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## Bush counting on one of 'The Wise Men'

By **MIKE DORNING**

WASHINGTON - In a city of fixers, climbers and vendors of influence, of people who parlay government service into lucrative private-sector employment, there is also a smaller fraternity made up of people with no less fondness for fame, perhaps, but no need for fortune.

Such people are often called "The Wise Men." They are a storied but shrinking club trusted for the soundness of their advice and judgment, not for the favor that can be returned. "Wise Men" are summoned at moments of national crisis, brought in precisely because of their ability to rise above partisan conflict in moments like the Sept. 11 attacks and, now, the Iraq war.

In both crises, official Washington turned to the same quietly resolute Midwesterner to make sense of it all: Lee Hamilton, a 75-year-old former Indiana Democratic congressman with a '50s-era brush cut and a clear-eyed appreciation for the hard realities of foreign policy.

Along with Republican James Baker, former secretary of state and Bush family confidante, Hamilton will convene the Iraq Study Group, a commission of 10 prominent Democrats and Republicans today and Tuesday to prepare recommendations for President Bush on U.S. strategy in Iraq.

"We have not reached agreement at this stage," Hamilton said in a recent interview. "We're working very hard to get a consensus view. That's not guaranteed at this point."

Hamilton - who represented Jackson County in Congress more than 30 years - comes to his assignment with a resume long on matters of substance. He was chairman of the House Foreign Affairs and Intelligence Committees and the committee that investigated the Iran-contra scandal. He helped shape the debate before the Persian Gulf war and on into the deployment of U.S. troops to keep the peace in Bosnia. He was in Washington throughout the period of Vietnam as well.

### Harsh assessment

The Sept. 11 Commission that Hamilton helped lead delivered a harsh assessment of the government's response to the terrorist attacks. That assessment shaped public opinion of the event's ramifications and led to changes in the nation's intelligence apparatus.

In an era of politics dominated by partisan warriors, Hamilton commands respect across party lines. And at a time when retiring members of Congress routinely rush out the door to lobbying firms where they can sell their influence to the highest bidder, he passed up the chance for big money and retains unquestioned independence.

Instead, Hamilton, a former Columbus resident, is living out the final years of his public life as director of an academic-oriented think tank, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution. He lives in the same suburban four-bedroom colonial in Alexandria, Va., where he and his wife raised their children.

### Lifelong learner



Lee Hamilton makes a point during his speech as part of the Leadership Jackson County Distinguished Speaker Series earlier this fall in Seymour. (Tribune photo by Brandy Emily)

When he is not working at his office in the Reagan Building or performing his swimming, bicycling and weightlifting workout regimen, he is apt to be in his study, sitting in his Kennedy rocker.

Often he'll read poetry aloud or continue his lifetime study of religious works, but these days he's more often poring over reports and paperwork on Iraq, said his wife of 52 years, Nancy.

His is nothing if not a serious persona, with an academic bearing, lanky body and perpetually sincere mien, the embodiment of the Wise Man model.

"Lee Hamilton is one of the few of them left," said former New Jersey Gov. Tom Kean, who worked closely with Hamilton on the Sept 11 Commission. Republican Kean was the chairman and Hamilton the vice-chairman.

"If you could name five or six of them now it would be a lot. You used to be able to name 20 or 30," added Kean, who grew up in the capital's power circles as the son of a congressman.

Bitter partisan divisions and changes in Washington's culture have made it harder for such elder statesmen to emerge. Informal ties among political figures, respect across party lines and a shared sense of national purpose helped nurture them.

But gone are the days when Harry Truman, Sam Rayburn and other members of Congress gathered over bourbon and branch at the end of the day or when Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill maintained a convivial after-hours relationship.

Members of Congress typically house their families outside the capital and limit their schedules in Washington to three days a week, so there is little opportunity for socializing among peers. Foreign-policy experts cluster around ideologically like-minded think tanks. Policymakers move up the ladder of government by showing fealty to a single party.

Yet the elder statesman historically played an important if often unseen role in guiding the government at critical moments, using his stature to nudge an administration to rethink an entrenched position or shepherd warring camps toward a settlement.

### **Shades of Vietnam**

The Iraq commission in some respects parallels an informal group of such advisers that President Lyndon Johnson gathered occasionally during the Vietnam War. That group included architects of the United States' post-World War II movement from isolationism to international engagement such as former Secretary of State Dean Acheson and diplomat-politician Averell Harriman.

Those advisers at first supported the Vietnam War but later urged Johnson to de-escalate it and open peace talks with North Vietnam.

The Baker-Hamilton commission, initiated by Congress and only belatedly embraced by the White House, has suddenly taken on huge significance in public expectations for a new direction in Iraq. It is completing its work just as the White House and Pentagon are engaging in their own re-examinations of strategy and Bush has changed leadership of the war effort with his dismissal of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The nominee to replace him at the Pentagon, Robert Gates, was a member of the commission until Bush named him.

Because Baker is a close adviser to the Bush family, he has received much of the attention in media coverage of the panel. But the leverage Hamilton and his Democratic colleagues have in shaping the panel's approach has grown since the party's congressional electoral victories that have been interpreted as a repudiation of Bush's policies in Iraq.

Democratic leaders in the House and Senate have declared they will press for a phased withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq once they take control of Congress in January. Republicans rattled by their election losses appear less anxious to defend Bush's Iraq policies.

So while the White House retains primacy in matters of foreign policy, some level of buy-in from influential Democrats on a new Iraq strategy is more important than ever.



Former 9th District Rep. Lee Hamilton speaks with Priscilla Wischmeier following his speech at a Leadership Jackson County Distinguished Speaker Series luncheon earlier this fall in Seymour. (Tribune file photo by Brandy Emily)

### **Divided waters**

Hamilton is on familiar ground navigating a divided government, noted former Clinton White House chief of staff Leon Panetta, a fellow member of the Iraq commission.

During the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations, Hamilton was deeply influential in negotiations between Congress and the White House on issues such as the U.S. deployment in Lebanon and policy in Central America. During the Iran-contra affair he captured national attention for his folksy but stern admonishments of Lt. Col. Oliver North and other Reagan aides for conducting free-lance foreign policy.

"There were countless situations where you had a Democratic Congress and a Republican White House and he was always at the center, trying to achieve what positive result he could," said Panetta, who also served with Hamilton in the House. "The (House) speakers and leadership on the Democratic side always relied on him to provide counsel into what the Democratic position ought to be."

### **Parents fed service**

Hamilton grew up in Daytona Beach, Fla., Chattanooga, Tenn., and Evansville, Ind., the younger of two sons of transplanted New England parents who had left their home region for his father's career as a Methodist pastor. Dinner conversation often covered world events and the two boys often were exposed to out-of-town guests visiting on church business, said Hamilton's brother, Dick.

Their father, Frank, took controversial positions from the pulpit. He preached against racial segregation during the Jim Crow era and delivered sermons against U.S. participation in World War II and the Korean War even though many of the sons of his congregants were fighting in the conflicts, Dick Hamilton said.

"I think both of us admired his courage and honesty and his ability to do that in a way that did not alienate people from him fundamentally. Even though people disagreed with him, he was still welcome in their homes and he never felt threatened in his ministry," said Dick Hamilton, a retired Methodist pastor who lives in Indianapolis.

As a youth, Lee Hamilton was a star athlete who played basketball for DePauw University in Indiana and later was inducted into the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame. After graduating college in 1952, he studied abroad for a year at the Goethe Institute in postwar Germany. He attended law school at Indiana University and worked briefly at a Chicago law firm before choosing the life of a small-town lawyer in Columbus, Ind. He was first elected to Congress in the 1964 Johnson landslide over Barry Goldwater.

Though a focus on foreign affairs offered no obvious political benefit for a representative of a

conservative rural district in southern Indiana, Hamilton spent his entire 34 years in the House on the Foreign Affairs Committee, now called the International Relations Committee.

### **Breaking with LBJ**

He captured national attention early on when, as president of the freshman class of lawmakers, he wrote President Johnson an open letter in 1965 urging a "pause" in the rush of Great Society legislation, an early sign that Johnson's liberal program was testing political limits. He cemented a reputation for independence in 1967, one year after Johnson campaigned for Hamilton's re-election, by breaking with the president again to sponsor one of the first amendments proposing to scale back the U.S. military presence in Vietnam.

He vigorously opposed congressional authorization of the Persian Gulf war in 1991 and supported the Clinton administration's deployment of troops to enforce peace accords in Bosnia.

"Lee truly was a multi-lateralist and considered the use of force a last resort," said Rep. Howard Berman, D-Calif., a friend and longtime colleague on the International Relations Committee. "I don't think Baker is a guy who can roll over Lee."

### **Consensus-builder**

In Congress, he gained a reputation as a moderate and cautious consensus-builder who sought to persuade through carefully constructed argument rather than prevail by political machination.

"Lee was one of the most respected members of Congress, and his level of respect has escalated in his post-congressional service," said Republican Rep. James Leach of Iowa, also a senior member on the International Relations panel. "He brings a common-sense Midwestern perspective firmly rooted in a non-ideological realism."