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FROM PRIVATE SECRETARY

SUBJECT: NOSEC: FOREIGN SECRETARY'S MEETING WITH VICE PRESIDENT OF
THE UNITED STATES, 23 JANUARY

SUMMARY

1. The Foreign Secretary makes the case for trying to get a second Resolution. Cheney says that the Administration have not yet decided whether or not they want a second vote; although he contemplates the prospect of a French veto with alacrity.

DETAIL

2. The Foreign Secretary met Vice President Cheney for 30 minutes at his office in the White House on the afternoon of 23 January. After a brief description of the deployment of British forces to the Gulf he said that the key question now was how to navigate the shoals between where we were today and a possible decision to take military action. HMG had said that it would much prefer a second Resolution. We would be fine if we got one. We would be OK if we tried and failed (a la Kosovo). But we would need bullet-proof jackets if we did not even try.

3. Cheney asked whether it would be better to try and fail or not

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to try at all. The Foreign Secretary said the former. Cheney said that it wouldn't hurt one bit in the States if there were a French veto. The Foreign Secretary pointed out that the French had signed up to 1441, which started by saying that it was a final opportunity for Iraq and ended by saying there would be serious consequences if Iraq did not implement its provisions.

4. The Foreign Secretary said that the composition of the Security Council since 1 January made matters more difficult. Cheney said that Powell had felt bushwhacked at Monday's meeting. But his impression was that the German position was increasingly fragile. The Foreign Secretary agreed, but added that Schroeder seemed to be giving Fischer his head on many international issues because he needed Fischer's support on his domestic and EU agenda.

5. The Foreign Secretary said that if we got a half-decent statement from Blix and El Baradei, which enumerated Iraqi shortcomings, we would have the beginnings of a further material breach as defined by OP4 in 1441. We could then use a period of time - weeks not months - to negotiate a second Resolution. The Foreign Secretary said that the text of such a Resolution wrote itself: a recitation of earlier Resolutions and then of the provisions of 1441. This had said that it was a final opportunity for Iraq, had set out what constituted a further material breach and had said that serious consequences would follow. The effort to get a second Resolution would help the UK and - he thought - the US to nail the canard that the US was operating outside the international community. It would also help with the "day after".

6. The Foreign Secretary said that the Prime Minister felt strongly that diplomatic effort could make the military effort easier. If the international community was united, then the Arabs could go to Saddam with a strong message that he had either to go or his regime would face destruction. Arab leaders were desperate to get rid of Saddam. A second Resolution would embolden them.

7. Cheney said that the Administration had not yet figured out next steps; to some extent it depended on what happened on 27 January. Stressing that this was a "private conversation", he said that it would clearly be preferable to get a second Resolution out of the Security Council. There was a sense in the US that a process was unfolding. It had started on 12 September when Bush's speech had challenged the UN to deal with the Iraqi problem. SCR 1441 had followed. Inspectors had gone in. The Iraqis had issued their declaration. But there was no prospect of the inspectors working properly unless the party inspected was willing. The burden of proof was on the Iraqis and they were not delivering.

8. So Cheney said that there was a timing problem. The idea that we could let it drift through months of discussion was not on. Troops were already in place. The weather was a factor. And nations in the region were mindful of recent history. In 1993 (World Trade Centre), 1996 (Al Khobar), 1998 (East African Embassies) and 2000 (USS Cole) the US had been struck with apparent impunity. If we backed off now, or sat there for months, the Saudis and others would also back off. It would be one more example of bold talk and no action. We would never get them gingered up for action again.

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9. Cheney said that the President could not let a charade continue at the UN. He could not let France and Germany dictate policy. The French seemed to be angling for tragedy for the UN; and he would have thought that the French had a vested interest, as a P5 member, in preserving the status of the Security Council. Instead, they were allowing the Council to be a place not of action but of restraining legitimate US action. The Foreign Secretary said that Bush's speech on 12 September had made a deep impression. He had shown confidence in the UN, but had also set out the need for reciprocal responsibilities. The Foreign Secretary said that he thought that Annan understood that need very well.

10. Cheney said that he thought that once military operations started the Iraqi regime was likely to fall apart quickly. Everything that had gone on under Saddam's regime would then become apparent: as they gave up on Saddam's regime, Iraqis would reveal all the WMD now hidden away.

11. The Foreign Secretary said that the Prime Minister thought that a second Resolution would reduce the uncertainties. If we had taken the international community through the arguments, they would help make the military campaign easier. On the other hand, if the international community were split, that would embolden Saddam Hussein.

12. Cheney said that watching the UN make Libya the Chairman of its human rights organisation had really stuck in his craw. The Foreign Secretary said that he had the sense that the UN was better under Annan than it had been. People in the UK had a sense of the UN as a legitimator of action. Cheney said that the same was true in the US too.

13. At the end of the discussion Cheney said that the Administration had not yet resolved whether they wanted a second vote or not. The Foreign Secretary discussed the Kosovo model and its limitations. The tactics of tabling a text in the knowledge of a likely veto were very delicate. But we might also face a situation where Germany or France tabled a Resolution to give the inspectors more time. We would have to veto but that would put us on the back foot. Last autumn, the knowledge that the US and UK had a text in play had deterred others from tabling an alternative. Cheney said that he was eagerly awaiting the Prime Minister's visit next week.

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