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## Doubt, Distrust, Delay

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The Inside Story of How Bush's Team Dealt With Its Failing Iraq Strategy

By Bob Woodward  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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During the summer of 2006, from her office adjacent to the [White House](#), deputy national security adviser [Meghan O'Sullivan](#) sent [President Bush](#) a daily top secret report cataloging the escalating bloodshed and chaos in Iraq. "Violence has acquired a momentum of its own and is now self-sustaining," she wrote July 20, quoting from an intelligence assessment.

Her dire evaluation contradicted the upbeat assurances that President Bush was hearing from [Gen. George W. Casey Jr.](#), the U.S. commander in Iraq. Casey and Defense Secretary [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#) were pushing to draw down American forces and speed the transfer of responsibility to the Iraqis. Despite months of skyrocketing violence, Casey insisted that within a year, Iraq would be mostly stable, with the bulk of American combat troops headed home.

Publicly, the president claimed the United States was winning the war, and he expressed unwavering faith in Casey, saying, "It's his judgment that I rely upon." Privately, he was losing confidence in the drawdown strategy. He questioned O'Sullivan that summer with increasing urgency: "What are you hearing from people in Baghdad? What are people's daily lives like?"

"It's hell, Mr. President," she answered, determined not to mislead or lie to him.

O'Sullivan was 36, with a PhD from Oxford and a year's experience in Iraq. As the violence had escalated, she began to feel that the strategy of drawing down had become indefensible. For months, she had urged her boss, national security adviser [Stephen J. Hadley](#), to begin a full strategy review.

That summer, with U.S. casualties eclipsing 2,500 deaths and nearly 20,000 wounded, Bush acknowledged to himself what he was not saying publicly: The war had taken a perilous turn for the worse, with 1,000 attacks a week, the equivalent of six an hour. "Underneath my hope was a sense of anxiety," Bush recalled in a May 2008 interview. The strategy was one "that everybody hoped would work. And it did not. And therefore the question is, when you're in my position: If it's not working, what do you do?"

This is the untold history of how the Bush administration wrestled with that question. Compiled from classified documents and interviews with more than 150 participants, it reveals that the administration's efforts to develop a new Iraq strategy were crippled by dissension among the president's advisers, delayed by political calculations and undermined by a widening and sometimes bitter rift in civilian-military relations.

No administration willingly puts its disagreements on display, but what happened in Washington during 2006 went beyond the usual give-and-take of government. The level of distrust became so severe that Bush eventually activated a back channel to Casey's replacement in Iraq, [Gen. David H.](#)

[Petraeus](#), circumventing the established chain of command. While the violence in Iraq skyrocketed to unnerving levels, a second front in the war raged at home, fought at the highest levels of the White House, [the Pentagon](#), the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#) and the State Department.

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By mid-2006, Casey, a stout four-star general with wire-rim glasses, had been the commander in Iraq for two years. As [American military](#) units rotated in and out, Casey remained the one constant.

He had concluded that one big problem with the war was the president himself. Since the beginning, Casey felt, the president had viewed the war in conventional terms, repeatedly asking how many of the various enemies had been captured or killed. Casey later confided to a colleague that he had the impression that Bush reflected the "radical wing of the Republican Party that kept saying, 'Kill the bastards! Kill the bastards! And you'll succeed.' "

Casey was troubled by the thought that the president didn't understand the nature of the fight they were in. The large, heavily armed Western force was on borrowed time, he believed. The president often paid lip service to winning over the Iraqi people, but then he would lean in with greater interest and ask about raids and military operations, grilling Casey about killings and captures.

Months earlier, during a secure video conference with top military and civilian leaders looking on, he told Casey that it seemed the general wasn't doing enough. "George, we're not playing for a tie," Bush had said. "I want to make sure we all understand this, don't we?" Later in the video conference, Bush emphasized it again: "I want everybody to know we're not playing for a tie. Is that right?"

In Baghdad, Casey's knuckles whitened on the table. The very suggestion was an affront to his dignity that he would long remember, a statement just short of an outright provocation.

"Mr. President," Casey had said bluntly, "we are *not* playing for a tie."

Asked later about Casey's perceptions, Bush insisted in an interview that he understood the nature of the war, whatever Casey might have thought. "I mean, of all people to understand that, it's me," he said. But several of his on-the-record comments lend credence to Casey's concern that the president was overly focused on the number of enemy killed.

"I asked that on occasion to find out whether or not we were fighting back," he said during the May interview. "Because the perception is, is that our guys are dying and they're not. Because we don't put out numbers. We don't have a tally." He said his overall question to his military commanders was, "Are we making progress in defeating them?"

"What frustrated me is that from my perspective," he said at another point, "it looked like we were taking casualties without fighting back because our commanders are loath to talk about our battlefield victories."

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**Casey also found himself** at odds with others in the administration. Once, when he had called the

number of civilian personnel who had volunteered to serve in Iraq "paltry," Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) had chided him. General, she had said, you're out of line.

On another occasion, in late 2005, he butted heads with Rice after her testimony before [the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#), in which she offered a succinct description of the U.S. military strategy in Iraq -- "clear, hold and build: to clear areas from insurgent control, to hold them securely and then build durable Iraqi institutions."

"What the hell is that?" Casey asked his boss at [U.S. Central Command](#), [Gen. John P. Abizaid](#).

"I don't know," Abizaid said.

"Did you agree to that?"

"No, I didn't agree to that."

When Rice next came to Iraq, Casey asked for a private meeting with her and U.S. Ambassador [Zalmay Khalilzad](#).

"Excuse me, ma'am, what's 'clear, hold, build'?"

Rice looked a little surprised. "George, that's your strategy."

"Ma'am, if it's my strategy, don't you think someone should have had the courtesy to talk to me about it before you went public with it?"

"Oh," she said. "Well, we told Gen. [Raymond] Odierno," who served as the liaison between the military and the [State Department](#).

"Look, ma'am," Casey said, "as hard as I've worked to support the State Department in this thing, the fact that that went forward without anybody talking to me, I consider a foul."

Rice later apologized to Casey.

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**O'Sullivan and Hadley** tried for months in the summer of 2006 to get an Iraq strategy review underway. But they encountered resistance, as well as the inevitable crush of daily presidential obligations.

They realized that conducting a review was risky, even under the greatest secrecy. A leak that the White House was questioning its strategy could be devastating. The midterm congressional elections were barely four months away. Iraq was likely to be the main issue, and the Republicans' thin margins in both the Senate and the House were in jeopardy.

In mid-July 2006, Hadley told the president that he wanted to plant the seed for a full strategy review by asking Rumsfeld, Casey and Khalilzad a series of tough, detailed questions. Because Casey and Khalilzad were in Baghdad, they would have the session in a secure video conference. O'Sullivan

hoped that in answering the questions, the three men would wake up and realize, "Hey, this picture has changed."

Bush gave his blessing, and Hadley scheduled the session for Saturday, July 22, which happened to be Casey's 58th birthday.

The general was flabbergasted. Just two weeks earlier, the president had been effusive in praising Casey during an exchange with reporters in Chicago. Now Casey had 14 major questions from Hadley, each with a series of sub-questions. Casey counted a total of 50. It didn't take much to see the list was a direct assault on the current strategy. One question was simply: "What is the strategy for Baghdad?" Casey found it demeaning.

When the video conference was convened, Casey and Khalilzad hoped to put off the questions by giving a routine update. But Hadley was not to be deterred.

"Is sectarian violence now self-sustaining and thus beyond the capacity of the political process meaningfully to influence?" Hadley asked.

What the f---? Casey thought. If the answer was yes, then they might as well give up. "No," he said, and wrote "No" on his page of questions.

Afterward, Rumsfeld made it clear he was not happy with the session, but Hadley and O'Sullivan believed they had at least sparked a strategy debate. Still, it would be almost a month before the president would be fully engaged in a strategy review again, as usual carefully shielded from the public.

Hadley had kept Rice informed of his efforts to get an internal strategy review going, and she was familiar with the 50-question grilling that Hadley had meted out to Khalilzad and Casey. Rice also favored a reevaluation of the strategy but didn't want "to do anything that would be above the radar screen in the heavy political breathing of the November elections." The administration did not need what she called "a hothouse story" that acknowledged Iraq had gotten so bad that they were considering a new approach. That would play into the hands of critics and antiwar Democrats.

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**On Thursday, Aug. 17, 2006**, the president gathered his war council in the windowless Roosevelt Room of the White House to address the Iraq problem head-on. The temperature outside was headed toward 90 degrees, humid and muggy -- vacation time for most anyone who could escape the summer doldrums of the nation's capital.

Two weeks earlier, during a visit to the president's ranch, Rice had warned him that the very fabric of Iraqi society was "rending." Picking up on that theme, the president said, "The situation seems to be deteriorating," acknowledging to his closest advisers a rebuttal of his public optimism. He said he was searching for a way to go. "I want to be able to say that I have a plan to punch back," he said. "We need a clear way forward coming out of Labor Day." They had nothing close to a clear way forward that day, with less than three weeks to go. "We have to fight off the impression that this is not winnable," the president said. Support for the war had plummeted. In a recent [Gallup poll](#), 56 percent

of Americans said the war was a mistake. Bush's latest approval ratings hovered around 37 percent.

"Can America succeed?" he asked, one of the few times he seemed to entertain the possibility that it might not. "If so, how? How do our commanders answer that?"

Abizaid and Casey had joined the meeting through a secure video link. Before they could answer, the president recounted his conversation with a widow of a soldier. The woman had said, according to the president: "Look, I trust you. But can you win?"

Bush then recited his goals: a free society that could defend, sustain and govern itself while becoming a reliable ally in the global war on terrorism. He added a dreary assessment, saying, "It seems Iraq is incapable of achieving that."

For two years, Casey's strategy had rested on the premise that he was preparing the Iraqis to take control. In June 2006, he told Bush, "To win, we have to draw down." Rumsfeld was fond of using a bicycle seat analogy to describe the goal: Train the Iraqi forces to assume responsibility for security, and then "take the hand off the Iraqi bicycle seat," to let them get the hang of riding solo.

The problem during the Vietnam War, Bush told me in 2002, was that "the government micromanaged the war" -- both the White House and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. Micromanaging the Iraq war from the White House had been a red line for Bush. The generals' words almost always were unchallenged gospel. He did not want to second-guess them.

That was about to change.

"We must succeed," Bush said. "We will commit the resources to succeed. If they" -- the Iraqis -- "can't do it, we will."

In a direct challenge to Rumsfeld, the president declared: "If the bicycle teeters, we're going to put the hand back on. We have to make damn sure we cannot fail. If they stumble, we have to have enough manpower to cope with that."

"I've got it," Casey said. "I understand your intent."

What he didn't quite understand was just how much his world was about to change.

Bush later told me that he was intentionally sending a message to Rumsfeld and Casey: "If it's not working, let's do something different. . . . I presume they took it as a message."

But the drumbeat of optimism continued from Casey.

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**Hadley told Rice** and others that he had come to disdain Rumsfeld's bicycle metaphor, in part because it triggered an unpleasant but relevant personal memory. In Hadley's telling, during the early 1950s, when he was in kindergarten in Toledo, Ohio, his father decided to teach him to ride a bike. Dutifully holding the bicycle seat, the father got his son going down the street at a fast clip.

"Great job!" his father yelled, and the young Hadley, wearing shorts and a short-sleeved shirt, pumped away at the pedals. But as his father's voice grew more distant, the boy realized he was on his own. He turned to look back and spilled right over, tearing up his knees and elbows. It would be 2 1/2 years before he got back on a bicycle again.

Now, when Rumsfeld said it was time to take the hand off the Iraqi bicycle seat, Hadley thought, "Well, there are costs and consequences of taking the hand off the bicycle if the lad falls over."

\* \* \*

**Despite the 50 questions** from Hadley that zeroed in on the essence of the strategy, the tough session with the president and the increasing violence on the ground in Iraq, Casey held firmly to his leave-to-win strategy. He continued to report that within the next 12 to 18 months, Iraqi forces could take over the security responsibilities for the country with very little coalition support.

Casey saw his mandate as accelerating a transfer to the Iraqis. But the president and others had begun to head in the opposite direction.

"We've got to pull this together now," Hadley told Rice in October 2006. "We've got to do it under the radar screen because the electoral season is so hot, but we've got to pull this together now and start to give the president some options." Rice agreed both that a more coherent review was warranted and that secrecy was key.

In mid-October, after months of inaction, Hadley told the president, "I want to start an informal internal review."

A small group of NSC staff members and Rice's Iraq coordinator, [David Satterfield](#), would operate under the radar. They could decide later to formalize it.

"Do it," Bush said.

On Oct. 17, Hadley summoned O'Sullivan to his office. He asked her to start the review quietly. Rumsfeld, Abizaid and Casey -- the man the president said he trusted on strategy -- wouldn't be involved. Soon, the review was underway in O'Sullivan's office. No one from the [Defense Department](#) and no one from the military was included.

*Brady Dennis and Evelyn Duffy contributed to this report.*

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