

Alan Simpson talks about Iraq Study Group

by Copley News Service

Alan Simpson, a Republican who represented Wyoming in the United States Senate from 1979 to 1997, was one of 10 members of the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan panel established at the urging of Congress to provide an independent analysis of the war in Iraq and to recommend possible strategic changes in U.S. involvement in the war. The panel presented its report to President Bush, the Congress and the public earlier in December. He also was a co-author of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which, though still controversial, remains the most comprehensive immigration reform legislation enacted in this country in decades. Simpson was interviewed Dec. 14 by the San Diego Union-Tribune editorial board.

Q: You just participated in the Iraq Study Group. What is your general impression of the situation in Iraq and what do you think should be done?

A: Here was 10 guys - nine men and one woman - who were a creation of Congress who sat down from March until Dec. 6 and decided that if we couldn't agree unanimously that we would disband. That there would be no one filing a dissenting report and covering their fanny while the rest of us went over a cliff. We never used terms like Democrat or Republican. We were all deeply concerned American citizens looking at what was to us one of the most vexatious things that we've seen in our lifetime. So we had access to all these resources of the federal government. We had experts that we sat at tables with - 20 or 30 at a time for half a day. Any question we asked was answered within 24 hours. And we just kept plowing. And (former Secretary of State) Jim Baker and (former Rep.) Lee Hamilton were superb (co-chairmen). And we were all people who enjoyed each other, trusted each other, respected each other and dug deep into what we should be doing - not what would be politically palatable, but what had to be done with what we saw on the ground. And we were doing nicely in anonymity until suddenly the confluence of the election of a Democratic House and Senate and the deterioration of things in Iraq. And suddenly the arc light falls on us. We never said we had all the answers. We said we had certain recommendations and we made them, 79 of them.

Q: What is your view of the Bush administration's reaction to the report so far?

A: We visited with the president. We had a 7 a.m. breakfast without breakfast. We went around the table. Jim and Lee spoke. And then we went around the table. The president I think at first was thinking, "Well, what's this?" And then everyone spoke and told about their view in just two or three minutes' worth. The only thing that we found that was positive in Iraq was the army. There isn't anything else that's positive. The militia and the police are criminals, marauders, rapists, pillagers, wear uniforms and go kill somebody else. They're monstrous. The corruption is endemic.

Q: Was it a mistake to disband the army then?

A: You're not going to get me to say anything about how we got here. Our whole job was what the hell do we

do now? The president listened. I said, "You know we're not here to vex or embarrass you. I'm not here to do that to you, Mr. President." And we knew he wouldn't (accept the group's recommendation to begin a diplomatic initiative with Iran and Syria). It's a pill that's unswallowable. But we visited with Iranian officials up in New York. And as Baker and Hamilton said, we sat with an open phone line with the Soviet Union for 40 years while they were going to blow our ass off. We had embassies and diplomats there. What was wrong with that? Somebody tell me? The right wing has gone goofy on that recommendation. Absolutely stupefying goofy. And let them stay out there. I don't know how you solve anything by giving each other the ice treatment. Why would you want to isolate Iran and think that that was going to be good for you? Why would you want to isolate Syria and think that would be good for you?

Q: After the press conference on your report, Richard Pearle called it absurd, Rush Limbaugh called it absurd, the New York Post called Baker and Hamilton the surrender monkeys. It was amazing how quickly the fire came at you, mostly from the right. What was behind that and is that something the president can stand up to?

A: I don't know. The left was saying that we were there just to cover the president's butt. I was surprised at the intensity of it from the right. About talking to Iran. I frankly don't get it. Unless you want to just bomb them away.

Q: Address this issue that those who say the report's recommendations are basically nothing more than a face-saving formula for getting out of Iraq, that this amounts to defeat if these policies are pursued.

A: First of all, we never used the word "victory." We never used the words "stay the course." We never used the words "cut and run." These are talk-show phrases to get people all worked up. And that's what's wrong with America. You want to know what's wrong with America? You turn Rush Limbaugh and Al Franken loose on the world every day and you're going to pay your dues from that. That's my view. But those recommendations (to withdraw U.S. forces by January 2008) were because we were convinced that you can't win this war militarily.

Q: The joint chiefs said the same thing to the president yesterday (Dec. 13).

A: We said it even before the joint chiefs. We can't win this war militarily. So what do you do? You go back to the American people and say we need 200,000 more troops and it's only going to cost you instead of \$2 billion a month it will cost you maybe \$3 billion a month? Now you've got a new Democratic Congress. There will be no more of these supplemental appropriations of \$80 billion or \$100 billion with no explanation whatsoever. That fun and games is over. This isn't a civil war. The civil war was like the North and the South or the Serbs and the Croats or Ireland. This is chop them up, Charley. This is within your own sect you're destroying people. Within with your own neighborhood. This is something that we don't understand, never will understand. All I can say is that the country is in chaos.

Q: The study group's position is that the Iraqi army appears to be a unifying institution?

A: Yes. The ones that are there. I can't remember how many brigades it is. But those brigades get up in the morning and salute an Iraqi flag. I was in the military. We saluted an American flag in the morning. Didn't care whether we were from Wyoming or New Jersey. I can't speak for all 10, but we just felt that the Iraqi army will work and is working more importantly as a cohesive, non-sectarian force.

Q: Having gone through this study group process yourself, on a personal level did you learn anything that changed how you might have viewed the war in 2003 or 2004?

A: Sure. I thought it was a good thing (to invade Iraq). I was just like every other American, looking at Colin Powell showing the figures to the U.N. and all those photos. And, hey, if that's what (Saddam Hussein) has got over there, take him out. I was like everybody. But yes, I changed my view. After listening to the military situation over there, where you've got the most sophisticated equipment the world has ever known and some dizzy bastard with a little piece of pipe and an explosive device can take you out. I said how does that happen to the most sophisticated fighting force in the world? So the whole thing was a puzzle.

Q: What do you hope will come from engaging Iran and Syria?

A: I don't know what will happen to open the door to Iran, but I'll bet you one thing: It'll be better than isolating them. We kept coming back to one thing. If you get into direct negotiations and get something done with the Palestinian-Israeli issue, at least with Palestinians who recognize (Israel's) right to exist, many problems in that part of the world will begin to settle.

Q: Do you have any sense whether President Bush is more inclined to stubbornly stick to his guns and stay there or whether he's tempted to think of his legacy and follow your recommendations?

A: He's going to wait til January and then it won't be that he "followed the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group." It will be that he followed the recommendations of four separate groups: the Iraq Study Group, the Pentagon Study Group, the intelligence group, the joint chiefs. That he weighed the issues and from all of that he'll make that address in January. He won't say there was a mistake made, that will never come. But he will say we need a new way forward. That's what we call our report, a new way forward. A new approach. And he'll say "Here it is."

Q: You paint a pretty pessimistic assessment of the situation. What do you think the prospects are that we can work our way through this and leave behind a stable government in Iraq?

A: I don't know. I just know you have to start. A stable government in Iraq can only come by a new diplomatic offensive. You have the Arab world and Israel and all the surrounding people around Iraq at the table. And things will come out of that that will never come out of anything by us just being there. We can't be an occupying force forever.

Q: Have we lost the opportunity to have democracy there?

A: I don't know. I'll tell you one witness - I'll never forget this - said: You know what it's like? It's like somebody getting out of a 30-year coma and you're at their bedside, they've been in a coma for 30 years, and you say what do you want most? And he's just about to say food and water and they say no, it's going to be a vote and democracy. There's no word for citizen in the Muslim vocabulary. The word citizen does not appear. There's no definition of a citizen.

Q: On another subject dear to you, what do you think needs to happen with immigration?

A: First thing is you've got to have a more secure identity card. And it's got to be real. And it might have embedded in it the maiden name of your mother or something and it's not used for law enforcement. It's not carried on your person.

Q: So a card that would be used solely for ...

A: Twice in your life. When you go to get a job or go to apply for a benefit at a state, local or federal government. Two times in life when you present it. And the rest of the time if somebody says have you got your national ID on you, no, I don't need it. And you've got to do something with the illegals that are here. You don't go hunt them down. You're going to have to have some kind of legalization process. A 700-mile fence isn't going to solve too much, in my mind.

Q: You've been critical of guest worker programs and said there is nothing more permanent than a temporary worker because they have families here and stay here. Can you do a guest worker program in this country where you bring in new people where it doesn't end up in a Bracero program.

A: I think you can do it. You've got to have some kind of legalization and you have to have a guest worker program.

Q: Do you feel the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was a failure?

A: Well, yes, because the failure was the administrations that administered it never carried it out. They never enforced it. So it was a failure. It wasn't a failure because of the language. It was a failure because nobody would do what you had to do.

Q: Can you expand on that? You said lack of resources is a bad excuse. What is behind the benign neglect the last 20 years?

A: Big business.

Q: Is it as simple as that?

A: Sure.

Q: So tell me what it was like, the federation of independent business lobbyists coming to your office twice a year and saying please don't allocate money?

A: They never came to my office. They went to the people higher than I in the administration and said don't knock us out of business, this is America.

Q: Do you think the Republicans will nominate John McCain for president in 2008?

A: I don't know. I'm getting a lot of stuff from Rudy Giuliani because I'm active in the Republican Party. And Mitt Romney. They're out there. And Rudy's I guess got himself a campaign guy. I like Rudy. I know him personally. And I know Romney because I was up in Massachusetts for four years. He's a good man. I think McCain is a very good man. But I think fresh faces have their appeal. Ask Barack Obama.

Q: What about Obama? You've got ties older than him.

A: I know it, I do. I saw him two or three weeks ago and I said, you know, let me tell you something. You're a remarkable young man but remember the arc light is shining on you like the sun. And the media will put it on you and you will be the toast of the town. And then after a little while they'll realize they've lost their objectivity and they'll come back and you'll feel the sting. So don't fly too close to the sun, like Icharus.

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