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DMar  
cc JPo  
AJ

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15 August 2002

Private Secretary  
FCO

Dear Sir,  
IRAQ

*FAXED*  
*@ 1430 IS*  
*19/8*  
*Fax out to PM,*  
*to glance at before*  
*Jack Jones phone call.*  
*Any*  
*19/8*

*✓*  
*Seen by PM.*

In the light of forthcoming meetings you may find it useful to have a snapshot of the public mood and what we are hearing from routine contacts on Iraq.

2. Despite repeated affirmations that no decisions have yet been taken, there is a general assumption that the administration is moving towards military action to remove Saddam. The President and numerous others have put it firmly on record that regime change is the policy of the US Government. The private language of the vast majority of those to whom we speak is "when rather than if". There have been a string of conflicting (and no doubt self interested) leaks from the Pentagon about the feasibility and means of doing this. And the President held a carefully publicised meeting with Franks at the start of this month to look at the military options. Over the past few days we have begun to hear a consistent line from the Administration (Feith to me, Condi to the BBC) on why Saddam should be removed (BW, links to terrorism, threat to neighbouring States, brutal oppressor). And Bolton told me yesterday that the US is planning to run a roadshow in the Autumn about the threat of Iraq's WMD.

This does not mean that the matter is yet settled. The debate on military tactics has died down and is now focussing on some other very big problems. These include widely publicised fears about possible use by Saddam of his WMD, the risk of Israel being drawn in to a war (and possibly retaliating with nuclear weapons to Iraqi BW or CW strikes), concerns too about the impact of any action on the oil market (to which the recent announcement of an expansion of the US strategic reserve may have been linked) and the need to build more international support for US actions. But the most vexed issue is probably the 'day after' question - what does the US do with a conquered Iraq. Burns has told me that they are increasingly thinking in terms of some form of democracy - but recognise that this would need to be propped up by a long term international (ie almost certainly US) security presence. They have of course been working hard on their contacts with the Iraqi opposition (including this week's conference - our telno 1044) to prepare for this eventuality. However the opposition have made clear they want to be in charge - this should not be a 'foreign invasion'. And some Administration contacts are realistic about the democracy objective - the nature of the opposition groups and the political culture of Iraq; and the difficulty of justifying pursuing the conflict if a benign dictator overthrew Saddam.

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4. On the question of timing, and behind all the press froth about imminent action, the one consistent point we have heard from political contacts is the impossibility of action (for 'wag the dog' reasons) before the November elections. The President recently tried to calm the press frenzy by talking about a "patient and deliberate" approach,

5. On international support we have regularly heard that the US only regard a few countries (Turkey, a couple of Gulf States - to provide bases) as absolutely essential. They are confident they can get these. But it is also clear that they feel a strong diplomatic and presentational need for the support, and perhaps involvement, of a few key allies - with the UK close to the top of the list. They of course recognise that allied support would be much easier to achieve if they could get Security Council endorsement for military action. They are already playing the inspections issue in the Council with a view to putting Saddam clearly in the wrong. But they claim they in any case have sufficient legal justification for military action in Saddam's breach of earlier UNSC resolutions. It is highly unlikely that they would go to the Council for further endorsement unless they were 100 per cent sure they would get it. A number of Administration hawks (Rumsfeld, Bolton) have made it clear that in their view the case for regime change would not be affected if Saddam accepted inspectors, on whatever terms.

6. More important than the UN in administration eyes will be US domestic and political opinion. So far the public debate has run rather against the Administration with a number of Republican heavyweights (Dick Arme, Brent Scowcroft) lining up to question the wisdom of military action; the Administration, constrained by the lack of a decided policy, relatively mute; and only the predictable hawks such as Richard Perle arguing in favour. Congress held hearings before the summer break which (although senior officials from Cheney's office and the Pentagon have described them to me as 'helpful') seem to us to have raised more questions than answers (our telno 1018). Nevertheless polls show strong support for action - although diminishing sharply if heavy casualties are involved. Administration contacts are now pointing forward to the resumed hearings, scheduled to start on 16 September, where (unlike in the last round) the Administration itself will be offering testimony and where we are beginning to be told that they will start to make the case for military action. Those who are for such action believe that once the gloves are off they can tip the debate in their direction. They are probably right. A key question is whether the Administration will seek, or be offered, a supportive congressional resolution (not a declaration of war - which no one is contemplating). Such hints as we have seen suggest that they will go for this - not least so that this is not just 'the President's war'.

7. Finally, as the key operational issues come to be addressed (including whether to go ahead at all), there is the balance of power within the Administration. The arch hawks are Rumsfeld and Cheney both of whom firmly support military action and are undeterred by the possible effect on the already inflammable Middle East (indeed they

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believe that successful US action in Iraq would have a salutary effect on other troublesome entities in the region). The instincts of the President himself (and therefore Rice) are likely to be closer to their side than to that of Powell, who is plausibly reported to be arguing the need to take account of international opinion and proceed more cautiously. There is also the political dimension. The Administration will not want to get into a vote losing quagmire - but will also be wary of failing to meet the strong expectations they have now created. The key point about this not unfamiliar pattern of forces is that (eg as on the MEPP) it is normally the Rumsfeld/Cheney faction that prevails.

*Yus en*  
*Way*

Tony Brenton

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