

## **The Surge – Collective Memory Project**

**Interviewee: Eric Edelman**

Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 2005-2009

**Interviewers:**

Peter Feaver

Professor of Political Science, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University

**Date of Interview:**

March 24, 2015

**Editorial Note and Disclaimer:**

This transcription has undergone a verification process for accuracy, according to the strictest practices of the academic and transcription communities. It offers the CPH's best good-faith effort at reproducing in text the subject's spoken words. In all cases, however, the video of the interview represents the definitive version of the words spoken by interviewees.

Normal speech habits—false starts, incomplete words, and crutch words (e.g. "you know") have been removed for purposes of clarity. Final transcriptions will conform to standard oral history practices. Editors will conform all transcription quotations to the Center for Presidential History's final edition.

Please contact the editors at [cphinfo@smu.edu](mailto:cphinfo@smu.edu) with any corrections, suggestions, or questions.

**Citation:**

Eric Edelman, interview by Peter Feaver, Evan McCormick, 24 March 2015. "The Surge" Collective Memory Project, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University.

-----  
**[Begin Transcription]**

FEAVER: Could you please describe your role in the government? What were your general responsibilities? And what were your responsibilities for Iraq policy specifically?

EDELMAN: There are really for me three phases of this. One was from about February 1<sup>st</sup> or so 2001 until June 2003. I was the principal deputy national security advisor in the office of Vice President Cheney reporting directly to Scooter Libby and to the Vice President. And obviously during that period I was involved in much of the effort leading up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

I then was nominated by President Bush and confirmed by the Senate to be the US ambassador to Turkey. So from 2003 to 2005 I was in Turkey, [00:02:00] which needless to say as one of Iraq's neighbors was seriously impacted by -- the US-Turkish relation, that is to say, was impacted by -- the ongoing conflict in Iraq and the emergence of the insurgency in Iraq.

I left Turkey in June of 2005 to become under secretary of defense for policy, the senior deputy to the secretary of defense for all matters relating to policy, and held that job under both Secretary Rumsfeld and Secretary Gates until January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009. So essentially for almost eight years I was involved in different phases of Iraq policy.

FEAVER: And you are Eric Edelman.

EDELMAN: Yes. I am Eric Edelman, retired Foreign Service Officer.

FEAVER: [00:03:00] One can start the Surge story back in 1990, the ancient history. But when would you start the story of the decision making for the Surge that the President authorized on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007? When does the Surge story begin for you?

EDELMAN: Well, for me it actually began really in 2005 when I returned to be under secretary of defense for policy. As I mentioned earlier, from 2003 to 2005 I was looking at Iraq through a very particular lens, which was the impact it was having on the US-Turkish relationship. So I was involved in the efforts to stabilize Iraq largely through for instance efforts to secure a commitment of Turkish peacekeepers to the stabilization force that we hoped would go into Iraq in the summer, fall of 2003. [00:04:00] And then the various ups and downs of the Turkish-Kurdish relationship, the upsurge of PKK [Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan or Kurdistan Workers' Party] activity, the breakdown of the ceasefire with the PKK while I was there, and then the consequences of that for the US-Turkish relationship.

As I was preparing for my new responsibilities as under secretary of defense for policy, as I came into the Pentagon, I was concerned that I didn't have a very good grip on what was actually happening day to day on the ground in Iraq. And I was having a little bit of difficulty understanding how Secretary Rumsfeld was following the conflict, because he basically had, once a week, a secure video teleconference with General Casey and Ambassador Khalilzad, [00:05:00] and then a secure conference call on the phone Fridays at around noon with the senior military leadership in the Pentagon and General Casey. I didn't find for my purposes that that was sufficient to have a very good idea about what was going on on the ground. So I asked my military assistant, Colonel Chris King, who had been

the senior strategic planner for General Petraeus at MNSTC-I and had come back to be my military aide. I asked him to start getting me the BUA, the battlefield update assessment, that General Casey saw every morning. I wanted those slides on my desk every morning so that I could get a better grip on what was going on on the ground, since I saw Iraq as one of my major responsibilities at DoD [Department of Defense]. [00:06:00]

And so for me it started in 2005, because as I began to review the BUA, it was clear to me that we were facing an insurgency. There had been frankly a lot of silly discussion about was it a guerrilla warfare, was it an insurgency, was it just dead-enders. I mean there was a lot of noise in the system about what it was we were facing. It was pretty clear to me that we were dealing with a classic insurgency.

And I went on a kind of self-education campaign to understand insurgency and counterinsurgency a little bit better. So I started reading David Galula's classic works on counterinsurgency, [00:07:00] Robert Thompson, Trinquier, the whole corpus of classic literature on this, as well as some works on the US experience and British experience of this. I read John Nagl's book. John Nagl was just down the hall, working for Deputy Secretary Gordon England as one of his military aides. John was kind enough to give me a copy of his book. So I was throughout 2005 and into 2006 trying to educate myself on that. I didn't conclude that we needed to dramatically change the course we were on at that stage. That came a little bit

later, after the bombing of the Golden Dome Mosque in Samarra in March of 2006, February or March, I can't remember now.

FEAVER: February. How would you characterize [00:08:00] what was our then existing course of action or strategy?

EDELMAN: Well, the strategy when I came in under -- General Casey actually also accepted that we were involved in a counterinsurgency effort. And he took some steps to educate the officers who were coming out on rotation. He created a counterinsurgency academy, etc. But I think my understanding of insurgency and counterinsurgency and his might have been a little bit different. His strategy at that point was and remained -- and I think it stayed until the end of his time there -- as one of training Iraqi security forces and transferring responsibility for them and drawing down US forces, in keeping with the transfer of authority to Iraqis. The way we would commonly refer to it is we would stand down as they stood up.

FEAVER: [00:09:00] Was it your assessment that this was a strategy that was working? And then something changed, and you said, "it's no longer working?" I'm trying to get a sense of what changed.

EDELMAN: I had concerns about whether it was working throughout 2005 and into 2006, in part because although we were in fact training Iraqi security forces and generating more and more units capable of -- with some support from US forces -- carrying out the fight against the insurgents, it wasn't clear to me how much ground we were making up. That is to say, the metrics for success were not clear

to me in terms of what we were doing to defeat the insurgency. We were clearly succeeding in training Iraqi security forces. [00:10:00] As we were transferring responsibility were we actually defeating the insurgency? That was a little harder for me to get a grip on.

What changed dramatically was the upsurge of sectarian fighting that began after the Golden Dome Mosque bombing. Really up to that point, while there clearly were elements of sectarianism going on in Iraq, really violent sectarian clashes were not something that had happened in big numbers before the Golden Dome bombing. That really changed, that was a big game changer in my view.

You got at that point for instance because there were two factors here. One was I was willing to give the strategy the benefit of the doubt in 2005, [00:11:00] because we were going through a series of elections in January, October, and December of 2005. And the elections from my point of view actually were proving to be somewhat successful, in the sense that over time -- initially the Sunni population did not participate in large numbers, but over time as you went from the first preliminary election to the referendum on the constitution and then the December 2005 election, you had increasing participation by the Sunnis. And so throughout 2005 I had some optimism about the political situation slowly evolving in a more positive direction, which is why although I had some reservations as I said about whether the train and transfer strategy was defeating the insurgency, I

was willing to give it the benefit of the doubt, [00:12:00] until March or so of 2006, when it became clear to me that the problems that we were encountering with sectarian violence were beginning to swamp our ability to train and transfer.

FEAVER: Did you have much involvement in the white paper, the NSVI, National Strategy for Victory in Iraq? And how you would characterize that?

EDELMAN: The involvement I had in it was that my NSC colleagues came and briefed me on it. Meghan O'Sullivan. As it was in gestation they briefed Secretary Rumsfeld on a couple of occasions. I participated in those briefings with him. And I wouldn't say I was cynical about it, but I didn't see much connection between that activity and what I saw going on in terms of the fight on the battlefield [00:13:00] and the Department of Defense. My view was that was more of a political exercise to try and provide a mechanism that was explainable to the public and to the Congress about what we were doing. And in that sense it was a valuable exercise. But it wasn't very connected to my own day-to-day operational responsibilities.

FEAVER: Just to clarify. Was it not connected because what it was describing bore no relation to what was happening?

EDELMAN: It was only loosely connected to I think what was actually going on, in the sense that I don't think it had particularly General Casey's buy-in. I mean I guess it had some buy-in from Ambassador Khalilzad, but it wasn't for instance reflected very much in the weekly secure video conferences that we were having, which really went more to the operational and tactical engagement on the ground in Iraq.

FEAVER: [00:14:00] So you said that the Golden Dome bombing was a game changer for your perspective. Was that the case elsewhere in the building? Can you describe how you think it affected other positions in defense? And were there other positions in defense? What were they?

EDELMAN: I think there were a group of us who were very concerned about what we were seeing. I mean I think of the late Peter Rodman, who was the assistant secretary for international security affairs, and his principal deputy, Mary Beth Long. I think all three of us were very concerned about what the sectarian violence was doing.

Now it is connected to the political side. I mentioned that through 2005 I thought we were making some progress politically. [00:15:00] Over time in 2006 that became a little harder to sustain because the 2005 election left us with the incumbent government of then Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari as a kind of lame-duck government, while the US and our Iraqi partners tried to figure out how a new government was going to replace it. And there was a lot of politicking, a lot of infighting. Different people had different views. Secretary Rumsfeld for instance very strongly believed that Jaafari had been too weak a leader, that he needed to be replaced. He used to say repeatedly, "We need somebody with some spine who could -- not a wind sock," as he put it, "needs to be there as the prime minister." There were a lot of other candidates to be prime minister. [00:16:00] It wasn't that



you had no government. But there was a lot of uncertainty about the future of the Iraqi government. You had a caretaker.

That I think created a kind of political void that when the bombing occurred -- a lot of us wanted to say that Iraqis were not willing to go down the path of sectarian civil war because really for two, three years we hadn't seen that. But I think as time went on it became harder and harder to say that wasn't really what was going on. It wasn't a classic civil war in the sense of an opposition and a government. You had on the one hand the Sunni insurgency. On the other hand you had the government. But you also had Shia militias. And you had a lot of Shia populations in the aftermath of the Golden Dome bombing who felt that there wasn't a government there to protect them, [00:17:00] because we weren't able to get the Iraqi security forces trained up fast enough. So what you saw in that circumstance was a massive inflow of people into a variety of Shia militias, mainly the Mahdi Army, so-called JAM, which grew enormously in that period in terms of its size. And that created a dynamic that it was very hard for us to recover from in terms of sectarian violence.

FEAVER: Did that unease that you described, did that trigger a strategy review process inside your shop or inside the government?

EDELMAN: We were constantly looking at this and thinking about what we could do to change things. General Casey and Secretary Rumsfeld [00:18:00] I think were very very concerned that as they put it we needed to take our hand off the bicycle seat,

that we needed to let the Iraqis carry the load in doing this, which meant that they needed to form a government. They needed to do all the political things that you would expect to try and put a situation like this on a less conflictual path. And they also needed to carry increasingly the load of the fighting.

So they were determined to keep the schedule of rotations and departures on track so as not to, I think in their thinking, substitute ourselves for the Iraqis and then take the pressure off them to have to do things for themselves. Which I think intellectually was a respectable position. [00:19:00] I was more worried that just sticking to the schedule might not take into account this new dynamic that we were running into, which was I think making Iraq much less stable. I had one moment when I was slightly hopeful. I actually was in Iraq in June of 2006 and I was actually having dinner with General Casey when he got the word from Stan McChrystal that --

FEAVER: Zarqawi.

EDELMAN: Musab al-Zarqawi had been killed in a Predator strike. I guess it was an airstrike. And I actually went up to Balad and was with General McChrystal the next day and went through the whole operation with him. That I thought was a hopeful moment, because [00:20:00] the thought occurred -- not just to me, I don't think -- that decapitating Al Qaeda in Iraq would be a big setback to them. In the end it didn't really change the direction of events in terms of the overarching

trajectory of sectarian violence. By July and August it was as bad as it had ever been, if not worse.

FEAVER: During this period that you describe as the February-to-July period, were there internal arguments and debates inside Defense? You've described several different positions. Was this a --

EDELMAN: I wouldn't characterize them as debates. I think there were a number of conversations going on with people. General Petraeus was at that point out at Leavenworth [00:21:00] where he was redoing the field manual on counterinsurgency, with a lot of help from people like John Nagl. There were conversations. I had them with John. I had conversations with colleagues in the Office of the Vice President who were very concerned about this. John Hannah. The Vice President was very concerned about it at one point. I can't recall exactly what the timing was. But it was during that period that the Army field manual on counterinsurgency was being redrafted. The vice president asked to see a draft. I got back-channel through my military aide Chris King from Petraeus a copy of the field manual, the draft at that point, and shared it with John Hannah for the Vice President to read.

There were a lot of conversations about do we need to adjust our strategy, [00:22:00] how can we change the course of this conflict? And the issue was really do we stay on track with train and transfer, or do we put a hold to that and do we put more emphasis as one would expect from counterinsurgency strategy on

population security, until we can get back on a track where we can move back towards the train and transfer approach.

FEAVER: And in that conversation --

EDELMAN: It was multiple conversations. It was not one conversation.

FEAVER: From your perspective what were the views in the rest of the interagency? And how was this conversation inside Defense plugging into those, the interagency conversation?

EDELMAN: It depends on what period of time you're talking about, Peter. I think [00:23:00] starting in the fall I began to have a number of conversations.

FEAVER: Fall of 2005?

EDELMAN: Fall of 2006. I had a Tandberg that allowed me to have video teleconferences with a number of colleagues around the government. I began to have some conversations with J. D. Crouch, who was the deputy national security adviser. Both of us agreed that we needed to change course in some way, and were struggling to figure out how to do that.

FEAVER: Can you pin that down closer by month or by time of month?

EDELMAN: I would say August, September. And during that period as well in the summer of 2006 we had a few other debates going on. Steve Hadley and I talked about -- also back-channel -- having to do with [00:24:00] creating PRTs [provincial reconstruction teams] in Iraq, something we had done in Afghanistan. And there was a lot of resistance from Secretary Rumsfeld. And so Steve asked me

to try and work the issue to bring Secretary Rumsfeld around to something that looked like PRTs.

Rumsfeld had, by the way, a lot of legitimate concerns that given the nature of the battlefield in Iraq and the lack of security, any kind of effort to bring State Department and other agency folks into a variety of provincial locations in Iraq as we had done in Afghanistan, where at that point the security situation was actually a lot more stable than it was in Iraq, that this would become another charge on the military; that they'd essentially have to ferry these folks around; it'd be more of a burden; and that frankly they wouldn't be able to do very much; and therefore the net benefit wouldn't be very great. [00:25:00] So we had to work through that issue. There was the issue of --

FEAVER: And that time period was --

EDELMAN: That would have been I think July, August maybe into September. That's something that you might want to discuss with Meghan if you haven't already, because she was part of this discussion as well. I was working with her on these things as well. We were trying to generate a series of short papers that Secretary Rumsfeld could agree to. There was a third one. There was PRTs. There was pipeline security because of the disruption to oil pipelines that was reducing the revenue to the Iraqi central government that was a huge issue. And there was a third one. And I can't recall what it is right now, what it was. But I'm sure if someone reminds you what it was I can talk about that one too.

FEAVER: [00:26:00] Before we get to the August, September timeframe, a moment that is in the literature described as a possible missed pivot is the war council out at Camp David in June.

EDELMAN: In June, right.

FEAVER: Were you involved in that? Did you see that as a possible strategy review pivot?

EDELMAN: Well, I was involved in that because we had a number of secure video conferences with the President leading up to that meeting. As I recall, the President went to Baghdad in the middle of all that. And we knew that he was meeting with a number of outside folks: Eliot Cohen, Mike Vickers, Fred Kagan. [00:27:00] I was actually in the process of trying to hire Mike Vickers to become the assistant secretary of special operations and low intensity conflict, which I ultimately did, one of my better hires by the way. So I was aware of some of these outside briefings.

Also because Donald Kagan, the father of Fred Kagan, had been on my graduate school PhD committee, I'd known Fred since he was in middle school. And Fred had been keeping me apprised of his project at AEI with Jack Keane about potential changes in strategy. And I had a lot of sympathy for what Fred was doing.

But there was a lot of resistance to the idea of plussing up, increasing the U.S. force at all. [00:28:00] And the opposition came from General Casey and from Secretary Rumsfeld for a couple different reasons. One, General Casey used to say

that if you bring an additional unit out here, it grows roots and then it's very tough for me to get them out of here. Because he was very focused on getting down from fifteen brigade combat teams to closer to ten by the end of 2006, which I think was the plan, if I recall correctly. And those numbers might not be exactly right. But it is now getting on in years and I'm getting older.

So he had reservations about bringing on additional forces except for very specific purposes like plussing up the security of the [00:29:00] Iraqi election process in December 2005, which we did. We brought in an additional brigade and we extended a couple brigades so there'd be more overlap, and we were able to plus up the numbers.

Second, he and Rumsfeld were very concerned about plussing up the numbers of troops because of the impact it would have on the rotation base. Because we wanted to give our troops time. In the case of the Army they'd be out for a year, have 12 months out, but then come back for reset and retraining and whatnot. For the Marines it was seven months out and then back. And then if you extended those tours from 12 months to 15 months or 7 months to 9 months as we ultimately had to do in part as a result of the Surge, you put enormous stress on the force in terms of personnel, which was a legitimate concern obviously for the [00:30:00] Secretary and his commander to have.

So there was a lot of resistance to that. But I still had a lot of sympathy intellectually with what Fred and Jack Keane were doing. Jack Keane I saw

periodically because he was a member of the Defense Policy Board, which I managed for the Secretary of Defense.

FEAVER: So during this summer period, did you have any sense that other agencies or parts of the government were pushing for alternative strategies beyond the ones that you were discussing inside the Defense Department? Did you have visibility into what was going on in the rest of the government? Or suspicions about what was going on?

EDELMAN: Well, you talked about the “National Strategy” in 2005 and that effort. That ultimately led to the [00:31:00] elaboration of the strategy and the announcement of it and the notion that it -- and Secretary Rice’s testimony based on it which said that our strategy was clear, hold, and build. That caused enormous consternation in the Department of Defense, in part because certainly Casey and Rumsfeld did not feel that that was their strategy. I mean their strategy was train and transfer and let the Iraqis build. And there was a concern that they had not ever really signed off on this and were not party to it.

So I was aware that there were a lot of other conversations and a lot of other people. As I said, I talked every day to J. D. Crouch. I talked periodically to Meghan. But we all, I think, were groping for some way to [00:32:00] change the trajectory of this and get things on a different course. I would say it wasn’t probably until September. We had these other efforts I was mentioning during the summer. We had the PRT and the pipeline security. And can’t remember for the



life of me what the third one was. But it'll come to me probably in the middle of the night.

But it wasn't really until September when I started talking with J. D. that he and I were saying, we really need to have some kind of review. We have to figure out how to get on a different path. J. D., even I know, at one point had a conversation with Rumsfeld about that as well. I was there while he had it. I can't remember what occasioned it. But J. D. was over at the Defense Department. We were down by the press office. And he talked briefly to Rumsfeld about it. And Rumsfeld kind of [00:33:00] half listened but was not terribly interested in having another policy review, because I think he felt it would be a lot like the "National Strategy" again, that it was going to be a lot of other people trying to tell him how to run the war, which he didn't particularly want or felt that he needed.

FEAVER: Around this time General Pace convened what became called the "Council of Colonels." Did you know that that was happening?

EDELMAN: Yes.

FEAVER: And was there a parallel OSD[Office of the Secretary of the Defense] effort or were you supporting that? What was the link between that and what you were doing?

EDELMAN: No. I mean I knew he had his effort ongoing. And he periodically would brief Secretary Rumsfeld on what the colonels were coming up with, different ideas that they'd come up with. And I would be kept current through that. But we did

not have our own internal review, except that we were constantly dealing with the issue and going through the normal interagency process and [00:34:00] preparing the Secretary or me to go to the various interagency meetings that we were having on this whole set of issues.

FEAVER: Around this time the Baker-Hamilton Commission was also ramping up their DC interviews phase of their project. Were you involved in that?

EDELMAN: I was.

FEAVER: And what impact did that review have on anything that was going on internally?

EDELMAN: So Secretary Rumsfeld was quite concerned about the Baker-Hamilton effort.

Again, I think he saw this as potentially another effort that could cut across what we were doing, what DoD was doing. He asked me to liaise with Paul Hughes, who was the executive director of Baker-Hamilton, in the hope that we could help maybe shape the approach that the Baker-Hamilton Commission was going to take. I think he had in mind [00:35:00] the fact that Steve Cambone had played a similar kind of role with the 9/11 Commission and thought that that had come out from his point of view better than he might have anticipated.

I talked with Paul and I tried to facilitate the Commission's interactions with senior Defense officials. There were two that I recall, one before they went to their one trip downrange to Iraq, which I believe was around Labor Day of 2006. They came to the Department of Defense and I remember meeting with them. It was mostly Steve Cambone and I who briefed them. They got other briefings as

well. They met briefly with the Secretary. And then they went off to their trip to Iraq. And I remember Secretary Panetta, [00:36:00] Secretary Gates -- well, he was still president of Texas A&M at that point -- being part of those meetings.

Secretary Perry.

Then there was another session later on with the Baker-Hamilton folks in the Roosevelt Room where a number of us met with Lee Hamilton and Secretary Baker. I think Secretary Baker was not at the first meeting. And I can't recall whether he actually went to Baghdad or not. I'm not sure that he did. And Senator Robb I know was very active actually. He was in that first meeting. I had known Senator Robb because he'd done some work on PFIAB [President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board] and had come and talked to me. So I knew Senator Robb a little bit. So I talked with him quite a bit on the margins of that first meeting.

FEAVER: So it's September 2006 and --

EDELMAN: Sorry. Just to finish the Baker-Hamilton thought. So we were aware that they were meeting and that they were thinking about what to do. We didn't really have [00:37:00] much visibility into what they were going to recommend and it was my judgment that no matter what they recommended, knowing how strongly President Bush felt about Iraq, he would only be swayed by recommendations he thought made sense and were consistent with his own views about the war. He

wasn't going to be swayed by something that was completely orthogonal that said just withdraw or whatever.

FEAVER: So it's September 2006. Is it your judgment at this point that there needed to be a new strategy? There needed to be a strategy review? What was the need at that point?

EDELMAN: As I said, [00:38:00] for some time I had been concerned that we didn't have a good metric for whether we were defeating the insurgency or not. And I was convinced by the summer of 2006 that we had to make population security more of a focus of our efforts. I wasn't necessarily persuaded that we needed to have a lot more troops, although that might have been helpful. And there were a lot of people who kept saying, we need more troops. And that became a big fight.

I think in some sense that became a distraction because -- well, to give an example. There of course was a minor political event going on during all this, which was the off-year election in 2006. And one of the members of Congress who'd been extremely supportive of the Iraq policy [00:39:00] had been Congressman Chris Shays, a Republican from Connecticut, who was involved in a very tough reelection battle. And so he decided he was going to use his chairmanship of the permanent government operations subcommittee on investigations to have a hearing on this subject. And it was decided that I would go and be the ritual sacrificial witness who would take a beating on television where he would say, "You need more troops, you need more troops."

This is a bit of arcana. So there are some discussions in the literature on counterinsurgency about what is the appropriate ratio of insurgents to counterinsurgents if you're going to be successful in a counterinsurgency fight. [00:40:00] They're not by the way all the same. I mean [David] Galula has one number and other people have different numbers. And so we got into a numbers game.

One of the reasons I think that the numbers game was a distraction was that really in my view what really mattered was do we have the right strategy? And the numbers game tended to underestimate the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces who we were training. And when you think about it, I think the peak number of troops we had in the surge was 171,000, which is only about 5,000 more than the peak that we had in -- remember I mentioned the plus-up in the force to account for the December 2005 election. I believe that was like 166,000 BOG [boots on the ground]. So you're [00:41:00] not talking about a terribly significant number of troops.

We're getting ahead of ourselves a little bit but I think what really made the difference in the surge was not the number of troops but what they were doing, what their mission was, and what the strategy was. So what we really needed was in my view to have the right strategy, not necessarily some abstract number, an arbitrary number of troops.

So anyway I get dispatched off to testify on 9/11, no less, in front of Congressman Shays who's got the TV cameras there and all that. I'm going to go get beaten up on this. Unfortunately for Congressman Shays, it didn't actually work out as he anticipated, because as it would turn out, there was an intelligence assessment by the [00:42:00] Marine Intelligence Officer Pete Devlin in Anbar that leaked to the *Washington Post* that morning saying Anbar Province was lost. So this became an opportunity for Congressman Dennis Kucinich and Congressman Chris Van Hollen to beat the crap out of me about Anbar is lost, our strategy is failing. It was all partisan. Poor Chris Shays had to defend me. So all this television footage he'd hoped to have of him attacking an administration witness, saying we need more troops for Iraq didn't actually occur, and he lost his seat anyway. But that was the backdrop against which a lot of this discussion was going on, the prospect that the Republicans were going to lose control of the House of Representatives and the Congress.

FEAVER: When did you become aware that the President might be interested in a more thoroughgoing review?

EDELMAN: [00:43:00] I had some inklings of it from both Meghan and from J. D. in the fall of 2006 before the election. One thing we haven't talked about is the so-called "Revolt of the Generals" in the spring of 2006. But you had a number of retired general officers: John Batiste, who'd been military aide to Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz; Paul Eaton, who had been Dave Petraeus's predecessor

training Iraqi security forces in the early days in 2004 or so, 2003, 2004. And they were all calling for Rumsfeld's resignation on the basis of the strategy was failing. I think actually my view is that actually retarded [00:44:00] a strategic review because the President, needless to say, was not going to have a bunch of retired generals tell him who his secretary of defense should be. And I think it's possible that Secretary Rumsfeld might have departed sooner had that not happened, which might have facilitated -- it would have been a natural moment for a strategy review.

But we were where we were. And I think a lot of people thought we would have to wait and see what the result of the election was in November before we'd actually get a review. And in fact that is what transpired. The Republicans lost control of the House and Senate in November 2006 and a couple days after the election, Secretary Rumsfeld resigned and the White House announced a strategy review. I was actually on my way to India [00:45:00] for a trip when the strategy review was announced, and so I actually missed the first few sessions because they were two-a-day sessions meeting continuously for a couple of weeks. And so Steve Cambone represented the Department of Defense with Peter Rodman as his number two for most of those early meetings, before I came back and Cambone turned the baton back to me.

FEAVER: What was Defense's position going into the strategy review? Was there internal debate? And can you describe the DoD's contribution to that process?

EDELMAN: Well, it was a bit of an awkward period in the sense that Secretary Rumsfeld had resigned, Secretary Gates had been nominated, and initially had not been confirmed, and then later was confirmed but didn't take office until mid December, because he wanted to preside over the winter graduation at Texas A&M. [00:46:00] And so that made it a bit of an awkward period for me, because you only work for one secretary of defense at a time. And Secretary Rumsfeld as I've indicated had some very strong views about not increasing the troops, about continuing to train and transfer and make sure the Iraqis took the responsibility for this fight themselves, not just push it back on the US.

In that period, somewhere in there in November, Ray Odierno, who was then down at III Corps as commander, but who was headed back out to Iraq to become the corps commander under General Casey, replacing Pete Chiarelli, paid an office call [00:47:00] on me while this review was going on. And he said, "I've been doing a study of this and I think I need more troops." And I said --

FEAVER: Can you give me a rough time?

EDELMAN: This is November.

FEAVER: November.

EDELMAN: Yeah. I think he went out there in early December so it was maybe a month before. It was probably -- I don't know. Maybe November. I think it was before Thanksgiving that he came to see me. It must have been.

FEAVER: So after the review was announced but before the --



EDELMAN: But before the review has reached its conclusion. And he said, “I think I need more troops out there.” And I said, “Ray, I’m very sympathetic. Very sympathetic.” I said, “But I’ve got a Secretary of Defense who doesn’t want to have more troops out there. I got a new secretary of defense who’s getting briefed up. I don’t know what he thinks. I’m going to have to navigate my way through this.”

And then we had the review [00:48:00] which was winding its way through the various processes. The review had its own rhythm. I mean there were a lot of different papers being drafted by different agencies. Some of my military colleagues were pretty reserved about the idea of a surge. Doug Lute for instance, who was not yet the war czar. Paradoxically, he would inherit all this. But as the J3, the person on the Joint Staff responsible for operations, he was actually not terribly supportive of the idea of a surge. General Pace I think was more open-minded, but like me mindful that he had a secretary of defense who did not want to put more troops in the field. General Pace I think deserves a lot of credit for trying to play it very straight. [00:49:00]

A subject you [Peter Feaver] and I have talked about from time to time that you’re quite expert in, civil-military relations. This is one of those periods when civil-military relations and the lines become really blurry. What’s policy advice? What’s military advice in this context? I think General Pace, to his enormous credit, was trying to play it very straight and not prejudice people one way or another. He was offering up some of the ideas of the Council of Colonels, which

included the idea of perhaps a surge of forces, among other ideas. They had lots of different ideas. They had a lot of football names for different options, different plays, We can go long, go deep, etc. But basically when asked, he would just be straightforward about. OK, [00:50:00] what do we have in the kit bag, what could we provide in terms of additional forces? He would play it very straight.

As did General Lute whenever asked directly. But General Lute was I think -- made it very clear he had minimal enthusiasm for increasing the number of troops. I think very much in the Rumsfeld camp in terms of making the Iraqis step up and do their part. And about that time -- remind me when -- because the Baker-Hamilton Commission report comes out pretty much about the time our policy review is reaching its denouement. It's all happening about the same time.

FEAVER: First, second week in December.

EDELMAN: Like December 8<sup>th</sup> or something like that. I remember going to Secretary Rumsfeld, who was now literally in his last week or so, [00:51:00] and telling him, "Look, I think where this policy review is likely to come out is that we need to put more emphasis on population security. And we need to perhaps plus up the number of troops." And I said, "I think that's where it's headed. And I think that's where the President is." And he said to me, "Well, I think the president maybe just wants to do something different than Baker-Hamilton. Doesn't want to be boxed in by Baker-Hamilton." But he basically said, "Look, I'm leaving, I'm out. It's Bob Gates's problem."

And we then had a meeting in the Tank, which I think was the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> of December, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, somewhere in there. Again before the final review was completed but when we were headed in that direction. I mean I was sitting there. It was like Charles Dickens. [00:52:00] I had the Ghost of Christmas Past and the Ghost of Christmas Future. I had Rumsfeld and Gates both sitting in there, neither one of whom said anything in this meeting with the President and the Chiefs in the tank. And discussion of should we have an increase at least temporarily in the size of the force in Iraq to try and provide more population security for Iraq. We had the President, Vice President had this discussion with the Chiefs.

FEAVER: And what was the Chiefs' reaction in that session?

EDELMAN: Well, my recollection is that there were two members of the Chiefs who were most vocal about this. General Pete Schoomaker, the Chief of Staff of the Army, and General Jim Conway, who had just become Commandant of the Marine Corps maybe a month earlier. And both of them were very concerned. Well, they were concerned about a couple things. [00:53:00] General Schoomaker was very concerned about public support and whether if we increased the size of the force in Iraq, the American public and the Congress would support it. I think a lot of members of the military have this concern because of Vietnam and it's very deeply ingrained. I mean, as I sat and listened to this I thought the President both very politely and very deftly handled this by basically saying, "Thank you very much for your political advice, General Schoomaker. That's my job. I'll handle that. I'll



make the presentation to the public. I'll manage the Congress. And you'll have all the support you need."

General Conway made a slightly different argument, which was going back to something I talked about earlier, which is the rotation base and the stress on the force, and talked about how long we could go extending these [00:54:00] deployments by three-month or two-month increments for the Army and Marine Corps respectively without some change in either the end strength or without breaking the rotation base.

And the President said in response to Conway -- this is a longer conversation, so I'm somewhat telescoping it. But the President said, "Look, I get the stress on the force." He said, "I'm the one who goes out and talks to Gold Star families and has to comfort people who've lost loved ones. I recognize that this is very stressful on the force. But if you're talking about breaking the force, in my view, nothing would break the force like us walking out of Iraq with our tail between our legs. We don't get into wars to lose them in this country." And basically the Chiefs all said, "Yes, sir, we agree with that. We can't lose." And that was pretty much the end of the discussion.

FEAVER: [00:55:00] Before he left, Secretary Rumsfeld wrote a memo outlining options for Iraq. What was the provenance of that memo and what was its impact? Did it come out of your shop?

EDELMAN: No, it was written by the Secretary. It was actually one of his snowflakes, I believe. He frequently would do memos which he called above the line and below the line exercises, where you would say, “Here are a bunch of options that a lot of people are talking about or you might want to consider.” And then here’s what he called below the line: these are things that maybe people weren’t thinking about, or were less likely options. And he did that. It was his final shot on this subject, because as I said he had [00:56:00] already told me that this was going to be Secretary Gates’s problem to wrestle with ultimately, not his. And he sent that in. But my sense is to some degree, it was for the record. It included, for instance, some of the things that General Pace had told him about ideas from the Council of Colonels, etc.

FEAVER: Were there other positions presented in the formal interagency review that you described, the two-a-day sessions? And different strategic options: what were they and what was Defense’s position in reaction to those?

EDELMAN: Well, there were some papers about should we go with a Shia option, should we put all our eggs in the Shia basket, for instance. Then there was some discussion of: this is sort of like the Balkans, this is just an ethnic conflict and [00:57:00] we should just let it burn itself out. Because until it’s burned itself out you’re not going to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again. I think that was really a State view that Secretary Rice put forward, but I believe really it was Philip [Zelikow] who was mostly the guiding force behind that.

So there were a lot of different ideas that went into the mix and were considered. In the end of the day I think the President's determination that we couldn't have something that looked like we were giving up or losing made it unlikely that any of these other ideas would actually become policy. That was my assessment at the time.

FEAVER: As the review proceeded were there key decision moments there that you think proved ultimately to be consequential?

EDELMAN: [00:58:00] One of the things about the review as I recall it, was that it was never very clear when the end point was going to be, and when we were going to actually deliver ourselves a kind of product. And in a way we never really did. It just evolved into a discussion of what are the options. What it really boiled down to in the end was should we move away from "train and transfer," and try and put some emphasis on population security until we can stabilize the situation. And it was at that point that Secretary Gates came into the picture, because he was sworn in on I think the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup>. Don't hold me to it.

FEAVER: Eighteenth.

EDELMAN: Or 18<sup>th</sup>. And we left that night to go to Iraq. And this was where Rumsfeld was right. It was going to be Bob Gates's problem to wrestle with. And we went off on this trip with General Pace, [00:59:00] with John Hannah from the Vice President's Office, with General Kevin Bergner representing the NSC staff, and David Satterfield, the deputy assistant secretary of state, representing the State

Department. So we had a full interagency team and I went to represent the policy shop with Secretary Gates and to staff him on the trip.

Secretary Gates I think realized a couple things. One was we were going to have to take some kind of different course. We had to do something to change the dynamic. That's point one. Point two: I think he recognized that we probably -- since we were going to embark on something of a strategic shift -- needed to have a new team in Iraq to execute that shift. Ambassador Khalilzad was [01:00:00] due to depart Iraq in any event and I think was heading off to New York to become UN ambassador. I guess he was succeeding John Bolton, whose recess appointment had expired.

General Casey had been in place for several years and clearly was tired, and I mean it was a lot of stress on his family being over there. But also was very very wedded to -- as I said, even though he had some inkling of counterinsurgency and had created the counterinsurgency academy under -- [01:01:00] he talked a lot about -- I want to be fair to General Casey, because he and Zal had understood that one of the key things you need in counterinsurgency is unity of command with the political and the military, something that had been very much absent during the [Paul] Bremer-Rick Sanchez era, when the civilian and military sides of this were headed in very different directions. He had established the counterinsurgency academy. He talked a lot about strategic patience because it takes a long time, as

he pointed out repeatedly to us, to defeat insurgencies. They don't get beat overnight. It takes years to do this.

But he was, having said all that, very committed to the train and transfer strategy. So if we were going to do something different and put more emphasis on population security, it probably made sense to have an entirely different team. And as it turned out, [01:02:00] John Abizaid, the CENTCOM commander, was also coming up to be replaced. So you were going to have a completely new team, and Gates thought of that as an opportunity and was trying to think about it as he went out there, about what his team should be, who should be the new commanding general, who should be the new CENTCOM commander, who should be the --

FEAVER: So it was not already wired for Petraeus by that point?

EDELMAN: Oh no. Petraeus I think was a candidate who had a lot of support from a lot of people. I mean Jack Keane was pushing very hard for Petraeus, who'd been his protégé. Petraeus of course had written the counterinsurgency manual. So if you were going to move towards a more population-centric counterinsurgency strategy it made a lot of sense that the guy [01:03:00] who wrote the manual would be there to execute the strategy. But it wasn't wired, as far as I know, until pretty close to the end.

FEAVER: Two questions. Can you describe the debate over the number of brigades to send and how that debate finished? And then another question later.



EDELMAN: So when we were on the flight to Baghdad, I had gotten a set of the briefing slides that Fred Kagan had prepared for Jack Keane, that Jack Keane had basically drawn from when he briefed the President maybe a week or so earlier before we'd gone out, basically calling for an increase in the force and a change in mission. [01:04:00] And I gave those to Secretary Gates and said, "I think you ought to take a look at these, because the President is getting this from other sources, and you ought to be knowledgeable and aware of it." So Gates took a look at it while we were coming off the plane.

When we got off the plane and got to Baghdad, we were met by Generals Abizaid and Casey and Odierno and we went off to Camp Victory and sat down with them and got briefed by Casey and Odierno. Casey at that point was saying, "I need another brigade." He'd actually come around to needing some additional forces. "I need one more brigade basically in Baghdad so I can have one brigade on each side of the river in order to tamp down the violence in Baghdad." Because so much of the sectarian violence was going on in Baghdad as neighborhoods became ethnically more homogeneous as a result of [01:05:00] sectarian violence and essentially sectarian cleansing if you will.

General Odierno, interestingly, said, "I'd actually like to have two brigade equivalents. I'd like to have that additional brigade in Baghdad. And I'd also like to have two Regimental Combat Teams of Marines, essentially Army brigade equivalent, in Anbar Province to support General Zilmer," who was the

commander out there, “and help him reassure the Sunni sheikhs,” who were part of the Sahwa, the so-called Sunni Awakening, “that we’re going to be there to support them as they fight Al Qaeda in Iraq.” This goes back to the “Anbar is lost” discussion from a couple months earlier, [01:06:00] Colonel Devlin’s famous intel analysis for the Marines out in Anbar Province.

Interestingly, General Casey pulled John Hannah and me aside before we had dinner that night at his residence and said, “I want you guys to go down and sit with Odierno and Zilmer and run them through their paces.” He said, “They want another. They’re pushing for these two Regimental Combat Teams. I’m not sure we need them.” And so Hannah and I actually spent much of that evening at dinner talking to Zilmer and Odierno. And actually I think both -- you’ll have to ask John for his view. But I think at least I found that they made a very persuasive case for the two Regimental Combat Teams. And I told Secretary Gates that.

Secretary Gates then launched into a series of meetings with Maliki, [01:07:00] most of which ended up being one on one, where he pitched the notion of two additional brigades to Maliki, who was somewhat resistant. Not somewhat. He was very resistant. It took several hours for Gates to finish this discussion with Maliki. And in the end of the day he came out and said, “I think I’ve persuaded Maliki to accept these two increased brigades for a limited time span.”

And so we got on the plane and we flew home and I drafted the trip report for Secretary Gates and reported in this conversation to the President with Maliki.

And then he circulated, as was his wont, he wanted to make sure he had interagency comity as it were, on the plane. [01:08:00] We were in a C-17, we were in the Airstream trailer, because you can't hear yourself think in a C-17, to have this discussion. So we went into -- which is the bedroom and office for Pace and for Gates. And we went off to have a meeting with Kevin Bergner and Dave Satterfield. And he had circulated the trip report and asked for people's comments. And then I took all the comments and cleaned it up and gave him a final version of the trip report. And he discussed it with all the members of staff.

And I wish I could say I did it, but the one person who raised a concern was John Hannah, who said, "Mr. Secretary, this is great, two brigades. But I'm worried." And this was pursuant to a conversation that Satterfield, Bergner, Hannah, and I had while we were going over the draft and looking at the edits. [01:09:00] And Hannah said to the Secretary, "We've been failing here for some time to stem the sectarian violence. Is two brigades just enough to fail?" And Secretary Gates thought about it. He said, "John, that's a great question. I don't know the answer to the question. But I don't think I can persuade Maliki to take more than two brigades, even if we had more than two brigades to throw at this." We came back. I actually went off on leave for Christmas. And the Secretary and General Pace went down to Crawford to brief President Bush -- Steve Hadley was there, I believe, I think Condi might have been there as well -- on his trip and the trip report, and to discuss what we should do next.

So I went off on my Christmas vacation [01:10:00] thinking we were going to have to come back and figure out how we were going to get two brigades deployed to Iraq. And the answer came back: five brigades. And that was a function of the discussion that the President and the Vice President and Pace and Gates had where I think the President, I gather, put pretty much the same question to Secretary Gates that John Hannah did: is two brigades just enough to fail? How many brigades do we have? I think both he and the Vice President said in Crawford, as I understand it, I wasn't there.

But basically, this is our last roll of the dice in Iraq, how many brigades do we have. And the answer, which we had been through before in the interagency review, was five, that's how many we had that we could throw at the problem. And so the answer came back, five. Actually we ended up sending six [01:11:00] because Dave Petraeus was somehow able to wheedle a brigade equivalent helicopter aviation support brigade that went into the mix.

FEAVER: Can you describe the influence of Jack Keane and Fred Kagan? You've mentioned them several times. What was the role of the AEI effort in shaping the surge review?

EDELMAN: They had I think a very important and very useful role. I mean I think it was very useful to have that out there as a gadfly. As I said, Fred was keeping me apprised all along of what he was doing, sending me the slides. He asked me to be very protective of them because some of the members of the Council of Colonels

were also providing informal advice to Fred. I think he wanted to protect those folks. But I found it very useful [01:12:00] to have access to that and I think they played a big role in affecting the thinking of the Vice President and President. In their sessions I know the Vice President saw Jack Keane as well. Not just the President. I know he was also being briefed on the AEI effort as well.

I think they played -- this is not a universally held view. I think General Abizaid and Chairman Mullen were quite put out. Because Mullen later on became Chairman. But I don't think Pace was particularly upset about it but I think there were others who were very very upset that military advice was being provided by the President that wasn't coming from his combatant commander or his commanding general or the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. [01:13:00] I mean a lot of noses were out of joint that somehow this was a violation of Goldwater-Nichols, which says that the Chairman is the senior military adviser to the President. I didn't see it that way. My view is Goldwater-Nichols says that the chairman is the senior military adviser to the President in the formal chain of command. But there's nothing in Goldwater-Nichols that says the President is not allowed to ask anybody else in the world for advice. I mean I think Presidents would be foolish to limit themselves just to the official chain of command when they seek advice.

FEAVER: So that's the end of my questions. Is there anything that we did not ask you that we should have asked you? Is there anything you want to say that you didn't get a chance to say already?

EDELMAN: No, I can't think of anything. If I do, I'll let you know.

FEAVER: OK. That ends the formal part of the interview. Thank you. [01:13:59]

**[END OF AUDIO FILE]**