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INFO IMMEDIATE , CABINET OFFICE, CANBERRA, EU POSTS
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NOSEC

IRAQ LIMITED

SIC: CAO/A2N/A2M/A2P/INX/LDQ

DESKBY FOR RESIDENT CLERK (PLEASE PASS TO AZORES PARTY AND OTHER
 OTHER RELEVANT OFFICIALS)

SUBJECT: NOSEC: IRAQ

SUMMARY

1. The President is determined to get rid of Saddam, soon, and has good military and domestic political grounds for confidence. His relative failure on the diplomatic front makes the UK, and the Prime Ministers role, all the more important. He will be keen to make the transition to war in a way as helpful as possible to the Prime Minister and should therefore be willing to concede a substantial (but not total) UN role in post Saddam Iraq.

DETAIL

2. On the eve of the Azores summit how does the President see the situation?

3. The first, central, fact is that he himself is utterly determined to get Saddam out. In retrospect it looks as if he finally and firmly reached that conclusion in early December at the time of the false Iraqi declaration. The entire subsequent action has been driven by it. This is a President who sets targets and expects his subordinates to deliver. Hence the ironclad firmness of the timetable (which has hardly budged in three months) and the occasionally visible uneasiness about focussing exclusively on disarmament and sticking to the UN route (in case we got the answer "yes"). This does not mean Bush wants to go to war, but the bottom line is that Saddam must go.

4. On the military side the President has every reason to feel confident. In 1991, after the air bombardment, Saddam's ground forces were defeated in less than a week. Since then Iraq has

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become weaker and America immeasurably stronger. The chief current nightmare in the Pentagon and intelligence community is "catastrophic success" - a collapse of resistance in Iraq which moves too fast for us instantly to establish order in its wake. Of course nothing is certain and there are downside scenarios - the "Baghdad option" in which Saddam gathers his most loyal troops in Baghdad (or Tikrit) as well as the possibility of Saddam using some of his WMD. And there are also collateral risks such as destruction of the oil wells. But the high probability projection is for a quick and relatively clean victory. The one real military concern lies in the North where there are acute worries about the Turks getting entangled with the Kurds and where (because of Turkish unhelpfulness) the US may not be in a position to interpose itself in sufficient force in time.

5. As you know, the US are ready to start the (short) countdown to military action next week.

6. On the domestic political front too, Bush has no real concerns. In formal terms the Congressional resolution of late last year gave him everything he needs. While the US public is not enthusiastic about going to war with Saddam its support for the President if he decides to do so is firm and growing firmer. As the conviction that war is inevitable has taken hold so the doubts of liberal commentators (most liberal politicians have kept their heads down) have come to sound increasingly ritualistic. Meanwhile the conservative commentariat (whom the President and his advisers take more seriously) have grown increasingly impatient with the UN's delays. Rove will be telling the President that he needs this business out of the way before the primary season gets going in the Autumn. And it would be more than human if, despite the experience of his father, the President did not feel that getting rid of Saddam will help in 2004.

7. On the diplomatic front the President has much less to feel satisfied about. They have been shocked at their inability to get the Turks on board and at their failure, despite what they see as vigorous arm twisting, to get a majority for a second security council resolution. The State Department, at least, are concerned at images of US unilateralism and are working hard at giving the "coalition" of supportive countries a much more visible international presence. In this optic the steadfastness of UK support, bringing with it other key players such as the Spaniards and Australians, has been invaluable to them. The President is thus concerned about the Prime Minister's present political difficulties not only out of fellow feeling (in any case a genuinely significant factor with this President) but also out of self interest. It would be massively damaging to US interests for the British Government to fall because of our support in Iraq. The US will go to great lengths to help it not happen (as indeed they have started to do with their announcement on the roadmap).

8. At the Azores summit therefore Bush will be looking for a way of making the transition from the UN process to the military countdown in a manner maximally helpful to the Prime Minister. A key component of this will be the announcement of our intentions for post Saddam Iraq, and in particular the level of UN involvement in administering it.

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red line on fighting to liberate Iraq and then handing the governance of it over to the UN. Extensive UN involvement short of this ought to be achievable, and is a prize worth fighting for.

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