
The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Frederick Kagan
Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute, 2005

Interviewers:
William Inboden

SAYLE We're joined by Fred Kagan today. Dr. Kagan, could you introduce yourself and explain your occupation at the time of the Iraq Surge decision process, and how your work related to Iraq?

KAGAN: So, I'm Fred Kagan. I was Professor of Military History at West Point until 2005, and then I came down and joined the American Enterprise Institute as a resident scholar, and was in that job in 2006 and '07, working on Iraq and related issues, but focused heavily on Iraq as my primary subject.

INBODEN: When and why did you first develop concerns about conditions in Iraq and the way the war was going, because while a lot of what [00:01:00] we're focused on here is 2006, we understand that there were concerns predating that. So when did this pop onto your radar screen in a significant way?

KAGAN: Two-thousand-two, and I'm not kidding. I published an article, I think it was in Commentary, in 2002, when a lot of people were talking about applying the Afghanistan model to Iraq, because my view at the time was that the Afghanistan model was flawed, and that Afghanistan was not going as well as people thought it was going, and that an attempt to apply that model to Iraq would have devastating consequencesB-9 (pl)1358 0 Td3 (t tra)-3 (1358 0(e)-4 (e)-1 (v)3 (a (f w)2 (h0te)-4 (e)-1. 4p0(e)-



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strategy, that General Abizaid, from the outset, was emphatic that if we put too many forces, we have too much of a presence, we're going to create antibodies, we're going to create hostility, which is true. That is a phenomenon observable throughout counterinsurgency. It's not arguable that that happens. And he was also concerned that if we did too much, we would create a perennial dependency on our forces and the Iraqis would be stunted in their development and they would never be able to take over, and that's also true and has been demonstrated repeatedly in the history of counterinsurgency. So, we started with two premises that I absolutely agreed with, but my study of counterinsurgencies told me that there was a missing third component, which is that if [00:12:00] the counterinsurgent is not providing security, then the whole thing will go off the rails even if you avoid those other two traps, and that in fact, the real art is in balancing these three mutually contradictory requirements of providing security, without having too heavy a footprint that you create too many antibodies, without creating dependency, but without allowing stability and security to collapse. So on the military side, I felt like there was a very sophisticated approach that was just missing a piece or overemphasizing two pieces.

From the White House perspective, or from my understanding of how the White House or how the President seemed to be understanding this; there was in some respects, an even more sophisticated theory of the case, that was that this is fundamentally a political problem, and that when we've had a constitution, when

reassess their approaches, because when you have a theory, how ever artful it is, how ever logically consistent it is, and the indicators on the ground [00:15:00] are contravening it, then you should recognize a bit sooner, that you maybe have a problem with your theory.

SAYLE So was that meeting in June, 2006, a possible turning point? Was this an opportunity missed there? How do you characterize that meeting?

KAGAN: I would say that I have no idea. Let me put it that way, because I actually have no idea what the President was thinking coming into the meeting and whether his mind was changeable or what. I have to say, especially with the experiences that I've had subsequently, if the situation were such than an hour and a half meeting with four outside experts could change the course of the strategy of the war, with nothing else going on, we would have been in a really weird world. Sd didn't have that expectation at the time, and I don't think that was a reasonable expectation. I think fate and a somewhat [00:16:00] unfortunate decision by the President, conspired to make that meeting pretty meaningless. The fate was that we killed Zarqawi a couple of days, at met, before the meeting, and thrilled as I was and am, that we offed Zarqawi, I think it did -- I had the impression that the President felt that that was a very positive moment and a potential turning point, and so his openness to believing that things were really fundamentally off the rails was relatively lessened, because Zarqawi was in fact a real bogey, and no one, certainly no one outside of maybe a handful of people in the intelligence

community, if that, knew that in fact, Abu Ayyub al -Masri would be a much more dangerous and effective foe. So that, I think reduced the intellectual valiance of it a little bit [00:17:00] for the President. But then there was the fact that he had decided to pull a whizzer on everybody by leaving at the end of the first day and turning up in Baghdad. It was pretty apparent to me, after I saw that happen, that there was a certain giddiness in his demeanor that was driven by the fact that he was pulling a whizzer over on his team, and I think that was an unfortunate decision. As is so often the case with this President, there were very admirable attributes in that decision . But from the standpoint of, if the President going to decide to devote two full days to really sitting down and talking strategy, that was not a good use of that time. And so I think those two things together conspired to reduce any real possible significance that that meeting could have had.

One thing, I've [00:18:00] almost never spoken about this meeting, because I actually really do try to respect the confidences of private meetings that I go into, and I talk about this one because now all of the participants have talked about it, it's out, I mean there's no point. But one of the things that really struck me was that after the meeting was over, the President came over and shook our hands, and stood talking with -- I think he was mainly talking with Eliot Cohen, and I think the rest of us were mainly straphangers on that conversation. I think Eliot was the one that he was most interested in talking to, and one of the questions that he asked really struck home, and it was, "How do I know? How do I find out what's



really going on?'



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Together Forward was an unmitigated catastrophe, and Together Forward II was even worse, would have been even worse especially, if General Chiarelli hadn't stopped it, I think about three weeks into its course, because it reflected another failure of the strategy and of the strategic approach, that continued to bedevil us and continues to bedevil us to this day, [00:25:00] which is we were so fixated on the insurgency and we were so fixated on al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in Iraq, that we did not recognize the role that the Iranian-backed Shia sectarian militias, many of whom, in 2006, were actually in the security forces, were playing in driving the sectarian conflict. Now at the time, without the full context, I, like many others, largely thought that the sectarianism, the real bad sectarianism that we saw, was driven by the destruction of the al-Askari mosque in February of 2006, and so forth. I now understand that that's not the case, that we'd had really serious sectarian actors in the force from early on, avenging themselves, avenging the Shia on Sunni populations, which was driving the sectarian conflict, so that it was even deeper than I thought it was at the time.

The problem with Together Forward [00:26:00] is that it didn't recognize that at all. I mean, the premise of that operation was that the Iraqis are blue, the Iraqi Security Forces are blue, and they're fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq, which is red, and we're backing blue against red, period, full stop. What we're actually doing was backing Iranian-backed-and-controlled sectarian Shia militias that were engaged in vicious sectarian cleansing of Sunni neighborhoods that looked like an

existential threat to the inhabitants of those neighborhoods, who then allowed al-Qaeda-in-Iraq to come in to defend them, because it was the only force that could defend them, and in some cases replace them. One of the problems, of course, is that as we were not, as our troops were not living out with the population and were not engaging regularly enough with who was there, we didn't have a sense for who actually belonged in the neighborhood. And so in areas [00:27:00] south of the Karrada Peninsula, in East Rasheed, you had neighborhoods that were fundamentally depopulated, and then they were repopulated by various extremists and so forth. So you would go in and you'd think that you would be talking to the population, but you're actually talking to terrorist squatters. And the Iraqi Security Forces were not helpful because they were ready to tell us, especially the sectarian elements among them, that any particular Sunni that they were looking at was an al-Qaeda terrorist and we needed to kill him. Together Forward just enabled this on a grand scale, and it basically drove off the military age males in the Sunni communities, established Iraqi police units, including the Wolf Brigade basically, the Badr core sectarian cleansing machine, in Sunni heartland areas, where they began to do unspeakable things, and drive things even worse.

[00:28:00] It was absolutely a counterproductive operation that was driven by a, at this point, I've got to say, pretty blind acceptance of our own theories of what was going on, not enough in touch with what was actually going on.

SAYLE Could you speak about that blindness for a moment and perhaps recall what information you were drawing on in the summer of 2006 to make your analysis, and whether information was available to either outside analysts or policymakers, to understand what was actually happening in Iraq in the summer of 2006.

KAGAN: We were observing at the time, from outside, this phenomenon, that we were having sectarian cleansing going on, that we had militias. That was certainly knowable, and it was known. There are people inside the military at the time that you can talk to, who certainly knew about this. I'm not going to name them on camera for you, but yeah, [00:29:00] I mean, that information was available. When it made it to which decision maker, I don't know, but you could see it from open sources, you could see what was going on. We were able to track pretty well, from open sources actually, where the fault lines, where the fighting was, where the sectarian fighting was, because there was report -- I mean, if you read into the reporting, if you read into what the media narratives are, about what's going on, on the street, you can draw some conclusions that did not make sense in the context of the theory that was driving these operations. So, yeah, I think it was knowable.

expert panel at some point. I think I spoke to their expert panel and to the seniors at some point, separately, so knew that was going on. I knew something about the review that then Colonel McMaster was involved in. Not much, but I knew that he was doing it and that that was going on. And I had a strong sense, from my various interactions relating to the June 6th -- I forget what the date was, June 9th maybe.

INBODEN: June of 2006.

KAGAN: June, 2006, Camp David meeting, that there was, shall we say certain amount of turmoil on the NSS, regarding the strategy, and people trying to get the President to re-look it. I don't think I was aware of more specifics than that. But being in Washington, involved in Iraq at the time, you had the general sense that there were a lot of reviews going on, without being [00:31:00] very clear, necessarily, what they were doing.

SAYLE Maybe we can move to discuss AEI's review of the situation in Iraq, and eventually recommendations AEI made. There's a weekend that began December 8, 2006, a planning weekend. Tom Ricks has called this the weekend at AEI that changes the war! Can you talk about the fall at AEI, leading up to that weekend, and then tell us about that weekend.

KAGAN: At some point in the fall, my boss at AEI, Danielle Pletka, who's the Vice

going very badly and let's do something I mean let's do more than say it's going badly, let's sort of try to figure this out. A big part of the motivation for that, [00:32:00] that I was aware of, was simply incredible frustration at the level of discourse in Washington about the war. You just had a lot of huge handwaving about how many troops it would take, and you had people get up --I had people get up, when we presented the surge paper, and say This is ridiculous. Who takes



ourselves to meet a timeline that was driven by when I was going to go to a conference.

It turns to have been incredibly fortuitous, because it could not have had the effect that it did if it had come out the week after that, but that was entirely accidental. People have all kinds of conspiracy theories about how we knew exactly when to release it, and of course it was that that specific timing was fortuitous. And then we-- Shall I take you through the exercise?

SAYLE Yes, please.

histories is Lieutenant General Retired Dave Barno, who actually was there for a considerable chunk of the exercise, and helped us ensure that we were thinking at a strategic level, because the people who were doing the planning so it brought in Colonel Retired Joel Armstrong, who had been the deputy commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment when H.R. McMaster had it, in Tal Afar; and Major Retired Dan Dwyer, who had been, I think the S3 or something on the staff there. So we brought in these really outstanding officers who had the experience of Tal Afar, but they'd also had experience in other parts of Iraq. Joel had actually been in Baghdad, in Southern Baghdad for a time, so he knew something about what that terrain looked like [00:38:00] and so forth. We got these guys in and we got in a few others, including a couple of active duty off(l)-2 (y)--1 (Tw 0 -2.4)gf acad0 -2.45 Td (274



So, we started off and of course the process

go, how long?" This kind of stuff. And we went neighborhood by neighborhood, and laid out - we're going to have to control these road junctions, we're going to have to -- I mean, it was a very serious undertaking by people who did this professionally. We went through all of that and we came up with a requirement for [00:43:00] five Brigade Combat Teams, additional, into Baghdad. We also looked outside of Baghdad a little bit, and we thought we probably needed two additional brigades, although in reality they were going to be Maine Regimental Combat Teams, in Anbar. And so that was our initial, first blush, going through, putting the toy soldiers on the map, what does it work out to?: five brigades and two regiments, with enablers and all that. And we were thinking in terms -- I want to be clear about this too. We were not thinking in terms of numbers at that point. We were actually looking, from the standpoint of guys who had done planning for a brigade size unit. This is going to be a brigade. Okay, well this is a brigade, you're going to have a battalion over here, you're going to have a battalion over there -- so doing it unit by unit, and not numbers, and we came to five brigades and two regiments, which [00:44:00] I then looked at our patch chart and basically we did the. Okay well, if we go to 15month deployments and stuff what can we get? And the answer is you get five brigades and two regiments pretty much. I almost fell off my chair. I have to tell you, it seriously never occurred to me that we would come up with an answer that was going to be militarily feasible from the standpoint of available forces. That was a contingency that I had not

expected. Because we'd had this +had to put a certain amount of effort into
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