



Harry Kreisler: Welcome to a “Conversation With History.” I’m Harry Kreisler of the Institute of International Studies. Our guest today is Stephen Biddle who is the Military Fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations and an advisor to General Petraeus in Iraq. Steve, welcome back to the program.

Stephen D. Biddle: Thanks for having me.

HK: Let’s look at the initial strategy of the Iraq war, the first phase of the war. What was bad about that strategy and why didn’t it work?

SB: Well, I think the strategy certainly that we had under General Casey was a serious mistake because it was built on a mistake and assumption about what the nature of the underlying conflict was. Iraq is clearly a guerilla war, car bombings, assassinations. Most Americans, I think understandably, when they look at something that seems superficially guerilla-ish tend to think of it in terms of our most prominent guerilla involvement ourselves, which was Vietnam. Unfortunately guerilla tactics get used in the service of many very, very different strategic ends, and the strategic ends being served by our opponents in Vietnam were dramatically different than the strategic ends being pursued in Iraq. That in turn means that the nature of the war is different, in ways that would make the things that might have made sense in Vietnam seriously problematic in Iraq. And I think what you had happening early in the Iraq conflict is because of this largely implicit assumption that if it’s a guerilla war, the way you ought to wage it is to go back and fix the mistakes we made in Vietnam, was a strategy and a policy that represented, mostly implicitly but nonetheless powerfully, an attempt to undo the mistakes of the 1960s and get it right this time. And the result of that was a series of policies that actively made things worse in Iraq rather than better.

HK: Now let’s be more specific about the differences between Vietnam and Iraq, because this is an analogy that comes up again and again.

SB: Oh, it is. The critical difference between Vietnam and Iraq is that Vietnam underneath it all was a classical ideological insurgency whereas Iraq is not. Iraq is what I would call communal civil war. A classical ideological insurgency is at the end of the day a war of ideas. You have an insurgent

group that's making a claim to represent the interests of everyone in the country against a government that they see as narrow, particularist, often class based, and a puppet of foreign interests, in Vietnam a puppet of the United States, and you have a government that's attempting, by contrast, to reach out to a relatively undecided majority of the population and saying, no, no, no, our ideas for how to govern this country are better than those, better for you than those of this insurgent group that's claiming that we're a narrow particularist defender of foreign interests. And these two groups, the insurgency and the government, through a combination of persuasion and really brutal negative coercion, compete for loyalty of the population at large. Iraq, by contrast, is not a war of ideas. Iraq is primarily a war of identity in which Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds are all desperately afraid of one another and for perfectly understandable reasons fear that if one of their internal rivals captures the coercive instruments of a modern state, the result would be genocide visited against them, but there's nobody in Iraq floating manifestos for what form of government would best serve the interests of all Iraqis because no one is trying to persuade anybody else. The groups are hardened, mutually exclusive, and the conflict is essentially zero sum. What this means, however, is that in a classical ideological insurgency, because at the end of the day it's a war of ideas, you can in principle change people's ideas, persuade people to side with you rather than the other side and win by drying up the opponent's support base and causing the opposing effort to just wither on the vine and blow away. You can't change people's identity the way you can change their ideas. Strategies designed to win hearts and minds in a classical insurgency, a la Vietnam, make no sense in a communal civil war of identity in which people's ideas, and their hearts and minds, if you like, aren't really up for grabs. And when you look in particular at the kinds of strategies that we tried to adopt by the early 1970s, late 1960s, in Vietnam to win hearts and minds, the standard kind of three-part ideological counterinsurgency cookbook is either irrelevant or actively harmful, if you then misapply it in a context of communal civil war as opposed to classical ideological counterinsurgency.

HK: So, what sorts of things was Casey and the previous command trying to do in Iraq because of this mistaken perception of what the situation was on the ground?

SB: Well, I think if you look at the big three elements of U.S. strategy under Casey, what you'll find is something that would have made a terrific deal – a great deal of sense in Vietnam but was poorly suited to Iraq. So, for example, the three pillars of U.S. strategy under Casey were first of all, political reform, central in the form of democratization, early elections...

HK: And at the central level.

SB: Well, at the central level but with aspirations to extend it down to the local level as quickly as possible. And it's a great idea if it's a classical ideological counterinsurgency. It takes the wind out of the insurgent sails, defeats their argument that the government is illegitimate and unrepresentative. You put that same policy though into a communal civil war of identity, especially early on when sub-national sectarian and ethnic identities are just beginning to take shape – and what you do is you dramatically accelerate the process of breaking the society down into its component factional parts. Overwhelmingly the easiest way for me to get votes as perhaps a Shiite

politician in Iraq in, let's say, 2004 is to demonize some group that my natural constituency is already somewhat afraid of, so I campaign on the basis of elect me or these demon Sunnis are going to take over the government and visit genocide on you. Sunnis, if they had participated, had the same incentives, Kurds had the same incentives – the electoral process accelerates the breakdown and the centrifugal crackup of Iraqi society. So, the first key element of our strategy, rapid democratization, would have been helpful in Vietnam, actively made things worse in Iraq. Second key element was economic reform, development aid to try and facilitate economic growth in Iraq. Again, it's a great idea in a classical ideological insurgency, it gives everyone a stake in the success of the government, it tends to take the wind out of the sails of the insurgents' argument that the government is out to impoverish the average member of the public. In a situation of communal civil war it's still a good thing to do for a variety of reasons, most of them normative actually, I just think morally it's the right thing for us to try and repair as much of this economy and society as we can, but it's very unlikely to get you much traction in terms of actually resolving the conflict. I mean, at the end of the day the primary underlying driver of conflict in Iraq is extraordinary levels of fear. These communities are desperately scared of mass violence at the hands of the other. Given that, let's look at how things look from the standpoint of an 18-year-old Shiite in Sauder City, for example. The Americans are coming to me and saying, "We want you to make nice with these Sunnis and engage in some sort of power sharing political compromise deal, and in exchange for that we will repair the local clinic, or we'll clean up the garbage, or we'll reduce the sewage problem, we'll keep the electricity on for a little longer." If I do these things that the Americans want and I let these Sunnis into the government, the odds are very good, I think, that in a year or two when they capture the rest of it, they're going to take me and everyone else I know, line me up in front of a brick wall and shoot me. In exchange for that, the Americans will build a clinic and keep the electricity on longer? I mean, the scale, the scope, the gravity, of the stakes here are just wildly incommensurate. When people are worried about mass violence, promises of economic redevelopment are just going to pale into insignificance. So, with respect to the economic leg of this three-legged strategic stool, it's probably a good idea, it's just not likely to get you very far. The real problem is the third leg of the three-legged strategic stool of the Casey years and before, which is the security dimension. The primary goal of U.S. security policy in Iraq under Casey and before was to rapidly build up an indigenous Iraqi security force to whom we could hand off the fighting and allow us to go home. Once again, in a classical ideological insurgency it's a great idea. The locals are the ones who have the biggest stake in the fight, after all, they're willing to put out levels of effort that would keep a large military force in the field for a long period of time in ways that we probably would not be, it puts savvy locals on the street as opposed to clueless foreigners who don't speak the language and can't communicate with the people on the street corner. Great idea if it's a classical ideological insurgency. In the context of a communal civil war over identity it's like throwing gasoline on the fire. We think when we build up the Iraqi government security forces that we're building up a disinterested nationalist institution that can defend all Iraqis alike. What Iraqi Sunnis have thought, when we built up the Iraqi security force, is that we're building up a Shiite sectarian militia on steroids. Sunnis, especially through the Casey years, believed that the government had been captured by their Shiite sectarian rivals, and they believed that the security instruments of that captured government were therefore tools of their Shiite rivals. In a war that they thought was

literally over life, death, genocide and survival, the stronger we built up their sectarian internal rivals in their eyes, the more they dug in their heels and the harder they fought back. Because how could they do otherwise? I mean, they can't very well say, "Okay, do with us as you will." They think that means genocide. So, by trying to build up an indigenous Iraqi security force to whom we could hand off the fighting, we ended up making the fighting worse, not better, and making the stakes for the Sunni side in particular higher, not lower. So, all of this taken together, I think, actively tended to make things worse.

HK: We have a new commander now, General Petraeus, who seems to be turning around some aspects of the set of problems we have there. I'm curious – I want to talk a little about him and what he's trying to do there. Before we do that, how would you compare him with Casey as a military leader? What are the – is it a generational difference, or what, that has allowed for a change in the perception?

SB: Well, I think there's a collection of things taken together. In part, Petraeus' advantage of coming later, so by the time Petraeus took command it had been pretty well understood by everyone, including Casey, that the strategy we had in place was failing. So, Petraeus knew he was – that's clearly a bad idea, whatever else you do, don't try that. So, he had the advantage of hindsight in that sense. I think Petraeus is also an unusually thoughtful, tweedy, intellectual style of general officer. I mean, he's not typical of the general officer corps in any of the American military services, and I think in a situation where getting the war right conceptually, understanding the nature of the conflict, is an absolutely important first step for developing a sound strategy, having an unusually thoughtful, unusually intellectual officer in charge, I think, is a good thing.

HK: Now you are an advisor to Petraeus and you're one of a group that he has drawn on to rethink our strategy there. Talk a little about that process, how it came about and how you think it's contributing to a change in thinking.

SB: Well, I was a member of a roughly twenty-person team of Ph.D.s and senior military officers who General Petraeus convened in Baghdad last spring, March and April of 2007, to assess the current joint campaign plan for the waging of the war, assess the situation, figure out what was going well, what was going badly, what should change, what should stay the same. The group was brought together for about five weeks. We spent some time initially traveling around the country, doing fact finding, and then we were essentially locked into a couple of rooms in the embassy annex and told to come up with an analysis. So, you took twenty very strong willed, very – fairly senior people, and told them to butt heads and come up with some understanding of the situation, which would then inform General Petraeus' development of the new joint campaign plan, which was then formalized in mid-summer. I had not actually expected to be asked to do this. I had been told by friends on General Petraeus' staff that my name had been forwarded for his consideration as a potential member of this advisory group but I knew that Petraeus had read my foreign affairs article on Iraq and didn't like it.

HK: Which raised this communal argument, basically, about the nature of the conflict.

SB: That's right. It essentially made the argument I just made about the problems of prior strategy and the kinds of direction the strategy should take as a result. And my experience of Army general officers has been that by and large you don't increase your odds of being asked to give them advice by being known as having disagreed with them in the past. So, I thought it was nice that my name had been forwarded but I didn't cancel any meetings, I didn't get any shots, I didn't check any life insurance policies. I thought the odds of being asked to do this were very, very low. I was quite astonished then when, in fact, I get an email from him asking me to serve on this group.

HK: And so, what is the new strategy? What does this conceptual insight lead to in terms of, well, how do we implement it, what do we do?

SB: Well, the new strategy is all about trying to get a compromise political reconciliation deal between Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis. Originally when the surge began, before the new strategy was formally articulated, interestingly we didn't have a new campaign plan, a new set of orders for waging the war until mid-summer. The idea set that differed so much from the Casey plan when Petraeus took over was beginning to be implemented on a tentative basis as early as January and February. Originally that idea set focused on the problem of getting a safe negotiating environment in which you could imagine national level leaders of these three internal factions coming to a power sharing deal, that the idea was the background violence level, especially in the national capital, is so high that we can't possibly get the kind of power sharing compromise that normally makes sense for terminating a communal civil war. We recognize that this is essentially a communal civil war, we recognize that in order to get a resolution you have to have a power sharing deal yielding a cease fire. The reason we can't get it, so the logic went, is with a car bombing every thirty seconds no one feels safe for making compromises that involve inherently a substantial degree of risk. The first thing we've got to do, therefore, so went the argument, is increase the U.S. troop count to the point where we can pacify the national capital, get the violence level down and create a safe space within which national leaders could negotiate and reach a deal. The increase in troops that started in January and didn't actually reach fruition until early summer did, in fact, depress the background level of violence. The original logic for the surge, however, that if you build it they will come, if you create the safe space they will then reach a deal, hasn't come to fruition. The violence is down, the political deal hasn't happened. Interestingly though, although the original idea for the surge was very much oriented at a national level grand compromise bargain, as we were starting to implement this a largely unplanned, largely unanticipated second route through which you might get something like compromises yielding a national cease fire dropped into our lap more or less accidentally. And the group that I was part of in the spring saw the beginnings of this and put a great deal of emphasis on furthering and accelerating it. The result was what has now sometimes been referred to as the bottom up, as opposed to the original top down, approach to reconciliation.

HK: And here we're talking about, for example, the arming of the Sunni tribes which has helped create security in those areas where they're implementing self-governance in a way.

SB: Well, intuitively that's right. We haven't actually had to arm any of them yet. Interestingly enough, in Iraq there are so many arms around that's not something they need from us, but the basic idea is to build on the Anbar awakening, as it's sometimes called, this changing of sides by a series of Sunni tribal sheiks in Anbar province, beginning actually before Petraeus took over but accelerating dramatically through the course of the winter in 2007, in which they agreed to stop shooting at us and the government of Iraq and turn their arms instead on al-Qaeda in Iraq, their erstwhile Sunni allies. And in exchange for an agreement to do that we would recognize them as the primary local security providers in their neighborhoods, we would give them uniforms, other equipment, instruction as necessary, and we would provide the firepower to back them up in their fight against al-Qaeda in Iraq.

HK: When one looks at the big picture here, over time and even into the present period, there seems to be a disjunction between what we might call the military components of strategy and the political components of strategy, and here I have in mind that our grand strategy in Iraq was democratization, and you've just indicated why it wouldn't work. On the military side, especially under Secretary Rumsfeld, was an emphasis on what technology can do, what a few troops could do in defeating the enemy. Now your scholarship has actually, in your book on military victory, has pointed the way in helping us understand why the technology fix doesn't really work and it's not actually happening. Talk a little about that because this disjunction between political and military occurs, it seems to me, at the strategic level and at the tactical level.

SB: One of the various features of the technology oriented revolution in military affairs argument that was so popular for the last generation and that the Rumsfeld Defense Department was so fixated on is that if we somehow developed new technologies that would allow us to find any target anywhere and kill any target anywhere, that would translate in a simple, unproblematic way to securing American interests in the world. And in the 2003 campaign to topple Saddam, for example, implicit in the campaign plan was this idea that if we destroy all of Saddam's tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, and weapons of mass destruction delivery systems, the rest will be fairly straightforward. I mean, the man will have no ability to defend himself anymore, his government will fall, and then we'll be able to create the society that we want to in Iraq. This tremendous interest in, and emphasis on, the potential of new technology had a tendency then to focus attention on the things that technology can do, which at the end of the day, in terms of the hierarchy of military objectives, are primarily tactical in nature, destroying things, breaking military organizations, maybe even taking and holding ground under the right circumstances. So, there's very, very little thought about how do you go about getting a new form of political organization in Iraq that serves American and Iraqi interests as opposed to Bathist particularist interests. We did a good job of removing the Iraq military from the field in 2003. The technology was helpful in doing that. It said very little about what happens next, and what happens next involves a variety of things that technology has very little ability to influence. And in particular, there's very little that American technology could do that could, for instance, reassure non-Bathist Sunnis that a Shiite government wasn't going to result in mass violence against them, or reassure Iraqi Kurds that a government

dominated by Shiites, at the end of the day, would respect their desire for autonomy and self-government in the north. These kinds of conflicting political interests were not the sorts of things that a putative revolution in sensing and precision strike technology would help you very much with. Because we were so focused on what technology was doing to warfare, it contributed to an inattentiveness to the ultimate political goal of the campaign in the first place, which was to create a different Iraqi society than existed before.

HK: So, this problem - namely okay, you knock the dictator off, you win the first phase – requires for its ultimate success, in a way, to address the second phase, which is really stabilization and making sure that the political future that you envision is possible. Now a key element seems to be having enough troops to do that, to at least make that transition before you actually move in to reconstruction. In your book, as I recall, you argued that there tended to be on the part of those who embrace technology a realization of, on the one hand, the need for personnel on the side with the technology, but also the need to respond to the other side as it confronts the technology that the adversary has.

SB: One of the great challenges for advocates of this kind of technological revolution is you've only got so much money to spend and people, troop strength, infantry strength on the ground, is tremendously expensive. Not only do salaries cost a lot but equipping them costs a lot, housing them costs a lot, training them costs a lot, exercising them costs a lot, and boy, their retirement and healthcare is tremendously expensive. So, if you really believe that technology has radically changed the nature of warfare, the last thing you want is a huge investment in all this sunset legacy, labor intensive ground force strength because it just eats up the resources you need to transform the nature of our sensing and precision strike technology. So, the Rumsfeld Defense Department was actively trying to shrink the Army and the Marine Corps in ways that sure enough, would enable them to buy more of the technology but would create big problems in terms of the larger objective of the war effort in the first place. Military force is an instrument to political ends. I mean, the goal in Iraq was to create a different political structure there, it wasn't to destroy X number of T-72s and BMP armored personnel carriers. Not having enough ground force troop strength made it very, very difficult, once we had done the easy job of destroying Saddam's military, to reassure all of Iraq's internal communities that they weren't going to be the subject of mass violence at the hands of their internal rivals, because what we did was to create a security vacuum and not fill it with anything because we simply didn't have the troop strength in country to provide that alternative source of local street level security that would lead people to say, "Yeah, I don't trust those Sunnis but I'm not desperately afraid of them because there's an American platoon that I see coming through the neighborhood every day, and I trust that they're not going to line me up in front of a brick wall and shoot me. Therefore I can be tolerant of Sunni involvement, for example, in the government. I can be tolerant of the construction of a non-sectarian society because there's somebody here who's going to protect me against people I don't trust." That's labor intensive. That kind of security provision requires visible presence by people walking on the street, and we just didn't have enough of that in 2003 to establish that kind of confidence.

HK: What does a military look like that prepares for a future situation like we've just encountered for Iraq? We have to defeat the leader, the despot, the tyrant, whoever, we have to transition. But then what are the kinds of functions that are then required, if we've ensured security, and is the military the best organization to do that?

SB: Well, let me present what I think is the emerging conventional wisdom on that view, and then I may challenge it a bit. The emerging conventional wisdom on that is destroying the opponent's military has become so easy for a high-tech force like ours that it can be subcontracted out to the Air Force. So, that job can be handled by a relatively small number of very high technology standoff precision wielders, typically from the air. The bit problem, so this argument goes, is what happens next, providing this kind of local security that's required to enable a society to rebuild, and that's inherently manpower intensive. Therefore what we ought to do is take the majority of the U.S. military, the Army and the Marine Corps, shrink the Air Force and the Navy, because you don't need a lot of standoff precision to do that job anyway, swing those resources into the ground forces, reduce the capital intensity of the ground forces themselves, get rid of the tanks, and the heavy artillery, and the combat engineering, and the air defense, and all those things, not to worry, those jobs are easily performed by the Air Force from standoff precision, and instead let's increase infantry strength, let's increase military police strength – I mean, who better to provide the policing work to make people feel secure in their neighborhoods than police. If it's going to be U.S. deployment into a foreign land it'll probably be military police but ideally you'd want police to do that, so you'd want more infantry, more military police, more civil affairs officers, Army officers who know how to keep an electrical power grid running, who know how to run a municipal government, who know how to make sure that the garbage gets collected and the streets stay clean, so we want lots of civil affairs capability. You want lots of special forces who have intensive training in local culture, local language, local social organization in forums of the world where we may have to do this, and connect as go-betweens to communicate with local leaders in ways that will enable this large infantry, military police and civil affairs force to function effectively. And last but not least, you would want to have equipment for these kinds of large troop count, generally speaking labor and not capital intensive, forces that will at least enable them to travel around at relatively modest risk to the kinds of unsophisticated, low-tech insurgent opposition that they're likely to encounter in these kinds of missions. So, instead of these Abrams tanks and Bradley infantry fighting vehicles that we're going to cash in because they're too expensive and suited only to a form of warfare that we're handing off to the Air Force, we instead want some form of wheeled, lightly armored vehicle that's oriented towards protecting its occupants against mines, improvised explosive devices, the kinds of leave-behind, stay-behind, safe but unsophisticated military capabilities that you would expect insurgents and criminals to wield against this kind of force. So, there's a lot of interest in re-equipping the Army and the Marine Corps with, for example, things like the MRAP or the mine resistant armor protected vehicle that's now coming into service in Iraq. If you do all those things though, you end up with a very, very different military than today's.

HK: And a very expensive military? Is it more expensive?

SB: Yes, tremendously expensive, because not just do you have more people, and people are expensive, but you're going to re-equip all those people. I mean, the bill for buying new fighting vehicles for this larger ground force is staggeringly large, so there's a huge cost associated with the kind of transformation that would be involved in carrying out this agenda.

HK: So, would the two arms of the military be able to live together as one force transitioned to the other one?

SB: Well, there're a whole collection of institutional and organizational challenges in doing this. Nobody in the military wants to be considered a second class citizen or to be in a unit that's considered old-fashioned and out of date, because it's not considered career enhancing to be a brigade commander of a sunset brigade that no one would ever actually use because it's old-fashioned. So, as you go through this transformation, if you pursue it, you need to make sure that you don't create the military equivalent of ghettos. You don't want to retain a couple of old-fashioned brigades or divisions to handle unfashionable missions while the rest of the Army transitions into this counterinsurgency force because everyone's afraid that all the talented officers will gravitate to the counterinsurgency force, no one will be left to put talented leadership in the other units, and you'll end up with this caste system developing in the military. So, there're a variety of challenges associated with transforming in a way that keeps everyone moving forward and keeps the talent uniformly spread across the organization. There're also difficulties in keeping the kind of tight inter-service relationships that we've developed recently in the American military in which the Air Force supports the Army in a seamless, efficient, responsive way as you change the nature of the organizations that're being supported, and you change their mission and emphasis and focus away from the kind of war that the Air Force focuses on and toward the kind of counterinsurgency and nation building effort to which the Air Force has a harder time contributing. You don't want to create services whose view of the world, and mission orientation, and value structure becomes so different that they can't interact very effectively when they do find themselves fighting state militaries. I think there's also, in some ways, a bigger problem on the horizon in that this entire new transformation agenda really involves taking a military that was pretty good at a variety of things but in a sense was a jack of all trades and perhaps a master of none. It was probably a master of high intensity major warfare against other states, but as a secondary accident [?] it was okay, tolerable, than other things, and restructuring it around one particular mission in ways that could very well make it even worse at the other secondary missions than the U.S. Army was in 2001-2002, when its focus was on major combat and counterinsurgency was secondary. This kind of transformation agenda creates a very specialized military instrument and we need to think carefully about whether that's a good trade.

HK: So, in a way, what you're saying is that we might be preparing to fight the last war which we're still in to the detriment of broader strategic issues such as the rising of China in Asia.

SB: The rising of China in Asia, or for that matter, a change in the nature of the kind of non-state opponent that everybody right now is so focused on. Right now, the conventional wisdom is the

future of warfare isn't fighting states. Yeah, yeah, there's China off on the horizon, we'll let the Navy and the Air Force worry about that, maybe in ten or fifteen years they'll become a great power, who knows. The future of war, so goes the popular argument today, lies in things like the Iraqi insurgency, these sub-state guerilla, militia, irregular military organizations, and the argument that we should transform the military around this low-tech, high manpower conception designed to do a better job of waging counterinsurgency in Iraq is built on this notion that the future of non-state warfare looks a lot like Iraq. I mean, among the various ironies of this is that the way to be seen as being an out-of-the-box, futuristic, forward looking thinker at the moment is to re-orient the military around fighting the most immediately previous war in Iraq. I think there are a variety of reasons to suppose though that this conception of the nature of future warfare against non-state enemies may be very narrow and particularist, and we could very well, I think, end up in situations where, in fact, the nature of non-state military opposition could very well change in ways that could make this very specialized military that we're creating on the basis of our experience in Iraq from 2003 to 2007 much less capable than we think.

HK: Does the Lebanon war of 2006 auger well for a decision to repeat the Iraq war?

SB: I think the 2006 Lebanon campaign is quite fascinating in this context. I mean, Israel, a westernized state military, fights Hezbollah, this transnational, non-state, irregular guerilla organization. Most people would have imagined that it would look kind of like Iraq. The Israelis, interestingly, prior to 2006, had essentially bought both of these American revolution and warfare arguments, that for state opponents like Syria they bought the high-tech revolution argument, the Israeli air force will deal with that through standoff precision strike. The ground forces, they thought, are dealing with the future of non-state opposition in irregular methods, and so they were in the process of transforming the Israeli ground force to deal with the Intifada by making it lighter or more personnel intensive, and by focusing it not on conventional warfare against a sophisticated enemy but on policing, and counterinsurgency, and pacification, and population security for controlling a Palestinian population in the occupied territories. And especially they had already changed the training syllabus of the Israeli ground forces to emphasize skills necessary to the Intifada, de-emphasize traditional war fighting, combined arms techniques. Then they invade Lebanon south of the Litani River and they discover that Hezbollah has actually developed a surprisingly traditional, surprisingly conventional style of military operations. If you look at least what's been published about Hezbollah's behavior in 2006, their defensive doctrine in the south of Lebanon looked an awful lot like the Wehrmacht's defensive doctrine on the eastern front in World War II, very sophisticated use of local cover and concealment, a hedgehog defense and depth system oriented around control of fortified villages at critical road junctions, and a substantial ability to reduce the ability of Israeli standoff precision to find and destroy targets in advance. The result of a non-state enemy which had nonetheless developed the skill set required to fight in a surprisingly conventional way was when a state military like Israel that had stopped training for conventional warfare and had started to restructure itself in the way we're now talking about doing, crossed the border and entered Lebanon, is that it absolutely had its hands full, and they had a tremendous amount of difficulty trying to recover these kinds of traditional, classical combat skills for fighting a

non-state enemy who had adopted a way of fighting that looked a lot less like the Iraqi insurgency and a lot more like better trained state opponents. And the result, I think, was very near defeat for a state military at a huge numerical advantage against a supposedly unsophisticated non-state opponent.

HK: What you're saying, I think, if I can try to sum up, is that warfare changes but not as much as we think when we embrace the new formats, the new technologies, and so on, and that what really is required here is a kind of flexibility, a nuanced perception of what's going on. But then my question is if a small state like Israel fails in this regard, what happens to a large empire like the United States with such a large global military force?

SB: Well, the kind of preparation that's necessary for this sort of future is very, very challenging for the United States, especially given the point, as you suggest, that we Americans are so fascinated by change and novelty that we tend to overlook long trends of continuity in the nature of war, and in this particular context I don't think we can safely assume that warfare has now been transformed to the point where opposition will be exclusively unskilled, irregular, unsophisticated guerilla armies of the kind that we have often faced in Iraq, nor can we assume, however, that the opponent is exclusively sophisticated, traditional, conventional military organizations, whether they be in the hands of people like Hamas, or someone else. We're going to face a future in which, I think, we're going to see both, and the difficulty here is that that means that we then can't optimize the U.S. military around any of them. Now this is a problem for structure and design to some degree, I mean, how many infantry brigades do we own as opposed to how many tank brigades, and so on. The biggest problem, however, is our training syllabus and the way we prepare our troops. The U.S. military is accustomed to being exceptionally good at what it does. What it would like to do, if you let it, is to say the future is X, the future is insurgency and counterinsurgency, or the future is major warfare against other states, so that it can focus on that and get extremely proficient at it. If the reality though is that we can't rule out sophisticated opponents or unsophisticated opponents, and the demands of those kinds of warfare are different, the military is going to have to split its attention among very different activities in ways that's going to make it impossible for them to be as proficient at any of them as they remember having been in major warfare prior to 2003. And the culture of the institution is going to resist that. In a sense what I'm arguing is that to meet the demands of the future is going to require mediocrity at everything. To become extremely proficient at one thing is to become unacceptably incapable at something else. We can't tolerate that in a future in which we're going to encounter both of these kinds of challenge, and that's going to mean that the military is going to have to deliberately accept not being as good at major combat as they were before 2003 and not being as good at counterinsurgency as they are right now. They're going to have to tolerate being okay but not as good as the officers know that they could be at everything all at once, and that's going to be a very, very hard thing culturally and institutionally for the U.S. military.

HK: If you were advising a presidential candidate or a future president, what is the nature of the political problem that what you've just said poses? Because there're going to be real challenges in following through on your insight and making it happen.

SB: There are. I think for a presidential candidate the first order of business in this is to repair the nature of civil/military relations in the United States. We're at a very problematic moment in the relationship between political authorities and the military as an institution as a result of the frictions of first, the Clinton years in which the military was so distrustful of the values and directions and goals of the civilian government that it fought back in ways that bordered on the insubordinate. Then you got a 180-degree change in the Bush administration in which a very assertive civilian regime dominated the officer corps and suppressed dissent from the officer corps in a way that produced bad or insufficient military advice. We're now in an environment where the military is going to be asked to do, I think, something that it doesn't want to do, split its attention in ways that prevent them from being as proficient as they want in anything in particular. That's going to create a lot of potential friction. If we get either of those two solutions, an insubordinate military or an excessively subordinate military, this won't work very well. It's going to require a very difficult process of reconstructing a relationship between the civilian and the military characterized by what Eliot Cohen has called an unequal dialogue and productive tension in which the military is subordinate but makes its views known, the civilian government is in control but tolerates dissent. That's a very, very hard balance to maintain.

HK: Before we can get to that national debate on that subject we're going to have to solve this Iraq conundrum which I want to go back to, because the political momentum at home seems to be for withdrawal. What would be the consequences of a precipitous withdrawal, and then is this new Petraeus strategy attempting to prepare us for withdrawal in the mid-term?

SB: Well, let me set the question of withdrawal into the context of the requirements of the civil war termination, and conflicts like this. And in particular, if you view this as the kind of communal civil war we've been talking about and not as an ideological counterinsurgency there are two key requirements for success. You need to get a power sharing deal that yields a cease fire but then you need to have peacekeepers from outside the system police the cease fire that results. The locals don't trust each other with guns. That's the reason you've got a civil war in the first place. Even if you get the cease fire it requires a perhaps twenty-year-long presence by outsiders to keep that cease fire stable. Now we're at a very interesting moment in Iraq right now. We're, as a result of the rapid expansion of this Anbar model, this process of local cease fire agreements between the United States, the government of Iraq and individual factions taken alone, we have had a dramatic increase in security around the country. Much of the Sunni insurgency has essentially left the field in a series of local cease fire agreements with individual American commanders on the scene. This process of local cease fire negotiation has started to spread into the Shiite community. If this process continues to unfold in this way, and that's a big if, it might and it might not, it's gotten to the point where it's at least plausible to suppose that perhaps, if we continue to get lucky, we might get something that looks like a national level cease fire. We might actually be able to get the first of the two central requirements of civil war termination for Iraq. The problem is that leaves you with the second one, and the second one is going to be politically very difficult for the United States. We are the only plausible provider of this kind of peacekeeping, policing, stabilizing role to keep these local cease

fires stable in Iraq. No one else is going to line up to go to Iraq as blue helmeted UN peacekeepers anytime soon. The political debate in the United States though has tended to be oriented around the hope and the expectation that as soon as we get this country stabilized everybody will come home. There's going to be huge demand, if we continue to get fortunate and violence continues to come down, to take a peace dividend in the form of major withdrawals of large fractions of the U.S. military in Iraq. If we're not very, very careful we could easily end up in a situation in which we hit the lottery and got tremendously fortunate and got the cease fire that was the first of the two requirements of civil war termination and then too rapidly withdrew the stabilizing forces that classically are necessary to keep the cease fire stable and lost what was gained.

HK: Realistically how long do you think we'd have to stay and with how many troops to achieve the second goal?

SB: Let me start with how long and go to how many. How long is a generation. To get to the point where the locals trust each other and no longer require a stabilizing presence from outside, I think you have to get the rise to leadership age of a generation that is not caught up in the sectarian conflict of 2003 to 2007-2008. So, that's a long, long time. Now let me then speak to the question of how many, and that answer changes over time. Initially you want as many as you can possibly get. I mean, the literature on peacekeeping, such as it is, says that in an ideal world you'd like to have one peacekeeper per fifty members of the population. If you apply that to Iraq you get something like a requirement for a half million peacekeepers, which we're obviously not going to get. So, no matter what you do in Iraq you're stuck with fewer peacekeepers than you would like. What that implies, I think, is if we want to maximize – if we continue to get fortunate and we get the cease fire, to keep it stable we want to keep as many Americans there as we're able to sustain so as to try and keep the thing stable. That requires somebody to do a careful staff study in the Pentagon to get you an exact number. My hunch – we apparently cannot sustain 130,000 soldiers in steady state in perpetuity. If I'd take a guess I'd say 90,000, 100,000 maybe, is the most that we could sustain. That requirement is not the same through this entire period though. Historical experience suggests that if a large peacekeeping force establishes that violations of the cease fire will be punished, and they'll be punished aggressively and forcefully, over time the demand for troop strength goes down, first of all. We have many fewer peacekeepers in the Balkans now than we did initially after Dayton was signed and initially after the Kosovo war ended. Secondly, whereas no one's willing to come in and do this job now because they think of Iraq as a war, if four or five years of apparent peace makes it look like a peacekeeping mission and not a war fighting mission, the willingness and ability of the UN to provide peacekeepers to lighten the burden on the United States goes up substantially. So, initially I think we need, if we continue to get lucky, as large a peacekeeping force as we can sustain. Somebody's going to have to stay there for twenty years, the presence of U.S. forces to do that will go over time, but if we try and nickel and dime this and bring them home too early, we run the risk of undermining the prospects dramatically in the process.

HK: Steve, I want to thank you very much for being here for our program...

SB: My pleasure.

HK: ...and really giving us this overview of the situation in Iraq and what our options are for the future. Thank you.

SB: Thanks for having me.

HK: And thank you very much for joining us for this “Conversation With History.”

[End of Interview]