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Death by Consensus **by Sheldon Richman**

When John Kerry came back from fighting in Vietnam, he famously inquired, How do you ask a man to be the last to die for a mistake? Regarding the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group (ISG), a lot of people would like to know, How do you ask a man to be the last to die for a bipartisan compromise?

Just when you think Washington has hit the rock bottom of cynicism, it finds even lower rungs to descend. The ISG, co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former U.S. Rep. Lee Hamilton had one overriding objective: to prove that five Republicans and five Democrats could unanimously agree on a strategy for the Iraq war. “Consensus” was the magic word. It’s almost as though the entire purpose of the ISG was to demonstrate that in an age of heightened partisanship, a bipartisan consensus is possible.

The ISG, established in March by Congress, included 10 of the power establishment’s eminent elder statesmen. Expertise in Middle East affairs was not a necessary qualification for membership. Anticipation of the group’s report and recommendations achieved farcical dimensions. It was as though the tribe’s wise elders (all men but for retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor) had ascended to the mountaintop to commune with the gods, who would impart a wisdom about the war that the rest of us could never hope to achieve. “Tell us, oh wise ones, what should we do?”

A few months later the anointed came back down the mountain with a slim book and dozens of recommendations. Judging by those recommendations, they sure don’t make wise elders like they used to.

The ISG painted a realistic, which means dismal, picture of Iraq today. “Grave and deteriorating” about sums it up. White House denials aside, the description is correctly read as a rebuke to the Bush administration.

But in keeping with the goal of reaching a consensus, the ISG came up with a list of recommendations that, in trying to satisfy everyone, satisfies no one. President Bush seems ready

to chuck the whole thing and stay the course without using those words. Get ready for the “surge” — a big increase in the American force.

According to the group, the U.S. government cannot pull its forces out immediately, but it also cannot stay the course because a military solution is impossible. So what does it recommend? It seems to propose that the administration work toward getting U.S. combat troops out by early 2008 while sending in lots of personnel to train and advise the Iraqi forces — as though that were a piece of cake. This has angered both the advocates of ending the U.S. occupation and the advocates of a military victory.

I say “seems to propose” because, as Fred Kaplan of Slate.com pointed out, the recommendation is vague. The language is broad enough to permit President Bush to maintain a force large enough to engage in special operations and rapid response. Some “redeployment.”

What’s new about this recommendation anyway? Bush has long said he wants to shift the U.S. role from combat to support of the Iraqis. It’s the old Vietnamization strategy, which was little more than a public-relations campaign to stay involved in Vietnam while making the American people think the danger to their kin was ending.

The Baker-Hamilton report makes a big deal of the need to bring Iran and Syria into a political solution to Iraq’s turmoil and the rest of the Middle East’s problems. Baker is reported to think nearly everything hinges on “flipping Syria” to the American side. Do these so-called realists live in a dream world? Iran wants to dominate Iraq — Bush’s policy brought that dream closer to reality — and Syria wants to dominate Lebanon. What can Bush offer them as substitutes for those aspirations? And why would they want to assist a foreign occupier anyway?

Here the neoconservatives are right. There’s nothing to talk about. But while they think that means the U.S. should bomb those countries and overthrow their governments, it really means the U.S. should exit the Middle East. Intervention there for the past half-century has brought us only trouble. Further intervention will only make things worse.

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