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VIETNAM'S LONG SHADOW:
THE WAR'S IMPACT ON U.S. FOREIGN AND MILITARY POLICY

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. INDYK: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Martin Indyk, the vice president and director of the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings. Welcome.

It's an honor for me to have the opportunity to introduce two gentlemen who are valued friends and colleagues here at Brookings and have storied legends in their own right as journalists for television and radio. It so happened serendipitously that they've both written books that are coming out more or less at the same time so we thought it was a good opportunity to bring them together to discuss those two books.

The first, by Ron Nessen, *Making the News, Taking the News: From NBC to the Ford White House*. I don't know whether you can all see this. It's an amazingly handsome picture of Ron.

SPEAKER: You mean with hair? (Laughter)

MR. INDYK: I didn't say that but --

The other one, by Marvin Kalb and his daughter Deborah, *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama*. Ron is currently journalist-in-residence here at Brookings. He has had a very distinguished career in journalism serving five tours in Vietnam as the NBC news correspondent. He went to Vietnam initially in 1965 to cover the beginning of the American troop buildup. He was seriously wounded during a battle in the Central Highlands in 1966. Excuse me, 1966. In 1967, he was awarded the George Polk Memorial Award for his Vietnam coverage. He went back and continued to cover Vietnam. And then when he moved to the White House as the press secretary to President Gerald Ford, it fell to him to announce the final evacuation of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. He became vice president of news for the Mutual Broadcasting System, NBC Radio, and subsequently served on the Peabody Awards Board of Trustees, including as its

chairman in 2003-2004, as well as the George Polk Memorial Award. He's also received the Peabody and the Edward R. Murrow Brotherhood Award for his radio news programming and production at NBC radio.

Marvin Kalb is also, I think, known to you but you probably don't know that he is now, I'm very proud to say, guest scholar in the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings. He is the Murrow professor emeritus at Harvard where he was the founding director of the Shorenstein Center at the Kennedy School there. He is, of course, a former network correspondent at CBS and NBC. He was the Moscow bureau chief and chief diplomatic correspondent for 25 years at NBC. And he was also host of Meet the Press. He's the author of 12 -- count them -- 12 books, including this latest one. He hosts the Kalb Report at the National Press Club and, of course, is a regular commentator on NPR and even FOX News.

To lead the conversation today between Marvin and Ron I'm very grateful to Bob Kagan, who is a senior fellow in the center for the United States and Europe in the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings, also a sometime journalist, columnist actually for the Weekly Standard and the Washington Post. Bob.

MR. KAGAN: Thank you. These are my books. Thank you very much. Heavily marked.

Well, thank you very much, Martin. And thank you to all of you for coming in out of the rain to this very -- I think it's going to be a very interesting conversation. It does occur, you know, somewhat interestingly very soon after President Obama has announced the end of the U.S. involvement in the Iraq War imminently. And we were commenting right before we came up here on the slightly different reactions in America to the announcement that Ron Nessen made 36 years ago about the end of the Vietnam War. I think the country had a much larger reaction to that announcement than

they have had to this most recent announcement which may tell us something or it may tell us nothing. But in any case it's wonderful to have you both here.

I thought we might start, at least since you both have two books out, which everyone should go out and purchase especially once you've heard them talk about them. I thought it might be good to maybe kick it off with any points you want to make from those books and then take the conversation from there.

So, Marv, would you like to start?

MR. KALB: Sure. Thank you very much. And thank you all for showing up.

This is a book about what followed the Vietnam War. There have been many books written about the war itself. There have been many documentaries. I think there was one that I noticed on last night on television about Vietnam and movies, articles, many journalists who have achieved great fame covering the war.

But the war ended on April 30, 1975. And the issue for me and for my daughter, and I'll use the "we" and "us" pronoun here which means nothing more than me and Debbie. We decided in 2004 that we wanted to do a book on the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and the way in which they picked themselves up and went after John Kerry in the '04 Election. The only problem with that idea was that no publisher wanted to run it. So we ran up against the necessity of rethinking our Vietnam idea and we both came up with this book which I believe -- I could be wrong but I believe is the first of the books looking into Vietnam, what happened after the war, the way in which Vietnam affected presidents.

We have to bear in mind in that connection that Vietnam was the first war that the United States ever lost in its history. There is an argument about the War of 1812, I grant you that.

SPEAKER: It depends who you ask.

MR. KALB: But in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1814 -- this is the historians -- you will note that the Brits --

SPEAKER: Ghent.

MR. KALB: Ghent. 1814.

SPEAKER: Correct.

MR. KALB: Right about that anyway. It's good to get one fact right every day.

But they made a very important point there -- that they were going to not nail down who the winner and the loser was because they both had France in mind as the ultimate loser. So that was kind of interesting. But to me, and I think to most historians, it was Vietnam that was the war that the U.S. lost in a most humiliating way. I think there are many people in this room, and I notice a couple of them who had intimate roles with the Vietnam, that when Americans and Vietnamese who worked with us climbed up rope ladders to helicopters which then went off to battleships and aircraft carriers in the South China Sea in an extraordinary rescue mission, nevertheless, that was for the United States a major humiliation.

Lyndon Johnson always referred to his North Vietnamese enemy as that raggedy-ass little fourth rate country. But the fact is that raggedy-ass little fourth rate country beat a modern global super power with nuclear weapons. Logically, that kind of loss has a major impact upon anyone in the White House responsible for sending troops off to war, and each one of the presidents from Ford to Obama faced with that kind of responsibility logically, naturally thought back to the last experience with Vietnam and wondered is there a way not to repeat that dreadful experience?

I don't want to talk to you about the seven presidents because we really

don't have the time. What I'd like to talk to about briefly is Obama and Vietnam and Afghanistan. Obama was 13 years of age when the Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975. He had absolutely nothing to do with the war. He carried no Vietnam baggage with him whatever. It was not like Bill Clinton dancing through hoops to avoid service in Vietnam; he was too young. And yet, because he's a democrat with no military experience whatsoever and because he is smart and because he reads history books, he knows about the power of Vietnam.

And so when he was running for office in the summer of '08, it was quite remarkable to me that in July he went off to Afghanistan to have pictures taken of him with the troops. That's obligatory for any presidential candidate. He brought along with him Jack Reed, a democrat from Rhode Island and Chuck Hagel a republican from Nebraska. It is a 14-hour flight from Andrews Air Force Base to Kuwait City. In 14 hours, Obama kept asking the two of them questions. Hagel had fought two missions in Vietnam, wounded, two Purple Hearts. Reid was a West Point graduate, no service in Vietnam, but very much absorbed with the military after Vietnam. Obama's questions focused on one issue and that was Vietnam on that 14-hour flight, which I found most remarkable because he's going off to Afghanistan. What's in his head?

At his first National Security Council meeting two days after taking over as president he begins his statement to everyone by saying, "We have to remember that Afghanistan is not Vietnam." Why did he say that? No one -- I mean, Dick Holbrooke was there but Holbrooke had not yet begun to address the Vietnam issue. Why did he say that? It's on his head. The first major action he took, send 17,000 troops to Afghanistan. Why? Because the wording from the CIA was that the condition in Afghanistan at that time and building through '08 was very precarious and we might lose it. And he did not want to be the democrat responsible for losing another war.

Seventeen thousand additional troops.

Bruce Riedel, who lives here at Brookings, told me and Debbie when we interviewed him that Riedel's responsibility at the very beginning was to come up with a policy involving Pakistan and Afghanistan that the president needed by the beginning of April when he was going to a NATO meeting. And Riedel told us, "Wherever we walked in the White House, Vietnam -- we bumped into Vietnam all the time, both in personality and in issues that were raised."

Most remarkably for me was what happened during the summer of '09. At the White House, the issue -- because they knew McChrystal had a responsibility when he became general there in early June to come up with some idea about whether we needed more troops -- so the president assumed that the general would ask for more troops. The people at the White House in a funny kind of way began to study one book more than any other. And the book is called *Lessons on Disaster* and it's written by a young scholar named Gordon Goldstein. And the book has to do with Mac Bundy, the national security advisor for Kennedy and Johnson, the many mistakes that Bundy made with respect to Vietnam that Goldstein wrote about in the book.

Now, mind you, Holbrooke did a review of that book for *The Times*. Holbrooke pointed that out to Tom Donilon, who was at that time the number two national security advisor. Donilon read the book and was utterly captivated by it because though a very smart Washington lawyer, he knew nothing about the experience in Vietnam. And in his mind was, my God, if it could have that serious an impact on us in Vietnam, here we are thinking about sending more troops to Afghanistan. Might there be some relevance, one to the other? And might we be -- ought we not to be quite careful about what it is that we're doing?

A couple of days after he read the book, Rahm Emanuel, then the chief

of staff of the White House, stopped by for a summertime cookout, asked if the Donilons were reading anything interesting. They both said Goldstein. And Rahm Emanuel took the book, read it in three days, was so absorbed by it, so impressed by it that he told the vice president about it, who told the president about it. And at the White House that was the discussion: the mistakes of Vietnam in the early 1960s and how to avoid that now then in Afghanistan.

At the Pentagon it was a different story. The Pentagon best seller at the moment was a book by Lewis Sorley called *A Better War*. And Sorley's point was that the military did not lose the Vietnam War. Congress lost the war by pulling funds, the media lost the war by distorting the coverage, and the president lost the war by chickening out. That we could have won the war if the other parts of Washington cooperated. And those two visions were in collision all summer. And when McChrystal came in with his request on the high side of 80,000, 10,000 on the bottom, Obama did the normal thing for any president in those circumstances. He split the difference and ended up at essentially 33,000 troops.

When he made that decision public in West Point in early December of '09, three times in his speech he tried to make the point that Afghanistan is not Vietnam. I repeat: there was no need to do that. That afternoon he had all of the big shot columnists in at the White House for lunch and that's all he talked about -- Vietnam is not Afghanistan; Afghanistan is not Vietnam. It is on his head. And one of the reasons that he is currently, in my judgment, kicking the can down the road to avoid a definitive decision about troops and our policy outlook in Afghanistan is because he does not want to be the president who loses a war. So he's going to, in my opinion, kick the can down the road as long as necessary to avoid that kind of humiliation.

But I'll stop there and turn it over to our leader.

MR. KAGAN: That's fascinating and grist for conversation. Let's turn it over to Ron and then we'll see where we go from there.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I want to pick up on something that Marvin said, which is Vietnam was the first war we ever lost. And your brother, Bernie, Bernie Kalb, came back from one of his many trips to Vietnam and we were having a conversation here in the Brookings cafeteria. And he started talking about Vietnam today with luxury hotels and fine restaurants and I remember one month I got my American Express bill, which always has a little brochure about places you can use your card, and one month they had the fine dining tour of Vietnam. And another month they had you can buy a condo on China Beach, which is where the Marines came ashore. And I thought to myself, you know, maybe we won the war after all. (Laughter) Certainly, Vietnam still has a restrictive communist political system but they have a booming capitalist economic system with American chain restaurants and chain hotels and, as I said, condos on China Beach and so forth.

But I think most people would agree with you that America did lose the war in that we were trying to prevent the communists from taking over the southern part of the country. And why did we lose that war? Let me make just a couple of suggestions about that. It seems to me that -- and this is a link I think between -- one link at least in my mind between Vietnam and our current war in Afghanistan or the larger war against militant Islam. We didn't seem to understand the history of Vietnam -- the regional rivalries between the Mekong Delta and the highlands; the religious differences between the Buddhists and the Catholics; the tribal differences, the Wahow and the Kadai. And we didn't seem to understand that or take it into account when the United States was formulating its Vietnam policy.

And I've had this discussion many times with friends who were in the

government, in the CIA, state department, and what they say is that this information was provided to the policymakers but it wasn't taken into consideration in making policy decisions. And to me, I think that's one similarity between Vietnam and what we're facing now. And that is I'm not sure that the policymakers are taking into account the history of militant Islam, the various rivalries, all the political forces that are going on and rivalries in that part of the world. I'm not sure that the United States really understands them or is taking them into account in formulating its policy.

Somewhat related to that is a second similarity I think between Vietnam and today's threat from militant Islam, and that is that the American public, and I think the policymakers also, have a very short attention span. And they really -- there is strong pressure on the policymakers to end the American involvement in Iraq, to end the American involvement in Afghanistan in a few months or a year or by some set date. And it seems to me that militant Islam operates on a much longer time scale of decades or even hundreds of years or a thousand years to achieve the goals of militant Islam. And I think that's one of the things that's affecting how we deal with the problems in that part of the world.

I'll just tell you one final Vietnam story and then we'll go on to our discussion. I don't know if any of you have heard the LBJ tapes. Lyndon Johnson taped all of his phone conversations, and I got involved in a rather peripheral way in the editing and publication of those phone conversations. And the one phone conversation I will never forget, and particularly because so much of my life was tied up in Vietnam for a decade or more, Lyndon Johnson is talking on the telephone to Richard Russell, the chairman of the Senate Arms Services Committee. And this is about '63, '64.

MR. KALB: '64.

MR. NESSEN: '64. And he says, "Dick, I don't see how we can win this

Vietnam thing.” And there’s a pause. And he says, “But I got to do it.” And you think how much history hung on that one sentence, “But I got to do it.”

MR. KAGAN: Well, great. I can’t imagine two better people to be talking about this fascinating set of issues.

I mean, the thing that I’m always struck by thinking about both Vietnam and Iraq and Afghanistan, and I wonder what you think about this, in all cases the enormous consensus at the beginning in favor of the necessity of going in. In the case of Vietnam it was practically universal. David Halberstam was a complete believer right through 1965, maybe even into 1966. The New York Times editorial page editorialized on the essential, the vital interests we had in Vietnam. Republicans and democrats. I mean, really in the early years of that conflict before it got very complicated you would have been hard-pressed to find somebody who would have publicly said it was a bad idea.

In the case of the Iraq War, 72 to 28 vote in the Senate approving it. In the case of Afghanistan, the democrats during the Bush years ran saying you’re spending too much time on Iraq. Iraq is not -- Afghanistan is the war we need to fight. And so when Obama came in, he may have had Vietnam on the brain but he also had run on the premise, almost like Jack Kennedy running on the premise that Eisenhower wasn’t tough enough on communism, Obama ran on the premise that the Bush administration wasn’t tough enough in Afghanistan, had under resourced it. Given that, how much would you say that plays into how difficult it is to avoid the syndrome, even if you’ve decided that it’s difficult?

MR. KALB: Well, there are two things at work there, I think. One is that at the beginning of the Vietnam War, first of all, it never began on any one day. Vietnam kind of crept up on America as if on cat’s paws. And starting with Truman and then with

Eisenhower, there would not have been a problem, let us say, if in 1954 at the Geneva Conference if Eisenhower had not decided to split Vietnam in two. And the minute they split it into South Vietnam it became our prize. So it became part of the free world. And as part of the free world we were obliged to defend it. Then in '59 Eisenhower made a speech at Gettysburg College in which he made the explicit point that the future interests of Vietnam are tied to the interests of the United States. He linked the two so that when Kennedy came in, who was he to argue against Eisenhower?

So sort of step by step you became part of it. And it was all, then, as you said before, the larger global context of fighting the Cold War. It was only, let's face it, not until the fall of '67 when American casualties began to go up to 300 a week and then with the Tet Offensive at the beginning of '68 when casualties rose beyond 500 a week that the American people said, oh, wait a second. And Lyndon Johnson said, wait a second. But that was not the larger issue of fighting communism; it was the way we were doing it. We weren't winning. Likewise, in Iraq, at the very beginning, there were people as you well know who objected strongly but the media, I think to its disgrace, simply went along with sort of a train ride that it chose to get on and never looked at where it was going. And they simply did whatever it is that the administration said was happening.

You know, you had people like Walter Pincus at the Washington Post who on page 93 was raising questions about what was going on. But you're right. We just went into it. Where the problem arose -- same as in Vietnam -- was in the execution of the idea. And in that execution, we, at the very beginning, were failing in Iraq. So I think when you discuss this, it seems to me anyway that the context of where the war is in a larger framework and then how the war is being prosecuted are two separate issues. And the second one is where the disputes really arise.

MR. KAGAN: I just raise it only because whenever we look back on

these conflicts we always say how did they do, you know, what were they thinking? It was crazy. Mac Bundy, what an idiot. You know. Mac Bundy was supposed to be the smartest man in America. Right? Wasn't he --?

MR. KALB: He was not an idiot.

MR. KAGAN: He was not an idiot. I mean, I'm just saying, and we forget how much consensus there is until the war goes bad and then it turns out nobody was in favor of it.

MR. KALB: Absolutely.

MR. KAGAN: That's usually how it works. But I don't know what your thought is on that.

MR. NESSEN: You know, I was thinking about the effects of, again, to come back to something I had mentioned earlier, the effects of losing the Vietnam War. And it seems to me that one of the things I remember was that the effect of the U.S. pulling out of Vietnam was to send a signal primarily to China that we were not just getting out of Vietnam but we were really giving up on Southeast Asia. You know, that was too far from home and it took too much to be involved and so we were leaving. And, of course, that -- China has always wanted to take over Indochina. And the first demonstration it seemed to me that that could be what was happening was when an American merchant ship, Mayaguez, was captured in the South China Sea by Chinese and taken ashore.

MR. KALB: Cambodia.

MR. NESSEN: Cambodia. And taken ashore in Cambodia. And I was in the White House then and I have a very vivid memory of this. And I think President Ford recognized that he had to act very strongly because it was the first test of whether we were resolved to stay in Asia or get out and leave it to China. And so there was no

American military force very close so they put a bunch of Marines on a ship in the Philippines and started sailing them across. There was one American destroyer which was in range. And the people who had captured the Mayaguez took it ashore, took it close to the shore, took the crew off and this was a real test. And President Ford understood this and that's why he had the Marines on the way.

And the interesting thing was there was no way to communicate with the people who had taken the ship captive. And so the White House is trying to figure out how do you get a message to them that they better damn well let the ship go because we've got Marines on the way? And somebody figured out that the only way to get a message was through the news media because somebody maybe was listening to the BBC or whatever, you know, broadcast they were able to pick up in that part of the world. So I was the press secretary and I went out in the briefing room and read this statement, you know, saying let it go or else we're going to take it back by arms and so forth. And the reporters wanted to ask a lot of questions. And we wanted to get this message out as fast as possible. So finally I said, "Stop asking questions. Go file." (Laughter) And they did.

MR. KAGAN: They were so obedient in those days.

MR. NESSEN: Yeah. Even Helen Thomas went and filed. (Laughter)

MR. KALB: You know, it's kind of interesting. What they were afraid of at the White House was that the Richard Nixon warning about us being taken as a paper tiger if we were beaten in Vietnam. We were beaten. So Ford very much had it in his mind and when he didn't, Kissinger reminded him rather forcefully that you must bear in mind that you've got to act vigorously with the full strength of the United States. And Ford went in there as if he were taking on the German Wehrmacht. You know, it was a couple of Cambodian pirates. But he could not allow the perception to form.

MR. NESSEN: Especially right after we had gotten out of Vietnam.

MR. KALB: And that was two weeks later.

MR. KAGAN: You've got a great section on this in your book.

MR. KALB: Yeah, I think so. I even quote Ron in that part.

MR. KAGAN: It's a perfect synergy.

Well, I mean, is this silly? Is this concern about -- because I think that the United States, particularly given the role that it took on after World War II, I think almost every president has taken very seriously the issue of how does the United States look? How does it look to its allies?

MR. KALB: Absolutely.

MR. KAGAN: How does it look to its adversaries? Is this a silly consideration? Does it play too big a role in our foreign policy?

MR. KALB: No, no. I don't think it's a silly consideration at all because reality is formed in large part these days by perception of reality. It's not necessarily what is. It is what it appears to be.

MR. NESSEN: Or what you see on television.

MR. KALB: Or what you see on television, which is a big part of that effort.

Look, take each one of these presidents in terms of Vietnam. All of them were affected by Vietnam but each was affected in his own way. For example, someone like Ronald Reagan -- by the way, if he were alive today I would apologize to him because I didn't give him enough credit as a reporter for what it is that he was trying to do them. But Ronald Reagan had in mind the lessons of Vietnam almost every single day at the beginning of his presidency. And he kept on saying that the American people, in these wonderful letters that he wrote longhand to friends -- they're marvelous to read.

Extraordinary letters, I think. And he wrote that the American people had been spooked - - that's his verb -- by Vietnam. And I don't want to put them through it again. And it was on his mind when he was down at Augusta, Georgia, for a weekend of golf, and Bud McFarland, his national security advisor had to awaken him at two in the morning to tell him that 241 American Marines were murdered in their barracks in the International Airport in Beirut, Lebanon. And we know who did it. We know exactly who did it. We even know where they are. We knew their hotel rooms in Baalbek, Lebanon.

And Reagan thought about it and he was pressed to try to take action by McFarland, who was an ex-Marine; by his secretary of state, George Shultz, who was an ex-Marine; and he didn't do it. He simply wouldn't do it. And there's an interesting issue here because there's one thing about why presidents act. But there are also the consequences of those actions. And with Reagan, though I sympathize very much with why he did not act, I am aware at the same time that when you begin to read Osama bin Laden's writings and Nasrallah on the Hezbollah Front in Lebanon, you find them commenting about how the U.S. was forced to leave Afghanistan; how 241 Marines were killed.

SPEAKER: Vietnam.

MR. KALB: Excuse me. Vietnam. How 241 Americans -- and we do nothing? And they kept on saying after that that all you have to do is bloody the Americans and they'll do nothing.

MR. NESSEN: Well, there's an old expression in Washington and I think this is a perfect illustration of it.

MR. KALB: And I'm old enough to remember it.

MR. NESSEN: And I think most presidents understand this, that if you don't punish bad behavior and reward good behavior, you get a lot more bad behavior.

And I think that's, you know, --

MR. KAGAN: Well, which brings us back to Afghanistan and the decision that Obama has made which, you know, with Vietnam consciously or unconsciously on his mind he has at a lower scale so far repeated Johnson's decision. He escalated. Now he wants to deescalate, which Johnson never got around to. But he's not pulling out. I mean, at the end of -- at the end of, you know, he'll pull down the surge forces by September 2012 but he will still -- when he either moves into his second term or hands it over to the next president, we'll have roughly probably 70,000 troops still in place. And, you know, in a way, listening to this conversation, it's entirely understandable and you might even say and it's right because on the one hand he doesn't want to move down. The let's send the 200,000 troops in because who knows what that would do, but maybe he doesn't want the people clinging to helicopters off the embassy in Kabul.

MR. KALB: You could certainly sympathize but I must say my level of sympathy has fallen off rather dramatically lately.

I have been told by people at the American Embassy in Kabul that American policy right now, so far as they understand it, goes by the expression "good enough." That if we can somehow work out a deal that is good enough to be accepted politically by the American people, then that's good enough. But my own feeling very strongly increasingly when I see every couple of weeks on the news hour and they run photographs of the Americans who were killed in that last week or two, the thought runs through my mind that good enough really these days is not good enough. That there has to be a purpose for continued killing; that there might have been a purpose 10 years ago when we went into Afghanistan. We were supposed to do something at that time with al-Qaeda. Well, we knocked off the leader and we have severely weakened the al-Qaeda

establishment. They're off in Yemen doing their mischief there.

What then is the essential purpose? If it be Pakistan, tell us. If it be Pakistan's nuclear weapons, tell us. But the idea that we flit about innocently, that we're leaving at the end of 2014 when we know we're not, what is the point of that? I think there has to be greater clarity now to justify continued loss.

MR. NESSEN: But, you know, I think that so much of the daily discussion of policy is very, very short term. Very short term. You know, how many more weeks or months is it going to be before we get out of there? And as you know, Henry Kissinger was the secretary of state and also the national security advisor when I was in the White House. And we had our differences. But the one thing I admire about Henry is he has this long view of history. And I know we've talked about this before. He believes the things we do today will -- you won't understand the full effect of them for 30 years or 50 years down the line. And I really believe that.

And I think to come back to what I said earlier, I think the militant Islamists have very long term views -- 100 years, 1,000 years. And if we're talking about months, we're not really going to achieve our policy goals if we put that kind of short-term timetable on actions and events when the adversaries have this enormously long --

MR. KALB: Ron, if I truly believed -- and I have made a determined effort to try -- if I truly believe that there is a clear purpose, consistent with the national security interests of the United States for a long-term American commitment to Afghanistan, I would take my hat off, salute, and say great. But I don't see it. And increasingly I don't see it. And if American diplomats in our embassy in Kabul don't know essentially why we're there now and are talking about good enough and kicking the can down the road, that's not a policy. That's an exercise but it's not a policy.

MR. KAGAN: But you could, I mean, you know, what you're saying

could be an argument for making the case for a more sustained commitment, for a larger commitment for a longer period of time.

MR. KALB: And make the case.

MR. KAGAN: And make the case. Yeah. And if they made the case then you would be --

MR. KALB: Well, if I thought it was consistent with the security -- yeah.

MR. KAGAN: Because we've gone -- I mean, the people in the embassy in Kabul have moved to where they are now because of decisions that have been taken by the White House. Prior to the announcement of September 2012 drawdown, I think they would have answered it differently. The September 2012 drawdown announcement signaled to them that we were now in that area of talking about electro politics on the one hand, what the American people put up with on the other hand, and now we're -- so now we're in that game. And so they know what that game looks like.

And so, I mean, in a way it's an argument against having made that particular decision.

MR. KALB: Yes, it is. And I think that when you have an opportunity, as I have tried to have, of talking to soldiers who come back from Vietnam and ask them what is it that you do? And they explained it -- excuse me, forgive me. In Afghanistan. They come back from Afghanistan. What have you done there? They explain with pride that I think is fully justified what it is that they tried to do. And then you ask them -- if you're an ex-reporter you ask them -- was it worth it? Do you feel that what you did was worth it? There you get a very wobbly response. Sometimes, outspokenly, no. And sometimes, "I don't want to get into it." And quite often a point that we discussed earlier.

The idea that these are soldiers, they are volunteers, they chose this line of work, during the Vietnam War we had a draft. And imagine if there were today some

kind of obligatory draft system or national service system of some sort, I think we would have a totally different attitude. I mean, I just read this afternoon that several hundred young people have invaded Harvard Yard. And the police have now wondered what are we going to do with the townies who are now coming in, taking advantage of the openness of the university, to advance their interests on the Occupy Boston front. It's a serious issue.

If there were a draft now, that would be a daily occurrence in Harvard Yard.

SPEAKER: Sure. Sure.

MR. KAGAN: Well, let me -- just to follow up a second on what you're talking about, you know, it just seems to me that we have such a short-term goal in Afghanistan and it seems to me that, you know, I said some of this before, you know, that the people we're facing there have very long-term horizons and we have a much shorter term horizon. And I think also what do you make of the -- what's been described as leading from behind where the United States is not any longer, you know, the leader in defending democracy, opposing oppressive regimes, etcetera?

MR. KALB: I think that that is Obama's way of coping. Literally coping with the Vietnam phenomenon.

MR. NESSEN: I agree.

MR. KALB: That you try very, very hard not to commit yourself and not to send troops unless it is absolutely necessary. And in Libya he rolled the dice and he won after seven, eight months. But even here victory is going to be terribly difficult to define after a while.

MR. KAGAN: Well, it often is. I mean, it's funny when you think about what the American people want. What the American people will tolerate. It's not that

easy to say. The American people are very conflicted, schizophrenic people. And their history shows it. I've often been struck by the fact that the American people will keep troops somewhere for 40 years as long as you don't tell them that that's what they're going to do.

I think Dean Acheson had to promise Senator Hickenlooper who asked him this question directly. I know you all remember Senator Hickenlooper. How long were U.S. troops going to be in Europe? And Acheson said two years, baby. Two years. Bill Clinton said we're going to be in Bosnia, the Balkans, for one year. How many Americans know that we still have troops in the Balkans? Not to mention troops, you know, not to mention the troops in Korea. Not to mention the troops in Japan.

And so I think -- I really feel like earlier you hit on a very key point which is do the American people perceive that we are in it to win? Do they perceive that we're being successful? They will tolerate a lot more, and they have tolerated. I mean, after all, I think you quote somebody in your book saying how astonishing it was that the American people tolerated being in Vietnam for 14 years. So we can over interpret the American people's desires in these cases.

Which leads me to the next question.

MR. NESSEN: But do leaders lead public opinion or follow public opinion?

MR. KAGAN: I think they -- well, they often lead public opinion. Events have a way of shaping public opinion. And as I say, the American people are schizophrenic. It's not actually that hard to understand. They don't like losing wars; they prefer to win. They do think of America having a special role in the world when you can appeal to that but they also don't like the burden of playing that role. And so there are various elements of all this that leaders play to at different times.

I actually happen to think that when the president, you know, whose decision-making in Afghanistan at times I've been happy with and times I haven't been, when he explicitly said at the same time that he was announcing the September 2012 drawdown that it's time for American to start nation building at home, I thought that was very unfortunate because that encourages the view which I think is widespread that it's an either or. We're either engaged in foreign policy and commitments overseas or we're working on it at home. And if you start the American people down that road, well, then you do kind of lose foreign aid. You do kind of lose other support for America's role overseas. And I think that the presidents need to be careful with how they address that kind of pressure.

MR. KALB: The president did say in his December West Point speech about nation building at home, and he has been aware of the need to do something with the American economy.

MR. KAGAN: Sure.

MR. KALB: And it's only, you know, sort of gone down the hill since then. But he's been aware of that and he's fought that battle within himself from the very beginning. How international should he be? And at this particular point, how much can you do about the domestic front?

MR. KAGAN: There is also the question, and then I think maybe if you want we can open it up to the audience who have been patiently listening to us. But has the military learned? I mean, I would say that there is obviously a generation of Vietnam era professional military men, like David Petraeus, who went through the experience of Vietnam, made himself in a way the world's leading expert on counterinsurgency.

MR. KALB: He never served in Vietnam.

MR. KAGAN: Right. Right. But he certainly has of that generation has

had that experience. And, you know, as you know, some of the people who had the Vietnam experience came out and said never again. We're never going to get into that kind of thing. And some of them said, no, we can get it right next time. And what Petraeus did in Iraq was the application of a very intelligent approach to these things. I mean, I know you were criticizing the military for not getting what's going on in society but I think it's fair to say that Petraeus, you know, really drilled down hard into what was going on in Iraqi society and played it. And I think you were being a little too tough on the military in Afghanistan. I think they know that there were tribes and complications. And the question is have they been able to deliver presidents a better option as long as presidents are willing to take the option? That's a question.

MR. NESSEN: I think the impact of Vietnam on this process that you've described rightly is that was a completely different kind of war than we had ever fought before. Well, there was no frontline.

MR. KAGAN: Philippines. Philippines War.

MR. NESSEN: Maybe. Yeah, maybe. But you know, most of the wars we fought were with big units and the enemy was over there and you were over here and you're trying to push them back and so forth. Whereas, in Vietnam there was no frontline and the war was everywhere. And, you know, bombs went off in the streets of Saigon and so forth.

MR. KAGAN: But then they went through a kind of learning process as a result of that.

MR. NESSEN: Well, that's my point. That I think the military learned a lot from the Vietnam War, which they have put into practice. And now --

MR. KALB: Which they --

MR. NESSEN: -- even a different kind of war beyond Vietnam, I think.

MR. KALB: Yeah. Well, they did put the Vietnam experience -- when Abrahams replaced Westmoreland in '68 or '69, the whole policy changed.

MR. KAGAN: Right.

MR. KALB: And things began to get better at that point.

MR. KAGAN: Right.

MR. KALB: And it was that better that they have picked up and tried to apply in Afghanistan now.

MR. KAGAN: Right. Right.

MR. KALB: I mean, you talk to someone like General David Barno, for example, who was the chief out there in '04 to '06, I think. When he was there, he said -- what he told us was that in almost every single meeting that he had, we would sit down in the meeting and try to figure out what they were doing that day. The Vietnam experience was raised either by him or one of his other officers. But it was in their heads.

MR. KAGAN: Sure.

MR. KALB: They were trying to avoid the lessons, the mistakes of the past and apply the good things to the present.

MR. KAGAN: Right. Right.

MR. NESSEN: Well, you know, there's one -- just to follow --

MR. KALB: This happens only once a year.

MR. KAGAN: That's General Barno right there calling you up.

MR. KALB: Yes, Mr. President. (Laughter) Excuse me, whoever you are, I can't talk now.

SPEAKER: Stop at the grocery store and pick up some eggs on the way home.

MR. KAGAN: Well, look, folks, you have a rare opportunity. You're

never going to be confronted by this much wisdom and intelligence again for the rest of your life.

MR. KALB: Where?

MR. KAGAN: So I do want to give you an opportunity to take care of it. Are you the gentleman who talked about the Treaty of Ghent? Did you make the correction there?

SPEAKER: Yes.

MR. KAGAN: Okay. We'll come back to you. (Laughter) No, seriously. Yeah, go ahead.

SPEAKER: This is a two-part question.

MR. KAGAN: Oh, now I really wish that I had --

SPEAKER: Would the two authors be willing to name the three books that they consider the best treatments of Vietnam? And I would include not just books but, for example, David Petraeus' Ph.D. dissertation? And number two, and this is prompted by a viewing of the British TV series, Battlefield Vietnam, regarding the lessons in disaster, was the number one lesson that we never should have gotten in the first place and basically cut our losses in the mid-'50s? Or could the communists in Vietnam have been defeated at a price that the American people would have been willing to accept?

MR. KAGAN: Do you want to take those or do you want to take a few and then come back? Or do you want to go right now?

MR. NESSEN: Whatever you say is fine.

MR. KAGAN: Okay. Why don't we just take a couple more and then we'll come back. Yes, sir.

MR. GRINDSTAFF: My name is Hugh Grindstaff. Next time in the

Calvary Report I'm going to kid Marvin about not having the phones on.

But I was stationed at the Pentagon Telecommunication Center when I got my orders to Vietnam. And when I was working there I had access to a lot of highly classified information. So when I got my orders I somewhat jokingly said, "God damn it, I'm not going. I know what's going on over there." But I ended up spending five months in Ban Me Thuot with the 23rd ARVN Division and then seven months in Saigon. So I have a sense of the war.

But recently, the *National Journal* had 2012 elections. It had a review about that. And in one segment they had a person from each one of the republican candidates. I sent up three notes asking them about Afghanistan and Iraq. Why do you not ask the campaign people what their candidates really think about it? And if you can look at some of the debates, where is Afghanistan and where is Iraq? You have only one candidate who has served in the military, Perry, and he's, I think, in the Air National Guard. You have candidates and then you have Obama. And Obama right now is the hot president. These other guys want to get out of Libya. They want to get out of -- they want us to go into Libya. So what are we facing in this next election? And have we learned any lessons at all?

MR. NESSEN: That's a good question.

MR. KALB: One answer quickly is that we are making a determined effort here at Brookings to get the republican candidates to come here one at a time and talk about foreign policy and national security. We don't know what their answer is yet but we are making an effort.

MR. KAGAN: Okay. Why don't we take one more here and then we'll answer those and then go to another round.

SPEAKER: Thank you. I'm (inaudible) from (inaudible) Vietnamese

Americans. Since you're talking about Vietnam, I thank you for letting me talk.

First, I would like to say thank you to all the Vietnam veterans since tomorrow is Veterans Day. And I also would like to make the point that in Vietnam history on November 11, 1945, Ho Chi Minh had actually announced to dissolve the Communist Party of Indochina.

And then I talk to your very good point of long-term vision and the 30 or 35 years it takes to see the whole picture. With that, you can easily see it in Afghanistan how we can deal with the current situation and how wise President Obama and his cabinet and all the secretaries, especially Senator Webb, has been playing all the right strategy moves.

So I'll come back to my questions. I feel that we are just the wrong focus because the war in Vietnam wasn't between the U.S. and Vietnam; it was actually between the U.S. and China and Russia. And we, somehow, with you being in the press and you being in the White House with all seven presidents, somehow address it wrong. The agreements signed in Geneva in 1954 were signed between the U.S. and China and Chun-Li. The agreements signed in 1973 were signed between Kissinger and Chun-Li in China. And if you look back, you made the right point that our adversary had the long vision that they would never stop. They wanted the whole Indochina. They wanted the Star of China Sea. And mind you, they want the whole Asia. They want Afghanistan. They want all the oil in Iraq, too. And that's the vision we have to face.

So if they only have one in China, they only have one central government, we have presidency every four year term. And unfortunately what happened in Lyndon Johnson and Kennedy, the president only had a two-year term. And Nixon and Ford, our president only had a two-year term. And who played a partisy? The media. The media played a partisy.

So then my question again is when we talk about Vietnam we should talk about the war between the U.S. and China and how to maintain U.S. stability in the economy domestically. How to build our nation maintaining our posture globally.

MR. KAGAN: Thank you.

MR. KALB: Thank you.

MR. KAGAN: Okay. Go around that group.

MR. NESSEN: I want to answer the question about the books.

(Laughter)

MR. KAGAN: Well, there are two. There are two excellent books right here.

MR. NESSEN: Well, clearly this is my favorite Vietnam book right here. Yeah. No, I would say that the best Vietnam book in my view is a book of fiction. And it's Graham Greene's *A Quiet American*. And I think you see in that book, and certainly in the latest remake of the movie -- not so much in the original movie but in the latest remake of the movie -- it was so prophetic. So prophetic about what was going to happen to America and our lack of understanding and so forth. So, to me that's the best book, the most insightful book on Vietnam.

I think non-fiction I had the opportunity when I first went to Vietnam in '65 to spend a fair amount of time with Bernard Fall, the French writer. And he wrote two books. *Hell in a Very Small Place* about the Dien Bien Phu and *Street Without Joy* about Highway 1. And he and I actually spent time together and would have dinner together. One time I was going on and on about what a beautiful country this is and these beautiful people and how much they're suffering. And Bernard Fall said to me, ah ha. You've come down with the majun, the yellow sickness. You've fallen in love with Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. And it was true. But anyhow, I think his books are the best non-

fiction books about Vietnam.

MR. KALB: I was just -- I was going to mention the Bernard Fall book as well, *Hell in a Very Small Place*.

MR. NESSEN: *Hell in a Very Small Place*.

MR. KALB: The question about the U.S. and China, may I address that briefly? Part of the ignorance of American policymakers at the beginning of the war was that they knew very, very little about the history of Southeast Asia. They saw it all within a Cold War context. If the communists were to take over something, that was bad and it had to be stopped. We did not understand at that time that Vietnam and China had fought many, many, many wars over hundreds of years. And I find it rather amusing in the saddest way that our secretary of state now is discovering that there is an ally against China in Vietnam. And when she goes into that neighborhood she makes that point time and time again, which is so painful to listen to because it suggests a large vacuum in terms of knowledge of the region.

MR. KAGAN: Okay. By the way, I thought -- one thing -- reading your book and your story about the Goldstein book --

MR. KALB: Yes.

MR. KAGAN: I don't think they helped him sell any more copies. The president and the secretary of state and the secretary of defense, everybody is reading this book and nobody even knows about it. It's like the biggest nightmare for an author I've ever heard of.

SPEAKER: \$3.89 on Amazon.

MR. KAGAN: Pardon?

SPEAKER: It's \$3.89 on Amazon.

MR. KAGAN: \$3.89? Okay. Well, probably for an academic -- is it an

academic book? Is it an academic book?

MR. NESSEN: No, it's by a very good publishing house.

MR. KAGAN: Well, \$3.89 is not good enough then.

Yes? There in the back. Yes, sir.

SPEAKER: Here?

MR. KAGAN: Yes, you. Thank you.

MR. KALB: Very distinguished gentleman.

SPEAKER: Well, I'm a Vietnam veteran. I first arrived there in 1954.

I wanted to comment and then ask for a response. I'll never forget, I think it was 1966, when we were trying to figure out over at Lansdale's house how we could get to Washington some kind of understanding of what that war was all about. And he said the problem is that how do you explain something to people that don't understand what the problem is they're trying to solve? And this was a very profound observation. The thinking in Washington was, and very often continues to be, that if we make a policy here that it all depends on what we decide our policy is. And so we made some tremendous policy mistakes. But the biggest one of all was thinking that we were going to win the war and give the country back to the Vietnamese; that this was an American war. It was never from the beginning the American war. And we made it the American war. We really were going to lose.

And so what I'm driving at or trying to drive at is that we need to understand the kind of war we're in. And as it was said at the time, I think a most profound statement, was our problem was that we didn't understand the enemy. We didn't understand the South Vietnamese, our allies. Nor did we understand ourselves. And I think that we are still plagued by this problem. And I'd like some comments.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I mean, I think that you're exactly right about that,

particularly the fact that it was -- I think the policymakers in the United States understood that this was not necessarily a war to help the South Vietnamese stave off the North Vietnamese; this was a war to stop the Chinese from coming down into Indochina and then even further south than Indochina. And I think that is, you know, I think policymakers -- certainly Henry Kissinger, I think -- understood that. And just to, again, because I see so many parallels between Vietnam and the war against militant Islam, I think that there again we don't quite fully understand what the ultimate goal of militant Islam is. And I think that is another similarity between the Vietnam War and the current conflicts.

MR. KAGAN: Yes, sir. Right here.

SPEAKER: I want to ask about why most of this conversation, mostly what's been mentioned is Afghanistan and not Iraq, when Iraq has -- it's perhaps a much better situation than Afghanistan, certainly. But I mean, talking about short memory, it really wasn't that long ago that almost every day in the news there was talk of some kind of horrible violence that happened in Iraq. And here only a few years later we're going to leave soon and, I mean, perhaps it's definitely different from Vietnam and hopefully there won't be -- and most probably there won't be some horrific disaster after we leave. But I still don't understand why not Iraq has not been mentioned as much during this conversation as Afghanistan.

MR. NESSEN: Well, as far as I'm concerned, because it wasn't as relevant as the issue of Obama's views in Afghanistan. Obama was not the president during the decisive decision time in Iraq. He was against Iraq. And I was dealing with the issue of the way the Vietnam experience continues to haunt presidents from the Vietnam time to today. And I thought it would be most relevant to discuss Obama and Afghanistan.

MR. KAGAN: Well, this is a point that I was going to get to eventually, which is there's obviously more than one paradigm playing around in presidents' heads --

MR. NESSEN: Of course.

MR. KAGAN: -- when they make these decisions. And I don't think Vietnam looked very large in the decision-making process of the Clinton administration. In the '90s, when it came to Iraq or the Bush administration when it decided to invade in 2003, I think they had other paradigms in mind. I think they had, in the case of Bush, they probably had the first person in the Gulf War in mind. There was a lot of Powell doctrine playing into the way Bush dealt with Iraq, which I suppose you could say was a -
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MR. NESSEN: I suppose it was the direct offshoot --

MR. KAGAN: Right. Not suppose.

MR. NESSEN: -- of the Vietnam experience.

MR. KAGAN: But for Bush, I don't think he was thinking much about Vietnam when he went into Iraq. And, of course, and it gets to -- one answer to your question which I think you have already come to yourself but which Marvin made before is it wasn't unsuccessful enough. You know, the fact that the military did a reasonably good job of putting things in place ultimately after the debacles of the first couple of years. And so it's not looming as large as a failure as we thought it was going to.

MR. NESSEN: Right.

MR. KAGAN: And so it doesn't seem to have -- whereas Afghanistan, once again, now you could say Afghanistan today is to Iraq 2004 or 2005. And maybe someday we won't even be talking about Afghanistan and Vietnam. But right now it doesn't seem that way.

Yes, sir.

SPEAKER: First a comment. And that is I want to honor my brother and my colleagues, Vietnam vets who showed up here today. And Happy Birthday to the Marines.

I want to kind of put this in context because I heard Dien Bien Phu mentioned a little bit earlier. I was at Que Son. Do you think -- and when you said Dien Bien Phu, I recall Johnson's comment about when he learned about the buildup at Que Son and that sort of thing. He said I don't want this to be no damn Dien Bien Phu. How important a role do you think Que Son played in the policy that followed the siege?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I will only --

MR. KALB: Ron, I'll give it to you.

MR. NESSEN: I can't help much with the larger picture. And you can. But I was in Que Son with my camera crew. And it was perhaps the scariest experience of my entire life. This was a special forces camp on the border, and it was surrounded, completely 360 degrees, by North Vietnamese troops. And I was young and stupid and I went there with my camera crew. And the way you got around in Vietnam if you were a reporter was you hitched a ride on a helicopter that happened to be going where you were going. So we went in on a Marine supply helicopter. And the North Vietnamese had zeroed their mortar shells to the camp, as you know. And so the helicopter didn't want to actually land so it just came in very, very low. And we had to jump out and run across and jump in a ditch. And then the mortar shells started raining in, you know. So I was there a couple of days and that was, as I say, the scariest experience of my life.

But the Marines stayed there and, you know, established and protected that fort on the border.

MR. KAGAN: Yes, sir.

MR. BURN: I'm Jim Byrne, a journalist who has covered a lot of this stuff

myself.

I was -- at 24, I was the first press officer of the newly formed Army Intelligence ranch. And boy, did I get solicits, although we didn't talk Vietnam in those days. It was just '61 and '62. The people who worked next to me were sending people to Vietnam at that time. But my question is who? And I studied all this stuff. I've read most of your books. Who are any thinking heroes that you remember? What about Bob Ball? What about Wayne Morris? What about Marc Mansfield? I saw a quote by Lyndon Johnson saying Mike Mansfield drove him crazier than anybody because he brought legal issues to him and Johnson couldn't answer them.

MR. KALB: The only answer I could give you is one that is not centered or something like that. But I've spent a lot of the last five years reading presidential biographies, autobiographies. And I have developed in my old age a new kind of respect for -- not the position, which I always respected -- but for individual presidents because when you think about the problems that they have to address on a daily basis and you think about the problems we as citizens address on a daily basis. And I know they fought for the job very hard.

I find it quite extraordinary the kind of pressures that these men worked under. I think that every now and then we can sit back and be a little more humble and not proclaim what we would do were we president but take a look at what these guys have to think about every single day. It is awesome. Truly awesome. And as I said before against Reagan, you know, as a reporter covering Reagan you fell into line. That Reagan was just another act who happened to become the president because he had the nice kind of shrug and a wonderful smile and he could speak well in television. There was a lot more to this guy. And as a reporter I wish that I had in those days -- not looking back now, 20, 30, 40 years -- had been more understanding of them.

MR. NESSEN: You know, we have this tendency or trend among some reporters to decide that he's just too dumb to be president.

MR. KALB: That's right.

MR. NESSEN: You know, Harry Truman --

MR. KALB: Gerald Ford can't chew gum.

MR. NESSEN: Harry Truman was too dumb to be president. Right? John Kennedy? No. No, he was okay. Lyndon Johnson, well, he had his other faults as president. And you go right, and you know, George Bush, too dumb to be president. Gerald Ford, you know, played football too often without a helmet. You know, he was too dumb to be -- you remember that, don't you?

SPEAKER: Oh, yeah.

MR. NESSEN: He was too dumb to be president. And so forth. Well, who is the smartest president we've had in the last 50 years? Let's see. By college degree it would have to be Jimmy Carter. So do you think he was our best president?

So my theory that I've developed over the years of both covering the White House and working in the White House is what kind of intelligence does it take to be president? You know, is it book learning intelligence? Is it a master's degree, a doctorate's degree? Or is it some other kinds of intelligence that make you or help you to become a great president?

MR. KAGAN: Using this as a guide, can you tell us who you're going to be favoring in the next election? (Laughter) Well, I mean, and you know, when you talk about the burden that presidents feel, I mean, we have a decision which we haven't talked about. We have an issue coming up now which is what to do about Iran. I think that that's a decision that this president is going to have to take very seriously, whether he does anything or not or the next president. They may choose not to take any action.

But I can assure -- I'm confident they're reviewing their options. They're going to review their options and make a decision.

SPEAKER: Sure.

MR. KAGAN: What will be the historical lessons you think they'll be drawing on? I mean, I might argue that it's not going to be Vietnam in the case of Iran that they're thinking about; it's going to be Iraq. How good is the intelligence? What's the aftermath that we're not predicting? It's the same part of the world. But maybe there's a Vietnam part of it as well.

MR. KALB: Well, I have a feeling that there probably is but only because my sense is that presidents come in and all of their advisors sit around and you've got a problem. They work on a layered experience that builds up over a period of time and becomes the conventional and accepted wisdom and what it is that they have to do. So, whether it was specifically Vietnam, who knows? Was it Munich? I mean, Madeline Albright was telling us time and time again she was not affected by Vietnam she said. Her model was Munich. And I heard that from other people as well but I developed sort of the idea that no president deals with just one motivating factor. There's a lot going on. And what I've been told now is that Vietnam very, very often sat at the table, maybe as an unwelcomed guest, but sat at the table and participated in that way. But again, I don't know in every single case whether it was just Vietnam, Munich, Iraq. If they're smart, they would take all of that into account.

MR. KAGAN: Well, I sort of feel like that's a great way to end our discussion. Thank you very much. And thank you all for coming. Thank you.

(Applause)

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