

1 (2.00 pm)

2 SIR JOHN HOLMES

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Welcome to our witness. At this session we
4 are hearing from Sir John Holmes, who served with the
5 British Ambassador in Paris from 2001 to 2007 and we are
6 going to ask Sir John to share his recollections from
7 his time as Ambassador into French policy towards Iraq
8 and UK engagement with France on Iraq.

9 We recognise, as I say each time, that witnesses are
10 giving evidence based on their recollection of events
11 and we, of course, check what we hear against the papers
12 to which we have access and which we are still
13 receiving.

14 I remind every witness that they will later be asked
15 to sign a transcript of the evidence to the effect that
16 the evidence given is truthful, fair and accurate.

17 That said, I'll turn straight away to
18 Sir Lawrence Freedman.

19 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I would like to start in pre-9/11
20 2001 and perhaps you would just give us an assessment of
21 the French position right at the start of 2001 about the
22 sanctions regime and containment.

23 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I wasn't actually there in Paris at the
24 beginning of 2001. I actually arrived in October 2001.
25 But obviously I have a general impression of where they

1 were, as you say, before 9/11.

2 I think their position was that they could see, as
3 we could see, that containment was unravelling in some
4 important ways, but they certainly thought that
5 containment was better than the alternative, which they
6 saw as possibly war, or military action of some kind
7 as had happened in the past.

8 They were very keen, and had been for a long time,
9 to, as they would see it, improve the sanctions regime.
10 In other words, narrow down the list of goods which were
11 not allowed, going on to a sort of negative list, rather
12 than a positive list, rather as we have seen in the
13 Israeli case recently. So they wanted smarter
14 sanctions. They wanted a way to, while preserving the
15 basic motivation of controlling Saddam Hussein's
16 rearmament, of at the same time toning down or weakening
17 the increasingly strong humanitarian arguments against
18 the sanctions regime on the grounds that it was simply
19 damaging the people of Iraq, and there was a lot of talk
20 at the time about the effects on children that you will
21 remember, while maintaining the key points.

22 So there was a lot of detailed discussion going on
23 at that stage in preparation for later Security Council
24 Resolutions about the general control list. I wasn't
25 involved in the detailed negotiation, but that sort of

1 thing, to try to make it smarter, to try to make it less
2 open to attack.

3 One of their long-running beliefs had been that you
4 needed to give Saddam Hussein and the regime some
5 incentives to cooperate; in other words, if it was all
6 stick and no carrot, then it wasn't clear where you were
7 going to lead and maybe you were simply entrenching
8 Saddam Hussein in a box from which he saw no way out
9 and, therefore, he would simply continue to try to
10 re-establish his WMD, whatever state they were in by
11 then.

12 THE CHAIRMAN: Could you talk a little more slowly?

13 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Sorry, yes.

14 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: What was the main sort of incentive
15 that they had in mind? Was it essentially the end of
16 the sanctions regime?

17 SIR JOHN HOLMES: That was the carrot that they had long
18 wanted to hold out. That had actually been offered,
19 I think, by then in 1284, as I recall, so that part of
20 it was there, but they still weren't convinced that it
21 was really there, that we were ever going to -- or at
22 least the Americans in particular would really be
23 prepared to see that happen. But at that stage the
24 discussion was a fairly technical one in the Security
25 Council between capitals about exactly how to

1 modify the sanctions regime, and we and the French were
2 actually working quite closely together on that at that
3 stage. The particular problem we had was convincing the
4 Russians, I seem to remember, that they needed to go
5 along with this and make the sanctions smarter.

6 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So the basis for UK/French
7 cooperation was making 1284 work better, getting the
8 Americans to take it seriously?

9 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Essentially, yes, and I think the initial
10 indications from the new US administration, from
11 Colin Powell in particular, they were prepared to go
12 down that track and, of course, everything did change
13 after 9/11, but at that stage, they were cooperating.
14 They were very tough-minded about it, and we were, as
15 always, somewhere between the French and the Americans,
16 trying to get people into the right position.

17 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Can you perhaps say a bit, which is
18 relevant to this period 2001 but later as well, about
19 the French relationship with the Russians on this
20 particular issue? Did they make any effort to persuade
21 the Russians to shift their policy? Did they
22 co-ordinate with the Russians, a joint approach on these
23 issues?

24 SIR JOHN HOLMES: From my recollection, at that stage we and
25 the French -- I mean, coming not exactly from the same

1 position but from similar positions anyway, were working
2 together to persuade the Russians to shift their
3 position, rather than -- in the later stages, it was
4 a rather different line-up, but, yes, there was a lot of
5 discussion with the Russians and I think with Lavrov,
6 who was then the -- I think he was the Russian PR at the
7 time, to try to persuade them of the benefit of moving
8 in the direction that we wanted to move in.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: The French were quite active in that
10 effort?

11 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: If we move to the period when you
13 were much more directly involved, to the effect of 9/11
14 and then the negotiations. So you are coming in just
15 after 9/11. There was that famous headline in
16 "Le Monde" and so on. What did you sense of the shift
17 in French attitudes as a result of 9/11 and the extent
18 to which it affected policy on Iraq?

19 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, obviously, as you say, the immediate
20 reaction was one of enormous solidarity with the
21 Americans after what had happened, and I think Chirac
22 was the first visitor to New York, actually, at his
23 level, and expressed great sympathy and warmth for the
24 American position and there was not any significant
25 difficulty with -- between the Americans and the French

1 or indeed ourselves, about what was going to happen in
2 Afghanistan. So I mean, the initial period was
3 relatively harmonious and trouble-free.

4 I think it was more -- it was later, essentially,
5 and perhaps most of all after the Axis of Evil speech by
6 Bush, which I think was January 2002, that the French
7 began to worry seriously that attention would shift
8 after Afghanistan to Iraq and in similar mode. So
9 that's when -- the fear had been there perhaps before
10 that, but that's when it began to be rather more focused
11 and genuinely a concern.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Did you get a sense in late 2001,
13 when you get the first discussions in the United States
14 of pushing Iraq up the agenda, that the French were
15 getting anxious even then about the direction of
16 American policy, or was it not until January 2002?

17 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think the first signs were there, were
18 being picked up, particularly as time went on and the
19 focus shifted away from the total focus on Afghanistan,
20 that those concerns were being picked up from some
21 quarters in the US administration. I think we were
22 picking up the same concerns and maybe had the same
23 concerns about them at that stage, but it really became
24 much more focused, I think, after January 2002.

25 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: What were the nature of the French

1 concerns? How did they express them to you, for
2 example?

3 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think they were concerned that the
4 Americans had once again espoused very openly regime
5 change and that the risk of them attempting to do that
6 militarily, possibly in a fairly, unilateral way, were
7 high and that posed great risks. They all the way
8 through were very concerned about the possibility of an
9 invasion of Iraq and what that might portend in all
10 sorts of ways, which we can go into, if you like, but
11 they were fairly conventional fears in some respects.

12 But they feared that there might be unilateral
13 intervention. They feared that it might not occur with
14 any UN sanction and of course they feared the position
15 they might find themselves in if that were to happen.

16 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Did they have any expectations of
17 what the British Government might be able to do to calm
18 down these American attitudes on Iraq?

19 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think as always, they hoped we would
20 play that role, we would try to use our influence in
21 Washington to argue for more sensible courses, as they
22 would see it. Of course, they could argue for
23 themselves, they didn't need to rely entirely on us by
24 any stretch of the imagination, but at that stage
25 -- I think we were discussing Iraq -- Iraq wasn't the

huge

1 focus it became later, so it wasn't the only thing
2 anybody was talking about, but they were hoping that we
3 would argue with the Americans that there were other
4 ways still available.

5 Of course, letting the inspectors back in was the
6 constant refrain of French policy for a very long time,
7 I mean, before that and all through this period.

8 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Were we co-ordinating policy with
9 the French at all on this issue? Was there much
10 diplomatic activity between the two governments, between
11 Chirac and Blair on how to respond to the American
12 initiative?

13 SIR JOHN HOLMES: At what stage are you talking about?

14 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We are still talking mainly early
15 2002 now.

16 SIR JOHN HOLMES: There was certainly a lot of diplomatic
17 activity, a lot of discussions about the Middle East,
18 about Iraq, I mean, the Middle East more widely, the
19 Middle East peace process as well, which of course was
20 a major concern at the time as well as, about Iraq.

21 I don't think you can say that we were co-ordinating
22 and collaborating against the American ideas, I think
23 that would be to give the wrong impression of it, but
24 certainly there was a very frequent contact at all
25 levels between the Foreign Offices, between the

1 diplomatic advisers of the President and the
2 Prime Minister, and of course occasionally between the
3 President and the Prime Minister themselves, but again,
4 Iraq was not perhaps the main focus of their
5 conversations at that point.

6 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: How did the French react to Crawford
7 and the Prime Minister's speech after Crawford in which
8 he spoke in general terms about regime change? Did they
9 see this as an important shift in British policy?

10 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I'm not sure they saw it as seminal at the
11 time. I don't recall them saying that or thinking that
12 or the press really reporting that. I think what you
13 got, as 2002 went along, was increasing concern that the
14 Americans might take military action and that we would
15 go along with them

16 -- you know, without necessarily setting down the
17 conditions of the process that they would want to do
18 themselves. Of course, they were very much keeping
19 their own options open at that stage.

20 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So how would you assess French
21 policy objectives at this stage, other than
22 worrying about where the Americans might go? What
23 routes did they see to heading them off in 2002 if that
was their concern?

25 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, I think at that stage, certainly in

1 early 2002, their main concern was, as you say, to head
2 them off. Indeed, their policy throughout this period,
3 and more intensively so as time went on, was to prevent
4 the war. That was their main preoccupation, was to stop
5 the war happening.

6 Their main way of doing that was to, apart from
7 seeking allies in that battle, as it were, was to call
8 for the inspectors to be allowed back in and to go down
9 the peaceful route and, of course, if the inspectors
10 found things or if Saddam refused to cooperate -- and
11 this became the -- those became the issues in a more
12 focused way later -- then maybe conclusions would have
13 to be drawn, but "Let's go through that process again
14 first, before we rush into war", against the wrong
15 target, as they would see it.

16 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So this was essentially with the
17 existing UN Resolutions, or did they see the possibility
18 of reinvigorating the UN process with a new resolution?

19 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think there was -- from recollection,
20 there was some talk about new resolutions, which
21 eventually crystallised in the effort to get Security
22 Council Resolution 1441, but I think it was more vague
23 than very focused at that stage. The main concern and
24 the main discussion was: well, how can we actually get
25 the inspectors back in there? How can we make sure that

1 there is an alternative route to the one which they
2 thought -- increasingly thought the Americans were bent
3 on?

4 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Can I get a sense of how you are
5 reporting this back to London? At what stage are you
6 starting to flag that the French are getting really
7 quite bothered about this? Is this early in 2002, after
8 the Axis of Evil speech? Is it becoming more intense as
9 the year goes on?

10 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think essentially it was a mounting
11 drumbeat of concern as the year went on. Certainly,
12 after the Axis of Evil speech, there began to be a real
13 French concern expressed in different ways by different
14 people and reflected in the way that the French press
15 were writing about it, that the Americans had decided
16 that another response to 9/11 was to attack Iraq and was
17 to produce regime change by attacking Iraq.

18 So, you know, the more that fear became crystallised
19 in what the Americans said and increasingly what they
20 could see of the American military preparations to
21 prepare to do that, the more their concern rose and the
22 more they were looking for alternatives.

23 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just finally, what sort of messages
24 were you taking back to the French from London about the
25 British view of this, what made for a sensible response,

1 how the two countries might work together?

2 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, I think what we were trying to say
3 to the French was that we did not think that war was
4 inevitable, that they were not inevitably committed to
5 war certainly, that we saw peaceful ways forward, but we
6 couldn't simply stay where we were, the status quo was
7 not acceptable -- I think to actually quote something
8 Villepin himself said at one stage -- but we needed to
9 find a dynamic way forward if we wanted to avoid war,
10 and that would have to go through letting the -- getting
11 the inspectors back in with a fairly aggressive
12 programme of inspections in order to see what was really
13 there.

14 That could be done, but the French needed to work
15 with us to do that. I mean, I think our case to them
16 was "Very often, if you really want to avoid war, then
17 you need to make sure the international community is
18 united and it is united on an alternative course, which
19 can produce some result", in other words, of actually
20 establishing once and for all, if you like, whether the
21 WMD were there and what conclusions should be drawn from
22 that.

23 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Did you find them receptive to that
24 message?

25 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Up to a point, but of course they were

1 always suspicious that what we were doing was trying to
2 set up UN cover or, you know, a better basis for a war
3 rather than trying to avoid the war. So they were never
4 quite sure of entirely what our motives were, but
5 obviously our intention was to assure them until right
6 to the end that our intention was to avoid a war and to
7 find a way of doing that which the Americans could live
8 with.

9 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Thank you.

10 THE CHAIRMAN: I would like to ask, within the limits of
11 what can be said in a public session, about the French
12 assessment of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction
13 programme, stocks and capability.

14 Jeremy Greenstock told us that in June 2001 -- I'm
15 quoting him:

16 "The French Government were telling us at a very
17 senior level that they believed that Saddam Hussein was
18 continuing to develop his chemical and biological
19 capabilities."

20 Is that an impression that you would have formed as
21 well?

22 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes. I mean, the French were not at any
23 stage very forthcoming about exactly what they knew and
24 exactly what their intelligence was showing, but when
25 the intelligence experts met and when diplomats met, the

1 French did not say "We do not believe they have weapons
2 of mass destruction". They said, "Well, you know, our
3 evidence and our indications are pretty similar to
4 yours. Of course, the evidence is not conclusive but it
5 is difficult to draw any other conclusion from what we
6 know, that -- the concealment and so on -- there must be
7 something there".

8 So I don't think there was ever any really major
9 difference between the experts about what they thought
10 about WMD. This was not necessarily reflected in quite
11 the same way in which they talked about it, because they
12 tended to talk them down rather than talk them up, if
13 you like, for obvious reasons, but I think the major
14 difference between us was always whether they thought
15 that what the Iraqis had, whatever it might have been --
16 and, of course, that was the subject of debate -- was
17 either sufficient or sufficiently alarming or
18 sufficiently of an immediate threat to mean that you
19 needed to go to war to stop it. That's where the
20 differences started to arrive rather than exactly what
21 the intelligence assessment was.

22 THE CHAIRMAN: In other words, the threat assessment might
23 have differed from the assessment of the stocks and
24 programmes, intention rather than possession.

25 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes. I don't think their intelligence was

1 very good. We never had the impression that they really
2 knew a huge amount about it.

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Did you sense any shift in their assessments,
4 both of stocks and of threat/intent, over the period up
5 until the end of 2002?

6 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Not significantly, not significantly,
7 I don't think. As I say, different people said
8 different things at different times. There was always
9 a feeling that maybe President Chirac, although he would
10 say when pressed, "Yes, probably they do have
11 something", wasn't really sure himself. Villepin was
12 perhaps a bit more convinced. I remember a visit by
13 William Ehrman to Paris to present the evidence as we
14 saw it and they came away thinking that the French had
15 not contested what we had.

16 So I don't think that changed and I don't think
17 their assessment of the threat that represented changed
18 either.

19 THE CHAIRMAN: So although policy as between London and
20 Paris began to diverge through 2002, the underlying
21 intelligence assessment, so far as it was relevant about
22 policy-making, did not shift?

23 SIR JOHN HOLMES: That's right and I think you know, even to
24 the last, to the actual eve of the war, when we said to
25 the French, "Well, you know, do you still agree we need

1 to do something about these weapons of mass destruction
2 or what we believe about the weapons of mass
3 destruction?" the answer was "Yes", it is simply that
4 the policy conclusion was a different one. They wanted
5 to do it through the inspectors, rather than through the
6 route of invasion.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Just a last point on the actual assessments:
8 was there any particular reaction which you caught when
9 we published our dossier in September 2002, of the
10 nature of the weapons of mass destruction threat?

11 SIR JOHN HOLMES: No, it wasn't a sort of huge story on the
12 French side of the Channel, as I remember. Of course
13 the French press talked about it, but they didn't make
14 a huge thing of it. The French officially, as I recall,
15 did not make a huge thing of it. It is clear that they
16 wouldn't have published a dossier like that themselves,
17 if you like. As I say, they tended to talk down and not
18 talk about what they believed about WMD, but again it
19 wasn't a seminal moment, as I recall.

20 THE CHAIRMAN: Right. Thank you. Turning perhaps from the
21 intelligence assessments to the policy-making itself.
22 Martin?

23 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Could you describe for us how foreign
24 policy was made in the French system when you were
25 Ambassador and, in particular, the role of the

1 President?

2 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, the role of the President in the
3 French system, and certainly all through that time with
4 Chirac, was pre-eminent. He essentially set policy. He
5 saw foreign policy as his pre-eminent domain, even when
6 there was a socialist government with which he was
7 co-habiting before 2002 and, of course, he regarded
8 himself as the elder statesman if you like, of the
9 international community, who had been around for very
10 many years and knew these subjects extremely well. So
11 there wasn't ever much doubt about where actual policy
12 was being set.

13 It was in the Elysee and not in the Quai d'Orsay.
14 Of course, the Quai d'Orsay had their input into it and
15 they had the experts and they did the negotiation on the
16 ground, but the policy was pretty much set by the
17 President and by his diplomatic adviser and then working
18 with the Quai d'Orsay and with the minister.

19 Now, when Dominic de Villepin became minister, of
20 course he was a very close collaborator of Chirac and
21 then it became a rather more seamless operation perhaps
22 than it might have been at different times before that.

23 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: What do you assess to be Chirac's
24 overriding objective with regard to Iraq?

25 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, I think his overriding objective

1 through this period, as I say, was to prevent war with
2 Iraq because he did not believe that it was justified.
3 He believed it would be a very dangerous venture, that
4 it would have all sorts of implications for stability in
5 the region, the likelihood of Iraq breaking up, on
6 the Middle East peace process, on the West's image in the
7 Islamic world in general -- there was a whole series
8 of very strong fears they had about it, which he was the
9 one who felt most strongly and articulated most
10 strongly. Therefore, he particularly was very strongly
11 opposed to any military action against Iraq unless there
12 was no other option.

13 So that was very much the essence of his own
14 position. Of course, as I say, he did not rule out,
15 until a pretty late stage before March 2003, the
16 possibility that France might participate in military
17 action, but it increasingly became a remote option.

18 I think he was also very much influenced in all
19 this, particularly, again, after the Axis of Evil
20 speech, by the belief that the kind of foreign policy
21 which was being represented and articulated by
22 President Bush was a unilateralist vision of the world
23 which he could not share, thought was dangerous and
24 based on a lack of knowledge of the world, and that he
25 was therefore determined to counter by setting out an

1 alternative, multipolar vision of the world, which was
2 very much the French vision at the time.

3 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: So essentially, Iraq fitted quite
4 closely to his wider international concept?

5 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, Iraq was the point at which these
6 two visions collided. One was the multilateral route of
7 dealing with the problem. He didn't deny there was
8 a problem with Iraq, but he didn't believe that the
9 solution being put forward by the Americans, and to
10 a lesser extent by us, was the right one.

11 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Sir David Manning told us:

12 "It is important to recall how bad political
13 relationships were at the top among the different
14 governments at this time."

15 Do you have any observations with regard to that in
16 the Anglo-French sphere?

17 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, Anglo-French relations is a subject
18 in itself obviously, and relationships between us have
19 always gone up and down with regularity and sometimes
20 sharp swings.

21 At that particular time, we had had a particularly
22 difficult period between President Chirac and
23 Prime Minister Blair because of a European summit
24 in October where there was a big row about -- I think it
25 was about CAP payments and French policy towards

1 agricultural interests, when Chirac was said to have
2 said some very sharp things to the Prime Minister, and
3 postponed a bilateral summit because of that. So that
4 was a low point obviously, but before that, certainly
5 when the Prime Minister and Chirac first knew each
6 other, the relationship was perfectly reasonable, indeed
7 good, but it became more difficult later on, but I think
8 they were always able to find a way back from the
9 occasionally sharp exchanges they had.

10 For example, we had, in the circumstances,
11 a remarkably successful bilateral summit at Le Touquet
12 in early February 2003. Obviously, we tried to avoid
13 the worst of the disagreements about Iraq and talk about
14 other things, because there were plenty of other things
15 to talk about, not least European defence. But the
16 point was that we could do business including at that
17 level, despite these rows, the sort of rivalry you could
18 see there was at times between President Chirac and
19 Mr Blair.

20 So I wouldn't necessarily exaggerate the differences
21 there or posit that there was a huge personal element in
22 this. Indeed, I remember the Prime Minister asking me
23 at one point in -- I think it was February 2003, to make
24 a real effort to see whether common ground could not be
25 found with the French and with President Chirac in

1 particular. I made that effort, fruitlessly, obviously,
2 but, you know, it was not a situation where
3 relationships or communications had broken down
4 irrevocably.

5 Of course, that was also true throughout the war
6 period and the post-war period, that we always continued
7 to talk, not always very productively but we always
8 continued to talk.

9 THE CHAIRMAN: I think Sir Lawrence would like to come in
10 with a quick question.

11 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: You mentioned the element of
12 cohabitation. There was also Chancellor Schröder's
13 re-election. I was just wondering whether you could say
14 anything about how President Chirac may have seen his
15 freedom of manoeuvre change during the second half of
16 2002. Did he feel he was in a stronger position with
17 more alternatives than he might have done before when
18 Franco-German relations had also not been that good?

19 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think the answer to that is yes,
20 particularly when it became clear that
21 Chancellor Schröder had severe doubts of his own about
22 American policy on Iraq and, for whatever reasons -- it
23 is not for me to speculate what those reasons were --
24 was going to take a rather negative position.

25 That meant you could then, from President Chirac's

1 point of view, build a Franco-German position opposing
2 military action in Iraq, and I think there was an
3 assumption at that stage, an assumption which proved
4 wrong, that if France and Germany took up this position,
5 then essentially the rest of Europe -- Britain aside of
6 course, and maybe one or two others -- would follow.
7 That was, I think the state of thinking.

8 For example, there was a huge Franco-German
9 celebration of the Elysee Treaty, when the Franco-German
10 position on Iraq was cemented essentially, and there was
11 an assumption that others would follow that.

12 That was then, of course, a great disillusion,
13 I think, when it became clear that certainly the new
14 members -- remember the new Europe, old Europe split
15 which came out of this -- were not going to follow the
16 Franco-German lead but, in the majority of cases, were
17 going to follow a sort of British, Spanish, Italian lead
18 and there was then a big split in Europe which I think
19 the French had not really reckoned for at that stage.

20 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: When negotiations began for what became
21 Resolution 1441, what did you understand the French
22 objectives to be?

23 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think the French objectives were, all
24 throughout this, to get the inspectors back in, to make
25 sure that there was going to be no automaticity -- that

1 was the great catchphrase, "no automaticity" -- from
2 1441 or, indeed, any subsequent resolution, which had to
3 be a subsequent decision by the Security Council, and
4 there should be no hidden triggers in 1441, which would
5 allow the Americans and the British to claim that
6 somehow they had legitimised military action when they
7 hadn't.

8 So that was -- I think those are the essential
9 points they were trying to defend in 1441, and that's
10 why there was such a very long and complicated and
11 tortuous negotiation about exactly what the language
12 was.

13 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Right. What of the two-stage approach?
14 Did it approach something which they had from the outset
15 of negotiations, or did this evolve as those
16 negotiations went on?

17 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think they had always seen the
18 possibility of a two-resolution approach, a two-stage
19 approach, and quite liked the idea. Of course, that was
20 one way of avoiding automaticity. But I think, during
21 the negotiation of 1441, it wasn't so much that they
22 were insisting on a second resolution. They would have
23 preferred that and, if the language could have been more
24 explicit about that, they would have liked that, but
25 they accepted weaker language in the interests in the

1 end of getting a result, and I think the other objective
2 they did share at that point was getting the
3 international community united about something, which of
4 course 1441 did, however temporarily, because everybody
5 was on board and, therefore, they thought that was
6 a difficult negotiation, but a successful one, from
7 their point of view, at the end of the day.

8 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: As far as you are aware, did the French
9 ever acknowledge that the United States would not agree
10 to a resolution that would require a further resolution?

11 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I'm sorry, I'm not sure I quite understand
12 that.

13 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Did the French ever acknowledge that
14 the United States had taken up the position that they
15 would not agree the second resolution?

16 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think their assumption was that -- and
17 increasingly so as the autumn went on and so on -- and
18 this is the view they had come to -- that the Americans
19 were going to mount a military operation virtually come
20 what may and, therefore, there could be a second
21 resolution maybe, but that could not be something which
22 was going to actually stand in the way of that action.
23 So they had no expectations of what the Americans might
24 agree to in the way of a second resolution and saw --
25 increasingly saw -- and this was obvious from January

1 onwards, I think -- saw a second resolution as a trap
2 for them rather than something which they actually
3 wanted to encourage.

4 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: In the final text of 1441, they didn't
5 of course say that the Security Council must
6 specifically decide what action should be taken in the
7 event of further breach, and Jack Straw told us in his
8 evidence:

9 "What is incontrovertible is that the French wanted
10 the word 'decide'. They accepted the word 'consider',
11 and that's what went on, and the language of negotiation
12 was English."

13 Did the French acknowledge to you that they accepted
14 this point, when they agreed to 1441?

15 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, of course they knew what they were
16 agreeing to, that there was no actual decision to have
17 a second resolution. But of course that, at that stage,
18 remained their preference or at least their preference
19 always was -- because the main concern was to avoid
20 automaticity, therefore, the main concern was to be sure
21 that you had to go back to the Security Council.

22 Now, what that meant -- whether it meant
23 a resolution or not was perhaps less important to them,
24 which is why they conceded the language at the end of
25 the day, than the fact that you had to go back there and

1 the fact that 1441 could not be considered of itself as
2 a sufficient legitimisation by the Security Council of
3 military action.

4 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: In his explanation of vote in his
5 statement, Levitte said:

6 "France welcomes the fact that all ambiguity has
7 disappeared from the resolution."

8 It has been suggested to us that the French did
9 accept ambiguity about what could happen in the event of
10 Iraqi non-compliance in order to achieve consensus at
11 the UN. What's your view of this discussion?

12 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, I think everybody knew that this was
13 ambiguous. This was the best language that could be
14 achieved in the circumstances, given the positions that
15 people were starting from, that it did leave, you know,
16 a central area of doubt about what exactly would happen
17 should Saddam Hussein be determined to be in a further
18 material breach or whatever exactly the language was.

19 But you know, they knew what they meant in their
20 heads by that and we knew what we meant in our heads by
21 that, but that's the nature of a negotiation like that.
22 You come up with some language that can encapsulate both
23 those things simultaneously, but it doesn't remove the
24 ambiguity.

25 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: We have touched on, very briefly, the

1 question of France's possible participation and in his
2 rather long interview with "The New York Times"
3 in September 2002, President Chirac at one point in the
4 interview did not rule out France joining in with the
5 military action. His words were:

6 "If it is decided by the international community on
7 the basis of indisputable proof."

8 What did you understand to be the French position on
9 whether they would participate in military action in the
10 event of a clear breach?

11 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think at that stage it was clear that
12 they wanted to avoid this if they possibly could. That
13 was their main objective; to avoid having to make that
14 choice, but at the same time, while that game was being
15 played, they wanted to keep, at that stage, their
16 options open because they could see the disadvantages of
17 being left out and the military certainly felt that
18 strongly. They could see the difficulties of being the
19 outsider, as it were, the big country, which was the
20 outsider in this, if that's the way it played out, and
21 of course they didn't know exactly how the diplomatic
22 discussion was going to go. So they kept that option
23 open, at least in theory.

24 Actually, probably into early January 2003, it
25 became increasingly unlikely that they were going to

1 participate in any but a token way or maybe
2 a backfilling way. That would be another possibility,
3 and then it became clear that, as we went into February,
4 that they had decided, rather than sticking at
5 benevolent neutrality, or neutrality, which they could
6 have done, to actually go for opposition, and that's
7 when they decided that -- you know, President Chirac and
8 Foreign Minister Villepin decided that they had
9 sufficient -- a sufficiently strong position morally, as
10 they saw it, diplomatically, with support from many
11 countries around the world -- not so much in Europe
12 perhaps, but elsewhere -- to actually embody the
13 resistance to military action and I think there was
14 a sort of intoxication almost about what happened in
15 late January/February with the French position, when
16 they recognised or suddenly realised how much support
17 they had in the rest of the world.

18 I do remember a visit by President Chirac to Algiers
19 when he was greeted -- unusually, I have to say -- by
20 adulatory crowds because of the position they were
21 taking, and of course his domestic popularity was rising
22 extremely rapidly and Minister Villepin had been
23 applauded in the Security Council, which was a very
24 unusual event, to say the least. So I think they became
25 a little bit intoxicated by that and that's when any

1 possibility of any sort of participation or help or even
2 neutrality disappeared, but that hadn't been the case,
3 I think, until probably January.

4 Until then, I think they at least in theory kept the
5 option open, but they were not prepared to take part in
6 any military planning. Not that the Americans were
7 particularly inviting them, to be honest, but they could
8 have asked. They did have a planning cell. So they
9 wanted to know what was going on. But the military were
10 not being allowed to actively plan for participation
11 from probably late autumn onwards, and then it became
12 very clear, as I say, in early 2003, that that was
13 simply not an option anymore.

14 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: Thank you.

15 THE CHAIRMAN: Roderic?

16 SIR RODERIC LYNE: You have just described the ambiguity
17 surrounding the French position on 1441. You said that
18 you felt that they were taking the assumption from the
19 autumn onwards that the Americans were going to take
20 military action irrespective of the second resolution,
21 but also that they were not prepared, in 1441, to vote
22 for a resolution which actually authorised military
23 action, and of course, in their explanation of vote and
24 in the tripartite statement made by France and Russia
25 and China, at the end of the 1441 process, they set out

1 a position that the Security Council should meet again
2 and take a position. They didn't say "take a decision",
3 they said "take a position".

4 From all of that, did it essentially remain the
5 French position, post-1441, that military action against
6 Iraq could only be authorised or legitimised if the
7 Security Council itself had made a determination that
8 Iraq was in a further material breach?

9 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think essentially yes. They were
10 a little bit wary about articulating that as clearly as
11 they might have done, and I think that's because, like
12 us, they had always had this concern, a broader concern,
13 not related to any particular situation, that they
14 didn't want to be in a position where military action in
15 the modern world could only be authorised by the
16 Security Council. They, like us, had taken the position
17 that of course Security Council authorisation is much
18 the best, but there may be circumstances -- of course,
19 Kosovo had been an example -- where military action can
20 be justified if there is sufficient international
21 support, even without a Security Council Resolution.

22 So they were a little bit wary, even in these
23 extreme circumstances of Iraq, about declaring that only
24 a Security Council Resolution could authorise it, unlike
25 the Germans who were very much more obviously camped on

1 that position in general and in this particular case.

2 Nevertheless, in the particular case of Iraq, they
3 always used a formulation about "It has to be approved
4 by the UN. It has to be legitimised. Only the UN can
5 legitimise action". With that slight wriggle room in
6 their language, which they wanted to preserve for the
7 future, their position was that 1441 of itself could not
8 justify action, nor could anything else, except coming
9 back to the Security Council and discussing it again.

10 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Now, in order to try to work out
11 precisely what 1441 meant, the Attorney General, when he
12 was in the process of finalising his advice to the
13 Prime Minister, talked to Sir Jeremy Greenstock about
14 the negotiating history, as he told us in his evidence,
15 and then went to America and talked to lawyers and
16 others in Washington, and in these conversations was
17 exploring what the French, as the main negotiating
18 counterparties on 1441, had really intended, what they
19 had accepted, what they had signed up to in 1441.

20 We asked him whether, apart from relying on the
21 reporting of the United Kingdom and the American
22 representatives at the UN on the French position, it
23 might have been logical for him to go to Paris and ask
24 the French directly what they had meant by it and he
25 said:

1 "You couldn't have had the British Attorney General
2 being seen to go to France to ask them 'What do you
3 think?'"

4 Couldn't he have gone to Paris to actually talk to
5 the French about this?

6 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I don't see why he couldn't have done or
7 at least had somebody else ask the question on his
8 behalf. But I think what is true is that the French
9 were, again, very wary about ever saying what their own
10 legal position was. They took a very strong political
11 position about no automaticity -- I was just describing
12 the need for UN legitimisation of any action -- but they
13 were very careful -- I don't remember them ever actually
14 saying what their own legal position was.

15 I don't remember whether we ever went and talked to
16 the Quai legal advisers. I don't suspect we would have
17 got very far, if we had, to be honest.

18 THE CHAIRMAN: Would it have mattered as much to the French
19 as it certainly did to us?

20 SIR JOHN HOLMES: No, because the automatic assumption
21 increasingly was they weren't going to be part of it, so
22 it wasn't going to be quite the same debate and, as
23 I say, the underlying assumption of everybody -- the
24 press, the public -- was that this was clearly
25 unjustified, illegitimate, so it wasn't really an

1 argument.

2 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Perhaps I can now turn to the question of
3 the attempt that was made to get a further resolution,
4 the so-called second resolution in the early part of
5 2003.

6 Did the French position change between the end of
7 1441, end of November 2002, and the point at which the
8 United Kingdom, the United States and Spain actually
9 tabled a further draft resolution, 28 February, I think
10 it was -- 24 February, sorry, 2003?

11 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think that it did in the sense that they
12 had been at the point of 1441 at least, you know,
13 obviously, as we were just talking about, envisaging
14 a second discussion in the Security Council, but I think
15 what changed was that, as the military preparations
16 advanced and they could see that that was what was
17 actually driving the timetable rather than anything
18 else, that they saw a second resolution, unless it was
19 very much of the kind that they wanted -- and what we
20 were putting down wasn't what they wanted -- as simply
21 a means of legitimising the war, and they were simply
22 not going to go along with that.

23 That's why they resisted it all the way along and
24 spent so much diplomatic capital, bizarrely in a sense
25 acting against their allies, their main allies, touring

1 Africa to persuade people not to go along with this and
2 ultimately threatening to veto it, because they felt
3 that what was being proposed was not a reasonable
4 exercise; it was simply a way of trying to fit something
5 diplomatically to the military timetable that was
6 underway and was therefore simply a ploy to help the
7 British, which they weren't prepared to go along with.

8 SIR RODERIC LYNE: By February 2003, do you think they had
9 a pretty good idea of what the American military
10 timetable was?

11 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes, not exactly, not to within a day, but
12 I think they could see, like everybody else, that the
13 impatience was growing, the troops were there, there was
14 all the discussion, which you have, I'm sure, discussed
15 at great length, about how long you could keep the
16 troops there, could they fight in the heat, all that
17 sort of stuff was there, they had their ears close
18 enough to the ground to know all that.

19 So whether they actually knew which day in March,
20 I do not know, but they could see it was going to happen
21 quickly and, therefore, they were being pushed up
22 against a diplomatic wall, as they saw it, in order to
23 agree something to legitimise this which they didn't
24 think was reasonable.

25 If we had been able to offer much longer timescales

1 and real time for the inspectors to do their work, then
2 I think they could have been in a different position,
3 but they didn't believe that they could offer that or,
4 rather, they didn't believe that the Americans could
5 offer that, and although we were trying to sort of
6 manoeuvre to find some way of gaining a bit more time,
7 to have something in there which looked plausible in
8 terms of time, they didn't think what was on offer was
9 serious enough.

10 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Did they indicate to you and to the
11 British Government in general, in early February, before
12 we tabled the resolution, that they would rather not
13 even have to confront a draft resolution than be forced
14 into a decision on one? Was it their preference simply
15 that we didn't go back to the Security Council at this
16 stage?

17 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think they found it hard to say that in
18 so many words, given the history of 1441, but what they
19 were saying was "We will not go along with anything that
20 does not give the inspectors time to do their work".

21 Of course, this was all going on against the
22 background of the discussion of "Was Saddam Hussein in
23 full compliance or part compliance? What did that mean?
24 What did further material breach mean? Did it imply
25 automatic consequences of a particular kind?"

1 As I said, I think their underlying concern was that
2 they thought the military action was pretty much
3 inevitable, whatever we were saying to them and,
4 therefore, they were very, very wary of getting involved
5 in some diplomatic exercise which would only have one
6 objective, which was to somehow legitimise that action.

7 SIR RODERIC LYNE: As you will know, Jean-David Levitte has
8 said publicly, after the event, that around this time he
9 was privately saying to the Americans, "Don't go ahead.
10 If you are going to do it anyway, you are going to do it
11 without a second resolution", but you weren't getting
12 that message directly because it would have been
13 a difficult one for them to put to you?

14 SIR JOHN HOLMES: They weren't saying it as directly as
15 that, no.

16 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Okay.

17 Now, on 10 February 2003, President Putin was in
18 Paris, I think, on a pre-arranged visit and while he was
19 there, he and President Chirac had also, in the name of
20 Chancellor Schröder, put out a tripartite statement of
21 the three heads of government about Iraq, which was
22 essentially setting their positions on a different
23 vector to the policy, at that stage, of the
24 United States and the United Kingdom, stressing the
25 alternatives to war, use of force, only as a last

1 resort, give peaceful disarmament every opportunity,
2 cooperate with the inspectors and so on.

3 Was this a significant point? Was it a point at
4 which those three countries were, in effect, locking
5 their positions together and into a position essentially
6 opposed to the course that we were steering down?

7 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes, I think it was. I mean -- I think
8 the view we took at the time was there was rather less
9 to that declaration than met the eye perhaps, but
10 nevertheless, as a symbolic act of the three of them
11 getting together to say something very different from
12 what we and others were saying at the time was, of
13 course, significant.

14 There was increasingly, from that moment onwards --
15 there was this idea around that maybe there should be
16 some kind of -- maybe France could lead a new diplomatic
17 axis of France, Germany and Russia. I don't think we
18 ever took it terribly seriously. I don't think some of
19 the Quai experts ever took it seriously. It may be that
20 Chirac took it seriously for a while at least or thought
21 there was something to be gained from that, but it never
22 really developed fully as time went on.

23 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Given all of this, both the public and
24 private position of the French, were ministers in London
25 over-optimistic in going for the tabling of the second

1 resolution -- London, Madrid and Washington, I suppose
2 one should say, but we will focus on London -- and
3 thinking that they could get France with its veto power,
4 as well as Russia with its veto power, to agree to this?

5 SIR JOHN HOLMES: It was always an optimistic approach to
6 think you would get a second resolution and you would
7 get nine votes for it, as the struggle to get those
8 votes demonstrated very clearly in the weeks that
9 followed.

10 I think the strongest point we had was that we could
11 say to the French "Are you really contemplating a veto,
12 to veto a resolution which is being put forward by your
13 principal allies? This is an unprecedented situation.
14 Do you really want to be in that position?"

15 I think it was the desire not to be in that
16 position, from their point of view, which explained why
17 they were so against, at that point, having a second
18 resolution. They did not want to be in the position of
19 having to veto it, when they started out at least.

20 Of course, they couldn't be quite sure whether they
21 might be left in that position in a rather isolated way.
22 They didn't absolutely know whether the Russians would
23 be prepared to jeopardise their relationship with the US
24 by vetoing or what the Chinese might do.

25 I think they became more confident about those

1 things as time went on. They became more confident that
2 we were not going to get the nine votes as time went on
3 and they became more confident about their own position
4 as time went on and the support they could attract for
5 the position they were taking against military action.

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Do you recall what advice you were giving
7 London at this point, late February 2003, about the
8 chances of getting the French off a veto when push came
9 to shove? Were you pessimistic, optimistic?

10 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Pessimistic. We were doing our job by
11 providing all the arguments we could think of to use
12 with the French, including a last minute appeal from the
13 Prime Minister and all the arguments of the kind I was
14 just describing about the undesirability of splitting
15 the international community in such a very obvious way,
16 voting against our allies in such an obvious way, of
17 cutting yourself off from the aftermath, the day-after
18 issues, in Iraq.

19 So we were, as I say, using those arguments
20 ourselves and putting them forward to London as the best
21 arguments we could think of, but we were also saying
22 that the chances of getting the French to go along with
23 this, unless we were prepared to go quite a lot further
24 in their direction in terms of the timetable, for
25 example, were poor.

1 SIR RODERIC LYNE: We will come back to this in a minute,
2 but I think this might be a good moment, Chairman, for
3 us to take a short tea break.
4 THE CHAIRMAN: Yes, ten minutes.
5 (2.50 pm)
6 (Short break)
7 (3.00 pm)
8 THE CHAIRMAN: Let's resume with Sir Roderic's questions at
9 as measured a pace as we can.
10 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Sorry.
11 SIR RODERIC LYNE: I seem to be to continuing the batting.
12 This is obviously a test match, not 20/20.
13 Can we now move forward from the period we were
14 discussing, which was the start of the second resolution
15 process, to the end of it?
16 On 10 March, President Chirac gave a television
17 interview in which he made some rather strong statements
18 about the resolution that was on the table "ce soir", as
19 he put it, this evening. Why do you think he did that?
20 SIR JOHN HOLMES: To be honest, I have often asked myself
21 that question and never quite found a satisfactory
22 answer, and clearly he did it -- the interview was
23 obviously very deliberate, very well-prepared and, if
24 you read his answers, you can see that he was very
25 well-prepared.

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1 Why he chose to say exactly what he did about using
2 the veto, using that language, I don't know. I think he
3 took some of his own advisers, probably, by surprise or
4 at least probably the Quai d'Orsay by surprise, by going
5 that far in talking about using the veto, "quelles que
6 les circonstances". We can go on to the ambiguity of
7 that, as I'm sure you will want to.

8 But I think what it represented was, as I was saying
9 earlier, he had by then decided he was fully in
10 opposition to this move, to the invasion of Iraq, had no
11 hesitation in expressing it and was seeing himself as
12 the leader of the global movement against military
13 intervention in Iraq and, therefore, he was willing to
14 say that out loud in a way that they had hesitated to do
15 before.

16 Now, another explanation is that he was worried that
17 we might have got more votes in the bag than we even
18 perhaps thought we had ourselves and that this was a way
19 of discouraging the so-called "swing six" from voting
20 with us. I'm not sure it would have had that effect
21 necessarily, but that's a possible explanation, but
22 I don't think the French thought, at that stage, that we
23 had the votes. So I'm not sure that's a plausible
24 explanation of why he said it.

25 SIR RODERIC LYNE: The Foreign Secretary of the time,

1 Jack Straw, told us in evidence that he couldn't for the
2 life of him understand why the French and the Germans
3 were not agreeing to a second resolution, because this
4 was the way to resolve this peacefully.

5 Was that interpretation of the second resolution,
6 that it was still a possible way of getting a peaceful
7 outcome, not one that President Chirac would have shared
8 at this point at all?

9 SIR JOHN HOLMES: No, I think, as he was suggesting, the
10 draft in the form it was at that stage, with the kind of
11 timelines and tests which the French thought was
12 impossible to pass, and deliberately impossible to pass
13 for Saddam Hussein, was not a way of actually avoiding
14 a war but was simply a way of legitimising it. That's
15 really why they were so strongly opposed to it.

16 Now, the discussion about what the resolution could
17 contain went on even after that statement by
18 President Chirac, with the French continuing to suggest
19 longer timelines, but by that stage, we were so much up
20 against the military deadline, that it became
21 increasingly desperate and irrelevant.

22 SIR RODERIC LYNE: If the second resolution had contained
23 a longer deadline for Iraqi compliance, do you think
24 that France would have considered supporting it?

25 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think it is possible because that's

1 what essentially they were suggesting. They were
2 suggesting -- they didn't like the six tests or whatever
3 they were called, but they said "If you give -- if you
4 put in a period" -- I think 120 days was the period they
5 wanted -- "for the inspectors to operate, so they can do
6 their job properly without being put against impossible
7 deadlines, then that's something we could contemplate",
8 but of course, they were still wanting to say that
9 a second resolution of that kind would also not have any
10 automatic trigger in it.

11 You would still need to come back at the end of
12 that, the Security Council would need to come back at
13 the end of that, and take a view on what the inspectors
14 were saying to them. So you know, at that stage, you
15 were into third resolution territory. So that is
16 a reason why we weren't particularly attracted, perhaps,
17 to that route, but in any case in those timescales it
18 was simply not available.

19 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Do you think there are any other
20 circumstances in which France might have supported
21 a second resolution which authorised the use of force?

22 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think if the inspectors had found
23 something very dramatic, which they thought
24 Saddam Hussein could use quickly or if Saddam Hussein
25 had done something stupid, as it were, from his point of

1 view, like expelling the inspectors again or something
2 of that kind or doing some other reckless act against
3 his neighbours, yes, I think they could have been
4 persuaded, perhaps, to vote for a resolution and even to
5 take part in military action or something of that kind,
6 but it would have taken something pretty dramatic of
7 that nature, by that stage, to change their mind.

8 The weakness in their position, I think, was always
9 that they always wanted to give the inspectors more
10 time, which was a sort of reasonable argument in itself,
11 but they had more difficulty in answering the question,
12 "Well, what are you going to do at the end of that? How
13 long do you actually need? When does this period of
14 further testing and inspection actually end? We have
15 had 12 years of it. Are we going to have another
16 12 years?" That was the argument they found most
17 difficult to deal with, I think.

18 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So when Chirac made his statement in this
19 television interview -- it wasn't a formal statement
20 but, as you say, it was a clearly prepared interview --
21 was he saying in that statement that France is going to
22 veto a resolution authorising military action, whatever
23 the circumstances and for all time to come?

24 SIR JOHN HOLMES: The words are clearly ambiguous but
25 I don't honestly think that's what he intended to say.

1 I think he was saying, "The text, as we have it at this
2 moment, is not one we can support and we will vote
3 against it".

4 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Did you try to get on to the French to
5 clarify this ambiguity and find out precisely what he
6 was meaning or was that your own interpretation of
7 reading his words?

8 SIR JOHN HOLMES: That was my interpretation of reading his
9 words but, of course, the French were on to us
10 reasonably quickly to try to explain that that's what he
11 had meant. But I am afraid what happened was slightly
12 different in the sense that this statement was seen in
13 London as being the veto in any circumstances, seized
14 on, to some extent, as meaning that.

15 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Was it seized on immediately? He made it
16 on the 10th. At what point did we start interpreting it
17 as a veto for all time to come, the 11th or the 12th?

18 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I can't remember. I have a day job and
19 I haven't had time to study all the papers in the detail
20 I would have liked to, and obviously not available in
21 London very much, but my impression is it was started to
22 be used very quickly by commentators and by British
23 ministers as saying this has scuppered our chances of
24 a second resolution and the French, of course, got very
25 upset by that interpretation and were on to us very

1 quickly to complain that we were unreasonably twisting
2 the President's words because we were desperate to find
3 some way of getting out of the hole we were in. That
4 was the attitude they took.

5 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Who on the French side got on to us?

6 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I was certainly telephoned, but that was
7 I think a day or two later on the 13th, by
8 Maurice Gourdault-Montagne, to complain very bitterly
9 about --

10 SIR RODERIC LYNE: He was the President's diplomatic
11 adviser?

12 SIR JOHN HOLMES: He was the President's diplomatic adviser
13 at the time, and I think there were other complaints
14 made in London by the French Ambassador of a similar
15 sort of kind and then there were also discussions. But
16 again, two or three days later, as the campaign in
17 London against this statement mounted and the use of the
18 statement --

19 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Do you know if these complaints from the
20 French Ambassador reached Downing Street?

21 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I'm sure they did. Not directly, but
22 indirectly certainly, because I recorded mine and
23 sent --

24 SIR RODERIC LYNE: He might have spoken to Downing Street
25 about it?

1 SIR JOHN HOLMES: He might have done, I don't know.

2 SIR RODERIC LYNE: You don't know. The Foreign Secretary
3 would have been aware of this complaints?

4 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes, I think he had his own discussions
5 with his French opposite number. Again -- but that was
6 probably -- I think that was again the 13th and, of
7 course, they did resume, as I was suggesting earlier --
8 they resumed their discussions on what sort of
9 resolution might be possible, but it was essentially too
10 late to change anything by then.

11 SIR RODERIC LYNE: You may not have noticed, because you are
12 away a lot, that Maurice Gourdault-Montagne, who of
13 course is now the French Ambassador in London, recently
14 was asked about this on a public occasion at the Hay
15 festival and was reported in the press as saying that
16 President Chirac, his comments had been
17 misinterpreted -- this was a "Guardian" report -- and he
18 had made it clear that he meant France could not have
19 supported a new UN Resolution at that time -- which you
20 said was the way in which you had interpreted it -- as
21 it would have triggered an invasion, despite the lack of
22 evidence that Iraq possessed WMD.

23 Did you have the impression that the French were
24 making quite a big issue of the way the
25 British Government were interpreting Chirac's words,

1 that they were reacting strongly to it?

2 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes, they did react to it. Whether that
3 emotion was quite as strongly felt as it was expressed,
4 I'm not absolutely sure, but I think they believed that
5 it had been seized on in London with relief as a way of
6 getting out of the position we felt we were in at that
7 point of not being able to get the votes and, therefore,
8 we were using that statement unreasonably. And of course
9 it was then used very much by the Prime Minister and by
10 the Foreign Secretary to explain why the attempt to have
11 a second resolution had failed, and this was a point,
12 obviously, when public opinion was extremely difficult
13 and a Parliamentary debate was coming up. So they
14 linked all these things together and thought that we
15 were exploiting their statement for our domestic
16 purposes in an unreasonable way.

17 SIR RODERIC LYNE: The Foreign Secretary told us in evidence
18 that he had seen the statement on television, that his
19 French, as he put it, wasn't bad, and that to him this
20 wasn't ambiguous at all, it was very clear, and his
21 interpretation of it clearly was very different to
22 yours.

23 Would he have been aware that his interpretation of
24 it and the Prime Minister's was being challenged by the
25 French and they were pointing out that wasn't what

1 Chirac had actually said, or an interpretation of it?
2 Would the Foreign Secretary have been aware of this?
3 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, he was certainly aware of it a few
4 days later. I don't know at what point he became aware
5 of it and -- I mean, I think I remember sending some
6 very diplomatically phrased telegram about this the
7 following day because, as I say, this was by then, at
8 this stage, an extremely sensitive domestic political
9 issue about what he may or may not have meant by saying
10 what he did.
11 THE CHAIRMAN: Domestic in France or in Britain?
12 SIR JOHN HOLMES: In Britain.
13 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So you reported that in a telegram.
14 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes, the following day, the following
15 morning.
16 SIR RODERIC LYNE: I suppose the other question about this
17 interpretation is what impact it had. You said there
18 was one theory that President Chirac might have made the
19 statement because the French were worried we were going
20 to get the votes, but you don't actually think that was
21 probable.
22 By 10 March, which is pretty late in the game at
23 at the UN, after a lot of lobbying and discussion and
24 debate, did it actually look as if we were getting close
25 to getting a consensus on the draft Security Council

1 Resolution?

2 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, obviously, sitting in Paris I wasn't
3 intimately engaged in that in the way that others were
4 in London and elsewhere, but my impression from the
5 time, as I recall, is that it was very unclear. It went
6 backwards and forwards, but it was not my impression
7 that we were in anything like a position where we had
8 the votes in the bag at that stage.

9 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So if that was the case,
10 President Chirac's remarks did not, in effect, abort our
11 chance of success because at this stage we weren't
12 succeeding.

13 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, I think the chances of success were
14 by that stage looking not particularly good. Let's put
15 it that way. As I say, I wasn't engaged in the -- all
16 the intimate discussions that were going on with the
17 Mexicans and Chileans.

18 SIR RODERIC LYNE: The Mexicans and the Chileans were --
19 at the point of lobbying.

20 SIR JOHN HOLMES: But even the African votes, what you could
21 see was that the countries -- both sides were lobbying
22 very intensively and were doing their absolute best to
23 give absolutely no indication of what they were going to
24 do because they would have found themselves in an
25 extremely uncomfortable squeeze, but it didn't --

1 I mean, my impression at that stage, sitting where
2 I was, was not that things were moving particularly well
3 in our direction, at that particular moment. But of
4 course the French may have had a different view, because
5 they may have had fears, in the sense that we had our
6 own fears, about the way the votes were going.

7 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So you were sitting there in Paris. You
8 could see that, from what you were hearing from
9 Sir Jeremy Greenstock in New York we were not on the
10 verge of success here. President Chirac makes
11 a statement which is interpreted in London in
12 a different way to the way it is being interpreted in
13 Paris, and then the British Government in its public
14 statements at Cabinet level and, indeed, in the House of
15 Commons on the eve of the war, places a very large
16 responsibility on the French for preventing us from
17 succeeding in getting a second UN Resolution.

18 What view did you have from Paris of how this
19 sequence of events unfolded, whereby the government
20 decided to place that responsibility, that blame, on the
21 French?

22 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, as I say, we had expressed our view
23 about what he may or may not have meant by what he said.
24 But it was ambiguous. There was genuine ambiguity
25 there. There was scope for interpretation. As I say,

1 this had become an area of high domestic politics in
2 Britain at this stage. So I think we were trying to
3 keep the dialogue with the French going about the second
4 resolution and there were discussions between Jack Straw
5 and Dominic de Villepin later in that week about what --
6 where that might lead, and I think even between the
7 Prime Minister and President Chirac, if I recall
8 correctly, but as I say, it was becoming increasingly
9 clear that this was a game without meaning at that
10 point, because the military timetable was so close to
11 fruition, that that particular game was pretty much
12 over.

13 But for the rest, I mean, given what was happening
14 in London, I suppose I was keeping my head down.

15 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But it can't have helped your efforts to
16 keep a dialogue going when you saw a number of Cabinet
17 ministers starting to take the line and this percolating
18 through the press and indeed in the public domain, that
19 it was the French "what had stopped it"?

20 SIR JOHN HOLMES: But it was my job at the time also to
21 explain to the French the position that the
22 government had taken, Chirac having said what he did,
23 having said he was going to veto a resolution being put
24 forward by some of his principal allies, had not exactly
25 gone down very well in London and why we might have

1 thought it was an extremely unhelpful move. It was my
2 job to present the opposite case at that particular
3 moment, as I say, and that was a very sensitive moment.

4 Although there was a lot of bad feeling in Paris
5 about the way it was being used, I think people could
6 understand why it was being used in that way because
7 they could see perfectly well what the game was in
8 London, and it was a game with extremely high
9 stakes at that particular moment, and I think they took
10 the view, perhaps slightly against their instincts, that
11 they had better not push their objection too far because
12 it was too much domestic politics in Britain to be
13 trifled with.

14 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So that was essentially their reaction
15 that this was domestic politics, you could understand
16 these things, shrug the shoulders.

17 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think it wasn't quite as resigned as
18 that. I think they were angrier than that, but I think
19 they decided at some point, after a few days to see what
20 was going on there, that it was not their job to try to
21 bring the British Government down.

22 SIR RODERIC LYNE: From the French point of view, the action
23 was going to go ahead but they had not in any sense
24 endorsed it, they had kept themselves well away from it
25 and that was the prime objective of President Chirac.

1 He couldn't stop it, but he wasn't going to endorse it.

2 Is that right?

3 SIR JOHN HOLMES: It wasn't only that he wasn't going to
4 endorse it, he was going to be the champion of the rest
5 of the world against it, which he had become and
6 remained for some very long period of time.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Can we step lightly across the actual
8 invasion into the aftermath?

9 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: We will start with a little bit
10 about the French involvement in the reconstruction of
11 Iraq. I mean after the famous resolution, that France
12 agreed to the Resolution 1483, which provided the legal
13 basis for reconstruction. What did you understand to be
14 their motivation for supporting this resolution?

15 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, I think they -- I mean, throughout
16 the time of the military action, and afterwards, they
17 were in a dilemma essentially between seeing that their
18 interests as a major player in the world were bound up
19 with success of the coalition and successful
20 reconstruction of Iraq, and they understood that
21 intellectually.

22 At the same time, they had taken a very brave, let's
23 put it that way, decision to oppose this in a very, very
24 public way, as we have just been talking about and,
25 therefore, the temptation for them constantly to be

1 saying, "I told you so", about the mess that Iraq was
2 becoming was extremely strong. So they were
3 constantly vacillating between the need to be with their
4 allies, given that the decision had been taken that
5 military action happened and had been successful in its
6 own terms. But what that meant was essentially was that
7 they were prepared to go along grudgingly and
8 reluctantly with UN Security Council Resolutions which
9 sort of authorised eventually the Multi-National Force
10 and legitimised in a sort of way the occupation. But
11 that was, you know, not exactly where they wanted to be.

12 But the second part of it was that they were not
13 prepared to be part of it in any physical way. They
14 made very clear and stuck to it all the way through,
15 that they were not going to put any French boots on the
16 ground, whether military or police or anything else.
17 They did allow -- again, a little bit grudgingly --
18 others, like the European Union and so on to offer help.
19 They did eventually, but much later, go along with the
20 idea of debt relief, but they were always very reluctant
21 to be seen to be involved, to be contaminated by what
22 they saw as an ongoing disaster. They talked in those
23 terms for four or five years. In fact, all of my time
24 in Paris until I left in February 2007, those were the
25 terms they constantly used reinforced by the French

1 press.

2 So while they were gradually brought along
3 to endorse Security Council
4 Resolutions endorsing more and more explicitly the
5 occupation, the provisional authority and so on, they
6 were at the same time very -- and I think this was very
7 much at the insistence of President Chirac -- they
8 wanted to stay away from it all themselves. It wasn't
9 their mess and they didn't see why they should exert
10 themselves too much to fix it.

11 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So the concern about not damaging
12 the international system, but they wanted to support it,
13 but did so grudgingly?

14 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes, I think that's right. Again, there
15 were competing voices in the system because there were
16 those in the system saying we have an interest in being
17 part of this because we want to have a good relationship
18 with whatever Iraqi Government may emerge from this at
19 the end of the day, and of course there were commercial
20 interests somewhere to protect as well. But those were
21 not the voices which prevailed, certainly not in the
22 early stages, when they were saying "We are staying as
23 far as away from this as possible" because they thought
24 that, to a large extent, Iraq was irretrievably broken
25 and would fall apart and the attempt to reconstruct it

1 was not going to succeed easily. So they didn't see why
2 they should be part of it.

3 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: As you are aware, the UK wanted the
4 United Nations to play quite a key role in the
5 aftermath. Did the French actually join in championing
6 the United Nations actively, so far as you are aware?

7 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes, they did. They had wanted the UN --
8 and this is one of their insistences about the day after
9 discussion before the military action, that the UN
10 should be centrally involved. Of course they had to
11 accept that the US military -- I mean, the military in
12 general, but the US military in particular, were going
13 to be in control for the early stages, but they did
14 support as a matter of principle, although they were
15 not, as I say, engaged on the ground themselves, that
16 the UN should take as leading a role as possible on the
17 civilian side and on the issue of the transfer of
18 sovereignty to the Iraqis.

19 Again, they had certain very clearly defined themes
20 of their discourse on Iraq, which were transfer of
21 sovereignty, a timeline for the departure of the foreign
22 military forces, the Iraq-isation of the process,
23 a wider political process because they feared that the
24 Sunnis were being excluded and this was a very dangerous
25 tactic. They had a lot of concerns of that sort.

1 So those were the kinds of issues they were
2 expressing, but having the UN in there on the civilian
3 side and someone like Lakhdar Brahimi, who eventually
4 went there, was very much in line with their thinking.

5 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Those are statements of principle,
6 but did they actually make any tangible contribution to
7 the reconstruction effort?

8 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Very little in the early stages. It did
9 gradually increase. They offered I think -- I can't
10 remember exactly when, but a few months in, maybe the
11 following year -- some police or gendarme training for
12 the Iraqis, as long as it was done outside Iraq, they
13 were not prepared to go into Iraq to do it.

14 Of course, the Iraqis did not accept that offer
15 because they had their own reasons for not being
16 particularly keen on the French, having opposed the
17 invasion as they saw it, so that offer was not taken up
18 until much later and never turned into anything very
19 real.

20 They did agree at a later stage to debt forgiveness
21 and they gradually become part of the discussion about
22 the future of Iraq, about the Iraqi compact and, again,
23 this is two or three years down the line.

24 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Did you yourself have any
25 discussions with them about the contributions to

1 reconstruction or did you have any understanding of the
2 development programme?

3 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, we were constantly talking to them
4 about this because we wanted to re-engage them. I mean,
5 as part of repairing the international system more
6 widely, but also, as part of getting the international
7 community together on Iraq again, we did want to engage
8 them. Of course, they had expertise and other things to
9 offer. They listened politely, but essentially they
10 were not prepared, as I say, to get engaged physically
11 themselves in any significant way for a very long time.

12 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: So your understanding is that they
13 remained reluctant in terms of being physically engaged
14 in the process of reconstruction?

15 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Absolutely.

16 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: My final question really is: has the
17 Iraq conflict had any lasting effect on the UK
18 relationship with France?

19 SIR JOHN HOLMES: It is a hard question to answer. I mean,
20 as I was saying earlier, UK/French relations go up and
21 down and go through cycles. We are very close and then
22 we are falling out and squabbling and we get over it
23 quickly. One of the things that we were very insistent
24 on, both on the French and the British sides, certainly
25 at senior official level, was that we should not allow

1 Iraq to contaminate the wider relationship. We should
2 try to insulate the wider relationship as much as we
3 could, recognising that there were limits to that, from
4 Iraq and continue to discuss all the other huge number
5 of issues we had to discuss. Immigration at Sangatte
6 was a big issue at the time. European defence was a big
7 issue at the time. Iran was beginning to be a big
8 issue. We wanted to work with them.

9 I would say that effort was successful. We did
10 manage to insulate the wider relationship and we did not
11 go through the kind of trauma that US/French
12 relationships went through, for example. There were no
13 boycotts, there was no refusal to talk. We talked
14 constantly all the way through this process, as I was
15 saying earlier. So in that sense, I think we managed to
16 preserve the relationship.

17 I think now, it is not a particular issue between us
18 anymore, except to the extent that it sort of confirmed
19 both sides in their caricatural or view of each other:
20 we taking the view of the French as the awkward squad
21 always in international relations, always trying to play
22 their own game and of a rather anti-American kind, and
23 the French view of us as essentially poodles and not
24 able to take our own view and having been humiliated by
25 the Americans over the approach to the Iraq invasion,

1 and that's an argument they used with us quite a lot.
2 So it sort of didn't help to overcome those sort of
3 caricatures, but by and large I think we did overcome it
4 and the relationship never broke down over it and there
5 was never any of the sort of nonsense that we saw
6 between the French and the Americans after the invasion.

7 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Did it lead to any kind of
8 understanding that all the three parties concerned,
9 Britain, USA and France, had a different world view? It
10 is one thing having a caricature of the countries
11 concerned, but was there a deeper understanding that
12 they had a different world view?

13 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Yes, there was an element of that
14 obviously, in the relationship with our allies, in
15 the way the French were insistent on talking about
16 multipolar worlds, which we regarded as a sort of
17 disguised way of describing a slightly anti-American
18 view. But they were there before Iraq. They were, as
19 I say, in some sense confirmed by Iraq and perhaps made
20 worse, at least for a period, by Iraq, but they were not
21 caused by Iraq itself. Those issues are still there in
22 different ways and perhaps always will be. We are not
23 going to look at the world in entirely the same way from
24 London, Paris and Washington.

25 BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: Thank you.

1 SIR MARTIN GILBERT: I just have one question.

2 In September 2003, the time of the Madrid donors'
3 conference that the French declined to participate,
4 would there have been a dialogue, a serious dialogue
5 between the embassy, between you, between the embassy
6 about this? Was this something we would try to move
7 forward in our direction?

8 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Very much so. As I say, we were
9 constantly trying to persuade the French that their
10 interests were engaged in Iraq just as much as ours
11 were. Whatever they may have thought of the invasion,
12 it was done, therefore we needed to -- the international
13 community needed to reunite and they needed to get back
14 engaged for their own reasons, for their own interests.
15 So we were constantly persuading them to be as positive
16 as we could be about the Security Council Resolutions
17 about the Multi-National Force and about things like
18 debt forgiveness, the Madrid conference and so on.

19 As I say, they were usually polite, they listened
20 and they were not particularly obstructive. It is fair
21 to say that. They let things happen and they could see
22 that that was what was going to happen and certainly
23 the rest of Europe and the Germans were particularly
24 keen to get more engaged in it, but they were -- they
25 were not going to obstruct these things, but they were

1 not going to be active participants in them because of
2 the stand they had taken and because they thought that
3 what was happening was a disaster.

4 THE CHAIRMAN: Lawrence, do you have a question?

5 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Just one question and it is a more
6 general reflection or hypothetical, I guess on what
7 might have happened.

8 During the course of 1441, which was a difficult
9 negotiation, the British, the Americans and the French
10 worked things out together and came out with
11 a conclusion and it was -- we have heard --
12 a compromise. Was there a sense in France that the
13 strong positions taken -- I suppose the Americans would
14 trace it back to January 2003 -- by Villepin ruled out
15 a certain sort of discussion on how this issue was to be
16 carried through in the UN, that one argument might be
17 that the British were almost forced to choose between
18 the Americans and the French, whereas, if they had
19 stayed much more in the game, British options in a sense
20 might have been more open for a longer time?

21 SIR JOHN HOLMES: Well, I think we did have an interest in
22 keeping the French in the game because it did give us
23 more options and I think genuinely, as I think
24 Jack Straw said to you many times, genuinely might have
25 had the possibility of a different outcome and

1 a peaceful possibility.

2 I think -- as I say, I think the French were
3 extremely sceptical about that because, whatever we
4 might have been saying to them, what they saw happening
5 on the ground was different and, therefore, they had
6 a belief that the military action was pretty much
7 inevitable whatever they did, and that was why they were
8 so concerned not to legitimise it.

9 I think there was a sense in which the French were
10 trying to argue to us both, before and afterwards, that
11 "This is the consequence of your policies".., And they
12 always had a view, and probably still do, that somehow
13 Britain has to choose between the US and Europe, and we
14 have always said, "Why do we need to make that choice?
15 We want to have a good relationship with the US, for
16 obvious reasons, but we are European, we want to be
17 closely part of the European Union as well. Why do you
18 want us to make that choice? You do not ask anyone else
19 to make that choice."

20 That's a constant, ongoing argument that's been
21 going on for many years, but in the Iraqi context they
22 wanted to say "Look what happens when you take this
23 pro-US, anti-European view", as they saw it. "What you
24 need to do in the future is to work with us and the
25 Germans and if the three of us work together, we can do

1 almost anything we like", and that was a sort of in the
2 background view they were taking.

3 THE CHAIRMAN: One question just before

4 Sir Lawrence Freedman's was the impact on Anglo-French
5 relations. Was there an impact on French relations with
6 the wider Europe, not the UK, the others? Having seen
7 the split between the new and the old, did that
8 fundamentally alter French attitudes within the
9 European Union to the wider membership?

10 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I would say it certainly did temporarily.

11 There was a famous outburst by President Chirac, I think
12 in February 2002, against the new European members or
13 the East European candidate members, essentially saying
14 "Who do you think you are? If you want to be part of
15 Europe, you need to do what we want you to do", which of
16 course was deeply resented by them and caused a real
17 split or hostility -- "hostility" is the wrong word --
18 frostiness, shall we say, between the French and others,
19 particularly the Poles and others like that.

20 Of course, it did sort of fit in to an underlying
21 French view that, once you enlarge Europe too far, then
22 you can't -- it doesn't stick together in the same way.
23 One of the issues behind all this somewhere was, was
24 this going to push the French in the direction of going
25 back to the founding six? That was another of these

1 sort of issues, a bit like the Franco-German-Russian
2 alliance, which was there. We never took it very
3 seriously, but it was there somewhere as a consequence
4 of what was going on.

5 But those things didn't have real legs. We knew
6 they didn't have real legs and eventually the French
7 had, at a later stage, to go back to cultivating the new
8 members of the European Union and get away from all this
9 stuff about old Europe and new Europe, and recognise
10 that that's what they had to deal with and people had
11 the right to have different views without them being
12 branded anti-European, but that was quite a lengthy
13 process. But again, that was something where
14 President Chirac was leading these kinds of outbursts,
15 if you like, somewhat to the horror of the Quai d'Orsay
16 at various intervals.

17 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. As we close, do you have any
18 final reflections from your position as Ambassador on
19 the Iraq story, or have you said as much as you want to
20 say?

21 SIR JOHN HOLMES: I think I have probably said as much as
22 I want to say. Obviously, one of the questions is:
23 could it have been avoided if we had behaved differently
24 or we and the French had behaved differently or we and
25 the French had found common ground before the invasion

1 at different points?

2 I think probably the answer to that is: no, we
3 couldn't have done. I think we did try extremely hard
4 to find that common ground, but in the end the gap
5 between the convictions and the instincts and so on was
6 unbridgeable.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Our thanks on our witness, Sir John Holmes,
8 today and to everyone who has been present either this
9 morning or this afternoon and with that I'll close this
10 session.

11 We resume again at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning when
12 our witness will be Lord Jay, who was
13 Permanent Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth
14 Office from 2002 to 2006.

15 That ends this session.

16 (3.40 pm)

17 (The Inquiry adjourned until 10.00 am the following day)

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