The Surge – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: J.D. Crouch

Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 2005-2007

Interviewers:

Peter Feaver

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

Meghan O'Sullivan

Kirkpatrick Professor of the Practice of International Affairs, Kennedy School, Harvard University

Timothy Sayle

Assistant Professor of History, University of Toronto

Date of Interview

June 25, 2015

Editorial Note and Disclaimer:

This transcription has undergone a verifcation process for accuracy, according to the strictest is, (tr)-2.5 0 -1.207 T11.04 72 403.5-15 c35C5 (a6-3.2 (c(e)-2.2 s)10.7 o)-5.5 (H)-5.5 r(ri)-2.6 r(r(e)-2.2 p a)-2(c

March as Steve's Deputy. I think it was 1st of March, end of February, something like that. And so, to some degree, there was some time there where I was getting up to speed. But generally, what I talk about when I think about Iraq, I think about the period of '05 really, to some degree, as one of quite a bit of hope and optimism. There were a lot of sort of positive things that occurred in that timeframe. I don't have them all in my head, but I know we managed to get the constitution through, we had some elections. There was kind of a general sense, amidst problems as well, that things were heading politically in a positive direction.

There were also counter sides, and [00:04:00] one of the things that I think is difficult, to sort of read the distinction between those two things. We're also getting, I think, fairly positive views from the leadership team that was forward deployed, Ambassador Khalilzad and the commanding general, who I think was George Casey at the time, right?

So I think, obviously, a turning point, if you want to think about it, was really the Golden Mosque bombing, to some degree. I think that was a huge wake-up call. And of course, the initial reaction of the administration was to say, "Oh boy, we stared into the abyss and we survived." And I guess that's sort of true, but I think that really began, in my mind, and in a lot of people's minds around me -- and Meghan, to some degree, I was a student of what you were seeing as well at the time -- an [00:05:00] accelerated decline in our ability to have an influence on

[00:09:00]

CROUCH: Well, remember what happens in the late summer. You've got the execution of Operation Together Forward -- I think that's what it was called --

O'SULLIVAN: Right.

CROUCH: OK. And then Operation Together Forward II, right [laughs]. [00:13:00] – This is the way I would put it. If there had not been doubts about whether those actions were on the right track, there would not have been that kind of meeting. There were plenty of ways to get briefed on what was going on. There was weekly interaction between the President -- or almost weekly interaction between the President and the senior military leadership and down range, and all of that. So I think the fact that this was done at Camp David, with the cast of characters who were there was an indication that fundamental assumptions ne[illegible]

CROUCH: And I think you probably should rely more on Steve to answer that question.

FEAVER:

kind of a coherent alternative put forward at that meeting; I guess that's the way I would put it.

FEAVER: The narrative at the time was the Defense Department's fully in the fight, the State Department is not yet. So the conflict between Rumsfeld and Rice about where are the State reps for the PRTs [provincial reconstruction teams], and things. So that was one of the other disputes at that time.

O'SULLIVAN: But the big State Department effort had been to get a government, right? That had been really where the energies of our ambassador, our team, people who went out from the White House were all sort of focused on that at that particular meeting.

CROUCH: Right.

FEAVER: So the other dog from that spring is the change in Chief of Staff from Andy Card to Josh Bolten, [00:17:00] and the possibility that sort of a fresh eyes on Iraq, and also his consideration of possibly a change of leadership at Defense at that time, which gets public attention in the form of the revolt of the generals. So do you remember either the internal White House discussions about change in Defense, fresh look, or the revolt of the generals, and just what was your experience on those two things?

CROUCH: Yeah. I don't have much to say on the first one, to be honest with you. And this may simply have been the fact that, obviously, I worked for Secretary Rumsfeld. Maybe there were lots of conversations that went on behind the scenes that I was not privy to, and I can completely understand why that would be the case. Folks may have thought out of respect [00:18:00] or deference to me, O'SULLIVAN: Let me take you back to we're coming out of the Camp David session, and so it's end of June, 2006. [00:20:00] And let's take a look at that summary. You mentioned Operation Together Forward I and II. Do you remember what was going on within the NSC staff? What were the currents within your own staff? And do you remember when internal efforts at review began?

CROUCH: OK, yeah --

O'SULLIVAN: And how they --

CROUCH: -- and this is where sequencing gets a little fuzzy. But coming out of that meeting, I sort of remember the general call that evber2.44 TD [(g)-5 (o)aDMe(0.9 (l)1 -0.004 T

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

FEAVER: I think she's asking about July --

O'SULLIVAN: June, July, August, when the NSC internal group started their own work on reviews. But we can move to this point where you remember it is --

CROUCH: Well, I mean, I remember there were all kinds of discussions. And again, I'm not exactly certain when this was either, but we talked earlier about the napkin, right? The napkin was in the fall, right?

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

CROUCH: All right, so that's still not in that June-July timeframe. My recollection's pretty vague about that. The other thing I'm trying to remember was, when did we produce the strategy document on Iraq?

FEAVER: [00:22:00] NSVI? Or the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq, the public version?

CROUCH: The public version of it.

FEAVER: That was fall of '05.

O'SULLIVAN: Five. That's the previous year.

CROUCH: Right. OK. That's right.

O'SULLIVAN: -- the outcome of the "clear, hold and build."

FEAVER: That's the "clear, hold and build."

CROUCH: Right. Exactly, OK. So that's out of sequence. So the answer is, I don't have much to tell you, other than the people you're talking about are you and your

compartmentalized. They're compartmentalized by agencies, State's doing their own thing, JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] is doing their own thing, and not a lot of cross-visibility across branches. But then even within the NSC, compartmentalized within the NSC structure itself, so can you talk about that? What was the reason for the design of it that way? Were you confident you had visibility in all of it? Who had visibility in all of it? Can you speak to that period? This is the August-

Department, again, I think we all knew that the Secretary had turned to Philip Zelikow to sort of take a look at this, but my recollection there was there was not

CROUCH: And we were -- and I'm trying to remember, I think -- I can't remember who said, "We're kind of out of Schlitz."

O'SULLIVAN: I think the napkin was you, me and Eric Edelman?

CROUCH: And Satterfield. Satterfield [00:31:00] was there.

O'SULLIVAN: And Satterfield. Yeah.

CROUCH: Satterfield was there as well. Philip was not there.

O'SULLIVAN: No.

CROUCH: The napkin was after the meeting.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

CROUCH: What generated the napkin was a discussion around the table as to whether or not there really was any more force available I see those as distinct questions. Is the strategy right? Is there more force available? But they come together later in the Surge. And so we set down on the napkin and said, "Surely there must be a way to stage some additional forces here, understanding that they can't surge forever." You can't build up and never have any kind of build-down. On the basis of that discussion was when, after talking to Steve, we went back and asked Bill Luti to sort of begin to work that question, thinking that he could [00:32:00] get some traction inside the building with the --

FEAVER: Inside which building?

CROUCH: Their Department.

FEAVER: Of Defense, yeah.

CROUCH: Because we had to get the Department involved in that. At the end of the day, I'm not saying that -- we had a Major General or a Brigadier General on our staff, what was Kevin then?

FEAVER: Brigadier.

CROUCH: A Brigadier General, you know, who had been in Iraq --

O'SULLIVAN: He was promoted to Major while he was on the staff.

CROUCH: He was -- OK, yeah. So both.

O'SULLIVAN: Yeah.

CROUCH: On our staff, we had even a guy like Bill had a lot of experience and could put those kinds of materials together with credibility, right? And of course we all know civilians could do that, because we were seeing what was coming out of Kagan and others on the subject. But I think there was a sense that this had to get worked with the Department. And so Bill was kind of chosen to sort of work that side of it. But it was very much a question of -- I think the question that was posed was not, "Is this the right strategy?" Because Meghan was working that. [00:33:00] I think the proposal was, "what force would be available over what time to implement that strategy?"

O'SULLIVAN: "Are the resources there?"

CROUCH: "Are the resources there? How long can we have them?" Those kinds of questions. That's how I remember the questions being separately formulated.

FEAVER: And so a question that future historians might ask is, "Why didn't --

CROUCH: Or historians right now.

FEAVER: -- yes. Why didn't we just task DoD to answer that question, or task the JCS to tell us that answer? Why did that question get handled within the NSC staff?

CROUCH: Because I think there was a belief that -- look, in any interagency context, you have different ways of getting the information that you need. And sometimes you do it through formal taskings, and you do it at DC meetings, or principals' meetings, or assistant secretary level meetings, or whatever. And [00:34:00] it's done in a very formal way. And other times, it's a judgment call. Is that the best way to work? Is that the best way to get the answers that you're looking for? Because those can be much more public; they're much more likely to leak. Those kinds of things. There's a question of, what's the best way to get the information, but also since when you asked the question, you didn't really know what you were going to do with it when you got it. How do you get that information so you can make it part of your evaluation, and you can also kind of control where it goes?

So I think the sense was there that -- look, the idea that President Bush at that time was potentially looking at putting more force in Iraq - that was front page news. That was *The Washington Post* all over again. So I think there was a sense that we would get a [00:35:00] more cooperative response from the Department by doing it that way, that it was a better way to sort of control the information. And it gave us the ability to decide how we wanted to use that information, because -- and I don't know whether you're going to get to this, but one of the questions I think is out there is, was the fix in early on on this?

FEAVER: We'll get to that, yeah.

CROUCH: Right. Or, was there doubt going through? And I can give you my impression on that. So I think that's what I would say to a future historian as to the reasons why it was done that way.

FEAVER: And did you know Lisa Disbrow's role in that study?

CROUCH: I was aware of it, but I didn't [00:36:00] interact with Lisa on it. There were some personnel reasons for that, I think, and we can talk about those after, off-camera.

FEAVER: The other thing that's being worked at this time related to that is, what would be done to alleviate the pressure of surging troops in terms of raising the top line of end strength of Army and Marine Corps? Do you recall when that piece of it was worked, or did that come out of the formal review? Or was that done separately?

CROUCH: No, it did not come out of the formal review. I think this was clearly a response to where the Chiefs were. And it came out very clearly in the meeting that the President and Vice President had with the Chiefs over in the Pentagon. It came out directly, I should say. But it was understood [00:37:00] that this pressure needed to be alleviated in some way. So I can't give you a date, but it was well-

they said "cur" or "sir" actually, but -- [laughter] they were very respectful, I don't take that in any way, I'm just making it a little funny there. But they said, "Look, sir," and they threw out a map, and they said, "Look, Anbar is a very big place, but if you control the river that runs through it, you control the road that runs down the river, you control the place. We've got about enough force right now to control two thirds of the road and two thirds of the river. The bad guys are where we are not. And as a result of that, [00:42:00] we can't get to the final step in turning the Sunni population here to our side. If we had enough force to do that, we would be able to do that."

So hold that thought, because that thought was in my mind as we go forward. And they actually said something like half a brigade or a brigade was what would be needed, although we didn't get into a lot of detail on things like that. They did talk about the Awakening in all the places I was at there, that things were turning, and that actually, it was complicating them a little bit, because when they saw Sunnis with weapons now -- I mean, if you think about it, six months or even a year earlier, a Sunni with a weapon was a problem. Now, they weren't sure whose side they were on, because there [00:43:00] were people turning against Al Qaeda in Iraq.

So that was the general impression that came out of that interchange. So all of that was brought home, and it was relayed to Meghan and Steve and fed into the President, with all the other stuff that was going on. So again, my focus was really on what's the military situation look like? And Kevin, by the way, he was the note taker, so he's probably got better recollections of this stuff than I do, but he would be a good person to talk to at some point.

FEAVER: And Rumsfeld's departure?

CROUCH: You know, this is going to sound -- when was Rumsfeld's departure? It was right after the election, right?

FEAVER: Right after the election, yeah.

O'SULLIVAN: Right.

CROUCH: Could you ask a question about it?

FEAVER: Was that a crucial turning [00:44:00] point in the Surge story? Was it somewhat separate and part of the political part of the story, but not part of the strategy development part of the story? Were you involved in that decision in any way? Those things.

CROUCH: Yeah. I was not involved in the decision. It was a political decision. And it obviously was, I think, rightly, very closely held. The only thing I would say is that obviously by the time I'm getting into the serious discussions in this interagency meeting, it did have the effect of unsettling the people at the table. Steve Cambone, for example, was originally part of the group, Steve left shortly after Rumsfeld did. Eric Edelman replaced [00:45:00] him, so that became a new face. Although the two -- and I'm happy to talk a little bit more specifically about these things off-camera for you -- the two, I didn't find them all that different in the meetings, although I think Eric felt freer, to some degree, to say what he was thinking.

The general view that I think I got from the Department in those meetings, in the trans-Secretary changeover, was, one, still a belief and confidence that over time, the strategy would work, respectful of the fact that the President needed to have options and needed to get options in front of him, but at the same time wanted to make sure [00:46:00] that there wasn't just a single point solution that was being developed by the NSC, or somebody else And that's very consistent, I think, with the way Secretary Rumsfeld always looked at issues. He wanted to make sure that all the assumptions got surfaced up. And there was still a very strong feeling, and this was not just on the political side, but on the uniform side as well, that the rest of the government had not shown up to this fight, yet. Rightly or wrongly, that was the view.

O'SULLIVAN: Can you go just a little bit more into, we're in that room, whatever it is, 206 in the NSC building, and you're chairing this review that later got morphed into the principals' review for the President. So, you've got the different agencies presenting their different viewpoints. What do you remember about that period of time? Do you have a particular approach that you [00:47:00] were trying to get out of it? Was there a desire to shape a consensus out of the views of all the different agencies? Or was it very much a sense, we're going to get a series of options and put it forward to the President? Do you feel like you had a specific mission?

CROUCH: Well, yeah. I think I had a very specific mission. I recall the President saying to me, “If we can win, I want to win. If we can't, we have to find a way to get out. And I don’t want to spend any more blood and treasure on this.” That was the strategic level guidance. And so I think what that meeting was trying to do, or those meetings were trying to do, was actually suss out that question. And was I looking for a consensus per se? No. And I think in the end, we didn’t get a

disaster, because America at home, and the Americans particularly on the ground who were executing that strategy could not have sustained that. It would have morally undercut the purpose for which they believed that they were there. So that was a debate that got surfaced in all of this.

O’SULLIVAN: Oh, OK. I’d like to just maybe here come back to what

P

And so the NSC is also the President’s policy entrepreneur. The National Security Council staff is his policy entrepreneur. He’s making sure that if the deal can get done, there’

force to do this. That was the general sense, and I'm being very, very shorthand

Pentagon and the State Department is, look, figure out what the [01:04:00] right thing to do is, and I’ll figure out the politics. Or, subtext -- and this is not a quote from President Bush; he never said that to me, but that’s my sense. Or, I’ll go down swinging, trying to figure out the politics . And I remember, we go fast forward to the announcement, and it