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From the Ambassador

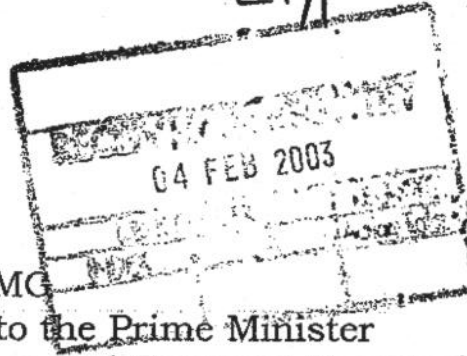
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21 January 2003

Sir David Manning KCMG  
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and Head of the Defence and Overseas Secretariat  
10 Downing Street  
LONDON SW1A 2AA



~~WJ 23/1~~  
~~B 23/1~~  
~~SB~~

Dear David,

~~HB~~  
AU pretty depressing  
- esp para 12

**IRAQ: FRENCH THINKING**

Summary

1. Chirac strongly opposes war. Preventing it is more important than disarming Saddam for him. He is looking to gain time and increase pressure against the war. He will be very difficult to persuade to support a second resolution and participate in war short of a new and evident *casus belli*. He may well accept the pain of exclusion from the action rather than change this position, though he has yet to face up to this choice and hopes to avoid it. Our position is important for the French but not critical while they have German support. Little scope for more explicit joint action for now, but opportunities to push Chirac in our direction may arise as circumstances change. Meanwhile we should stay in close touch.

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## Detail

2. As discussed, a further look at where the French are/will be on military action may be useful, with the caveat that the ultimate French decision will depend heavily on the circumstances at the time of any US decision to pull the trigger, so that firm predictions are impossible. The decision-making scenario is one of differing views in the French government set-up, but everything ultimately depending on Chirac, who has very strong personal views on this issue; and a wider background of widespread (but how deep?) public hostility to military action, even with UN sanction, the opposition political parties hostile, and virtually no-one in the French media/public establishment prepared to stand up with a contrary view.

## French objectives

3. The driving force of Chirac's policy, and therefore of the government's, is to avoid a war at almost any cost. He does not believe it is necessary/proportionate to the real threat. He fears disastrous consequences in the region for the MEPP, for the US-Western image more widely, and for further fuelling of terrorism (the most urgent threat we face, which the French see us as in danger of neglecting). He is also seriously concerned about the effect on the world economy, and therefore France's economic recovery. Beyond that he wants to go on demonstrating that France can incarnate a different, multilateralist world view from the Bush administration; and he wants to preserve French influence through keeping the main decisions in the Security Council. Behind these priorities, in his mind, are the need to ensure France is part of any day-after scenario, to maintain influence and standing in Washington; and only lastly to do something about disarming Saddam (because he does not really believe he is a threat, though WMD more widely are).

## French tactics

4. Chirac is not yet sure the Americans will go this spring without an obvious *casus belli*, because of wavering US public opinion in such

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circumstances, and the lack of allies, but suspects they may well, given the built-in pressure of the military build-up. The French do not want to face the choice for them this will bring. Their response is to encourage international pressure against the war, to argue for more time, to help the inspectors do their work, and to put more pressure on Saddam to cooperate. They know they have a key swing vote in the Security Council when it comes to debate on a second resolution, and are ready to play that for all it is worth if necessary, in concert no doubt with the Russians.

5. Why are the French apparently keen on making the inspectors more effective? For Chirac, it is not, I judge, the hope or expectation that the inspectors will find something really incriminating, and therefore provide the *casus belli* which will avoid the awful choice referred to above. First, because Chirac does not believe there is anything seriously incriminating to find (a widely shared view here); second, because he thinks Iraq's concealment techniques will be too good for the inspectors; and third, because if the inspectors do find something, the French are bound to argue, at least in the first place, that this shows the inspections are doing the job, making war unnecessary. Rather helping the inspectors fits with the French tactic of playing for time and their argument that they have not so far had the tools for the job. The Chirac hope is more that, even with the extra intelligence/resources, the inspectors will not find anything, thereby demonstrating that the threat has been overblown and does not justify war.

## French bottom lines

6. As I said above, the circumstances will be crucial, and there are of course multiple scenarios as the pressure on Saddam mounts. Chirac has just about kept his options open, even if the public and private argument (apart from one, perhaps kite-flying half-sentence early in January about military readiness for anything) is all against participation in military action. But my reading is as follows:

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- If Saddam manifestly blocks the inspectors, with or without a major find, but more obviously with, the French will probably concede that he has had his chance and blown it, vote for a second resolution (after lots of haggling) and take part.
- If the inspectors find something big, the French will first argue for the continuation of inspections; but if it is a plausible smoking gun, and it is clear the US (and we) are committed to military action, again they will probably commit to a second resolution and take part. But they will try everything to find alternatives (final ultimatum to Saddam, appeal to him to step down, last chance visit), as well as playing for time to give their forces chance to prepare.
- If there is no major obstruction and no smoking gun, France will oppose a second resolution (while trying to avoid having to veto) and stay out of military action, though they would probably at the end of the day try to sound neutral and might be practically cooperative (to avoid appearing to support Saddam against the Americans – a bit much even for Chirac). Continuing Iraqi deception and only passive cooperation, and/or a US Adlai Stevenson moment, will almost certainly not be enough to persuade them to change this in the short term, given Chirac's own strong views and the public line they have taken. But a continued drip of finds and poor Iraqi behaviour would obviously have their effect over time.

#### UK position

7. What do the French think we will do? They are pretty sure we will join the US if the inspectors find a plausible smoking gun. They are less sure we would join the US if there is no new obvious *casus belli*, given the public opinion/parliamentary concerns they can see, but they probably expect we will. How far does our position affect theirs? If we don't go with the Americans, or are obviously hesitating, that would reinforce their own doubts. If we did, that would sharpen their own dilemma but not be a sufficient factor on its own to push

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them into going, even if we had the Spanish and Italian  
They would have the Germans with them.



## French military position

8. The military worry about the effect on them of being left out/at odds with the Americans, but do not say so much. Of more immediate concern is that the French politicians may decide to jump on board at the last minute and demand a contribution in accordance with France's place in the world. They are doing as much planning as is possible in the necessary conditions of non-visibility, but there are clear limits to this.

## Conclusion

9. As things stand, there is a relatively narrow window of circumstances in which the French would take part fully in military action: a clear *casus belli* and a second resolution. This looks to me possible in the next few weeks but not probable. Short of that, they will not go with the Americans, though they could stop short of outright opposition and be ready to do something to help eg backfilling. The consequences for France of not being there if the US go are painful for them to contemplate: the fridge in Washington, possible loss of influence internationally from not being seen to be part of the big show on the world stage, little role in the day after, being on the wrong side of the argument if the action is an obvious rapid success. There would be consolations if the Americans had no or few allies: the international moral high ground, a claim to leadership of the "real" European position. And if it all went wrong, they would be on the right side of the argument.
10. Logically, if Chirac concludes that the Americans are soon whatever happens, he ought to find ways of France her own participation to avoid the consequence of a major split. I have little doubt he could get away with it domestically if he put his mind to it. I have little doubt that some of his advisers are trying to get him into this frame of mind. He may still make such a switch, great opportunist that he is. But for the moment I see no evidence



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that his mind is going in that direction. I go back to where I started: he sees war as unjustified, wrong and dangerous and sees his mission, and France's greater glory, in preventing it, and avoiding contamination by it if it is too unilateral.

## Implications for our policy

11. I would love to conclude that I see a chance of Britain and France now working closely together, and forging a European position, perhaps minus Germany. Objectively we share some short-term aims: more time, inspectors doing their job fully, keeping the US to the UN route as long as possible. But the gap between the Prime Minister's convictions and Chirac's is, for the present, unbridgeable. Meanwhile Chirac and Schroeder say they agree completely over Iraq. These factors do not allow for much explicit joint Franco-British activity even if, as over 1441, our efforts in Washington are in many ways complementary. So for now I see no alternative to massaging our differences, letting them show as little as we can (the Le Touquet Summit will be a major challenge in this respect) and staying within shouting distance of each other – and perhaps further joint efforts on the MEPP. It seems to me essential that the Prime Minister and Chirac speak before the Prime Minister goes to Washington on 31 January, and that meanwhile others maintain a close dialogue – Straw-Villepin, you-MGM, Ricketts-Laboulaye, Webb-Brichambaut, CDS-Bentégeat etc – including pushing the French to focus on scenarios for a second resolution and on the day after.

12. If at the end of the day, we and the French (and Germans) diverge over military action the consequences of that will depend a lot again on the circumstances and the success of the war. But the implications for successful pursuit of our European policy, including CFSP and EDSP, could be severe. We can expect the French to try to use such a split against us in Europe. So if any chance emerges in the next few weeks of bringing our positions together, we should grab it with both hands.

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John Holmes

*cc by e-mail*

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Sir Kevin Tebbitt, PUS, MOD – via EUD(B)  
Peter Ricketts CMG, DG - Political, FCO  
Simon Webb, Policy Director, MOD – via EUD(B)  
Kim Darroch, DG Europe, FCO  
Edward Chaplin, DG – Middle East/North Africa, FCO  
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