

Better Late Than Never

By [Michael Tomasky](#)

["Work Hard, Study...and Keep Out of Politics!": Adventures and Lessons from an Unexpected Public Life](#)

by James A. Baker III, with Steve Fiffer
Putnam, 460 pp., \$28.95

[The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward—A New Approach](#)

by James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton, co-chairs
Vintage, 142 pp., \$10.95 (paper)

Shortly after 10 PM on the night of Tuesday, December 12, 2000, in Tallahassee, Florida, James Addison Baker III received a telephone call from George W. Bush, who was in Austin, Texas, that night and already in his pajamas. The United States Supreme Court had just handed down the decisions in *Bush v. Gore*. There was much confusion in both Democratic and Republican camps as lawyers and aides scrambled to interpret the decisions. Television reporters, reading the opinions for the first time on the air, offered wildly differing (and ill-informed) interpretations. Bush's strategist Karl Rove, watching one channel at campaign headquarters in northern Virginia, concluded that the Court had decided in his candidate's favor and called the Texas governor to congratulate him. Bush, watching another channel that was spinning the decisions differently, thought the opposite.

Bush may have been confused about the decisions' meaning, but he had no doubts about whom to call as his final authority on the matter. James Baker, the old family friend whose rise to prominence owed everything to the help of his close friend from Texas George H.W. Bush, had not been involved in the campaign, by Bush Jr.'s choice. But Baker had been summoned by Don Evans, the Bush-Cheney campaign chairman (and current commerce secretary) to orchestrate the thirty-six-day partisan knife-fight on Bush's behalf—

it was Baker who decided, on November 11, to go to federal court to block a statewide recount (a move that, according to the legal commentator Jeffrey Toobin, took "stunning bravado—or, seen in a different light, hypocrisy"^[1]). And now, a month later, the highest federal court in the land had indeed decided in his candidate's favor. When he picked up the phone, Baker writes in his new memoir, "I answered with a smile. 'Good evening, Mr. President-Elect.'"^[2]

Baker is so famous for his service as secretary of state that it can be easy to forget that he has spent the better part of his thirty years in the public eye not as a diplomat but as a sought-after, and cunning, political operative. When Gerald R. Ford's 1976 reelection campaign against Jimmy Carter was flagging under the chairmanship of Rogers Morton, Ford asked Baker—at that point with barely a year's experience in national politics, as the number-two man in the Commerce Department—to take over as campaign chairman. That was the first of five presidential campaigns Baker led. Likewise, in his four-plus years as Ronald Reagan's chief of staff between 1981 and 1985, Baker,



James Baker

while certainly immersed in policymaking, spent much of his time putting out political fires:

One of my major responsibilities was to protect the president. The chief of staff is, among other things, a catcher of javelins aimed at the president—by political adversaries, by the press, and—surprisingly, perhaps—by members of his own political party. Those last kind come in from close range and are usually unexpected.

Baker was named Reagan's treasury secretary in 1985, and he became secretary of state in 1989, thanks to George H.W. Bush, the old friend and tennis doubles partner whom he had helped elect president. They were eventful times—the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the end of apartheid in South Africa, China's massacre of students in Tiananmen Square, Slobodan Milosevic's war in the Balkans, and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Baker's doggedly realist approach to foreign policy served the country well at times—restructuring Europe after the collapse of the East, building the coalition to repel Hussein's invasion—and quite badly on other occasions, most notably in the Balkans ("we don't have a dog in that fight"). He left the post prematurely—when Bush called on him to invigorate his 1992 reelection campaign, Baker found it "hard to leave the best job I'd ever had" but "could not say no to my friend." He is polite about it in his new memoir *Work Hard, Study...and Keep Out of Politics!*, but one needn't read very hard between the lines to see that the man who had finally, after all the years of messy political work, earned the right to think of himself as a statesman resented returning once again to the rank of mere fixer.

It becomes obvious to the reader of this memoir that whether Baker, now seventy-six, will be remembered as statesman or political hired gun is a matter of great concern to him. By his own admission, Florida looms large in this question—as indeed it should. In this brusquely self-laudatory memoir that is almost wholly lacking in introspection, Baker reports one exchange that is strikingly out of character with the rest of the book and that

seems to have pricked his conscience just a bit. After he accepted the job of leading the Florida recount strategy, he writes, he had a conversation with Robert Strauss, a fellow Texan and old Democratic fixer in his own right. Strauss warned him: "You're going to get hurt by this. Florida is going to be a tough legal and political brawl that will be very emotional with both sides. It could diminish your aura as a statesman." Twenty-three pages later, he returns to the Strauss quote, asking whether Strauss was right. On the page, he announces himself satisfied that Florida was a "unique and historic event" and that he was "proud to have been able to play a successful part in it." But it seems clear that Strauss rattled him. And his current efforts concerning Iraq suggest that he was waiting for an opportunity to seize once again the mantle of statesmanship, to demonstrate that he could, after all, put country before party and the fate of two nations before that of a president he did so much to put in office.

The young Baker had little need for introspection—his life, which he discusses in this volume for the first time (his previous memoir covered only his years at the State Department), was shaped for him by a heritage that he embraced without apparent reservation. Born in 1930, he was in fact the fourth, not third, James A. Baker in his family.^[3] His great-grandfather was an Alabama Scotsman who went to Houston in 1852 after the death of his first wife. He became a friend of General Sam Houston and eventually joined the law firm that came to bear, and still bears, the family name, Baker, Botts.

Grandfather, called "Captain" Baker, achieved greater fame still. At a time when Houston began growing rapidly owing to the discovery of oil, the Captain sat on the boards of banks, utility companies, and railroads; by protecting the estate of William Marsh Rice after Rice was murdered by men who wanted to steal his fortune, he also helped in endowing the institute that became Rice University. The book's infelicitous title

was the gruff Captain's favorite admonition to the young associates who joined the firm. Baker's father, a "strict disciplinarian" who rarely indulged the children save for the private rail car he often hired to take the family to the Texas–Texas A&M game, had an axiom of his own: "Prior preparation prevents poor performance." These were the Five Ps, and Baker III, as he reminds us here and there, has lived by them.

His every intention was to follow the Captain's credo as well, and, for the first forty years of his life, he did so. Like his father, he went to Princeton, majoring in history and graduating in 1952. He joined the Marines; he'd hoped to serve in Korea, he writes, but ended up stationed in the Mediterranean. He married his first wife, Mary Stuart McHenry, an Ohio native whom he had met during a spring break in Bermuda, and went to law school in Austin. An anti-nepotism rule prevented him from joining his father at Baker, Botts (he's a senior partner there today), so he joined another firm, Andrews, Kurth, Campbell & Bradley. Four sons arrived. "Houston," he writes, "was my world, and I never dreamed of living anywhere else or doing anything besides being a lawyer."

But in the pivotal event of his life to that point, in February 1970 Mary Stuart was struck down by breast cancer. The misery was compounded by the fact that he and the boys were now living in the new home that had been his wife's dream house. Baker would come home, help his sons with their homework, then "have a drink to take my mind off things, have a second drink, and then maybe one or two more." He needed something to do. It just so happened that the man he'd befriended years before as his doubles partner in Houston was running for the Senate that year, aiming to avenge his 1964 loss to the liberal Democrat incumbent, Ralph Yarborough. As late as 1970 Baker was still a Democrat. Almost everyone in Texas had been since Reconstruction. The Texas Democratic Party of the era was famously divided between conservatives and liberals, and Baker was very much in the conservative camp, which was, during the mid-twentieth century, segrega-

tionist, pro-business, and very anti–New Deal.^[4] Little imagination or effort was required, then, for him to enlist in a crusade against an outspoken liberal advocate such as Yarborough.^[5] Baker ran Harris County for Bush; he carried the county, and Baker was hooked.

The culture that produced Baker is pretty much the same culture, it seems fair to say, that runs our country right now. It was a culture of confident wealth, country clubs, oil speculation, and ranches of literally thousands of acres; a culture of the great outdoors, of fly-fishing, and most especially of hunting all manner of game from ducks to elk to bear where permissible. It was a place where money was measured differently than in most places (his father, he writes, had warned him that he'd never make the "really big money" practicing law); and a place, and time, where one did better not to talk too much about personal matters. When Mary Stuart was sick with cancer, Baker didn't even tell his sons, then aged seven through fifteen, that their mother was dying (he says he regrets this profoundly). In 1973, when he decided to marry his current wife, Susan—she was a product of the same culture and had been a very close friend of Mary Stuart's—he again shared nothing with his sons, who were, he writes, "shocked" to learn that they had suddenly acquired a new stepmother and three new stepsiblings.

This was the life Baker decided to leave when, through the intercessions of his friend George H.W. Bush, by now a Washington player, he got that job in the Commerce Department. But it was his skill as a political operative, his devotion to the Five Ps, that won him the favor of his party's leaders. He was not a thinker—for one who yearns to be thought of in the same breath as Dean Acheson, Baker has shockingly little to say about the changing course of history. He writes at several points in the book, as if it's a matter of great pride to him, that he reveled in the details and left the big-think to others:

That's how I worked. I would go to my desk every day and cross all the t's and dot

all the i's, then I'd go home. I ran presidential campaigns that way and served presidents that way. I never thought too much about history in the abstract sense. In the back of my mind, I knew the things I was involved in were important; that's one reason I enjoyed public life so much. If I had a theory of history, it was: that if we worked hard and worked smart, we could win each day's battles, and that if we won each battle, we would win the war. To the extent that I had a larger theory, it was that history is shaped by human actions and reactions.

By 1980, he was getting near the top. He managed George H.W. Bush's losing presidential bid, but he did so competently enough that William Casey, Reagan's campaign chief, gave him a job in Reagan's campaign after Bush's folded. Here he met the men, such as Mike Deaver and Ed Meese, with whose names Baker's will always be associated. The three of them, known as "the troika," were Reagan's closest advisers. "Deaver, Baker, and Meese" became a sort of talismanic chant in the early 1980s, and fodder for the likes of cartoonist Herblock and satirist Mark Russell; Meese, of course, joined Baker in the Iraq Study Group. And though he had run two campaigns, Ford's and Bush Sr.'s, against Reagan, Baker impressed the candidate with his judgment and his incessant Five P-ing. Reagan—to Meese's mild disappointment—made Baker his chief of staff in 1981.

The next few chapters of *Work Hard, Study...* dwell on episodes that had been described many times before, like working to pass Reagan's first budget, which came to be known, after the two legislators who fashioned the final bill, as Gramm-Latta. It dramatically raised military spending, lowered taxes, and cut spending on entitlements. In passing the House with the support of sixty-three Democrats, it exposed for the first time the fact that there were profound fissures in the post-Great Society Democratic Party that were ripe to be exploited. This was accomplished with finality in 1986, when Treasury Secretary Baker had a crucial part in the changes to the tax code enacted that year.

The bill, officially sponsored by two Democrats—Richard Gephardt and Bill Bradley—lowered the top marginal rate from 50 percent to 28 percent.

Reading all these years later about age-old controversies—Al Haig's famous assertion that "I am in control here" after the assassination attempt; David Stockman's too-candid interview about the impact of supply-side economics with William Grieder in *The Atlantic*—is, frankly, less than edifying. Baker, discreet in the best of circumstances and intensely devoted to Reagan's memory, adds little new insight to these events, which have all been discussed in many other memoirs and biographies. And he has omitted certain matters according to his own preferences. Baker was and remains close to Nancy Reagan, so Joan Quigley, the astrologer she consulted for guidance on national policy, who got central attention in Donald Regan's *For the Record*, makes no appearance here. Occasional light is shed from Baker's memos and notes, many of which he appears to have saved. From his notes of a conversation during the transition period with his friend Dick Cheney, who had been Ford's chief of staff, we learn that Baker asked Cheney for his advice about the job he was about to take over. Cheney's first suggestion is telling: "Restore power and authority to the executive branch."

By 1988, Baker was in charge as he never had been before, running the presidential campaign of his close friend of thirty years' standing, who trusted him completely. Taking over as campaign chairman in August, Baker joined Roger Ailes, who had advised both Reagan and Richard Nixon, and Lee Atwater, the ruthless young conservative strategist who already, at age thirty-seven, had a string of unsavory practices to his name.^[6] Not coincidentally, it was, many observers agreed at the time, the most negative campaign of the modern era, and one from which Karl Rove undoubtedly learned a great deal. Michael Dukakis's veto as Massachusetts governor of a bill requiring students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and the prison furlough program that released Willie Horton

became the overwhelmingly dominant issues. Baker does not, in this instance, invoke his famous Five Ps, but he thinks the campaign was entirely above board:

But there's also a place in politics for going after the other guy. It is, after all, a contact sport, and has been since at least John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. And going after your opponent is also an appropriate part of politics in a free society. Think about it: what better way is there to explain how your candidate is right than to show how the opponent is wrong? I make no apologies for going after Dukakis on prison furloughs, the Pledge, or anything else. He led with his chin on a lot of these issues, and we used them to take him out.

And so it came to pass that the man who orchestrated a presidential campaign as a contact sport became America's chief representative to the rest of the world. Having delivered himself of 672 pages' worth of accounting of his tenure in his previous book, Baker here recalls what he considers to be the highlights of his term. Under Reagan, he writes, the United States had "hedged its bets on whether glasnost and perestroika represented genuine change or merely a fresh coat of paint on a rotten structure." He and Bush, to their credit, changed that position. Bush offered financial aid to Poland to show support for the reforms inspired by the Solidarity uprising. Addressing the convulsive situation in Nicaragua, Baker arranged with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze that both nations would support free elections there and abide by the results.

After the Berlin Wall fell, Baker "logged tens of thousands of miles" on his Boeing 707 jet across Europe to help settle issues related to German unification and the turning of the other Warsaw Pact states toward the West. Baker surely deserves a measure of credit for their (more or less) smooth transitions into free-market democracies, and he is entitled to emphasize them. On the other hand, he ignores almost completely his low point—his failure to see that the United States did in-

deed have an interest in helping to stabilize a multiethnic democracy in Bosnia against the pan-Serbian aggression of Milosevic. "The Balkans" is mentioned once, in passing.

But the most salient sentences in Baker's chapter on his tenure at State are about Iraq. "For years," he writes, "the question I was most often asked about Desert Storm is why we did not remove Saddam Hussein from power." He explained why in *The Politics of Diplomacy*,^[2] but for reasons that should be obvious he feels compelled to restate them here:

...If Saddam were captured and his regime toppled, American forces would still have been confronted with the specter of a military occupation of indefinite duration to pacify a country and sustain a government in power. The ensuing urban warfare would surely have resulted in more casualties to American GIs than the war itself, thus creating a political firestorm at home. And as much as Saddam's neighbors wanted to see him gone, they feared Iraq would fragment in unpredictable ways that would play into the hands of the mullahs in Iran, who could export their brand of Islamic fundamentalism with the help of Iraq's Shiites and quickly transform themselves into a dominant regional power. Finally, the Security Council resolution under which we were operating authorized us to use force only to kick Iraq out of Kuwait, nothing more. As events have amply demonstrated, these concerns were valid. I am no longer asked why we did not remove Saddam in 1991!

The formation of the Iraq Study Group was announced last March 15. It was created by a \$1 million appropriation inserted into a larger bill by Republican Representative Frank Wolf of Virginia, who directed the money to an independent, non-profit group called the United States Institute of Peace. The institute's president, Richard Solomon, persuaded the heads of two other similar organizations to get behind the effort: David Abshire of the Center for the Study of

the Presidency and John Hamre of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.^[8] Those three men asked Baker and Lee Hamilton, the former Democratic representative from Indiana, to serve as co-chairs.^[9] Baker and Hamilton then chose the other commissioners.

The group's creation was not much noticed; more than a month passed before *The New York Times* even took note of the event.^[10] Originally, its principals were suggesting in interviews that the group might not report back for a full year. No one was clamoring for it to do so any sooner.

Things do change. I was in the Central Hearing Facility of the Hart Senate Office Building the morning of Wednesday, December 6, when the group presented its report to the press and public. Some 250 journalists and perhaps fifty television cameras, a turnout equaled only for the most momentous events, filled the cavernous, paneled room; the ten members sat across a long table on a high stage; Baker and Hamilton stood at a podium in the middle. Baker, who in person exudes all the crisp authority that one would expect of him, directed the show, choosing the journalists who would be permitted to ask questions, leaning forward to say that perhaps Bill Perry—a secretary of defense under Clinton—might address such-and-such a point, steadily but slowly working a piece of chewing gum for the full hour.

At this early juncture, while the group's members are still out peddling their seventy-nine recommendations, and while President Bush awaits a presumably friendlier assessment from his Joint Chiefs of Staff, three points about the report are worth making.

First, it is stunning, in view of the political loyalty that has characterized Baker's behavior over the years, that he would assent to such a frontal assault on the policies of a Republican administration. It is not merely the recommendations, pushing the administration to lower troop levels, negotiate with Iran and Syria, and (most provocative of all) pressure Israel toward some accommodation with the Palestinians. The language of the report itself is clearly designed to say to the administra-

tion and the world: it's a failure. The first forty pages, called "Assessment," describe the realities on the ground in Iraq in merciless detail. The Iraqi army faces "significant questions" about the loyalty of units; the Iraqi police force is in "substantially worse" shape than the army. The political situation is close to hopeless; the economic situation is worse; US reconstruction efforts have failed. The consequences of failure are described in terms more far-reaching than any I've seen:

Ambassadors from neighboring countries told us that they fear the distinct possibility of Sunni-Shia clashes across the Islamic world. Many expressed a fear of Shia insurrections—perhaps fomented by Iran—in Sunni-ruled states. Such a broader sectarian conflict could open a Pandora's box of problems—including the radicalization of populations, mass movements of populations, and regime changes—that might take decades to play out.

Such language recurs throughout the section. To have signed off on it, Baker must feel both horrified at the war and personally betrayed—by the president he helped to gain office, and more emphatically by Cheney, his close friend of thirty years' standing. The two men have regularly hunted together in Wyoming.

Second, the report has set in motion the logic of withdrawal. Bush can repudiate the findings all he wishes, as he, in effect, did at his December 7 press conference with Tony Blair, and the neoconservatives can complain about the report's being tantamount to surrender all they wish. But the important political fact about this report is that it gives wavering Republican legislators, who get an earful from constituents about Iraq every trip home, the excuse they've needed to jump ship. Already nervous about 2008, these legislators—and all the GOP presidential candidates save John McCain, who wants to increase troops—will demand a resolution to the Iraq crisis, and a weakened White House will probably be forced to capitulate to them.

The third point, unfortunately, is that it's hard to envision these recommendations either being fully implemented or saving Iraq

even if they are. The real political problem in Iraq is one of national reconciliation—the Kurds want to be left alone, the Shiites want control after more than a thousand years, and as for the Sunnis, it's difficult to imagine them participating en masse in a federated republic. The ISG devotes fully fourteen of its recommendations to this important matter, chief among them a review of the Iraqi constitution, an accelerated de-Baathification process, and the development of a new oil revenue-sharing formula (for which a scheme was independently mooted by Iraqi leaders on December 8). The goals are the right ones, but they suggest a diplomatic process for which Iraqis have shown little enthusiasm, and the United

States even less aptitude. Indeed it was a Sunni politician, Ayad al-Sammarai, who offered what might have been the sharpest, pithiest assessment of the report: "It is a report to solve American problems, and not to solve Iraq's problems."^[1]

Al-Sammarai could have added that it is a report to solve James Baker's problems, too. Whatever error he feels he may have committed as the political operator who helped install an administration that would create such chaos so blithely, he has tried to undo with the publication of this report. Let us hope that the only benefit of this exercise is not to James Baker's conscience.

—December 13, 2006

Notes

^[1] See Toobin's *Too Close to Call* (Random House, 2001), pp. 47–48.

^[2] Toobin's version has Baker calling Bush.

^[3] In a footnote, he comments that he is Baker III and not Baker IV because "the numbering didn't start until I came along," which still doesn't explain anything.

^[4] Baker says nothing of his own racial attitudes in those days. In his State Department memoir, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War & Peace, 1989–1992* (Putnam, 1995), he notes in passing that his father considered the New Deal "tantamount to socialism" and that he, as a youth, had memorized a piece of anti-Roosevelt doggerel that he would recite for the amusement of his parents and their friends.

^[5] As it turned out, Bush, a sitting congressman at the time from the Houston area, would not run against Yarborough, but against the conservative Democrat Lloyd Bentsen, who upset Yarborough in the May primary. Bentsen went on to defeat Bush in November.

^[6] In a South Carolina congressional race in 1980, Atwater had used "push polling," a practice in which callers are not merely asked questions but guided toward conclusions and then finally told a piece of damning information about a candidate, to "inform" white suburbanites that the Democratic candidate, who was white, was a member of the NAACP. He also told reporters that the candidate, who had undergone electroconvulsive therapy as a teenager, had been "hooked up to jumper cables." There is much more.

^[7] His explanation there is somewhat more thorough; see pp. 436–438.

^[8] After Baker signed on, the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University became a fourth supporting partner.

^[9] A good inside-baseball account of the ISG's formation is by Michael Duffy, "Inside the Commission," *Time*, December 11, 2006. According to Duffy, Hamilton said yes immediately, while Baker first checked with the White House. Also, Solomon, Abshire, and Hamre approached Condoleezza Rice to secure the administration's cooperation in the venture (providing staff, documents, etc.). Duffy writes that the idea was kept secret from Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld while Rice persuaded the President that "the thing was going to happen anyway, so he might as well get on board."

^[10] See Steven R. Weisman, "Baker, Bush Family Fixer, Will Advise President on Iraq," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2006.

^[11] Sudarsan Raghavan, "Threats Wrapped in Misunderstandings," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2006.