



ABIZAID: John Abizaid, former CENTCOM commander from 2003 until 2007, and prior to that, deputy commander of CENTCOM.

BRANDS: We are here to talk about the decision-making leading up to the Iraq Surge in 2007, so General, just as background, you were CENTCOM commander at the time --

ABIZAID: Right.

BRANDS:-- of this decision-making process. So could you just give us a brief sense of what were your general responsibilities as CENTCOM commander, and what were your responsibilities as regarded Iraq?

ABIZAID: As CENTCOM commander, I had an area of 27 different countries stretching from East Africa up through Sudan and Egypt, over and across through what I would call the Levant, not including Israel. [00:01:00] It included Iran, Afghanistan, central Asia -- very, very broad, dynamic area.

I was the commander responsible for military operations in those areas, a combatant commander, and I did that job for pretty close to four years, and overall in the region I was there for five years, and of course I'd been involved in other military operations in the Middle East before that. So the commander in Iraq was one of my subordinate commanders I use the term "subordinate" loosely. I mean, of course a four-star commander in a major military operation's always going to have direct access to the President and the Secretary and the Cabinet officials. The commander in Afghanistan, who at the time was not a four-star commander, he



also worked for me, the American commander. The ISA [International Security Assistance Force] commander did not. [00:02:00]

The Horn of Africa operations were under my watch, the operations throughout the region. In 2006, the area that the --period that I think you're interested in, we had a major earthquake in Pakistan, which CENTCOM had to muster forces and aircraft for to support it, and I spent a lot of time doing that. There was also a war between Hezbollah and Israel; that area, which was normally in the EUCOM area, was chopped to me, and we had to run the evacuation of that particular area. Things that happened in Turkey were of a lot of concern to me, and of course I was always traveling around in the region as the senior military representative in the region talking to the senior leaders. So I frequently spoke with heads of state and various people. I talked to the President quite a bit, our President. Certainly the Secretary of State. [00:03:00]

George Casey and I had served together in a lot of different places; we served together in Bosnia, Kosovo, Germany, and the Pentagon. So we knew each other very well. I'd talk to him, if not daily, close to daily. The commanders in Afghanistan, little bit less so. Even though my headquarters was in Tampa, Florida, I spent most of my time deployed in the forward headquarters in Qatar. But if you look at my schedule, I was probably traveling,



in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a lot of time in the garden spots of the world, and it was a fascinating job and a good job.

BRANDS So you mentioned that MNF-I was subordinate to you, or the commander of MNF-I was subordinate for you. Can you give us a sense of what the strategy that CENTCOM and MNF-I were pursuing [00:04:00] in Iraq in the 2005, early 2006 time period?

ABIZAID: Yeah. Well, you have to actually go back a little bit further than that, because I think it's important for context. I was a deputy commander during the invasion of Iraq, and after the invasion of Iraq I became the CENTCOM commander, and this was about three months afterwards, and we were in the process of pulling forces out on the orders of the Secretary of Defense. We were going to leave a very small, residual force behind, and it was clear that that was not going to work, so we had to reorganize the force.

Originally envisioned was a three-star commander with the corps headquarters, and that was General Sanchez and the fifth US corps. And by about the eighth month into my command I went to Secretary Rumsfeld and the President, and I said, 'We have to have a four-star command there. We have to



and that there would be no early victory any time soon, that it was going to be a long, hard military slog, but the real work that had to be done was political work.

So General Casey came in. I recommended General Casey for the job. I personally went to the Secretary and the President and told them I thought he was the man, and they both interviewed him, as you might expect that they would. I think at the time he was a vice-chief of the Army. And they selected him for the job. So I think it's important to know that at that period, we're transitioning from "maybe we're in an insurgency" to "we're in an insurgency." And there was a lot of consternation about whether we called it "insurgency," not on my part, but on the part of many of the [00:06:00] political leaders. But I thought it was important to make sure the political leadership had an idea that was going on. I gave General Casey the instructions, both verbally and in writing, that he was to put his main effort in developing Iraqi security capacity, in order to enable our eventual drawdown and departure from the country. And of course, he would set the conditions for fair and free elections, transition to Iraqi sovereignty, and all of these things were very important. These were important political goals that were conveyed from the President, National Security Adviser, Secretary of Defense, etc.

In the previous period, when Ambassador Bremer was there, we were not building Iraqi security capacity. And I thought that that was a major problem.



And some people call it the first battle of Fallujah, the second battle of Fallujah -- in reality [00:1100] there's one long battle of Fallujah, and it wasn't really until George Casey employed Iraqi forces that we ended up getting some traction that allowed us to get that as under control as it became.

Throughout this period and well into 2006 and 2007, there was a real problem with the Sunnis in particular. The Kurds were clearly on board; the Shia were not clearly on board. They had their own agendas. But the Sunnis in particular felt that they had been disenfranchised



So, again, the notion of insurgency wasn't one that anybody had hoped, but hope is not a method. We were fighting a war, and it was fairly clear [00:13:00] what we were doing. I don't think there was a single time, whenever I talked to either the President or the Secretary, that I said that I thought that we weren't doing enough to ensure that the Sunnis understood that we were going to try to elevate their status from being an unhappy minority to a minority that could participate in the future of the country. And I think all of us did that very poorly.

BRANDS So looking at the late 2005 time period, there were a couple of significant events in American strategy toward Iraq. So there was the release of the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq, and then there was Secretary Rice's "clear, hold, and build" statement and Congressional testimony in October, I believe it was. Did you have insight into the processes leading up to those developments, [00:14:00] and what was your reaction to them?

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was a broader Sunni Islamic extremist movement in the region that required urgent attention. And [00:15:00]so many of our resources were focused on Iraq, it was very, very difficult to get at it the way that we needed to. And I was constantly saying that to the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and the President.

Matter of fact, if you should find somewhere that there was an unclassified version of the long war strategy that was briefed to Congress, you should take a look at it.

BRANDS Did you think that the concept of “clear, hold, and build” was feasible, realistic

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ABIZAID: Yes.

BRANDS -- through late 2005?

ABIZAID: Yeah. First of all, any military commander, I think -- I don't want to

characterize anything that General Casey would say; you need to talk to General

Casey. He's the field commander. He's the field commander in Iraq, and other

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General Casey than to the other commanders. But you should understand that this theater, at the height of 2006/2007, we have a huge amount of American forces and allied forces involved in the effort. And most, or a lot of, the allied effort was external to Iraq, [00:17:00] primarily because a lot of the allies didn't like fighting in Iraq, or wouldn't.

So, yeah, the notion of "clear, hold, build" was a legitimate notion, but I think it's important for you to understand, and I very rarely see it come out -- Secretary of Defense and the President and General Pace, and General Myers before him, all were very, very concerned about casualties. And the instructions that they conveyed to me and General Casey were to do whatever we could to minimize our casualties, for obvious reasons. Of course, every commander wants to minimize casualties, but it got to the point where I had to say something to all of them in the period -- especially after the Samarra bombings -- that you can't get at the problem and minimize casualties at the same time. I'm somewhat perplexed why I don't see this [00:38:00] in the discussions. I mean, both the President and the Secretary were both very, very engaged with the parents of the fallen and the loved ones of the fallen. They visited troops that were in the hospital. My own son-in-law was seriously wounded in Iraq; the President invited him and his family over to the White House once he had recovered enough. So they were very compassionate, they were very concerned, and the President in particular kept on saying, "Why aren't the Iraqis doing enough to defend their own country?"



So this notion that “clear, hold, build” would somehow or other minimize casualties was a problem. Clear, hold, build” -- “build” was going to cause casualties to increase, not decrease. Then, after the Samarra bombing, there’s the problems between the Sunnis and the Shias that became very, very severe, and we also had a major problem in Iraq with MNSTC [Multi -National Security Transition Command –Iraq] with regard to the politicization of the Iraqi police. Iraqi police essentially became Shia militia. And we were very unhappy with the way that the government, which was supposed to be nonsectarian, was moving towards the Shia side. When are the first elections? 2005? Yeah, we had hoped that that election would start to lead us to a period of decreased tensions, but because the political factions could not get along and the government that had been elected



ABIZAID: Yes.

BRANDS -- conflict?

ABIZAID: 2006. Look, I don't want -- again, it's very important that you understand, I am not on the ground saying "put these forces here, go to --"[00:21:00]guys on the NSC[National Security Council] staff were doing that, and I wish they hadn't, but that's a different problem for a different day. In one of these big operations you have too many people who don't know what they're doing with their fingers in the pie, and that was certainly the case from the NSC, both under Condi Rice and under Steve Hadley. When they did know what they were doing, dealing with strategic political issues and diplomatic issues, they were excellent. But arguing with us over whether or not we had enough forces allocated to Dora district of downtown Baghdad was --there was nothing, no insight that they had was any better than any other person in downtown Washington, DC. And I trusted our commanders on the spot to be able to know what was going on there.

So it was clear that we were entering into a period where we had to reassess [00:22:00]what we were doing and how we were doing it, and we were not satisfied with the performance of the Iraqi defense forces --first and foremost the police, secondly the army, although the army was not nearly as bad as it subsequently turned out to be. But it was doing some good missions, particularly in the Sunni areas. And General Casey came to me and said we needed money, which of course was one of the things I could fight for in Washington, to be able to



extremist al-Qaeda/al-Qaeda in Iraq insurgency with a lot of Baathist participation. Today it's fairly clear that all of these things are successors, and when you look at ISIS today, ISIS is a successor of [05:20] Baathist, al-Qaeda, Zarqawi, and if I had a dollar for every military commander or politician who said "We've got them on the run," I'd be a rich man today. Now, the truth of the matter is we never really did have it under control.

So this is in -- so where are we up to now? What else do we need to talk about?

BRANDS So this is sort of early spring 2006. You mentioned the civil/military dynamic, and one other thing -- as the situation in Iraq's deteriorating, you have the so-called "revolt of the generals" back in the US. Did that have any impact on --

ABIZAID: Well, "revolt" -- you should call it as it's supposed to be --

BRANDS Revolt of the retired [overlapping dialogue; inaudible].

ABIZAID: Retired generals, right? Retired generals have no authority. Retired generals

do have the ear of the President. (e)-4 (ac)-9 (-se-4 (n)2 (t) 002 Tw 0.5178.15 0 Td(rig)w 27(e)



ABIZAID: No, I got that sense from the President, although he didn't tell me directly. But about October/November of 2006, it was clear to me that that's where the President's thinking was.

BRANDS So we know that during this period, this was sort of the start of more intellectual ferment in DC about thinking about whether the strategy was working, and one of the reflection points was the so-called war council meeting at Camp David in June 2006.

ABIZAID: Right.

BRANDS Can you describe what role you and CENTCOM might have had in that meeting and what the results were?

ABIZAID: Well, I was in the Middle East, and I sat next to Ambassador Khalilzad and General Casey on a number of VTCs from Baghdad. Sometimes they were VTCs from CENTCOM, dependent on where I was; maybe one time it was even in Afghanistan. But as usual [00:27:00] was moving around the theater, making sure I understood what was going on. And so yeah, I participated, from the point of view of -- George did the primary amount of talking about what was going on in Iraq, and Ambassador Khalilzad, as you would expect, and I frequently interjected with, "By the way, there's other things going on out here that you need to understand. Any change in strategy in Iraq will have significant impact on the rest of what we're doing. And you need to help me in the prioritization of the effort."





around Baghdad, [00:34:00] Samarra, and down around various areas south of there. But the prospect that you could either miscalculate and go to war with the Iranians,



ABIZAID: Who?

CRAWFORD: Was it Jaafari?

ABIZAID: Jaafari. Jaafari was the first of a bad situation, and Maliki made it twice as bad.

[00:36:00] With regard to sectarianism. Is this what you guys want me to be



government suppress the Sunni unelected minority, that's the insurgency, and then after that suppression takes place --I mean, these are the big strategic issues that we're talking about. And then where were the Kurds in all this? And the Kurds were leaning more towards the support of the Sunni than the Shia. So that complicated the situation even more. And of course the Kurds always had the notion of eventual independence somewhere at the end of the rainbow anyway. So they were looking for the least intrusive central government possible. And we, politically, were pushing for a very strong central government, which just was not going to work. So what was your question again?

CRAWFORD: About the political situation here in Washington, and specifically --

ABIZAID: Look, I understood. [00:38:00] I'm a student of history; I read a lot of World War II. I'm trying to remember how often Bradley or Eisenhower or MacArthur or any of those guys came back to testify before Congress, and I can tell you how many times I would get called back to testify. And part of that was --I thought it was-- it's inappropriate to have a field commander come back and testify all the time, because a field commander's supposed to be in the field. And I thought that the chairman was not doing what he was supposed to be doing, which is handle the military equities back in the States, and worry about kind of the political dynamics that are going on. And I had some conversations with him about that -- this is General Pace in particular. So it was clear to me that when I would talk to the commanders [00:39:00] in the field, there's this notion -- and I would be really



interested to see how George Casey answers this question, or Pete Chiarelli, or Ray Odierno or some of these guys --but none of us ever thought we were losing. But when I came back to Washington, everybody thought we were losing. And I came



deal with is, what's the best way to deal with that? Now, George also recognized that there was --



I think somewhere around November George comes to me and he says, “I think I ’m going to need



other -- you guys would probably know better than me. And I thought that the fact that they didn't call and tell me about that, or they didn't indicate it, Petraeus in particular, I still take great umbrage at that to this day. I thought it was very unprofessional.

CRAWFORD: So sort of piggybacking on that, at this point in Washington, [00:49:00]

there seems to be this effort of everyone to rethink the strategy. Did you have any insight into any of the other things that were going on? Did you get the sense of the movement?

ABIZAID: I didn't have any insight as to what Keane and Petraeus were doing. I knew

that there had been a meeting with Downing and others, because Downing had

called me and told me about it. And maybe McCaffrey did too. TDC 0.002ryoidna28e(d)-3 (te T





converging on [00:52:00] a recommendation that would lead to an increased effort in Iraq?

ABIZAID: Well, I was converging on that view, and so was George Casey. It was a view that we were converging on. It probably differed between me and George as to how the forces would be employed locally. My notion was we had to throw more manpower and capability into the training. And George was looking for more



surge or not?' I said, "I'm in favor of additional forces to Iraq." So apparently, he knew a lot more about it than I did. And I'd also say it may be a reflection on me,



thought that the force structure was under-resourced, and that our ability to have the right forces on the ground after we had won --we knew we would win, of course --after the first stage of military [00:58:00] operations was woefully under resourced as well. And I didn't get around to being able to correct those until I was a commander, but I did. But it took me a long time, like eight months.

By the way, I made plenty of mistakes myself, so let's not -- and if we're talking about mistakes, Aaron, this goes to your point, it's a very interesting point: why didn't I know more about what was going on? Were we purposely cut out of it? I felt like I had a very, very good relationship with the President. I had a contentious relationship with the Secretary, but it was professionally respectful.

And I could say, "I didn't know," and he would tell me, "You should have known."

ally, I would certainly follow my orders. That's what the Constitution says

] we do.

o, the other thing - both George and I were at the thing going on, 12/95/2/44/1 (Was) 5 NS3 (aff

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was going and that was going. And I thought that maybe they were worried about unintended consequences. And so if they had clearly delineated what they were



and not to the American Enterprise Institute, I think you would be surprised how similar the solutions would have been. George was already arriving at them. Now, that doesn't take away from the great skill in which the Surge was handled tactically, and I thought it was brilliantly played [01:00:00] by Dave Petraeus. And I was still the commander in January, February, and March. And I thought that the way he disposed the forces, the way he used the forces, the way he eventually used the additional five brigades that really didn't arrive there in the way that people had envisioned, was also quite innovative and capable. And I really admired how he did all that, and at the same time, generally keeping the majority of people at home with the opinion that there was cause for optimism.

BRAND: So coming back a little bit to the DC dynamic, just to press a little bit on that issue, how closely did you track the formal interagency review in the November-December time period, the one led by J.D. Crouch?

CRAWFORD: After Secretary Rumsfeld, who's left

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started. And interestingly enough, the guys in Washington were fixated on



develop intel.” And so we started moving resources right away. And when Dave took command -- when was it, December? January?

BRANDS I believe it was in early 2007.

CRAWFORD: Early 2007.

ABIZAID: Yeah. When Dave took command, we had a discussion about continuing to support his efforts. I was scheduled for retirement, I had been scheduled for retirement. I told the Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld that I was going to retire back in October, November. So, it was clear that I was headed out the door. Which was good. [01:16:00] I mean, which was good for, I think, the President and others, because I could give unencumbered military advice without having to worry about what I was going to do next.

BRANDS So from your perspective, looking back at this whole process the decision-making process leading up to the Surge was it a healthy, fruitful process? Were there aspects of it that should have been done differently? What was your assessment-

ABIZAID: Look, the process was not healthy, because the process did not use the whole of government approach to include the chain of command in a way that could have resulted in a different outcome. I mean, the fact that I'd been in command for four years and George had been in command for two plus years-- it's clear that you have to rotate commanders in and out, so it wasn't about whether or not the right commanders were in place. It was whether or not the right strategy was in place.



And I thought that we were politically reactive, [01:17:00] we weren't inclusive. And to be honest with you, if I had been on the joint staff as the director, I don't think I would have kept the commanders in the field so much in the dark as we were. It's not our job to read the minds of what's going on in Washington. It's a huge military establishment in Washington, and a collective body known as the combined -- known as the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You say the Surge is never what it was reported to be; the Surge was only what the army could handle. The army could field five brigades. And by the way, you know, most of the brigade, most o -9S



[01:19:00] you use your considerable diplomatic leverage to make the Iraqis do what you want to do. And we did not do that, and I was very disappointed in that.

BRANDS So we've asked you a number of questions. What important aspects of this experience have we not asked about? Are there any other issues you would flag for us?

ABIZAID: Well look, it's funny -- from your perspective, you've been talking to all the guys in Washington, right? I imagine you've talked to some military commanders. There was clear discussion in General Casey's headquarters, in my headquarters, etc. about allocation of forces, and my perspective was a strategic one. I thought that the national command authority very much undervalued the threat of Islamic extremism. And I was very concerned about that. And I tried to convey that constantly. So I'



I'm shocked [01:21:00] that he didn't call me, Keane didn't call me, or George or somebody and let us know what they were working on and why they were working on it. It was rational, and we were coming to that direction. And then in the subsequent selling of the story, to claim that somehow or other we avoided defeat -- we were never on the road to defeat. If you could think of the US military being defeated anywhere, please let me know where it is. It's not Iraq, it's not Afghanistan, it's not anywhere. It's all a matter of pain -- how much pain can you assume? And once we set the pain levels, I think probably with the Surge, we didn't set the pain levels high enough. Because the pain level, to maintain a bigger force over time, with more involvement with the Iraqis, and then more involvement with the political end of the spectrum, was what had to happen, and that did not happen. [01:22:00]

BRANDS Anything else?[To Aaron Crawford]

CRAWFORD:No.

ABIZAID: Has this been entertaining for you guys?

BRANDS It's been fantastic. Very enlightening.

CRAWFORD:Thank you very much.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]