



The Surge – Collective Memory Project

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and said he'd had a call from Frank Wolf – Congressman Frank Wolf, Republican of Virginia – suggesting that things weren't going great in Iraq. He had a constituency that was very skeptical of the war, skeptical of President Bush, and he wanted to do something that would get to the bottom of the question and fix it. That was about all that there was in that initiative, but that was an important initiative.

Solomon called me in and said, "What do you think?" And I said, "Well, you know, it's high risk. Can we really do this? Can we do it in a way that makes a difference but is high gain? And what we ought to be doing as the United States Institute of Peace is looking for a way out of his war. [03:00] Not to abandon it, but to fix it." At that point, a number of institutions were interested in co-sponsoring. The Center for the Study of the Presidency here in Washington was interested. Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars was interested. And, later on, the Baker Institute joined, and CSIS [Center for Strategic International Studies] kind of dropped out because they were less interested.

Baker and Hamilton were chosen as co-chairs in a process that I was not really privy to. I was asked my views. I made a couple of suggestions. I don't remember what they were. You know, Solomon, Congressman Wolf, the White House – I don't know who else was involved – determined [04:00] that it should be Baker and Hamilton. I think actually the first choice was Baker, and Baker said, "Yeah, Hamilton would be a good idea." Both of them were thought not to have



expressed strong public views on Iraq up until that point, and that was something we were – I was involved in defining some criteria for what we wanted. And that was one of the criteria, that we wouldn't sign somebody into the Iraq Study Group who had already made up his mind. We wanted to be a study group. In the end, Baker and Hamilton chose the other members of the study group. It was co-optation by them, not by the staff. And here's where I have to explain something fundamental about the Iraq Study Group.

The Iraq Study Group was very much a creature of Baker and Hamilton. [05:00] And their view – they didn't want experts who were mucking in the policy. They wanted experts who could enlighten the situation, and they wanted a good process. So, I became the sort of chair of the supporting organizations, because the money for the affair actually came to US Institute of Peace. So, that made us the natural chair of the effort, because otherwise how were we going to decide how the money was spent? And we would meet every few weeks at the expert level. Chris Kojm and Ben Rhodes for Hamilton. Djerejian often on the phone, not so often in Washington, for Baker, and not always participating. [06:00] Various people from the Center for the Study of the Presidency, various others. And several USIP people, who either worked for me or who were cooperating with the effort. We had a single administrative person.

I came to understand that Baker and Hamilton guarded very jealously their prerogative to choose the policy options. My job was to be the guardian of the



pretty sure that Djerejian did all that Israel-Palestine stuff, and that it's there because Djerejian said that it had to be there, and Baker went along with him.

That was almost not discussed in the Group. The Group, in fact, did not discuss policy options a whole lot, because there was staff in the room [11:00] not many, but there was staff in the room. And they would discuss policy options behind closed doors.

I think Ben Rhodes played an important role, especially in drafting the first portion of the report, which is the analytical piece. That, to me, is the most important part of the report. The policy recommendations, frankly, are uneven. They were partly –I won't say dictated, but encouraged by the White House, especially the whole thing about reconciliation. It was very much on General Casey's mind and the White House's mind. So, I had the sense that a number of recommendations really came from the White House. [12:00] But the first part of the report was, from the first sentences onward, was shocking because it said the truth, which was that things were going really badly. Remember, up until that year, Rumsfeld was still saying, "What insurgency?" I can't quite quote exactly what he said. But it was not recognized across the political spectrum how bad things were. And, to me, that was the real contribution of the report. Nobody, by the end of that year –probably because things deteriorated even further during the year –but nobody at the end of that year, with the publication of that report, could pretend that the war was going well for the United States. And that, to me, is vital.



But your interests are mostly in the Surge. And here I'm a little bit handicapped, because part of what I say to you is going to be hearsay. But my understanding at the time, and I think I heard some of this conversation, was that Chuck Robb was the driver behind the mention of the Surge in the Iraq Study Group report. He became convinced that we couldn't get out without doing more. And he pressed for that. What he pressed for, though, was on a timeline so quick that [16:00] who knows whether it would have worked or not, but probably not.

But this has a great deal to do with the President's reception of the report. You'll have to ask the principals, but I think they were shocked when the President essentially slammed the report. I think they thought they had incorporated a lot of things that the White House wanted. I think if you talk to Steve Hadley, he'll tell you that that was true. And the Surge was mentioned, so why did he have to slam the report? Well, I think that was a political choice, basically. He didn't want to be seen as being shoved around by Jim Baker. And he didn't want to be seen as shoved around by this peacenik report, either. So he chose to [17:00] I've argued this with my good friend, The New York Times reporter Michael Gordon. I don't regard the fact that the timeline they suggested was faster than might have been



would have been a much less contentious way of receiving the report. But, frankly, in the end, because the President did what he did, the report became even more important. If he had accepted it, everybody would have nodded and said, “Well, that was a oneday story.” [18:00] But it went on for –you’ve got to realize, the press attention to this thing was just gigantic.

SAYLE What was your sense of the press reception of the report itself? There was a lot of reporting on it. Would you have described it as favorable, unfavorable?

SERWERI would have described it as mostly favorable. And it was a very intense effort on publication – I meant to explain to you something about publication. So, the report got drafted, parts of it, I think, by Djerejian, parts by Kojm, parts by Rhodes. We became very concerned. We hadn’t seen what they were doing, and my boss, Dick Solomon, was getting pressure from his board, saying, “What the hell is in this thing?” Well, they didn’t want to show it to Solomon. [19:00] So, Solomon negotiated a deal in which I would read the report for substance –not for policy, again, but to make sure that they hadn’t made any serious substantive errors.

To make a long story short, the one that I remember –I made a number of

“unitary” Iraq when they



in the Balkans, “unitary” means a unitary state [20:00] no devolution of power, or very little. The Kurds hated the report anyway, because it wasn’t kind to them.

But that would have really been seen as an error. I mean, it really would have been a problem.

So, I felt useful having read the report on that issue and on a few others that I raised with the drafters. I was only too well aware of the sensitivities of Baker and Hamilton, that I not be mucking with their report. So I limited my comments rather drastically. And I was able to go back to Solomon and say, “Don’t worry. It’s fine. You may not agree with it, but it’s not going to embarrass us in any way. We’re not going to –” Even the recommendation for the Surge which in a way could be interpreted as a recommendation for more war [21:00] was and USIP can do almost anything except recommend more war –wasn’t going to create problems, and I knew it. So, I was able to reassure my leadership. And I think the secrecy around the contents of the report was actually very well maintained. It didn’t become public until the event.

SAYLE Well, you mentioned the Kurdish reaction to the report. Were you following or aware of other Iraqi reactions, or regional reactions to the report? Did it signify something to people in the region?

SERWER I have to remind myself sometimes of what’s in it. [Thumbs through report.]

[22:00]

SAYLE There was a regional recommendation to be involved with Iran and Syria-



SERWER: Yeah, that's what I'm trying to dig out of my memory. Yeah, I think it was fairly forward-leaning in that direction.

SAYLE Yes.

SERWER: That's my memory, and I think they were right, that you couldn't solve Iraq without some understanding with Iran and Syria. And the President did move in that direction. I forget whether he had actually moved in the direction of talking to Iran before the report was published or did it afterwards.

SAYLE I know Ambassador Crocker spoke with the Iranians repeatedly in 2007, but I don't believe it was in 2006.

SERWER: Yeah. So, in that sense, they were doing I think Ryan thinks that he didn't – it was useless. But it was the right thing to be doing, and I think you'd find that quite a few of the recommendations were actually [23:00] adopted, some of them even before they were made, because they were things that Casey and others were advocating.

SAYLE Well, you mentioned that – I think it appears self-evident in hindsight that speaking with other actors in the region was critical to solving Iraq. Iraq was not an island. I'm not sure that everyone involved in the Surge decision-making would



They wanted balance, political balance. There was quite a bit of concern for political balance.

SAYLE The American political balance, right?

SERWER:Yeah. Yeah. And they all served without compensation and wrote papers without compensation.

SAYLE Were there inputs to the group from the government [28:00], from the Department of Defense or from the CIA, or anything like that?

SERWER:Yeah, there were. But they generally went directly to the members of the working group, I would say. I don't remember seeing—I mean, I knew that reconciliation, for example, had been pushed by the government. But I don't remember seeing the paper on that. It may be here. You know, memory this is ten years ago, guys. I mean, nine years ago. You know, memory doesn't—I'm a historian by trade, and I can tell you I'm absolutely convinced that oral history doesn't work, and the only thing that counts is documents. But I may have seen some government papers handed to them. They met with a wide variety of people. I think you asked in your questions, "Why did they meet with Warren Christopher and Dick Holbrook?"

SAYLE Yeah, the Clinton team. I was curious to know— [29:00]

SERWER:Was Bill Clinton himself there?

SAYLE Yes, he was. Yes.



SERWER: Yeah. That's right. I was remembering, but I wasn't sure. Because they wanted to – it was generally bipartisan. They wanted to hear from the Democrats.

Frankly, the Democrats argued that Iraq wasn't worth a dime and that they should go for Afghanistan. If that sounds like something that later happened, it's true, in a way. And they met up on the Hill with members of Congress, knowledgeable members of Congress Senator Reed of Rhode Island. What's her name, who's head of Woodrow Wilson now?

CRAWFORD: Jane Harman.

SERWER: Jane Harman. She was on the Intelligence Committee. She was very, very good. [30:00] They met up with a number of other people who were just bags of wind. I never – it was just awful every once in a while. And then, they met with journalists. They met with some of the big name columnists. They were –

SAYLE It was a long list. There were –

SERWER: They were a bag of wind, too.

SAYLE Who was particularly impressive or important, besides those you mentioned?

Does anyone stand out in your memory?

SERWER: Well, certainly Reed and Harman, Colin Powell.

SAYLE Apparently he was quite pessimistic about the situation in Iraq. Does that ring –

SERWER: He was. And he said something – and (hi)-7 (2 Coli)2 (n)d [((D)1 (o)1 (e)-1 f m)-4 n P2 (v)3 (



order to get out a particular product. And they weren't going to go beyond investing that amount." He said, "That's not how you do war. [31:00]War is done by committing yourself completely," in accordance with the Powell Doctrine, as a matter of fact. The interesting thing to me is that Barack Obama who is obviously trying to avoid all the mistakes of George W. Bush, is doing exactly the same thing. He'



less. And of course the Surge was done with significantly less than that. Basically, he was advising “If you don’t do it with 100,000 troops [33:00], don’t do it.” And that had a big impact on the thinking of the experts – because I think he’d spoken to the experts. I don’t think – I can’t remember whether he – maybe he did both, experts and the Group itself. But the point was, among the experts, a number of people wanted to win the war. But when they heard that it would take 100,000 troops, and they knew the 100,000 troops didn’t exist, they said, “Well, we can’t do that.” And actually, I believe there’s an option in here that derives in part from that thinking. Option 3.5, I think, was a sort of – anyway, later the Kagans naturally celebrated their great success. But the truth of the matter is, the administration didn’t do what they were asking [34:00] to be done, because it couldn’t be done.

SAYLE There was a whole range of Congress representatives and senators that the Group met with. Was there pessimism from that group, as well?

SERWER Certainly from Senator Reed and Harman, you got a big dose of pessimism.

They talked with Nancy Pelosi. I think she was more concerned with what she regarded as the out-of-order setting up of the Iraq Study Group than she was with the war itself. I mean, the Iraq Study Group – what Frank Wolf did was, he inserted a line into the appropriations that said, USIP gets a million dollars for Iraq. And he told us it was for the Iraq Study Group. But this was not the proper way to fund the Iraq Study Group, and she was really annoyed about it, really,



really annoyed. [35:00] Anyway, she probably be annoyed at my saying so, too.

They'll all be annoyed. Because, from their point of view, this is all still secret.

CRAWFORD:What would be the proper way?

SERWER:Oh, it should have gone through the Appropriation Subcommittee. It was done

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CRAWFORD: That's sort of a question I have, is this notion—and it's something we deal with quite a bit these days—of the experts. What was the general response, while this was going on in Washington, to the experts getting involved in trying to understand what was going on there?

SERWER: What was the general reaction among whom?

CRAWFORD: Congress, the White House, --

SERWER: Well, you always have—in every country on earth where something happens, you have a group of experts in Washington. I just came from a meeting with kind of the rump of Iraq experts. Mark Kimmitt was there. Doug Ollivant was there. You know, Denise Natali, Judith Yaphe. And there was an Iraqi in town, and we were meeting with him. In every country on earth, there is a little group of experts that follows that country.

But by 2005-2006, [39:00] on Iraq you had hordes of people writing and thinking about Iraq. There were a few experts who refused to join the expert working groups. Their reasons varied. Some just said, "I don't like group-think exercises." Others said, "Oh, it's biased toward withdrawal." Everybody had their own reasons. But we had more than enough peo



the other direction.” And I basically agreed with them. By that time in Washington, everybody wanted out.

SAYLE Is that toward the end of the report period? Is that –are we speaking about the fall of 2006?

SERWER Even at the beginning. There was pretty strong sentiment for wanting out.

And it was very difficult for me –



SERWER: Yeah. I wasn't at either meeting. I can't help you on those.

SAYLE: Did you have any sense after those meetings if those meetings [42:00] had affected anything within the Group, or the process, or the policy?

SERWER: I think the second of those meetings, which occurred not long before the report went to bed, I think had



errors. And they needed to be corrected. [44:00] And they still haven't been corrected. I mean, even the oil law, which was a big deal in the Iraq Study Group



process, reconciliation. The problem is, it was conceived [46:00] by the Iraqis – I remember going to Iraq, it was probably before the report was done, and talking to their reconciliation people. Because they had a reconciliation office in the prime minister's office. And basically, the concept of – We forgotten the name of the woman who headed it – the concept was, we pay off the Sunnis. We give them pensions, and they get the hell out of the army. And, they have to be satisfied.

And, you know, we're still talking about exactly the same issue. Because that was a misconception of what reconciliation is about. I've written on reconciliation since. Reconciliation starts with something very difficult. It starts with mutual acknowledgement of harm done. And that is really hard when you feel that you have been mistreated for [47:00] decades. Shiite guy just said to me, "I went to Mosul for university. The only Shia in Mosul were the people who clean the toilets." And he said, "To this day " He says it with passion, and he's not the most Shia nationalist guy I've ever met. But he did work for Maliki. For years, he was close to Maliki. And these feelings run deep. And for him to acknowledge that, "Yes, that's true, but look what was done to the Sunnis in the aftermath of the occupation." I mean, very difficult. Very, very difficult.

SAYLE: Well, and then in 2006, the security situation of course amplifies that to an extraordinary level.

SERWER: Right. Because when your relatives have been killed, how are you going to reconcile with these people? I always tell people, "Look, reconciliation is a nice



SAYLE It was 30,000.

SERWER:Thirty ?

SAYLE Yes.

SERWER:Thirty thousand . That's even less than I thought. That was a number that arises to fulfill an objective. And the objective was to distribute the Americans much more thoroughly into the population. And it was limited by the availability of soldiers. So, calling it the Surgas just a misnomer. It was the –I don't know. You can't call it the "rivulets," but that was what it amounted to.

SAYLE Right, getting out of the Forward Operating Bases –

SERWER:Getting out of the – yeah, out of the FOB, into the communities, being there with the police, with the army, and protecting the people. And they went a long way to doing that. [51:00] If you look at the numbers, they're really remarkable. They really do come down pretty close to pre-civil war levels. Because there really was a civil war. I forget what we did with that in the Iraq Study Group report. I don't think we called it a civil war.

SAYLE No, I don't think it was quite so bald.

SERWER:But it was. I mean, we ~~d~~ knew it was.

SAYLE Do you remember when –would that have been at your time at USIP, when you started to assess it that way, as a civil war?

SERWER:I thought it was a civil war by 2005. I didn't have many doubts about that.

SAYLE Because of the inter-ethnic killing? That's the –



SERWERIt's hard to assess. I think there's no doubt, but that the more Americans in more vulnerable positions did create some target-rich environments for bad



you still send an assessment mission. How much do you retrain? But you have to know what the police are going to do the day after you arrive in Baghdad.

And it was that, more than anything else, that really damaged the [58:00] whole enterprise. Because that destruction of the ministries and sending the police home was just first-rate stupid. They sent the police, as well as the military, home initially, then they called back the police. But that destruction of the ministries that occurred, with Rumsfeld essentially saying ()-5, will





[After the interview was completed Dr. Serwer invited the interviewers to turn the camera back on so he could provide more information.]

SERWER:What the paper on lustration that was prepared by USIP said was, “Do it in one fell swoop.”

SAYLE That’s the De-Ba’athification –

SERWER:“That’s not the way you do it. The way this is done effectively is to do it once, do it again, do it again – you never get them all in the first go, and you don’t want to destroy the institutions.” And we had people who had experience with this in East Germany and other places. The other thing they said was, “Look, [02:00] you can’t tell what so-and-so did during the Saddam Hussein regime on the first interview. So, you give them a piece of paper that says, ‘Here are the illegal acts I performed. Here are the people I murdered.’ And have them sign that paper. Nobody will admit to anything, of course. But have them sign that paper. Because then, when you discover that he did do some of those things, you can fire him right away based on the signature. Not based on what he did, but he lied on the form.” The US Government does this with all its employees. US Government employment requires, I think even today, they require a signature that says,



terrible error. An error that Jerry Bremer insists the Kurds insisted on, and that may very well be right. But that doesn't mean we had to do it for them.

SAYLE You have extensive experience in the Balkans. What lessons or practices from the Balkans worked for Iraq, in your understanding, or could have worked, and which didn't apply? How can we compare those two conflicts?

SERWER Well, it's very difficult to compare, because the dimensions are so different.

[01:05:00] Bosnia is a country of four million people, Kosovo fewer than two million people. Iraq is a country of – I've forgotten exactly what it is, 26 million, or something like that. It's a completely different order of magnitude. The scale of the problems in Iraq, both in terms of numbers of people, but also in terms of the level of violence involved – we never – in Bosnia we deployed, I think it was 60,000 peacekeepers. No peacekeeper has ever been killed in Bosnia by hostile fire. The warring parties accept (c)-2 01 Tc 0ce weavoTd [(m)-4 .or T arrin-3 (1 (g)-5 (p)-3 (a)-13 (rt30 (y



I think it's very hard to picture the staybehind operation working as well as it did if there had been a surrender signed. I think you would have captured Saddam Hussein much more quickly. Big mistake [01:07:00] not to obtain a surrender. It didn't matter who the hell the guy was, if he had a general's uniform on. You set him up there, and he surrenders on behalf of the president.