
Jim Baker's War

PETER DREIER DECEMBER 12, 2006

The war in Iraq may be a disaster for George W. Bush, but for James Baker III it has become an opportunity to seal his reputation as a statesman rather than a political fixer, which is how he's spent much of his career. Baker is already getting kudos as a skilled diplomat who engineered a "bipartisan consensus" -- the highest honor that can be bestowed by the political punditry -- among the 10-member blue-ribbon Iraq Study Group, laying the groundwork for a possible U.S. withdrawal from an unpopular war.

As a nation, we seem to be suffering from short-term memory loss. After all, if it weren't for James Baker, we wouldn't be in Iraq in the first place.

Let's connect the dots. Baker was the ringmaster who orchestrated the Bush campaign's strategy for the controversial Florida recount in 2000 that turned his popular vote loss into a Supreme Court-imposed victory and a rent-free home in the White House. Without Baker, there'd have been no President George W. Without George W., no war in Iraq. And without Iraq, no need for a Baker-led blue-chip panel to help the president untangle himself from the mess he and his neocon cronies got the country into.

Recall: When it became clear that the outcome of the controversial Florida vote would determine the winner of the presidential sweepstakes, Bush 41 drafted his old friend Baker to use his lifetime of political dealmaking and connections to bail out his son. Baker led the Republican team that challenged the Gore campaign's efforts to get an accurate recount of votes in counties with confusing "butterfly" ballots, hanging chads, broken vote machines, and obvious undercounts that clearly would have given the state's Electoral College votes, and the presidency, to Al Gore.

Baker played brilliant hardball, completely outmaneuvering his Democratic counterpart -- former Clinton Secretary of State Warren Christopher -- in the legal and political battle. Under Baker's guidance, and with the full cooperation of Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris, the GOP brought phalanxes of party hacks from around the country to Florida to intimidate county election officials, mau-mau the media, and stall the recount until it could be brought to the U.S. Supreme Court, packed with Reagan and Bush 41 political appointees, to intervene in the Florida vote recount.

If ever there was an example of unadulterated partisan hackery, Baker's Florida goon squad was it. At the time, it looked like Baker's crowning achievement following a long career as a Republican operative, Bush family *consigliere* and corporate fixer. A partner in a politically-connected Texas law firm, Baker managed his friend and tennis partner George H. W. Bush's unsuccessful Senate campaign in 1970, served as Undersecretary of Commerce under President Gerald Ford and then ran Ford's unsuccessful re-election campaign in 1976. In 1980 he was Bush's campaign manager in the Republican primaries, and when Bush was named Reagan's Vice President, Reagan appointed Baker his chief of staff, then Treasury Secretary. After Bush 41 won the presidency in 1988, he named Baker his Secretary of State and then White House chief of staff.

When Clinton beat Bush in 1992, Baker left government but continued his role as a political insider -- as senior partner at Baker Botts law firm and senior counsel to the Carlyle Group. Baker Botts' clients included Exxon-Mobil and the Saudi Arabian government; the Carlyle Group was a powerful investment firm whose members, mostly former GOP bigwigs (including George H.W. Bush), used their political contacts to snare military contracts and other lucrative deals, especially in the Middle East.

Baker continued to give George W. advice, although he was not as personally close to the son as he'd been to the father. After 9/11, (contrary

to the emerging mainstream narrative), Baker supported invading Iraq. In an August 25, 2002 op-ed column in *The New York Times*, Baker called the Saddam Hussein government an "outlaw regime" that had "embarked upon a program of developing weapons of mass destruction and is a threat to peace and stability, both in the Middle East and, because of the risk of proliferation of these weapons, in other parts of the globe." The op-ed was taken to be an effort to advise Bush away from the most unilateralist elements in his administration, but he was certainly explicit in saying that "the issue for policymakers to resolve is not whether to use military force to achieve [regime change], but how to go about it."

ADVERTISEMENT

Throughout George W.'s checkered career in college, business school, the National Guard, business, and politics, his father's money and connections have opened doors and bailed him out of difficult situations. This has made his relationship with his father -- and with his father's establishment friends -- a difficult one. Once he entered the White House, George W. hoped to keep his distance from his father's advisers. He wanted to forge his own path, one much more heavily influenced by both neoconservatives and the Christian right. But when it became clear that the mission was far from accomplished, and as the United States waded deeper and deeper into the mud of Iraqi civil war -- with nearly 3,000 Americans killed, a staggering cost so far of about \$400 billion, and no end in sight -- Bush 41's buddy Jim Baker was asked to help rescue his son once again.

Congress created the Iraq Study Group, and appointed Baker is co-chair, to take a fresh look at U.S. policy in Iraq, a clear slap in the face to George W. Since delivering its report last week, Baker has been showered with praise for leading the ten-member panel and crafting a bi-partisan consensus document with 79 recommendations. (Given the oil industry and business ties of Baker and other members of the group, it should come as no surprise that the recommendations include the privatization of Iraqi oil by global corporations.)

Some pundits now claim that Baker belongs among the pantheon of diplomatic "wise men" -- powerbrokers who move easily between corporate boards and law firms, corporate-sponsored think tanks, blue-ribbon task forces, and government service, but who put their version of the national interest before partisan advantage. "I think he'd like to be remembered as a 21st-century Disraeli," Leon Panetta, a member of the study group and former Clinton chief of staff, gushed to *The New York Times*, referring to the 19th-century British statesman and prime minister. "I think deep down he is someone who believes that his diplomatic career, in many ways, helped change the world."

Baker, who is inevitably described as "former Secretary of State," surely does hope that the Iraq Study Group will secure his place in history as a diplomat and statesman who rose above personal loyalty to George W. to construct the widely-cherished "bipartisan consensus." But Baker should be remembered primarily for his most significant accomplishment, the shameless and ruthless partisan rescue mission that put George W in the White House, sent almost 3,000 Americans to their graves so far, and embroiled the United States in a costly and unpopular war that will undoubtedly be recorded as one of our nation's most stupid foreign policy blunders.

Peter Dreier is Professor of Politics at Occidental College in Los Angeles and coauthor of The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City.

If you enjoyed this article, subscribe to *The American Prospect* [here](#).

Support independent media with a tax-deductible donation [here](#).

You might like:



SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA AT THE TIME.



Three New Facts about the Tea Party



The Wealthy Kids Are All Right



The GOP's Bush Dilemma



Why the Republicans Should Go Ahead and Have Their Civil War

© 2013 by The American Prospect