GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH ELLIOTT ABRAMS

May 17–18, 2012
Charlottesville, Virginia

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UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA

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Riley: This is the Elliott Abrams interview as a part of the George W. Bush Oral History Project. Thank you for coming to Charlottesville. Before the tape began running we reviewed the ground rules, the most important being the confidentiality of the proceedings. The other thing we need to do is a quick voice identification. I'll ask everybody to go around the table and say just a few words. I'm Russell Riley, the chair of the Presidential Oral History Program.

Long: I'm Stephen Long, assistant professor of political science at the University of Richmond.

Leffler: I'm Mel Leffler, professor in the history department here at UVA [University of Virginia] and a faculty associate of the Miller Center.

Perry: I'm Barbara Perry and I'm a senior fellow in the Presidential Oral History Program here at the Miller Center.

Abrams: This is Elliott Abrams and I'm the victim here today.

Riley: Very good. The specimen. We normally like to begin with some biography. That's tricky in your case because there is a lot of rich, relevant Washington experience before we get to the 43rd Presidency. You weren't interviewed as a part of the project that we did on the [Ronald] Reagan Presidency, so we don't have that on record.

We thought that what we would do rather than go through the chronology, where we might get bogged down, was just to take a little while and maybe ask you some thematic questions about your earlier experience as it relates to what happens in the 43rd Presidency. So I guess I'll open it up with a kind of global question about what you yourself think to be maybe the most important experiences or episodes in your own career leading up to the time you joined George W. Bush in his White House.

Abrams: I was Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights in the first Reagan administration, first term. That's what led me into the George W. Bush administration. It is actually a story worth telling.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: I was not part of the Bush campaign. I spoke once to Condi [Condoleezza] Rice by phone about how I thought he might inject some human rights issues into the campaign. He was elected. The administration took office and I was doing two things then. I was president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center [EPPC] in Washington but also chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I was actually an appointee of Speaker [Newt] Gingrich.

When the administration took office we, the Commission, went to see the new administration. We didn't get a meeting with the President right away, but we did with the new Secretary of State and the new National Security Advisor to discuss our issues. So I saw [Colin] Powell and Rice. Rice I believe I had never met; Powell I knew from the Reagan administration. After these two meetings, the other commissioners were present but I spoke more on behalf of the Commission. They both tried to hire me. Both of them had vacancies.

In the case of Powell it was to do Sudan, which was already a big issue, particularly with evangelicals. Ultimately I think it was Senator [John] Danforth who became the Envoy. But shortly after that Commission meeting, I think it was Rich Armitage who called and said, "You should do this." Steve Hadley called and said, "You need to come work here." Both of these offers were basically human rights in character. In the case of the White House, it was the NSC [National Security Council] Senior Director for Democracy, Human Rights and International Organizations. I had also been Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations in the Reagan years, so it was a good fit.

I accepted the Powell job. Then about three hours later I called Rich Armitage back and said, "I unaccept," at State; I don't want to do that. I had been in the State Department for eight years, and this would be new at the White House. So I accepted that job. I had the democracy, human rights portfolio and the IO [International Organizations] portfolio, both of which I had had in the Reagan administration, and in that sense I think one could say that was the background to going to work at the White House.

Parenthetically, what happened to me in the Reagan State Department, [George] Shultz State Department, was that I was working in a global portfolio, but an awful lot of it in those days was Latin America. So when the Assistant Secretary for Latin America left, Shultz said to me, "You're it. You should be the Assistant Secretary for Latin America." Similarly in the Bush NSC, when the Senior Director for Near East and North Africa, Zal [Zalmay] Khalilzad, left or moved on, Condi asked me to take that job, which I did. So I am living proof, I think, that there is no such thing as regional affairs expertise.

Riley: Were there—

Leffler: Let me just ask a question on something you just said. When you spoke to Condi Rice during the campaign you said you spoke to her once and tried to infuse some focus or engage her on human rights. What was her reaction?

Abrams: I don't have a very strong memory of this. She was, as always, extremely friendly and courteous. I have no memory of what it is I advised her to say. I didn't want Bush to be seen as either like his father or in the kind of [Henry] Kissinger, [Brent] Scowcroft realpolitik school and

somewhat uninterested in human rights. That was really the purpose of the call. You don't need to fall into that trap. There are a couple of things you could say that would not be particularly controversial but would be useful. What those were I have no memory. But she heard me out. She was friendly.

Perry: You had also said that you were not a part of the campaign in 2000.

Abrams: Right.

Perry: Was that because of your position? You didn't want to pick a candidate? Or was there another candidate you were supporting behind the scenes or otherwise?

Abrams: I don't remember why I didn't get involved. Maybe it was EPPC. I was, as I recall it, much more favorably inclined to [John] McCain, but I didn't get involved in his campaign either.

Leffler: I'd just like you to step back a little bit. Reflect for a moment or two on the intellectual experiences that shaped your thinking. Long before the Reagan administration, I know you worked for [Henry] Jackson and for [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan, but what were the factors? What would you say were the influences that shaped your orientation toward foreign policy broadly? What are the key influences shaping your intellectual or ideological dispositions?

Abrams: I'm probably as pure a case of neocon history as you're ever going to find.

Riley: Good. We want to hear it.

Abrams: Having started with Scoop Jackson, having published my first article ever in the *New Leader* magazine, now defunct, and my first in *Commentary* magazine in October 1972. I was, as an undergraduate at Harvard, chairman of the Americans for Democratic Action chapter there. I was a liberal Democrat but of the—I was for [Hubert] Humphrey in 1968, not for [Eugene] McCarthy or [Robert] Kennedy. I was the national chairman of Campus ADA [Americans for Democratic Action], which had a membership of about 20, so it is not quite as great a post as it might sound.

It did mean I would go to these meetings, which were interesting because we're talking about 1968 here and that is when ADA was kind of a microcosm of the Democratic Party, because it was riven by Vietnam. ADA had been the coalition of trade unions, the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations] that is, and Walter Reuther, George Meany, and anticommunist intellectuals of the Arthur Schlesinger variety and it was split over Vietnam and over McCarthy and over Humphrey.

I note that I was for Humphrey by way of saying I don't know what I'd say—Cold War Democrat, maybe that's the way to put it.

Riley: Can I interrupt and ask was your family background also sort of liberal Democratic?
Abrams: Yes, middle-class, Jewish, liberal Democrats of very standard variety. Adlai Stevenson was a saint, Eleanor Roosevelt was a saint, Franklin Roosevelt was a saint. I was always interested in politics and foreign policy, even as an undergraduate. So I'm not quite sure why I didn't, like most of my classmates in the late '60s, move further left, but I didn't. This probably

gets into the realm of psychiatry, but I didn't.

For Humphrey in '68, part of the old line ADA. Then went to England for a year, came back, went to law school. So intellectually that's really where I was.

Perry: Before we leave that period, how about Vietnam? Talk about your thoughts about that and coming out of college in '69.

Abrams: I was always opposed to the kind of extreme ends of the antiwar movement. During the 1969 Harvard strike I was a co-founder of the Ad Hoc Committee to Keep Harvard Open, which was an anti-SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] movement. Part of this—I went to a private high school in New York City prior to going to Harvard called Elisabeth Irwin, which is the high school of the Little Red School House, which was, to use the term carefully and deliberately, a communist school. My parents didn't know that. They sent me there. They only knew that it had a good rep for getting people into college.

Communist in the sense that many of the teachers had been thrown out of the New York City public school system for being party members and many of the parents were in fact party members, former party members. One of the teachers, a substitute teacher, was the wife or widow, I can't remember at that point, of Morton Sobell, the nuclear spy. In the school were the [Robert and Michael] Meeropols, the boys who were the sons of the [Julius and Ethel] Rosenbergs. I'm using the term "communist" carefully, not as a smear. I reacted against it. This was not my family background. My father was an immigration lawyer whose clients were people whose main goal in life was to be an American. Maybe that was one of the things that pushed me in that direction.

My views on the Vietnam war were essentially that it didn't seem like a very good idea, but not that it told you what a horrible, Fascist country America was.

In one of these ADA meetings there was a fellow around named Richard Perle, who worked for Scoop Jackson and he introduced me to Scoop one Sunday. That's how I met Scoop. Then when he ran for President in '72, I was in law school. Jackson ran in the Massachusetts primary, so I worked for him. I got to meet him a few more times and said, "If you actually are going to run in '76 in a serious way, I want to come back," and then did. That was the intellectual camp. I was pretty much there, but obviously the people to whom I was exposed in the Jackson campaign in '76 and then working for Jackson—Moynihan for one also formed—

Leffler: Did you gravitate toward your interest in human rights as a result of working with Jackson? The Jackson-[Charles] Vanik issue, Jewish emigration from Russia, was that your sort of trajectory into human rights issues?

Abrams: It was part—certainly a piece of it is Jackson and Soviet Jewry and some other relevant things. Jackson is very big on Christians in Lebanon. Moynihan then more broadly is involved in this. It is in the context of his time at the UN [United Nations]. I was not with him then, but the sort of opposition to the Soviet line in the Third World, the opposition to the notion that social and economic rights are the same as political rights. All of that became an interest. It became clearer to me meeting Moynihan, Irving Kristol, people like that, who were writing about this.

When I joined the State Department, I actually worked on the Reagan campaign. After the campaign went, I wanted to go into the government.

Riley: This is 1980?

Abrams: This is November 1980. We win. I was trying to figure out: What do I do here? I had no regional expertise. I could not hope, I thought, to go into the Asian Affairs, European Affairs Bureau. But I thought because of Moynihan, the International Organizations Bureau. Now of course I had not worked for Moynihan at the UN, but it didn't matter because I figured people would say, "Oh, Moynihan, yes, sure." So I went to see Moynihan. I was no longer working for him. I left in the summer of '79. This is a year later.

I explained my thinking. I said, "I'm going to go see Bill Casey," who had been chairman of the campaign and whom I had met, "and ask for this job." It was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs. "What do you think of that?" We were having lunch, and Pat in his inimitable way said, "Deputy Assistant Secretary? Deputy? No, that's stupid. Tell him you want to be Assistant Secretary." OK. Went to see Bill Casey. I said, "I want to be Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations." He said, "Huh? OK, talk to [Alexander] Haig."

I got a call two weeks later from Al Haig offering me the job. So I went into IO. But you may recall that in the spring of 1981 the Reagan nominee for the human rights job, Ernest Lefever, withdrew his nomination because he could not be confirmed. What he had done—I mean, his views on human rights—Ernie had been my predecessor once removed at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, George Weigel being the interim. He said really dumb things about human rights, really what I would call foolish, right-wing remarks. It was a classic example of the contribution of neocons in thinking about those issues in what I would say was a much more sophisticated way.

Anyway, Bill Clark, President Reagan's close friend and then Deputy Secretary of State, and I had formed a relationship of trust. He had found very few people in the State Department he trusted and I was one of them. So he said, "Look. Haig wants to eliminate the Bureau of Human Rights. I think and the White House thinks that that is politically a bad idea, too controversial, but I don't know what to do with it. I want to ask you to think about it." So I thought about it. I came back to him and said, "First of all, I have a candidate for you. I have found someone who is suave and debonair, handsome, brilliant." He said, "OK, fine, I get that point."

I had thought about it. I wanted to leave the IO Bureau because I was caught between Haig and [Jeane] Kirkpatrick, which was not pleasant. But I had a view of what a conservative human rights policy would be. He said, "Write it up." So I did write it up, a memo that really was a terrific memo. I'm desperately unhappy. I can't find a copy of it anywhere. It is known as the [William] Clark-[Richard T.] Kennedy memorandum because it was sent to the White House by Deputy Secretary Clark and Under Secretary for Management Kennedy. In it were a number of personnel matters as well as my memo.

It talked about basically what a neocon human rights policy would be. I thought that through. I wanted the job. I thought I could make a real contribution here. Everybody said, "If he is stupid

enough to want this job, we should give it to him." So they did.

Long: So what was that view, substantively? Since you can't find the memo, can you reflect on what you recall, tell us the substance?

Abrams: In the Human Rights Report for I guess 1982 reflecting on 1981, there is a preliminary essay on this question, which was actually written by Charles Fairbanks and me. The view is that we should be serious about a human rights policy because we are the United States. We are not a country that is organized around a tradition of blood but rather around ideas. These ideas are central and we need to make them central to the extent possible in a foreign policy. We have to do that.

We also have to do that for Cold War purposes because it is one of our great weapons against the Soviet Union. If you accept that that is true—even if you don't accept the first part but you do the second, the realpolitik part, then the policy cannot be a fraud. The line in the memo that [William] Safire later wrote a column about was, "A human rights policy means trouble." You cannot just oppose communist regimes. You're going to have to think about [Ferdinand] Marcos and you're going to have to think about our friends in Latin America and you're going to have to have a human rights policy with respect to them as well to have any credibility.

I made both a realpolitik and an idealistic argument about the need for a human rights policy. I think we did pretty well, I must say. Not, frankly, while Haig was Secretary of State. He was not much interested in this. He gave an infamous press conference when he said, "What human rights was to the [Jimmy] Carter administration, counterterrorism will be for this administration." In fact, while he was Secretary of State we didn't do much. But Shultz had a very different view.

I took this job in December 1981. Shultz came in the summer of '82. So the bulk of the time I was there he was Secretary and he was interested in this. For example, though it pained him greatly to push very hard against the [Augusto] Pinochet regime because he knew so many of the economic figures in it and because they had a terrific economic policy, he did it, nevertheless. If I went to him and said, "They've closed another newspaper, we must do this," he would shake his head and say, "Yes, we do have to do that." He got it.

Riley: I don't want to get bogged down on this, but there were two sort of precursor questions.

Abrams: Back to the Reagan Oral History Project?

Leffler: This is fantastically interesting.

Riley: And it is very important. I only want to draw you back to an earlier time and ask you were there intellectual influences either as an undergraduate or during law school, the people that you worked with?

Abrams: Yes, there were in college. In my first year I took Samuel Huntington's course, Political Change and Political Order, which was fantastic and dazzling to me, new thoughts. I really had had a sort of [Karl] Marxist education. I didn't know that at the time. In eleventh or twelfth grade I learned about the French Revolution. I also took as a freshman Samuel Beer's course, which was one of the greatest courses I think in the history of American education. Talk

about opening a young student's mind.

So you get to the French Revolution in Beer's course. There are varying theories. There is the Whig theory, the Marxist theory. To my amazement I had learned the Marxist theory. I thought I had just learned about the French Revolution. One of the things that I would say Beer was doing, though he was a liberal Democrat and Huntington obviously a Republican—no, I think he was a Democrat but a conservative Democrat. They were challenging.

In Huntington's case I remember a lecture where he said, "Corruption is a very good thing in the Third World because it means that they're moving from tribal affiliations to more open affiliations, which gives you greater hope of moving to an open economy, an open political system." Wow, what an incredible thing to say. The residue basically is, "think." The same thing for Beer—the purpose of that course was that in each of these, it was six important moments in history, the Nazi Revolution, the French Revolution, the Glorious Revolution—what happened here? Could it have gone another way? What is the point at which we want to argue that a democracy called Weimar should have called out the troops to crush this Nazi movement?

All of those were, I think, intellectual influences in at least one way, which was to say don't accept the conventional wisdom. Also had Kissinger, some of the same. Particularly because the zeitgeist, if you're talking about '68, '67, was at Harvard and elsewhere in academia, quite left. Here were people who were saying, "Wait a minute." I don't think that happened at LSE [London School of Economics] or at Harvard Law School. I think by then my leanings were pretty clear.

Riley: Then you mentioned Jimmy Carter briefly, but you're sort of engaged in a kind of partisan transformation too in the 1970s.

Abrams: In the beginning not, in the sense that I'm a Democrat. I'm for Humphrey. We lose. But I'm for Scoop. He runs in '76. April 26, 1976, we lose the Pennsylvania primary to Carter. He immediately endorses Carter. Why? Because Carter is the second most conservative Democrat, a southern Navy guy.

The Carter administration then carefully excluded from any positions everyone associated with Jackson. But the pattern is unspoken, so it had to be very carefully done. I am now working, let's see. In '76 I'm working for Moynihan. He gets elected in '76, so I move over in January '77. We are in opposition to this President, Jackson and Moynihan. Moynihan's first or second Senate speech announced his opposition to the confirmation of Paul Warnke to head the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. So we were in essence in opposition but still in the party.

In the spring of 1980—wait a minute, I'm getting screwed up on numbers here—right, '79, that was '76. In '79 I leave Moynihan. In the spring of 1980 it was obvious to people that the conservative Democrats—I don't think the word "neocon" was around—the Jacksonites were unhappy with Carter. [Walter] Mondale arranged a meeting for us with the President, us being Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, Admiral [Elmo] Zumwalt, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Austin Ranney, Ben Wattenberg, me.

Leffler: Max Kampelman, was he there?

Abrams: Max Kampelman, yes. This is in the Cabinet Room. Mondale comes in and does a dazzling 15-minute presentation: Come home. You're Democrats. Not this idiot from Hollywood. Really a terrific job. Then the President comes in. We had agreed Austin Ranney would represent us. So Austin Ranney began by saying, "Mr. President, we are Democrats who want to support you, and I have to say, we're really happy with the way in which your foreign policy has changed since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan."

The President interrupts him and says, "My foreign policy has not changed. I don't have two foreign policies. I have one foreign policy. It is the same one I've had since the day I came to office." At which point everybody in the room looked at each other and said, "OK, let's go." [*laughter*] I suppose that everybody in that room except for Carter and Mondale voted for Reagan. It was the point at which many of us in that school said, "He is as bad as we think and we're going to support Reagan."

Some of us did that—Ben Wattenberg didn't, but many of us did, publicly. I actually worked on the campaign part time. When we won, the view of, I guess you could say, Reagan and Lyn Nofziger and certainly Bill Casey was, "We want the Reagan Democrats." No one ever said to me, "You need to switch party, we can't hire Democrats." Reagan, having been a Democrat, seemed to really like the idea that Jeane Kirkpatrick was a Democrat.

Now I'm talking about November 1980. In the fall of 1981 when I moved to the Human Rights Bureau, Nofziger did say to me, "How would you feel about becoming a Republican?" I recalled the great line of my mother-in-law, Midge Decter. "There comes a time when you need to join the side you're on." [*laughter*] So I said, "Yes, sure. I'm a Republican, let's do it." So I switched registration at that point.

Riley: On the human rights portfolio had you been happy with Carter? Or had the Afghanistan, Cold War issues overwhelmed any favorable effect you had?

Abrams: We had not been. We here I would say the Jackson camp. Maybe it's better to say the Jackson-Moynihan camp because Pat had actually written some articles about it. Our view was that Carter was turning human rights into casework. The purpose of policy was to get this man or that man out of prison and there was no broader systemic effort to create democracies. That was the ideological—that was part of the criticism.

The other part of the criticism was that he seemed only to apply it to American allies so that he didn't do much about Fidel Castro. He was beating up on people who certainly deserved it, but it was people like the Shah [Mohammad Reza Pahlavi] or [Anastasio] Somoza, or Marcos or people like that. Then there was a vacuum created because we were not trying to solve the problem, we were only criticizing. So yes, it is good to get rid of the Shah or Somoza, but then you have to fill that vacuum or you get disaster.

There was a famous—Shirley Christian, the *New York Times* correspondent covering Central America, wrote a book called *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family* about Nicaragua where she interviewed Bob Pastor, who had been the Carter NSC Latin America guy. She asked him the question: You know that Somoza is falling apart; there are the Sandinistas. Why didn't you create a new government? He said, "We were out of that business. We didn't want to be in that

business." That was part of our critique, that we *should* be in that business.

Long: I'm just wondering. It's hard not to get drawn into this, because this is an interesting period, certainly, but I wonder how much of a ready-made group of allies did you find once you made the transition after deciding that Carter wasn't going to be going in the right direction on this stuff and you had to be in the Reagan camp? Did you find that there were people already on that side who were ready for this human rights message? Did your memo put you in the minority pushing against the majority, or was this already out there and just needed some more people and some more talking to make some progress?

Abrams: No, it was a fight; it was always a fight. I was very lucky in that Shultz saw this. From my point of view not for ideological reasons but mostly for reasons of character. He just saw that this was an important thing to do for the United States. But there were fights over this.

Many people close to the President—on some Latin America things Jeane was not with us at all. Actually, she and I had lots of fights over this and this period ruined our friendship pretty much. General Vernon Walters was totally opposed to this. The Latin America shop of the NSC was opposed to this policy. So this struggle, obviously you again see in the two, three Bush administrations, if you will.

There were allies. Some were traditional Republicans, like Shultz, for whatever personal or ideological reasons. Some were the other neocons. But I'd have to say—

Leffler: Who were your key allies would you say? Other than Shultz and the State Department, who was your key ally?

Abrams: [Paul] Wolfowitz.

Leffler: That was later on.

Abrams: No, Wolfowitz was the head of policy planning and then was moved by—I want to say Haig. I think it happened pretty early—to be Assistant Secretary for Asia.

Leffler: That was later.

Abrams: OK, because I was already at Human Rights. So it had to be '82 or '83. Anyway, Paul tells the story that we were already friends. I went to see him when he became Assistant Secretary and said, "What are you going to do about Marcos?" He was clearly an ally and was throughout. On things like South Korea, the Philippines, he was terrific.

Leffler: But you were arguing this case in late '81, '82, '83 when some of the worst imaginable abuses were taking place in Central America, particularly in Guatemala. Your mention of General Walters, who goes down to Guatemala several times and comes back and wants to whitewash the issue.

Abrams: On Latin America, other than people within the Human Rights Bureau, I would say no one. I remember a meeting, this would be '82 maybe. There had been a phony election in Guatemala, the [Fernando Romeo] Lucas Garcia regime was then in place, which among bloody

regimes has a very high standing. The question was whether to continue American military aid.

I remember we had a meeting about this. I'm pretty sure Haig was still Secretary, so this is the first half of '82. I remember saying at this meeting, "Here's the thing, guys"—I think Bill Schneider, Under Secretary for Security Assistance, was the chair. "There would be no military aid to Guatemala. You've got to understand that. There is no possible way you're going to get this past Ted Kennedy and Tom Harkin. You're going to look bad if you try, but you're going to lose as well. So there will be no military aid."

"The only question is, does the military aid get stopped by principled people in Congress against the bloody Reagan administration, or do you take a principled stand that you can't." Schneider and others in the room said, "You know, he's right. Congress is not going to—" At that point in the administration that was the way you had to win the human rights argument. You couldn't win it on ideological grounds; you could sometimes win it on pragmatic grounds. Very few other—on the ideological level Reagan got it, but not on the practical level.

At one point much later on we were trying to figure out what to do about Pinochet, who seemed to want to cling to power. How do you force him to do the referendum? The President at one point said, "Maybe I should invite him to Washington and talk to him about it," at which point Shultz essentially fell out of his chair and said, [*shouting*] "No, no, no!" [*laughter*] NSC support I think had not really ever—some opposition, some indifference, but never support. In this sense Shultz was really the key, I'd say.

Long: Maybe this is something we'll get into later, but I am curious about—looking from more distant perspective across the Presidencies, at which point did the American evangelicals really start to play a role in conversations at the top level about human rights? Certainly in the time of the early Reagan Presidency that wasn't really a big part of it, right? It came in more in the Bush years. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Abrams: I'm not sure of the answer to that. My impression of it is Sudan.

Long: Really?

Abrams: Yes, which is, let's say, 2000. I don't remember them having a foreign policy view in the Reagan years, in the '80s. I wasn't in the [George H. W.] Bush 41 administration so I don't know, or obviously [William J.] Clinton. I don't know. For me, I don't remember feeling this. We got this some in the Commission on International Religious Freedom and that's where I first feel these people exist and they care about foreign policy. Prior to that it had been they care about domestic policy. But here you were getting Franklin Graham and people like that who had big missions in Sudan. That was interesting. It was not Lebanon, it was not the defense of, say, Christians in the Middle East, it was Sudan the first time I really feel it.

Long: Did that stem into discussions about American policy on Israel at any point earlier?

Abrams: Not then.

Long: Later?

Abrams: Not that I recall. No.

Leffler: In order to facilitate the transition from the Reagan years to the George W. Bush years maybe you could take two or three or four minutes to just tell us about the friendships you formed in the 1980s and ’90s that would then really shape the nature of your everyday interactions sometimes in the George W. Bush administration. Obviously you got to know Wolfowitz and you became friendly with Perle. But tell us about the nexus of associates that you developed in the 1980s and ’90s. Clearly you were part of the group that signed that letter to Bill Clinton in 1998 with regard to Iraq. Interestingly that letter says nothing about human rights or democracy. I’ve always been struck how a group of neocons could write that letter, saying support regime change in Iraq and saying nothing about human rights. I’m curious about that too.

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: But tell us more about the texture of relationships that you think then would influence things during the George W. Bush years.

Abrams: I think by this time, by 2000, you have a less distinct group of neocons, but rather you have a group of what I’d call hardliners. So that for me in the Bush administration, for example, Richard Perle is not important, John Bolton is important. Bolton, whom I’d met in the State Department. Whatever differences may exist over some things, they don’t really exist at this point over foreign policy. In my view in any administration you have an org chart and many of the people in the org chart are not loyal to the President because they are career people. Not particularly loyal. I don’t mean they’re disloyal; they’re not particularly loyal to the President. Some are disloyal—we’ll get to the names later. [*laughter*] Then you have the org chart that nobody makes out of the real loyalists.

If you are in the administration you sort of figure out *Who are my real allies here*. There is always a struggle. There was in the Reagan administration, in the 41 and the 43 administrations. There are differences in foreign policy. There is a network, I’m sure there are 50 networks. No doubt this happens on domestic policy, but on foreign policy there is a hardliner network.

You go into the first term and it is clear, probably by January 21st, Colin Powell is a problem for us. Who is us? The hardliners. There is John Bolton, who is forced upon Powell in exchange as I understand it for Charlotte Beers. He wanted Charlotte Beers; he was forced to take John. OK, John is there. There are more hardliners at the NSC. Now, I didn’t get to the NSC on January 21st. These meetings I mentioned were probably April and I came on Memorial Day.

Leffler: So who would you define as the hardliners on the NSC when you arrived? How would you characterize—when you say that are you thinking of Condi Rice? Are you thinking of Steve Hadley?

Abrams: I didn’t know them, so it was not clear to me for a while. The answer became yes, mostly because—again, I come on Memorial Day, it’s the summer. For me the administration largely begins after 9/11, but the President is a hardliner. Therefore Rice and Hadley are because Rice and Hadley at the NSC are completely loyal to the President, so they are pretty reliable hardliners.

Leffler: Can I interrupt? Because what you said is very important. Bush is a hardliner. The President is a hardliner. Please amplify. Talk extensively about that. How do you know he was hardliner? How do you define hardliner? What made George W. Bush a hardliner? Maybe you could preface it—how often did you meet with the President? How well did you know him? Are you comfortable making a statement like that? I don't mean that in an impolite way, it's just—

Abrams: No, no, that's true. As you know, people always exaggerate their exposure to the President, [*laughter*] with the exception of people like the Chief of Staff, the National Security Advisor, who really do, at least in the Bush White House, see him constantly. My exposure to the President—I'd never met the President until I got to be part of the White House staff. I remember my first Oval Office meeting, which was about immigration policy. He was standing around. Either I introduced myself to him or Condi said, "By the way, this is Elliott. He started on Monday." He said, "Yes, I'm very glad you're in the administration."

Long: Did you get a nickname?

Abrams: Half. He changed the "ls" into a "y" so it was "Eyiott." I actually saw him this week when he spoke in Washington and he did it again.

In the first year and a half when I was Senior Director for Democ [Democracy, Human Rights, and International Organizations], as we called it, I would say I perhaps saw him once a month. In the second period, which was both the Senior Director job and the deputy job, I don't know, twice a week. I saw him, meaning doing something together. It could be a larger meeting; more often I would see him in the Oval Office. There is also a little bit of foreign travel. Mostly it is meetings in the Oval Office. He is meeting someone and I am at that meeting, or—and this was a lot of it, actually, and it is a great part of it, an underestimated part of it, phone calls. Bush was very big on phone calls.

When he would see me he would say, "When was the last time I talked to the King of Saudi Arabia" or, "I haven't talked to [Hosni] Mubarak in a long time."

I'd say, "Yes, it has been two months tomorrow." Then I would come back for that call to give him a little bit of prep for the call. Not alone. Hadley would be there too, or Condi. Then I would be there during the call and then after the call he would often sort of chat. From my point of view I saw him a lot. Not compared to Rice or Hadley, who saw him hours every day. But I think it would be pretty rare to go for a week without seeing him. What I mean by seeing him, an interchange of some sort, not seeing him in the hallway.

I think that I got a read on him. I was in enough meetings and was with him, I would say, enough times alone, meaning no foreigners and no nonstaff. That is, it is Hadley and me, it's Condi and me, it's Josh Bolten and me, where I think he was frank, he had no reason to—I saw him express anger, not often, but a few times at Condi when she was Secretary of State.

My read on Bush is that he was instinctively a hardliner. That is, he thought, *This is the greatest country in the world and the world is a better place the more active, the stronger, the bolder we are.* A wonderful neocon view. But he didn't reach it by classes. I saw him react to a variety of not particularly similar stimuli, but they point in the same direction. Just to give a couple of examples, large and small.

His reaction to [Ariel] Sharon's efforts to put down the Intifada in 2001 and '02 was basically, "Give me a break. What do you think we would do?" When told yes, but there are so many civilian casualties, he said, "How many mud huts do you think we've inadvertently bombed in Afghanistan?" He was a tough guy.

You saw this I think generally in his support for Israel. When General [David] Petraeus wants to go to Damascus, which Petraeus did for two years because he thinks *I can talk to [Bashar] al-Assad and I can*—I thought this was the craziest thing I'd ever heard and I blocked it to the extent that a Deputy can do this, for a while. "Let's think about this—" After a while Petraeus got annoyed at being thwarted by some stinking White House staff guy and said, "I'm going."

I told Hadley, "We have to tell the President." Hadley said to the President, "Petraeus—" The President said, "What? No four-star general of mine is going to talk to that—" That's the real Bush, to me. Very much, in a certain sense, the man that some of his enemies caricature, that is a Texan, a tough-minded guy, a guy who believes that force can often be useful, a guy who believes in America.

Now, there are times when things happen that I think don't fit that picture. I would have liked him to do more in Sudan, for example, and he didn't. To me one of the great mysteries of the background of today's Syria problem is why the United States permitted Assad year after year after year to send jihadis into Iraq. You could ask the same question about Iran, which was killing Americans. Why didn't we do more? The answers are obvious in the sense that whether it was the right policy or wrong, it would have been quite dangerous and difficult to do more against Iran, not Syria. A weak, unimportant military. So I'm not suggesting on every issue he came out on the ferocious side. But I do think that his instincts were pretty hard line. I'll stick with that.

Perry: Back to Mel's point. So is what you're saying that it's personality, it's instinct, and substance about the role of the United States in the world?

Abrams: It is the role of the United States in the world, yes, I think that is sort of a fundamental belief. Then it is experience as President. The George Bush of 2001 could not possibly have done the surge. It requires a sense of knowing—I understand what the generals are saying, they are wrong, I'm right. That takes years.

Leffler: But talking about Bush now. You come in, you're the senior person on the staff initially interested and focused on human rights. What would you say is Bush's attitude initially, as you knew it, in spring, summer? Maybe 9/11 is a divide. I'm not sure. It is initially. About human rights, quote, when you say he is a "hardliner." Where do notions of freedom fit into this, human rights, values?

I say this because I've actually done a huge amount of reading of Bush's speeches in 2000, 2001, 2002. Obviously somebody else is writing lots of his speeches, but nonetheless, they are very anomalous, they are very paradoxical. When Bush is asked, for example, during one of the Presidential debates, "When you think about foreign policy what is it that you're most interested in?" Do you know what the answer is?

Abrams: No.

Leffler: "Interest. Interest will shape what I do in terms of American foreign policy." That was his instinctive answer, I think, during a debate. But you also then find notions of freedom talked about in his speeches. Not only after 9/11, not only when he is trying to rectify the problems of no WMD [weapons of mass destruction] in Iraq, but notions of freedom do enter the vocabulary.

But when you also talk to people who knew Bush, like yourself—that's why I'm interested in your answer, very much interested in it. I don't really get a sense that when people say, like you do, he was a hardliner, he was a tough guy, that they think that Bush was really thinking a lot about freedom, human rights—

Abrams: This is very interesting to me also, because who is this guy who gives the second inaugural? I think first he has no foreign policy views to speak of as Governor of Texas and as a Presidential candidate. In the campaign I think he is giving voice to a kind of amalgam of standard Republican lines, what the Vulcans write, his father, and to the extent that you can describe anything, I think you're describing realpolitik more than anything else. There is—so OK, how do you get from there to the second inaugural, let's say.

First the answer is, I think, Bush. This is not staff work. The answer is not Powell, Condi, something like that. I think Bush—most of the answer is 9/11 in this sense. I think after 9/11 Bush tries to figure out for himself what is this, what has happened here? Why do these people hate us? Why are they attacking us? Why have thousands of Americans been killed? Now there is a ready answer from the State Department. It is ready on 9/12. It is because we support Israel too much. Why do you think that is? Bush rejects that view. That is not his view.

He doesn't have a view in September, October, but he moves toward a view that the lack of freedom is a key here. You see this, I think, not in such grandiose terms, but you see it in the April 2002 and more in the June 2002 speeches about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the dumping of [Yasser] Arafat, which to me is a precursor to the later, broader question of the Freedom Agenda in the Middle East.

What he says in April but more clearly in June is, "I am for a Palestinian state and you may not have one while that man is there and you do not have a democracy. When you get a democracy, come see me, I'll give you a state." That's very much against what is coming from the State Department. Powell and his people are very unhappy with that speech, the June speech, and think it is a very bad speech, but he does it anyway. That speech goes through something like 30 drafts. I'm not involved with it really. I saw that speech the last day because I'm in the other job, the Democ job at this point, but I've talked to [Michael] Gerson about this.

Long: Gerson writes that speech, right?

Abrams: Gerson says this is with very much Presidential involvement. Not only in the sense that when he is in the Oval alone with the President and the President is saying, "I want to say this, then I want to say that." But also there is actually a session in the Roosevelt Room or the Cabinet Room, a drafting session with the President there. There are disagreements, particularly in the one that—I think the last session Powell is someplace else and Armitage is there. Armitage is arguing, "We shouldn't be saying this stuff," and the President is saying, "I want to say this," and makes a remark about European anti-Semitism. So you're already seeing this argument in

favor of the importance of freedom and democracy emerge certainly by the first half of 2002.

I think there are other influences later that pull this out further, and [Natan] Sharansky is one of them. I think Sharansky does help him conceptualize this and broaden it and say it is always the answer. You also have—

Leffler: What are Condi's and Hadley's views of this trajectory?

Abrams: Let me finish my thought and come back to that. You also have in 2002 the Arab Human Development Report from UNDP [United Nations Development Programme], which says, "What is the problem in the Middle East? The freedom deficit." So it's in the air. It's not just the Bush administration. Some people are beginning to point to this. I think Bush ultimately plays a great role, but he is not the only actor in this.

I don't remember when the Sharansky first meetings are, but this is first. My view is Condi is a facilitator. I don't think that she is frankly adding much to this intellectually, oddly enough. She is following the President. He wants to go in this direction; we're going to go in this direction. Being an intellectual herself, she is easily able to do this and to help him achieve this. He is the originator. I believe that if the President had come to a different conclusion, a much more, let's say, realpolitik, a Powell-like conclusion, she would have helped him do that too. She did not think she was President and she was really loyal to him. She would have argued with him face-to-face at times, but I think particularly now—remember again, she is also new in 2001-'02. She is not the person she was five years later.

So I think there are facilitators. I am a facilitator in helping think about what does this all mean? But he is at the center of this and he is moving in this direction. He is not being pushed in this direction by his staff.

Riley: Let me pose one question about that, and I'm going to harken back to what you said about your meeting with Jimmy Carter and the question—"We're all happy to see that you changed after Afghanistan," and he rejects that characterization. Do you think that the President was a hardliner before 9/11, or was there a change after 9/11 when he becomes a hardliner and in effect there are two administrations?

Abrams: First, I only got there Memorial Day. I didn't see much of the President in June, July, August, September, so I don't have much personal insight into this. But I basically think he wasn't much of a foreign policy President prior to 9/11. I think the basic idea is Powell is in charge of foreign policy. That's certainly Powell's idea, I think. I think Powell's failure to adjust after 9/11 just gave him three horrible years, three unsuccessful years as Secretary.

Riley: Maybe inevitable in a post-9/11 environment.

Abrams: There is some inevitability in this sense. When you have a President who says, "Now I'm taking the reins," what does a Secretary do? I would say the same thing about Hillary Clinton. My criticisms of her tenure as Secretary of State are all diminished by my view that she had a very narrow track to go on because the President really wanted to be in charge of foreign policy. That was not true, I think, prior to 9/11. I think Powell was the man.

Leffler: Talk about the tensions between the Vice President and his staff and the State Department even during this period of time. In the literature as it now stands there is a lot of emphasis that Vice President [Richard] Cheney, from the moment he became Vice President, part of his mandate was intelligence, national security, energy policy, and he did put together a very well-informed staff of people, certainly people like [I. Lewis] Scooter Libby, Eric Edelman, who were extremely interested in these issues. This is going to be more and more important over the next few years.

You get to the NSC. Did you start seeing, boy, this is a very, very complicated bureaucracy? Now we not only have a National Security Council staff but we have a Vice Presidential staff, we have the State Department. Tell us how this affected everyday life. When you first get to the NSC talk to us about the interactions.

Riley: I don't want you to lose track of the question about the President's own transformation. I'm happy to pick up with the Vice Presidential stuff here, or if you want—

Abrams: Let's go on with Bush then and let me come to the OVP [Office of the Vice President].

I think the word "transformation" is right. Obviously it is not overnight. I think what happens very quickly after 9/11 is that the President realizes his Presidency has changed. America is under attack and he takes charge. He becomes the center of the national security policy in a way I don't think he was prior to that.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: But if you had said to him on the 15th of September, "What's your policy?" I don't think he could have answered that. I think over time he comes to more and more deeply believe in the Freedom Agenda. As I said, I think you can see part of it in the context of Israeli-Palestinian affairs. I think you see it in the context of Afghanistan. We want them to have an election. We want them to have a democracy. Human rights is important, the role of women, the freeing of Afghan women. It broadens out, partly because as he thinks it through he likes it. People come to see him.

One of the things about Bush that I think is interesting—and you see this even in the speech he made this week—I've always felt the people whom he was closest to, the foreign leaders, that is, that he was closest to, were people he thought were trying to get things done. They were in a certain limited sense heroic figures: Tony Blair, John Howard, [Junichiro] Koizumi, Sharon, not people like [Jacques] Chirac and [Gerhard] Schroeder, whom he thought were just pols. People matter and people have choices to make and some make heroic choices. So you meet these people and Jesus, you meet the Dalai Lama and you meet Sharansky, all those years in prison and you meet Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and how can you not be deeply impressed?

Now, this is another subject, but we should segue later to Christianity because this matters also. He has a view of the world and the role of individuals and the choices individuals can make. I think it all comes together for him, certainly by the time of the second inaugural, obviously, but before then democracy and human rights were playing a big role.

He is the man he is. He is not an ideologue. So in the sense he can give the second inaugural but

he can then meet with the King of Saudi Arabia. He doesn't say to the King, "I have to give you a freedom lecture." He is always pragmatic at the same time. I think this moves from becoming a reaction, a view, to a kind of coherent theory of American foreign policy as we move through the administration, and we should come back to this. The problem that happens later is as he's moving into this, OK, this is being developed. He is developing it in his own mind. Condi and Steve are helping both develop it and implement it and so are we on the NSC staff, OVP staff. We're not getting any help from the State Department, but it doesn't matter. The impact of that is OK, so they lose power, we gain power. Foreign policy begins to move toward the White House.

The problem is in the second term because Condi moves from being implementer, in my view, to being something else. OVP, let me just turn to that.

I get to the White House and what is obvious is that there are in this administration as within Reagan's all sorts of different views. Particularly now in June, let's say. I'm new there. It takes me at least 10 or 15 minutes to recognize the State Department is the enemy. [*laughter*] Who is on your side? Condi, Steve, some other people in the NSC. For example, on human rights issues in Europe, Dan Fried, the Senior Director for Europe, career Foreign Service officer who was ambassador to Poland, is fabulous, amazing, both as a pragmatic Foreign Service officer and as an intellectual. He becomes a friend and ally. And OVP.

I don't know if I'd met Eric Edelman. I doubt it. I'm not sure. Scooter Libby I had met and we were quite friendly. But the whole staff there in my view then and now, was first-rate, and kind of a neocon staff, which I say because Cheney is no neocon. Cheney is a Republican conservative. On these issues he is thought of as being more of a realpolitik guy. When it comes to human rights policy I think that's right. It's just not an interest of his.

Leffler: He is not.

Abrams: He's not interested in it; he's not against it. He never speaks against it. Where I think people get him wrong is I think most people's assumption, given his Halliburton period and the business they do in the Middle East, everybody assumes he is going to be pro-Arab, not pro-Israel. This is completely wrong, partly because they don't remember the Dick Cheney I remember, who is the number two Republican in the House whom I knew during Central America days as being a real tough supporter of the Contras and of President Reagan but also pro-Israel. So I'm not really surprised by this.

It's interesting that Cheney does not hire a Kissingerian-Scowcroftian staff. He hires basically a neocon staff.

Long: Did you know David Addington?

Abrams: I believe I knew Addington prior to that. Addington is not in this category.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: And does have a foreign policy influence as time goes by. They become, first of all friends, particularly professional friends. That is, we plot and scheme together in the White House. It is sort of what do we think about X, what are we going to do about X? Well, the State

Department is a problem; how do we get around this problem.

Leffler: Would you say they're scheming? Does that scheming include Condi and Hadley?

Abrams: Sometimes, usually. The difference is that, this is a difference I think of form rather than of content. So my answer is yes, but. We have a problem with the State Department. What you can say to Condi and Steve is, "I just think they're resisting. I think they're not really on board with this." What you can say to the colleagues in OVP is, "You see what Powell is doing? He's disloyal to the President." You cannot say to Condi, "Powell is disloyal to the President." You cannot deprecate Powell to Condi because they're friends; to Steve because, at least to this point, Steve is Steve. Steve is a great gentleman and he doesn't want to hear that kind of talk. So the tone changes, but the content—and Condi is aware.

Riley: Would you say that this is true before 9/11?

Abrams: No.

Riley: You say it took you 15 minutes to figure out that the State Department was the enemy.

Abrams: I don't know. It's hard for me to remember what human rights issues arose and I was not aware of a lot of stuff arising. For instance, there is a confrontation with the Saudis in August I think it is of 2001 that I now know about only because I've been told about it. But at the time, it's completely over my head. And I think that as time goes by, particularly in 2002, it is clear to Condi and Steve that look, the President wants to do certain things that Powell doesn't agree with. The Department thinks, Powell thinks, they're wrong. So we argue about them.

I think over time what happens is they're in charge of foreign policy largely. It begins to move to the White House, so we have arguments. That's the sort of middle stage. For example, the drafting of the June 2002 speech on Israeli-Palestinian matters. But the process continues to the point where we make foreign policy. So, for example, in June 2003 the President goes to Sharm el-Sheikh and Aqaba for two summits, what we call the Red Sea Summits.

It is all Condi. Condi arranges them. Now of course the White House is always more or less in charge when the President is traveling, so we do all the arrangements. But it's not just the arrangements. The idea is Condi's and the implementation is Condi's. How do we get this done? Condi calls in Bandar [bin Sultan] and says, "The King has to go to this." The State Department is completely peripheral.

By June 2003 I think she is in charge. Powell is an unhappy official. I've talked to Powell in the last few years about some of this. There is still a great deal of bitterness on his part that the NSC and the office of the Vice President—at one point in one of these interviews he said to me, "I would be sent to the Middle East and before we were wheels up you guys were all stabbing me in the back." There is an element of truth to that in the sense that we, at this point if we're talking 2003, I'm now doing Middle East, we, in my shop and OVP, do not trust him to carry out the President's instructions fully because he doesn't agree with those instructions. Even if he is trying to carry them out, it's not clear that you'll do a perfect job if you don't really believe in the policy.

Perry: What did you say to him in the interview when he expressed his view about what happened when he was on the plane?

Abrams: What he said was, "The White House is stabbing me in the back, and if it is 2003 that probably includes you." [*laughter*] He said it very nicely.

Riley: I'm looking at the timeline from the administration and it indicates that President Bush meets with [Vladimir] Putin in June of 2001. Were you around? I guess it would have been after Memorial Day. It would have been very shortly after you came in. I can't remember if that's the—"I looked into his soul—"

Abrams: We have a problem. I can't tell you when it appears, but it's clear over, let's say, the first term. There are two schools in the NSC and they can be represented by people. There is Dan Fried and me and there's Tom Graham. Tom Graham is very much a Scowcroftian-Kissingerian. He is the Senior Director for Russia, theoretically under Fried, but not really. So there is Graham, who is pushing what actually is the policy at that time, and there is Dan and me wringing our hands.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: Here I think we're getting no help from Condi. At this point Condi is the old Condi of the Scowcroft NSC. But to be fair to Condi, again, Condi is as NSA [National Security Agency] never more than an inch away from the President. This is the President's view at this point. He changes later, but at this point she is where he is. So Dan and I, who worry a lot that we're not saying much about human rights in Russia and so forth, we wring our hands more as time goes by, but we're not able to do much about it.

Long: Was there much support from other people around the President for that viewpoint? If Rice wasn't really taking the lead yet at that point and she was echoing what the President thought about Putin, where was that coming from? It certainly couldn't have been just his impression from meeting him. Were there other voices saying things are going in the right direction, it's not all so bad? Or was it really—?

Abrams: I really don't know in the administration. I don't know his relationship with Cheney and what Cheney was saying about this. I said before that the President liked people who he thought were trying to do something. I think at the beginning Putin got some of the benefit of that doubt. He looked like a guy who was trying to do something. But there is one other thing to say about this.

Foreign leaders are mostly politicians. It's really different, when I'm with the Secretary of State, say, or National Security Advisor Rice or Hadley, and we're meeting with these foreign ministers, many of whom are not politicians. There is this politician-to-politician thing, and Putin gets a little bit of that because, as you know, he is not exactly a politician but he is not a career diplomat either. He is a career spy. He becomes a political leader and at least for the first year he is pretty successful at it.

I think there is a sense for the President when he meets with these other people—I was either physically present or on the phone with him talking to real politicians, [Angela] Merkel, Blair,

and politics is a constant part of this. Understanding that you have your political system and problems, I have mine, and talking about it, asking about it. Tell me about this. Are you going to be able to do X? Explain it to me. Then I explain to you my situation and my Congress. I think that is important for Bush. I think personal relations are quite important for him with other foreign leaders in a way it was not true really for Reagan as much or, I would say, [Barack] Obama.

I think Putin gets a little bit of the benefit of the doubt early on. There are some conversations with Putin that I was—I happened to be in the Oval because I guess we were—sometimes because I'm the next call. So you get there and you just stand there. They did have what sounded like a personal relationship. I can remember the President saying sometimes, "You know, I think my daughter is going to get engaged pretty soon." Putin says, "Do you like the guy?" The President says, "I don't know if I should answer that. You know, Vladimir, there are a hundred people listening to this call." [*laughter*] So there is a personal relationship.

Riley: Why don't I give you a break. Take five minutes and we'll come back for the rest of the morning.

[BREAK]

Riley: Mel, you want to get us started here?

Leffler: Sure. One of the things that might be useful would be, when you joined the staff, just to go back and create a baseline, what did you expect to be your two or three major issues? When you were hired you probably met with Hadley, maybe with Rice. What did you talk about that you would really be focused on initially? Obviously this is going to evolve a lot, but create a benchmark for us.

Abrams: I don't have much of a memory of it. I did have I guess a long phone call with Steve and then came in to see Condi. I knew on paper basically it's human rights policy, it's UN. Somebody had to cover the UN. There was an AID [Agency for International Development] person always at the—we inherited this pattern at the NSC. I was also the person at the NSC who looked at AID. We had somebody—and cats and dogs, Cuban migration issues, which meant liaison with the Coast Guard.

Riley: Which you hoped would be quiet.

Abrams: We didn't get another Mariel, anyway. But in terms of what I would actually be doing, I don't think it was very clear. From my point of view I was at the White House. I had a terrific title, Special Assistant to the President.

Leffler: You did have a great title.

Abrams: —forget the rest, Special Assistant to the President. I did eight years at State, so now I

have the NSC itself, enormously prestigious.

Leffler: So what did you focus on? You didn't have a clear agenda initially, but pre 9/11 were there issues that you recall that you actually focused on?

Abrams: One I remember only because it was my first time in the Oval Office in 15 years or something. Immigration policy. You remember pre-9/11 there was talk of a big Bush initiative. He had met with Vicente Fox, and so this was one thing that I thought about and looked at all the papers and tried to make a contribution to papers going to Condi and Steve.

The UN. We instituted, or not, maybe it had always existed, but we had a daily phone call as I recall at eight o'clock in the morning. It was the Assistant Secretary for IO, the UN Ambassador or Deputy Ambassador, me, my Director for UN Affairs, so that I was getting—as the weeks went by, really *au courant* with what was going on at USUN [U.S. Mission to the United Nations] so that I could tell Condi and Steve. Later it became more important because we didn't trust the State Department. So we wanted to make sure, for example, do we know a veto is coming? Are we clear there is going to be a veto? Are they clear there is going to be a veto? Clearing speeches. Who is the UN Ambassador in the first year?

Riley: I should know.

Abrams: It's not Bolton.

Riley: I'll look it up.

Abrams: Is it [John] Negroponte, or does he come later too?

Riley: I believe it is Negroponte.

Abrams: Right from the start?

Leffler: I think so too.

Abrams: This becomes significant because for example, let's go back to your OVP question. Later, in 2002 I guess, or maybe later even, we are negotiating at the UN. This must be in the context of Iraq, so it's probably 2003 or '04. We are negotiating UN resolutions. There are a lot of people in the White House, particularly—is it Negroponte?

Riley: I'm still—

Abrams: There is a lot of distrust already, deep distrust of Powell. So this is in the context of Iraq, and the distrust is coming from OVP and DoD [Department of Defense]. What are we going to do about this? He is still Secretary of State. The answer is we're going to send Abrams up to New York for days at a time to shadow Negroponte.

Riley: [James] Cunningham was active—

Abrams: Cunningham is Deputy.

Riley: Then Negroponte in 2001.

Abrams: OK, I knew John. I had in a certain sense been John's boss when he was Ambassador to Honduras. It worked in the sense that I went up there and he said, "I know why you're here." I said, "We all know why I'm here. It's not you and me, it's those guys in Washington." I went to meetings with him where I could report back to Libby and Wolfowitz. It's OK. The country is not being completely sold out. That was one of the things I actually did.

Leffler: This was during those critical debates in the fall of 2002 at the UN? You were there?

Abrams: I don't remember.

Leffler: That's really critical. This is after Bush gives his UN—?

Abrams: No, this is not when Powell gives the famous speech that he now so regrets.

Leffler: But is it before then, because Bush gives his critical UN speech when he says, "We're going to go through the UN," which is to follow Powell's advice.

Abrams: Right.

Leffler: Powell tells Bush, let's take the issue—

Abrams: When is that?

Leffler: Powell talks to him August 6, 2002, and then Bush goes and gives his big speech at the UN in late August, maybe early September.

Abrams: In my memory this is 2002.

Leffler: Yes, that would be exactly right.

Abrams: Fall of 2002, I think.

Leffler: That's a very—

Abrams: We're negotiating resolutions.

Leffler: And that is a very critical time when the folks in the Vice President's office are extremely distrustful of what is going on.

Abrams: And so is DoD.

Leffler: Yes, absolutely.

Abrams: Basically I don't think I'm doing much in the sense that I'm merely reporting back to them it looks pretty much OK to me, but that's because first of all, John and I trusted each other so we didn't have any secrets from each other. He is trying to be both loyal to the President and loyal to Powell and the way to do that I think is to be candid, which he was. So the only thing I

remember—my most vivid memory is of a negotiating session with the Chinese Mission to the UN when I received a cell phone call from Paul Wolfowitz who said, "Can you talk?"

I said, "I am on a cell phone in the Chinese Mission to the UN. I don't think these are the best circumstances for this conversation." [*laughter*] So I did that.

One of the things I did is, I actually, then, we're talking 2001, 2002, I could get along with everybody and that was very useful to Condi and Steve. I knew the State Department; I knew a lot of people in the State Department. I knew Powell, I knew Armitage, and I could call Rich, which a lot of people at my rank could not do. I got along with everybody then. It got more strained later. I knew how the Department worked. I knew how to get things done at the Department. The DoD people trusted me, OVP trusted me. So that was one of the things I was doing for Condi.

Riley: Now DoD, Wolfowitz, or was there anybody else?

Abrams: Well, I don't—yes, there was [Douglas] Feith. I knew Doug from Jackson days, so we trusted each other. I didn't really know [Donald] Rumsfeld. I don't even know if I had met Rumsfeld. But certainly Wolfowitz, Feith, some others working—

Leffler: Can you take a few minutes during these early months after you get there to talk to us, just literally, about a day at the NSC? How did the NSC operate? This is something that's a void in the literature. Could you just walk us through a typical day at the NSC? Did you start with a staff meeting at 8:30? Who did you meet with? Condi? Steve?

Abrams: I am constantly telling students the first part of this to shock them. I would get up every day at 4:30 and I would be at my desk at 6:00. Why? Because the President got to his desk about 6:55 or 7:00. He wasn't going to call me. In fact, I remember the time he did call me and I said to him, "I'm so glad you called because now I can tell people the President called me." But Condi or Steve who went down to the Oval might. You cannot be in a position in which they said to you, "Could you believe that *New York Times* editorial?" and you hadn't seen it. Or said to you, "I don't understand what just happened in Yemen" and you would say, "What? What?" So I really needed that hour to look at the incoming, let's say.

Things would quiet down. My staff would arrive usually at about 8:00 and I think I would say the Director levels at the NSC would arrive at about 8:00, Senior Directors more likely at 7:30 or 7:00.

Leffler: When did Steve and Condi get there?

Abrams: Six.

Leffler: They got there the same time.

Abrams: Yes—they might call or you could call them or email them. Condi and Steve didn't do email, but you would email their assistants. Condi made a decision at the beginning: *First of all I don't want a record, and secondly I don't want to be snowed under.* Each of them had one executive assistant. So you would email them and say, "Show this to Steve immediately."

Seven to eight was quiet because they would be likely to be in with the President.

Riley: Where was your office?

Abrams: The whole time in the Eisenhower building. I moved three different offices with the three different jobs but always on the third floor of the EEOB [Eisenhower Executive Office Building], which is where the whole NSC was then. This was before the reconstruction started.

Eight o'clock is the staff meeting with Condi, which would go from 8:00-8:30 every day for Senior Directors plus. At a certain point we started inviting—I don't remember how early—Scooter was invited, or Eric. Maybe it was Eric who would come. Robin Cleveland from OMB [Office of Management and Budget], but basically it was the Senior Directors with Condi in the old Sit Room conference room. We would go around the room. She would not usually start by saying anything. It was show and tell, literally.

Riley: How big a group would that be?

Abrams: How big a group? Say, 20. That's probably good, 15, 20. This is a very useful moment for us. First of all, it meant you got Condi every day. Second, it meant that you got all your peers. So the walk over and the walk back from the EEOB is quite useful to grab somebody and say, "Look," particularly if you're me and you're at Democ. I had started in a functional post and then moved to a geographic one. When you're in one of these functional posts, the lifeblood is the regional guys, so you have to grab them and ask them and pressure them and cajole them.

This is your chance to say to Condi, "Powell is going to the UN tomorrow," or, "We're moving toward a vote on Israel, an effort to get a compromise next week, could be a veto." Or whatever. "Mubarak just threw somebody in jail," or nothing. The rest of the day—

Leffler: Did she ever tell you at these meetings what was on her mind? What she most wanted?

Abrams: Yes, she would respond. So you got to see—she would say substantive and significant things. One of them, by the way, I remember very well, because remember I get there in May—I guess I got there May 1st or something like that.

She said to us in early June, "Everybody here has been working a crushing schedule since January 20th and you are to take two weeks' vacation. You are not to take one week's vacation; you are to take two weeks' vacation. You are to email to Liz," Liz [Laura E.] Lineberry, her secretary, "the dates of your two weeks' vacation. If you do not do that, you will hear from us. You need it, your family needs it, and to do what you need to do for the President—"

I hadn't had two weeks' vacation in 15 years. Fantastic. Condi as the personnel manager is very impressive. But she would say substantive things. She would say, "The President would not want this. The President won't accept that. I want you to do this." She would react substantively on foreign policy issues. You then go back to your office and do your work. The work—we were on the Internet so we had normal email. We had, at some point, and I don't remember when, the interagency system, which later becomes the basis for WikiLeaks, but it is a big change for me coming from the Reagan State Department because in those days the only form of communication is cables. Now I am able to email first of all people at State, but also embassies,

which of course presents a challenge because you're not supposed to be giving instructions. You had to be really careful.

Leffler: Did you email embassies?

Abrams: Yes, always copying the Assistant Secretary so that what I would say in this email is, "I think it is really important that—" say, in Tunisia—"we make it clear that these arrests are terrible," and by copying, let's say, David Welch I'm hoping that he will instruct you to do that. That sort of thing. So I cannot be accused of—you know.

There is a third email loop, which is the internal NSC loop. The unclassified Internet loop, the—I can't think of the name of the system for the one throughout the government—that's secret. The NSC line is top secret. That is NSC only. Later, I think—we can actually reach CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] on that line. It is CIA, NSC. That is internal only.

Riley: OK.

Perry: So what is the flow of information coming to you? How are you getting your information, and from whom?

Abrams: First you're getting the unclassified stuff. So you're getting newspapers and articles, that sort of thing, including emails that have information on them because they have, "You need to see this from the *Financial Times*. Make sure you don't miss it." Or from people in your world just sending you stuff. Through this interagency loop you're getting State Department cables, and this is very important. Theoretically, we're getting all the relevant cables, including the EX-DIS and NO-DIS cables. The cables we're not getting are theoretically the ones that say, "For the Secretary's eyes only." We're not getting those.

But following the cable traffic is very important. Theoretically, I'm seeing what the Assistant Secretary of State for IO, Near East, or whatever is relevant. Theoretically I'm seeing in the Democ job anything involving human rights. This is a big cable take that I try to read through. In the Democ job it's easier because it is your job. It's not like the geographic job. So you're getting cables, you're getting CIA reports.

At some point, and again I don't remember quite when it goes mostly to email, you're also getting NSA reports on the screen. Many of them are coming in this top-secret loop. Some of them were sensitive ones. The NSA guy will walk in to you, hand it to you, watch you read it, and take it back. But you're getting most of the information on the screen. CIA is still doing a 20-page report on "Whither Saudi Arabia." Nobody has time to read those except over the weekend. People come in—I'd say Hadley and Condi basically work 9:00 to 5:00 on Saturdays. I don't. I come in Sunday mornings, kind of 8:00 to 12:00 to do that kind of reading, to catch up.

So you're getting all the intel [intelligence] and you're getting the State Department cables all day long and reading those. You have meetings. In the first job if the Secretary General is coming down or the Under Secretary General for Political Affairs is coming down, or Terje Rød-Larsen, the Envoy for the Middle East, so we see those people. Of course, in the regional office you're seeing lots of foreign diplomats. You're seeing people visiting from capitals and you're seeing people from the embassies all the time, every day. You're going to interagency meetings a

lot. There's a lot of time in the Situation Room, endless deputies' meetings. This is a criticism of Hadley that I think is probably reasonable.

Leffler: You're the number two person at these deputies' meetings. You sit behind Hadley, essentially?

Abrams: Right.

Leffler: Hadley is representing—

Abrams: It changes in the second term because then I'm a deputy so I get to sit at the table. In the first term I'm in the back row. There are eight seats at the table. So you would have, let's say, the big deputies are at the table. Hadley is chairing; Armitage, Wolfowitz, whoever is representing CIA and JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff], and then there is a back row with probably a dozen chairs more where I'm sitting and other special assistants, Dan Fried, are sitting at these deputies' meetings. These meetings go on too long. Hadley is not a sufficient disciplinarian. They start late. We have a backup, where you go to the Sit Room for your 11:30 meeting and there are 30 people standing outside because the meeting that was supposed to end at 11:00 is still going on, never mind the one that was supposed to end at 11:30, which annoys a lot of people because time is so scarce. "Why am I standing here waiting?"

Perry: You started to say that Hadley had been criticized. Was that your point? You were cut off.

Abrams: Yes, and it was a fair criticism I think of him and one that I think he would probably agree with.

Perry: So he was not on the President's time schedule, meetings start and end on time.

Abrams: No, and it's a big problem for people who—you get people like Wolfowitz and Armitage saying, "I have to stand around here?" if they're not at the meeting that is taking place. So hours are spent over in the White House.

Riley: And it had to take place in the Sit Room because of the classified nature—?

Abrams: Yes, later we had a few more SCIFs [Special Compartmented Intel Facility]. We had a couple in the EEOB and the technology gets better so you were able to do classified video. So that's what you were doing in the course of the day. A problem is you have so many meetings—the classic problem is I get back to the office, it's 5:10 and I have 180 emails to maybe look through. So lots of meetings in your own office with the guys from the French embassy who want to come in, the guys from this embassy, that embassy. The interagency meetings, I would say three hours a day, then time at the screen.

I commented to my wife once that I was sitting there and thinking, *OK, it's 7:20 and I'm in good shape here.* I'm thinking, *What does that mean?* It means I have gone through the emails. That's what I have accomplished today. I am up-to-date on my emails. Wow.

Leffler: So you don't have much time to really think about substantive policy. You're not

spending a lot of time writing memos on key issues during these first few months?

Abrams: I would say there is a policy debate at some of these meetings, some. Both at the—at all levels, NSC, PC [Principals Committee], DC [Deputies Committee], PCC [Policy Coordinating Committee]. We do sometimes have worthless meetings, but sometimes you actually engage. One thing we should probably go back to later—I think one of my real criticisms of the way the Bush administration was organized by Condi and by Steve, and I suspect therefore the fault is the President's, is the effort to homogenize opinion rather than present him with choices.

I do write a lot of memos to Condi and Steve. I do that sitting in my office at the computer writing a memo in which I make an argument, particularly in the second term, where I'm arguing really against much of the Middle East policy Condi is conducting. I'm writing memos to Steve that say, "We're making a mistake here. We're doing something wrong here. It's not what we should be doing."

Or, I'm redrafting—this is probably not drafting. You produce a lot of paper for all of the Condi or Steve meetings later and the President's meetings. That is, the meetings that I mentioned before when I'm in the Oval Office, including for phone calls. There is paper that goes to the President prior to those. It goes the night before so you get it to the National Security Advisor I guess the day before your meeting with or talking to the King of Jordan tomorrow. Agenda, key issues, talking points. The President was diligent in going over this material so that I would sometimes come to the pre-brief for this meeting, let's say at 9:45 for a 10 o'clock meeting and the President would say, "I didn't agree with what you proposed and I'm not going to say that." He really read this stuff.

Leffler: Tell us during these first few months' substantive questions at the NSC, at these meetings, how much focus was there on terrorism?

Abrams: In these months I don't think I was at an NSC meeting, meaning one that the President presided at prior to 9/11.

Leffler: Within your staff meetings does terrorism come up much?

Abrams: Not for me.

Leffler: [Richard] Clarke is at these meetings.

Abrams: At the staff meetings?

Leffler: Yes.

Abrams: Yes, but prior to 9/11 the only thing I know about Clarke is that he is extremely unpleasant and odd, which is rare. The tone comes from the President and Condi and it is a tone of great courtesy and *esprit de corps*. It's the kind of White House where if it were found out that you had stabbed somebody in the back, you would get fired. People were fired. Condi fires the Senior Director for Asia for having an affair with his secretary. This is a very genteel NSC. Bob Blackwill was fired by the President later, actually, for laying hands on an employee. So

everybody is very nice to everybody. That is something that hits you early on. How courteous.

Condi says, "We're in these jobs 12, 15 hours a day, we've really got to be good to each other." In Condi and Steve you have two of the finest people you're ever going to meet and the President is like that too. So to find somebody who is really off-putting, doesn't know what chitchat means, is odd, and that was all I knew about this guy Clarke.

Riley: If I could press on that, do you think that it may have been the case that because the messenger himself was a bit off-putting that his message may have been treated with less respect?

Abrams: It's conceivable. I have no evidence to support that. It's a theory that deserves to be examined. If you were—

Leffler: Except the other great exponent of the terrorist threat was a person with a totally different personality, and that is George Tenet—

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: Who was everybody's good friend and chum.

Abrams: As you know, this all matters because you see this later with [Dov] Dubi Weissglass in the context of Israel policy. It matters whether the principal, generally Condi, looks forward to meeting this person or says, "God, keep him off my schedule. You talk to him." It matters. It matters in terms of face time and it matters in terms of getting things done. So it is a theory that deserves to be at least thought about.

Riley: Let me pose a similar question to Mel's about Iraq. Is Iraq on the radar?

Abrams: I don't think so. Again, what is pre-9/11? I'm counting my two-week vacation. Condi took time off; Steve took time off.

Perry: By the way, was this in August while the President was at the ranch?

Abrams: Probably.

Leffler: He was. He goes away for about—

Abrams: Yes, that's probably when—

Perry: So everyone was taking vacations.

Abrams: In July and August, right. It's really hard for me to recall. In my world, in thinking of the UN or—yes, what we know about—there are a bunch of countries that are just really horrendous. Iraq. From a human rights point of view there is Iraq, there is North Korea. Those are really at the top of the list. There are a few like that: Iran, Burma. But they're not—we know also that we are in a confrontation with Iraq, no-fly zones and so forth. It's not really my business though.

Leffler: But your business might have engaged the Taliban and Afghanistan during these first months. Did it?

Abrams: I'm sure as you look you'll find—

Leffler: But it wasn't a focal point?

Abrams: It wasn't a focal point and I would also say there are easy ones and there are hard ones. The Taliban, like Iraq, they're evil.

Leffler: Can't do anything about?

Abrams: No, simple. What I meant by that is that there is no bureaucratic pushback.

Leffler: I see, right.

Abrams: In my previous work on the Commission on International Religious Freedom, I had actually been to Saudi Arabia in January of 2001. This is a problem for any administration. But the Taliban, Afghanistan—they're not a problem, they're awful. You want to put out a statement, put out a statement. Who is going to say, "Don't put out a statement"? You want to condemn what happened yesterday? Condemn. This is easy.

Leffler: Tell us what it was like on 9/11 or 9/12.

Abrams: On 9/11, I have a very strong memory. As I said we have eight o'clock staff meetings. I am Senior Director for Democ. As I'm leaving the office, third floor of the EEOB, the Director for UN Affairs, Tony Banbury, points in the—as you walk in you're in the secretary's area, waiting room. They had a six-inch TV. Tony Banbury points to it and says, "Look at that. A plane crashed into the World Trade Center." My immediate thought was, *This has happened before. It happened at the Empire State Building.* But it's a big plane. It's a commercial plane. It is bizarre.

Anyway, so we go off to the staff meeting. It starts normally. At some point five minutes in, ten minutes in, one of the Sit Room staff comes in and hands a note to Condi. It's a folded note like this only larger. This happened all the time—"The President wants to see you right now," or "Blair is calling the President. He's going to take the call. You'd better go up." I told her this story later; she had forgotten it completely. She opens the note, looks at it—remember now, this is the most courteous person who was ever born. Closes the note, looks up and says, "You are dismissed" and gets up and walks into the Sit Room.

So all of us were—"What the hell was that? You are dismissed?" So anyway we walk back. I walk back to the office and the second plane has hit. As I get to the office, as I remember it, almost simultaneously, the staff says, "Look at this." At that point, somehow, and I don't remember if it is an alarm system or not—I think we had an alarm system already. We were told to vacate. Uniformed Secret Service officers are going through the building. In addition, I believe we must have had a fire alarm system. "Get out." We immediately realize—it's obvious that somebody thinks the White House is going to be a target. I don't think we knew about the other plane. I don't even think we knew about the Pentagon.

Anyway, what I remember is we're thinking about New York—I don't think any of us thought seriously about an attack on the White House, at least I didn't at this point. You know the way you are in a fire drill. This is a pain, but it's interesting what is going on in New York. That's horrendous. We get down to West Executive, separating the White House and the EEOB and the uniformed Secret Service guys are there. You notice that people are running up West Executive toward Pennsylvania and the uniformed Secret Service guys as we come out of the EEOB are saying to us, "Run, run, get out of here, run." So now this is a very serious thing because you have to assume they know what they are talking about.

My secretary then, who was like most people seconded from elsewhere, was a CIA secretary. She never got over that. She very soon thereafter asked to be transferred back. Why she thought Langley was not a target is a different question, but she never got over that experience. So we ran and got out of the White House grounds and were told to keep moving, go beyond Lafayette Park.

Perry: Where did you run?

Abrams: Actually, I stood around for a while, realized that they weren't going to let us back in in five minutes as in a fire drill. I went to the Ethics and Public Policy Center, which was on 15th Street, and sat there looking at TV for a while. We got messages—how did we do that, I don't know—saying go home at a certain point in the day.

Leffler: Were you thinking this is al-Qaeda?

Abrams: I had never heard of al-Qaeda, I don't think. I don't recall.

Leffler: Had al-Qaeda come up much at your staff meetings?

Abrams: I don't remember.

Leffler: So during these hours—I don't mean it in a derogatory way, but you're clueless. You have no idea.

Abrams: Right, who is behind this. My belief is that Dick Clarke was not a collegial type. He was the kind of person who would not say what he had to say at the morning staff meeting. This was for Condi only, not for you palookas. So I don't believe he talked about this kind of stuff at staff meetings, probably rightly. The staff was told at a certain point, like five o'clock, "Go home," which I did by Metro.

Riley: Your residence is where?

Abrams: Virginia. I believe we came back to work the next day. The perimeter around the White House had been widened from whatever it is, 18 acres, to several streets up Pennsylvania Avenue. I was parking at 1700 Pennsylvania. It's a commercial office building and the NSC takes about 50 spaces. As I remember I couldn't get to it. For several weeks it was very hard. You had to keep showing your pass five different times to get close to the White House. Of course security was great. But we did get back to work pretty quickly.

Later, because of 9/11, the NSC established an alternate site beyond that expanded perimeter so when we had some drills you knew where to go 10 or 20 blocks away in case it happened again.

Riley: Elliott, had you ever been involved in the continuity of government exercises that were—

Abrams: No, as it happened—is that right? Maybe once. I don't think I was involved while I was at the NSC, which was good for my marriage because my wife's view of the idea that she and the children were expendable in case of emergency—she didn't think that was great judgment.

Riley: There had been exercises prior to the Bush Presidency. Cheney and others had been involved. Had you taken part in those things?

Abrams: I don't recall going to the mountain.

Leffler: Can you recall your first meetings with Condi after 9/11, what they were like? Did she meet with the whole staff on 9/12 or 9/13?

Abrams: I don't recall an all-staff meeting. Obviously we did resume the morning staff meetings. I don't recall a bureaucratic difference in the way work was being done.

Riley: What about your portfolio?

Abrams: Except—the great change was—soon after, I don't know if I'm talking about days or a week, but soon after it was obvious we were going to invade Afghanistan to punish these people. I don't remember when it was publicly obvious. It was clear to me this was going to happen and it was just a matter of time. The reason I mentioned the AID thing before is that I actually had a job here.

I believe this was said to me by the President, although I also heard it from Condi; we were going to invade Afghanistan and we were going to overthrow its government. We were going to be in a "you break it, you bought it" situation. The President said there cannot be a famine in Afghanistan. Robin Cleveland and I were given this job in the wonderful bureaucracy; we were tasked. I had on my little staff somebody from AID, Jonathan [Dworken], who was from OFDA [Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance], the disaster assistance, that was the best part of AID. He became critical in this.

We worked to develop a plan to make sure there was adequate food, which was not easy because Afghanistan at that point really was on the verge of famine, and like all famines, government caused, really. Getting food there was going to be difficult. The heroes here are really the World Food Programme people who devised different routes, the rail route down from the Baltic, the route up from Pakistan. We worked on this with them successfully. There was no famine.

We didn't, as I recall it, have a larger assignment, that is, at that point the President and Condi were not saying, "Develop a plan for the health system and the educational system" and everything else. My memory is that it was really focused on famine. Ultimately, this is before the invasion. Steve asked me to brief the President on all of that, which I did. I brought Jonathan with me. We briefed him on what was being done to avoid a famine essentially by the World

Food Programme, how this is being organized. Where is the food? Where is it coming from? How are we getting it there?

The only other thing I remember about that is the supply from the north was actually critical. For whatever operational reasons, it was turning out to be quite difficult to get it to the south by ship. Therefore I remember saying to people—I would not be involved operationally in a war anywhere, but I do remember saying to Steve and Condi, "The failure to take Mazar-i-Sharif is going to screw up our plans. You've got to take Mazar-i-Sharif. That is the rail transit point. Everything is coming down through there. So I don't know, I'm not a soldier, but I'm telling you this is critical from the food point of view. You just need to know that."

That was the real change in the job. You had an Afghanistan focus in the fall after 9/11 in my shop. Of course the UN got busier as well.

Long: As you began to transition and pivot to Afghanistan and the issues there, at what point—or I guess I'd like to understand more about how the decision came to be to work so closely with Pakistan despite the lack of democratic process, despite—the transition from calling him General [Pervez] Musharraf to President Musharraf and all of that, especially from your perspective as having democracy promotion in your portfolio. Was that just seen as a necessary evil? Did they think that he was less autocratic than he ended up being? What was going on there?

Abrams: I should say I don't really know the answer to that. I was not part of that decision. I am willing to speculate. I think some things are done for national security reasons and you just do them. I think this was that kind of situation. This was an operational necessity and we were going to do it. We were all aware of the problem of this new, wonderful ally. So here I think you would have to say that human rights became a slogan. We had to make believe in a sense that there was progress being made.

One of the problems you have with human rights policy is that sometimes you make believe there is progress being made in an effort to get it made. That is, it is a careful human rights-oriented tactic. Other times you just say it because you realize you're going to be accused, so you have to say, well—I don't know whether anybody really believed that. People had to persuade themselves that he was actually going to move against terror, too, which was probably equally difficult. But I don't remember there being a real human rights policy with respect to Pakistan.

Leffler: Who was the person on the NSC dealing mostly with Pakistan at that time? I know Armitage is the real point man on Pakistan, but who—

Abrams: Who was it at the NSC?

Leffler: Yes.

Abrams: I don't know. Condi, Steve, Zal. I think Zal at this point has—I think Bruce Riedel is gone, Zal is Senior Director. I don't think that was split off yet. I think he had Middle East and it extended—you have one other thing. As you get into these wars, this and Iraq, the defense directorate at the NSC becomes more significant. I guess it is Frank [Franklin C.] Miller who is Senior Director, and that becomes more important. I guess it is Armitage and we're playing a very secondary role.

Leffler: But soon, now that the wars begin, soon we have detainees and you do get involved.

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: Walk us through from your human rights perspective the trajectory here. Tell us what it was like to deal with David Addington and [Joseph] Cofer Black. I suspect day-by-day you had interactions.

Abrams: Not much with Cofer. I'll give you my perspective on this. I know from reading these materials and from others it's a narrow perspective, it's just one perspective, but I think it is useful. I didn't know very early on much about black sites. I do remember meetings in the Situation Room where we said, "There are going to be detainees. What are we going to do with the detainees?" I don't remember much being said about bringing them to the U.S. I don't remember a big debate as to whether this is a good idea or a bad idea. Rather the question was where are we going to put them outside the U.S.?

I don't remember who invented Guantanamo. My recollection is that as soon as it appeared on the list, everybody including me said, "Wow, perfect." Now part of the reason it was perfect was of course that Castro would hate it so much. That was an added—it was near, we had full control. It was a foreign country. It met all of the requirements. I don't remember there being a long process of deliberation.

Riley: There wasn't a long list of possibilities.

Abrams: I think that's right.

Riley: Shipboard was one. Shipboard detention?

Abrams: Yes, some places in the Pacific Ocean, but I think Guantanamo was a pretty quick consensus. So people start coming to Guantanamo. I did go down there once, God knows when, probably 2002. There were some regular trips down there for people, including press people. I was very impressed by it. That is, I took a long tour of the medical facility, which was already there, which was fantastic. I think we never got credit for the marvelous medical and dental treatment we gave to the prisoners.

We had a big problem it seems to me. I'm putting aside the black sites; I didn't know about that or have anything to do with that. You have these guys starting to come into Guantanamo. It seemed obvious—let me tell this story because I think it is illuminating. What do they do all day? What do they have in their possession? Nothing. They just sit around all day, except you have to give them a Koran, that's obvious. So [John B.] Bellinger and I—parenthetically I was amused by the—I don't know if it was Glenn Kessler or whoever wrote the piece that noted what an odd pair we were because he was a Princeton graduate and I was a sort of neocon thug. I thought it was really interesting considering my educational background.

Long: I think it said, "bare-knuckled in-fighter."

Abrams: Right, from Harvard Law School. [*laughter*] John and I thought—it's the kind of thing you do walking back from staff meeting in the morning—*This is very stupid. They're going to be*

there for a long time and we should give them other reading materials. Why? We said, "Frankly, reading the Koran is only going to make this worse. Let's give them other stuff." The State Department by then, 2002, had a bunch of things into translation, into Arabic and probably Urdu. I don't think we wanted to give them the *Federalist Papers*, but stuff about America. Maybe even some stuff about Islam. We thought this is obviously very smart to do.

The reaction from the Defense Department was, "We're not giving them any reading materials. They're there to be detained and punished." John and I both thought that was a really stupid reaction, but obviously it will be overcome when we explain this is not to reward them and give them a more pleasant life. This is in our interest. Otherwise all they've got is the Koran. It was obvious to John and me that then everyone would say, "Oh, I see." Then we would have a task that others could be involved in. What exactly do you give them? This does not happen because of, I would say, the stupidity of people at the Defense Department and a mindset there that continued for months and months to be a matter of amazement to John and me.

We had this argument endlessly. I think the State Department's handling of this—and I think conditions at Guantanamo were fine, so that's not the problem. The mindset and the handling at DoD were atrocious, were abysmal, did great damage to the country and to the President. It is typical that you couldn't get them to understand that giving a guy something else to read was a good idea.

We also became aware—timing is not clear to me in my memory—that we had other problems at Guantanamo, that is, that people in Afghanistan had been, for whatever reason, promiscuous in their decisions as to whom to send so that there was a guy who was about 90.

Long: Was that al-Qaeda Claus [Faiz Muhammad]?

Abrams: Yes. By the way, I never heard that phrase, neither then nor since. However, who knew how old he was? He was very old and obviously needed to be sent back. Again, obviously, John and I were saying this guy is about 80 or 85 years old, let's get him out of there right now. So he would be gone within a few days. No, no, he was not gone. Both of us were—you'd say over time we should be less shocked by this. We were continually shocked by this. Addington was no help. A series of people were put in charge at DoD. This is partly an organizational complaint. You're in charge, you don't do a good job, somebody else. Marshall Billingslea they put in charge.

Part of this is a tar baby problem I'm sure. Nobody wants to be in charge of this. But you have to blame, I guess, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz for not taking charge. Who in the Pentagon really has this? Don't know. They appoint the judge from Pennsylvania. We thought he would do—nothing improves.

At one point actually John said to me, "There's a way to cut through this. Talk to Judge [Alberto] Gonzales, because this is largely a legal issue and he is the White House Counsel. But you need to come with me. I can't do it." He had a relationship with Gonzales because he's the NSC Counsel, right? He's part of the White House Counsel's office too, he's dual-hatted. "But, you're you." I said, "This is absolutely right." What they're going to say is if John goes alone, well, we all know who Bellinger is. Bellinger is suspected—

Riley: Too soft.

Abrams: Suspected of being liberal. Yes. I thought that was right and wanted to go because this was very stupid what was happening. I thought I would tell the judge, "Look, I'm a sort of real right-winger. I'm a real loyal Bush-ite. This is stupid, we have to protect the President." I guess we had two meetings with Gonzales. It was in those meetings that I formed the conclusion that he was a terrible White House Counsel and doing a great disservice to the President. Something which I think, I don't know if the President believes it, but I think an awful lot of people who work in the White House came to believe it. Because what he did was nothing. He did not protect the President. The President was damaged by this. It was his job as White House Counsel, in my view, to act in a situation like this.

Perry: Why do you think he didn't? What was the problem? Why was he not protecting the President on any issue in this?

Abrams: I think in terms of temperament and intellect he was not willing to challenge anybody. You have to be willing to do that. You have to be willing to say to the Attorney General, the Secretary of Defense, anybody, "We need to do this. If you can't do that part, maybe you should get another job." Then go see Andy Card and say, "Look, we have a problem here."

Leffler: Is it possible, though, that he had the same view?

Abrams: It's possible.

Leffler: I mean, Gonzales knew President Bush very well, right?

Abrams: It's possible that he had the same view—

Leffler: The same view as President Bush? That you said earlier, Bush is a really tough guy—

Abrams: You could say anything to the President. You could challenge the President. You could disagree with the President. Maybe I should make this criticism of Condi and Steve too, but it seems to me that had somebody, Andy Card, Condi, Gonzales, said to the President, "Look, this is not working well." We each kind of knew it wasn't working well in the sense that from an organizational point of view you can see he's in charge, but then he's in charge. We kept having to reorganize. So ultimately you have to blame the President for not insisting on a better—

But look, the President can't do everything. The *Washington Post* had this wonderful series explaining—this is actually to me very interesting. The President gave almost no pardons. Very odd for a Christian, in a sense, who believes in repentance. Why not? I think that if the White House Counsel or Attorney General had said to the President, [*whistles*] "Your whole first term—this is terrible. Don't you believe? We've got to do this," I think the President would have said, "You're right." So yes, blame him, but nobody said to him, "Look at this."

My sense is nobody did that here either. So the buck stops there, but you have to blame people at a lower level as well.

Leffler: Did you tell Steve Hadley and Condi Rice that this was—

Abrams: This is a good question. I think that John and I did complain, mockingly, about the stupidity, we thought, of the DoD approach. But we're talking about 2002, I think. It's the case during the first term, I think many people have written about this, that in the Powell, Rice, Cheney, Condi was a lesser figure and was careful about challenging them, more willing as time went on to do so as her own stature rose.

But you have two problems here. It's early, so her stature was just rising and this is a war. So when the DoD guys say, "Excuse me, we're in charge of this," it's hard to say, "No, I know better than you do, General."

Riley: There is also—and we're going to have to break here for just a second. Let me put this on the agenda for us to come back and deal with. You earlier had said that there was a factor that you wanted to come back to with Condi related to not presenting the President with true options.

Abrams: Yes.

Riley: Which is something that Doug Feith has written about. It could be that that is at issue here. I'd like for you to address that. Let me plant that seed for us, for you to think a little bit about while we're at lunch.

Perry: You used the term "homogenization of opinion."

Abrams: Yes.

Perry: And yet just a few minutes ago you said you could disagree with the President.

Abrams: This is the anomaly. He's the decider, right? But he's not deciding. Many, many questions on which there is disagreement at the Cabinet level, at the principals' level. You have Condi at times, Steve at times, actually saying, "We can't take this to the President." The President is at ease making decisions, yet establishes, I wouldn't even say accepts, establishes a system that takes many of them away from him. Why? Why is that? I don't really understand it, but I think it's worth talking about.

Riley: Let's come back and deal with that after lunch.

[BREAK]

Riley: We left on the table this question about Condi Rice's operating style and maybe more generally the President's decision-making style in terms of what he liked to see in the way of competing views and so forth. You made reference to this earlier, so why don't we start by getting you to elaborate on that.

Abrams: Let me talk about the President and Condi, Condi as National Security Advisor, Condi as Secretary of State. They're related but different. I find this mysterious. It's something that

maybe someday I will ask the President about.

Riley: Maybe we will.

Abrams: It is worth asking. There was a clear thought—from an observation you would say clear, but also a stated thought—that you could not go to the President and say, "Your Cabinet is divided on this question. We can't reach a consensus recommendation to you." You would hear at principals' meetings somebody say, normally the National Security Advisor, "Well, let's discuss this again tomorrow. We've got to come up with a recommendation." It was a view about how to run the government.

Now, I have to assume that the President liked this and that it came from him. It seems to me inconceivable that Condi or Steve would have done this in defiance of guidance from the President that I want to decide all these things. That's what makes it mysterious to me. The business about, "Well, he's the decider" stems from something real, which is he did not agonize over decisions. He did like to make decisions. Why therefore did he set up this system? I would have recommended that these meetings, particularly at the PC level, would be used to, and the National Security Council staff would be used to clarify the decision that is being made and present it in the best possible fashion and make it clear to the President what his options were and so forth.

Riley: Right.

Abrams: That happened occasionally. The best example of that is the 2007, what was ultimately the Israeli bombing of the Syrian nuclear reactor. The Israelis presented the evidence to us in the spring. We then went through a long process with them of clarifying what was there. Was it a nuclear reactor being built? Then, with them and alone what the options were: diplomatic, overt military, covert. We all agreed there was no covert option. That is, Israelis did, we did. This is clear, so OK, diplomatic or military.

We went through a very elaborate NSC-led process, secret at the time, but Bush, Rice, Cheney all mention it in their memoirs, so less secret, not secret now. I was very much involved in this process and it was great. It was a classic process in the sense that it should be taught at grad schools. Every pro and con was carefully examined in papers that we went over and over and presented to the President. If you had a military option, what would it look like and what are the risks? What is a diplomatic option?

We had scenarios. On Day One you can go to the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] Board of Governors and you're going to go to the Security Council. You start with the Brits and French and then the Russians. Very elaborate. There were differences because the Vice President thought we should bomb. The Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense thought we should pursue a diplomatic route. I thought the Israelis should bomb. All these were debated before the President I think on three occasions. He would say, "Well, what do you think?" "Why do you disagree?" Wonderful, classic debate. Parenthetically, the President then made the wrong choice.

So the beauty of the process does not guarantee, from my point of view, the proper outcome. To my complete amazement he went with Condi. Not amazed that he would go with Condi, but on this one because it seemed to be clear that the diplomatic option was ludicrous. In fact, when he

told [Ehud] Olmert he had decided on a diplomatic option, Olmert said, "Well, that's impossible. That's completely inconceivable. You're telling me you're not going to do it; we're going to do it."

Bush, I then wondered, *how is he going to react?* I was in the Oval Office for this call. *Would he get mad at Olmert?* The reaction—he said to Olmert on the phone, "If you feel this is vital to your national security, you've got to do what you've got to do." Hung up the phone, turned to Hadley and me and said, "That guy's got balls." No remonstrance, no complaints, leading of course to the question of whether he expected this.

Riley: Sure.

Abrams: But this process was unique, not just rare, in my experience unique. To argue it out in front of the President—I can understand one argument against that pattern. That is illustrated by the following story from the Reagan administration. Toward the end of the Reagan administration we were trying to get rid of [Manuel] Noriega in Panama. He had been indicted on drug trafficking. I was working for Shultz. Shultz's view was we had an opportunity to get rid of him through a deal, which we were in fact trying to get done. "We'll drop the charges if you leave Panama." This was a culmination of a long process. By the way, I should say that's interesting in that the main opposition to it was George H. W. Bush and Jim Baker, who thought that dropping the charges on an indicted drug guy would hurt in the campaign that was coming.

Because Shultz so forcefully pushed this, largely because of this, you may recall the number of times that George Shultz was invited back to the State Department during the George H. W. Bush Presidency. One, for the unveiling of his portrait. This had been a long argument, essentially with Shultz wanting to do more and more and [Caspar] Weinberger being against it. We would go to an NSC meeting and ten days later another NSC meeting. At the end of the meeting Reagan would not decide. They would argue it out again two days later, two weeks later. Reagan would not decide.

At one point I said to Charlie Hill, who was Shultz's executive assistant, "Why is he taking that President's salary if he is not going to do the work? Make a decision, for God's sake." Charlie said to me, "Why, you're so naïve." I said, "What? What?" He said, "Look, George wants to act. Cap doesn't. Are we acting? No. So Cap has won, right? Now, because you're stupid you would expect the President to say, 'Hey, Cap, you win; George, you lose.' But the President knows as well as you do that their relationship is awful and he's not going to do that to the Secretary. That's not the way he is going to manage the government. So instead he makes believe he is a dope and he phumphers and he says, 'Well, I have to think about that' week after week because he's smarter than you are." That was a very interesting lesson in the management of the Cabinet and the National Security Council.

Maybe that's one of the reasons why the President didn't want direct confrontation among Cabinet officials. Certainly with Rumsfeld and Powell you could see some of the same thing. I understand that. As a matter of managing the personalities it's worthy of consideration. But I really do think the President lost something here in this, what I would call "homogenization of opinion," and I just don't get it. My advice to [Willard Mitt] Romney if he were to win would be, "Don't do this. Tell your National Security Advisor, 'Bring them to me, and we'll worry about

how to work the personalities. We can figure that out.'" This did not change from the first term to the second. So it was not a matter of well, Condi liked to work that way or Steve liked to. The President liked to work that way and I don't get it.

Perry: Can I probe just a little bit on that with three possibilities? One, again his time issues that we hear so often and you've mentioned it too. "Start the meeting on time, end the meeting on time. I'm the President and my time is valuable," number one. Number two would be a sense that I'm getting of impatience that he had in briefings and this might be a bridge to your talking about the times that you briefed him. But we hear, "Get to the point. I'm the President. I'm a busy person." The other is, you mentioned Romney and I'm thinking in terms of the business background of these people that may bring a different management style to the Presidency from others with other backgrounds. I offer those three for your thoughts.

Abrams: I think there is something to that. I think it's right that he would not have wanted to sit through an NSC meeting with endless argument back and forth, particularly argument that had a personal side to it. But he would not have wanted that kind of discussion. "Well, I think this," and "Well, I think that." But that is a matter, I think, of format.

The National Security Advisor could have figured it out. You don't have to argue it in front of the President. You could set up a system where the National Security Advisor's job is to give you the best statement of the case for both sides. On some of these occasions the Cabinet member might have insisted almost, if it were important in getting to the President directly. I agree with that, but I think you could have gotten around it if the President had insisted on this.

Riley: So what happens instead is a situation where the National Security Advisor is pressing for consensus or compromise, what I think Doug calls a "bridging solution" or something like that.

Abrams: Yes, I think that's right. You try to—what can we all agree on.

Riley: Right.

Abrams: You find something and it is not necessarily the best policy. It seems to me it is almost by definition not necessarily the best policy. It may be. I don't, I really—there are a number of arguments in favor of avoiding lengthy and contentious NSC meetings, and I do think you're right that the President would not have liked such meetings. But I don't think you have to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Riley: Let me ask you, why do you think he didn't like those kinds of meetings? I think you've already said it is a little bit of a puzzle to you, but I'd like to push on that for a minute. This is a guy who is so Texan and tough and you would think, let's get this rodeo underway and let's see which of these cowboys can stay on longer. Is it possibly an issue of self-confidence?

Abrams: I don't think so.

Riley: Intellectual self-confidence.

Abrams: That's interesting. That could explain certainly setting up such a system in 2000 when you're President-elect. That's interesting, because I would think he didn't have a lot of

confidence in foreign affairs. A confident man, but he knew what he didn't know. It's odd, even if you posit that that is the case, that he never changed it. He had the perfect chance to change it—the second term. New National Security Advisor. You can even argue, "I don't want you to homogenize Condi. I want her—" New Secretary of Defense.

I do think the impatience question comes in here. He was, is, an impatient person. He would cut people off all the time in midparagraph or midsentence, "Get to the point." He didn't say that, but it was obvious. You therefore knew in briefings you didn't have a long time. He was not going to sit there and listen to you. Shultz when he was Secretary would sit there and you could speak for 15 minutes and he would listen, obviously assuming you had something to say. But you could not brief the President in that way in my experience. He would interrupt and ask questions.

Now you might be able to get all of your material out in answering the questions, but there was no question that he was impatient. I don't know, couldn't you have established a pattern of NSC meetings where you state your case in two minutes? Now you do yours in two minutes. Now we'll see. What are you disagreeing on? Tell me what the areas of disagreement are. We didn't have that, or we rarely had that, I think.

Riley: Two things. Is it possible that there is something about the perch of the President that makes whoever occupies that position in some way conflict-averse? Presidents famously don't like to fire people. We've heard that from every project we've done. Carter didn't like to fire people, Reagan didn't like to fire people, Bush didn't like to fire people. Is there something about being behind that desk that maybe creates a conflict-averse—

Abrams: Averse to conflict within the administration, maybe. Again, if you posit that that is a good form of personnel management, that these arguments in front of the President with winners or losers would create or heighten personal confrontations or difficulties among key Cabinet members, then I would say, "OK, Mr. President, then how are we going to get you these decisions to make?" Because I think the process a) deprived him of a certain degree of decision-making power and b) failed in the sense that do you think that Weinberger and Shultz didn't fight because of this? That Rumsfeld and Powell were buddies because of this? I don't think that happened.

Riley: Let me suggest that maybe we're looking at the wrong end of the exchange. If this is a President who is relying on his in-house professionals to design a system for him, a President who admittedly doesn't have much foreign policy experience, then maybe the person to look to for responsibility is Condi herself. Does she have a conception of the role of the National Security Advisor or the proper function of a national security–making process that takes the President offline until some sort of compromise is available? I don't know if there are precedents in this that she would look to as the sort of gold standard for what—

Abrams: George H. W. Bush probably. But there you have a President who believes he knows all about foreign policy. He has a couple of advisors, Baker and Scowcroft, to whom he looks, so you don't have an interagency process in a sense, you've got his two guys who are close to him.

Riley: Three if you include Cheney.

Abrams: Three if you include Cheney. This is more of a Reagan-like setup with which Condi is not personally familiar, by which I mean you go into this with the assumption the President doesn't know a lot about foreign policy. Cabinet principals are going to be key players here. It is not at all clear that you are going to have a dominant President in foreign policy. So maybe—this is an interesting theory—Condi sets up a system for this President where if you push this a little bit further you have a system where the President isn't really making foreign policy, we're making foreign policy, the big shots, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, Condi to some degree. We're going to get together and decide these issues and we'll tell the President what he is supposed to think and what he is supposed to do.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: Again, I think that is very plausible, but why does it last eight years?

Riley: OK. Any follow-up on this?

Long: Not on the leadership side. I have a broader question about some of the policy perspectives, but if you want to continue down this path—

Riley: No, we'll come back to this, please go ahead. We can come back to this as we want in terms of process.

Long: In the academic literature on human rights and ideas about ethics and so on there is a lot of discussion about the differences between universal rights and a more kind of cultural relativism approach. I recall in the morning when you were talking about Afghanistan you very briefly mentioned the desire among many folks to provide more freedom to Afghan women and so on. That's precisely one of those issues that some would argue that the types of things we're talking about are not universal human rights. Was there any sort of discussion like that in your meetings or discussions with the administration folks, or was it just kind of assumed that everybody knew what human rights were and let's just move forward with this?

Abrams: There was discussion, lots of discussion of certain issues like should Hamas be permitted to run the 2006 Palestinian election, which led to other questions about democratic theory, election theory, and so forth. On your question, though, I would say the answer is no, that the President was not a cultural relativist. The President on human rights questions—I think religion mattered. That is, these rights come from God. They do not come from the state; they were not culture-bound. To the extent that they don't exist in your culture, that is a failing of your culture. All it means is that it is going to take a lot more time and work to reach this point.

He says this to varying degrees in different speeches. Remember in the NED [National Endowment for Democracy] speech, which is 2003, he mocks cultural relativism in the speech. He mocks people who said the Japanese or Germans or others could never be democrats because of culture. So that view was not really debated. It was rejected.

Long: And that was definitely Rice's perspective going in, right? I actually interviewed her in the past and asked her something about this. She said that her impression was that if you say that any society cannot be democratic, that's ethnocentric and prejudiced to make that argument. So was it your impression that she was definitely on that page, not just because it was the

President's view?

Abrams: I don't have an impression of that, actually.

Long: Sure.

Abrams: I don't know.

Long: So it just wasn't really discussed.

Abrams: No it wasn't, really. I mean, we had a view; we had a line. It came down from the top. I don't remember anybody really disagreeing with it. We never called them universal rights, which is an Obama neologism that I hate. We call them human rights. In the President's speeches he does say this is the work of generations. Maybe we had some illusions about how quickly they can come, but we certainly didn't think this was—the role of women in Arab culture was going to change fast. But everybody thought one standard.

Perry: So could you talk now specifically about Afghanistan? You talked before lunch this morning about the food situation, the famine possibilities after the invasion.

Abrams: Yes.

Perry: But you had also talked before that about the Taliban and how that was universally understood that these people needed to go. If not talking about cultural issues, are you specifically talking about what is going on in Afghanistan, what will postwar human rights look like there?

Abrams: I do not remember a lot of discussion of that at all. I do recall the enormous satisfaction of the emergence of [Hamid] Karzai. Karzai appears and comes to Washington. I don't remember when. He was a great hit, left, right, and center. Partly because of the issue of women's rights. There was no partisan difference here. You can find a *Washington Post* article about his magnificent capes—

Perry: Hats.

Abrams: He was a great hit and everybody was in love with Karzai, and Karzai was not saying, "Leave me alone, we're not going to be able to do this." He was speaking the right language too. There had been an immediate impact on the rights of women. I just don't remember really any discussion.

Perry: About democracy itself?

Abrams: Not big discussions. The assumption was that they'd move somehow in this direction. Unlike Iraq, where I think there were more discussions, but I don't recall this. We'll come back to Iraq I'm sure, but part of the issue is once the war is over, Karzai is there. I shouldn't say once it was over, during the war. Something happens, which is DoD takes over, it's a war. So the Defense directorate is more important, Condi is less important, DoD is more important. One of the reasons I think there is less going on at the NSC—

Riley: Are you finding that you have an enhanced role at that point because you have a good connection with DoD, or is DoD now so self-contained?

Abrams: In Afghanistan I just don't recall any role after—but on the other hand there is another problem, which is I'm changing jobs.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: So for 2003 and '04 I'm just doing Middle East, which we define without Iraq and Afghanistan because that's now a new team.

Riley: Right. So let me come back and pose a question this way. What are you mostly tending to in 2002 and the early part of '03 before you change jobs?

Abrams: I actually change in the end of '02.

Riley: What are you doing in the balance of '02 that keeps you mostly occupied?

Abrams: I have no idea. UN I imagine. Afghanistan and Iraq and the UN.

Leffler: But you were working on what they called, I think, the Policy Coordinating Committee to deal with the issues that dealt with detainees at Guantanamo, which we were talking about. It was not just you and Bellinger. You were supposed to put together a committee that had people from Justice and other—it wasn't a very functional committee from what I could gather.

Abrams: Right.

Leffler: But it was still your task and part of your task, as I understood it, was not just to assess who was there—there were a lot of people there who shouldn't have been there as prisoners—but also how they were treated. There were reports from the very early times in the middle of the spring and summer of 2002 coming from FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigations] assessments, people who went down there as well as even some CIA reports that prisoners were being egregiously mistreated. I'm using those words, but they would describe the treatment.

You told us the facilities were good, which I think was probably true from what I've read, but there was already a lot of argumentation about—I'll use the word—whether torture was going on. What was your role in all of this?

Abrams: None. I don't remember having anything to do with that. Partly because the nature of the Democracy, Human Rights, and Internal Organizations directorate at NSC has nothing to do with the issue of misconduct by American officials. It has to do with foreign governments. John and I were thrust into this question of detainees for a while. We got nowhere. It was owned, we would have said, by DoD. Now you say DoD and CIA, or DoD, CIA, and FBI. But I remember just not being involved in that issue.

Perry: So beyond the reading material issue that you spoke about before, there wasn't any other discussion?

Abrams: There was discussion I remember of, clearly, some people there who shouldn't have been there. One was very old, but others were too young. This came up at meeting after meeting. We got nowhere. We had no ability to budge DoD. I'm not sure in retrospect why. I can probably guess the answer is because they didn't wish to be budged and it would have taken a stronger push from a higher level. I remember meetings about this, who is there, who decided and how did they decide, about sending people back. There was the general problem of DoD's decision-making process and handling of this, which was constantly changing.

Riley: Were you in any way involved in the back-and-forth with the Office of Legal Counsel about the legal basis for the decisions that were taken?

Abrams: No, Bellinger may have been, but it was not my—

Riley: It would have been an interagency process.

Abrams: Not involving me.

Riley: So if I'm hearing correctly you had a lane and you basically stayed in that lane during the duration of the time.

Abrams: Yes.

Riley: Did that strike you as odd in any way? You're a highly trained professional attorney with a lot of executive branch experience across agencies.

Abrams: No. Look, I've been Assistant Secretary for Human Rights. What is the role of the Assistant Secretary with respect to human rights violations in the United States, not—

Riley: Yes.

Abrams: You can cross lanes but you need to have a pretty good reason for it.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: Generally speaking that's not what you're there for.

Riley: So the prospect that potential abuses would undermine U.S. policy on human rights abroad was not something then that bubbled up on your watch?

Abrams: It may have bubbled up within the government, but it was not something that I attended to or raised with Condi or Steve. It is true that I was a highly trained lawyer, but it was also true that I had practiced for about six months. Look at the guys at OLC [Office of Legal Counsel] who were working on this who were all Supreme Court clerks. Do they really need to hear from me?

Long: Maybe this reference is incorrect, but in Jane Mayer's book she talks about this committee in 2002 that you chaired with Bellinger and indicates that it starts in the spring and goes through December or so when you're reassigned. She indicates that it met twice a week with Defense and

Justice and CIA staff. So in all those meetings the only real topic was what to do with the elderly prisoners?

Abrams: I don't believe that is correct.

Long: That's from her book, not from someone who was at the meetings, obviously, so it could be wrong.

Abrams: I must say I have very few memories of that piece.

Leffler: Once you took over the new position, what were the things that most preoccupied you?

Abrams: So we're talking about 2003 really.

Leffler: Yes, late 2002, 2003.

Abrams: We've had some evolution of policy in 2002, the two speeches.

Riley: Your portfolio at this time is—

Abrams: Middle East. After Bush's speech of June 2002, we have the creation of the quartet and the road map. So what we were doing at the very end of 2002, beginning of 2003, we have the road map. We need to get Israeli and Palestinian sign-off. Sharon is still fighting the Intifada with very tough measures, intermittently a great deal of violence. There are lots of terrorist attacks.

We are trying—we have said that we would not issue the road map. Sharon said to us, "If you issue the road map now, it will become an issue in our elections." So we have agreed to wait until after the Israeli election, which I believe is February. But we also say—this is part of the road map—there has to be the creation of the office of Prime Minister. We are trying to diminish Arafat's power, and it has to be filled.

The creation, the issuance of the road map publicly, formally, comes only when Arafat finally gives in and the Palestinian legislature creates the post of Prime Minister and he names Mahmoud Abbas Prime Minister. We then issue the road map and—this is 2003. OK, this is huge progress. We have the road map; we have a guy we can work with. We can't work with Arafat; we've already said that. Now there is somebody we can work with. So we meet to get this process started.

How do we do that? The Red Sea Summits. We begin to think about that and then organize to make that happen. That is early June, so we're working on that. I think it's something like April first the road map is released. Abbas is named. We then start organizing. The President goes on this trip—we went to other places too, as I recall. But I think first Sharm, then Aqaba, then the Gulf. We have these meetings. In Sharm it is Mubarak, the then Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, King of Jordan, maybe the King of Bahrain was there. Then we go to Aqaba and we have Sharon and Abbas. Abbas is in Sharm too.

We then have Abbas come to Washington, which is a significant laying on of hands. It is

significant in part, I think, because it persuades Arafat this guy's got to go. Arafat is jealous, does not want to see his power ebb. By the end of the summer Abbas resigns in frustration because one of the things we have made Arafat promise to do is reform the security agencies, of which there are thirteen, into three, and put them under the Prime Minister. He won't do that, so Abbas resigns.

I should say that there is a critique here that one hears very often, hears it from the Obama people. Bush made this gigantic mistake. Yes, it's true, he tried Annapolis. That was in his last year. He did nothing for seven years, which is complete nonsense in my view. We came in with the Intifada. We came in with the collapse of Camp David. With Clinton—this is in Cheney's memoir—telling him on inauguration day, "Arafat is a son-of-a-bitch. Don't ever trust anything he says. Don't work with him." So it takes us 2001 and through June 2002 with 9/11 in the middle to get the policy set and to begin to get rid of Arafat.

By the summer of 2003 we've done it, we think. We're ready to go with the peace process here. Aqaba in June is where Sharon says the Palestinians should govern themselves in their own state and Abbas says, "We are completely against violence. It is against our culture. Not only is it self-defeating, it is against our religion and our culture." This is all terrific. I actually wrote some of those speeches, everybody's speeches. They're down there in the Bush Library, the first and second and third drafts. This is Condi doing all of this. By the end of the summer we're dead. It's all gone because Arafat has kicked out Abbas and he has put in Abu Ala'a and everybody understands Ala'a's job is to do nothing.

We are in a sense back to the drawing board, so by September this policy is at a dead end. We're trying to figure out what to do and what are the alternatives. Sharon is going to be in Rome for a state visit, so I am sent secretly to Rome to see Sharon. Secretly—we didn't announce it. I traveled as me on my diplomatic passport. I went alone, checked into a hotel, walked over to the Hilton where Sharon was, and saw him. As I had been instructed I said, "We're dead in the water."

Riley: The date again is?

Abrams: Early November.

Riley: Of?

Abrams: Two thousand three.

Riley: Dead in the water.

Abrams: I said to Sharon, "At various times you've come close on Syria. We're trying to think of something new to do. The Palestinians seem stuck, so have you contemplated a new negotiation with Syria?" Sharon's answer is, "I'm not negotiating with those murderers. They're a bunch of murderers and I will not negotiate with them. But we're going to get out of Gaza." This is completely shocking to us because I think a year before as I recall it, or maybe very early 2003, we asked Dubi Weissglass, "Any possibility of anything in Gaza?" "None, zero." So Sharon says to me, "I haven't decided exactly what, all settlements, most settlements, but there is going to be a withdrawal in Gaza."

I am the first American he says this to. This is a great trip because I've really got something to go home with. Of course he then takes the next two years to do it. So that's November 2003. He announces it in his Herzliya speech second half of December. He says a little more in a Likud party meeting I think late January, early February. This is now our policy essentially for 2004 and 2005. Sharon is getting out of Gaza. We're with him.

You can say he buys himself two years or that this is the beginning of the peace process. Anyway, we're with Sharon. Sharon says to us directly and through Dubi, "I'm in big political trouble over this," which we can see because he is losing votes in the Likud party central committee and in the Knesset and the Cabinet is divided and this is an unrequited concession. It is not negotiated, so by definition the Palestinians were giving him nothing. "So the compensation I need," he says, "is from you. Ideological compensation, political compensation. I can't get this through without you guys, you Americans." This is what leads to the April 14th letter to Sharon, which is a form of compensation in that in essence it says there will be no right of return, which we had not previously said. The Palestinian refugee problem will be settled in Palestine, not in Israel. That is said normatively.

On the settlements we have a different formulation, which is not normative, it is descriptive. Every previous effort at peace has understood that there are new realities on the ground. Any future effort is going to have to have the same understanding. But shorthand, Bush said, no right of return, keep the settlements, the major blocks. This is a great victory for Sharon. We think he needs it because in the end after all he did have to take the whole Likud party apart to get this done. So he wins, in a way, two years, and in the summer of 2005 he actually does it.

This is partly by way of responding to, "You didn't have a policy until the end." We were really in good shape here because we really believed in, say, Labor Day 2005, Sharon had done this, that the next thing would be the West Bank in 2006, '07, '08, before George Bush left office. So no, there would be no final status agreement. They couldn't seem to be heading to negotiation. Arafat had died in November 2004. That, rightly or wrongly, hadn't changed the policy at all. But I really do believe this, we thought it and Sharon's closest collaborators whom I've talked to since, all believed he planned a similar unilateral step in the West Bank to define Israel's borders, not permanently, but for a very long time, more or less along the fence line, keep 12 percent of the West Bank.

We want to move forward with that. But then Sharon has a stroke.

Leffler: Did Sharon or any of his people actually say that to you, that we Israelis are contemplating unilateral evacuation of substantial parts of the West Bank? Or are you just inferring that?

Abrams: Several of them said it to me since then, when I have asked in the context of writing my book, "What was on his mind? Did you guys ever talk about this?" I have asked enough people I think to get a pretty good view that there was no plan, nobody had come up with a 12-page plan, but there was certainly a view, there was an intention. There was a sense that this is next. All of his collaborators expected him to do that next.

Leffler: Were you thinking—

Abrams: But the one-word answer to your question is no. That is, I'm not aware of any discussion with Sharon then in 2005 in which he said to us this is first, then we do the West Bank. It was an assumption or a hope on our part.

Riley: Elliott, were you viewed in the Middle East as a partisan in these negotiations? Did the Palestinians or the Arabs automatically view you with suspicion and the Israelis embrace you as one of theirs?

Abrams: This is an interesting question, which I will answer without false modesty about myself or the United States of America. I was not much of a known quantity initially.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: The Palestinians came to like me a lot because they felt I had some sway with the Israelis and I was basically fair. I got along really well not just with [Salam] Fayyad, whom all Americans got along with, but with Abu Mazen and Saeb Erakat and Abu Ala'a, all these people. Arab regimes I think had a slightly sharper view. I remember saying to my wife at one point—I worked perfectly well with the Saudis. They viewed me as a very intelligent, very effective Israeli agent. [*laughter*] Once that was understood, what was the problem working together? I got along fine with them. I got along fine with Prince Bandar, all the Arab ambassadors whom we wanted to get along with. I get along with Tunisian—but [Zine el-Abidine] Ben Ali, we, I didn't really like him.

Riley: Sure.

Abrams: So Palestinians did like me, and in fact I remember about six or twelve months into the Obama administration seeing Abu Mazen, President Abbas and having him say, "We miss you." And they did miss us. It wasn't just me. What they missed in part I think was a decisiveness on the part of the United States. I think they felt they were floating around. They didn't know who to talk to. There's [George] Mitchell, there's no Mitchell, what's Mitchell doing? Is he in, is he out? One of the things they had with Dennis Ross under Clinton I would argue, and me under Bush, is they had somebody to talk to. They had a place to go. They could ask a question, and if I gave them an answer they could rely on it because they knew I wouldn't give them an answer that wasn't going to hold.

There was an element of division of labor at times between David Welch and me, that State does the Arabs, the White House does the Israelis. But also we went to all of our meetings together and we saw everybody together, as I did with Bill Burns in the first term. So I think the Arabs had a very pragmatic view of that division of labor, and working with them, the Palestinians, and others was pretty easy. The exception to that was the Egyptians, who I think understood that there was a division within the administration, particularly in 2004, '05, '06, on how hard to push Mubarak. They knew what my position was and they didn't like it.

Riley: OK. I wonder if you would go through and give us your character sketches of the main political actors in the Middle East that you were dealing with. It would be very useful for history to get a sense of—because personalities are important, who these personalities were, your assessment of their strengths and weaknesses.

Abrams: The main people would be Crown Prince and then later King Abdullah [bin Abdulaziz Al Saud]; King [Abdullah] of Jordan; Mubarak; Sharon; Olmert; King of Bahrain maybe to a lesser extent; the Crown Prince of the Emirates. OK, let me start with the Israelis.

Bush had met Sharon when Bush was Governor of Texas. He made his ritual trip to Israel. He had the great helicopter flight with Sharon guiding him and it had an impact. If you haven't done it, it is really quite amazing to be able to go up a few hundred feet and see the borders of the country, particularly perhaps if you're from Texas. Sharon was very good at making those points.

Riley: Sure.

Abrams: Bush liked Sharon. He thought he could work with Sharon. Remember, there was a famous moment when he called Sharon a man of peace. This is 2002. Interestingly by the way, one of the very few times in eight years—the people who told me this I think are credible. Very few times in eight years did George H. W. Bush ever say something about policy to his son, particularly something critical, and this was one. He apparently called in after the "Sharon is a man of peace" to remonstrate with his son about that line. Bush used it later and said to Sharon, "I called you a man of peace; now I want you to live up to that."

One should not exaggerate the relationship, however. For one thing, it was hard to communicate with Sharon for Bush or anyone else. Condi has a brilliant line, which I'm quoting in my book. Sharon was one of the very few people one will ever meet who spoke English better than he understood it. It's really true because he had a number of verbal formulae—after all, the subject matter he was discussing was quite limited. He knew what he meant to say about the Intifada, the settlements, Arafat. But the truth is his comprehension was not so great. You'd say something to Sharon and he would turn to Dubi Weissglass and say in Hebrew, "What was that? *Ma*?"

This is made worse by the fact—it's an interesting phenomenon about the President. I think I'm not idiosyncratic in speaking differently to foreigners for whom English is a second language, more slowly, more limited vocabulary. The President never did that. The President never, ever did that. He had one way of speaking to everybody in the world. That was a problem sometimes for somebody like Sharon whose comprehension was not perfect.

The other problem was that the President used expressions that are colloquial, easily understood by any American, and also used some that are not so easily understood because they're Texan. So you could speak English a lot better than Sharon and still once in a while wonder what the President was talking about.

I was there one day when he said to a bunch of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] foreign ministers about Iraq, "The question is whether you guys are going to saddle up and join the posse." There were some odd looks around the room. It was clear that they had no idea what he was talking about.

So, one, I don't want to exaggerate. They were not friends, buddies, but Bush admired him. He really did admire what Sharon was doing in Gaza. To him, that's leadership. You are taking a risk. You are using your political capital to do something; you're risking it. Of course he thought it was good for the United States that Sharon was doing so. So they got along fine. There was no

tension in their meetings, or rarely. At Aqaba Bush got annoyed when Sharon mentioned security and Israel's security and risk to our security. He did actually say at one point—I don't think he interrupted Sharon, but he did say, "That's about the twenty-fifth time you've mentioned security. If you don't think I'm committed to Israel's security, you should just go home." So there were moments of tension.

There was the time when they were putting down the Intifada, surrounding the Muqata in Ramallah. They had surrounded Arafat. There was a time when Bush said something like, "I want the Israelis out, and when I say now, I mean now." So there could be tension. Basically, though, a very good working relationship. Bush certainly thought of him as a friend and ally, a man of his word. Somebody he could easily work with. All of that I think was true. Bush did one thing brilliant with Sharon. The first meeting—this is such a contrast with the mistake Mitchell and Obama have made. He sent Steve Hadley and me to see Sharon and to listen to him. We went. This is partly Hadley's brilliant idea too. So we went to the Prime Minister's residence and we talked to him for a day.

"When did your family come to Israel? Where did you grow up? Tell us." He talked to us. He loved it. We weren't lecturing him the way the EU [European Union] was doing, about settlement. We were saying, "When did you meet [David] Ben-Gurion?" He just loved it and he talked and talked and talked. It established, over time, a sense of trust with the United States, also obviously 9/11 mattered because you go back to pre-9/11, putting down the Intifada, the United States is saying the cycle of violence must stop.

Post 9/11, consequently, I actually say, even though I'm in the Democ job, "What do you mean the cycle of violence must stop?" "What do you mean targeted killings are wrong?" I'm saying this to the State Department. We are doing targeted killings. We would like to do more, only we're not very good at it. What do you mean the cycle of violence? Should the cycle of violence stop in Afghanistan? Then why are we invading?

We changed our rhetoric to "Israel has a right to defend itself." All of this changed the relationship with Sharon over time. I think it helped getting the Gaza decision. He felt Bush was on his side and could be trusted. Oddly enough—I'll be here for 15 days.

Riley: This is fabulous, go ahead.

Abrams: Olmert—then Sharon has his stroke. After the first stroke, when it was thought he would recover, I remember Bush called him to say, "Take it easy. Don't rush back to the office." and "Ariel, you have got to lose weight. We need you around." After Sharon's second stroke, came over to Olmert, Bush perhaps did not know him. Cheney knew him. They formed a closer relationship, partly because Olmert has perfect English, so they could communicate. It also seemed to Bush that he was trying to do the same thing. Indeed he ran on it. He ran explicitly on doing some withdrawal from the West Bank and won the election on that, which of course we liked.

The interesting thing about it was Olmert, as you know, was involved in lots of corruption charges, and that plus the war in Lebanon meant that his popularity diminished greatly. So it didn't affect their personal relationship; the President was rueful about it. I would come back

from a trip and he would say, “How’s my buddy Olmert?” I would say, “You know, Mr. President, his popularity is 11 percent at the moment.”

Bush, of course, would always say something like, “Oh, he’s got two points on me.” But he knew. I would say to him, “Look, he’s in real trouble.” We can come back to this later. In fact throughout the second term I was saying to the President, “There will be no deal.” It was interesting because the President would say to me, “But I talked to Olmert on the phone yesterday and he told me they’re making progress. They’re going to get an agreement.” I would say, “They’re not going to get an agreement, Mr. President. I have to tell you, that’s my view.”

He and Olmert talked a lot. I would say he trusted Olmert. He did not judge him morally; he judged him as a political leader. They got to be quite friendly, friendly in the sense that Olmert visited him in Texas about a year ago, two years ago, and he thought Olmert was a sharp politician who wanted to do something. Again, he didn’t want to prolong his days in power in order to be in power; he had a plan. Set Israel’s borders, I’m going to start moving out of the West Bank. That was a very warm relationship.

Olmert and Condi by the end hated each other—we can go back to that. With Bush it was always a close relationship. Bush got along great with Crown Prince Abdullah, later King Abdullah. You may read in Bush’s memoir the famous wild turkey incident. This is before my time, but in the summer of 2001 we have a crisis with the Saudis over the Intifada and Sharon’s crushing of the Intifada. The Saudis believed that Bush would be pro-Arab a) like his father in their view; b) because of Cheney in their view. Bush didn’t do anything in response to Sharon in 2001.

There was a moment in the summer of 2001 when Crown Prince Abdallah writes a letter that in essence threatens Saudi-American relations. It’s “agonizing reappraisal” language. The President responds to this letter by writing to Crown Prince Abdallah—I think it is in writing—“We’re going to call for the establishment of a Palestinian state.” This becomes controversial in-house because the letter is a secret from everybody including OVP. It’s accidentally mentioned in a corridor by Hadley, and Libby overhears it and says, “Letter? What letter?” OVP then gets the letter. The letter is gone. They’re very angry about it, in part because what did we get for it? Couldn’t we have bargained?

According to OVP, the President has been told we’re just restating some—this is American policy. It’s not really true. Clinton had said it. It was certainly implicit, but it was never explicit. It’s one of the reasons they distrust Powell because Powell knew about it. It’s also a bad moment in OVP/NSC relations. In the summer of 2002—oh, by the way, so that is in the President’s speech to the UN General Assembly, which is scheduled for September 12, 2001, obviously never given that day.

In the summer of 2002 the Crown Prince comes to the ranch. Sharon is still at it and at one point the Crown Prince threatens to walk out because, “You’re not doing—you tell him to stop.” The President says, “He is an elected head of government. What do you want me to do? Call him up and say stop?” “Yes, call him up and say stop.” The President says, “I can’t do that.” The Crown Prince basically says, “We’re out of here.”

This is a real crisis in bilateral relations. The President very intelligently says, “Let’s take a

break. I want to show you my ranch." Gets in the pickup or Suburban or whatever it is and drives the Crown Prince around the ranch, which is about a 10-minute drive, 15-minute drive. At one point a wild turkey crosses the road. The Crown Prince says, "This is a message from God that you and I are to be friends." This is in Bush's memoir in a slightly bowdlerized fashion, but it happened. This is the beginning of a great relationship and they have it for the whole time he is President.

He sees the Crown Prince a lot. He sees him certainly once a year, maybe more. We see him, he's there in the summer of 2002. We see him at Sharm. We see him in New York—probably once a year on average. They talk on the phone. He is a man of faith, and what links them in ways, they are believers. This comes up in every conversation, and the Crown Prince trusts him.

The President has no illusions, in the sense that he says he's 80 at the time. He is a Bedouin; he is 80 years old. If you think you are going to turn him into a believer in women's rights, you're not. But the President is also aware that in the Saudi context he is something of a reformer compared to some of his brothers. Also he sets up the King Abdallah University, which is co-ed. That is a very useful relationship. It's in the context of Iraq, it's in the Israeli-Palestinian context, and it is important.

There is a joke between Cheney and Bush about some of the meetings with Abdallah because he tends to—he had two tropes, you might say. One is that all problems in the Middle East are the fault of the Shi'a and the other is all the problems in the Middle East are the fault of the Jews. You were never quite sure which one of them you were going to get, but you would get one of them. But they really had a very good, I think, and productive relationship.

With Mubarak he started out having a very good relationship in the first term. He kind of inherited it from his father. That relationship continued. George H. W. Bush made a couple of trips to Sharm or Cairo, saw Mubarak. We saw Mubarak once or twice a year. He had a longtime custom of a spring visit to Washington and he continued that. But we also saw him at Sharm. Of course Condi saw him more, as did Powell.

Riley: Let me interrupt just for a second. The President's father was making trips with the explicit purpose of fostering better—

Abrams: No, they had a relationship. They maintained it. One or two of these trips may have been for a paid speech someplace. But if he was in the region he would certainly see Mubarak. I don't think—I'm not aware of any business that was done, but I wouldn't be, because if it was the President's father he would tell him face-to-face and I wouldn't hear about it. It was interesting, in a way. This is an untroubled relationship for a while.

Riley: Notwithstanding your human rights portfolio.

Abrams: This is what changes. I'm part of the reason it becomes a crummy relationship. Whenever they talk—and the President believed in staying in touch—whenever they talked on the phone they would talk about the President's father and Mubarak would say, "How is he, give him my regards. Where is he?"

The President would say, "Oh, they're in China, they're in Texas. Jumping out of an airplane.

How's Gamal [Mubarak]? What is he up to?" It was interesting because Mubarak would never answer this question. Ultimately, when is ultimately? Probably 2005. I said to Hadley, "Have you not noticed this pattern? The President has got to stop asking him about Gamal. He does not want to be asked about Gamal."

Hadley said, "Yes, let's raise that with the President." I said to him, "Think back. He always says, 'I don't know' or 'he's traveling.'" Leading me to the view, which I still hold, that Mubarak was not keen on Gamal following him. This is all Mrs. [Suzanne] Mubarak's doing. But he would talk to Mubarak, who was hard to talk to partly because he was hard of hearing. Partly because Mubarak didn't like to do business on the phone. Middle Easterners generally didn't. These are not secure calls, most of them. But they got along fine 2001, '02, '03, '04.

Starting in about 2004 we're moving into the Freedom Agenda and we start criticizing them. We criticize, for example, beginning 2005 you have the election. Via Condi we get Saad Eddin Ibrahim out of jail. We criticize his arrest and his imprisonment and we keep the pressure on. We get him freed. They don't like this, obviously. We criticized the jailing of Ayman Nour. We start really criticizing them. Now, this criticism has some impact in the sense that Mubarak had never been elected President. Under their system the parliament chooses. He changes that in 2005 to have an election. The first round of the parliamentary elections in 2005 was actually pretty free and they didn't do very well, so then the second and third round increasingly they steal the election. But there is a problem here. Condi cancels her visit when they arrest Ayman Nour. We cancel the plan to move toward a free trade agreement with Egypt over human rights issues. There is a lot of tension in the relationship.

There is an added tension that comes in because it happens that Mubarak is in America in April 2004 and we see him. He comes to the ranch. Then he goes to I think California. He is therefore in America on April 14th when the President does his Sharon bit in Washington. He feels blindsided and embarrassed. "He was told about it; he didn't prevent it. He went along with it." He never forgives us and he never comes back to Washington. He never again visited the United States while Bush was President.

Of course this is one part of it. The other part of it is human rights. How you weigh them I don't know, but it's both. Though later we give up on human rights in Egypt because of Annapolis. But in 2004, '05, '06 we are pushing on it and they are very unhappy about it. The President tried to stay somewhat above that in the sense that he did not say, "You've got to let Ayman Nour out." That was for Condi to do. I would say his view of Mubarak was he was too old to change. In fact, he said that sometimes. In the 2004 trip to the ranch we had a discussion with the President beforehand. How do we raise these issues with Mubarak?

We came up with an answer the President then used, which was kind of, "Hosni, I want to talk to you about the future of Egypt." You know, "I think about the future of America. How do you see—you have all these young people, the average age is—" whatever it was, educational problems, we tried to kind of segue into a discussion of political change and political development and movement toward democracy.

Mubarak immediately jumped into a discussion of educational reform in Egypt and turned it over to Gamal. He knew exactly what was going on. He didn't want to talk about this. That was the

only time the President tried, I think. The President's view was that it was hopeless, hopeless. He is 82. He is who he is; he's an old general. Of course when we talked to him he would say things like—I remember the lunch at Sharm, "You don't understand Iraq, you don't understand Iraq, I understand Iraq. I'll tell you what Iraq needs. A general. You don't understand Iraqis. They need a general to lead them. What you're doing there is ridiculous nonsense, elections."

He liked Mubarak. He didn't think Mubarak was going to provide leadership for change in Egypt. Those are the key figures.

The King of Jordan he liked a lot. I have to talk about Arafat and Abbas. King of Jordan he liked a lot, but he was not a key player. We all understood. He's a good guy. He is a real ally. He has real problems. The problems of the Middle East are not his doing. We didn't really push him on political reform. This is partly because he was smart enough to talk about it. He never did anything about it, but he was smart enough to talk about it. The system that they evolved, his father evolved and he maintained. You had wonderful people handling us, Marwan Muasher, who was Ambassador to Washington then, Foreign Minister, talked our language, good guy, is a democrat, reformer.

The King's system was that he would have a new Prime Minister every six months and there would be an illusion of reform but no real reform ever. This is true to this day I would say. But we didn't push him on it because he had a lot of trouble and we liked him and he was sort of a weak friend of the United States.

Arafat the President never met. He talked to him on the phone I think twice. There was one funny incident at the UN. It would be 2001, I think. Arafat attended, if I remember, this is November 2001 when the UN was rescheduled. We believed that as the President was walking around there was a possibility that Arafat would accost him to get the photo op and we didn't want that to happen. This could be 2002, I just don't remember, but what was amusing about it is we knew this might happen. It was Powell's job to prevent it if it looked like it might happen, and indeed it did.

We're going down the hallway from the General Assembly chamber to Kofi Annan's office or vice versa and we're turning the corner and there's Arafat, who did want the photo op. Powell was really the sort of fullback. Powell literally—

Riley: It's the Defense Department's job.

Abrams: —arms out, preventing this meeting. The President had a very clear view of Arafat. He is a bum. He is a thief. He is stealing the money of these poor people. He is a manipulator. He is dishonest. He is not a democrat. Of course he had gotten a lot of this from Bill Clinton too. He didn't want anything to do with Arafat and said so publicly.

Riley: Where else is he getting this perception from? Are you informing him?

Abrams: No, in 2001 and '02, he's getting it first from Clinton. Then a very important incident happens in early January 2002, the *Karine A*. The *Karine A* is a ship carrying Iranian arms to Arafat. The Israelis intercept it. That is bad enough. Iran is an enemy of the United States. Arafat lies and says, "It isn't mine." We know it is his. He says it face-to-face with General [Anthony]

Zinni, who is sent as part—the Zinni Mission was one of the things we were doing. There was Tenet, there was Zinni, and Zinni knew exactly what was going on here.

When Arafat said that to him he at some point later said, "The game is up with Arafat." This is the proof for Cheney and for Bush. He is incorrigible. Not a single thing he says can be trusted. We've got to get rid of this guy. I think the *Karine A* is really critical in that.

So then we get Abbas. We like Abbas, who becomes Prime Minister, leaves, then becomes President when Arafat dies. Becomes Prime Minister April 2003. The road map is issued. He comes to Aqaba; he comes to the White House. He leaves. After Arafat dies, he becomes President and chairman of the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] and of Fatah.

First of all he's not wearing a military uniform, he is wearing a suit, he is our kind of guy. He is a moderate in this context. He is great at Aqaba. He says absolutely everything we want him to say and says it convincingly about terrorism, about Israel. But the President had one question. Does he have it in him to be a great leader and go across the finish line? Is he the guy who is going to set up the Palestinian state? Later, when it is clear the answer to that is no, is he the guy who will make a deal for a Palestinian state even though he can't bring it into existence?

The President—he says this to, for example, Mohammed bin Zayed of the Emirates. He says it to the Sheikh of Kuwait and the Foreign Minister of Kuwait. He says it to the King of Jordan. It's not a secret that his view is, *I really like this guy. I just don't know whether he's got what it takes.* That view never changes. *He's a good guy, I like this guy, I like dealing with this guy, I just don't know if he's got what it takes.* I think those are the key players. He meets others once or twice, the King of Bahrain a couple more times, but they're not important.

Riley: Are there any peripheral political leaders who are important for this story?

Abrams: Yes, Blair. Chirac. Chirac is important in Lebanon because what happens in the case of Chirac, over Iraq, there is a complete break between Bush and Chirac, a complete break. Condi and Steve correctly realize something has to be done. This is France. This is an important relationship. So we set up a wonderful process where their National Security Advisor, Maurice Gourdault-Montagne, comes to Washington once a month and he sits there with Jean-David Levitte, who is the French Ambassador to the U.S. Later [Nicolas] Sarkozy's National Security Advisor.

Once a month we have these meetings in Steve's office. Condi, Steve, me, Dan Fried, the two Frenchmen. We build a relationship largely over Lebanon. We talk about many, many things. Some parts of the meetings I'm not at because it's dealing with Iraq or whatever, China. But with deliberation, with deliberateness, we build a relationship. We say this is where we agree. Chirac and Bush when they meet at one or two summits, I forget where, have now found something they can talk about together civilly and constructively—Lebanon. This is done with forethought.

I won't say that it influenced our policy, because we had the same policy, but we do cooperate a lot on Lebanon. Blair has an influence on everything that he wants to have an influence on, but Blair—and he says this in his memoir and he is quite right—Blair early on says to the President, "If you're going to do Iraq, you have to do the Palestinians. You cannot do Iraq without having a peace process." One doesn't need to debate whether that is right or wrong, it is accepted advice.

It is also the State Department's advice.

Riley: It is accepted.

Abrams: It is accepted. It is also the advice he is getting from Powell very strongly. I don't know what would have happened had they not had that view, but Bush accepts that view; he does not fight it at all. Blair is a, you almost want to say consultant, advisor, on Middle East policy. It's not so shocking that he ends up being the Quartet Envoy. He talks to the President a lot. They have phone calls later when we get to do secure teleconferences. They have those. Of course they also see each other. Blair also sends him notes, which are preserved in the Bush Library, handwritten notes advising on where we are.

I often disagreed because I thought he was too optimistic about where we were and about the chances for moving forward, but his basic message is a) you've got to try this, and b) at any given moment here is how. You need to tell Olmert this, you need to get Sharon to do that. So he is in a way a player. Nobody else I think. Neither Kofi nor Ban Ki-Moon have any influence, I'd say.

Leffler: I'd like to orient you in a different direction in the same way. We've asked you to give little biographical sketches of the Middle East leaders. I'd like to hear you give your biographical sketches of the American leaders, of the key people shaping U.S. policy and on which issues. Tell us how you saw the relationships with Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz and Cheney and Libby. Tell us about that. Tell us about the people as you saw them and felt them exerting policy.

Abrams: This will be maintained in secret until my death.

Leffler: Your candid views really would enhance the historical record tremendously. Keep in mind, after all, these people have all written memoirs where they talk a lot about one another and sometimes not so kindly.

Abrams: That's right. I'm happy to do that with one caveat, which is, of course, I saw what I saw and there is a tremendous amount I didn't see.

Riley: Sure.

Abrams: I'm aware of that. Who should I start with?

Leffler: Start with Condi.

Abrams: OK, I tend not to share—first of all, Condi is a great person. I'm sort of amazed that there is anybody, maybe there aren't many—Rumsfeld perhaps is in this category—who don't appreciate how great a person she is. Wonderful leader of a staff and inspirer of a staff and thoughtful—oddly enough, more at the NSC than at State—about the staff. Just parenthetically, what I mean by that—I told you the story about vacations.

Riley: Yes.

Abrams: As Secretary of State, she loves three-day weekends, July 4th, Memorial Day, because

she can go someplace Friday, go out to Andrews, leave at 8:00 P.M., go to China and back by Tuesday morning. She does not seem to appreciate that those three-day weekends are desperately important for everybody on the staff with spouses and children. It is a morale problem by the end.

I don't tend to share the criticisms of Condi as National Security Advisor that she was too weak. I really think she was what the President wanted her to be. I don't think the President wanted her to have giant fights with Powell and Rumsfeld and Cheney. She was, in my experience, the absolutely faithful implementer of his policy and the best interpreter of what he wanted and what he thought. That is completely unsurprising because she spent so many hours with him. As you know, not just in the Oval Office but also at Camp David weekends and holidays.

I think she was what he wanted her to be. If you want to make criticism, she wasn't creative enough with this policy or that policy. The blame is probably pretty widely shared. I think that changed in the second term and I am quite critical of her as Secretary of State. I think she was largely captured by the building. I think she made one horrendous mistake at the beginning, a mistake that George Shultz didn't make and I would have thought would have advised her against. Don't fill your top jobs with FSOs [Foreign Service officers], which she largely did, in my view did too much. I think she had a big problem in the sense of what are we doing? It is 2005, what are we doing? Well, we're doing Afghanistan and we're doing Iraq. She doesn't have Afghanistan or Iraq. They're not hers. They're wars.

There is a story that Bush at least testifies to half of in his memoir that when she was appointed, when he said to her, "I'd like you to do this," she said, "I'll do it if you'll let me have—" The story is, "I want to make a big initiative on North Korea and on Palestinian statehood." In his memoir he says Palestinians; he doesn't say North Korea. But she did make big pushes on both of those. I think that this desire for an achievement led her in the wrong policy direction on both of those.

I am a great critic of the North Korean policy of Clinton, Bush, and Obama. I think we've been hornswoggled and misled. I should stop to tell you a story. I said it at the time, 2006, '07, '08, privately of course. At one point I exchanged an email with somebody at the NSC, saying, "I don't understand this policy. This is a terrible policy. Chris Hill should be fired." This gets into the *Washington Post.* There is something, "Abrams is one of the people." There are many in the administration, OVP, Cheney. The following morning I go into the Oval Office on some Middle East business, probably for a phone call. The President looks up from his desk, sees me, and says, "I'm not mad at you," which came out of the blue for me.

I must have looked that way and he said, "North Korea. I'm not mad at you because you did not leak. Somebody leaked something you said with the expectation of privacy within the NSC, but you're wrong. Let me explain what I'm doing." It was really quite something. He took three or four minutes to explain his North Korea policy, which was basically, "I'm concentrating on a nuclear deal because if we can get the nukes away from Kim Jong Il, the regime will collapse." I was so amazed that he would take the time to explain it to me—actually stand up and explain it to me. This happens to everybody? Out in the corridor after I'd left I said to myself, *Why didn't you say, "Mr. President, if you know that, don't you think he knows that and therefore these talks are doomed?"* But of course you're always brilliant in bed at night.

So I think those talks were badly mishandled. Chris Hill was disloyal and disobedient in my view and should have been fired and the policy didn't work.

The Middle East policy with which obviously I was involved, I think Condi decided she would push for a deal and she believed she would get a deal. That was a mistake in that there was no deal to be had in my view. By the time Olmert was pushing for a deal, Olmert was completely discredited. That was one problem. Second problem, Abu Mazen is never going to sign anything, never will sign anything. It seemed to me clear. Thirdly, there is opportunity cost here and there is collateral damage. For example, Egypt disappears as a country. If you want to do Annapolis, all you need is the President and the Foreign Minister. So there goes the human rights policy.

If you talk to Egyptians, not only human rights activists, editors, journalists, politicians, talk to people in the brotherhood, they will say pressure really came off in 2004, '05, '06 and then it came back. There was a remarkable incident in 2009. One of the first events at what will be the Bush Library, I don't even remember the occasion, a bit of a reunion, we were all down there for this. Condi spoke with the President, Mrs. [Laura] Bush. Condi spoke, I don't even remember, human rights, I think. Yes, it was a human rights thing because I remember Carl Gershman was there from the National Endowment for Democracy and a number of human rights activists from around the world.

There was an Egyptian there and after Condi's speech there was a Q and A and this Egyptian stood up and said, "I want to ask you, after all of this, the NED speech 2003, the second inaugural, your speech in Cairo in 2005, which was fabulous, American University in Cairo, why did you abandon us?" Silence in the hall. I went up to him later and said, "I'll give you a one-word answer, Annapolis." I think that blunted the human rights policy toward Egypt. I think more generally we had a problem with the Freedom Agenda, that the State Department didn't believe in it and wasn't pushing it.

What was so odd was the President didn't change his view or his focus. For example, if you were to look at the number of dissidents he met within the Oval Office from the Dalai Lama to people no one has ever heard of, if anything it increased. Sharansky calls him up. Sharansky is having a dissidents' conference in Prague. The President goes to it. Yes, he was going to be in Europe around then for something else, but he goes I think two days early to attend this conference and meet with all these dissidents, including people—it was uncomfortable for a number of governments for him to meet with. So his commitment is not diminished, but the government's commitment is diminished because we are not carrying this through.

Example: In Prague, at this conference Sharansky organized, the President's speech says, "This is something I want to do and I am going to instruct every Ambassador to make this your mission. For example, you should visit dissidents who are imprisoned. If you can't go to the prison, visit their families." He had two or three examples of this. "I'm going to tell everyone." But the State Department doesn't issue a cable; there is no instruction that you should do this.

Leffler: Can we infer from this that you are saying that in effect Condi Rice did not really share this Freedom Agenda, or can we say at the very least that Condi Rice unequivocally put other priorities ahead of the Freedom Agenda?

Abrams: I think you can say the latter. I would argue without psychologizing or analyzing that is a fact, that other priorities were put ahead of it. So if you look at what she says, she begins as a Scowcroftian, then she supports the Freedom Agenda. In my view she backs away from it. If you look at her rhetoric today, that never happened. It's very difficult to talk about this in the administration because Steve will not hear much criticism of Condi.

Leffler: I know that.

Abrams: Tactical criticism, yes. That is, you can say, "Look, she wants David Welch to go to Saudi next week. That's a mistake. He should wait until after—" Fine. But you can't say, "Steve, she's not for the Freedom Agenda." I think it is. I think one has to say she didn't have the kind of visceral commitment to it the President had because he did not believe he was putting anything before it.

I was never able to say to him, "Mr. President, Condi has been captured by the State Department. She is not doing what you want her to do." I was able to say to him, "This policy won't work, the Israeli-Palestinian policy." I was able to say to him, "You need to know that the leadership of the Jewish community has really quite soured on Condi. She does not have good relationships now because they believe that her policy has changed and that she is hell-bent on getting an agreement, and if it means forcing the Israelis to do things that they don't want to do, she is doing it." She had a very tough relationship with Olmert and [Tzipi] Livni.

But the broader question of why didn't he bring her into line, did he not perceive that there was a weakness over there, I don't really know the answer to that. Steve I think would deny also that there was any change in her attitude or her behavior or the State Department's pursuit of the policy, but I think he would be wrong in that.

Riley: There was a *Washington Post* headline, "Bush a dissident in his own State Department," or something to that effect.

Abrams: Yes, Sharansky was the guy who said, "You're a dissident," which Bush rather liked. Condi had certainly been the leader of this policy. Witness the 2005 AUC [American University of Cairo] speech. But that then changed. You can see—

Leffler: People have also done very careful studies of U.S.-Egyptian relations during this period of time, and one can see there was very little follow-up after that speech. In fact, there is a recession in terms of the commitment and in terms of support for democracy, promotion initiatives.

Abrams: Right.

Leffler: There is very little government money actually spent on that. It's really a miniscule amount.

Abrams: Right. I don't even think the money is as important as the impetus. You could look at Condi's press conferences with [Ahmed] Aboul Gheit, the Egyptian Foreign Minister. She is not pushing back very hard on these—or at all—on these issues.

Leffler: This also, I mean, one of the interesting things, when you study during this period of time U.S. relations with the various "stans," Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan—

Abrams: Yes.

Riley: You're dealing with incredibly repressive governments there that you are fully knowledgeable about, your human rights reports talk about, and yet the American need for air rights, bases, etcetera, trumps human rights time and time again in a very systematic way. Would you say that President Bush wasn't aware of this?

Abrams: No. I think I would distinguish. I think there are cases where he is aware—Uzbekistan. This is a clear case, a human rights case trumped by the need for the air base and so forth for Afghanistan. I think if you had said to the President, "This is a mistake," he would have said, "No, it's not. We're doing this now. We've got to do this. Over time we'll have a relationship with them, maybe we can move them."

What is worse is there are places, some of the –stans, I think, which were not so directly involved. Mike Kozak was Senior Director for Human Rights in the last few years reporting to me. Mike had been our man in Havana and had been Ambassador to Belarus. So he is very much watching all this and we're not pushing. Now, Belarus has nothing to do with Afghanistan. The Ambassadors that we have, OK, you can blame them. Some Ambassadors are better than others, and some, without much impetus from the State Department, are pushing and others are not. Where they are not we try to get them to do so and they basically say, "Drop dead." This is a change. This is not happening in 2004, '05. This gets worse as time goes by because I think they feel, *The Department doesn't want to make me do this. You don't like it, tough.*

When I raise it with some Ambassadors their basic attitude is, "I have to make a judgment about the various American interests and I don't come out where you do. That's not what I'm hearing from back home."

Leffler: I've diverted you from my initial question to talk about the other key participants. We have Condi—talk to us about—

Perry: Before we leave Condi, can I just circle back to the very beginning when you described her as great and wonderful and a great person. What makes her that?

Leffler: Have you ever met this woman?

Perry: Yes, I know my answer, Mel, but I want to see what Elliott says.

Abrams: That's a hard question. First of all, she is bright and effervescent. She is fun to be with. She is more able than anyone I know to talk interestingly about anything, from athletics to music, obviously, to world politics. Anything. She is fun. She has a great sense of humor. She loves to hear jokes and stories. Traveling with her in the Middle East as National Security Advisor in a small jet, so you're really together—it's great. All you're doing is having fun, telling stories, discussing—telling stories in the sense of funny stories and reminiscences, but also discussions of world politics. She knows a lot. She is a terrific administrator. She is a clean-desk person. Papers come in; papers come out.

We appreciate this a lot later when we have Steve because Steve is not as good and the papers pile up and get lost. In the Reagan administration people used to talk about people having an [Edwin] Meese case. This is the kind of briefcase that Ed Meese had, which is bottomless. Steve was normal I think. It is when you see Condi in that context that you realize, *My God, look at what is on her plate*, but you go in and there is nothing on her desk. If papers come in, they come out 37 minutes later all marked up. So her efficiency was absolutely dazzling. That's what I mean.

Perry: You're describing the perfect person to work with this President.

Abrams: Yes. It's not an accident that they end up being so close. She is in many ways the perfect person for this President, I would argue until she becomes Secretary of State, where I don't think she does as well.

Riley: OK, who next? Want to go to Rumsfeld?

Leffler: Yes, sure. Let's go to Rumsfeld.

Riley: Let's go to Rumsfeld.

Abrams: I had a lot less to do with Rumsfeld. I never saw him except at PCs. There weren't a lot of NSCs, but PCs. I got along with him fine; I liked him. I always found that he was intellectually curious and quite relaxed in the sense that—let's say it's a PC and he's there and there's four minutes on the clock. We start, he is the first one there. Chatty, never stood on ceremony. You know from the snowflakes and all he had a large, wide interest in things. I didn't see the guy who appears really in almost everybody's memoirs as a bad manager and close-minded and so forth.

Leffler: But there must have been talk on the NSC staff about his disdain for Condi Rice.

Abrams: Sure, everybody understood that he and Powell didn't get along and he was treating Condi badly. As time went by you heard this. Of course I don't think that I would say that I saw it at these PCs, which she chaired. I wouldn't say that he treated her any differently from Powell or Cheney, not quite as an equal. We're full professors here. You're an assistant professor. You don't have tenure. You're chairing this meeting for some reason; we're going to treat you as an equal. Of course we know you're not. All of that comes through.

Perry: So that's age, experience, gender?

Abrams: I don't know if it's gender. You'd need to know them better. I don't know. Certainly age and experience come in. I'm old enough to be your father, sort of. While you were Director of the NSC I was the National Security Advisor, I was this, I was that. You're going to go meet the King? I've known the King for 20 years. But they were careful. It was there, it wasn't so visible, but I wouldn't say it was invisible. I can't say much about Rumsfeld. I just didn't interact much.

Leffler: What did you see? In many of the memoirs it's written that Rumsfeld and often Rumsfeld's subordinates who attend some of the meetings in his place were unwilling to discuss

the substance of issues, were purposefully obstructionist during key meetings.

Abrams: Well—

Leffler: Certainly you speak to any State Department official, they'll tell you that Powell, Armitage, [Marc I.] Grossman—did you see that? Was that true from your vantage point?

Abrams: I did not see most of what they're talking about because a lot of it is in the context of Iraq and Afghanistan. I'm not at a lot of those meetings. However, I did see some of it but I have to add, you also—we'll get to it. Paul is Paul and Doug is Doug.

Leffler: You'll need to explain that—

Riley: That's two more on your list.

Leffler: Paul is Paul and Doug is Doug. OK, tell me about that, too, but go ahead with Rumsfeld.

Abrams: I did not—I think you do see, if I recall this again, because I did not have that much exposure. Rumsfeld certainly had a view that this is the Defense Department and we have this empire and we're in charge of a large number of things and you are not. So it is sort of interesting to hear what you have to say but it is of no import to me.

Riley: Chain of command.

Abrams: Yes, but it's more than chain of command. It's chain of command and it's area of responsibility; this is mine. So you don't think that general should be doing that? That's nice. I'm in charge of this. Now, if it's the State Department, stick to your knitting; I'll do mine. So I think that—I don't even know, well, some of that is personality, but I think it's a very strong view of the prerogatives of the Department and a strong and old view that the State Department is hopeless. We all know that.

Riley: We'll want to get into a more involved conversation about Iraq, but did this extend to the so-called Phase Four planning of Iraq, the postwar stuff?

Abrams: Yes, but let's talk about that separately. I do have a strong view of that.

Riley: Good.

Abrams: Let me say, I have to be careful here because some day this will be public. We at the interagency process had a problem with Doug. Doug talked at much too great length and Steve did not shut him up. There were moments when everybody in the room—the conference room is smaller than this room, the old one, it's quite confined. After the seventh minute of this peroration it's quite clear that there is a bubble over the head of everybody in the room that says, "Shut up!" and Steve is not doing this.

Riley: At dinner tonight we'll talk.

Abrams: Steve is not doing this. So there is a criticism of Steve as Deputy, not being tougher. I think it's widespread. To some extent it may be right, to some extent not right, because he has to manage these meetings and the personalities, so this is partly a question of what is DoD's and what is Doug assigned to do by the Secretary. It's partly a mistake on Doug's part. It's an odd mistake because he is extremely smart. It's not an intelligence failure, it's a sort of inability to read the room, get a sense of everybody in this room is saying shut up, and not succeeding.

Paul was different. I think the problem with Paul—the criticism of Paul was that he was acting too much as if he were still Under Secretary for Policy and was not running the Department. There was an element of truth to that, I think. I think Paul would probably say that. I don't know.

I am very critical of Powell and Armitage in many ways, and some of them—others will come out here—the management team was fabulous. This was very important to Powell. He had a view of how to manage that building, or I suppose any building. He was a great National Security Advisor in my view for Reagan from the management point of view, and boy, would Reagan have been better off had Powell been there on Day One in 1981. From the management point of view, a great Secretary of State. Rich was a real deputy. So if Powell is out of reach—and in 2001 the communication was not what it was five or ten years later—if Rich Armitage tells you the decision is X, that's it, it was X. You knew it; you could trust him. Powell had no faith in anyone more than he did in Rich. They really ran that building wonderfully well, I think, basically. Toward the end I think relations got bad within the administration.

It was obvious Powell was being marginalized. It was obvious he was going to be gone in the second term and you began to have indiscipline. I think by the fourth year, more or less the fourth year, he didn't correct it, he permitted it. So you were hearing people who were for [John] Kerry. I know of one Assistant Secretary who was for Kerry and hoped he would win. Not fired. You have the case of Larry Wilkerson, whose conduct I think is a permanent stain on Powell for not stopping it. This is late. This is when things are beyond repair. But basically he's got a fantastic machine, which I think Condi had, pretty much. She had the same relationship with Steve, complete confidence, could speak for her, could speak for the President. Rumsfeld didn't have that.

Leffler: Tell us about what you perceived or felt was the relationship between Vice President Cheney and President Bush.

Abrams: Well, this is one whereof we're all outsiders and rightly so and Cheney and Bush made a point that there is a lot of one-on-one here. I think that the notion—early on you remember there was a notion that Cheney was actually Prime Minister. I had that view going into the administration, why would I not? That's what everybody said, right? Outsiders, watching closely.

I mentioned that first meeting on immigration policy that I attended in the Oval. So you've got those two big chairs, you've got Bush and Cheney, and on the two long couches the various Cabinet members, [John] Ashcroft and others, Al. I was really quite struck. I think it was Ashcroft who led off saying, "Mr. President, we're here to discuss immigration policy." I think he got about 40 seconds before Bush interrupted and said, "Here's what I want to do. Tell me this, what about that, let me ask you this." Totally in charge. This is domestic policy, really, not

foreign policy. But interrupting Ashcroft. Cheney may or may not have said something, but I came out of that meeting dazzled and said to my wife that night, "Boy, this is completely false. He is totally in charge, interrupting Cabinet members, sure of himself."

I realized that the Prime Minister bit was not true within my first few days there. I do think Cheney was a real counselor and advisor. You could see that in some of the meetings I did attend that Cheney had a lot of weight. He didn't speak a lot, but he was *primus inter pares* for anybody but the President and he had a terrifically effective staff until Scooter left. I think that people have generally—we'll see when all the memoirs are out—underestimated the import of Scooter's departure. Addington was not Scooter.

Scooter was a marvelously adept bureaucratic player and knew a lot of people and was not just smart but had an agile mind. This changed. This diminished Cheney's effectiveness. I think he was less effective in the second term therefore than in the first. I don't remember when Scooter resigned, but more or less second term.

Cheney in the second term it seemed to me was brought down more to the level in a sense of Condi and [Robert] Gates as a key person and key advisor, obviously not in the formal sense such that at a PC meeting we're sitting around, Gates enters the room, we say hi. Cheney enters the room, we stand. But in meetings with the President, though, there is deference. Dick speaks first, but there is not the sense that—it's obvious that the President values his advice and it's going to weigh a lot more than anybody else's.

Leffler: What were the—

Abrams: Let me say one other thing. Of course, given his experience, Cheney plays his influence very carefully. Some things he says in a meeting, some things he obviously only says one-on-one. I remember in the second term I view Cheney as an ally against the State Department on a number of issues, the Israeli-Palestinian issue, on Lebanon in the war, 2006.

There were times when I would ask Cheney either face-to-face or through John Hannah, usually, when John is his chief in the second term. He needs to do this or that. Nothing would happen. Somehow I would find out, because I'd be in a meeting and Cheney would not do what I asked him to do, or I would just find out. I would say to John, "What happened?" He would say, "I raised that with the Vice President and he said to me, 'I can't do that now. I'm pushing the President on Korea and this and that. There is a limit. I've got to figure out how to play all of this.'" To which you cannot do anything but say OK.

Leffler: I just would like you to talk for a minute. From your observation what were the substantive issues or priorities that you felt somebody like Rumsfeld or Cheney or their subordinates were really interested in, focused on, committed to?

Abrams: That's a hard question. I remember Senator Moynihan once saying to me and to his secretary that he had two passions in life: communism and architecture.

Perry: But not communist architecture, presumably.

Abrams: No, though he thought there was a lot of that in Washington. [*laughter*] That's a very

hard question, partly because of the pre-9/11, post-9/11. I don't know what Rumsfeld went in to do. Maybe it's just military modernization or something, but it's clearly the War on Terror, Iraq, Afghanistan after that, and making it all work. It's interesting.

I think one has to stand back and say his return to the Defense Department does not go well and he is probably better off as an individual had he not done that and would have been remembered, or maybe had he left right after Afghanistan. He was still flying high. His press conferences about Afghanistan everybody loved. The known unknowns, all of that. For a while there he was very popular. I can't really answer that question, particularly for Rumsfeld.

For Cheney I think it's much more the War on Terror. We were in a war. We were in a war with Islamic radicalism, it's a bloody war and we need to fight it and win it. I think that is clearly his top priority.

Riley: I owe you a break, but let me pose one other question. We have heard from some sources that there was a perception that occasionally the staff—Cheney's staff, the Vice President's staff—were actually a bit more proactive shall we say on issues than the Vice President himself was. In other words, that they were—I wouldn't say setting up shop on their own, but they had some enthusiasms that the Vice President perhaps was aware of, at a minimum, but didn't work to intrude on. Did you get any sense that—

Abrams: I think that is basically unfair. Of course I've heard that as well. First, he is a smart guy. He is aware of everything and because he is not President access to him is a lot easier for his staff, for me, for anyone else. So I don't think there is much going on that he doesn't know about. I think there is something else, though, that I would say—and he has a very loyal staff who really love him and wouldn't do anything they thought he wouldn't want them to do and, more to the point, wouldn't approve if he heard about it. The latter I think is a critical point.

I did stuff too that I thought the President never knew about. I tried to block David Petraeus from going to Damascus because I was absolutely certain the President wouldn't want it to happen. I was right. You need, of course, to have a very firm view, particularly if you're taking risks, political risks, that you know your guy. I think that the Vice President's staff, it's not a criticism of them, or shouldn't be, to say they knew their guy. When they pushed very hard on an issue—Addington, for example, on interrogation issues—I think he knew his guy.

I would make one exception to that, which is you can argue with your guy and maybe he didn't do that. That is one way—you can always go back and say, "I'm confident I know your view on this, and I want to tell you it's wrong" and argue with him, which I think on these interrogation issues no one on the OVP staff did, because they agreed with the hard line, they genuinely did. But I would not agree with the criticism that they were doing, ever, anything that he wouldn't have approved of had he known about it. I think had they had the slightest thought of this, they would not have done it.

Riley: One way of hearing this—and this comes from some interviews, as a sort of protective mechanism for the Vice President himself. In other words, that which we might conventionally attribute as a shortcoming of the Vice President actually is not properly attributed to him but is more properly attributed to a hyperactive staff when you've got a busy Vice President who by all

accounts is probably busier with personal engagement with the President in this administration than most Vice Presidents have been because the Vice President is in more meetings with the President.

Leffler: You're very ambiguous here. On what issue are we talking about that they were—

Riley: Gosh, this is—

Leffler: You don't have to tell us who told you this, but what issue are we talking about?

Riley: I'm trying to think of specific instances and nothing comes to mind. It's more a question of whether the Vice President had agendas of his own that the staff was carrying out. What I have occasionally heard, again without divulging, without betraying confidences, is some perception that maybe the staff had agendas that the Vice President did not have.

Abrams: I'm disinclined to believe that.

Riley: That's fair enough.

Abrams: The interrogation issue—

Leffler: One issue where something of that sort is often said, and that is with regard to the support of [Ahmed] Chalabi and some of the exiles. That is an example where—

Abrams: That is a good question.

Leffler: Since you've dealt with that directly.

Abrams: I don't know. I would say, for example, on Israeli-Palestinian stuff I know where the Vice President stood. They were not out ahead of him. I don't know. It was certainly the DoD view. You can say, well, it was Doug's view, Paul's view. But it was the building's view. DoD was for Chalabi. I never came across anything that suggested doubts about this from the Vice President. I think he and Rumsfeld thought this was all a good idea. If we get into this, to me the handling of postwar Iraq is a complete disaster and I blame DoD. But it's possible, I just don't know.

Leffler: Maybe we could take a break and spend the next hour talking about Iraq.

Riley: Take a deep breath and—

[BREAK]

Abrams: One thing I was thinking is personalities. We might say a little more about Powell.

Riley: Sure, why don't we start with that?

Abrams: And then there is Hadley.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: Is there anybody else?

Riley: I don't know. You've got Defense, State—what about Tenet? Did you have enough exposure to CIA?

Abrams: Not enough with Tenet to really say anything. Gates maybe a little bit.

Riley: Who are the other—after the reform, the intelligence community.

Abrams: Negroponte—

Riley: Mel will know. Mel is my expert on that. I'll follow his guidance.

Abrams: On my ride home I'll think about what you said, why would a President set up the NSC this way, the homogenization issue, which I think is very interesting as to why you might—

Riley: You have to believe that Condi must have had an archetype in her mind when she set the organization up. Now, if it were Bush 41, that is so idiosyncratic because of the personalities that were involved. We interviewed for the 41 project; we went down to see Jim Baker. We didn't get a lot of his time, but I remember asking him whether the chemistry would have been the same if John Tower—and he immediately said no because Tower had a different experience with the group and was his own man in a way that Dick Cheney was not, that it actually would have changed the chemistry of that bunch. But I don't know. Maybe, because we have interviewed Condi. My memory is so bad. I like to say I had a football concussion before they became so popular.

As to Mel's question, I do remember discussions about the Vice President's staff. I just can't remember the context in which these things came up so it is hard for me to answer the question, which would be helpful in terms of giving a prompt.

One thing that did come to mind in that regard—Mel, in response to your question—was the whole rubric of unitary executive stuff that clearly Cheney had a long history on. But I think some of the arguments I've heard suggested that Addington himself was maybe more proactive on that agenda than even Cheney was aware of.

Abrams: Listening to the discussion today, one of the things that occurs to me is this interesting mistake or opportunity missed. What if Bellinger and I had not gone to Alberto Gonzales and we had gone to Dick Cheney and said, "This is dumb. This is just too dumb. It can't be permitted." I don't know. Had we agreed, had we persuaded him, it would have mattered.

Riley: I ask if there weren't a couple of people we ought to deal with on the personality issue before we get into Iraq, with the idea we can carry over to—are you going to be back tomorrow morning, pending stuff at home? You had mentioned Powell, Hadley, and Gates to round out the personality sketches.

Abrams: Gates, of course, is there less time and was an easy person to work with as near as I could see. I wasn't working with him; I attended a lot of meetings with him. A pleasant personality and obviously a good colleague. A team player in the sense that Rumsfeld was not. Strong views on only one issue that emerged in my limited exposure to him, which was in the context of the Israeli strike on the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007, which he did not favor. He was totally with Condi.

What was interesting was that what it produced from him was some very tough, agonizing reappraisal language. We're just going to tell the Israelis you're not going to do this, and if you do it the whole relationship is at stake. What is this "they have to"? It was really tough language, tougher language than anyone else was using.

Leffler: Can I ask you what were the factors that led him to that view? Why did he feel that so strongly?

Abrams: I would assume that the answer is we were involved in two wars and we couldn't risk another. Now, that doesn't speak well of him, because as the Israelis correctly predicted there was no war and there wasn't going to be a war and it was all just foolish. I assume that there are only two or three possible explanations. I think that is a good one as a possible explanation; we've got enough trouble, we don't need more military action by anybody in that region of the world.

Another possible explanation is kind of Bush 41-type hostility to Israel and its alleged influence in American politics. This is a good opportunity for us to put them in their place, which is what it sounded like. You weren't getting that from Cheney and you weren't getting that from anywhere else in this circle. From Condi you were getting a view of what should be done. It was certainly not in the same tone. I didn't deal with him really on any other issue.

Hadley. I have one line in my book that will cause consternation to Steve Hadley, which is that he had a better policy sense than Condi. While it will make Condi angry to read that, it will make Steve angrier. I think Steve is a very smart person and has a wonderful analytic mind. On some of these issues, of course what am I saying is that he agreed with me sometimes when Condi didn't. But that's what I mean by saying he had a better policy sense. He did really have one. It's probably underappreciated by people who point to Condi in the first term and then Condi in the second term.

It is true that Condi was the President's key foreign policy advisor, but there were times when Steve could disagree with her and could say it to her and get her to change her view.

Leffler: What did they disagree on? What sorts of things?

Abrams: Again, I'm only seeing what I'm seeing, but Steve in this period in which she—we're talking 2006, '07, '08. At the end of the Lebanon war, the Lebanon war causes Condi to lose confidence in the Israelis. They don't know what they're doing; they're making many mistakes and we need not defer to them. Part of the problem is Sharon is gone. She deferred to Sharon partly for reasons we all did: He is 75 years old, he is a great general, and so forth. Olmert is just a pol. He is a pol who is making mistake after mistake, putting aside the corruption issues.

I think one has to remember Condi almost resolved the war in Lebanon. She stood up for the Israelis under incredible European and international pressure, including directly at the Rome conference on Lebanon. Then she goes to the Middle East and we basically have a deal. We've got [Fouad] Siniora, we've got Olmert, and we're going to go to Beirut, get his signature, come back, get his signature, go to the UN, get a resolution. She did it. July 2006. She has been Secretary of State for a year and a half. What has she achieved? Not a lot. Peace in Lebanon. She resolved the war in Lebanon.

The night before we're supposed to go to Beirut, Qana happens, where the Israelis hit a building. They say they think it's empty. About 30 civilians in the basement are killed. It's a disaster. Siniora says, "Don't come." We go home.

It's interesting to me partly because I thought that was a turning point. When I said to Danny Ayalon, who had been the Ambassador, then Deputy Foreign Minister, "When did Condi become more difficult for you?" "Qana" he said, "no question." More generally, though, the war in Lebanon. So after that she says, "Look, we've broken the Middle East, Iraq. We need to have a peace process. We need to have a big international conference. We need to get the President out here." She's driving this and she's talking about—she had a meeting in her apartment where NEA [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs] had prepared a paper about the NATO troops and the American troops we're going to put in the West Bank.

Steve is pulling her back. This is a good example. Steve is saying, "Wait, hold on, let's think about this again." So Steve is—look, part of this is this line, "where you stand depends on where you sit" is really true. I see this because what is Condi doing as National Security Advisor? It isn't that you spend all your time with the President, which Steve is now doing, you start the day at I think 7:30 with the staff meeting. So there is Andy Card or Josh Bolten and there is Karl Rove and there are the National Economic Council guys and there is the Congressional liaison guy. It is a completely different world you're living in.

The Foreign Minister of France is a peanut. He doesn't matter. But if you're Secretary of State, he matters. Steve is in this world, so Steve is I think sometimes saying, "Wait a minute, can't really do that now. We've got this on the Hill, we've got this, midyear elections." I would say the job is kind of counseling and restraint of Condi. It's not so much disagreement as that. Now the general rap on Steve is that he is too weak as a National Security Advisor. What does "too weak" mean? That he doesn't push Condi around enough?

I actually said at one point to, I think it was Eric Edelman actually, "Don't you think Steve was too weak because he wouldn't discipline—he wouldn't fight the departments and agencies?" Eric said to me and I think he was quite right, "You know, that's not true. He wouldn't fight Condi." Look at the surge. He fought the Defense Department. He fought the Joint Chiefs. It wasn't true except in the case of Condi. I think that is a fair criticism. He did restrain, he did counsel, but there were times when I would have wished for a bit more of saying to the President, "She's wrong and you've got to stop this." Now, am I at one-on-one meetings? Would he say it to the President in my presence? No. Can I prove that he didn't say it to the President? No. Did the President want him to fight Condi? No. So this has to be a very limited criticism. I think he should have done more of it.

Riley: Interesting.

Abrams: Powell. I think that Powell never recovered from 9/11. I think Powell never accustomed himself to the notion that the White House was going to be in charge, that the President was taking over foreign policy. I think also that—this is a deeper criticism—after he left office I once said to George Shultz, whom I think was a great Secretary of State, "What do you think it takes to be a good Secretary of State?" Shultz replied, "Well, it helps to have some ideas." I don't think Powell had any ideas.

I think that's why he was not an effective Secretary and wouldn't have been a good President. I think he didn't like ideas. I think he thought ideas were really—I'm not being facetious. I think he thought all these people with ideas were dangerous people. Who, after all, in the State Department did he surround himself with who had ideas in this sense? Nobody. What did he want to do as Secretary of State? I don't think there is an answer to that—manage, I think.

Riley: Who did he have in policy planning?

Abrams: He had Richard Haass and then he had Mitch Reiss. Both of them he assigned to do Northern Ireland. You'd have to ask them, but I don't think there was really any kind of policy planning process. I don't think he wanted one. But I don't really know if you said to him what are you doing here—

Leffler: When you say ideas in this context you're really meaning priorities, objectives, goals.

Abrams: Yes, that's what I mean. He had the view, for example, we need to have a Middle East peace process. Why? Well, the Arabs and the Europeans expect one. That's true, they did expect one, but that's a fraudulent process. That's not because you think we have to make peace in the Middle East. You have to appear to make peace in the Middle East. Fine. What do you want to do here as Secretary? What do you want to achieve in four years?

I think he was a very good National Security Advisor in part because you're not supposed to have ideas. In a sense in that context you are supposed to manage the interagency process. When he gets to be Secretary I think that's a problem. The larger problem is by 2002 the President has some ideas and I don't think he agrees with them.

Leffler: What are those ideas of the President in 2002? What are the President's—

Abrams: Israel is a key ally. Don't talk to me about how we need to distance ourselves and they're the reason for 9/11. They're fighting terror, we're fighting terror. We're with them. I don't think Powell agreed with that. I don't think he agreed with the Freedom Agenda, which is developing as of 2002. He's a realpolitik guy. My impression was he thought all of that was just foolishness.

You know, I think he believed in having good relations with people, but no, I don't understand what his priorities were beyond the efficiency of government. OK, I'm done.

Riley: Iraq?

Leffler: Please, let's talk about Iraq.

Abrams: Let me just say I had two pieces of Iraq. One was the UN, to some extent the UN process, a little piece of that, and then of course prewar planning, whether of course or not. Let me talk about the UN.

Riley: I was just going to ask the global question that everybody wants to know, and that is how soon was Iraq on the agenda?

Abrams: I have no idea. Considering where I was in 2001 and '02, this is way above my head.

Riley: What are you finding—

Abrams: Right after 9/11, I would say. It's clear to me, don't ask me how, we're going to take down the Taliban. I have no sense that early—and then comes Iraq. It's clear to me by the time we're doing the humanitarian planning we're going to do this. I didn't think this was just in case; I thought it was obvious we're going to do that.

Leffler: That is late 2002 though. How about when you started that humanitarian planning? You're sitting in on staff meetings at the NSC in December 2001, early 2002. Did you get a sense of we're heading toward war in Iraq? Condi is set on war in Iraq. The President is set on war in Iraq. When did you start thinking that, or didn't you?

Abrams: As I think of the Afghanistan planning in the fall of 2001, it doesn't seem to me Iraq was on my radar screen at all. I don't think I would have said Iraq comes next. When we get to the—

Leffler: You don't think you would have said that in the view of the people really making policy that Iraq came next?

Abrams: It's not on my radar screen and I have no idea what is going on at that level then. I have only one insight into the preparations for the UN, the famous Powell speech that he so much regrets. At a certain point prior to that, we are doing—do you know when that Powell speech is? Is it the fall of 2002?

Leffler: That is in January of 2003—

Riley: February.

Abrams: Prior to that we are putting stuff together on Iraq. Given my job, I'm doing human rights material. This is before I move over. It's easy to do, it's all out there. The only question is who you would prefer to quote, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty. It's all UN rapporteur on this or that. We are in fact putting it together so we get a good dossier. Prior to his speech we are asked by, it has to be Condi or Steve, to put together the human rights part of his speech and we do that. We do what I think is a fantastic dossier, it is just so easy, on how dreadful this is. What I don't know is who made the decision not to use it. In retrospect, of course, it's obvious that had Powell done ten minutes on human rights we would all have been better off because the WMD didn't prove out. So if we had said, "—and also because he is a monster," that would have been

better.

Riley: Again, who tasked you originally to do this?

Abrams: It's either Condi or Steve. It comes down from the top of the NSC. "Get this ready." So we work on that and we get it ready. It's not used. I think it's Powell.

Leffler: It is Powell. At least people in interviews have said that.

Abrams: It's there. It's a mistake. I don't know why, except he is generally not a—

Leffler: The argument is that in an international forum at the UN the basic argument is against Saddam's violation of previous UN resolutions that really don't focus that much on these issues of human rights but focus on WMD and reporting and things of that sort.

Abrams: It's a wrong argument. I don't even mean with 20/20 hindsight, which I do mean, but not only with 20/20 hindsight because of the WMD but rather there is a context for these things. You're dealing with a monster; it is good to remind people. WMD in his hands is a lot worse. We're not here because Canada has a nuclear program. It hypes the danger. It would have been a nice basis to point back to when we get to "responsibility to protect" debates. It's not just Rwanda.

To me it is Powell-like failure. That is, he doesn't see this, he doesn't get it. It is the "vision thing," if you will, and he didn't get it. He didn't understand it really. In 2004 we had a human rights event at the UN. Condi—after the—I don't want to get the years wrong—Sea Island is probably later in second term, Condi in Bahrain—we had already started some of these human rights things in the Middle East, for example the democracy assistance dialogue and a few other things. We had one of these events in New York. We had it at the Waldorf where we were all staying. Powell agreed to come; he comes. I remember him saying, "This is really good." You had all these dissidents from around the Arab world, sensible dissidents, good dissidents. This is not the Muslim Brotherhood; this is newspaper editors who have been in jail and talking about what they were doing and how it would be possible to open societies more.

He stays for a while and he listens. I remember thinking, *Yes, it's good. You should have been for this. You would have liked this stuff.* But it's too late. He is obviously—this is toward the end.

Leffler: But lot of people would argue, and polling data suggests that the argument is true, that advocating U.S. military intervention in favor of regime change in Iraq was deeply unpopular on the street in the Middle East and made proponents of democratic change and supporters of democracy, the things you were interested in, much more reluctant to speak out that their own credibility was hugely tarnished by American interventionism. Was this something on your radar screen *before* the intervention? You're thinking this is a prodemocracy—

Abrams: Not much, I think not. I don't agree with it, even now with 20/20 hindsight. That is, I would still have done it, partly because I don't believe that the reason it was so unpopular over time was—let me put it in positive terms. I believe the reason it was so unpopular was because it was such a disaster. There was so much violence.

Had it worked out better, had there been a much more orderly transition in Iraq to a new government without the terrible violence and communal sectarian fighting, I think we wouldn't have had that impact on democracy promotion and I think a lot of people in the Middle East would have just not talked about it.

Leffler: I agree with that. Here is where you were involved. Talk to us about why it worked out so badly, talk to us about the planning. You were a little bit involved, more than a little bit at times involved in the planning.

Abrams: I have a view of this.

Leffler: This is one of the most focused-on issues in the entire literature, and frankly, no one has very well explained why smart people screwed up so badly.

Abrams: Well, you know, I have a view of part of that. Robin Cleveland and I had done this little project for Afghanistan. It wasn't a big deal. We did it, it was basically successful. It was a good interagency process; everybody participated. Everybody felt happy about participating and no famine. So we were asked to do the same thing in Iraq and we do it. We met in her office because she had a big office with a table like this. Everybody is at the table, AID, all the military, everybody, JCS, CENTCOM [U.S. Central Command]. This is a more elaborate process.

Some of the writings in here have some of this. For example, we did do consideration of things like what is a medical system and what are its basic needs and how could we meet them in the immediate aftermath of the invasion? Shipping. Shipping will stop because nobody will insure during the conflict. How do you get that back on? Treasury is there, Commerce is there at our meetings.

We reached the conclusion, and accepted, interagency, that the food system—I forget what it is called. There is a food system in Iraq. Everybody has a passbook. It works. Keep it, we'll use it for a while. We have to. So we had, we thought, a good plan. We worked with some Iraqi Americans. Some, not a lot. Mostly this is U.S. government. But so food, medicine, universities—much more complicated than Afghanistan. It is a much more complicated society, bigger and so forth, but we're working on this.

Riley: Is there a predicate about the basic governing structure that you're relying on?

Abrams: It's an interesting question. How does this fit in with the issue of whether Chalabi is going to be King or we're going to have a democracy, or who is going to—I think the assumption we made is basically the United States will have to be in charge of this for a while. Maybe a while is only a month, but in that month we really want to do everything right.

So we're working on this. We're moving toward what by now I don't really know what I'm talking about, but as we're doing this planning, Robin and I, nobody else thinks this is all "just in case." One day—and we have lots of meetings. These are not deputies' meetings. Robin and I and we sort of feed into the deputies. One day we're at a deputies' meeting. Hadley is chairing.

This can't be right, but I'm telling you this as I saw it and as I remember it. At this deputies' meeting Doug Feith says, "This is a war. This is an invasion. You cannot have obvious and

elementary division of command. There can't be a civilian governor of Iraq, Iraqi or American, and we're in charge of the battle space. That's impossible. So we're going to take over on the civilian side as well. We're going to take over everything." This is my memory. My memory is that Steve says OK. And that's decided. No predicate, no discussion. Now, it can't be right. I'm just telling you what I saw.

DoD is in charge, OK. Now how are they going to be in charge? Well, it is obvious to them this is a very difficult problem. So you begin to elaborate what becomes ORHA [Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance] with General [Jay] Garner, which turns out to be a disaster, the first of a series of disasters.

There had been a number of preparations for postwar Iraq. There is one, and I can't remember where it is centered, but it deals—where the Iraqis in exile and Iraqi Americans feed in.

Leffler: So [Thomas] Warrick's background in the State Department.

Abrams: State Department, that's right. Robin and I did not think that was such a great program and we thought he was a pain, but it is there, and then there is what we've done, which of course we think is wonderful. In my experience of it, DoD completely ignores everything that has been done, including what Robin and I—*completely* ignores it and hands this to Garner. We do what he called a "hot wash." We go over to the Defense Department. Jay hires—Jay is a nice guy, but it seems to Robin and to me very quickly this man has no idea what he is doing. He did something in Kurdistan. That's the equivalent of doing it in New Jersey. It is completely irrelevant and he is way over his head and he's not that smart it seemed to me. He surrounds himself with a bunch of old guys, colonels, whom he grew up with who are clueless. Some of them did Kurdistan, some of them did nothing.

I am first of all told, "Thanks a lot, you can come to our meeting." I go over to the Pentagon for this meeting and I'm seated in this hall and there are 400 people in this hall. First of all we're just told, "Butt out. The Pentagon is in charge." My short answer to the question "What happened?" is DoD insisted on taking it over and then did nothing. They certainly did nothing smart. Now there are other questions here, which I think are very interesting, and I don't know the answer. Who made the decision to disband the Iraqi Army, and was that a smart decision? I can criticize it and defend it. I still don't know. Is it [L. Paul] Jerry Bremer? Does anybody know about this? Is it possible that he made this without discussing it with anybody in Washington? I don't know.

On the humanitarian side, my experience of this is DoD takes it over and it is a calamitous failure on their part to organize for the postwar period. Who do you blame for this? Everybody. Bush, Condi, Steve, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Feith, JCS, everybody.

Long: Do you have any more direct observation of the broader policy of de-Ba'athification? Not just the Army disbanding but taking all the civilian authorities out, since that would apply more directly to the kind of problems you were facing?

Abrams: Not really. We understood the problem, which is intellectually an interesting problem. What are you going to do here? It's like the problem of disbanding the military. How do you not disband this murderous Sunni military? Not a great analogy, but when we took Panama we disbanded the military for the same sort of reason, although it didn't have the sectarian element.

So I can argue that both ways. I don't know what the right answer was.

I think the decision to disband the military is made for idealistic reasons and is morally correct. You can also argue that it is a disastrously evolved decision because you would have been better off, you could have gotten rid of them over a two-year period. You wouldn't have had this calamitous violence. Same with de-Ba'athification. How are you going to run the country if you throw everybody out? But on the other hand, how are you going to run the country with these people?

At this point basically no one is asking me this question. I am really out of it on Iraq.

Riley: Let me ask you if you could. Again, I'm referring back to Doug Feith's account in his book.

Abrams: Which I have not read.

Leffler: By the way, it is really a good book.

Riley: It is a good book.

Leffler: It is a truly serious effort to defend everything he did and Rumsfeld did. People are incredibly dismissive of it.

Abrams: Sure, for all the wrong reasons.

Leffler: I've read all the literature. I think if you really want to get a sense of what happens, you don't have to agree with his reasons, but it is truly a good book.

Riley: It is very thorough and very well documented.

Abrams: It is. I'm not surprised to hear that, knowing Doug, but I would also say he had this fantastic advantage, which is to leave in the middle of an administration, which will then declassify everything for him. I didn't have that.

Riley: The question I want to raise is this. Of course part of what Doug is doing is answering the criticism about the Defense Department and the Phase Four planning, the postwar planning.

One of his methods of self-defense is to claim that the State Department really didn't have usable plans for them to pick up and run with. What I think you've suggested is that maybe there was something more substantive here. What I want to do is to tease it out a little bit and see if you can't tell us a bit more about your own characterizations of how far along this was as a rejoinder to that defense.

Leffler: How far along what was?

Riley: The postwar planning on the State side.

Abrams: This will seem slightly ridiculous and it may *be* slightly ridiculous. We, meaning Robin and I and our people, tended to share the deprecating view of the State posits. We thought

Tom Warrick was a sort of unrealistic State bureaucrat.

Riley: And Tom Warrick is?

Abrams: The guy who is heading this up at State. We saw a lot of what we thought were unrealistic plans. There is the problem of the role of exiles, which we thought was a big problem. We were really not for Chalabi. Not that that was what Tom was doing, but the whole role of exiles was a difficult problem. I think he was anti-Chalabi.

We thought, I think this is fair to say, the planning we were doing was—there are 84 hospitals in Iraq and here is where the shortages are. We need 17 MASH [mobile Army surgical hospital] units, we need 515 X-ray machines. Tom, we thought—this may be unfair—Tom is doing this top to bottom reorganization of the system of justice. Wait a minute, this is a country. They're going to write a constitution. They have their own system of justice. You can't impose that, and who is the "you?" Some guy who fled Iraq 14 years before and teaches at the University of this or that? Why are they going to listen to him? You think there are no judges or lawyers in Iraq who are going to—so we were equally critical of State, maybe all of it.

Therefore of course I realize what State Department people would have said was, "We had everything planned and Doug and DoD wouldn't listen to us." Robin and I would say, "No, no, we had everything planned and DoD wouldn't listen to us. They shouldn't have listened to you."

Leffler: How deep did you think your own planning went, that which you knew? How good was your own planning?

Abrams: That's a very hard question to answer. I thought we had a pretty good plan because it was, what is the right word? Mechanistic maybe. What I mean is, we didn't think we were going to have a system of justice. We thought we were going to have X-ray machines. We thought it was far more limited in scope and far more concrete and therefore maybe, we thought, much more likely to be realistic and to be one that we could execute as we did in Afghanistan. We didn't have a plan for the system of justice of Afghanistan. We just had a plan for calories.

I think Tom would have said that was not enough, that was your problem. More was going to be needed. Herman Kahn once said about Vietnam that there were 50 ways to win the war in Vietnam, but of course we chose the 51st way to go about it. Maybe that's true of Iraq. In a sense, it's hard to see how it could have turned out worse, actually, which leads one to the belief that surely we could have done better. I'm in the happy position of saying, "Yes, but you can't blame me for that."

Leffler: There is a very detailed book by one of Jay Garner's planners—

Abrams: Really?

Leffler: On reconstructing Iraq. It just really deals with about six months and it's about 500 pages. It's very detailed. The name of the guy who wrote it is [Gordon] Rudd, [*Reconstructing Iraq: Regime Change, Jay Garner, and the ORHA Story*] He worked for Garner. In his account there is a paragraph or two about your interactions with Wendy Chamberlin in which he claims that you were an opponent of Wendy Chamberlin's ambitions.

Abrams: What was she doing there?

Leffler: She was the number two or number three person at AID.

Abrams: Yes, I think number two.

Leffler: She was very involved in the initial stages and then apparently got really angry at people at the NSC and OSD [Office of Secretary for Defense] for pushing her aside and disregarding her and being disdainful of her. I think by most accounts she is a very competent person. Anyway, she was arguing a position that there should be at least $10 billion set aside for reconstruction, humanitarian relief, writ broadly, that you nixed that. Do you have any recollection of this?

Abrams: I like to think I ran the country, but really I'm Senior Director for Democracy, Human Rights and International Operations and with Robin running this interagency group that is so powerful that the Defense Department flicks it away like a flea, and I am able to say no to this plan? It is more likely, frankly, that Robin is able to say it, and maybe I'm supporting her. We are co-equal here because Robin is the Associate Director of OMB for international stuff and is therefore able—she is not able to nix it; we were not making decisions. She is certainly able to say, "Are you crazy? Where in the budget is this going to fit?"

Leffler: The account is obviously not that you guys are running the country, but without your support—you're a coordinator of this and an important participant on this particular issue. Without your support—

Abrams: I find it hard to believe.

Leffler: I'm just asking.

Abrams: Why would I have been against it? As you know, we did spend billions of dollars, trillions of dollars, in the context of the Iraq war. For example, we handed out tons of money to people like the Egyptians and the Jordanians and others, so $10 billion is not such a crazy number in the overall context. I don't know why I would have been against it. We were going to spend a lot of money.

Leffler: But there were people strongly against it?

Abrams: Why?

Leffler: For financial reasons. Later on of course we spend sums that are extraordinary.

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: And make $10 billion look like a paltry figure.

Abrams: Right.

Leffler: But in early 2002, early 2003, Paul Wolfowitz and others are telling Congressional committees, "We're not going to spend anything on this."

Abrams: Right.

Leffler: Iraqi revenues from oil will generate enough to facilitate.

Abrams: And it won't take long, anyway.

Leffler: Right. It's not going to take long. So this would be the reasoning behind it.

Abrams: This is possible. I don't have a memory of this; it is certainly possible. Two things occur to me. One, that we thought this is a ridiculous number. We don't need it. I think we did have some numbers. That is, as I say, this is a fairly concrete project and I think we did have price tags, much less than a billion dollars maybe.

So one question is we thought perhaps she pulled it out of thin air. The second thing that occurs to me, your comment about Wolfowitz makes me think this, we had a line, which was, "This is cheap, be quiet." What do you mean it's going to take $10 billion? The two may have sort of melded together because I find it hard to believe that Wendy in fact had a basis for that number. Why not $20 billion? Why not five?

I can certainly see in the context of the Robin-Elliott meetings, as we called them, somebody comes in and says, "This is going to cost $10 billion," we would say, "Shut up. We're doing planning here." All that said, I have no memory of this.

Riley: You said that you went into a meeting with 400 people—

Abrams: It's an exaggeration, but it probably is 150.

Riley: What's happening at that meeting?

Abrams: This is an early meeting. Jay Garner is in charge, Jay and his deputies. Disorder is happening. I can't think of who else from the White House was there. I think all of us came away thinking, *Oh, my God, they don't have a handle on this.* What I can't remember, sitting here, is did I then go write a memo or speak to Condi or Steve and say, "Oh, boy, are we in trouble." I'd love to see the memo record to see whether I did because I sure remember thinking this was all going badly.

Riley: This would be how soon before—

Leffler: This is February 21st and February 22nd, 2003.

Abrams: This is a month or two before the invasion.

Leffler: Six weeks before the invasion. The meeting was called by Garner to try to bring everybody together who was going to have a role. He is very angry, in a sense, that the top people don't show up.

Abrams: Who are they? Hadley?

Leffler: Wolfowitz, Hadley, et cetera. So you come, you're reported as having left early and not

staying for the whole—

Abrams: Probably right.

Leffler: —meeting. Eric Edelman represents the Vice President's office. This is an important meeting in the sense that everybody involved in planning, truthfully, knows that planning is going badly.

Abrams: Certainly after this meeting.

Leffler: There is very little coordination. People aren't talking to one another. The military folks aren't even taking Jay Garner seriously.

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: The folks in OSD aren't listening to the people in the State Department. What is really scary at this meeting, Warrick talks up, you may not—Tom Warrick is in the crowd.

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: And he immediately starts talking. He is not a presenter.

Abrams: Right.

Leffler: And Jay Garner, who is leading the whole effort, doesn't know who he is and walks up to him at lunch and says, "Who are you? How come you know so much about this?" He says, "Well, because I've been the guy in the State Department coordinating the Iraq study for the last six months." Garner says, "Gee, I think I should have gotten to know you. Maybe you'll come and work with me." You know that this leads to an incredibly big dispute that's very important because Rumsfeld refuses to allow Warrick and Meghan O'Sullivan to work initially for Garner. When Garner says to Rumsfeld at a meeting, "Why are you doing this? Warrick knows more about Iraq than any single person in the American government." Rumsfeld says, "This comes from people beyond me. You can't have Warrick and O'Sullivan." Ultimately O'Sullivan does go work, but Warrick is prohibited.

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: The literature has it that it was Cheney who barred Warrick from working. But anyway, what is interesting, all this is a dialogue with a question, and that is to what extent were you really concerned by your observation that coordination was not taking place effectively on an issue that you can now say was atrocious?

Abrams: Not much. Before I come back to that I just want to say there are lines of authority in the government. There is no possible way for the Vice President to bar somebody from going to Iraq. He doesn't have that authority. He can call Don Rumsfeld and say—but one has to be very careful in that because I read all the time about "Cheney decided." Actually, Cheney couldn't decide anything. All he could do is advise.

I remember being really quite amazed that we were just kicked out one day. To me this had no predicate. I didn't know there were discussions and maybe there weren't. I didn't know there was a possibility that one day Robin and I would be told this is going to DoD now, thanks. My last memory is the hot wash that happens at the Pentagon that day, but I do not remember after that carrying around emotionally or mentally a feeling of *Oh, my God, this is a disaster*. I think my feeling basically was, *I have a job. This is not my job. I don't really know what they're doing. Jay Garner seems to be way over his head. This is a mess, but it's not my mess.*

Remember where we are now. Quartet road map, Sharm, Aqaba, Israelis, Palestinians, Mubarak. I have a new job. This is the old job. I'm well out of it. In my mind I'm not doing Iraq. In fact that's it for me on Iraq.

Riley: Let me ask one question before I get to the follow-up on this. Where does the responsibility lie then? You're talking about lines of authority and Mel has described this sort of chaos. In a properly functioning administration where would the action, the responsibility, rest, not ultimately—of course the President is held responsible—but how does one establish a properly functioning interagency process on something this major that's so consequential?

Abrams: With a disaster of this proportion, there's plenty of blame to go around. It's a good question for me to ask myself. If you did not go in to see Condi and say, "Are you aware of what a disaster this is?" why not? I don't think I did, I really don't remember doing it. I don't remember writing that memo. I'd love to discover that memo someday, but I don't remember doing it.

Riley: One possibility is that you think that everybody else understands what a disaster it is too, and you don't need to restate the obvious. It's a possibility.

Abrams: To me it's some combination—at the highest level, OK, the President—some combination of DoD and NSC. So Rumsfeld and his deputies and Condi and Steve, it seems to me you have to say, if the interagency process isn't working, why didn't they fix it? Well, part of the reason it wasn't working was two reasons, I think. One, Rumsfeld was such a big fish and, I think it's fair to say, in the moment we're talking about, he is at the top of his path up and down because Afghanistan has gone well we think at this moment. We have Karzai. It's all wonderful, it is popular, it is bipartisan popular. Rumsfeld has done a good job, it is unbelievable. This guy is 70-what years old and he is on top of everything. So it's harder then than it will be later for Condi to say, "You are messing this up. This is a disaster." That's part of it, I think.

Part of it is the older question of Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, and Condi not being quite on the same level in the first term. Part of it I think is the interagency process always breaks down in a war because it really isn't an interagency issue. It is the Commander in Chief, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Combatant Commander. What is the NSC doing in this? It's a war. They're running this war. What is your role in the middle of a war? Diminished, I think. You're a fifth wheel.

Again this phenomenon exaggerated by who Condi was, who Rumsfeld was, and the fact that we're coming out of what was generally perceived then as a very successful war. These guys don't know what they're doing? What are you talking about? They're great.

Perry: Can I ask something we haven't touched on really at all today, and that is domestic politics. Two thousand four will be upon you soon. Does that occur to you that if this is going as badly as you think it is, and will, that could have a major impact on the President's reelection?

Abrams: No. I don't think so. First, remember, this is a prediction. It isn't going badly; I just think it will go badly. Who am I to know about this? What is my military experience? Zero. Afghanistan is going well. Who the hell are you? So it is a prediction, it is a worry. Nobody is really talking about the election.

Leffler: Were there any opponents as you saw it? During the year 2002, as the march toward war became more and more evident, did you have a sense that anyone on the NSC staff was having reservations about the trajectory? Did you see some criticism of the trajectory, some doubts?

Abrams: No. I don't think so. Trying to think of people who were there then.

Leffler: For example, Dick Clarke had real doubts, but he leaves, as I recall.

Abrams: He may never have expressed them, certainly not to me. I assume [Rand] Randy Beers had doubts; he leaves and goes to work immediately for Kerry, a remarkable event. Now, part of the problem here—suppose you have doubts. What are you going to do about that? The way the system is run, almost any system, but certainly ours, you are not going to say in one of Condi's morning meetings, "Can I just say I think this is all a bad idea?" What you are going to do, I think, is you are going to tell her. Because for all the obvious reasons, I would think they're obvious, you're going to tell her face-to-face.

You don't want to appear disloyal. You don't want to be accused of trying to get other people—so you go tell her, "I have to tell you I think this is a very bad idea." Maybe Dick did that? Maybe Randy. I don't know. I know of no one and no one said it to me and I certainly never said it.

Perry: Would you have felt comfortable doing that? Did you do that at other times? What would have been the process for that? Would you say, "I need to have five minutes face-to-face with you?"

Abrams: I did it. People knew I thought the North Korean policy was stupid, I thought the Middle East policy was wrong. I said it to Steve several times. I said it to the Vice President. I said it to Josh Bolten. I said it to the President, "It's not going to work." This is a little different. This would have been much harder. You would have needed more courage, because this is a war.

Leffler: But we're not at war yet.

Abrams: No, we're not at war yet.

Leffler: There are a lot of people in the country expressing doubts. Brent Scowcroft publicly expresses—

Abrams: And he is cut off for doing it.

Leffler: He is cut off.

Abrams: Because he did it publicly. I think the President would have respected him had Brent come in, and he could have come in. It's interesting as to why he didn't come in to see the President, whom he knew, to say, "I want to give you my best—this is not—" Or see Cheney if you don't want to see the President.

What would I have done? I would have talked to Condi, I guess, and told her. I did tell her in the first term, the first year, this would be after 9/11 I guess, yes, 2002. I was uncomfortable with several aspects of our Middle East policy—this is when Bruce Riedel is there, so maybe 2001—which I thought were biased against Israel. You could have done that. Condi being Condi. You would have gotten a very tough reaction from Condi had you not done it privately, had you done it in a staff meeting. But I think if you'd gone to see her—

I guess we'll get to this now or later. I went to see her at one point to tell her she should fire Blackwill. I didn't do a whispering campaign; I went to see her one-on-one.

Leffler: To fire Blackwill?

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: Why did you want her to fire Blackwill?

Abrams: Blackwill was abusing his female employees. I want to be careful about that—abusing. He was abusing them in the sense that he was treating them differently from the male employees. He was treating them like dirt, he was shouting at them, he was pushing them physically on occasion. Several of them came to me and said, "Look, can you help us? We have a problem here. You know Condi and you've been around for years." Several of them told me of these incidents. I said, "Talk to Condi." They said, "We've talked to Condi and she didn't take it seriously." I went to see her.

So I really think you could have done this. Ultimately, by the way, she didn't fire Blackwill and she was wrong. Not so long afterward the President fired Blackwill. I think you could have said, "I am against going to war in Iraq. It is a terrible mistake the President would be making."

Leffler: So reputedly Richard Haass writes in his published book, "I started to express my reservations about the war to Condi."

Abrams: One-on-one.

Leffler: One-on-one, July 19, 2002. "Condi cut me off and said, 'Don't waste your breath. The President's mind is made up.'" I personally, from my research, am not sure that the President's mind totally was made up then. But anyway that's what Richard Haass says and that Condi totally and abruptly dismissed any possibility of dialogue over the issue. Of course among scholars, which is an important issue here—not that the scholars think this, but they point out that there never was an organized meeting about the desirability of going to war in Iraq. Condi never called such a meeting.

Abrams: Knowing Richard, knowing Condi, I believe both of them and therefore there is no reason not to believe it happened as Richard writes. It is odd though. As I said before, she is so courteous, polite, that to come off—it comes across in the book as being pretty abrupt.

Leffler: You've read that too.

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: "Don't waste your breath," she says. I'm not saying it happened, I'm just saying what he says happened.

Abrams: I don't know. I really don't know. These are not conversations I'm in. I'm less impressed than most scholars, and maybe wrongly I'm less impressed about not having a meeting. The purpose of having a meeting on this would be for the sake of history only. "You know, Mr. President, if we're going to take this decision, let's have an NSC meeting and let's—" Because informal mechanisms were far more important. In the areas that I was familiar with, I don't think we had two NSC meetings in five years; you didn't do things that way. We did things by standing around with the President. How did we decide to do Sharm and Aqaba? I think we did without a meeting. How did we decide to support Sharon in the Intifada or getting out of Gaza? All these things. Far less important than going to war, but I'm just saying the pattern was of less formality.

Perry: But does this circle back to our discussion earlier today about the President's style and homogenization of opinion? If the Secretary—or at that time NSC Director Rice is saying, "Save your breath, the President has made up his mind," that indicates that he is not open to any further discussion about this.

Abrams: Yes, it's a little strange. I never found the President that way. He never, he had—Condi was doing her peace process and Olmert was saying, "This is great. This is going to work." I was saying, "This is not going to work." The President never said, "I've heard enough of that defeatist talk." In fact there were a couple of times when he would say, "We're doing this. We're going to do the Annapolis meeting. We've done the Annapolis meeting. They're negotiating, we're going to push this forward. Elliott doesn't believe it is going to work but—" He would do this in front of the King of Jordan or something like that. No secret, he didn't mind. You were allowed to have a thought. So it's odd to me.

Riley: But what he would not do, based on what we've heard, he was very opposed to relitigating decisions once they had been taken. This is criticism in the Clinton project. When you talk with them, this is a constant problem, that Clinton was always reopening things. Might this not just be one manifestation of somebody coming to say, "Look, I want to talk about this." Her claim is for economy of effort. "Don't waste your breath."

Abrams: Maybe. This goes back to your point earlier about Bush the businessman. He had a management style. Certainly, remember the great Shultz complaint during Iran-Contra that nothing ever gets settled in Washington. That would be something the President would very much not like. Once he made up his mind, I don't know, I think you have to go back to the surge.

I don't know much about this. I'd be picking up scuttlebutt in the hallways. My impression of the

surge with Jack Keane coming in and Fred Kagan and all that is that it is a process and the President wants an alternative. He asks for DoD and they won't give it to him. So he tells Steve and Steve had JD [Jack Dyer Crouch]—it is a process but it doesn't happen in a day. It is a process. It leads me to wonder, sort of, when does he make the irretrievable decision to go to war in Iraq and would he not listen to somebody who said, "I want to argue with you one more time before you irretrievably—" It's not my impression of him. I never found him to be closed-minded in that way.

Long: Could it be as some, mostly outside the academic world, have suggested, that somehow the Iraq case had a special significance to President Bush that other—

Abrams: Because they tried to kill his father?

Long: I hate to even give voice to it, but it's out there as an idea in our time and I'm curious what you make of it.

Abrams: The true answer is I don't know. It's clear that he has both an intellectual and an emotional reaction to 9/11 that is visible to the country and it changes his Presidency. I would think Afghanistan—*These people did that, we're going to get them and punish them for this, you can't do that to the United States.* I believe the Iraq part of this is less direct, less emotional. I think later it's easy to rationalize in a whole variety of ways for all of us in the administration, including what we're saying in 2002, what we're saying five years later. We're trying to change the whole Middle East. You couldn't do this if Saddam Hussein were at the heart of the Middle East with his dictatorship and his style of leadership and so forth. That's later. I don't see emotion on his part with respect to Iraq.

Riley: Mel, you have a last question for today?

Leffler: Were you thinking in 2002, early 2003 that the overthrow of Saddam was going to lead to reconfiguration of the entire Middle East? That this was a means of democratizing the Middle East?

Abrams: I don't think we thought that or said that to each other.

Leffler: Almost everyone denies that, but it's one of the biggest themes in the literature even though everyone denies it.

Abrams: Having said that, let me change it a little bit. I don't think this goes into the war-making process, the decision-making process. However, the President used to say—the NED speech is 2003 so you're already getting this view of we're going to change the Middle East, the beginnings of the Freedom Agenda. In 2003 Abu Mazen comes to the White House. It is probably July. The President is already beginning to say there are going to be two democracies in the Middle East, Iraq, and Palestine. Later we say Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon after the Cedar Revolution. So this thought is there.

Part of the new Middle East, Iraq is a critical part. You Palestinians are a critical part. I think this is ex post facto.

Riley: That gives us a good launching off point for tomorrow. It has been a fascinating day.

Abrams: It has been fascinating for me.

Riley: Twice as much for us. You're reliving things you already know; for us it is completely new and unplowed territory. I often tell people about this work that when it's going as well as it does today, there's no place in the world you'd rather be than here listening to these accounts.

May 18, 2012

Riley: We're here for day two of the Elliott Abrams interview. I always start the second day by asking if there's anything that occurred to you last night or this morning that you thought, *Oh, I wish I had remembered to say that.* Sometimes people have something come to them afterward.

Abrams: There is one area that I thought I would just make a comment on that is not a specific area-related subject.

We did talk yesterday about the tone of the White House coming—at least in foreign policy—from Bush, Rice, Hadley, being a pretty friendly, courteous type of tone. I wanted to follow that for a second and say, dealing with the President, which I did only on foreign policy questions of course, he is a very upbeat person, not at all dour or prone to anger, pretty rare to see him angry, at least in my experience. Much more common, I won't say always, but really quite frequently, like 90 percent of the time quite upbeat. Lots of jokes, the nicknames are an element of that tone of banter, and there was a lot of banter. When you went in, let's say you were doing a pre-brief for a meeting, sometimes you would see the President, for whatever reason, felt harassed and he would say, "OK, what have you got?"

More often it was a joke about something someone was wearing or the person who was coming in or a joke about the substance of the meeting. That is, you would start with the briefing and he would make a joke about the information you had just given. When you're doing these phone calls, if there is a translation it becomes quite long because you wait for him to be translated into whatever, Russian, Arabic, let's say. Then of course the person speaks, so it can be two minutes, which is really quite a long time in this context. If the person on the other end is somewhat long-winded and is speaking for two minutes, then it's four minutes. That's a long time. What the President would do very often in these circumstances, while the person on the other end was—he would go like this.

Riley: This is mimicking someone talking.

Abrams: Or he would take the physical phone unit, put it down on his desk, and walk away, walk around his desk in the Oval Office. One of the things he would do that was always very amusing—he had a flyswatter at all times. There were lots of large, I think you would say

horseflies, in the Oval Office, lots. There was often one there, or two, and he would try to kill it. They were there when we got there. We used to call them "Clinton holdovers." So that was the tone. The tone was almost always of humor, of great energy, of enjoyment of what was happening, enjoyment of the work he was doing.

When you combine that now with Condi, it made for quite an effervescent work environment, which was lots of fun. The energy made us more energetic. This was of course less so with Steve, who is much more workmanlike. He is a lawyer. The President would kid around with him more about his supposed failings, but the President was still the President, so it was equally fun. I can only think of two or three times I actually saw him angry. It just wasn't the tone in which he did his work.

Riley: But he could get aggravated or impatient.

Abrams: Impatient frequently. That wouldn't make him angry. He would interrupt, he would move things along. Long statements were simply not possible. Usually that's a good thing. Of course on occasion it can be more difficult. It meant that you had to boil down your remarks. It is usually a pretty healthy requirement, I would say.

I remember one time when he was on the phone with Merkel, and Hadley and I are in the Oval and she said to him, "I'm very glad you have agreed to—" attend some conference, I don't remember what it was. He looked at Hadley and he was clearly angry. He said something to Merkel like, "Say that again?" She had been informed by Condi. The President said, "I'm still thinking about that." When the phone ended he was really angry. "She's not President, get her on the phone." But that was extremely rare, at Condi or anyone else. That happened, it just didn't happen very often.

Leffler: I find it surprising, maybe somewhat uplifting, to think that in the midst of the terrible situation that he was in in 2006 and '07 and then in some ways even worse domestic context in late 2007 until the time he left the Presidency, that his general demeanor was one of "effervescence."

Abrams: It's true. None of us were under any illusions about this. We read the polls as much as anyone else did. It is restorative even in the middle of the war when you get reelected, and reelected by a pretty good margin, so that helped a great deal. I think religious faith had something to do with this, a feeling that you just do what you can, that is what you must do. But more cannot be expected of you, in a sense. It's character and temperament I think that you're seeing here. You remember there were some times right after 9/11 when he appeared on the verge of tears. He actually was quite, I think, an emotional person, a physical person. Lots of hugs and pats.

I can't tell you of course what was going on inside his mind. I do think that he was consciously aware of the need to buoy up the country, not just the staff. We saw him face-to-face, but I think he actually felt this is a part of the job. I need to show everyone I'm on top of this.

Long: I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about that notion that he was—this has been said before about him—he was more of a feeler, a people person, an emotional person who connected with people, very much on an individual level rather than thinking about their position

or what they had done in the past in policy. Could you talk a little more about that balance between emotion-centered leadership versus analytical thinking? Did you see parts of analytical thinking in him at different moments or emotion at certain moments? Was there a dominant part of his personality?

Abrams: He is a very interesting person, at least as omnivorous a reader as anyone I've ever met. Classic example for me, we're on Air Force One going to Israel in January, I guess, 2008. I am reading Michael Oren's book about the Six Day War. [*Six Days of War*: *June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*]. The President is walking back from his compartment and walks by, and as is typical of him I didn't know he was coming, so I'm sitting there reading. Because he is President he is allowed to do this; he grabs the book to see what I'm reading and says, "Good book, read that a few weeks ago." Classic example, constantly reading and constantly saying to people in a context like that, "What are you reading?" "What is that book?"

So he is certainly absorbing a lot from official sources, briefings, CIA, meetings. He has a network out there, of course, of which no one is aware, giving him information. No one is aware in the sense that it includes the official network, the family network, and then of course whatever age he is, 60 then—so you will occasionally hear—"And the problem is Mexican oil production is way off in the last six months. I was just talking to the head of BP [British Petroleum] and he told me that—" That is the sort of network that a President can have.

I think the central way in which he functioned was in fact a constant, not at all deliberate and conscious, but a constant you almost might say pinging in a radar sense of his environment and the people in it. Who are you? What are you up to? What is your goal? This is what makes a great politician, after all. A great awareness of the people so that he wants to know who Mahmoud Abbas is, what he's made of. What is he like?

One of the reasons for travel, one of the reasons for all these meetings is, of course, it's nice to know what you think, but I trust myself. I got elected President, I must be reasonably good at this. I want to know. I've met a lot of these people and I want to make my own judgment. He makes those judgments.

He has a flaw I think in that he doesn't seem to review them once they're made. I think Alberto Gonzales is a great guy, really is a wonderful man and a terrible White House Counsel and a terrible Attorney General. The appointment of Harriet Miers was a joke, was a disaster because it was a joke. So that's a problem. I benefited from this. He decided I was great. It's pretty rare, I think; I can't offhand think of cases where he changed his view unless an event occurred.

Schroeder lied to him about what he was going to do. OK, you're gone, you lied to me. Arafat after *Karine A*, he didn't get much of the benefit of the doubt but he lied, he's gone. But I think he was impatient to get things moving, to make those judgments about people and events, to get a path forward. In that sense he was less interested, I think it is fair to say, in the analysis per se, than he was in the plan. "This is all very nice, but what are we going to do?" was more his attitude.

Riley: You said that you benefited from his kind of comedic judgments, and this is sort of a two-part question. One is that you just also said that he was a voracious reader, and yet the popular

image is that this is a guy—the old joke about the library burned down and one of the coloring books was safe, or something like this, a guy who is not very bright.

Abrams: Right.

Riley: And is not a reader. So I want to ask you how do you reconcile that public image with the man that you know privately? Are there legitimate roots to that public impression? But let me stop and ask that and then I'll come back.

Perry: Can I just drop in the element of television to that?

Abrams: Well, many people have commented on the private George Bush, the public George Bush. I have heard then and have heard since if you spent an hour with him you'd be amazed he's so smart, he's so this, he's so that. I think part of this is he wanted it this way. He didn't have to have the Texas accent he has. Jeb [John Ellis Bush] doesn't have it, his father doesn't have it. He wanted to be a Texan. He wanted to speak in a certain way, including many colloquialisms. He wanted to present an image; it worked. Really no downside in Texas. There was a downside in national politics. Part of it is a decision he made as to how to present himself. I would just say on that—

I worked for Scoop Jackson and Pat Moynihan. One of the great differences between them was that Pat lived and died for the *New York Times.* A bad editorial in the *Times,* a bad story, would cause anguish. Scoop literally could not care less what the *New York Times* said about him. It wasn't just because he wasn't a New York politician. He was a national politician. He simply didn't care. That was Bush. He could not possibly have cared less. He didn't really read the *New York Times.* He would read a story that was pointed out to him, but the editorials? My God, he did not care about elite opinion. I am always drawn to the story, which I think is not apocryphal, about William Sloane Coffin. Do you know the story?

Riley: I don't.

Abrams: George Bush, an undergraduate at Yale, is crossing the campus. It's very shortly after Ralph Yarborough beats George H. W. Bush for the Senate seat and Coffin stops him and says, "You're George Bush, aren't you? I know your family" and so forth. "So how is your father getting over the election?" Coffin says. "I suppose it's not much help to think that the better man won." To an 18-year-old boy he says this. Now, first of all, it's insight into William Sloane Coffin, not a surprise to me, but—I think that is the East Coast establishment in the eyes of George W. Bush. That's who they are. He had no respect for them. The respect would be earned man-by-man, woman-by-woman. He was not antiintellectual, he had plenty of intellectuals around him, starting with Condi. So this is another part of that.

The other piece of it I would say is the prejudice of the national media. They wanted [Albert, Jr.] Gore to win. They wanted Kerry to win. They didn't like this guy, to some extent because of what they thought he was, and that's a little bit his fault again. They thought he was antiintellectual; they thought he was stupid. There was no reason in the course of the 2000 campaign to believe he knew anything or cared anything about foreign policy, and that's his fault. But part of it I think is just liberal media.

Riley: I thought that was probably going to be your answer, but I didn't want to prejudice it, so let me come back to the second one, which was, how then do you pass muster with this man as a New York—

Abrams: Jewish intellectual?

Riley: Jewish, Ivy League-educated intellectual.

Leffler: Who went to a Marxist school.

Abrams: I don't think he knew about that though. That might have changed things. You know, he'd been to Yale and Harvard Business School. If you looked at the people around him, if you looked at Condi, at Hadley, and at Josh Bolten and so forth, there were plenty of Ivy Leaguers around. There was no prejudice—there were jokes, but there was no prejudice.

It's likely it seems to me that he viewed the whole Iran-Contra experience as a great mark in my favor. He and I never discussed it, but I would assume that Condi raised it before she hired me, so that probably helped too.

Riley: Did you think that that experience kept you out of a confirmable position in the administration?

Abrams: Condi and I talked about that. It certainly didn't at the start. I didn't know anybody in the administration, had nothing to do with the campaign, so I really wasn't on the list. The question would have come up in the second term. We talked about my going to the State Department, but as what? That was the problem. She offered me the job of Counselor at one point, which Eliot Cohen took.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: Because she and I agreed—why is this a good idea? I thought about it and thought it wasn't a good idea. This was not right after the election; this was a year or two later. The problem was in part that we were already quite in disagreement on policy and I thought, *I really don't want to go over there at all, it's just going to be troublesome.* But I can't answer that question. If Romney gets elected, then we'll find out.

Riley: Mel, should we go back to the policy stuff? We dealt a little bit with Iraq but didn't really get there. I'm kind of curious. Let me throw out a global question for you to pick at a little bit. That is, there would be an expectation from the outside that what is going on in Iraq is going to have a big effect on your ability to do what you need to do in your portfolio elsewhere in the Middle East. Can you talk about the intersection of those two things? In advance are you getting a lot of pushback or signals from within the region before the invasion that this is a good idea or not a good idea? And walk us through how things look from your perspective as Iraq unfolds.

Abrams: I would say there is less of an impact than you might expect.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: For example, Mubarak is not opposed to invading Iraq. What does he care? You want to invade Iraq, invade Iraq. Saddam Hussein is no friend of his. What Mubarak is concerned about is the postwar period, where we have these, to him, ridiculous ideas about democratization, and as I said before, he said, "You don't know them. They're a tough people and they need a general." In fact, I remember an Egyptian—it wasn't Mubarak and I can't remember who it was, but one of the people around him saying, "You know what we did when we got rid of King Farouk [I]? We sent him on his yacht to Monte Carlo. In Iraq they hang these people and drag them through the streets to kill them. That's who they are." That was not just Mubarak's view; it was a wider view in Egypt. But, OK, he's giving us advice. We're not taking it.

They're a little bit rueful about the fact that—but, bilateral relations aren't affected except to the extent that they can get some more money from us, which they did, as everybody did. To the extent that it led the President to be a little bit more energetic on Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts, that was great. They liked that. For the "Gulfies," classic Bush conversation. He's on the phone once with the Sultan of Oman, this is pre-war. The Sultan says, "I'm very worried about Saddam Hussein. He might do this and he might do that."

The President said to him, "You need not worry about Saddam Hussein. There is no Saddam Hussein. I can't tell you operational plans and you don't expect me to. He's gone. Just put him out of your thoughts." That became true within weeks. That has a real impact on not just the Sultan, but everybody he tells the story to, the Saudis and everybody else. This is a very powerful America and George Bush is a man of his word. So that had an impact as the First Gulf War had an impact.

Leffler: Do you think we were seen as a very powerful America in 2003, '04, '05 as the insurgency spreads and we seem impotent to deal with it?

Abrams: Sure, it diminishes, but at the beginning remember that with Saddam gone, immediately the statue comes down.

Leffler: Yes, I know all that.

Abrams: It diminishes.

Leffler: That dissipates pretty quickly.

Abrams: Yes and no. Yes, but we have a lot of guys there and everybody knows that. Over time it dissipates in part because we don't do the things that people are afraid we'll do—invade Iran or Syria; hit, let's say, Iran or Syria. I think it does dissipate. But as I recall the interactions with the Kuwaitis, the Saudis, the Emiratis, Bahrainis, oddly enough in this context, the really excellent relations with all of them are not much affected. They like him and they trust him. They're unhappy about the troubles we're having in Iraq because they're on our side against Iran. They're worried about one thing above all in the Gulf, and that is that the removal—that chaos in Iraq helps Iran. The main Saudi complaint—we didn't really hear it so much from the others, although I think they agree with it—but the main Saudi complaint is that you are going to hand Iraq to the Persians, to the Ayatollahs, to the Shi'a.

Perry: What did the President say to try to alleviate those fears?

Abrams: Again, this is an argument of diminishing power, but early on he said, "No, we're not. This will turn out better than you fear." It didn't affect the relationship. It's very odd I guess in retrospect. I'm kind of wondering why. I was there with his last meeting with the King of Saudi Arabia, which was in New York.

Riley: This is before the invasion?

Abrams: No, the last of all, September 2008. His last meeting is at Camp David with the Emiratis in September, October, maybe even later. Personal relations are terrific, worries are shared. In the context of Iraq what did they want? They know he was trying for something, really up to the end on Israeli-Palestinian affairs. He was their ally militarily, and he was sticking with it. The surge was a remarkable thing to them. Everybody knew the Americans would turn away from this, but they didn't. That's Bush.

I suppose it's possible that some of them at least nursed the hope he would bomb Iran even in 2008, so maybe that had something to do with it, but what is striking to me is that it had far less impact than it's logical to expect.

Long: Were there any discussions of that issue? That Saudi Arabia was concerned about his leaving the Shi'a in charge of Iraq? Was there a concern in the administration about that possibility of cozying up to Iran or at least increasing Iranian influence in Iraq? Was there any discussion of maybe somehow a different arrangement of power sharing, something that favored the Sunnis or splitting the Sunni?

Abrams: The problem was obvious. The Iranian involvement in Iraq was pretty obvious. We knew more about it from intel, but you could certainly find out everything you needed to know in the *New York Times.* What discussions there were about changing arrangements in Iraq I don't know, because those were really meetings I was not at. You know the Iraq-Afghanistan team-Meghan O'Sullivan loop and so forth, that was a different team. I was vaguely aware of the surge when it was happening. I didn't know—I heard scuttlebutt, this guy Jack Keane coming in to see the Vice President. I really didn't have much insight into that except through scuttlebutt.

The only real involvement I had in this was through Syria. All the jihadis were going in through Syria. That is, if you came from Pakistan or Libya, you didn't cross the Saudi or Jordanian or Turkish border, which were all patrolled. You flew to Damascus International Airport, whence you were escorted to the border and in to kill Americans. Again, this is Syria, not Iran. So why didn't we do anything about it? This was to me bizarre and unacceptable. We had meeting after meeting about this. Since Syria was mine, as it were, I was able to keep pushing.

We never did anything because the military didn't want to. That's the basic reason. Under [John] Abizaid, under Petraeus, under [William] Fallon. Their view tended to be either *Leave me alone, I have enough trouble*, or *Let me go to Damascus and I'll straighten this out*. I don't think that was really [Raymond] Odierno's view, but he was not in charge.

Riley: Go to Damascus with force?

Abrams: No, to negotiate. Good question. As Petraeus wanted to. "I will go, I will see [Bashar] Assad, and I will straighten this out." In my view, repeatedly stated, if you want to straighten this

out, do a few raids into Syria and close down the Damascus International Airport and it will be straightened out pretty quickly. OVP supported that view. There were a number of people in the military who would semisecretly tell me that they agreed.

What amazed me was we would go to a meeting—we would have DC after DC after DC, attended by literally 50 people. There were one or two cases where I got so mad I actually was banging on the table and then would say to John Hannah or others from OVP, "I really don't understand this. There are five guys from JCS around this table. It's their boys who are being killed. Why are they not pounding on the table?" I think the answer is they had their instructions.

When I proposed closing Damascus International Airport, I thought it would be easy enough to do. You could screw up the electronics; do it at 3:00 A.M. so there are no planes landing, or do it more forcefully, blow up a runway. To me the height of absurdity here was the guy who was there from the Department of Transportation, aviation side, a career civil servant who paled and said this would violate international aviation agreements.

I really thought it was a great joke. Then I saw he wasn't joking. We're losing at this point a hundred men a week and you're telling me that the IATA [International Air Transport Agreement] Agreement then—but he won. So I still consider this to be one of the great mistakes we made, and I think it was of some impact because had we moved early, then I think fewer jihadis probably would have gotten into Iraq, fewer Iraqis would have been called, fewer Americans would have been killed. That was about the only serious involvement I had on Iraq.

Long: I'm struggling to recall, but didn't Rumsfeld make some threatening remarks toward Syria? Maybe it was earlier than that. It was when things were going a lot better. He had made some comments that suggested—

Abrams: Right, he was gone already.

Long: "You don't want to be next" kind of thing.

Abrams: That's probably right.

Leffler: He did say that in 2003.

Abrams: Second term, he's gone.

Leffler: Can you tell us about specific other policies or initiatives that you proposed that were thwarted in one way or another by other people in the administration, substantive issues that you felt strongly about?

Abrams: Syria is one example, something I thought we should do and we did not do, things that were thwarted. There were policies that I attempted unsuccessfully to thwart.

Leffler: Tell us about those.

Abrams: I was opposed to the Annapolis Conference. After the Lebanon War, Condi wanted to do this very much. I should say in defense of her view—we're in 2006 now, and we are facing a

disaster in Iraq, the loss of the off-year elections, Hurricane Katrina, it was horrible. She is trying to create some good news and a real achievement for the President. That is certainly quite creditable. I thought, though, this is a bad way to do it because nothing will come of this.

I think most of the people in NEA thought so too. They weren't opposed to trying, they didn't see much of an opportunity cost, but they were cynical about the outcome. NEA people who have spent their careers in the Arab world are, as is generally thought, less sympathetic to Israel than the White House usually is. But it's not because they're Arab-lovers. They were very cynical about Abbas; they were cynical about Fatah, the PA [Palestinian Authority] and the PLO. I tried, in small ways and big ways, to slow this down.

Just as an example, the President's big speech, the one in which he essentially kisses off Arafat, is June 24, 2002. So June 24, 2007, is the fifth anniversary and it's time for a big speech in which we are going to announce a big conference. The President will lead it off and so forth. I managed to stop it. I just kept saying no, arguing with Steve and the President. I thought, *This really is amazing. I can't really believe I did it.* My victory lasted two weeks. He gave the speech on July 16. Three weeks. Condi persuaded the President that we have to do this. That's when we announced the Annapolis Conference, which was then held around Thanksgiving. Part of the reason for continuing with this was Olmert, who for his own reasons, which I think were mostly personal, wanted to continue, and the worse his personal problems got the more he wanted to continue. But Condi was doing it for the country, for the President, for herself. What were the major achievements of her four years? This was going to be a big one.

I thought we were foolish to pursue this outcome. We were making a lot of mistakes that had previously been made. We were asking nothing from the Palestinians. We were overlooking the problems of the Palestinians. The opportunity cost, which was heavy, was that we were not really supporting Fayyad. It was all about Annapolis and diplomacy. Fayyad in fact said it to me, he said it to Condi. At one point I said it to him, when he said it to me—"You've got to say this to the President, not just me." He did pretty straightforwardly say, "I have a project here on the West Bank. I'm trying to build a state. I'm trying to lay the foundations for a state and all anybody wants to talk about is Annapolis." I think that was a heavy opportunity cost. One example.

Leffler: What do you think we should have been doing there?

Abrams: I think we should have been putting most of our eggs in the Fayyad basket. I think we should have been trying to really lay the foundations for the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank. I think we could have accelerated the process.

Leffler: Did you argue this at the time?

Abrams: Yes, I did. There are lots of memos in the Bush Library.

Leffler: There are—

Abrams: I did. Steve was not going to fight Condi on this, and Olmert, as I said, was saying we can do this. The opportunity cost is not great. This is the opportunity. Peace is the opportunity. I think there was not a sufficient awareness of what we were losing. [Benjamin] Netanyahu has

removed lots of checkpoints. We could have done that in the Bush second term.

If Condi had gone, I think, to meetings or if the President had said to Olmert, "I want you to remove those two checkpoints. They're not necessary to your security," I think maybe we could have gotten both. Maybe we could have gotten one that day and then the following week we could have gotten another.

On Condi's birthday in 2006 or '07 there was an Israeli delegation. We met with them. This was preparation for Annapolis, I guess, 2007, at the Watergate, where she would always hold dinners. She was trying to get concessions from the Israelis to help the Palestinians look better, always concessions from the Israelis. I said to Steve at one point, "You know, we're back in this again. Do you realize what you're saying? It's the 15 things the Israelis have to do and the Palestinians don't have to do anything." "You have to release 1,500 prisoners," she said at this dinner to the Israelis. They said, "We can't do that." She said, "Certainly you can do that. Figure out a way to do it. Start with the release of all the women prisoners, or release all the youngest prisoners. Or maybe this is a better way to do it, release all the oldest prisoners, the ones who have been in longest."

Aharon Abramowitz was the Secretary-General of the Foreign Ministry under Tzipi Livni. He had been her Secretary-General, "Director-General," I think, is the right term, in her previous job as Minister of Justice. He said to Condi, "Madam Secretary, we do not have the death penalty in Israel except for Nazi war criminals. The people you are talking about having been in prison longest have not only committed murder but usually aggravated crimes of murder, and I don't understand the moral basis for your statement that we should release them." Dead silence around the table.

At the end of this, by the way, at eight o'clock, eight-thirty, Condi got up and said, "Well, you've given me some happy birthday" and walked away. Some memorable dinner. [*laughter*] That was the kind of thing I was objecting to. It was a sort of moving target. We'd get a peace deal and then we wouldn't get a peace deal. We'd get a partial peace deal, we'd get something, right up to the end. I remember her saying at one meeting, "I may be the only person left on earth who thinks an agreement is possible, but I do think it. I think you guys should continue to negotiate."

So there is one big thing. I just want to mention Egypt. It's obvious to any observer that the human rights pressure came off. It shouldn't have come off and I think it needn't have come off as much as it did and in fact was a mistake. In 20/20 hindsight we now see that Egypt was roiling, something that I think, in a way, Mubarak understood.

Riley: It came off after 9/11?

Abrams: No, no.

Leffler: After 2005 you mean.

Abrams: The pressure came off—yes, roughly the end of 2005. Maybe after the Lebanon war in the summer of 2006. We went too far. We tried, for example—if you look at the President's remarks when he visits Mubarak at Sharm el-Sheikh in 2008, we have a big fight on Air Force One about what is in the speech. Condi takes out all the best lines, quite literally, with a pen. She

lines through what Bill McGurn, who was the chief speechwriter then, and I had put in as the most forceful lines about the need for democracy in Egypt, which we feared she would do. Both of us as we're writing this said, "I don't know what is going to survive here."

This is a mistake. Now, obviously from the point of view of post-Arab Spring it is a mistake, but there were plenty of us who thought it was a mistake at the time.

Leffler: Why did she do it?

Abrams: The easy answer is to say she wanted Mubarak and his Foreign Minister, Aboul Gheit, to keep helping on the Israeli-Palestinian front, and I think that is the answer. So Egypt was the main problem on the democracy-human rights front. We had a pretty good record on [Zine el-Abidine] Ben Ali in Tunisia, because he didn't matter in the sense that if I wanted to make a nasty statement about Ben Ali, who was going to say, "Oh, please, don't do that"? No one.

Libya, I'm just thinking, thwarted—we were trying to get a little bit more on Saudi Arabia through the State Department, a little bit more pressure. We were under no illusions, but there was an effort on religious freedom to get them to rein in the religious police more. There was constant pressure on Christians in Saudi Arabia, the diplomatic community even. But there are about a million and a half Filipinos working there. No priests, no sacraments. We didn't do zero, but we didn't do much. The State Department didn't monitor.

Long: I would like to follow up on that. In the briefing book we have one of your own pieces where you are talking about the connection between the Freedom Agenda and the Arab Spring you have seen since. The general gist is that the administration had it right to be pursuing this and Arab Spring shows that there were legitimate concerns that really were going to bubble up to the top. But it sounds more like maybe you and some of your compatriots were right. The administration as a whole didn't typically prioritize these concerns.

The story we heard yesterday and today is usually these things were traded or set aside for other important agendas. So you can see maybe how the outside world looks at United States policy toward Egypt or the opening relations with Libya after the end of the WMD program there as really going against the sentiments that would eventually lead to the Arab Spring.

Abrams: I think that's not right. I think it was revolutionary when Bush started to talk this way going back to the 2003—well, going back to the Palestinians in 2002. The Afghans, the NED speech of 2003. He was addressing this head-on and he was saying something that was amazing for Arabs to hear. That was, "You're going to be free. These governments are temporary. You're just like everybody else in our view. You want freedom. You have the right to freedom." He also said of course it is a mistake from an American foreign policy point of view to believe otherwise. I think that was less significant to them than to hear him say what he said.

Leffler: Could I interrupt?

Abrams: Sure.

Leffler: Just because the President of the United States says these things doesn't mean that Arabs are hearing them. I've studied the polling data in the Middle East during these years of

2005, 2006, 2007. It's extraordinary the degree to which people believed, at least as recorded by polling data, that these words were totally hypocritical, that the United States was not following a Freedom Agenda. The percentage of Arabs who believed the overriding preoccupation of the United States in the Middle East was oil just trumped by multiple, multiple numbers the—

Abrams: My answer to that is how could they believe otherwise. That is exactly what they were being told every day by the controlled media. We're talking about a period in which access to the Internet is quite limited, ten years ago. What do you think Mubarak is telling them every day on Al-Ahram and on TV? This is what they're being told.

Leffler: With respect to what Stephen is saying—Stephen is saying in part, as others have written, that despite the articulation of support for freedom, what Arabs saw was that we were still supporting Mubarak. What Arabs knew was something that you said five minutes ago, that the United States was actually giving more military support to—

Abrams: There is truth to that, but it is not the only truth. I'm not talking about the broad masses. I am talking about the people who are actually engaged in this business of pushing back against governments, and that is not the Fellahin in Egypt. It's a small community in Cairo and Alexandria, to take that country. They knew because they felt it. Their lives changed because of George Bush. They weren't being arrested for stuff that they were being arrested for in 2003.

The same is true of everybody in Tunisia who was involved in human rights. Now, small community? You bet. Elites, only in Tunis, knew that the American Embassy people had gone to visit the human rights guys and been prevented by the police from doing so. Nobody knows about all these things; these are relatively small communities, which is one of the reasons why we thought it would take a hell of a lot longer for there to be an Arab Spring, years and years, maybe decades longer.

But I think that people, I think that in those circles it was pretty well known whether there is American pressure, there is no pressure, there is more pressure, the pressure is gone, what happened? Everybody involved in this knew when Condi Rice canceled her visit. Why? Ayman Nour. Everybody knew that. When she meets with Ayman and his wife. When the Americans get Saad Eddin Ibrahim out, everybody in Egypt who is involved in this knows. Now, how many people is that in a nation of then 70 million? If it's 70,000 it's a lot. Maybe it's 7,000.

Riley: And it's just the beginning of a social media explosion, which happens—

Abrams: Later, I would say at this point.

Riley: That's what I'm saying—

Abrams: It's too soon.

Riley: It pre-dates—

Abrams: Yes.

Riley: —the time when that technological development makes something possible.

Abrams: I think there is something else here worth adding. It mattered—take a sort of obscure case. Take Paraguay. It mattered when Ronald Reagan said, "General [Alfredo] Stroessner isn't a barrier against communism, he is the path to communism. His illegitimate rule is ultimately—" It mattered. How many people in Paraguay heard about that? Not many. They certainly didn't hear it from the government of Paraguay. It had an impact in delegitimizing his rule.

I think this had an impact in delegitimizing tyranny in the Arab world. Tell me, sitting here ten years later, what is the impact of the Arab Human Development Report? A bunch of Arabs—the UNDP report, which is read by 10,000 people in the whole Arab world or the whole world? Then George Bush makes a few speeches. I think it's impossible to say ten years later that it did not have a significant impact. Why did the Arab Spring happen when it happened? Why is it that people all of a sudden came to the view that they have rights, that they have a right to dignity? They are not going to tolerate this treatment anymore.

I would argue that a) we don't know the answer, but b) there are many ingredients. I think certainly the President of the United States not saying, "Hosni, you're a bad person, leave," but saying, "This is fundamentally an illegitimate form of government you have here."

Leffler: Our Presidents always say that. Our President Bill Clinton said that a hundred times. I read his speeches. I actually agree with your—by the way, I have argued, and most of my colleagues think not to my credit, but I have argued that the rhetoric of the Bush administration did have a lasting legacy. My argument is even though the Bush administration often betrayed that rhetoric in practice, that it really had long-term consequences. The rhetoric highlighted American values as universal values far more than anybody else. The retort of course by people who don't believe this is twofold. One, what I just said, that American Presidents always use this rhetoric, and two, that like previous administrations, the majority of American actions betrayed and contradicted the rhetoric.

Abrams: I would respond that it's always going to be the case that the majority of American actions in a certain sense betray those ideals because a government is not an NGO [nongovernment organization]. We have a lot of interests. It's great to be Amnesty or Human Rights Watch; there is no balancing necessary. A government has to do balancing, and we do have other interests than the promotion of human rights on a date certain in a particular country. But there is a counterbalance because the real problem, I think the greater problem would be if these remarks were simply hypocritical.

They're not hypocritical. That is, if you make those speeches and then what do you do in Egypt? You do nothing for Saad Eddin Ibrahim. You do nothing for Ayman Nour. You don't cancel the—

Leffler: This is what my colleagues say to this and let me hear how you would respond. That is, the photos of Abu Ghraib so trumped any rhetoric that George W. Bush used in the images of the Arab world of the United States, in the hypocrisy of American championing of human rights, that those were the indelible images that were left by the Bush administration.

Abrams: My answer to that is that is an extremely difficult argument to defeat in 2008 and is a ludicrous argument in 2013 or '12 because then you had the Arab Spring. So it seems that the

other images of America supporting human rights were not erased by human rights abuses. It seems to me we see that something happened here.

Leffler: Just because we see something happened, and this is the way the vast majority of scholars argue, because—and if Bill Quandt were here he would be saying this, our rhetoric, your rhetoric, and Mel Leffler's rhetoric right now suggest that what the United States does is significant and it excludes all the multiple other factors, indigenous factors—

Abrams: No, I'm not saying that at all. I'm just saying—I'm only arguing against exclusion of George Bush as a factor. I don't know how one weighs these factors. Something happened. No intelligence agency predicted it. I actually said to John Sawers, the head of MI6 who came to the Council, "Does it strike you as an unfortunate thing that no intelligence agency predicted this?" To which he replied, "Does it strike you as an unfortunate thing that no think tank predicted it?" But something happened.

I think that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was a factor. Half a percent? Four percent? I don't know, a factor. I think that the American words and actions—I think it might have been viewed as completely hypocritical had we not done anything, but we did do something. Again, yes, the people, particularly the people watching Al Jazeera, which is a very negative influence here, would conclude America equals Abu Ghraib, period.

Leffler: The people watching Al Jazeera is a huge majority of the people.

Abrams: Of course it is, but it's not the people who are starting—it's not the people in these communities, in the capital cities, who are involved in fighting back against their governments, and those people, I think, were aware something was up in Washington.

Riley: Elliott, maybe one way to get at this is to get you to elaborate a little more for the historical record what those kinds of things were that the administration—you've touched on them idiosyncratically here, but—

Abrams: There are several things here. One of them—there is Presidential rhetoric, that's one thing. The President was always delighted to speak about these subjects. There is the President's own activity, which is important not only because he meets with people, but of course it gets out again in that world, the meeting he attends in Prague, the many people he sees, Chinese dissidents, Iranian dissidents, Venezuelans, in the Oval Office, which he is doing constantly. Then there is the question of bilateral American policy.

Riley: Is this something that you're responsible for?

Abrams: In the Middle East, yes.

Riley: OK.

Abrams: Others to a lesser extent, less power, less influence everywhere because of the democracy hat. We get differing degrees of resistance depending in part on who is the relevant Assistant Secretary of State, and, I would say, who is the Senior Director for that region at the NSC. But you try to inject this in bilateral relations. You try to get démarches made, you try to

get speeches made by the Ambassador. You try to get the kinds of things the President talked about in Prague, prison visits.

Riley: Can you enumerate some of those? Do you have any at your—

Abrams: We certainly did this when Mike Kozak was Ambassador to Belarus. We did lots of this stuff in Belarus. I would say that [Clark T.] Sandy Randt, the President's, I think, last Ambassador in China, had quite a good record on the prisoner issue. It was something that he attended to. He raised the prisoner question, getting people out of prison. Not Chinese-Americans, Chinese. Out of prison constantly. In a number of cases, and I think Randt is an interesting example of this, I couldn't force him to do that. I could meet with him when he came to Washington and urge him to do it. I couldn't instruct him to do it. He did it partly as a matter of character. He thought it was the right thing to do as an American. And he thought it was good American policy. We were doing that in lots and lots of countries.

We were certainly doing it in Tunisia. We were doing it in Egypt. We were doing it in Lebanon. We were probably not doing it enough in Saudi Arabia. We did push the King, we really did. We had talked with him face-to-face about religious freedom in Saudi Arabia and with Saud al-Faisal, religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, why don't you let people—these are non-Muslims—have more ability to practice their religion?

Riley: We who? You and?

Abrams: In that case it was John Hanford, who was the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom who actually negotiated over this with Saud and then met with the King and talked about what we were trying to achieve in greater religious freedom. We certainly did it in Venezuela, Cuba, obviously. I can go—people understood that this was what the President wanted. I do believe that there wasn't enough of a push frankly coming from Condi. I don't think she was pushing her Ambassadors hard enough on this question. Thus we got to the situation I would say in 2007 and '08 where the President was having all these meetings with dissidents.

As I said before, I think his own—Burma, excellent example, where the First Lady was also interested. Lots of time spent on Burma, lots of meetings, video calls, video conferences, which I think actually had an impact. It's one of the things that leads into this remarkable change in Burma.

Leffler: Where did Steve Hadley stand on these issues, Elliott?

Abrams: With the President, but unwilling to fight Condi would be my conclusion on this.

Riley: I'm wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more on the President himself. What is he doing in these meetings with the dissidents? Beyond that, how is he communicating to you and to others, and how vigorously is he communicating to you and others, "This is one of my issues, this is one of my priorities."

Abrams: He didn't have to because the President is. The problem is, it's an interesting problem for a President. What do you do, actually? The most valuable commodity is the President's time. The President wants to spend some of that time face-to-face with the dissidents. These are not

secret meetings mostly; the press is aware of them.

The President goes to Prague and makes his speech. The problem is, most of this is done on the ground in other countries by our embassies. The actual carrying out of human rights policy is mostly the function of embassies. I would argue that we're not getting enough push from the embassies except when the Ambassador is personally committed himself or herself for you might say personal reasons, devoted to this. You're not getting much of a push.

The story I told yesterday about the failure to send that cable after the Prague conference—did I tell that story?

Riley: I don't think so.

Abrams: The President's speech in Prague was the one where he said to visit the jails, visit the dissidents.

Leffler: No, you didn't tell this.

Abrams: This is a conference that Sharansky put on in Prague and the President attended, spoke, and met with all the dissidents who were there afterward privately. In his speech he said, "I want the support of human rights to be central for my administration, for the United States. I'm going to instruct Ambassadors visit dissidents. If you can't go to the jails, visit their families," that sort of thing. He had a list of five things to do. There was never an instruction cable. I kept inquiring, "Where is the cable that says, from the Secretary, 'Here are the President's remarks, now do it'?"

What you would do normally is you'd say, "Send the relevant Assistant Secretary your plan for how you intend to accomplish this, let's say within 30 days. Then three months later send in the report on what you've done." Zero, nothing. I tell this story to my students as a how-Washington-really-works story.

I was really frustrated and annoyed, so I called a friend at the *Washington Post* and said, "I want to tell you a story. This is all off the record." I told him the story. I said, "I would like you to call the Public Affairs Office at State and tell them you've just been reading the President's speech in Prague and wondered if you could get a copy of the instruction cable on this or is it classified." Which he did. The answer of course in Public Affairs was, "Hmm, don't know, get right back to you." Well, they didn't get right back to him. The cable went out that evening. That's a lack of cooperation or interest on the part of the State Department.

The problem is, if you're an ambassador and you are not a self-starter on this issue, your primary interests are economic, political, military, whatever, you have to be instructed. I don't think there was much feeling in the field of a push from State.

Leffler: Had you raised this at meetings with the Assistant Secretary Welch at the time?

Abrams: David oddly enough was ahead of the curve on this. Oddly only because NEA has a reputation for not much interest in this. Yes, that was easier for me because I could even do that country by country. I could send an email to an ambassador saying, "I see they've arrested—" I would always copy Welch on this. "I see they have arrested So-and-So. Have you said anything

about this or done anything about this? Have we talked about this? If you have, please let me know; if you haven't, I'm hoping David will with this instruct you to do so." That I could do much more easily. But it's not—it is a 10 percent substitute for an ambassador feeling your Assistant Secretary and the Secretary are really pushing on this. I don't think Condi really pushed on this. I did raise this with Steve. He did not want to hear it. He did not want to hear this kind of criticism of Condi.

I want to tell you, there is one thing I meant to mention before in the context of who is George Bush, just before I forget it.

Riley: All right.

Abrams: I dealt a lot with White House personnel on many issues, including appointment of Ambassadors. They would just bounce things off you. It was Middle East, particularly, but more generally because I'd been around for a while and I was friendly with people in that unit. Once a guy was proposed to be an ambassador in some Middle Eastern country and he was not first-rate, he was third-rate really, but the family had long ties with the Bushes. His father had been Ambassador under George H. W. Bush. They were big donors.

I said to the White House personnel guy, "This guy is a dope. We can't let this—" He said, "Elliott, just back off. Look at these ties to the Bush family. The President's father makes his father Ambassador. You're going to run into a stone wall here. Just drop it." I said. "OK, can't win them all."

What happened to me then was accidental. I would not normally be there in a meeting of the personnel people with the President. Purely accidentally I'm in the Oval Office for this and they raised the issue. "We have three Embassy meetings to take up with you, Mr. President." This is the first one they mentioned. The President responds, "He's a dope. You know what? The Bush family has done enough for the Jones family," whatever the name was. It was so interesting. You never quite knew when you were going to get that kind of response from the President.

Long: I feel like maybe there is some value in us just revisiting this one topic that Mel brought up, the contrast between the talk and a lot of what was going on behind the scenes, except for the dissent by Rice and blocking by Rice, the contrast between this Freedom Agenda and not Abu Ghraib per se because that was not—from what I understand, from what I know, that wasn't authorized, that wasn't expected.

Abrams: No, I really think—

Leffler: That was not my point that it was authorized.

Long: But I think Guantanamo is a fair case because that was authorized. The treatment of al-Qaeda detainees as noncombatants in Guantanamo was through the command chain; that was separate from how things were supposed to be done in Iraq. That was authorized. Yet you say that in the committee where you were co-chairing that dealt with detainee issues there was only one topic that you told us about, the elderly Taliban prisoners, and you don't recall much about the rest of the meetings. Did no one draw the contrast between our treatment of detainees and the human rights agenda? It strikes me as impossible.

Abrams: Well, it isn't, for a number of reasons. The first is information. I don't think that John and I had much information until it became public about precisely what methods of interrogation were being used. Let me not speak for John and what he knew. I'm not President. I'm not even National Security Advisor. I have a lane. The decision on interrogation techniques isn't in it, no one is asking me my opinion. No one is telling me there is a thing called a secret prison or there is a debate between the FBI and CIA about the treatment of people. So that's the first question. There are a lot of people in the administration. The vast, vast majority of people handling foreign policy in the administration are not included in this discussion. There is such a thing as need to know. This is a highly sensitive debate with people, certain people included and certain people not.

I will tell you that when we were debating whether to bomb the Syrian nuclear reactor there were three people in the NSC who knew anything about it. The other 300 people, or whatever the number is, were carefully excluded from the slightest knowledge that there was such a thing as a Syrian nuclear reactor and that we were contemplating bombing it. So that's the first point I would make.

Secondly, there is a question of who is right. The general attitude I would say was if the CIA and the President and the Vice President believe that we need to be undertaking certain interrogation techniques and the *New York Times* doesn't agree, is it your immediate stance as a Bush White House staffer that the *New York Times* must be right or that the President must be right? We're not in this debate, but I don't know what you would have found had you asked 300 people on the NSC where do you come out on this, which we were not asked, of course.

Leffler: I think Steve's point is that, not what the *New York Times* said or anybody else said, but the issue of whether, among those making the decisions, obviously a tiny group, whether this is just a dramatic example where issues of national security, i.e. thwarting another terrorist attack, simply trumped concerns for human rights, even though they knew it would ultimately tarnish the reputation—

Abrams: I don't think they knew that, first of all. Maybe they should have assumed that it would ultimately get out, but I'm not sure they did assume that. Secondly, I guess I would argue with you on the merits of this in the sense that if there is a technique that we use in training American—

Leffler: There is a SERE's [Survival evasion resistance escape]—

Abrams: I'm not willing to grant the notion that this qualifies, that is, you've seen all the numbers. What is the number of people who are actually, for example, waterboarded? The average person watching Al Jazeera thinks it's probably 5,000.

Leffler: It is less than ten, I'm sure.

Abrams: That's relevant to the question of what you're doing here. I would also argue—here is a question—there are people trying to kill us, and we need to—they have killed 3,000 of us, and every day, every day, the President gets additional information about efforts to kill more of us. So we need to decide whether these three or ten techniques are morally justifiable. Also actually smart techniques in an effort to extract information about these. I do not believe that one can

make an analogy, and Hosni Mubarak arresting a newspaper editor, even torturing the newspaper editor—what is the purpose of this? It's not to prevent terrorist attacks on Egypt.

I understand the political problem that the United States has because of this, but—

Leffler: It's more than a political problem, and I myself am conflicted on this, so I'm just asking the question. I think it's a profound ethical issue. Torture, which I think this was, enhanced—I'm saying that. I think it was torture. Obviously in a very few cases, for what were believed to be very good reasons. I believe that. It's a profound ethical issue. Is the prospect of saving the lives of X thousand people worth, does it justify, the unequivocal maltreatment of another individual against all baselines of international ethics that we have subscribed to as a nation ourselves? I think it's a profoundly difficult question.

Abrams: I guess the first—

Leffler: I think your Rabbi would say it is probably not justified.

Abrams: And I would say to him, politely, "When I want your opinion I'll ask for it." [*laughter*] I would tell him the story of the Catholic Bishops and the nuclear freeze. That is a problem here in the sense that what is my judgment as a staff member in 2000—pick a year, 2008.

Leffler: I'm not blaming you.

Abrams: No, what I'm saying—

Leffler: When I say "you"—

Abrams: But I see people constantly making judgments about things that I really do know about and one of the problems is they don't know what they're talking about. So here we have this issue. This is more really another Steve question than—what do I know about this? I know enough just from the newspapers to know that I don't know about this. That is, what's the process by which the President decided on this? What's all the information? What exactly are the techniques? Are they torture? Who makes that judgment? According to whom? Do we want the Supreme Court to make the judgment? The Hague, the President? There is a reason nobody is asking my opinion, because I am not involved in this.

I would hope that the people who made the decision, starting with the President, would actually avoid this. So I know the President, and that leads me to believe the answer is yes because I know the President cares about the country, cares about the reputation of morality, is himself a deeply moral person. So I'm not going to substitute my judgment for his as a staff member in the White House. I, as a citizen, am aware of this. I've read Alan Dershowitz's articles suggesting that this be permissible with a court order.

Leffler: Some of your good friends, and I say this with admiration, have told me in their description of the President, which was generally very respectful and favorable, but they've used the word "incurious" to describe the President. Smart but incurious. I'm curious about whether when he would have been briefed on these issues that we're talking about would his curiosity have prompted him to say, "What exactly are we doing to these people? Tell me what we're

really doing."

Abrams: I think so because I don't accept the word incurious, which is also applied to Reagan and I think with greater justification. I didn't find the President incurious.

Leffler: OK.

Abrams: You know, we recently had a revelation. This is the May 2012 revelation by a CIA former official, [José] Rodriguez, that he briefed the Speaker of the House on waterboarding, in essence saying she was lying when she said she was never briefed. If you assume he is right, how is it possible the President wasn't briefed? I don't think he even had to be curious, in the sense that I would assume he was told. So my assumption is that he would have asked. It would have been natural to him, in my experience with him, to say, "What does that mean, 'waterboarding?'" Waterboarding has no meaning. What is a waterboard? I do think he would have said, "What's that?"

Riley: Again, to get back to where we began, I think the basic question is not so much whether this crosses your lane. The consequences of all of this very much cross your lane. So the more general question is, how are you dealing with the fallout of this kind of information and trying to do what you're doing when there seems to be hypocrisy, whether it really existed or not.

Abrams: The fallout doesn't affect much. What is the fallout? The fallout is visible in public opinion polling, but stand back. You have these horrendous numbers about the popularity of the United States. We're back. It's 2012, we have President Obama, we're back.

Riley: Right.

Leffler: Actually, Elliott, we're not back. One of the amazing things is to look at Arab public opinion polling. When Obama was elected, Arab public opinion went like this, and in the last 18 months it has gone like this, it's a dramatic reduction. Now, it may have changed the last few months, but the last time I looked at that poll was exactly last year at this time, so the Arab Spring was already taking place. But what was amazing was the precipitous falloff in Arab public opinion toward Obama.

Abrams: I think that's very instructive, because what it suggests is that if you're in the job I had, what can you do about that? Who knows what caused it? Did Abu Ghraib cause it? Well, there is Abu Ghraib. Here you have a President who cares about it, President Obama cares about this, isn't torturing anybody. So what explains this? Of course we can argue about what explains it, but if you're sitting in this NSC job, what are you going to do about it? There isn't anything you can do about it. You're not quite sure why it happened. Does it matter? How does it matter?

It matters in a sense now when you're dealing with governments that may be more responsive to public opinion than they were then. They're always responsive to some degree. I think it's a mistake to think that Mubarak didn't care about public opinion. He certainly did. But if you think about what we were trying to do, keep Lebanon on an even keel under Prime Minister [Fouad] Siniora, sanctions on Assad, maintain good relations with the Gulfies and sell them arms with which to defend themselves against Iran, push them, in at least some cases, toward a greater political opening, some political opening. Egypt, Tunisia, allied countries like Morocco and—so

what's the difference?

The polls are terrific. The polls are not terrific. The only question is whether it actually affected their relations with us from their side. I didn't see it. I do not recall one instance in which somebody said that it would be good if we could do X together but you guys are too hot to handle right now and we can't do that. One example of this is travel. The travel that Welch and I did in the region, the Secretary's travel, the President's travel. The President in his 2003 Sharma and Aqaba trip hit a few more places. In 2008 in his two trips he hit a few more places. Nobody ever said, "Don't come."

The one example of that is after Qana in the Lebanon war where Siniora said, "Don't come to Beirut," but that's a special case. So oddly enough I would argue that dealing government to government, this is background music that you barely hear.

Long: Was it ever broached that perhaps the budget lines, sending military assistance to Egypt or other friendly but perhaps not totally free regimes could be used as leverage at any point in the Freedom Agenda?

Abrams: Yes, we did talk about that. There are always countries that are easy because we don't care about them. Paraguay was by example, Latin America, Tunisia, so that's not a good way to judge. There's no pushback, really. Egypt is the best example, and I did at one point try to reduce the military aid to Egypt.

There were a lot of people on the Hill who were thinking about this. I remember Tom Lantos saying, at a hearing I think, "Do you think that Egypt needs more tanks or more schools?" A wonderful way to put it. I never got anywhere. There was a solid wall of resistance in the Pentagon. I remember an interagency meeting where the Pentagon was represented by the late Peter Rodman, well represented. Basically, their line was, "This is nice, but you know we're at war. We overfly Egypt every day. We get special treatment in the canal every day. Maybe you ought to discuss this with Condi also, because she is trying to do this peace effort but she can speak for herself. We're 100 percent against this."

Now Peter, because he was very smart, would then make an argument, which I can also make. I don't believe it, but I can make it, about the relevance of the military and long-term relations with them and so forth. So it didn't really get anywhere at all. There was no—I judged after that meeting that this would be a bad investment of my time, that in the middle of the Iraq war I'd never win this one.

Perry: Can I just follow up on one more element in this long conversation? You and Mel had a brief exchange about Rabbis and you said, "Who should make these decisions about—" let's call it—"human rights and Guantanamo." You suggested the Supreme Court, and of course they did make a whole series of decisions in this area. You're a lawyer. What were your thoughts about that, and does that help in making the cases to other countries about the fact that our system cares about these rights?

Abrams: We would use this argument, because I think it's a valid argument, that we have a self-correcting system. One of the reasons we don't need The Hague, for example, is that we have the Supreme Court and we do have a free press and we have a Congress. With some people,

Europeans above all, you could get somewhere with those arguments. My problem in these was there was never enough time.

One of the things I would love to do would be to dig a little deeper. What did the Supreme Court say? I look at the *Washington Post* and I read the first paragraph and maybe print out the Supreme Court opinion and it's 60 pages. Three weeks later I gave up and threw it away because I was clearly never going to read it. So this is part of the problem, in the sense that we're all being buried by work here.

Perry: Ah, but this goes back to our discussion that we had this morning before we began officially and that was, I was pondering the comment yesterday that Elliott made about getting 180 emails a day. I said, "What impact did that have on just being able to read things?" This might be one example, wouldn't you say?

Abrams: It certainly means that you have very little time to meander, and this is meandering largely. Look at the whole—there is this small, minor area called domestic policy. My first article in *Commentary* magazine in 1972 was about employment quotas. It was about the EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission]. It is an interest, but it's impossible to keep up with what you're actually charged with. Kissinger had this famous statement about how you use up rather than add to intellectual capital. That statement is true with respect to what you are doing, never mind what you're not doing. Where what happens is all of these other areas that were previously of interest.

I would say that the time I entered the government, one of the things I liked—I had a reasonably good level of information about the Supreme Court for, in a certain sense, a layman. That is, I'm not a part of the Supreme Court bar, I'm not practicing law, but I would read, and not just read the newspapers, I would read some of the opinions. I would read a couple of blogs to see what people were saying. This is completely gone for eight years. There was no time.

So this is relevant because it means that almost any subject—now this is really hard for a President or a National Security Advisor because your area is much wider, but for me it just meant—Better example, Latin America policy. Gone. Once in a while I would be prevailed upon by somebody under the human rights hat to do something. Normally Mike Kozak, who was the Senior Director for the Democracy Directorate, had been—our man, not called Ambassador, in Havana, and had been my deputy for a while in the Latin America bureau at State. He was a career officer. I knew he cared. I trusted him; I left it with him.

If he said to me, "You need to do this, you need to send an email to Ambassador So-and-So," I would do it. But basically I was out of touch.

Leffler: What did you learn from doing your job, though? I know that that statement from Kissinger is one that resonates widely. It is true in certain ways, but I personally think that people do grow in these jobs and learn things. That's just my opinion. But I'm curious. What did you learn from doing your job, both substantively and in terms of process?

Abrams: This is a very interesting question because I left the White House three years and four months ago and I have never been asked that question.

Riley: That's why we have Mel in the room.

Abrams: Well, on the question of intellectual capital you learn a phenomenal amount about whatever the area you are working on is, but I think that would be true whether it's narrow or broad because the information—the old expression of "drinking from a fire hose"—it's true. You end up with a really remarkable amount of information about the countries, their politics, their culture, the leading political personalities of them. So I think the Kissinger statement is wrong from that point of view. Even if you come in, I think, as an area specialist, you leave with a much deeper understanding of the area. So that's first.

I think you also learn—this is trite, but you don't come away with a sort of Marxist view that the great forces in history are beyond the control of any individual. I think you come away with a greater appreciation for the role of individuals everywhere. Presidents, obviously, but in the U.S. government, foreign leaders, things change depending on when somebody dies, when somebody is assassinated, when somebody is elected or loses an election.

Leffler: You mean like when [Konstantin] Chernenko died and we got [Mikhail] Gorbachev.

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: Made a difference.

Abrams: Sharon's stroke.

Leffler: Made a difference.

Abrams: One of the defenses of Bush, I think, that Bush makes but others have made, and I'm trying to make in this book, is that we actually tried a lot of things. At several points it looked as if we had turned a corner in a positive way. One of the moments that things got turned back was Sharon's second stroke. One was the war in Lebanon. But for example, had Sharon been Prime Minister and not Olmert, I do not believe there would have been a war in Lebanon in 2006. No way of proving that, but—

So the role of individuals I guess would be second. You learn I think a lot of things about the functioning of the U.S. government. I'm actually thinking about writing a book about that next, trying to see if I can come up with 10 or 15 rules of bureaucratic behavior or something. But you certainly learn a great deal about the functioning of—in this area—of these three or four great bureaucracies—State, CIA, DoD, White House—and the interaction of the fundamental bureaucratic needs of each of those pieces of government with American politics and with the people who are charged with running the government and whichever administration is in power.

But this is not a very good answer because I'm really answering off the top of my head.

Riley: I owe you a break. Why don't we take five minutes? You can ponder it and we'll come back and give you a second crack at it.

[BREAK]

Riley: OK, have you had any more thoughts about Mel's question?

Perry: I have a follow-up. That is, you had said yesterday of course that you decided you wanted to come over to the White House rather than go back into the State Department. Did your views about the Presidency and how it operates change?

Abrams: This is a very good point to make. Administrations obviously differ and you can't necessarily extrapolate, but it is the case, I think, that when I worked for Shultz we thought we were in charge of foreign policy. Now, of course, Shultz was, I think, a dominant Secretary of State, and the NSC was very weak in those days. There were a whole bunch of National Security Advisors, and at least until Powell came they were not very good at the job. So that's unique.

But it's striking to me because of course now at the NSC we thought we were in charge of the foreign policy. What is common is the desire to prevent other bureaucracies from accruing power and rather taking it yourself. When I was at the State Department working on Latin America, we viewed the Latin America people at the NSC as the enemy and we tried to keep them out of everything. There is to a certain degree the reverse—to a certain degree the same thing was true here, that is, the State Department tried to keep us from fooling around with their activities.

I think I would probably say that what is more striking to me is the differences than the similarities and the way the whole process worked. I think it's largely the product of who is the President, who is the Secretary, who is the National Security Advisor. I think it changes a lot. On paper it looks the same, but it isn't the same.

I guess one thing I would say, getting back to Mel's question, it's really striking how many wonderful people there are in any White House who are really dedicating their lives for four or eight years to doing good works. I often used to think that the average American voter or taxpayer would really be quite pleased to find out that there are all these people earning a government salary but not working nine to five, working mostly eight to seven and with great sacrifices in many cases to try to do things right. Certainly in the Bush administration we really tried to do things right and regretted mistakes we made.

Long: Yesterday you made a joke about how you thought maybe there wasn't such a thing as an area expert, or certainly they didn't have a role in this kind of work. I'm curious about whether you think those extra hours—it strikes me that you send in an average American, perhaps they'd see all these extra hours but they would also see that a pretty decent share of those hours are doing exactly what you described, watching out for your own bureaucratic territory and the encroachments of other bureaucratic actors rather than necessarily dealing with an issue or a crisis. So in your perspective maybe if you were hiring someone to work under you, do you prefer someone—or what value do you put on actual expertise about, say, Latin America versus that political savvy that is required to be effective in government?

Abrams: This is something I learned, I would say. To go back to the question again, the latter, that is, government expertise, is far more important. I had the case of hiring, in one case, an

academic who was not a competent official. If you're not a competent official it doesn't matter how much you know, so that has to come first.

I was not a Middle East expert, I'm not a Latin America expert. There are critics who would say that it showed. But I did not find when I would deal with our Ambassadors in the field or I would deal with their Ambassadors in Washington or I would deal with the State Department guys who had been in the field for 20 years, I didn't think I was at a disadvantage. I couldn't find the great insight that they had and I lacked. They had information about individuals that was very useful because they'd dealt with them, but you know you get a CIA biography, you find out some of the basic facts, and then you meet the guy. The term "guy," since we're dealing with the Middle East, is the right term, and you'd form your own judgment, which might vary because area expertise—now we're talking about personalities.

There is no area expertise in judging personalities. So what are we talking about here? Arab culture. What is Arab culture? Who knows what Arab culture is? Who can describe Arab culture? The greatest experts thought Hosni Mubarak would be President of Egypt today and thought that Arab Spring would never happen.

So I really am fairly far on the side of the spectrum that deprecates area expertise as opposed to bureaucratic expertise. Unfortunately I can't describe what bureaucratic expertise is. What are the seven things you need to know?

Riley: That's your next book.

Abrams: It is something I'm thinking about trying—are there any rules of behavior that you could at least apply that would help? In hiring I think basically what I would do is hire people who had been in the government and therefore had a track record that led you to believe they knew how to get things done. My experience is that it can't really be taught, you have it or you don't, it is instinctive or it isn't.

I happen to be very lucky because when I started in the IO Bureau—it is not a very important bureau in the State Department and I was not thrown into the ocean and told to swim. I was thrown into a sort of puddle and learned to swim and had a lot of help. Joe Meresman was a career Foreign Service officer who had worked for Pat Moynihan in New York at the UN mission and Joe was back at State when I arrived and was sort of a mentor bureaucratically, including the immortal line, which I, being new, had never heard. I actually said to him at one point, "How many people work in this building?" to which he replied, "About half."

I would rather hire somebody who had been the chief LA [legislative assistant] for foreign affairs for a Senator than a brilliant young professor.

Riley: No offense.

Long: No, I'm not seeking employment, but my students often say "Gosh, I'd love to go into international affairs. I'm going to study political science, I'm going to go and get a Ph.D.," or "I'm going to go work for the State Department." I say no, no, and no, none of the above. But that sounds about right.

Leffler: Elliott, one of the things you've not talked about is the role of fear and threat perception in shaping the way you and your colleagues behaved and operated after 9/11. Condi Rice has this striking sentence in her book, which says, I'm paraphrasing, but it is like, after 9/11 every day felt like 9/10, and trying to make sure there would not be another 9/11. When Philip Zelikow in his essay in that little book, writing about his work on the National Security Strategy Statement of 2002, which he drafted in substantial part for Condi, emphasizes how important was threat perception and the role of fear in shaping the mentality of people. I'm just curious about your thoughts about the atmosphere.

Abrams: That strikes me as wrong in one way. I want to divide up threat perception and fear. Threat perception clearly in the sense that Afghanistan, Iraq, the administration was completely changed by the notion that America is under attack. The threat perception remains because it isn't 9/11, it's that you are getting constant reporting about threats and efforts. If there is one thing the President was determined to do, it was of course not to permit another such attack or even a much smaller one.

So I think the threat perception affects—for one thing, what we were talking about before, all these questions about what is a permissible interrogation technique, cannot—this debate cannot be understood outside the context of genuine perception of threat. Why establish DHS [Department of Homeland Security] and the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security? Why the really top to bottom change in the FBI? All of this is threat perception. My experience however is that it has nothing to do with fear. I certainly didn't feel any, and I think that's not because I am a courageous person, I think it's just human nature. You just get over it because after all we do our jobs.

So how did they change after 9/11? Not a lot. You get to work, you come in the same turnstile, you park in the same place. Secret Service was pretty tough about protecting the President before. I suppose on foreign trips they're tougher, but I don't see a lot of that preparation.

I don't think any of us felt afraid, I really don't. We knew, obviously, that the White House is a potential target more than, say, the State Department. Many jokes about this, as you would expect. As I think back, for example, hiring people, I don't think it was in their minds either. You get an opportunity from State or CIA to come down to the White House for a year, I never heard, ever, of anybody saying, "I tried to persuade her to do it and she said, 'That's a target. I'm not going to do that.'" Never. So I think that's wrong. We just put it out of our minds.

We did have the continuity of government stuff in the narrow sense in that we had an alternative NSC. We went over there; we knew what you were supposed to do. It was treated with lots of gallows humor and then put out of mind three hours later.

Leffler: What Dick Cheney writes about in his memoir and Condi Rice in her memoir is that 9/11 was followed very rapidly by the anthrax threat and by rumors of contamination, which they themselves were told, individually, respectively, each of them.

Abrams: I never knew about that.

Leffler: They write about the impact that that had, that they themselves for two or three days, or two days in Cheney's. They said that he was contaminated and he would soon feel the

symptoms.

Abrams: That was a very narrow group of people and most of us didn't know about that. That, it seems to me, is much different. That's something we all understand because we have it in our own lives. When a relative gets a bad diagnosis or you get a bad diagnosis, we all understand this. This is completely different from a political diagnosis in the sense that al-Qaeda is out to get us.

Leffler: But they linked the anthrax—

Abrams: I understand that. What I mean, to be told what Cheney was told is the equivalent of a personal—it seems to me. We all knew al-Qaeda is out to get us and maybe there will be another 9/11. That's why they're looking under your car when you drive in. You just basically—have you stopped flying? I think that's the equivalent. We all know about this. What are we doing at these airports? Do you feel afraid every time you go on an airplane? I think most Americans feel annoyed, not afraid.

Riley: But is it—and to carry this through then to the decisions about Iraq in particular, those decisions were actually somewhat easier to comprehend if you believe that the decision makers were acting under a perception of a heightened threat.

Abrams: But again, let me distinguish, that's not fear, that's responsibility. I am determined this will not happen to the country again. That's not fear. It is fear of a terrorist attack on the country, but it is not an emotion. It is a conviction; it is a determination.

Riley: Is there a distinction between personal fear and political fear?

Abrams: Yes, I think there is. One thing I learned in government, not particularly in this term, more actually in the Reagan years. There is a complete distinction between political and physical courage. I knew people who had distinguished records in the military that really were—I couldn't imagine myself having such a record in the military. They had no political courage. They really didn't. They weren't willing to fight for any—I don't know if George Bush has physical courage. I know he has plenty of political courage. They're different. I think what we're talking about here is unrelated to these personal issues.

Riley: You've introduced this a couple of times. Let me ask you to tease this out a little bit more. You served in two administrations and in some respects one of the things that emerges from the interviews is that the 43rd Presidency is more directly a descendant of the Reagan administration than of the 41st Presidency. Is that a fair assessment, and can you do a little bit of comparison of the two administrations and the two Presidents, how they were alike and different.

Abrams: It strikes me as fair and fundamentally correct. How this President emerged from his father I think is difficult to explain. So different in so many ways. I didn't know his father all that well. I did know him because he was Vice President. I met him a few times in the administration. I have the very distinct impression he did not like me and I can think of many reasons why that might be true.

This was more like the Reagan administration in the sense that the President seemed to have a

bunch of firm views and if you were a loyalist you could persuade yourself in any event that you really wanted to get things done in foreign policy and you should go ahead and push. The example I gave was Petraeus going to Damascus, but that I think is suggestive. If they reached the President, he'd be on your side because he had a lot of things he wanted to accomplish.

Now in the Reagan case, Reagan was not nearly as engaged as Bush. I think that is generally true, so what you're really saying is if the President knew everything I knew, he'd come out where I came out. I come out that way because I want to be for the President. With Bush the sense was if he knows about this, he wants me to do this, and if he doesn't know about it, when he finds out he will. And of course you had a very aggressive foreign policy agenda in both administrations.

Many, many differences, obviously, but I think that is a critical—and there is in both administrations that unofficial organization chart of loyalists, the network of, let's say, conservatives. I'm sure this existed in domestic policy too. Who in the Justice Department are our guys and who in the Labor Department—maybe nobody in the Labor Department but in other departments? What is the political policy nervous system of the administration? I think in both of them it existed. Many differences. One of them, for example, Reagan never had a strong NSC. I think Bush did at certain periods.

There was no figure—you had some personalities in the Reagan administration who were larger. Perhaps Weinberger, certainly I'd say Casey and Shultz than Gates or Tenet even. Larger in personality, but also in their impact on the administration. Condi would be the only question here.

Leffler: Let me just interject. Do you think there was a "strong NSC" under Condi Rice? Because that seriously goes against the grain of a lot of what has been written.

Abrams: In the area of Middle East policy there was a strong NSC. By the middle of 2002 Powell was a goner and for two and a half years we ran Middle East policy out of the NSC.

Riley: Middle East including—excluding Iraq?

Abrams: That was not my field, but I think I would say he sure wasn't in charge of the policy.

Leffler: But neither was Rice. It would have been Rumsfeld.

Abrams: Rumsfeld. That's the exception. That's why I say Middle East policy was run out of the NSC. Can you have a strong NSC in the middle of a war? I would say no probably. I don't hold that against Condi. I think that is inevitable, perhaps exacerbated by the fact that she wasn't a general. Did you have a strong NSC during the first Iraq war? You had Cheney and Powell—I wasn't there—really strong figures. What was their role vis-à-vis Scowcroft during the Iraq war? I don't know, but I think that would have to be the kind of question one would have to ask. There is a case where you had a fully qualified National Security Advisor on very good terms with the guys at DoD. I don't know.

As I think back to it as an outsider, you don't hear much about Scowcroft in that context. You hear about the generals and Cheney.

One difference of course is the First Lady. Everybody liked the First Lady. The First Lady was not a problem. The First Lady, when she was interested in something, Burma for example and human rights questions, that was great. It gave you more oomph.

Perry: Afghanistan and women?

Abrams: Yes, it was all positive. If they said, "Can you meet now?" and you said, "No, I actually have a meeting with the First Lady," nobody said, "Oh, boy," which would happen with Nancy Reagan. She was a tough customer. Given all the personnel issues—I don't know this from personal experience, but in a way history judges as deleterious. That did not happen in the case of Mrs. Bush.

Leffler: Can I bring you back to the role of the NSC in 2003 and '04 in terms of the deteriorating situation in Iraq? To what extent as you recollect at NSC—and this was not your job, but—at NSC staff meetings were people beginning to say or Condi Rice or Steve Hadley expressing concerns, apprehensions? This situation in Iraq is really getting worse? Take us through May, June, July, August, September and then into 2004. Was there much talk about it?

Abrams: There is talk about it, but it's not at those meetings. Again, there aren't all that many NSC meetings. There are a million PC—

Leffler: I meant staff meetings.

Abrams: There are a million PCs and DCs, and of course we have our staff meeting every morning. Not much talk about this. It is just a separate kind of loop bureaucratically. There were plenty of meetings. Frank Miller, Senior Director for Defense, was chairing a million meetings and I attended some of those. I think there is a feeling that yes, things are going badly. There is a feeling Steve would never do this or rarely do this. Among Senior Directors and others involved now you've got—I don't remember when [Douglas] Lute came on, but you had people—Brett McGurk, Meghan—you're beginning to have people who were doing Iraq and Afghanistan.

The scuttlebutt is that this is not going well. A lot of blame of the Pentagon, hard to work with Rumsfeld, Feith, and Wolfowitz for different reasons, but lots of annoyance, anger, frustration bureaucratically and a growing sense that this is not working. Why is it not working? We can't seem to fix it. That sense was there, I would say.

Riley: Do you see this registered on the President?

Abrams: I don't because I am not talking to him much about Iraq. He is not—when I'm talking with him or just with him, let's say, he is not saying that. That is, when I'm with him it's because we're about to do something with a foreigner most of the time. This is peripheral usually to those meetings or conversations. Once in a while he and Blair, for example, would do a video conference and they would decide they were going to discuss Israeli-Palestinian issues, so I would be there. I'd sit there and they would be discussing Iraq.

I think it's fair to say that he and Blair shared a lot more confidences about this. It's obvious. He would not say to Merkel, "You know, Angela, this is really falling apart." I was not privy really to those discussions.

Riley: How about temperamentally or physical wear and tear? Are you detecting any more of that on him?

Abrams: My experience is nothing changes over eight years. He gets grayer, which you don't see day-to-day. He looks older, that's obvious. I don't see a change in temperament. It's the same. As I think back, you're going to the Oval Office and he is joking around. I would not say, for example, that these instances where he is not in a good mood, where there are no jokes, where it is obvious he wants to get through this meeting fast, I would not say that you can graph this and it corresponds to events in Iraq. I think it corresponds to a meeting he was just at or something like that.

Riley: What about within the general staff itself, particularly the National Security staff? Were there individuals who suffered because of the turn of events? In other words, are there resignations? Are there people who are being marginalized because their counsel has proved to be either wrong or particularly unhelpful?

Abrams: I have no insight into Dick Clarke, but I would think that would be one case. The only case that—there is Rand Beers, who I think in an act of unbelievable disloyalty stays on and then goes and works for Kerry essentially an hour later—it is a week or something like that. So there is a case, presumably.

Within the White House, I don't see that. Of course as time goes by you have acts that are viewed as disloyalty. Scott McClellan, we all react the same way toward that, which is anathema, bad person, how could you do that to the President? But there is—I'm cognizant of the fact that there is plenty I don't see.

Riley: Sure.

Abrams: I'll give you one example. I have to see the President one day. I go to the Oval Office and the door is open and he is chatting with Jim Baker alone. He is saying to Jim Baker, and this will tell you the time period, September, maybe, 2004, "I haven't decided whether I'm going to get rid of Rumsfeld after the election. Maybe I won't decide until the election."

There are lots of conversations and lots of relationships he has that are personal and special, but I didn't see a lot of it.

Riley: From your inside perspective, should he have gotten rid of Rumsfeld earlier? Were there other pieces of the puzzle—we already said Presidents don't like to fire people.

Abrams: They don't like to fire—a study was done a couple of years ago about whether there is a connection between being fired and having a heart attack. What the doctors discovered is there is not, but there is a connection between firing people and having a heart attack. But you know, it is not that Presidents don't like people to *be* fired, they just don't like to fire them. Yes, I think the general view at the NSC by then was Rumsfeld was a problem. He was hurting the President and the time had come. This is way over our heads.

Riley: Of course, I'm merely asking your impression as someone who is inside.

Abrams: The scuttlebutt is this is not going well. This is a product of a million meetings where people are tired of Doug and talking too much and assuming greater knowledge than we all had. People are tired, frankly, of Paul for different reasons, just the sense he wasn't the kind of deputy he should have been. He was too much into policy and not operations. He wasn't running the building. Iraq is a mess and these guys aren't fixing it. So, yes, I think there is a sense— Obviously this is something you don't voice. Nobody is asking your opinion as to who should be Secretary of Defense. But, yes, sure.

There are certainly within the NSC different circles, but I think even beyond the NSC there is incredulity about the Harriet Miers nomination.

Riley: That's second term, right?

Perry: Two thousand five.

Leffler: Can you talk a little bit about Frank Miller, your colleague who is really a very key player on Iraq and Afghanistan? What is your impression of him?

Abrams: My impression of him was very positive. He is a good colleague. It's hard for me to judge at the time or now how good a bureaucrat is he within the Pentagon, but it seemed to me that he was good. He knew a lot of people; he had a lot of relationships, as I did at State. That is, he knew how to go around people, underneath them, over them, and when to do so. He had a lot of information loops that he was in. He was candid. My sense of him was that he was a very good colleague. I was very sorry when he left. He left in frustration. I wasn't clear exactly what he was frustrated at, partly Condi and Steve, I think, but I was sorry to see him leave.

Leffler: When you say Paul was not running the building well, what do you have in mind? You've said it two or three times in the last two days.

Abrams: Armitage is running the State Department with Powell. Anything you were to see in the State Department, OK, State Department is teensy compared to DoD. But he is the number two guy on every issue, on every question. He can make a decision or know when he can't make a decision and get you a decision instantly. It's great, bureaucratically. It's ideal bureaucratically. This is not the way DoD is run. All right, it can't be because you have JCS separately. There are two bureaucracies, not one. All of that understood, I think people did not think Paul was a good bureaucrat in the sense in part that he was not in the way that Armitage was helping Powell or Steve was helping Condi. He was not giving Rumsfeld that degree of help.

He was an idea man. He was the policy guy. He was, I think a lot of people felt, the Super Under Secretary for Policy. That's the criticism.

Riley: Could you say a bit more about civil-military relations as you witnessed them and give us your assessment? We've asked about various other actors, but about the senior military officers and advisors that you're dealing with at this period of time.

Abrams: You know, I have limited exposure to them. I think we all felt, I felt certainly, that if you're talking about civil-military relations in the sense of their relations with Condi or Steve, the President or the Vice President, that's fine. But it's obvious within the Defense Department

they're not fine. I really can't recall how much of that is based on observation and how much of that is based on being an American and living through that period.

Riley: Sure.

Abrams: These are really—

Riley: With that caveat, we understand.

Abrams: These are careful—you don't get to be a three- or four-star general without being a terrific bureaucrat. So you've got [Peter] Pace and [Richard B.] Myers or Myers and Pace, then Myers leaves, you've got Pace as Chairman. One of the things that was striking to me was I thought the quality varied a lot. Now, I'm not in their bureaucracy. I'm not judging—it's hard for me to judge.

Everybody liked Pace in particular. He was a very popular person. He is a very easy to get along with person too. One of the reasons people liked him was that there was a sense that he is not an empire builder. Some have called him too weak for this reason, I know, but I think relations with the JCS were pretty good, partly because Myers and Pace were easy to get along with. The people at the level just below I dealt with too. Not all the names come back.

I thought NSC–military relations were good. They were pretty candid, we got along. We tried to keep whatever problems they had with the civilians depending on—out of that direct relationship. The only problem I had was—there were a number of bad personnel decisions. I mentioned a few that I thought were bad. [William] Fox Fallon was a ludicrously bad decision for CENTCOM. He didn't know anything about the region. Having deprecated area knowledge, I realize it's bad of me to say that, but he came from—all right, he was one of our most distinguished officers and he had just been what, CINCPAC [Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific]. All you had to do was meet with him. I don't know military culture, but you meet with the guy and you think, *How did this happen? What is this bureaucracy where this man rises to the top?* He was a problem from Day One.

In fact, people who knew people like Frank Miller who knew the military, a lot of people said to me, it cannot be possible that Fox Fallon is going to be CINCCENT [Commander in Chief, U.S. Central Command], it's not possible. So I met him and I thought, *Oh, we're going to have trouble.* He was trouble from the first day. He was not following the policy line from the first day. Combatant commanders don't get fired a lot. It's a big deal, so that he was fired was a big deal. That's a reasonably rare occurrence. He dug his own grave. That's how really bad the military-civilian—I guess I would say that the White House relationship with the military was good despite the fact that it was not so good within DoD.

You do have the surge, which is interesting in the sense that it is the President saying, "I'm not interested in your advice. Thank you for your advice, but I'm not taking it." I felt, *What do I know about this?* Everything I've learned from Eliot Cohen. I thought the President was too deferential until the surge. It's not surprising. Most Presidents go in—maybe not [Dwight] Eisenhower—being deferential for the right reasons. But we see it now, we see all these—this year the Republican candidates saying we should do what the generals tell us to do. This is wrong.

The President was very deferential, I think, until he came to the conclusion that they didn't know what they were doing. Part of this, though, I think he should have intervened more in personnel decisions prior to that. I don't know these people, but it's therefore even more striking that you immediately even hear in my limited circles, "This is a really bad choice." Fallon is an example. There were others in this region. I thought Abizaid was a really bad choice. I think I was proved right. I think the President came somewhat to that view. So I think—it is obviously very hard in the first year of something like that, but I think one of the lessons here is to intervene, try to make fewer mistakes.

Leffler: What is interesting about that, just as a comment, is that one of the reasons why Rumsfeld had such bad relations was that he did intervene himself. Many of these people whom you've mentioned were Rumsfeld's choices, actually, because he inserted himself directly into the process, prided himself on his ability to select the right people as he thought they were. So in a sense then for Bush it would have been overriding his Secretary of Defense.

Abrams: You're right. From my perspective many errors were made.

Leffler: That's fair.

Abrams: How to fix that? I would say I don't know enough about it to have a firm view.

Leffler: Once again it brings you back to Rumsfeld as a real issue.

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: What is interesting is that President Bush did ask all his Cabinet members to resign at the end of the first—to submit—and of course that's when he doesn't ask Powell to come back but he does ask Rumsfeld, in essence.

Abrams: Yes.

Leffler: So there is that symbolic nonact there.

Abrams: Yes.

Riley: I'm not an expert in this area, but my recollection is that [Barry] Goldwater-[William] Nichols intervenes between your first tour in government and the second.

Abrams: Yes.

Riley: Are there any noticeable effects? Do you have any observations about whether that worked for better or worse in the 43rd Presidency?

Abrams: I haven't been asked that question before. I haven't thought about it. My immediate reaction was to say not much in the sense—think of Powell. I don't think Powell was empowered, or Powell would be dominant pre- or post-Goldwater-Nichols. As I think of the Chairmen it seems to me basically that their role in conduct is mostly the product of their personality. Service chiefs, combatant commander—I was going to say it does seem the

combatant commanders were bigger fish in the Bush administration than the Reagan administration, but we didn't have a war.

Riley: Right.

Abrams: That might have been the difference. Admiral [William] Crowe [Jr.] I remember as Chairman was a pretty big fish. I guess my sense is that it's not as important as it's made out to be.

Leffler: Could you talk a little bit about how the counterterrorist struggle, the hunt for al-Qaeda people actually affected relations with governments in the Middle East during your time there? Were you involved with this in ways? There was a lot of effort to get terrorists, right?

Riley: There were some renditions?

Abrams: Yes, the renditions we were unaware of. That was just a different loop. In the background it certainly leads to a greater desire for military and intelligence cooperation with everybody who is in power.

Leffler: Take the case of the Saudis, for example, yes.

Abrams: We grow apart in these years from Qatar because of al Jazeera and its problems. We grow closer to the Emirates. This is not mostly I think because of al-Qaeda; it is mostly because of the nature of their leadership. With the Saudis, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 there was a lot of talk about how they were going down. There were CIA analyses, there were academic analyses saying these people will not survive. I remember some CIA analyses, really on the fence these guys. They're going to need to get their act together in a way that is so unlikely for these 90-year-olds. They didn't get their act together.

There is a crisis in relations in 2001 prior to 9/11. There is another crisis in 2002, but I would say the War on Terror brings us together. They do their part in the sense that they destroy al-Qaeda within the Kingdom, mostly through actions of their own, not because we're doing it for them. They have strong leadership in this period under Abdullah [bin Abdulaziz Al Saud].

It certainly creates, as it does between Bush and Sharon, a much closer meeting of the minds; we're on the same side in this. This part of the kinetic and intelligence struggle is very close. Because of it I think we underplay what ought to be the other part of the struggle, which is the fact that al-Qaeda emanates from and is being supported by the Saudis. Now, we do make some progress in these issues. For example, if you look at 2001 or '02, every Saudi Embassy has a religious attaché who is actually a mullah who is handing out money to groups, half of which are murderers. I'm exaggerating here, but these are really extremist groups. This is reined in under pressure from the United States.

Leffler: Of course they've been doing that for decades.

Abrams: Yes, and we never said anything about it. Now we say something about it. We say, a) for us; b) for yourselves, you can't do this anymore. There are some changes. There are no longer religious attachés. They want, for their own reasons, to stop people they, the King,

recognizes are in some cases al-Qaeda types from getting government money, and I think they do a good job at that so that by the end of the Bush administration I think if you look at whether the Saudi Embassy in Jakarta has connections with Salafism or a jihadist group, that's fixed. But that's all that is fixed.

They are still of course spending huge amounts of money promoting Wahhabism, which is pretty close to Salafism, I think. The other thing is, of course, that is public money. What about all the private money, billions and billions of dollars around the world, which is Saudi money and is going to these groups including al-Qaeda? So we tell them that and they say they will fix it. We talk to them about, for example, the fact that you need to establish a charities commission that will regulate all of this, that will prevent it because a lot of this is going through so-called charities.

This probably happens in 2003, would be my memory. In 2008 they still haven't established a charities commission. It's all talk. I think it's still true today that lots of Saudi money is going to al-Qaeda and other jihadis. One of the reasons we did not lean on them hard enough on that is the cooperation on the more traditional forms of intelligence work. It's also true that it would be very difficult to do so because what we are actually saying to them is your belief system is in fact tantamount to terrorism and you should abandon your belief system. You had to say that carefully. But we didn't make as much progress as we should have.

Riley: Can you talk about the relationship between the White House and the intelligence community, particularly the CIA over time, from when you get there over the course of the administration? The sense is that there is some considerable alienation over time.

Abrams: I didn't have that feeling. I didn't really see much of Tenet. But let's see. Was he followed by [Michael] Hayden?

Riley: Porter Goss.

Abrams: Oh, Goss, briefly. This is another personnel mistake in the sense that it just didn't work. It's not a moral judgment; it didn't work. I don't remember—I'd see George Tenet at a PC once in a while, but I never worked with Tenet. Then I'd start doing Middle East stuff. So I did work with Hayden and of course we established the DNI [Director of National Intelligence]. I knew Negroponte pretty well, [John Michael] McConnell I didn't know but was at meetings with. That was not my impression that we had—by the time I'm looking at this, say 2003, it's easy to get along with McConnell, highly regarded professional, easy to get along with Hayden, highly regarded professional. I dealt with the Middle East types a lot, certainly constantly on the DI [Directorate of Intelligence] side. When I was in the field I'd meet the station chiefs. I had the feeling that relations were good.

Riley: That's why I asked the question.

Long: Was there much turnover in those—Goss had a reputation of being sent to clean house in the CIA. He was an opponent of the CIA infrastructure.

Abrams: No, there was one while Goss is there; Steve Kappes resigns essentially in protest. I guess it was when Hayden comes in, or he brings Kappes back. I worked fairly closely with

Kappes on different things including the Syrian thing, but that is an important moment because that is the moment at which Hayden is in a sense saying, "That's behind us, that's over, guys." Certainly if you were a CIA career person you would have thought, *OK, we're back. We've won.* Which, of course, improves the mood. We've excluded this alien object and things are going to be OK.

Riley: Which got melted.

Abrams: Things will be fine. I think they were fine in this narrow sense. That is, feelings, relations. Judging from meetings, I knew of course we had an intelligence director very much involved in this reorganization, creating DNI and so forth. My sense of it is that it's not a tense relationship. Lots of good personal relationships, relaxed banter, no tension.

Riley: In the bureaucracies did that manage to work out reasonably well from your perspective, the creation of the DNI?

Abrams: No. From my perspective a complete fifth wheel. Not a problem. For example, go to these meetings on the Syrian reactor, or another subject, the Palestinians. In Reagan days I'd go to these meetings and there would be a DO [Directorate of Operations] guy and a DI guy, maybe only a DO guy. Now of course you had the DNI guys. So what would happen before a meeting is you'd say, "I was in Israel last week. Let me just say what I found out. I talked to Olmert." Then, "Let's get an intelligence update." We had some satellite stuff. "You going to do that?" So the DNI guy would say to the CIA guy, "I don't know, you want to do it?" Complete fifth wheel, no added value.

This is just my perspective on the margins. Maybe it's quite different, but I didn't see it as a problem. They're not sitting there saying, "You're not speaking at this meeting." None of that. Partly because we're talking now about people who are CIA colleagues for 30 years and we're talking about Negroponte, who is very careful about this, wants to make it work. So I see it as a—and we also then begin to see it's growing like Topsy. I initially thought the DNI—somebody tells me at some point, "DNI, they're up to 3,000 people now." "What? I thought it was going to be 30 people." I view this all, from my perspective in those years, completely repetitive and useless. Not a problem, just a waste.

Riley: I think we touched on this yesterday, bouncing around here as we reach a conclusion, but do you have any observations about the immediate postwar leadership situation in Iraq? Garner I think you had said that didn't work. But there is sort of a mystery still I think about [Lewis Paul] Bremer and his understandings and his sources of authority and where the chains of command were.

Abrams: No information.

Riley: OK, do you have any comments about the reaction in the White House when he takes some of the major decisions he takes early on? Was it a surprise?

Abrams: I'm really not in those groups. Someone like Steve would be careful. If Steve is furious at Jerry Bremer, he is not going to let you know. It's not your business; he'll discuss it with the President or with General Lute.

Leffler: How did you see Condi Rice or Steve Hadley change over time? You talked about seeing no changes in President Bush. Did you see changes in Condi and Steve over time?

Abrams: Interesting question. My instinctive reaction is to say no and I'm trying to think if I actually do think that. Steve's style of operation does not change. He does not become strongly assertive. His work habits do not change, and that's bad in the sense that it matters less when he is Condi's deputy because her work habits are superlative. There is an occasional problem because he hasn't gotten through the papers. They're all someplace, but that's the lack of change.

Condi, I guess I'd say more moments of less relaxation, not surprisingly, I think. The Condi I saw as National Security Advisor was amazingly laid back when you consider what her job is, how many problems we have, the wars, 9/11, and the fact that she is actually doing an astonishing amount of work in an almost physical sense, what is going through her office. There is never a sense—for example, "I don't have time for you. I'm busy." Never. Now that's also true at State. There are many times when we'd have meetings, Condi and I, but more likely Condi and David and I would meet to talk about something. That's pretty much the same. In those meetings it's the same. I have really nothing to do this afternoon, so let's talk. She gives you that impression.

But there are other meetings where I think she seems a little bit more harassed where—here is a way of judging this. Condi in the first term has perfectly wonderful relations with the Israelis. The only exception is Silvan Shalom, the Foreign Minister, for a while, because he kept trying to insert himself into areas where neither we nor Sharon wanted him. So there is a certain amount of trouble dealing with him.

In the second term she has pretty bad relations with all the Israelis, particularly after Lebanon. Of course Iraq is a mess and we're now getting to the second half of her term, and the press, everybody is starting to write maybe she is not a good Secretary of State, what has she done. So I think she feels a little bit more pressure.

After Lebanon—this is probably a slight exaggeration but if it is an exaggeration only slight. She never had a good meeting with the Israelis. I don't recall a meeting that was not filled with difficulty and tension and disagreement, including Livni.

Perry: How did she respond in those meetings when they were tension-filled?

Abrams: She's tough in these meetings and aggressive in—I don't mean that as a negative comment. She's tough, she's pushy in the sense of you need to do this. In our own meetings, that is the U.S. government, this idea that we can't want peace more than they can [*banging table*]. "We've got two wars underway. We need this done. Don't tell me it's not in their national—it is in my national interest. I'm going to get—" and in this tone, quite—I really never heard in the first term. So she is pushing harder. I think there is a sense that a lot has gone wrong. Time is running out; we need to get some things done. As somebody I interviewed for my book said, it's not at all anti-Israel. It's, "You're not doing this. I need you to do this and I'm going to make you do it." So there's lots of—I mean she and Olmert at times could barely speak and are really arguing. That you see for the first time, which never happened with Sharon, saying to Olmert, "Before we start this meeting, I don't like to read about what happened in our last meeting in

Haaretz," to which Olmert replies, "Well, I don't like to read about it in the *Washington Post*." These are terrible meetings. They're awful. It gets worse.

I have all of this, some of this comes out in my book. It gets worse, where the day after Annapolis in the Oval Office Olmert says, "I want to thank you, Mr. President, for all you've done and I particularly want to thank Secretary Rice, to whom we are so grateful and we admire so much," and the President responds, "No, you don't, she pisses you off." He is aware of this, partly from me. Rice and Olmert then have an argument in the Oval Office.

The rest of us—these meetings, there are ten people in the room, are sitting there. It's like a tennis match, your head goes back and forth. You're thinking sometimes, *I cannot believe this is happening.* So it's bad. This is a product of the tensions of the second term, of wanting to do something, of a sense, I think—so some of this is personal, what have you done as Secretary. Some of it is she loves the President, as we all do, and he is getting murdered in the press, his popularity is way down and so forth. We're here to help him, we want to help him, what are we doing for him? What have we achieved for him? That's part of it. So I think life is hard at some points for her.

Leffler: How did you collectively feel—you stayed until the very end, right?

Abrams: The last day. On January 19th, I went into the Oval Office to say goodbye to the President.

Leffler: So you're going through in late 2008. You're not part of the horrendous financial crisis. Is there just an overall sense that this administration has not succeeded, or does the surge compensate for that?

Abrams: No, there is a sense of frustration because we know how much we've done and the country doesn't yet recognize it and they will. The President says this publicly. We all believe this. The surge in part. I didn't think the financial crisis was well handled. Of course to say that nobody is asking my opinion is quite an understatement, but I've met two, I think, three heads of Goldman Sachs. In my time I've met a lot of smart people who served—you have a meeting with them, of the Sam Huntington variety, and you come away thinking, *What a mind.* I never met a head of Goldman Sachs who left me with that opinion. And [Henry] Paulson didn't leave me with that opinion. I thought—just as an example, we should have sanctioned Iran's Central Bank and he wouldn't let us do it because he was sure of the impact it would have on world finance. You know, it's fine that you have an opinion, but he made $400 million and you didn't. He owns an island in the Bahamas and you don't. So this seems to be evidence that he knows more about this than you do.

I think the President actually—here I think—and again, what do I know about this? I'm standing around these occasional meetings, but this is a little bit like the early Bush with the military. What do I know about this? These guys know. Later he concludes they don't actually know, or some of them don't know and I know a lot about this. He is dumped into this financial crisis and he turns to Paulson as the guru. Personally I think Paulson fails. I think the President basically thought, *If he tells me we're in a crisis and I have to do this, we're going to do this, we have to do this, I'm not going to second-guess him. He knows about this and I don't.* But we did not

leave feeling we'd been part of a failed administration. At the secondary level that I was at, though obviously Steve felt that way too. We love the President. He's a great President, he's a great man. We did a lot of great things. It's like Harry Truman, whether it takes 10 years or 25 years, people will know. That was the zeitgeist.

Leffler: We're more or less near the conclusion, so what were you thinking were the great things that you had achieved, that would ultimately be recognized?

Abrams: Basically I guess I would say from my perspective it's the War on Terror, it's reorganizing the government to fight the War on Terror. It's preventing a recurrence for seven and a half years. From my point of view it's the Freedom Agenda. It's recognition by the United States that as the President said, in the long run this is not the way you achieve stability. Repression and stability do not go together.

Riley: Are there things that we should pay attention to that we're not in historical retrospect? Are there germs of things that are likely to produce fruit later on?

Abrams: We've touched on all of these. I think the President as a military leader is a very interesting question, his relations with his generals over time. I think it's worth looking—I have this view of the financial crisis and perhaps it is completely wrong, but I think given what a gigantic crisis this was and how much it meant for the country it's worth finding out more what happened.

Most leaders—I was thinking of Sharon for a minute there, and I think this is true of great politicians—have the ability to make a fairly cold-hearted judgment about people. They make their living assessing people. Bush is interesting in this sense because I think he does it but—some of his personnel errors are the failure of making cold assessments of people. They're too warmhearted. He is an interesting variety of this phenomenon. Reagan was famously ice cold in this sense, Bush not so. Maybe wrongly.

Riley: Interesting.

Abrams: I guess maybe one other thing. You may have done this already, sort of taking a look. Who you chose as your Chief of Staff is an interesting question. He had two. If you compare him to previous people—his father, like Ronald Reagan, wanted people who would wield an ax. He didn't. Andy Card and Josh Bolten are very nice people. Sure, they can be tough, but they're nothing like [John] Sununu or any of the Reagan people.

Riley: Don Regan.

Abrams: They're nothing like them at all. This is an interesting insight it seems to me into Bush, why them.

Riley: That is certainly worth following up as we go through.

Leffler: From your observation or what you heard from others, who do you think were the three most important influences, people, on George W. Bush?

Abrams: As President?

Leffler: As President.

Abrams: Condi is one of them. I think that's easy. I guess I would say Cheney for the first term. It's unclear to me whether in the context of his Presidency Mrs. Bush is in that group or not. From a policy point of view I think not.

Leffler: Where does Karl Rove stand in this?

Abrams: Probably he wouldn't have been President without Karl Rove; he wouldn't have been reelected without Karl Rove. But in my world Rove is not a key figure. Rove never attends a foreign policy meeting, never. I talked to him about things like Jewish community support for the President, human rights in Cuba, things that intersected between politics and foreign policy. I guess he might fit in that group, but from this NSC perspective, he's a small player.

You might want to say Paulson is a key figure in the sense that he determines how he responds to the crisis. I think that is a fair assessment.

Riley: Is it possible that his father is in that group?

Abrams: It is, clearly. One would have to exclude him with deliberation. I exclude him. I think that he tried very hard, that is, 41 tried very hard not to intervene. You had to do something extreme like saying something nice about Ariel Sharon to elicit a remark from him. This is the deepest, darkest secret, those one-on-one conversations. You didn't have that sense.

Once in a while—we briefed the former Presidents, for example, before the war in Afghanistan. I went with Condi to brief President Clinton in Washington. I alone flew out to Palm Springs to brief President [Gerald] Ford. Forty-one came into the White House and several of us, Condi and I and who knows, two or three others briefed him. He wasn't around a lot; he was around certainly more than any other previous President. Although Clinton came in one time, one photo on the wall of my office now, Clinton with his arm around me in the corridor of the White House, which he autographed.

Riley: Can you tell us how those briefings went? How interactive?

Perry: Compare and contrast the Presidents and their responses?

Riley: Was Clinton probing and pushing?

Abrams: We briefed Clinton. He had [Samuel] Sandy Berger with him. This is Afghanistan, this is the good war. Yes, there were questions, they were not passive. Likewise President Ford. I don't have a strong memory of this, but it was not an unfriendly meeting in any way. How do you know this? How do you now that? What do you think? How are you going to get this done? How are the Brits? How are the Paks behaving? The same briefing you would have given to George Shultz. I don't think the President's father had a policy influence.

The note I wrote because I didn't want to forget it. The President met with a bunch of us from

the NSC about November of 2011, and one of the things he said about President Obama was, "I wasn't offended, I wasn't insulted by Jimmy Carter. What did I care? I was damaged by Jimmy Carter. The policies of the United States were made more difficult by his telling people to vote against us, for example, in the Security Council. You're not going to hear a word from me about President Obama. I just vowed at that time I am never going to do this. I'm not telling you what to say or not to say, I'm not saying I like or don't like what Dick is doing. I'm just saying I am never going to do what Jimmy Carter did." He had good relations with everybody but Carter. He had a perfectly good relation with Clinton, partly because his father was then doing stuff with Clinton, but it wasn't just that. Why wouldn't they have a good relation? Clinton was not being particularly difficult. Carter was the exception with whom he had no relation. He had none with the administration given it was just a giant pain.

Perry: Did you say anyone briefed him?

Abrams: I think Condi did, that was the short straw. Maybe Steve went down to Atlanta, somebody did. I never heard a remark from Condi or Steve or anybody else suggesting that 41 had attempted to influence policy.

Riley: We always say at this point that we've never exhausted all the topics, but we do a pretty good job of exhausting the subject. You have been amazingly cooperative, and your candor is appreciated. This will be an interview that people will consult for a long time and we're grateful for your public service.

Abrams: I would say not for a long time but then for a long time after that. [*laughter*] This has been a great pleasure for me. It's really interesting to get all these questions never asked before. I run into Paul or John Hannah, and we have a two-minute conversation usually about current affairs, not about 2003. One doesn't do much of this, and it's fascinating.

Riley: Glad you enjoyed it, and I hope if it comes up in conversation that you'll encourage your colleagues to participate. We're doing reasonably well with returns, but busy people have a hard time justifying taking this amount of time out of their schedules.

Abrams: We delayed this.

Riley: Why?

Abrams: Because my initial view was I should do this, but it's just a giant pain. Why do these people want more than an hour? I agreed out of a sense of responsibility. It never occurred to me that I would actually enjoy doing it. If you run into a recalcitrant Bushie, get in touch with me.