

Iraq: The Battle of the Reports

Giles Scott-Smith

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On 3 December 2006 the *New York Times* published a leaked memo sent by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to the White House one month earlier, on November 6. Entitled 'Illustrative New Courses of Action', it was written one day before the Congressional elections and two days before Rumsfeld, due to the outcome of those elections, was forced to resign. On the face of it, the memo shows that the Defense Secretary was searching for a way forward to deal with the escalating carnage in Iraq. Despite claiming that the US Army had successfully adjusted 'from major combat operations to counterterrorism, to counterinsurgency, to dealing with death squads and sectarian violence', Rumsfeld called for a new approach since 'what U.S. forces are currently doing in Iraq is not working well enough or fast enough'. The emphasis of this new approach lay in 'beefing up' the Iraqi Ministries of Defence and Interior and speeding up the transfer of skills, equipment, and tasks to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). At the same time it was the aim that 'U.S. forces provide security only for those provinces or cities that openly request U.S. help and that actively cooperate', with the message that no cooperation would mean no military support. What is more, in line with the general aim to construct a phased withdrawal of Coalition forces, Rumsfeld called for 'an accelerated draw-down of U.S. bases. We have already reduced from 110 to 55 bases. Plan to get down to 10 to 15 bases by April 2007, and to 5 bases by July 2007'. Operating from these bases, US forces would become no more than Rapid Reaction Forces coming to the aid of the ISF if required. Ever the information strategist, Rumsfeld included a telling caveat to his outline: 'Announce that whatever new approach the U.S. decides on, the U.S. is doing so on a trial basis. This will give us the ability to readjust and move to another course, if necessary, and therefore not "lose".' This is of course highly reminiscent of journalist Ron Suskind's eerie account of a senior White House staffer telling him in 2002 that 'we're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality'.¹ Nevertheless, 'New Courses of Action' did demonstrate a preparedness to shift the whole foundation of the US presence in Iraq

and seek a new set of goals for applying its military forces. Tellingly, Rumsfeld ended his memo with a list of 'less attractive options', which can be grouped loosely into three sections:

- 1) Carry on as before and 'set a firm date to leave';
- 2) Pursue 'an aggressive federalism plan' or Dayton-like division of the country;
- 3) 'Move a large fraction of all U.S. Forces into Baghdad to attempt to control it' and 'increase Brigade Combat Teams and U.S. forces in Iraq substantially'.

It would be unwise to read too much into this memo. Rumsfeld had been under severe pressure for some time, not least from his own military, and on 1 November President Bush had gone so far as to back his Defense Secretary unreservedly (a sure sign that change was about to come). Yet it is striking how close the memo comes to the conclusions of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) report, which appeared a few weeks later. The bipartisan report under the leadership of James Baker and Lee Hamilton appeared as if ready-made to occupy the space left by the departed, discredited Rumsfeld. The Congressional elections had produced a remarkable turn to the Democrats due to widespread angst over the failure to make any headway in Iraq, and popular support for the war is now somewhere between 20 and 30 per cent. Baker, Hamilton, and their colleagues wanted to appear as the spokespeople for a new beginning in US policy towards Iraq following the Republican disaster in the congressional elections. 'Our political leaders must build a bipartisan approach,' declares the Report with obvious claim to authority, 'to bring a responsible conclusion to what is now a lengthy and costly war...Our country deserves a debate that prizes substance over rhetoric...The President and Congress must work together'.²

What options does the ISG offer? Firstly, it takes a regional approach, looking at the escalating violence and its potential to spread across Iraqi borders as a problem for all neighbouring nations. This would include not only a 'diplomatic offensive' to secure Syrian and Iranian compliance, but also a renewed effort to secure a breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian-Lebanese relations, calling on the President to revive his long-forgotten and doubtfully sincere commitment to a 'two-state' solution in June 2002. Secondly, within Iraq itself the goal is to gradually wind down the US military

presence, turning the largest part of security operations over to the Iraqis themselves and adapting the remaining US forces into Rapid Reaction Forces concentrating on defeating Al Qaeda forces and ready to assist the ISF when and where needed. It is true that Rumsfeld wasn't exactly running to embrace Iran and Syria and construct a regional dialogue on Iraq, and his memo only indicates a show-of-force approach to better secure the Iraqi borders and tell its neighbours to 'stay out'. Yet there is little difference between the ISG and Rumsfeld on either the need to improve Iraqi competences and structures of government, or the new strategy for the US military in the region. Both understood that the presence of 141,000 US military personnel was inadequate to regain the security initiative, and both refused to countenance increasing this number. Dealing with the 'big push' argument for assigning more troops, the ISG states the following:

Sustained increases in U.S. troop levels would not solve the fundamental cause of violence in Iraq, which is the absence of national reconciliation. A senior American general told us that adding U.S. troops might temporarily help limit violence in a highly localized area. However, past experience indicates that the violence would simply rekindle as soon as U.S. forces are moved to another area. As another American general told us, if the Iraqi government does not make political progress, "all the troops in the world will not provide security." Meanwhile, America's military capacity is stretched thin: we do not have the troops or equipment to make a substantial, sustained increase in our troop presence. Increased deployments to Iraq would also necessarily hamper our ability to provide adequate resources for our efforts in Afghanistan or respond to crises around the world.

The direction that the ISG would take on Iraq was well anticipated around Washington, so it is not as if its similarity with the policy options of Rumsfeld's memo were a coincidence. Rumsfeld had long refused to bend to the calls from the military for a change in approach to deal with the insurgency, and the memo was way too little way too late. Perhaps, as a final throw of the dice, the Defense Secretary was preparing the ground to recuperate the imminent electoral losses of the Republicans (and the credibility of the Bush administration) by taking the initiative away from the

soon-to-be-published ISG. Instead, the ISG was to be sidelined by another stalwart of Bush's 'Stay the Course' world-view, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

Under the direction of Resident Scholar Frederick Kagan, the 50-page 'Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq' of the AEI's Iraq Planning Group appeared in early January 2007. The contrast in approach and outlook between this and the ISG is worth reflecting on. Rejecting the immediate 'Vietnamization' of the conflict as proposed by the ISG (and Rumsfeld), Choosing Victory calls for a 'surge' of 30,000 extra US troops to secure Baghdad by autumn 2007, thereby setting the conditions for establishing national reconciliation and an effective Iraqi government. The report went on to reject the ISG's proposal for a regional solution via talks with Iran and Syria, claiming that this over-estimated the ability, never mind the willingness, of these countries to act in concert with the US:

The problem with relying on Iraq's neighbors to control the violence is less that they will not do so than that they cannot. This approach is a blind alley that will lead nowhere because it misrepresents the fundamental nature of the problem in Iraq.³

Bush, predictably, chose for the AEI and has duly requested 21,000 extra troops to pacify Baghdad, at the same time tearing up any thought of overtures to Tehran or Damascus. On the face of it, the two Iraq reports represent opposite poles in the deeply divided US political landscape. The ISG, calling for reconciliation both at home and abroad, is rejected by a President determined to find military solutions for everything, even if this means turning his back on the democratic voice of his own people. The AEI report skillfully presents a situation that requires only political will and the US military for everything to be restored, conveniently ignoring the four years of escalating deaths, astronomical corruption, mismanagement of resources, and incompetent calculations. How, for instance, can it talk so convincingly of securing 'national reconciliation' in Iraq with the scenes of Saddam Hussein's hanging still so fresh in everyone's minds?

However, the political manoeuvring that is taking place around the reports is more complex than this suggests. The Democrats won the mid-term elections by turning them into a referendum on the war, but are understandably not enthusiastic about

picking up the shared burden of a bipartisan foreign policy. Iraq is Bush's war, and to keep it this way it seems politically opportune to vote through an extra \$100 billion in February, patriotically support the troops, and make sure that any further failure remains firmly glued to the Republicans. The determination of the Democrat leadership not to rock the boat in the coming 20-month presidential election campaign is very strong, and reformers are anyway now confronted with a formidable conservative block in their own party.⁴ So while Ted Kennedy mobilises the Senate against Dick Cheney's typically misjudged comment that Congress has no authority to alter the war's strategy, presidential contender Hilary Clinton visits the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to confirm her patriotic credentials.⁵

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of the 'battle of the reports' is the different view of the uses of diplomacy. For the ISG, the Iraqi fiasco had effectively opened up an opportunity to reach out and recast relations with members of the Axis of Evil, in doing so abandoning one of the defining statements of US foreign policy during the Bush years. The US may have to eat some humble pie, but if pitched right it could ultimately lead to a successful improvement in Middle East dialogue. Bush ignored this option in favour of the black-white logic he is famous for, announcing instead a round of stepped-up diplomatic activity to bolster the resolve of the main Arabic allies in the region, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. It was not just political hubris that caused this choice. Reasons for dismissing the Iran-Syria option were already being rehearsed by AEI Resident Fellow and Iraq Planning Group member Reuel Marc Gerecht prior to the arrival of the ISG in November 2006.⁶ On the face of it Gerecht's arguments and the evidence he provided to back them up were quite convincing. Both states benefit from the power struggles in Iraq and neither has any desire to support the appearance of an oil-rich democratic neighbour, let alone assuming that either regime could have a decisive influence in developments there. What, indeed, would the United States have to bring to the negotiating table to gain the cooperation of Ahmadinejad and Assad? Gerecht's answer is more than clear: 'When you are weak – when you are seen to be weak and see yourself as weak – you do not have much to offer'. The ISG was, from this perspective, not only misguided but basically defeatist. Gerecht is right that successful diplomacy is often carried through by applying a careful mix of hard and soft power, but one does not get the impression from his article that *first* Iraq should be secured *and then* all diplomatic channels can be

opened. The discussion revolves solely around hard power, since that is all these regimes apparently understand. Genuine diplomacy involves a certain amount negotiation and give-and-take to secure a consensual outcome for all sides, with the goal that the decisions will be respected. For the intellectuals of the AEI, diplomacy means little more than either keeping allies in line or issuing demands to the enemy – it is not a hard-soft power combination but hard power alone. [Caveat: It is a great missed opportunity that Clinton's 'healing' and conflict resolution escapades during his final years as President (Northern Ireland, Israel-Palestine, Pakistan-India, Vietnam) did not take in Tehran. Madeleine Albright did open up the trade barriers to allow in a few Iranian carpets, but that was it. Perhaps it wouldn't have solved anything, but it would at least have put relations on a different footing at a time when the Iranian moderates looked as if they were still in the ascendancy.]

But what of diplomatic relations with the Coalition of the Willing? What level of consultation has there been with the Coalition's vital Number 2, Britain? Of the 16,500 non-US military personnel in Iraq from the 27-strong Coalition, 7200 are from the UK, making it by far the most credible 'partner' and the one most deserving of some kind of a stake in the decision-making process. Tony Blair has also come under pressure to set a date for the withdrawal of British troops, something that he has refused to do without first waiting for Bush's move. Commenting on the publication of the ISG Report on 6 December 2006, Margaret Beckett, the Foreign Secretary said the following:

We welcome the publication of the Iraq Study Group's report. It is a substantial and complex piece of work, to which of course the Prime Minister and senior British officials have contributed. From those discussions, we get the impression that their thinking was broadly in line with our own.....⁷

So far so good. Yet, following the announcement of President Bush's new (AEI-influenced) strategy on January 10, the Foreign Secretary then gave this comment at a press conference:

The announcement President Bush has made and agreement and back up from the Iraqi Government and from Prime Minister Maliki shows that both are determined to try to come to grips with what's unquestionably a difficult

situation, particularly in Baghdad. We welcome that and we hope that this joint effort to resolve this very difficult security situation, which is undermining efforts to put other things right in Iraq, will indeed succeed.⁸

Beckett went on to deny that British troops would be involved in the Baghdad operation, and would not be pushed to offer any kind of schedule for British troop withdrawals, ostensibly because ensuring the security of the Basra region was still an ongoing process. But the most noticeable feature of the two quotes is the smoothness with which the Foreign Secretary switched opinions in line with what was coming out of Washington. The recent troop reduction from 7100 to 5000 by late 2007, announced by Blair on February 21st, suggests that some kind of transatlantic deal has been struck in the wake of the 'surge' plan. Cheney's immediate claim, while on a Japan tour, that this confirmed conditions were improving in southern Iraq was just too glib.⁹ Meanwhile other sources have pointed out that UK forces are only being freed up for rotational duty further East in Afghanistan, under the guise of a 'return home'. It is, as one observer puts it, no more than a "juggling of overall numbers that has a nice political bonus for a faithful ally."¹⁰

¹ Ron Suskind, 'Without a Doubt', *New York Times Magazine* (17 October 2004), pp. 50-51.

² 'Letter from the Co-Chairs', *The Iraq Study Group Report*, New York: Vintage, 2006, p. ix.

³ Choosing Victory, pp. 41-42.

⁴ For a pungent analysis of this trend see Mike Davis, 'The Democrats Return', *New Left Review* 43 (Jan/Feb 2007), pp. 5-32.

⁵ On Kennedy and Cheney see <http://kennedy.senate.gov/newsroom/press_release.cfm?id=D054B515-6C65-4DDA-BA28-004FF164BFC9> (22 January 2007).

⁶ Gerecht, 'Bartering with Nothing', 20 November 2006, available at <http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.25163.filter.all/pub_detail.asp> (22 January 2007)

⁷ <<http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029394374>> (22 January 2007)

⁸ <<http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029391629&a=KArticle&aid=1168349840025>> (22 January 2007)

⁹ <<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=2891738>> (27 February 2007)

¹⁰ See the Sky News statement on Afghanistan from 23 February and other comments at blogsite <<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/2/23/82254/4386>> (27 February 2007)