

Bush rejects Iraq Study Group report

The editorial board
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President Bush on Thursday made it clear that he rejected the conclusions and policy prescriptions of the Iraq Study Group, the bipartisan panel headed by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Democratic congressman Lee Hamilton.

The panel's report presented a grim assessment of the US position in Iraq and concluded that Bush's military and diplomatic policies had failed. But less than 24 hours after it was issued, Bush reiterated his perspective of military victory in Iraq and rejected the panel's call for a revamped military strategy combined with a diplomatic initiative to salvage the US position, including direct talks with Syria and Iran.

Appearing at a joint press conference with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Bush thanked the panel and praised its report, calling it a "serious study" and "very constructive," and then proceeded to dismiss its findings.

He signaled his rejection of the report in his opening remarks, in which he pointedly spoke of "victory" in Iraq. He rehashed his stock phrases casting the US aggression in Iraq as part of a global "ideological struggle" between the forces of "extremism" and "hate," on the one side, and "democracy," "freedom" and "civilization" on the other.

He once again invoked 9/11, and compared the conflict in Iraq with World War Two, citing the December 7 Pearl Harbor anniversary to declare: "In that war, our nation stood firm. And there were difficult moments during that war, yet the leaders of our two nations never lost faith in their capacity to prevail. We will stand firm again in this first war of the 21st century."

The "crusade for democracy" rhetoric, recycled from scores of previous speeches, took on added significance in light of the Iraq Study Group's decision to dispense with the democratic pretenses of the US occupation. The Iraq panel, as well as Bush's nominee to take over the Pentagon, Robert Gates, made it clear that in their view the goal in Iraq was not a made-in-the-USA "democracy," but rather an Iraqi client regime capable of ensuring some modicum of security and stability.

Bush downplayed the Iraq Study Group report by presenting it as one in a number of policy studies currently underway, including assessments being prepared by the Pentagon, the State Department and the National Security Council.

In the question-and-answer period, he bluntly rejected the Baker-Hamilton panel's call for direct talks with Syria and Iran as part of a diplomatic initiative throughout the Middle East aimed at stabilizing the Iraqi regime, and he implicitly rejected the conclusion of the panel that a US disaster in Iraq could be averted only through a renewed effort to restart peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

He reiterated his position that the US would not talk to Iran until it agreed to suspend its nuclear enrichment program. "We've made our choice. Iran now has a responsibility to make its choice," he declared.

Similarly, he ruled out talks with Syria until it agreed to a series of US demands concerning its role in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority. "We've made that position very clear. And the truth of the matter is that these countries have now got the choice to make," he said.

While the Iraq Study Group report characterized the situation in Iraq as "grave and deteriorating" and warned that the US is losing influence and "time is running out," Bush merely conceded that he was "disappointed with the pace of success."

To underscore his commitment to a policy of continued, and, if anything, intensified military violence, he declared: "There's an ideological clash going on. And the question is: Will we have the resolve and the confidence in liberty to prevail?... it's not going to face this government, because we made up our mind."

The swift rebuff delivered by the US president to the findings of a panel headed by James Baker—who was secretary of state in his father's administration and has repeatedly served as an establishment political fixer—has intensified the political crisis and the bitter divisions within US ruling circles over Iraq.

Opposition to the panel's proposals also found expression during testimony by Baker and Hamilton before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday.

Sen. John McCain of Arizona, one of the leading contenders for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, denounced the panel's call for withdrawing all US combat brigades from Iraq by 2008, terming it a "recipe that will lead to our defeat in Iraq." He likewise rejected its finding that the US military is stretched too thin to sustain a major increase in the deployment of occupation troops in Iraq.

He rejected the proposal for opening talks with Iran and Syria, declaring, "I don't believe that a peace conference with people who are dedicated to your extinction has much short-term gain."

McCain was joined in criticizing the panel's report by Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, who bluntly questioned the proposal for talks with Iran and Syria, and Senator Lindsey Graham (Republican, South Carolina), who also has advocated a sharp increase in the US troop deployment in Iraq.

A leading Democrat, Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, the incoming chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has likewise criticized the Iraq Study Group report's proposal for a US-led effort to revive peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, on the one hand, and Syria, on the other. "The notion

that an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement would end a civil war in Iraq defies common sense,” said Biden, in a speech to the Israel Policy Forum.

For his part, Israel’s Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Thursday rejected the Iraq Study Group proposals. “The attempt to create a linkage between the Iraqi issue and the Mideast issue—we have a different view,” said Olmert. He added, “To the best of my knowledge, President Bush, throughout the recent years, also had a different view on this.”

Opposition to the panel’s recommendations found their most hostile expression in the Thursday’s lead editorial of the *Wall Street Journal*, a paper that has consistently reflected the right-wing views within the Bush administration.

Entitled “The Iraq Muddle Group,” the editorial declared, “...the way to success in Iraq lies in stronger US support for Baghdad’s Shiite-led governing coalition, not in some bipartisan strategic muddle ginned up for domestic political purposes.”

The *Journal* noted approvingly, however, that the report did serve at least one “useful purpose.” It stated: “In calling for a withdrawal of most US troops by 2008—if security conditions allow—the report rejects any rapid withdrawal or deadline. Likewise, it reinforces the case Mr. Bush has been making about the ugly consequences of failure in Iraq for American interests.” This position, the paper added, would serve “to isolate the get-out-now left.”

The Iraq Study Group report is by no means a prescription for ending the US intervention in Iraq. The concrete proposals contained in the document envision tens of thousands of troops remaining in Iraq for the foreseeable future, including “rapid reaction” and “special operations” forces as well as US airpower, along with the 20,000 embedded “advisors.” The utilization of such a force could prove more lethal—in terms of Iraqi and US casualties alike—than the present troop deployment.

The findings also include specific recommendations “to reorganize the [Iraqi] national oil industry as a commercial enterprise;” i.e., subordinating it to the interests of US finance capital and the major oil conglomerates.

One significant passage buried in the recommendations concerning “a military strategy for Iraq” notes that, while the panel concluded that a sustained deployment of a substantially increased number of troops—100,000 to 200,000 more—was not feasible, “We could, however, support a short-term redeployment of American combat forces to stabilize Baghdad.”

Significantly, the demand for a short-term escalation of the US deployment has also been taken up by a leading member of the incoming Democratic leadership in Congress. Representative Silvestre Reyes of Texas, who is to take the chairmanship of the House Intelligence Committee, told *Newsweek* magazine this week that he supports deploying another 30,000 US troops to “take out the militias and stabilize Iraq.”

Such proposals, from both sides of the aisle in Congress, as well as within the Iraq Study Group report itself, suggest that, in the short term, American imperialism is preparing for a major escalation of the bloodbath in Iraq, most likely through the launching of simultaneous offensives against both Sunni resistance movements and the Shia militias in Baghdad’s teeming Sadr City.

The divisions that have surfaced over the report concern not merely military and political tactics in Iraq and the Middle East, but even more importantly the political situation in the US itself.

“Continued problems in Iraq could lead to greater polarization within the United States,” the report warns, noting the two-thirds majority that presently opposes the war. It suggests that the tactical shifts proposed by the panel would enable the administration to demand “the broad support of the American people” and dampen antiwar sentiments.

The conflict within the American ruling elite over US policy in Iraq has brought to a head a protracted crisis of American democracy. One expression of this crisis is the spectacle of Bush—in the name of promoting democracy in the Middle East—declaring that a national election in which the voters repudiated the war in Iraq will have no impact on his policy in Iraq or anywhere else.

One month after the US congressional elections, it is increasingly clear that government policy cannot be changed by a popular vote. Despite the disastrous results of his policies in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, Bush feels he can defy popular opinion and even the views of considerable sections of the ruling elite. There are several reasons for this.

First, for all their differences, all sections of the ruling elite, and both of its parties, are implicated in the illegal war in Iraq, and all are agreed that an outright defeat would have catastrophic consequences for US imperialism—in Iraq, in the Middle East, and throughout the world. It would, moreover, have socially and politically explosive ramifications within the US.

Second, Bush and his allies represent in the most consistent and ruthless form the global imperialist aims of the US ruling elite as a whole.

Third, there is nothing that can seriously be called an opposition party within the American political establishment. Bush is confident that he cannot be forced to change his policy in Iraq because the only means within the US constitutional system to do so, the initiation of impeachment proceedings, has been rejected by the Democrats.



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