



**GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS LUTE**

August 3, 2015  
Washington, D.C.

**Participants**

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### INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS LUTE

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**Nelson:** This is the Doug Lute interview. We're conducting it at the Hamilton Hotel in Washington, D.C., on August 3, 2015. Ambassador, when did you first become a part of the [George W.] Bush administration? Was your first role in that administration as executive assistant to the Joint Chiefs Chair?

**Lute:** I suppose that's right. As a serving military officer, when he became President, I became part of his administration, in a sense.

**Nelson:** Good point.

**Lute:** But probably the first *actual* contact was when I was the military assistant to Hugh Shelton, who was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs at the time that President Bush became President. I served in that capacity through 9/11, until maybe October of 2001, and then moved off to my next military assignment.

**Nelson:** Pre-9/11, what did you think were going to be the big issues that would involve the military?

**Lute:** Of course, alongside Secretary [Donald H.] Rumsfeld, there was a big push to move the military into the 21st century, to rely more on high-technology sensor systems, and so forth, which could lead you logically to a lower-profile, lighter-footprint role for the U.S. Army. I was an Army officer, and there was this move to the high-tech, sensor-based, Internet-based kind of conflict, and managing that conflict. This was the "revolution of military affairs."

When President Bush moved into office and selected Rumsfeld, the Pentagon was all abuzz with what this might mean in terms of force structure and budgets, and shifts of budgets across the different services, and so forth. But quite frankly, this was only the beginning of the conversation by the time 9/11 happened. He was inaugurated in January and 9/11 happened in September, obviously, and there wasn't much time there to get into the reform of the military before we were actually in conflict.

**Nelson:** What were you doing on 9/11?

**Lute:** I was on a military airplane with General Shelton, headed to a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] meeting in Europe. The way these planes are set up, General Shelton and Mrs. [Carolyn] Shelton were in a suite-like setting somewhere to the rear of the aircraft, and I was with the "loyal staff," just making our way across Europe, preparing for the meetings, I'm sure, that we were about to attend.

We received a report from the pilots, who were listening to the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation], just passing time as we approached the UK [United Kingdom]. They said, “There’s a strange news report of a plane crashing into the World Trade Center.” And we thought that was peculiar, because we had just passed over Manhattan on *our* trip, several hours earlier. It was beautiful, a clear blue sky, and we thought, *How could this possibly happen?* Of course, our initial image was of a small, privately owned, propellered plane, that there was a pilot error or something. I thought, *Well, that was strange*, and went back and told Shelton that there was this report, but we didn’t really think much of it.

Not long afterward we got a second report, and I went back and told him. He, I think instantly, concluded that this was deliberate and, therefore, a terrorist attack. I told him, “We need to turn around, because this NATO meeting we’re going to is not going to be very fruitful, and you’re going to be needed back at the Pentagon.” He said, “Well, we’ll continue a little bit,” and thought about it for four or five minutes, and we turned around.

The problem was, we couldn’t get airspace clearance, because U.S. airspace had been locked down and all planes grounded. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, you’d think we’d be able to crack that code. It took us a little while, and then we headed back across the Atlantic. We picked up a fighter escort, because now the national defense mechanisms had gone into place. We had fighter aircraft up, looking for the last plane. Remember, there were four planes; three had been accounted for, with the strike on the Pentagon.

We flew over New York, and it was very eerie. The smoke plume from the site was up at about 20,000 feet, and there were no aircraft—When you fly over Manhattan, you’re used to aircraft crisscrossing—no aircraft and just this huge smoke plume. We landed at Andrews [Air Force Base], and as we were coming in, we saw the smoke from the Pentagon.

**Nelson:** When did you get word about *that*, the hit on the Pentagon?

**Lute:** It must have been en route back. I don’t have a distinct memory of how that worked.

**Nelson:** OK.

**Lute:** I do recall that we received a false report on the way back home, that there was a bomb outside the State Department. I don’t know where that came from, but obviously it was proven false. We landed at Andrews, went to the Pentagon, and it was actually struck opposite—on the west side—opposite Shelton’s office, so it was exactly the wrong side of the Pentagon from al-Qaeda’s perspective. We dropped our bags and walked around the perimeter of the Pentagon to the crash site. The firefighters were still fighting the fires, and there was the police do-not-cross-this, yellow-striped tape around the incident site, and airplane pieces. I remember there was an empty airplane seat out there on the grass, and the very heavy smell of aircraft fuel and so forth. Then we went back into our offices.

**Nelson:** What time was it now?

**Lute:** This was in the afternoon, maybe five o’clock, six o’clock. We went back into our offices, which had a heavy smell of smoke and jet fuel fumes, and went to work.

**Bakich:** What did you do?

**Lute:** I think the Chairman went immediately into a lower-level command center, where he, as I recall, linked up with Secretary Rumsfeld, and Dick Myers, who was the Vice Chairman at the time and was about to succeed Shelton as Chairman. He'd been with Rumsfeld through the whole day and Shelton went down and joined them. I was with the staff, so I was not in that meeting.

**Nelson:** What were the conversations like after the plane turned around and started heading back?

**Lute:** Shelton, as the former commander of [U.S.] Special Operations Command, SOCOM, had, for a long time, been tracking al-Qaeda, and had been involved, as now has been written about, in the contingency planning, in the [William J.] Clinton administration, for potential strikes against al-Qaeda, in fact some actual strikes against al-Qaeda, cruise missile strikes of Tarnak Farms, outside Kandahar, in Afghanistan. Of course, at this point, we had had the embassy bombings in '98, in Nairobi. He had been very involved with this challenge of al-Qaeda, and I think he concluded quite quickly that they were the only terrorist group that we knew of that could pull this off, at this scale. I'm sure that early on there were plans for contingency operations, just "what if" drills, to see what might be possible in response. Then, as we know now, six weeks later, we were in Afghanistan.

**Bakich:** Can you describe your role in the run-up to the war in Afghanistan?

**Lute:** It was very much the head of the personal staff of Shelton, so it wasn't a policy role. It was procedural, mechanical, getting to the right place at the right time, with the right papers having been briefed in advance, responding mostly to questions and demands from the third floor, Secretary Rumsfeld, and just helping him in his job of trying to meet the demands of being the key military advisor to the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the NSC [National Security Council]. It was much more of a personal staff role; it was not a policy role.

**Bakich:** And you stayed in that position until you became CENTCOM [Central Command] J3 [Director of Operations, Joint Chiefs of Staff]?

**Lute:** No. When Myers and Shelton swapped out, Myers brought his own executive assistant. I moved on to Europe and I went, first, into an Army job. I was promoted to one-star [general], the Assistant Division Commander of 1st Infantry Division in Germany, and began, immediately, to prepare for a six-month stint in Kosovo. We were running, at that time, a six-month rotation of U.S. troops through Kosovo, and, at that time, about half an Army division went at a time. We had maybe 6,000 or 7,000 troops in the U.S. area, and we spent about six months preparing and then six months actually deployed, from May to November of 2002.

Not long after returning from Kosovo, I left that Army job and went to a Joint job, also in Germany, this time in Stuttgart, at European Command, as the Deputy J3, the Deputy Operations Officer. So I had two back-to-back, one-star jobs in Germany immediately after leaving the Joint Staff.

**Bakich:** What in particular, struck you about your time in Europe?

**Lute:** First, it seemed a little strange to be in Kosovo, [*laughter*] when we were now at war in Afghanistan.

**Bakich:** It's so '90s.

**Lute:** Yes, it seemed strange because, before 9/11, Kosovo was the only place to go, in fact, the only place that you could deploy and have a real operational experience. I very much wanted to do that, but then it was surpassed quite quickly. Now we were in *actual* combat operations, but with a few conventional troops, so mostly Special Operations guys. But that seemed a bit strange, to have the war in Afghanistan ongoing, and to be in this peace-enforcement operation in Kosovo.

When I left that first job and went to the second one in Stuttgart, as the EUCOM [European Command] Deputy Operations Officer, that brought things much closer to home, because EUCOM was in planning, in the late '02 and early '03, in support of Central Command, and the potential for going to war in Iraq. The notion here was that—if you're still following me with acronyms—the EUCOM/CENTCOM boundary was Turkey, so Turkey belonged to EUCOM; Iraq and Syria, south of Turkey, belonged to CENTCOM.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** There was, early on, an interest by Central Command, which was doing the war planning for Iraq, to use Turkey as a northern access route into northern Iraq, to not only attack Iraq from the south, but to do it from the south *and* the north. That meant that EUCOM had to be closely involved with the war plan, so I became very much involved with that venture. I was exploring with the Turkish military and the Turkish political authorities the potential that they would open up a land route from the Mediterranean, across southern Turkey, and then south into northern Iraq. That idea we explored in detail, but in the end it never came to fruition.

**Bakich:** In that capacity, did you, or anyone involved in EUCOM, deal with Turkish parliamentarians at all? They were, if memory serves, the ones who scuttled that option.

**Lute:** I don't remember that. We deployed a part of the EUCOM force structure into Turkey to work with them and to do a reconnaissance of this route. It was partly a military problem, because it was a single route, not very capable. It had a single rail line parallel to the route, but the rail line wouldn't accommodate American tanks, so it wasn't going to be ideal under any circumstances.

**Bakich:** These were plans for the 4th Armored Division?

**Lute:** The 4th Infantry.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** Putting an infantry division with probably 20,000 vehicles on one route is just not an act of war. It would have been difficult in any event. The Turkish general staff, the Turkish military, was not fully supportive, and the Turkish political scheme was even less so. Of course, Turkey has, even to this day, a very complex set with their Turkish-Kurdish problem, which bleeds over

to Iraqi-Kurdish and, now, increasingly Syrian-Kurdish dimensions. That was all part of that scene.

We spent four to six months trying to figure out what might be possible from Turkey, and if not a land route, what about air bases, because that would have been enormously helpful, to be able to fly from Turkey, but that was denied as well. We played out the modern version of this story just over the last week or so, as we just gained access to Incirlik—which is the key base down in southern Turkey—against ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], which they have just granted us the permission to use. This is all reminiscent of my time 10, 12 years ago, but the Turks this time have an interest in allowing us access. They didn't really have an interest in picking a fight with Saddam [Hussein].

**Nelson:** Through this period, was the original idea for the revolution of military affairs affecting things in any way? What you read about the planning for the Iraq War is that Rumsfeld wanted to use fewer troops rather than more, as a way of demonstrating what could be done with a smaller, more mobile force.

**Lute:** That may have been in the background, but the bigger influence was our relatively quick success in Afghanistan, which was very much on this design of Special Operations Forces linking up—and CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] counterparts linking up—with indigenous forces on the ground and controlling precision American air strikes. This was a light footprint, enabling American technology, most evident by way of air power, in six or eight weeks toppling the Taliban regime, scattering al-Qaeda, and essentially looking like a quick win. I was not involved, personally, in the CENTCOM war planning, only in the supporting effort regarding Turkey, so I can't say to what extent. I've read similar reports, but I only know those reports, so I don't have any firsthand knowledge of it.

**Bakich:** We should move along to when you became CENTCOM J3. This was in—?

**Lute:** The summer of '04.

**Bakich:** Before we do that—You didn't have a direct role in war planning apart from Turkey, in Afghanistan and Iraq, through that period?

**Lute:** Right.

**Bakich:** OK. So, you picked up the ball, then, in the summer of '04.

**Lute:** I went to CENTCOM in the summer of '04, and I did that for two years, so the summer of '04 to the summer of '06. I knew General John Abizaid and he asked me to come and be his operations officer. For an Army guy at that time, that was *the* two-star job that everybody wanted [*laughter*] because CENTCOM was running the wars, and the operations officer largely did that on behalf of the commander. It was a great job and it took me from the periphery of the fight into the fight. In a way, that is why you're in the military. [*laughter*] I was very happy to do it, and very happy to work alongside Abizaid.

**Bakich:** Before we get specifically into what you did, can you talk about the transition, from your perspective, from General [Ricardo] Sanchez to General [George] Casey, about that time?

Did General Casey come in with a mission to fix, in his mind?

**Lute:** Yes. My sense is that in March, April of '03, we had been very successful in toppling the Saddam government, but then it became apparent that we were in a different fight, and a fight that we weren't ideally structured for and hadn't planned for. One of the challenges during that period—this was '03 into '04—was the command and control structure. For the invasion itself Central Command, the four-star headquarters, was commanded by General [Tommy] Franks with Abizaid as his three-star deputy; they were in Doha, Qatar, in a forward-command center. Then in a classic way we had air, naval, and ground force subordinate commanders. For the land—it's a terrible acronym—CFLCC [Coalition Forces Land Component Command] was run by Dave McKiernan. Beneath McKiernan, we had two three-star land subordinates: one Marine and one Army. Initially, we had a classic Fort Leavenworth doctrinal command structure ready to do a major combat operation.

In the summer of '03, much of that command structure was collapsed and redeployed. CENTCOM went back to Tampa; it retained a forward presence, but it mainly went back to Tampa. CFLCC, the next level down on the ground, was no longer in charge of day-to-day operations, and took one of the two, yet still subordinate once again, three-star headquarters, the V Corps headquarters, and made it in charge of the whole operation in Iraq. It's because of that move that Sanchez moved into—

**Bakich:** That was his billet?

**Lute:** He was the V Corps commander. The problem was that a corps headquarters is not appropriately structured to run complex civil-military operations across an expanse like the country of Iraq. There's been a lot written about this, but one of the lessons here, and a lesson that Abizaid would always harp on when he spoke to us as his staff, was that one of the most important things to do in a major operation like this is to get the command and control structure right.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** He felt that we had not done Sanchez or the effort itself any favors by so quickly collapsing these supporting chains after the fall of Baghdad, and that, to some extent, the system had given Sanchez sort of an impossible chore. The off-the-cuff saying within the Army at that time was that Rick Sanchez was the V Corps commander; he had all the structure above him. Then one day he woke up, was taking his morning command briefing, drinking a cup of coffee, and his staff reported to him that he was now the senior guy left in Iraq. [*laughter*] This must have been very surprising to him.

**Nelson:** It's interesting; most analyses you see of what went wrong after the military victory in Iraq focus on decisions by Paul Bremer, disbanding the army—

**Lute:** De-Ba'athification.

**Bakich:** The CPA [Coalition Provisional Party] wanted to do it.

**Nelson:** —or on the failure of planning that involved the State Department and civilians.

**Lute:** Right.

**Nelson:** How do those explanations fit into what you've been focusing on, which is the command structure, within the Armed Forces? In other words, the military had done everything right—

**Lute:** We would have had a more senior command structure, devoted to the relationship with Bremer and CPA, not scattered in their attention, everything from tactical operations all the way through coordination with Washington and coordination with Bremer. The bottom line is that a corps-level headquarters is a *tactical* headquarters in the Army structure. It's not designed to do the political-military-diplomatic interfacing that had to be done with Bremer. To what extent did the military structure contribute to Bremer's problems? It's hard to say.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** But part of that the military community owns, in that we didn't set Sanchez up for success.

Other things happened during that same period. Abu Ghraib happened during that same period, where, in my view, the command structure was understaffed. There was a sense of "everybody went home," and that's unfortunate. This had all happened before I arrived at CENTCOM in the summer of '04.

One of the things Abizaid was sent out to do was to set this command structure right. He was convinced that the commander in Iraq needed to be a four-star and needed to have a subordinate three-star who was going to deal with the day-to-day tactical operations, so that the four-star could sit above that activity and interface with the Ambassador and interface with Washington. This is classic in military command structure, that at some level you have a break between who focuses up and who focuses down, as opposed to asking one guy to do it all.

He set this up, and that's what ultimately brought Casey into the scene, as the four-star commander, leaving a three-star to deal with day-to-day operations. That structure actually did work, in the sense of dividing the labor and the responsibility up and down the military command structure, in a way that the senior military leader, Casey, could have a meaningful, functional relationship with the Ambassador, because they were dealing with the same issues—maybe from different perspectives, but they were the same issues.

**Nelson:** When was this change brought about?

**Lute:** As I recall, Casey came in some time in '04. I think your timeline has it. I forget, but I think it was summer of '04.

**Nelson:** It was June of '04.

**Lute:** Yes, that's the same month I got to CENTCOM.

**Nelson:** I don't know if this is a question that you'll have a response to or not, but it was an election year. Did the fact that there was a campaign going on, that the war is an issue, in any way affect the way you did your job, or thought about your job?



**Lute:** No, I don't recall any impact at all. There was much public support for what had already taken place in Afghanistan, again, relatively fast, relatively cheap, low cost, low profile. There was obviously a huge international debate and national debate about Iraq, but Baghdad fell within weeks, not months and years, and by '04, there was a pretty sizable, pretty energized debate—OK, now what?—because it was quite clear that, a year after the fall of Baghdad, this was not going as advertised.

Remember that we had not found the weapons of mass destruction, but there was an active effort underway to still investigate what happened to the WMD [weapons of mass destruction]. That was still a bit of an open question in 2004, but I don't recall the politics of the election campaign touching CENTCOM in any meaningful way. We were doing what militaries do, and we had, now, two fights on our hands. There was a lot of work to do.

**Nelson:** In the circles you moved in, what were the prevailing opinions about first, Secretary Rumsfeld, and then President Bush, as far as relating to the way you—

**Lute:** There was much friction between the uniformed military and the Secretary, and part of this was just his style. On the one hand, the senior professional military felt it was our responsibility to adjust to him, because we have civilian control of the military. He's the Secretary of Defense; he sits above every uniformed officer in the chain of command. We understand the chain of command and we're going to do what we need to do with Secretary Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense.

On the other hand, he made it very difficult. He had a very caustic style, a dismissive style, a style that did not promote a sense of being in this together, a sense of teamwork, and did not routinely communicate a sense of respect for the uniformed military. In fact, he was rather dismissive of the uniformed military. There was this tension between he's our boss, and on the other hand, he's a really hard guy to work for, and he makes it a lot harder than it has to be, because of style. Look, every general officer, flag officer, across all the services, is a student of leadership, and when you see leadership that is divisive and caustic and that is disrespectful, it grinds on you, because you know that's not the ticket for successful leadership.

**Bakich:** I know you asked a question about the President, but if I could interrupt. There's the Secretary, but also there's his office.

**Lute:** His senior staff amplified the worst instincts, the worst characteristics, of the Secretary himself. Rather than buffer or serve as a bit of a shock absorber between him and the military establishment, particularly the uniformed military, many of his senior staff seemed to take on his qualities, and simply therefore amplified the tensions and the discord, so it was not a good time. It was a good time to be in Tampa. It was not a good time to be in the Pentagon. *[laughter]*

Those of us in Tampa were happy to be in Tampa. We spent, under Abizaid, about three weeks out of every four in the region. We would go to forward headquarters and live in Doha. From that hub, we would go visit the different parts of the CENTCOM area. We would take a two-day trip up to Afghanistan, back to the hub; a two- or three-day trip to Iraq, back to the hub; down to Djibouti, to see the Horn of Africa operation. Then he'd do political military engagements across the Gulf, all the way out to Egypt, and so forth. We were very busy, and we were happy to be

there and not in the Pentagon.

**Nelson:** President Bush.

**Lute:** Nearly uniformly, the military held him in high regard: as Commander in Chief; as someone who showed genuine, authentic concern for the military; a person who could relate to the junior-most person in uniform, all the way up to the senior-most ranks, with mutual respect. It was clear that when the President was with the military, he was in his element, which is maybe a little unexpected. Yes, he had a military experience, but it was a pretty compartmented, short military experience.

I had the impression that he got the sense of how to relate with the military from his sense of how to relate with sports teams, and that's how he treated the military. He treated them as teammates. I don't know that that's right; I've never asked him about it, but I think he actually enjoyed being around the military and they enjoyed being around him. There was no question who the Commander in Chief was. It's not that this was a very friendly—

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** There was this obvious distance, or setback, from the Commander in Chief and the uniformed military, and that was always carefully watched, but there was always a sense that he liked interacting with the military, and there was absolutely a sense of mutual respect.

**Nelson:** He makes a big thing out of saying that he deferred, whenever possible, to military judgment, in contrast to the LBJ [Lyndon B. Johnson] sort of dereliction-of-duty mindset, of micromanaging.

**Lute:** It seems to me he did. This is an interesting line, because he maybe did, on tactical issues. But remember, nobody in the senior uniformed military supported the surge—and I know we'll talk about the surge—but maybe in the biggest, most consequential campaign decision that he took as Commander in Chief, he took it in opposition to the uniformed military, [*laughter*] which is interesting.

There was a pattern of following the advice of the commanders in the field, so Casey and Abizaid both had *very* strong voices, and in the interagency environment, voices that the President deferred to. John Abizaid and George Casey always appreciated his support, and they felt it was genuine. Now, they would give mixed grades to the Pentagon bureaucracy, in terms of supporting them with resources and priorities and so forth, and also mixed grades to the rest of the government, but there was no question where the White House stood.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** That was supportive.

**Nelson:** And yet, Rumsfeld was there for six years because Bush put him there and kept him there. The people didn't transfer their dislike of Rumsfeld toward the person who was responsible for Rumsfeld?

**Lute:** No, I don't recall that. There was also this very strategic conversation underway about whether it was the right thing to invade Iraq. It's not that anyone should believe that the uniformed military was anxious to invade Iraq, or that the senior leadership of the uniformed military thought that it was the right thing to do. And as things began to unravel—with the control of the population, with the discord between CPA and the military, with the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq—Abizaid, I think in early 2004, in a press interview at the Pentagon said, "Look, let's just call this what it is, it's a classic guerrilla campaign, a classic insurgency."

He got significant press-back on that from Rumsfeld: "How can you say that? This is just that we don't agree. These are dead-enders." Abizaid was, I think, the first to call it like it was, an insurgency. There are strategic issues here.

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** Before the invasion of Iraq, we had the no-fly zones in place. Saddam was essentially neutered in terms of his threat to the region. It turns out there were no WMD. And now we own this problem, with 25 million or 30 million people with deep sectarian divides and no government. In fact, the only government any adult in Iraq had ever known was Saddam, and Saddam had kept a lid on Iraq with an iron fist.

When you take all those factors and shake them up and start anew, the outcome is quite unpredictable. There are a large number of uniformed military officers who appreciated what we had gotten ourselves into. I don't remember too many resigning over the fact, and there could be political disagreements, but you put your uniform on and go on and do what you're expected to do.

**Nelson:** I know it's getting ahead of things, but there was that so-called "revolt of the generals," the ex-generals.

**Lute:** Yes, I always thought "revolt" was strange [*laughter*], not quite the right noun there.

**Nelson:** How would you characterize what happened and why?

**Lute:** This was John Batiste?

**Bakich:** Barry McCaffrey.

**Lute:** Yes, Barry McCaffrey somewhat, but Barry, of course, was already retired. He was well retired by the time he laid into this. The serving generals were John Batiste and Paul Eaton. There were really only several. I know some of these guys personally. In many cases, their "revolt"—which is, again, not the right word—traces back to a personal decision that they were ready to do something else and that they were not ready to endlessly go on one-year tours to Iraq in favor of that policy. But they'd also been drawn to do something else. It's not exactly that this was a case where their policy disagreements drove their personal decisions to retire and speak out. To some extent, it was molded into that fashion and that's not exactly what happened.

**Bakich:** I want to ask a related question. What sense was there, do you recall, in CENTCOM, about you and Abizaid, when you came to the understanding that the operational environment

wasn't really truly an insurgency?

**Lute:** By the time I arrived, in the summer of '04, I considered it an insurgency. We talked about it as an insurgency. Again, it was about that same time that Abizaid called it as it was.

**Bakich:** Right, OK. You had entered the region at this point?

**Lute:** Yes. The challenge there was that it's an insurgency and we don't have a counterinsurgency tool. This is a hammer-nail, or hammer-screwdriver-nail-screw kind of problem.

We don't have an Army that's organized, trained, equipped for counterinsurgency, so we're applying a conventional tool. We're applying the Army that swept in and toppled Baghdad to an entirely different problem. And it's such a bad fit that the type of Army we're applying as a remedy actually worsens the problem, because it's too much of a blunt instrument: large bodies of American troops in Iraq, with armored vehicles and attached to all the high-end firepower and so forth, in an environment where insurgents are hiding among the population—in some cases supported by the population—planting roadside bombs, which are crude but very deadly. You have a big problem in terms of the type of force you're employing and the problem that you're employing it against.

That mismatch between problem, remedy, and force was fundamental to almost the whole Iraq experience. It was diminished a bit and we adapted a bit over the years, but the Army never wanted to become a counterinsurgency force. The best adaptation was in the Special Operations Forces under Stan McChrystal, who completely revamped what was a sort of counterterrorism, hostage-rescue, Desert One-like structured force, JSOC [Joint Special Operations Command]—

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** —to an industrial-scale, man-hunting, al-Qaeda in Iraq-hunting force in Iraq. And he did that by force of personality. He's one of my heroes here. By force of personality and great strategic vision, he gave America *one* of the tools it needed to succeed in Iraq, which was this ability to go after [Abu Musab al-] Zarqawi and AQI [al-Qaeda in Iraq], and strip off the high end of the insurgency by way of the JSOC actions. They didn't, however—and they weren't designed to—address the bulk of the insurgency, which were just Sunni and Shiite militants, supported by the population and targeting us.

One theme was this mismatch between the forces needed and the nature of the war. The other theme, which is related, was Abizaid's deep understanding of the Arab world and his appreciation from the outset that a large and prolonged Western presence in an Arab country, to include Iraq, was not going to be a winning measure. He talked about it as generating an antibody, that our presence itself became, over time, part of the problem.

I say these two issues were related. If we had been better suited to the task, maybe we wouldn't have been so heavy and such a blunt instrument, but we were. That's the Army we had, and you don't shape or reshape an army by writing an order and waking up the next day and finding that things are different. His struggle was that he was in an insurgency fight, didn't really have a counterinsurgency force, and the clock was running. That's very much, in a couple of sentences,

my two-year experience at CENTCOM.

**Bakich:** It's fascinating that your assessment of the Army is what it is. People that I read—John Nagl, Tom Ricks—they say, "Oh, no, we see the Army as an institution learning," and point to people like, for example, General [Raymond] Odierno, who started off in the Iraq War in one way, and then by 2007, was doing radically different things.

**Lute:** But it's one thing for an individual to go through a three-year period of adaptation. It's another thing for an institution to do that. After commanding a division early in the war, Ray in 2007 became the three-star commander of the surge forces. The forces were rotating into Ray's command on an annual basis. Remember, you have a wholesale change of force structure every year; you wipe the slate clean. Those forces that are coming from Mother Army, from the institutional base, had not had Ray's three years of adaptation.

An associated problem is what I call lack of campaign continuity. Ray spent five years in Iraq. [David] Petraeus had three tours there: as a two-star, as a three-star, and as a four-star. Ryan Crocker, the U.S. Ambassador, had been a lifelong Arabist, spoke Arabic; I think that was his fourth embassy in the Arab world. When you have those kinds of leaders, you have the potential to see things differently and adapt. And John Abizaid speaks Arabic, had gone to school in Jordan, had served in UN [United Nations] peacekeeping in the region. I accept that Ray, as an individual, changed his perspective over time, but what I don't accept is that the *Army* was able, in a period of just a few years, to adequately adapt to this operational setting.

**Bakich:** In that same vein, then, can you talk about General Casey's performance during that time?

**Lute:** First of all, I'm a Casey fan, in case you haven't noticed, and an Abizaid fan. [*laughter*] He went into an enormously confused, complex, and deteriorating situation in '04 and righted the ship. He set in place processes, the senior-level executive command posture, that allowed those beneath him to get on with their tasks and he set things in motion. He also was experienced enough, and senior enough, to have a very close relationship with a series of Ambassadors: [John] Negroponte first, then [Zalmay] Khalilzad, then Crocker. Their photos are in the hallway somewhere in the State Department, as you know, icons. We upped the ante not only in terms of the military command structure, but also in the political and diplomatic pasture, and things began to settle in.

Now, I think George Casey would tell you—and maybe you've interviewed him or will interview him—that he struggled throughout with the resources provided not being a good fit. He was still tied to the conventional Marine Corps and the conventional Army, who were providing him 150,000 troops on rotation every year, but it's seemingly fighting the war a year at a time.

If you send a division, which is a basic building block of the Army, of about 15,000 troops, they'd come over and be there for 12 months. At the beginning of the twelve-month period, they were conventional Army. At the end of the twelve-month period, they had largely adapted and understood what they were doing, but then they rotated out, and when they went back to the States, they disbanded and those 15,000 troops went all over the Army. There was some pollination of counterinsurgency over a period of years because of this rotation cycle, but you

could not replicate, in an institution, what Ray was able to replicate personally, and this manifested itself in a number of very important ways.

First of all, we discounted the importance of building Iraqi security forces in sufficient quantity, quality, and early enough to begin to give us a light on the horizon, where we could leave and they would increasingly be in charge. This was the only meaningful response to Abizaid's concern about the clock.

The only way you could beat the fact that we were creating antibodies with our very presence was essentially to leave. But if you didn't want to leave chaos, you had to have a strategic construct, a framework that said we're going to train these guys and they're going to replace us, and then to some extent we might be there to support them, but essentially we're going to substitute Iraqi capability for American capability. The first gross misstep was disbanding Saddam's army; that ensured that this substitution strategy was going to start from zero.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** Not to mention that many who left also fed the opponents.

**Nelson:** Right.

**Lute:** So it was a negative. It was below zero in terms of its impact. Then, because we weren't prepared to fight an insurgency and we didn't appreciate fully, early enough, the need to build these Iraqi security forces, we did the job ourselves. As we Americanized and did this job ourselves, we made more prominent the fact that it was a bad fit. We had many things going against us in '03, '04, '05, because of some bad choices and the fact that we didn't have the tools. Not until we made Petraeus the lead in the "train, advise, and equip" mission, which—

**Bakich:** And when was that?

**Lute:** I want to say '05.

**Bakich:** Yes, I think that's right.

**Lute:** We lost a couple of years in that process. Then it didn't take off like wildfire. *[laughter]* There were some false starts. You may remember at one time we trained a bunch of Iraqi National Police, who later became one of the most sectarian bodies in the whole structure, and we had to disband them and start over. We spent literally years, meanwhile the clock is running, on Abizaid's theory, getting our act together on training Iraqi security forces.

By the way, later in life, I experienced this all over again in Afghanistan. We thought the Taliban were defeated; they went away, so we don't have to worry about it. By my count there, we lost eight years in training Afghan security forces, only to appreciate later, that if we don't have these guys to replace us, we're there forever and the Afghan antibodies, while not as strong as the Arab-Iraqi antibodies, are beginning to erode our welcome in Afghanistan.

This became very prominent, because we needed to resource or prioritize the advisors who would work with these new Iraqi forces, and the system had no advisors. In fact, the only

advisors on the payroll of the U.S. Army were the Green Berets that John Kennedy had inaugurated for this role with our Vietnamese allies in the early '60s.

The problem is that, in the post-9/11 period, the Green Berets mostly wanted to be in JSOC, because they were kicking down the doors and fighting terrorism. They were fighting the guys who brought the towers down. In my view, the Green Beret community lost its way and migrated to do what is called direct action, which are these raids. They dismissed, or placed at a lower priority, the task we really needed them to do, which was to train the Iraqi security forces.

Where we have applied, in both of these wars, the Army Special Forces, Green Berets, to the “train, advise, and assist” task, we’ve had very good results. The Iraqi Special Forces, the hard inner core of the Iraqi forces, even today, were built by Green Berets. The Afghan Special Forces, likewise. They’re the best in the region; they’re the best across South Asia. The problem is that we stopped there and applied to the rest of the forces, the conventional army and police in Afghanistan and Iraq, conventional solutions.

For years, if you went into an Iraqi battalion—newly trained, organized, equipped, and fielded—and went to visit its American advisors, you would find about 12 soldiers perhaps from the National Guard, who were not organized, trained, and equipped themselves to be advisors. In some cases, they were advising Iraqis on jobs that they had never held as Americans. We would say they “met on the tarmac” at the airport just before deployment. They arrived in Iraq, we gave them a couple of Humvees, a bunch of weapons, and said, “Here, you’re an American, you can certainly advise these Iraqis.” We got exactly what we paid for. We got a very uneven, subpar outcome from our “train and assist” programs, until we became serious about it. But we didn’t get serious about it until '06 and '07.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** Sorry for this excursion, but that’s important.

**Nelson:** No, no. For the sake of time, we have to get you to the White House, but before that comes about, are there blanks to fill in, in your story?

**Bakich:** I don’t think we’ve gotten to the Joint Staff yet.

**Lute:** There are a couple of things I want to put on the record. One of the values of CENTCOM is that as the CENTCOM J3 I’d met everybody, or worked closely with everyone, refreshed relationships, which I would later use in the White House. If there was any serendipity here, when I somehow ended up at the White House—which is still a bit of a mystery to me—it was that I knew all of these guys.

I knew Crocker. Crocker had been the Ambassador in Pakistan, so when Abizaid and I went to Pakistan, we stayed with Crocker, so I knew Ryan Crocker very well. When I was at the White House and he was in Baghdad, it was no problem to pick up the phone and talk. Dave Petraeus is one year senior to me out of West Point, and we had served together three times. Dave had been one of my predecessors as the executive assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and had also worked for Shelton.

There was a network developing, where I had very close contact with these guys. When I ended up moving to the White House, I had established relationships, not at the White House, but with all of the people I dealt with outside the White House.

You asked about the biggest challenges I faced as the Director of Operations. There were a couple of things: scarce resources. I heard, “These are the only wars we’re in; how is it that we’re fighting for resources?” I’ve gone through the Special Operations dimension of that. We needed Special Operations guys to be doing “train, advise, and assist” work, and they were doing something else.

At one time, in terms of ISR—intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, essentially airborne systems with sensors that could tell us what was going on, on the ground—we had maybe 10 Predator UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle] “orbits” in the whole CENTCOM area.

By the way, we only had 10 in the entire military, and we have maybe 10 times that number today. For those 10 Predators you could fly somewhere in the world—independently, at one time, simultaneously—once you launched them, the constraints were satellite connections, bandwidth, pilots back in Nevada, and all of the infrastructure. John Custer, the CENTCOM intelligence officer, and I had to decide where to put these things, and there were never enough.

Ten orbits for the entire CENTCOM area was a small fraction of the requirement. Yet there wasn’t a big industrial-scale push in the Pentagon to give us more. If you gave two or three to Stan McChrystal for JSOC, to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq, and there were one or two in Afghanistan, then most of the conventional forces in Iraq didn’t have Predator feeds. So how do they find the enemy? How do they fight? They fight by bumping into people in tanks and Bradleys [American tracked armored reconnaissance vehicle].

We constantly had to push for better advisors. We constantly had to push for more ISR, more qualified advisors, and it never seemed like the Pentagon, as a whole, really understood the importance of what we were doing. And all the time Abizaid’s clock was running. Every month that we went in and made another request for more advisors was a month lost. We were not going to regather time lost; we were not going to regroup at this point.

**Nelson:** When you say, “the Pentagon,” are you talking about uniformed and civilian?

**Lute:** Yes. And in particular, I’m talking about the acquisition system. As a small, overly simplistic case study, the Air Force wasn’t interested in creating a drone fleet, because it competed with its normal, conventional priorities for acquisition. It wasn’t until well after this time period we’re talking about, that [Robert] Gates, essentially personally, reached into the Pentagon, grabbed them by the throat, and said, “You’re going to prioritize this.”

The same is true with the next thing on my list: counter-IEDs [improvised explosive device], counter-roadside bomb technologies. It took a personal press by Abizaid, saying we needed a Manhattan Project to defeat IEDs. Only with that kind of push did we eventually get—this is, again, a terrible organizational name—JIEDDO, the Joint IED Defeat (that’s another D) Organization. This was organized in an ad hoc, off-the-wiring-diagram effort to provide organizational boost, or energy, to the counter-IED effort.



As another example, we knew that something like 80 to 90 percent of the foreign fighters and suicide bombers in Iraq were coming through Syria, transiting the open border between Syria and Iraq, and strapping on bombs, and driving car bombs into the Iraqi people and into us. We could not get a move to shut down the foreign fighter flow out of Syria.

The biggest problems in the region were eastern Iran and western Syria: Syria mostly, because of the foreign fighter flow; Iran because they were sponsoring deadly Shiite militia that were a fundamental part of the insurgency and providing them sophisticated weaponry, in some cases training inside Iran. And we never really made inroads against those problem sanctuaries.

At CENTCOM we had problems with the Pentagon, mostly having to do with personnel and rotation schemes and acquisition. You had priorities with the region, which fell to the rest of the U.S. government, not so much the Pentagon. Quite frankly, we never came to grips with Syria and Iran's role in supporting what was going on in Iraq. The result is that we treated Iraq as though it were an island with no neighbors. We focused and we had a very intensive effort to deal with Iraq as Iraq, but we denied, somewhat, the importance of what was going on around it. Now, if you drift into South Asia, the counterpart logic there is Pakistan and its influence on Afghanistan. For too long, we treated Afghanistan as another island.

**Nelson:** I hear the "we." It sounds more like the U.S. government than the Pentagon in particular.

**Lute:** Yes. This is beyond the Pentagon.

**Nelson:** Right.

**Lute:** But the Pentagon—I did a lot of congressional testimony preparation for Abizaid, preparation for interagency meetings, usually via VTC [video teleconference], because he was forward and didn't relish his visits to Washington. This is how we communicated at the time, 10 or 12 PowerPoint slides; the last one was about what we needed. This was the easiest damn slide to design, because it was always the same; it never changed. They were the things that I'm laying out for you here.

**Nelson:** To be honest, this sounds like a failure of the Bush administration, to pay sufficient attention to problems that the Pentagon could not solve.

**Lute:** It's a fair critique to admit that for too long we treated Iraq as an isolated problem, separated it distinct from its region. This is obviously not just being blind to reality. No one was interested in picking another fight, given the situation we had on our hands, with the 150,000 American troops there, and with the casualties and all that that entailed, and the political implications of that back here, because we haven't talked about where the American people are on this experience.

There was no interest in expanding the war effort, and it's not even clear to me that there was some meaningful military way to address these two regional problems, east and west—Iran, Syria. What were you going to do to stop individual suicide bombers? There was a border there we could not control, that had never been controlled. We knew these Sunni volunteers to al-Qaeda in Iraq were coming mostly through Damascus International Airport.

At one point we even considered whether we should demonstrate to [Bashar al-] Assad that his tacit support for, his tolerance of, this foreign fighter flow is unacceptable by cratering one of the runways or taking down the air traffic control system. That would have meant that you couldn't land civilian airplanes, so these guys would have had to find another way.

This is eerily familiar to what's going on today, because the foreign fighter flow from Europe, North Africa, South Asia is going to Syria. Now they're joining ISIS, not AQI, and Syria is, to some extent today, suffering from the fact that it didn't crack down on these networks then, and it made itself very vulnerable. So I suppose it is a critique of the overall effort that assigned too low a priority to the regional dimensions of the conflict.

**Bakich:** But it doesn't sound to me like CENTCOM, as a regional command, was missing any of this regional dimension.

**Lute:** No, we knew it was happening.

**Bakich:** Rather it was the mismatch between the Pentagon and CENTCOM.

**Lute:** It was somewhat a mismatch between CENTCOM and the Pentagon, but more accurately, it was a disconnect between Washington and the field—"Washington" writ very large. To this extent, I do think that the campaign was hindered, was impeded, by this lack of regional appreciation. Now, I don't have any quick answers for what we should have done. I don't have the policy prescription for "Therefore, we should have done A, B, and C," with regard to Syria.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** But we should have tried something, because the suicide bombers were mostly not Iraqis. Something like 80 percent of the suicide bombers were foreign fighters. Imagine, if you shut that down, or even if you just caused some attrition before the suicide attack, you could begin to get at some of the more horrific attacks in Iraq.

**Bakich:** You did a study on profiling suicide bombers, didn't you?

**Lute:** Yes, we did do some work. Some of this was from captured data, because it turns out that these groups keep pretty meticulous records. But we never got at the foreign fighter flow coming out of Syria, and we never got at Iran sponsorship of Shiite militia, and both of those inflamed the insurgency.

**Bakich:** So Abizaid's clock was ticking. Did it keep ticking?

**Lute:** It was still ticking, and the result of that was that, inevitably, we made very slow progress. We detained the wrong people. Inevitably, as the clock ticked, we caused civilian casualties, because we had a blunt instrument against an insurgent target that's embedded in the population. Inevitably, we destroyed property.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** So, detentions, civilian casualties, property damage were all causing the clock to keep

going, not to mention the rhetoric and propaganda: This is like the British occupation, this is all about oil, on and on. And there was no reversing that.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** One time in Iraq, we had 25,000 Iraqis in U.S.-run jails—25,000—and every one of those with families and extended families. Sometimes we didn't even know who these guys were. Again, a blunt instrument. We slapped a black canvas bag over the guy's head, and when the bag came off, he was in Abu Ghraib. That's an Army that wasn't prepared to do an insurgency, because a big part of counterinsurgency operations is detention. Well, we did detention on an industrial scale, but it was a blunt instrument. Anyway, those are the themes coming out of CENTCOM.

**Bakich:** You're about to move to the Joint Staff here, in September of '06.

**Lute:** September of '06, yes. "So," you say, "how did you come to serve in this position?"

It was a huge surprise to me. I was barely a two-star; in fact, I was frocked as a two-star. That means that you're authorized to wear the rank, but your actual promotion number hasn't come up yet. So I wasn't really a two-star, and Abizaid called me. This would have been the summer of '06. He said, "You're going to be the Joint Staff J3."

I said, "Look, I'm barely a two-star; that's a three-star billet. You mean you're going to press for me? You're going to nominate me?" He said, "No, you *are*." I said, "How can you say that?" He said, "The Secretary has already decided." So, this was an Abizaid-Rumsfeld deal, which I still have never asked Abizaid about. I don't know how the hell he did it. I had served on the Joint Staff before, so I knew the Joint Staff well, but I didn't expect to go back as the three-star operations officer; that was completely a result of Abizaid.

I got there in August, September of '06. A couple months later, I was on the J. D. Crouch interagency team with John Sattler, who was the J5 [Director of Strategic Plans and Policy, Joint Chiefs of Staff]. As the J3 and the J5, we worked for Pete Pace and participated in the NSC review on Iraq over in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

**Bakich:** Right. If you have a particular way you want to talk about the Crouch review, I'd love to hear it. I have some questions I could tee up, but if you have a place you'd like to start—

**Lute:** Compared to the conventional wisdom it wasn't clear to us that there was a leading option, a leading alternative, at the beginning of the review. There was, it seemed to us, a legitimate, honest attempt to review the bidding across a range of options, and admit that things were not going well, that the status quo was not going to be sustainable, and that we needed to explore alternatives.

When John Sattler and I went over there, we were pretty much armed with what George Casey and John Abizaid wanted to do. It's well recorded. They were not interested in a 20,000- or 30,000-troop increase. They were still on track with what was called PIC, provincial Iraqi control, the deliberate, province-by-province transition of security responsibility from us to the Iraqis across the 18 provinces in Iraq. Obviously, we took the provinces with the most benign

security settings first, and we began to build momentum. There was a process, an evaluation, of assessing the security forces, the level of threat, but this was essentially Casey's campaign plan. When we reached province 18, at the end of the process, we would have substituted Iraqi forces for U.S. forces across the entire country.

**Nelson:** I'm sorry. As I understand it, his theory was, as long as we're here doing it for them, they'll never do it for themselves, but they will if they understand that we're leaving. Is that a fair summary of Casey's plan?

**Lute:** That's fair, but it sits alongside Abizaid's "we can't do it forever" philosophy. There are two dynamics here: "As long as we're doing it, the Iraqis aren't anxious to do this themselves," which is the dependency argument. It sat alongside Abizaid's: "We can't imagine that we're going to do it forever."

**Nelson:** Right.

**Lute:** Not to mention U.S. politics, the expense of this, and the fact that the longer we stay, the worse it gets.

**Nelson:** I'm thinking, when this review began, you had just had an election that was basically fought on the issue of our continuing to stay in Iraq, and the Democrats won. Was that overshadowing?

**Lute:** Yes, there's no question that that dynamic was a piece of this.

**Nelson:** That would strengthen Abizaid's point, that we can't assume we're going to be here forever; in fact, maybe less than before the election.

**Lute:** That really picked up after the election.

**Nelson:** We're talking about the midterm now.

**Lute:** Yes, the '06 midterm. After the election, you got the Bush decision to surge.

**Nelson:** Right.

**Lute:** There was a lot of skepticism on the Hill, reflecting, in no small part, the midterm election. And by this time, the surge began to be deployed. By July, August of '07, you even had some talk about congressional defunding of the war—

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** —which then led to the Petraeus-Crocker testimony in early September of '07. But those politics are—That's pretty obvious. The key, for the 2006 J. D. Crouch review, is that the situation was simply deteriorating. You had the al-Askari Mosque bombing early in '06, leading into the review. You had [Nouri al-] Maliki elected, but unable to form a government for more than six months of '06, so you can't argue that governance is going to relieve the pressure of the insurgency, because you couldn't form a government. So the government was gridlocked, the

Iraqi security forces had a mixed performance. Again, we started late on building the Iraqi forces. And then you had the slippage of support, which was pretty weak all along, here in the States. So, when you add that up, it's pretty clear that it was time for a strategic review, and that's what J. D. chaired in the NSC.

**Bakich:** Now, can you talk about how that review—You said you didn't think the deck was stacked in the favor—

**Lute:** We did not.

**Bakich:** OK. Do you think it was stacked?

**Lute:** I don't think so. There were certainly advocates for a surge inside the White House: the VP [Vice President]'s office, Meghan [O'Sullivan], maybe Steve [Hadley]—although Steve's more cautious and more deliberate in his approach. My sense, and some of this is hindsight, is that the President was very open to a new approach, but not decided; and that he most preferred that this be organic, that this come from the military, because of his confidence in, and his respect for, his relationship with Abizaid and Casey. They had been his guys for all this time, but he wasn't getting the surge option from them. After numerous VTC sessions and so forth, it was quite clear that he wasn't going to get that answer from Casey and Abizaid. He didn't get the sort of bold stroke that he was looking for from them. Meanwhile there was this alternative growing. The origins of the surge idea are sort of muddy, shady to me.

**Nelson:** Talk about that.

**Lute:** In the course of the Crouch review, he framed options. I think the VP's office had an idea that we would maybe admit that the Shiites were going to be the dominant party and we should just side with the Shiites and the Kurds, and the Sunnis would somehow get over it. I wasn't sure how that was going to happen. So there was that option.

There was a State Department option that essentially was a reflection of the dependency syndrome: as long as we keep doing this, the Iraqis will be happy to remain as dysfunctional as they are today and we'll take all the heat. There was a variant of transition, in that we needed to step back and see if, rather than stepping forward and gaining leverage, we could step *back* and gain some leverage with Maliki and the Iraqis. And then there was the surge, which was that we could do more militarily to steady the boat.

**Nelson:** Where does that idea come from?

**Lute:** It wasn't clear to me at the time where this came from, until—

**Nelson:** When that idea came forward, was it just more troops or was it more troops with a different, redefined mission?

**Lute:** Yes, more troops were always attached to population security and in particular, Baghdad.

**Nelson:** I'm sorry; I interrupted you.

**Lute:** It was very much Baghdad security. In the midst of this going back and forth to the White House for these review meetings—and then we'd come back to the Pentagon at the end of the day, report to the Chairman and so forth, over maybe 10 days or two weeks—the Chairman called us in because he was receiving a briefing from Fred Kagan at AEI [American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research] and Jack Keane, a slide presentation. As I recall, John and I sat there just listening.

**Nelson:** John Sattler?

**Lute:** John Sattler, who was my teammate on the Crouch review. The Chairman said, “OK, thanks; I have it. Thanks very much.”

When the briefers left, Pace said, “OK, this is going to resonate with some people in the interagency. You should be aware of this.” *He* made us aware of it, but it still was not clear to me that it was cooked, and I'm not sure it was. I don't think the inside history of this has been written yet. I just don't have the evidence that the whole Crouch thing was a big charade, to consider other ideas—

**Nelson:** When the idea for a surge was mentioned in these meetings, who was mentioning it?

**Lute:** Because the NSC owned the pen on the preparatory documents that fed the meetings, my guess is that it was in those papers.

**Bakich:** It's important for us to take a step back. The surge means a million things to a million different people, right? We can talk about the increase in troops; we can talk about the introduction of FM [Field Manual] 3-24, and how that changed tactical population security. You can talk about Odierno's treatment of the Baghdad belts, and then you can talk about the fact that AQI was upsetting tribal sheikhs in Anbar, and you get the Awakening.

**Lute:** Right.

**Bakich:** This is the question, talking about the internal history: To what extent were those four vectors coming together in the Crouch review? Were there certain things that were being touched on besides just the increase? Did you people know that FM 3-24 was coming out?

**Lute:** Probably not, because the Army has a whole library of olive-drab field manuals.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** The fact that you even know what 3-24 is, is quite impressive.

**Bakich:** I teach it to my students.

**Lute:** OK, good. But the point is, that's a reflection that the American military was trying to adapt, but the publication of the manual didn't, in any near-term way, have a huge impact.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** It probably had more of an impact in Washington than it did in the Army.

**Bakich:** Interesting.

**Lute:** At that point in the Army, if you wore an American Army uniform in one of the combat arms, you were either in Iraq or you were in the one-year dwell time before you went back. That's it. What were you doing in that dwell time? You were probably reintroducing yourself to your kids, getting a divorce, settling a financial crisis. The list on the refrigerator at home was not pretty, for things that you must do, and for six months of that twelve months at home, you were preparing to go back to Iraq. So the stress level here was high and the ability of the Army to adapt was somewhat constricted, impeded by the fact that they were on this treadmill of just deploy, deploy, deploy, and they had no time to go to Leavenworth, read the field manual, absorb what it meant, get it into their training program. Do you see what I'm saying?

**Bakich:** Yes, that sounds about right.

**Lute:** It was a vortex and you couldn't escape the vortex until you no longer required 150,000 troops, because it was the troop demand, the demand signal, that was creating the tempo, the turbulence. As I look back on the surge, to this day there's a big debate: Was the surge a success or was it temporary, tactical? Was it operational? Did it turn the tide and give us a chance to win, whatever that might have meant? And what was the impact of the 30,000 U.S. troops?

I was not a surge advocate, because I felt it would further Americanize the war. It would let the Iraqis off the hook as a result. It would only speed up Abizaid's clock; it would *accelerate* the clock, because we were going to have *more* troops doing the things that created the antibodies. And, at a point where it would be interesting to know how many provinces we had transitioned at the time of the surge—I don't know the answer to that, but it was more than half of the 18, I think—it would arguably have put a delay into the transition process. And oh, by the way, the surge troops weren't going there to train the Iraqis.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** They were going there to do it themselves. It was the Americanization, that character of the surge, that I disagreed with, largely because of my two years in the school of Abizaid. I also didn't see how the surge addressed the political side of the equation. Yes, you can send 30,000 American troops somewhere and they'll do what they're asked to do, but how does that impact the stagnation and the dysfunction of the Iraqi government?

Here's an Iraqi government. Maliki gets elected, but he can't form a government; he can't pass any one of the key benchmarks; he can't get de-Ba'athification; he can't do the amnesty law; he can't do the oil revenue sharing law; he can't do the provincial powers law. None of this can get through this gridlocked, dysfunctional Iraqi political system. The surge did nothing to address, east and west, the regional problems I've described. It did nothing to address Syria or Iran.

I remember talking about this around the conference table at the Crouch review. OK, the U.S. military has the capability of putting 30,000 more troops on the ground. What's the capacity of the State Department and AID [Agency for International Development] and others to keep pace with that effort? When the answer was quite unsatisfactory, it even emphasized, more so, that all

we were doing was applying an American military solution to a problem that had to be cross-government and had to very much try to empower the Iraqis. It didn't seem a good fit to me.

This goes back to a bigger issue, and I'm not sure how your study wants to take account of this. There's a question in these sorts of operations, between the progress you can make on the security front and who ought to make it, Americans or Iraqis, and the counterpart progress on the political front. Because if you prioritize the security effort and suppress the insurgency, but you don't make counterpart progress on the political front, you are in a campaign of constant occupation and suppression, colonization, essentially.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** Otherwise, there's no way you're ever going to hand this off to an indigenous Iraqi solution. The idea here was to balance two parallel tracks of effort: effort on the security front, which arguably we could do, but at great cost—and frankly, only temporarily—and progress on the political front. There the burden fell much more on the Iraqis, because we couldn't do it for them. The Americans could not produce an Office of the Prime Minister. We could not produce a functional Iraqi Parliament. We wrote the constitution. I mean, the CPA did, but we could not govern Iraq for the Iraqis.

You could only do so much on these things. It turned out that we could actually do more on the security front for them than we could on the political front. Strategically, the security effort outstripped the ability of Iraqi politics to keep up and solidify, consolidate those security effects. There was no reconciliation; there was no sense that oil revenues would be shared. It was a losing fight, because we could not generate the political counterpart.

**Nelson:** Solidify it even when it was winning?

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** Yes. Even when you were making gains over here, we became fixated on the shiny object with metrics like security incidents, levels of attacks, the indicators that MNF-I [Multi-National Force-Iraq] headquarters used to track. How many incidents happened across Iraq on a given day? There was no counterpart effort on the political front in which we had influence and the ability to shape the way we did the security front. So we did what we knew we could do and in the surge, we did even more of it, but all the while, the politics are lagging.

Eventually what happened—This is now where we're racing forward—was that the security situation was suppressed, secured sufficiently for us to rationalize our departure, but the politics never did catch up, and increasingly over time Maliki went back to his roots, which were sectarian and sponsored by Iran, and not what our image of Iraqi politics could be, which were across sectarian lines and so forth. The politics never caught up, and that's where we sit today.

One other thing I want to insert here and then back to your list—

**Nelson:** All the more amazing that you were brought into the White House.

**Lute:** Yes! Nobody was more surprised than I was, [laughter] believe me. By the way, maybe



you're picking up on this, I'm not soft-spoken on this topic. I was well known as Abizaid's guy. I had been outspoken in the review process—J. D. Crouch, Meghan, they're friends of mine, but we don't agree on these things—so it was quite a surprise.

Here's essentially what happened. Hadley's contribution to the surge was this: Let's create this position in the White House, so that I, Steve, don't have to spend 90 percent of my time on Iraq every day, because there's other things happening in the world that I can't get to, because I have this anchor around my neck. Let me create an assistant, a senior assistant. We'll promote this a bit by making him an assistant to the President, and there were only like 12 of those.

**Nelson:** That's a remarkable thing. You had the same status, in that sense, as he did, right?

**Lute:** Yes, but of course there is only one National Security Advisor.

And let's put him in charge of keeping track of and coordinating, as he can, the two war efforts, although frankly, through the whole Bush administration it was mainly Iraq, and oh, by the way, Afghanistan, but it was mainly Iraq. Then that will free up Steve to do other things. And if we're going to do that, let's do it while we're surging, because this would be the White House version of the surge. We'll surge with the senior staff.

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** As I understand it—and I don't know this firsthand—they asked a number of retired folks to take this on, including some who had advocated the surge.

Anyway, they had no takers, and now it was out there that they were trying to do this, and couldn't get any takers, which itself became a problem.

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** What kind of good idea is this, if we can't get anybody to take the job? I remember Pace called Sattler and me back into Pace's office and he said, "Look, they've asked for my list of retired people to recommend. I've given them the list, none of those guys want the job, so now I'm going to tell you guys that you have to both go interview for this. You can't turn me down, because you work for me." So we said, "Fine, whatever. Anyway, how does this work?"

Sattler and I interviewed separately, obviously, but I met with Hadley, the Vice President, and the President. Not long afterward, I either won or lost, *[laughter]* depending on your perspective.

**Nelson:** How did those interviews go? Did you say, "You're asking me to oversee a policy with which I'm out of sync with you right now"?

**Lute:** Because Steve had been pretty involved with the recruiting, he knew. I don't remember much of a conversation with the Vice President; it was just him laying his eyes on me. And I told the President, in the interview, "You may know this, but before it comes up, before someone else tells you, *[laughter]* I should tell you that I didn't support the surge."

**Bakich:** What did he say?

**Lute:** He said, “I know that, but I love you for telling me about it.” I thought, *OK. I’m glad I told him.*

The conversation with Steve had mostly to do with “What is this? What’s the idea here? What’s the concept?” We talked about the reporting chain, the sorts of things you do if someone was considering you for a brand-new job: Who do I work for? What are my responsibilities? How do you and I divide labor here, because there is this kind of unusual overlap? What about staffing? Will I really have the authority that you’re describing?

My suspicion was that this was not going to work, because I’d be responsible for all these things, but I’d have no authority to get anything done, and I would have to go to Steve, or to the President to get something done. And that would be fruitless, because how do you make things happen in a meaningful time frame if you have to run home for every issue? And how would that actually solve the problem? If Steve still held all the authority or the President held all the authority, we would be just putting me in the works, but not speeding things up, because I still have to come back to get a go. Steve assured me, and he proved true to his word, that I would have the responsibility, and we outlined those, but that I would also have authority.

First of all, he gave to me the daily contact with the President, without Steve in the room, and that was an important symbol to everybody. That was an important symbol to the President, that he was supposed to turn to me for Iraq and Afghanistan. It wasn’t that Steve couldn’t be in the room, but Steve, I think deliberately, said, “You have to give Doug a chance to do this.” It was, more important though, a signal to everybody else in the White House, and to everybody else, because the word got out very quickly, that I was the guy the President was seeing every day at seven o’clock, on what happened over the last 24 hours. It wasn’t just military; in fact, *most* of the morning updates had more to do with politics than they did with the military.

Every morning, I arrived at the White House at five and read the intel. At six, I called Crocker, then Petraeus by Tandberg, our secured desktop video links: “How are we doing, Ryan? How are we doing, Dave? OK, thanks.” I’d have five minutes of notes in my little notebook, and I’d go sit outside the Oval Office.

The President would walk down the portico, take his coat off, hang it up, and say, “Lute!” And I’d get up, walk in there, and he’d typically be standing or sitting at his desk. I would just give him three, four, five minutes of things. If there was a big security incident, I covered that, but more often, I’d cover the issues that Crocker gave me, because I believed that that was the linchpin of this whole thing. The center of this whole thing had to be the politics.

**Bakich:** Can I ask a question about the politics? Crocker is on record as saying that he was not convinced that Maliki was effective over the long term, but that the President had a very close bond, either to Maliki personally, or to the idea of Maliki, however you want to sort that. What’s your assessment of that?

**Lute:** I think the President was invested in Maliki as the elected leader of Iraq. The December ’06 Presidential elections that had brought Maliki into office were better than expected in terms of turnout and outcome. Remember everything else that was happening at the end of ’06, the early part of ’07: the security situation was lousy, the U.S. midterm elections back here. It

seemed to me that the President was invested that Maliki was the Iraqi leader, duly elected, and we were going to put our weight behind him. Ryan had reservations because of Maliki's background in the Dawa Party, and his linkages to Iran. Ryan was always among the most sensitive to the Iranian connection at the interagency table.

The President also felt that Maliki faced challenges and demands that to some extent only he, the President, could relate to, because a staffer at the White House, someone at State, the Assistant Secretary at State, or someone in the intelligence committee, had never been a head of state.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** —a head of government. Only President Bush had done that, and so with both [Hamid] Karzai and with Maliki, I think the President said, "Look, these are the duly elected leaders. One of my key personal tasks as President of the United States is to relate to them at a head-of-state, head-of-government level, because nobody else can do that." He took this mentorship, or this coaching role, personally. I think both of them appreciated it; both of them warmed to it.

**Bakich:** What was your assessment of that?

**Lute:** First of all was his ability to relate to them personally, because he reached out as he did. He did this by way of very regular devotions of his own time. Every Monday at nine o'clock was an NSC meeting, essentially a War Cabinet meeting, which he chaired. Petraeus, Crocker, the CENTCOM commander were on the screens. That's a huge commitment of Presidential time, to say every Monday, every week, we're going to start the week talking about Iraq, and I expect my Cabinet members to be there. Every other week, after dismissing that NSC meeting, he stayed on in the same room, refreshed his coffee and Maliki would video conference in, and he would consult and coach Maliki.

By way of the seven o'clock every day, the nine o'clock every Monday, the Maliki every other Monday, the President committed his most valuable asset, which is his own time, and a good deal of that was committed to Maliki personally.

This personal investment in Maliki plays out in 2008 when Maliki got in an up-armored Suburban and drove, with two cell phones in his hands, to Basra to quell the Shiite militia uprising. Everybody says this guy's crazy. He drove away from all his American support. We have nobody down there, because Brits were down there in Basra, and they're not leaving their base. He's driven away from American support; our intelligence isn't set; he's probably going to get killed, and if he doesn't get killed, he's going to fail. This is nuts!

The President was the only one—I can remember him, in the Oval Office, saying, "Hey, look, everybody's wanted him to step up and be an Iraqi leader. This is what Iraqi leaders do. Now, we're going to scramble. I want you to do everything we can to scramble and support and make sure he doesn't fail, but let's not critique him for taking on the Shiite militia. This is what we've been asking for." Sure enough, Maliki came out as a strong man, at least for a while. So President Bush knew what it is to be a President or a Prime Minister and felt that his special role was relating to and coaching these counterparts.

**Bakich:** Did he have the same relationship with Karzai?

**Lute:** Yes. Similar.

**Nelson:** Let me see if I'm hearing you correctly. You didn't support the surge, but you took this position in the White House. The surge was now a given.

**Lute:** There were five brigades in the surge, and beginning in February, we committed a brigade each month. By the time I got there in July, the surge was in place.

**Nelson:** Your earlier worry that the military situation is going to outstrip the political was still there, but it sounds to me like what you were doing in this role was trying to accept the military situation and bring the political up to that level.

**Lute:** Yes, help the politicians catch up to the security improvements. And do that by way of giving prominence to the politics by way of the White House connection to Crocker, and by emphasizing the political issues in my briefings to the President. Because I knew that once we committed those 30,000 troops, they were going to do as advertised. They would be able to suppress more of the violence around Baghdad. We committed some of those 30,000 to Anbar, too, and they would have an impact, but I wasn't convinced that that would be a lasting, enduring impact.

**Nelson:** Unless—

**Lute:** Unless the politics caught fire.

**Nelson:** Right. And that's where your focus was.

**Lute:** And that's where I thought I could bring those two paths, which I thought should be relatively in parallel, but with the politics lagging, I could bring them closer to getting in parallel.

**Nelson:** Right.

**Bakich:** What in particular did you want to focus on, on the political front? What were your points of emphasis, what was your task list?

**Lute:** The initial task lists were the Iraqi-accepted, but even Congressionally originated, list of benchmarks. These were the sorts of prominent legislative moves in Iraq that would begin to signal that the government of Iraq was willing to reach out to the Sunnis and the Kurds and deliver politically, or at least attend to their concerns. Again, this had to do with oil revenue sharing; this had to do with provincial powers: which powers were held at the center, which powers were held at the provinces. This had to do with the reform of the de-Ba'athification laws, amnesty, and so forth. There were five or ten items.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** These are the things that Ryan Crocker was working on *all* the time. There was also outreach to the region, where we tried to get Sunni Arab states to open embassies in Baghdad, break down the divide with the Saudis, and build other support for Maliki. At one point we had Ryan and the government of Iraq talking to Ryan's Iranian counterpart, so we opened up a

diplomatic channel to Iran, essentially, but about Iraq, in Iraq, with Iraqis present. The idea there was to see if we could make inroads on some of the Iraq–Iran problems.

Inside Iraq, we worked on coordinating executive and legislative actions. In the region, we were trying to either diminish some of the problem actors or lend support by way of some of the Sunni Arab states that were sitting on the sidelines. We also worked on economic and development funding, to try to get meaningful, durable economic support for Iraq.

One of the things that this led to, with regard to the center and the periphery, was that we tried to get more robust civilian manning for the provincial reconstruction teams, which were supposed to be our American outposts, in the 18 Iraqi provinces, but also the American outlets for development assistance. That was a constant challenge, because the State Department isn't structured as the military is, where you can simply say, "We have this unit in Fort Riley, Kansas. In six months you're going to go to Iraq for a year, get ready." There's no counterpart in the State Department.

I didn't feel—partly because I was still in uniform at that time—as though I needed to, day to day, manage the military effort. I knew how that was working. Talking to Petraeus and talking to the CENTCOM commander regularly kept me abreast of that. More important was the politics of Iraq.

**Nelson:** You said that having that one-on-one meeting with Bush established your credibility in the White House and in the government. What did you do with that credibility when you brought in people from the other agencies?

**Lute:** I didn't have to do anything with it. As the Deputy National Security Advisor, I had the ability to convene deputies meetings, and I did that often—at a pace of about two a week, which is a lot—on Iraq. These meetings established a set of core go-to senior people in each of the relevant agencies and departments.

**Nelson:** Which deputies did you bring in?

**Lute:** One thing I learned was that true deputies don't have the time to be deputies.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** So, the Deputy of Defense never came to deputies meetings; I went to the Assistant Secretary. Jim Shinn was my go-to guy; he was an Assistant Secretary of Defense. At State, Condi Rice made Eliot Cohen, the counselor, her go-to guy, so Eliot came. At DNI, [Director of National Intelligence] it was David Gordon, who became a fast friend. At OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense], as I recall, Mary Beth Long, who was another Assistant Secretary, often came, and then typically, the J5 and the J3 came. We formed a little core group that was much more agile than the formal deputies meetings tended to be. We met about twice a week for more than a year to level the information flow across the agencies.

We formed the deputies group, and that proved effective. I never had to tell them I was briefing the President every day. Their principals knew that, and it just became pretty well known. It was the power to convene and it was the reflected authority of having access to the President that

empowered me.

Steve also had me chair Principals Committee meetings on Iraq, and he would sit maybe three chairs down the table. He and I would talk in advance of a PC, and decide what we wanted to get out of this. I would chair the meeting and, at the key moment, turn to him for his perspective. Between the two of us, we delivered principals on key issues. I was his set-up guy. I was at the chair, chairing a Principals Committee, and to the right was [Richard B.] Cheney and to the left was Rice; and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was down there on the right. I was an active duty Army officer. It was a little bizarre.

**Nelson:** What about Gates? Gates's name hasn't come up yet this morning.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Nelson:** Talk about Gates in general.

**Lute:** A breath of fresh air for the Pentagon and for the military leadership, mostly just because the relationship with Rumsfeld had soured over time. There was no surprise in that. He came in quite well grounded on Iraq because of his Iraq Study Group experience. He'd gone through that and had really gone to school on the problems. He had expansive government experience, huge credibility, and was a breath of fresh air, and at a point where the policy was really lagging. It was a perfect—If you could pick your spots in term of job assignments, he had a lot going for him.

I was his J3 for the first six months, and when Pace sent Sattler and me over to the interviews, we came back, and some couple of days later, Hadley probably told Gates that I had been selected. Gates called me to his office and Pace was already there.

**Nelson:** Did you really not want this job?

**Lute:** In my heart of hearts, yes, I wanted the challenge. I felt good about where I was as the J3, what I was contributing. I had a great relationship with Pace. This was a real shot in the dark: a new position, a losing war effort.

**Nelson:** You didn't know what authority it really would have yet.

**Lute:** It's hard to imagine.

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** And I'd never been to the White House. I'd been over there for meetings in the Situation Room, but not into the Oval Office, so what the hell was I doing? Gates said, "I really need you to take this job. It's important, so I need you to take it, but I want you to know, there will always be a path back for you, to the Pentagon, when this is over. The guy I'm going to rely on to make sure that path stays open is sitting right here," and he pointed to Pete Pace. Within a month, they declined Pete Pace's reappointment. So I went over to the White House in July, and one of the first big news items out of the Pentagon was, "Pace will not be renominated." I thought, *Well, there goes my lifeline back to the Pentagon.*

I didn't think through all this at the time, but the job description put me at odds with the Chairman, who was supposed to be—by Goldwater-Nichols [Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986]—the principal military advisor to the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the National Security Council. I had just become an advisor on Iraq for two of those. The Secretary of Defense, unlike the Chairman, is in the chain of command, in the national command authority, from the President, the Secretary of Defense, to the combatant commanders. And now I'm at the White House.

I understand the chain of command, so I was very careful never to command anything, because it's not the nature of the job, but it was awkward. It came out less under Bush than it did later, under [Barack] Obama, where I think Bush and Gates were quite tightly aligned and therefore, my role was maybe less intrusive on their relationship. Under Obama, there were gaps, seams, and I was often the person standing astride that seam.

**Nelson:** I'm not sure I understand.

**Lute:** The two big themes in my 18 months under Bush were the surge, and the recovery of the surge, and the progress on the ground on the security front. There you had Bush, Gates, Pace for a while, and then [Michael] Mullen, and Petraeus and Odierno, quite tightly aligned. It wasn't as if I was carrying bad news or reporting unreported things, or I was not an irritant in that. On the political front, nobody else was vying for that role.

**Nelson:** Not even Rice?

**Lute:** She put a lot of weight and responsibility on Ryan, and that was a pretty good bet. He's as good as we have, but she wasn't so personally involved on a day-to-day basis. Remember, there were many other things going on in the world. Aside from the political portfolio I've described, the other thing was the Status of Forces Agreement negotiations, that consumed 2008. So, I was only there for 18 months. The first six months are getting settled, getting the surge in place and so forth. The last 12 months were securing the SOFA [Status of Forces Agreement] with Crocker. Those things didn't put me at odds with the people who owned them, Defense and State.

There were things that put the Obama administration at odds with what the military had come to expect of the White House under Bush. The reality here is that the American people elected President Obama to end the war in Iraq, so he was going to do that. And they elected him to reemphasize the fight against the core al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan and the good war in Afghanistan, and he was going to do that.

It was just different and by the time we got into that period, it was pretty clear that I wasn't going back across the Potomac, so I retired in 2010.

Pace was present at the creation of my position at the White House. He knew what this job was about. He asked me to go interview for it and said he was going to take care of me. He had some ownership in this. Not so with his successor.

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** Keeping the President informed was task number one. Task number two: try to get the politics to catch up with the security. Task number three: form, inside Washington, this body of trusted agents, the “board of directors” I could turn to, to get things done. And task number four: stay in close touch with the network and expand the network beyond Washington. This was Petraeus, this was the MNF-I commander, this was the CENTCOM commander, this was the embassy Baghdad, embassy Kabul, and military command in Afghanistan, embassy Islamabad. Both military and political, and I did this from my desk, using secure phones and secured video links.

**Nelson:** Your desk in the White House?

**Lute:** Yes.

**Nelson:** You were in the White House?

**Lute:** I was in the West Wing. That was another thing Steve Hadley did. He cleared an office in the West Wing for me.

**Bakich:** Why?

**Lute:** Because he realized the power of being in the West Wing. Steve was true to his word. He said, “Look, this is not going to be easy. I’m going to take hits for this because it looks like I’m outsourcing this difficult job to someone else, but this is the right thing to do for the President and for the policy.” Then, he and I made it work and we’re very close friends to this day. I greatly respect him for the way he empowered me in the job, because it would have been fruitless otherwise.

**Bakich:** We should probably move to the Lute review.

**Lute:** All right, we should probably cover ’08.

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** The big, big theme there is that the President is not going to be President in 2009. The Democrats are surging; how do we secure what we have? There were two big tactics the President used. One was the selection of leaders. He moved Petraeus from MNF-I to CENTCOM, and he moved Odierno to MNF-I. I think he did that deliberately, because he had a lot of confidence in these guys. They had proven themselves and he knew that they understood Iraq, and the next President would be, in President Bush’s judgment, best served by having them still there.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** So he moved them in ’08, so that the new President had a set team of military in theater on Day One. The second thing he did was he launched us on this effort to see what we could get with the Iraqis by way of an agreement that extended our time horizon in Iraq. It started with a Declaration of Principles, but then, by November of ’08, it was captured in the Status of Forces Agreement.



This was not your standard SOFA. The President was intimately—line by line, paragraph by paragraph—involved with this document. Much of '08 for me—and for Ryan Crocker and Brett McGurk, who was my guy working with Ryan, and Elissa Slotkin, who was on my team in Washington, and David Satterfield at State—was spent just getting this agreement settled with the Iraqis. The message is that, first, the President was intimately involved in this.

Well down the road, as we were moving close to agreement, Maliki wanted to change the title of the security part of the agreement to something that read like, “The agreement between the United States and Iraq, on the full withdrawal of American forces from Iraq.” Now, there’s no other Status of Forces Agreement that has the word “withdrawal” on it, but for Maliki this was important. In one of his routine VTCs with the President, he said, “Look, I need to have this. You know the way parliamentarians are. Half of them won’t read the agreement, but they’ll read the title and say, ‘This is an agreement on withdrawal,’ and it gives you the protections and authorities you need, but it gives me the title I need.”

We went into an NSC meeting—the President was chairing—and maybe there were a half a dozen key edits on the text, and the first one for the principals’ consideration was this word “withdrawal.” One of the President’s top political advisors was sitting off to the right-hand side in the Situation Room. As the meeting was convening, he was just reading this paper for the first time. He said, “Oh, my God!” and stood up and said, “This is a surrender document!” President Bush said, “Sit down.” He was saying, OK, everybody take a deep breath.

Then we got very close, within days of when we thought we were final, and Ryan called in and said, “Look, it’s two o’clock in the morning”—late afternoon Washington time—“I think we have a deal if we can change these few words.” I said, “OK, but you’ve told me that and I’ve already told the President that about 10 times.” He said, “No, I think this is it.”

So I said, “All right, I’ll call you back.” It was maybe two or three in the morning in Baghdad. I found Steve, who was also tracking this very carefully, and I said, “Look, we are very close to this. Ryan thinks that this fix is the last fix.”

Steve said, “Well, let’s go find the President.” We went and he’s not in the Oval Office, not in the Residence. He was at the White House pool where there’s a workout room. Steve said, “Listen, we’ll just go in there and ask him; he’s working out.”

We went in there. The President was sweating profusely on an exercise bike, pumping away, country music blaring, and reading a book. Hadley and I walked in there with a two-word edit or something and he said, “What do you guys want?” I said, “Mr. President, I know I’ve told you this before, but I think this is the last change. Would you be OK with it?” He said, “What do you two think?” I said, “We should do it.” And he said, “All right, get out of here.” Just amazing.

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** OK, one last vignette, but again, this has nothing to do with Iraq.

The President has a way, and had in office, a way of connecting with people in a very genuine, convincing, warm, charismatic way. One of the things he instituted was that all the senior staff could bring their family in before Christmas, for a family photo. In the Oval Office, there was a

Christmas tree, and he spent a couple of minutes with each family, which is really nice, because then you have a series of Christmas photos from year to year.

Our daughter Kamryn was probably four in 2008. We got her all dressed up. My wife, Jane, and I, were talking to the President, and Kamryn wandered off to the Christmas tree, where she took one of the Presidential gingerbread men and decided it was time for a snack. She was eating a gingerbread man from the tree and my wife was horrified. Josh Bolten and the President said, “No, no, it’s OK.” And to set Jane at ease, the two of them went over, took a knee by Kamryn and shared the cookie with her. You can’t make that up. What I’m saying is, he was doing his job that day, he was just taking photos, but he had a personal connection, or a personal warmth, that I really appreciated.

**Nelson:** What you’re describing is somebody, after he’d been President for six years—

**Lute:** This was his last year, seven.

**Nelson:** —six, seven years. I’m talking about the whole time you were there, the whole time. He’d been President for six years, the war had not gone well, his party had lost control of Congress, and yet, it doesn’t seem as though his temperament was affected by that.

**Lute:** He is very even-keeled. He has a good heart, he’s quick with a joke, or just to lighten the moment up a little bit. He has a good sense of humor, very witty, but also he can be very focused. He gets short shrift on being not analytical. The stereotype is he’s not analytical, not focused, not engaged. I didn’t find any of that. I had the pleasure of dealing with, probably next to the ’08 financial crisis, the crisis du jour for 18 months, Iraq, but I found him very personable. He’s someone who you look forward to interacting with. I never dreaded interaction with him. But he could get to the point, too, if we were drifting.

**Bakich:** We probably should talk about the Afghanistan review, so we can get that in.

**Lute:** By the summer of ’08, the Taliban, who had been overthrown, but maybe more accurately displaced, into Pakistan, in ’01, ’02, were on the comeback. The levels of violence, geographic dispersion of violence, scale of attacks, had all risen since ’05, ’06, and by ’08 there were pretty disturbing concerns.

On the political front, Karzai had not taken the bold leadership steps that we thought he might have been capable of, and had turned out to be more of a classic conventional Afghan leader who ruled from Kabul, and didn’t really attend much to the politics on the periphery. So, things were not looking good in Afghanistan. I wrote a memo laying this out to the President and his response was “Well, why don’t you go look into this: get a team, take some time.” That became the review.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** So, I went back to my trusted agents, and Shinn, Cohen, Gordon, Long, and I, rather than meeting in the Situation Room, got on a government airplane and went out and spent maybe 10 days or so in the region. We went to Kabul and then around Afghanistan, and went into Pakistan. We came back and held 40 or 50 hours of meetings in a dedicated room in the Eisenhower

Executive Office Building.

**Nelson:** Wow.

**Lute:** Then we wrote this report that said that the situation was deteriorating. We were not going to lose this, it wasn't like the Taliban was going to march on Kabul or seize a major city, but we were also not doing enough to move it in a positive direction. We made a whole set of recommendations.

This was delivered to the President in the fall of '08, and there was some consideration. First, it obviously wasn't good news. While we were cleaning up Iraq by way of the SOFA, and it looked like we'd secure another three years of life in the Iraq mission, it was pretty clear that the U.S. election was not going well for the Republicans.

Once Obama was elected, the President made the decision that he would give the President-elect, and the transition team, access to this report, and they could tell us what they wanted to do with it. I went over to the transition headquarters in late November or December of '08, and briefed [Thomas] Donilon, [James L.] Jones, the team that was then forming in the Obama administration, and they were noncommittal. But not long after that, partly because I had served with Jones a number of times—back in my European tours, he had been SACEUR [Supreme Allied Commander Europe]—he asked my team and me to stay on. One of the cornerstones of that agreement was that we needed to do something about this review, and then it went from there.

**Nelson:** Where did it go from there?

**Lute:** When President Obama came into office on the 21st of January, he held an NSC meeting on Iraq. His first full day in office—everybody was finding the Situation Room—he held a meeting on Iraq. The only outcome of the meeting was that he wanted to launch a sixty-day review on Iraq, and see what options were possible, given that he had promised to withdraw U.S. combat troops in 15 months. At that time, I still had Iraq, so he said to launch this review and we'd figure out where we were going. The next day, now the 22nd of January, he did likewise with Afghanistan, and brought Bruce Riedel in to conduct a review on Afghanistan. Now there were these two, sixty-day reviews underway. For Afghanistan, the NSC review that my team and I had done served as one start point.

**Nelson:** Right.

**Lute:** A number of key things made their way through the process. One was to refocus on core al-Qaeda, which is largely in Pakistan, not in Afghanistan. Another was to treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as an inseparable pair, to get away from this tendency to address them independently, which we had experienced before. This led to the "AFPAK" [Afghanistan/ Pakistan] nomenclature and to the "disrupt, degrade, and eventually defeat, core al-Qaeda" objective. At State, it led to Richard Holbrooke and his office as the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

And it led to the first troop decisions by Obama, to act on the troop demands that had been on the table for some time but had been deferred by Bush. Not only did he defer the review and give his

successor space to figure out how to deal with that. On troop decisions—he could have taken troop decisions in Afghanistan as early as I recall, September of '08—but rather than make those decisions, he left them to Obama, so that Obama could make them soon after coming into office. Within the first month or so, Obama authorized 21,000 troops to go to Afghanistan.

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** But that was set up by Bush and given to Obama as an offer.

**Nelson:** Did Obama and his people appreciate the way Bush had handled the transition on these issues?

**Lute:** I think the senior-most people did, including Donilon and Jones. They understood the value of what President Bush had done, which was to give Obama an opportunity early on to do what he had said that he would do, which was refocus on Afghanistan and al-Qaeda.

The troops weren't going to move until February or March anyway, so Bush could have done this in an effort to maybe minimize criticism that he wasn't attending to Afghanistan. Instead, he just put it on the shelf and said, "I'll give this to the next administration."

**Bakich:** As part of the review, was there any significant attempt to address the confused command situation in Afghanistan?

**Lute:** Yes, absolutely. One of the slides in this report that we produced was called the "10 war problem." In one of the stops of the traveling team, we went to Kandahar, where we began to compile a list of how many compartmented, segmented, not-talking-to-one-another efforts there were, just around Kandahar. You can imagine.

There was the CIA effort; the JSOC effort, the high-end black SOF [Special Operations Forces]; the white SOF, as they were called, the Green Beret effort; the conventional U.S. Army; the "train, advise, and equip" teams, the advisors to the Afghan army; then there were separate teams for the Afghan police; then there was NATO. I don't know how many I've just named, but the tally was 10, and the problem was that nobody was talking to all the others. The left hand was not talking to the right hand. JSOC would come in, raid a compound overnight, and the conventional Army would not know it was coming or going. The sun would come up and there would be a burning compound. And a conventional infantry unit would have to go and figure out what happened, make amends with the locals, and it just went on and on. That was one of the issues that we had to clean up, the chain of command.

**Nelson:** Is it a fair criticism of President Bush, that he didn't pay sufficient attention to Afghanistan?

**Lute:** I'm afraid it is. To be fair, Afghanistan, in '01, '02, '03, looked almost too easy. The Taliban were brittle; they fell quickly; they didn't stick around to make trouble; they went to Pakistan. Al-Qaeda, after Tora Bora, were disbursed, and largely in Pakistan and not in Afghanistan. Karzai looked the part as a national leader. The constitution came together pretty quickly. There was pretty broad-based international support with the UN mission and so forth. Violence levels were relatively low.

There was this lull between the fall of the Taliban regime and maybe '05, '06, when the Taliban began to find its feet again and reassert itself. Then by the time that was happening, in Iraq, you had all-out crisis. To some extent, it's understandable how this happened. We were managing, in Afghanistan, with maybe 20,000 U.S. troops, and there were 150,000 to 170,000 in Iraq. Our casualties were just off the charts, much worse in Iraq. So, all the indicators were that Iraq was the focal point, the main effort.

It wasn't until '06, '07, that things begin to deteriorate in Afghanistan, and when you think of what the administration was doing in '06, '07, '08, you understand why. But yes, we were not focused on Afghanistan.

Also, the reality is that before the Iraq surge, the two brigades in Afghanistan and the 15 brigades in Iraq were all the U.S. Army and Marine Corps could manage, on a one-year-on, one-year-off program. You would be in the combat zone in one of those two places for a year, back for a year, and then you would return. Nobody was interested in breaking that proportion, that ratio. The service chiefs were telling the President that this was the bare minimum in terms of keeping together the force, because this is a married force, an all-volunteer force. They can leave at any time. If you were in the Army at that time, it was a year on, a year off, and for some of these guys, the year at home was so tough that they almost longed for a return to the combat zone, which is telling. We were operating at nearly maximum capacity.

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** To sustain what was going on in Iraq and send more to Afghanistan meant that you were going to violate this one-and-one proportion, because you either had to lengthen the deployment times, shorten dwell times, or enlarge the force. It's just math. The surge, obviously with five more brigades, did violate the proportion. We went from 12-month combat tours to 15 months.

**Nelson:** Right.

**Lute:** That was the bill payer. The bill payer for the surge was longer deployments. We had to change, so it became a 15-months-deployed, 12-months-not-deployed ratio, and that was hard.

Some of those brigades for the surge in Iraq were in Iraq, programmed to leave at 12 months, and told to stay to 15. General Marty Dempsey commanded a division that was in the midst of redeployment after 12 months when the surge was announced. He had elements that had already redeployed; he had to recall them and bring them back to Iraq. Can you imagine standing in front of the troops and giving them that message? The voice of the service chiefs, and especially the Army and Marine Corps, who were bearing the burden in Iraq and Afghanistan, was that we want to be careful of how far we pressed the all-volunteer force.

In '07, President Bush went to the Pentagon for a check-in on the surge. All the service chiefs were in the tank, which is a conference room. All the service chiefs were there, Steve Hadley and I were there, and the President went around and said, "How's the state of the force?" They looked at divorce rates, suicide rates, and reenlistment rates, things like this, and the sum across the service chiefs was that the force was really stressed and we couldn't keep this up forever, and we had to worry about the morale of the force.

The President listened very patiently. When he summarized at the end of the session, he said, “Look, I want you to know I’ve heard you on the morale of the force, but it seems to me the biggest risk to the morale of the force is losing, so we’re not going to lose.” And he closed the meeting, he shut them down a bit.

**Bakich:** You also mentioned that you wanted to get to lessons learned.

**Nelson:** Your lessons, yes, absolutely. The floor is yours for as long as you want it; we won’t interrupt.

**Lute:** We’ve covered most of this. A couple of points, not yet lessons: There’s an ongoing debate in the foreign policy arena about the surge. Was it a success or was it not a success? People come down on both sides of this.

One thing that that argument typically misses is that it considers the five-brigade U.S. surge as the key variable and does not give sufficient weight to other things that were happening at the same time, which also had an impact on suppressing the violence. Remember, if we started in February—February, March, April, May, June—by June of ’07, the fifth and final brigade of the surge is in place. Two months later, in early September, Petraeus and Crocker were back saying, “We’re getting early signs that the violence has decreased.”

It has never rung true to me that it was because of those five brigades, in that short a time frame, that we were able to turn the corner. There were a number of other factors that are worth considering. Number one is that the Awakening has already happened. By the time Petraeus and Crocker testify, the Awakening was at least a year old. It started in Anbar, but it spread beyond Anbar and was not a factor of the surge, although the surge tended to reinforce it; it was preexisting. The Awakening was a reaction to what al-Qaeda had done.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** Al-Qaeda had gone to the Anbaris and said essentially no liquor, no cigarettes, no women, and Anbaris essentially said if this is what you, al-Qaeda, mean by the caliphate, don’t count us in. Al-Qaeda’s overreach with declaring Anbar as a caliphate—and the Anbari reaction to that, which prompted the Awakening—was a big part of quelling the violence.

Number two: JSOC, by 2007, was launching 10, 12, 15 raids a night on al-Qaeda in Iraq. We had put our best killers against the most virulent part of the insurgency, and General Stan McChrystal was hammering these guys and had been doing so for *months* before the surge.

Number three: In Baghdad, many of the ethnically mixed neighborhoods had already been cleansed and made homogeneous. So, the horrendous violence that we saw in the second half of ’06 and the first half of ’07 burned itself out. So, much of that ethnic cleansing had already taken place, by the Shiite militia. Also, at the time that Petraeus and Crocker came back, Muqtada al-Sadr had taken JAM, the Jaish al-Mahdi Army, off the streets, so that decreased, by about 40 percent, the Shiite part of the insurgency.

I think the argument about whether the surge was a success or not a success misses the point that the surge played out in a broader context, which included factors that also contributed

to the decrease in violence. I get a little intolerant of arguments on both sides, because they're just too simplistic. It's too simple to say that these five brigades, in a matter of a couple of months after their full deployment, resulted in the downturn in violence. That's too simplistic.

**Nelson:** You've given a reason to make more complicated the idea that the surge worked, period, but what about the other side, that the surge didn't work? What are they missing?

**Lute:** On the positive side, let's just take the Awakening, for example, the psychological impact to the Sunni Awakening that Bush was ready to double down, given the politics of what was going on. Republicans had lost the midterm election, things were going bad for the President, the violence was peaking. In the face of all that, they were dealing with an American leader who had doubled down to support them. I can't quantify the psychological impact that must have had, but I think it amplified the effects of the Awakening, because they felt reassured.

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** I also think it probably solidified Bush's relationship with Maliki, because twice before, in late '06, Maliki had tried to secure Baghdad with Iraqi forces. There were two efforts where they were going to focus and gather Iraqi security forces from elsewhere, surge into Baghdad with Iraqi security forces, and suppress the sectarian violence. Both had failed. So Maliki was probably politically on the ropes in a way that the surge helped him, but beyond that, my sense is it probably had a more psychological and political impact than it did a physical military impact.

**Nelson:** OK.

**Bakich:** You weren't thinking of Together Forward and Together Forward II, were you?

**Lute:** Yes, I think that's right. I think it was Together Forward II, which was Casey's plan to secure Baghdad with Iraqi forces.

**Bakich:** Yes.

**Lute:** So there was this question of style, and because my team and I were on both sides of the divide between the Bush administration and Obama administration, I often get asked, "So how are they different?"

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Lute:** First of all, as individuals it's difficult to imagine two who are more different. They're very distinctively different individuals, but I think it is fair to say that President Bush was more instinctive as a leader. He relied on interpersonal relationships, which built trust and a bond of teamwork both in the administration and with international leaders. Some of this is probably somewhat biased, because the Bush team, at the six-and-a-half-year mark, when I joined, was set. Hadley had been there the whole time; Rice had been there the whole time, with two different jobs. The Vice President was there. This was a mature administration when I came in.

**Nelson:** Bolten.

**Lute:** Yes, Bolten. The Bush team was very well established when I joined. I came into a brand-new Obama administration. In that way the styles and so forth are hard to compare, because I came in at different points of time in the two administrations. President Obama is more analytical; he's more deliberate in his decision making; and he's more into the details. He'll take the time he needs to unpack a decision and think about it from a variety of analytical perspectives.

There is a bit of a difference, but I always come back to it being a little unfair to compare them. Also, when Obama came in, he didn't only have Iraq and Afghanistan, but he had the full-fledged economic crisis, and President Bush didn't have that. So, it's hard to compare them.

One of your questions was, "How should the Bush Presidency be viewed in history?" In the long-term history, it will be viewed in light of the immediate response to 9/11. *The* event for the Bush administration was 9/11, there's no question about that. It will be viewed as having set very high, ambitious goals for itself in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

It will be viewed as having an incomplete, too-little appreciation for the magnitude of what it set out to do. When I've talked to military audiences about this, we talk about the components of strategy in a classic [Carl von] Clausewitz-ian frame: ends, ways and means. It's what you're trying to accomplish; the methods, the how you go about it; and then the resources. So, the Bush administration will be seen as having set high ends, high goals for itself, but not completing the logic of the strategy by way of carefully designing ways and means that could deliver those goals. It's a bit of a breakdown in strategy, between ends, ways and means.

By the way, you can also apply this to the other administrations.

Related is a tendency to fixate on military as the principal object of foreign policy, with too little appreciation that the military can deliver effects, but the effects are mostly short-term, not durable, *unless* they're linked to political change, political progress. In both Afghanistan and Iraq we've seen large military efforts that never came close to being matched on the political front. We can use our military like that, but I don't think many Presidents are going to be satisfied with the results.

I have several key lessons. One is *policymaking* is easy, *policy implementation* is very hard. What tends to happen—in my experience at the White House, and I was there a total of six years—is that both administrations focus on the policymaking: make the decision, record it in a summary of conclusions, roll it out in a Presidential speech or some variant to that path, and then presume that the government is going to implement itself. It doesn't work like that. There's a huge gap between decision making and decision implementation, and often, it's not the decision that's flawed. At the time, that decision probably made sense, or at least you can make a case that it made sense. Where we fall is in implementation. There has been too little structural adaptation to the fact that we've been at war since 2001. We're managing the wars by way of the NSC process, with PCs and DCs and interagency policy coordination groups, memos, and all this, as though it's just another policy issue, like pollution or global warming or immigration, and it's *not* just another policy issue. We should have adapted structures and procedures. Bush came closest to this, in my view, by way of his battle rhythm during the week, where he was routinely updated. The fact that he was getting briefed at seven o'clock in the morning had an impact



across the government, because the entire administration got the message on his priorities and didn't want to be caught short.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** He sent a signal just by being updated every morning at seven o'clock. He sent a signal with the nine o'clock Monday morning NSC meeting. What's his first priority of the week? Easy, look at his calendar.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** He came closest to trying to make the existing system fit the nature of the crisis, but we've done, in my view, too little adaptation. I've talked about ends, ways and means, and when we take a shortcut on aligning ends, ways and means, you end up with flawed strategy.

Further, when what you say and what you do are not aligned, that's fundamentally where you get into political problems with America, because we're a democracy. This is so obvious it shouldn't have to be said. You have to align what you say and what you do.

In the White House and in the interagency, a little discipline is a wonderful thing. What I mean by that is having a rhythm that's predictable. The fact that Bush had his meetings every morning, every Monday at nine o'clock, was absolutely predictable. It meant that the War Cabinet came prepared for that meeting. It meant they scheduled their travel around that meeting. If they were on the road, it meant they got to a VTC. Why? They didn't want to miss that meeting. If that meeting were floating across the week and would be on call, "We'll give you 24 hours' notice," you wouldn't get anywhere near the preparation, you wouldn't get anywhere near the participation and it would begin to fray.

**Nelson:** Would he allow principals to send deputies in their stead?

**Lute:** Yes, if they were informed. But he'd place such a priority on it that they didn't want to miss it.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** He enabled that whole process by just having a little discipline: "OK, it's going to be every week at nine o'clock." Maybe this is my military background, but there's a huge benefit to showing just a little bit of discipline. If it's going to start at nine o'clock, start the meeting at nine o'clock, not nine-fifteen. It's not good enough that you walk in at nine-fifteen. If it's going to end at ten, ten-thirty, you get the idea. Is there an agenda? Is there a follow-up memo? Just a little discipline is a good thing.

Here are my last two points. In my experience, having a deep understanding of the problem is where you must start. The impact of 30 years of Saddam's leadership on Iraq was a knowable thing. We knew he kept an iron grip on this. We knew what happened when the Shiites stepped out of line after the First Gulf War. We knew what he did to the Kurds. His leadership style, its impact on the society, and toppling that, was analytically predictable.

We also knew, roughly, the demographics of Iraq. It was knowable, the demographics, the geography, the culture, the religion of Afghanistan. The fact that the Taliban went to Pakistan should have been no surprise. There are more Pashtuns in Pakistan than there are in Afghanistan. The fact that in rural Afghanistan, even if you're not carrying a Kalashnikov, you're much more like the Taliban than you are an Afghanistan political leader in Kabul, and it's just the way things are; it's the culture. There was much more about Iraq and Afghanistan that we should have understood before we went in.

The last lesson is that as much as you try to master the substance and understand what you're getting into, there's an equal burden to have humility that you're not going to really understand this. When countries like ours go to countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, we're absolutely foreign. We don't speak the language, know the culture, or understand regional dynamics.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Lute:** It's so foreign that we have to, as much as possible, try to master the substance, but then go in with an equal dose of humility that we're not really going to understand what we're getting into. In the course of this 10 or 11 years, I've become very cautious in terms of what might initially sound like a good idea.

Well, that's it.

**Nelson:** Thank you so much, Ambassador. This has been wonderful.

**Bakich:** Wonderful.

**Lute:** Well, I hope it's useful.

**Nelson:** I think it will be enormously useful.