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29 August 2002

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Dear Edward
 IRAQ

1. I understand that the PUS is to hold a meeting on this tomorrow. You may welcome a snapshot of the situation as it now looks here. This supplements my letter of 15 August to the Private Secretary (attached) and should also be read in conjunction with my telno 1104 reporting developments here today. It draws only on material shared with us in a relatively uncaveatted way by our contacts.
2. The public debate, launched by the congressional hearings at the end of July, is now firmly engaged. We have seen contributions from practically every prominent Republican foreign policy name. With the signal exceptions of Scowcroft (reportedly very close to Bush 1), and Zinni, virtually all have endorsed the idea of military action, subject to various preliminaries (such as going through the UN) to maximise international support. Cheney's speech (my telno 1091), reiterated today, has further raised expectations of an early decision leading towards military action.
3. The key points under discussion have been:
 - a) **Whether to do it at all:** The President's public position has been that he will proceed "cautiously and deliberately" with full consultations of Congress and allies, and that a range of options, including military, remains open. As noted above, most Republican commentators have argued for action, subject to various caveats. Democrats, strikingly, are keeping their heads down
 - b) **UN Inspections:** Baker and others have argued that the US must go the UN route - demanding unfettered inspections (with

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the expectation, but not certainty, that Saddam will refuse), and the right to take action to enforce compliance, in order to maximise international support. Cheney and Rumsfeld have been highly dismissive in public of any value to resumed inspections, although it is striking that in today's reprise of his 26 August speech Cheney toned down his language on this point;

c) Consulting Congress: The White House has made it clear that it sees no legal need to get Congressional support for military action (relying instead on the Congressional resolution that preceded the 1991 Gulf War). But they have also been briefing that there will be "full consultation" and have not ruled out seeking formal support (for political reasons). The signs are that Congress will certainly press for a say. And even Congressional opponents to whom I have spoken privately concede that if the Administration makes an effective case then Congress is likely to support action.

4. A number of other considerations continue to weigh heavily in the debate - the 'day after' question (what would the US do with a conquered Iraq?), the impact on the oil market, the possible use by Saddam of WMD. One consideration which has not featured as prominently as might have been expected is the relevance of the Middle East dispute. The hawk's argument here, which has gained some resonance, is that to postpone action in Iraq until Arab/Israel improves is to postpone it for ever.

5. Such evidence as we have seen on the state of US public opinion is that it is lukewarmly supportive of action. Polls indicate that support for action is still just a plurality, though now down to pre 9/11 levels. Commentators believe that if a public case begins to be made that support will firm up.

6. Largely due to the President's emphasis on caution and deliberation the frenzy about imminent action seems to have died down. Dates upon which attention is beginning to focus for further public signs of the Administration approach are 12 September (Bush's speech to the UN) and 16 September (when Congressional hearings are due to resume).

7. In summary, the hard questions are now out on the table and it is clear to the main players that they are going to have to make a convincing case before going ahead with any action. So far the absence of a political green light has hindered them in making that case - although Rice to the BBC and, particularly, Cheney this week have launched that process. The expectations which have now been generated will make it very difficult for the President to do nothing (though this, of course, does not mean that military action is inevitable). And it would be naive to overlook the political dimension to all this. Even if concrete action against Iraq

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is still some way off, the Republicans would far prefer an Autumn in which the press is dominated by Iraq headlines than one where the economy is the lead story.

*Yours
Tony*

Tony Brenton

CC:

PS

PS/Mr O'Brien

PS/PUS

Peter Ricketts, Political Director

Stephen Wright, DUS

Graham Fry, DUS

Charles Gray, MHD

Sir David Manning, No. 10

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