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Foreign &
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Dear David

Foreign Secretary's Visit to the US, 20 August 2002

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The Foreign Secretary met the US Secretary of State for two hours before lunch with Mrs Powell and Ambassador and Mrs Lauder at the Lauders' cottage in the Hamptons on 20 August. I was the only other person present at the initial meeting which was dominated by discussion of Iraq. Powell spoke frankly and asked for this record to be seen only by you and the Prime Minister.

Powell said that the Prime Minister's letter to the President had been very timely. The case for doing something straight away was being pressed hard

But Powell was putting the case for a longer haul. Two and a half weeks ago, on his return from Asia, he had seen the President at a private dinner. Condi Rice had been the only other person present.

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What happened next would depend on what principals heard when they got together in ten days' time, in particular about the status of the military plan. The President was also keen to hear the outcome of Powell's meeting with Straw. Unclassified and classified dossiers on the case-for-action were being prepared. True believers would see a smoking gun no matter what. But most of the stuff Iraq was importing was dual-use. It was not clear that the situation was any more serious this year than last. The Foreign Secretary handed over a copy of our own draft document. Although it made clear that Saddam was a very bad man, the contents did not lead inexorably to the conclusion that the only way to deal with him was by military action. Powell agreed - containment had worked.

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The Foreign Secretary said that he had spoken to the Prime Minister the day before on a secure line. The Prime Minister had asked him to stress that the problem was that we had been "outed" long before we had been able to make the case with the public for action. Tony Blair had the same low opinion of Saddam Hussein as George W Bush; he was also signed up to the importance of the relationship with the US, and had moved mountains to ensure that the EU stayed in line with the US. Nonetheless he had been irritated to find himself in his present position because of US hawks. (Powell nodded.) The key issue for the Prime Minister was whether the US wanted an international coalition or not. The US could go it alone, if they wanted that, they had only to tell us. But it seemed to the Foreign Secretary that the case for an international coalition was overwhelming: first for basing and access, and then for what happened after getting rid of Saddam. But also, especially, if things went wrong. In such circumstances the US would need the international community at the scene of the crime - some in Europe were dying to say "told you so". A solo US effort that ended in failure would give those who saw the EU as an alternative power to the US the chance they had been waiting for.

If the US answer to a coalition was "yes", then UN involvement was essential. The Prime Minister's letter had been a little ambiguous on who should issue the ultimatum; yesterday he had been clear that the ultimatum should issue from the UN. He wanted a hard-edged ultimatum with a clear link to military action - but recognised that achieving such a text would be difficult. If Saddam then caved in and accepted inspectors on our terms, the Prime Minister thought that would end the case for military action for the time being. But he thought Saddam unlikely to give in. The Foreign Secretary said that his opinion was slightly different: Saddam was a busker and survivor. Powell agreed that there was a real chance that he would allow inspectors.

The Foreign Secretary said that, for the Prime Minister, building a coalition in respect of the wider world meant working through the UN; building a coalition in respect of the Middle East meant doing something on the Middle East Peace Process. The Prime Minister would be willing to spend time and political capital on the MEPP including holding a peace conference. (Later, Powell returned to this subject, saying that although he had been the principal advocate of a conference he now recognised that, frankly, there were not "enough elements to get it together". He did not see the purpose of holding a conference yet.)

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On the public case, the Foreign Secretary said that our dossier needed a compelling last chapter. We could make a better case than the one we had made so far. Traditional Cold War style containment did not work for WMD. Rogue states did not have as much at stake as the Soviet bloc.

The Foreign Secretary said that he had told the Prime Minister of Powell's more sceptical view of Russia's likely support, but Blair was convinced that securing Russia depended on the price.

On the military side, the Foreign Secretary said that we wondered whether it would work. Powell explained that thinking had developed since the end of July: the "standing start" needed an Iraqi trigger, so US enthusiasm for it had waned. The focus now was on the "generated case".

On the politics, the Foreign Secretary said that if there were action tomorrow the Prime Minister would be in difficulties: the Tories would support; the Lib Dems would oppose; and the Labour Party would be split, and it was not just the usual suspects causing trouble. Respected retired officials (Quinlan/Wright) were also publicly raising doubts. And the lawyers were saying in terms that there were not sufficient grounds for us to support regime change; on military action more generally, they had not definitively opined but had said it would be easier if there were an SCR. On Cabinet opinion, the Foreign Secretary drew attention to the passage in the Prime Minister's letter that "in Britain, right now I couldn't be sure of support from Parliament, Party, public or even some of the Cabinet". He added that, although things obviously did not work this way, if there were a secret ballot in Cabinet tomorrow, it was unlikely that the Prime Minister would win.

On the "day after", the Foreign Secretary said that Iraq had been the artificial creation of the UK in 1921. The country had no experience of democracy and democracy could pull it apart.

At the end of the long discussion about Iraq, Powell said that he took it that the Prime Minister wanted some kind of UN Resolution. Some of his colleagues did not want UN involvement in any shape: it might frustrate their purpose. But he did not think that the evil/moral case worked: there were lots of evil people we did not go after.

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At the (video) meeting last week, he had made the argument that the US was isolated and had slipped badly in the Arab world (because of the Rand briefing) and must make the case in the international community, otherwise the US would be accused of the biggest act of unilateralism, "ten times bigger than Kyoto". So, the US should start making the case in the President's 12 September speech. The Vice-President had come on board - but added the line that we could not allow the UN to stop us if we did not like the way things were going. Importantly, the President had repeated the line that the objective of regime change was getting rid of WMD. Others in the (virtual) meeting had not, he thought, appreciated the importance of what the President was saying; but, for Powell, the logic of the President's position meant that, if WMD were dealt with, regime change would no longer be required.

Powell said that the hawks had not made the terrorism case against Iraq.

He had read about Iraq's terrorist networks but nothing had ever materialised. If you looked back 15 years you could not find an Iraqi threat against the US; Saddam was a "regional bastard". So the US might find itself taking action for the benefit of regional friends who were not keen on that action. The Foreign Secretary said that we had seen no evidence of a link between Al-Qaida and Iraq. He pointed out that Iraq had a secular regime; there was no natural link to the fundamentalist AQ.

Powell said that he was still alone in the Administration, except for the President. The Foreign Secretary said that we supported him and asked how we could help. Powell said that if his strategy was OK'd by the President, the US would need to share with us what they planned at UNGA and need us to back them up in the Security Council.

After lunch, Powell took the Foreign Secretary aside to summarise their Iraq discussion: we were agreed that we had to do something with our public and with the international community. We had to think about the "ultimatum sentence" and recognise that, if Saddam accepted inspectors, military action would be on hold. A key question then was whether we could

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live with a Saddam who had fulfilled the UN mandate. The Foreign Secretary said that it would be harder to make the case for military action if he had been disarmed - and, eventually, Saddam would go. Powell said that war in Iraq would define the first term. He poured scorn on the hawks' beliefs: that a quick triumph was inevitable because Iraqis were waiting to be liberated; and that victory in Iraq would help the MEPP and spread democracy in the region. What would the Syrians and Iranians make of US action - where next? The Democrats were offering tacit support but would turn in a heartbeat if things went wrong.

At the end Powell asked, where is the Prime Minister? The Foreign Secretary said that if he had a free choice the PM wanted to get rid of Saddam. But the more he thought about it the more difficult it looked to the PM. He would stand by the US but he was worried. The UN was the way through. An effort now could be a dry run for later if military action were required. As the PM had said to him, the UN should be seen as an opportunity, not an obstacle.

Yours ever
Simon

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