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NOTE ON IRAQ

I will be with you, whatever. But this is the moment to assess bluntly the difficulties. The planning on this and the strategy are the toughest yet. This is not Kosovo. This is not Afghanistan. It is not even the Gulf War.

The military part of this is hazardous but I will concentrate mainly on the political context for success.

Getting rid of Saddam is the right thing to do. He is a potential threat. He could be contained. But containment, as we found with Al Qaida, is always risky. His departure would free up the region. And his regime is probably, with the possible exception of North Korea, the most brutal and inhumane in the world.

The first question is: in removing him, do you want/need a coalition? The US could do it alone, with UK support. The danger is, as ever with these things, unintended consequences. Suppose it got militarily tricky. Suppose Iraq suffered unexpected civilian casualties. Suppose the Arab street finally erupted, eg in . . . Suppose Saddam felt sufficiently politically strong, if militarily weak in conventional terms, to let off WMD. Suppose that, without any coalition, the Iraqis feel ambivalent about being invaded and real Iraqis, not Saddam's special guard, decide to offer resistance. Suppose, at least, that any difficulties, without a coalition, are magnified and seized upon by a hostile international opinion. If we win quickly, everyone will be our friend. If we don't and they haven't been bound in beforehand, recriminations will start fast.

None of these things might happen. But they might, singly or in combination.

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And there is one other point. We will need to commit to Iraq for the long term. Bedding down a new regime will take time. So, without support, the possibility of unintended consequences will persist through and beyond the military phase.

So, I'm keen on a coalition, not necessarily military but politically.

What Coalition?

I am a little alarmed at the report back I've had from our various officials' meetings in the US. They say everyone over on your side is pretty optimistic that we could neutralise or gain support from most of the Arabs; and that the EU, in particular even the French, but certainly the Italians, Spanish and Germans, would be with us. I have to say that's not my reading. The trouble is, everyone says: they will support action, but they add a rider and the rider is not always sufficiently heard or spoken. The Arabs may support but are far less likely to do so, if the MEPP is where it is now. When I met

- and said we would do Iraq, he said:
'fine - just do it with total force'. But when we started later to talk about the MEPP, he said he was far more optimistic about it. 'Why?', I asked. 'Because obviously, with Iraq coming up, the US will put it in a quite different place', he said. When I said, we couldn't guarantee that, he looked genuinely shocked. Then Iraq would be a very different proposition, he said.

In my opinion, neither the Germans or the French, and most probably not the Italians or Spanish either, would support us without specific UN authority.

Again, they express this by saying 'yes' and then adding the rider. But the rider is real. Stoiber might be different from Schroeder, but again I doubt it. In fact, if we launched it in exactly the same state as we are now, there is a chance the French would actively oppose us and start to create real waves inside the EU.

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I know the French are anxious to escape their anti-American outlook. I know Berlusconi and Aznar personally strongly support you. Stoiber will be desperate to come on board with the US. But some of them are very tied to specific positions about the UN which they will find it very hard to ditch.

And – and here is my real point – public opinion is public opinion. And opinion in the US is quite simply on a different planet from opinion here, in Europe or in the Arab world.

In Britain, right now I couldn't be sure of support from Parliament, Party, public or even some of the Cabinet. And this is Britain. In Europe generally, people just don't have the same sense of urgency post 9/11 as people in the US; they suspect – and are told by populist politicians – that it's all to do with 43 settling the score with the enemy of 41; and various other extraneous issues like steel etc have soured the atmosphere a little.

At the moment, oddly, our best ally might be Russia!

A Strategy for Achieving a Coalition

Here is what could bring opinion round.

(1) The UN.

We don't want to be mucked around by Saddam over this, and the danger is he drags us into negotiation. But we need, as with Afghanistan and the ultimatum to the Taleban, to encapsulate our casus belli in some defining way. This is certainly the simplest. We could, in October as the build-up starts, state that he must let the inspectors back in unconditionally and do so now, ie set a 7-day deadline. It might be backed by a UNSCR or not, depending on what support there was (and I'm not sure anyone, at present, would veto it if Russia was on

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board). There would be no negotiation. There would be no new talks with Annan. It would be: take it or leave it.

I know there will be reluctance on this. But it would neutralise opposition around the UN issue. If he did say yes, we continue the build-up and we send teams over and the moment he obstructs, we say: he's back to his games. That's it. In any event, he probably would screw it up and not meet the deadline, and if he came forward after the deadline, we would just refuse to deal.

(2) The Evidence.

Again, I have been told the US thinks this unnecessary. But we still need to make the case. If we recapitulate all the WMD evidence; add his attempts to secure nuclear capability; and, as seems possible, add on Al Qaida link, it will be hugely persuasive over here. Plus, of course, the abhorrent nature of the regime. It could be done simultaneously with the deadline.

(3) MEPP.

My judgement is this is essential and whatever the Arabs say at one level, at another this is in the very soul of their attitudes. So it is worth a real effort to get a proper negotiation going. but at the moment there is no other option. But this negotiation won't start unless someone takes charge of the detail in the negotiation. But for the Arabs, MEPP doesn't have to be settled. It just has to start in earnest.

(4) Post Saddam

Suppose we were able to say as follows. Regime change is vital and, in the first instance, it must be one that protects Iraq's territorial integrity and provides stability; and hence might involve another key military figure. But it should lead in time to a democratic Iraq, governed by the people. This would be very

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powerful. I need advice on whether it's feasible. But just swapping one dictator for another seems inconsistent with our values.

(5) The Arab/Moslem World

Some will fall into line. But others won't and others still - Syria and Iran to name but two - might be actively hostile or use it as a means to support terrorism in Israel. We need a dedicated effort to woo the Arab world, to offer the hardliners a very hard-headed partnership or put them on the 'axis of evil' list. But we shouldn't just leave this to chance and their own (bad) decision-making.

(6) Afghanistan

We need this to be going right, not wrong. It is our one act of regime change so far, so it had better be a good advertisement. My hunch is it needs renewed focus and effort.

It goes without saying that the Turks and the Kurds need to be OK. Strangely, I think they are going to be the easiest, despite the Turkish elections. They both want our help badly and will play ball, if offered enough.

I would be happy to try to put all this together, ie to dedicate myself to getting all these elements (1-6) sorted, including involving myself in the MEPP. But it needs a huge commitment in time and energy. So it's only really worth doing if we are all on the same page.

The Military Plan

Finally, obviously, we must have a workable military plan. I don't know the details yet, so this is at first blush.

The two options are running start and generated start.

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The first has the advantage of surprise; the second of overwhelming force. My military tell me the risks of heavy losses on the running start make it very risky. Apparently it involves around 15-20,000 troops striking inside Iraq, with heavy air support. The idea would be to catch the regime off balance, strike hard and quickly and get it to collapse. The obvious danger is it doesn't collapse. And there is the risk of CW being used.

For that reason, a generated start seems better. It could always be translated into a more immediate option, should Saddam do something stupid. Also, the build-up of forces in such numbers will be a big signal of serious intent to the region and help to pull people towards us; and demoralise the Iraqis. This option allows us to hammer his air defences and infrastructure; to invade from the south and take the oilfields; to secure the north and protect/stabilise the Kurds. Then effectively with huge force we go on to Baghdad.

We would support in any way we can.

On timing, we could start building up after the break. A strike date could be Jan/Feb next year. But the crucial issue is not when, but how.

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