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Butcher, Baker: The neo-cons' new villain

By Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON - From having read the neo-conservative press in the US over the past month, one would think that former secretary of state James Baker poses the biggest threat to the United States and Israel since Saddam Hussein.

As the realist of US Middle East policy who once had the temerity to threaten to withhold US aid guarantees from Israel if right-wing prime minister Yitzhak Shamir failed to show up at the 1991

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Madrid Conference, Baker has long been seen by neo-conservatives, as well as the Christian Right, as close to the devil himself.

But his role as co-chairman and presumed *eminence grise* of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG), whose long-awaited recommendations on how the US can best extract itself from a war that the neo-conservatives did so much to incite was to be released in Washington on Wednesday, has provoked a new campaign of vilification of the kind that they normally reserve for the "perfidious" French.

The specific aim of the campaign - which has been waged virtually daily on the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Times and the online and printed versions of The Weekly Standard and The National Review - has been to discredit the ISG's presumed conclusions, even before they are published.

Its recommendations, general and remarkably vague accounts of which have appeared in the New York Times and the Washington Post, reportedly include a gradual reduction in the US combat role in Iraq in favor of a much bigger effort at training and strengthening Iraq's army. It is a strategy that the military brass appear to have already adopted and that ISG consultants have said could reduce the number of US troops there from about 140,000 today to 70,000 in 2008.



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On the other hand, neo-conservatives, backed by Senator John McCain among others, favor a "surge" of as many as 50,000 more troops to stabilize the country. They have attacked any troop reduction as a betrayal of President George W Bush's dream of democratizing Iraq and the region, leaving their harshest attacks for the ISG's anticipated call for Washington seriously to engage Syria and Iran, as well as Iraq's other neighbors, as part of its diplomatic strategy.

Baker himself telegraphed this aspect of his approach after meeting with Damascus' foreign minister and Tehran's United Nations ambassador, Mohammed Javad Zarif, who reports directly to Iran's supreme leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Khamenei. "In my view, it's not appeasement to talk to your enemies," Baker said.

Those remarks set off a tidal wave of protest and criticism, beginning with the published announcement in The Weekly Standard by Michael Rubin, a fellow at the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI), that he had resigned from an "expert working group" advising the ISG. Rubin accused Baker and his Democratic co-chair, former congressman Lee Hamilton, of having "gerrymandered [the] advisory panels to ratify predetermined recommendations" - panels, he noted, that included Middle East experts who had actually opposed the Iraq war.

In a preview of attacks that appeared with increasing frequency over the following month, Rubin also assailed Baker for what he called the former secretary of state's "legacy" in the Middle East - namely, his approval of the 1989 Taif Accords that "sacrificed Lebanese independence" to Syria and his "betrayal" of Kurdish and Shi'ite rebels after the first Gulf War.

Rubin was quickly followed by Eliot Cohen, a member of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, who, writing in the Wall Street Journal, mocked the ISG as a "collection of worthies commissioned by Congress that has spent several days in Iraq, chiefly in the Green Zone".

"To think that either [Syria or Iran], with remarkable records of violence, duplicity and hostility to the US, will rescue us bespeaks a certain willful blindness," Cohen wrote.

The campaign against Baker and the ISG heated up after the November 7 Democratic victory followed by the resignation of Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld and his replacement by Robert Gates, an ISG member who two years ago had called for negotiations with Tehran.

The Journal published a series of harsh attacks in mid-November by both Rubin and columnist Bret Stephens on Baker and other alumni, such as Gates, who held top posts in the realist-dominated administration of president George H W Bush.

In an appeal to "progressives" who had opposed the realism of the administrations of both Ronald Reagan and Bush Sr, Rubin noted that Baker served as Reagan's chief of staff and Gates as his deputy director of central intelligence when Washington sided with Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War and "sent people across the Third World to their graves in the cause of US national interest".

The following day, Stephens blamed Baker for forcing Israel to take part in the Madrid conference, "which set the groundwork for the Oslo Accords [which] for Israel ... meant more terrorism, culminating in the second intifada, and for the Palestinians it meant repression in the person of Yasser Arafat and mass radicalization in the movement of Hamas".

Things got even more personal with columns by Frank Gaffney, president of the neo-conservative Center for Security Policy, and

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Mark Steyn in the Washington Times suggesting that Baker's thinking was motivated as much by anti-Semitism as by realism.

"Jim Baker's hostility towards the Jews is a matter of record and has endeared him to Israel's foes in the region," wrote Gaffney, suggesting that the ISG - which, in another column published on Tuesday, he called the "Iraq Surrender Group" - would recommend a regional approach similar to Madrid that would "throw free Iraq to the wolves" and "allow the Mideast's only bona fide democracy, the Jewish state, to be snuffed in due course".

Indeed, the past week has witnessed a veritable orgy of Baker- and ISG-bashing, beginning with a Weekly Standard article by former Republican House of Representatives Speaker and AEI fellow Newt Gingrich that warned that "any proposal to ask Iran and Syria to help is a sign of defeat" and "appeasement".

At the same time, the Washington Post's Charles Krauthammer, an Iraq war hawk who has blamed Washington's troubles in that country on the Iraqis themselves, resurrected the charge that "Baker gave Lebanon over to Syria as a *quid pro quo*" for its backing in the 1991 Gulf War and mocked the notion that "Iran and Syria have an interest in stability in Iraq".

For sheer consistency, however, The Weekly Standard, which in this week's edition featured no fewer than three articles denouncing the ISG - including one that described the commission's membership as "deeply reactionary" and the "Kmart version of the Congress of Vienna" (Kmart is a US chain of bargain department stores) - has led the field.

In successive lead editorials by chief editor William Kristol and Robert Kagan, the magazine first assailed the notion that Washington should engage Syria and Iran as "capitulation", and then, reassured by Bush's declaration last week that he was not prepared to follow the ISG's advice on talking with either Damascus or Tehran, accused Baker of having "quite deliberately created ... the disastrous impression ... that the United States is about to withdraw from Iraq".

"At home and abroad, people have been led to believe that Jim Baker and not the president was going to call the shots in Iraq from now on. Happily, that is not the case," wrote Kagan and Kristol, who recently called Bush "the last neo-con in power".

(Inter Press Service)

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