian effort into this overall fight. So I think the formal process was also important in really identifying those concerns and then finding ways to address them.

FEAVER: Some of the things that have emerged, let me ask you about them, whether you are aware of them.

O’SULLIVAN: Sure.



FEAVER: In his interview with us, General Peter Pace said that he recommended the Surge to the President fairly early on in the process [01:38:00] in November. Were you aware of that at the time?

O'SULLIVAN: In November. I was not aware of that, with the very obvious caveat that there were many meetings I wasn't in. I was not aware of that. I do remember General Pace's, many of his concerns as they were expressed in the December meetings really had to do with, do we have the capability to take on the kind of expansive mission that would be required under a counter-insurgency strategy? I remember him making those arguments pretty persuasively at that time. I'm not aware of that, no.

FEAVER: Another name that often shows up in the story of the Surge is Jack Keane and [01:39:00] Fred Kagan. What, from your perspective, was their role in this story?

O'SULLIVAN: They played a very important and interesting role that I think underscores the value of outsiders to a formalized process. I guess the first thing to say that my sense is, again, looking back with having more information than I did at the time, they were coming up with proposals that were very similar to the Surge, to the application of more force, to embracing a counter-insurgency strategy. So certainly I would never say that we at the NSC were the only ones who had that idea. There's not a lot novel about that idea, right? The challenge is, can the boat of government be turned in such a way that in the middle of a war the strategy can



be changed and [01:40:00] resourced. And that really required a decision by the President.

So I think they were certainly working on these ideas at a similar time. The question when I look back on it is, at what point do they influence our actual process? And my memory is that it's quite late in the game where we start hearing from them directly. So I think that General Keane met with President Bush with a number of other military scholars and former military people on December 11. So fairly far into the process. And I think Steve actually met with Fred Kagan maybe December 20 or something like that. So they definitely did have a chance to meet with President Bush and Steve Hadley.

But by that point I think the pendulum had swung pretty far in our internal workings in the direction of the Surge already. So in my mind they played [01:41:00] an invaluable role, but it was less than being the genesis of the idea, and it was more providing kind of a credibility cover, that we had a lot of difficulty in getting people inside the Pentagon to stand up and say this was possible, this was feasible, this was a good idea. And here we had a very credible military person, General Keane, saying this is feasible, this is a good idea, this is a credible idea.

And so it was having a credible military voice in favor of this outcome, I think, gave people comfort and a sense of, again, that the proposals had credibility. Again, I'm not a military person. I would never claim to be. So actually having a military person being supportive of a very similar proposal, I think, was very



valuable. I would say that was the primary role, being a validator of something rather than [01:42:00] an originator.

FEAVER: Other key figures, certainly for the implementation, and they were inside. So General Odierno, subordinate commander to General Casey, and General Petraeus who later became MNF-I but over at TRADOC - what was their role in this process?

O'SULLIVAN: Again, I think that I don't have a matrix of everyone who is calling whom and this and that. General Petraeus was someone who was very important to me in the process because he was someone that I had known since 2003, someone whose military advice I really valued and someone who I had a good relationship with and so I could call him and ask him questions without feeling that I was going to upset anyone over at the Pentagon. Just give him a sense, Hey, does this sound right? and [01:43:00] If we wanted to do this, what would be required?

And he was the person, he'd been working on the counter-insurgency manual. He was the person who first walked me through all of the COIN concepts as he was laying them out in that kind of new doctrine. So he was someone who I would say repeatedly, throughout this process that we've discussed, who I would call and talk to him about things that were happening.

It was a very delicate situation because he had no formal role in the process, and he was not in the chain of command that was giving us the official military assessment. So in some ways, he shouldn't have been giving input to the White

House. I was reaching out to him and asking for it. Steve and President Bush knew that I was doing that but couldn't acknowledge it. And so there was this strange kabuki game where I would somehow communicate to them that I was getting this from [01:44:00] credible military sources and they would know it was Petraeus but there was never anything explicit.

Odierno, I don't think I personally had any contact with him at the time. I only know later, much later, from reading other accounts of this period that he was in Baghdad actually working up operational plans that would actually do something on the ground that was very different from what the explicit strategy was. And I mentioned to you General Bergner, who had been in Iraq in 2005 and caught my attention because he had been doing exactly that.

So clearly, there were people on the ground, and General Odierno probably the most prominent of them, who were thinking about, again, hey, if we took a different approach, would it work better? That did not come into our formal process. And again, that is just because, I think, the Pentagon has a very specific way of how it [01:45:00] transfers information over to the White House, and debates that were happening inside the Pentagon really were not aired in the White House.

And so that's a really fascinating part of this process for me is learning about all the different points of deliberation and commotion that were happening that weren't evident to us working on it in the White House. So the fact that

several different nodes had the same idea, I think, is a great thing. And it's not surprising, right? If you really looked at the situation, this is not a surprising conclusion to come to. I think what is tremendous about what happened in the process that we've been discussing is that -- and I give credit to President Bush and to Steve Hadley -- that they were able to get the government to move in that direction.

I saw someone quoting General Odierno, saying when he was talking about the Surge [01:46:00] and the extra brigades, he said, "We needed it, we asked for it, and we got it." And that's a very simplified version of everything we've been discussing, because it took a lot on the part of many, many actors -- well beyond me and you and Steve and others but many, many actors -- to put everything in place that this was a decision that the President could make, did make and that it could be implemented by -- I think first and foremost I give credit to General Petraeus and General Odierno and then to Ryan Crocker. But it was implemented by lots of different agencies, countless numbers of people. And I think that's what's amazing about this segment of time we're talking about was actually getting the consensus in our government to do something that was such a dramatic change.

FEAVER: That would be a great place to stop, but let me just ask you to describe one episode [01:47:00] that we haven't covered, and that was the decision and the



debate taking place over Christmas time period about do you announce all five?

Do you send one, two, four? Discuss that part of your visibility into that.

O'SULLIVAN: This is the part in my mind I've got in the basket of talking about how to resource the strategy. At this point, in my memory, this is sort of in the mid-to-late December period that the President has made it fairly clear that this is the direction he's leaning. And now the question is, how much military force are we going to apply to this new strategy?

The Luti brief had given Steve visibility as well as the work done by General Keane and Fred Kagan, because they produced some numbers [01:48:00] which were very helpful when we weren't able to get numbers directly from the Pentagon. I think Steve had a sense of what was out there and what might be applied. And the proposal that came back initially from MNF-I was, we can do this. I think it was first said, we can do this with two brigades. We don't actually need the full contingent, all five that we understood could be made available. This can be done with less.

I think there was a pretty surprised reaction to that, and then a more serious proposal, in the sense that it was floated to us explicitly -- I believe General Pace to Steve -- saying, well, let's just commit one brigade or maybe two first and then one later, and then one later. We'll do it incrementally depending on whether they're needed. And so this was a sense of, well, we don't know how much force it's going to take.

And at this point, [01:49:00] General Petraeus was, at least in many of our minds, as being the likely commander. And I did call him up and I said, "If you were to be executing this strategy, how much force would you need?" And he said to me, "Everything you could give me." And so there were quite a few of us who had very strong reactions to the idea that somehow you could resource this in an incremental kind of way.

I remember having a pretty frank exchange with Steve about this in his office. And my feeling very strongly at the time was, we have come this far to where the President is going to make a very bold, risky, and courageous decision to dramatically shift strategy, and then we're going to kill it by not resourcing it. Again, this was another point of being apoplectic. But it turns out when this proposal was suggested to President Bush, he said, "Absolutely not. No way. [01:50:00] I'm not going to make this decision every month. Let's give them everything we've got and take it from there."

So it was a pretty intense conversation. And Secretary Gates -- I don't know if he was sworn in yet -- but he went to Baghdad right around this time and met with Odierno. He was definitely involved in this conversation but, I think, ended up agreeing with President Bush pretty quickly.

FEAVER: Is there anything else you want to say, anything that we haven't had a chance to discuss yet about?



O'SULLIVAN: I think we've covered a lot of the things I wanted to discuss. I'm going to look at the last page of my notes, which I have not looked at. Yeah, I guess the last thing I would [01:51:00] mention, I think we've talked a lot about the parts of the process which I perceive in my mind as having made it a good process: the various levels at which people are allowed to engage the real debate in front of the President; the long time we spent really trying to diagnose the problem rather than just prescribe a solution. As you know, so often in government, you've got a serious problem, people just want a solution. So getting people to really focus on, how are we understanding the dynamic? I think that was an achievement.

Another thing that comes to mind is just how the review -- I don't know if you remember it this way, but it was so long and painful in the sense that there was this pervasive uncertainty for a long time, and it was really uncomfortable. People were very agitated, stressed out. And that, I think, was necessary. And that there's often in government, at least in my experience, [01:52:00] this impulse to close something quickly, to put people out of their misery, make a decision and march forward. And I think there was a lot of uncertainty that was allowed to fester because the President was really doing his due diligence. He was really thinking about the problem, the issue, the possibilities, the solutions, all of those things.

I would say it definitely wasn't a perfect process, so I would just end on a couple of reflections about things that we could have done better. I think there



are a lot of questions that you raise that maybe it could have been structured differently. I certainly think that it was slower than we would have liked it to be. I think about there are so many dynamics in Iraq we didn't even talk about. But probably, had this decision been made a year earlier, it might have not worked because the politics were so different in Iraq. There wasn't the awakening to capitalize upon. Ibrahim Jaafari would have absolutely not been able to [01:53:00] step up to the plate.

So there were some factors. We could have made it somewhat faster, but the thing that I think we misjudged in a way that I regret was I think we just didn't have a good sense of how quickly political progress would follow progress in the security realm. So it's actually pretty amazing at how quickly we started to see progress in the security realm. So by the time that Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus came back to Washington in September of 2006...

FEAVER: Seven.

O'SULLIVAN: Seven, sorry. They were able to make a credible case. But there were certain positive political things, but it took quite a while, longer than we expected, for that positive bump in security to translate into the kinds of politics that we were hoping for. And I don't think we prepared everyone for, there's going to be this gap. And we weren't [01:54:00] prepared for the gap. I don't think it was detrimental to the overall strategy, but I wonder if we might have thought or structured things a little differently if that had been the case.



And then lastly, it's just the question of might have we done something more with the region at the time? As you will remember, the Baker-Hamilton report, which came out around that time, to me -- and I was thrilled that there were so many people of that stature who were willing to devote themselves to this problem. But the report to me read more like the strategy we wanted to have than the strategy that actually had a relationship to what was actually happening on the ground in Iraq at that time.

But that report really talked about the region and focusing on the region, and a lot of emphasis on Iran and on Syria. And we definitely didn't have much of a regional lens on at the time. But I do think we gained a lot of capital by doing the Surge with other Arab countries in the region. And I wonder, [01:55:00] might have we been able to translate that somehow into more support for the Maliki government at that time?

But, net-net, I think it was something that I will forever look to and remember that as a really important and privileged time to be in government, and remember all the people that I worked with during that time, but most importantly, just the real admiration I have for President Bush making a decision that a lot of people look back now and say, That was inevitable or That was easy. It was a really hard decision, and I think he was standing pretty alone by the time he made that decision.

FEAVER: Well, thank you very much.

O'SULLIVAN: Thank you.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO]