

A Cloud Rolls in From the Outside

Interviewer

So weâ€™re here with Dr. Eliot Cohen at the office of Paul Nitzeâ€“distinguished Americanâ€“in the SAIS offices in Washington, D.C. Today is July, the 29th, 19â€“I mean, sorry, 2011, and weâ€™reâ€“weâ€™re here to start a first interview with Dr. Cohen. Dr. Cohen, tell me where you were on September 11th, 2001.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

I was working at home, andâ€“

Interviewer

Home wouldâ€™ve been in Maryland, is that right, or?

Eliot Cohen

Yeah, in Maryland. I wasâ€“I forget what I was working onâ€“but I got a call from New York, from a former student of mine whoâ€™s working on Wall Street who I stayed in touch with. And he just called, and he said, â€œTurn on the television set.â€ I said, â€œWhatâ€“what are you talking about?â€ And he said, â€œJust turn it on.â€ And I turned it on in time to see the second airplane hit the Towers. And wasâ€“the rest of the morning was taken up with picking up my kids at school and trying to arrange a ride for my wife, who works downtown, who ended upâ€“she ended up getting a ride back. But you know, that wasâ€“I was pretty apprehensive. And then like everybody else, you know, the worldâ€“the world changed.

Interviewer

Do you think the world changed, actually? I think I read that one of the comments youâ€™ve made aboutâ€“about September 11th is that we just became aware of the way the world is.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah, I suppose thoseâ€“I donâ€™t know if Iâ€™d use those exact words. I mean Iâ€™“Iâ€™“well, you can answer that question, I suppose, at different levels. I mean, in one way it certainly changed in that we ended up getting involved in two wars, at least, if not three, as a result of it. And now our experience in going through airports, theâ€“in that sense, a lot of things changed.

Eliot Cohen

I think, in a different way, it didnâ€™t change, in that it wasâ€“it came as a shock, I think, most of all to people who had grown up in the 1990s. And I really noticed this with myâ€“with my students, who then, as now, were in their mid-20s. And so their formative experience had really been post-Cold War, and it had been a world that was wide open, and you could go anywhere, and there was Starbucks everywhere. And the stock market was booming, and the internet was taking off, and so there were only good things. And they werenâ€™tâ€“they were completely unaccustomed to the idea that a cloud would roll in from the outside.

Eliot Cohen

And for a whole bunch of reasons, I wasn't that way. I mean part of it just by virtue of age, you know? I vividly remember the Kennedy assassination. I mean I was a child, but everybody lived through that and experienced that. And, of course, the '60s, and [the] Vietnam [War], and riots in the cities and all that—plus other things about my background were such that, you know, I mean I was surprised like everybody else.

Eliot Cohen

But that the world could harbor evil people who would want to do horrendous things, and that they would periodically get away with it? That did not come to me as a surprise. I remember one of my colleagues that was a couple of years younger than me—we were talking in the—in the days after 9/11. He says, "How do I tell my kids that everything's going to be all right?" And I said, "That's the difference between us. I've never told my kids that everything's going to be all right."

Interviewer

Did you actually think there were signs preceding this that anticipated 9/11?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Not really. I was serving on the National Security Advisory Panel at the National Intelligence Council, which was—it was originally a military advisory panel, which they'd had a couple of academics. It was mainly retired military, and then they'd broadened it out, and I think wisely so. And I remember shortly before 9/11, we got some briefings on al-Qaeda, and this guy Osama bin Laden, who I think that was probably the first time I'd heard the name. And I do remember that—this was just a couple days before—they'd picked up some video from some training camp that a friendly service had given us.

Eliot Cohen

And I remember watching it and saying, "Wow, these guys are serious." But that they could pull this kind of thing off—no. And I think most people didn't think that, and it—you know, it's—to get to Iraq, which—we're going to be talking a lot about, I think one of the things that people found very hard to believe was that a bunch of terrorists could orchestrate something this large, this simultaneous, this devastating. And I think it was—that was very hard for senior policymakers to believe. I found it hard to believe.

Interviewer

Tell me what your thoughts were immediately after 2000—after September 11th with respect to national security policy. Did they change? Did you have a fundamental difference with the Bush administration, the way they were proceeding in response to 2011?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, at—in 2001.

Interviewer

2001, I'm sorry, yes.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

At the time, I was a member of the Defense Policy Board, so this was an advisory panel, and the senior members were people like Kissinger and [James R.] Schlesinger and Harold Brown.

Interviewer

Richard Perleâ€“Richard Perle was on that, too?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Richard Perle was theâ€“the chairman of it. And I haveâ€“another very vivid memory is we had an emergency meeting of the DPB quite shortly after 9/11. And first, just the layers of security around the Pentagonâ€“you know, guys in ninja suits with MP5sâ€“butâ€“but above all, driving around, andâ€“you could still see the smoke rising. You know?

Interviewer

At the Pentagon.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

At the Pentagon.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

And you could smell it. It was justâ€“thatâ€“that was earth-shattering, the idea of a blow having been landed right here. I think, you know, I tended toâ€“I tended to agree with the administration. First that you had to doâ€“you were going to have to act in Afghanistan. I didnâ€™t think there was any question about that. And on Iraq, I tended to be in favor. I mean I guess I thought, as did a lot of other people, that first there had to be a large response to this, because thereâ€™s been such a demonstration of American vulnerability, that the reaction had to be prettyâ€“pretty large.

Eliot Cohen

But that, also, that this reflected a deeperâ€“what we saw with al-Qaeda was not just a particular group of people, but some deeper pathologies, particularly in the Arab world, that were being manifested. And in one way, I have found myself at variance with both the Bush administrationâ€“I would even say with the Obamaâ€“with the Obama administration as well in that, for perfectly good reasons, or perfectly understandable reasons, both the Bush administration and, I would say, the Obama administration after it, devoted less care to characterizing al-Qaeda than J.K. Rowling did to characterizing Lord Voldemort.

Eliot Cohen

And I make that comparison advisedly. Theyâ€“so the picture of al-Qaeda was, â€œOkay, these are just a bunch of utterly evil people.â€ Thatâ€™s all. And this has nothing to do with anything else. Itâ€™s just a bunch of evil people who dropped out of nowhere who decided to be reallyâ€“

Interviewer

Sort of one-dimensional, you mean, right?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Completely one-dimensionalâ€“completely.

Interviewer

Without any context or anyâ€“

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right. Andâ€“and you know, the difficult truth is this does come out of one stream of Islam.

Eliot Cohen

Itâ€™s a minority stream, but itâ€™s a stream that goes back pretty far and pretty deep, and that was fed in a number of ways, in that part of the world, by a number of forces. You know, which we could go through atâ€“at great length. And toâ€“to include financing from Gulf states that were allied with us. And by the way, I think thatâ€™sâ€“thatâ€™s still out there, and where did the madrassas in Pakistan get funded from, and what are the consequences of that? And I think there was a profound reluctance on the part of policymakers toâ€“to look squarely at that. I mean people were sâ€“were aware of it, obviously, but very reluctant to discuss it openly.

Religion and Reason in the Political Sphere

Interviewer

Is that the legacy of realpolitik, just wanting us to find our way in the worldâ€“stability, the seeking ofâ€“

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Part of it is realpolitik. I mean it was very striking to me that both policymakers and international relations scholars found it very difficult to deal with religion, because they thought religion had been banished as a force in international politics. Some of this, I think, was the realpolitik.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s not even been banished as a force in American politics, much lessâ€“

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right. Rightâ€“well, I was going to get to that.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Eliot Cohen

So partly the idea that this could affect state behavior, and of course, the Bush administration was very state-oriented, initially. But thisâ€“you know, pretty much across the board. The foreign policy elite was notâ€“was basically a very secular elite. And then domestically, there were both tactical reasons why he didnâ€™t want to talk about Islam, which are perfectly understandable, but also the level of discomfort talking about religion

as a real force in politics just made people very goosey about having an honest discussion about this.

Eliot Cohen

And, you know, you were kind of allowed to denounce evangelical Christians, but depending on where you were on the political spectrum. But other than that, people are very uncomfortable talking about religion and politics, and they didn't know how, and they didn't know anything about the history of Islam, either.

Interviewer

Is this kind of American First Amendment absolutism, where sort of we feel like when we talk about just thinking today, opening the papers, about the shards of the cross from 9/11, you know.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

Being objected to the atheists are suing now about the

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, I think it's partly about being it's partly about the success of the American project, you know. That this is a country which, by and large, remains much more religious than, say, European countries, with many different sects, if you will Christian and non-Christian who have all kind of accommodated themselves to one another, and to the American dream.

Eliot Cohen

And so to talk about the basic American story about religion again, and this is a sweeping generalization the basic American story is a very positive one, you know. That eventually you could get over divides between Christian and Protestant, believer and nonbeliever, Christian and Jew, you know all kinds of folks, and you could all believe in the same thing.

Interviewer

And that it's not state-centered.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

And it's not state-centered. It's not established religion. But but religion is nonetheless seen as a powerful and an on the whole, beneficial force in public life. And so you suddenly and on top of this, you have these foreign policy elites, which are pretty secularized, or if they're non-secularized, religion is very much a matter of private belief, and you just don't drag it into the public square all of which I'm very much in favor of.

Interviewer

Yeah, one more question before we move on to the “back to the policy issues. But is it foreign to the foreign policy “secular foreign policy elites because it does “defies reason, in some respects? I mean religion is not something that “I mean religion is faith, you know.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Religion is faith, right.

Interviewer

It’s hard for “it’s hard for someone who analyzes foreign policy and the interactions between states based upon self-interest and reason, that to then say, “Well, this also could be movements that are larger than that, different than that, and don’t rely upon reason.”

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, of course, you know, there are all kinds of nonreligious forces in the world “

Interviewer

That are irrational, yeah.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

That are also utterly irrational, but have tremendous force. And there are individuals who are charismatic and powerful who are not entirely rational, by our “our definition of rational. And so yeah, I mean I think part of “this is a longer story here, which is “was an academic story of a pretty “and it actually has something to do with the guy whose office this was.

Interviewer

Paul Nitze.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Of “I think what was a pretty bloodless understanding of international politics, which didn’t even really work for Metternich and Talleyrand, but certainly doesn’t work for us.

Interviewer

And how “that relate to Nitze? I’m curious what you mean by that.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, Nitze was very much a realpolitiker, you know?

Interviewer

Yeah.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

And I think when he thought about the United States and the Soviet Union, he thought

about it in realpolitik terms. He didn't think about it nearly so much in ideological terms.

Interviewer

So the Bush administration adopts a kind of state-centered approach to this, I mean because they can't really declare war on al-Qaeda. In "in al-Qaeda's"

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well"

Interviewer

But it focuses on those who harbor al-Qaeda, or those who harbor the terrorist, was the "was the description, right?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah. I mean "well, they do declare war on al-Qaeda, and it's "you know, one of the interesting debates that occurred early on, which I got a little bit engaged in, was should we think about this even as war?

Eliot Cohen

My argument was yes, this is war, because what you're dealing with is not simply random acts of violence motivated by greed or simply by sadism. It's people trying to achieve something, broadly speaking, political by using force. And that's a pretty good definition of what "what war is. I think they also initially found it very hard to imagine that this didn't have state connections. That's going to take you eventually "that's part of what got us to Iraq, I think.

Eliot Cohen

I think it was also strategically reasonable to think, you know, if you take away the safe haven for these guys, you know "the world is divided up into states "where are they going to "where are they going to go? Well, we sort of found out what the answer to that is, but "but they had a basic point. But I think they "they did very much decide to go to war against al-Qaeda as well, and try to nab these people where you can. And of course, over time that policy evolved into one of "just kill them," which "and the Obama administration even more than the Bush administration "the basic policy is "just kill them."

Interviewer

Well, but that's the "the tension that gets described between a war and a crime is, of course, part of the argument, right?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right.

Interviewer

If it's a crime, you go after those who actually committed the crime. If it's a war, you actually think more strategically and broader and more future-oriented, right? To prevent

the next attackâ€œ

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Actually, you know, itâ€™s interesting that President Bush always talked about bringing perpetrators to justice. Now, he clearly meant killing them, but he also meant apprehending them.

Eliot Cohen

The Obama administration has sort of dropped that formulation. That formulation was ambiguous. That could either be â€œthat was really, actually, a little bit more of a kind of a criminal justice way of thinking about it. The Obama administration is actually more bellicose, in a certain way, understanding it as war and just saying, â€œHey,â€ you know, â€œweâ€™re going to send drones to blow them up.â€ Andâ€œand of course, if youâ€™re dealing with crime, you know, those would be called â€œdeath squads.â€

Interviewer

Yes. It even comes up in the bin Laden raid, doesnâ€™t it? I mean if bin Ladenâ€œ

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Very much so.

Interviewer

If bin Laden hadâ€œwell, the termâ€œrules of engagement really wouldâ€™ve been thatâ€œ

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Noâ€œwe were out there to kill him.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Thereâ€™s just no question about it.

Interviewer

But the rules of engagement would counter that. I mean weâ€™dâ€œwe may have wanted to do thatâ€œI donâ€™t see how we wouldâ€™ve taken him alive and have ended up then with a trial of bin Laden, right? Weâ€™d have beenâ€œ

Dr. Eliot Cohen

We just wanted to kill him.

If You Ask the Soldiersâ€œ|

Interviewer

Yeah. So tell me what your role was at this time. I mean youâ€™re one of the thinkers of this period.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, I mean I'm commenting in the public prints, and I was on the Defense Policy Board, which some people thought had a lot of influence I did not. You know, and and actually, when I finally did go into government, my sense of the relative unimportance of people outside government went up, I think. So I was a commentator I was in favor of the Iraq War, for a number of reasons.

Interviewer

Right from the start from

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yes. I mean at first, I, you know, from what I saw initially of the circumstantial evidence that there was some sort of Saddam-al-Qaeda link. You know, that struck me as plausible. But I think more more broadly

Interviewer

But not not now, I take it, I mean

Dr. Eliot Cohen

No, though I think I think there's still questions. I mean my guess is that Saddam's basic approach was, if you're an enemy of the United States, I'm willing to help you at some level. And we do know that people passed through Iraq. I don't think it was a particularly close relationship. I don't think Osama bin Laden needed Saddam's help to plan or execute 9/11. But nor do I think that there was simply a firewall between them. I mean this is a part of the world that understands the enemy of my enemy is my friend. And so there was that.

Eliot Cohen

But more broadly, I thought and to some extent, I still think on the one hand, you had this Iraq problem which was going to have to be dealt with, because what had happened was that the inspections regime [in Iraq] was over and the sanctions regime [in Iraq] was falling apart. And it had actually done us a lot of damage we forget how much damage it had done, reputationally, to us.

Interviewer

Because it had failed, you mean.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, because also the sort of the propaganda was, you know, that you're inflicting tremendous suffering on the hapless Iraqi people. And I tended to agree with the administration that if, you know with the end of inspections, you know, this guy would do his best to restore his WMD programs, both biological and nuclear. And so, you know, like everybody else, my willingness to tolerate risk had gone down after 9/11.

Eliot Cohen

But I also tended to think, with the administration, and probably more than I should've, that if that regime were gotten rid of and replaced by something reasonable and moderate,

you really would have a huge impact on the Middle East. Which I think has happened, actually, in a variety of ways, with a lot of bumbling and mistakes and disasters along the way, for sure—“more than I expected. But—“

Interviewer

You connect, though, the Arab Spring to what happened in Iraq.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

You know, historians are going to have to deal with that one in about 30 or 40 years, when it doesn't bear on people's personal reputations or current policy debates. But—“my instincts is to think there's a connection of some sort. Would I say that it caused it? No. Do I think it may have helped bring to a head forces that were there? Yes.

Eliot Cohen

I mean Saddam was the great representative of what turns out to be yet another one of the great dead ends that the Arab world marched into. This was the dead end of the, you know, the big man—the Gaddafi, the Hafez al-Assad—and Saddam was really the biggest of the big men. There'd been other dead ends. I think radical Islamism is another dead end. And I think the Arab Spring—“part of the Arab Spring could be finally that part of the world working its way to something that's not a dead end—“but we'll see.

Interviewer

Why Iraq and not Iran?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Iraq because—“

Interviewer

I'm talking about back at that time, now.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah, yeah. I think for a number of reasons. First, Iraq, because of the WMD connection, just seemed much more dangerous, potentially. I mean we—“you have to remember that in 1995, of course, we find out about the biological programs, which we hadn't been aware of. I had run the Air Force's study of the first Gulf War, so one thing I was acutely conscious of was that the nuclear program had been a heck of a lot bigger than we had understood until after that war.

Eliot Cohen

I think we had gone in with two sites that we were—“were on our target list—“cause of the nuclear program. We came out with eight, and we found something like two dozen or more facilities, what—“after—“after the war. So I had a very—“I had a very strong sense of just how effective that regime had been in covering up its WMD program; so that's one thing. Secondly, there was a continuing state of hostilities there. They were shooting at American pilots. It was an unstable situation. There had been this mobilization against Kuwait.

Eliot Cohen

Again, which they pulled back from, butâ€“but it was a strong sense that this was a very unstable thing. And on the other hand, this guy looked like heâ€™d be pretty easy to push over, which he turnedâ€“he turned out to be. And furthermore, this is from the heart of the Arab worldâ€“itâ€™s Baghdad. And so I think for a number of reasons itâ€™“it seemed like a reasonable thing to do, to have one of the next big steps of American foreign policy to be to topple that regime. Which, by the way, had been American policy since 1998. And people forget that when Clintonâ€“President Clintonâ€“launched Operation Desert Fox in 1998â€“

Eliot Cohen

I think it was in Decemberâ€“heâ€™“he announced that American policy was to overthrow the regime, or seek the overthrow of the regime. That was a change. Thatâ€™“that hisâ€™“the first President [George H.W.] Bush had never said that. And I think, you know, that the Clinton administration conducts this massive bombing campaign for four days, which did more damage than people realized at the time. Butâ€“but as he announced it, he said, you know, â€œOur policy is to get rid of this regime,â€ so.

Interviewer

Did you worry at all that we might, inâ€“in invading Iraq, create more instability that could favor Iran?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

I did. I did worry about it. I mean I worried â€™cause I worry about all the uncertainties that areâ€™“that intend the use of force. On the other hand, I thoughtâ€™“I didnâ€™t think it was a stable sitâ€™“I didnâ€™t think it was a stable situation you were dealing with to begin with. And I think as people assess the Iraq War, thatâ€™s one of the things toâ€™“you have to remember. That was not a stable situation.

Eliot Cohen

That was going to evolve in one direction or another. If 9/11 had never happened, a President Gore or President Bush would still have found themselves confronting the Iraqâ€™“the Iraq problem, because, as I said, the inspections regime had collapsed; the sanctions regime was collapsing; and the question was going to be, were you going to step back and let Iraq resumeâ€™“return to the path that it had been on before?

Interviewer

This is a point youâ€™ve made frequently, I think, that status quo is an option.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right.

Interviewer

I mean itâ€™s not that youâ€™re doing nothing.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right.

Interviewer

You're allowing whatever is happening to happen.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right.

Eliot Cohen

So I'm intrigued by this quote: "If you ask the soldiers, nothing is safe" which reminds me of Lincoln, actually, right? And a lot of presidents, for that matter "to which the politicians must respond, "Neither is inaction."

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right.

The Military and Historical Experience of Afghanistan
Interviewer

Talk a little bit about the civil-military relationship and how it played out in those months after 9/11, in Afghanistan, and then finally, in Iraq.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, okay. So my window into this was partly "and again, okay, I was a member of the Defense Policy Board, and I'd periodically write up ads. But "a lot of people tell me otherwise, but I don't think I don't think I was particularly influential, and I don't think I"

Interviewer

Well, but your influence grew over time, and finally you became. with"

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah. I mean it "well, I don't know. What influence is, I'm not sure. But in any case, I knew Wolfowitz, Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary, and I was a member of the DPB. So I probably had some. On civil-military relations, you know, it was clear that Secretary Rumsfeld was a difficult guy.

Interviewer

Did you know him, too?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, I got to know him through the DPB, although it was always a good "and still is a good relationship. I mean he struck me as somebody who was kind of aggressive and testy. A bit of a bully, although I think kind of a tactical bully "I mean he wasn't doing it just because he was an innately mean guy. He's not innately a mean guy.

Interviewer

He's a wrestler.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

He's a wrestler, right. A number of people have pointed that out. And if you mean there were a couple of times in the ensuing years where I've found myself arguing with him, and you pushed back, nothing bad happened to you. And the truth is, Bob Gates fired a heck of a lot more generals and, for that matter, senior civilians, than Donald Rumsfeld ever did. I think it was partly a question of his technique. I did get to know General Myers quite well, and less well, General Pace. But I have a lot of regard for General Myers, and I think he was picked, and I think wisely so, to be a steady pair of hands, which is what he was.

Interviewer

What about General Franks?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Franks I don't think I've ever met him. I think in retrospect he was a poor choice as Central Command Commander.

Interviewer

Why do you say that?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Particularly if you read his memoir. He just comes across as a very shallow guy. I think, like a lot of decision-makers, he had you know. He operated on the basis of a sort of a kind of a caricatured vision of each of the different countries he was dealing with, but particularly Afghanistan.

Eliot Cohen

And so the basic belief was, Well, you put any American troops on the ground there and the locals go nuts, because that's what the Afghans have done for 2,000 years. You bring in foreigners, they go nuts, and you find yourself like the Russians. And that's that is not that is certainly not the case. And I think he bears a lot of responsibility for the failure to really to put in adequate forces early on to get bin Laden.

Interviewer

So now you say not the case you mean the ex-historical experience has been read incorrectly, or you mean the historical experience should not inform the decisions on Afghanistan that were made initially.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, the historical experience of Afghanistan, like a lot of places, is very complicated. I mean what happens is, you know, the way history gets folded into policy-making is people, you know, come to their favorite story, and then they use that story. So in the case of Afghanistan, it's the British Army being wiped out in Kabul in 1837 or it's actually on the retreat to Jalalabad.

Eliot Cohen

Of course, they don't notice that, okay, most of that army were camp followers. That they'd camped in Kabul, surrounded by hills, and put their powder magazine a mile outside of town. Then it gets blown up and then they don't have any ammunition, and

they forget that actually the British came back a year or two later, occupied the city, blew up the Grand Bazaar, and were able to actually enforce their will. But to the real point, what had happenedâ€“Afghanistan in 2001 was not Afghanistan in 1980. Afghanistan in 2001â€“

Interviewer

1980 being when the Soviet invasion [of Afghanistan] began.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right, or â€™79, I guess.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

You know, it was a country thatâ€™d been through 30 years of civil war and chaos and turmoil and suffering. And actually, the Afghan population welcomed us, and I think there wasâ€“it was not unreasonable toâ€“to expect that. And, you know, they were not simply reactâ€“going to react crazily against Americanâ€“some sort of American military presence.

Eliot Cohen

And it wasâ€“and I remember being baffled at the time. Whyâ€“why were we doing this with such a small footprint? You know, Special Forces, and put in a Marine Battalion Landing Team, I think. I mean, you know, just a couple battalions of the 82nd or 10th Mountain, and to block these guys as theyâ€™re getting away into the mountains. Why couldnâ€™t we do that? And I think that a lot of that was Franksâ€™ doing, and I also think Franks, then, bears a lot of responsibility in Iraq as well, where I think this guy, heâ€“you know.

Eliot Cohen

And part of this was an institutional problem or a problem with the Army, that the model for how to fight war had really been shaped by 19â€“by a combination of [the] Vietnam [War]â€“in 1991â€“and the first Iraq War, with [the] Vietnam [War] being everything terrible and the? the first Gulf War being the right way to do it. And the right way to do it was a four-day war, from the Armyâ€™s point of view.

Interviewer

But the right way to do it in 1991 was also massive numbers. A large footprint, wasnâ€™t it?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right.

Interviewer

So how didâ€“why would that not carry over?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, because in this case—because in this case, you didn't have to do that, because you could have Special Forces and a lot of air power and locals and that's—

Interviewer

About how much of this was Franks, and how much of it was Rumsfeld? Because Rumsfeld also has the light footprint attached to his reputation.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Probably some. And I wouldn't, you know, I haven't gone deeply into it, enough into it to know.

Eliot Cohen

I mean I'm judging Franks partly by what I heard and partly by reading his own book. But I think—and Rumsfeld no doubt bears responsibility. I mean he's the senior civilian decision-maker after the president on all this. But—but I don't think I don't think Franks was a particularly successful CENTCOM commander.

Interviewer

Do you think if we'd gone in with a larger footprint into Afghanistan we would not be there now, ten years later? I mean would it—

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, I think there is—you can never tell. But I think there was a better chance that we would've—we might've been able to get bin Laden and more of the senior leadership before they got out of the country, which would've been, I think, a huge deal, if al-Qaeda had really been thoroughly crushed. You know, with Afghanistan, what people forget is that actually things were pretty good there for the first few years. It's around 2006—2000—around 2006, maybe a little bit earlier, that things go sour.

Eliot Cohen

When General Dave Barno, who's a friend, and Zal Khalilzad—was there as the military Commander, and Zal Khalilzad was the ambassador, things were actually going pretty well. I think we're going to be in Af—well, I don't know whether we'll be in Afghanistan for a long time. I think—you would've had to go in thinking that you couldn't simply go in and get out, which I think is what Franks wanted. And what Rumsfeld wanted as well. And I think you had to go in with some sort of concept of okay, what can you help them do that is Afghan-right? Not our idea, but something that is consistent with both their history, but also where they are now—and I didn't think we had to end up quite where we've ended up.

Unequal Dialogues

Interviewer

Your book, Supreme Command goes into the relationship between civilian leadership and military leadership. Can you describe the thesis, briefly, and then—

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Sure.

Interviewer

How it applies in some of these recent conflicts?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

So the book grew out of my experience teaching at the Naval War College from 1985 to 1989, when, actually, I came to the Pentagon to work in the policy planning staff. And it was informed by tension between the theory that we taught the officers that they believed in, and the reality as I understood it as an historian.

Eliot Cohen

The theory is well, what civilian leaders ought to do is be very clear about what the objectives are. They ought to provide the resources. Pick the senior commanders. Set some left and right limits, and then get out of the way. And the problem with that is, you know, when I looked at people like Lincoln or Churchill, that's not the way they behaved. And the argument of the book instead was that what is desirable is what I call an "unequal dialogue," where the civilian and military leaders are going back and forth, which is "it is a dialogue."

Eliot Cohen

It is unequal, because the civilians are ultimately responsible and ultimately in charge. And that sometimes the civilians will have to go quite deeply into detail "not all the time, but sometimes. And that's you know, when you need to be involved in the detail is a matter of judgment, and that's part of what it is to be a statesman. It's not a book "some people read it as saying civilian leaders ought to pistol-whip generals. That's not what the "that's not what the book is. So "

Interviewer

When you say go to detail, you mean to strategic detail, you mean to "

Dr. Eliot Cohen

No, "sometimes tactical detail, and "I've got a chapter on Churchill. There's one point where a decision about whether or not the Royal Air Force will use chaff "aluminum strips to blind German radar "ends up in the cabinet. It's a cabinet-level decision. And the reason why is they've decided "they've realized this will work. This will jam German radars. The problem is they are still worried about German air attacks on Great Britain, and they have no defenses against this. So the part of the Royal Air Force that's responsible for the bombing of Germany very much wants to use this,

Eliot Cohen

because it'll protect the bombers by jamming German radars. And the people responsible for defending the British Isles against a pretty robust Luftwaffe "this is early "43 "are dead-set against it, because they know they have no defense against it. There is no expert military opinion on this, really. There's divided military opinion, as there usually is "and by the way, that's something we can come to as we talk about the Iraq War. There was a lot of divided military opinion. And in this case, first, military opinion was divided, and secondly, you know, potentially, it's a very consequential decision, for obvious reasons. And so it gets forced up to the political level.

Interviewer

Whatâ€™s the cabinet decide in that case?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

To use it. And they were right, because at that point, actually, the Luftwaffe was so preoccupied dealing with the Russians and so on that theyâ€“and they had really moved away from strategic bombingâ€“that the threat was controllable. But there are otherâ€“

Interviewer

Did that inform their decision, their understanding, thatâ€“

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer

That was the way things were in the war, so it was notâ€“it was not choosing one point of view or the other. It was actually minimizing the risk of argument.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right, they were manâ€“they were managing risk. And one of the things I say that political leaders have to do is they have toâ€“they have to be the ones who have to decide what risks are going to be run.

Eliot Cohen

Andâ€“and one of the points that I make is thereâ€™s almost never any such thing as kind of a monolithic professional military opinion, and that theâ€“the range of militaryâ€“expert military judgment can be much greater than it may be in, you know, the case of somebody deciding whether or not to get bypass surgery or something like that. And thatâ€™sâ€“you donâ€™t have protocols the way that you do in medicine.

Interviewer

Give me an example where Lincoln faced the same kind of issue. I mean notoriously slow generals, we know that, butâ€“

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, one of the things I talk about is Lincoln firing generals, which he did.

Interviewer

Repeatedly, really.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Which heâ€“he did repeatedly, and the way in which he kept an eye on them. One of the main things I talk about in the book is the way in which heâ€“he plants a spy with Ulysses S. Grant, because heâ€™s heard, on the one hand, that this guyâ€™s veryâ€“obviously, this guyâ€™s been successful.

Eliot Cohen

On the other hand, he hears that heâ€™s an alcoholic. And what he does is heâ€™the man, Charles Dana, who becomes Assistant Secretary of Warâ€™actually decides thatâ€™that Grant is very good. But he ends upâ€™Lincoln kind of indirectly begins influencing Grant. So, for example, Dana is the guy who tells Grant to ease up on operationsâ€™very bloody operationsâ€™around Petersburg, Virginia, before the election of November 1864, because itâ€™s going to have a bearing on who wins the election.

Eliot Cohen

And Lincoln thought, with some reason, that if [General] McClellan won, the war could have a different kind of outcome. So it was a differentâ€™you know, it was a different kind of thing, where he was in there and sort of shaping things. But heâ€™he got involved. For example, he ordered McClellan to adopt corps-level organization, which McClellan did not want to do. I think â€™cause he wasâ€™partly â€™cause he was a control freak, and he realized if you have corps commanders, they become rivals, or potentially could become rivals at some point, like he just saidâ€™

Interviewer

Why did Lincoln want it?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

He was getting other military advice. Lincoln, like most political leadersâ€™

Interviewer

Talked to a lot of people.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

He talked to a number of people, and one of theâ€™one of the problems with our system now where you have the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the principal military advisor to the president, it boxes the president in. And presidents end up reaching out elsewhere.

Eliot Cohen

As in the case of the Iraq surge, where a general whoâ€™s no longer even in uniform, General Jack Keane, who Iâ€™m sure youâ€™re talking toâ€™or have already talked to, plays quite an important role in advising the political leadership. And it drives the generals crazyâ€™the ones on active duty crazy.

Eliot Cohen

But itâ€™sâ€™itâ€™s going to happen. So thatâ€™s what the book is all about. The book came out kind of coincidentallyâ€™it really was coincidentalâ€™shortly before the Iraq War breaks out. President Bush read itâ€™whether he actually applied it or not, I donâ€™t think, at least not until quite late.

Interviewer

Did he reach out to you after he read it?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

He did not.

Interviewer

Did you know he was reading it? When he was reading it?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yes. I heard from several sources. I knew that Karl Rove had read it, and actually I did book-signing at the "in the White House, but he did not reach out to me about it. I mean he knew who I was, but no. They have "the one time is, you know" this is probably getting ahead of ourselves, but "there "what does happen, there are these two meetings, one at Camp David and then one in the Oval Office, in 2006. One, I think, was June, one November, where some of these issues came up.

Interviewer

Before we get to that, I wanted you "there "s an anecdote in Tom Ricks " book Fiasco " "

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

About you at the Gettysburg battlefield, I believe "is that right?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

Did I have the right one? With an entourage of politicians "am I right?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Probably not. I mean it was probably "

Interviewer

It was Wolfowitz " "m sorry "

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah, well, Wolfowitz came along. " "

Interviewer

Yes.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

One of the things I do with my students is we go on staff rides " "

Interviewer

Yes.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

So—and I know this is at West Point where you do staff rides. I do better staff rides. And we go—we usually go to—in the fall and in the spring, we go to either Civil War or Revolutionary War battlefields, and we do an international staff ride in the spring.

Eliot Cohen

And Paul [Wolfowitz] was the—my dean then, and he came along. And I always bring along a couple of other interesting characters, and Ricks was one of them.

Interviewer

Yeah. And just tell that story, because it seems instrumental—well, it had to do with Lincoln, and it had to do with—

Dr. Eliot Cohen

You know, I read the story, and it wasn't saying that I said it. I think it was saying that Wolf had said? And I—m embarrassed to admit I forgot what's in the book.

Interviewer

Well, it's a reference to Lincoln scolding his generals for not advancing.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, it's—what's very—well, what is an interesting story—and I don't know whether Paul [Wolfowitz] knew this or not. One of the things that's fascinating about Lincoln is, of course, his generals drove him nuts. And he drove them nuts, as is usually the case. He would write these letters, which were very powerful letters, and sometimes he'd send them, and sometimes he wouldn't. There's a very famous letter that he wrote and he sent to [Joseph] Hooker when he put Hooker in charge,

Eliot Cohen

which was basically saying, "I see right through you, you know. And I knew that I know that you undercut General Burnside, and I'm appointing you anyhow. And I've heard the things that you've said, and I'm appointing you anyhow. But I've got my eye on you, and that was one he decided to send. There was another letter that he thought of sending to [General] Meade, which we read, which—because he was beside himself that Meade had failed to pursue and destroy [Robert E.] Lee. Cause after Gettysburg, the river had flooded, and Lee was really with his back up against the Potomac, and Lincoln thought he should've been annihilated.

Eliot Cohen

And it's—“you can—the letter's in any standard collected work—works of Lincoln. And he decided not to send it because he realized it would do no good. And then one of the great things about Lincoln, he was such a great judge of character, and he knew when he was dealing with somebody who would not be usefully changed by having that happen. Meade, by the way, still found out via [Henry Wager] Halleck—who was

theâ€“was sort of the equivalent of the chief of staffâ€“that Lincoln was disappointed, and was furious, and offered his resignation, which was turned down. Preciselyâ€“

Interviewer

Quite a theme, though, for Lincoln, if anything happens after Antietam, right, that whereâ€“

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right.

Interviewer

Heâ€™s furious with [General] McClellan for not following Lee into Virginia.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

He is furious with him. And thereâ€“and then he goes up and he visits him.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

And he looks for him. So thatâ€™s, again, very characteristic of Lincoln. Heâ€™d go around, look for himself, see what was going on. One of the things, he comes back, he saysâ€“he said, you know, â€œThe Army of the Potomac is not an army. Itâ€™s McClellanâ€™s bodyguard.â€ And he was not going to have that. And again, he gotâ€“he really got involved. Heâ€“there was a major who had been reportedâ€“I talk about this in the bookâ€“had been reported as saying, â€œWell, you know, the game is not toâ€“to destroy Lee. Itâ€™s to kind of fight this thing to a draw so that you can restore the Unionâ€“â€

Interviewer

Preserve slavery.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right, preserve slavery.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s the key, I think, wasnâ€™t it?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

So Lincoln calls this guy into his office?

Interviewer

Yeah.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

And he says, â€œDid you say that?â€

Eliot Cohen

He calls the officer to him. He said, "Yes, but, but, but, but?" cashiers him on the spot. This guy appeals for "to have the rank restored, after he's lost his son somewhere out west, and all this guy wants to do is serve, and Lincoln, who's a very humane and gentle guy, says, "I'm sorry. You said there is a game, and I have to make sure that there is no game." And, you know, so "Lincoln could actually be very hard. That said, I forget the story in the Ricks book.

Interviewer

Well, it's essentially that Lincoln ends up being tougher than his? I mean Lincoln in "this is in '62, of course"

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

And right in the time he's about to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, but he's also "the war is turning more bloodthirsty, right?"

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right.

Interviewer

I mean it becomes much more of a sort of modern war going forward from there"

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right.

Interviewer

And that's what justifies it.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Lincoln could be very "could be very hard that way.

Interviewer

Very true.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

But I forget what Wolf had said at Gettysburg.

Interviewer

That's all right. Well, just that the notion was that if you don't pursue"

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah. Yeah, I mean that wasâ€“that wasâ€“that was Paul [Wolfowitz]â€™s view.

Eliot Cohen

Myâ€“whatâ€“on that one what I was trying to doâ€“I donâ€™t really try to have the students come away with any particular lesson. In that case, you know, the important thing to convey is whyâ€“why somebody like [General] Meade would not feel like pursuing afterâ€“and part of what he needed to do was just visualize the carnage and the 50,000 casualtiesâ€“what thatâ€“what that place must have looked like.

Interviewer

So the early part of the war is under some critique from theâ€“the military establishmentâ€“at least from part of the military establishmentâ€“in respect to the footprint.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

Did you join that critique?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Of theâ€“on Afghanistan?

Interviewer

No, Iâ€™m talking about Iraq.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

No. No, well, on Iraqâ€“see, we were actuallyâ€“see, the DPB was never actually briefed on Iraq before the war, and a number of us had been agitating for it.

Eliot Cohen

I think they didnâ€™t want to share things with us. See, and thatâ€™s the thing to remember about the Defense Policy Board is on the one hand, youâ€™re advising the secretaryâ€“on the other hand, the staff. Nobody on the staffs really want toâ€“you know, a bunch of former secretaries of defense and smart-aleck academics to second-guess them. So there was, I think, a lot of reluctance.

Interviewer

Well, Perle came under some attack, too, didnâ€™t he, earlier in that time?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah. Perle?

Interviewer

Interviewer: Yeah.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Perleâ€“well, Perleâ€“

Interviewer

For being too intimately involved.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Perle was intimately involved. He broughtâ€“he brought in people like Ahmed Chalabi. I think I was the only person who walked out of that room, agnostic about Ahmed Chalabi. â€™Cause on the one hand, he struck me as very smart, on the other hand, not particularly trustworthy. I thoughtâ€“I thought a lot of theâ€“the criticism of Rumsfeld about the size of the force going in was misplaced.

Eliot Cohen

Among other things, I think he turned out to be right. It wasâ€“to knock over Saddam, that was what you needed. I think the real criticismâ€“the justified criticismsâ€“all have to do with how we managed the occupation, how we thought about the occupation. And I think thereâ€™s a lot of blame to go around, and civilian leaders, for sure, deserveâ€“I mean theyâ€™re ultimately responsible, but I think the military leadership failed them as well. Andâ€“

Interviewer

How is it that we did not understand how to fight the peace, so to speak?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, I think there are two big reasons. One was our picture of Iraq, which was a correct picture, but about 20 years plus out of date, which was a pretty secular society with a strong civil service and public institutions. Which just, unfortunately, had this really bad guy at the top of it. And I think what we didnâ€™t realize was how much that society like, in a different way Afghanistan, theyâ€™d already been through a Cuisinart â€“because of the regime, because of the Iran-Iraq War, because of everything that had followed.

Eliot Cohen

And so we werenâ€™tâ€“thatâ€“we didnâ€™t understand that, and theâ€“weâ€“you know, there were a lot of Iraqi exiles, not just Chalabi. We believed them, and they were not lying to us about Iraq. Itâ€™s just the Iraq that theyâ€™d left was not the Iraq that we found. So thatâ€™s one thing. I think the second thing is a lot of this does go back to, I believe, these twin morality tales of the Vietnam [War] and the first Gulf War, with Vietnam being the bad war and the first Gulf War being the good war. And the conclusion the military came away with is weâ€™re not going to do this. Weâ€™re not going to do this nation-building counterinsurgency stuff.

Eliot Cohen

And I know. I had a lot of students who were serving. You know, when we went in, it was okay, thereâ€™s supposed to be this thing called ORHA which is going to take over, and we just hand things over to them. And we were feckless, and the military was feckless, and the civilians were feckless. It was compounded by an utterly inappropriate set of fights between [Department of] Defense and [Department of] State, again, in which there was

plenty of blame to go around on both sides, and blame to the president for tolerating it.

Interviewer

Characterize that competition between [Department of] State and [Department of] Defense during this time.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, first, it was animosity between Rumsfeld and Powell. There was much deeper animosity between Armitage and Wolfowitzâ€“notâ€“I donâ€™t think Wolfowitz was particularly hostile to Armitage, but Armitage hostile to Wolfowitz. And fed by Powellâ€™s chief of staff, Larry Wilkerson, who was a nut, and who let himself be openlyâ€“say openly hostile things about the deputy secretary of defense when heâ€™s serving as the secretary of stateâ€™s chief of staff, and Powell never called him on it, never reprimanded him, let aloneâ€“I mean he shouldâ€™ve been fired.

Eliot Cohen

But itâ€™s insaneâ€“truly insane and deplorable. [Department of] State, I think, inclined against the war, understandably. I mean different people had different views. [Department of] Defense, very suspicious ofâ€“of [Department of] State, and personalities like Doug Feith, so it wasâ€“it was a mess. Andâ€“and I think the president tolerated this feuding and it was prettyâ€“pretty awful. And then I think that the military had not been thinking about military governance and those kinds of things. Rumsfeld wasâ€“assuredly did not want it.

Eliot Cohen

He created this abortion known as ORHA, which then did not have resources. The military comes up with a plan where the command that conducts the war immediately leaves, and gets replaced by very little. It was aâ€“even for somebody whoâ€™s basically inclined to be pessimistic, it was an even bigger strategic cock-up than I expected.

Interviewer

What did you think should have been done in theâ€“after the toppling of Saddam?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, I think the first thing wouldâ€™ve been in the run-up to Saddam, you wouldâ€™ve had to think thatâ€“you wouldâ€™ve had to think through the problem of governance. And I think the governance issue was going to require some kind of military government for at least a year-plusâ€“maybe longer than that. A very strongâ€“

Interviewer

Occupation government.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah. Yeah, I think that wouldâ€™ve been the reasonable thing to expect. You wouldâ€™veâ€“you certainly wouldnâ€™t have rotated commands around. You would have, from the very beginning, realized that what you were going to need was aâ€“either, ideally, a single individual, a general with kind of a political sense, or a civilian with a military sense.

Eliot Cohen

Or if not that, then a kind of a dual command of, you know, on the lines of what we eventually got with Dave Petraeus and Ryan Crocker. But with the civilian being much stronger, because theyâ€™d be doing more in the way of politics and administration. And I think those were the key things. The rotation of commands, by the way, isâ€™this is kind of a technical pointâ€™but itâ€™sâ€™it is still insane that what we do is we rotate divisional headquarters and corps headquarters to these places. And thatâ€™s just military malpractice. I mean it means you have no institutional continuity whatsoever.

Eliot Cohen

Thereâ€™s no need to do it. They shouldâ€™ve just planted a bunch of flags and rotate people through as individuals, and you retain some kind of institutional memory about what youâ€™re doing. And, you know, they hadnâ€™tâ€™they hadnâ€™tâ€™they really hadnâ€™t thought it through. They had thought through lots of other problems. Theyâ€™d thought through, you know, what happens if Saddam blows up all the wells and so on. But they hadnâ€™t thought through those issues. I think it still wouldâ€™ve been very difficult, I mean, andâ€™but it didnâ€™tâ€™I donâ€™t think it had to be as difficult as it was. But itâ€™s stillâ€™it was goingâ€™it was going to be difficult no matter what, but weâ€™there were lots of unforced errors.

Eliot Cohen

I would not have allowedâ€™weâ€™weâ€™we did sort of step back during the initial breakdown of public order in Baghdad. Crazy. Crazy. We shouldâ€™veâ€™I think we couldâ€™ve done more with the Iraqi Army. I knowâ€™I mean Walt Slocombe, who I have a lot of regard for, says, â€™Well, they disbanded themselves.â€™ Well, yes, the soldiers didâ€™the officers did not simply want to be disbanded.

Visit to Iraq: A Dark Picture
Interviewer

Letâ€™s go to those two. Thereâ€™s two critiques of the piece based upon the critique of the de-Baathification and the critique of the disbanding of the [Iraqi] Army.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Now, now, again, one thing I should just make clear. I mean theyâ€™all these wereâ€™these are partly my retrospective critiques, but they were also, I think, my critiques at the time. Just in terms of my actual engagement in this, I was engaged as a member of the Defense Policy Boardâ€™the first time was really in 2004, which is when I asked to go to Iraq. No member of the DPB had gone there. And I really wanted to see things for myself, and I did, and I came back pretty disturbed. And then I went again in, I think, 2006.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s talk about those two trips before we go into the subject of de-Baathification and the [Iraqi] Army. So youâ€™re a member of the Defense Policy Board, and yourâ€™your concern is that youâ€™re advising in something that youâ€™re not seeing firsthand.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right. Right.

Interviewer

So you go to Iraq, and what do you see, and what does it look like?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, I guess two points of departure before I left. One was I was increasingly uncomfortable with the statements that you were getting. "Well, there are just 5,000 bitter-enders. That's all it is."

Interviewer

The insurgency is driven by 5,000 bitter-enders.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right, "There's 5,000 bitter-enders. That's all it is." Or, "Well, you know, Germany was a mess, too, in 1945." And I thought all these were not "didn't strike me as right. Secondly, there was clearly a large counterinsurgency story to be told, and I had volunteered for a project on American counterinsurgency doctrine. And the thing that had already struck me before I left is that all the manuals were from the 1960s. It was basically the doctrine, such as we had, was all Vietnam-era doctrine, which is basically for fighting peasants in rice paddies. It was not really about this.

Eliot Cohen

So I go there, and let's see "I was in Baghdad, I was Ramadi, in Fallujah, and I went down to Basra. It was a very partial view, and of course, one of the things you first learn when you go to war is how every place is different. Nothing "no story is straightforward.

Interviewer

And who was escorting you? Who determined your itinerary? What "why did you just choose to go to the places you went to?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well "I'm trying to remember how we came up with things. My "the guy who became my chief of staff when I was counselor at State was then working as a military assistant to "to Wolfowitz "a guy named Steve Ganyard, who was a Marine colonel.

Eliot Cohen

So he helped set up a lot of this. And I had a British contact who was the chief of staff of their Multi-National Division headquartered there. So I was trying to get with people that I had already had some connection with "Jim Mattis, who was the commanding, First Marine Division. And I guess the first thing that you encounter is, okay, different places are very different. I was very struck that we often didn't know who we were fighting. I mean you ask people, you'd say, "Okay, tell me who the enemy is here," and you'd get a lot of hand-waving.

Eliot Cohen

I had a really dispiriting day with the "it was then called the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps, which is what we were standing up, and "I actually said, "Can you leave me alone with these guys with an interpreter?" And I talked to them, and boy, you know. A lot of soldiers hadn't shown up because they were being intimidated. Officers were stealing

their pay, you know, their kit was terrible. They were being treated better by the Marines than they had been by the 82nd, which had been there before, but itâ€“you know, itâ€“I reallyâ€“it really made me realize this thingâ€™s a really weak read. They were a pretty demoralized, dispirited bunch.

Eliot Cohen

So, you know, you had all that, and it was clear there was a lot of internal antipathy betweenâ€“you know, every time youâ€™reâ€“when youâ€™re out in the field, between the divisional headquarters and Baghdad. It was pretty clear that in Baghdad, the Sanchez-Bremer relationship was just deeply poisonous. So I came back and Iâ€“I reported to the [Defense Policy] Boardâ€“and I think this is in Ricksâ€™ bookâ€“and gave, you know, a kind of a dark picture. Not saying that weâ€™re losing, but saying that itâ€™s really not going well, and that I thought there wasâ€“which I felt for a long timeâ€“thereâ€™s just way too much happy talk. Thereâ€™s way too muchâ€“that also just did usâ€“and itâ€™s

Eliot Cohen

Iâ€™m not saying it did us in, but itâ€“it was aâ€“itâ€™s been a huge problem in Iraq, and a huge problem in Afghanistan. So whether youâ€™re in favor of these conflicts or against them doesnâ€™t make a difference, but, you know, be candid about whatâ€™s going on. And when I was, later on, at State, it was exactly the same story with Afghanistan. The secretary sent me over there for a couple weeks, and I came back and said, â€œThere are a lot of things that are going very badly here.â€ But theâ€“the kind of push-back with happy talk from both commanders in the field, and the ambassador, and the bureaucracies here is very powerful. Itâ€™s aâ€“thereâ€™s a powerful tendency toâ€“to say, â€œNo, things are reallyâ€“

Interviewer

Itâ€™s everâ€“itâ€™s ever thus. So hasnâ€™t it been with war?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Huh?

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s always been the case with war.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

It is ever thus, yes, but. And so these were, in some case, in some ways, my wars. I felt more strongly about it.

Interviewer

So you come back with this assessment thatâ€“what should be done, then? What is your reactionâ€“not that things are just going poorly, but you mustâ€™ve had a reaction as toâ€“

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Wellâ€“

Interviewer

How we should respond to it.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

I actuallyâ€“you know, the military obviously likes to say, â€œDonâ€™t come to me with a problem. Come to me with a solution.â€ I think thatâ€™s sort of bogus. I think first youâ€™ve got to realize that youâ€™ve got a problem, and sometimes the solution to the problem may not be clear. But youâ€™re only going to begin figuring it out once you acknowledge that youâ€™ve got a problem.

Eliot Cohen

And so lâ€“thatâ€™s often the way lâ€™ve viewed my role in this things is to say, â€œYouâ€™ve got a problem. So letâ€™s face the fact that youâ€™ve got a problem, and then think about theâ€“the ways through it.â€ I thoughtâ€“I thought of really two basic things. One is the personalities had to be changedâ€“it was clear that you had some toxic personalities, or at least some toxic relationships.

Interviewer

The Sanchez-Bremer relationship.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

Others, too?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

There wasâ€“that was the main one, and both of those guys were deeply problematic. Andâ€“butâ€“I mean both dedicated, patriotic, hardworking, decent, good human beingsâ€“thatâ€™s not the point.

Eliot Cohen

But they were not suited for the jobs they got, and they were not handling them well. They werenâ€™t handling each other well, and they werenâ€™t handling the Iraqis well. Another second thing was that the key to this, as in most places, is the development ofâ€“of indigenous forces, together with some sort of acceptable level of governance. So those were the two conclusions. Partâ€“part of what happened as a result of thisâ€“Jack Keane and lâ€“I feel when Jack [Keane] came on theâ€“on the DPB, but we really became allies on these things, and talked a lot.

The Surge and the Turnaround in Iraq

Interviewer

But what became popularly known as the surge started as a kind of academic discussion, am I right?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

I donâ€™t know. I think, you know, the surgeâ€“because the surge was a success, itâ€™

Interviewer

A lot of people are claiming credit for it.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Rightâ€“

Interviewer

Yes.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Thatâ€™s what I was going to say. As the proverb has it, it had numerous farmers.

Interviewer

Yes.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

I think there were a whole bunch of things going on simultaneously. My little piece of itâ€“and it was a little pieceâ€“was the White House was accepting that there was a big problem by 2006, and I think partly because of my friend Peter Feaver, who was working on the embassy staff at the time, I got invited, first, to a session with the President at Camp David in June. And then to a sessionâ€“I think it was November-Decemberâ€“at the White House.

Interviewer

This is June of â€™06.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

This is of â€™06, yeah. And so they were clearly kind of coming to terms with the fact that this was not going well. You had a number of people coming up with the idea of a surgeâ€“I think some of it was coming out of AEI. A lot of it, I thinkâ€“

Interviewer

American Enterprise Institute.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah, the American Enterpriseâ€“and a lot of it, I think, was coming out of Jack Keane. I think some of it was coming out of David Petraeus, who had been kind of watching all this.

Interviewer

At this point, Petraeus is where, in 2006?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

He isâ€“was at Leavenworth, and of course, there, heâ€™s grappling with the counterinsurgency manual, which I played some small role in. So I think there were a number of people who were thinking about that. The thing that was interesting about that

decision, of course, is that—and I give Bush an enormous amount of credit for it, even though I can be very critical of him—was he was swimming against the tide of military advice. The CENTCOM commander was not in favor. The

Interviewer

The CENTCOM commander at this point was?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Abizaid.

Interviewer

Interviewer: Abizaid.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Theater commander Casey was not in favor of it. I think the chiefs were not in favor of it. And he made the very gutsy decision to do it.

Interviewer

Now, June 2006, you come to the White House

Dr. Eliot Cohen

That was at Camp David.

Interviewer

I'm sorry, Camp David.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

And it was for alternative approaches to Iraq. It was me, Mike Vickers, Bob Kaplan, and Fred Kagan. The

Interviewer

All in a room with the president?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

And who else?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, pretty much everybody. Condi was there, and Rumsfeld, and [Richard] Myers, and

Interviewer

Yeah. What was the discussion like? Tell me how that—I mean you went here, there's a group of, what, 15 people or something?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah. It was sort ofâ€“it wasâ€“

Interviewer

Round table?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

It was what we thought about what was going on in Iraq, and what one might do about it. Andâ€“

Interviewer

Youâ€™re sitting around a round table, though? What isâ€“how does it work? Youâ€™re sitting in easy chairs? Youâ€™re where?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yes. No, no, noâ€“it was a round table. I think the four of us were on one side, and the president and vice president on the other. We talked about different things. Iâ€™d have to look at the notes that I wrote up for that.

Eliot Cohen

Iâ€“I remember coming awayâ€“it was my first experience, really, talking to a president, and Iâ€“you know, you realize these things are more difficult in practice than in theory. And Iâ€“I came away kicking myself because I wasnâ€™t forceful enough in saying that, I think you really need a major change in personnel running the war, particularly on the ground.â€“ It was a very hard thing to do to say, you know, Iâ€“this is a guy wearing a bowtieâ€“I think you ought to fire the general youâ€™ve got in charge and replace him with somebody else.â€“

Interviewer

Whoâ€™s leading the discussion?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

What?

Interviewer

Whoâ€™s leading the discussion?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

The president.

Interviewer

He did?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

Is he pointedly asking you questions, orâ€“

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah, he was asking each of us questions. I mean he was listening. We were talking about things like the strain on the force and so on. Butâ€“and again, Iâ€™d have to look at my notes.

Eliot Cohen

Part of the story in all this was I had a son that was going off shortly toâ€“to Iraq, whoâ€™s a soldier, and Iâ€™I was really furious at myself, actually, after that one. So when I got the second chanceâ€“which you usually donâ€™t getâ€“it was in the Oval Office, and that was a different cast of characters.

Interviewer

This was December, now, 2006.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah, I think it was December, yeah. So itâ€™s meâ€“the other civilian was Steve Biddle from the Council on Foreign Relations, but it was Jack Keane, Wayne Downing, and Barry McCaffrey. So three quite eminent retired four-stars. And the president started with me, and Iâ€“that time, I decided I wasnâ€™t going to hold back, and Iâ€™I sort of started with, â€œI think you need a change in command.â€ And that was just in the Oval Office, two couches, him, the vice president sitting next to him. I think [Steve] Hadley and some of the others were in the background.

Interviewer

Was Rumsfeld there?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

No. And I said, you know, â€œI think you really need a differentâ€“a different team,â€ and he said, â€œWell, who would you put in?â€ I said, â€œPetraeus,â€ and Keane picked up and ran with that. But Iâ€™I wasâ€“I was much more forceful on that occasion, which I wasâ€“I felt a lot better about. I think, you know, as you think about the surge, here, I guess, to go back to your original question, I think there were a number of ideas that were floating out in different planning staffs. I think Petraeusâ€“and of course Petraeus and Keane are very closeâ€“there was this AEI exercise, which sort of validated some of this.

Interviewer

AEI exercise.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah. I think some of this came in through Cheney. I donâ€™tâ€“I think untilâ€“we may never know what the vice presidentâ€™s influence on the president was. And I think the most important thing is the presidentâ€™s ownâ€“it almost doesnâ€™t matter where the

ideas came from. What matters isâ€”â€”cause there was only one guy who could make the decisionâ€”that the president was willing to make a very gutsy decision to double down, even if it meant extending tours, and to follow through.

Eliot Cohen

But I also think that just on the surge, the thing that people forget is that a large part of the success of the surgeâ€”some part of it was an increment of troops. A large part of it was a new commanderâ€”Petraeus. A large part was his new wingman, Ryan Crocker, whoâ€™s much better, I think, at managing the Iraqi relationships. It was the slow, steady development of Iraqi forces, which we tend to forget about, but that was really important.

Eliot Cohen

It was the Anbar Awakening, which we had something to do with, but that was a lot ofâ€”you know, that was very much the Anbaris. And it was Stan McChrystal and his guys putting a lot of pressure on al-Qaeda in Iraq in particular, by, you know, capturing or killing those guys. So I think it was a whole bunch of things that came together to make thatâ€”to turn the war around, of which the surge was just one part.

Interviewer

Well, wasnâ€™t a big part of it the fact of acceptance, finally, that this was counterinsurgency? I meanâ€”

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Oh, yeahâ€”yeah. For sure.

Interviewer

That was reallyâ€”I mean you described the beginning of the war. Weâ€™re really still sayingâ€”in a dreamland, that this could end up beâ€”weâ€™re not going to face this.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Oh, thereâ€™s noâ€”no question about that. That was one of the reasons why lâ€”you know, you asked what I was doing after 2004. A large part of that was I wasâ€”I was promptingâ€”trying to prompt the Army and the Marine Corps to rewrite the counterinsurgency manual, andâ€”

Interviewer

Yeah, lâ€™m curious how that happened, because thereâ€™s Petraeus out there in Leavenworth, working on that, right?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

Someone in the Defense [Department] establishment is saying, â€œWe got to think of this way now,â€”obviously, and someone is led to Petraeus. And, what, Con Crane, was he also involved in it, andâ€”

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah, well, I mean the piece of credit I will claim for this was I mean Petraeus who's a very smart guy understood the need for a revised counterinsurgency manual. And it was

Interviewer

Based on his experience, though, in Iraq.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah. And it was it was already underway, and I'd gone out to Leavenworth quite a bit, and they brought me out there I think I don't know if it was Dave who brought me out. I think it was. And I was talking to the guy who was drafting the [counterinsurgency] manual, and he was a good guy, but he was a vanilla-flavored colonel, who I think had not had Iraq experience maybe he did, I don't know.

Eliot Cohen

But he was not the right guy. So I went I was having dinner with Petraeus that night, and I said I did say to him I said, "You really need to take charge of this in a big way and get somebody else to write it." And I believe I think he already had the idea, but I suggested Con Crane. I had not known the two of them had a connection, actually, but I have an enormous regard for Con Crane. So I think I played some role in pushing that along, although, again, everybody has a role, so.

Interviewer

One of the revisionist histories I guess it's Lewis Sorley, primarily of Vietnam is that there we had the Westmoreland period, and then we had the [Creighton] Abrams period the Abrams period characterized by smarter counterinsurgency kind of strategy.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

And that we were winning in this Abrams era, and the way we were not in the Westmoreland era. Is there a parallel here to Iraq with Vietnam?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, there's there is some parallel, but I wouldn't I mean actually, I think I think Buzz Sorley kind of overstates things.

Interviewer

In his analysis of Vietnam, he overstates things.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah, in his analysis of Vietnam, and of course, he's a huge admirer of Abrams, as one should be. But personalities matter hugely but, you know, in this kind of war, it seems to me there are a lot of different things that end up shaping success. And so you don't want to be too mono-causal about it and some of these just take a long time to

have an effect.

Eliot Cohen

And the two that, in this case, I would point to is the development of Iraqi security forces, where really there was a lot of hard work that went on in 2000â€“starting around 2004, 2005, 2006â€“that really begins to be felt in 2007. And I do thinkâ€“and itâ€™s difficult to talk about, â€™cause so much of it is still in the black worldâ€“the really relentless pursuit of the leadership of some of the moveâ€“the insurgent movements by Stan McChrystal and his people, and in a way that transformed how we conduct those kinds of operations.

Interviewer

So the success of the surge, it almost seems youâ€™re saying, had less to do with the surge than it had to do with coincidence at these other events.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, itâ€™s a culmination of a whole bunch of things, and I do think the additional five brigades made a big difference, particularly in Baghdad. It meant that you could really pacify Baghdad, although a lot of it was also Petraeusâ€™ approach that weâ€™re going to push people out into the neighborhoods.

Interviewer

Precisely. Well, thatâ€™s theâ€“

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Right.

Interviewer

And thatâ€™s the doctrinal approach that he adopts.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

And itâ€™s also the Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Itâ€™sâ€“itâ€™s a whole bunch of things coming together, I think.

Interviewer

And the other side getting tired, you know. We forget, in a way this goes back to talking about the enemy as Lord Voldemort. The enemyâ€™s not Lord Voldemortâ€“they get tired.

Interviewer

Would you rateâ€“how would you characterize, then, the [Iraq] War as a whole? Have we achieved the objective? What was the objective?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, I think there were multiple objectives, and one objective, obviously, was to get rid of Saddam, and to neutralize the WMD problem that turned out not to exist in the way that we thought it existed. I do think it delivered a huge shock to that part of the world, with second and third and fourth-order consequences that we still can't judge. But which are more or less positive, I think.

Interviewer

By "shock," you mean that we're willing to use force.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, (a) we're willing to use force, but a part of why Saddam could succeed was because he could—he could take a large part of the Arab world into a fantasy-land. You know, if you ever wandered around his palaces and you see this totalitarian art, it's—it is all fantasy. It's—you know, he's literally on a white horse, you know, as this tremendous champion against crusaders and outsiders, and, you know, it was all rubbish. And—and instead, what you had were these miserable, poor, you know, tyrannical, unhappy, unproductive societies, and—and that—that was the world that bred Osama bin Laden.

Eliot Cohen

You know, a very dysfunctional, very, very dysfunctional world. My—my former colleague Fouad Ajami I think wrote about it quite well, and I think that was one reason why Fouad was very much in favor of the [Iraq] War. And in some ways, what you see in the Arab Spring is the final culmination of that. People saying, "You know, actually, our problem is not the United States. It's not Israel. It's not the colonial powers. It's the kind of regimes that we've had that have led us into this dead end."

Eliot Cohen

You know the kinds of things that have been documented in the Arab Human Development Reports coming out of the United Nations. That, I think, fewer—fewer books translated from English than in Greece, and that kind of thing. And I have a sense of revulsion with that. And I think we—we delivered a hard blow that kind of rattled that part of the world. We paid a big price for it, and other people paid an even bigger price for it, and it may not even have been a good idea—I don't know, and I don't think anybody can know. But—

Interviewer

You mean, historically speaking, we don't know—is that what you're saying?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

I think—yes. I think this is—this really is one of those things where it'll be very hard to come to a really informed judgment about it for 30 or 40 years. I really do. Until you have historians who don't particularly feel that they've got a stake in this fight. And until we have a better idea of what was going on on the other side. You know, there's another way in which Iraq is like Vietnam. The histories we write are all about us—it's never about the locals, much less about the enemy. It's completely solipsistic. We live in a world of mirrors.

Interviewer

Shortly before the surge was adopted, or contemporaneous with the discussion, the Iraq Study Group analysis came outâ€“

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yeah.

Interviewer

And was a kind of competing vision, really.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Yes, it was.

Interviewer

Can you characterize that, and your response to it?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, Iâ€“I did. I mean I firedâ€“basically, I would write op-eds whenever I was just fed up and the alternative was throwing a brick at my television set.

Interviewer

Describe what the conclusions were of the Iraq Study Group, and then your response to it.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Basically, the conclusion of the Iraq Study Group was that we need, in effect, to begin a withdrawalâ€“pull away from the city, step back, and basically begin a disengagement, in effect, accepting aâ€“a loss. Andâ€“and begin negotiating a deal with the surrounding powers, particularly Syria and Iran, which I think would have been calamitous. And the thing that infuriated me about the Iraq Study Group report is most members of the Iraq Study Group never bothered to go there.

Eliot Cohen

The few who did spent, I think, a day or so in Baghdad. And only Chuck Robb went outside the wire, â€™cause he was a former Marine, so he visited with the Marines. And I just thought that was irresponsible. And I also thought the idea that you could really cut a deal with the Syriansâ€“and the Iranians, who were killing usâ€“was crazy. And whatever you thought of going into the place to begin with, to give Iran and Syria a victory, which is what you wouldâ€™ve been doing, wasâ€“wouldâ€™ve been calamitous for American power. So I said as much, and, you know, Iâ€™m very glad that it went nowhere.

Radical Change, Uncertainty, and Optimism

Interviewer

What do you think the future is for U.S.-Iranian relations?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Well, inveterate hostility before the counterrevolution, and then friendship thereafter. I think that regime will go down, sooner or later. Itâ€™ll go down bloody, I think. Although you never can tell. Itâ€™s a deeply unpopular regime. It ultimately wonâ€™t work, and I think the Iranianâ€”for sure, the Iranian middle class is very pro-American.

Eliot Cohen

Just all the indicators are that. And so I think when that regime goes, weâ€™ll actually have a very good relationship with Iran. But until that time, itâ€™s going to be very difficult. And theyâ€™ve beenâ€”we were soâ€”and again, I thinkâ€”oh, sorryâ€”the Bush administration and in the same sense the Obama administration have been very reluctant to admit just how much American blood the Iranians have on their handsâ€”and the Syrians, too.

Interviewer

What do you mean by that?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

You know, theâ€”

Interviewer

You mean Iraqâ€”the insurgency in Iraq?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

In Iraq. In Iraqâ€”also in Afghanistan, feeding weapons, feeding training, peopleâ€”doing everything they could to bleed us. Iâ€™I was always very much in favor of punching back hard and picking up members of the Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iraq. Make them feel that theyâ€”they would suffer. And particularly theâ€”the Syrians, alsoâ€”I mean they were running these rat lines for suicide bombers in through Syria. We never made the Syrians pay for it in the slightest.

Interviewer

Will it take an invasionâ€”

Dr. Eliot Cohen

Big mistake.

Interviewer

Would it take an invasion of Iran toâ€”

Dr. Eliot Cohen

No, you wouldnâ€™tâ€”you wouldnâ€™t have to do that. I mean you could do things thatâ€”you could do very aggressive things to their operatives in Iraq. Andâ€”and other thingsâ€”there are lots of things you can do short of invasion to make them realize that they will pay a real price for this.

Interviewer

Are you optimistic about the security of the world, going forward into the 21st century?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

No. No. I think we're in a very, very difficult period. I think we're in a period of well, I shouldn't say that absolutely that I'm pessimistic. But I think we are in a period of tremendous change, which is incredibly difficult to predict. And so you're in a period where you can't really have a grand strategy there'll be surprises which will be good, and there'll be surprises which will be bad, and which will come at us seemingly out of nowhere. Think about the Arab Spring. That's, on the whole, a good surprise on the whole.

Eliot Cohen

Think about 9/11 that was a surprise that was a bad surprise. Think about the collapse of the Soviet Union. Think about the economic crisis of 2008. None of these were really foreseen. I mean people claim in retrospect that they didn't. And so I think we're going to be going from one shock to another, in a world in which the United States has less power, in which there are rising competitors of different kinds who have their own very serious problems where some of the fundamental assumptions about state and society that we've had since World War II are coming under challenge.

Eliot Cohen

But right now, I think we're living through a challenge to the basic model of the welfare state that evolved in the Western world Europe, and also, differently, in Japan after 1945. It's not workable, but what's it going to be replaced by?

Interviewer

What about the threat to the nation-state itself?

Dr. Eliot Cohen

I think that's also there. I mean there are, you know, the kind of shattering effects of technology, which is, you know, above terrific, but also destructive. Biotechnology possibility of I mean I think we're looking at a lot of nuclear proliferation.

Eliot Cohen

Look at the instability of states like Pakistan, which are deeply problematic. So I think we are in for a period of quite radical change and uncertainty, and you know, I am fundamentally a long-term optimist about the United States, although that's getting a little bit harder as we have this discussion in the summer of 2011. But I am fundamentally a long-term optimist about this country, but that said, I think there are huge challenges outside.

Interviewer

Thank you very much.

Dr. Eliot Cohen

You're very welcome.