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PERSONAL FOR AMBASSADORS

IRAQ LIMITED

YOUR VISIT TO WASHINGTON: MIFT

SUBJECT: PERSONAL: NOSEC: US/IRAQ: WILL THE PRESIDENT GO TO WAR

SUMMARY

1. Bush does not believe it possible to disarm Saddam without eliminating him. Attempting the UN route offers the best conditions for this. Bush will face tough decisions if there is a UN bust-up or Saddam caves to intrusive inspections. Public support for military action is shallow, but biddable. Thinking is lagging behind on the "day after", even more on the regional fallout from any action.

DETAIL

2. At the end of the Prime Minister's visit to Camp David last month, a small group of us was standing with the President, waiting to walk to the helicopter. Bush suddenly said, without prompting, that it was a terrible responsibility to send young men to war; but if this would bring freedom and democracy to the Middle East, the price had to be paid. Future generations would be grateful. As he said this, he became teary-eyed.

3. Bush wants to be rid of Saddam. He is the prime mover of US policy. He believes that this can be done in the end only by war. To eliminate the danger presented by Iraqi WMD is to eliminate Saddam. Anything short of that, including highly intrusive inspections backed by a new SCR, will not do the trick. Inspections are a tripwire for war.

4. He is intensely suspicious of the UN

There is no guarantee that what may be acceptable to Powell/Negroponte will stick with the White House. State are as nervous as cats about attitudes there and in DoD.

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5. So, in Bush's ideal world, he would be on his way now to Baghdad, with a little assistance from the British and a handful of regional helpers. This is why he is eternally susceptible to those like Cheney and Rumsfeld who think coalition-building is of limited utility and inspections a waste of time (thus their attempt to insert in the UNSCR a pre-inspection tripwire in the requirement for Saddam to make a declaration on his WMD holdings).

6. The analysis above is little different from what I sent just before the PM's last visit (Washington telno 1140). What has happened since is that the forces arguing for more haste, less speed have gathered some strength, sharpening dilemmas for the White House.

7. Bush has bought the argument that it is worth trying to maximise international support by giving the Security Council one last chance. The argument has got stronger as the Administration starts to focus in earnest on "day after" issues: it is one thing to go to war without UN cover, another to rule Iraq indefinitely without benefit of UN backing. Polls tell the White House that Americans are far happier about going to war if they do so in company and under UN cover. Bush is well aware of the British political debate. (Mega-hawk Scooter Libby, Cheney's chief of staff, told me once that the UK was the only indispensable ally for an attack on Iraq). Recent Bush rhetoric has been less inflammatory and he has soft-pedalled on regime change. This has helped him get, by large majorities, the Congressional resolutions which as near as dammit gives him a free hand in Iraq.

8. But the resolutions, now passed, are likely to make Bush increasingly impatient and tough with the Security Council. , he will be doubly frustrated by French obstinacy if it continues (

). His patience could start to expire next week. As I have previously warned, the UK's and US's views of what exhausting the UN process means could suddenly diverge.

9. Most people in Washington see two scenarios, each leading to war: Security Council discussions collapse without agreement, in which case the UN will - in Bush's eyes - have failed the key test; or Saddam flouts a new UN resolution on WMD declarations/inspections, thereby bringing the full force of the international community to bear.

10. The big worry for the hardliners is a third way: that Saddam appears to fold his cards and the US is forced to take 'yes' for an answer. If Saddam is clever, he will give UNMOVIC and the Security Council no cause for complaint for months to come, until the US becomes enmeshed in the 2004 presidential election campaign. Assuming we can get past the current US/French impasse over the SCR, the next argument will therefore be over the trigger. The White House claims to agree with us that there would have to be a pattern of non-cooperation to provide a casus belli:

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I do not think that this is bankable. An important point for you to discuss with Powell is whether, a la First World War, mobilisation has reached such a point that there is an intolerable contradiction between the preferred military timetable and Blix scouring Iraq for months on end.

11. We are not yet at the moment of truth when the irresistible force meets the immovable object: Bush's basic instincts versus Middle East and international realpolitik (and maybe the US economy and voter as well). I appear to be in a minority of one in thinking that if all goes wrong in New York, and the US is faced with going it alone, Bush may blink. Or, to put it another way, what the UK decides to do in these circumstances could be the decisive factor for the White House.

12. MIFT reports US views on the "day after", a confused area of US thinking. Even more underdeveloped is planning for regional fall-out. It is pretty clear that the US will do no more than the minimum to keep ISRAEL/Palestine under control, while it goes for Saddam. Bush has bought the argument that regime-change in Iraq is the panacea for Middle East tensions.

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