



ISG must stand for, uh, Inane Strategy Guesswork

(Published in *Chicago Sun Time*, December 10, 2006)

Mark Steyn

Colaboraciones n° 1406

December 26, 2006

Well, the ISG -- the Illustrious Seniors' Group -- has released its 79-point plan. How unprecedented is it? Well, it seems Iraq is to come under something called the "Iraq International Support Group." If only Neville Chamberlain had thought to propose a "support group" for Czechoslovakia, he might still be in office. Or guest-hosting for Oprah.

But, alas, such flashes of originality are few and far between in what's otherwise a testament to conventional wisdom. How conventional is the ISG's conventional wisdom? Try page 49:

"RECOMMENDATION 5: The Support Group should consist of Iraq and all the states bordering Iraq, including Iran and Syria . . ."

Er, OK. I suppose that's what you famously hardheaded "realists" mean by realism. But wait, we're not done yet. For this "Support Group," we need the extra-large function room. Aside from Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Kuwait, the ISG -- the Iraq Surrender Gran'pas -- want also to invite:

". . . the key regional states, including Egypt and the Gulf States . . ."

Er, OK. So it's basically an Arab League meeting. Not a "Support Group" I'd want to look for support from, but each to his own. But wait, Secretary Baker's still warming up:

". . . the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council . . ."

That would be America, Britain, France, Russia, China. A diverse quintet, representing many distinctive approaches to international affairs from stylish hauteur to polonium-210. Anybody else?

". . . the European Union . . ."

Hey, why not? It's not really multi-lateral unless there's a Belgian on board, right? Oh, and let's not forget:

". . . the Support Group should call on the participation of the United Nations Secretary-General in its work. The United Nations Secretary-General should designate a Special Envoy as his representative . . ."

Indeed. But it needs to be someone with real clout, like Benon Sevan, the former head of the Oil for Food Program, who recently, ah, stepped down; or Maurice Strong, the Under-Secretary-General for U.N. Reform and godfather of Kyoto, who for one reason or another is presently on a, shall we say, leave of absence; or Alexander Yakovlev, the senior procurement officer for U.N. peacekeeping, who also finds himself under indictment -- er, I mean under-employed. There's no end of top-class talent at the U.N., now that John Bolton's been expelled from its precincts.

So there you have it: an Iraq "Support Group" that brings together the Arab League, the European Union, Iran, Russia, China and the U.N. And with support like that who needs lack of support? It worked in

Darfur, where the international community reached unanimous agreement on the urgent need to rent a zeppelin to fly over the beleaguered region trailing a big banner emblazoned "YOU'RE SCREWED." For Dar4.1, they can just divert it to Baghdad.

Oh, but lest you think there are no minimum admission criteria to James Baker's "Support Group," relax, it's a very restricted membership: Arabs, Persians, Chinese commies, French obstructionists, Russian assassination squads. But no Jews. Even though Israel is the only country to be required to make specific concessions -- return the Golan Heights, etc. Indeed, insofar as this document has any novelty value, it's in the Frankenstein-meets-the-Wolfman sense of a boffo convergence of hit franchises: a Vietnam bug-out, but with the Jews as the designated fall guys. Wow. That's what Hollywood would call "high concept."

Why would anyone -- even a short-sighted incompetent political fixer whose brilliant advice includes telling the first Bush that no one would care if he abandoned the "Read my lips" pledge -- why would even he think it a smart move to mortgage Iraq's future to anything as intractable as the Palestinian "right of return"? And, incidentally, how did that phrase -- "the right of return" -- get so carelessly inserted into a document signed by two former secretaries of state, two former senators, a former attorney general, Supreme Court judge, defense secretary, congressman, etc. These are by

far the most prominent Americans ever to legitimize a concept whose very purpose is to render any Zionist entity impossible. I'm not one of those who assumes that just because much of James Baker's post-government career has been so lavishly endowed by the Saudis that he must necessarily be a wholly owned subsidiary of King Abdullah, but it's striking how this document frames all the issues within the pathologies of the enemy.

And that's before we get to Iran and Syria. So tough-minded and specific when it comes to the Israelis, Baker turns to mush when it comes to Assad assassinating his way through Lebanon's shrinking Christian community or Ahmadinejad and the mullahs painting the finish trim on the Iranian nukes. Syria, declare the Surrender Gran'pas, "should control its border with Iraq." Gee, who'dda thunk o' that other than these geniuses?

Actually, Syria doesn't need to "control its border with Iraq." Iraq needs to control its border with Syria. And, as long as the traffic's all one way (because Syria's been allowed to subvert Iraq with impunity for three years), that suits Assad just fine. The Surrender Gran'pas assert that Iran and Syria have "an interest

in avoiding chaos in Iraq." This, to put it mildly, is news to the Iranians and Syrians, who have concluded that what's in their interest is much more chaos in Iraq. For a start, the Americans get blamed for it, which reduces America's influence in the broader Middle East, not least among Iran and Syria's opposition movements. Furthermore, the fact that they're known to be fomenting the chaos gives the mullahs, Assad and their proxies tremendous credibility in the rest of the Muslim world. James Baker has achieved the perfect *reductio ad absurdum* of diplomatic self-adulation: he's less rational than Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

If they're lucky, this document will be tossed in the trash and these men and women will be the laughingstocks of posterity. But, if it's not shredded and we embark down this path, then the Baker group will be emblematic of something far worse. The "Support Group" is a "peace conference," and Baker wants Washington to sue for terms. No wonder Syria is already demanding concessions from America. Which is the superpower and which is the third-rate basket-case state? From the Middle Eastern and European press coverage of the Baker group, it's kinda hard to tell.