

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Frederick Kagan

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I: Planning the Surge (0:15 – 24:47)

KRISTOL: Hi. I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm joined today by my friend, Fred Kagan, fellow scholar here at the American Enterprise Institute and director of the Critical Threats Project at AEI.

If you ask someone on the street in Washington, Fred Kagan, architect of the Iraq surge, and that was 2006. Things had gone very, very badly. We were all supporters of the Iraq War in 2003, things had really started to go badly, and by – in 2006, it was pretty disastrous looking. And you convened a group. Well, why don't you tell the story? So.

KAGAN: So, you know, what happened is that Dany Pletka, my boss, our vice president here, came to me and said, "Hey, why don't you, maybe we should do a war game about Iraq?" And this was probably in about September of 2006. And maybe we can try to raise the level of discourse in some way.

KRISTOL: And there had already been criticism that we didn't have enough troops there. I think we had all written those pieces.

KAGAN: Many times. You published many of mine, for which I'm grateful.

KRISTOL: Yes, and worrying that President Bush wasn't adjusting, and Secretary Rumsfeld in particular, weren't adjusting strategy to the conditions on the ground. So we're September '06 and –

KAGAN: And it's getting worse. And so there was a feeling that I think we all had that there was a lot of big-hand, little-map, you know, general discussions of Iraq but there weren't a lot, there wasn't a lot of specificity.

And, you know, so Dany said, "Maybe we should do a war game." And I said, "Well, I don't really want to do a red-on-blue war game because I don't want to game the enemy, but I think maybe we should do a planning exercise."

And the whole intention behind that was it never occurred to me or anybody that was involved in this that we were going to affect policy. It was simply "Maybe we can put some concrete numbers on the table, some concrete enemy on a map, some concrete units on a grid, and force other people who want to have this discussion to wrestle with the specifics of the problem and not do the, you know, well, 'Iraq is a country of 32 million people, 1-to-20 counter-insurgency ratio means 600,000 soldiers, so we're clearly

not going to do that.” You know, and I heard that a few times, and you did too. And, you know, our answers were, “Well, we don’t need to do it in the entire country, but then the question would be, ‘Well where do you think you need to do it?’” So we set out to answer that question.

KRISTOL: And it was strikingly unusual, I remember, just because, I mean, I had written pieces, published pieces but they did tend to have that level of generality. One has the sense there aren’t enough troops, so send more troops. But who are we as civilians to tell the military exactly where to send the troops?

Meanwhile, the military are busy fighting the war, and they have their own doctrines, which lead them, and their own institutional reasons, even, perhaps, for not being so eager to send more troops. And so the whole discussion was kind of deadlocked at that point, it seems to me.

KAGAN: I actually find that – I mean as a little sort of digression – I actually find it fascinating, you know, what was the doctrine that was actually driving the military in 2006? And, you know, what was the Casey strategy, and you know, was Casey just – General George Casey, he was the commander. Was he just dumb?

No, he’s not. He’s a very smart man, he’s a very experienced fighter. And he actually had a theory, and it wasn’t a dumb theory. The theory was that this is a problem that has to be solved fundamentally by political accommodation among the Iraqis and that the presence of foreign troops in any country create antibodies and generate resistance and generate a certain amount of violence. And so and that’s right.

KRISTOL: And General Abizaid who was his, I guess, superior –

KAGAN: He was, he was the CENTCOM –

KRISTOL: Was very much attached, I think, to this light footprint, I remember that. And yes, if you, if we have American troops going around kicking down doors, that will just create more of a problem. As you say, it’s not a crazy –

KAGAN: No. It’s absolutely accurate. It’s just that it’s two-thirds of the strategy, is the problem with it because, you know, as we were seeing, as we were arguing, when there is no security, when the local forces are not able to do this before you’ve had the political accommodation, somebody has to keep the level of violence down because otherwise you’re not going to get the political accommodation, you’re not going to get the security forces and so forth. And so it was a thoughtful and intelligent and articulate strategy.

And I also think it’s worth pointing out the Bush Administration strategy writ large wasn’t – and just stick with me here for a minute, audience, just stick with me. It wasn’t fully, fairly tested in a certain sense until Maliki became Prime Minister in May of 2006. Now, you and I both thought that it was failing long before that and both thought, rightly, as it turned out, that that would not be a significant event from the standpoint of turning the tide. But their theory, as I understand it, was that when you had a democratically elected leader under the new constitution, and Maliki was the first one, that that should have ended the conflict or begun the end of it.

So it wasn’t – now we, of course, we were criticizing this in 2004, it was apparent to us that this wasn’t working. But it’s all to say that it was a very, is very plausible, intelligent series of arguments, which can be made for why we did what we did as a nation and the decisions that were made. They just didn’t work.

KRISTOL: So September 2006, and you’re trying to now really flesh out what it would be to actually change strategy at a much greater level of specificity and granularity than people like me writing op-eds, on the one hand. But also to put it in a bigger context than maybe some colonel working in the Pentagon who was looking at whether they should move one brigade over or one battalion over or something like that.

KAGAN: Well, the problem, the colonel and Pentagon has to operate within the policy constraints that he's given. We didn't have to do that. We said, "Okay, what's the situation, what should we do about it?"

I immediately recognized that I did not have the technical skills necessary to do this. And so I reached out to a number of friends including my closest friend in the Army, John McMaster, and a number of other West Point colleagues, and some of the people who had served with him in Iraq when he cleared the northern city of Tal Afar in Ninawa Province in 2005. Reached out to them. We had a first day session of bringing in all of the policy experts that we could to talk about the regional situation, the political situation. So it wasn't just a military planning exercise. And then we had Jack Keane come in and we also had retired Lieutenant General Dave Barno, who played an important part in this, come in and advise us and talk to us about how to do an exercise like this, and be a good smell-tester for it.

And we sat down, we laid out as best we could what the critical terrain was, which was basically the sectarian fault lines largely within Baghdad. And then we actually got with our military experts. And this is something that I couldn't do myself. You know, got them on Google Earth imagery and said, "Okay, how would you go about clearing and securing this area, and how much force do you think that it would take?" And these were guys, some of them had served in Baghdad, others had done it elsewhere. And we laid down, sort of, area by area about a battalion fight here, a company here, and so forth, added that all up. And that came out to about five brigade combat teams and two Marine regimental combat teams for Anbar, which is what we thought.

And I was very surprised by that outcome. I expected it to be a bigger force. And it was a coincidence – Petraeus gives me a hard time about this all the time because he accuses us of having backward planned from this but it's actually not true – we were able to figure out how much additional force the military could generate by extending the tours of units from 12 to 15 months and accelerating some deployments. And it turned out to be five brigades.

KRISTOL: Which is about what, about –

KAGAN: It was about – organically, a brigade has about 3,500 guys in it.

KRISTOL: So 20,000 people-plus.

KAGAN: By the time you're done with enablers, it's more like 25,000 and then there are enablers behind that, of course. And we weren't looking at numbers. We were just looking at units, which is the other thing, I think, that was different about what we did from what a lot of the discussion in town was about. But I was very suspicious of that result. It was too neat. And it did sort of match up too closely with what we could do.

And so I said, "Okay, let's do this another way; let's make the best estimates we can of what the populations are in each of these areas and apply the standard 1-to-20 counter-insurgency ratio on it and see what numbers that produces." Produced about the same numbers. Okay, so I took yes for an answer. We published about a 55-slide PowerPoint deck, or we produced it, on Monday, December 11th, I think it was.

KRISTOL: After Thanksgiving, I remember, yeah.

KAGAN: And it was also right after the Iraq Study Group had released its much ballyhooed report.

KRISTOL: Right. As an example, the opposite of how not to think seriously about dealing with the real issues, in my opinion anyway.

KAGAN: And we had two opportunities that day and one was that Jack Keane was already –

KRISTOL: Retired Army Vice Chief of Staff, I think, four stars –

KAGAN: Yes, he'd been acting Chief of Staff.

KRISTOL: Four-star general, yeah.

KAGAN: He was already scheduled to go in with a bunch of other retired four stars on that Monday to talk to the President and so we were able to put the deck in his hand. And he and I also had the opportunity on that Monday to brief Vice President Cheney. And then we had a couple of other opportunities to brief the national security staff and –

KRISTOL: And you and I had some private lunch with the Chief of Staff. With Steve Hadley, but also with Josh Bolten, the Chief of Staff. Maybe that was before the thing was finished even.

KAGAN: That was that week. That was Thursday of that week after it was finished, yeah. Well, it was a very significant emotion for me.

KRISTOL: I was just there as a bump-along, what do I know? But it was nice to be. I guess what I was struck by coming up to some of those meetings that were mostly held here at AEI in the 12th floor in the conference. I kind of – I had never been to a planning exercise, and I expected it to be very formal and sort of impressive, you know, people with, of course, PowerPoint presentations, maps. And there was all of that.

But it really was mostly – I don't know 15, 20 people sitting around a table – kicking ideas back and forth. Looking obviously at maps, looking at the charts of how many forces you could deploy, looking at documents to some degree. But I was struck how seminar-like it was and not what I would regard a military planning session as. I don't know, maybe that was unusual in that way.

KAGAN: No, it wasn't. It was –

KRISTOL: I was just struck how intellectual it was, how –

KAGAN: It was, no, it wasn't unusual. What I came to realize is that what we did was the phase of developing the concept of the operation and an overall estimate of forces required.

What you're talking about does happen. You do get to a point where you have a lot of people sitting around with a lot of thick binders and PowerPoints and stuff. And that – but that's not what they do – because Kim and I have now had the opportunity to sit in on planning exercises in Kabul for two strategic plan redesigns and so forth. And it is like this seminar that we had, when you're trying to figure out what should we do, and where should we do it, and how should we sequence it, and, you know, how do we go about thinking about what kinds of forces are going to be required.

When you've done all of that and the commander said, "Yeah, that's what we want to do," then the staff will go away. And this is the thing that only a military staff can do, and it will go through what's called a formal troop-to-task analysis. And that's where you really have to go through and say, "Okay, we're going to occupy this forward operating base, it's this large, it's going to require a force of this size to protect it, they're going to need these kinds of guns and these kinds of tanks." And this, how many trucks and all of that stuff happens.

But what's really good to see is that that process is divorced in our military – or it's not divorced but it's subordinated to, first, let's figure out what we're doing and then we can have that discussion and if it turns out in that discussion that it's not logistically sustainable, you can't do this or that or the other, then we can go back and revisit the concept. So it actually wasn't unusual in that respect, which was even more surprising to me.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good, though. And I remember being so impressed by the military people. General McMaster – I guess then-Colonel McMaster.

KAGAN: Well, he wasn't actually at that, but his guy, Colonel Joe Armstrong, who had been his deputy, Major Dan Dwyer, retired, who had also been there.

KRISTOL: I met McMaster in that period socially.

KAGAN: When he was just a colonel.

KRISTOL: Being impressed by how thoughtful those guys were and interested in thinking things through, not just applying whatever they were given to –

KAGAN: To being creative.

KRISTOL: Yeah, yeah. It was interesting. So just to finish the surge story since that was an unusual moment, I think, where a think tank took something up on its own, not really being asked to do it by, in real part, by a couple of rogues in the White House and the Pentagon were friendly to it but it was not –

KAGAN: Not that I'm aware of.

KRISTOL: Not that they wanted really, and then amazingly it becomes policy. I think President Bush announced the surge more or less along the lines that your group recommended less than a month after that paper came out. And the Iraq Study came out at the same time, and that was the huge multitrillion, multizillion dollar group with big shots, former Secretary of State, and so forth. And it didn't really affect policy much.

KAGAN: Look, I've never understood and I don't think I ever really will understand how important our report was in all of that. I mean, General Odierno who was at that time the three-star commander in Iraq had already come to these conclusions, was already working on contingencies.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that turned out to be very important.

KAGAN: Well, it was critical because we didn't give anybody anything that could be implemented. We described a concept. I think my best understanding of the role that we played was to help get something really concrete in front of President as an alternative to the things that he was being pitched.

And it made it possible for him, and I think for the Vice President, definitely for the Vice President, and for other members of the Cabinet to interrogate harder what they were being presented with by the military and ask questions about feasibility and whether this made sense or that made sense on the basis of a real – not a real but a much more detailed and specific set of propositions. So I think we enabled the discussion that allowed ideas that were percolating in the military but not making it all the way up to be discussed and then ultimately to be adopted by the President.

KRISTOL: And don't you think General Keane who had real stature, his being onboard was really critical.

KAGAN: Well, it was critical for us that he thought it was a good plan to begin with because I'm just a civilian. I mean, we really were sensitive to that. And you know if General Keane and General Barno, for that matter, had – we outbriefed both of them on Sunday before we were finished with this thing. And you know, if they had not said, "This makes sense," we would have backed off of it. And then, of course, Jack is such a well-respected, rightly, rightly so, as someone who's not afraid to tell truth to power and really just interested in getting things right, it would have been meaningless without Jack.

KRISTOL: And General Petraeus is not at this point yet in Iraq or in charge of Iraq?

KAGAN: No. He's still at Leavenworth where he is completed or has completed the rewriting of our counter-insurgency doctrine.

KRISTOL: And you were in touch with him or not much?

KAGAN: I wasn't.

KRISTOL: Did you know him really?

KAGAN: I had met him once when he'd come here after completing his tour in Iraq as the head of the training command. I hadn't interacted with him. The first time that I met him in meaningful way actually was in January of 2007. So now other people were reporting back to him on these discussions and I think probably also reporting back to General Odierno on what was going on. And I had – I didn't know about any of that.

KRISTOL: And so General Petraeus takes over in January '07 –

KAGAN: It's February '07, actually.

KRISTOL: Right. And Bob Gates has replaced Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense, so clearly this issue is very much open to a new strategy and then he kind of announces it in January.

KAGAN: He does announce it. I mean, you know, it's –

KRISTOL: It didn't quite go as far as we wanted, as I recall.

KAGAN: No, it was frustrating. You know, I wanted two regiments, he gave us two battalions. There were timelines, there were various other things that we didn't like about his speech. It was probably the least effective speech visually that he ever gave. It was remarkable. He was standing up and he looked very uncomfortable. But you know, and you and I –

KRISTOL: Not greeted well by the media.

KAGAN: Oh, it was hammered immediately. Oh my God, it was. And you and I, we'd been hammering the Administration pretty hard and hammered them subsequently on a lot of things and so – but I think it's very important to give him credit for what was one of the most courageous decisions a president has ever made.

I mean, the war was polling, if I recall, about 19 percent support at the time. I think if you'd asked – no one thought, I don't think anyone thought to ask Americans what do you think about sending another 50,000 troops to Iraq, I doubt you could have gotten more than 10 percent of the population onboard with that. He was getting hammered –

KRISTOL: He had lost the midterm election in part, the Republicans had in part, presumably because of Iraq.

KAGAN: No. Clearly because of Iraq. You know, it was this antiwar tide. You'd had this blue-ribbon commission that was supposed to be the adults coming in and they'd said, "Get out, get out, get out." And he turns around and says, "No, I'm going to go all in and double down."

It was an amazingly courageous decision. And it was critically important because if we had – you know, bad as things are now, avoidably bad in my opinion, but bad as they are, it would have been devastating had we allowed ourselves to get run out of Iraq in 2006 in the way that we were going to be run out. Basically, we were going to be driven out because it was going to be a contested withdrawal, and it was going to look like a rout of American forces. And that would have been a serious calamity.

KRISTOL: And so General Petraeus comes over and you've gotten some notoriety at this point as one of the authors of the surge and so forth. But I can't recall – did he then have you come to Iraq pretty soon after that or you were in touch indirectly or –

KAGAN: So we met him in January and then I first went over, I think, in April perhaps. I actually, he invited me to tag along on a trip with Max Boot. And then Kim and I went over with Jack in – Jack Keane – in, it might have been April or May. And then he brought us, General Petraeus brought the three of us back basically every quarter and we would go for a week, two weeks.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I tagged along with you at the end of July just as the surge troops had – they had finished bringing the surge troops in and General Odierno famously said, “The surge of troops has been completed, the surge of operations is about to begin,” something like that –

KAGAN: Yep, exactly, exactly right. Exactly.

KRISTOL: It was an exciting time to be there.

KAGAN: It was. It was a fascinating time. I mean, we were there. If you look at violence, you know, the violence map, so the first time Kim and I went there, it was right at the peak of that. And then by the time we went there with you, it had come down somewhat but it was still very close to the peak. And the speed with which that violence curve dropped surprised everybody.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that’s what I recall. We didn’t expect it to work as well as it did, I guess.

KAGAN: I don’t think anyone did. I don’t think anyone did.

KRISTOL: Is there a lesson in that or just –

KAGAN: I guess the lesson is that sometimes you can really underestimate, you can become so fixated on the magnitude of the problem that you miss opportunities to achieve nonlinear positive change but I would never bank on it.

KRISTOL: That’s a good lesson, though, yeah. I guess it cuts the opposite way, too, to some degree, right?

KAGAN: Well, this is, I mean, I would say this is what the sort of problem with the Rumsfeld strategy before that had been, which is that we were so fixated through the success through a certain path that we missed the downside risk of really nonlinear bad stuff happening.

KRISTOL: I remember – maybe it was you or maybe our friend, Gary Schmitt, someone saying near the end of 2004 – President Bush would be reelected, Rumsfeld was staying Secretary of Defense – and someone said to me, I remember, you know, “We could really be losing this war in a year, a year and a half.”

And I said, “Oh, I mean, yeah, we don’t like the strategy, it’s certainly not great, and we could lose public support here.” That was already clear. “But we can’t lose a war, we’re the U.S., we have a 150,000 troops there.” I mean, what are we fighting really?

And I underestimated and I think – not publicly because I was happy to keep making the case for more troops and different strategy – but I sort of underestimated on the downside, too, how much things can – how fast things can get worse and how much one or two inflection points – the bombing of the mosque, I suppose, in February 2006 in Samarra. Things can really just things can start to snowball down.

KAGAN: Yeah and –

KRISTOL: It’s a good lesson about military things but, I think, about politics in general.

KAGAN: I agree. Yeah, things are nonlinear. I mean, this is a huge problem. Everybody tends to make linear projections and linear extrapolations. You know, if it was this way today, it will be this way plus

something tomorrow. And that's not the way the world works, not the way politics works, it's not the way the world works.

And I think that we, I think we all underestimated that, and I think we need to learn those lessons today where things are very, very bad. But it doesn't mean that they can't get a lot worse very quickly. It also doesn't mean as with the surge, that yeah, I mean, that they couldn't get a lot better or stay the same.

I mean, these things are not predictable. You have to interact with them, and I think that's sort of what I come away with from my study of military history, but also from this experience, too, that you really can't know how a situation or a system is going to be affected by actions you take until you take them. And then you have to see what the effect is and it has to be iterative because you can't predict these things.

You know, on the one hand, you never have enough information. But on the other hand, you know, sometimes the question is, "If we attack this position, is the enemy going to hold it?" A lot of the time, the enemy doesn't know the answer to that question until the attack comes. So and it depends on the attack. So these things are actually unpredictable and that's why you have to be prepared to interact with the changing situation and not just say, "Is this going to work: yes, no?"

KRISTOL: That seems to be so contrary to the spirit of think tanks in a way in general – not so much AEI – where people want a kind of certainty of prediction, you know, a sort of social science model of how the world might work. And I think that's true of our public discourse of some degree too, don't you think?

KAGAN: I think it's become, I think it's really, really bad that it's become dominant in our public discourse, and this, you know, tell me are we going to win or not, is it going to work or not, how long is it going to take, when are you going to know, what are your metrics, you know, all of this kind of stuff. I'm not an economist, so I can't tell whether that stuff works for the economy or not. But it does not work in war. And, you know, I mean, you know better than I, it doesn't seem to me to work in politics, either.

II: Soldiers and Civilians (24:47 – 39:37)

KRISTOL: So what does it mean to direct the Critical Threats Project – and to be a scholar at a distinguished think tank like AEI?

KAGAN: Well, right now, it means being very busy because there are a lot of threats in the world, and a lot of them, unfortunately, are critical. So the Critical Threats Project is basically an open-source intelligence center that collects the information that is available in print media and on the web and so forth, and really tries to conduct a professional-level intelligence analysis to understand exactly what is going on, what the threats are, what the problems are so that we can inform the policy debate and help people come up with good policy recommendations.

KRISTOL: And the government isn't doing an adequate – don't they have kind of more resources than you do to do this, you know?

KAGAN: Yeah, yeah, they do and –

KRISTOL: You're not listening into people's conversations abroad or anything?

KAGAN: I'm absolutely not listening into anyone's conversations, and it's not necessary for us to do that because there's a huge amount of information that's out there. I think it's incredibly important that there be competitive analysis. I think it's incredibly important that there be independent analysis.

And, you know, this is what think tanks provide in general, and we're just providing it more specifically with contacts to the intelligence community because there's always a risk of groupthink, there's always a risk of people being captive by particular constructs or ideas about how things are working. And I think that the intellectual discourse always benefits from having very well-informed, well-documented, based-

on-good-technique argumentation put out there, and then the decision-makers can use whatever they think is best.

KRISTOL: You've been pretty close to the decision-making as well as providing this information from afar, which I guess is characteristic of people in think tanks. That's probably why most of them are in Washington, DC – not everyone but.

And, I mean, how does that work? I think people would be interested in that. It's a bit of a mystery, I think, to people from abroad sometimes or people from, just citizens in America. What does this think-tank community do, how does one advise policymakers, what's the – how do you see your role?

KAGAN: Right. Well, I mean, there's a lot of, as you know, there's a lot of disparity, and different people do this different ways. I have the distinction of not having served in government except when I was at West Point, which doesn't count. And so all of my influence, such as it is, has been from the outside. And it's a matter of understanding the decisions that are coming up, understanding the decision space, the time space, and having something to recommend that's concrete and can be implemented.

And then the good thing about this city and a good thing about the American government is that a lot of people are very open and really look for different ideas, people with ideas, especially when problems get hard. And so I've found a lot of opportunity to interact with people on the Hill, people in the administration, people in the military, even apart from the very strange experience that Kim and I had when we were in Afghanistan for a long time with –

KRISTOL: Well, let's talk about that since that sounds like an unusual – a lot of people write reports, a lot of people testify to Congress. You've done a ton of both, write pieces for *The Weekly Standard* and many, many other places. But you spend, what, over a year in Afghanistan?

KAGAN: We spent about 15 months on the ground in Afghanistan in four-to-six week bursts over the course of a couple of years.

KRISTOL: And you – where physically?

KAGAN: We were based in Kabul at the ISAF headquarters, although we went out periodically and visited brigades and battalions in the battle space. It was the *Gilligan's Island* tour, actually. We went there for what was supposed to be an eight-day trip, and we got there after McChrystal had left.

KRISTOL: And this is when, so we're in 2000?

KAGAN: This is in 2010, is it? I think in the summer. And so we got there –

KRISTOL: President Obama has ordered the surge of troops –

KAGAN: He ordered the surge at the end of 2009 and –

KRISTOL: They come in 2010.

KAGAN: They're coming in. McChrystal is leading it. Then we have the *Rolling Stone* article, and then McChrystal goes back to DC and hands in his resignation, and we are out, are going out to do a usual, you know, sort of eight-day battlefield circulation, and we're there when General Petraeus arrives. And he basically mobilized us in place, he basically said, "I need you to stay and help me with the transition," and so forth, and so we did that for the better part of a couple of years. At the expense of AEI and ISW, I should add because and this is –

KRISTOL: ISW being the Institute for the Study of War, which your wife, Kim Kagan, runs, ably I would say.

KAGAN: And we were not being paid by the government, and our institutes weren't receiving funding for it. So I think it was pretty unusual in the think-tank world for, especially AEI, to be willing to support me doing that.

KRISTOL: We'll come back to your background teaching military history, teaching at West Point, and so forth a bit later. But I think people would be interested, I'm interested. So, what, okay, you really had a close-up view of the American military in action and a big deployment, obviously, of drawing down Iraq but building up in Afghanistan and fighting there so it wasn't just sitting around doing plans. What would surprise people about being close to the command center of a major military operation, major U.S. military operation?

KAGAN: Well, I mean it was a life-changing experience for us, as you can probably imagine because –

KRISTOL: Even though you were familiar, you'd been in Iraq and you'd taught at West Point and you were familiar with the military?

KAGAN: I mean, you know, you can talk about the fog of war, you can talk about friction, especially in large organizations. You can study this stuff, you can read about it. Seeing it up close is another thing and sort of being part of it, in a strange way, is another thing, as well.

And so one of the things that was really fascinating for us is that we – we were free radicals; we didn't belong anywhere in the chain of command, nobody knew what to make of us, really, we were just there because General Petraeus wanted us to be there. So nobody really knew what that meant either. So –

KRISTOL: But you had access to all –

KAGAN: But we had access to a lot of information and to him, which made us of interest to a lot of people. And so we would hear his intent, we would hear him explain what he wanted to do to senior leaders. And then we would spend a lot of time with the staff at ISAF and hear how his intent was translated into the staff actions, which was sometimes interesting.

And then we would go down and we would visit the next echelon below, the Intermediate Joint Command, which was the core equivalent, three-star equivalent headquarters, and listen to how they interpreted the guidance, which would be different. And then we'd talk to their planners and hear how their planners interpreted their guidance, which would be different. And then we would go down to a division at the two-star level and hear how they interpreted it. And sort of follow it all the way down to, sometimes down to battalion level, occasionally we would even talk to a company commander.

And then bring that back up because when we were done with a trip like that, we would outbrief everyone all back up the chain. So we would sort of tell the brigade commander what his battalion commanders thought was going on, and the division commander what his brigade commanders were going on. And it's a fascinating, even with all of the, you know, the technology and the standard operating procedures and all that, it is still to some extent, a game of telephone in the chain of command because each echelon is interpreting the overall situation and the orders and the instructions a little bit differently, putting his own spin on it, and by the time it gets down to the bottom, sometimes it actually is changed pretty fundamentally from what the commander intended. I mean, that we really we found that fascinating.

KRISTOL: And changed sometimes for the better as well for the worse? They're reacting to stuff in the field and –

KAGAN: No, I mean our military is designed to do this because the point is that we don't give top-down orders – "You will do this, you will move all your units this way." It's always intended for the subordinates to take their initiative. And I would say 9 times out of 10, the changes that are made improve the order and implement it better. Every now and then, we'd get off course somewhere. But I guess the other thing

I should back up and say is the most remarkable thing we learned about the military is that there is a willingness to tolerate people like us.

And it wasn't just General Petraeus. General Allen kept us on for several months and a couple of trips after he took over. You know, Kim has done this for General Odierno. General McChrystal had had us and a number of other civilians over. And so the eagerness with which the military embraces outside, particularly, civilian advice and brings people into its decision-making process to offer other opinions to avoid groupthink, to give it different perspectives – I think is really remarkable and I think it's one of the strengths of our military.

KRISTOL: I guess I was struck by that when I went with you to Iraq for that week in 2007. It's not really the caricature – the military is not, really not, the caricature, almost the opposite of the caricature of the military, people slavishly following orders, "Yes, sir." And quite a lot of, not criticism exactly, but pushback up the chain, don't you think and openness to fresh thinking. I mean –

KAGAN: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we watched commanders at all levels formally, politely tell their bosses that they were all "dorked up," that this is a stupid plan, and this wasn't going to work and we should do it this way, and, you know, a healthy back-and-forth on that.

And we watched a lot of outsiders apart from us, we watched a lot of other outsiders come in and present the broadest spectrum of views that you could possibly imagine. And some of them were just clearly out of contact with what was going on. And they were listened to very politely and people argued, but it wasn't just that they were listened to politely, people would – the officers would sit down after they were gone and say, you know, "Are we really comfortable just dismissing this? Is this, you know, is there something?" So there was a real intellectual – first of all, firepower that I think most people don't understand is in the military, and enthusiasm for intellectual engagement even in combat, especially in combat because it, you know, they understand it's all about getting it right.

KRISTOL: What criticism would you have, I mean, what needs to be fixed in the U.S. military in a big-picture way, I mean, anything striking?

KAGAN: You know, my answer to that is it's too small. You know, in terms of – you know, in terms of culturally, you know, it is a problem that the – the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 198 – whatever it was – which created the combat commands and took the Chairman and the Joint Chiefs out of the chain of command, and all that in the interest of creating joint environments and making the Army, the Air Force, and the Marines, and the Navy all work together, had a lot of really positive effects.

But it had a negative effect also. And the negative effect was that the lowest-ranking person in the Washington area who is actually responsible for the conduct of our wars is the Secretary of Defense. And

KRISTOL: So all the Washington-based people are out of the actual war-fighting and in the – procurement business and the force –

KAGAN: Yeah, it's the force-generation business. And it's recruitment, procurement, training, supporting the deployments, and so forth, in the case of the Chiefs, advising, and depending on the individuals in those positions, and we've seen over time, different people behave differently.

The degree to which the institutions back here are at war or grip the urgency of the situation can vary a lot. And this is something, I mean, I think this came over very vividly in Gates' book, his memoir about his frustrations with the degree to which the building, the Pentagon, just a lot of times, especially early on, just didn't seem to be at war. And there's no malevolence or ill will involved in any part of that, it's just sort of a natural consequence of the structure that we've gone to. And I think over time, we're really going to have to think about how to address that without undoing the positive benefits.

KRISTOL: And more broadly, I guess people in Washington will often say that the military is at war or parts of the military are at war or the Army and Marine Corps are at war, but the rest of the government is not at war, let alone the rest of the country.

How worried are you about that as we fight wars like Iraq and Afghanistan with a volunteer force – not like World War II obviously – and half the volunteer force is, I think, sons and daughters of people who had served in the previous generation, I mean, are you worried about the whole military-civilian gap and fighters and sort of the rest-of-the-country gap?

KAGAN: I'm not worried about it from the standpoint that a lot of the people who study this are worried about it. I'm not worried about it in terms of the military losing its identity as a subordinated instrument of national policy. Or, you know, there was an article written years ago about the origins of the coup of 20, 2012, I forget. I think it was supposed to have happened already. And it was just a thought piece that I think was over-the-top. And I'm not concerned about that. The military is never confused about what its role in society is.

I'm more concerned about the civilian side of the equation, and I'm more concerned about – not so much that Americans don't feel the pain of war. I don't want anyone to feel the pain of war more than is necessary. I mean, I don't think that there's a virtue in sharing the pain of war just to do that. And I don't think Americans have acquired any degree of callousness about it at all; so that doesn't concern me.

But most Americans don't understand anything about it. They don't know anything about the military. They may or may not know anyone in uniform. They generally have a very positive impression of the military but that leads almost to another problem, which is that most people, including increasingly most politicians and appointed officials who haven't served, don't really feel comfortable interacting seriously with the military. And they either are very suspicious, without being able to articulate the suspicion very well, or they're very trusting without really being able to challenge the military in a good way. And so –

KRISTOL: That sounds like our last two presidents, maybe without your dotting that “i” and crossing that “t,” right?

KAGAN: Okay. But I think both of those are just different sides of the same problem, which is that the civilians, sort of, to put it this way, in a weird sense, the civilians have moved away from the military, not that the military has moved away from the civilians.

III: David Petraeus in Command (39:37 – 58:45)

KRISTOL: So you and your group and colleagues recommended the surge, President Bush announced the surge and then selected Dave Petraeus to be the general in command of not just the surge but in command of our effort in Iraq. And you got to know him pretty well over the years. You spent time with him in Iraq, then time with him in Afghanistan. Tell us what that was like, what you learned from watching him, one of the most successful generals of the period, I guess, certainly of modern, of recent decades.

KAGAN: Absolutely and he's in my opinion is one of the greatest commanders in American history and one of the great commanders of our age. And it was an incredible privilege for us to get to know him and serve for him in this way. The watching a-day-in-the-life-of was fascinating, and it was interesting to look at it in Iraq as opposed to Afghanistan.

In both cases, I mean, he would get up early – not crazy early but he would get up early in the morning, and he would go for a run, and would continue to do that in Kabul even where the air is absolutely horrifically bad, and we would give him a hard time about that. He'd say, “Oh, it's nutrients.” We'd say, “No, sir, I don't know about that.” But he would go for his run, and he would – actually he didn't do that in the morning, now that I think about it, he would do that later.

But he would come in to a morning update, which in Iraq was called the BUA, the Battlefield Update and Assessment. And – BUA, right. It had lots of – this happened in all the units in different ways and in some

places it was Above Battlefield Update Briefing, in some places it was a CUB, which I don't even know what that is, you know a CUB or CUA or BUA or whatever.

KRISTOL: I mean, I was struck when I visited you and I guess he had been up for a while but so at 7:30 in the morning, as I recall. I think people will be interested. So we're on this base. We're on the headquarters.

KAGAN: Which in Iraq was this vast, sprawling victory base camp around the airport.

KRISTOL: And around Saddam's old –

KAGAN: And around one of Saddam's old palaces. The Al-Faw Palace. And right you'd come into a big room and you've got a lot of screens up and you have him in the middle of –

KRISTOL: And this is 7:30 in the morning?

KAGAN: This is 7:30 in the morning, right. And everybody has been up for a while. And you have him and all his senior staff officers. And then on the video teleconference, the VTC in, you have General Odierno, who is the corps commander, do in a similar room in his headquarters, which isn't very far away. And then you have a lot of people at the outstations, you have a lot of people, especially in Afghanistan, you would have people all over the world who would tune in at different hours. And so the NATO command echelon in Brussels would – or in Brunssum would be on. And the Joint Staff, there would be some poor sot who had to be at the Pentagon in the wee hours of the morning to listen, to be available to answer questions, to take notes, to pass on requests or questions and so forth. And these would go on usually for about an hour and they were incredibly detailed.

KRISTOL: But that's what struck me as very – so was I wrong to be surprised by that? I guess I didn't realize what being commander of an actual war is like. I kind of assumed you delegate and then you delegate – he delegates to someone else and the next guy delegates to someone else and the general deals with – you know, meets with the Prime Minister and does geostrategic things.

But Petraeus was challenging colonels, and why was there a brigade here and not there, and why were there two casualties here yesterday, didn't they have better intelligence than they should have had?

KAGAN: He was there was a time when – I mean, he was going around and asking brigade commanders where all their platoons were at. And you know people pushed back on that and said he shouldn't have been doing that.

And he wasn't trying to deploy the platoons for the guy. The points that he was trying to make was you need to get everybody you can off the base. The purpose behind that question was a purpose intent, the question was intended to drive home – you know, he loves to talk about big ideas. And he articulates a number of big ideas but then he recognizes this is the hardest thing about land warfare – is the hard part isn't coming up with the strategy, the hard part is getting an organization that consists of several hundred thousand people spread across the globe and throughout the theater all to work toward that idea. That's the hard part. That's the friction.

And so, and you want to give them the initiative because you want to let them – you don't want them to be robots, so you're trying to give them a big idea, you're trying to give them left and right limits, and you're trying to tell them move out and accomplish this for me. But you need to make sure that they're doing it, not that they're doing what you said, but that they're accomplishing what they need to.

And so you have to have in my opinion – this is something that Petraeus really had going for him, other generals view it differently – I think you have to be able to have that micro-understanding, not so that you can micromanage, because I never saw him do that, but so that you can challenge, so that you are in a position to engage your subordinate brigade commander, battalion commander in a way that gets him or her to think about whether he or she is really accomplishing the overall objective in the best possible way

and leads them to think that through, rather than having General Petraeus, four stars, come in and say, "Okay, I know what I'm doing, you don't, you need to do this," which isn't helpful because as you walk out the door, then all they can do is execute like robots.

So it's always a fine balance, I think, between the need of the commander to have that micro-sense. And the risk of micromanagement. But I think this is one of the things that Petraeus was unquestionably magnificent at was balancing that. So were all of – I mean. General McChrystal was the same way. I think General John Allen was the same way also when I watched them. They all had that ability to go from low to high and back without ever micromanaging.

KRISTOL: And did they have the ability to select how many of the people in command under them, the colonels, lieutenant colonels?

KAGAN: Virtually none of them. I mean, on their staffs, within limits. The personnel policies were fascinating. I mean, the default set is that the services back here in Arlington just crank their machines, and it pops out officers and units in –

KRISTOL: This colonel is highly rated and so he's going to be –

KAGAN: He's next, he's been, yeah, you know, he's next in line basically for this, that or the other thing. Now, that becomes the opening in a negotiation a lot of the time, especially for important staff positions. And so in general terms a theater commander has a lot of – you know, his requests are taken very, very seriously when he says, "I would want this person or that person or the other person." Doesn't always get them but gets them a fair amount of the time.

Unit, the unit subordinate commands he's really not in control of. Brigades have their commanders; he hasn't been involved in their selection. The brigades come when they're –

KRISTOL: They come with their commander.

KAGAN: Yeah. So he has really no effective control unless he wants to fire people, which none of these guys wanted to do. You know, he has no real control over those subordinates, and he's got to just work with what he gets.

KRISTOL: And he was able to do that.

KAGAN: Yeah, I mean on the whole. There were a couple of instances. Petraeus was able to do that on a couple of – in Afghanistan, it was a lot harder, and there were instances where brigade commanders decided that they really didn't need to do what they were being told and that got kind of ugly.

But on the whole, the military is designed to do this, and everybody is accustomed to this because when you're in a garrison, if you're a division commander, you don't have any control over who the brigade commanders are on your base. This is normal. So the military is accustomed to this. And it's remarkable to see it in action.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it is.

KAGAN: You know a new unit comes in, and there's a whole procedure for the handover. You know, they call it left seat/right seat overlap where you'll have the new commander and staff in theater literally often sitting next to the outgoing commander and staff and hearing the same briefings, and now technology is interesting.

So as Kim and I have been invited to come to a number of units getting ready to deploy and they can now teleconference into these morning updates. And a lot of them do. And especially at the tail end right as they're really getting ready to go, they'll be participating in a lot of these things at least passively so

that they're really current and up to speed when they land and then they'll have a left seat/right seat. So they've really gotten the ability to transition from unit to unit down at the tactical level pretty well.

At higher headquarters, it's a different story. And here I think it's very important to understand that the – what Petraeus and Allen and McChrystal commanded in the four-star command in Iraq and the four-star and the three-star command in Afghanistan, those were ad hoc headquarters. There was no unit that those were built around.

And that's a real big problem because it meant that you had a sort of a random collection of human beings brought together, coming in and out all the time, constant staff flutter. And very hard to build a cohesive team and different parts leaving at a different times and coming in and then there are gaps and all this kind of stuff. And it's not accustomed to functioning together as a cohesive organization.

When you go to Afghanistan and you add in the friction of 54 true contributing nations or however many we got up to, and all of the requirements for general officer representation at the supreme level and all that kind of stuff, the amount of friction that that introduces at those levels is really mind-boggling. And that's something we really I think need to address more seriously because there are ways of establishing four-star – we have three-star units that could do this, we just chose not to send them to Afghanistan, this is what a corps does, and that's what General Odierno was in command of in Iraq in 2006.

KRISTOL: So the corps, if I understand, he was in command of whatever number corps – was –

KAGAN: It was Third Corps.

KRISTOL: Third Corps of the Army. And so when he went to Iraq –

KAGAN: He took the Corps staff with him.

KRISTOL: So there were 200 or 400 or 700 people –

KAGAN: No, it was more than that. It was about a thousand –

KRISTOL: That he had worked with at Fort Hood. And –

KAGAN: They trained together. They prepared all together for the mission. And he'd been able to work out the kinks, they had worked out the kinks with one another. They knew him so they knew what he would expect when he deployed and they knew how to serve him best. He knew them, so he knew what he could expect from the different elements of the staff. And it wasn't discovery learning once he got there.

When General Petraeus landed in February, he fell in on this ad hoc organization that still had pieces coming and going and all that kind of stuff. And I think he managed it very well but it created a weird dynamic in Iraq because it meant that the three-star command generally worked a lot more efficiently than the four-star command. In Afghanistan, neither command ever really worked really, really efficiently, and that generated a whole other set of issues that was just unnecessary. We could have sent a corps –

KRISTOL: Because we're not sort of – the Army ultimately is not quite as set up to fight wars but rather to kind of be an Army that – is it just complicated to do that, I guess?

KAGAN: No, it's – so. It's not actually. You have to be prepared to maintain those higher echelon headquarters in peace time.

KRISTOL: I see.

KAGAN: And people, it's not that the Army doesn't want to do that. In principle, it's that going back to the 70s, we have big arguments about tooth-to-tail, and we define headquarters as tail.

KRISTOL: Explain that. So that's yeah so that's the criticism that we have too much bureaucracy and not enough fighters.

KAGAN: Exactly. And this is a combat soldier's perspective of it, which is basically the guys who are on the staff are wienies and they just, you know, they're there and they don't fight, and they're not contributing to the effort, they just do paperwork and all this kind of stuff.

It's so the opposite of the truth. The fighters don't have anything coherent to do if nobody knows who's the enemy, where is he at, what's he trying to do, how's it going, who's the population, what are we going to do about it, what's the plan, what does each unit need to do, what's the logistics for that. All of this stuff. The organization can't function, it can't survive, let alone operate against a living, breathing, thinking enemy without having a lot of staff wienies.

But when you're really looking to sort of cut money and cut end-strength, and you have people, a lot of congressmen on the Hill. And this goes back. Again, I mean, this was at the 70s that we really started having at this, who don't really understand – even those who served, a lot of serve in combat, subordinate combat positions, don't necessarily appreciate the importance of higher level headquarters, just look at it and say, "This is fat, let's just trim it."

KRISTOL: When they see the general with his five aides and – not all of them are probably strictly necessary, and you know, carrying his bag and his briefcase and they think, "Oh, that's what all the headquarter staff do."

KAGAN: Right. And, I mean, of course, the flip-side is do you want the general to be making his own coffee and carrying his own briefcase? Because the answer to that should be no, because one of the things that's amazing is watching the strain that this undertaking puts on the commanders.

And watching Petraeus' battle rhythm, which is what the sort of military term of art for what the individual does every day and every week and so forth. And he would start his morning, I don't know, at 6 o'clock and he would go until 9 or 10 every night without – without a single break. Maybe for a run, maybe for a haircut. And for him, it was just meeting to meeting to meeting to meeting with no breaks between them.

And I say that, I say 6 to 9, that's a lot of people work long hours, right, okay. You have the burden of literally being responsible for the lives of 100, 150,000 people. You have the burden of continually interacting with a living, breathing, thinking enemy, of dealing with the demands of the press, of dealing with Karzai, which is enough to drive you insane anyway, or Maliki which is just as bad. Of having to deal with Washington. And there's always the \$6,000 screwdriver, there's always that kind of thing. And the really important questions that come in from Washington.

Having to – and having to switch back and forth from meeting with the Romanian defense minister to going to a ceremony for a fallen soldier to giving an award to taking a briefing on the targets for the evening to – you know, if you imagine that continuously for a whole day, for a whole week, for a year, it's killing.

KRISTOL: Does it have to be? I guess I was struck by this, too, just in my one-week-each visit to Iraq and Afghanistan. Does it have to be as focused on that individual, is that – ? I was struck how much it was I guess, how much at the end of the day – I mean, obviously, they were extremely important generals and colonels and so forth fighting the war, and Petraeus would be the first to say that. Odinero in particular who was in command of the actual, I guess, operation under Petraeus. But I was struck how much of it came to that point, the one man at the top. I mean, is that a –

KAGAN: You know, I think that part of that was because of the way we were traveling through. We were oriented on him.

KRISTOL: So it looked to us –

KAGAN: So it looked to us that way. As we've – as Kim and I have gone in at different times in different ways, we're able to see the world from a different perspective, and you actually have a lot more poles than that. And this was especially true in Afghanistan, which was a much more decentralized fight. But we also saw Petraeus at the height of doing the very hardest thing that he had to do, which was to take an organization that was moving in one direction and get it to swing radically in another direction.

KRISTOL: I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that. I'm just struck by how much – these are modern-world bureaucracy, Max Weber you know, etc., etc., Pentagon. You know, and somehow you sort of felt when you were there that it was not that different from Alexander the Great or Napoleon or whatever. I mean, sort of that he was fundamentally shaping the strategy and battle plans.

KAGAN: Yeah. I don't think so. I mean Odierno would definitely take issue with that, and I would take issue with it on his behalf. You know, he was as important or more important to the design and execution of the campaign plans, and the division commanders were critically important. I mean, it did function as a proper hierarchy.

You know, I think it really was an artifact of first of all the time when we were there, so what he was doing and the fact that we were there as his guests. Because in Afghanistan, we saw it differently, and you got a better sense for how dispersed the effort actually is.

KRISTOL: But the same would be true to a slightly lesser degree of these secondary, so to speak commanders who aren't that secondary, they're pretty high up. So Ray Odierno's day was not much easier than Dave Petraeus'. And some colonels –

KAGAN: Well, once you get down to the tactical unit level, these guys are also much more regularly going out visiting – I mean, not that Petraeus and Odierno would visit troops in the field frequently but when you go down the brigade, especially battalion and below commanders, these guys were engaged with the enemy in tactical fights, so they have to do all of this other stuff and they have to be really out there motivating and leading soldiers.

And so the burden on them in some sense is – I don't want to say it's greater but in some respects it is, and especially the emotional burden of being involved in these really tough fights that we were in in Iraq. And, you know, where we got to know a number of these brigade commanders, just incredible Americans. But they took, they really took heavy casualties. They had, one of our good friends had – one of our good friends had his sergeant major blown up right next to him in an attack. I mean, these guys are having experiences like that but they're still also having to engage intellectually, flexibly, creatively, agilely think about the overarching strategic goals and how to implement them at their level. And it's – they're amazing human beings.

IV: How the Army Learns (58:45 – 1:12:49)

KRISTOL: I was struck when I was there – I agree with that – I was struck when I was there by how more than I expected, I don't know why I didn't think of that much, but how important intelligence was. It was thought to be by General Petraeus, General Odierno, or down to the colonel and lieutenant colonel, maybe even captain level, they really depended on getting good intelligence. They valued it. They spent a lot of time thinking about how to get better intelligence.

Yeah, I don't know why I didn't expect that. I guess I just thought you've got a big army, you go out there, you sort of, you know, the intelligence, obviously it's better to have good intelligence than not. But I didn't realize I guess how central it was.

KAGAN: No, it really is. I mean, it's always important. I mean, Napoleon was fixated by this. You know, we were joking about the Battle of Gettysburg before. You know, Lee's problem was he had no intelligence because he'd let his cavalry go off on a romp. This has always been critical.

It is interesting when you get into a command echelon and you see the pull for intelligence, for understanding on the part of the commander. And then I also had the opportunity to spend a fair amount of time sitting with the intelligence people when I was in Kabul, sitting in the joint intelligence operations center watching that sausage get made.

And that was another interesting sort of interpretation skill that Kim and I acquired because when operators ask questions of the intelligence people, sometimes there are comprehension gaps because the operators live in an operator view and they are really focused on, "I need to know this so that I can do that to the enemy." And the intelligence community isn't thinking about "so I can do that to the enemy," they're thinking about, "Well, this is what the enemy is doing, and this is what's going on and like that."

And so we found a certain lesser niche in knowing the operational community pretty well because that was the community we had grown up intellectually understanding. And then learning the intelligence community – and by this I mean also military intelligence community. And just sort of sometimes helping, after hearing the guidance from the operators and then how it would get translated among the intelligence analysts, say, "Actually, guys, I think you might want to think about it this way because this is what is framing this question: and that sort of thing. And every now and then, we'd go back to the operators and say, you know, "It really might be helpful if you asked the question this way because when you ask it that way, then this is the train of thought that that leads them into and that's really not what you're getting at."

KRISTOL: It is just striking what a huge organization is and dealing with everyone from operators to logistics to intelligence. I mean, it really is pretty remarkable to put it all together and then it has to be integrated but, of course, you can't over-integrate it in a funny way but you want – you need the logisticians to do their thing and you need the intelligence people to do their thing. I mean –

KAGAN: It's incredibly hard. I mean, it's the – you know, anybody who ever sort of lightly tosses off – "Well, we should just do this or we should just do that" or whatever is – it's just very dangerous because you really have to understand the complexity, the friction, how hard it is to do anything.

KRISTOL: And the people who say we could bring business practices to the Pentagon, to the military. Any truth to that or any utility? There's some, I guess, parallelism of running a complex company that's competing with other companies in the same field. I mean, it's integrating different things. But I guess it's –

KAGAN: Most companies aren't competing with other companies by destroying them. And you really have to not take that element off the table. I mean, at the end of the day, this about the managed use of violence and so that's – and mistakes are higher. This isn't, you know, if you're wrong, the stockholders don't lose money – people die and wars get lost. So, you know, businesses can be risk-tolerant that the military really shouldn't be risk-tolerant.

You know, that having been said, when you're talking about pure business practices, procurement practices, auditing, various other things, sure. But this goes back to the Goldwater-Nichols problem in part. You know, now, McNamara was trying to do this long before there was Goldwater-Nichols. But the more you see the Pentagon as being a large bureaucracy that spends a lot of money and you want to interact with the military in that way, the further you get away from the actual purpose of having a military and the actual complexities that are involved in that. And so sure there's efficiencies that we can get. But, you know, we've been going after waste, fraud, and abuse in the Pentagon for 40 years, and I'm not persuaded that we're not reaching a point of diminishing returns – I think we probably are.

I've asked this question, and I don't know the answer but I really would love to know. What percentage of every dollar spent on defense is spent counting up how many dollars are spent on defense? You know, because we've layered so many things on top of one another to try to have perfect accountability, exactly to achieve this that I think we long ago crossed the point where we're probably spending more trying to account for money than we're saving by actually accounting for it, which doesn't mean we shouldn't do that, it just means we might want to think about this a little bit more cleverly.

KRISTOL: And how about the human capital, as they say in the military. Do we do a good job of educating them and promoting them, and what's your thought on that?

KAGAN: In general terms, I think yes, we do a great job. I mean, we attract amazing people. The military is better than any other government service in terms of having multiple mid-career education requirements, mid-career education opportunities, and so forth. They're not all as good as they should be. People get past promotion boards who shouldn't, people don't get promoted who should. I mean, all that kind of stuff goes on. But on balance, I think actually the machine has been performing very well.

The main critique I would make of it, and others have made this before, is that it's too tactically oriented. We, you know, an officer or an NCO will spend 15 years, sometimes 20 years in his or her career in tactical units learning how to fight tactically and then will get promoted to an operational unit or a strategic unit. And there will be a War College course, maybe there will be this, that or the other thing. But we don't provide anything like the amount of intellectual effort, education, and so forth into preparing people for the higher levels of command as we do for the tactical level, which makes a superb tactical force, which I would never want to lose. But it does make it a bit more discovery learning than it should be for people at higher echelons.

KRISTOL: That's interesting. Could that be solved with – how could that be solved?

KAGAN: You can solve it with – I mean, you can never fully solve it, of course – but I think, candidly, we can spend less time at West Point and our commissioning sources really driving the nail through the wood on how to be a great second lieutenant and take young people who aren't going to be doing – most of them aren't going to be strategic stuff ever, got it. Most of them aren't going to be doing it for 20 years, got it.

But when you go to West Point, that's your only four-year education opportunity. So you learn a lot of things in college that you're not going to use for a long time and that you might never use. That's been a little bit in my experience too much of an excuse to focus on more immediate training. And I think that goes for a lot of the interim education also.

KRISTOL: And do you think the promotions are a little too – it struck me that it's a little bit one-size-fits-all. I mean, that's inevitable in a huge organization, and it's the antidote to favoritism, and this colonel likes that lieutenant and promotes him over someone else. And that's why we have promotion boards and you're there at a certain rank for four years or eight years or whatever. But it struck me from talking to some junior officer types that maybe it's a little too far in that direction that there's not enough, I don't know, I don't know maybe people don't want to give senior officers the discretion to suddenly move someone up fast and someone else, or give someone a –

KAGAN: Yeah. I'm – I would not be in favor of creating a whole lot of discretion because it would create favoritism, and I think that that's always a risk and it's a big one.

KRISTOL: You pay a big price.

KAGAN: You really do, and if you allow it to go too far and you get cliques and things. It really can be very dangerous. So I don't think so.

What I think, you know people have talked about a lot before and I really think is worth looking at is what's called 360-degree evaluations, which would require promotion boards to look at not only what the superiors say about an individual but what about what his or her peers say and his or her subordinates say because if I were going to identify systemic flaws, opposed to the individuals we all know – I mean, I think this guy should have been promoted and I think that guy shouldn't have been promoted – I'm going to dismiss that because at the end of the day, that's all anecdotal, you know people can disagree.

But I would say systematically we observe too many officers who present a very good face toward their superiors but are not necessarily effective leaders, except in the sense that they can get their

organizations to do the things that they need to do in order to look successful. And some of those people would be weeded out earlier on if you had a 360-degree evaluation system.

KRISTOL: That's interesting. Anything else that struck you from your sort of tours and visits to both Iraq and Afghanistan kind of compared to what you expected? You were knowledgeable about the military, you had taught at West Point for 10 years, you had studied this since college and grad school. I mean, did the exposure to real reality in real time, I'm sure –

KAGAN: You know, I'll give you a – this may seem abstruse and weird but I was actually surprised to discover the importance of doctrine and of technical language. And I really noticed it in Afghanistan where it was lacking because in 2009, we couldn't admit that it was a war, we couldn't admit that it was an insurgency because NATO would have gone bananas. And so no one could use any of the doctrinal language that was being used in Iraq even for what's going on.

And, you know, the fascinating thing about that is initially you think, I mean, come on, these guys, generals and colonels, have endless arguments about should the mission be defeat the enemy or destroy the enemy or annihilate the enemy or beat them up. And we've sat in on arguments like this that have gone on for days about that. And in a certain sense, it seems very, very silly. But, you know, it really isn't.

And I'll give you a couple of examples. The great thing about doctrinal terms is that everybody knows what they mean. So if I say the mission is defeat the enemy, everybody from the four-star general to the lieutenant knows exactly what is meant by that.

KRISTOL: It's a term of art.

KAGAN: It's a term of art with a very specific definition that everybody is drilled on so everybody knows that means deny the enemy the will or ability to continue to fight. Okay. If I say annihilate the enemy, that means kill them all, every last one. Okay, those are two different things. If I say neutralize the enemy, that means something much less than that, prevent them from being able to interfere with our operations for a time.

So these things all have technical meaning and when they come down from the top and they get translated to the bottom, everybody is able to pick it up very quickly. When you start inventing terms at the strategic level – and "clear, hold, build" was a great example of this that came out, it was actually Condi Rice who first coined that expression in 2005, and then it became sort of doctrine, non-doctrinal doctrine.

KRISTOL: Clear the area, hold the area.

KAGAN: Clear the area, then hold it, then build, you know, civilian and all that kind of stuff. You know, that was non-doctrinal. And so what does that mean to the lieutenant? Well, you know, for a long time, it was really unclear what that meant to the lieutenant, and it wasn't clear what it meant to the captain or the brigade commander.

And so early on in Afghanistan when we started going around in 2009, you know, you would find everybody briefing the same we're doing this, whatever this is. But then everybody was doing something completely different because there was no, because *this* didn't have any meaning. And so we actually got a reputation for being real old-style martinets because we would go around saying, "Can we have this in doctrinal language, please?"

And that, you know, and Petraeus supported that and General Rodriguez, the three-star commander, really supported that, and General Allen supported it. And I think it helped a lot because it did – and General McChrystal believed in it also – because it's another way of eliminating friction. I mean, this all goes to why the military does all the things that are goofy. You know, there are generally a couple of explanations. One is because you have to motivate men and women to put themselves in harm's way

and risk getting killed or maimed and alternatively kill or maim other people. And there's a whole swath of things that go on in the military that are designed to help people do that and deal with it.

But also you have to be able to get a huge organization to accomplish an overarching, complicated objective while being able to take the initiative. And things that seem silly like bludgeoning people about "Is it defeat or destroy?" really matter a lot actually. And that was kind of surprising for us.

V: West Point Education (1:12:49 – 1:28:28)

KRISTOL: That's interesting, that's interesting. You had taught at West Point for 10 years. Talk a little bit about that. And let's just go backwards. How did you get – you graduated from college –

KAGAN: Yeah. I graduated from Yale in 1991 with a degree in Russian/East European studies, being fully trained to be a Sovietologist, a field that was –

KRISTOL: It lasted for six months after your graduation.

KAGAN: Yeah. Yeah, that was not brilliant timing. But I have never been very quick on the uptake, so I immediately doubled down on that and went back to graduate school in Russian military history, and I had the – in both cases, the magnificent opportunity to study with retired Lieutenant General Bill Odum, who had been National Security Agency Director and was up at Yale visiting and who gave me a taste of exposure to the military and taught me a lot about really thinking about war in a good way.

KRISTOL: Now in those days, did colleges actually teach military history?

KAGAN: No. There was no meaningful military history being taught. Sir Michael Howard came over and offered a course on war and revolution, which was wonderful in some senses but really wasn't operational. And I mean, you really didn't have anybody teaching operational –

KRISTOL: Isn't that kind of amazing? If we could have a detour on military history for a minute because I know it's something you and Kim have both thought about and even tried to do a little bit about. I mean, really, we have history departments throughout the United States and people, nations fight wars in history, and they're kind of important in nations' histories, and we don't teach military history.

KAGAN: No, we don't. And I mean it's a legacy of Vietnam, and it's this, I think it really stemmed originally – now I think it's habit a lot – but it stemmed originally from this belief that if you studied war, it must mean that you liked war. You know, as if oncologists like cancer. And so if we don't study war, you know, we ain't gonna study war no more. Right and if you don't do that, then you won't have any more wars and all that kind of stuff, which of course hasn't worked out terribly well.

And I think there was also in the 70s, the field of military history was actually still pretty limited in its intellectual development. And so it looked, it was easy to lampoon, and it was easy for professors at the time to say, "Well these guys are clowns anyway, this is not a real discipline" and so forth. Now, what's happened over the intervening period is it's become a very serious discipline with a very serious intellectual base. Unfortunately, there are only a handful of institutions in the country that actually offer outside of an ROTC program anything approaching operational military history, which contributes to the civilians moving away from the military phenomenon that I was talking about before.

KRISTOL: And presumably the ROTC programs are hurt by the fact that the campus on which they might be located or near which they might be located doesn't have a distinguished military historian there to teach their kids, so they have to get some – I don't know – they get some colonel major to teach the class and they do their best but they're not trained really to –

KAGAN: Well, they're not professional historians and so they present it in a way that's useful but it could be supplemented or replaced by some of – there are very good operational military historians in academia, it's very hard for them to get jobs, it's very hard for them to keep jobs and get tenure, and it's

even harder sometimes for them actually to get to be allowed to offer the courses that are very popular with students when they are offered.

And so as you know, Kim and I have been able to, through the generosity of Roger Hertog, to run a program at the Institute for the Study of War, it's a two-week program to bring in college students and recent graduates and really throw them into the deep-end on operational military studies, not just history. And we've done it for two years, just finished the most recent iteration. And it's fantastic. And one of the things that really struck us this last time were comments that we were getting from the students exactly along the lines that you'd been saying earlier – "Wow, the military, they're not a bunch of knuckle-draggers, these are really smart, thoughtful people, and I wish I had known about that" and so forth. And on the one hand, that makes you feel really good; on the other hand, it makes you think, "Oh my God." I mean, we only had this handful of kids.

KRISTOL: And it is just shocking. I mean, World War II was kind of a big deal in the 20th century, and there's a whole bunch of social and economic and political aspects to it, God knows. And I think it's great that those are taught. But it was a kind of a war.

And my impression is you can really go through Harvard, where I went, Yale where you went, most places and not only don't you have to learn about it, obviously you don't have to, you can't, actually. There's no one that actually teaches well, what happened in the Pacific, which is actually how was that military campaign devised, was it a good idea, a bad idea to do island-hopping. I mean, I know nothing about this. But I'm just saying you'd think at least it would be an optional course of the 2,000 that are offered each year at Ivy League schools.

KAGAN: It should be. I mean, in the classic, you know it's not even a joke, it's true, is history runs up through 1861, jumps, and picks up with Reconstruction, goes up to 1914, jumps, picks up with Versailles and the Depression. Goes up to 1939, jumps, picks up with the Cold War or whatever. And you know in between, you have studies on war and this or that or the other thing, war in everything except war. And that generates a lot of frustration among students. And that's, you know, it's really interesting as we get applicants for these things. We had a lot of people who were writing in and saying, "This is just nuts, I mean, can't we at least know why anything happened the way that it actually did?"

KRISTOL: Yeah. But you had studied some military history and went ahead and got your degree.

KAGAN: Got my degree, and the thesis was on Russian military reforms in the 1830s. It was – I managed to get it published. I sold about 473 copies of it.

KRISTOL: A surprisingly high number.

KAGAN: It was a surprisingly high number, actually. I was –

KRISTOL: A lot of relatives, yeah.

KAGAN: I only bought a few of those. And then started applying for jobs and was thrilled to see a couple of jobs at West Point, one in Russian history and one in military history. I applied for the one in Russian history and they asked me to switch over and apply to the one in military history, I said, "I'll take any job you want to offer me," and then they didn't offer me the job.

Okay, so worked on plan B there for a while, and then I learned that there was another position had opened up at West Point, and I got really excited, and they didn't offer me that one either. And so I was actually a week out from having the movers come to pick up all my stuff to take me to another job.

And it was an academic administrative job. It actually wasn't a teaching job, and I got a call from then-Colonel Casey Brower who was the acting head of the department of the history department saying, "Hey, Fred, you got any plans for the fall?" I went, "Well, yes, sir. I got a job." And he said, "Well, we have a one-year nonrenewable position that just opened up, are you interested?" And I said, "Well, let me talk

to the guy that I was about to go work for and but yeah.” So I took the one-year nonrenewable position, which to my great good fortune turned out to be renewable after all.

KRISTOL: So this was in '95, I think?

KAGAN: It was in '95.

KRISTOL: And you stayed at West Point.

KAGAN: And I stayed for 10 years.

KRISTOL: Had you ever been at West Point?

KAGAN: I had not. No.

KRISTOL: Is that right, so you just –

KAGAN: Yeah, the first time I was there was for the interview.

KRISTOL: Wow, that's amazing.

KAGAN: And it was an incredible experience.

KRISTOL: Tell me what that's like since 90 percent of Americans, which I include myself, might have visited the service academies once or twice, watched the sports teams on television but don't probably have a great feel – knowledge of what happens educationally there. How different is it than –

KAGAN: Oh, it's totally different. It's totally different from what goes on at a university. And rightly so. You know there are three components of the West Point education or of any of the service academy education. And they're all weighted much more equally than they would be at a civilian institution.

So you have the academic component, which is slightly dominant. But you also have a physical fitness component, which includes team sports and various other things. And you have the military studies component as well, which includes drill and training and practices of various other sorts. And all of these things get piled on top of the cadets. And the Corps and the academic program at least as of when I left, most cadets took 40 courses and –

KRISTOL: So five a term.

KAGAN: Five a term. And of those, 32 were required courses. Most of them ended up taking more than 40 so that they could get requirements for a major and things they were interested in. So you have a lot of cadets taking five, six courses a term. And we made them hard, and we were allowed to grade from A to F. And that was another major difference.

KRISTOL: That's not like Harvard or Yale.

KAGAN: Yeah. I mean, there was no grade inflation. In our core courses, the average tended to be pegged around 80 or 81.

KRISTOL: And so these courses would be recognizably similar to college courses –

KAGAN: Yeah. I mean, they were more intensive in the sense that each one had 40 lessons and they were all seminar style, so there were no lectures. And so class size or section size was capped at 18, so you never had more than 18 cadets in a class.

KRISTOL: Is that right? At West Point, wow. And so what did you teach, for example?

KAGAN: So I taught the military history core course which –

KRISTOL: World military history or U.S.?

KAGAN: Yeah. Although it was – I mean, it was largely western but it was technically rocks to rockets. So we started off with ancient history a lot of the time and then we would come forward to Vietnam and Desert Storm.

KRISTOL: But it was similar to the readings to what you would have thought if someone told you to teach that course at –

KAGAN: Yeah, I mean, we were required – so cadets also average about four and a half hours a sleep a night for four years. And so we're very careful or we were very careful about how much reading we would give. So it was a lighter reading load in principle than I would assign Yalies. On the other hand, cadets are much more likely to do it.

KRISTOL: They do the reading, and that's totally unlike –

KAGAN: No, no and it's – you know and this is the thing that was remarkable about teaching cadets is –

KRISTOL: I hadn't realized it was all seminars. Well, that really does change – that makes it harder for the students.

KAGAN: It makes it harder.

KRISTOL: They have to participate.

KAGAN: They do, and they're graded on participation. It's a significant part of their grade in every single class. And it also makes it challenging for the professors, especially when in a core course, I would teach four sections.

So you'd have a seminar discussion about the same reading and topic four times, twice one day, twice the next day. And that could be good, by the fourth time, you might get it. But it also is hard to maintain the spontaneity sometimes. Except the cadets made it easy, and that was the thing.

I mean, the thing, I mean, the magic of being at West Point is being able to teach cadets. And there's just no, there's nothing like it because you're dealing with people who have self-selected, and they want to succeed honestly. And you would give a cadet a bad grade and almost never did I have a cadet come in and complain about a grade. Almost invariably, they would come in and say – "Sir" – they had to call me sir.

KRISTOL: Just like Harvard and Yale.

KAGAN: Yeah, exactly right. You know – "Sir, I'd like to meet with you to discuss how I can do better." And they would be serious about it and they really imbibed this sense of you're going to fail at some things. And this I think is so important as compared to the experience of your average Yalie, speaking as a Yalie, or a Cantabrigian has. You know, I mean, I think a lot of people go through Yale and Harvard and Princeton and never fail at anything. And I think it runs the risk of making them fragile.

No one graduates from West Point without having failed multiple times and badly because it's designed to make them fail. And then to have them see that you can recover from that and to build the muscle memory for how to recover from failure and how to react to it so that they're generally much more resilient, much less fragile people for having had that experience. You know I had the fortune of failing a few times in my life, which I think it was valuable.

KRISTOL: And I suppose these were important lessons for life in general, not just for succeeding in the military because, I guess, if I've got about half the junior officers in, let's say, the Army or West Point grads, is that about right, and about half are from officers or previous enlisted who have taken officer candidate school. And I think the studies show not much difference, is that right, in terms of who does better promotions and so forth.

KAGAN: And that's been my experience too. I mean it's –

KRISTOL: Do you think that's sort of a reasonable mix and you try to keep it that way?

KAGAN: Yeah, I would. I think there's value that both – that all of those commissioning sources bring to it. And I think that's working well, I wouldn't change that.

KRISTOL: But I guess quite a high percentage – I'm looking at this data of any graduating class of West Point are not in the Army 20 years later. I mean, a certain number do stay for a career, and a certain number become a general officers, that's a smallish number. And some top out at colonels. But I'm sure some serve their mandatory five years or a second tour or third and then get out.

KAGAN: Which is fine.

KRISTOL: And you think that's fine.

KAGAN: Absolutely. I mean, look first of all, West Point graduates a thousand officers a year. We're not going to produce a thousand generals a year. So I mean this had to happen. You're going to have to have that kind of attrition anyway, and it's designed for it.

But look those are – so the ones who go and serve their five years, first of all, God bless them and thank them for that service because five years is a long time to serve. And then they go out into the civilian workforce, and they at least understand something about the military and they're able to do that. So I think that's important too.

KRISTOL: Any recommendation if the next president is watching about reforming military education? You think it's pretty good the way it is?

KAGAN: I think that it's –

KRISTOL: Bigger, smaller?

KAGAN: I don't think I'd change the size. I mean, I think the size is right, and I think the basic structure is right. I think we really do need to open our minds up more to liberal arts at the service academies. I believe it's still the case or it was until recently that cadets majoring in history would graduate with a bachelor's of science degree in history.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I think that's right. At West Point, doesn't everyone graduate with a BS?

KAGAN: They do and with an engineering –

KRISTOL: Sort of leftover that engineering is the key.

KAGAN: But it's because they will still take an engineering sequence that will prepare a lot of them to be qualified engineers. The truth is, West Point does not need to be preparing engineers for the nation anymore. That's, you know, we should be focusing more on languages, we should be focusing more on area studies programs, on interdisciplinary studies, various other things.

I think there's a lot of room to reform the academic experience. And I think it would be very valuable because I think the faculty, we did the best job that we could. I think we could have done better. And I

think that our future officers deserve it, need it. And this is the only four-year education that these young people are going to get. So it does kind of need to be equivalent in terms of academic quality and rigor to what they would get if they didn't go to West Point.

VI: How Great Was Napoleon? (1:28:28 – 1:34:26)

KRISTOL: You're known here in Washington for your writing and your advising of the military, writing on contemporary issues ranging from the Middle East, obviously, to military issues, Russia, Ukraine and so forth. But you wrote a big, fat book on Napoleon. Tell me about Napoleon.

KAGAN: Bless you. That's, you know, that's where my heart was at and that was actually supposed to be the first of four volumes. I had to bail on that. That was – so that was about the 1805 campaign.

KRISTOL: So you worked on that while you were at West Point as a professor.

KAGAN: Yeah. And so that was about the 1805 campaign, Napoleon's first campaign as emperor in sole command and so forth, and it led up to the Battle of Austerlitz, famously narrated and not quite accurately in *War and Peace*.

And it was an attempt to combine operational military history with the diplomatic history of the time and to look at how the wars and the campaigns and the battles interacted with the politics. And I found that really endlessly fascinating. And so I did research in Moscow for it, I did research in Berlin, in Vienna, in Paris. You know, by the way, that was the work. I mean, I really resent, you know, having to change my world travels from Paris, Berlin, and Vienna to Dubai and Kuwait and Baghdad and Kabul and stuff.

KRISTOL: It's not really upwardly mobile.

KAGAN: No, it was really downwardly mobile.

KRISTOL: When you were younger, you were in Berlin and Paris and now you're in – yeah.

KAGAN: It's really not headed in the right direction. But, you know, it was, and it was intended to be very much not from the Napoleonic perspective because the Napoleonic Wars are almost always narrated from his perspective. And this was really an attempt to look at his adversaries and how did they see things.

And it was very useful for me actually as a basis for the way that I understand war. You know, learning things about how Napoleon used intelligence and acquired it. How he ordered people around, about coalition warfare, which was endlessly useful, as you can probably imagine. You know, really studying how Russia and Austria and Prussia and Britain came together or more often didn't and how that affected policy. Really getting into the internal debates within the Prussian Cabinet about whether to go to war or whether to make peace, watching – that was enormously helpful to me because people are people. And if you study history looking at the commonalities that result from human nature, it's almost certainly going to be transferable to anything else that you look at that involves humans.

KRISTOL: I think if you study with real granularity that you did, you really learn – and I found this trying to read a really good biography but those have to be actually quite long to give you a sense of what's it's like day-to-day, week-to-week to be in a position of command, the intersection of politics in the military or different nations. Very hard to capture that, I think, on the outside. So more impressed by Napoleon or less at the end of the whole thing?

KAGAN: Less, I mean I – Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think he's – he was – he was a hedgehog, he was a one-trick pony and he relied on his enemies making mistakes, which is a pretty good bet most of the time.

I think probably my biggest takeaway from the Napoleonic period is that the three commanders who emerge as the anti-Napoleons – the guys who defeat him, were Schwarzenberg the Austrian, Tormassov

the Russian, and Wellington the Englishman. They were all pretty mediocre generals actually. And I will stand on that for Wellington, too. What they had in common was that they were very cautious and very conservative and they never made a mistake that Napoleon could take advantage of.

So they were the perfect people to fight him but they – but the whole line of people who had fought him and lost before that were in many respects better commanders than they. But they also were ready to measure their manhood against Napoleon in a way that caused them to make mistakes that he, if you make a mistake in front of Napoleon, he will destroy you. So it was really interesting to me also to sort of learn, understand that dynamic that it is in part about horses for courses. You know, there's not just a best general for all time. You need to be the right guy for this situation.

KRISTOL: Yeah, history is – there are some general trends and general things one can say but a lot of it's about particulars. I do think that intersection of military and the political is so important. And Leo Strauss, the great political philosopher, recommends somewhere that if anyone is going to read one history book written in the 20th century – he died before your book. So he would have – he recommended Churchill's *Marlborough*. And why? I think part of it was – I mean, Churchill was a great writer and Marlborough was, I gather, a great general and, you know, it was a very interesting time in the early 18th century. But I think a lot of it was so he thought it very hard for people – very important for people to get the sense of the intersection of all these different things at once, especially the political and the military, which you don't normally get, I'd say, reading the kinds of history books that are produced today.

KAGAN: Yeah. I mean, I think – and this is sort of tying together everything that we've been discussing – the opportunity to see what and you saw this when you were in the White House with Vice President Quayle, I'm sure, but just seeing all of the complexity and the fact that you have to deal with all of the complexity. And you don't get to just sort of sit there over coffee and read a thing and mull about it for a while. You have to make the decision now, based on what you know and then you have to move on to the next thing and you have to get it right as often as you can. And it's really hard.

KRISTOL: On that note, thank you, Fred, for joining us today. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

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