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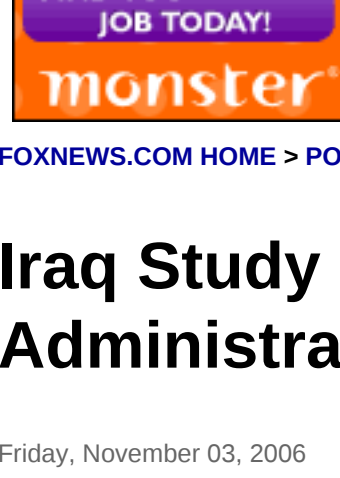
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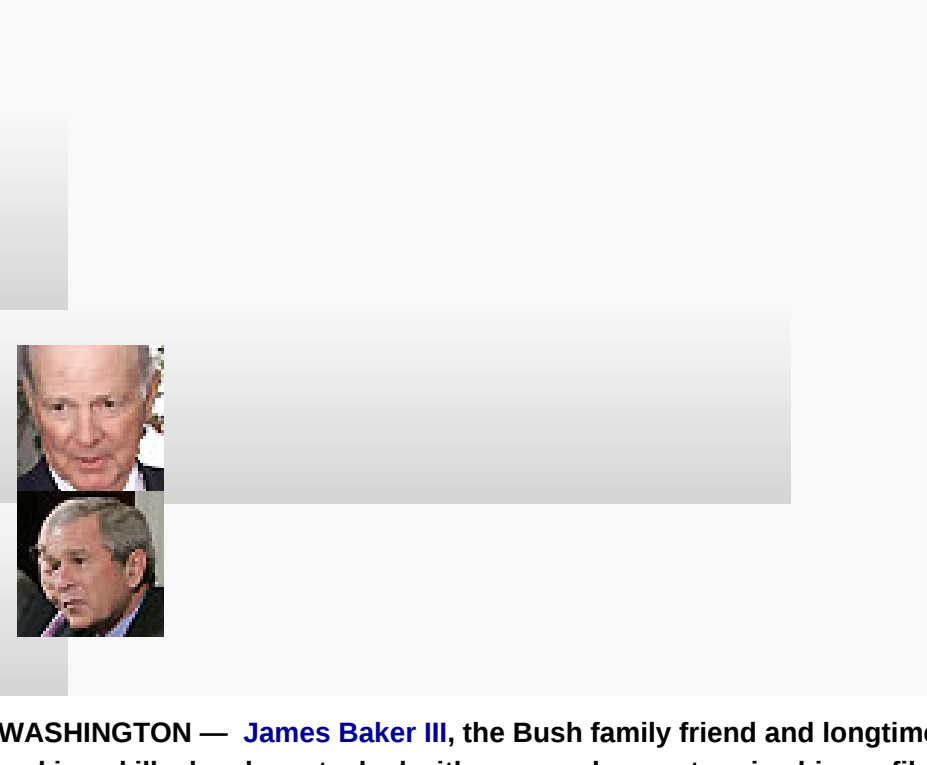
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Iraq Study Group: Blessing or Curse for Bush Administration?

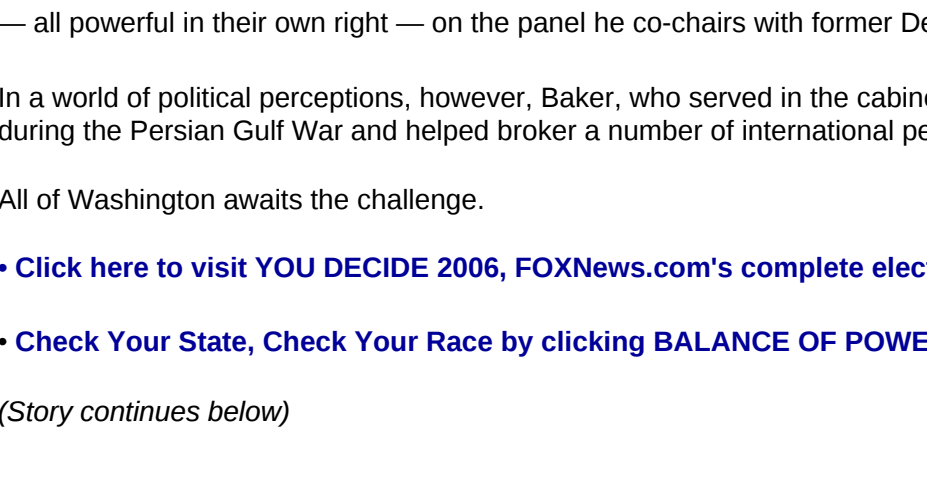
Friday, November 03, 2006
By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

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James A. Baker III



WASHINGTON — **James Baker III, the Bush family consigliere, said Sean Evans, political science professor at Union University in Tennessee. "Where in the past the Bush family has the need to get out of a hole, they have turned to James Baker."**

Baker is a longtime friend of the Bushes, and more recently served as an attorney for President George W. Bush in the contentious Florida recount battle of 2000. Many credit him for helping put Bush in the **White House**.

Never mind that any recommendations offered by his **Iraq Study Group** next month are non-binding. Never mind that he is one of 10 bipartisan ex-officials — all powerful in their own right — on the panel he co-chairs with former Democratic Rep. **Lee Hamilton**.

In a world of political perceptions, however, Baker, who served in the cabinets of three Republican presidents, counseled President George H.W. Bush during the Persian Gulf War and helped broker a number of international peace accords, is the one who is going to throw down the gauntlet on Iraq.

All of Washington awaits the challenge.

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"Baker, he is the Bush family consigliere," said Sean Evans, political science professor at Union University in Tennessee. "Where in the past the Bush family has the need to get out of a hole, they have turned to James Baker."

Baker is a longtime friend of the Bushes, and more recently served as an attorney for President George W. Bush in the contentious Florida recount battle of 2000. Many credit him for helping put Bush in the **White House**.

And while it was Congress, not the White House, that launched the Iraq Study Group, some say Baker could "bail out" the now-president once again, giving Bush a plan for Iraq that will help on the ground and in American public opinion polls.

"This is who the family trusts. If someone this close to the Bush family says we need to make a change in direction — strategically or tactically or whatever — it's a warning dressing for withdrawal," said Evans.

Early reports about the group's final recommendations, not due for release until after the Nov. 7 midterm election, suggest Baker's commission could give the president political cover to start pursuing an exit strategy out of the troubled country.

"What the Baker commission is going to propose will be some sort of fig leaf for our withdrawal," said Bill Lind, military analyst and conservative author. "It's a window dressing for withdrawal."

The **administration** in recent weeks has been adamant that it has been constantly changing tactics on the ground in Iraq as the generals in command see fit. And while acknowledging that the war has not gone as easily as hoped, Bush said he is still unwilling to establish a timetable for American withdrawal.

"I know many Americans are not satisfied with the situation in Iraq. I'm not satisfied either. And that is why we're taking new steps to help secure Baghdad and constantly adjusting our tactics across the country to meet the changing threat," Bush told reporters at a press conference in the White House East Room on Oct. 25.

But, the president added, "There is a significant difference between benchmarks for a government to achieve and a timetable for withdrawal."

As for the Iraq Study Group, the president said he welcomes the report, and his administration would "carefully consider any proposal that will help us achieve victory."

ISG Report a Mixed Bag for Bush?

Newspaper reports in early October based on leaks from unnamed persons supposedly affiliated with the panel suggest that the Iraq Study Group recommendations will include plans for a phased withdrawal and redeployment of U.S. troops, and engagement of Iran and Syria to help stabilize the country.

In recent interviews, Baker would not confirm any of the reporting, but said the proposals will cover a wide range of options. He said he does not think it's possible for U.S. forces to leave in the next year, and played down rumors that the group may propose breaking up Iraq along sectarian lines. But he said every alternative remains on the table.

"I happen to think, and I think it's fair to say our commission believes that there are alternatives between the stated alternatives, the ones that are out there in the political debate, of 'stay the course' and 'cut and run.' There are other things," Bush told ABC last month.

Members of the ISG, which since March have interviewed more than 150 people and traveled to Iraq and neighboring countries, include former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, former CIA Director Robert M. Gates, former Attorney General Edwin Meese III, former Clinton Chief of Staff Leon E. Panetta, former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, former Sens. Charles S. Robb and Alan K. Simpson, and business executive Vernon Jordan.

"I think when the Baker report appears, when it becomes public, it will become a great source of media attention and whether or not he wants to, the president will have to respond to it in a significant way," said Tony Sullivan, president of Near East Support Services, an intelligence consulting firm.

Sullivan said he hopes the study group will provide an exit the administration will accept.

"At this stage, the war is unwinnable, militarily and geo-strategically," Sullivan said. "I don't expect the situation in Iraq will get any better. I think they will have to give (the report) some serious consideration."

But others complain the ISG is stacked with individuals, including Baker, who did not really support the war in Iraq in the first place. Baker freely admits in his new book "Work Hard, Study ... and Keep Out of Politics" and in subsequent interviews that he was wary of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and knew it would cost more lives and more resources than anticipated.

Michael Rubin, Middle East expert for the American Enterprise Institute, said he withdrew from one of the group's advisory panels because he found the whole project "gerrymandered" with people predisposed to a course that would ultimately lead to broader engagement with Iran and Syria, and timetables for withdrawal or partition. All those options have been long opposed by the Bush administration.

"I am concerned," Rubin said. "I would argue that the recommendations as they seem to be turning out will do more harm than good."

He added that while Baker is "a master operator," the president all too often "is too trusting with people who may be skilled but might have different agendas."

Others say it is Rubin and other "neoconservative" supporters of the war who are being unrealistic about the U.S. options.

"I think what the commission can do is give the Bush administration the political cover it needs to face reality," said Ret. Marine Col. Thomas X. Hammes, author of "The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century."

Working with "the enemy" to contain the violence, or even helping Iraqis reach a power-sharing agreement in a divided country, may be the only way out at this point, said Hammes, who served in Iraq. "To think there is anybody who can save a situation this bad is unrealistic," he said.

Neo-cons and 'Realists'

Evans said Baker's re-emergence on the scene has recharged the rift between the so-called neoconservative wing of the Republican Party, those who support the war as a way to democratize the Middle East, and "realists" like Baker and his contemporaries in the first Bush administration who argue that stability and control in the region must come first, even at the expense of democracy.

If the "graybeards" offer alternatives that seem radical yet reasonable to the present course, it may "free up those Republicans who have been uncomfortable with the war ... to speak out," Evans said.

On the other hand, it might generate another anti-Bush media circus, said Mike Franc, political analyst for the Heritage Foundation. He said the media love any "Republican-on-Republican violence" story.

Franc said he doubts the panel's influence will meet the hyped expectations. "I'm not aware of any precedent in American history of a commission, no matter how prestigious, altering a strategy in a war."

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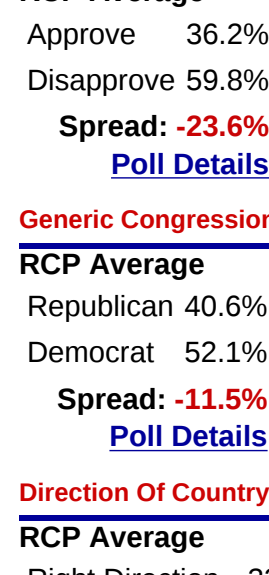
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