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FROM PRIVATE SECRETARY

SUBJECT: NOSEC: IRAQ: FOREIGN SECRETARY'S CONVERSATION WITH
FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTER, 19 MARCH

SUMMARY

1. Villepin passes on message from Chirac, who had been "shocked and hurt" by the Prime Minister's statements to Parliament. They had been unnecessary, unacceptable and not in accordance with reality. Such statements showed no courage. Foreign Secretary contradicts him: the Prime Minister had displayed great courage.

DETAIL

2. Dominique de Villepin telephoned the Foreign Secretary on the morning of 19 March.

3. He said that he had followed the Parliamentary debate on 18 March: France had been in the thick of it. The Foreign Secretary said that, as he had previously told Villepin, this was a difficult period. But he hoped that all sides could now look forward.

4. Villepin said that both sides had to take care of the relationship. There was not a lot of courage in pointing fingers at each other. He had his views and he respected the Foreign Secretary's. But he was also a historian. In 100 years time, no one would write that France was responsible for the current situation. Overnight he had looked at the archives recording the history of UNSCR 1441. If he had to write how the resolution had been secured, his version would be far more convincing than the Foreign Secretary's.

5. Villepin then said he had a message from Chirac, which he asked be passed to the Prime Minister. The President had been "shocked and hurt" by the Prime Minister's statements on 18 March. They had been unnecessary. Chirac understood the pressures the UK government was under. But such statements were not acceptable from an ally and EU partner. Nor were they in accordance with reality.

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6. The Foreign Secretary said he would pass on the message. In the end, it was a conversation that had to take place between the Prime Minister and Chirac themselves. But the Prime Minister and he had felt that their comments were justified by the circumstances. Villepin interrupted: "to solve your domestic problems by using the French?" The Foreign Secretary replied: no, to explain the reality of the situation to which France had contributed. The UK felt that, after UNSCR 1441, France had made a strategic choice not to follow through.
7. Villepin said that they could have this discussion for many years. But what he heard from London and Washington did not "link with the truth".
8. The Foreign Secretary said that the UK and France should look ahead. Both agreed on the need for a UN mandate for the reconstruction of Iraq. The UK and France should work together on this. It was in our common interest. The US had also accepted the need for a UN chapeau for post-conflict work in Iraq.
9. The Foreign Secretary and Villepin agreed to take forward their discussion in Brussels on 20 March. Villepin said he would be very happy to hear face-to-face what the Foreign Secretary had already told the UK Parliament and press. He always enjoyed hearing the message first from the Foreign Secretary. The Foreign Secretary replied that Villepin always heard what he had to say before he told Parliament or the press. Villepin said that he had never heard from the Foreign Secretary what had been said on 18 March. The statements from the UK government had shown no courage. The Foreign Secretary replied that he knew a great deal about courage: the Prime Minister had displayed great courage.

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