GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE CASEY

September 25, 2014
Charlottesville, Virginia

Participants

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To cite an interview, please use the following general format: [name of interviewee] Interview, [date of interview], George W. Bush Oral History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia
Riley: This is the General George Casey interview, as a part of the George W. Bush Oral History Project. We appreciate your coming to Charlottesville. We’ve just spent a few minutes covering ground rules before the tape came on, but I do want to mention, on the record, that this is being conducted under a veil of confidentiality and you’re the only person in the room who’s allowed to report anything outside the room.

One piece of administrative business for the advantage of the transcriber is that I’m Russell Riley and I’m chairing the session, but I need to go around the table and make sure everybody identifies himself or herself. Say a few words so the transcriber will know who’s talking.

Nelson: I’m Mike Nelson, glad to be here.

Bakich: I’m Spencer Bakich from Sweet Briar College.

Perry: I’m Barbara Perry and, as always, I’m the only woman in the room, so the voice identification is usually pretty easy for the transcriber.

Casey: I’m General George Casey. I retired from the Army three years ago. My last position was the Chief of Staff of the Army. Prior to that, I was the Commander of the Multi-National Force in Iraq for almost three years.

Riley: We’re delighted to have you here. One of the things that I want to do on the record is to direct anybody who might have access to the transcript, to your book, Strategic Reflections, which is terrific. It really has a wealth of information in it and we don’t want to spend a lot of time repeating what appears there. You’re a very disciplined person who is reporting in this book much of what you’re seeing. You’re disciplined in some respects in not telling us very much about what you’re experiencing from other actors, especially political actors. You’re smiling.

Bakich: For the record, the general is smiling.

Riley: What I hope we can do is flesh out that picture of what you’re hearing from these people in your relationships with them.

Casey: I wrote that, targeting midlevel military officers, the War College–level students, so they’d understand what it was like to be a theater commander in this 21st-century environment. I tried to say, “This is what I saw, this is what I thought, this is what I did. You form your own judgments.” That’s what I wanted them to get out of it.
Riley: It works very well, but I thought of—Who was it? Officer [Bill] Gannon from the old TV show, who said, “Just the facts, ma’am.” We’ve got a terrific array of facts here.

Perry: Dragnet, that’s it.

Riley: There are some impressions of people you were working with, and some value judgments about how things were going, that we could maybe get you to flesh out. Let me start by saying again that it’s a terrific piece of work and we’re indebted as political historians to having this here. I wonder if I could start with a broad overview question to get you to reflect a little bit about your time—Our starting point here is going to be January 21, 2001—talking about the Bush Presidency. Obviously, you’ve got a wealth of professional experience before that. Could you tell us a little bit about how your impressions of civil-military relations were being developed, the key positions that you held, maybe the turning points or the learning experiences that you had?

What I’m trying to understand is—You’re somebody who comes in with a wealth of military experience, but by the same token, somebody who’s dealing with the Pentagon and is dealing with Washington through the course of your career before this begin date. If we could get you to reflect a little bit about what you were learning and what the critical experiences were for you in the period leading up, that will serve as the backdrop before the main course. Does that make sense?

Casey: Sure. I came in the Army in ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps], from Georgetown University, and I was in Washington in college at Georgetown from 1966 to 1970, which was a very turbulent time. While I didn’t serve in Vietnam, the images of what was going on during that time, and my own father’s service and death there, had a significant impact on me over time. I find that people tend to be affected more when something happens in their developmental years and it sticks with them. So I always had Vietnam kind of in the back of my mind, and going through the basic officer training we were prepared to go to Vietnam because that’s what we thought we were going to do. We were going to go to Vietnam. But they were winding down at that time and it wound down before my number came up. The first eight years of my career I spent in infantry battalions basically learning my trade, learning how to be a soldier and learning how to manage and lead small organizations.

Riley: Did you ever consider another career?

Casey: The original plan was for me to stay in for two years and get out and go to law school. That was the plan. I had a two-year obligation coming out of Georgetown, and when we got to Fort Benning, Georgia, they were already downsizing. So they offered the basic officer class the option of staying on active duty 90 days for training. They called it ADT, Active Duty for Training. You were there 90 days and then you had an eight-year commitment in the Reserves. We had already kind of made our plans for two years, so I decided, well, I’m just going to stay there and finish this up. But the plan then was to get out and go to law school.

It’s interesting how things happened. I wanted to go to Airborne School and be a paratrooper like my father, but to do that I had to sign on for another year. It was a trap! And then, since I had now a three-year tour instead of a two-year tour, I was eligible to go to Germany and I said I’d
The first eight years or so of my career, I spent at the low levels of the Army, learning how to be a soldier and a leader. At the end of that eight years I found myself asking, “Is this all there is to the Army? Am I just going to be down here at this low level pushing these troops and being responsible for them?” I said, “There’s got to be more to it than that,” and I knew there was because I had watched my father’s career. As luck would have it, my detailer calls me and says, “Have you thought about fully funded graduate school?” I said, “No, as a matter of fact I haven’t.” He said, “Well, you’re eligible. Would you like to go?” I said, “You know, that would be a pretty good thing to do right now.”

My alternate specialty was foreign area officer, because my degree from Georgetown was international relations and I was always interested in that. So I was given the opportunity to go to graduate school. I was going to be a Northeast Asia foreign area officer. I was born in Japan. I found that the University of Denver, right up the street from where I was stationed in Colorado Springs, had just had a professor who had just come back from a sabbatical in Japan. He was a China expert, and I said that will work, and I went up to the University of Denver. I tell people that that was one of the two most broadening experiences that I ever had in my career. It got me to see that there’s a lot more to the Army and the military in support of political objectives, than just pushing troops and going out in the field and training. That was a real eye opener for me.

After that, I was selected for a staff college and I went to the Armed Forces Staff College, which got me in with other services. One of the things that I’ve learned over my career is how insular we are in the Army. We’re so big, and just being successful in the Army is hard enough work. Most people in the Army didn’t look outside and weren’t able to figure how the Army integrates with all of the other services. This was my first real shot at understanding the joint world and understanding that the power of all the services working together is much more than the power of one service. So, relatively early on, less than a quarter of the way through a four-decade career, I’m already realizing that the Army, to be successful, needs leaders who can operate outside the Army.

After that joint course, I was sent off to the Middle East, to Egypt for a year, to the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization. The Armed Forces Staff College got me to start considering and thinking about operating with other services. This was a UN [United Nations] mission. I’m in Cairo with observers from 16 other countries, including 18 Russian officers, in the middle of the Cold War. I would spend a week at a time on the Suez Canal, with just myself and three Russians, in the middle of the Cold War. During that time the tensions and the suspicions were really high. As an example, we took turns cooking. We would rotate the cooking duties. The first time I cooked, they wouldn’t take a bite of the meal until I took a bite of mine. Now, after some wine and vodka and cognac, everything was fine and we got on with it.

So there was the time with the UN, operating with other countries, and how you do that and how important that is. The time with the Russians was really special because we would sit around and just talk. There was really nothing much to do on this post on the Suez Canal except once or twice a week we would help the observers who were going out to the Sinai [Peninsula] get across the Suez Canal, and help the ones coming back get back across the Suez Canal. There was nothing else to do, so we would sit and talk. I realized that what we considered propaganda, they
believed. They believed it. It wasn’t something that they thought was made up and they said it just to be saying it. They believed it. It was interesting.

**Perry:** Can you give some examples?

**Casey:** They would say, “George, do you live in a house or an apartment?” I’d say, “We live in a house.” “How many families live in that house?” “Just us.” “Oh, come on.” They’d say, “Do you have a car?” “Yes, we have two cars.” “Do you have a television?” “We have three televisions.” “Black and white?” “No, they’re all color.” They just couldn’t comprehend it. So you know, as I went forward and I had to negotiate and deal with people in Bosnia and Kosovo and Iraq, I always tried to figure out, OK, where are they coming from?

**Perry:** What year were you in Egypt?

**Casey:** It was ’81, ’82.

**Perry:** Were there discussions ongoing about Afghanistan? Their invasion would have just happened right before that, right?

**Nelson:** In 1979.

**Casey:** Probably. I don’t remember heated discussions about Afghanistan. We’d have heated discussions about the value of capitalism over communism, which inevitably ended with them saying to me, “Well, communism is better, but by the way when you go to Port Said, would you buy me …? Because I can’t get it in Russia.”

I was also there at the parade with my family when [Anwar] Sadat was shot. We were just over a little a little rise, so we couldn’t see what was going on, and there were jets flying over and all kinds of noise. We knew the parade had stopped.

**Perry:** That was fall of ’81.

**Casey:** Yes. The timing was such that the people we were with had to catch a plane, so we started walking away after it stopped. But in the back of my mind (The parade wasn’t far from where we lived, and we’d seen them practicing.), I just kept saying to myself, *I didn’t see the Katyusha rockets*, because I had seen them practicing with those, driving by, and I didn’t see them, and something was just strange. As we’re walking back to the UN villa, all these limousines go by and there are people lying all over each other in the limousines. The Egyptians on the street don’t know what happened, so they’re waving and no one’s waving back, and we’re saying, “Well, that’s odd too.” Then we got back to the villa and we found out that Sadat had been shot. Again, another very broadening experience, but an experience outside the Army.

I went back into the Army again and I did my field grade officer business, deputy battalion commander and some other jobs, and then I was selected to command a battalion, which is really the first big step for an officer. It was what I had wanted to do ever since I was a lieutenant and I thought it was the best job in the Army. I was selected for that and I was selected to do it at Fort Carson, Colorado, where I had been, so we stayed there.
That all went fine, and then I was selected to go to War College, out of battalion command, which is the next big step if you’re going to be upwardly mobile. But instead of going to the Army War College, I was sent to the Atlantic Council of the United States. At the time I was selected, I had no idea what it was. I thought it had something to do with the Law of the Sea but it turned out to be a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] think tank and support group in Washington. That became the second most broadening experience of my career. I had avoided Washington up until that time, because that’s what hard infantry officers did. You didn’t want to be a Pentagon person. You wanted to be out there with the troops and leading the troops.

What it enabled us to do—It really gave us access to all the other think tanks in Washington, to Congress, and really to anybody we wanted to talk to. We got to go around Washington and sit in on Congressional hearings, listening to people talk about anything under the sun. Right about that time, Hedrick Smith published a book called *The Power Game: How Washington Works*. I remember reading that at that time and I was seeing it in what I was doing, and that really prepared me. It was a great introduction to Washington. It kind of piqued my curiosity and interest into the role that Congress played. At the lower levels of the military, you have a pretty low view of what Congress does, particularly on the national security side, which is only confirmed, the higher up you get.

Anyway, as the time came for me to leave that fellowship, we had decided we wanted to stay in Washington because we had had to move our boys in high school from Colorado to Washington, and we wanted them to finish in the Washington area. So I said, “OK, I’m just going to go to the Pentagon.”

This is kind of interesting: I called the Joint Staff J5—I ultimately was the J5—and I called the NATO director and I said, “Hey, I’m just finishing up this NATO fellowship, and I’d like to come work there.” Well, I was talking to a major on the phone, and his boss came in. He must have tried to cover the phone, but he said, “This is Colonel Casey on the phone and he wants to know if you want him to come over and work.” I hear his boss say, “No, he has no Pentagon experience. He doesn’t know how to work in the Pentagon. No.” I said OK.

A buddy of mine was working in Army legislative affairs and as I said the fellowship had kind of piqued my interest on the Congress. I thought, *Well, Congress is kind of interesting, so why don’t I go do that?* I get him to get me an interview with the two-star who is the head of legislative affairs. He kind of looked at me like, *what’s wrong with this guy?* Because I’m a War College graduate and I’m upwardly mobile, and most everybody else there was on the last part of their careers because they were getting ready to go out and do something else. He’s looking at me like, *what’s this all about?* They actually created a job for me and I wound up working with the Congress on the Army’s operations and maintenance budget; that was my account. It was at that time a $26 billion account, which was so big nobody had any idea what was in it, and they just whacked a billion dollars a year off it.

**Riley:** And this is—?

**Casey:** This is ’88, ’89. I came out of command in ’87, then spent a year in the fellowship.

**Nelson:** Can I ask you a couple of things about the Army in this period from the ’70s, and now I
guess we’re in the late ’80s? You were there when the Army became an all-volunteer force. What was that transition like?

Casey: It was a very difficult transition. Those early days in Germany were bad. The draft was still going on. People would come on active duty, they’d go to basic training for six weeks, they’d get sent to Vietnam and then they’d get sent back to Germany with six months left on a two-year tour. They’d survived Vietnam and they brought back some of the problems that they had in Vietnam, like posttraumatic stress, which at the time we had no idea what we were looking at. We just thought these guys were disciplinary problems. It was not a good environment. There were race issues. There were drug issues. The time in Germany, my first platoon, when I first walked in, had nine or ten guys, and half of them were pending some type of discharge. That’s kind of how it was. The other thing that I saw was that we had neglected Europe for years while we were fighting in Vietnam, which is what happens during the course of a war. So it was a very difficult period.

It took us really through the ’70s to get the Army back on track. In my view, the formation of what we called the National Training Center was what got our heads back in the game. If you look at the history of the all-volunteer force, it wasn’t adequately funded in the beginning so we couldn’t pay the bonuses to get people with high school diplomas. We got “not bad” people in, but we didn’t get the best people in, which only created more disciplinary problems down the road.

That was going on, and then there was the post-Vietnam funk, kind of an institutional funk because we felt we’d done everything we could and we didn’t win, and that really stuck in our collective craws. Those kinds of things were going on. It takes the formation of the National Training Center in the late ’70s, early ’80s, to get people focused back on what’s important, which is our warfighting trade. And then at the same time, the [Ronald] Reagan buildup starts happening and we start getting the tools that we need to execute the doctrine that we had, which is AirLand Battle, and we start getting the Abrams tank and the Apache helicopter and the Patriot missile system, and all those kinds of things. All that happens in the ’70s and early ’80s, and by the end of the ’80s, we’re a fundamentally different force. We’re a force that really could deal with the Russians in Western Europe.

Bakich: Was there a great deal of hesitance to the adoption of AirLand Battle with a transition from an all-volunteer force, or were these two things completely separate?

Casey: Separated. The transition to the all-volunteer force had more to do with the personnel side of things. We say it takes ten years to ingrain doctrine in the force, so there wasn’t friction but there were questions.

Bakich: Sure.

Casey: I mean, the first doctrine that came out in ’76 had something called the “active defense,” which is basically fighting backward. We couldn’t quite figure that out. In fact, when I was a captain we did a skit and made fun of it at a division officer’s call. But that’s what happens. Coming out of Vietnam, we had to put something out there to change the focus of the Army. In fact, and I know this from my time as Chief of Staff, the memo that the Training and Doctrine
Command commander, Bill DePuy, sent forward to the Army Chief of Staff said this doctrine is designed to “take the Army out of the rice paddies of Vietnam and put them firmly on the plains of Europe.” That’s what it was designed to do. That was ’76.

It was maybe ’82 before we got to AirLand Battle. The systems I talked about earlier are starting to get fielded. The National Training Center is set up and people are realizing how to use all that equipment, so it’s the whole decades of the ’70s and ’80s.

**Nelson:** I wanted to ask you, too—You were ROTC, and at these early stages of your career or at any later stage in your career, did you notice any sort of difference between West Point-trained officers and ROTC officers? Were there tensions? Were there advantages? Come at that question however you want.

**Casey:** Early on when you’re in the officer basic course, and the advanced course, there’s a strong bond between the West Point officers. They went to college together and they were all classmates, so they bond together and they stick together. What I found was, the really capable ones didn’t use their West Point connections. They were capable enough where they didn’t need to. The ones who were less capable, the middle-of-the-roaders, would get the class ring out there.

**Nelson:** The ring knockers.

**Casey:** The ring knockers. That was in the early years. The middle years, not really, not so much. Then what happens is you see a relative preponderance of West Point officers in the senior general officer ranks.

**Nelson:** And why is that the case?

**Casey:** One, it is the preparation. And two, they get some very high quality officers who go to West Point. They benefit from the military education, sure they do, but they’re already the kind of people who are going to be successful anyway.

**Riley:** So, we had you in Congressional relations.

**Casey:** Congressional relations, also a very broadening experience. I traveled with Members, I traveled with staff, I learned how the staff operates. Probably one of the greatest lessons I learned was, in taking Army leaders around to see Members of Congress to argue for Army things, I’d sit there and I’d listen to these generals, and they were talking inside-the-Pentagon-speak and it was clear that the Congressman didn’t have a clue what they were talking about. I’d have to kind of shape it. That was a great lesson for me.

**Perry:** So they would speak in jargon terms, acronyms?

**Casey:** We’re terrible with that, acronyms. You pull out these briefing slides that are good for briefing each other inside the Pentagon, but if you’re looking at this thing for the first time, you didn’t have a clue. There are satellites and lightning bolts and it’s just crazy.

**Perry:** So you had to translate.
Casey: It’s all about communications. I started learning this then, but whenever you go to a session with somebody like that, you’re going to have one or two things that you want to come out of the session with. Then you have to shape the presentation so that that’s what you get out of it. It really helped me understand communicating at the high levels. I was starting to get into that a little bit. I stayed there for about 18 months and then I got pulled up to the Chief of Staff of the Army’s office. He had a little support group. They called it the Chief’s Assessments and Initiatives Group, and it was about 15 or 20 lieutenant colonels and colonels who each had a specific area that helped the chief. This was outside of the regular staff, which stuck in the craw of the regular staff because we would give things straight to the chief without clearing it with anybody. That was a great eye opener for me, about operating at the highest levels of the Pentagon.

Our boss was a colonel and he had been with the Chief, General [Carl E.] Vuono, for a long time. They were in sync mentally. One day I walked in with some talking points that I had prepared for the Chief and he said, “I don’t have time to look at them; just give them to him.” In the past, he would always check them out, so you knew you had a safety net. Now he’s saying, “OK, Colonel, give your stuff to the Chief of Staff of the Army.” I’m thinking, Boy, I hope this is right. It was good for me to see that interaction at the top of the order.

Bakich: It sounds like an early Red Team.

Nelson: I was thinking the same thing.

Casey: It wasn’t a Red Team. If you can think about the top ten disciplines that the Chief of Staff of the Army has to deal with, he had a representative in each of those areas. They helped decipher the things that the staff was trying to tell him, and they prepared notes for him so that he could quickly bring himself up to speed on the really important parts of the issue. So it wasn’t like a Red Team.

I had the Congressional portfolio and I wrote his Congressional testimony, which was also very helpful, because you learn how to testify. You have your transcript for the record, where you put everything you want to say, and then you have no more than a five or six minute presentation that you need to write yourself. You need to get it down to say, “OK, these are the two or three things I want everyone to take away from this session,” and that becomes the communication.

Here’s a funny one: I had written a testimony for him that talked a lot about what happened in Korea with Taskforce Smith, which was the first force that was sent into Korea after the North Koreans attacked South Korea. They were badly mauled because they weren’t ready. They didn’t have the right equipment; they didn’t have the right training; they weren’t fully manned. It was a mess. What we were trying to tell Congress was you can’t keep cutting our budget, because that’s what’s going to happen again.

Unfortunately, it was about eight minutes and it had to be six minutes, and I knew that. I knew he wasn’t going to like that and I tried to cut it as much as I could but it was eight minutes. I called the chief of legislative liaison, the two-star, and I said, “Sir, the chief is going to ask you if his testimony is too long. Tell him no, it’s just right.” [laughter] Sure enough, he gave it back to me. I said, “Sir, I’ve worked this. This is going to be great.” So he goes in—and it was to the Senate
Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense. He went in and gave his talk and the Members kept playing back the quotes from Taskforce Smith to him. And as he walked out, I was standing by the door and he looks at me and says, “Good speech.” For a speechwriter, that’s as good as it gets.

**Perry:** Touchdown.

**Casey:** But it was a learning experience for me to be able to see how it played, to listen to how it worked. It really helped me a lot. Legislative liaison wasn’t where up-and-coming officers went.

**Riley:** Sure.

**Casey:** They stayed out in the field. This is a reflection now, looking back. I was able to build a solid enough base in the first probably 19 years of my career. It was important to work on the broadening things, so that I was able to do other things and deal with people outside of the military once I got to higher positions. I can’t tell you that I was thinking about that at the time, but I enjoyed that. I enjoyed the international relations. I enjoyed the politics. So it was something that fit into what I liked to do anyway.

**Riley:** All right, so through the ’90s then?

**Casey:** I’m stuck working there for the Chief of Staff of the Army during Desert Storm. There’s just a long group of cubicles, and you could hear these guys calling up the personnel center, saying, “You’ve got to get me into the fight here. You’ve got to get me a job.” We all tried to get a job but the chief said, “You can’t all leave; some of you have to stay.” A couple of guys got out. So I tell people when they ask, “What did you in Desert Storm?” I say, “I shoveled “script” in the Pentagon.” [laughter]

Then it was a very interesting time. This was a fork in the road. I had been promoted below the zone and lieutenant colonel, and you could hear these guys calling up the personnel center, saying, “You’ve got to get me into the fight here. You’ve got to get me a job.” We all tried to get a job but the chief said, “You can’t all leave; some of you have to stay.” A couple of guys got out. So I tell people when they ask, “What did you in Desert Storm?” I say, “I shoveled “script” in the Pentagon.” [laughter]

Then it was a very interesting time. This was a fork in the road. I had been promoted below the zone to major and lieutenant colonel, which is a crapshoot, but once it happens twice, you come to expect it. I didn’t get promoted to colonel below the zone twice, so I was saying to myself, *What’s going on?* Then I got promoted to colonel on time with everybody else, and then I missed the two-brigade command lists. So I’m saying to myself, things are kind of slowing down here a little bit. When the Chief of Staff left, this Chief’s Assessments and Initiatives Group stood down, and the new chief had his own group of folks that he wanted to bring in. As I said, the staff didn’t like it because they felt it undercut their work. The new chief disbanded it and set up his own smaller group.

I was kind of in between. I had a guy who had offered me a job in OSD, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, in conventional forces and arms control. It was a colonel’s position. I was promoted to colonel in May of ’91, I think, and I was waiting in the Pentagon for this one job to finish and the other one to start, and I got a call from the commanding general in the 1st Calvary Division saying, “Would you like to be the chief of staff of the division?” It was the division my dad had commanded in Vietnam and division chief of staff is a wonderful job, so I said sure, and I went down and interviewed with him.

So I’ve got this maybe two-month period where, if I get the chief of staff’s job, then my career continues. If I have to take the conventional forces and arms control job, I’m done. Back-to-back
Pentagon assignments for a colonel is finished. As it turns out, I get the chief of staff’s job, go down there in August, stay in the chief of staff’s job for about two and a half years, come out on the brigade command list, command a brigade in the 1st Cav, and then go to Europe to be the operations officer for the V Corps, the only corps that was left in Europe, and then I’m selected for brigadier general.

_Nelson:_ At the time of the First Gulf War, the Army has, if anything, overlearned the lesson that we should be preparing and fighting in a Europe-style campaign, rather than a Vietnam-style campaign. Is that a fair statement?

_Casey:_ It is. You hear a lot of criticism and cynicism about how the Army “turned its back” on counterinsurgency after Vietnam, but the reality was, we were far behind the Warsaw Pact. It’s what I saw in Germany in the early ’70s. We were doing our alerts and we were running out to the field, but we didn’t really have the capabilities. We had these M113s, which are armored personnel carriers, but they had a 50-caliber machinegun on top that you had to aim yourself. Our tanks were old and I don’t think we could have stopped them (in Warsaw Pact) in the ’70s.

So it was a major shift and it’s one that I think we did very well, and it paid great dividends. It became one of the deterrents that ended the Cold War and it was greatly responsible for our success in Desert Shield and Desert Storm. I think the bane of the military’s existence is not necessarily that you’re going to prepare for the last war, but you’ll never be fully prepared for the next one, because it will always be different. That’s one of the things that led me, when I came back from Iraq and we wrote the first doctrinal update for the Army since September 11th, to focus the Army on what we called full spectrum operations: offense, defense, and stability operations that were performed in different ways, depending on the environment that you found yourself in. No matter where we went, we were going to do those three things.

That became a way to codify the transition from conventional war to the counterinsurgency, which I think is probably one of the untold stories of the period from September 11th to now. I lived through it in Iraq but I didn’t fully appreciate it until I got back to be Chief of Staff of the Army, when I saw how little the institution had adapted. For example, the educational system—There were little things about counterinsurgency in our schools, but they were basically teaching you how to fight a conventional war in the officer basic course and the advanced course, and at Fort Leavenworth. And this was six years after 9/11 [September 11, 2001] and we still hadn’t made that adaptation.

The family services hadn’t adapted, the logistical systems hadn’t adapted—We were continuing to field new systems, and we were trying to get them to the unit in time to train with them before they took them to combat, but we were getting them there right before they were getting on the boat.

_Bakich:_ Do you think that the focus on full spectrum capabilities, full spectrum dominance, was within the Army or within the Armed Forces push, or do you see that more as coming from the Office of the Secretary of Defense?

_Casey:_ That was within the Army, but one of the challenges we had was that full spectrum operations meant something different to the Army than it did to other people. For most people
outside the Army, it meant the high end. It meant conventional war where you overwhelm. For us it meant dominance across the spectrum of conflict, from the peacekeeping operations to a conventional war.

Nelson: If you went to West Point or the War College now, would you find the same kind of teaching going on?

Casey: No, I hope not. We started moving the institutions. While I was the chief, we worked on setting up the National Training Center so it wasn’t just a conventional fight; it was a full spectrum fight. You know, the doctrine and the training will pull the institution forward. Just like when I was growing up and the National Training Center caused me to focus on being successful fighting a conventional war, what I tried to do was set it up so that the National Training Center caused the next generation of leaders to focus on the full spectrum of warfare.

Riley: Let me see if we can conclude the prelude. About your experience in the Balkans, which I would guess must be important—We could listen for five hours about this. It’s fascinating material.

Casey: The V Corps operations officer, the G3 there is a colonel. I get there in March, and over that Memorial Day weekend we are told to put together an aviation and infantry taskforce to be prepared to extract the UN observers out of the eastern enclaves of Zepa, Gorazde, and Srebrenica. So we put it together, and we put them through a training regimen. I had to organize all this and put it together. That’s where we really, as an Army, started with situational training, where we tried to create an environment that was Bosnia-like, to include replicas of the bases and towns. We caused everybody to prepare to go and operate in an environment as close to what they were going to operate in as we could imagine.

Then I got a good view about what happens when the political issues overwhelm the military issues. For us to have any chance of being effectively deployed, we had to go to Italy because we couldn’t make the deployment times from Germany, but the Italian government wouldn’t let us in. I still remember sitting there in the training area in Germany, listening to the reports of Srebrenica.

Bakich: Right.

Casey: And the Dutch peacekeepers running away. It was gut wrenching. We were ready and we could have done something. Then I was involved in deploying the 1st Armored Division into Bosnia. I had worked with Wes Clark (the U.S. J5 [Director of Strategic Plans and Policy, Joint Chiefs of Staff]) before. He had a colonel calling me straight from Dayton, telling me the changes to the Peace Accords. What we were concerned about was how to implement the Dayton Peace Accords, and we were updating the training to prepare the 1st Armored Division to go into Bosnia in the peacekeeping mission. So I’m learning the interaction between the strategic and the operational levels of war—here’s the treaty we’re negotiating and now you’ve got to translate it into a military mission that these soldiers can execute. That was a great learning experience.

Riley: Sure.

Casey: We deployed the 1st Armored Division over Christmas. It was another example of how
we let our conventional mindset override us. Wes Clark calls the crossing of the Sava River the greatest unnecessary river crossing in the history of warfare. We told ourselves we didn’t know how the Serbs were going to react, and so we wanted to be ready if it was an opposed river crossing. It was crazy. Anyway, the bottom line is we got in there. We got the entities separated; they did a very nice job.

At that time, I moved up. I got promoted in April of ’96 to brigadier, and I was made Chief of Staff of the Corps. And then that summer or that spring, right after I got promoted, I was sent down to Hungary, basically to prepare the base in Tata, Hungary. Everybody coming from Germany went through Hungary to get into Bosnia. Tata was an intermediate staging base. My mission was to set that base up for the relief in place of the 1st Armored Division by the 1st Infantry Division in December. We were going to have a division of about 16,000 people come into Bosnia with all their equipment, and another one come out. It was a huge logistical challenge. I worked on that and set that up through July, and then in July, I actually went into Bosnia to become the assistant division commander of the 1st Armored Division. I did that for about nine months and learned a heck of a lot there. I like to say I learned more about intelligence in the first week I was in Bosnia than I did in the previous 25 years, or whatever it was, that I had been in the military.

Nelson: For example?

Casey: You’re operating against a real competitive foe. You can try to make your training exercises as good as you can, but you’re really having to think about your opponent. The level of thought that it takes trying to analyze a complex intelligence situation and weigh the different variables is mind boggling. What happens is, as a leader, you’re constantly getting feeds from all different sources and you’re constantly interpreting those feeds and fitting them into your beliefs, and then you’re challenging your beliefs and trying to figure it out. The mental process is staggering.

Bakich: Can I ask you a very quick question on this? You’ve got multiple sources of information that they’re throwing at you, and a dynamic picture is evolving. At any point, as you’re going through this process, did you start to think about different ways of creating support mechanisms? Are you bringing in any people to help you interpret the information? Are you actually having to get rid of people because it’s a too cumbersome process?

Casey: What I got in the habit of doing was spending time with intel analysts on a periodic basis. I’m the assistant division commander; I don’t have a staff. I work through the division staff. So what I would do is once a week, I would sit down with the intel analysts. I told the G2, “You don’t need to be there. I just want to sit down and talk to your folks,” and I bounced things off them. I just asked questions. Every morning you get an intel book and you read the book, and you always have questions about sourcing. How comfortable are we that this source is a valid source and he’s not playing us? But you don’t get to ask those. You have to send them an email or walk over and ask somebody. Sometimes it’s important enough to ask a question right away; other times you just kind of file it in the back of your mind. Once a week I would sit down—and I did the same thing in Iraq. Once a week I sat down with the intel analysts and bounced things off them. I tried to set up different forums periodically that allowed me to address the different aspects of the mission. I did it in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Iraq, and as Chief of Staff of the Army.
Bakich: OK, thank you.

Nelson: I had another big question, this one tied to the ’90s. This is a decade when there’s a President whose military is not necessarily inclined to respect, and there’s a lot of studies coming out, based on surveys of serving officers, that the officer corps is overwhelmingly Republican and resistant to civilian control if asked to do things that are unsound in their view. Did you see any of this and did it have any effect on the Army as you experienced it, through the ’90s?

Casey: There was clearly friction when [William J.] Clinton came in. There was the story going around that he disdiss Barry McCaffrey in the White House. There was an impression that the President didn’t value the service of the men and women of the Armed Forces. I don’t know that that was true but that was the impression.

Riley: Did you know him at Georgetown?

Casey: No. I might have met him, but we traveled in different circles. That said, there was a lot of grousing. But resistant to civilian control? Never. I say in my class that civilian control is a given with the military. There was never any discussion, “Let’s get rid of this guy,” or anything. I mean, never.

Perry: No Seven Days in May scenarios?

Casey: Not even remotely, but grousing, sure. I remember I went with President Clinton when he made a speech in Bosnia. He gave a wonderful speech in Sarajevo—it was in a theater downtown—about democracy and the importance of working together and bringing all the ethnic sectarian groups together. It was a wonderful speech. But he clearly had perception problems with the military. Now President [Barack] Obama, in my mind, saw that, and when he came in he worked very hard to create exactly the opposite impression by meeting shortly after he got there with the chiefs, meeting with the sergeants major and the senior chief petty officers of the military, and Mrs. [Michelle] Obama meeting with their spouses. That sent a really significant signal. The sergeant major of the Army told me he looked to his files and the last time he had a record of the sergeant major of the Army being in the Oval Office was during the [Lyndon] Johnson administration.

Nelson: So what I’m hearing you saying is that it doesn’t matter what the officers think, what their political opinions are in terms of how they conduct themselves professionally.

Casey: Absolutely not.

Riley: Is there anything more you want to say about Bosnia?

Casey: Bosnia is important because it influences my thinking about Iraq, especially on the American military operating in other countries. This is a long story but I’ll make it short: In Bosnia there was a group of Bosniaks who had reoccupied their village. It was called Jušići, I never thought I’d forget the name of that. It was on the Serb side of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line. The Serbs said that they came in with arms, they had violated the Dayton Accords; they had to leave.
So for six weeks I worked with the Serbs, I worked with the Bosniaks, I worked with the Serb police, to get these people to be allowed to stay, because it would have been the first time that Bosniaks had been able to return to the Serb side of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line, which was something that we were trying to have happen across the country. At the end of that six-week period, I had it to where the Serbs said, “OK, we’re going to come in tomorrow morning at ten o’clock, we’re going to search the village, and if we don’t find any weapons, they can stay.” So I get everybody together and say, “OK, they’re coming tomorrow at ten o’clock. Do you understand that?” “Yes, General.” I said, “Get all the weapons out of town if you want to stay here. We’ve been working at this for six weeks. You almost have your goal. Make sure there are no weapons here, you got that?” “Yes, General.”

So the Serbs come in, and they’re searching, and we’re five minutes from closing the deal, and the deputy mayor says, “Come into my house and let’s have some tea.” We go in there with the Serb chief of police from down the road and the Serb Minister of Interior. This is like having Darth Vader inside a Bosniak house, but they’re in there. We’re sitting there drinking our tea, and a Serb policeman walks out of the next room with a rifle, a bag of bullets, and a bag of grenades. I look at the deputy mayor and I’m just—I’m completely flabbergasted. I had told the Serbs that if they found any weapons, they could arrest the people who had them. So they’re arresting the deputy mayor, and we’re trying to walk down the stairs to get out of the house and the village women have come out and now they’re lying on the ground at the bottom of the stairs so you have to step on them to get out. Holy mackerel. I finally negotiate that if they get up, I will bring the guy down to the Serbs in the morning, and the Serbs agreed to leave. It was getting dark. It was a terrible situation.

Anyway, I get back to my boss and I’m obviously crestfallen. I come in the door, he’s sitting there and he looks at me and all he says is, “George, never forget that it’s their country.” I never forgot that. And going into Iraq, that meant—

Nelson: What did you take that to mean?

Casey: That we can’t want it more than they did. I wanted that to happen more than they wanted it to happen. If they wanted it to happen it would have happened. They didn’t. And there were forces at play that I didn’t fully appreciate or understand. That was one thing I took into Iraq with me. We can’t want it more than they do.

The other thing I took into Iraq was I tried to do too much to bring these guys together, and I saw it in others. The men and women of the American military, when you put them on the ground in a deployed environment, they’re going to work 24/7 to get the job done. Well, we were in Bosnia nine years because we never let the Bosniaks and the Serbs do anything, or do very little. We did it all for them, and they used us and they pitted us against each other. So I had that in my mind too as I went into Iraq, and that influenced me significantly.

Riley: Terrific.

Casey: Because very few people in the military had Bosnian experience, Balkan experience then, I got picked up to be a brigadier in the Joint Staff, J5. This dragged me into the political-military sphere, something that I hadn’t really been involved in before. And it’s the policy
sphere. Basically, the European and Africa desk is what it was called. I had all the NATO stuff and then I had all the Balkan stuff.

**Riley:** And this begins in ’99?

**Casey:** This is ’97. I do a lot of work in the Balkans, meet with [Slobodan] Milošević several times, work with Dick Holbrooke, get to see how he operated. Then as Kosovo starts up it’s on my watch and my boss has back surgery. The three-star has back surgery. He’s out, and we’re getting ready to go to war in Kosovo and I’m the brigadier and I’m the one sitting behind the chairman and the vice chairman in NSC [National Security Council] meetings. I’m watching the country go to war under the Clinton administration. It’s a fascinating process. We make the decision to go to war. We have the NATO 50th anniversary summit that’s going on right after that. We get into a big discussion about ground forces or not, as one of our options.

**Bakich:** Forgive me, who’s “we” at this point?

**Casey:** We’re talking within the Joint Staff.

**Nelson:** About whether to ask other NATO countries for ground troops?

**Casey:** We were debating. Wes Clark, the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, comes in and he wants to put a ground option on the table. He was already planning a ground option. Actually, as a brigadier, I made the recommendation to the chairman that we ought to take the ground option off the table, to get Russian support for the peacekeeping operation. It was one of those things that was a great learning experience for me—that you never take anything off the table. I made the wrong recommendation to the chairman on that. As it turned out, interestingly enough, Milošević didn’t believe us. He believed we still had the ground option on the table.

Anyway, we went to war. I got involved in the team with Strobe Talbott to negotiate the end of the Kosovo War. It was Talbott, [Viktor] Chernomyrdin for the Russians, and Martti Ahtisaari, the President of Finland. They would sit in a room like this and there would be four chairs. There would be Talbott, Chernomyrdin, Ahtisaari, and there would be an empty chair that was Milošević. The deal was, when Chernomyrdin and the Russians agreed with the terms, Ahtisaari and Chernomyrdin would fly to Belgrade and say, “OK, Slobodan, this is it,” which is what ultimately happened. I then wound up negotiating the Russian participation in the war with the Russian military, and I got some great experience in dealing with the Russians.

We finished, and I’m in Helsinki having a meeting, the final meeting between the Ministers of Defense of Russia and the United States, to sign the final agreement for the Russian participation. And who’s the interpreter for the Russian Minister of Defense? My boss from Cairo. [laughter] So we had a little side meeting and obviously caught up about what was going on with our families.

**Nelson:** Did he believe you this time when you said you had your own house?

**Casey:** That was a very seminal experience. I spent time sleeping on my couch in the office, because Dick Holbrooke would walk out of negotiations with Milošević at one o’clock in the morning Serb time and he’d be going back at nine o’clock that night and he’d have four issues
that we needed to work on the interagency, so they would call me and I’d work the issues in D.C. So I got a real good view of how the country went to war and how the interagency process worked, going through these things. I got a real good sense of that.

I left Finland—I actually left early. I left my job in the Joint Staff to go command a division in Germany, which ultimately wound up implementing the Kosovo agreement that I had negotiated. Having had the experience from Dayton, and translating that into operational details that military people could execute, it went off fairly well. But I was not in an operational role in Kosovo. I prepared a brigade that was basically about half my division, to go and do the mission, and I supported them from the rear.

I finished that and then after two years, in which I was in and out of Kosovo a lot, I came home to the Joint Warfighting Center. Now this was interesting: When you command a division—There are only ten in the Army—the assumption is you’re going to go on to a third star. The assumption is you’re going right to a three-star billet out of that job. The Chief of Staff of the Army came over and told me I wasn’t going to a three-star billet out of that job, and I was crushed. He said it’s all timing, and I thought, Yes, that’s what you tell everybody, until I became the Chief of Staff and I saw how difficult the timing really is.

So I went down to the Joint Warfighting Center in Norfolk. I got there in July of 2001 and was just getting kind of settled when September 11th happened, and that changed everything. I was given the mission by my boss to stand up a homeland security organization, because Joint Forces Command had all of the forces in the United States assigned to it. So we had the resources to do it. He called me and said, “George, there’s no homeland security organization in the country right now, so you need to stand something up.” We basically pulled all of the military together to execute the homeland security mission. And the whole time we’re doing this we know there’s another shoe going to drop. When I think back about the daily anxiety—We are working as many hours a day as we can because we know that something else is going to happen, and we were appalled by how little we knew about terrorists and what was going on.

We get it done. We put a campaign plan together. The big thing we did was we brought in the Pacific Command commander who had the West Coast, the Southern Command commander, the European Command commander—all of these combatant commanders had homeland security responsibilities that they weren’t focused on. We had to tell them, “Hey, look, you need to be looking this way as well as that way.” I did that for six weeks and right as I finished that, I got picked to be the J5. That’s probably not a bad place to stop, because that’s the post-September 11th stuff.

Nelson: Just this: At this stage of your career, was there anybody else at that stage, the same stage, who was as thoroughly, broadly experienced as you were, to lead the nation in war?

Casey: Probably [John] Abizaid is the only other guy I’d say at that point. [Stanley A.] McChrystal was coming along on the Special Operations side. [David] Petraeus was also starting to come along. What was he doing when the war started? Oh, he was the commander of the 101st Airborne Division. He hadn’t really moved into three-star billets yet that would prepare him to do things, but he was clearly somebody coming along.
Riley: All right, let’s let you have a chance to catch your breath.

[BREAK]

Riley: Barbara, did you want to start?

Perry: After 9/11, you mentioned the anxiety over the other shoe to drop. What did you think that other shoe would be? Did you have a sense of what that shoe to drop would be?

Casey: We just thought there was going to be another significant attack of some sort.

Perry: And what kinds of attacks were you then preparing for?

Casey: We weren’t really preparing for any particular kind of attack, but we were war-gaming about how, if you were a terrorist group, how would you attack us? We were just killing ourselves with all these vulnerabilities—the containers on the ships—all the different ways that they might come at us. Planes, we were less concerned about the airplanes, although the possibility still existed. We were definitely concerned about some type of chemical weapon employed, either in a U.S. city or brought in, in a container, on a boat. I’m rusty on this because I haven’t really thought about this in a long time. I just remember that we were war-gaming and scaring ourselves to death by how ill-prepared we were to do it.

Perry: And what was your sense about why we had missed the 9/11 possibility?

Casey: It’s still the same. It’s what the [Albert and Roberta] Wohlstetters said about Pearl Harbor; it wasn’t so much an intelligence failure as it was a failure of imagination. We just couldn’t imagine some guys coming out of caves, being able to inflict that much damage on the United States. That’s really what it was. As a country, we weren’t focused on terrorism at the national level, because we didn’t see it as a threat that could inflict catastrophic damage on the United States.

Riley: Right.

Casey: That’s what, to me, September 11th did. It introduced into the international equation, nonstate actors who have access to the instruments of catastrophic destruction. That’s a fundamentally different environment than I grew up in for the first 30 years of my career, trying to work with.

Bakich: At this time, we have the military that’s essentially doing homeland defense. I’m curious, were there any discussions—

Casey: Well, I wouldn’t say we were—We were rudimentarily trying to execute homeland security. We weren’t much safer by the time we finished our plan than we were before the plan was written, and we didn’t get into the intelligence side of it at all.
Bakich: That may answer my subsequent questions then. What’s the nature of the guidance that you’re getting from official Washington?

Casey: None that I saw. My boss took this on himself.

Nelson: And did your war-gaming result in any recommendations to anybody? Was there a constituency for what you were doing?

Casey: No, there really wasn’t. What we did was organize the military as best we could, to fill the voids as we saw them. It was a military thing. In fact, there was a brigadier in J5 who received, after September 11th, the homeland security portfolio and he didn’t know any more about it than we did. But that’s what happens. The whole country was and still is transitioning to coming to grips with a fundamentally different threat than we had grown used to working with, and grown “comfortable” with over the past 50 years.

Nelson: Backing up just a little bit, you’ve got a new Secretary of Defense who has some pretty strong ideas about how the military ought to be organized. How did his talk about the revolution in military affairs look from your vantage point?

Casey: It didn’t really impact on the post–September 11th environment. It was an inside-the-Beltway thing, more than anything else. Other than the intellectual chatter at the war colleges and things, it really hadn’t had a significant impact on the military, because the way you impact the military is you change the program (budget). You move money from one system to another. The SecDef was embarked on—and I think he knew this—He was embarked on a long-term proposition.

Riley: Let me ask the question more generally, about the influence of a new administration and a new Secretary of Defense, sort of through the organization. Does it—You’re shaking your head. It doesn’t register at all?

Casey: No. It takes so long for a new administration to have an impact. It just does. When you think about it—the President comes in in January, he presents his first budget in February, and it was the budget that was prepared by the previous administration, so they always say, “Give us a couple more months here.” So that budget goes in. Now that’s for the fiscal year that starts that September, so it’s pretty much all done. You know, it’s the battleship—You don’t make sharp turns with a battleship.

Bakich: Was there a QDR [Quadrennial Defense Review] before September 11th?

Casey: I don’t remember. Yes, there was, because I got there after September 11th. I got there in the end of October of 2001 and people still had the scars from the QDR. This is opinion, but that’s where Secretary [Donald] Rumsfeld and the people he brought with him during that QDR process were perceived by the military as holding them in great disdain. They never really recovered from that. I don’t think it was his intent, but the way they acted toward the military—

Nelson: Who didn’t recover?

Casey: The Rumsfeld team.
Bakich: He gives that town hall meeting at the Pentagon, where he basically says the greatest threat to national security is the Pentagon bureaucracy.

Casey: Well, he wasn’t going to change it overnight. It was the way that he and the people he brought with him interacted with the senior generals. It turned them off. Actually, I never had that problem with him, but I’ve talked to guys, very senior folks, three-stars, who just couldn’t be in the same room with him, and it was because of what happened in those early days before I got to the Pentagon.

Riley: Right. Any particular offenders in the senior group?

Casey: Well, I think Steve [Stephen] Cambone was the point man on this thing and so it was his charge to go in and stir things up, and he did, and he generated a lot of animosity. I worked fine with him. The military is not blameless in this. If you’ve worked in the Pentagon, people are very protective of their budgets and their programs.

Riley: This is true in universities too.

Casey: I suspect it is.

Perry: I’m sure you’re shocked to know that.

Casey: They’re not open-minded about it. “This is in my program, it’s in my budget, I fought the fight within my organization and this is the right thing, and I’m committed to it. Now, what do you want to talk about?” [laughter]

Perry: You spoke very candidly about the military’s view of President Clinton, and you spoke candidly about the view of President Bush 43’s Defense Department leadership. Are you getting, at this point, a sense of how the military feels about Bush 43?

Casey: Not really. I’ll say first, I’m getting all the QDR feedback secondhand, because I wasn’t there. I’m in Germany or I’m down in Norfolk. I’m getting this from General John Abizaid, who is now the J5. So I didn’t see that stuff and frankly, by the time I got there, I think the Rumsfeld crowd was sensitive to how they were being perceived and they had adopted a little softer touch. But it was all inside the Pentagon. I didn’t have any reason to interact directly with the President at that point. I got to the Pentagon in October of 2001.

Perry: No pun intended, but any general views of the fact that there is this constant anxiety after 9/11, about the next shoe to drop, and the person who is the new Commander in Chief?

Casey: The military reacted like most people in the country did. They saw him taking a very forceful leadership role in the aftermath of September 11th, and that’s a good thing.

Riley: Let me try a slightly different angle on this and ask, institutionally, the view toward the intelligence community—Is there tension between the Defense Department and the external intelligence communities? If so, was there any heightened concern about the intelligence communities in the aftermath of 9/11?
Casey: I don’t remember any direct finger-pointing going on between the Department of Defense and the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], saying you guys should have had this and this and this. I don’t remember, but my early portfolio—I will tell you that when I got there my charge was to work on and build a national military strategic plan for the War on Terror—we were looking beyond Iraq and Afghanistan. We were trying to write—I forget the national security planning directive that was laid out for the Cold War in the early fifties, but we were trying to write something like that because we thought this was going to be long-term.

Bakich: NSC-68?

Nelson: That’s what I was thinking.

Casey: Could be. Yes, I think that’s probably right, NSC-68. We were doing that. So my interaction with the intelligence folks is, you know, what else is out there? It was forward; it wasn’t back.

Riley: It strikes me that there are three big things on the agenda right now: You’ve got a kinetic war that’s about to occur or is occurring in Afghanistan; planning and eventually a kinetic war in Iraq; and then your main charge that you’ve already identified is creating a new strategy for a new world. Maybe the thing to do is to ask about Afghanistan first. Is any of that coming across your desk? Do you have a piece of the Afghanistan—

Casey: By the time I got there, we were already in Afghanistan and it was in operation. That was already done.

Riley: That’s down the road, elsewhere.

Casey: I’m trying to figure out my role in the Afghan stuff. Who’s developing plans for the building of the Afghan army and the police? I’ve got three Navy captains who are submariners. That’s my Afghan shop.

Riley: They’re experts in the Afghan navy, right?

Casey: Yes. That’s the way it worked.

Nelson: You said you needed to be prepared for the unexpected.

Riley: That would do it.

Casey: Afghanistan was primarily the J3 and CENTCOM. It was Central Command’s fight and they were working that.

Riley: All right.

Casey: As I said, I was focused on the strategic military plan. We were looking at places like Somalia, Yemen. We’re trying to get a sense of, OK, how could this morph and spread? We’re looking at Indonesia. We looked at the Philippines. Again, candidly, we’re building our knowledge and understanding about the global terrorist threat in the Pentagon.
Riley: Are you doing this generally on your own as an exercise because you’ve been charged to do it by your immediate superior? Is there Rumsfeld oversight and input into this or are they too busy?

Casey: No. It’s primarily a military deal. I would brief Rumsfeld on aspects of it but it was always, where could the next threat come from? Is it Somalia? Is it Yemen? Is it the Philippines? Is it Indonesia? Looking back, our understanding was rudimentary.

Bakich: Are you getting most of your intelligence, your information, strictly from DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] or are you going out to other elements of the intelligence community?

Casey: We’re using all the elements of the intelligence communities. The chairman has a CIA rep. His office is right down the hall from me. There’s a DIA rep. All those guys were always present. You’re always drawing on everything.

Bakich: Pre-9/11 as well?

Casey: Yes. But whether you were getting everything is a different story.

Riley: Could you tell us how you stand up this effort? What are the obstacles you’re confronting? We don’t have, from the outside, a picture of what’s emerging. Because this is perhaps the single most important issue confronting the American government at that time, it would be helpful for us to have a better understanding of how you’re doing your job and what it is that you’re learning as you’re doing it.

Casey: We’re at the end of 2001, and this process starts, and there’s a time where the chairman gets the whole Joint Staff, all the leadership together in a room, and we start thinking our way through this whole plan. It wasn’t just me. I had the pen, but we were bringing everybody together here. Again, we’re all building our level of knowledge and understanding about something that was relatively unknown to us at the time.

We had some broad parameters that said, look, you’ve got terrorist organizations and you have state sponsors of terror. There were a few other ones that have now escaped me. At least from a military perspective we told ourselves we were going to have to deal with state sponsors of terror. Hopefully, they can drop their state sponsorship of terror through diplomatic pressures and initiatives and we don’t have to attack them, but we need to be prepared to do that if we should.

I’m moving along on this. I remember telling my boss, John Abizaid, who was the director of the Joint Staff then—Probably in the beginning of 2002, when I started hearing this Iraq chatter. I’m hearing that [Douglas J.] Feith and [Paul] Wolfowitz are all fired up about Iraq and the vice chairman, Pete Pace, is going up and having secret meetings with Dick Cheney at his house. You know, “the fix is in.” I remember telling him, “Look. I’m not paying any attention to this Iraq stuff right now. I’m focused on the broader war plan here. You need to tell me when I need to start paying attention to Iraq.” He says, “Right.”

It was probably the end of July or the first part of August and we were walking in the hall and he stops me and looks at me and says, “All right, it’s time to start paying attention on Iraq.” Now, I
didn’t know this at the time, but having taught my class on civil-military operations in war—and use Bush’s book, Rumsfeld’s book, [Tommy] Franks’s book, [Richard B.] Myers’s book, Bob Woodward’s book—I was only getting snippets of what was really going on. What the President says is that he wanted to make sure that he had a viable war plan to back up his diplomacy if diplomacy failed, which was perceived by other people as, they’ve already decided to go in and do this. I don’t necessarily believe that was the case.

My own conclusion from my class is that in a post-9/11 environment—and you have to put yourself back in that post-9/11 environment, with the anthrax scare on top of 9/11. (That was real to me because I had a meeting in Senator [Joseph] Lieberman’s office and he was one of the offices that had the letters mailed to him. When I got there, there was yellow tape across the door and I didn’t know what was going on. I looked down there and the staffer was waving at me from the bottom. I went down, and he talked about the anthrax. I told my wife and she burst into tears. I was on Cipro for about two weeks because of the anthrax stuff. So that was completely real in people’s minds.) But I came to the conclusion in my own mind that we went to war in Iraq because President Bush felt that, in the post-9/11 environment, Saddam Hussein with chemical weapons was too great a threat to the United States. That was my own conclusion after the research.

Riley: Was Iraq turning up in your own strategic researches at the time, as being a particularly problematic place?

Casey: The Iraqis had been shooting at us and we’d been dropping bombs on them since we put the no-fly zones in after the Gulf War. So for probably 15 years, we’d been shooting at each other. The other thing was, the UN went in and inventoried and said, “They have X (chemical weapons).” They came back and said, “We destroyed Y.” There was this huge delta and nobody could explain what happened to the delta.

I questioned the timing of doing a state sponsor right away when we were still dealing with Afghanistan. I do remember we did some military analysis as part of our plan. We had Syria, Iraq, and Iran, right in a row there, as state sponsors of terror. We knew that that was the heart of terrorism in the Middle East and we were going to have to do something about them. An analysis from a military perspective is: OK, which of those would be the easiest to do from a military perspective? Well, interestingly, the answer came back Iraq: one, because we had war plans already there; two, because you had the access from Kuwait. We dutifully reported our analysis up.

But it wasn’t clear to me at all why there was so much pressure to move on Iraq as early in this War on Terror as we were. That was the part that was unclear to me. Did I believe Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction? Yes. I read the intel and I believed it. It was really chemical weapons I was concerned about. Did I believe that his having chemical weapons that he could give to a terrorist, or he could look the other way while a terrorist took them—Did I believe that was a real threat? I sure did, but I didn’t necessarily see it as an imminent threat that had to be dealt with.

Perry: Did you also consider if we did go in and take out Saddam, what that would do to the balance of power in that area, in that region of the world?
Casey: We did. The J5 is called the Director of Strategic Plans and Policy, but the way it’s organized on the Joint Staff is the War Plan division is in the J7, and the J5 is organized regionally. J5 does have a director of strategy but the director of strategy directs programmatic strategy, not grand national strategy. I had a bunch of regional experts trying to develop a national military strategy for the War on Terror, which wasn’t working, so I had to stand up a War on Terror branch that I staffed with the strategists, and they helped me get planning going.

Bakich: I have a couple of questions. As you’re hearing the Iraq chatter—

Casey: I’ve got to come back to your question on the plans here. Go ahead.

Bakich: July 2002, I believe, we get the establishment of the Interagency Iraq Political-Military Cell. What was that stood up in response to? I read that it was in response to some war-gaming that your office had done.

Casey: No. Really it was done in direct response to Abizaid saying, “OK, you need to pay attention.” The way it’s organized now is you’ve got Tommy Franks, the Central Command commander. He has got the war planning, so all the war planning is being done in Central Command, and because of the way it’s organized, what the J5 winds up doing is being the political-military interface with the other departments of the government. So, since Franks had the war plan, we were trying to fill the void and the void was political-military interface, particularly with the State Department. We basically put a cell together and we started doing our homework on Iraq, and asking the questions about what’s going to happen when this is over. My Bosnian and Kosovo experience played heavy on this, and basically I was able to direct the planning effort because I had some sense of what it was going to be like once Saddam was gone.

It took us some months. In fact, I saw in your notes it said July. I remember it as being August, but it was around that period. It took us a while to get ourselves spun up, and then to find out who else in the interagency was also working on this. We’re doing this when it’s very close hold about who can be involved, and I think I didn’t have more than five people involved in it. The State Department had something going, and I’m sure the intelligence agencies all had things going, but we became the place where people could go and talk about Iraq outside the war plan, about what was going to happen afterward and what we needed to do from a political and military standpoint.

Bakich: So then when does the Executive Steering Group enter the picture, and Frank Miller’s leadership?

Casey: I don’t remember exactly. My recollection is that we in the military, in the Joint Staff, took it as far as we could in the interagency by ourselves. I was getting things done just by my own personal relationships with people in the State Department. I think one day I looked at Frank and I said, “You know, Frank, you ought to be doing this, because this is interagency coordination. I’m happy for you to come over and take charge of this meeting here and if you invite these guys, they’ll come and they’ll come at a high level,” which is what happened.

Nelson: Is there a problem created by having Central Command in Tampa, and all the other work going on in Washington—a geographical problem, a coordination problem?
Casey: No, it’s actually better because you don’t want the people in Washington involved at a tactical and operational level. Tactical and operational actions suck people in. They become a magnet, people are fascinated by it, and, really, it’s a chore to keep people in Washington focused at the strategic level.

Bakich: That’s really interesting.

Riley: I wanted to go back and ask a couple of questions before we get too far down the road.

Casey: Did I get to yours?

Perry: Yes, but I guess I would say, do you have anything more specific to say about how you were perceiving, given the information you were getting, what would happen in taking out Saddam, and what would be necessary to fill that vacuum?

Casey: I will tell you that we probably focused more on the internal Iraq implications than we necessarily did on the broad regional implications. I’m sure we talked about it, but at the end of October, I briefed the National Security Council on postwar planning.

Riley: This is ’02?

Casey: This is ’02. For the first time I presented a broad view of how we saw the situation at that time. I remember getting knowing glances as I went through this, and then I remember talking to Steve Hadley a bit later and I realized from the questions he was asking how little they really understood about what I had been telling them. It was because this was fundamentally new to them. It was the first time that they really had to chew on this. I went back to the deputies and did it again for the deputies, and let them ask questions.

This is something that’s just my own thought, but the Democratic administration, the Clinton administration, had been through Bosnia, had been through Kosovo, and they had understood postwar, postconflict planning. They’d been immersed in it. Bosnia, we struggled through. Kosovo, we learned from Bosnia, and we did that much better. Now you have all these Republican folks who basically weren’t in government when all that stuff happened and they’re thinking about this for the first time.

Bakich: It was NSPD-56 [National Security Presidential Directive] that was Complex Contingency Operations that they did away with very early on in the administration. That was a holdover from the Clinton administration’s experience.

Casey: Right. I hadn’t thought that but yes, you’re right. I remember that vaguely. Anyway, there was a big educational process on that end, and then there’s friction between what Wolfowitz and his folks are saying, because they’re being fed by Iraqis, that we will be welcomed as liberators. “We’re not going to stay for a long time.” “Why do we need to be thinking about all this stuff when we’re not going to be there for that long?” they asked.

Nelson: You said, by way of self-criticism I thought, that you’d been thinking about the in-country, but not the region, the implications.
Casey: The briefing focused on the internal implications and less on the regional implications.

Nelson: OK, so in your own thinking, you were aware of the regional consequences. I was thinking in particular of its borders, of Iraq.

Casey: Did I think, when we went into this, that this was going to spawn the Arab Spring? No way. That was not something that I thought about.

Nelson: Did you think there would be a group like al-Qaeda in Iraq that would be coming in across the border of Iraq?

Casey: We thought we would be a magnet, that we would attract terrorists that would come to Iraq to fight us. We knew about the borders. There’s a slide that I used, a map of Iraq, and around the edge, we had all the things that we thought were going to happen, like sectarian conflict, terrorists crossing borders, Iranian influence, and Syrian influence. It was a snapshot. It was very much a snapshot.

Riley: This is what I really want to dig into, the question of what were you learning during this period in terms of your expectation that would happen inside Iraq, and if you have recollections about the substance of the briefing that you’re giving at the National Security Council.

Casey: Is this all unclassified?

Riley: We have to ask you to use your judgment about this. It doesn’t go anywhere.

Casey: The reason I’m saying that is because I’ve got the briefing; it’s in my papers at the National Defense University.

Riley: It could be appended.

Casey: It could be. We’ve had a bunch of stuff declassified. I don’t know if this has been declassified or not.

Riley: I couldn’t tell you.

Casey: But it’s up there. I haven’t looked at it in a long time.

Riley: OK, but just to further the discussion, are there things that you can tell us about your— We’re trying to recapture—

Casey: Right, and I haven’t thought about this in a long time. What did we think? First and foremost, after being involved in Bosnia and Kosovo, I knew this was going to be a long-term proposition. In fact, Brad Graham, a Washington Post reporter, was interviewing me one day and asked what I thought and I said, “I thought it was going to take an Army corps five years.” Now, I was fudging a little bit, because a corps can be anything from 45,000 to 100,000+, but it was going to take at least five years, because I’d seen what happened in Bosnia and I’d seen what happened in Kosovo. Things just don’t happen that quickly in postconflict environments.
Again, this is all rubbing up against the friction that, *Hey, this is going to be easy and we’re all going to be gone*. We thought there were going to be frictions. I would tell you that I thought that people, even the Sunni population, would be relieved to be out from under Saddam’s thumb. We figured that there would be obviously some vested interests that would not be so happy about that, and we expected that there would be some friction. I don’t think we expected it to go into a full-blown insurgency. We also expected that there would be economic issues.

**Nelson:** Did you expect that the Army would be disbanded, the Ba’ath Party?

**Casey:** No, we actually planned to have a very low level of de-Ba’athification. We planned on telling the Army to return to their barracks and we’d deal with them when we got to them, but that was in terms of the general situation.

The other interesting thing is how poor our intelligence was about what life was like inside Iraq. People always ask me what I was most surprised about and I always say the infrastructure. I was amazed at how poor the infrastructure was, particularly in the Shia areas. He had great roads, so Saddam Hussein could move his forces around quickly, but there was no water, no sewage, no electricity in a lot of these Shia areas. It was amazing how bad it was, and that kind of transcended everything. We didn’t have people on the ground. We didn’t have good sources, so we really knew very little.

**Bakich:** At this point then, are you—You said you’re liaising with the State Department. Do you have anyone involved in the Future of Iraq Project that they’re running up there?

**Casey:** Those are the guys that we’re liaising with. They’re coming to our meetings. We’re getting their product.

**Bakich:** The Future of Iraq Project has been on the one hand praised as being prescient. On the other hand, it’s denigrated for having no planning content. I was wondering if you could weigh in on what the State Department is—the quality of what they’re doing, the usefulness of it.

**Casey:** My sense is that the Future of Iraq Project was useful to the State Department. It didn’t necessarily have the same utility to us as military planners who were going to have to do things, but it was very informative. That’s what the State Department does. They do that kind of stuff. It was informative and as I said, I expect most of the criticism is from the military side because it wasn’t military planning, but it still was informative.

**Bakich:** That was the criticism from what I understood too.

**Casey:** You asked this about intelligence too, but OSD has an international policy group that always conflicts with the State Department’s policy side. They have an intelligence group that always conflicts with the intelligence side. It’s a big gorilla that has tentacles into everybody else’s business in Washington.

The personalities were such, with Doug Feith, particularly, at the deputies level in the interagency. He was always right and he was so tenacious in his arguments and in his positions that it really became difficult. It made interagency coordination difficult, if not impossible. When I was going around making my pre-Iraq visits, I went over and saw Marc Grossman, who was
the Under Secretary of State at that time, whom I had known for years, and he said the friction over the NSPD (the division of labor between State and Defense)—The friction on that with Feith had just broken the relationship. He said they were done. And he’s a pro, you know?

Bakich: Yes.

Casey: He was so frustrated with Feith that he didn’t see how the departments could work together at all. I saw it and it’s true.

Bakich: Are you speaking to [Richard] Armitage at all during this time?

Casey: I met with Armitage, Grossman and [Colin] Powell. It was the same thing.

Bakich: I might actually be jumping ahead about five months here, but in your interactions with senior policymakers, you see that they are surprised at the description of what is likely to happen in the aftermath of major combat operations, things like that. Is it at this point that you start to realize the necessity of standing up the taskforce for looking at how do we explicitly start planning for postcombat stability, postcombat reconstruction? And then I’m going to take you to: Do you have relations with [David] McKiernan at CFLCC [Coalition Forces Land Component Command] on that point?

Casey: Let me back up a little bit. This is October. The other problem you have with postwar planning for a war you haven’t decided you were going to do yet—you’re dealing with a pretty small group and you can’t talk about it outside that group. Any time you have a very restricted group, you have restricted inputs; that’s just the reality of it. I did the briefing in October and then it devolved, between October and December, into a fight between State and Defense about who’s going to be in charge. The plan that we laid out was the military goes in and then basically assumes control, which by international law, that’s what we had to do. At some period, we pass it off to a civilian, who then at some time passes it off to the Iraqis. That’s kind of the thought process. But immediately there was friction between Feith and Wolfowitz, and to some extent Rumsfeld—Secretary Rumsfeld had no confidence in the State Department’s ability to do anything operational (and it wasn’t too far off the mark)—and the State Department about who would be in charge.

From October to December, when the President finally put out the NSPD breaking the tie, it evolved into a battle between State and Defense about who’s going to be in charge in the postwar time. You had the Feith/Wolfowitz group that said this is going to be easy and we ought to be able to do this, and then you had the other group who said this is going to be hard; it’s going to take a long time and we have to be more thoughtful about it.

So the President puts out the NSPD, which basically establishes ORHA [Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance]. So now you have this guy, Jay Garner, who’s been given the mission but he’s got no staff and he’s got nobody to do any work for him.

Bakich: This is NSPD-24 in January, correct?

Casey: I don’t know. As you’ve seen, I’ve lost my NSPD numbers. To get Garner a staff, from my time down at Joint Forces Command, I remember that each of the combatant commands had
these standing joint taskforce headquarters, which are basically a group of folks that had all the communications capabilities that could stand up a joint taskforce. So I said, why don’t we get the one from the Joint Forces Command, and give it to Garner in Central Command so they have somebody who can focus on postwar planning?

**Riley:** Had you known Garner before?

**Casey:** Briefly. So that’s where that came from. Then I got a couple of guys who had Bosnia experience and injected them into the headquarters. I had my division chief of staff and General Steve Hawkins, who had been in Bosnia with us, and put them down there so that we had some people who had some level of understanding for postwar planning.

**Bakich:** Let me just make sure that I’ve got this clear in my head. The joint taskforce is specifically designed to work with ORHA, not necessarily with CENTCOM and CFLCC.

**Casey:** It was both, but we recognized that we couldn’t control how Central Command used it. So I think you’re right, we stood it up and gave it to Central Command, but in my mind I thought that ORHA would go down and be the lead in the headquarters.

**Bakich:** Which matters, might as well.

**Casey:** Yes. You can’t give somebody a mission like that and then not give him any staff to do it. Anyway, I’m a little vague on the timing of that, but I think that’s how it came out.

**Nelson:** I was thinking about your comment earlier, five years and a corps, and that was based on the assumption that Iraq would have a functioning military and a functioning civil service. What would it have been if you had made different assumptions, which turned out to be what actually happened, about the Army?

**Casey:** It’s all in the assumptions. But the other thing is the USA was doing something for the first time in anyone’s memory. When is the last time we attacked a country? Maybe the Spanish-American War. Everybody was doing something for the first time. Going to war is so consuming and there are so many different things and variables that could go right, or that could go wrong. When you look at the list of what-ifs that we did in the military, about oil fires and all these different war-planning things, it was all-consuming.

The impact on the President? He’s getting all of this different advice. One of the things that Rumsfeld was very good at was asking hard questions, and he was “kicking over a lot of rocks” on the plan to go to war. It was so difficult and so complex, and the outcome was so uncertain going into the war, that it became all-consuming and there was precious little intellectual and emotional energy left to say, “OK, let’s put the plan together here for the postwar.”

**Bakich:** It’s interesting that you say that because it sounds to me like you’re going into this entire endeavor with the uncertainties looming large in your mind, and much of what I’ve read about Feith, Wolfowitz, and to a considerable extent, Rumsfeld—what we have are certainties.

**Casey:** Yes, it’s interesting.
Bakich: I don’t know if you have anything to say or add or maybe say that I’m wrong about that.

Casey: They were more certain in their mind about the outcomes, but we’re paid to be pessimists in the military.

Riley: I missed my career calling. I want to ask a point of clarification. Go ahead.

Casey: One other thing here, because now we’re getting down to the end of the year—The last piece, and this gets at what this standing joint taskforce headquarters was about. In December, we also sent Tommy Franks strategic guidance on the postwar planning, where the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs directed him to do the planning necessary for postwar Iraq. This directive went down along with the standing joint taskforce headquarters, so in our minds we weren’t just giving him the mission and telling him “Suck it up with everything else you’re doing.” Now we’re giving him a group to do that planning. But my view is that Tommy Franks never embraced the postwar mission. You can do all the planning you want in Washington, but it doesn’t make a thing happen on the ground. It’s not until the planning goes to the next level, and that level gives directives to people on the ground to do things, that you actually have a functional plan. In my view, that level never happened.

Riley: This might partly answer the question I wanted to ask. There’s sort of a perception from the outside that in the end the Defense Department really didn’t want to be the major force in postwar, that the job of the Defense Department was to go win the kinetic battle, and then it becomes somebody else’s problem in the U.S. government, once the battle is won, and the troops want to return home. Is that a misperception of some of what’s going on here?

Casey: I don’t think there was any doubt that Secretary Rumsfeld did not want to be involved in the postwar reconstruction of Iraq. He wanted to be out of there as fast as we could. And some of the friction that you see with the military units about “You’re going. You’re staying. You’re going. You’re staying,” is caused by this perceived desire to get out. It was directed. I don’t have firsthand knowledge of this, but John Abizaid tells me that they were told to get out of Iraq.

The other thing that caused confusion was that we had always planned that Third Army, a three-star headquarters with a colonel level, mature staff, would be the one to go in and take charge in the aftermath, to take charge of the postwar—This was General Dave McKiernan. We recognized that a corps is an operational headquarters that is not designed to operate at the level the Army headquarters can operate at. Rumsfeld pulled the Third Army headquarters out of there pretty quickly, which was a major problem. My impression was that he wanted us out of there and he conveyed that to Tommy Franks, and that’s what they were doing.

Riley: And that would have colored the prewar planning as well, right? We’ll go in and take care of business but then it’s somebody else’s problem.

Casey: It corroded postwar planning, I think, with Tommy Franks, which is maybe one of the reasons why he didn’t do much and they didn’t do much in CENTCOM to operationalize the directives that he was given. Now the other thing that we did when we stood up this taskforce was we brought all those guys to Washington and we did a two or three-day seminar over at the NDU [National Defense University] in January, to bring these guys and gals up to speed on what was going on.
Riley: These guys and gals, meaning?

Casey: The joint taskforce, the 58 people down there that we stood up. It was all of us coming together, DoD [Department of Defense] and State Department and intel agencies, to educate these folks. In my view, we did everything we could at the strategic level there to prepare these guys for success.

Riley: How did that go? Can you tell us about that?

Casey: I went over there to help kick it off. I didn’t stay for the whole thing, but we got very positive feedback for it. We were the core group of Iraq postwar planners, and we got ourselves all spun up, and then we widened the group. Then we had to stop what we were doing and get all these new people spun up, so just doing that over and over takes time. It takes weeks and months before this thing expands. It’s not instantaneous.

Riley: There was one other thing I wanted to follow up on. This is another perception from the outside, which is that there was a criticism about contemplating costs broadly, and I would include military personnel, because of exactly the factors that you’re suggesting, the almost impossibility of planning. Is it the case that there was pressure to avoid dealing with cost estimates of this nature because of the sense that if you’re forced to reckon with these costs before you go in, you’re going to complicate the business of rallying support to make possible the invasion in the first place?

Casey: To a degree. I would say the difference is—There wasn’t a reluctance to consider the costs internally; there was a reluctance to discuss the costs publicly.

Riley: So you’re providing estimates?

Casey: There were estimates of casualties and costs of the ground war. Frankly, we didn’t know enough to project what the costs of a long-term postwar plan were.

Riley: Budgetary costs, rather than long-term.

Casey: Budgetary costs, personal costs. I knew it was going to take a long time to get it to a point where we could credibly walk away and say, “OK, we’ve done our best here,” but I couldn’t have told you if it was going to cause 100 casualties or 2,000 or whatever it was. We didn’t have that level of detail.

Riley: As a professional planner, is it common for you to get to a point in a planning process where you say, “I don’t have enough information in order to make a plausible projection about what’s going to happen,” or is it more likely that the military way is to say if X then Y, if Y then—?

Casey: No. Sometimes, you just have to say, “I can’t give you an intelligent answer to that.” If someone had asked me, “How many casualties do you think it’s going to take in the five years that we’re going to be there?” I can’t tell you. It depends on what kind of resistance you want to postulate. If there’s heavy resistance, OK, maybe you can figure that out. There were some things that weren’t credibly known.
**Riley:** If I can push this then, we shouldn’t take the absence of hard cost estimates in advance as an indication of planned obfuscation; in other words, the political people were saying, “We’re not going to tell you how much this costs because that’s a deterrent to taking the action we want to take.” This actually could very well plausibly be a function of the impossibility of planning in an uncertain environment.

**Casey:** Yes and no. Cost is a good example. There was reluctance to come up with how much this is going to cost. You don’t know. You can make planning assumptions and you can say, “If all this happens, here’s a range of cost estimates.” But in Washington you hate to put a number out, because as soon as you put the number out, you might as well chisel it in stone. So there is a reluctance to give out numbers. Now, I’ve never heard anyone in the administration say, “We don’t want to tell them this because they might not vote for it.” There was not an obfuscation. But I know that people in the administration—Some people thought that way, and what they did on their own was up to them.

**Riley:** Thank you.

**Bakich:** We’ve been talking, actually looking downward toward the command. I’d like to kind of take the gaze up. As soon as you invite Frank Miller in, or you bring him to the meeting and say this is an interagency thing and it makes sense for you to staff it—At this point, can you describe the direction, management, oversight of Steve Hadley and Condi Rice? Are they taking an active effort in trying to drive the interagency system in particular ways?

**Casey:** For postwar planning?

**Bakich:** Yes, for postwar planning.

**Casey:** I don’t have direct knowledge of that, but my impression from Frank was that we were the only ones who were doing postwar planning, and it wasn’t until the end of October when I briefed the National Security Council—that was like the first toe in the water. Hadley was having deputies’ lunches to discuss postwar planning—and that was my first introduction, probably in the July/August time frame. The Vice Chairman, Peter Pace, was going to those. When we stood up the cell, then I started going to those meetings. So Hadley was doing some things, but it was at a very high level and the discussion was just discussion and it wasn’t leading to any actions.

**Nelson:** Here’s what I’m hearing, and tell me if it’s what you’re actually saying; that is, you all are doing this postwar planning work intensively and thoughtfully, but General Franks isn’t really interested, the Secretary’s office isn’t really interested. Who else within the military is interested? Who is actually interested in what you’re doing and wanting to work on it?

**Casey:** I was the one who had postwar planning experience and frankly I was the one who was driving it. Frank Miller was my comrade in arms in this, because Frank realized that this was going to be important in the long haul. We had Ryan Crocker and a few others over at State working on that Future of Iraq Project, but it was largely driven by our own initiative.

**Nelson:** It sounds like a voice crying in the wilderness.

**Casey:** Well, my impression was, it wasn’t that people didn’t want to think about it. They were
just so consumed with the decision to go to war. What if we lost? Think about that. What if Saddam had employed chemical weapons against us? What if he had blown up all the oil wells? Things could have been a lot worse.

**Nelson:** What I’m also hearing is that when the war was won, it’s not as if people said, “Now, General Casey, we’re ready to hear all that you have to tell us and are going to implement that.” Is that the case?

**Casey:** Now I move from the J5 to the director of the Joint Staff in January, and so I move out of the postwar planning business, unfortunately. I kept my fingers in it enough to ensure the transition went smoothly, but I was out of the business. I looked back at that and thought, *What could have been different if I had stayed there and kept banging on this?*

**Nelson:** So when you left, nobody picked up the torch?

**Casey:** My successor picked up the torch, but I forget how long the gap was. He picked up the torch and did it and worked it with Feith. By that time you had ORHA, and you had Garner there. He had a little office in the Pentagon with butcher paper on the wall, in a little corner.

**Bakich:** Did you go to the rock drill that ORHA ran in January or February? I think it was at NDU, if I’m not mistaken.

**Casey:** That’s what I was talking about. That was the seminar. They call it a rock drill; I don’t know why.

**Bakich:** That was Garner’s phrase, yes. How many people were there?

**Casey:** I remember 50 or 60.

**Riley:** I want to go back and ask you once again—You had said that you started attending the lunches with Steve Hadley.

**Casey:** Maybe we need to go back to that. They’re consumed with war planning for one thing, but the other thing was, there was this mindset from Rumsfeld and crew that we ought not stay there. Again, I don’t have direct, firsthand knowledge of that, but Abizaid says Rumsfeld was very clear about that with Franks and Franks was following that guidance, and that was a problem. And from what I’ve read in his book, he doesn’t own up to the impact that that direction had on the force.

**Perry:** That is, Secretary Rumsfeld does not?

**Casey:** Yes. In President Bush’s book, he says the second biggest failing after no weapons of mass destruction was reducing the number of troops early on in the mission. That led to this big spike in insecurity that led to the insurgency. To me, that was Rumsfeld’s desire. That’s what he was pushing on the military.

**Nelson:** He ended up looking awfully smart in the prewar planning, right? Telling General Franks, You don’t need 400,000; you can do it with such and such, and on the ground—
Casey: No, he did. In fact, my conclusion about the civil-military interaction in the run-up to that war plan was that it was pretty good. The President was involved, and the Secretary of Defense. It was very good and it produced a very good and successful war plan. Unfortunately, we miscalculated on the front end and we miscalculated on the back end.

Riley: Which takes me back to my question about Steve Hadley and your experience with him. You said you’re meeting with him on a regular basis for lunch during some interval before you move on.

Casey: The lunch meetings give way to the Frank Miller meetings. The deputies are there and they’re doing their thing. They’re listening to the war plans and they’re asking themselves, OK, what are we really doing about the postwar? That got things germinating and then it kind of evolved.

Riley: My question was about your own sense of confidence in your window onto the White House. Presumably, Hadley is the person that you’re dealing with most after you—You’ve mentioned this National Security Council meeting that you attended. Are you getting the sense that Steve Hadley is asking the right questions? Is there a fairly high level of confidence between the community of people who are meeting with Hadley and the White House itself at this point, not specifically on postwar planning but just more generally?

Casey: I’m reacting to your question now and I don’t remember thinking that Hadley was disengaged or not engaged in the right things. I don’t think he was doing a good job of resolving differences between State and Defense, but Condi Rice couldn’t do that either—Powell and Rumsfeld. I fault Defense. In my mind, it was the intransigent attitude of Rumsfeld and Feith that really made working in the interagency difficult, and it caused longer-term problems.

Riley: And your sense is that Rumsfeld is aware of these perceptions of his assistants and deputies in the department, and he felt that they were doing the job that he wanted them to do? Or is he just blind to—

Casey: No. I think he’s even encouraging it, “it” being the interagency frictions. He’s not trying to generate interagency frictions; he just has such a low opinion of State’s capabilities that he was convinced that the Department of Defense could do it better.

Nelson: This may be beyond your knowledge, but the Secretary of State at this time is not some striped pants boy. Why wasn’t Colin Powell an effective voice on military affairs, including postwar planning?

Casey: One, he’s not the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs anymore, and he’s professional enough to know that that’s not his job. His job is no longer to give military advice. His job is to give the political and diplomatic advice. Now when you read Franks’s book and you read some of the other books—You never take the uniform off completely, so Powell lets it be known to Franks that he has real questions about the number of troops going in. He calls him up before Camp David and says, “OK, we’re going to do this; I’m going to raise this issue.” Franks gets all amped up, but then he doesn’t raise it. I think that’s the primary reason. Powell is a pro. Powell knew where his lane was, stayed in his lane, and raised his concerns privately with the military people and with Rumsfeld. That’s my view.
Nelson: But on matters of interagency planning, why wasn’t he an effective advocate for State? Rumsfeld was clearly a more than effective advocate for Defense. You’d think staying in his lane would mean pressing for genuine cooperation.

Casey: I guess I don’t know why he wasn’t more confrontational in dealing with Defense. Again, in some of the books, when he had a real problem, when he was afraid that Cheney and Rumsfeld were going to push us away from the UN and go without a UN resolution, he personally went to the President, sat down with him and convinced him to go to the UN, for which all the military guys cheered.

Nelson: So that’s the fight he picked, I guess is what I hear you saying.

Casey: Yes, which was his fight. You get Rumsfeld arguing, and Cheney arguing, strongly for something that is really out of Rumsfeld’s lane, but he’s got strong opinions on it.

Riley: I want to go back and ask one general question, and there may be no relationship. There was the emergence in 2002—This is the new national security strategy that was authored by our colleague, Philip Zelikow, if I recall correctly.

Casey: [laughs] Did he really?

Riley: Well, maybe that’s an overstatement. Because you had at least an overlapping portfolio, did you play a role in that? Were you consulted about that?

Casey: I want to say that I saw copies of it before it was finalized, and had the opportunity to provide some level of input to it. You have to put yourself back in a post–September 11th environment. Are we going to act preemptively? It’s a different environment and you have to act preemptively, much as we’re doing right now. After you’ve been attacked, you can’t sit there and see a potential threat emerging and wait for it to hit you. The consequences are too significant.

Riley: So that doctrinal statement was consistent with your own internal thinking?

Casey: It absolutely was, yes. You win in war with offensive action. We believed we were at war. It was a War on Terror and it still is a War on Terror. Whatever you want to call it, it’s a long-term struggle that, for me, in terms of duration, is going to be more like the Cold War, except we’re shooting. We’re involved in the shooting.

Nelson: There wasn’t a lot of shooting during the Cold War.

Casey: The target wasn’t us. Now we’re the target. So that’s how we came at it. You had to take offensive action or you’re going to get surprised.

Riley: We’re at a good stopping point. We’ve made excellent progress and you’re being a terrific sport by letting us pummel you with these questions.

Casey: No, that’s fine.

Riley: We’ll get you into a new job when we come back.
Riley: General, I can see that you made some notes before you came in. Is there anything out of the period leading up to this change in position in early 2003 that we haven’t talked about, that you think is important and you want to talk about?

Casey: You’re talking about the director of Joint Staff position?

Riley: Right.

Casey: The stuff with [Eric] Shinseki and the meeting with all the combatant commanders comes after that.

Riley: OK, but is there anything in the period that we covered and we’ll move away from, that is important, that we’ve omitted?

Casey: I guess I’d say that I was a backbencher in this process up through December. I wasn’t directly involved in all the sessions that dealt with the war planning. I was involved with the few sessions that there were on the postwar planning.

Riley: Let me ask an evaluation question: Were you satisfied with the way the process was? Did it strike you professionally that you were doing the best that could be done?

Casey: Frankly, having been involved in postwar planning in Bosnia and Kosovo, what we did for Iraq was light-years ahead of what we had done for those two, and it was informed by what we had learned out of those. It frankly was a little frustrating for me to see that it wasn’t picked up by the action.

Bakich: Right.

Casey: I mean, the fact that we had a headquarters that had some level of training. You know, you can’t pass off to someone in three days what you’ve been working on for months, but the fact that it was there—I thought we had given the combatant commander the tools that he needed to put together a reasonable plan.

Riley: You said you were disappointed it wasn’t picked up. Who would have been the proper responsible party?

Casey: I never thought that Tommy Franks embraced the postwar mission and as I said earlier, whether that was his own bias or whether that was because of the directions he got from Secretary Rumsfeld—light U.S. footprint after we were done, and get out of there quickly.

Riley: You changed positions. Tell us, for those who are not students of this, what’s your new portfolio?
**Casey:** The director of the Joint Staff is basically the Chief of Staff of the Joint Staff. The Joint Staff is responsible for directing the operational actions of the U.S. Military. I oversaw all of the different aspects, from personnel to logistics to communications and planning. Basically, for any kind of chief of staff position, you’re a mile wide and an inch deep. I went from being embroiled deeply in the political-military things to being an inch deep on a range of different things.

**Riley:** This is not the ideal timing to be taking on a new position.

**Casey:** No. It’s in the run-up to the war and I didn’t make a clean break, because I made sure there was continuity in the postwar planning. I remember going to some National Security Council meetings in February when I was the director, but I was there not in a director’s role but more in the military policy role of the J5. I immediately became consumed by all the different aspects of the new job and gradually worked myself out of the other job, and my successor, Skip [Walter L.] Sharp, was put in.

**Riley:** Presumably the new job is Iraq.

**Casey:** It was Iraq-focused to a degree. The run-up to the war was all-consuming, between the military aspects of it, the diplomatic aspects of it, the building of the coalition in the region to get the overfly rights and the basing rights and all those things. It’s a huge effort and as the director you’re more involved in ensuring you’re cross-leveling the actions across the whole staff, the whole landscape.

**Riley:** Do you remember having a reaction as you got into this new position? Did things look better than you expected? Are you finding that the planning you’re witnessing at this stage is fundamentally screwed up or flawed in any way? Or are you just so busy that you don’t have a chance to take stock?

**Casey:** I was probably as close to the planning as any three-star in the Pentagon. In the other job, J5, as I said, I didn’t disconnect right away. I was sitting there in the meeting that they had, probably in the January time frame, where the President went around the table to all of the combatant commanders and service chiefs, and said, “Are you ready to do this?” Everybody, to a person, said yes, they were. Now, that was not a meeting where you raised your hand and said, “Hey, excuse me, there’s a problem here.” You would have had to have found your courage a long time before and been on the record with the President.

People always think that military guys get slapped for talking against what the President said, and the reality is it’s your job to provide the President military advice, the military implications of the policy. That’s your job to tell him that. All the Presidents I’ve worked for—Bush, Clinton, and Obama—wanted to hear what you had to say about the military implications. Where the generals get in trouble is they go public before they tell the President. As an example, we were having to go to the Hill to testify in “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” and we hadn’t talked to the President, and I’m saying to Admiral [Michael] Mullen, “Mike, you’ve got to get us on the President’s calendar. He’s got to hear from us.” We did and we went in and we told him what we thought and then we went up on the Hill and said what we thought. They said, “The Chiefs differ from the President,” but it was OK, because we had told the President that, and why.

But back to that meeting: If people felt strongly about the war in Iraq, they should have raised
their issues with the President well before that, and they didn’t, because we all believed that Saddam Hussein with chemical weapons was a significant threat, especially in a post-9/11 environment—to a person.

Riley: But there’s a different question between that and “Are you ready for what’s coming up?” right?

Casey: Right.

Riley: The question of justification for going in is one thing but the preparation is something else. Are you telling us that everybody across the board felt that they were prepared?

Casey: Everybody said that they were prepared.

Nelson: That’s not what Russell asked you. They said they were prepared but do they feel it? Do you think they honestly felt they were prepared?

Casey: I can’t imagine a four-star general or admiral telling the President of the United States something that they didn’t believe.

Nelson: But you just said that it would be hard to be the one to raise your hand and say anything other than yes.

Casey: And they had, but they hadn’t raised their concerns with the President beforehand. If they really felt that it was a problem, they would have been obligated to raise it with the Secretary of Defense and then the President beforehand, and nobody did.

Riley: Let me push the question in a slightly different dimension. The question posed to them was—

Casey: And, I’m going to say, I don’t remember exactly whether it was, “Are you ready or not?” I think that’s what it was. I can’t tell you specifically what the question was, but it was along those lines.

Riley: And there are written accounts in close proximity of the time that may get the specifics right. The follow-up question is—At this stage, the focus is on invading the country and making it ours, owning the country.

Casey: The focus was on overthrowing Saddam Hussein.

Riley: OK, but I was going to take it one step beyond that. Was the question put on the table at that time: “Are we ready for what’s going to happen after that, as well?” Or are you so focused on victory at this point that you’ll deal with Phase IV later?

Casey: I don’t recall any questions being asked about the postwar effort at that meeting. You raise—Here’s a good issue: When should military leaders answer the unasked question? That’s something I wrestled with. Frankly, I do believe it’s up to the civilian leaders to ask the tough questions, much as Rumsfeld and the President did, on the war planning. There was a discussion,
something in Rumsfeld’s book, and I think in Dick Myers’s book, where Rumsfeld has the chairman and the vice chairman and Wolfowitz all sitting around his table and he said, “OK, I want everybody to write down how long they think this is going to take.” And they write down things like two weeks, three weeks, a month. They were all so focused on the ground war. The mission was to overthrow Saddam Hussein. The mission wasn’t to go in and establish a free and sovereign, democratic Iraq. That’s the mission that basically John Negroponte and I evolved after we got there. It was 15 months after the ground war.

Bakich: Do you believe that Ric Shinseki would have answered that the same way, short periods, you know, a week, a month? His testimony to Congress—

Casey: Here’s the deal on Shinseki, and I have personal knowledge of this because as the three-star director of the Joint Staff I was told by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to get General Shinseki, my assignment officer, and ask him what the hell he meant. I actually invited him to my office and we had a conversation and I said, “What happened?”

I’d been pounded by [Carl] Levin before, so I knew what had happened, but he said, “Look, I went in there and Levin was pounding me, and I realized I wasn’t getting out of there without giving a number.” He said, “My one thing that I wanted to make sure I didn’t do was to give too low a number that the combatant commander got stuck with.” So he didn’t want to say 50,000 and then Tommy Franks comes in and asks for 200,000 and everybody says, “What the hell?” He said, “I went back to my time in Bosnia, I did some quick mental math and I jacked it up to make sure I didn’t get too low.” He said, “Several hundred thousand.” That’s how that all came about.

As Rumsfeld says in his book, he never corrected the record on it. He never came out and said, this is what I meant. This is what I said and why I said what I said. He’s never said that. And if he were going to speak truth to power, he needed to do it in private, to the President and the SecDef.

Riley: Right.

Casey: There’s another thing in Rumsfeld’s book about [James L.] Jones, the Marine Corps commandant; and Shinseki, the Chief of Staff of the Army, perceived to be opposed to the ground plan. I have no doubt that there were people in the Army who thought that anything less than 400,000 was terrible, because they couldn’t think any other way than conventionally. When you looked at the improvements that had been made just in precision weapons since the Gulf War, and if you looked at how much the Iraqi military had eroded and decayed since the Iran-Iraq War, it was a different ballgame, but you still had all these Army folks saying 400,000 is the answer, and they were going to be concerned if it wasn’t 400,000.

Bakich: And that’s not because they’re concerned with anything Phase IV related; it’s just the ground war.

Casey: No. It was all the ground war, and it’s all because that was the way we used to do it.

Nelson: A couple of things: One is, you said earlier that when you were in the Pentagon and the First Gulf War broke out, everybody wanted to get their ribbon. Is that part of what people are thinking, that 400,000 means I can say yes?
Casey: No, not at that point. I don’t think so. It was more that this is the way we’ve always done it. It’s Powell’s rule of decisive force. You want to have overwhelming force all the time. We had overwhelming force in Iraq; it just wasn’t on the ground. We had very precise air that could target anything that moved.

Nelson: The other thing is you’ve opened up this philosophical question: Should you speak up on something you haven’t been asked about? When you mentioned Rumsfeld then I thought, is this the kind of thing Rumsfeld was talking about when he talked about known unknowns, and unknown knowns? In other words, you are sitting there and you realize that you know something that the President needs to know but he doesn’t even have a reason to ask about it unless you bring it to his attention. Is that the kind of situation you’re talking about in answering a question?

Casey: Yes. You don’t know what the President knows or doesn’t know. Myself, I thought it was going to take five years. But it’s not a military judgment for how long we’re going to stay in a conflict; that’s a political judgment. So I said, “Well, that isn’t my call.” I told my boss that, but I was never asked that by Rumsfeld or Wolfowitz. Should I have said something to them? I think I should have.

Nelson: The President is saying our goal here is not just to overthrow Saddam. It’s to create a stable and free and democratic Iraq.

Casey: I don’t have access to what he said at that time but I’ll tell you, I believe that came later.

Nelson: You do? OK, you may be right.

Casey: Because I sure didn’t hear any talk about a free democratic Iraq in the run-up to the war. It was all about overthrowing Saddam Hussein and giving the government back to the Iraqis. That came later. In my mind, it came later.

Nelson: Well, I can’t disprove you.

Bakich: Right back around to Shinseki—You appeared slightly critical. I was wondering if you would be willing to make any comments on Wolfowitz’s performance the next day.

Casey: I think Wolfowitz was wrong. He was wrong in rebuking Shinseki. Dick Myers said that in his book. Rumsfeld, I think, says it in his book. He was wrong to lash out at Shinseki. Nobody called him. Nobody called him and said, “Why did you say what you said?” They got me to ask him.

Bakich: Right.

Casey: Part of it is because Ric had already—Ric’s bridges with them had already been burned over an Army issue, the Crusader, which is an artillery piece that we wanted, which we didn’t need, but we kept pushing it. So he had lost credibility already.

Riley: Are you actively engaged when the ground war begins? Is that something that is—

Casey: Well, we’re all actively engaged by that time. It was all about the ground war.
Riley: What is your job at that point?

Casey: I’m orchestrating the staff.

Riley: What are the issues then, that you would typically be involved in?

Casey: The issues were, in the lead up to the war do we have everything in place? You’ve got the satellite coverage. You’ve got the bandwidth. There was a big scramble going up to the end, making sure that all this stuff was in place. And then of course, CENTCOM comes in at the last minute with, hey, we’ve got to have this, or this basing right is not in place, or they’ve said no. There was all kind of turmoil going up to the end.

Then, this is an interesting one for civilian-military relations: I remember being at the White House, and for some reason I think this is in February. Franks is briefing his plan and it got a little complicated at the end because we wanted to have some options. He starts talking about G-day, which is ground day, A-day, which is air day, N-hour, which is the actual time the operation begins on D-day, which is the day the operation begins. I’m sitting there listening and people are asking questions and the chairman is interjecting, and I’m sitting there thinking, I’m not sure I have a clue. And the question from the President was, “When does the war start?” [laughter] I’m sitting there, thinking, Gee, I couldn’t tell you when the war starts.

It adjourns. We go back and I call Frank Miller and I say, “Frank, when does the President think the war starts?” We were like two weeks apart, and it was because there was no definition about when we felt hostilities had begun. When you put the Special Forces guys across the border, is that when the war starts? When you start taking down the berm that the ground forces are going to drive through, is that when the war starts? When you drop the first bomb, is that when the war starts? It wasn’t clearly defined in anybody’s mind, and as a result it was a classic example of how military guys with their briefings and their acronyms can confuse the hell out of civilians.

Riley: You mentioned all of the complications of getting all the pieces put together, and there’s a problem at the last minute with Turkey.

Casey: That wasn’t a last-minute problem because that had been going on for a while.

Riley: Did you have a piece of that?

Casey: I did.

Riley: Tell us about it.

Casey: I actually went to Turkey with Secretary Wolfowitz in December of 2002, to talk to the Turks. I was in the meetings. The government—[Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan’s party had just won the election, so they had just stepped in. He was still under some type of ban from holding elective office, for something that had happened before, so we met with [Abdullah] Gül, who was really the Foreign Minister, but was the acting Prime Minister. It was a matter of months before Erdoğan was able to come in and take his role as President.

I remember going through this whole process. I went over and talked to the military guys. We
had this mindset that if we could convince the military guys to open basically what amounted to a second front, we could put pressure on Iraq from the north as well as from the south, which involved us landing a division in Turkey, moving them across Turkey and then down into Iraq.

**Bakich:** That’s the 4th Infantry.

**Casey:** It’s 4th Division, yes. We felt that if we could convince the military, they’d prevail on the civilian leaders. We got into this meeting with everybody, and we were offering them about $1 billion in economic assistance. They wanted $3 billion. Ships passing in the night, you know? It’s a classic perception and misperception in international politics. We felt that we were talking to them on their wavelength; they felt like they were talking to us on our wavelength, and we just went right past each other. They s ultimately put it to a vote of parliament and the parliament said no. So now we’ve got the 4th ID [Infantry Division] doing circles with their equipment out in the Mediterranean Sea. We lost with the Turks, so we had to come around and bring them in from the south.

**Nelson:** What was the wavelength problem? Because it sounds like it was a matter of $3 billion, $1 billion, that’s—

**Casey:** We both felt that the other would cave to their wavelength.

**Nelson:** Oh, I see.

**Casey:** We felt that they really were just saying this because that’s how they bargained; but really $1 billion is what they’d take, and then it would all be OK.

**Perry:** Was that also over the Kurdish issue? Were they bringing that up, or did you know that that was part of it?

**Casey:** I don’t recall them raising the Kurdish issue. It certainly could have been. I can’t remember when the head of the Kurdish resistance was captured. I can’t remember if it was before or after that. But anyway, I don’t recall that being part of the problem, part of the issue. We just thought we offered them everything that they needed and it wasn’t everything that they needed.

**Riley:** Interesting, because I had the same reaction Mike did, that if you’re in a bargaining situation where money is the only issue, then compromise seems possible, but you’re indicating that we must have felt that they needed this more than we did, and vice versa.

**Casey:** There was more going on there, I think, than we understood, and that’s not out of the ordinary, because you have a brand-new government that’s not fully seated.

**Perry:** But I also thought it was a balance of power issue again, in the region, that their concern was if you removed Saddam, that would allow the Kurds in the north of Iraq to have freedom, and Turkey is always worried about their unifying with the Turkish Kurds.

**Casey:** I’m sure that was on some people’s minds in Turkey. I don’t recall that being raised as part of the discussions.
Perry: But something like that, an ethnic group issue and power issue.

Casey: Well, the whole idea of us going in from the north was to speed it up and to get it gone quicker, and the quicker it got done, the less likely there would be a Kurdish problem in the aftermath of it.

Nelson: But there might have been a subtext there as you indicate, such that if you had said, “OK, $3 billion,” then there would have been another issue. If they really didn’t want you to come through, that might have been.

Perry: Right. But it’s just also a basic sovereignty issue for them?

Casey: Yes, and how much did they really want to be a part of the overthrow of their neighbor?

Bakich: So the 4th ID’s equipment is spinning and you’ve got to find a way around. I can imagine that was anxiety-provoking for planners. At the same time, a ground campaign doesn’t last a long time, so how was the loss of that northern front accommodated? Efficiently, I’m assuming.

Casey: Well, just the threat of that northern approach fixed forces in the north and they weren’t available in the south.

Bakich: Right.

Casey: I don’t remember exactly when the Turkish parliament voted, but I suspect it was December, maybe even January. I don’t know.

Perry: I think it was January.

Casey: But the 4th ID basically had to embark and then go up north, so it took longer for us to get control of the northern part of the country, which is the northern part of the Sunni triangle, which was ultimately problematic.

Riley: Is there something that we should know from you, from your perspective, that would be helpful for us to understand the ground war, or is that you’re basically taking care of your staff work and we can move on to the next phase?

Casey: The only thing about the ground war is that in all the discussions leading up to the war, the military guys are trying to convey to our civilian political leaders that this is war, and things are going to happen that we don’t expect to happen, and it’s not going to go exactly as we’re telling you now. Everybody’s got that, right? And at one point the President or somebody said, “Well, what if this happens?” And Tommy said, “That will be really ugly.”

Fast-forward to the war start. You’re going through the war and we have the big sandstorm and everything grinds to a halt. Everybody is struck with this image, Holy shit, we could lose. What’s going on? We’re stopped. And Tommy—I kept saying, “I told you it was going to be ugly,” and they said, “But you didn’t say this ugly.” Then the storm lifted and we got on, but there was this 24-to-36-hour period where people were going, “Holy shit, what if we lose?”
Perry: Are they thinking of the attempts to save the hostages in Iraq, in the sandstorm?

Casey: I don’t know.

Perry: Are they having bad flashbacks?

Casey: They’re having flashbacks of every bad thing that could happen. That’s about it on the ground war.

Riley: All right, so we win the ground war. We’ve had all this discussion of Phase IV planning. It’s now time for dealing with the next phase, right?

Casey: Yes.

Riley: Do you have any observations about the beginning of that, and particularly, can you help us—

Casey: I’m disconnected from what goes on now, on the ground, and between CENTCOM and [L. Paul, III] Bremer. I don’t really have firsthand knowledge.

Riley: So the Garner-Bremer stuff is outside your knowledge.

Casey: I don’t get in there to see Bremer until I go with Wolfowitz the week before Bremer passes control over to the Iraqis. That 15-month window, I don’t have a lot of direct knowledge or visibility there.

Riley: Do you have any direct knowledge of the—I mean, one of the things that we want to transition into, because of the role that you’re about to get, is your perceptions of the White House and how it’s operating and supporting the Defense Department. How early, maybe earlier than where we are now, are you beginning to get a read on how this President operates and how this White House operates when it comes to the prosecution of the war and the aftermath?

Casey: Having been involved in some of the meetings with the President in the decision to go to war in Iraq, I personally saw him as someone who focused on the big issues, who tried to get to the essence of the problem, and was very supportive of the military, but not in a way that he didn’t ask the military hard questions. I guess the only other thing I had was I never quite had a feel for was how much he deferred to Rumsfeld and how much he wanted to do himself. I never could quite calculate that and frankly I’ve thought more about it after my time in Iraq, asking myself how much of what the President was conveying to Rumsfeld got conveyed to me in the same manner that the President conveyed it to Rumsfeld.

Riley: Sure.

Casey: I don’t know the answer to that question. My direct interaction with the President was usually over a video teleconference with the whole National Security Council, everybody sitting around there. It was pretty formal.

Riley: We’ll go ahead and try to fast-forward to the important phase here. One other preliminary
question: Maybe in one instance you’ve mentioned the Vice President or the Vice President’s office up until now. How big a presence was Cheney, and/or Cheney’s people, in these networks and discussions, as you’re observing them or as you’re hearing about it from your colleagues who are working with the White House?

**Casey:** At this point, I’m more hearing about it than I am seeing it myself, and I don’t really start interacting directly with the Vice President until I’m actually the commander in Iraq. But in this period here, what I’m hearing is the same kind of chatter that’s out there, that Cheney is pushing to go to war in Iraq, Wolfowitz is pushing to go to war in Iraq, Feith is pushing. I don’t know how true that was, but I think they believed what a lot of us believed, which was that Saddam Hussein with weapons of mass destruction was too great a threat in a post-9/11 environment.

**Perry:** Could I just tease out a little bit of that if possible? The literature that these people have written, and their statements about Saddam Hussein, particularly for Feith and Wolfowitz—They say he’s the late-20th-century and early-21st-century encapsulation of Adolph Hitler. He’s a horrible, brutal, murderous dictator and he must be removed. But you had said a while back that right after 9/11 we looked at the state sponsors of terrorism and came to that region: to Syria, Iraq, and Iran. And of course one could say the same thing about the heads of those other two countries, and you said to us that Iraq was chosen *in part* because it would be the easiest to take on, because presumably it would be easier to topple Saddam than the two brutal dictators in the other two countries.

**Casey:** I don’t know that the study we did was a factor in the President’s decision or not. It was a study that we did, that I showed to Hadley.

**Perry:** But that study said that, of those three that we know to be state sponsors of terrorism, if you’re going to pick one that would be the easiest to topple, it would be Iraq.

**Casey:** Militarily. Going back to the evil dictator ide—At some point, probably toward the end of the discussions, we said that we could have made a human rights case for overthrowing Saddam Hussein. He killed about 300,000 of his own people. But we focused on the weapons of mass destruction and we emphasized that more than we did the human rights cause.

**Perry:** Thank you, because that is why I asked that question. After we came back from lunch, you mentioned you had to get Saddam because of the chemical weapons, and so the WMD.

**Casey:** That was a threat to the United States.

**Perry:** Right, in the context of post-9/11.

**Riley:** Briefly, you’re the Army Vice Chief of Staff and get your fourth star in October of 2003. The briefing book says that you’re to oversee a multiyear reorganization of the Army. Is there something substantial we should park on in that regard?

**Casey:** One of the ways I think the President does play in this is that when Shinseki left the job as Army Chief of Staff, Rumsfeld, and probably to some extent the President, felt that we needed someone to really transform the Army. What’s really interesting is Shinseki was busting his ass to change the Army, and he wasn’t getting any traction until September 11th. We were so
focused on conventional war, and we convinced ourselves that that was our mission, that he was having a hell of a time getting people to change.

**Bakich:** Shinseki was a big proponent of the Strykers, wasn’t he?

**Casey:** He was.

**Bakich:** That was his thing.

**Casey:** It was. He had a big transformational plan in place but it wasn’t getting any traction. That’s when they picked Pete Schoomaker. They pulled him out of retirement because Rumsfeld didn’t feel there was any Army four-star or three-star who could move the Army forward, so he brought in a Special Operator, the former head of Special Operations Command, to lead that change. I had actually gone through selection of Delta Force with Pete Schoomaker, and we’ve known each other since then. He was the assistant division commander in the 1st Calvary Division, when I was the chief of staff there.

I got a call one day from Jack Keane, Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, saying, “Can you come down?” I was the director and I went down and he said, “Pete would like you to be his Vice.” I said, “Wow.” I assumed that came from Pete. Looking back at it, Pete was all Special Ops and I was really all conventional, but I had a little overlap. He’d worked with me and I guess he thought I could help him change the Army. I probably would have a little more credibility with the mainstream Army than he would. So that’s what we did. We sat down and he said, “Look, this is going to be a long slog,” because we were talking about completely changing the organization of every brigade in the Army and the Army Guard and the Army Reserve. This was not something that was going to be done in a couple of years. If we had done it in peacetime, it would have taken 20 years. We did it in wartime and it took us seven.

**Bakich:** Just so we’re clear, you’re talking about the transition to brigade combat teams as the primary unit. Is that what you’re talking about?

**Casey:** Yes, the brigade as a combat unit. He began the movement of the Army away from a Cold War conventional Army into a more versatile Army that could do a lot more different things. It was, as I said, a seven-to-twenty-year proposition, and that’s what I mean by multiyear reorganization of the Army. It took seven years. The nice thing about my going back as the Chief later was that I was on the ground when we approved all the concepts, and I was able to finish it. This is kind of a rule of thumb: if you don’t get it done in two Chief’s tenures, which is eight years, it doesn’t get done.

**Bakich:** And this has the effect of essentially making the Army a much more modular type of organization, where you can take smaller, more complete units.

**Casey:** Pete used to say, “I have a pocket full of $20 bills, but I don’t need $20 bills; I need fives. I need a lot of fives.” And what happened was when you took a brigade out of division, you took the supporting elements out of the division elements, and now you’ve got an unwhole division but a whole brigade, and that was the problem. President Bush was a big proponent of that. Pete Schoomaker went to the President twice directly to get funding, to ensure that when we canceled the major future helicopter program, we kept the money to improve Army aviation, and
the President approved that. Then, the President approved our keeping an extra 30,000 people so that we could make the transition while we were still fighting a war. Pete Schoomaker and the President interacted on a couple of those things, so he gets some credit from us for helping that.

Nelson: You said you weren’t involved in the early stages of the postwar reconstruction, but surely you were an informed observer, I mean you thought about this stuff a lot. I wonder, as you saw Jay Garner making decisions, as you saw Paul Bremer making decisions, did you have opinions or judgments about the wisdom of those decisions?

Casey: Well, the two big ones are the decision to disband the army and—

Perry: De-Ba’athification.

Casey: De-Ba’athification.

Nelson: You knew right off the bat that those were huge decisions?

Casey: They were fundamentally different from what we had been planning. It’s interesting, I asked Frank Miller about this. You know, one of the things that nobody writes about in their books is who made the decision to de-Ba’athify. Bremer did. I said, “Frank, how the hell did that happen?” Now this is secondhand I’m relating to you.

Riley: This is not a court of law, so we love hearsay evidence.

Casey: Frank says it was a Friday afternoon or something, and Bremer’s getting ready to go into the country. He comes in and he briefs the principals to the National Security Council that he intends to disband the army and to impose a very stringent level of de-Ba’athification. It had not been raised with anybody beforehand, and it’s one of those bureaucratic moments when nobody says anything because something this big surely had been discussed with somebody and their deputy must not have informed them. I can just see this going through their minds. And nobody said anything, and they adjourned the meeting.

Nelson: That makes perfect sense.

Riley: You know, we’ve talked to a lot of people and gotten various pictures, but I’m not sure that I’ve had it explained quite in that way.

Casey: Frank was there, and that’s what he said happened, and it’s just screwy enough to be true.

Riley: And because Bremer says in his book that he vetted the idea, or informed the White House, but you can’t find any—OK, thank you.

Nelson: It sounds like something else might have been going on. What do you think about this: Somebody says, “Well, we’re going to have a zero tolerance policy for this,” and nobody wants to say, “Zero tolerance? Really?” Because it sounds so good. De-Ba’athification. Disband the army. Would people have thought, Gosh, how do you argue against that sort of thing? Because they sound so good.
Casey: We on the military side had always said, as we were doing this planning, that the level of de-Ba’athification ought to be reserved to political appointees, the guys that Saddam Hussein put in power. Having been in the Balkans and everything, what I told people was, look, they’re going to tell on each other. We’re going to know that “Mike” was really a bad Ba’athist about three weeks after we get there because everybody’s going to tell us.

Perry: We’ve always said that about him.

Casey: We needed someone to make the trains run.

Perry: And teach.

Casey: And do all that stuff.

Nelson: I’m just thinking about the dynamics of a meeting where nobody speaks up, even though probably half the people in the room are thinking, Really?

Bakich: I’ve seen Frank Miller’s quote.

Casey: That’s what he says, right?

Bakich: I’m paraphrasing but he says everybody knows the difference between a well-thought-out plan that’s been vetted properly and something that’s blown through the system at breakneck speed, and that’s what it was. No one said anything because it was essentially surreptitiously pushed through, with very little consideration of the consequences.

Riley: What are we missing, before we get you into the meat?

Bakich: General [Ricardo] Sanchez is a three-star. He’s tapped to—Do you have any thoughts of a three-star being put in charge at this time or should it matter? Does it matter?

Casey: Three-star versus four-star—At that time, we thought that a three-star, 3rd Army commander, was appropriate, and it’s because of the composition of the headquarters. The Army headquarters is a much more seasoned headquarters than is a corps headquarters. You have full colonels as staff officers, and generals as principal staff officers, in an Army. In a corps you have full colonels as the principal staff officer and then you have captains and majors as the assistant staff officers. So the level of things that these headquarters are equipped to deal with is much different. A corps is basically the operational headquarters and the Army is designed to operate at the theater strategic and the strategic level.

Based on what we knew then, having a three-star with the Army headquarters in charge seemed to me to be appropriate. Putting the most junior three-star in the Army in charge of that mission, with an immature headquarters, was a terrible mistake. That’s on the military. It was part of the problem of getting everybody out of there. I was amazed. I remember someone telling me that the 3rd Army was heading out and I’m going, What? What the heck is going on?

The other problem was that there were some personality issues with Dave McKiernan and Scott Wallace. Scott Wallace was the corps commander and McKiernan was the theater commander.
They both basically flunked their orals with Rumsfeld. Dave is a wonderful, very capable guy, but he is laconic to a fault. I personally told him, “Dave, Rumsfeld is coming. He wants to know that you have the persona that can lead this organization and be the face of the mission.” Again, I can’t tell you what was going on in Rumsfeld’s head, but I did know that he had an issue with McKiernan, and he had an issue with Scott Wallace over some comments he made during the ground war, which I don’t recall exactly right now, which led to putting Sanchez in. Rick was a very capable guy but we, the military, didn’t set Rick up for success.

Riley: Is there anything else in this period, building on Mike’s question—you own perceptions about things going well or things going not well on the ground in Iraq, apart from these early decisions of the civilian-military?

Casey: The whole issue was the constant tension between Rumsfeld’s view to get out as quickly as we can and we weren’t there for the long haul, and what the military was doing on the ground. Then there was some discussion about sending in the 1st Cavalry Division. Everybody thinks that Rumsfeld said no. Well, basically we recommended not sending in the 1st Cavalry Division at the end of the ground war, because we had nothing left. That was the only heavy division left that wasn’t in Korea, so it was the only flexibility we had left. We were concerned that our enemies would see us totally committed and then try something. So we said no, we need to hold off on that. Ultimately, they became the first one to rotate in to relieve the troops on the ground. That’s another thing that we didn’t think our way through on the military side—planning for a long-term rotation. Again, you go back to the impact of the mindset that was created by the Secretary of Defense, that this not a long-term proposition. We’re in there and we’re getting out. But then you start seeing the second and third order effects of that decision all the way down and it’s problematic.

The only other thing that happened in that time was Abu Ghraib. I’ve been watching the Ray Rice stuff and there’s all this discussion about, well, we didn’t see the video. We got a call from Dave McKiernan saying, “There are pictures here and they’re really bad.” We said, “OK, don’t put them on the Internet. Get them back to us as fast as you can.” So he sends them by courier and some guy comes running in a couple days later and gives them to us and we go, “Holy shit, these are really bad.” He said, “I told you they were really bad.” We said, “No, you didn’t say they were this bad.” It’s the visual image.

It fell on me as the Vice—I got a call from Larry Di Rita, who was the public affairs guy for the Secretary, who said, “I haven’t even seen the Taguba Report yet,” (the report that was done). The next day, I had to do ten o’clock at the Senate Armed Services, eleven-thirty on the House, and a one o’clock press conference at the Pentagon. I was the stickee to roll it out. I kept people engaged so that my boss and General Abizaid and Secretary Rumsfeld could go testify the next day on what had happened. It was one of those things. We didn’t really know what had happened. We were piecing it together based on the reports we were getting out of the theater.

Bakich: Apart from the incident itself, what’s your assessment of how institutional Army handled it?

Casey: It’s a classic example of how the institutions are slow to adapt to significant changes in
the environment. What this highlighted to me as the Vice Chief was that here we were in a completely different form of war than we had trained to fight for 30 years, and all of our doctrine and all of our prisoner of war handling procedures were designed for a conventional war. In conventional war, we had frontlines, and the people who are in contact with the prisoners move them as quickly as they can, back to the rear area where they are dealt with in a prisoner of war camp and facility. Most of the capability to do that was in the Guard and Reserve, because it’s not something that you need significant numbers for in peacetime.

Now you’re in a fundamentally different situation. And oh, by the way, the kind of prisoner of war training you get in peacetime is you find a dummy on the ground and he’s got a map stuck in his pocket, and if you do your search procedures right you find the map and you get information. That’s how it’s played. There’s very little interrogation training and things like that. So these are all skills that are not only being relearned, but they’re being relearned in a fundamentally different environment that our doctrine hadn’t prepared us for, so we had to adapt. It was after I got to Iraq when they published a new manual, which was great, and it actually became law, Senator [John] McCain led this effort, I think. But that’s how long it takes. I’m not saying it’s good or bad, but it takes a long time for institutions to adapt.

**Nelson:** Did you think Abu Ghraib was an isolated problem or did you think it was symptomatic of some deeper problem in the Army?

**Casey:** I thought it was an isolated problem. I still do. These unsupervised thugs—I believe that was the problem. It’s not something that’s rampant across the Army.

**Nelson:** But the fact that they were unsupervised, and that thugs were put in that position—Was that symptomatic of anything?

**Casey:** It was symptomatic of the fact that you have this very conventional force now doing very unconventional things, and people have to change and adapt. Guardsmen and reservists, because of the amount of training that they have, are much more susceptible to be going in the wrong direction than the guys on active duty, just because of the amount of training that they have.

**Nelson:** This is maybe getting us further along than we want to be at this point, but the presence of Guardsmen and reservists, the presence of privately employed contractors of various kinds, were a massive part of our armed presence in Iraq after the war, maybe before the war was won. Is that something new, and do you see advantages or disadvantages to that?

**Casey:** Well, first, we couldn’t have done it without the Guard and Reserve. We couldn’t have sustained a rotation for as long as we did without the Guard and Reserve, and we couldn’t have made the transformation of the Army to the force that was going to be much more effective in this type of environment if we weren’t able to put Guard and Reserve units in there in the first rotation so we could change the rest of the Army. We couldn’t have done it without the Guard and Reserve.

Back to the institutional aspects: It’s a fundamentally different model for them now. We brought these guys and gals on, using the old World War II mobilization model. You throw the switch and you start cranking out divisions to go to Europe. Well, that isn’t what happened. Rumsfeld gets a lot of criticism for making us take these big deployment orders apart so he could feed the...
units into Kuwait without tipping our hand that we were actually going to war. But the system we had in place didn’t allow for that, so Rumsfeld is challenging the system while some Army guys are saying, “What a jerk.” I’m saying that we were the jerks because we can’t adapt our systems to meet the political needs of the President and the Secretary of Defense.

**Bakich:** So this is the whole dustup with Rumsfeld taking apart the TPFDD [Time-Phased Forces Deployment Data].

**Casey:** On the TPFDD, exactly—I sided with Rumsfeld on that. Just real quick, but I actually sat in the Tank, where all the chiefs meet, and I heard the Army Vice Chief, or maybe it was the Army Operations Deputy, say that the President needed to let them know six months in advance when we were going to war, so we could mobilize the port-opening package that would receive the troops. It was one of those moments when, as soon as he said it, everybody went, “What? You’re going to go tell the President that; I’m not going to tell the President that.” Again, it’s the nation now adapting to a fundamentally different environment, but the institutional systems don’t adapt that fast.

**Nelson:** How about the contractors?

**Casey:** Contractors have been around since Bosnia. They were there in Bosnia and they were there in Kosovo, so that is not a new thing. I forget exactly when it was, but I want to say maybe late ’80s. It was the late ’80s, early ’90s, because that’s when we were drawing down the Army from 780,000 to 480,000 to 300,000 people. Somebody went in and said, OK, we’ve got 200,000 logistics troops and they cost us X-billion bucks a year. If we go to contractors and plan to use contractors to support ourselves during nonmajor war operations, it will only cost us this. Even if we have to use them for five years, then it’s a bargain. So people said OK, and it worked in Bosnia and it worked in Kosovo, which were relatively small deployments. It worked in Iraq and it worked in Afghanistan, for the logistical contractors.

The security contractors were another story. It was another example of a new thing. It took us until after I left, really, to put them under the control of the Multi-National Force commander. They were under the Ambassador’s control up to that time. The way we kept “control” over them was we ran an operations center for civilian security contractors and if they wanted to get intelligence from us about what was going on around the country then we’d say, OK, you come into our meeting, then you have to do X, Y, Z, and you have to report to us so we have some idea of what’s going on.

**Bakich:** And was there pushback from—

**Casey:** Most of these guys are mature, seasoned special operators who have been around a while. There’s the “lunatic” 10 percent in any organization. There were some bad guys, some real bad guys. Most of these guys went along with the program.

**Riley:** OK. Tell us your story of being designated Commander of the Multi-National Force. I think we’re to that stage. Is there anything we missed?

**Casey:** No. So, I’m sitting there in my office—
Riley: You haven’t been there very long.

Casey: I’m the Vice Chief. I can’t remember how long it was.

Riley: It was October to May.

Casey: It was October to May, yes. The Chief calls me in and he says, “Put together a list of people, three and four stars, who could take over the mission in Iraq from Sanchez.” The Vice usually did most of the general officer actions for the Chief. I said, OK, and so I did, and I remember I took them over to him. He was sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of Quarter One. He looked at the list and we talked through it and then he looked at me and said, “Your name is not on the list,” and I said, “Well, I thought you wanted me to stay here and work with you to get the Army transformed.” He said, “I did, but you could do this.” I said, “Yes, I know I could do this.” He just nodded, “OK, thanks,” and I left.

Perry: Excuse me, can I stop you there? Why did you say, “I know I can do this?”

Casey: Because I’d been the J5, and I’d had experience in Bosnia and Kosovo and postwar operations. I felt I was very prepared. I had limited Middle East experience but I had that time in Cairo and I felt I knew a little bit about it.

Perry: So when you were putting the list together, it crossed your mind that you could do this?

Casey: It sure did. [laughter]

Perry: But traditionally, you would not, I presume—

Casey: Put my own name on the list? If we had not had the conversation that he wanted me to stay and help with the transformation of the Army, I might have put my name on the list.

Nelson: And you welcomed the question.

Casey: Yes, I did welcome the question.

Riley: That’s important.

Casey: Then Abizaid comes into town and he comes by and sees me and says, “It’s down to you, me, and McKiernan as the names that are going to be presented to the President to replace Sanchez.” I said, “Holy shit.” This goes from a maybe list—I can’t remember if it was Tuesday or Wednesday—and then Thursday I’m sitting in the office with my boss and the phone rings and they said it’s Abizaid. Pete Schoomaker walks over to his desk, takes the call and he said, “OK, OK, OK.” He hangs up and says, “You’re going to Iraq.” And I thought at that time that it was imminent. You always forget about the pesky confirmation process.

Perry: And your wife?

Casey: That’s another story. I was still living in the J5’s house, and we were just moving into the Vice Chief of Staff’s quarters, because Jack Keane had moved out of the Vice Chief of Staff
quarters late. This was now May, and we hadn’t moved in yet. That Monday, when I was giving Schoomaker the list, they were picking up our furniture at the one house and taking it to the other house. Just about the time that Abizaid called Schoomaker, the moving van was leaving our house after delivering the last of the goods. I went home and went up to the third floor where Sheila [Casey] was unpacking boxes, and I said, in a typical infantry way, “Sit down, Dear, I have to tell you something. I’m going to Iraq.” She burst into tears. We talked about it and we just realized that we were going to leave things in the boxes, move them back into the other house, and she was going to stay there.

Pete Schoomaker was nice. I went back the next day and I told him, “I’m going, but we’re going to move the stuff back,” to Fort Meyer. He said, “Don’t be silly.” And Dick Cody, who was going to take my place, said, “I don’t want to move.” Jim Loveless, who was going to take his place, said, “I don’t want to move.” I told Sheila that, and she’s been around long enough that she called their wives and said, “Your husband is giving the house away.” Both wives said, “No, that’s true. We don’t want to move.” So Pete allowed her to stay in the Vice Chief’s house the whole time I was in Iraq, which was a big relief for me.

Riley: All right. What are you doing to get prepared, or what are people doing to prepare you?

Perry: For the hearings.

Nelson: This is something I want to ask about. Would you regard having to go before Congress, now that you’re no longer a junior legislative staffer in the Pentagon, as, “I have to go talk to those clowns up on Capitol Hill,” or did you regard it more positively?

Casey: It’s not necessarily positive. It’s an inconvenience but it’s something that is laid out in the Constitution. It’s advice and consent. It’s something that you have to do, not something that you like to do. But like a lot of things in Washington, you do it, and you do it well. So I went around and met with everybody on the committees beforehand, and talked to them about things. I got a lot of questions about whether this or that was my idea or Rumsfeld’s idea, and I’d say no, it was my idea, if it was. The hearing was very sparsely attended, so much so that Hillary Clinton looked around and it was my family, Brad Graham and one other reporter, and it was basically empty, and she said something like, “You’re not a very popular guy.” I said, “I don’t know how to take that.”

Nelson: Did you feel like you learned anything from talking to Members of Congress, that they had insights that were of use to you?

Casey: Some. Pat Roberts gave me his copy of the Marine Corps Small Wars Manual, which I thought was very interesting. What I got more than anything was the views of Senators about what was going on, so I knew the issues that I was going to have to deal with from their perspective, and that’s very helpful. Nobody likes going to the dentist, and nobody likes having a confirmation hearing, but it was a breeze compared to the next one.

Perry: Can you tell us about the dinner that you had at the White House before you left for Iraq?

Casey: Yes. This came from Rumsfeld, I think. The President was having a dinner for John Negroponte and his wife, Diana. Rumsfeld—this is what he told me—suggested that he invite
me, too, so he could get to know me, which I thought was pretty smart. So they invited us and we went there and it was pretty heavy stuff, having dinner in the family quarters with a very small group at two tables. I had a minute with the President. We walked in and we were walking down the hallway and he was talking about having just met Ghazi Yawar, the President of Iraq, at something in South Carolina. He told me the story about his father meeting the Prime Minister of Japan some years after the war he had fought in as a pilot, and how he felt meeting him now as President and having an ally there in Japan. He looked forward to the time when his successor could meet with an Iraqi Prime Minister who was an ally with us in the Middle East. That was an image that stuck with me.

Nelson: That’s pretty profound.

Casey: It is pretty profound. I took a lot from that, that he was looking to build a long-term relationship with this country.

Perry: This is presumably the closest and most personal meeting that you have had up to that point, with President Bush.

Casey: Yes, with only him, at that point.

Perry: At that point the only one. And according to our briefing book, he calls you “a block of granite.”

Casey: That comes a little later. I used to work for Vince Lombardi when I worked for the [Washington] Redskins, and we got talking about him one day. I said, “There’s a great book you ought to read, the biography of Vince Lombardi by David Maraniss,” and I gave it to him. I wrote a note on it and I gave it to him, so that was probably a year later.

Nelson: *When Pride Still Mattered.*

Riley: All right, so you go through the confirmation.

Nelson: Could I ask you about—I mean, you spent an hour, a couple of hours that evening—the impression you formed of George Bush as a man, in relation to as a President.

Casey: Warm, generous, caring, level-headed. I was sitting next to his wife, and Sheila was over next to Rumsfeld and him, but just the fact that he’s invited a relatively junior military guy to dinner—I’m thinking he’s a pretty good guy. He’s very relaxed in private and he was actually relaxed in public, but you get a sense of someone who is very comfortable in his own skin, and as I said, very warm and generous and caring. I definitely left with the view that this was somebody I could work with.

Bakich: You don’t see a President who is becoming war-weary, compared to the physical toll that you see in 2007?

Casey: Not at all.

Riley: What are you doing then? Obviously, you’re going through the Congressional hearings
and you get confirmed. Tell us about your preparation regimen for getting ready to go.

Casey: It’s interesting, and we can do a lot better job in this militarily with some help from Congress. I basically designed my own preparation program. Pete Schoomaker, to his credit, looked at me the next day and said, “Look, this is the most important thing you’re ever going to do. Give all your Vice Chief of Staff jobs to Dick Cody and get out and prepare yourself to do it.”

I basically sat down and laid out some things that I thought I should do, and then John Negroponte called probably the next day and we agreed to meet. We met the next day and we started talking. I describe it in the book in more detail, but I wanted to find out what people in Washington were thinking about what was going on in Iraq, to gain some insights about what at least people in Washington thought we should do. John and I decided right at the beginning that if we were going to be successful as a country, the military and the State Department were going to have to work together. So right from the beginning we said, “One Team—One Mission,” and we talked through how we thought we should implement that on the ground, and then we started framing our views of what we thought we needed to do.

It’s interesting, in the military, you get an operation order. “There you are, General. Go do that.” Well, at this level, you don’t get anything in writing. I expected it because I’d seen it before, and that’s what happened. My impression is political folks don’t like to put things in writing because they can be held to them. That’s a little overly cynical, but you don’t get things in writing.

We had the National Security planning directive that basically set out the division of labor between State and Defense, which was a good thing, but what it did was it guaranteed that there wasn’t going to be unity of effort. So the Ambassador and I had to create unity of effort in the field. Is there ever going to be unity of effort in these kinds of operations? The military is never ready to get put under an ambassador and an ambassador is never going to work under a general, so that’s just something that we had to get through.

The President made a speech at the Army War College in May, where he laid the mission out. So we took the speech and we copied it down: this is what the President said we’re going to do. There was the UN Security Council resolution with the letters attached, and we parsed through that and we pulled out of there, our country agreed that we were going to do for the UN. It’s interesting because everyone thinks that I came up with the idea of transitioning security to the Iraqis. It’s in the UN Security Council resolution. Right from the beginning it said that’s your mission.

We basically took these things—I typed them out on a piece of paper and Negroponte and I would talk about them and we’d adjust them—and we came up with the broad construct that to be successful as a country, we needed to do three things: We needed to help the transition to a representative government. We needed to build security forces that could maintain domestic order, and keep the terrorists out. That’s what we went in thinking we needed to do. Then we said that we were going to go in and take a month on the ground to go out and talk to people and confirm or deny the things that we thought, because the view from Washington is just that—It’s a view from Washington and it’s not the same as the view on the ground. We agreed that we were going to put together a joint mission statement when we got there, and to my knowledge,
it’s the first time that there’s been a joint mission statement signed by an ambassador and a
genral, to their respective headquarters, saying this is what we’re going to do together.

Nelson: And this was blessed by?

Casey: Blessed by us.

Bakich: Nobody.

Nelson: Because I could imagine somebody saying—I could imagine Rumsfeld saying, “You’re
taking a speech and a UN resolution and out of that you’re forming your policy? And, you’re
working one team—one mission with the State Department?” Are you surprised you didn’t get
anything like that?

Casey: No. I had sessions with Rumsfeld and with Dick Myers, and in fact they were joint
sessions. Rumsfeld was clear on a couple of things: He wanted to have a soup-to-nuts view of the
Iraqi Security Forces, because he never felt he had one. The existing plan then was three Iraqi
divisions designed to fight conventional war, and police trained to do community policing. That
was overcome by events already, and so he wanted a soup-to-nuts view of that. And then he said,
“Be careful about doing too much.” I forget exactly how he couched it, but it was to be careful
not to do too much, which resonated with me because of my experience in the Balkans. I knew
what he was talking about, that we would go and try to do everything for everybody and as a
result, you’d never be able to hand it off because you haven’t trained the people that you’re
going to replace.

Bakich: Is that what he meant or is that the way, because of your Balkan experience, you took
it? I never got the sense from anything that you’ve said today, or in your book, that you were
thinking that this was going to be a short thing. This was going to be a long-term commitment.
Rumsfeld was not seeing that. One could easily see that maybe Rumsfeld says that as a means of
saying, “Don’t overcommit,” because we’re still looking to—

Casey: I’m sure that there was some of that in there. That’s a fair question. You’re exactly right;
I interpret it through my Bosnian lens.

Bakich: But he never came back and said—

Casey: One of the other things we had was a letter from him that he put out, maybe in April,
listing all of the different things that you should try before you use U.S. forces. It was clear he
was interested in not overly committing ourselves.

Perry: Just to wrap up what Mike had asked, and that is, you were doing one to one, General
Casey with Ambassador Negroponte, what the Defense Department and the State Department
would not or could not do.

Casey: You know, I was basically told to go in there, take 30 days, make an assessment, and
then tell them what we thought we should do. I was told that by Secretary Rumsfeld. I brought
Negroponte into that because it had to be the two of us doing this. It couldn’t be just what I
wanted to do. We set out to write our joint mission statement, and to do that we stood up the Red
Team and put in charge a Senior Foreign Service officer Negroponte was very comfortable with. I put an Army two-star in there with him and we had CIA, British SIS [Secret Intelligence Service], all these folks in there, and they were doing an alternative look at the situation. Meanwhile, my staff, which was still standing up because the headquarters had only been activated in May (split out from the corps headquarters) had started a counterinsurgency plan, but they got all tied up with the April [Muqtada al-] Sadr riots, so they hadn’t gotten very far.

So we had three things going on simultaneously, the third being our going out around Iraq, talking to all different kinds of people. He kind of went his way, and I’d go my way. I’d take his political-military officer or his deputy with me when I went, so they could get some feedback about what was going on. One of the things I learned about interagency operations is if you’re going to be successful, you have to have an open kimono, because if you exclude people, they think you’re plotting against them. In Iraq, everybody could come to any meeting that they wanted to come to. It was all open. We gave ourselves 30 days to publish the new plan. The existing plan was a basically conventional plan. It was for conventional war.

Nelson: The plan you inherited?

Casey: The plan I inherited. They knew that they were past that and they were working to fix it, but the plan that was in hand wasn’t the right plan. There are so many challenges when you’re in the planning process. You could plan and plan and plan and never issue it, but there’s the old adage that an 80 percent plan violently executed now is better than the plan that never comes off the shelf. So we said, “We’re going to take 30 days. We’re going to do the best we can, and we’re going to get it out there.” And that’s what we did. We actually put the plan out before the joint mission statement went out, but I made sure that they were both sync. Then we signed the joint mission statement and then we briefed the President and the National Security Council. We said, “OK, this is it. This is how we see the situation and this is what we think we should do.”

Riley: Do you come back to Washington to do that?

Casey: I think we did it by VTC [video teleconference]. I didn’t go back to Washington until the end of the year.

Nelson: You had some insights into the difference between briefing somebody or interacting with somebody at a videoconference, and doing it in person. Most of your interactions were by videoconference, but I got the sense from something that I read that you felt like you lose a lot in that process. Could you talk about that?

Casey: Sure. I’m looking at a television screen that has this table in it, and now you’re all this big, you’re this big. [gestures]

Riley: Much smaller, just for the tape.

Perry: An inch high.

Casey: And there are staffers behind you. So you have no sense of the room, you have no sense when everybody goes, “Awww.” You can’t see that, and you have no sense of body language, you get no sense of sidebars. Even as good as the VTCs are becoming now, there can be a little
time lag, so everybody is very cautious about interrupting and about letting the conversation go on too long, so you never know if you’re done with that bit of the conversation. Do people just want to get on to the next topic? You miss the personal aspects of it.

**Nelson:** I wanted to ask you also about the Red Team concept, how that concept came into being. Was it used for your experience? What was the value of it?

**Casey:** In the Army, we would routinely use it as a way to have someone thinking about things from an enemy perspective. What’s the enemy thinking? What is their reaction going to be to your plan? I knew that the Army was still going through a transition that was going to take the whole time I was there in Iraq and then some.

**Nelson:** The U.S. Army?

**Casey:** The U.S. Army and Marine Corps, from a conventional mindset to a counterinsurgency mindset. I didn’t know what I was going to get, but I knew I was going to get a very conventional solution from the staff, which by the way was a multinational staff. If you think we were conventional, our allies were even more conventional, because they didn’t know anything else. I wanted to have some freethinkers who were operating outside of the staff process, who had no allegiance to anyone except us, to give us their ideas. I wanted to have a separate view of what was going on. I can’t speak for John [Negroponte], but I know that he had enough experience with the military that I’m sure he thought he was going to get a canned military brief, so he was pretty comfortable.

**Bakich:** Was Kalev Sepp on the Red Team?

**Casey:** No.

**Bakich:** Bill Hix?

**Casey:** He comes along later. They weren’t there yet. Anyway, the bottom line is we’ve got the campaign plan. I’m getting feedback from one group, on the campaign plan. I’m getting feedback from another group, the Red Team, and I’m getting my own insights from going out on the ground. And now I’m getting a much more holistic view of what’s going on and what I think, and I’m filling my head with things that I have no idea how I’m going to sort out.

**Perry:** How did that feel?

**Casey:** It was mind boggling, but I kind of felt I was prepared for it because of the things that I had done. I wasn’t cowed by it and I was driven by the fact that I had an obligation, as the Commander, to make sure that the men and women who were out there fighting knew what it was I wanted them to do. I was driven more by that, to make sure the men and women knew what the heck I wanted them to do, even if it wasn’t exactly right. It was more important that they had a mission and they understood what it was.

When we issued the plan, I gave the subordinate units 30 days to review it and make their own plans, and then I went all around and they briefed me back. I went all the way down to brigade level, Multi-National Force, division, brigade—three levels down—and I went to every level in
between. I visited every unit and they briefed me back, and we exchanged views. It was just a way of cross-leveling the information so I could see that they had it in their heads, and it was important that they hear my thoughts directly from me.

**Perry:** I get the sense, from all the readings, that that was your father’s approach to command.

**Casey:** He was a hands-on guy. I don’t know, it may be one of those unconscious things that I had read about him doing and I just did, but that’s kind of the way I always was anyway.

**Perry:** When we were talking about leadership earlier at lunch, that was not necessarily a leadership lesson you were taught, but something that came naturally to you.

**Casey:** I’m sure that I picked it up watching other people that I respected. I had seen, having all the different jobs I’ve had in the military—At this headquarters, you think it’s all fine, that everybody down here understands your wise words, but when you get down there you find out there’s a big disconnect. So it’s a way of just eliminating disconnects.

**Riley:** In some of the interviews, we’ve heard reference to the 8,000-mile screwdriver. Did you have problems with the 8,000-mile screwdriver? If so, is the person working it on the other end coming out of the Defense Department or is the person on the other end working it coming out of the White House?

**Casey:** The only time I felt that I was really getting the 8,000-mile screwdriver was in the summer of 2006, when the Ambassador and I got 50 questions from Steve Hadley. As a military guy, when you say, “I got 50 questions from the NSC,” everybody goes, “Oh, the 8,000-mile screwdriver.” A lot of people thought that Rumsfeld was overly meddling. I found his questions right, deep, focused. His questions caused us to think deeper about things. I had watched him do it with Franks in the ground war. I expected it; I wasn’t cowed by it. I was comfortable enough disagreeing with him. He asked good questions. The President generally asked pretty good questions. Cheney always asked good questions. You know, when you’re in the meeting and there’s one guy in the back who is really smart, and you know he always asks one really great question that nobody else has thought about? That was Cheney.

**Nelson:** Can you think of an example?

**Casey:** Right after the mosque blew up, he said, “Is this a great ploy that [Abu Musab al-] Zarqawi has used to foment civil war?” And I said, “Unfortunately, I’m afraid you’re right; that’s exactly what’s happened here.” This was early on in the process and he had hit it right on the head.

**Nelson:** You mentioned the military, and you and the Ambassador, State, Defense and so on, but at what point do you bring the Iraqis into the equation as an independent voice?

**Casey:** Early on. I think there’s a section in the book where Negroponte and I are going through this. We’re getting our plan together, our joint mission statement, and we’re getting the campaign plan together, and then we look at each other and go, “You know, we can do everything that we just talked about right, and still lose if we don’t get the Iraqis onboard.” He came into my office and closed the door and sat down and said that, and I said, “Yes, you’re
right.” So then we started bringing them in.

This was now a matter of weeks after we got on the ground. The challenge was, we served a lot of different masters, and one of the things you’ll see in Army leadership instruction now is that we’re all talking about how, as a senior leader, you have to be able to influence people who are outside of your direct control. I had to influence the Ambassador. I had to influence the Prime Minister, the Defense Minister, and the Interior Minister of Iraq; and the CIA station chief. All these folks were ostensibly on the team, but they were working for someone else. They could often have diametrically opposed interests, so we constantly had to bring everybody in. People forget about the debilitating impact that three Iraqi governments in a two-year period had, especially with no bureaucracy. Everyone thought that we were building Iraqi ministerial capacity on a straight line, but the reality was, as soon as one government left, it went down like this. In some cases, like under [Ibrahim al-] Jaafari, they put Sadrists in these ministries and they looted the ministries. They’d take the budget—thank you very much—then they’d leave. It was awful.

**Riley:** What most surprised you on the ground when you got over there?

**Casey:** The lack of infrastructure in the Shia areas; that was the most significant thing.

**Riley:** Did you take that as a sign of something larger? Was the absence of a physical infrastructure a manifestation of what you’re finding politically there as well, in terms of people’s ability to form institutions?

**Casey:** You know, I think I saw it more as these people have nothing, and Saddam has 50 palaces all over Iraq, (I’m living in one of his hunting lodges that is borderline gaudy). That was the discrepancy, how he had so much and the people had so little.

**Riley:** What about beyond that? Were there any misperceptions that you detected, when you went over, about the condition of American preparedness to deal with what was over there?

**Casey:** I went in there with the mindset that we were fighting an insurgency. Right before I went over there, there was some friction about—The DoD didn’t want to say this was an insurgency, and Abizaid said it and got criticized for it, but you had to call it what it was. I knew, just from my own 35 years or so of service in the conventional military, that I was going to have a hard time changing the way the military thought about fighting a war. So I felt like I needed to say right up front, “This is a counterinsurgency.” We said that in the joint mission statement in the campaign plan.

Just to give you an idea of where the mindset of the military was then, I wanted to say, “Multi-National Force conducts counterinsurgency operations.” Two division commanders said it needs to say, “Multi-National Force Iraq conducts full spectrum counterinsurgency operations.” One of them said to me, “Otherwise, if you say counterinsurgency, the troops think of chasing people around in the jungle.” Even at that level, and this is the summer of 2004, the thought about the counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine wasn’t there, even at the high levels.

**Bakich:** Speaking of mindsets—I have a number of friends that I called up and said, “If you have one question to ask General Casey, what’s it going to be?” They all know that they don’t
get the answers. But you come in and you are very clear that this is a counterinsurgency campaign, but you, yourself, have to make a theoretical and intellectual choice, and that’s how to approach COIN [counterinsurgency strategy]. Do you do it from the ground up or do you do it from the top down?

Your choice, whether it’s actually a sit-down choice or if it’s something that you had to just intuit, is to focus on legitimacy-building in Baghdad as the means of winning hearts and minds. I was wondering if you could reflect on that. I read in the [David] Cloud and [Greg] Jaffe book [The Fourth Star] that you had read John Nagl’s Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife, and it’s been a couple of years since I read that. He’s advocating more of a bottom-up approach, and I was wondering if you had wrestled with these different ways of thinking about waging COIN.

Casey: I never thought about it as a top-down or bottom-up approach. It was interesting—As we worked on trying to frame the campaign plan, you had to think about it in a couple of different dimensions. You had to think about it functionally and you had to think about it regionally, or geographically. There was a geographic component to it. We said, look, to be successful, we have to succeed along several lines of operation—political lines, economic lines, military lines, and information lines, or security lines and information lines. So we had to have a plan to succeed in each of those areas.

The standard counterinsurgency doctrine says that the people are the center of gravity. We had a substantial debate among the planners, with myself, about what should be the Iraq theater center of gravity. Should it be the people, themselves, which is standard counterinsurgency, or should it be the legitimacy of the Iraqi government? My view was that the Iraqi government was more likely to deliver the Iraqi people than we, a foreign, armed force are. That’s where the idea of demonstrating the legitimacy of the Iraqi government came from. It wasn’t intended to be Baghdad focused. In fact, we did provincial reconstruction teams—provincial support teams, we called them—that came in the summer, in June maybe, of 2005, to start that process. Then by the end of 2005 we started getting some larger teams to come on.

Bakich: Right.

Casey: That was the mindset. It was that we were going to increase the legitimacy of the Iraqi government in Baghdad and provincially, and they would deliver the Iraqi people. The other thing I was concerned about goes back to: “If you tell us to do it, we’re going to do it ourselves.” I was leery of directing a force with a conventional mindset to deliver the Iraqi people. They would have tied them up and delivered them.

Bakich: Right, right.

Casey: I didn’t think it would work. So that’s that discussion. But I never thought of it as top-down, bottom-up.

Bakich: That’s interesting as well. Were you pleased with the way that the PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Team] system got rolled out?

Casey: No. Rumsfeld was always against it, because he felt that the State Department would never deliver all the assets, and he was somewhat right in that. But it took the Ambassador,
Abizaid, and me all ganging up on him and saying, “Mr. Secretary, we need to do this. It’s going to be imperfect on the State Department side. We know that, but it’s important enough for us to devote military assets to.” He said, “All right. Yes. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

**Riley:** How often are you briefing the President?

**Casey:** Usually about once a week. I’ve got two phone calls with the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman, Wolfowitz, Feith, the Vice Chairman—Those were usually the folks who were on the call. So Tuesdays and Thursdays, and then there was usually a Thursday morning video teleconference with the President.

**Riley:** Tell us how that is. You’ve mentioned a little bit about the deficiencies of the medium, but I wonder if you could tell us a bit more about the substance of the conversations. How long did they last? What is it that you’re learning about this President, that you’re now interacting with on a regular basis, whereas before it was at a remove?

**Casey:** As I thought about these, and I don’t want to be overly cynical, but they were, in my view, too tactical. Initially I was part of the problem because I would get these reports from my staff, all about, well, today we had two IEDs [improvised explosive device] and two bombs, and I realized, after doing that once, that’s a recipe for disaster. I’ve got to get their eyes out of the tactical stuff, into more strategic matters. So I would take the stuff the staff gave me, but it became my responsibility to figure out what were the important things that the President needs to know? The VTC would start off, and the Ambassador would give an update and I’d give an update.

**Riley:** These were joint? You were both—Were you seated next to each other?

**Casey:** Yes, just like that. We’re sitting there and he would speak, I would speak, and then we’d usually take questions. That’s kind of the routine weekly deal, and whatever the issue *du jour* was, we’d talk about it. When we were getting into big policy things like preparation for Camp David, or the surge, or things like that, you’d have session after session. You could have eight sessions in a two-week period. That was grueling, because you have a day job.

**Perry:** You said that when you’re briefing Secretary Rumsfeld, Feith and Wolfowitz are there and part of it.

**Casey:** On the phone.

**Perry:** Right. What are they saying now? They were the ones, particularly prior to the war, who were saying, “We’ve got to go in. Things will go quickly. We’ll be welcomed as victors.”

**Casey:** You know, it’s interesting—

**Perry:** Now what is their tune?

**Casey:** The tune is now: Something’s happened we didn’t expect. We’re not sure exactly what’s happened, and so we’d better not give them any guidance, but let’s ask a lot of questions. That’s overly simplified, but I asked myself—Rumsfeld was criticized, and the administration was
criticized, for oversupervising the military during the preparation for the ground war. I didn’t necessarily see that was the case, but I understand how people could say that. I thought it was civilian leaders asking the military very good questions that they should have answers for.

I didn’t get any guidance. I got a lot of questions. And, as I said, we went in, put a mission together, worked it with the Ambassador, briefed everybody, and they said, “We approve your plan.” The President made one tweak to the mission statement. He said, “Add ‘an ally in the War on Terror’ to the mission statement,” so we did. But that was it. I got a lot more questions than guidance, which was not bad. I got a lot of oversight. I wasn’t on my own, but I didn’t get a lot of direction, which was interesting.

Riley: This is true of the President. Barbara’s question was about the Secretary of Defense’s office.

Casey: The same thing.

Riley: OK. When you’re having interactions with the President, he’s mostly asking questions of you about conditions there, political and military?

Casey: He’s asking the Ambassador the political questions and me the military stuff.

Riley: You had earlier said that there was a concern that sometimes he was overly focused on tactics. Was that at the outset?

Casey: Who is he?

Riley: The President.

Casey: Not so much him in particular. In fact, he probably less so, but just in general. The tactical stuff—There’s a fight going on. People want to know the details of what’s happening. No, the President generally stayed at a very good level, at a Presidential level.

Riley: OK, because you know far better than I, the history of this, particularly with Lyndon Johnson, the questions that the White House would have.

Casey: He would quote that, and in the VTC, he’d say, “I’m not getting into telling the military how to act.”

Perry: President Bush would say, “I’m not going to go that route.”

Nelson: I recently read that he and [Karl] Rove had contests about how many books a year they can read, mostly history and biographies. Did he have a model in mind for a Commander in Chief, from any of his predecessors? He was not Johnson. He made that clear, but who was he?

Casey: That’s interesting. I never thought that. I did think that he had a not-Johnson model.

Bakich: Right.

Casey: That was clear. I couldn’t say who—
Nelson: Maybe he didn’t have any.

Riley: His dad was so successful in foreign policy. Is it fair to think that maybe he used his own father as a model?

Casey: I don’t know. He clearly respected his dad. He showed me notes that his dad had written him. He’s got some notes in his book that his dad had written him.

Riley: Let me come back to the line of questioning—Rather than trying to characterize or build models, can you tell us anything more about his way of operating with you on these calls? Was he upbeat? Was he critical?

Casey: He was always upbeat. He was always energized. He always asked big questions. He didn’t read talking points. He knew what he wanted to talk about. You didn’t get the impression he was asking questions that the staff wanted him to ask. He’s asking his own questions. I had the impression that this is someone who knows what he wants, who’s engaged, and was asking good questions.

Riley: Did you feel his anger ever? Was there anger?

Casey: There was never anger. There was coldness in the first VTC we had after the midterm elections.

Riley: This would have been in ’06.

Perry: November of 2006.

Casey: Yes. It was within a week or so after the—

Perry: When the President’s party had lost.

Nelson: Do you think he had already decided to relieve you?

Casey: I don’t know. Nobody said anything about being disappointed in me personally. It wasn’t until I had a call from a reporter, right around New Year’s, saying that Hadley is briefing everybody that “Casey was slow to react,” and da-da-da-da-da-da. They basically were throwing me under the bus. Abizaid and I used to joke that the reason they kept me around so long was so that, when it went bad, they could throw me under the bus. That’s overly cynical.

One of the frustrating things is nobody said, “Casey, this is what we want you to do.” I’m telling them what I’m doing, they’re saying yes. The Ambassador and I briefed them at Camp David on the campaign plan for the next four years and everybody said yes. And then I read in books that the summer of 2006 was the worst summer of the Presidency and I’m thinking, Why didn’t you say so?

Riley: Did he have a good grasp of the basic issues that you were confronting, or did you feel frustrated that there were things that you would have to revisit because you couldn’t get the message embedded with him in the way that you wanted it?
Casey: I always faulted myself for not being able to articulate to him the depth of the issues that I was dealing with. Now, in retrospect, I’ve come to realize that you will never make your boss understand the totality of the issues that you’re working with. You can’t. I struggled to try to convey to him the significance of the things that I was wrestling with and why I was recommending what I was recommending. It was clear to me, from his language that he had a conventional war mindset: “We need to win. We need to beat the enemy.” And I’m trying to say, “We’re not going to go into Fallujah and clean it out and then the war is going to be over. It’s a long-term proposition here, and we’re not going to succeed until the Iraqis take over and we leave.” That’s why I would say to him, “We have to draw down to win.” I never was able to explain that to him in sufficient depth, I don’t think.

Bakich: Can you take that example of Fallujah and maybe—

Riley: Yes, there are a couple of things that I want to press on. Forgive me.

Casey: No, it’s OK.

Riley: I don’t want you to lose that, but just a couple more things on the President.

Casey: Please.

Riley: In your dealings with him, did you find—Reagan, for example, famously conceptualized things around stories and narratives. Was this true of this President? Did you sometimes find that you had to find a story that would communicate something to him, or was he fine at just receiving abstract information and processing that in a way that was useful?

Casey: I don’t think I ever thought of the story way of approaching it. He reacted to abstract facts. He gave me the impression that he was internalizing it and understood what I was saying.

Riley: Probably so. I just didn’t know whether you could—I’m trying to get a sense about how he processes information, how he likes to have information presented to him, where you felt that you were most effective when you were trying to make a case to him, if there were any patterns like that. It may be too abstract.

Casey: Yes, and especially when you’re doing it by VTC.

Riley: The only other question on this line and then I’ll stop doing what I told you I wasn’t going to do, which is dominating the conversation. It’s about the staff, particularly the National Security Advisor and so forth. Did you have confidence that they were being honest brokers with you? I guess Condi was there for part of your tour, and then Steve. The two National Security Advisors—Did you get the sense that they were giving you a fair shake, or was there a concern at times—We’ll say before the surge—that the National Security Advisors are putting their thumb on the scale in ways that you were having a hard time competing with?

Casey: The National Security Advisor serves the President and is out to protect the President, and so I was axle grease. Now, I trust Steve Hadley. He’s a fine, honest gentleman. I trusted that Steve Hadley did what he thought was the right thing for the President, and advised the President what he thought was the right thing for the President. We didn’t agree at all on what was going
Riley: This was at the time of the surge?

Casey: Yes.

Riley: But there’s a difference between a National Security Advisor who works for the President and is there to serve the President. My question is whether you felt that your views were being—Apart from the verbal communications where you were watching him and it was unmediated, did you feel, in other instances, that the National Security staff was accurately and adequately communicating your concerns to the President?

Casey: Around the time of the surge?

Riley: No, this is—

Casey: In general, yes, up until the time of the surge. Then it’s my view that they weren’t leveling with me about what was going on. Everyone is smiling and Hadley comes over, talks to me, and says, “Wow, this is really complex.” I said, “Yes, I know. That’s why we’re doing what we’re doing.” No one ever said, “You need to change what you’re doing because the President is concerned.” Nobody in the NSC staff, no one in the Department of Defense, no one ever said that.

Nelson: We’ve got a lot to cover in the Iraq theater itself, don’t we, in the remaining time?

Bakich: I have a list of questions that much of the histories have touched on, not completely to my satisfaction, because we don’t have everyone’s view, but can you tell us about your role in [Herbert Raymond] McMaster’s Tal Afar operations?

Casey: McMaster. There were two guys who came into one part of Iraq and were there for a few months and then moved to another part of Iraq, and were very successful in that other part. McMaster was one of them. I first visited McMaster south of Baghdad, which is where he was originally assigned with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment.

Bakich: Tal Afar?

Casey: No, it was just south of Baghdad. This was probably the second rotation. He’s briefing me that he has this squadron out doing a screen, this one doing an area recon, this one doing a zone reconnaissance. These are all very conventional cavalry tactics. I listened to this whole briefing and then we finished and I took him into his office and say, “H.R., this is not a conventional war here, guy. This is a counterinsurgency. You need to get the book out and you need to go to work here.” To his credit, he did.

Then we moved him up to Tal Afar because, at the time, we were having a lot of suicide attacks in Baghdad. This was the spring and summer of 2005. The terrorists were all coming down the Euphrates Valley, or over to Tal Afar, and then down to Mosul and then down the Tigris Valley. We worked to get better control on the border out there. H.R.’s going to Tal Afar was part of that. To his credit, he basically put in place a good strategy to retake control of Tal Afar.
I tried to use Tal Afar as a way to demonstrate that the Jaafari government at that time was capable of even-handedly providing security in the Sunni part of Iraq. I got the government to say they were going to put some tens of millions of dollars into Tal Afar for a reconstruction project. That was part of our plan to go in and clear the bad guys out, hang onto it, and then start reconstruction projects to demonstrate to people that it pays to stick with the government.

H.R. had his plan all laid out. I was trying to get the Prime Minister to commit with these millions of dollars. It took me a day longer than he wanted. He had to delay a day. There was a little friction on that, but he ultimately went in and did a fine job. We flew the Prime Minister up and he made a big speech, showed the money, and people were happy with that. H.R. took it from there. It was a good example of how we could apply the clear, hold, and build strategy.

**Bakich:** Three questions: One, for the historical record, you’re suggesting that H.R. McMaster was prodded into a more counterinsurgency mindset by his commander, rather than he thought of it on his own?

**Casey:** That was my only view I could have after getting the first briefing.

**Bakich:** OK, that’s interesting. Secondly, there was some reporting that he had requested additional troops and that you said you could use additional troops, but somewhere in between that command relationship, communications broke down.

**Casey:** He had three squadrons. He had to leave one squadron back in South Baghdad while the rest of the squadrons moved forward. Like any other commander, he wanted to get his other squadron back, and his division commander told him no. His corps commander told him no. And when he asked me, I said, “H. R., shut up, you’re not getting your squadron back.” [laughter]

There wasn’t a brigade commander in Iraq that couldn’t tell you what they’d do with another battalion. There wasn’t a battalion commander there who couldn’t tell you what they’d do with another company. There was lots to do, and you always will find work for these guys. The question I always ask is, would it make a strategic difference? Based on what he did, the answer was no.

**Bakich:** My last question is about the longevity of Tal Afar’s success. The conventional wisdom is that it languished. Can you shed some light on how that happened, why that happened? The President talks about it as a stunning success.

**Casey:** And it was, and we basically held it. But t’s an island in a sea of Sunnis and Kurds.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Casey:** It’s a small piece of the operation. Until you’ve got Mosul secured and brought into the political process, the region up there was never going to be ripe.

**Bakich:** Thank you.

**Nelson:** You said earlier, and you say in the book, that the center of gravity in Iraq as you defined it was the people, but the people as represented by their chosen government. It seems
like that’s a big theme of your book, the challenges of trying to mobilize the support of the Iraqi people through an ever-changing and erratically competent set of governments. If this were a class, I’d say, “OK, discuss.” Having chosen that as your mission, to win the support of the Iraqi people through their government, how did that go, step by step? Did you ever feel like maybe that was too indirect an approach?

Casey: The problem was that the first campaign plan we wrote was 18 months. You had an interim government, a transitional government, and it wasn’t until the summer of 2006 that you finally had a four-year Iraqi government. So we weren’t really going to do a lot of building in those ministries. We kept trying and kept having small successes, but it wasn’t really until we got this new government seated that we expected to be able to move forward in building the capabilities of the government. The other piece of this is that the Iraqis wanted us gone from the time we got there.

Nelson: The Iraqis, meaning?

Casey: With every Iraqi government that came in there, the first question I got from the Prime Minister was, “When are you leaving?” You know, we went through several iterations of building a transition plan with the governments, but they all wanted us to be able to demonstrate that we were leaving. It’s different from Germany, different from Japan. It’s very different. In Germany and Japan, you had these homogenous societies that were defeated in war, and they basically obeyed. We were able to go in and say this is what we’re going to do and it went.

Here you had a very fractured society, 60 percent of which had been oppressed for 35 years. Now they’re elected, they’re empowered, and unfortunately in that culture they apply the golden rule: “Them that has the gold makes the rules.” So they were going to treat the Sunni population just like they had been treated by Saddam when he was in power. It was a nonstarter.

You talk about the value of assumptions—When we first went in, the big assumption was: We can get them through this 18-month process while we build their military to some level, but it will be the political empowerment of an elected Iraqi government, based on an Iraqi constitution, that will then bring the country together. That was the assumption that we had, that we kept calibrating and recalibrating, and it really wasn’t until a month after [Nouri al-] Maliki got there that it just hit me like a ton of bricks that this ain’t going to work. This government is not seen as a representative government.

Now, could we have seen it earlier? Probably. Once the Iraqi constitution was done in October of 2005, it was clear then that it was not a national compact. It wasn’t a document that would bring the country together. But the implications of that weren’t clear. And then the Sunni population voted in the elections in December of 2005, and we start having significant discussions with Sunni political leaders, some of who claimed to be able to influence the resistance. At the end of that election, we off-ramped two brigades, from 17 brigades to 15 brigades, and while I can’t demonstrate this, I believe that was a key factor in the Sunnis coming forward and saying, “OK, we recognize that you’re leaving and we recognize that you’re really not the big problem here. The big problem here is al-Qaeda and Iran. We want to work with you against al-Qaeda and Iran.” For the guys out in Anbar Province, it was al-Qaeda. For the guys in Diwala Province, it was Iran. That’s what we set up. We had a two-star who was responsible for Sunni engagement.
We were actually moving in a good direction in early 2006, when the mosque blows up.

**Nelson:** On the security track—You say in your book that progress was a lot slower in building a police force than in building an army. I wonder, why was that the case?

**Casey:** Well, first of all—and I said this to President Bush—the world sucks at police. I saw it in Bosnia; I saw it in Kosovo. There is not an effective mechanism that I have seen yet where an international organization could go into another country and help build their police force. It didn’t happen in Bosnia and it didn’t happen in Kosovo. Part of the problem is there is a rule of law. The rule of law wasn’t in good stead in Iraq, so we had a problem there.

Second, there’s a lot more local recruitment of police than military. You can recruit military from a province. You recruit police from the local area. The people who are locally recruited are much more susceptible to corruption at small local levels.

The third thing is when we started off we just had the wrong concept. We were training these guys for community policing. We were giving them handguns and they’re fighting terrorists, guys with long rifles. So we had to really make them into a paramilitary force, and that was a significant part of the training.

Then the fourth thing I’d say is, in militaries around the world we speak a fairly common language, and there’s more structure in the military, and we know how to train each other. We all know how to train, so when we initiate a training concept, it’s not so foreign to them that they don’t understand. We do a lot better training military than they do training police.

**Bakich:** As the ISF [Iraqi Security Forces] effort goes—I don’t want to say fits and starts if that’s not the correct terminology, but it’s never going as well as you seem to hope.

**Casey:** The ISF?

**Bakich:** Yes.

**Casey:** The Army generally bumped along at a steady pace. The police didn’t.

**Bakich:** And the police were—You’re right that the police were absolutely crucial, so this wasn’t an inconsequential thing. This is something that’s actually strategically crucial for stand up, stand down. Throughout your time, did you ever have doubts that the emphasis on ISF building was the right way to go?

**Casey:** No. Again, the mission from the UN, from everybody, was to build the security forces and transition the security responsibility to them. That was the mission. Two, it was the only way that I thought that we, a Western armed force, could credibly walk out of that country and say we’ve done our job, and this country is on their own now and they’ve got to resolve their own problems. It had to be done. Otherwise, we were going to be there for a heck of a lot longer than I thought the American public would stand for. We did a study that said the average successful counterinsurgency in the 20th century lasted nine years. At the time, I remember thinking that the American people were not going to be here for nine years.
**Bakich:** Right.

**Casey:** That led to the discussion, are we going to defeat the insurgency or are we going to neutralize the insurgency? By neutralize, you meant to bring them down to a level that could be contained by the Iraqi Security Forces.

**Nelson:** Let me ask you a grossly naïve question: You thought it would have been a good thing if the Iraqi army had been left intact. Why wasn’t it just a matter of saying, “All you guys who got discharged, come on back. You can take your old jobs.”

**Casey:** We tried that.

**Nelson:** Did you?

**Casey:** Yes, we tried that.

**Nelson:** What went wrong? Why didn’t that work?

**Casey:** Nobody came back. [laughter]

**Nelson:** Why not?

**Casey:** The Prime Minister, in the early days, kept saying, “I have this division commander, just tell us, we’ll bring in the division commander, General So-and-So, and he’ll recall his division.” Finally I said, “Do it.” A couple of weeks later I said, “Where’s the general?” “He’s not coming back.” There was some level of suspicion, I think, that there was a trap, because a lot of these folks, especially up north in the Sunni areas, went into the insurgency.

**Nelson:** I’ll take that as a satisfactory answer.

**Casey:** More than once, we allowed the Iraqis to try to reassemble divisions and they never came.

**Perry:** What we generically call Balkanization, which you had seen literally in the Balkans, where you’ve got religious, ethnic, and tribal differences that seem to Western eyes and American eyes to be irresolvable. Is that what you saw happening, and is that what the President is not grasping?

**Casey:** No. The President, I think, had a good grasp of what was going on there. He has as good a grasp as you could have being in Washington. I never could get comfortable, myself, that I had given him the depth that he needed. There’s a quote in the Bob Woodward book that says I didn’t think the President understood what was going on. Bob and I have argued over this and I said, “Hey, I didn’t say that, and I’ve got the quote. I said, ‘I didn’t explain to the President well.’”

He grasped the big elements of the challenges that we were wrestling with. I don’t think it’s as tribal as people say it is. That’s something that we don’t understand. When you say tribal, people say, “Oh, that must be it,” but it’s really not. One of the things that happened with the first
election, and I didn’t see this initially, was the provincial Governors became the people that the tribes went to, to solve their problems, instead of going to the sheikh. At some low level they went to the sheikh, but they went to the provincial Governor because that was where the money ostensibly was.

Anbar was very tribal and ultimately we got the tribes to come against al-Qaeda, and that was a good thing. The rest of the country, you know, not so much.

**Perry:** Religion? For sure.

**Casey:** For sure, sectarian, yes.

**Perry:** Right.

**Casey:** Most of them are Arabs, and it’s the Arab-Kurd divide, but that wasn’t significant. The Kurds had been basically operating their own democracy for some period of years, so they knew how the system worked. When you look at the constitution and the constitutional process, the Kurds came out like bandits. They understood how to get things done, they used the system, they worked within the democratic system and they got what they wanted. Sectarianism was the divider, but like the ethnic divides in the Balkans, it was manipulated for political purposes.

**Bakich:** Whatever we call the Sons of Iraq, the Sunni Awakening, I’m getting the sense that there are precursors under your command. Are we going so far as to say that you are using commander’s discretionary funds, or whatever the term is, to start putting Sunni tribes on payroll? Is this starting with you?

**Casey:** Yes, but we did it through the Iraqi government.

**Bakich:** Ah-ha, right.

**Casey:** This starts right before the 2005 elections, and we have this group from a tribe all the way out by the Syrian border. They’re working with the Special Forces guys and they say, “We want to help you against al-Qaeda, and keep al-Qaeda from coming across the border.” So we basically let the Special Forces guys bring them together and train them, and they became known as the Desert Protectors. This was a very small thing, but it was an important step because it demonstrated to the tribes that you could work with us, and that was a good thing.

The Western Euphrates campaign that we did from the summer of 2005 until the end of the year basically cleared out the al-Qaeda facilitation networks they were using to bring in suicide bombers and jihadists, down the Euphrates River. We went in and cleaned that out and established some places along the border to stop that flow. We didn’t stop it but the suicide bombs were cut in half between July and December, in Baghdad, as a result of that.

After that, we called it the Anbar consolidation plan. We said, “OK, now we’ve got to consolidate our success here.” We started working with the Jaafari government in early 2006. I took Jaafari out to Ramadi, the capital of the Anbar Province, and we met with the Governor. It was the Ambassador and Jaafari and me. We met with the Governor. We were being shelled—in the government offices, Jaafari was wonderful with the Sunni. Then we took him to Fallujah and
he passed out the compensation checks for the Fallujah attack from the year before, that they had been trying to get the money from the government for. In the Ramadi meeting, the Governor said, “Here’s what we want: We want an Anbar division of 16,000 or so people. We want prisoners released. And we want some money for economic reconstruction.” We said we would take this under advisement.

We went back and said, “You know, we can’t let you build an Anbar division, because it would become a division to go attack the government, but we’ll give you 16,000 people in police, but your tribal chiefs have to vet them. You have to sign on the line and guarantee that if you’re putting a person in the police he’s a credible person.” The Jaafari government approved that plan. They also settled on $75 million and some prisoner releases. By the middle of 2006, we started bringing these guys into the police force, training them, and then they became the local force there, and they were fighting with us against al-Qaeda. That’s when the sheikh right outside Ramadi came forward—I forget his name, but it was the beginning of the Awakening. What people don’t appreciate is how long that takes, to build the confidence, in order for these people to come and take a step forward and do that.

When I went back for the first time in August of 2007, after I left, I met with a CIA station chief and I said, “Come talk to me.” I said, “Who are those guys?” He said, “We were talking to the same guys. We were talking to the right guys.” Part of it was the surge, and it was the realization among the Iraqis that with the surge—We were saying, “This is your last chance, guys. This is all we’re going to do. If you want to come onboard, you need to come onboard now.” That certainly helped put some of these guys over the top, but it takes a long time to build confidence in folks, to make a decision, because they’re putting their lives on the line, and they’re putting their families’ lives on the line. They’ve got to be sure that it’s going to be OK. Nothing happens like that. [snaps his fingers]

Bakich: Your answer pushes back the time frame, though. For the historical record, it’s very important that we know that this is happening, just so I can put a date on it—in late 2005?

Casey: Late 2005 and throughout the spring of 2006. Jaafari signs this agreement with the Governor of Anbar, like in March of 2006, and then we get into implementing it over time. There’s that wonderful video of when Anbaris coming into their army were told they’d have to be able to be deployed around the whole country, and they didn’t like that. So some low-level person said, “OK, you’ll just be used in Anbar,” so they say OK. They come in, they’re graduating from their training, and the general comes down from Baghdad and says, “Yes, and you will go across Iraq,” and they say, “What?” And they’re taking off their shirts and throwing them away. I’m thinking, You’ve got to be kidding me.

Bakich: This all starts with some Special Operations guys up near the Syrian border. Can you talk about your relationship with Stanley McChrystal’s JSOC [Joint Special Operations Command]?

Casey: Here’s where it really starts: It really starts with [Zalmay] Zal Khalilzad coming in and saying—He was much more attuned to the Sunni population than was the previous regime. There were people in the administration who favored the Shia and who didn’t want to do anything for the Sunni, and we kept saying, look, the Sunni is the insurgency; you’ve got to do something to
bring them into the political process. Anyway, Zal starts working that, and right before the
elections, he comes to me and says, “OK, it’s time that you need to start engaging with some of
these Sunni political leaders.” I said OK.

I go to a meeting. The first meeting went great. The second meeting we have is right before the
elections and they say, “We want to tell the Sunni population to come out and vote, but they’re
afraid that they’ll get caught up in military operations. So if you can tell us that you won’t
conduct any significant military operations between now and the elections, we’ll tell the Sunni
population to go out and vote.” Well, I knew this was coming. I had already talked to my
subordinate commanders. We had already planned to stop operations a day or so ahead of the
elections anyway, so I went back and said, “OK, you’ve asked me to do this and I’ll do it, but
we’re still going to protect and defend ourselves and still clear our convoy routes and everything
like that.” Fine. They go on TV the next day and say, “Go out and vote.”

So that’s where it started, and right after that was when the Sunni leaders started coming in and
saying, “OK, I control some element of the insurgency. Let’s talk.” And there was a lot of
discussion in early 2006, up until the mosque blew up.

Bakich: Unfortunately, they don’t turn out to vote. They go out and say, “Come out and vote,”
but it doesn’t work.

Casey: No this is December of 2005, not the January—

Bakich: I’m sorry, my mistake. I misunderstood.

Casey: The Sunni population comes out in the largest amount that they have so far.

Nelson: I’ve got to tell you, I was reading your book on the plane yesterday, and the woman
sitting next to me said, “Gee, that really looks interesting. What are you reading?” I showed her
the cover and that was the end of the conversation. [laughter] But it is really interesting.

Riley: It is interesting.

Nelson: I think the reason I looked especially interested was I had come to this page, and I know
of your interest in civil-military relations generally, but I came to this page—Here it is, page
150—where you list a series of maxims, I guess, that you offered to Maliki, about how civilian
leaders should provide guidance to military leaders. I wonder if I could just hand you the book.
Are there any of these that you would care to elaborate on? It sounds like these were the fruits of
your long experience dealing with civilian leaders.

Casey: They’re a little tactical because he’s in the position, as the Prime Minister of Iraq, of
giving tactical direction for operations, I mean, broad tactical direction. These are things that I
had learned over time. It’s a combination of my experience and what I felt he needed to do to
give guidance to his military leaders, because as the Prime Minister he was going to be giving
them the guidance.

Be clear about what you want them to accomplish. That’s what we expect from civilian leaders.
Tell us what it is you want the military to accomplish and we’ll tell you how to do it. What
happens all the time, even in our government, is they say, “Give me military options.” “Give you military options to do what?” “I don’t know yet; just give me military options.” Most young officers think that we should expect the political direction from the President and the civilian leaders, which you should, but what I’ve come to realize is that because the problems now are so difficult and so complex, you can’t expect any civilian leader to have the depth of knowledge to communicate effectively with their military. So it’s an interactive process of give and take, where the military helps the civilian leaders frame their thinking and frame their direction, too, but in the end, the civilian leaders have got to say, I want to do this and not that. A good example was President Obama and the Afghanistan surge. He said, “I want to disrupt the Taliban; I don’t want to defeat them. You tell me how many troops it takes to do that.” Anyway, be clear about what you want to accomplish.

Make them tell you how they see the enemy situation. You need to have a common view of what you think you’re up against. One of the biggest problems I always saw was that people have different views of the threat, so they argue for different solutions. You have to have a common view of what’s going on to have a common solution, and you have to have a discussion about it. Because the threat is usually so diverse, people will always have different views.

We spent an awful lot of time in Iraq asking the question: What’s the most significant threat to the accomplishment of our mission? In the almost three years I was there, it changed three times. First it was Sunni-Arab rejectionists, then it was Islamic extremists, and then it was the sectarian violence—three different things in an 18-month or two-year period. You have to focus on the enemy. Ask them for their assessment of planning and preparations. How long until you’re ready? What do you need to do the job? How long will it take? Could you use something else? Those are just standard questions that as a civilian leader you want to know. I watched the Iraqis when they briefed the Prime Minister. These guys would tell him anything not to get shot. Saddam Hussein was a pretty tough boss. “This will take four weeks.” “We need to get it done in two.” Yes, Prime Minister.” You can’t get it done in two weeks.

A collective judgment of the appropriateness of the plan relative to the mission and threat. Will the plan accomplish the mission, given how you described the threat? It’s a simple question but it’s not simple.

Reaction forces. If things don’t go according to plan, and they never will, what are you going to do?

Risks. I always tried to tee up the risks of anything I was telling the President. There’s always risk to accomplish a mission. Could this fail? If you think so, you could do something else. Collateral damage. How much collateral damage? How many civilian casualties do you think you’re going to take? Friendly casualties. I told the President I thought we would suffer a thousand casualties in Fallujah, and we wound up having a hundred dead and some number wounded. But you have to get that out there—You need to put a number on it, because if you don’t put a number on it, you can say it’s going to be ugly, but people won’t understand.

Adversely affecting broader objectives. Sometimes you can have tactical success but you can unhinge something that’s far more important than that, and you have to be able to consider that in your deliberations.
Command and control relations. Sometimes the military will wish away very difficult command and control problems. For example, the Marines ostensibly were under the control of the Marine Commander in the Pacific. They ostensibly didn’t work for me. I never had an issue with it, but that could have been a problem if the personalities were different. Special Forces didn’t work directly for me. They worked for the Special Operations Command Commander. With Stan McChrystal, of course, the head of Special Forces, we made the relationship work. Sometimes the civilian leaders need to help the military, to make sure that they’re not wishing away difficulties. Do you need help on the political and economic side? In the counterinsurgency environment, it’s not just all about the military victory, it’s how do you sustain it? You sustain it through economic and political success.

**Nelson:** That’s interesting, because usually, in the literature on civil-military relations, it’s all within the same government. You had plenty of that, but you also had to think—and it seems like this is the dominant strain in your book—about civil-military relations meaning the U.S. military and the Iraqi civilian authorities. I don’t know if you want to comment on that or go straight to a question I have, which is if you had given President Bush or President Obama a similar list of maxims, would it have been substantially the same or would it have been different?

**Casey:** A little less tactical, but the big things: What do you want us to do? Do you have the resources? What are the risks that are involved? When I briefed President Bush on Fallujah, I kind of used that checklist. I said these are the questions that I think he should want to know the answers to, so this is what I briefed him on. I made sure I answered all those questions. I used that as a framework. And I put that in Arabic and gave it to Maliki. I don’t know what he did with it.

**Bakich:** As you were describing earlier, you were getting really a lot of questions, questions, questions, but no guidance. It almost sounds to me that this is one of the major problems, that you have civilian leaders who, by virtue of their functions, are not going to be as involved, and they’re not going to have experienced a threat, and in some ways that makes it difficult for them to formulate what they want the military to do.

**Casey:** Yes, but well educated civilian leaders can be strategic thinkers and they can develop strategies, and they know how to match resources to strategies. If you’ve run anything big, you’ve had to do that. I don’t necessarily subscribe to the fact that you have to have been in the military, or had some military experience, to effectively lead the military in war. Look at Eliot Cohen’s book, *Supreme Command*. Look at Lincoln, and [Winston] Churchill. Churchill obviously had some military background. There was [Georges] Clemenceau.

**Bakich:** [David] Ben-Gurion.

**Casey:** Ben-Gurion.

**Bakich:** Do you think President Bush took that book to heart?

**Casey:** *Supreme Command*?

**Bakich:** There was a time in the run-up to the war where he was seen, on a number of occasions, holding that book, and I don’t think that was an accident. Do you think that he subscribed to
those lessons, to Cohen’s thesis?

**Casey:** I do, and Rumsfeld certainly did, and I didn’t see that as a bad thing. We in the military should expect that from our civilian leaders. The example in there about Churchill and the division patch—I don’t know if you remember it, but he goes out to visit an English division, and he says, “How’s everything going?” “Well, they’re not going to give us a patch for our division.” It was a little square piece of maroon cloth. He said, “Well, why is that?” “They said it’s too expensive.” So he goes back up to the commanders of the army and says, “What’s going on?” They said, “It’s not us, it’s the ministry of trade that won’t do it.” He goes to the ministry of trade. The bottom line is that he keeps getting stiffed by the military, and he keeps going back, and finally they get their patch. It was just a dumb bureaucratic thing. The military is a big bureaucracy, and if you want to get something done, you have to keep banging away at it sometimes.

**Bakich:** I’m getting the sense here that much of the policies and the strategic mindset that we associate with Petraeus and the surge—I’m getting the sense, from this conversation, that we’re seeing its precursors in your command; if not precursors, actual policies that were probably broken up by the Samarra bombing, in many ways. Can you reflect on the role of the actual publication of FM3-24, and how important that was in pushing down counterinsurgency?

**Casey:** It was very important.

**Bakich:** You tried to do this with the COIN academy. What more did the doctrine give you that the COIN academy wasn’t?

**Casey:** The updating of the counterinsurgency doctrine was a way of institutionalizing counterinsurgency in the Army and in the Marine Corps. It was the beginning—Well, it wasn’t the beginning, because we had been forcing it from Iraq. The institution won’t change without the doctrine.

**Bakich:** Right.

**Casey:** You had to have that for the institution to begin to change. It’s an example, so that was December of 2006, and that’s five years after that we were fighting counterinsurgencies, but that’s how long it takes for institutions to react.

**Bakich:** Did you send people who were participating in the COIN academy?

**Casey:** The guy who stood up the COIN academy went to Leavenworth to help them write the doctrine. It was a Special Forces colonel.

**Riley:** You’ve touched on this before—We’ve got about 45 minutes, and I want to give you an ample opportunity to give us your narrative of what happens with the surge: how it emerges, how it presents itself to you, and then ultimately the resolution of that has an effect, evidently, on your own service there. If you have some reflections in retrospect about its success or lack of success, you could tell us about that too.

**Casey:** Obviously, after the Samarra bombing we went through a couple of weeks, trying to get a
handle on the violence, tamp it down. Things settled down a little bit, so we got commanders together and said, “OK, has what’s happened here been so significant that it ought to cause us to change what it is we’re doing?” We were going through this in March and April.

**Riley:** This is all internally in Iraq, or back in—

**Casey:** All internally in Iraq. The question I was getting from Washington was, is this a civil war? Because the media drives a lot of this and the media drives a lot of the tactical focus by the administration, and in a lot of those VTCs, the questions were about the questions that they were getting in the media. So in the media—Is it civil war, is it not? If it is civil war, what should we do? I’m getting a lot of that stuff and I’m writing responses and saying, “No, I don’t think it’s civil war.” As long as the army stays intact, as long as there’s still a government in power, it’s not a civil war. Oh, by the way, 90 percent of the violence is in about a 50-mile radius of Baghdad. The rest of the country—the south is moving along, Kurdistan is moving along, and we’re still doing an insurgency in the western and northern part of the country.

I’m sitting there looking at this, and we’re trying to figure this out. What’s happened? I was coming back from Basra and I took out a napkin [drawing] because that was all I had to write on at the time, and I started thinking about it, and it struck me all of a sudden that this wasn’t about an insurgency directed against us. The greatest threat to the accomplishment of our mission was this sectarian struggle that had the lid blown off it by the bombing of the mosque. And what I realized was that this now was an Iraqi struggle, and it was the struggle for division of political and economic power among the Iraqis.

**Nelson:** Is this what you’re drawing?

**Casey:** Yes.

**Riley:** I’m going to reference it for the transcript. It’s the same diagram, not on a napkin but on a notepad, that appears on page 95 of your book. Thanks, Mike.

**Casey:** In that struggle, you have four different factions that are trying to influence: You have the Sunni extremists, which is al-Qaeda; the Shia extremists, which is the militias primarily; Iran; and then you have the insurgency. The insurgency at that time, the summer of 2006, was probably the least of our problems. As you’ll see in the diagram, there’s a dotted line in front of the insurgency. We were trying to bring the insurgency into the political process while we were blocking the ability of the other elements to affect the process.

That was a fundamentally different challenge for us, and we’re now trying to through this challenge with a lame-duck government because the Jaafari government has lost the election. They’re fighting for their political lives and their political future, and I’m trying to keep them focused on the security problems that are facing the country. That was a real pain in the neck.

The elections were always wonderfully exhilarating days, but then you’d go into this four- or five-month vacuum of political transition where we lost ground. In the first one, we used the vacuum to implement the transition team approach, to put our guys out with the Iraqi Security Forces. In the next one, there wasn’t much we could do, but we kept building the Iraqi Security Forces while this whole political struggle went on, while we tried to tamp down the sectarian
violence.

**Bakich:** Did that vacuum, that lull, catch you by surprise both times, or did you know it was coming?

**Casey:** The first one was somewhat of a surprise, but the second one wasn’t a surprise. We kept saying to Washington, “There’s going to be a vacuum here. We’ve got to figure out how to do this.” Poor President Bush is on the VTC, telling us all, “We’ve got to have a government.” Some of the most animated discussions were over “Get a government formed.” Then the whole question is, “OK, how badly do you want it?” It was one of those things where everybody in Iraq thought we were manipulating the process, that we were the king makers, that we were the one who was going to say who the next Prime Minister of Iraq would be, which, as it turned out, we were. But I can remember saying to Hadley, “Everybody thinks we’re doing it, so we might as well do it.” [laughter]

**Bakich:** I recall, in the Frontline interview that was just done, Ambassador Khalil-Azad is talking about how he’s urging Maliki to run, you know.

**Casey:** Yes. Anyway, that was a big change. We had to adapt to that. I kept trying to figure out, tactically, whether we could address this differently. The Shia extremists didn’t wear orange; the Sunni extremists didn’t wear blue; the insurgency didn’t wear red; the Iranians didn’t wear green. They were all out there in civilian clothing and you really didn’t know who was who, you just knew somebody was shooting at you. We had some brigades that were in the difficult areas, leaving, and I went and sat down with the commanders and I said, “How different is what you’re doing right now, from counterinsurgency?” They all said it’s not much different. You still have to do the same kinds of things. It’s just that you can’t really tell motivations. You can tell people are shooting at you, but you don’t know why. But when they’re shooting at you it doesn’t make any difference. You know what you need to do.

**Riley:** Sure.

**Casey:** It was a very confusing situation. We knew the campaign plan that we first wrote, in the summer of 2004, ran out with the December 2005 elections. The outcome of the election was so uncertain and we didn’t know what we were going to get, so we actually put in a bridging plan, because we had a rotation of forces that was going to come in then, and we wanted the new guys coming in to know what we wanted them to do while we were still figuring out what happened with the elections. I knew it was going to be spring before we had a new government, where we could see what happened. So we wrote this plan called the bridging strategy. It was al-Qaeda out, Sunni in, and ISF increasingly in the lead. So we did that.

Then we had the Camp David meeting, and we were asked to brief the situation and our plan. We did, we briefed a four-year campaign plan. Now, up to that time, no one had really talked more than about 18 months for the duration of the mission, but finally I said, look, we’ve got to say it. We’d said it was going to be a long-term proposition but we never put a number on it. So we put a number on it and nobody said a word. Four years. We said this is our plan for the next four years, and nobody said anything, which in VTC-speak means approved. Everybody said yes to the plan.
Then the President gets on a plane and flies over. We also killed Zarqawi about the same time, after months of tracking him. We announced Zarqawi. The President comes in and it really energized the Iraqis. He surprised the heck out of them. They thought it was going to be Condi Rice or somebody, but when they saw the President, I mean, Maliki was just beside himself. Then he talked to the whole Cabinet and fired them up, and he’s a good fire-upper. Boy, they were really energized.

I had a brief moment with him. We shared a small cigar out in a little alcove outside of my office. I had two things I wanted to tell him and I wanted to make sure that I could look him in the face. One was that we can’t let violence become the metric for success, and two was that we had to draw down to win. I made those points with him but I could tell from his eyes, I wasn’t getting through on we had to draw down to win. So I said, “I realize we need to do better on the draw-down to win,” and he said, “Yes, you do.” I went back in June and we talked a little more about it.

Riley: This is June of—?

Casey: This is June of ’06.

Bakich: What’s the disconnect? Is he not understanding your thinking?

Casey: I don’t know. You asked about the staff. He’s hearing chatter from the staff all the time. I don’t know what he’s hearing from them, so I don’t know what is in his head. I’m communicating as clearly as I can, but I’m not getting through and I don’t know why.

Riley: Well, in retrospect, is it fair to jump to the conclusion that he had already started leaning in the direction of more, and therefore you’re working against his presumptions?

Casey: Could be. He could get a little—I’m going to use the word flippant but it’s not the right word. He’d get a little cowboy-esque about kicking ass and that kind of stuff.

Riley: Maybe the wrong moment with a cigar?

Casey: No, sometimes he was talking in conventional terms: We’re going to win. We need to beat the enemy. And the message I was getting is he thinks it’s all going to be done with military force, and it wasn’t all going to get done with military force. I’m sure he had a better understanding than that, but the way it was conveyed—I think he knew he could rely on the military. He didn’t know about the rest of the government, but he knew he could rely on the military. So when you’ve only got one tool you can rely on, I can understand.

Bakich: Do you believe that the President had a firm grasp of the limits of what the military can deliver?

Casey: I don’t know. I know that if he had a problem with that, we were probably a good contributor to that mindset, because we often overstate what we think we can do. As you’re seeing now, the problems in Iraq are the same political problems today as they were in 2006. They know what they are, and I think we missed an opportunity to leverage the fear and the concern they had in 2006 and 2007, to get them to reconcile. Everybody said nobody will
reconcile, because they’re scared to death. People don’t reconcile unless they’re scared to death; that’s another Balkan lesson I learned. They don’t reconcile when they’re fat and happy. They think it’s OK.

**Riley:** Track us through the rest of ’06.

**Casey:** So the rest of ’06, we have a couple of operations. We have Together Forward, to try to bring security to Baghdad. Together Forward I is launched right as Maliki comes in, and I blame myself for pushing Maliki too fast into this operation before he was comfortable with it. But we’ve got Iraqis dying in Baghdad, and we needed to do something.

He’d just come in as Prime Minister and he wants to get his arms around it. In fact, we have a meeting to talk about the operation and he doesn’t even have his appointed Interior and Defense Ministers there. He’s got the old Defense Minister and Interior Minister there. When we briefed the plan to him, it’s the plan that the Baghdad division commander had drawn up, he wasn’t comfortable with it. So Zal says let’s put a little team together to look at the plan. We put an Iraqi team together and we looked at the plan, and we launched it. Well, they weren’t committed to the plan. We saw that in the lack of Iraqi army units and police units showing up.

The cycle was: We’d go in, we’d be successful with the military operations, we’d clear the bad guys out of an area, we’d put the Iraqis back in, we’d stay with them for a while, and then we’d start moving on to do other things within a week or two, and the area would go back to the way it was. So basically with that and Together Forward II, which—though we got better every time—we weren’t successful in securing Baghdad, and I know that became a huge bone of contention with the President, as it should have.

**Nelson:** Can I just interrupt, because there’s a passage in your book about Together Forward II. The flow of the book is, the Iraqi Security Forces are getting better and better. Then I read this sentence and I thought, *gosh.* “Together Forward II, and it began in earnest in early August, with the planned addition of 12,000 Iraqi (Unfortunately the Iraqi troops failed to arrive).” I’m thinking, *This is an army that’s getting better and better?*

**Casey:** You should have seen them when we started.

**Nelson:** I can see where somebody might come in and say the Iraqi army is getting better, but not at a speed quickly enough to accomplish what you hope it will accomplish in any sort of timely way. American troops know how to do things, and that’s the button I can push. That’s sort of summarizing what you said.

**Casey:** That’s right, I think there’s no doubt. I think that’s probably what the President said.

**Nelson:** But was he right?

**Casey:** He got tired of waiting.

**Nelson:** Was the surge necessary?

**Casey:** An addition of coalition troops at that time was necessary. Whether it’s two and a half
brigades or five brigades, that’s the difference. I believe we could have gotten it done with two and a half brigades, and it would have had more Iraqi ownership and it would have been longer lasting. As a result, we went in and did it for them, and that’s the difference. That right there is the core of the difference: two and a half brigades.

Riley: If I heard you correctly earlier, you feel like you’re beginning to be perceived around this time, as not—

Casey: Delivering.

Riley: Not delivering.

Casey: Well, I felt that way.

Nelson: You felt you were being perceived that way?

Casey: No, I felt I was not delivering. No one is talking to me saying it’s imperative that you secure Baghdad right now, whatever it costs. Let me know what it costs.

Bakich: Didn’t Abizaid—Wasn’t he trying to make this case to you? I say this only because I read this yesterday in the Cloud and Jaffe book, and they make the point that Abizaid seems to have been the only one—Because he’s your friend, he wasn’t grabbing you by the lapels, but he was saying we need to make progress on Baghdad.

Casey: I knew we needed to make progress on Baghdad. There wasn’t any doubt we needed to make progress on Baghdad. The issue was whether it was serious enough for us to do it by ourselves, or whether we would have better, longer lasting results if we had the Iraqis have a larger role in it.

Riley: Right.

Casey: Even Abizaid—Abizaid and Rumsfeld came and said it’s OK to ask for more troops, because there was the perception that Rumsfeld was stifling us, which I never felt. I think I asked for more troops about seven times while I was there. They were saying it’s OK to ask for more troops. It was my call to say—and I still believe this to this day—that we had to involve the Iraqis in securing their capital. If we had to secure their capital, it wasn’t going to be a long-lasting solution. This is my Bosnian experience. We can’t want it more than they do.

Your question about the surge—The surge was a decisive application of combat power at a critical time. I believe it had a temporary effect, and the temporary effect was it allowed the U.S. military to leave Iraq several years later saying we did our job, we accomplished our mission, and we left with our heads up, which is not an insignificant thing. It also allowed the Iraq campaign to transition administrations. I always felt that President Bush was very concerned with that, that he wanted to make sure that he had the mission in a place where—He never said this to me—when it transitioned to the next administration, the next President wasn’t handed what he was dealing with right then, in 2006.

Riley: What about your eventual departure? When did you begin to feel discomfort, if that’s the
right word?

Casey: The discomfort starts at New Year’s.

Riley: New Year’s of ’07?

Casey: Of ’07, when I get the call from that reporter saying, “Hadley’s throwing you under the bus.” I said, “What’s going on?” By that time—

Riley: Was there a precipitating issue on his throwing you under the bus, or is it just an accumulation of things?

Casey: My impression was—We’re getting ready to roll out the surge. Why are you surging? You’re surging because Casey screwed it up. That’s kind of what—

Nelson: I can see a more benign interpretation, which is: We’re surging. This is not the strategy of choice for General Casey, so we need a general for whom it is the strategy of choice.

Casey: Yes.

Nelson: A less adverse comment on you.

Casey: Yes. The thing that I found interesting was what I said about the civilian leader. Be clear about what you want to accomplish. If you want me to do something else, tell me.

Riley: Exactly.

Casey: In my mind, I’m telling you what I’m doing, and you’re saying yes. If you want me to do something else, tell me. That’s the other thing about video teleconferences. In a war, as a commander, I can’t go off and execute a course of action because the President pounds his fist on the table. There are too many different interpretations of that. In a war, the civilian leaders need to communicate clearly with their military leaders about what it is they want them to do.

Perry: That raises an interesting question about technology in time of war, and communications technology in time of war. This would have been the first war, presumably, where video teleconferencing was used?

Casey: Bosnia was, and Kosovo, because Wes Clark was noodling the target list by VTC.

Perry: How would communications have come to commanders prior to that? Would it have come through written correspondence? Would that have been clearer in your mind? It wasn’t all this back-and-forth, like now people are always using email, where they used to just pick up the phone and call someone, or go walk down the hall to the office and say this is what we need to do. Now, there’s back-and-forth and to-ing and fro-ing.

Casey: Ideally, for the civilian leaders to sit down and force themselves to write out what they want forces to do will help them to get clarity. When you read some of Churchill’s dispatches to his field commanders in World War II, holy mackerel, I would have killed for one of those.
Bakich: Snowflakes don’t cut it?

Casey: Snowflakes don’t cut it. Well, but they help. That’s something.

Bakich: Right.

Nelson: You were saying this morning that in civil-military relations, the changes in technology and the media have made an enormous difference. That sounds like what Barbara is asking about now.

Riley: I hope you’ll expand on that, because I think you actually started that part of the conversation before we turned the tape on, when we were first becoming acquainted.

Casey: I think I was talking about the role of technology and the media, and the need for military leaders to represent their organizations, but at the same time do so in a way that doesn’t put them at odds with the civilian leadership. In that environment, you have the media and you have Congress, who would make mischief with it. They liked the idea of taking a military leader and pitting him against the administration. And it’s not just military; it’s anybody in the administration. Technology has made that a heck of a lot easier to happen. I would give an interview to a Polish television group that was down in Iraq, and it would get reported in the early bird, about what I said to the Polish guys, and my message to the Polish guys may not necessarily be the same message I want to go back to the United States.

The other thing is, you’re talking to your enemies. Whatever you say, ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] and al-Qaeda are all watching it. It’s a fundamentally different environment than from when I started.

Perry: Not to mention they’re using modern media and social media themselves to get their message out. Could we come back to your being thrown under the bus, to piggyback on Mike’s point about other explanations? Is it just that you are in that position, and the President has gone through a very painful midterm election, in which he sees his party and his policy in Iraq utterly repudiated, and his party loses the Senate?

Nelson: And the House.

Perry: And the House. And he has, in effect, to fire his Secretary of Defense. He keeps telling the American people that, in a phrase, “It’s hard.” It’s hard over there. And you’re the commander, so you’re the one who has to go. All of his frustrations and all of his upset just goes squarely on you. Is that how we should look at this?

Casey: Oh, no. In fact, he was very gracious the entire time. You asked was he ever heated, and I said no, he was cold. He was cold in that first VTC after the midterm elections, but he was still gracious. Nobody ever told me I was fired. [Robert] Gates came in December. I talked to him. He told me I was being considered to be the Chief of Staff of the Army. Was I interested in the job? I said yes, I was. He asked me for nominations for my replacement and I said Petraeus, [Martin] Dempsey—I think those were the two guys that I said.

They went back, and we had a video teleconference where we did the normal conference, then
they cleared the room and it was the President, Gates, and the chairman. The President said, “Look, George, we’re working your confirmation for Chief of Staff of the Army.” These are my words now, but [John] McCain has basically said he wants Petraeus over there quickly, so he said, “You’re going to have to come out pretty quickly here and we’re going to try to get you a hearing for confirmation for Chief of Staff of the Army quickly.”

What happens is, when you’re confirmed for a three- or four-star billet, you’re confirmed for that billet. Sixty days after you leave the billet, you either have to be in another billet that you’re confirmed for, or you go on the retire rolls. Because we didn’t know when we were going to get the hearing, I had to write a letter putting in my request for retirement, that the Secretary of the Army kept in his desk drawer. In the event I didn’t get confirmed before 60 days, I could retire as a four-star. Otherwise, I retire as a two-star.

**Riley:** I see.

**Bakich:** Oh, my gosh.

**Casey:** That was just a little backdrop. The President understood that, and they worked it, and they basically told McCain, you want Petraeus, you get Petraeus. You leave Casey alone. He said OK.

**Nelson:** So it happened before the new Democratic Congress came in, in January.

**Casey:** No, the hearing was in February, like the first of February or something like that. So that was it.

**Riley:** Other than the precipitous nature of the original notice, it was handled reasonably well?

**Casey:** Believe me, I have great respect for the President and I trusted him. I trusted him to do what he thought was right for the country, and so I gave him my military advice, what I thought we should do. He didn’t take it. Did that make me feel bad? You bet it did. But I had great confidence in his leadership ability and that’s what he needed.

**Nelson:** Something I meant to ask you earlier, that actually was timely again, and that is when you replaced Sanchez, when Petraeus replaced you, does the ingoing and the outgoing theater commander—Do you spend time with each other?

**Casey:** Yes.

**Nelson:** What was that like in each instance, when you were coming in, when you were going out?

**Casey:** I actually asked Rick to stick around for a couple of days so I would have more time to interact with him. Usually what happens is you come in, you take the flag and you take over. This situation was way too complicated for that. So he stayed around for a couple of days. He wrote out a very nice memo for me. We had dinner together, we talked through the memo, and he was very helpful. I had basically six weeks from the time they said, “You’re going to Iraq,” to when I was in Iraq, so he was very helpful.
With Dave, I set up his incoming schedule, to make sure that he met the right people. He came over three or four days ahead of time. We ran him around there, and then he came in and we sat down and spent several hours together, talking about what was going on. He was pretty well spun up. He had left in October of ’05, and so he’s only been gone a little over a year.

**Nelson:** What’s the encounter like with Sanchez? This is a general who was being replaced because he was perceived as not having done the job. You’re not being replaced because you didn’t do the job; you were replaced because they have a different notion of what the job ought to be. I’m thinking here are two people who are professional colleagues in each meeting, but have strongly different views about the job.

**Casey:** He had worked for me.

**Nelson:** Petraeus had?

**Casey:** Petraeus had, and so we talked very candidly. Honestly, and I still don’t know exactly what was going on back in the rear, with him and Jack Keane, but there was some stuff going on back in D.C. that I wasn’t privy to, that I don’t think was kosher. But at the time, I didn’t really know what Dave’s role in that was. All my concern was for continuity in the mission. That was the most important thing. I remember I told him, “Look, you’re going to do a different mission here and you need to be clear about that, because all these guys are focused on putting the Iraqis in the lead, and now you’re saying we’re going to do it for them.” He wasn’t saying that, but that’s what’s happening. “You’ve got to be clear about it with the Iraqis and with our own guys.”

**Nelson:** So your goal was to help him succeed.

**Casey:** Absolutely.

**Riley:** We’ve got about 15 more minutes and I want to stop and ask you if there’s anything that we haven’t covered up until this point, that you wanted to talk about, that you think it’s important for us to hear from you.

**Casey:** I’m trying to think back on the President. I guess there was another thing with the President that we didn’t really talk about. June of 2006, I’m back for a physical and a break. I’m up at Walter Reed and I get a call from my aide, “Hey, the President invited the Casey family to the White House for dinner tonight.” I said, “What?” I called my son in Richmond. My other son is away on business, and he’s flying in. Anyway, we all show up—It was just he and his wife and us. We sat down and it was quite a wonderful evening. Again the same relaxed kind of person. What I didn’t know at the time, and of course I should have suspected it but I didn’t—I think he told a reporter later that he was kind of checking me out to see if I was really under Rumsfeld’s thumb or not under Rumsfeld’s thumb.

**Nelson:** When was this in ’06?

**Casey:** June. He certainly didn’t say that to me, but it was interesting to me, for him to say that. It said to me that he either thought that I was doing everything Rumsfeld said, or maybe that Rumsfeld wasn’t passing on the direction that he was given.
Perry: But in a family setting like that, how do you think he was going about determining that aspect of you and your approach?

Casey: I think he was just kind of watching me, talking to my kids. My boys are both grown. At that time, they were probably late thirties, early forties. How I interacted with them, what kind of person I was. He’s someone, I think, who looks at the whole person and tries to figure out, is this a man of character or is this somebody who is not a man of character?

Perry: What were the topics of the conversation, do you remember?

Casey: We talked about baseball. I was with his wife at one table and he was over at the other table.

Riley: Laura [Bush] was debriefing him after the session.

Casey: He was sitting next to my daughter-in-law, Laura.

Riley: Maybe he was asking your wife, is Rumsfeld giving your husband instructions?

Casey: It was much more sophisticated than that.

Nelson: One thing we haven’t talked about, and I don’t know if you have any perspective on it, is the so-called revolt of the generals, the ex-generals criticizing Rumsfeld.

Casey: Really, that’s such bullshit. It really bothers me because none of those guys had direct knowledge of anything that they were talking about.

Nelson: I was going to say, You know all that?

Bakich: You’re speaking of Keane, in particular, right?

Casey: Well, Keane was one of the revolting generals.

Nelson: McCaffrey.

Casey: McCaffrey. He was on this other thing that National Geographic just did and he said he hated Rumsfeld. Why say that? I’m sure he did, but McCaffrey had nothing to do with this. Nothing. Keane had never served in Iraq. Keane became the instant expert. But the guys who did that, they were one and two stars. What’s his name? I forget—[John] Batiste and some other guy. Batiste was closest, because he was Wolfowitz’s exec for a while, and Paul Eaton worked on the Iraqi Security Forces under [Walt] Slocombe.

Nelson: What I wondered is, did you think that was an inappropriate instance of military-civilian relations?

Casey: Very inappropriate.

Nelson: Even though they were retired?
Casey: Yes.

Nelson: Why was it inappropriate?

Casey: Most importantly, because they didn’t have direct knowledge of what they were saying. They’re repeating stuff that they’re hearing, that they don’t know to be true and I just don’t feel that it’s appropriate for generals to criticize their civilian leaders in public.

Nelson: Even when they’re no longer in a line of command?

Casey: If they haven’t said it to their face, they should keep their mouth shut. If you don’t have the courage to tell them to their face, then telling it to reporters—that just doesn’t do it for me.

Riley: Is there any piece of the story, when you move back to the States, that we ought to cover here?

Nelson: I was just thinking that you are Army Chief of Staff while Bush is still President, so that period.

Casey: I did a lot of speaking, right after I got back, about what was going on.

Riley: Did he ask to see you after your return to the States? Did you go to debrief the White House after your return?

Casey: No.

Riley: Interesting.

Casey: No, I didn’t. I had 60 days between the time I got back and the time I took over as the Chief of Staff of the Army, and I had two things to do: I had to recuperate and I had to get my head into leading the Army. But anyway, I can’t remember if it was email or a note or something he wrote, but he said thank you for talking about what was going on in Iraq and talking about the Army, and those kinds of things.

After I did my confirmation hearing, where I basically got to defend the whole Iraq War up to that point, I got on a plane and went straight back to Iraq, walked into a Cabinet meeting with the Prime Minister, and I said, “I’m glad to be back in Iraq where the people are friendlier.” [laughter] I wasn’t there ten minutes when the President called me. I had to step out and take the call, and he said, “Thank you very much for the hearing and what you did.” He was very good about that kind of thing.

Perry: And the issues as I understand them, particularly for you, are about the Army being stretched too thin, and stress issues in military families. You focused quite a lot on that at that point, right?

Casey: Yes. My wife and I took off on a four-month trip around the Army so I could get my own sense of what was going on. I talked to people from all ranks. Basically, we had a volunteer force now that was stretched to the breaking point. They’d been going six years, one year out, one year
back. We couldn’t continue to do that and the President was very receptive to that. He’d already made the decision to increase the size of the Army. We were doing that as fast as we responsibly could do it. He was very sensitive to the needs of the force, and very receptive to those concerns. You could tell that he was the kind of person that when he made a decision to put someone’s life at risk—He took that personally. I saw a lot of wounded when I was in Iraq, but I didn’t have to deal with the families of the fallen. But when I became the Army Chief, I saw how gut wrenching that is. He put himself out there with families of the fallen all the time, and it was genuine.

**Nelson:** While you’re theater commander in Iraq, you obviously have to focus entirely on that position, but I wonder, coming back as Chief of Staff, are you more aware than perhaps you had been, not that you’d been unaware, but more aware than you had been that we’re fighting two wars, or maybe the same war in two different theaters? The Afghanistan part of it—Does your mind turn to that more now that you are Chief of Staff?

**Casey:** I always saw this as a War on Terror. Frankly, I still do. Iraq and Afghanistan were theaters and Somalia was a subtheater, but I always thought of it like that. I thought of Iraq and Afghanistan as two theaters of the same war in my role as a member of the Joint Chiefs, where I provide strategic military advice to the President. As the Army Chief, I’m focused on trying to hold the Army together through this period.

When I came back from my four-month tour, I said, “The Army is out of balance.” We’re so weighed down by our current demands, we can’t do the things we need to do to sustain the force and prepare for the future. We’ve got to put ourselves back in balance. I said, “That’s going to take a lot of time and it’s going to take a lot of money.” That became the theme, to put the Army back in balance. I got great support from the President and I got great support from Congress on that, and four years later, we were in a much better position. I think we were approaching two years between deployments, which was our goal, so it was pretty good.

**Riley:** We’re about at our concluding point and I wanted to ask you—You’ve told us about the Korbell course, and you’ve been giving a lot of thought to that. What are the general lessons about civil-military relations that we ought to take out of the Bush experience, and in particular, your experience? What can we learn over that eight-year interval, to better understand things, either descriptively or prescriptively?

**Casey:** I think people need to understand that every President treats his responsibility to provide for the security of the United States of America as his number one job. I can’t imagine what President Bush was dealing with, having been surprised on September 11th, but knowing him as I do, I believe that he said to himself, *This ain’t happening again, not only on my watch but on anybody else’s watch.* The idea that you’re going to have a Department of Homeland Security that pulls together groups from 13 different government organizations—Anybody who’s worked in the government knows that is an unbelievable task. But he realized that needed to be done. He directed it and it happened. To pull the intelligence communities together was a huge undertaking. He took Negroponte out of Iraq and brought him back to do it. He fundamentally changed the way our government protected ourselves from a very different threat, and other people weren’t seeing it. I thought that really took great guts and great vision.
What other lessons? I’m trying to stay at the Presidential level. I put my other lessons in the last chapter of the book. The other thing is—I think the President learned this with me and used it with Petraeus—it’s good for the President to have direct interaction with his military commander on the ground in vital theaters, individual stuff where they have conversations. He told me at that first dinner at the White House, “If you ever need to talk to me, call me.” I’ve often thought that I probably should have taken him up on that in 2006 sometime and said, “Hey, we need to talk.”

Riley: But you never did?

Casey: I never took him up on that, no.

Perry: So in other words, add that communication mode to the teleconferences, since you’re not getting the written directives.

Casey: You could have a teleconference just with the general and the President, maybe the SecDef sitting over in the corner by himself, but he needs to have that interaction. Rumsfeld was smart to say, “Invite him to dinner.” You’ve got to get to know your generals. Civil-military relations are relationships and they’re built on trust. You don’t trust someone necessarily just because they’re wearing a uniform. You can start to trust them, but you need to build a relationship, and it’s hard for the President now to build a relationship with every general who walks down the street, but it’s really important to have the personal relationship, especially with the field commanders who are dealing with the big problems.

To give you an idea of the scope of the problem for the President, when the chiefs and the commanders are in that meeting, sitting around that big table—I mean it takes up the Cabinet room and there’s no space—there’s everybody sitting in a chair and it’s impossible for one person to have a personal relationship with all the—You’re looking at probably 20 people there, sitting around the table.

The other thing is everybody thinks that Presidents aren’t receptive to hearing negative input from their generals. They may not like it, but they understand that they’ve got to hear the military’s views and advice. The military has to understand that they are only one part of the President’s decision calculus, and sometimes a relatively small part. There are a lot of people in the military who think, You tell us what you want to do and we’ll call you later, and it doesn’t work like that. It’s really a two-way street.

Riley: Let me see if I can ask you one final question. You mentioned earlier the business about the limits of imagination. You likened the war on terrorism to the Cold War. The Cold War ended. Not very many people foresaw how it was going to end, but it did end. Is this war on terrorism going to end? If so, do you have any idea how it ends?

Casey: Is it going to end? I sure as hell hope so. The Cold War went 45 years, and I think at 13 years into the Cold War, in the early sixties, you’re in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis and you’re asking yourself, is this ever going to end?

Bakich: That’s a really interesting connection.

Casey: How is this going to come out? It’s a long-term proposition. It’s only going to be won
within Islam, and so the fact that now we have moderate Islamic governments involved in a war against extremist Islam, that’s a hugely positive thing. It’s going to go away when some of these Muslim countries that have 60 percent of their populations under 25 get more economic opportunity and educational opportunities for the young people, because right now you have these huge populations of disaffected youth who are ripe for the extremists.

The Arab Spring was going in the right direction. The battle was joined between moderate and extremist Islam. Democracy is not necessarily the most efficient form of government, especially when you’re starting up in a new country. It’s just going to take them a long time to get there.

Bakich: When the Arab Spring gets going, what’s your reaction? Do you have a sense of foreboding?

Casey: With the Arab Spring?

Bakich: When it happened, not now. As it’s going on, what is General Casey thinking?

Casey: I’m thinking, Great, the battle is joined. We’ve got moderate Islamic governments coming forward. I did a paper for the Atlantic Council on this. I traveled to Egypt and to Tunisia, and we met with people across the political spectrum, and the countries are very evenly divided. About half the country says Islamists—not extremists, but Islamists—and the other says secular. Well, you know, it’s 50/50.

In Egypt, they cranked out a constitution. They did the same thing that the Iraqi Shia did. The Muslim Brotherhood rammed a constitution through. The secular guys didn’t like it. They were opposed to it from the beginning. They were constantly telling us that the military is the only thing that could save the country. This was a year before the military “saved” the country.

Tunisia was about the same, except they had a President there who was the only Arab leader I’ve ever heard talk about forgive and forget. We were walking in his palace overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, and I said, “How does it feel to be living in the palace of a man who put you in jail?” And he said, “General, you know, we have to get past that.” That’s the type of spirit that needs to go forward if the Arabs are going to succeed, but it’s a long-term proposition.

Riley: Well, we’ve reached our appointed hour, and we are enormously grateful.

Casey: Hopefully this has been useful.

Riley: It has been fascinating and it’s just invaluable.

Casey: You’ve caused me to open some doors I hadn’t opened in a while.

Riley: I hope it’s therapeutic rather than frightening.

Bakich: The transcript can’t get your smile.

Casey: It definitely wasn’t frightening.
Riley: Each of these is a piece of a mosaic about this time. We always say that when these interviews are going well, there’s no place in the world you would rather be, because this really is a front row seat to history. Today’s been fascinating for us and more importantly has created a document that people are going to be able to rely on for a very long time. Your candor and your good humor and your accommodating spirit are much appreciated.

Casey: I’ve always been a big fan of history. Gosh, the reason I wrote that book is we’re going to do this again, and these young folks who are now colonels and brigadier generals are going to get thrust into something like that and they’re going to ask, “Has anyone done this before?”

I was actually having dinner with Stan McChrystal and his wife one night and he was talking about his relationship with [Hamid] Karzai, and I realized that it hasn’t been since Vietnam, where you had American military leaders living and operating inside another country, dealing with the political leaders of that country. I said, “I’d better finish this book.”

Riley: Well, we’re glad you did, as well as this complement.

Casey: OK, well good.

Riley: Thanks so much. We wish you a good trip. And thanks to my colleagues, for their help, as well.

Perry: Thank you, Russell, for your leadership.