

## *The Contemporary Presidency*

# The Power and Limitations of Commissions: The Iraq Study Group, Bush, Obama, and Congress

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*This article uses a case study of the 2006 Iraq Study Group to illustrate the policy-making power and limitations of blue-ribbon commissions. I argue that the distinct political credibility of commissions can enable them to shape public opinion and drive policy change, but that commissions usually cannot bridge partisan divides on highly salient issues marked by intense polarization. The case study reveals that the Iraq Study Group influenced public views of George W. Bush's Iraq policy, placed significant pressure on Bush to change his Iraq strategy, and shaped the Iraq plan of Barack Obama—even though the commission was unable to forge agreement between Bush and Democratic congressional leaders.*

On February 27, 2009—five weeks after his inauguration as president—Barack Obama delivered a speech at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina announcing his plan for winding down the Iraq War. Obama told the assembled Marines that the U.S. combat mission in Iraq would end by August 31, 2010, and that a contingent of no more than 50,000 American troops would remain in Iraq after that date to train Iraqi forces, conduct counterterrorism missions, and protect American personnel. Obama also said that he would engage diplomatically with all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran and Syria, in order to make Iraq and the Middle East more secure.<sup>1</sup>

This announcement was not surprising considering that Obama had been saying he would take these steps if elected president since early in the 2008 presidential campaign.

1. Remarks by President Barack Obama, "Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq," February 27, 2009.

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But few people realize that the Iraq plan that Obama developed during the campaign and adopted as president was shaped by the Iraq Study Group, a blue-ribbon commission chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former U.S. Representative Lee Hamilton (D-IN).

In December 2006, the Iraq Study Group proposed shifting the U.S. mission in Iraq to training and counterterrorism, launching a diplomatic offensive in the Middle East, and conditioning aid to Iraq on its progress toward milestones. When President George W. Bush decided a month later to send more than 20,000 additional troops to Iraq to execute a new counterinsurgency strategy, commentators observed that he had rejected the commission's advice (Barnes 2007; Hedges 2007; *Washington Post* 2007). But at the same time that Bush decided to "surge" in Iraq, Obama decided to make the study group's proposals the basis for his own Iraq platform.

In this article, I provide the fullest account to date of the origins of Obama's Iraq policy and show how the Iraq Study Group heavily influenced it. I also demonstrate that the study group turned public opinion more sharply against the Iraq War, placed added pressure on Bush to change his war strategy, and served as the inspiration for important Iraq initiatives by centrist legislators. At the same time, I argue that the study group's impact could have been even greater if the stances of Bush and Democratic congressional leaders on Iraq policy had not been so far apart.

More broadly, this case study illuminates the policy-making importance and limitations of government-sponsored ad hoc advisory commissions. Such commissions, which can be established by the executive branch or through legislation, have three key characteristics: (1) by definition, at least one of the commissioners is not a government official, (2) the commissioners typically include Republicans and Democrats, (3) the commissioners typically possess significant stature. These attributes generally give commissions an aura of independence and bipartisanship, which can make them powerful vehicles for policy change. But commissions face significant limitations in that their lack of formal policy-making power usually prevents them from overcoming political divisions on highly salient issues marked by severe partisanship and polarization. The story of the Iraq Study Group illustrates these strengths and weaknesses of commissions.

This case study also underscores that the creation of a commission can be an effective way for Congress to challenge administration policy in an ongoing war. In general, Congress tends to be quite deferential to the president during wartime, as legislators often fear that they will be punished at the polls if they oppose the president on a national security issue (Fisher 2000; Hamilton with Tama 2002; Lindsay 1994; Weissman 1995).<sup>2</sup> The establishment of an independent commission can be a relatively low-cost way for members of Congress to challenge administration claims about the progress of a war and to introduce alternative proposals into the public debate. This was the goal of legislators in forming the Iraq Study Group, and it succeeded to a remarkable degree.

This article is based in part on more than two dozen interviews that I conducted with study group members and staff, Bush administration officials, Obama presidential

2. Howell and Pevehouse (2007) have a different perspective, arguing that Congress has greater influence on use of force decisions than is commonly believed.

campaign advisors and administration officials, and members of Congress and congressional aides. (Some of the people I interviewed requested anonymity so that they could speak more freely.) The case study also draws on the only other detailed accounts of the study group, by political scientist Christopher Kirchoff and journalist Bob Woodward (Kirchoff 2009; Woodward 2008).<sup>3</sup>

## Commissions and Policy Change

The conventional wisdom is that government-sponsored advisory commissions do not lead to reform. As a *New York Times* headline declared a few years ago, “Commissions Are Fine, But Rarely What Changes the Light Bulb” (Rosenbaum 2005). Some scholars share this pessimistic view. Mark Fenster asserts that the influence of commissions “seems to fall within a narrow range—from marginal to nil—and rare is the commission whose proposals are actually adopted into law or regulatory rule” (2008, 1242).

Recent research has found that this conventional wisdom is right concerning one set of commissions, but wrong with respect to another (Tama 2011). In the absence of a crisis that places pressure on policy makers to make reforms, commissions tend to be unable to force changes to the status quo. During a crisis, however, the proposals of commissions often catalyze important policy changes that would not otherwise occur.

This remarkable power of commissions stems from their impressive political credibility: the ideological diversity, stature, and independence of commissions distinguishes them from other political institutions and gives them great public appeal. In addition, their relatively depoliticized deliberative environment makes them far more likely than politically diverse groups of elected officials to reach agreement on findings and recommendations. When a bipartisan commission does issue a unanimous report, it sends a powerful signal to policy makers and the American people that its proposals are both sound and politically acceptable. These proposals often thereby become the focal point for reform efforts and attract enough support to be adopted by policy makers (Tama 2011).

This article reinforces those findings by demonstrating how the Iraq Study Group achieved internal consensus and how its bipartisanship and unanimity enabled it to influence public opinion, drive initiatives by moderate legislators, and shape Obama’s Iraq plan. At the same time, the case study extends earlier findings in two ways. First, the study group’s impact reveals how commissions can help members of Congress challenge administration dominance of national security policy making. Second, the study group’s inability to bridge the divide separating Bush and Democratic congressional leaders on Iraq policy reveals that the influence of commissions is heavily constrained even when they operate during a crisis, issue a unanimous report, and receive public acclaim. In particular, it is extremely difficult for a commission—no matter how popular it is—to forge consensus in Washington on a highly partisan and polarized issue.

3. Kirchoff (2009) provides an excellent, in-depth analysis of the study group but draws a different conclusion than I do about its influence, arguing that its effectiveness was limited by a deficiency in expertise. Woodward (2008) describes the study group’s inner workings but does not say much about its impact.

## A Moderate Republican Seeks Help

The Iraq Study Group's story begins with U.S. Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA), who sought to establish a commission on the Iraq War as violence in that country escalated during 2005. By the second half of the year, roughly 70 U.S. troops and 1,400 Iraqi civilians were being killed in Iraq each month.<sup>4</sup> Wolf commented that he wanted to form the study group because "at the time there were no real solutions being offered on Iraq."<sup>5</sup> But he also had a strong political motivation for creating the study group. He represented a district in northern Virginia that was trending Democratic as George W. Bush's approval rating dropped, and he surely realized that deteriorating conditions in Iraq threatened to harm Republican prospects in upcoming elections. Creating a commission was a way for him to prod the Bush administration to reevaluate its Iraq strategy without directly or publicly challenging the administration himself.

Yet even the act of forming a commission was threatening to the Bush White House because of such a commission's potential to criticize administration policy. When Wolf met with senior administration officials in November 2005 to discuss establishing a commission, Vice President Dick Cheney resisted the idea (Dreyfuss 2006). Given Cheney's great influence in the administration, his opposition suggested that Bush was also likely to oppose Wolf's proposal, and few prominent Republicans would want to serve on a commission that was opposed by the president.

Rather than give up, Wolf worked with three foreign policy luminaries—David Abshire, president of the Center for the Study of the Presidency; John Hamre, president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies; and Richard Solomon, president of the United States Institute of Peace—to try to gain Bush's backing by circumventing Cheney. On November 29, 2005, Abshire, Hamre, and Solomon met with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Rice was displeased with the existing administration Iraq strategy, which centered on transferring control to Iraqi forces, and she decided that a commission could be useful. As her then-counselor Philip Zelikow recalled, "The administration's views [on forming the study group] were divided. If you thought our strategy was going well, you didn't want it to be formed. If you thought things were going badly, you wanted it. We thought things weren't satisfactory and thought it would be a good way to get ideas for a change in strategy."<sup>6</sup> Put another way, Rice thought that the commission could give her greater leverage to press Bush to change U.S. strategy over the opposition of Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. For Rice, as for Wolf, the commission offered a way to challenge the administration's existing policy indirectly.

Interestingly, Abshire knew Rumsfeld, but as he left Rice's office, one of her aides told him not to mention the commission idea to Rumsfeld because the defense secretary would advise Bush to oppose it. The next day, Rice went to the White House and gained

4. These figures are from <http://icasualties.org/Iraq/ByMonth.aspx> and <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/> (accessed August 8, 2010).

5. Interview of Frank Wolf, October 2, 2007.

6. Interview of Philip Zelikow, October 22, 2007.

Bush's support for creating the study group—before Cheney or Rumsfeld had a chance to lobby the president against the idea.<sup>7</sup> Rice's ability to gain Bush's backing for the idea in this way illustrates how Bush often made national security decisions without formal deliberation among his advisors, thereby contributing to a dysfunctional policy-making process (Pfiffner 2009). In most cases, Cheney and Rumsfeld seem to have been the beneficiaries of Bush's informal decision-making style, but in this instance, Rice beat them at their own game.

Forging an alliance with Rice was not Wolf's only creative move designed to gain the Bush administration's backing for forming a commission. Rather than pursuing the enactment of legislation that would establish the commission with a statutory charter—the basis for most congressional commissions—Wolf sought legislative approval for an appropriation to the United States Institute of Peace to coordinate the commission's work without an official mandate.<sup>8</sup> Wolf said that he took this tack because it was likely to be faster than enacting a commission charter.<sup>9</sup> But forming the study group in this way was also important because the Bush White House probably would have opposed the formation of a statutory commission, fearing that an official charter might create a public expectation that the administration would follow the commission's proposals.<sup>10</sup>

As it happened, Wolf quietly worked with other legislators to win approval of a \$1 million outlay to the U.S. Institute of Peace for the purpose of coordinating the commission's work.<sup>11</sup> One of Wolf's key allies in this effort was Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John Warner, another moderate Republican from Virginia (Dreyfuss 2006). Like Wolf, Warner was concerned that violence in Iraq was spiraling out of control, and he probably thought that a commission could help formulate alternatives and place pressure on the administration to change course.

## Achieving Unanimity

The job of selecting the Iraq Study Group's leaders fell to Solomon in his role as president of the U.S. Institute of Peace. In consultation with Abshire, Hamre, Warner, and Wolf, he decided to ask James Baker and Lee Hamilton to serve as co-chairs. Hamilton readily agreed; Baker did so once he received assurance that Bush supported his participation. Baker recalled, "I agreed to do the study group because the president

7. Interview of David Abshire, April 11, 2007.

8. One year earlier, Wolf had spearheaded the creation of a separate commission on the United Nations through an appropriation to the U.S. Institute of Peace (Task Force on the United Nations 2005). That commission and the Iraq Study Group established a new model of congressionally funded study panels coordinated by a quasi-governmental institution. More recently, the U.S. Institute of Peace coordinated the work of a commission on America's strategic posture (Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States 2009).

9. Interview of Frank Wolf, October 2, 2007.

10. Interview of study group staff members, December 2006; interview of congressional aide, March 2008.

11. This appropriation was included in Public Law 109-234.

looked me in the eye and told me he wanted me to do it.”<sup>12</sup> Another person involved in the study group said that Bush wanted Baker, a longtime family friend, to lead it because he “realized that [the study group] was going to happen one way or another and that it would be better for him to have someone inside pissing on the tent than someone outside pissing on it.”<sup>13</sup>

In early 2006, Hamilton and Baker chose the study group’s eight other members: former Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates (who was replaced by former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger when Bush named Gates secretary of defense after the 2006 election), former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (who was replaced by former Attorney General Ed Meese after Giuliani missed initial study group meetings), Democratic power broker Vernon Jordan, former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, former White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, former Senator Charles Robb (D-VA), and former Senator Alan Simpson (R-WY).

Baker and Hamilton selected most of these members for their political credentials, rather than for their national security knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Giuliani, Meese, Jordan, O’Connor, Panetta, and Simpson all possessed impressive stature, but none was a foreign policy or Iraq expert.<sup>15</sup> (Gates, Eagleburger, Perry, and Robb did possess national security expertise as well as political standing.) Hamilton and Baker made these choices out of a belief that the commission’s impact would depend primarily on its ability to reach consensus and appeal to various constituencies.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, with a membership of five Republicans and five Democrats who were no longer serving in government, the group had good prospects for appearing nonpartisan and independent, and the relatively moderate leanings of most of the members were likely to boost their prospects for achieving unanimity. Reaching consensus would be particularly important because commissions are much more influential when they issue a unanimous report (Tama 2011).

It is especially notable that Hamilton and Baker chose O’Connor to serve on the study group—as the swing vote on the Supreme Court for two decades, she had long demonstrated a pragmatic ability to forge alliances with people across the ideological spectrum. The achievement of unanimity was also aided by the fact that few of the commissioners had previously staked out public stances on the Iraq War, making them more likely than many Iraq experts to be open to new ideas and compromises.<sup>17</sup>

Commissions are often mocked for being composed of “graybeards.” Indeed, the average age of the study group’s members was 74. But the fact that most of the commissioners were retired from public office facilitated the achievement of consensus in

12. Interview of James Baker, June 2, 2007.

13. Interview of study group participant, January 2007.

14. Interview of Lee Hamilton, December 14, 2006.

15. Of course, the study group did need expert advice, which it obtained through a small staff of 14 people and four working groups comprising 44 volunteer consultants. But the study group’s important decisions regarding findings and recommendations were made by the members themselves.

16. Interview of Lee Hamilton, December 14, 2006.

17. Interview of study group staff members, December 2006.

two ways. First, it softened partisan instincts, as the commissioners were not subject to the intense electoral pressures that confront public officials. Second, it meant that the commissioners could devote large amounts of time to the study group, allowing them to build camaraderie and hash out compromises. Two dinners hosted by Vernon Jordan and a research trip to Iraq by 7 of the 10 members helped forge friendships among the commissioners (D. Broder 2006).

The Iraq trip, which took place in late August and early September 2006, also led many of the commissioners to become more skeptical about the willingness of Nouri al-Maliki's Iraqi government to take the difficult steps necessary to achieve political reconciliation in Iraq. In meetings with Iraqi officials, study group members were shocked by the extent of their sectarian biases and downplaying of the scope of violence (Woodward 2008, 111-23). The trip contributed to a growing pessimism among the commissioners, which was fueled by a sharp increase in bloodshed during 2006. Iraqi civilians were being killed at a rate of roughly 2,800 per month in the summer of 2006, roughly double the rate of the previous summer, and the conflict between Shiite militias and Sunni insurgents increasingly resembled a civil war.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of these discouraging experiences and trends, the views of some of the commissioners evolved. Leon Panetta noted, "Some of the members who were initially supportive of administration policy had to recognize how bad the situation was."<sup>19</sup> This recognition was expressed bluntly in the study group's unanimous report, issued on December 6, 2006. The report began with a very downbeat assessment of conditions in Iraq, captured by the executive summary's stark opening sentence: "The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating" (2006, xiii). The report went on to state that the Iraqi government "is not adequately advancing national reconciliation, providing basic security, or delivering essential services . . . There is great suffering, and the daily lives of many Iraqis show little or no improvement . . . [T]he ability of the United States to influence events within Iraq is diminishing" (1). People involved in the study group commented that Baker's willingness to support such a sharply critical assessment, despite his close ties to the Bush family, was motivated in part by his interest in protecting his own reputation and legacy. He surely knew that historians would not view kindly a report that was considered a whitewash.<sup>20</sup>

The views of some commissioners regarding potential policy recommendations also changed. Lawrence Eagleburger recalled,

From the beginning of the Iraq war, I had felt that we need to stay in Iraq until we accomplish our goals. But when I came on board [the study group] and read the background papers I was horrified by the descriptions of conditions on the ground and the condition of our military and its equipment. I adjusted my view reluctantly to agree we might need to be looking toward reducing our involvement and getting our military in better shape.<sup>21</sup>

18. These figures are from <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/> (accessed August 8, 2010).

19. Interview of Leon Panetta, February 1, 2008.

20. Interviews of study group participants, April 2007 and December 2007.

21. Interview of Lawrence Eagleburger, January 24, 2008.

Still, reaching agreement on proposals regarding the U.S. troop deployment was difficult. As the study group began intense deliberations in the fall, a majority on the study group favored a gradual withdrawal, but Chuck Robb pushed for a temporary surge to stabilize Baghdad. Members also disagreed about whether to propose a withdrawal timeline. Bill Perry favored recommending a deadline, but Robb, Baker, and Ed Meese opposed doing so. Robb noted, "I thought it would be morally wrong and strategically devastating for the U.S. to leave without giving the Iraqis at least a chance to save themselves."<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, the members were able to hammer out compromises on these issues through direct negotiation, including two hours of private talks between Perry and Robb. In one key compromise, the members agreed to language stipulating that "all combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be out of Iraq" by the first quarter of 2008 (Iraq Study Group 2006, xvi). Panetta explained, "The way we found consensus on this was not to establish a firm timetable, but to establish a target."<sup>23</sup> In another important compromise, the commissioners agreed to a statement that they could "support a short-term redeployment or surge of American combat forces to stabilize Baghdad, or to speed up the training and equipping mission, if the U.S. commander in Iraq determines that such steps would be effective" (73). This statement's inclusion made Robb willing to sign the report.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to these compromises and the highly critical assessment of conditions in Iraq, the study group's 142-page unanimous report included 79 recommendations on diplomatic, security, economic, and other issues. The commission highlighted three of these proposals as being particularly important:

- The United States should launch a diplomatic offensive in the Middle East, including direct engagement with Iran and Syria and renewed pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace (Iraq Study Group 2006, xiv-xv).
- The United States should change the primary mission of U.S. forces in Iraq from combat to training Iraqi forces and conducting counterterrorism operations (xvi).
- The United States should condition assistance to Iraq on the Iraqi government's progress toward the achievement of milestones on national reconciliation, security, and governance (xvii).

## Influencing Public Opinion

On the morning of December 6, the study group presented its report to Bush, and then held a press conference that was carried live by the major television networks. The political drama of the group advising Bush to shift course in Iraq led a television critic to call the news conference one of the 10 most compelling television moments of the year (Stanley 2006). The study group's report was also widely read, with at least 250,000

22. Interview of Charles Robb, July 23, 2007.

23. Interview of Leon Panetta, February 1, 2008.

24. Interview of Charles Robb, July 23, 2007.



copies produced by its publisher and more than 2 million additional copies downloaded in the first two weeks after its release.<sup>25</sup> A month after the report was issued, it remained fifth on the *New York Times* best-seller list for nonfiction paperbacks (Kirchhoff 2009, 135).

Extensive newspaper coverage amplified the report's message: during the 90 days after the report was issued, it was discussed in 154 articles in a sample of four prominent newspapers (*Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*). Over the last three decades, only two other national security commissions received more newspaper coverage: the 9/11 Commission and the President's Special Review Board, chaired by former senator John Tower (R-TX), which investigated the Iran-Contra scandal.<sup>26</sup>

Opinion polling indicated that the report had an immediate effect on public attitudes—in particular, reducing the proportion of Americans who approved of Bush's handling of Iraq policy. Three recurring surveys of American opinion on this issue—by CBS News/*New York Times*, Gallup/*USA Today*, and ABC News/*Washington Post*—were conducted throughout 2006 and early 2007. Each of these polling organizations regularly asked respondents whether they approved or disapproved of the way George W. Bush was handling the situation in Iraq. During the two months prior to the study group's December 6 report, these organizations had conducted a total of four surveys asking this question, and the approval rating in those polls ranged from 29% to 35%. During the month after the study group reported, these organizations conducted a total of four new surveys, which found approval ratings ranging from 21% to 28%—a substantial drop from Bush's pre-study group Iraq approval measure. (Table 1 provides more detail on these surveys.) Moreover, there is no evidence that this decline in public support for Bush's Iraq policy was driven by new events in Iraq rather than by the study

**TABLE 1**  
Public Opinions of Bush's Iraq Policy Before and After the Study Group Report

| <i>Polling Organization</i>      | <i>Date</i>                               | <i>Percentage Approving of Bush's Iraq Policy</i> |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| CBS News/ <i>New York Times</i>  | October 5-8, 2006                         | 30  |
| ABC News/ <i>Washington Post</i> | October 5-8, 2006                         | 35  |
| Gallup/ <i>USA Today</i>         | October 6-8, 2006                         | 30  |
| CBS News/ <i>New York Times</i>  | October 27-31, 2006                       | 29  |
|                                  | Iraq Study Group report: December 6, 2006 |   |
| CBS News/ <i>New York Times</i>  | December 8-10, 2006                       | 21  |
| ABC News/ <i>Washington Post</i> | December 7-11, 2006                       | 28  |
| CBS News/ <i>New York Times</i>  | January 1-3, 2007                         | 23  |
| Gallup/ <i>USA Today</i>         | January 5-7, 2007                         | 26  |

Question in each survey: Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the situation with Iraq?

Source for polling data: Bowman (2008, 152-56).

25. Interview of Daniel Serwer, December 21, 2006.

26. Data set created and possessed by the author.

group: U.S. and Iraqi civilian casualties remained at roughly the same levels in November and December 2006 as in the previous several months.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, surveys in December 2006 indicated that the public viewed the study group and its proposals very favorably. Two-thirds of Americans reported that they trusted the study group a great deal or a fair amount to recommend the right policy in Iraq, and the commission's recommendations to negotiate directly with Iran and Syria, jump-start Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, shift the military mission from combat to training, gradually withdraw U.S. troops, and reduce aid if the Iraqis failed to meet political milestones were each backed by at least 6 in 10 Americans (Baker and Cohen 2006; Page 2006; Reynolds 2006). These remarkable levels of public support show the tremendous appeal of a unanimous report by a distinguished bipartisan group.

The study group's report was also endorsed by many members of Congress, particularly relatively centrist legislators. The most notable such endorsements came from moderate Republicans who were concerned that the Bush administration's Iraq policy was failing. Senators Judd Gregg (R-NH), Gordon Smith (R-OR), and John Sununu (R-NH) praised the report and criticized the administration's approach in Iraq, prompting a *Wall Street Journal* reporter to note that the study group was giving "moderate Republicans political cover to condemn the handling of the war" (Dreazen 2006). In response to this growing opposition, on December 18, Bush stated publicly for the first time that the United States was not succeeding in Iraq, telling a reporter, "We're not winning. We're not losing" (Ricks 2009, 115). This comment suggested that Bush had come to recognize that he could no longer simply stay the course in Iraq.

### Cold Shoulders from Bush, Pelosi, and Reid

The broader political climate gave further reason to believe that the study group's proposals might provide the basis for a shift in Iraq strategy. One month before the study group reported, Democrats had gained 27 seats in the House and 6 in the Senate, handing them control of Congress for the first time in 12 years. The day after this Republican defeat, which was widely viewed as a rejection of Bush's Iraq policy, Bush replaced Rumsfeld with Gates, thereby removing one of the chief obstacles to changing course in Iraq and bringing a former study group member into the cabinet. In these ways, the stars seemed almost perfectly aligned for Bush to endorse the study group's proposals as a means of rebuilding public support for his Iraq policy. In addition, the study group offered congressional Democrats potential political cover for backing Bush if he adopted the commission's recommendations.

Yet neither Bush nor Democratic leaders in Congress embraced the report. Bush decided soon after the study group reported to send more than 20,000 additional troops to Iraq to execute a new counterinsurgency strategy aimed at protecting Iraqi civilians. Although the study group had indicated that it could support a short-term surge, Bush's

27. Casualty figures are available at <http://icasualties.org/Iraq/ByMonth.aspx> and <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/> (accessed August 8, 2010).

new policy—announced in a primetime speech on January 10, 2007—did not change the primary mission of American troops to training Iraqi forces and fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq, as the commission proposed.<sup>28</sup> Nor did Bush endorse the study group’s proposals to engage Iran and Syria and to reduce aid if the Iraqi government did not meet certain milestones.

In Congress, House and Senate majority leaders Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Harry Reid (D-NV) also distanced themselves from the report. In a private meeting with the study group on December 6, Pelosi criticized the group for not calling for a rapid withdrawal.<sup>29</sup> In public comments, both Pelosi and Reid highlighted how the study group had found fault with administration policy, but declined to endorse its suggested timeline for a gradual pullout (Sweet 2006). Moreover, they later blocked an effort by a bipartisan group of legislators to adopt most of the study group’s recommendations, as detailed later.

These responses from Bush, Pelosi, and Reid reflected the political incentives they faced to reject a moderate compromise solution on an issue as salient and polarizing as the Iraq War. For Bush, the invasion of Iraq was the defining foreign policy decision of his presidency and promised to be, for good or for ill, at the center of his legacy. Doubling down on the American military commitment in the hope of salvaging the war effort, therefore, appealed more to him than a gradual withdrawal that would be viewed as an acknowledgment of failure (Abramowitz and Baker 2007; Broder and Stolberg 2006). This decision-making calculus is a common one for presidents who initiate wars that do not produce clear victories (Polsky 2010).

At the same time, Reid and Pelosi stood to gain little from compromising with Bush because Democrats held a strong political advantage on the Iraq issue. A compromise would have taken away some of this advantage, while making Congress share the responsibility with Bush for any future problems in Iraq. Moreover, support for a gradual pullout would have contradicted Pelosi’s existing stance on the war, which called for withdrawing troops faster than the pace suggested by the study group (J. Broder 2006). One Democratic congressional aide observed, “The leadership in the House didn’t want to take the glass half full.”<sup>30</sup>

The Republican and Democratic Party bases provided further obstacles to compromise. On the right, neoconservatives blasted the study group for favoring a pullout. The most colorful such attack came from Robert Murdoch’s *New York Post*, whose December 7, 2006, front page superimposed the faces of Baker and Hamilton on the bodies of apes, alongside the headline “Surrender Monkeys.” Neoconservatives also denounced the study group’s proposal to engage Syria and Iran (Abramowitz and Kessler 2006). At the same time, the study group was panned by some influential commentators on the left for not proposing a more rapid and complete withdrawal (Ackerman 2006; Yglesias 2006). These criticisms from the ideological bases of the Republican and Democratic parties made it more difficult for Bush, Pelosi, and Reid to embrace the study group.

28. Remarks by President George W. Bush, “President’s Address to the Nation,” January 10, 2007.

29. Interview of study group staff members, December 2006.

30. Interview of congressional aide, July 2008.

In these ways, the positions of key national leaders and party activists were already so polarized and entrenched that the study group could not forge agreement between the president and Congress on a new course for Iraq policy—even though most Americans supported its proposals. Given the political context, the study group probably could have been more successful in this respect only if it had promoted its report relentlessly.<sup>31</sup> But Baker was unwilling to engage in a major advocacy campaign.<sup>32</sup> Lawrence Eagleburger noted, “Baker wasn’t enthusiastic about promoting the report. He felt the war had been badly managed and believed we needed to moderate our position. But he also wanted to protect the president’s interest.”<sup>33</sup> Although other commissioners did conduct many media interviews and other activities to promote the report, Baker’s unwillingness to do so made it harder for the study group to maintain pressure on policy makers to adopt its proposals.

### Influencing Bush and Congress Nevertheless

Still, the study group did influence both Bush and Congress. As mentioned earlier, the study group’s finding that the situation in Iraq was “grave and deteriorating” placed added pressure on Bush to change his approach to Iraq, as he did by deciding to surge. In fact, the Bush administration felt this pressure from the study group even before the commission reported. In August 2006, the Pentagon began to formulate alternative plans for Iraq, in order, according to journalist Seymour Hersh (2006), “to preempt new proposals, whether they come from the new Democratic majority [in Congress] or from the Iraq Study Group.” Two months later, as the study group began to garner a lot of media attention and a Democratic takeover looked increasingly likely, the White House began its own informal assessment of Iraq policy. One Bush administration official commented that the study group was an important catalyst for this assessment, noting that the White House was nervous about the commission and “saw it as a threat.”<sup>34</sup>

A few days after the November election, Bush turned the informal study into a formal interagency review (Woodward 2008, 177-208). A November 15 *Washington Post* article indicated that the White House wanted to complete this review “before mid-December, about the time the Iraq Study Group’s final report is expected,” suggesting that the administration saw it, in part, as a means of responding to the commission (Wright 2006). It was during this review that Bush started to consider sending more troops to Iraq to execute a new counterinsurgency strategy. Shortly after the study group reported, Bush sided with Cheney and some National Security Council aides in deciding to surge, against the opposition of Rice and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Barnes 2008; Coll 2008; Gordon 2008; Ricks 2009, 94-120; Woodward 2008, 230-321; Wright and Tyson

31. Commissions tend to be most influential when their members—and particularly their chair(s)—promote their proposals intensively (Tama 2011).

32. Baker declined to be interviewed by the media after the report’s rollout and only agreed to testify before two congressional committees.

33. Interview of Lawrence Eagleburger, January 24, 2008.

34. Interview of Bush administration official, April 2007.

2006).<sup>35</sup> Even though Bush's new strategy departed from the main thrust of the study group's proposals, he probably would not have adopted such a dramatic policy change without the political pressure applied by the commission and the November election defeat.

In addition, the study group had a large impact on the congressional debate over Iraq—despite its lukewarm reception from Reid and Pelosi. Throughout much of 2007, the study group served as the inspiration for important congressional initiatives on Iraq policy. In particular, it became the lodestar for centrist Democrats and Republicans seeking an alternative to administration policy.

For example, on January 24, 2007—two weeks after Bush announced his surge decision—a bipartisan group of nine senators led by John Warner cosponsored a “sense of the Senate” resolution that expressed opposition to the new deployment, called for changing the primary military mission in Iraq to counterterrorism and training, and urged greater diplomacy with Iraq's neighbors.<sup>36</sup> In introducing this resolution, Warner noted that its provisions “track in large measure the Baker-Hamilton report.”<sup>37</sup> Although the resolution was nonbinding and never came up for a vote, it sent a signal that many Republicans (as well as many Democrats) were unhappy with Bush's decision to reject the commission's proposals.

In subsequent months, the study group's influence in Congress grew as a larger contingent of legislators cosponsored a bill to adopt most of the commission's recommendations. The leaders of this effort were Senators Ken Salazar (D-CO) and Lamar Alexander (R-TN). As representatives of relatively conservative states, Salazar and Alexander were attracted to the study group's proposals because they represented moderate alternatives to Bush's Iraq policy, which remained very unpopular after his announcement of the surge.<sup>38</sup> For Salazar, backing the commission's recommendations enabled him to disagree with the surge without endorsing a firm deadline for withdrawal. For Alexander, doing so allowed him to separate himself from Bush's policy before he came up for reelection in 2008. As one congressional aide noted, “For a Republican in a close race who didn't want to be with the administration on Iraq and didn't want to be for a pullout now, this was a comfortable place to land.”<sup>39</sup> Aside from these political motivations, the commission's membership gave its report strong credibility with the two senators. Alexander aide Matt Sonnesyn noted, “Baker, Eagleburger—these were people [Alexander] respected who knew a lot about foreign policy.”<sup>40</sup>

In the spring of 2007, Salazar and Alexander worked with Hamilton and Baker to draft the legislation to implement the study group's proposals. (Baker was initially

35. Rice pushed instead for a new policy that would ring the periphery of Baghdad with troops to contain violence in the capital, while the Joint Chiefs favored shifting the U.S. mission to supporting Iraqi troops and fighting terrorists, as the study group had proposed.

36. The nine senators were Evan Bayh (D-IN), Norm Coleman (R-MN), Susan Collins (R-ME), Mary Landrieu (D-LA), Claire McCaskill (D-MO), Ben Nelson (D-NE), Ken Salazar (D-CO), Gordon Smith (R-OR), and Warner. The resolution was S. Con. Res. 4.

37. Remarks by John Warner, *Congressional Record*, S1076, January 24, 2007.

38. Interviews of congressional aides, June 2007, November 2007, and March 2008.

39. Interview of congressional aide, March 2008.

40. Interview of Matt Sonnesyn, March 27, 2008.

reluctant to support this effort, but agreed to go along with it so long as it did not, in his view, overly constrain the president's authority.<sup>41</sup>) On the Senate floor in March, Alexander said pointedly, "I believe that it's time for President Bush to take the Iraq Study Group report down off the shelf and use it for something other than a book end."<sup>42</sup> The two senators subsequently gained 14 other Senate cosponsors, including seven Democrats and seven Republicans, giving the legislation more bipartisan support than any other measure aimed at changing U.S. strategy in Iraq (Zeleny 2007).<sup>43</sup> Notably, most of the Republican cosponsors faced reelection contests in 2008, suggesting that they, like Alexander, believed that the study group offered them valuable cover for distancing themselves from Bush's Iraq policy. At the same time, a bipartisan group of 62 House members led by Frank Wolf and Representatives Chris Shays (R-CT) and Mark Udall (D-CO) cosponsored the same legislation in the House.

The bill, formally called the Iraq Study Group Recommendations Implementation Act of 2007, was introduced in the House and Senate on June 5.<sup>44</sup> The measure stated that the president and Congress "should agree that the way forward in Iraq is to implement the comprehensive set of recommendations of the Iraq Study Group." It went on to mandate that the president formulate and implement a plan to carry out nearly all of the commission's proposals, including its recommendation to make training and counterterrorism the primary missions of U.S. forces. However, some controversial study group recommendations were included in the legislation only as "sense of the Congress" provisions, rather than as binding law. Most importantly, the bill stated that it is the sense of the Congress that "all combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be redeployed from Iraq by the first quarter of 2008," and that the United States should implement the commission's proposals concerning diplomacy in the Middle East.

As this legislation gained momentum, it brought the study group back into public debate and placed new pressure on Bush to adopt some of its principal proposals. In April, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius (2007) wrote, "The Baker-Hamilton report offered a way out of the partisan wilderness when it was released in December. It still does." One month later, as Salazar and Alexander steadily gained cosponsors for their legislation, Bush said at a news conference that he favored "Plan B-H" (the Baker-Hamilton plan) as his postsurge approach to Iraq.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Bush reversed his earlier opposition to some of the study group's diplomatic proposals. In May, U.S. diplomats held high-level talks with Syria regarding Iraq and held the first public bilateral meeting between America and Iran in almost three decades (Cooper and Slackman 2007; DeYoung 2007).

41. Interview of congressional aide, March 2008.

42. Remarks by Lamar Alexander, *Congressional Record*, S3081, March 14, 2007.

43. These senators were Robert Bennett (R-UT), Thomas Carper (D-DE), Robert Casey (D-PA), Norm Coleman (R-MN), Susan Collins (R-ME), Pete Domenici (R-NM), Judd Gregg (R-NH), Mary Landrieu (D-LA), Blanche Lincoln (D-AR), Claire McCaskill (D-MO), Bill Nelson (D-FL), Mark Pryor (D-AR), Arlen Specter (R-PA), and John Sununu (R-NH).

44. The legislation was S. 1545 and H.R. 2574.

45. Remarks by George W. Bush at White House press conference, May 24, 2007.

In addition, Bush decided to sign legislation that established 18 benchmarks for Iraqi progress on political, security, and economic issues, even though he had previously opposed such a measure.<sup>46</sup> Congressional aides involved in it said that the benchmarks measure, which was less polarizing than bills concerning the military deployment, was influenced by the study group.<sup>47</sup> But the legislation did not require that future aid to Iraq be conditional on the Iraqi government meeting the benchmarks, as the commission proposed. Some other relatively uncontroversial study group proposals were also enacted by Congress or adopted unilaterally by the Bush administration in 2007. For instance, appropriations for training Iraqi security forces increased sharply from the previous year (Kirchhoff 2009, 157).

Bush's return to the study group report was probably motivated in part by a desire to preempt the enactment of legislation, such as the Salazar-Alexander bill, that would challenge administration policy more directly. In this respect, he was successful: the benchmarks legislation was the only significant Iraq bill enacted by the Democratic-led Congress over Bush's resistance in 2007. Ironically, Reid and Pelosi helped him on this score, as they worked successfully to prevent the Salazar-Alexander bill from coming up for a vote in either house.

The bill came closest to being voted on in the Senate in July after Salazar reintroduced it as an amendment to the defense appropriation bill. However, Reid pulled the appropriations measure from the floor on July 18 without allowing the amendment to be voted on (Murray and Kane 2007).<sup>48</sup> Reid's opposition to the measure stemmed at least in part from his view that the legislation would diminish the political advantage held by Democrats on the war. One Democratic congressional aide said, "As long as the Iraq war is in Bush's court, it's good for us. As long as Bush owns the issue, we win politically."<sup>49</sup> A *New York Times* reporter wrote similarly that Reid opposed the measure because "it would let Republicans appear to be taking action against an unpopular war" (Herszenhorn 2007). The bill's supporters were stymied in the House too, where the Rules Committee turned down their requests to allow a vote on the bill on the House floor.<sup>50</sup>

The Bush White House also worked to prevent the Salazar-Alexander bill from passing. On July 11, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley went to Capitol Hill to urge Republican senators not to back the measure (Bresnahan 2007). This led Alexander to comment, "The President and the Senate Democratic leader are working against [the bill]. One says it is toothless, the other says it has too many teeth" (Zeleny 2007).

In fact, the bill had enough support that it may have passed both houses if Bush, Pelosi, and Reid had not actively opposed it. The bill's cosponsors in the Senate included Robert Bennett (R-UT) and Judd Gregg (R-NH), who were informal members of the Republican Senate leadership. Their cosponsorship indicated, according to a Republican congressional aide, that "in the absence of strong White House opposition, a majority of

46. This legislation was Public Law 110-28, enacted on May 25, 2007.

47. Interview of congressional aides, May 2008 and July 2008.

48. Reid did not bring the appropriations measure back to the floor until October, by which time support for the Salazar-Alexander bill had diminished.

49. Interview of congressional aide, November 2007.

50. Interview of Frank Wolf, October 2, 2007; interview of congressional aide, October 2007.

the Republican caucus would have voted for the bill.”<sup>51</sup> It is less likely that the measure would have gained the support of most Democrats because a majority of the Democratic caucus, like the base of the party, favored establishing a firm deadline for withdrawing troops. But the bill already had dozens of Democratic House and Senate cosponsors, suggesting that it had the potential to be approved.

As it turned out, the moment of opportunity for enacting the Salazar-Alexander bill did not last long. By the time Congress returned from recess after Labor Day, there were strong signs that the counterinsurgency strategy being carried out by General David Petraeus, in conjunction with the Sunni Awakening, was starting to make Iraq more secure. (That September, 1,200 Iraqi civilians died violently, down more than 50% from the average monthly totals of the previous year.<sup>52</sup>) This improvement, combined with the high regard in which members of Congress held Petraeus, took the wind out of the sails of efforts to legislate major changes in Iraq policy. The 16 cosponsors of the Salazar-Alexander bill started to fracture, and the bill was never reintroduced.<sup>53</sup>

### Influencing a Future President

Ironically, the study group ultimately had its greatest impact through a member of the Senate who did not cosponsor the Salazar-Alexander bill: Barack Obama. Like Pelosi and Reid, Obama did not endorse the Salazar-Alexander bill because it lacked binding language establishing a timeline for withdrawing troops. But Obama’s own Iraq platform during the presidential campaign was heavily influenced by the study group report.

Obama had first expressed a public position on the Iraq War during its buildup in 2002, when he told an antiwar rally in Chicago that an invasion of Iraq would be “dumb” and “rash,” and would lead to a “U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences.”<sup>54</sup> After entering the Senate in 2005, he adopted a lower profile on Iraq policy: for nearly two years, he did not articulate a plan for how the United States should seek to end the war. This began to change in late 2006, as Obama prepared to declare his candidacy for the presidency. On November 20, he delivered a speech that called for a phased redeployment from Iraq, stepped-up training of Iraqi security forces, and engagement with Iraq’s neighbors.<sup>55</sup> It was not simply a coincidence that these ideas were consistent with what the study group had recommended a couple of weeks later: the study group’s proposals had started to be leaked to the press that November, and Obama had discussed ideas for the speech with Lee Hamilton before delivering it.<sup>56</sup>

Shortly after the study group reported, Obama decided to introduce legislation based largely on its proposals. Mark Lippert, Obama’s foreign policy aide in the Senate,

51. Interview of congressional aide, March 2008.

52. These figures are from <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/> (accessed August 8, 2010).

53. Interview of congressional aide, March 2008.

54. Remarks of Barack Obama, Federal Plaza in Chicago, October 2, 2002.

55. Remarks of Senator Barack Obama, “A New Way Forward in Iraq,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, November 20, 2006.

56. Interview of Ben Rhodes, July 7, 2010.



drafted this bill with Obama advisors Anthony Lake, Susan Rice, Denis McDonough, and Ben Rhodes—a group that became the core of Obama’s foreign policy team during the presidential campaign. Rhodes’s role was particularly important because, as Hamilton’s special assistant, he had been a key study group staff member and had drafted parts of the commission’s report. Obama’s advisors asked him to write the commission’s main ideas into the Iraq legislation.

On January 30, 2007, Obama introduced the measure in the Senate. The bill, called the Iraq War De-Escalation Act of 2007, stipulated that one of its purposes was to provide “for the implementation of key recommendations of the Iraq Study Group.”<sup>57</sup> The measure mandated a “gradual” withdrawal of U.S. troops, to be “executed at a pace to achieve the goal of the complete redeployment of all United States combat brigades from Iraq by March 31, 2008, consistent with the expectation of the Iraq Study Group.” It went on to authorize retaining troops in Iraq after that date for the sole purposes of training Iraqi forces, conducting counterterrorism operations, and protecting American personnel—the same missions recommended by the commission. In addition, it followed the study group in requiring that economic assistance to Iraq be conditioned on Iraqi progress in meeting benchmarks, and in mandating that the United States undertake regional and international diplomatic initiatives with respect to Iraq. In all of these ways, the bill was patterned on the study group’s proposals. Rhodes noted, “It was intended to incorporate the study group report pretty clearly.”<sup>58</sup>

However, the bill departed from the study group report in an important way. Although the commission had said that it could support a short-term deployment of additional troops to Iraq, Obama’s measure prohibited the number of U.S. troops in Iraq from exceeding the number deployed on January 10, 2007 (i.e., the number before Bush’s surge). This meant that if Obama’s bill was enacted, the surge could not take place. Obama’s measure was also different from the Salazar-Alexander bill in a couple of other key respects: whereas their bill only included statements about a troop pullout and regional diplomacy as “sense of the Congress” provisions, Obama’s legislation made them binding policy. On the whole, therefore, Obama’s bill, which only attracted three cosponsors and did not come up for a vote, was more sharply opposed to Bush’s policy than either the study group report or the Salazar-Alexander bill. These differences surely stemmed both from Obama’s long-standing opposition to the war and the need for him to gain the votes of strongly anti-Bush and antiwar voters in order to win the Democratic presidential primary.

While using his antiwar credentials to appeal to the Democratic Party’s liberal base, Obama clearly sought to tap into the study group’s political credibility to help demonstrate that his Iraq proposals were sound. Anthony Lake, who directed Obama’s foreign policy campaign team with Susan Rice, commented that the study group “offered political cover and legitimacy to critics of the Iraq war and gave them a positive alternative approach to the war.”<sup>59</sup> Obama presidential campaign brochures mailed to

57. This bill was S. 433.

58. Interview of Ben Rhodes, July 7, 2010.

59. Interview of Anthony Lake, May 21, 2009.

voters throughout the country declared that his Iraq plan was “consistent with the goals of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group.”<sup>60</sup> This seal of approval was particularly valuable to Obama because he had limited national security credentials.

At the same time, according to Lake and Rhodes, the commission’s bipartisan approach genuinely appealed to Obama.<sup>61</sup> Rhodes said, “Obama thought the study group reflected a serious effort to figure out how to end the war in Iraq, not just an effort to arm Democratic members of Congress with anti-administration talking points.” Lake added that the study group’s influence on Obama’s Iraq plan was facilitated by his personal relationships with Hamilton, who was a trusted informal advisor, and Rhodes, who became Obama’s foreign policy speechwriter.<sup>62</sup>

The plan laid out in Obama’s Iraq bill remained his Iraq stance throughout the presidential campaign, and has served as the foundation for his Iraq policy as president. Obama’s February 2009 Camp Lejeune speech, which was written by Rhodes, adopted most of the central elements of the study group report and Obama’s Iraq bill as American policy. The only significant differences between Obama’s presidential policy and his campaign plan were that, as president, Obama moved forward the date for ending the combat mission to August 31, 2010, and did not announce an intention to make further economic aid to Iraq conditional on its progress toward benchmarks. Obama implemented this policy during his first 19 months in office by reaching out to Iran and Syria, shifting the American military mission from counterinsurgency to counterterrorism and training, and reducing the number of American troops from 140,000 to 50,000.

Aside from the difference on conditionality for economic aid, it is striking how closely Obama’s policy as president has tracked what the study group proposed. Of course, the commission was not solely responsible for shaping Obama’s Iraq plan, and Obama surely would have proposed withdrawing troops from Iraq regardless of the study group, given his long-standing opposition to the war. But Obama’s policy on issues such as diplomatic engagement and the retention of noncombat troops in Iraq might have been significantly different without the commission’s recommendations on these controversial issues. During the presidential primary, Obama faced pressure from the Democratic Party’s base and from opponents such as John Edwards and Bill Richardson to call for pulling out all troops from Iraq; tying his plan to the study group’s credibility helped him resist that pressure. In addition, the study group’s proposal to engage Iran and Syria, which was approved by most Americans in opinion polls, may have given Obama greater confidence to call for holding talks not only with those countries, but with American adversaries in general, as he did later in the presidential campaign (Pickler 2007).

## Conclusion

The response to the Iraq Study Group illustrates both the limitations of blue-ribbon commissions and their potential to influence public opinion and drive policy

60. Undated Obama for America campaign flyers possessed by the author.

61. Interview of Anthony Lake, May 21, 2009; Interview of Ben Rhodes, July 7, 2010.

62. Interview of Anthony Lake, May 21, 2009.

change. Their principal limitation, given their lack of formal policy-making power, is their general inability to force the president and Congress to compromise on a highly salient issue marked by high levels of partisanship and polarization among national leaders. On Iraq policy, Bush, Pelosi, and Reid had little incentive to adopt a middle-of-the-road solution marked by a gradual withdrawal from Iraq. For Bush, such a withdrawal would have been tantamount to admitting defeat in Iraq, whereas for the congressional leaders, it would have diminished the Democratic Party's strong political advantage on the war. Sometimes partisan divides are simply too great for commissions to overcome.

Yet the study group's story also shows how commissions can nevertheless have a substantial impact on an issue as salient as wartime strategy. Despite the cool reception that the commission received from Bush, Reid, and Pelosi, the study group had several important effects. First, it turned public opinion more sharply against the war, placing added pressure on Bush to shift course, as he did one month after the study group reported. The American people's strong support for the commission's proposals also indicated that the public was less polarized than the leaders of the Republican and Democratic parties.

Second, the study group became the focal point for legislative initiatives by centrist Democratic and Republican members of Congress, who sought to enact nearly all of the commission's proposals into law. Although Reid and Pelosi prevented this legislation from coming up for a vote, its cosponsorship by a bipartisan group of 78 senators and representatives further revealed the powerful appeal of a unanimous commission report.

Third, the study group shaped Obama's plan for winding down the Iraq War, which became the foundation for his policy as president. This effect has been the least noticed, but it has turned out to be perhaps the most important. Considering that the study group also said that it could support a short-term surge, U.S. policy since 2007 has followed its prescriptions to a remarkable extent, though on a later timeline than the commission suggested. The broader lesson of the study group's impact on Obama is that the bipartisan credibility of commissions can make their proposals very attractive to policy makers or candidates seeking to demonstrate that their policies are sound.

This case study also reveals that the creation of a commission can be an effective way for members of Congress to challenge the president's dominance of war policy. Legislators such as Frank Wolf and John Warner pushed for creating the study group because they were concerned that the Bush administration's Iraq policy was failing, and that this failure was hurting both the United States and the Republican Party. Whereas it was difficult for members of Congress to force a change in Iraq strategy—and for many Republicans, such as Wolf and Warner, the prospect of publicly attacking the administration's policy was unappealing—the establishment of a commission offered legislators a way to generate a high-profile critique of existing policy and politically credible recommendations for shifting course. The study group was quite successful in this respect, as its hard-hitting report attracted broad public support and helped prod Bush to adopt a new strategy.

Some commentators see the creation of a commission by Congress as an abdication of the legislature's responsibility for overseeing and formulating policy (Smock and Bruns

2010). While it is true that Congress should exercise its oversight responsibilities more vigorously, the formation of a commission is better seen as a creative means for Congress to create an additional check on the executive branch. Moreover, in an age of extreme partisanship and polarization, commissions sometimes represent our best hope for generating proposals that attract support from Democrats and Republicans.

In August 2010, Wolf sent a letter to Obama calling for the creation of a commission, modeled on the Iraq Study Group, to examine U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>63</sup> Wolf asked Obama to form the commission by executive order, but said that he would seek to establish it through a legislative vehicle instead if Obama did not do so. With the United States struggling to turn the tide against the Taliban and public and congressional support for the Afghanistan deployment diminishing, a commission's independent assessment could be quite valuable. Whether such a commission could forge bipartisan agreement on "Af/Pak" policy is unclear, but the lesson of the Iraq Study Group is that it would almost certainly have important political effects.

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