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cc: PUS

Sir A Manning

FROM: Dr Michael C Williams

DATE: 19 August 2002

The Foreign Secretary thought you  
might like to read this

Cc: Mike O'Brien  
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Secretary of State

### THE UNITED STATES AND IRAQ: HISTORICAL PARALLELS

1. In the idle weeks of late July and early August much was written in the press about the possibilities of US military action against Iraq. Little appeared that was of value – with the possible exception of Michael Quinlan's letter to David Manning published in unseemly haste (Financial Times, 7 August). Almost nothing that was written corresponded to relevant historical realities in the period since 1945.

2. As always, it is worth looking back, at stances taken by previous US administrations embarking on the hazardous adventure of war but also of the positions adopted by the Labour governments of Clement Attlee and Harold Wilson. A curious footnote is that when the US has undertaken major military actions – Korea (1950), Vietnam (1965), Kosovo (1999) and Afghanistan (2001) – Labour has been in power on each occasion. The one exception is the Gulf War of 1990/91 when the Conservatives first under Margaret Thatcher and then under John Major were in government.

3. Despite much of the shallow political analysis, especially (sadly) on the left, the United States has not used military force since the Second World War on a substantial scale. (The exceptions to this will be noted). There are two major reasons for this – the absence of an American colonial legacy and the success of containment during the Cold War.

- i. Unlike Britain or France, the US had no painful colonial legacy. The UK fought 'bush-fire' wars in Malaya (1948-60), Kenya (1956-62), Cyprus (1957-63), Aden (1962-66) while France fought lengthy and bloody wars in Vietnam (1946-54) and Algeria (1954-62). The Algerian War alone left a million dead. It should be noted that

none of

these wars were condoned by the UN or even discussed by the Security Council.

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ii. The policy of containment against the Soviet Union, first articulated in 1946, worked well. It is a policy which has mutatis mutandis also worked against Iraq, as Michael Quinlan has noted. I would take issue with him, however, on one critical point. Containment worked against the Soviet Union and Iraq in terms of making clear that offensive military action whether in terms of the Soviets during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 or of aggressive military action by Iraq post 1991 would be met by a massive military response.

4. But while containment has successfully boxed in would be aggressors, it has done nothing to stem the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Thus during the Cold War containment coincided with a massive arms race between the super powers. By the 1960s they had begun to see the dangers of this and entered into agreement to restrict the worse aspects of WMD beginning with the Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty of 1963. In time, further measures of arms control followed including the SALT missile treaties and the Chemical Weapons Treaty. It was in the mutual interest of both superpowers to reach such agreements.

5. Containment has been less successful in dealing with 'rogue states' and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Unlike superpowers, there are no mutual interests between rogue states and the US. Containment, by definition, is an acceptance of the status quo. Is this acceptable with regard to WMD? For the Bush Administration the experience of North Korea has taught it a bitter lesson it does not want to repeat with Iraq.

6. In the early 1990s North Korea was clearly developing nuclear weapons. In an effort to stop that the Clinton Administration reached an agreement with Pyongyang in 1994 to supply it with fuel and build nuclear power plants in return for North Korea not proceeding with nuclear development. This has led to the bizarre spectre of North Korea, one of the world's worst violators of human rights, being the largest recipient of US aid in Asia. Moreover, while North Korea has more or less held to its side of the bargain on nuclear development, it is the worst proliferator of ballistic missiles having sold profusely to Iran, Pakistan, Syria and Libya amongst others. More work needs to be done on linkages between containment and WMD.

#### Past US Military Action

7. Since the end of World War II US military action can be broken down into three major wars – Korea, Vietnam and Gulf – and two recent campaigns, Kosovo and Afghanistan. All point to differing involvement by the UN, the Allies and especially UK governments which, as noted earlier, were largely Labour.

8. In June 1950 North Korea attacked the South in a clear act of aggression. There could be no effective response except the use of force. The Security Council met and commissioned the US to form a coalition to meet force with force. Fifteen Allied countries including the UK, France, Netherlands, Norway, Turkey, Canada and Australia contributed forces to fight alongside the US.

9. Much has been written of the fact that US forces fought under a UN flag and mandate. This was only possible however because the Soviet Union had since January 1950 boycotted the Security Council on Stalin's orders because of the refusal of the West to accept the People's Republic of China as the legitimate Chinese government. (This was not finally accepted until 1971). Stalin's extraordinarily inept diplomatic move permitted action under the UN. If the Soviet Union had been present it would not have been possible. The outcome would have been unilateral US action and the probability that the infant UN like its predecessor, the League of Nations, would have been shown to be impotent.

10. The incumbent Labour Prime Minister Attlee, duly supported by Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, had no hesitation in supporting the US from the outset of the war. UK forces in Korea were second only to the US in number and fought tenaciously to the war's end in June 1953. (The 'Glorious Gloucesters' stand at the Imjin river is remembered to this day as one of the most significant engagements in the War.)

11. Attlee's support however was not uncritical. In December 1950 Attlee flew to Washington to see President Truman alarmed at reports that the US might extend the war to China and use nuclear weapons. Both had been advocated by General MacArthur, the commander of US forces, who was eventually dismissed in April 1951 by Truman after extraordinary divisions within the Administration. The war dragged on until June 1953 resulting in 54,000 US killed and ten times that number amongst Koreans. The UK itself lost 1,000 dead, the highest number of killed in any war after 1945.

#### The Vietnam War

12. Like the Korean War, the Vietnam War was fought by Democratic Presidents (Kennedy and Johnson). At its height in 1965 a staggering 500,000 US troops were committed supported by Australia, New Zealand and South Korea. Despite pressure from President Johnson to send a token UK force, the Prime Minister Harold Wilson would not agree.

13. His reasons for doing so were essentially threefold. Firstly, unlike Korea, the US had no mandate from the UN and actively sought to prevent discussion of the Vietnam War at the Security Council. Secondly, Wilson pleaded 'overstretch' of UK forces in operations

like confrontation with Indonesia and Aden, although both of these campaigns were over by 1967. Thirdly, no European country was willing to support the US. Not one of America's allies in Europe, in whose defence and security the US had invested a constant garrison of 300,000 troops for a generation, came to fight alongside the US in Vietnam. This was a source of considerable transatlantic tensions in the 1960s/70s. These tensions grew in the 1973 Yom Kippur Arabs/Israeli war when European allies refused to give permission to the US to allow its supply planes to refuel en route to Israel. (By contrast, today's transatlantic tensions are a storm in a teacup).

14. In his autobiography, "Time of My Life" Denis Healey, Defence Minister under Wilson, was perhaps more honest when he wrote that Wilson whilst strongly in favour of containing communism, was against actually prosecuting a war in the jungles of Southeast Asia. It is doubtful if a Tory administration would have taken a different view. In 1970 Edward Heath succeeded Wilson and a few years later took the UK into the EU. The war ended in 1975 with fifty thousand US dead and little to show for it. Indeed in 1975 South Vietnam collapsed and was absorbed into a unitary communist state.

15. The Gulf War of 1990/91 resembled Korea more than Vietnam. In the first place there was a clear act of aggression – the invasion and annexation of Kuwait – secondly, the US immediately resorted to the Security Council for support and a mandate to lead a coalition to oust Iraq. Allied support was overwhelming with up to 30 countries including the UK, France, Australia and Canada participating in subsequent military action.

16. The UK government led initially by Margaret Thatcher and then by John Major (from November 1990) was unequivocal in its support for US action. Labour in opposition under Neil Kinnock was at one in supporting a war fought under a UN mandate with full Allied participation.

17. Despite the necessity of military action, the resolve of the nations seemed to indicate, as George Bush senior noted, "a new World Order". In January 1992 at UK request the Security Council met for the first time at heads of government level to discuss a new international agenda. Tragically, the Bosnia war and genocide in Rwanda in 1994 soon led to its abandonment.

#### Kosovo and Afghanistan

18. The US led military campaigns in Kosovo in 1999 and in Afghanistan in 2001 can hardly be compared to the wars fought in Korea or Vietnam or to the Gulf War of 1990/91. In Kosovo (fought entirely as an air campaign) and in Afghanistan US forces fought alongside those of Allied countries with the UK in the lead. It is worth remembering that the campaign in the Kosovo was fought without a UN mandate, a move that even Germany reluctantly accepted.

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### Lessons for Iraq?

19. With the exception of Vietnam, the United States has always fought alongside substantial Allied Forces. On most occasions since 1945 (Korea, Gulf War and Afghanistan) it has done so under a UN mandate. It is not unthinkable that the US could do so again against Iraq. A UN mandate may not be so unattainable. Would Russia or China veto military action? Their more likely course of action would, it seems to me, be abstention.

20. The advantage for the US of a UN mandate would be twofold. Firstly, substantial Allied support would likely include in addition to the UK, Turkey, Australia, France, Canada and the Netherlands. Secondly, most importantly, a UN mandate will be essential for post war Iraq. It will simply not be possible for the US to do this alone as it found out after UK intervention, in Afghanistan. Experience elsewhere – in Cambodia, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor – has underlined the necessity of UN involvement as the mechanism indispensable for the marshalling of global, political and economic support in the context of post war construction.

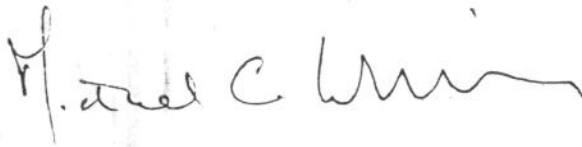
21. Finally, some thoughts on 'regime change' and war. Lenin was fond of pointing out that war was the harbinger of social revolution and political upheaval. World War I proved him subsequently correct but "regime change" per se has seldom been a declared war aim. Nevertheless, it was the declared war aim of the Allies from 1942 when they said they would only accept unconditional surrender of the Axis powers which could only mean the political demise of those regimes.

22. In more recent cases involving the UK, the defeat of Argentina in the 1982 Falklands War led to the ousting of the junta led by General Galtieri while the defeat of Serbia in the 1999 Kosovo war led to the overthrow of Milosevic within twelve months. Despicable though both regimes were, neither were as brutal and totalitarian as that of Saddam Hussein who survived military defeat in 1991 only through the exercise of extreme political coercion domestically. This unfortunate reprieve made it unlikely short of Saddam's death that his regime could change without external intervention. In this regard Iraq is different from either North Korea or Iran and its involvement in weapons of mass destruction that much more deadly. In Iran a real pluralist, if not yet democratic, politics has emerged which will in time temper its ambitions with regard to WMD. In the case of North Korea one can perhaps draw comfort from the willingness of the regime to enter dialogue and from the likelihood that it will not survive the long term.

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23. Lastly, it is worth remembering that in at least one recent case – the 1983 US invasion of Grenada military action was justified by 'regime change' the overthrow of the allegedly pro-Cuban regime of Maurice Bishop. Despite misgivings Margaret Thatcher went along with President Reagan's removal of a Commonwealth Head of Government. At least Saddam does not fit into the latter category.



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