

**DECEMBER 18**

# **Powell, Baker, Hamilton – thanks for nothing**

**W**hen Colin Powell endorsed the Iraq Study Group report during his Dec. 17 appearance on Face the Nation, it was another curtain call for a tragic farce. Four years ago, "moderates" like Powell were making the invasion of Iraq possible. Now, in the guise of speaking truth to power, Powell and ISG co-chairs James Baker and Lee Hamilton are refueling the U.S. war effort by depicting it as a problem of strategy and management.

But the U.S. war effort is a problem of lies and slaughter.

The Baker-Hamilton report stakes out a position for managerial changes that dodge the fundamental immorality of the war effort. And President Bush shows every sign of rejecting the report's call for scaling down that effort.

Meanwhile, most people in the United States favor military disengagement. According to a new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, "Seven in 10 say they want the new Congress to pressure the White House to begin bringing troops home within six months."

The nationwide survey came after the Baker-Hamilton report arrived with great – and delusional – expectations. In big bold red letters, the cover of Time predicted that the report would take the White House by storm: "The Iraq Study Group says it's time for an exit strategy. Why Bush will listen."

While often depicted as a rebuff to the president's Iraq policies, the report was hardly a prescription for abandoning the U.S. military project in Iraq – as Baker was at pains to repeatedly point out during a whirlwind round of network interviews.

Hours after the report's release on Dec. 6, Baker told PBS NewsHour host Jim Lehrer that the blue-ribbon commission was calling for a long-term U.S. military presence: "So our commitment – when we say not open-ended, that doesn't mean it's not going to be substantial. And our report makes clear that we're going to have substantial, very robust, residual troop levels in Iraq for a long, long time."

Baker used very similar phrasing the next morning in an interview on ABC's Good Morning America – saying that the report "makes clear we're going to have a really robust American troop presence in Iraq and in the region for a long, long time."

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That was 24 hours into the report's release, when media spin by Baker and Hamilton and their allies was boosting a document that asserted a continual American prerogative to devote massive resources to war in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. And, in a little-noted precept of the report, it said: "The United States should assist Iraqi leaders to reorganize the national oil industry as a commercial enterprise."

In short, the Baker-Hamilton report was a fallback position for U.S. military intervention – and for using Pentagon firepower on behalf of U.S.-based oil companies. But the report's call for tactical adjustments provoked fury among the most militaristic politicians and pundits. Their sustained media counterattack took hold in short order.

President Bush wriggled away from the panel's key recommendations – gradual withdrawal of many U.S. troops from Iraq and willingness to hold diplomatic talks with Syria and Iran. War enthusiasts like Sen. John McCain denounced the report as a recipe for retreat and defeat. The New York Post dubbed Baker and Hamilton "surrender monkeys." Rush Limbaugh called their report "stupid."

By the time its one-week anniversary came around, the Baker-Hamilton report looked about ready for an ashcan of history. Bush had already postponed his announcement of a "new strategy for Iraq" until after the start of the new year – a delay aimed at cushioning the president from pressure to adopt the report's central recommendations. Even the limited punch of the report has been largely stymied by the most rabidly pro-war forces of American media and politics.

But those forces don't really need to worry about the likes of Colin Powell, James Baker and Lee Hamilton – as long as the argument is over how the U.S. government should try to get its way in Iraq.

"We are losing – we haven't lost – and this is the time, now, to start to put in place the kinds of strategies that will turn this situation around," Powell told CBS viewers on Dec. 17. That sort of talk stimulates endless rationales for continuing U.S. warfare and facilitates the ongoing escalation of the murderous U.S. air war in Iraq.

Powell's mendacious performance at the U.N. Security Council, several weeks before the invasion of Iraq, is notorious. But an obscure media appearance by Powell, when he was interviewed by the French network TV2 in mid-September 2003, sheds more light on underlying attitudes that unite the venture-capitalist worldviews of "moderates" like Colin Powell and "hardliners" like Dick Cheney.

Trying to justify Washington's refusal to end the occupation, Powell explained: "Since the United States and its coalition partners have invested a great deal of political capital, as well as financial resources, as well as the lives of our young men and women -- and we have a large force there now – we can't be expected to suddenly just step aside."