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From: COMCEN Gateway 1b
Subject: I:OO:CONF:IRAQ: PM'S VISIT:WASHI/FCOLN 131:Id=0023100
Sent: 29 January 2003 21:50:17 GMT

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LNNFCN 1413 ZILNAN 1233

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OF 292130Z JANUARY 03

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IRAQ LIMITED

PERSONAL FOR AMBASSADORS

CABINET OFFICE FOR NO 10: MANNING, RYCROFT, POWELL, CAMPBELL

SUBJECT: IRAQ: PM'S VISIT

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1. It is politically impossible for Bush to back down from going to war in Iraq this spring, absent Saddam's surrender or disappearance from the scene. If Bush had any room for manoeuvre beforehand, this was closed off by his State of the Union speech (Washington telno 128).

2. In the high-flown prose to which Bush is drawn on these set-piece occasions, he said in effect that destroying Saddam is a crusade against evil to be undertaken by God's chosen nation: "this call of history has come to the right people".

3. The target of Bush's messianic appeal was less the doubters in Congress, more the anxious and unconvinced in the country at large. The polls will tell us soon how successful he was: early numbers are contradictory. The call to rally to the flag, the president and to the military should, on past precedent, evoke an emotional and positive response. The White House will be very disappointed if it does not.

4. The passages on Iraq wrapped largely familiar material in a new rhetorical package. The novel element was the promise that Powell would produce fresh evidence of collaboration between Saddam and Al Qaeda. For the White House, the key to the questions "Why Iraq, why now?" has always been the rogue

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state/WMD/terrorism nexus: not as a worrying possibility in future years, but as a clear and present danger.

5. I just hope that Powell will have something really compelling to offer the Security Council next week. The White House think that they are catching a wind, generated by Blix's report. That may be true. But if Powell goes off at half-cock, it will only reinforce - as Jeremy Greenstock has underlined already - the view that the US is hell-bent on war and short-circuiting SCR 1441.

6. The Prime Minister will find on Friday a pretty implacable Bush: impatient, deeply disillusioned with France and Germany, convinced that his - and Mr Blair's - critics will be routed by an early and easy military victory. He is very much influenced by something which Cheney said to you last week: that in the past the US had failed to respond forcefully to multiple provocations and attacks to the detriment of its reputation and standing. This time the US could not back off.

7. Unless we have some good ideas for sending Saddam into exile, Mr Blair's task on Friday will be to ensure that we and the US go to war in the best company possible. That means securing the time to assemble the largest possible coalition both for the war itself and for the aftermath. If the notorious smoking gun can be found, this will make things much easier. Otherwise a sequence of fortnightly reports from Blix saying that the Iraqis are still not cooperating will be the next best thing.

8. Bush does not look to have the patience to let Blix make the case. I said in an earlier report that exhausting the UN route was likely to mean different things in Washington and London. Bush is undecided about a second Resolution: whether it will be worth going for and, if it is, what should be put in it. In other words - as of this morning - Bush has not yet bought into the strategy which the Prime Minister put to him last week.

9. There are huge expectations here of Friday's meeting and the press are watching like vultures for splits. The Prime Minister will obviously want to reach full agreement with the President on the way ahead in the next few weeks. Unless something changes in the next 48 hours, that will require pressing back very forcefully to secure our interest, on another Resolution and timelines. The subsequent agreement will have to be clear beyond doubt in its particulars. After the last Camp David meeting, the hawks immediately started to distort the outcome to their own ends.

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