

The Price of Imperial Arrogance

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Lyndon Johnson was a conflicted man about Vietnam almost from the time he took office. As early as May, 1964, he confessed his doubts about the conflict to his good friend Senator Richard Russell in one of the many phone calls he taped in the Oval Office. That was three months before the fateful Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave him congressional authorization for military action in Southeast Asia without needing a formal declaration of war for it. Later that year, he privately acknowledged the Tonkin Gulf incident never happened and told Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara "we concluded maybe they hadn't fired at all." He was referring to the claimed attacks by North Vietnamese torpedo boats on two US destroyers which, on its face, seemed preposterous but which propelled this country deeply into the Vietnam conflict that didn't end until President Gerald Ford evacuated the last of the US forces and a few South Vietnamese collaborators in humiliation from the rooftop of the US Embassy in Saigon 11 years later in April, 1975. They left behind a nation in ruins, its landscape devastated and chemically poisoned that remains so today, and a few million dead Southeast Asians in three countries showing the kind of men Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were - imperial war lords who never had to answer for their war crimes as they never do under a system of victor's justice. The only compensation the victims got was their freedom from US aggression when realizing it couldn't win it decided to give up a futile fight and pull out.

Long before he left office, Johnson knew the war was unwinnable, and in 1965 told Secretary McNamara "I don't believe they're ever going to quit. And I don't see....that we have any....plan for victory - militarily or diplomatically" - spoken as he was about to escalate the conflict dramatically by shipping over many thousands more US forces that would eventually exceed a half million before things began to be scaled down in preparation for the final exodus in disgrace and defeat. Johnson did it even while confiding to his closest Senate friend, Richard Russell, that he was on the horns of his greatest dilemma. He had to find a way out of the Vietnam mess he felt was pointless but said he couldn't do it without being impeached - for Johnson, a classic Hobson's choice or in his own words "I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't." He asked his savvy friend for advice, but Russell told him he had none. Johnson felt trapped, and in May, 1964, (when the US commitment stood at a 16,000 troop strength level) he told Russell "We're in quicksand up to our necks, and I just don't know what the hell to do about it."

He did a lot about it, but made a criminal and coward's choice that destroyed him. It was apparent on March 31, 1968, two months after the momentous Tet offensive showed how hopeless things were and how pointless it was to pursue an agenda certain to fail. Johnson addressed the nation on national television that night saying he wouldn't seek reelection for another term. His only way out was to "cut and run" because he was so unpopular he had no chance to win. Lyndon Johnson left office in January, 1969 a disgraced and defeated man. This powerful, bigger-than-life figure was never the same again, and four years later he was

dead.

Audible Echoes of Vietnam Today

Today, echos of Vietnam are heard again resonating from the Middle East more loudly than 30 years ago. Does anyone in Washington high circles understand George Santayana's famous dictum that "those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it?" And do people in those circles know about British playwright George Bernard Shaw who said "We learn from history that we learn nothing from history" and could have explained how doomed this adventure would be from the start? There are just as many damn fools now as in the past, but the most dangerous ones are those who won't admit they got it wrong till it's too late and then it's someone else's problem. The only debate now is whether it's already beyond fixing, and no solution acceptable to Washington will work.

The elite there should read all 1000+ pages of noted longtime Middle East-based British journalist Robert Fisk's new book called *The Great War for Civilization: The Conquest of the Middle East* and learn how they're making the same mistakes that doomed the British occupiers after WW I. In a recent discussion of his book, Fisk compared today with then and explained: (today in Iraq) "It is not just similar, it is 'fingerprint' the same." During the "war to end all wars" the UK under Prime Minister Lloyd George (the Tony Blair of his time) invaded Iraq in 1917 and claimed, like George Bush, we (the UK) come "not as conquerors but as liberators." After the war, the Brits arbitrarily carved out the territory they called Iraq from the former greater Mesopotamia that was under Ottoman rule for almost 400 years until the war ended it. They told Iraqis they would have "democracy," held a referendum to prove it, and "elected" a puppet monarch who understood who was really in charge. In 1920, there was an insurrection, and Fallujah was the first town bombed followed by a siege against Najaf. Lloyd George defended his actions on the floor of the House of Commons (which British PMs must do unlike in the US) and claimed "if British troops leave Iraq there will be civil war." Sound familiar?

Winston Churchill was Secretary for War and Air for a time under George in the 1920s and thought it was a waste of British soldiers putting down tribal or sectarian revolts. Instead he advocated using the new Royal Air Force to bomb villages and was unconcerned if it targeted innocent civilians along with the legitimate resistance struggling (like today) to be free from a repressive occupation. He also authorized what Saddam was condemned for – using poison gas for the first time ever against a civilian population and at the time wrote: "I am strongly in favour of using poison gas against 'uncivilised' tribes." In a 2002 BBC poll, this "uncivilised" war criminal was voted the greatest-ever Briton, and his bust is now prominently displayed in the Oval Office occupied by the current war criminal ensconced in it.

British rule in the country was turbulent and harsh until Iraq became nominally independent in 1932 and later finally freed itself from British control after the Baathists expelled the Brits for good in the late 1950s, 40 years after they first arrived and not long after Saddam Hussein joined the party he would lead 22 years later. It took the Brits all that time to learn what the Bush administration should already know – Iraqis won't tolerate a foreign occupation, especially one as harsh as the one now imposed on them. This hopeless adventure was doomed the moment George Bush signed off on it, but the arrogance of imperial power blinded the neocons in Washington to what should have been obvious to them and eventually will be – the battle of Iraq can't be won, and the only alternative is a full, unconditional and immediate withdrawal along with reparations paid to help rebuild the

country we pillaged and destroyed.

That happening is wishful thinking even though many in high places understand the futility of “staying the (present) course” and are scrambling for an alternate solution. It remains to be seen what they have in mind and if they can get the ruling neocon cabal to accept it or manage to sidestep them if they don’t. It won’t be any easier convincing an administration nominally headed by a man who believes he’s on a messianic mission to decide he made a mistake and be willing to change course than it was to get a former president with a working brain to do it in 1969. He and his successor “stayed their course” for another blood-soaked six years that scarred this nation and the people of Southeast Asia who paid the greatest price and won’t ever fully recover until they reject the chains of neoliberalism that allow the dominant West to strangle them.

How Bad Is It in Iraq and On the Home Front

First consider the enormous and growing economic cost according to an estimate by Joseph Stiglitz – 2001 economics Nobel laureate, former Chairman of Clinton’s Council of Economic Advisors and chief economist at the World Bank until he quit his job in November, 1999 to speak publicly about his opposition to bank policies, and Linda Bilmes who teaches public finance at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. In January, 2006, they estimated the war’s cost could reach \$2 trillion but now believe that figure is low and may go much higher because of current and estimated future budgetary costs, the economic impact of lives lost, jobs interrupted, the risk premium in oil prices from uncertainty in the Middle East, the growing cost of veterans’ long-term medical care and disability benefit obligations, the human and capital investment needed to “reset” or restore the military to its pre-war strength and preparedness, and a host of other direct and indirect costs including the most accurate measure of the amount eventually to be needed for the war when all budgetary items are included now and into the future.

The government doesn’t calculate the total cost as Stiglitz and Bilmes say it should because of the way the it does its accounting. It uses a “cash accounting” system that would make a CPA wince (and likely lose his accreditation) and only reports expenses when payments are made, not when they’re committed for as most all businesses must do by “accrual accounting” methodology that includes future obligations assumed but unpaid. Add it all up according to Stiglitz and Bilmes and it comes to \$2 trillion + and counting because future obligations not yet in reported budgets are huge for years to come that will drain many billions of dollars from the federal treasury and put an enormous strain on an economy already reeling from massive deficits that are far greater than the phony numbers reported to hide how bad the country’s fiscal condition really is.

Stiglitz and Bilmes also point out that going to war with Iraq (and Afghanistan) was a matter of choice and so is staying there that raises the cost the longer the conflict continues (as well as in Afghanistan not included in their calculations). And they go much further saying as overwhelming as the \$2 trillion + budgetary, social and macroeconomic costs are already, more must be added to them such as the expenses incurred by other nations and this country’s intangible ones that include the following:

- the cost of our reduced capability to respond to national security threats in other parts of the world.
- the cost of high and rising anti-American sentiment in Europe, the Middle

East and elsewhere – most everywhere.

- the price paid for the sham notion that this country defends and supports human rights and democracy.

- the cost of the sharp decline of America's "soft power" from the Bush administration having tarnished the country's credentials, reducing Washington's ability to influence or prevail on crucial issues like trade, global warming, the international criminal justice system and much more.

Stiglitz and Bilmes don't say it, but they seem to suggest the "empire" is in decline economically and politically, and the Bush administration and its war on the world agenda had a lot to do with it. They may also be saying, or at least hinting, that this administration's budgetary recklessness did enormous fiscal damage to the country that by some estimates now place the national debt as high as \$70 trillion when all future financial obligations are included; it also ran up a true 2005 budget deficit of \$760 billion, not the fictitious \$318 billion it reported; and it exacerbated a huge current account deficit now exceeding \$800 billion and rising – meaning the nation leached at least \$1.5 trillion in 2005 from these two sources alone plus whatever is hidden and so far unknown including from other government reported data that was cooked to look better than it is.

In a recent interview, Stiglitz went even further saying...."in this current administration, the defense industries and the energy industries have really been running the show and it has been disastrous." He discussed the mismanagement and ominous signs of a housing bubble now deflating. It was generated by a tsunami of irresponsible Federal Reserve generated printing press created prosperity under Alan Greenspan and still ongoing under the radar because the Fed stopped publishing overall M3 monetary aggregate figures in March, 2006 it wants to conceal. And that was exacerbated by the administration's reckless spending policies that now set up the possibility of a global economic depression Stiglitz believes can only be avoided by implementing big changes in how the US economy is managed going forward. He added how hard it will be to do it because of the entrenched interests in the administration saying...."this has been perhaps the worst six years of mismanagement of the macro economy," and that an implosion can only be avoided with careful management, but if the present course continues to be followed a global depression will result in 12 – 24 months.

The news isn't any better in the November 20, 2006 issue of Business Week in which writer Michael Mandel points out another startling fact in his feature article called "Can Anyone Steer This Economy?" In it he says sometime around a year from now "the US will hit a milestone. For the first time in recent memory" this country will import a dollar value of goods and services exceeding what the federal government collects in revenues that now amounts to \$2.4 trillion a year. He goes on to say the US economy was once an "800 pound gorilla," but that's not true anymore because the global economy is overtaking us. The forces of globalization "have overwhelmed Washington's ability to control the economy." In today's brave new world order environment, giant corporations, called transnationals for a good reason, are free to offshore their manufacturing and other activities anywhere in the world and do it where the cost of doing business is cheapest – meaning, as Stiglitz and Blimes would likely conclude, this country is slowly sinking economically and the enormous financial obligations and burgeoning debt it's run up is only making it happen faster. Writer Mandel seems to agree saying "Washington is no longer the center of the economic universe"or New York, Chicago or Los Angeles either.

The Pentagon may know a thing or two about this, worries about what effect it eventually will have on its future operations as well as a lot about its current impossible one in Iraq it likely wants to wash its hands of. It showed in a mid-October classified briefing leaked to the New York Times in which high-level military officials said conditions in Iraq are in a state of chaos beyond its control. This came out of the US Central Command in charge of the Middle East. It reported Iraqi government security forces can't cope with the violence that's "at an all-time high, spreading geographically."

When the most powerful military force in the history of the universe throws up its hands and effectively cries uncle, it shows how bad things are in the Kafkaesque maelstrom of Iraq. It also shows how hopeless this adventure was that should have been brain-dead and stillborn from the start – but you'd never know it from the head-in-the-sand comments of the "stay-the-coursers" in Washington that includes the president, vice-president and Democrat leadership even when their language changes. They're willing to fine-tune the tactical management of the operation as they're now about to do but never willing to give up the prize they've already invested so much in and can't afford to give up because the cost of doing it is so great. It's what journalist Robert Fisk meant when he said "the US must get out (of Iraq), they will get out, and they can't get out."

Here's more evidence of how bad things are and how impossible it's becoming trying to deal with it. In his November 1 column in the London Independent, unembedded journalist Patrick Cockburn wrote that "Baghdad Is Under Siege." It follows his article days earlier called "From 'Mission Accomplished' to 'Mission Impossible' in Iraq." From his vantage point on the ground, Cockburn paints a grim picture of out-of-control chaos. "Sunni insurgents have cut the roads linking the city (Baghdad) to the rest of Iraq. The country is being partitioned as militiamen fight bloody battles for control of towns and villages north and south of the capital." He goes on to say food shortages in some neighborhoods are becoming severe, and the scale of daily killing is "massive" —

- 1000 or more violent deaths weekly.

- Shia fighters controlling most of the city encircled by Sunnis.

- 1.5 million Iraqis have fled their homes according to the Iraqi Red Crescent (a separate UNHCR estimate apart from Cockburn's article puts the number at 1.8 million Iraqis living in neighboring countries and another 1.6 million "internally displaced" within Iraq including those who left during the 1990s).

- Shia and Sunni militias control the country, not the US military, Iraqi army or police that are all impotent.

- the militias grow "stronger by the day because the Shia and Sunni communities feel threatened and do not trust the army and police to defend them."

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres confirmed through his chief spokesperson Ron Redmond on November 3 how bad things are in Iraq based on the number of refugees the conflict is generating. UNHCR says about 100,000 Iraqis now leave their homes each month in a desperate attempt to find safety. The UN agency estimates 2000 a day go to Syria, another 1000 a day cross into Jordan, some go to other countries and still others seek asylum in Europe. UNHCR also estimates an additional 50,000 Iraqis become "internally displaced" each month.

The immense refugee problem is the most visible sign of a failed US policy along with the out-of-control daily violence across most of the country killing 100 or more every day according to a UN estimate that's too low. It's the culmination of nearly 16 years of a US-directed reign of state-sponsored terrorism against the country and its people that slaughtered or caused the deaths of over two million Iraqi men, women and children and counting and left in its wake a surreal lawless armed camp wasteland with few or no essential services like electricity, clean water, vital sanitation, medical care, education, fuel and most everything else needed for sustenance and survival. Things aren't improving. They're getting worse as a brutal occupation grinds on and death squads roam freely including the US-directed "Salvador option" ones of the type National Intelligence Director John Negroponte once led in the 1980s when he was US Ambassador to Honduras during the Reagan Contra wars when he directed the administration's terror war of that era against the Nicaraguans and Salvadorans fighting for their freedom.

Today it's happening again, and it's all part of an insane agenda to control the immense energy resources of the Middle East by brute force. The plan in Iraq is to do it by destroying all the institutions of a modern secular society along with the country's historical treasures to transform this once prosperous nation into an impotent desert kingdom populated by serfs. If the Baker Commission plan prevails, discussed below, it's likely to be divided into several autonomous regions under nominal Iraqi regional and national rule but centrally controlled by a dominant US authority headquartered in the US Embassy in the fortress-like Green Zone using a US-directed satrap Iraqi army and police to enforce order for its master in charge of everything. That may be the plan, but it's another story to make it work.

What has worked is the US campaign on the ground that created an epic humanitarian disaster by every measure imaginable on top of the destruction of essential services listed above that barely exist anywhere in most of the country:

- desperate poverty and mass unemployment up to a 70% level.
- 84% of the country's higher learning institutions burnt, looted or destroyed according to a UN International Leadership report.
- archeological museums and historic sites, libraries and archives plundered deliberately.
- daily targeted assassinations against academics, other teachers, senior military personnel, journalists, doctors, other professionals and anyone in the wrong place at the wrong time which can be anywhere.
- nearly the entire country including parts of the Kurdish-controlled north now a lawless war zone with the US military and Iraqi security forces helpless to do anything about it and are just making it worse by their presence.

The Price Paid at Home

The US public has also paid an enormous price for the Bush administration's agenda and shows it in its anger over the hopeless war without end in Iraq, the endemic cesspool of Washington corruption and a general feeling of unease and mistrust with the political class in the nation's Capitol. But what about the rest – the annulment of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the loss of habeas and due process, the removal of checks and balances and

separation of powers, and the end of republican government replaced by congressionally and judicially allowed tyranny.

Chalk it up to the power and influence of the corrupted corporate-controlled media. They effectively program the public mind suppressing the ugly truths in their dual roles as flag-waving support-the-troops America-uber-alles cheerleaders on the one hand and as court jesters on the other diverting attention from the important to the trivial. With due respect to George Orwell – in a time of universal corporate media deceit, if some in it told the truth it would be a revolutionary act. None there are that bold as it would likely cost them their jobs – except for one noted host of a one-hour nightly newscast and commentary so far allowed on MSNBC for whatever reason the network airs it.

The first casualty of war (and of all the other ways government ill-serves us) is truth at a time when that commodity is more needed than ever. It's not hyperbole to believe if people understood the neocon's domestic and foreign agenda it would spark a second American revolution – this time aimed at the criminal class in Washington who betrayed the nation's founding principles. The Bush administration, led by the Vice-President and de facto head of state, shamelessly used the 9/11 tragedy to stage a power-grab coup d'état against free people everywhere. They declared war on the world for imperial gain and strangled a republic already on life support to establish a national security fascist police state in America signed into law in a contemptible act of lawlessness by George Bush on October 17 – a day that will live in infamy. He did it with little fanfare, public awareness or consent giving himself the power to rule like the dictator he once "jokingly" said he'd like to be.

In a White House signing ceremony for the occasion, George Bush signed the Military Commissions Act (aka the torture authorization act and lots more) that effectively annuls the Constitution and Bill of Rights and gives him the extraordinary authority (in violation of the Constitution) to designate anyone an enemy of the state on his say alone with no corroborating evidence. As noted British journalist John Pilger wrote in the New Statesman – anyone for any reason may now be labelled a "terrorist" for committing what Orwell called a "thoughtcrime" in his book Nineteen Eighty-Four. We're all now "enemy combatants," and no one is safe from the reach of "Big Brother" in Washington.

The new law grants the chief executive what Pilger calls "the power of unrestricted lawlessness." He can now order anyone arrested, interrogated, tortured and incarcerated in a secret prison anywhere in the world, subject to the justice of a military tribunal with no competent defense or right of appeal. The new law annuls the right of habeas corpus and due process, effectively applies to all US citizens, and subjects everyone everywhere to the whims of a man who uses the power vested in him to wage permanent war on all parts of the world unwilling to genuflect and kiss his ring.

On the same day, George Bush went even further. He privately and quietly signed into law a provision revising the Insurrection Act of 1807 that along with the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 prohibits the use of federal and National Guard troops for law enforcement inside the country except as allowed by the Constitution or expressly authorized by Congress in times of a national emergency like an insurrection. The new Public Law 109-364 (HR 5122) called the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007 allows the chief executive the right to claim a public emergency, effectively declare martial law, and deploy federal and National Guard troops anywhere on the nation's streets to suppress whatever he calls public disorder. It may be for any reason including against peaceful demonstrators demanding their rights of free expression and assembly we no longer have.

Without public knowledge or consent, the president of the United States signed away the last vestige of a free society with overwhelming congressional support that approved it 396 to 31 in the House and by unanimous consent in the Senate including all those Democrats we think will change everything post-November 7. As of October 17, 2006, the new law of the land effectively annointed George Bush Augustus Caesar subjecting everyone to the will and whims of a man who uses power recklessly, flaunts it with his audacious swagger, and has no concern for those he harms. This is someone who can't be trusted and was once described by his Texas aides when he was governor as a man who enjoys killing – referring to his indifference to those facing the death penalty in a state that executed more people under his authority than any other after the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976.

Is it any wonder a recent international poll published in the UK Mail & Guardian Online showed that in Britain and other countries people think George Bush is a greater threat to world peace than North Korean leader Kim Jong-il or Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (both of whom, in fact, represent no threat unless provoked). The US public spoke even more loudly pronouncing their own judgment on November 7 by rejecting the Bush administration's agenda at the polls. They gave Democrats nominal control of both houses of Congress for the first time since the Republican sweep in 1994 even though what they'll get when the 110th Congress convenes on January 3 may be little different than what they turned out, and at least one Connecticut Senate "Democrat" turned "independent" can now be counted on to vote Republican any time the party that funded and elected him calls in its chips.

Today in Washington – Democrat, Republican or so-called Independent hardly matters anymore. For six years, the Democrats marched in lock step with the Republican leadership making it clear little will change in the new Congress. Post-election, George Bush repeated where he stands announcing no plans for a hasty exit from Iraq. At the same time, he made a change of the guard at the Department of Defense (DOD) appointing Robert Gates, replacing one controversial secretary and accused war criminal with an unindicted liar and equally controversial former Reagan and senior Bush official based on his past role in cooking the intelligence to fit the policy in the Iran-Contra scandal he was never held to account for, and his involvement in secretly arming Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. When he takes over from Donald Rumsfeld after an easy Senate confirmation hearing, expect one thing – the Pentagon under new management representing the same failed strategic agenda smoothed over with some already planned tactical changes that aren't likely to work any better under his aegis than the old ones did under his predecessor.

Nonetheless, the new secretary-designate was chosen by and is allied with the more pragmatic wing of the party represented by the president's father under whom he served in a number of capacities including as CIA director in its last two years after the heat of scandal that tainted him cooled down enough. The neocon opposition he's allied with will need whatever support he and others can provide given the state of things in Iraq, the neocons professed desire to "stay the course," and the new Democrat leadership wanting business as usual proving once again the criminal class in Washington is bipartisan. What's not even on the table in all the packaged for television post-election hoopla is the growing out-of-control conflict in Afghanistan or any plan for an equitable resolution of the long-running Israeli agenda of genocide in slow motion in the Occupied Palestinian Territories without which there can never be peace and stability in the volatile Middle East.

For now though, the dominant theme portrayed in the corporate media is the deceptive post-election afterglow designed to make the public think a change of agenda will follow one in the congressional leadership. Expecting that is like believing with enough convincing carnivores will become vegetarian and opt for new menu choices. The only likely change ahead will be on the tactical management of the war in Iraq with no dispute among the contesting parties on the overall plan for the country and region. It's part of the agreed on unchanged strategic agenda for world dominance, now focused on nailing it down in the Middle East with all that oil the world's ruling class will never relinquish control of because having it is as central to its hold on power as Samson's hair was to his.

So the battle being waged is only a skirmish pitting the power of a neocon administration with Bush and Cheney still in charge allied with the influential Israeli Lobby dead set against any change in the regional agenda vs. the Baker team and Democrat leadership with most others in the party kind of on both sides of the tactical policy choices.

The neocon-Zionist alliance got a boost with the appointment of hawkish ultra-right wing Avigdor Lieberman as deputy Israeli prime minister with a brief to handle Israel's "security threats." It was greeted in Israel by a Meretz party parliamentary leader calling the appointment a (Kadima party) "terrorist attack on democracy," to go along with George Bush's power grab on October 17 that signaled the denouement of democracy in America.

The script in Washington today is eerily similar to the 1930s in Germany where there, like here, it happened with a whimper, not a bang, only much quicker then. On March 23, 1933, less than two months after Hitler became Reichschancellor, the German Reichstag allowed the democratic Weimar Republic to pass into history by enacting the Enabling Act or Law to Remedy the Distress of the People and the Empire that legally established a Nazi fascist dictatorship. It gave Adolph Hitler absolute power and the right to enact laws and changes to the constitution without public consent and with little more than rubber-stamping from a now impotent Reichstag.

On October 17, the Congress of the United States gave George Bush similar power, the difference here being the legislators go through the motions of enacting laws proposed and written for them by corporate lawyers and lobbyists the president then ceremonially or quietly signs and alters with signing statements to modify whatever portions of them he wishes to change, add to or delete. It's still called "democracy, American - style" which is no democracy at all.

Hitler just called for the people to support him and used his anointing to unleash a reign of terror across the continent. It now remains to be seen how much more damage George Bush will do with his power and what the newly elected Democrat congress will do about it that early-on doesn't look like much of anything. Dare we imagine the price to be paid for more of the same ugly business as usual and a president given the power of a dictator to act as he pleases without restraint and a willingness to use it.

Serious Efforts to Change Course in Iraq but Not the Strategic Agenda

Along with events at home, the so-called Baker Commission (officially called the Iraq Study Group or ISG) is now making news ahead of what it's likely to propose which, details aside, will be a reassertion of more practical neoliberal economic and political interests in the Middle East over the belligerent imperial agenda of endless wars and occupation there that aren't working as they failed to do in Vietnam and are isolating the US now seen as an out-

of-control hegemon pariah state. The Wall Street Journal calls the ISG “the foreign policy establishment’s vehicle” and when it makes its recommendations “both sides assume (they) won’t be resisted.”

We’ll soon learn if the Journal is right about a Commission that represents powerful business interests aligned with more practical former government so-called moderates and internationalists who fear the country may be heading for a political and economic train wreck without a change of course. No country can maintain a reckless borrow and spend policy forever without facing dire consequences eventually nor can it wage endless wars on the world for dominion over all of it without being destroyed on the shoals of its own hubris and imperial overreach. That’s where the US is now that’s led some of the savviest and most powerful people in Washington to believe a change in management tactics is essential while agreeing with the administration’s overall strategy that never changes whichever party is in power.

James Baker formed the Commission he heads to fine-tune the process before the current one leads to the inevitable train wreck he and others fear with potential consequences even he and they can’t imagine or predict. Baker is a noted Republican mandarin and a formidable figure in his own right having been a top official in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and GHW Bush and having helped engineer the fraud-laden election of GW Bush in 2000 – something he may now regret. He’s also been the longtime Bush family consigliere, is a man whose opinion is always taken seriously and is known to be the party’s go-to Mr. Fix-It when the going is the toughest and the situation is in most disrepair.

Baker put together a bipartisan blue ribbon group of 60 high-level figures (with no neocons) co-chaired by former congressman and empire loyalist Lee Hamilton and working with four like-minded influential think tanks – the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the US Institute of Peace, the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Baker’s own James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy – all combined to give added weight to their forthcoming proposals due out during the post-election congressional lame duck session. They’ll have the endorsement of the president’s father, some top former officials in his administration and other influential power-brokers in Washington other than Dick Cheney who’ll likely lead the weakening neocon opposition to them and on October 19 signaled his intentions using the language of “total victory” as the only acceptable course in Iraq. It remains to be seen if he really means it or if it’s typical Cheney bravado putting out some red meat for the hard line faithful but knowing post-election he has to compromise and may have already done it.

Cheney has been the most potent man in town, in contrast to Baker who’s one of the shrewdest, most practical, and when the stakes are greatest most ruthless, but the vice-president’s influence may be waning based on a growing disconnect within Republican ranks combined with the Democrat’s stunning electoral win on November 7. Jim Baker can exploit that and may now get added support in a quarter of Washington that would have been impossible a year or two ago. He’s also got public sentiment on his side that shows up in the polls and in the mid-term election results from the types of candidates who fared best in them. The public is fed up with a war gone sour along with a cesspool of government corruption and blames the Bush administration and politicians supporting him for it.

It’s the main reason for the president’s sinking approval ratings (now at a low around 31% in at least one national poll cutting deeply into his once solid base) and the fact that many in the party see him as radioactive and want to keep a safe distance from a man considered politically harmful. Jim Baker is a consummate well-connected politician and as savvy and

well-respected in Washington as anyone in this most political of all pieces of real estate in the world. He'll take full advantage of the strong tailwind in his favor to complete the job he's undertaken. Whatever his Commission proposes will be taken very seriously, and the way things work in Washington it may already be a fait accompli. Until an announcement is made, however, it remains to be seen what's in the Baker plan and how much of it will be revealed to the public – not the most important parts to be sure.

One thing almost for certain won't be in it – extending the Middle East conflict to Iran and Syria. It's no secret the powerful Israeli Lobby and Washington hard liners have wanted forcible regime change in Iran for a decade or longer and now claim another reason to pursue it is the contrived pretext that Iran's fledgling commercial nuclear capability is cover for its intent to develop nuclear weapons. Iran has every legal right to develop its commercial nuclear program, is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), unlike Israel (a known nuclear power and nuclear outlaw) that is not, and the US encouraged the Iranians to develop its commercial nuclear industry during the 25 year terror reign of its close ally at the time, Shah Reza Palevi – something unreported amidst the hostile anti-Iranian rhetoric today the Baker Commission will likely want to stop or at least curtail.

Baker and the other Commission members know any hope of ending the Middle East conflict depends heavily on getting Iranian and Syrian cooperation. If the Baker Commission recommendations prevail, there will be no extended war in the region targeting either country despite several recent ugly reports to the contrary. One was published on November 2 in Israel's Maariv Daily that French President Jacques Chirac asked George Bush at the recent UN summit if Israel could attack Iran to prevent it from getting the "bomb" to which the US president reportedly said: "We cannot rule this out. And if it were to happen, I would understand it." Another is a report circulating in many Western capitals in the wake of Avigdor Lieberman's appointment as Israeli deputy prime minister that even the Israel-uber-alles New York Times choked on calling him "the wrong partner." It said the Israelis will go it alone and attack Iran if the US won't do it and has given the Bush administration a six month deadline to decide.

Haaretz.com published a third report quoting Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh's November 10 comments that Israel must be ready to prevent Iran's nuclear program "at all costs." The minister added "I consider it a last resort. But even the last resort is sometimes the only resort....we must prevent this (Iranian) regime from obtaining nuclear capability at all costs." Still more anti-Iranian vitriol came out of the White House on November 13 during a photo-op session between George Bush and Ehud Olmert when the president seemed to rule out direct negotiations with Iran by calling for international isolation unless Iran "gives up its nuclear ambitions" which the Iranians have rightfully refused to do. On the same day, Condoleezza Rice told Maariv she believes Syria "is a dangerous state (because the country) is a way-station for Iranian arms that cross the Middle East."

Offsetting these reports was a positive one reported on November 7 by Agence France-Presse (AFP) quoting "a senior US official" (unidentified) saying "Israel will not target Iran's nuclear facilities because it has said this is a problem of the entire world. Israel understands that the only way to defuse the nuclear crisis is through diplomatic channels." That "understanding" takes on added importance in light of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's political weakness, following the Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) drubbing at the hands of Hezbollah in the summer Lebanon war. It showed in a recent poll of his approval rating that plunged to a low of 20% indicating his tenure as Kadima party leader is very shaky and uncertain. Add to that the Bush administration's embarrassing defeat in the mid-term

congressional elections over the Iraq war, and it points to more diplomacy and no extension of the conflict in the region because the US public won't tolerate it.

Can Even the Redoubtable Jim Baker Pull A Rabbit Out of a Very Threadbare Hat

Whatever comes out of the ongoing policy discussions in Washington, it remains to be seen if there can be any resolution of the Iraq conflict short of a total and unconditional foreign occupation force withdrawal from the country the resistance and majority of Iraqi people demand as well as preventing an attack against Iran, Syria or any other country in the region. Jim Baker knows this, and if the Commission recommends anything less it almost guarantees more conflict that will only get worse.

At the same time, Baker isn't about to recommend a full withdrawal because without the muscle of the US military close at hand on some of the many dozens of bases Halliburton built for it – reportedly 106 of them from micro to super-large according to Bradley Graham in a May, 2005 Washington Post report. They include four super-bases with one or two other ones like it planned that represent an enormous investment of billions of dollars Washington isn't about to write off voluntarily or hand over to an Iraqi force nor will it give up the control of the country and region it wanted to achieve by invading in the first place. It also won't write off its largest embassy in the world inside the protected four square kilometer fortress-like Green Zone HQ in central Baghdad equipped with every imaginable high tech device for communications and security including ground-to-air missiles plus all the conveniences of a modern US city.

But what the US planned and wants isn't likely to be what Iraqis have in mind. In the end, the US may have to give up what it's no longer able to hold onto just like it did in Vietnam when it had to walk away from the enormous investment it made at Cam Rahn Bay, Danang, Saigon and elsewhere once the Pentagon gave up the fight and withdrew entirely. A lot of people now think it's just a matter of time before it faces another much more serious strategic and humiliating defeat in Iraq than the one in Southeast Asia.

We're a long way from that stage now, however, and whatever comes out of the Baker Commission will be a plan to avoid a Vietnam ending at all costs. It's likely to be something on the order of a Nixonian type Vietnamization with a hoped for effective Iraqi praetorian guard satrap army ready to take over security operations supported by US air power with a smaller US ground force redeploying to hunkered down positions inside their protected super-bases but ready to move out again any time as needed – much like the Israelis did it in their announced disengagement in Gaza only to go back in again full-force over the summer to reinstate hostilities that are still ongoing with no sign of a letup.

Whatever they are, the best laid plans are never simple under any conditions, and accomplishing them in Washington is never easy – something Jim Baker understands as well as anyone. He also knows if Israel attacks Iran on its own (inconceivable without US approval), all bets are off. He has to head that off as well as build consensus and be willing to give a little to get what he and the Commission members want most – an exit/redeployment strategy with a reliable client state government in place (centrally and/or regionally) and an effective Iraqi security force firmly under US control. Anything short of that would create the possibility of Washington's worst nightmare – a majority Shiite ruled Iraq allied with Shiite Iran and possibly linked with the Saudi Shias located in the bordering eastern oil-rich part of the kingdom.

But even that possible disaster would worsen if a Tripartite Shia Middle East alliance controlling most of the world's oil joined either or both organizations formed to compete with the US for control of Central Asia's huge energy reserves – the Asian Energy Security Grid and the more significant Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that was formed in 2001 for political, diplomatic, economic and security reasons as a counterweight to US-controlled NATO. China and Russia are core members of both alliances and key countries like India, Venezuela, Iran and even Japan may join to add more heft to a Middle Eastern – Asian block jockeying with the US and the West for control of the most oil-rich part of the world. This worst of all possible nightmare scenarios is what the Baker Commission above all else will try to avoid, but it has its work cut out for it with no guarantee of success.

The Commission must pull off a near-impossible mission. First, it has to reach accommodation with the ruling neocon cabal on how to achieve their shared goal of world dominance – whether by the subterfuge of velvet glove neoliberalism or hard line iron-fisted militarism. Both sides are adherents to market-based imperialism based on the notion that all other nations must comply with the rules made in Washington or face the consequences. The debate then is what to do about the outliers. Baker, his Commission members and the president's father have nothing against persuasion by conflict as long as it's against targeted countries too weak to put up a good fight. The dominant interests of capital in the country love and support wars because when they're winnable the benefits for the bottom line outweigh the costs and potential risks.

Back in the 1980s, Jim Baker and the president's father had no qualms about the ugly Contra war the Reagan administration they served in waged against the people of Nicaragua and the ruling Sandinistas. The new government offended Washington by ousting the US-backed Somoza dictatorship, freeing Nicaraguans from serfdom and impoverishment and providing them with essential social services they never had before like free health care and education. Baker also supported the same odious business in neighboring El Salvador where the FMLN resistance was fighting the country's US-supported fascist dictatorship for the same things. He sided with the pathetic and illegal muscle-flexing invasion of Grenada in 1983, the toppling of Panamanian dictator and former CIA asset Manuel Noriega in 1989 because he dared disobey “the lord and master of the universe,” and even the appalling Gulf war because the plan was narrowly focused to remove the threat of Israel's main enemy in the region, seize control of Iraq's immense oil reserves, get the Saudis, Kuwaitis and others to pay for the operation, come and do the job quickly, and leave with mission accomplished.

What the Bush neocons had in mind for Iraq in 2003 was none of the above, and it's likely Baker and some on the Commission were dubious about it from the start and possibly the Afghan war as well as they should have been. Both countries have a long history of successfully expelling invaders which is why GHW Bush and Brent Scowcroft, his National Security Advisor, warned the younger Bush about the perils of his agenda that included invasion and occupation. They feared the Iraq adventure was unwinnable and could have easily discovered the futility of the Afghan one by talking to the Russians and Brits who learned that lesson the hard way as the US is finding out now in both countries. Bush co-conspirator Tony Blair also might have told George Bush about Sir Olaf Caroe, the last British governor of North West Frontier province in bordering Pakistan who understood the way events play out in that part of the world and once explained: “Unlike other wars, Afghan wars become serious only when they are over.” That's true in Iraq as well as the Bush administration now knows and so does Jim Baker and his Commission members.

Baker may have felt that way back in March, 2003 even while never expressing it publicly. It's commonly believed he's never been allied with the ruling neocons and has always been more of a internationalist and pragmatic adherent to the art and practice of realpolitik. He's also very close to the Bush family and especially the president's father who's likely been a significant behind-the-scenes player in the Commission's formation and it's assigned mission. GHW Bush, Jim Baker and the heavyweight members on it are plenty worried about the mess in Iraq and know a change of tactics is crucial before it's too late. They also may agree with former Reagan administration National Security Agency (NSA) chief General William Odom's view for the need to "unmask the absurdity of the administration's case (to) stay the course and finish the job (as well as Odom's belief it's) "obvious the war was never in the US interest." Odom added "(It's) the worst strategic mistake in the history of the United States."

That view was also expressed by Middle East expert Gilbert Achcar in his new book *Perilous Power* co-authored with Noam Chomsky. Achcar calls the Bush administration policy in Iraq "stupid" that will result in it going "down in history....as the undertaker of US interests in the region." It doesn't get any stronger and plainer than what Odom and Achcar believe, but it'll be even worse if the US ends up losing control of the greater Middle East's energy reserves because of the administration's colossal blunder and obstinacy. That possibility is central for the president's father, Jim Baker, and his Commission members assuring a significant change in management tactics is coming - but with no guarantee anything will work at this stage.

Baker must now craft an accord with the neocon leadership and newly empowered congressional Democrats who supported the war from the outset and won't go any further than criticize its management. He'll also have to confront and pacify the powerful Israeli Lobby as well as a caricature of a president who believes his cause is just and the Almighty directs him. Up to now, that opposition believed with enough super-weapons and unchallengeable military might it could rule the world forever as long as it didn't err and blow it up instead which is a real possibility. Adolph Hitler only guaranteed 1000 years, misjudged by 988, and might have blown it up himself if he had today's weapons of mass destruction. Baker and his realists face a formidable challenge, the stakes are enormous, and the potential cost of getting it wrong or failing because nothing will work at this stage is incalculable, especially if, in the end, the Iraqi resistance has the final say as it likely will. As they say, things are getting "interestinger and interestinger."

A Desperate Need for Change - But Will Anything Work at this Stage

The Baker team must come up with a sensible alternative agenda of the Hail Mary variety the ruling neocons will accept or at least reach accommodation with. To avoid a strategic policy meltdown, there must be consensus that the Iraq and Afghan wars can't be won, and the longer the US military remains in both countries in force the greater their losses will be, the larger the number of alienated countries no longer willing to support us will become, the more likely the unsustainable cost will move the nation closer to economic bankruptcy, and the harder it will be to reverse the mind-set of the majority of countries that now see this one as a moral pariah and greatest of all threats to world peace, security and stability.

Jim Baker has a formidable challenge trying to achieve a near-impossible goal to change the hearts and minds of the ruling establishment in Washington and Tel Aviv and convince Iraqis that rule by an even scaled back foreign occupying force inside its fortress-like super-bases and city-state sized fortified Embassy is in their best interest. As they say, the chance of

pulling this off may be slim to none, and it's likely to prove again the painful lesson all empires learn sooner or later – the price for imperial overreach is always the same. It never works, and those ruling the waves thinking it does almost never spot the time when the tide begins to turn and they're swimming against it. They're so consumed by their own hubris and belief their way is just and right, they're blind to the futility of their agenda.

Overcoming an obstacle this great may be a job for Superman and then some and more than even a man like Jim Baker and his power-packed team can handle. He's smart enough to know there's no assurance he can do it, whether he'll go far enough or even if he does if it can make a difference at this late stage. It is assured whatever he does won't be with the public welfare in mind but only for the interests of wealth and power he represents and the elitist class of which he's a member in good standing. It's his job to pull their fat out of the fire the neocons lit and keep throwing more fuel on, or better stated, it's his task to put spilt milk back in its leaky bottle and keep it there.

As for the public, it's not even a player in this game and won't come out a winner whichever side wins or loses. Neither will the people in the Greater Middle East short of a near-impossible eventuality nowhere in sight – a full and unconditional US troop withdrawal from the region, the freedom of Iraqis and Afghans to run their countries out of Washington's clutches, a solution to the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict not even being addressed, and an end to the joint US-Israeli partnership of imperial aggression in the region. Even with all that, it would only be a beginning but what a major one well stated by the old Chinese maxim that the "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step" or the joke about all those lawyers on the bottom of the ocean being a good start. At this stage, the best people of conscience, not at the table, can hope for is the beginning of a process that eventually will achieve the scenario just laid out that looks impossible now but one day may happen because enough people never stopped working for it in the region and around the world.

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