

THE BAKER-HAMILTON STUDY: PLUSES AND MINUSES

The most important positive element in the Baker-Hamilton study is to focus attention on the central predicament of the Middle East – the Arab-Israeli problem. Like a cancer, this issue has infected Middle Eastern affairs for over half a century. No American administration has chosen to attack it head-on. Simply giving Israel a blank check to do anything it decides to do is not an American policy. Indeed, as many thoughtful Israelis have pointed out, it is bound to bring out the worst in Israeli politics. For alerting the government and the public to the need to do something to solve or at least put into remission this problem is important and for doing so Baker-Hamilton deserves praise.

However, there are two minuses on this issue: Baker-Hamilton does not give more than a hint as to what an intelligent American policy would involve. The only concrete step it proposes is indirect – to return the Golan Heights to Syria – in the hope that the Syrians will then help persuade the Palestinians to opt for peace. As in other parts of Baker-Hamilton, this is to replace objectives or desires for means to achieve them. The Palestinians have their own agenda which arise from such issues, which Baker-Hamilton does not address, as illegal settlements, release of the 10,000 or so long-term prisoners in Israeli camps, severe and growing restrictions on the ability of Palestinians to work, move or even remain in their homes. Land for peace is a good slogan, but it is apparently not supported in Israel and probably is no longer regarded as feasible by Palestinians. Moreover, the explicit support for Mahmud Abbas rather than the group that won the last election, HAMAS, will be seen by most Palestinians as an attempt to divide them. Finally, here as in the rest of the study, Baker-Hamilton fails to lay out concrete steps much less indicate what such steps would require, how much they would cost, what the likelihood of success for each would be or indicate their cumulative effect. What they have done is merely to indicate a goal, not the means to reach that goal.

The second positive element in Baker-Hamilton is their suggestion that America turn toward diplomacy in its relations with Iran and Syria.

Baker-Hamilton put this suggestion in the context of America's desire to solve the Iraq dilemma. That is an understandable desire. But it is not a policy. It does not lay out a means to achieve our desire. Moreover, even the desire rests on intelligence appreciations that are weak or even unlikely. Briefly put, they include these:

First, why should Iran or even Syria wish to assist America in solving the Iraq problem? Baker-Hamilton suggests that Syria be "bought" by the return of the Golan Heights which the Syrians believe are legally theirs, but there is little reason to believe that the Syrian government puts so much emphasis on getting back the Golan Heights that it would radically alter its policies. Those policies arise in part at least from considerations that have nothing to do with the Golan Heights. Any Syrian and most outside observers will affirm that the lodestar of the Syrian government is fear of America. Thus, unless or until the United States forswears its often repeated proclamations that point toward invasion of Syria, change of its regime, and ostracizing it for alleged support of terrorism, the Syrians have insufficient reason to help America in any fashion. Moreover, the Syrians observed that in the conflict between Lebanon and Israel, the United States treated Israel as a surrogate military force; so, whether right or wrong, the Syrians would almost certainly require some sort of guarantee that it will not use force itself or allow Israel again do so before even considering helping the United States even if, which is doubtful, it could in any appreciable degree dampen the Iraqi insurgency or put a stop to the Palestinian resistance.

Iran, similarly, must see that a solution to America's mistakes in Iraq is more likely to be detrimental than beneficial to its national and governmental interests. The Bush administration has repeatedly told Iran that it is an enemy, the third member of the Axis of Evil, a suitable candidate for preemptive attack. Those set out what the Bush administration wants. What has held back is that it could not carry out such an attack because it was bogged down in Iraq. Would a rational government wish to help America free up its military force which might then be used to attack it? Baker-Hamilton substantiates the Iranian belief that this is a possibility in its recommendation 18 which points to "resources that might become available as combat forces are moved from Iraq."

Second, even if Iran wished to help the United States solve the Iraqi dilemma, could it do so? Baker-Hamilton not only does not address that question. The probable answer is that it has far less leverage in Iraq than Baker-Hamilton posit. During the Iraq-Iran war, the Iraqi Shiis fought determinedly against Iran. Moreover, the Iraqi Shiis are internally divided with many determined not to allow Iran to determine their agenda. Baker-Hamilton also fails to tell us what specifically it would want Iran to do. Presumably Baker-Hamilton wants the Iranians to tell the Iraqi Shiis to do what America wants them to do, but presumably the Iraqi Shiis do what they are doing from their estimate of what is fundamental to their interests or even to their survival. If this is so, it is unlikely that Iran can lead them to do otherwise. The idea that they are simply the puppets of Iran is based on an ignorance of history and current politics. Even if Baker-Hamilton believe America should make the attempt, it does not lay out a plan specifying what America would be willing to do to get Iran to act as it wishes. Simply to invite Iran to a conference is hardly a sufficient inducement. As with Syria, America would have to forswear in some meaningful way the threat of force. And, more difficult than with Syria, it would have to back off – and get Israel to back off – from its statements and threats on Iran's acquisition of a nuclear capacity. Baker-Hamilton does not address these issues. My own belief is that the only feasible way they can be addressed now is serious movement toward both general and regional nuclear arms control. Regional nuclear arms control must involve Israel which has a huge nuclear arsenal. Is forcing a reluctant Israel into giving up some or all of its nuclear arsenal feasible for any American government?♦ Baker-Hamilton does not even raise the question.

The third positive element in Baker-Hamilton is the admission that we need to get out of Iraq. The negative aspect of Baker-Hamilton is that it does not realistically face what that means. What it does, understandably given its origin and composition, is to attempt reach a compromise. Such compromises, of which diplomatic history affords many examples, are attractive because they preserve reputations, cover over mistakes and seem statesmanlike.

Baker-Hamilton's chosen move is reduction of combat forces and their replacement by Iraqis. This is what the administrations of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon tried in Vietnam. In fact the numbers proposed are eerily similar. But is this a practical move in Iraq? Was it in Vietnam? Consider where we are in Iraq, mired down in an unwinnable and wasting war and where we were in Vietnam in 1968 when the Tet offensive had shown that what we were doing militarily had failed. Thus, it appears logical to take steps to adjust to that reality.

♦ I have argued elsewhere that spearheading or at least agreeing to regional nuclear arms control would be in Israel's own best interest. The main reason is that sooner or later, indeed probably sooner, the fact that Israel has a huge nuclear arsenal will spur other Middle Eastern states to acquire them. This has been the history of nuclear weapons everywhere. Then, having a nuclear arsenal in an area where several other states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, a consortium of the Gulf states and, of course, Iran) will create insecurity rather than security for Israel.

In our book, *Out of Iraq: A Practical Plan for Withdrawal Now* (which was published shortly before Baker-Hamilton), George McGovern and I have urged that this be done cleanly, clearly, definitively and over a six months period. Baker-Hamilton thinks that it should be done piecemeal over a much longer but unspecified period. Why? Their argument is that Iraq is in the midst of a civil war and without the restraining hand of America troops there would be a bloodbath. Their proposal would cut down on combat forces but keep a large American training and advising force in Iraq.

We believe that such a force would inevitably be drawn into the fighting. In evaluating the Baker-Hamilton proposal, bear in mind that in Vietnam force reduction did not stop the war: in fact, in the following years as it was slowly implemented, almost 21,000 Americans were killed and over 50,000 were seriously wounded. Are Iraqis likely to stop fighting while we slowly reduce our combat troops but keep a significant presence of “advisers” to train – or as the insurgents will charge, control -- Iraqi security forces? We find that hope highly unlikely.

Baker-Hamilton appears to recognize the weakness of this hope and so urges that while American combat units are reduced more attention be given to improving the quality of the Iraqi army. We strongly disagree as we said in our plan. Iraqi history shows that building an army is a dangerous strategy. It was, after all, the relative strength of the Iraqi army vis-à-vis such relatively weak institutions as representative government, an independent judiciary, a free press and “grass roots” organizations that caused coup d’état after coup and dictator after dictator. Thus, in the quest for a short-term solution to America’s Iraqi dilemma, Baker-Hamilton may have opted for long-term catastrophe.

A less costly, more acceptable (to the Iraqis) and more likely-to-succeed approach, Senator McGovern and I assert in our book *Out of Iraq: A Practical Plan for Withdrawal Now* is to introduce into Iraq what we have called a “stabilization force.” That force, we argue, must be made up of non-Americans, drawn from mainly Arab and Muslim countries, working for the Iraq government but under the umbrella of the United Nations, with an American financial subvention. This force would operate in Iraq during the transitional period, when we can expect the current civil war to continue but also to gradually wind down. Is this just a pious hope? We think not. It has happened in all guerrilla wars during the last two centuries. Once the principal aim of the insurgents, usually to get the foreigners to leave, is met, the insurgency abates. Not immediately, to be sure, to meaningfully. During this period, with its sovereignty assured, it needs help: help to create minimal public security for schools, hospitals, government buildings etc. which is the role we propose for the multinational stability force, help in building an effective national police force, and help in getting the economy going so that the unemployed can earn decent livings and a significant portion of the refugees be lured back.

During this period, we advocate that the Iraqi army, on which we are spending \$2.2 billion and which Baker-Hamilton finds (rightly) to be dysfunctional, be converted into what Iraq really needs, an organization somewhat like our Corps of Engineers. Such a group could provide the infrastructure on which an Iraqi economy could reconstitute itself.

Overall, we have proposed a series of programs to accomplish our objectives, given estimates of cost, analyzed the chances of success, provided a timetable, and shown how they would save the American tax payers about 97% of what the occupation is now costing. That is, we provide in our book exactly what Baker-Hamilton does not address, a practical plan to get us out of Iraq with the least possible damage to ourselves, to the Iraqis, and to America’s position in world affairs.

A key proposal in Baker-Hamilton is a regional conference. The idea of a regional conference sounds appealing. We all like the idea of sitting down together and thrashing out our differences. It appears sensible, positive, practical and “diplomatic.” But a review of all international gatherings since the 1814 Congress of Vienna shows that a conference is meaningless, or sometimes even counter-productive, unless fundamental issues either have been resolved or at least narrowed beforehand. Merely to meet to discuss an issue which is worrying one party but not the others, *us but not them*, is hardly a recipe for success. Put bluntly, a conference is not the first step, the means, but the last step, the ratification, of the process.

Baker-Hamilton states that there are four “alternative approaches for moving forward”—“Precipitate Withdrawal,” “Staying the Course,” “More Troops for Iraq” and “Devolution to Three Regions.”

Baker-Hamilton rejects precipitate withdrawal. We do too. The word “precipitate,” of course, gives the answer but obscures the question. Everyone agrees that the United States must withdraw. The question is when and under what conditions. In the action plan contained in *Out of Iraq: A Practical Plan for Withdrawal Now*, we lay out a definite timetable and specify measures, each analyzed in terms of cost, effectiveness and likelihood of success, designed to bring about withdrawal in an orderly fashion with the least possible damage to American soldiers and interests and to Iraqis.

President Bush has repeatedly called for “staying the course” which Baker-Hamilton does not favor and recognizes will simply continue the casualties and huge expenditures without positive result. We agree.

The third alternative is to send in more troops. Baker-Hamilton believes that this will not work and will “hamper our ability to provide adequate resources for our efforts in Afghanistan or respond to crises around the world.” If we cannot control a small country, most of which is uninhabited desert, or contain a guerrilla force estimated at less than 20,000 with 150,000 American troops, it is just wishful thinking to believe we can do it with another 10,000 or so Americans. We agree with Baker-Hamilton on this. We also point to the history of Vietnam where we were told, time after time, that just a few tens of thousands more of American soldiers would bring victory. Victory proved elusive but casualties were ever-present.

The fourth scenario is to break up Iraq which, Baker-Hamilton believes (in our opinion rightly) would be a political, military and humanitarian disaster, which, should it happen, would require that the United States “manage the situation to ameliorate humanitarian consequences, contain the spread of violence, and minimize regional instability,” each of which is a likely result. As Baker-Hamilton rightly points out, the map showing Iraq divided into three areas is misleading: virtually every town and all cities are mixed. Thus, a division of Iraq would literally tear the society apart and would so “balkanize” it as to sow the seeds for future wars. Certainly, an independent Kurdistan would invite intervention from Turkey and possibly also from Iran.

Implicit throughout Baker-Hamilton is that stability must be achieved in Iraq *before* America can leave. History suggests that the sequence is wrong: only when the central objective of insurgents, usually getting the foreigners to leave, has been realized can “security” be attained. This is the lesson of insurgencies from the American Revolution against the British, the Spanish *guerrilla* against the French, Tito’s Yugoslav partisan war against the Germans, the Algerian war of national liberation from the French and so on. In each of these wars, to be sure, there was a period of chaos immediately after the foreigners pulled out -- they had been unable to prevent chaos with their massive armies -- but, once they were gone, the fighting died down.

Why did this happen and is it likely in Iraq? The answer was given to us by that great practitioner of guerrilla warfare, Mao Tse-tung: there are two elements in guerrilla wars, he said, the combatants and those who support them. He called the combatants the “fish” and their supporters “the water.” Without water, fish die. What has happened in guerrilla war after war is that the people, Mao’s “water,” get tired of the suffering that is inherent in guerrilla war and when the object for which they have sacrificed has been won, they don’t want to continue to sacrifice. So they stop supporting the “fish.” Then, one of two things happens: either some of the fish take over the government (which is the most common) and then themselves suppress the more radical combatants (as happened in America, Spain, Ireland, Yugoslavia, Algeria, etc.). The second possible outcome is that the combatants become outlaws or “warlords” (as happened in Afghanistan after the Afghans forced the Russians out). This is already happening under the guise of religious strife among Shia and Sunni Muslims in Iraq. Foreigners cannot prevent this; the only way it can be prevented, or at least the only way it has ever been prevented or stopped, is by natives. They can be helped, however, as we have urged in our plan with an international stabilization force during the period when a national police, no longer tainted by appearing to be collaborators with foreigners, become functional. In short, sovereignty is the first, not the last step in the process. Once sovereignty, not just a collaborationist government, is established, the steps lead (and can be helped to move with all deliberate speed) toward security.

That is why the plan we have proposed contains the interlocking elements that together constitute *Out of Iraq: A Practical Plan for Withdrawal Now*.

William R. Polk

William R. Polk taught at Harvard from 1955 to 1961 when he was appointed the member of the State Department’s Policy Planning Council responsible for the Middle East. In 1965 he became professor of history at the University of Chicago where he founded its Middle Eastern Studies Center. Subsequently, he also became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. Among his books are *The United States and the Arab World; the Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century; Neighbors and Strangers: the Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs; Understanding Iraq; and* together with Senator George McGovern, the just published *Out of Iraq: A Practical Plan for Withdrawal Now*.

© William R. Polk, December 15, 2006.