

DIPLOMATIC MEMO

Baker, Bush Family Fixer, Will Advise President on Iraq

By STEVEN R. WEISMAN

WASHINGTON, April 23 — In the late 1960's, an anguished President Lyndon B. Johnson sought advice from a respected elder statesman on the Vietnam quagmire. In part because of the private counsel of former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, a onetime hawk turned skeptic on the war, Johnson shifted course in 1968, halting the bombing of North Vietnam and announcing that he would not run for re-election.

The analogy is far from perfect, but Republicans and Democrats are seeing parallels between the quiet designation last month of former Secretary of State James A. Baker III to head up a Congressionally mandated effort to generate new ideas on Iraq and the role of Acheson, who served under President Harry S. Truman.

Mr. Baker, a longtime confidant of the first President Bush who has maintained a close but complicated relationship with the current president, plans to travel to Baghdad and the region to meet with heads of state on a fact-finding mission that officials say was encouraged by both father and son and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

"If you had a health problem, you'd want somebody to give you a second opinion," said Representative Frank R. Wolf, an influential Virginia Republican who helped recruit Mr. Baker for the job. "What the United States needs on Iraq is some fresh ideas from people able to speak out, and no one is more qualified to do that than Jim Baker."

The options that might be available at a time of rapid developments in Iraq, including the moves on Saturday toward establishing the country's first permanent, post-invasion government, are unclear. An official involved in enlisting Mr. Baker, who was granted anonymity because Mr. Baker has asked those associated with the effort not to speak to the press, said it would be a mistake to think that he could find a silver bullet.

"How Baker comes at this will be crucial," the official said. "He's a very shrewd fellow who doesn't want to be window dressing. He could

come up with nothing or it could be a very big deal. To my mind, Dean Acheson and Lyndon Johnson is the model."

At a time of growing American disenchantment with the war, but no real consensus on what better course there might be, the choice of Mr. Baker to lead what is called the Iraq Study Group is filled with historic and familial significance. It is also seen as the most telling sign yet of the administration's willingness to admit that it needs help in weighing its options and generating public support for them.

People close to Mr. Baker say that he was extremely concerned about being seen as second-guessing President Bush's foreign policy aides and made sure to get Mr. Bush's approval in person before he took on the job.

Mr. Baker declined to be interviewed, but at a news conference this month, he said it was not his intention to engage in "hand-wringing about the past" but to focus on the path ahead "on a bipartisan basis in the hope that we can come up with some advice and insights that might be useful to the policy makers in Washington."

He is co-chairman of the group along with Lee H. Hamilton, a Democrat and former congressman who served as vice chairman of the commission that studied the intelligence failures related to the attacks of Sept. 11. Mr. Baker and Mr. Hamilton chose the other members of the group, trying to pick respected people who would be prepared to take a fresh look at the situation, they said.

Among their team are William J. Perry, a former defense secretary under President Clinton; former Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani of New York; the former Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor; and Vernon E. Jordan Jr., a longtime civil rights leader, Washington power broker and confidant of President Clinton.

What gives Mr. Baker's role weight, however, is that while he has never publicly deplored the decision to go to war, he wrote in his memoirs that he had opposed ousting Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf war in 1991 out of concern that it would have

led to an Iraqi civil war, international resentment of the United States and eventual loss of American support for an occupation. He has told colleagues that he feels vindicated.

Two officials involved in setting up the study group, who were granted anonymity because they did not want to be associated with criticism of Ms. Rice, said she resisted it and was unimpressed with its potential to come up with alternatives to what the administration had already been doing.

But Sean McCormack, the State Department spokesman, said Ms. Rice was enthusiastic and is "going to make sure that the State Department provides everything they need to complete their work."

The Iraq Study Group is receiving funds from Congress with the help of Mr. Wolf, who is chairman of the appropriations subcommittee in the House that controls the budget of the State Department. The group has several subgroups, including a set of retired military commanders.

It is getting staff assistance from four academic and policy centers: the United States Institute of Peace, a government-financed entity; the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington; the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University in Houston; and the Washington-based Center for the Study of the Presidency.

Completing the team selected by Mr. Baker and Mr. Hamilton are Robert M. Gates, a former director of central intelligence; Leon E. Panetta, Mr. Clinton's onetime chief of staff; former Senator Charles S. Robb, a Virginia Democrat; and former Senator Alan K. Simpson, a Wyoming Republican.

Some officials involved in the study group say the mission reflects a growing realization inside the Bush administration that the course in Iraq is not working, and dissatisfaction with a foreign policy team that has not successfully trained the Iraqi military or brokered a political order that could win confidence of Iraq's disparate sectarian groups.

This is not the first mission for which the Bush administration has drafted Mr. Baker. Two years ago, Mr. Baker carried out a mission to win debt relief for Iraq. That effort was more successful among Europeans than among Arabs, particularly the Sunni-dominated Persian Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, where distrust of the Shiite-led Iraqi governments remains high.