

European disillusionment over the Baker-Hamilton report

Peter Schwarz
16 December 2006

The initial enthusiasm evoked by the US Iraq Study Group report in official European political circles has rapidly subsided. The first feelings of relief have been replaced by scepticism and reserve, with tensions simmering beneath the surface. What the European elites regarded as a possible light on the horizon has dissipated and now the prevailing view is that the report and its reception in America could prove to be the starting point for fresh inter-European and transatlantic tensions.

The report on the situation in the Iraq, drawn up by a bipartisan commission headed by former Secretary of State James Baker, a Republican, and former Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton, had been welcomed by most European media and political circles as a fundamental change of course in US foreign policy—representing a break with unilateralism and a return to the multilateralism; as a departure from the ideologically motivated policies of the neo-conservatives in favour of a “realistic” foreign policy; and the resumption of a Middle East policy stressing diplomacy and co-operation with the regional ruling powers instead of exclusive emphasis on military force.

There was a generally positive reaction to the Baker-Hamilton report’s blunt characterisation of the debacle in Iraq and the absence of any fanciful claims of a pending military victory. The French newspaper *Le Monde* noted that French authorities had never believed in the vision of the “hawks” and neo-conservatives who had maintained that “the overthrow of Saddam Hussein could lead to an infectious democratic transformation of the entire Middle East.” Instead French political circles were of the opinion “that the situation put forward in the Baker report confirmed what they had forecast more than three years ago.”

It was noted that the report supported integrating the European powers more closely into Middle East policy, made the recommendation that Iran and Syria participate in a solution to the Iraq conflict and called for new initiatives to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Last but not least, the Europeans hoped, it would be possible for the European powers to increase their influence in the region.

The reaction of *Spiegel Online*, was typical. On the day of the Baker-Hamilton report’s publication, its editors wrote jubilantly, “The period of American go-it-alone policy is past: The Baker commission will present a broad settling of accounts with a US foreign policy that has led to a fiasco. US President Bush has to change tack—he cannot do anything else.” Similar comments appeared in other newspapers.

This assessment quickly gave way to disillusionment.

First of all, it became clear that Bush could indeed do something else. Despite the wishful thinking on the part of Europeans, the Baker-Hamilton report did not find the hoped-for support in Washington. Bush praised the report but rejected its conclusions. He continued to speak of a forthcoming “victory” and will now finally announce his plans for Iraq only in the new year.

It already appears that the Bush administration is aiming to escalate its military forces in Iraq—at least in the short term. Proposals being discussed include the dispatch of an additional 40,000 soldiers to Iraq with the principal aim of crushing the Baghdad-based Shiite Mahdi army.

Other prominent American politicians, notably the potential Republican presidential hopeful, Senator John McCain of Arizona, have also dissociated themselves strenuously from the Baker-Hamilton report.

In Iraq itself, prominent Kurdish and Shiite politicians have vehemently rejected the proposals made by the high-level study group. The Iraqi president, Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, said he rejected the report “in its entirety.” Massoud Barzani, the Kurdish regional president, spoke along the same lines. He threatened a split if, as the Baker-Hamilton group suggested, the central government were strengthened and control of the regions over oil income questioned. A similar stance was taken by the leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Abdul Aziz al-Hakim.

Another proposal of the Baker-Hamilton commission, which was warmly welcomed by European political circles, direct discussions with Iran and Syria, has also been ruled out by Washington.

For some time now Germany, France and even Great Britain have been urging more flexibility with regard to Iran. Germany and France have extensive investments and maintain close economic relations with Iran, and such interests would be threatened by any escalation of conflicts with the Teheran regime.

Germany also maintains close diplomatic relations with Syria, in contrast to France. Due to its traditional interests in the former French mandate of Lebanon, Paris has categorically rejected any new initiatives to Damascus. Former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, murdered in 2005, had been a close ally of French President Jacques Chirac.

Last week German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier travelled to Damascus, where he met with Syrian President Bashar Assad. His trip was met with public criticism from both Israel and

the US. Steinmeier then flew to Washington to meet briefly with his American counterpart, Condoleezza Rice, who openly rejected any plans for direct discussions with Iran and Syria.

In his visit to Berlin this week, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made clear that his government would also refuse to make any concessions regarding Iran. He broke a traditional taboo in Israeli foreign policy when he spoke of Israel together with the US, France and Russia as countries possessing nuclear weapons. Until now Israel has never officially admitted its possession of nuclear weapons, although that it had such capacities has been well known.

The Israeli government has sought to present Olmert's words as a slip of the tongue. In fact his comments amounted to a threat against Iran, as well as against those in Washington and Europe who are working toward closer co-operation with Teheran and Damascus. The German chancellor Angela Merkel immediately adapted to Olmert and demanded rapid sanctions against Iran by the UN Security Council.

In the meantime the enthusiasm of the European press for the Baker-Hamilton report has cooled considerably. The report raises many demands that have been made by European governments for a long time. Now it turns out, however, that these demands are either unrealistic or impracticable. It is impossible to return to pre-war conditions in Iraq following four years of war, the death of hundreds of thousands and the systematic whipping up of ethnic and religious divisions. As a result current media commentaries are far more sober.

By December 8 the newspaper *Die Welt* had already concluded that the Baker report did not have "much to offer . . . apart from general appeals and pious desires . . . The suggestions for a 'change of course' in America's Iraq policy are to a large extent so general and vague that they are unsuitable as concrete guidance for a 'fundamental strategy change' on the part of the US government."

Two days later the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* commented, "Nearly all the ideas that are now being talked about have either been tried out already without success or have no chance for implementation at present."

The Swiss *Tages-Anzeiger* wrote that the issue was merely about "damage control." The paper saw little hope of preventing "a conflagration throughout the entire near and Middle East . . . The situation is much too advanced."

One alternative that European governments and the media wish to avoid at all costs, however, is a defeat for the US and an immediate withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. In this respect, their position is similar to that of the Democratic Party in the US, who won a victory in November's Congressional elections on the basis of widespread popular opposition to the Iraq war. Since the election the Democrats have made clear they have no intention of responding to majority opinion and resolutely refuse to demand the withdrawal of US troops.

Despite the French and German governments' criticism of the American invasion of Iraq, their refusal to participate was always of a tactical nature. They were fearful of the impact of such a war on their own interests and economic influence, as well as the stability of the entire Middle East region. They were never

concerned with overcoming the legacy of imperialist domination, with all its disastrous consequences for the population in the area.

Now they are afraid that a humiliating defeat for the US will harm their own interests.

So in the December 14 *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Toma Avenarius warned that any "overhasty withdrawal of troops" as proposed by the Baker-Hamilton report for 2008, "could unleash a genuine civil war in Iraq and even a regional war." It would immediately involve the neighbouring states, he wrote, "The chaos would be even greater, the entire Middle East would be destabilized, oil prices would shoot up and the world economy suffer."

One week before the publication of the Baker-Hamilton report, on December 1, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) had used even more drastic language. "The worst consequence of the failed Iraq war" does not affect "the Arab region," the paper commented. "There is the danger that the United States will be paralysed as a global authority . . . This is no reason for celebration in Europe, even for French multi-polarists. The weakening of the leading power affects the West as a whole."

The only alternative for Europe is to prepare to take up the military initiative itself, concludes the FAZ, "The Americans cook, the Europeans do the washing-up, is one common way of describing the transatlantic division of labour. In Iraq, however, America will be busy for some time with the washing-up. Europe will have to learn how to cook."

While European governments are fearful of an American defeat they are not, however, prepared to send their own soldiers into a war that even according to the new US Defense Secretary Robert Gates cannot be won. Therefore they are holding back at the current time.

Le Monde summarizes the attitude of the French government as follows: "In Paris there is not the slightest readiness to get involved in the Iraq question or reconsider the decision by President Jacques Chirac not to send troops to the country."

Up until now the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, has limited herself to proposing a revival of the Middle East quartet to discuss a resolution of the Palestine conflict—an utterly illusory suggestion bearing in mind recent tensions and conflicts between the members of the quartet: the US, Russia, the European Union and the UN.

At the same time, however, European governments are busy "learning how to cook"—in the words of the FAZ. In Afghanistan they have shared responsibility for the military occupation of the country with the US, and in Lebanon they have taken sole control of the mission—a decision which will inevitably draw Europe ever more deeply into the Middle East conflict.

The costs of the military escalation will be paid for by the working peoples of the Middle East and Europe—in terms of the blood of their sons and daughters, together with even further cuts in wages, social security benefits and living standards.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact