

Back to Your Studies

The Unbearable Shallowness of the Iraq Study Group

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

Posted: Monday, December 11, 2006

ARTICLES, The Weekly Standard

Publication Date: December 18, 2006

For the second time since 9/11, Americans have been treated to the undemocratic phenomenon of private citizens assuming the responsibilities and prerogatives of elected officials. First we had the 9/11 Commission. Not content to present its findings and recommendations to the president and Congress, the commission went on a nationwide lobbying campaign to persuade America, and pressure its representatives, into accepting its "advice." Now we have the Baker-Hamilton Commission, officially known as the Iraq Study Group, self-consciously following in its predecessor's footsteps.

From its paltry discussion of America's counterinsurgency in Iraq, to its recommendations about troop levels, to its scathing condemnation of American diplomacy under Condoleezza Rice and Iraqi politics under Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, to its embrace of "engagement" with Syria and Iran, and to its unstated but clear call for American pressure on Israel to concede more "land-for-peace" to the Palestinians, the ISG report is strong on assertions but weak on arguments. Let us look quickly at the commission's core commentary and recommendations, starting with Iraq, and then, like the report, radiating outward toward Iraq's neighbors.

The ISG opens by telling us that "the situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating" and that the country "is vital to regional and even global stability, and is critical to U.S. interests," but then fails to tell us what the U.S. military has done right or wrong since 2003. Nowhere in the report can we find a thoughtful discussion of those counterinsurgency campaigns where the American military has done well (Tal Afar) and those where it has done poorly (most of our operations in Baghdad since the fall of 2003). I suspect that the ISG has not done so because any serious review of the past would give the reader a profound sensation of *deja vu*: Baker and Hamilton assert boldly that their commission's conclusions do not amount to "staying the course." Yet Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his generals John Abizaid and George Casey could have written the report's Iraq portions. Take a look at Secretary Rumsfeld's final "options" memorandum, and read the ISG report. The similarities are overwhelming.

For three years, Rumsfeld and Abizaid have tried to train Iraqi military and police forces to replace U.S. soldiers. They stand up, we stand down. For three years, American and allied troops have increasingly withdrawn from directly policing Iraqi cities and roads. The result: a Sunni Arab insurgency and holy war against Shiite Arabs and Kurds that has slaughtered tens of thousands and engendered enormous anger in the Arab Shiite community, which had been defined in 2003 and 2004 by its astonishing forbearance. A once moderate Shiite community has radicalized. The Shia now seek protection from their own pitiless men. Where once Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, a bulwark of moderation and pro-democratic spirit, could check the young firebrand Moktada al-Sadr in the Shiite

slums of Baghdad, now Sadr, if he chooses to, can overwhelm Sistani in the holy city of Najaf, the seat of Sistani's power. As America's feeble counterinsurgency strategy--aptly named by General Abizaid a "light footprint"--helped wreck Iraqi society, Rumsfeld scolded the Iraqis for not doing enough.

And what does the Baker-Hamilton Commission recommend? More of the same, except faster. We are going to embed more troops and contractors in Iraqi military and police units as America simultaneously withdraws from Iraq? This is a strategy, already proven wrong, that can end only in the collapse of the Iraqi army, numerous American hostages, and a pointless increase in U.S. casualty rates. Embedding more U.S. soldiers in Iraqi military units is a good idea--an American presence among Iraqis clearly fortifies the confidence and combat potential of these units. But this is at best--as we have learned over and over again since 2003--a long-term approach to building an Iraqi army capable of waging perhaps the most tactically and spiritually challenging of all military exercises--counterinsurgency and urban warfare.

In a country like post-Saddam Iraq, where sectarian nerves are raw, only forceful American leadership can ensure the necessary combat ethics and discipline to keep military units from imploding into militias. If the United States is going to embed enough soldiers to ensure Iraqi military integrity, then we are talking about continuing U.S. military control of the Iraqi army. And we ought to admit that the Iraqi police forces, roughly 200,000 men, are unreliable and cannot be used in counterinsurgency efforts, perhaps even in basic crime prevention. We may, after a few years, make the Iraqi army more effective. At present, its official troop strength of 135,000 bears no relationship to the number capable of counterinsurgency operations. But Iraq is likely to descend much further into hell while we wait for this improvement. Meanwhile, the Iraqi army will fracture as internecine strife rips up the nation. Sunni versus Shiite, Sunni versus Sunni, Shiite versus Shiite, and Sunni and Shiite Arabs versus Kurds--all are probable unless the United States soon reverses the dynamic in Mesopotamia.

The ISG tells us that things are "dire" and that urgent changes are called for. They are obviously right, which is exactly why the United States must take the lead. Only the U.S. military is capable of moving quickly and decisively in clearing and holding Baghdad and other centers of the Sunni insurgency. Iraqis will have critical supporting roles in both these functions (as they have had in every single successful counterinsurgency operation in Iraq). But they will be supporting us. We will not be supporting them.

Let us be clear: The Sunni insurgency and holy war against the Shiite community cannot be broken unless the cities of Baghdad and Ramadi are pacified. Unless these two towns are cleared and held, there is no way any Shiite government in Baghdad can begin the process of slowly neutralizing the murderous Shiite militias that now operate often with government complicity. The militias have gained increasing support from the Shiite community because they are the only effective means of neighborhood protection and offensive operations against Sunni insurgents and holy warriors. Only the militias slake the very human desire for revenge.

The Iraqi army, despite the strenuous efforts of Generals Abizaid and Casey, simply isn't effective, either on defense or on offense. And the Americans, who started withdrawing from Baghdad's streets in the fall of 2003 (perhaps the most catastrophic decision ever made by General Abizaid), have retreated further into large, well-fortified bases. Revenge killings of innocent Sunnis are an ugly and unavoidable outgrowth of this process. They cannot be stopped unless the United States and the Iraqi government first significantly diminish the Sunni Arab menace--that is, clear and hold Baghdad and Ramadi.

According to the ISG, the bulk of American manpower in Iraq could be out of the country by 2008. How in the world does this happen? The Iraqi army is going to take down Baghdad and Ramadi without us in the lead, while we are withdrawing? The ISG didn't cite one--not one--military operation in Iraq since 2003 that would lend credence to the idea that Iraqi military forces any time soon can handle small clear-and-hold operations, let alone massive efforts to neutralize major cities. The ISG does cite the critical need for the United States and the Iraqis to have better intelligence in Iraq. But how does good tactical counter insurgency or anti-sectarian intelligence develop? Physical control of the terrain that comes through troop saturation. The more physical security Americans and Iraqis bring to a given area, the better our intelligence is.

The ISG's troop-withdrawal scenario would probably destroy meaningful intelligence collection throughout the Sunni triangle. The ISG wants to erect political "milestones" for the Iraqi government that would be impossible to meet but would trigger U.S. troop reductions regardless of the security situation. Contrary to its intent, the ISG would guarantee that radical Sunni Islamist groups, including al Qaeda, would expand their bases of operations in an intelligence void. The notion that the United States can maintain small units of special-operations forces inside Iraq, or "over the horizon," to neutralize al Qaeda and other Sunni holy-warrior organizations is impractical since we are very unlikely to have the intelligence to make special operations feasible. We won't know where their personnel are with any precision. We won't be able to distinguish between radical Islamists who just loathe us and radical Islamists using Iraq as a refuge and training base for attacks against Americans in the Middle East and elsewhere.

If the Americans start to withdraw precipitously from Iraq, intelligence collection will likely deteriorate even more quickly than the Iraqi army. Posting a much larger contingent of CIA officers inside the Green Zone to train more Iraqis in the American way of intelligence collection and analysis, which the commission recommends, is unlikely to compensate for the lack of U.S. forces on the ground. Once we are perceived as ineluctable losers in Mesopotamia--and we're not quite there yet--the quality and quantity of American intelligence will plummet.

The report's laundry list of 79 recommendations bespeaks the ISG's disconnectedness from Iraq, where the country's continuing implosion surely allows for only a few American options, all military. When violence is the common denominator of life, and all believe that they or members of their families may die tomorrow, breathless advice about Iraq's judicial system, the need for more economic reconstruction, the country's systemic corruption (welcome to the Middle East), or the Iraqi constitution are surreal distractions.

No error of the Baker-Hamilton Commission is greater than its insistence that there is no military solution to Iraq's instability, that it's the responsibility of Iraqis to solve the country's primary problems, and that America can only play a supporting role. The Iraq Study Group, many Bush administration officials, and Central Command talk incessantly about "national reconciliation" and a "political deal" between the Sunni and Shiite Arabs as the key to stability and peace. In other words, the solution in Iraq is Shiite concessions to Sunnis. For three years, Americans have been trying to convince Sunnis to accept the new Iraq, which will be dominated by Shiite Arabs and Kurds, who represent 80 percent of the population. Put another way, Shiite Arabs, who represent around 65 percent of the population, must give much more power to the minority Sunni Arabs than could be gained by them at the ballot box.

However, America's efforts in this have gone unrequited: No major Sunni Arab organization--especially not the all-critical Muslim Clerics Association--has ever condemned the insurgency or even suggested that foreign holy warriors, responsible for much of the suicide bombing, are beyond the pale. The ugly truth is that many, perhaps most, Iraqi Sunni Arabs are not much distressed by the killing of Iraqi Shia. Although it may still be possible to get the Shiite community to allow Arab Sunnis more checks and balances inside the government (for example, through the creation of an upper legislative house, permitted by Iraq's constitution), unless the United States changes the dynamic on the ground by surging troops (which would also better protect Sunnis against Shiite militias), the Shia are unlikely to compromise. They will not turn away from the militias, who offer the best protection against insurgents and holy warriors.

In short, no "national reconciliation" will be possible unless it is preceded by more physical security for all communities. Greater security for both Sunnis and Shiites will allow more flexibility in the political system. Unfortunately, the Iraq Study Group gets this backwards.

And the "external approaches" of the Baker-Hamilton Commission are substantively even thinner than its discussion of Iraq's internal challenges. The ISG envisions Iran and Syria, which have abetted the radicalization of Iraq, helpfully interfering in the country.

Repeatedly, the ISG asserts that "no country in the region will benefit in the long term from a chaotic Iraq." Really? If the self-interest of Iran and Syria is so clearly in favor of stability, why have they been fostering violence in the country? Syria and Iran have been aiding both Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq. According to U.S. officials, there is a pile of intercept and electronic intelligence clearly showing these two countries have been abetting both sides.

The ISG propounds that Iraq's neighbors "should form a support group to reinforce security and national reconciliation within Iraq." Leaving national reconciliation aside, Tehran has given aid to the militia of Moktada al-Sadr and the Badr corps of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Both groups are deeply implicated in death-squad killings. Iran has also aided in the importation of the Lebanese Hezbollah into the Shiite south and helped it set up offices. SCIRI has tried to convince the Iraqi

government, and the Americans behind it, that 16,000 members of the Badr Organization who are still resident in Iran--that is, young men who are culturally perhaps much more Iranian than they are Iraqi--should be incorporated into the Iraqi army and the security services. Baker might possibly conceive of this SCIRI deployment as a "support group" "reinforcing security" and "national reconciliation," but it's a good bet that not a single Iraqi Sunni Arab would agree with him. Approaching Iran and Syria on Iraq isn't cunning and clever realpolitik. It's just stark naivete.

Finally, the call for a renewed Israeli-Palestinian push also makes no sense. Let us ignore for the moment the Palestinian internecine strife, in which none of the contenders believes in a lasting peace with the Israelis. The war between Hamas and Fatah has made both organizations more anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic, and anti-American. How in the world would rancorous Israeli and Palestinian talks have any effect on Iraq or the Sunni-Shiite collision in Mesopotamia?

If the Iraqi Shia are provoked into conquering the entire Sunni triangle, which will send a massive wave of Sunni Arab refugees into Jordan, how will Israeli-Palestinian talks help the Hashemite monarchy survive the radicalization of its politics by Iraqi Sunni supremacists, fundamentalists, and former Baathists? As much as our European allies would love to see renewed Israeli-Palestinian talks, it's difficult to envision a scenario where these talks could be productive. It's difficult to see how the United States could back this enterprise without appearing to be scared and weak, hardly a formula to engender moderation in the other parties to these discussions. Failed talks are not better than no talks at all.

We didn't really need to wait nine months for a report that could have been written eight months ago. We already had Secretary Rumsfeld's and General Abizaid's unsuccessful tactics. We already knew what James Baker thought about Syria, Iran, Israel, and Palestine. For those of us who saw some of the deliberations of the Iraq Study Group, the report is less than the discussions that produced it. Even a Washington establishment hopelessly spooked by Iraq should have done better.

Reuel Marc Gerech is a resident fellow at AEI