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THEY SAID IT

Syria should stop infiltration, declares the report. And Iran “should stem the flow of equipment, technology, and training to any group resorting to violence in Iraq.” Yes, and obesity should be eradicated, bird flu cured, and traffic fatalities, particularly the multicar variety, abolished.

--Charles Krauthammer, “In Baker’s Blunder, A Chance for Bush.”
December 15, 2006.

In this Issue

Rational Choices in Iraq.

Announcement and Publication
Schedule.

RATIONAL CHOICES IN IRAQ.

In a way, we actually sort of feel sorry for James Baker. We’ve been there. Believe us, we’ve been there. We feel his pain, to coin a phrase.

You see, Baker thought that he had it all figured out. He and his fellow commissioners put together a nice big report, complete with all sorts of recommendations, all of which were designed to improve, if not solve, many of the world’s heretofore most intractable problems. They had recommendations about what to do in Iraq. They had recommendations about how to handle the broader Middle Eastern conflict. They had recommendations for how and why to engage Iran and Syria and explanations why such engagement would be productive. And most important, they had recommendations for President Bush about the adoption and implementation of their plan and the salvaging of the war, of his presidency, and of his legacy.

And none of these recommendations was frivolous, quite the contrary, in fact. Each was well researched, well thought out, much discussed, and painstakingly framed. And each made perfect sense *to James Baker*.

Of course, therein lies the problem.

What Baker did is something that we ourselves have done many times, far too many to count, and most of them in thinking and writing about this war. He thought about the problems and came up with solutions that made perfect sense *to him*. “Here’s what I would do,” Baker thought to himself. “Here’s what I think would make sense in that particular situation.” He proceeded to plot his analysis and make his predictions and recommendations based on what *he would do* under those conditions, apparently never stopping to think that none of the parties involved think exactly like he does, meaning that none would do exactly as he would, meaning, in turn, that his analysis is garbage and his recommendations absurd.

Two weeks ago, we recounted a handful of the times that we too have fallen into this same trap, believing that President Bush and his advisors would make certain adjustments to their war plan or launch specific new operations because that's what we would have done in the same situation. As we wrote (about any of a half-dozen Iraq-related predictions), "This made sense to us, so we naturally thought that the White House agreed."

What we did then and what Baker has done repeatedly in the report issued by his Iraq Study Group is simply to substitute our own preferences, and thus our own definition of "rational behavior," for those of the relevant decision-makers. For example, much has been made about the recommendation made by Baker and his fellow commissioners that the United States should engage Syria and Iran in an attempt to improve the situation in Iraq and to stabilize conditions throughout the region. Iran and Syria, the commissioners noted, have as much interest as anyone in bringing an end to the turmoil in the region, since they would be among the principal beneficiaries of the new stability. Specifically, the commission concluded that "Iraq's neighbors" (read: Iran and Syria) have "an interest in avoiding chaos in Iraq" and would thus willingly engage the United States and provide cover for its eventual retreat from the battlefield.

Naturally, Baker is right about what is in the best interests of the Iranians and the Syrians, from a rational *American* perspective. It just makes sense that stability in the region would indeed be the best for the Mullahs, for Boy Assad, and for all parties involved. Stability tends to foster the conditions necessary for prosperity and success. Baker knows that. We know that. You know that. The only problem is that the Iranians and the Syrians don't know that. Or, more to the point, they don't care. They see things a little differently. They have different priorities, different aims, different preferences.

None of this appears to have occurred to Baker, of course, which just makes him look like a doddering old fool. Addressing the purportedly "rational"

choice proposed by Baker et al. for Iran and Syria, the inimitable Mark Steyn wrote the following:

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.

The recommendations made by the ISG (all 79 of them) are rife with this specific logical flaw. The commission presumes that the Palestinians will be willing to acknowledge and co-exist peacefully with the Israelis after the return of all occupied territories, because that makes sense. It believes that the Syrians will be likely to support a less hostile Lebanese government, if the Golan Heights is returned, because that makes sense. It insists that Israel will do as it's told by its benefactor, the United States, and will unilaterally surrender control of all of this strategic territory, because that makes sense. The commissioners made sure that everything they proposed makes sense. They just never bothered to ask the question, "to whom?" Had they done so, the other nine commissioners might have realized that the answer to that question, "to Jim Baker," was not exactly the answer for which they should have been looking.

But of all the instances in which Baker and his co-commissioners misapplied their own preferences to their decision matrix, the one that matters the most and that will, we believe, prove most crucial to the outcome of the war in Middle East is that which involves President Bush directly. Baker and company presumed that their recommendations actually

mattered. They presumed that President Bush would take them to heart and would follow them. They even presumed to be so bold as to tell the President in no uncertain terms that their report did not constitute a “fruit salad” from which recommendations can be picked and chosen. The recommendations came as a package deal: here are the 79 keys to “success;” take ‘em or...well, take ‘em.

The commissioners’ expectation to this end was not unwarranted. Indeed, they had several very good reasons to think that the President would thank them for their service to the country and would then implement their plan word-for-word.

For starters, that’s the way things usually work in Washington these days. Rather than actually make difficult choices themselves, lawmakers have, over the last several decades, become accustomed to turning more and more of the responsibility for crucial decisions over to others, others who are not subject to the whims and passions of public opinion and electoral politics. Most often, these “others” include the bureaucracy; the courts; and grand, blue-ribbon, bi-partisan commissions and panels of experts (or in the case of the Iraq Study Group, a panel of an expert, an out of work Congressman, a retired judge, Bill Clinton’s golfing buddy, and handful of other jokers). These “others” make the hard decisions and the politicians see that they are carried out.

This is, of course, part and parcel of the long-term bureaucratization of politics. There are “experts” for every issue and occasion in this increasingly complex world. And it makes little sense to most elected officials to put themselves in harm’s way by doing something that might be perceived by voters as unpopular and which might therefore come back to haunt them some bright November day in the not-too-distant future. Better to avoid the risk and claim credit for having the “experts” handle things.

This is how things are done almost exclusively in Europe anymore. The “people,” such as they are, have very little voice in the European “democracies,” and even less in the amalgamation that is the EU. Bureaucrats and “professionals” enact laws, implement

regulations, write constitutions, etc. In his column last week, Gerard Baker, the Washington editor for *The Times* of London, wrote that in Europe, the Iraq Study Group’s report “was greeted with the kind of hushed reverence with which the shepherds heard out the Archangel that wintry night in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. The great and the good had deliberated for months and lo! from the clouds there came a great host of the heavenly army with a stunning rebuke for the Bush Administration....” This is precisely the reaction one would expect from the Europeans, whose direct relationship with democracy these days is rather limited.

Here at home, Baker, Hamilton, and the rest of the ISG had further cause to believe that the current crop of elected officials would be especially receptive to the idea of turning tough choices over to the “experts.” After all, President Bush himself as much as admitted during his first term that he’d rather not have to put his neck on the proverbial chopping block if there were experts who could stand in his stead. When the President signed the McCain-Feingold campaign finance bill, he openly conceded that it contained provisions to which he objected and admitted that he was counting on the Supreme Court to handle the adjudication of those provisions. It didn’t quite work out that way, of course, but that was the plan.

As for Congress, the new Democratic majority is so terrified of actually doing something that might be perceived as assertive in fighting the war on terror that it simply adopted the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission (also, coincidentally, co-chaired by Lee Hamilton) *in toto* as its terrorism policy. The substance of the commission’s proposals was largely irrelevant. All that mattered to Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, and the rest was that they were handed down from on high by the exalted and beneficent experts. Oh, and that they could be used as a club against the President.

Baker also had cause to believe that President Bush would do as he directed because presidents named Bush always have. No one, save perhaps the former First Lady Barbara Bush, was more instrumental in the political rise of the current president’s father than was Jim Baker. Baker managed two of George H.W.’s

three presidential campaigns (1980 and 1992) and served as one of his closest and most trusted advisors. Most important, Baker was always the Bushes' counselor of last resort. When all else failed, when the chips were really down, when, for example Al Gore and the Daley political machine were trying to pocket a few hundred votes here and there in Florida and thus swipe the 2000 election, Baker was the man to whom the Bushes turned.

What Baker couldn't possibly have figured (since that would have entailed trying to see the situation from a perspective other than his own) was that in this particular instance, none of those reasons would matter much to the younger Bush, that this President Bush would have his own set of preferences that would not correspond all that closely to Baker's. Or at least that's what we have to conclude based on the President's public reaction to the ISG's report and on his private plans (as reported by a handful of others) to do precisely the opposite of what Baker has suggested.

We can only guess that what Baker figured was that if the ISG's plan were implemented as written, he would get the credit for any success, while President Bush would take the blame for any failures. At the same time, President Bush likely concluded precisely the same thing, that any success of the ISG's plan would be attributed to Baker and any blame would be heaped on him. Needless to say, that made the implementation of that plan significantly less attractive, less rational, if you will, to Bush than to Baker.

Conventional wisdom has held since the election that President Bush is a broken man, that he and his wartime leadership were rejected by the American people, that he has no political capital or drive remaining, that he is the lamest of lame ducks. From that, it's been deduced that Bush will do whatever is necessary to salvage what's left of his presidency and to find a way out of the mess he created in Iraq with the smallest measure of humiliation.

What this conventional wisdom ignores, however,

is the old adage about a cornered animal, an adage perhaps best captured by liberal Baby Boomer icon Bob Dylan's observation that "when ya' ain't got nothing, ya' got nothing to lose." Right now, President Bush has nothing. And that means he has nothing to lose. And that, in turn, strongly suggests that he might act in manner contrary to that proscribed by the unelected, unaccountable guardians who champion little other than the Inside-the-Beltway insider consensus.

For obvious reasons, we've given up on attempting to foretell what President Bush is going to do, particularly with regard to Iraq and the war on terror. Fortunately for us, in this instance, we don't have to, since someone else has already done it. In this week's issue of *The Weekly Standard*, Fred Barnes reports that President Bush "is ready to gamble his presidency on a last-ditch effort to defeat the Sunni insurgency and establish a sustainable democracy in Iraq." According to Barnes:

Last Monday Bush was, at last, briefed on an actual plan for victory in Iraq, one that is likely to be implemented. Retired General Jack Keane, the former vice chief of staff of the Army, gave him a thumbnail sketch of it during a meeting of five outside experts at the White House. The president's reaction, according to a senior adviser, was "very positive." Authored by Keane and military expert Frederick W. Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute, the plan (which can be read at aei.org/publication25292) is well thought-out and detailed, but fundamentally quite simple. It is based on the idea – all but indisputable at this point – that no political solution is possible in Iraq until security is established, starting in Baghdad. The reverse – a bid to forge reconciliation between majority Shia and minority Sunni – is a nonstarter in a political environment drenched in the blood of sectarian killings....

[The plan] envisions a temporary addition of 50,000 troops on the ground in Iraq.

The initial mission would be to secure and hold the mixed Baghdad neighborhoods of Shia and Sunni residents where most of the violence occurs. Earlier efforts had cleared many of those sections of the city without holding them. After which, the mass killings resumed. Once neighborhoods are cleared, American and Iraqi troops in this plan would remain behind, living day-to-day among the population. Local government leaders would receive protection and rewards if they stepped in to provide basic services. Safe from retaliation by terrorists, residents would begin to cooperate with the Iraqi government. The securing of Baghdad would be followed by a full-scale drive to pacify the Sunni-majority Anbar province.

We have no way of knowing whether Barnes is right or not. We do know that Cliff May, one of the expert advisors to the Iraq Study Group, has confirmed Barnes' retelling of an incident in which he (or someone similarly credentialed) told President Bush to ignore the findings of the ISG. We know as well that President Bush has gone on record disagreeing with the conclusions and recommendations of the ISG. Most important, we know that from President Bush's perspective, the recommendations proffered by Baker, Hamilton, and the rest, make little sense.

This last point is, we believe, fundamental. James Baker is not dumb. Far from it. But his ideas about how to proceed in the Middle East make sense only from the perspective of one who has no real stake in the ultimate outcome, which is precisely what he is. Baker can recommend that the United States engage Iran and Syria. He can recommend that the

United States sell out Israel. He can recommend that the United States begin a slow drawdown of troops in Iraq. Indeed, he can recommend anything he wants. And he doesn't have to worry at all about the consequences of his recommendations, because for him there are none. He and his fellow commissioners are entirely unaccountable.

President Bush, by contrast, is supremely accountable. History will judge him and him alone by the outcome of war in Iraq. Given that, we would expect his preferences to be different from almost anyone else's. Whether those preferences now include more aggressive action in Iraq remains to be seen, though there are some signs that that just might be the case. Of course, we've been wrong in presuming so more than once before.

ANNOUNCEMENT and PUBLICATION SCHEDULE.

As per tradition, there will be no issue of the newsletter next week. We will be back with the first part of our annual two-part forecast the following Tuesday, January 2nd. In the meantime, if everything goes as planned, we should have a year-end letter/reader survey to you sometime later this week. Thank you all very much for your continued support.

Merry Christmas to those of you who celebrate Christmas. For others, we wish you a wonderful holiday season. And for all of you, we hope you have a happy and prosperous New Year.

God Bless,
Mark and Steve

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