



[REDACTED]

government, both your responsibilities in general and those relating to Iraq?

GORDON: Sure. So in 2006 I was the vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council.

The National Intelligence Council is the body in the US intelligence community responsible for coordinating the national intelligence estimates and for representing the intelligence community in the National Security Council process in the White House. So I was the vice chairman at that time. The chairman of the Council, [00:01:00] Tom Fingar, also was the deputy director of national intelligence for analysis. So he was the head of the NIC, but I managed the National Intelligence Council on a day-to-day basis. It was my role to supervise the preparation of the National Intelligence Estimates, and I had been involved in Iraq and in watching Iraq really for a very, very long time, but had been quite actively involved in following the evolving Iraq story.

So in 2006, we were still very, very actively watching Iraq. [00:02:00] I was asked by Ambassador Negroponte, who was the Director of National Intelligence, if I would be the intelligence rep to the Iraq group that was set up in the White House in November of 2006. I made several trips to Iraq earlier in 2006, and had been corresponding, engaging quite directly, especially with Meghan O'Sullivan, and also I did a lot of work with some of the senior US military folks who were [00:03:00] very actively involved. The two officers who were represented in the working group, General Sattler and General Lute, were both very close colleagues of mine.

Ambassador Negroponte, I think, asked me to do this because it was



something very important. He knew I had been following Iraq, but I think he wanted somebody who wasn't so involved in Iraq intelligence work that they would bring a set of assumptions to it. My job was much more general than Iraq, but I think what he wanted was a set of [00:04:00] eyes on this that could bring an objective view. He and I were very close, and so I was engaged with him about Iraq, if not on a daily basis, certainly several times a week during the whole period, long before the Surge discussions began, but very much so during that time as well.

BRANDS: It's great that you mention that. One of the things we're trying to get a sense of is how people's assessment of the situation in Iraq evolved over time. So if we could take you back maybe to late 2005, did you have a sense of how the trends in Iraq were looking, say around the time of the December 2005 election?

GORDON: So the first time I went to Iraq [00:05:00] was literally in the period just when it



like “Ho-ooh!”

In retrospect it's easy to say this was going to happen, but retrospect is always 20/20, and as historians, you guys know that. I followed this at a time -- in late 2005, we saw some [00:07:00] contradictory things happening, actually. Late 2005 was a time when the sectarian part of the conflict was really beginning to get a lot more intense. A lot more intense. But late 2005 was also a time when finally the efforts, particularly by the Agency, in Anbar Province and western Iraq to mobilize forces against AQI were beginning to gain some traction. So late 2005 was a funny time, because there were some interesting positive things going on. [00:08:00] They were basically not in the public domain, so the picture that most people were getting was one that was pretty negative. My view was that there were some very contradictory things going on. But it was a time of a lot of uncertain-- I think there was a lot of uncertainty about the military strategy in particular. A lot of uncertainty about the military strategy in particular.

BRANDS: So what pieces of the military strategy was there particular uncertainty --

GORDON: Every piece. So I went to Iraq twice in the first half of 2006, both times -- I believe both times, I'm pretty sure both times, I'm not absolutely sure. I'm quite -- if my memory holds, both times with General John Landry, who was the national intelligence officer for general purpose forces, and who was responsible on the NIC for following the military aspects of the war. So he had been in the first Gulf War as



leadership perceived them to be unwinding.


BRANDS: Were there particular events [00:13:00] or milestones in 2006 that you saw as sort of signposts in the unwinding? Were there certain things that really triggered a reassessment?

GORDON: There were a bunch of sectarian attacks on the Shia, I'm trying to remember the names of the places.

SAYLE: There was the mosque in Samarra.

BRANDS: Samarra.

GORDON: Yeah, exactly. The Samarra incident. Yeah. There was a bunch of that going on. So I was concerned that we were transitioning into something very different, that we were really transitioning from insy(e)16 (am)-4 (e11)T2 (61 (-)-20 (f)-53.w)19t0 (o)a (-) inq




was [00:16:00] the AQI strategy.

SAYLE: In that same period, in early 2006, the election has occurred but the government has not been seated yet. Could you recall your assessment of the possibilities of a strong government being established, and how you assessed Nouri al-Maliki as a possible leader?

GORDON: So our assessment of Maliki was that he was a sort of crafty politician, but not really a decisive leader, not that he was playing overwhelmingly -- he was playing Shia politics. That Shia politics was [00:17:00] far and away the dominant politics he was playing here. He was also playing a very complicated game between engagement with the United States, with President Bush, all of this, and engagement with the Iranians. The name of Qassem Suleimani was already -- the Suleimani of a decade ago was not the selfies and the press statements and all of that, but he was already a force in Iraq. [00:18:00] So I think the intelligence community was quite skeptical about Maliki. Quite skeptical about Maliki.

BRANDS: There was one other piece that I'd like to ask about, in sort of the summer of 2006. So this was when there's an effort to regain security momentum with the Baghdad security plan, so this is Operation Together Forward. So to what extent did those register in your assessment of the ongoing conflict in Iraq?

GORDON: That's a great question. I don't recall. I was doing a lot of different things then, and I don't have a good recollection. I do have a recollection [00:19:00] of -- and I forget if it was after my first trip or my second, or probably both -- of going to see



Meghan and saying, I think things are really beginning to fall apart. I think that you need to go out there and you need to have Mr. Hadley go out there. It's really time for a rethink. And I wasn't the only person who went out and brought back that kind of a message.

But again, this whole situation was combined with, through the first half of 2006, actually a lot of momentum [00:20:00] in Anbar. A lot of momentum in Anbar in terms of essentially retaking territory from AQI.

I think one of the myths of the Iraq Surge was that it was the Iraq Surge that created the momentum in terms of the turn of the Sunni against AQI and the weakening hold of AQI over the Sunni triangle. I think that the Surge was very critical in sustaining it, but that had a lot of [00:21:00] momentum before the Surge. And indeed, to my mind, had that not had a lot of momentum, the Surge strategy would not have made sense. And that was part of the unusual discussions at the time, because my recollection, I haven't read it recently, but I don't believe the Iraq Study Group report gave any influence to that. And I believe they had access to intelligence reporting. But that was not there in that.

SAYLE: Just as a general question, we've been trying to understand [00:22:00] from different officials what sort of information they were working off of to assess the situation in Iraq, and you must have had all sorts of information, but how are you measuring something like sectarian violence? Do you measure it? Is it quantitative, qualitative?



GORDON:





were you an outlier?

GORDON: No,



doing a lot of stuff on Iraq. Basically the mandate he gave me was, don't carry any kind of a policy presumption. Your job here is to represent intelligence and to [00:32:00] try to bring the best analytic view, and to give your judgments. So that was really what I was able to do during the deliberations. And again, I think I was chosen in part because I hadn't been in charge of Iraq analysis. I wasn't the National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East who was doing Iraq all the time.

SAYLE: I wonder if we could ask about your paper, or your contribution to the Review, and then --

GORDON: I had a bunch of contributions. There were many.

SAYLE: There was one paper that's been described publicly, and that's the one we know about, but we'd be happy to hear about --

GORDON: No, no. So, that's the one that's sort of the [00:33:00S(t)3 62a1-3 (:)-4x]TJ0.03 (w) (d)-3 (19 ()
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I know the point has been made that this was the only one that talked about troop withdrawal. We were actually quite negative in what we thought the implications of a troop withdrawal were. So we were of the view at the time that things weren't going great, but a lot of people, particularly people who didn't know very much about Iraq, frankly, were of the view that -- things aren't [00:35:00] going great; therefore the source of things not going great must be the presence. We really didn't think that was the case. Earlier on, that was definitely part of why things went downhill in Iraq.

We had not prepared adequately at all for this. We were not prepared for insurgency, and we hadn't really thought out the parallel processes of creating effective administration and building up Iraqi political institu-- there had been very little thinking done, this was done on the fly, basically. [00:36:00] But we were of the view, at the time, that if you actually took the US military presence out, that the civil war element would become more unbridled. I think in retrospect that was right. I think that was right. And that in the absence of a US presence, sectarianism was likely to get worse, not better.

The interesting affirmation to my mind of that view was what happened in Iraq [00:37:00] after the final withdrawal of US forces, when the sectarian nature of the region really deepened at that time. In some ways this is always the role of intelligence. We were "no good options," "lots of risks no matter what we do," these kinds of things. And I think that was -- there was -- if there was a tenor in that



paper, I think that was the tenor of the paper.

SAYLE: Could we speak about some of the other options? I know partition, I think, was one of the options that you explored.

GORDON: Right. And we were also very skeptical about partition. We were particularly skeptical that [00:




correct. Now, those boundaries have now been called into question, but at the time they weren't, and we thought, in particular, that the Kurdish question would create a really impossible situation with Turkey. [00:41:00] I mean, the great surprise of the aftermath of the Iraq War, and particularly after 2005-2006, was the growth of the strong ties between Turkey and the Kurdish entity, the KRG, nobody expected that. But it's still the case that if you move towards an actual partition in Iraq, that would really be very, very, very complicated 2190 (u)31 (r)3 (pr)9 ((e)51 (r)-7 0.004 Tc -0.005 Tw 16.48(m)



civil war, or was that disagreed?

GORDON: Yeah.





for the legitimacy of and the permanence of these forces that had begun to coalesce against al-Qaeda. Basically what we had done really successfully in the Triangle was a total divide and conquer strategy. It was – begun [sic] to work, and the coalitions that we had included [00:54:00] lots of guys we were not very comfortable with, but they were willing to be out there and to fight these guys.

But that leaves the issue of the rising civil war, and there was -- I mean, we had a long discussion, we had very intense discussions on -- this was our version of the R2P, Responsibility to Protect debate -- because it was clear that you had to do something. You had to do something to take the momentum [00:55:00] out of the rising civil war, or this was going to create just these really horrible outcomes. So I thought John Hannah's paper was useful for provoking a debate on a really serious question, but I think most people, virtually everybody in the group, at the end of the day was not of the view that you could double down on the Shia. And that was not even really talking very much about broader alliance issues in the region.

SAYLE: Could you speak to that? And did the strategy review group speak to that and consider regional politics?

GORDON: Yeah. We considered regional politics, I think probably not [00:56:00] as much as we might have. I mean, our main concern here was that basically, that the civil war continuing and rising was going to drive the Iraqis towards the Iranians, and that basically a context of rising sectarian conflict there was ironically something that was in the strategic interest of both AQI and Iran. And that was very much my



view point there. I mean, we had been burned in intel [00:



was ever this broad support for the notion of just being explicitly taking the side of the Shia, there was definitely the view that this thing was on a trajectory, unless something was happening, to give more oxygen to the AQI on the one side and to the Iranian, to the Quds force people and to the Sadrists [01:01:00] on the other.

And I think, frankly, my own view of the discussions of the group is that became a critical point in leading this group towards the Surge concept, because part of this was just -- I mean, the analytical continuity back to the paper I wrote was, if it's the case, as you so toa



about just how stretched the US military was. So at that point in the discussion, when we were focusing on just how stretched the US military was and the impact of [01:04:00] this very intense going out, coming back, training, going out again, and the fact that that was going to have to shift from year-on, year-out to even more; that the ratio of time-in versus time-out was going to have to shift, was on a trajectory to need to shift, even under the current resource assumptions. It did not seem to me early on - I didn't think that the Surge was going to be the outcome. I think we talked about the challenges facing the military prior to some of these more [01:05:00] in-depth discussions of the situation on the ground, and just how bad it was getting. What was the second --

BRANDS: The second part was when did you start to get a sense that the group was moving in the direction, or that momentum was gathering behind the Surge option?

GORDON: That's a great question, and the answer gets back to the point I just made. I think in some ways it was this recognition that in order to have a chance at success, we had to try to do two things at once. And the two things were sustain the momentum in the Sunni Triangle and do [01:06:00] something that would reassure the Shia and balance the Iranians. And I think that the consensus around this was partially driven by the view that trying this was going to be something that was essential. I think not everybody, certainly not me, were optimistic that this was going to work, but I think there was a broader consensus around trying that.

Now, that was partially also due to [01:07:00] our broader understandings of the President's



views. So the President wasn't part of the



with the President a couple of times, if I'm not mistaken, as a group. We also met with him a couple of times with other NSC principals, as he wanted to sort of have a larger discussion with the seniors there. And of course that was a little bit -- so having the seniors there was interesting for those of us who were representing seniors on the Surge. So a lot of the people on the NSC work [01:11:00] did not have people represented in the small group, but DNI did, SecDef, obviously, SecState, obviously. Mr. Hadley, obviously.

So those were very good discussions. The President was extremely engaged, extremely engaged. It was my view that at every meeting that the President attended, the quality of the discussions was heightened by his attendance, and this notion that was increasingly abroad at the time, that President Bush is way out of his depth and Iraq is the big example of that, I've never believed that. [01:12:00] I do believe that particularly in the aftermath of the Surge, the President later sort of lost his voice and lost his credibility on Iraq, and you see it in the degree to which presentations to the Congress about Iraq were given by General Petraeus. So that's not right. But that was a bit later, that was a bit later, and the President was very engaged.



happen, and of course it did not happen.

SAYLE:





SAYLE



it was pretty transparent, and we were reporting back to our principals and telling them. It was pretty transparent, and I don't think anybody around the table – the interesting guy



was going to be. But I think that Mr.



trying to do so. That became stronger during the period of the formal [01:30:00]

Surge group discussions.

SAYLE: Thank you very much for your time today.

GORDON: Great. Good.

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