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Iraq, 10 Years Later: A Conversation with Senator John McCain, General Jack Keane and Frederick W. Kagan

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DANIELLE PLETKA: Good afternoon, everybody. I’m Danielle Pletka. I’m the vice president for foreign and defense policy studies at AEI. And I’m going to try to keep my introduction under 15 seconds because we have a short time to have an important conversation.

I’m delighted, as I always am, to introduce three gentlemen who I consider members of the family – I hope that they don’t contradict me in their – in their remarks: Senator John McCain, who really needs no introduction, and I’m not going to give him one; General Jack Keane, who – ditto – needs none and isn’t going to get one, but whose bio is available on our website, as always; and our moderator, Fred Kagan, who directs AEI’s Critical Threats project.

This is an opportunity to hear an important and a thoughtful conversation about a topic that doesn’t get a lot of thoughtful conversation, and I was struck in the news coverage today how that trend has continued. So perhaps today we can rectify that a little bit with a wonderful group of people. I’m going to be listening, as you are. Thank you all very much, especially to Senator McCain and to General Keane, for being here again with us today. Over to you, Fred.

FREDERICK KAGAN: Thank you, Danielle. And thank you, Jack and Senator, for joining us. It’s a tremendous honor to be in your presence, let alone discussing an important issue like this.

So today we are observing – I won’t say celebrating – the 10th anniversary of the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. It’s also the 10th anniversary of the start of the process of relitigating the decision to go to war in the first place. We’ve been at that now for a decade. We’ve been at that now for a decade, and I really am not sure that we’re going to get any new insight into whether that was a good idea or a bad idea from the next 89 million iterations of this.

And I think that as we look at the news coverage and the discussions that people are having, as Dany said, I’m struck by the degree to which we – people are asking the wrong question. People are asking, was it worth it? And I have a number of problems with phrasing the question in that way, starting with, it implies that it’s all over, and it implies that when the United States pulled its troops out of Iraq, Iraq vanished fundamentally, and it was time for us just to – just to take tally of how we felt about things now that it’s done. And I think that there’s a real problem with that because the world continues to spin and – even when we’re not cranking. And even when we’re not paying attention to Iraq, things are happening, and things happening that matter to us.

So I’m going to ask for Senator McCain and then General Keane, what should we be asking? What would – what is the right question and the right issue to discuss on this 10th anniversary of the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom? Senator?

SENATOR JOHN MCCAIN (R-AZ): Well, thank you, Frank, and – Fred. (Chuckles.) That’s a great way to start. Thank you, Fred. And Dany, thank you for the continued outstanding work that AEI does informing the American people and policymakers of the important national security issues of the day and many other issues. I’m always honored to be with General Keane, who I view as one of the great and most thoughtful strategists that is in America today. And some of our newer, younger people here may not know that he was basically, along with a lot of
help, the architect of the surge, which was successful. And I – a lot of us in the Senate look to General Keane for advice and counsel in rapidly unfolding events that take place in the Middle East.

I guess, Fred, that the question we should be asking is what is the role of the United States of America in the world and particularly in the Middle East? The centrifuges are spinning in Tehran. The North Koreans obviously have – pose enough of a threat that the Obama administration has changed their policy in missile defense, that we don’t – we don’t have to go country by country throughout the Middle East, but I don’t think there’s any doubt that we are in a period of volatility that I don’t think we’ve ever seen when we look at the myriad of challenges that we face.

So I think the central question should be, have we learned the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan and other involvement, and what is the role of the United States of America today? Do we lead? Do we follow? Do we sit by and watch events unfold? And obviously, from, you know, my record, that that is a very dangerous course. Every time I travel – and I do a lot in the Middle East – there’s one theme, common theme from all the leaders that I hear from in that part of the world is, where is American leadership? We want American leadership. We want Americans to lead.

And there’s no greater example of that than Syria. Today we understand from news reports that there – and they’re only news reports – that chemical weapons may have been used on a Scud missile – Scud missiles by Bashar Assad. The president of the United States stated long ago that that was a red line that he could not cross. Now it’ll be interesting to see, if these news reports are true, what steps the United States of America should take. And there’s no greater example of a lack of American leadership than the British, the French, our allies and friends in the region and others, are all arguing strongly and strenuously for a no-fly zone and arming the rebels. What are we going to do about Tehran? The president of the United States I believe day before yesterday said that the Iranians were within a year. I believe the Israeli estimates are shorter than that. What are we going to do about North Korea? These are all looming challenges that I don’t think stand the test of time.

MR. KAGAN: Thank you. Jack?

GENERAL JACK KEANE: I thought that was a great way to phrase it. You know, I agree the same in the sense that what we need to be doing is, is our foreign policy as it pertains to Iraq, is it the correct one, has it been, and where are we going with it? It makes the most sense to me.

And the fact of the matter is, I think most people recognize, when we changed administrations, we also changed policy. And the policy in Iraq was to treat it as a sovereign state, even though it was a fledgling democracy, and to pull away from it. We did that almost immediately back in 2009. And by the time it came to a discussion of the status of forces agreement, which – (inaudible) – was penned by Bush and Maliki to end the current one in 2011, don’t let anybody tell you anything different, it was a wink and a – a wink and a nod by people in government and people who were seeking to be in government that the 2010 election would deny
them the opportunity to talk for forces to remain beyond 2011. You couldn’t get elected if that
was your position; your opponents would tear you apart for it. So what came down to a
discussion on 2011 – excuse me, 2009, 2010, and eventually the removal of all forces, was done
because the policy in Iraq had changed, and we were pulling away from Iraq, despite 4,400 dead,
20,000 maimed and wounded.

What I think frustrated so many of us is that Iraq is a country of consequence. This is an
educated class of people who have wealth and a relatively large country, and – (inaudible) – a
stable force or influence in the region. I believe there’s a relationship between Iraq and the fact
that they reached for democracy so enthusiastically, admittedly liberated by a war that the United
States began, but they reached for democracy so enthusiastically. Remember the purple fingers?
I mean, that transformed – that was translated all around the world. It also seduced us a little bit
into believing that we were – our political accomplishments in Iraq would somehow influence in
the overall situation. The fact of the matter is, the security situation was deteriorating while the
political situation was improving, and we got intoxicated a little too much by that political
situation.

But the fact of the matter is, I think there’s a relationship between Arab Muslims for the
first time in that region reaching for democracy and the right to vote and free – being freed of the
shackles of 35 years of repression and the other authoritarian regimes like Saddam Hussein, all
of which are now falling, that the people in the region were affected by that. I think – and
certainly the drivers of their instability in their own countries, lack of social and political justice,
lack of economic opportunity, you know, were clearly motivators. But when they saw someone
actually seeking a solution, I think it relates to July 2009 in Iran in the summer of 2009, when
there’s a million-plus people on the streets, something we could not imagine could have
happened, but it was happening. And I think it relates to the Arab Spring. I’m not suggesting it’s
the cause of it. What’s the cause of it are the drivers of instability in those countries and the
awareness of people in those countries that there is a better way. But the Iraqis were finding that.
And I think that had some clear impact on the rest of the region.

So the question I think is what should our policy be towards Iraq? And the fact that we’re
pulling away from Iraq and not trying to influence it I think is tragic. You know, Maliki therefore
has another influencer, much closer than we are, in Iran. He certainly doesn’t want to be in Iran’s
hip pocket, but he’s accepting a degree of influence that I’m convinced would not have been
there if we were still a major player in Iraq.

SEN. MCCAIN: Can I just add, I know for a fact, because Lindsey Graham and Joe
Lieberman and I were there, that Maliki, Alawi and Barzani were ready to make a deal on a
residual force of some 20,000 troops, which would have provided for stabilizing that buffer zone
between the Kurdish areas in Iraq, would have given them counterintelligence capability,
surveillance capability and other capabilities. And this administration let it dwindle and dwindle.
And in the words of General Dempsey, the chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, who said the
numbers – in his words, before the Senate Armed Services Committee – “cascaded down” to
around 3,000 troops. And then, of course, the Iraqis decided that that wasn’t worth it. That was a
seminal moment in the history of Iraq and the history of United States relations with Iraq.
MR. KAGAN: Senator, you know, one of the things that Jack was talking about is the notion of Iraq, democracy in Iraq, as a model for the region. And of course, that’s been one of the most thoroughly rejected and lampooned ideas of the Bush administration. And it was attacked at the time, and it’s been attacked subsequently as, you know, the folly of democracy promotion and the impossibility of bringing democracy into countries that don’t want it, into Arab lands that – where it’s not part of their culture and so forth. And it really was, you know, received wisdom that that was a foolish enterprise. Do you agree with Jack that what we’ve seen in Iraq is actually something that helped spur a larger democratic movement within the Arab world?

GEN. KEANE: He asked you.

MR. KAGAN: That’s for you, Senator.

SEN. MCCAIN: Oh. I’m sorry, I thought it was for the general.

I don’t know because there’s not been a very happy ending. We see more and more consolidation of power on the part of Maliki’s part. Lindsey and Joe and I were in Erbil about six months ago, and I asked Barzani, I said, when’s the last time you spoke to Maliki? He said – well over a year. Leader of the Kurds and the president (sic) of Iraq don’t speak to each other in over a year. There’s increased tensions in Kirkuk, Mosul. There is obviously the cleansing, in some ways, of the government of the Sunni. I worry a great deal about final outcome.

But I do believe there was a window of opportunity where we had basically a united government and united country, that they all spoke together. And there was friction, of course. That happens in democracies. We appointed an ambassador who had no knowledge or any experience whatsoever, who believed that we should have hands off. And we went through a period of time where, after their elections, where they could have a formed a coalition government with our leadership and guidance and didn’t. So I think the window of opportunity was there, but how it all ends up, I’m not sure.

This is off the subject a bit, but the Kurds have dreamed of a Kurdish state for centuries, and I think there are some Kurds that believe that that opportunity may be on the horizon given the situation in Syria and Iraq and Turkey and these places.

It might – so I’m – have little optimism, although I always hope that there will be a cohesive government – (inaudible).

Sorry, I didn’t realize you were – I thought you were asking the general. We always let generals answer first. (Laughter.)

MR. KAGAN: Well, you know, one of the other commentaries that you hear running through this 10th anniversary discussion is that when we invaded Iraq in 2003, we gave it to the Iranians, and we did Iran a huge strategic favor, and that was, you know, a fundamental mistake. And that implies a sort of an inevitability about Iranian dominance in Iraq. Do you think that
there was an inevitable outcome, or do you think that there really was an alternative path that Iraq could have followed where Iranian influence would have been much less?

SEN. MCCAIN: I’m convinced. I am absolutely convinced. They had an election. They had a chance for a period of months to form a coalition government, and we let that opportunity go aglimmering. So I am absolutely convinced there was that opportunity. And there’s no doubt that Iranian influence was very big in their elections. There was a lot of money thrown around in that – in that election. And I do believe that President Maliki, who I know fairly well, has some of the traits that President Karzai does. I think he’s somewhat paranoid, intent on staying in power.

GEN. KEANE: And I mean, the Iranian influence in Iraq while we were fighting the war was pretty significant, somewhat underreported in the media in the United States. They were training Shia militia on a regular basis at two training bases.

It was their engineers that developed the advanced IED, because as – we had a physics problem going on in Iraq. We had vehicles that were encased in armor protection, and they were trying to blow them up, and we increased the level of protection for that, and we found ways to counter their devices and also to detect them before they blew them up. So we were actually achieving an advantage over that technique. The Iranians devised, through their engineers and scientists, the advanced IED, which penetrated our vehicles, and they told the Shia militia – and think of the Shia militia as no different than Hezbollah, trained and directed by Iranians, another proxy – and they told them to use these weapons exclusively on U.S. forces, with the – and also, they gave them rockets and mortars and resources.

So they were heavily invested because what they wanted – they knew – I think they were totally intimidated by the fact that the United States was on their eastern border and on their western border, and with a country of consequence in Iraq, by comparison to Afghanistan, in terms of its impact on the region, and also its impact on its own population. And having a country that may be reaching for democracy on its border, they had to do something about that. And they certainly wanted the United States out of there as mission one, just as the al-Qaida did, and they wanted a relatively weak, ineffectual government in Iraq, but yet a stable country and that – one that they had influence over. And they’re certainly moving in that direction and continue to move in that direction.

So their strategic objectives that Iran has, dealing with Iraq, are real. And I think they are moving closer and closer to, unfortunately and tragically, achieving those objectives, driven by the fact that there’s no counterweight because we have pulled away.

And I don’t suggest for a minute – I’m not Pollyanna-ish about democracy in the region. All I was suggesting is that they’re – they had achieved momentum in doing something that no Arab Muslim country had done before, and what we needed to do was to continue that momentum. And I think not only would it have had positive impact on Iraq and could have on the region – I have not given up on Iraq. I think, you know, when you spend a lot of time there and you’re with the people there, what they have in many parts of Iraq is so much better than what they have had before. I mean, life is, by and large, much better in Iraq than certainly what it
was under the Saddam Hussein regime. There’s a free press that criticizes Maliki on a regular basis.

And there’s a provincial election coming next month. I think it’s their third provincial election. And it was where they elect the equivalent of our governors. And there’s going to be an (expression ?), and some Sunnis are obviously going to win. The Sunnis may win, actually, in Shia and Sunni parts of the country, where they – where they share population and share power together.

But make no mistake about it: Maliki – the best thing you can say is he’s a nefarious character, and he has consolidated power, undermined his political opponents to a certain degree, taken on a huge authoritarian role and heading closer to something like Hosni Mubarak was in Egypt, as opposed to what he certainly started out. And there’s nothing to check that and balance that, and the Iranians are certainly influencing him to do all of that.

SEN. MCCAIN: Could I make one additional point, Fred? I don’t think we should have this discussion without the events that led up to our involvement. And one of the critics of our involvement in Iraq – and it’s a legitimate criticism – is that we told the American people and the world that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Now, that was said by our secretary of state, with our director of the CIA sitting right behind him, at the United Nations Security Council. And obviously, we found out that that was not the case. And so people are understandably cynical about telling the world, as well as the American people, that that’s our rationale for the military operations that we undertook.

And so I think if there’s a lesson to be learned, we ought to be sure of our intelligence information. How many times have we gotten intelligence estimates that turned out to be wrong? One of them that springs to mind is the Iranians have abandoned their quest for nuclear – their efforts for nuclear weapons. Remember that intelligence estimate? So I think one of the lessons we have to learn here is we better really make sure that that information is correct that leads us to send young Americans into harm’s way.

And that, I think, has colored, understandably, the opinion of a lot of Americans in that we gave them the wrong reason. I could argue that Saddam Hussein was hell-bent on developing those weapons. I could argue that he was a brutal and terrible oppressor of his people. I can argue that he was a threat to security in the region. But I can’t – I can’t do anything but say we made a mistake when we used Saddam Hussein – the pretext of Saddam Hussein having weapons of mass destruction as a reason to initiate Desert Storm.

MR. KAGAN: Iraqi Freedom.

SEN. MCCAIN: Iraqi Freedom, sorry. I’m – Desert Storm was a lot better. (Chuckles.)

MR. KAGAN: Yes, and the – and the proximate cause of that was actually indisputable, since there were Iraqi tanks in Kuwait. And I actually am glad that you made that slip because the other part of the problem with the discussion is – as we’ve been having it in America is that we’re pretending that the – our Iraq involvement began in 2003. In fact, we were engaged in
armed hostilities against Iraq continuously from 1990 on. And that – they were on a different scale, obviously, and we can talk about whether it was wise to move from one type to another type. But this was a long war. And it was a long war that was protracted by Saddam Hussein’s refusal to live up to obligations imposed on him by multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions and so on. And it is important to understand, I think, the full background of this, as you say, going all the way back to Operation Desert Storm.

On the Iranian point –

SEN. MCCA$

MR. KAGAN: Please.

SEN. MCCA$

GEN. KEANE: Certainly that time frame – the – that was a brilliant campaign, as was the second invasion. But the fact of the matter was – and it’s debated time and time again, should we have gone all the way to Baghdad and – after pushing them out of Kuwait, and that – it would certainly have been better for the region as a whole, I believe, if that did happen, al-Qaida had not grown to the strength it eventually would grow to in the next decade, and it would not have had, you know, the similar kind of impact on trying to stabilize a liberated Iraq that we were attempting to do in post-9/11.

But in the same sense, I mean, you have to put yourself back with the decision-makers at that time. And we were going to invade and – we were going initiate a conflict in Kuwait to push out an invasion force that had seized the country. The United States was going to lead that force.

SEN. MCCA$

GEN. KEANE: Right. And the president of the United States, I think, made the right decision to have Arab Muslim countries participate as part of that force to do that. We even had Syria, if you remember, as part of that force going in there. And I think that was the right decision.

And those – the agreement that they had to keep that coalition together was to liberate Kuwait and not liberate Iraq. That was the decision to hold the coalition, and if you look at it in the context of the time that they were dealing with, it’s an understandable decision, and I think it was the right one. And if you look at it in terms of would have been better if they had liberated Iraq, sure, certainly. But that’s – I don’t think it was realistic given what was taking place.

MR. KAGAN: To – I’d like to ask you both, what are the real lessons that we actually should draw from our experience in Iraq and from what’s come away? I think, Senator, your
point about intelligence in both senses is very important. But you know, I think the main lesson that a lot of Americans are trying to draw from Iraq is never again, and it’s fundamentally the Vietnam lesson: Let’s just never do this again; this was very painful and traumatic and not successful, and we just want to stay away from this. Is that the right lesson to draw, or are there other lessons?

GEN. KEANE: Well, for me, without repeating what the senator said – certainly I agree about the intelligence issue. The problem we had – we had a very successful, brilliant campaign, and I think it showed predominantly U.S. prowess as a military force in 2003 at how we could dispatch a military so quickly, watching that force unfold – watching that attack unfold 24/7 on television, and do so with a minimum amount of casualties, not just on casualties to us, but casualties to our opponents. You know, the United States military has no interest in taking unnecessary casualties, even of our enemies. We want to try to get something over as quickly as we can to minimize the suffering and bring it to some kind of stability. And that certainly happened.

But we never understood what needed to be done after that. I think the administration – the Bush administration, coming into power, watching the Clinton administration in Bosnia-Herzegovina, was unduly influenced by those protracted campaigns that were somewhat conflict-oriented, but mostly not that, not much. And we were doing some nation-building. And I think – I had discussions with Secretary Rumsfeld on this very subject. And there was a thought that those countries that we were in in Bosnia-Herzegovina, et cetera, were far too dependent on us, and their maturity would have been exceeded if we let go of them soon.

So this manifested itself when we went into Afghanistan. We pulled away from that new government that we put in there very quickly. And we did not help them grow the security forces rapidly enough. And we did the very same thing in Iraq. That was a major lesson, it seemed, that we should have learned from Iraq. We took over – we liberated a country, we deposed their military, and we began to walk away. We did not reorganize the army. We did not reorganize police. We did not reorganize the bureaucracy that people were used to receiving in terms of services, et cetera.

And that began to help fuel the insurgency. There were people who – clearly, Saddam Hussein’s people wanted to take back the government they just lost, but it was – they were able to get much more participation in that because of some of our actions. That, to me, was a major lesson.

The second – and we – didn’t we do it again in Libya? You know, we deposed Gadhafi, and then we pulled away in a sense that we do not help them – the number one problem in Libya today is the lack of capable and competent security forces to help stabilize the country, with all of the armed militia groups that are running around that country with guns and imposing their will. And we pulled away from that government. We appreciated the fact that it’s a moderate government, to be sure, compared to what took place in nearby Egypt, but in the same sense, we did not help them grow and develop a security force, which they are incapable of doing themselves. And as a result of that, they lose – they do not have control of their country. That was a major lesson we should have learned out of Iraq, and we have not learned it.
The other thing is how to fight a war when your opponent chooses to fight you indirectly and chooses that form of war that disarms our technology. And that was the form of war that’s most prevalent in the history of mankind, not conventional war, and they chose to use it. And it took us far too long to recognize it and also to have a strategy that was effective against it.

For three years in Vietnam, ’65 to ’68, we had the wrong strategy fighting an unconventional force using conventional methods for three years. And it wasn’t until Creighton Abrams took over that he began to protect the population and put in place counterinsurgency methods, which defeated that insurgency by ’71.

Fast-forward – did we learn that lesson? No, no, we didn’t, because we removed from the lexicon of the United States military, particularly the Army, any of our doctrine and training and techniques and strategy that we had learned from counterinsurgency, and we began stumbling around in Iraq for three years trying to figure out how to deal, which was in many people’s mind who are – who know more about insurgescies than I do, that that was the most formidable insurgency the West had ever faced because unlimited amount of money, unlimited amount of weapons, unlimited amount of ammunition. The guys running it used to run a regime for 35 years, and they began with an extraordinary amount of human capital, all things that most insurgescies starve for and need outside assistance. They didn’t need anything, and they had the – obviously had the will, and they had the means to do it.

And we struggled around for three years trying to figure out who are they and how best to defeat them. We finally put in place a strategy that made some sense, but that has to be a major lesson learned. And there are – there are military strategists for years who will tell you first and foremost, who is your enemy, what are they trying to accomplish, and what are the means they’re using to accomplish it, and then what is the strategy to defeat that enemy? Now, this sounds simple, doesn’t it? But look at how many times we missed this point. In other words, what kind of war are you fighting, and what is it going to take to defeat them? And that, to me, was major, major lesson learned.

SEN. MCCAIN: In 2004, I was in the airport at Basra, which had not been damaged because it was a no-fly zone. I met a British colonel there who briefed us, and he said, Senator McCain, I know who you are, but I’ll probably never have to brief you, I’ll never have to answer a question from you or a letter from you, and if I’m lucky, I’m never going to see you again – (laughter) – which was a pleasant beginning. And he said, and now I’m going to tell you why you’re going to lose this war, and that – he laid out exactly the problems that General Keane just described.

We were fighting a losing battle. And if I have a scathing denunciation of the Bush administration, as is – as General Keane said, it took us three years to figure that out. And if it hadn’t have been for the loss of the election in 2006, I’m not sure that President Bush would have agreed to those who came over and advocated the surge and advocated for, I think, one of the great generals in American – leaders in American history, and that’s General David Petraeus.
So we knew what had to be done, a lot of us did, including this one. But we couldn’t and didn’t have the nerve or the will to do what’s necessary, and that meant a dramatic increase in number of troops, which of course was very unpopular with the American people, to tell them after all these casualties, now we’re going to send 30,000 more. But that, in my view, was the mistake – unpardonable mistake, that we let it – the war limp along for as long as we did.

But at the same time, the – we learned so much that – I think a lot of that was employed in Afghanistan, which led to some of the success that we’ve had, making sure that everyone knows that no two insurgencies are the same. But I believe that if we had changed that strategy earlier, which a hell of a lot of people knew should be done, I think that we could have succeeded a lot earlier with a lot less loss of American blood and treasure.

GEN. KEANE: I forgot – I got one – I forgot to that the third one for me is when you – when you deal with a protracted war as opposed to the invasion force that we did in 2003 or the – or the Desert Storm liberation of Kuwait, you know, you don’t have to talk to the American people much about what’s going on, because they understand it. I mean, you have – you have an enemy force that is in Y place, and our invasion force is in X place, and they’re moving towards them. And if they’re moving towards them, they’re probably doing OK. If they’re not moving towards them and if they’re paused for some reason because we’re crossing bridges and we can’t get across because somebody’s shooting missiles at us or blowing bridges up, then something’s not going right. And if you’re not going – if you’re going away from the enemy, it’s probably really bad. OK, so everybody sort of gets that. You don’t have to explain it to them.

But now you get into a protracted war where an enemy is using unconventional methods. It doesn’t organize itself in large groups; it doesn’t identify itself; it doesn’t have formations on the ground; it lives in and among the people. And I’ve been convinced for years, to deal with protracted war, you have to have continuous communication with the body public. The leader of the nation must talk to the people to explain, this is how we’re fighting this war, this is why we’re fighting it this way, and these are what we’re trying to achieve and give periodic assessments what’s working and what’s not.

War has – is fundamentally a test of wills, at the end of the day is what it is. And it will always have setbacks and disappointments, and you have to persevere through this if you intend to win. And you have to bring your people through those setbacks and disappointments as well, because they have to persevere, and they need your leadership, and they need your understanding of what it is and why this is happening. And we did none of it under the Bush administration of any consequence. And we’ve done none of it here with the current administration in Afghanistan. It is rarely talked about in terms of what’s happening.

So when the vehicles blow up in someplace, we leave it to the American people to make a judgment about, is that success or failure? Well, hell, it looks like failure to me if some vehicle’s blowing up someplace and the horrible suffering that’s taking place of the people involved in that human tragedy. But what’s the assessment? Are they able to sustain that over time? Is that – are those incidents, are they affecting the ability to govern? Are they affecting the ability to provide services to the people? What is the consequence of that action?
I mean, we were not going to stay in Iraq indefinitely because somebody would blow up a vehicle from time to time. Their own forces can take care of that. It was the systemic, organized, logistically supported operations that were able to sustain themselves over time that we had to defeat. We had to defeat an entire network. Isolated acts of terrorism, even though horrific, are not something that need the presence of U.S. troops to be there indefinitely to do.

So why don’t we talk to the people about this so they can sort of get it and understand it? And that’s a failure of leadership, in my mind, and that should be a lesson we learn from Iraq. Even though we were able to turn things around militarily, politically we have to wait and see. But we – didn’t we just go and do it again in Afghanistan?

The other thing is about the American people themselves. I mean, it has been – it has been proven through study – a couple of universities have taken it on – the American people will underwrite casualties to a significant degree if purpose and end make sense to them and they sort of understand if armies are clashing, those can be very heavily casualty-producing, which is what was going to take place in Desert Storm. We estimated to the American people 40,000 casualties, and nobody blinked. Thank God that didn’t happen. And we’ve had very light casualties as war goes in Iraq and Afghanistan, so only in terms of the human dimension and what it means to the people involved – you know, it’s staggering in that sense.

But the fact of the matter is it’s the length of time that’s the issue and the appearance of no progress that is the – really the issue. The American people will underwrite protracted wars in my view – not that – not that it doesn’t need and deserve the leadership to get them to understand it – they’ll underwrite a protracted war if there’s progress, if there’s some sense of progress.

But it gets to the point where it appears to be a futile effort, that we don’t seem to be making any progress. We’ll always have governments that we’re supporting that will not be what we want them to be, or there wouldn’t be an insurgency. So you can’t get there, or you’re supporting a government that’s taking care of its people, providing services, has all the democratic values that we want it to have. But governments that you’re helping will invariably have huge problems associated with them, so you have to deal with that but also deal with the reality, are you making progress? And if we are, we should be able to demonstrate that to the people.

SEN. MCCAIN: Could I kind of fast-forward to what we’re facing today? And I think it’s important about that old adage about those who ignore the lessons of history. And I would remind you there’s always been a struggle in this country, particularly in the Republican Party, the isolationists versus the internationalists. But it’s been larger than that too. It’s been throughout American thought. After World War I, obviously, we didn’t join the League of Nations. Into the’30s we had Lindbergh and Senator Borah, I believe, and the America Firsters, an isolationist – and wonderful book called “While We Slept” that I read as a kid, which was a wonderful book about what happened while we had our isolationist.

And after World War II, there was never going to be another war, so we basically dismantled the military except for our atomic weapon. Korea came along. War weariness after Korea. We again scaled down. And, of course, after Vietnam there was again a tremendous war
weariness. Many here forget or are too young to know the divisiveness within our country to the point where the chairman – the chief of staff of the United States Army came over and testified before Congress that we had a, quote, “hollow army.”

This same war weariness is apparent from Iraq and Afghanistan, and we’re going through this sequestration, which is the most incredible thing that I have seen in the years I’ve been in Congress, while members of Congress who are otherwise pro-defense or care about national security sit back and watch these cuts take place while our military leadership, our uniformed leadership, are saying, this is going to destroy our ability to defend this nation. The commandant of the Marine Corps said, sequester will cause 50 percent of his combat units to be not ready to deploy. Meanwhile, the centrifuges are spinning in Tehran, and the North Koreans and all the things that you know about.

And it’s this – again, this great debate is going to take place in the Republican Party and in this nation. Will the United States lead? And then it’s a legitimate question, if the United States doesn’t lead, who will? Who do you want to lead?

So I see – I see the severe deterioration in the finest military force that this nation has ever seen, and I say that with great respect to veterans of other wars. And we are watching morale, readiness, training, equipment, ability to deploy, the ability to defend this nation, the view of every military leader at the point of risking our national security. And there are some of us that are going to have to go out and tell people that there is a reason why we spend what we do on national defense, to understand the instability in the world and the flashpoints that are – that are – that are all over. And it’s not going to be real easy. We’ve got to win this fight.

MR. KAGAN: So we’ve promised to get Senator McCain out very shortly.

SEN. MCCAIN: But I – in the words of Chairman Mao, it’s always darkest before it’s totally black. (Laughter.)

MR. KAGAN: The nice thing about covering this topic is that it’s so uplifting. (Laughter.)

GEN. KEANE: Yeah, right.

MR. KAGAN: And we perennially have happy things to talk about.

So I’m going to go to the audience and involve you in the discussion, and here are the rules. Stand up when I recognize you, wait for the microphone, identify yourself and ask a brief question. And I will – I will ask our – the people with the microphones to take it away from people who start making statements.

Q: Paul Mirrenkopf (sp). Do you think that had we not gone into Iraq when we did or not gone in at all, that Saddam Hussein watching Iran, his deadly neighbor, develop nuclear weapons would have done so himself?
And do you also think that had we not gone into Iraq, that come the Arab Spring, Iraq would have had the mother of all civil wars, particularly – being particularly dangerous if it had nukes on top of the civil war?

SEN. MCCAIN: Well, on the first part of your question, the debrief of Saddam Hussein was very clear, that he was hell-bent on developing weapons of mass destruction. I mean, he made that abundantly clear.

On the second issue, I’m not sure, because I think the Arab Spring was going to happen because of these – I really believe that when that young man who had been humiliated set himself on fire in Tunisia, that that spread, and it’s going to spread further. It’s going to spread to Russia. It’s going to spread to China. I think that the ability to communicate and convey information and rally is something that – the consequences of it will be for a long period of time.

I’m sure that General Keane has a better answer than I have. I just think it was going to happen because of the ability to communicate and organize.

I’ll never forget being in Cairo and a young man said, I can – he pulled out his BlackBerry and said, I can get 200,000 people in the square in two hours.

And I worry about Egypt, and I worry about these countries where this Arab Spring hasn’t turned out as we want it to. But it’s a tough path to democracy.

But I think that the United States has to understand one fundamental, and it brings me to Syria. Our interests are our values, and our values are our interests. And as long as we are guided by that, I think that the United States of America can get through this very unsettling time.

GEN. KEANE: Yeah, on the first question, dealing with Saddam Hussein, I mean, we shouldn’t forget that he did have weapons of mass destruction. We knew that for a fact. And those were chemical weapons. He had thousands of them. And these weapons would be fired by artillery devices.

But the fact of the matter is, he did get rid of them. No doubt in my mind that as this crisis that he was having with the U.N. and continuous resolutions and the United States in the lead in all of that, that he would certainly get back to the development of his chemical stockpile but also the development of a nuclear weapon, which we know for a fact he always wanted to have. And that’s the reality of that. And certainly in terms of what of what proliferation has taken place in the region, he would have been, you know, part of that – part of that proliferation.

As to the second question, yeah, absolutely. The conditions in Iraq were certainly ripe for the Arab Spring. And when you look at the motivation of the Arab Spring – and I agree with the senator; we didn’t necessarily get that result – but the – they are – the drivers of the instability are the lack of freedom and political opportunity, the significant social injustice that exists in those countries for people at large and for women in particular. And the third thing is the lack of genuine economic opportunity. In many of those countries people are truly suffering.
And you can find these conditions to varying degrees in every single country in that region of the world, to include ones that we’re closely allied with. That’s the reality of it, and that’s the potential of this as it goes.

But what took place is the radical Islamists, while not – people weren’t on the streets seeking jihad – that’s for sure – and radical fundamentalism, but the radical Islamists saw the advantage that the Arab Spring provided them, and they have been all in. And that’s the reality of it. And their gains have been significant. What – they are now the most influential rebel group in Syria. They started out very small. We’ve already seen what’s happened in Libya and the rise of radical Islam there and other countries in the world and certainly an elected government in Egypt as a result of it.

So this is going to take a generation to certainly unfold, but in terms of Iraq, they were ripe for it, and I think if their – if we had not liberated it, they would have tried themselves, very hard, to liberate it. It would have been similar to Gadhafi, though, and would – similar to Assad. They all learned the lesson of Tiananmen Square, and that is, you got people in the streets that are opposing your viewpoint and they’re willing to die for it, then you better make them die for it.

MR. KAGAN: Senator, let me impose on him for one more question.

Q: Thank you. Given the current political climate and the current atmosphere about war weariness I this country, Senator, to your point about your conversation with President Barzani, how much confidence do you think the Kurds have in the United States that we would stand by them if something were to happen?

SEN. MCCAIN: I think the Kurds are very tough people. They have been for many centuries.

I think President Barzani and the Kurds are grateful to us, enormously grateful, because of the liberation, and they were terribly oppressed, as you know, by Saddam Hussein. But at the same time, Kurdish interests are first and foremost in President Barzani’s priority list, and I think that he would very much like to cooperate with us, have our assistance, do things, but he also covering all of his bets, and if I were him, I’d be doing the same thing.

MR. KAGAN: OK. One more.

Q: Senator McCain, my question is, how do you see the future relationship between Iraq and the United States? And what do you think about the Obama administration’s steps towards Syria?

SEN. MCCAIN: Towards Syria, I’ll be very frank with you. It’s a shameful chapter in American history. We are sowing the wind, and we are going to reap the whirlwind.
I was in a refugee camp in Jordan, some 50,000 people there – children everywhere. We met with the camp leadership. They’re very bitter and angry. Why won’t you help us? Why won’t you help us? they kept saying.

There was a woman there who was a teacher, and she said, you see all these children around here? She said, they will take revenge on those who refused to help them when they needed it most. We’ve seen what happens in refugee camps. We see the – we’ve seen the radicalization of what happens. And for us to sit by and watch this massacre, I think, is a shameful chapter.

I would also point out that General Mattis, one of the great generals we’ve had as head of Central Command, testified that if Bashar Assad fell, it would be the greatest strategic blow to Iran in the last 25 years.

So when the president of the United States says, well, there’s thousands of people dying in the Congo, and so therefore that precludes the United States from taking any action in Syria, is – it’s one of the most – least substantive statements that I have ever heard a president of the United States make.

Now reports are today, whether they’re true or not, that – we don’t know – that chemical weapons were put on a Scud missile by Bashar Assad. Now the president said that was a red line. We viewed it, unfortunately – and I think Assad did – as a green light to do anything short of that. But if – but if Bashar Assad has crossed that red line by putting a chemical weapon on a Scud missile, then I don’t see how we have any other choice but to do what we need to do, and that’s not American boots on the ground. It is providing a free – a safe zone which is protected by Patriot missiles and perhaps MANPADS, if necessary, a Benghazi where they can organize and govern and start to reverse this trend of the jihadists we – who are pouring in from all over the Middle East, many of them having fought in previous conflicts, and of course are not afraid to die.

So I – the – I hope to God that we have at least got plans to secure these chemical weapons caches, which are abundant throughout Syria, which we didn’t do in Libya with arms caches that were there. . . .

I think general might say something about Syria –

MR. KAGAN: Absolutely, and I want to ask you specifically about the chemical weapons and the issue of securing them and the impact of sequestration and the sorts of things that the senator has been talking about on our ability to conduct an operation like – as would be involved in securing Syrian chemical weapons, if they started to get into hands of Hezbollah or al-Qaida.

GEN. KEANE: Yeah. Well, certainly, you know, I think since we became a global power – and it’s something we didn’t seek but it befell us as a result of World War II and our own economic engine of prosperity – the reality is that every president has had strategic surprise in the sense that something really serious happened that they – was not predictable, and whether the
Korean War, Vietnam War; premature collapse of the Soviet Union; Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait, Milosevic fighting four wars in Europe, killing 350,000 people, in the same half-century of Hitler, and the Europeans not responding to it initially; and certainly 9/11 – but I believe the strategic surprise of this administration is in fact the Arab Spring. And their failure to respond to it, to try to influence it and shape it for the sake of that part of the world and also for the sake of American interest is a huge strategic policy failure.

Our adversaries are in, as I said before, and they are shaping it, and they are gaining as a result of it. And Syria is a case in point, as are the other countries in the region, to include Iraq, has doubled in size in terms of its al-Qaida capacity now, since we left there in 2011.

But the fact of the matter is, you know, I have spoken to some Syrian leaders, and none of them have ever asked for boots on the ground. But I think that they would certainly take it if – I think they know what the political reality is, but to give them critical weapons – we have a stalemate in front of us in Syria, and Assad has – doesn’t have the capacity to defeat this movement in different parts of the country, and the rebels themselves do not have the sustainment capacity to cede – lay siege to Damascus or lay siege to Aleppo and take control of those cities. They don’t have the lines of communication – this is military jargon for – to be able to sustain the logistical effort, it would take a considerable amount of time, it would take weeks, and they begin to run out of ammunition. They don’t have that kind of system in place.

And then what he does, what Assad does – he pounds on them with fighter aircraft and with helicopter gunships and artillery, and he pulverizes many of them.

Now they don’t lose will, which is – which is – it gives you an indication of how serious they are about removing Assad. And what they want in that fight that I just described to you, what they want more than anything else, is the ability to kill his armored vehicles, and they have some of that, but they don’t have enough of it. And they want the ability to shoot down those airplanes, and they believe once they begin to hold some of Assad’s pilots liable, that’ll curtail dramatically their behavior, and that will give them a decided advantage, and the momentum will shift to them. That’s why those two capabilities are so very important.

What’s fascinating in our own government, if we believe what’s in the media – and it’s been reported many times – most of the national security leaders in our government have made that recommendation to the White House – if I understand what I’m reading, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the secretary of defense, the Central Intelligence Agency and director – previous one, in David Petraeus, and also the secretary of state. And those recommendations have gone unheeded, and that is really tragic.

What we get from that is, as Senator McCain has spoken of, we’re at 80,000 casualties now, unreported, some – that’s U.N. If you listen to the Syrians talk about it – and I don’t know where it is, but it’s probably more than 80,000; they think it’s closer to 200,000 – 1.3 billion right now, refugees, and climbing. And through the stalemate, the civilian casualties will rise, and they will continue to rise. They’re already, I think, at horrific standards, and that’s going to continue to happen.
As to chemical weapons, that certainly is a major, major issue for all of us in trying to secure those weapons, just, one, knowing where they are – multiple, multiple locations compounds the problems. And we are involved, we are involved – and I’m glad that we are – with other countries in the region in how to go about doing that and what forces it would take to do that, and do it as quickly as possible. I mean, it would – it would certainly be a tragic event to have the al-Qaida who’s there right now, in force, and Hezbollah, who would be here, to get their hands on any of those weapons. And certainly that is a possibility. And we would – we would have to make a considerable effort with the other countries in the region to help secure those weapons.

SEN. MCCAIN: I asked the commander of NATO this morning in a hearing, will – could the Patriot missiles that are already there defend a no-fly zone? Yes.

Could we ensure that aircraft would not encroach into an area of no-fly zone? Yes.

And then I asked him – I said, do you recommend that? And he said yes.

So the president of the United States and his national security adviser and I don’t know who else has overridden the views of every one of his national security team plus his commanders in the region. That is a remarkable thing.

MR. KAGAN: And a no-fly zone actually is a extremely important, for a variety of reasons. Among other things, it’s –

SEN. MCCAIN: Got to have a Benghazi. You’ve got to have a place to organize. You’ve got to have a place to govern. You got to have a place to make sure that the weapons get to the – to the right place. And you’ve got to have someplace where a government can – in exile can basically function. It can’t be in Istanbul or Cairo or some other place. They’ve got to have that. And I believe that, by the way, the leadership is – that I’ve met with are pretty impressive people.

MR. KAGAN: You know, and one of the things that is becoming clear and that will – you will see in a report that Critical Threats Project will release jointly with the Institute for the Study of War I think early next week is that the Iranian support to the Assad regime is almost entirely dependent on the airline of communication. And the truth of the matter is there’s nothing – there’s no one single thing that we could do that would have a faster, more significant effect on Iran’s ability to continue to support this Assad regime than to disrupt their ability to move by air.

SEN. MCCAIN: As the general has pointed out, in this terrain, in this weather, air power is a decisive factor. And by the way, along with the increase in weapons that are coming from some of the Gulf states, there’s been a commensurate increase in weapons coming from Iran and Russia. And this idea that we clung to for over a year, that somehow the Russians would take Bashar Assad, will go down as one of the really worst jokes in history.

MR. KAGAN: I would take one more question from my left flank over here so I don’t ignore it.
Q: Thank you. General, if there is a change in the administration in 2016, is it too late to revisit the Status of Force Agreement?

And Senator, are you concerned about the power consumption in Baghdad that Maliki is consuming?

GEN. KEANE: What was the first part of the question, Fred?

MR. KAGAN: If there’s a change in U.S. administration in 2016, which I’m pretty sure that there will be – (laughter) – could we revisit the Status of Forces Agreement?

GEN. KEANE: Yeah.

SEN. MCCAIN: And mine was?

GEN. KEANE: Well, I don’t get involved in the politics in America, but the fact of the matter is – should we? Yes, absolutely. I think it would probably be hard to put forces back into Iraq for, you know, where the American people are, but I think there are some things that we could do with them in terms of assisting them from a security perspective, and that would be through the Central Intelligence Agency and various things that they could do with the growing al-Qaida threat.

There is a possibility we could put some of our JSOC forces back in there, which was a mistake in taking them out, because no one is holding those leaders of that movement liable like we were doing in the past. But I think in terms of any forces of consequence, I think that would be a challenge. One thing we could do is we could train with the Iraqis – and I think we could go to Iraq not to fight but to train and help the security forces, and that may be something that would be acceptable, you know, politically.

I don’t know if I’m much help here in terms of what took place. I think our real efforts have to be diplomatically. And from a policy perspective, open lines of communication with the leaders of Iraq; make sure that they understand that Iraq is still in our national interest; we still have interest in the region; we want this government to be stable; and start working on mutual objectives that are beneficial to each country together in a coherent fashion. That, to me, is something we can achieve. We could achieve that now if there – the administration was willing to do that. We only could achieve it with a new administration that had a different policy toward Iraq.

SEN. MCCAIN: But I’d just say – add to that – two and half years ago, Mubarak was in power, Ben Ali was in power – (inaudible) – look at the way the whole landscape of the Middle East has changed in just around two and a half years ago. So to predict what the Middle East is going to look like in 2016 – it requires a degree of clairvoyance that I certainly don’t possess. But I don’t believe it’ll look like it looks today.
MR. KAGAN: One of the last points that I want to make is lost in a – one of the most partisan political environments that I’ve ever seen in my lifetime is that this is actually a nonpartisan discussion. The – our panelists today, as they have throughout the past 10 years, have spent as much time criticizing the Bush administration as criticizing the Obama administration, maybe a little more, actually. (Laughter.) And –

SEN. MCCAIN: Then I was the maverick. Now I’m the angry old man – (inaudible).

MR. KAGAN: That’s right. (Laughter.)

And I raise that point just because we – this should not be a partisan debate. We can turn this into a partisan argument, but criticizing the way President Obama has handled this war is not a partisan attack. Criticizing the decision to go to war, the way President Bush handled the war is not a partisan attack.

We need to move beyond that in our discussion, as we’ve tried to do here, and really focus on what American interests are, what the threats are in the world, what we can do about them and really – I think it’s really time to try to – to try to get foreign policy – or try to get politics once again to stop at the water’s edge and try to confront together the issues that we face as a nation.

And Senator McCain is – has a long history of doing that, very famously, and General Keane the same. And I would leave you in that spirit of barely hopeful bipartisanship – (laughter) – as the only ray of optimism that came out of this entire discussion and thank our two panelists very much. (Applause.)

(END)