



Conclusion First, Debate Afterwards

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Policymakers are abuzz with the explosive recommendations for U.S. policy toward Iraq soon to be released by the Baker-Hamilton Commission: Abandon democracy, seek political compromise with the Sunni insurgents, and engage Tehran and Damascus as partners to secure stability in their neighbor. While former secretary of state James Baker and former representative Lee Hamilton said they would withhold their report until after the elections on November 7 to avoid its politicization, they have discussed their findings with the press. On October 8, for example, Baker appeared on ABC's *This Week*, and the next day he discussed the group's findings with Charlie Rose. On October 12, both Baker and Hamilton appeared on *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*.

Both men are master inside-the-Beltway operators. Rather than prime the debate, they sought to stifle it. While on March 15, 2006, Baker said, "Chairman Hamilton and I have the same objective...to make an honest assessment of where we are and how we go forward and take this issue to the extent that we can out of politics," both chairmen designed the commission to affirm preordained conclusions that are neither new nor wise.

Take the four subordinate expert working groups: Baker and Hamilton gerrymandered these advisory panels to ratify predetermined recommendations. While bipartisan, the groups are anything but representative of the policy debate. I personally withdrew from an expert working group after concluding that I was meant to contribute token di-

versity rather than my substantive views.

Many appointees appeared to be selected less for expertise than for their hostility to President Bush's war on terrorism and emphasis on democracy. Raad Alkadiri, for example, has repeatedly defined U.S. motivation for Iraq's liberation as a grab for oil. Raymond Close, listed on the Iraq Study Group's website as a "freelance analyst," is actually a member of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, which, in July 2003, called for Vice President Dick Cheney's resignation for an alleged conspiracy to distort intelligence, which they said had been uncovered by none other than Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson IV. The following summer, Close posited that "Bush and the neocons" had fabricated the charge "that the evil Iranian mullahs inspired and instigated the radical Shia Islamist insurgency." To Close, the problem was not Iranian training and supply of money and sophisticated explosives to terrorists, but rather neo-conservatism.

Other experts include a plaintiff in the January 17, 2006, lawsuit against the National Security Agency for its no-warrant wiretap program and a think-tank analyst who had not traveled beyond the Green Zone on her only trip to Iraq in September 2003, but nonetheless demonstrated her open mind by declaring the Iraq endeavor a failure in an interview with a German magazine just days before the commission's inauguration.

Baker placed Chas Freeman, his former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, on the panel, despite Freeman's assertion, in the antiwar documentary *Uncovered: The War in Iraq*, that the Bush administration had fabricated its justifications for war. Why seek advice from an area specialist who has clearly crossed the line from analysis to conspiracy?

Even if the eight other commissioners--all distinguished retired government officials--approached their work with honesty, they had little opportunity to get an independent look at developments in Iraq. U.S. evaluations of Iraq have long suffered from an overemphasis on both PowerPoint presentations and conversations with a limited circle of Green Zone interlocutors. During the commission's three-day visit to Iraq, only former senator Charles Robb left the Green Zone, despite the embassy's willingness to facilitate excursions. Had commission members embedded with U.S. servicemen on patrol, each in a separate area of the country, they might have expanded their contacts, broadened their collective expertise, and gained access to unvarnished opinion.

Had they done so, they might not conclude that the solution in Iraq lies with further engagement of Iran and Syria. Rather than inject a "new approach" to U.S. strategy, the Baker-Hamilton Commission's recommendations resurrect the old. In May 2001, Hamilton co-chaired an Atlantic Council study group that called on Washington to adopt a "new approach" to Iran centered on

engagement with Tehran. And, in 2004, Baker-Hamilton Commission member Robert M. Gates co-chaired another study group that called for a "new approach" toward Iran consisting of engagement.

The problem is that this "new approach" hasn't been good for U.S. national security. After Secretary of State Madeleine Albright extended an olive branch to the Islamic Republic in March 2000, the Iranian leadership facilitated anti-U.S. terrorists. As the 9/11 Commission found, "There is strong evidence that Iran facilitated the transit of al Qaeda members into and out of Afghanistan before 9/11, and that some of these were future 9/11 hijackers."

In the weeks prior to the Iraq war, Washington once again engaged Tehran. Zalmay Khalilzad, the current U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, who, at the time, was Bush's chief Iraq adviser on the National Security Council, solicited a noninterference pledge from Iran's U.N. ambassador in exchange for a U.S. pledge to bomb and blockade the Mujahedeen al-Khalq terrorist camp inside Iraq. Writing in *Asharq Al-Awsat* just after Saddam's fall, Ali Nourizadeh, known as the Bob Woodward of Iranian journalists for his connections to the ruling elite, described how, even as Washington kept its bargain, the Iranian leadership ordered its Qods Force, the Iranian equivalent of the Green Berets, to infiltrate Iraq with weapons, money, and other supplies. "According to a plan approved by the Revolutionary Guards command, the aim

was to create a *fait accompli*," he wrote. Rather than send a diplomat to head its embassy in Baghdad, the Iranian government sent Hassan Kazemi Qomi, a Qods Force commander who was Tehran's former liaison to Hezbollah. Effective realism requires abandoning the utopian conviction that engagement always works and partners are always sincere.

While Baker and Hamilton themselves may be sincere in their convictions, conclusions absent acknowledgment of historical context will backfire. In Iraq, perception trumps reality. Sunni insurgents, former military officers, and Shiite tribal leaders each voiced one common complaint in a meeting last month: They believe Washington is ready to hand primacy in Iraq over to Iran. "You have allowed the Iranians to rape us," a former general said. Just as Iraqis believe the coalition's failure to restore electricity to be deliberate--if NASA can land a man on the moon, who would believe that USAID cannot turn on the lights in Baghdad?--so Iraqis across the ethnic and sectarian divide are convinced the White House has blessed a paramount role for Iran. Why else would we allow Moktada al-Sadr and the Badr Corps to expand their influence unchecked? Such conspiracy theories may appear ridiculous to an American audience accustomed to government ineptitude, but in Iraq they have real consequences: If Washington has blessed Iranian ambitions in Iraq, then Washington is to blame for outrages perpetuated by Iranian militias.

When Rep. Frank R. Wolf conceived of the Iraq Study Group, he chose Baker and Hamilton to lead it in recognition of their extensive diplomatic experience. But it is this experience that may not only condemn the commission's recommendations to failure, but also further inflame Iraq. In the Middle East, Baker's legacy is twofold. As secretary of state, he presided over the 1989 Taif Accords, which ended Lebanon's civil war. By blessing Syrian military occupation, he sacrificed Lebanese independence on the altar of short-term pragmatism. Many Iraqis--Sunni elites and former officers especially--fear Washington may repeat the episode in their country. They fear Baker's cold realist calculations may surrender Iraq to Iranian suzerainty. While Americans may nonetheless welcome short-term calm, in terms of U.S. security, the Taif model failed: Damascus used its free hand to gut civil society and turn Lebanon into a safe haven for terror.

Baker's other legacy may be harder to shake: Iraqis remember him for his role in Operation Desert Storm. On February 15, 1991, President George H.W. Bush called upon Iraqis to "take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein the dictator to step aside." Iraqis did rise up, but Baker counseled U.S. forces to stand aside as Saddam turned his helicopter gunships on the rebellious Kurds and Shiites. Had more commission members exited the Green Zone, they might have found that among the greatest impediments U.S. forces and diplomats face in Iraq is the experience of

betrayal that Baker imprinted on their country. Washington's adversaries have capitalized on this legacy. The foolishness of Iraqis' trusting Washington has been a constant theme in Iranian propaganda. Should the Baker-Hamilton Commission also recommend abandoning democracy--which the Shiites understand as their right to power--and urge a political accord with Sunni insurgents, they would push 16 million Iraqi Shiites beyond possibility of accord and into the waiting embrace of an Iranian regime that, paid militias aside, most Iraqis resent.

Iraq is a bipartisan problem. Regardless of the outcome of the 2006, and even 2008, elections, the legacy of Iraq is going to impact U.S. policy and security for years to come. It is unfortunate, then, that the commission has bypassed its responsibility to seek a new approach and instead has embraced the old.

Perhaps, rather than revert to the pre-9/11 habits of short-term accommodation and a belief that two oceans insulate the United States from the world, the commission should expand its mandate. Iraqis fleeing Saddam for the West have embraced democracy wherever they have settled, an indication that their culture is not to blame. Rather than preempt debate, fresh eyes might consider whether the deterioration in Iraq signals the failure of democracy or an inability to ensure the rule of law.

Rather than pretend the Iraq problem can be contained, they might

consider whether it has suffered from an unwillingness to address provocations from beyond Iraq's borders. National security depends on dealing with the world we have, rather than the world diplomats construct with smoke and mirrors. Exit strategies might seem easy, but--like the Taif Accords and the failure

to topple Saddam in 1991--they are irresponsible and replete with long-term consequences. What is needed in Iraq is reconsideration of the resources and parameters conducive to long-term victory, not a repeat of short-term solutions that will almost certainly fail.

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