

## The New York Review of Books

[Home](#) · [Your account](#) · [Current issue](#) · [Archives](#) · [Subscriptions](#) · [Calendar](#) · [Newsletters](#) · [Gallery](#) · NYR Books

VOLUME 52, NUMBER 10 · [JUNE 9, 2005](#)

[✉ Email to a friend](#)

Feature

# The Secret Way to War

By [Mark Danner](#)

1.

It was October 16, 2002, and the United States Congress had just voted to authorize the President to go to war against Iraq. When George W. Bush came before members of his Cabinet and Congress gathered in the East Room of the White House and addressed the American people, he was in a somber mood befitting a leader speaking frankly to free citizens about the gravest decision their country could make.

The 107th Congress, the President said, had just become "one of the few called by history to authorize military action to defend our country and the cause of peace." But, he hastened to add, no one should assume that war was inevitable. Though "Congress has now authorized the use of force," the President said emphatically, "I have not ordered the use of force. I hope the use of force will not become necessary." The President went on:

Our goal is to fully and finally remove a real threat to world peace and to America. Hopefully this can be done peacefully. Hopefully we can do this without any military action. Yet, if Iraq is to avoid military action by the international community, it has the obligation to prove compliance with all the world's demands. It's the obligation of Iraq.

Iraq, the President said, still had the power to prevent war by "declaring and destroying all its weapons of mass destruction"—but if Iraq did not declare and destroy those weapons, the President warned, the United States would "go into battle, as a last resort."

It is safe to say that, at the time, it surprised almost no one when the Iraqis answered the President's demand by repeating their

claim that in fact there were no weapons of mass destruction. As we now know, the Iraqis had in fact destroyed these weapons, probably years before George W. Bush's ultimatum: "the Iraqis"—in the words of chief US weapons inspector David Kay—"were telling the truth."

As Americans watch their young men and women fighting in the third year of a bloody counterinsurgency war in Iraq—a war that has now killed more than 1,600 Americans and tens of thousands of Iraqis—they are left to ponder "the unanswered question" of what would have happened if the United Nations weapons inspectors had been allowed—as all the major powers except the United Kingdom had urged they should be—to complete their work. What would have happened if the UN weapons inspectors had been allowed to prove, before the US went "into battle," what David Kay and his colleagues finally proved afterward?

**T**hanks to a formerly secret memorandum published by the London *Sunday Times* on May 1, during the run-up to the British elections, we now have a partial answer to that question. The memo, which records the minutes of a meeting of Prime Minister Tony Blair's senior foreign policy and security officials, shows that even as President Bush told Americans in October 2002 that he "hope[d] the use of force will not become necessary"—that such a decision depended on whether or not the Iraqis complied with his demands to rid themselves of their weapons of mass destruction—the President had in fact already definitively decided, at least three months before, to choose this "last resort" of going "into battle" with Iraq. Whatever the Iraqis chose to do or not do, the President's decision to go to war had long since been made.

On July 23, 2002, eight months before American and British forces invaded, senior British officials met with Prime Minister Tony Blair to discuss Iraq. The gathering, similar to an American "principals meeting," brought together Geoffrey Hoon, the defense secretary; Jack Straw, the foreign secretary; Lord Goldsmith, the attorney general; John Scarlett, the head of the Joint Intelligence Committee, which advises the prime minister; Sir Richard Dearlove, also known as "C," the head of MI6 (the equivalent of the CIA); David Manning, the equivalent of the national security adviser; Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, the chief of the Defense Staff (or CDS, equivalent to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs); Jonathan Powell, Blair's chief of staff; Alastair Campbell, director of strategy (Blair's communications and political adviser); and Sally Morgan, director of government relations.

After John Scarlett began the meeting with a summary of intelligence on Iraq—notably, that "the regime was tough and based on extreme fear" and that thus the "only way to overthrow

it was likely to be by massive military action," "C" offered a report on his visit to Washington, where he had conducted talks with George Tenet, his counterpart at the CIA, and other high officials. This passage is worth quoting in full:

C reported on his recent talks in Washington. There was a perceptible shift in attitude. Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy. The NSC had no patience with the UN route, and no enthusiasm for publishing material on the Iraqi regime's record. There was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action.

Seen from today's perspective this short paragraph is a strikingly clear template for the future, establishing these points:

1. By mid-July 2002, eight months before the war began, President Bush had decided to invade and occupy Iraq.
2. Bush had decided to "justify" the war "by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD."
3. Already "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."
4. Many at the top of the administration did not want to seek approval from the United Nations (going "the UN route").
5. Few in Washington seemed much interested in the aftermath of the war.

We have long known, thanks to Bob Woodward and others, that military planning for the Iraq war began as early as November 21, 2001, after the President ordered Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to look at "what it would take to protect America by removing Saddam Hussein if we have to," and that Secretary Rumsfeld and General Tommy Franks, who headed Central Command, were briefing American senior officials on the progress of military planning during the late spring and summer of 2002; indeed, a few days after the meeting in London leaks about specific plans for a possible Iraq war appeared on the front pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

**W**hat the Downing Street memo confirms for the first time is that President Bush had decided, no later than July 2002, to

"remove Saddam, through military action," that war with Iraq was "inevitable"—and that what remained was simply to establish and develop the modalities of justification; that is, to come up with a means of "justifying" the war and "fixing" the "intelligence and facts...around the policy." The great value of the discussion recounted in the memo, then, is to show, for the governments of both countries, a clear hierarchy of decision-making. By July 2002 at the latest, war had been decided on; the question at issue now was how to justify it—how to "fix," as it were, what Blair will later call "the political context." Specifically, though by this point in July the President had decided to go to war, he had not yet decided to go to the United Nations and demand inspectors; indeed, as "C" points out, those on the National Security Council—the senior security officials of the US government—"had no patience with the UN route, and no enthusiasm for publishing material on the Iraqi regime's record." This would later change, largely as a result of the political concerns of these very people gathered together at 10 Downing Street.

After Admiral Boyce offered a brief discussion of the war plans then on the table and the defense secretary said a word or two about timing—"the most likely timing in US minds for military action to begin was January, with the timeline beginning 30 days before the US Congressional elections"—Foreign Secretary Jack Straw got to the heart of the matter: not whether or not to invade Iraq but how to justify such an invasion:

The Foreign Secretary said he would discuss [the timing of the war] with Colin Powell this week. It seemed clear that Bush had made up his mind to take military action, even if the timing was not yet decided. But the case was thin. Saddam was not threatening his neighbors, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran.

Given that Saddam was not threatening to attack his neighbors and that his weapons of mass destruction program was less extensive than those of a number of other countries, how does one justify attacking? Foreign Secretary Straw had an idea:

We should work up a plan for an ultimatum to Saddam to allow back in the UN weapons inspectors. This would also help with the legal justification for the use of force.

The British realized they needed "help with the legal justification for the use of force" because, as the attorney general pointed out, rather dryly, "the desire for regime change was not a legal base for military action." Which is to say, the simple desire to overthrow the leadership of a given sovereign country does not make it legal to invade that country; on the contrary. And, said the attorney general, of the "three possible legal bases:

self-defence, humanitarian intervention, or [United Nations Security Council] authorization," the first two "could not be the base in this case." In other words, Iraq was not attacking the United States or the United Kingdom, so the leaders could not claim to be acting in self-defense; nor was Iraq's leadership in the process of committing genocide, so the United States and the United Kingdom could not claim to be invading for humanitarian reasons.<sup>[1]</sup> This left Security Council authorization as the only conceivable legal justification for war. But how to get it?

**A**t this point in the meeting Prime Minister Tony Blair weighed in. He had heard his foreign minister's suggestion about drafting an ultimatum demanding that Saddam let back in the United Nations inspectors. Such an ultimatum could be politically critical, said Blair—but only if the Iraqi leader turned it down:

The Prime Minister said that it would make a big difference politically and legally if Saddam refused to allow in the UN inspectors. Regime change and WMD were linked in the sense that it was the regime that was producing the WMD.... If the political context were right, people would support regime change. The two key issues were whether the military plan worked and whether we had the political strategy to give the military plan the space to work.

Here the inspectors were introduced, but as a means to create the missing *casus belli*. If the UN could be made to agree on an ultimatum that Saddam accept inspectors, and if Saddam then refused to accept them, the Americans and the British would be well on their way to having a legal justification to go to war (the attorney general's third alternative of UN Security Council authorization).

Thus, the idea of UN inspectors was introduced not as a means to avoid war, as President Bush repeatedly assured Americans, but as a means to make war possible. War had been decided on; the problem under discussion here was how to make, in the prime minister's words, "the political context ...right." The "political strategy"—at the center of which, as with the Americans, was weapons of mass destruction, for "it was the regime that was producing the WMD"—must be strong enough to give "the military plan the space to work." Which is to say, once the allies were victorious the war would justify itself. The demand that Iraq accept UN inspectors, especially if refused, could form the political bridge by which the allies could reach their goal: "regime change" through "military action."

But there was a problem: as the foreign secretary pointed out, "on

the political strategy, there could be US/UK differences." While the British considered legal justification for going to war critical—they, unlike the Americans, were members of the International Criminal Court—the Americans did not. Mr. Straw suggested that given "US resistance, we should explore discreetly the ultimatum." The defense secretary, Geoffrey Hoon, was more blunt, arguing

that if the Prime Minister wanted UK military involvement, he would need to decide this early. He cautioned that many in the US did not think it worth going down the ultimatum route. It would be important for the Prime Minister to set out the political context to Bush.

The key negotiation in view at this point, in other words, was not with Saddam over letting in the United Nations inspectors—both parties hoped he would refuse to admit them, and thus provide the justification for invading. The key negotiation would be between the Americans, who had shown "resistance" to the idea of involving the United Nations at all, and the British, who were more concerned than their American cousins about having some kind of legal fig leaf for attacking Iraq. Three weeks later, Foreign Secretary Straw arrived in the Hamptons to "discreetly explore the ultimatum" with Secretary of State Powell, perhaps the only senior American official who shared some of the British concerns; as Straw told the secretary, in Bob Woodward's account, "If you are really thinking about war and you want us Brits to be a player, we cannot be unless you go to the United Nations."<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2.

Britain's strong support for the "UN route" that most American officials so distrusted was critical in helping Powell in the bureaucratic battle over going to the United Nations. As late as August 26, Vice President Dick Cheney had appeared before a convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and publicly denounced "the UN route." Asserting that "simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction [and] there is no doubt that he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us," Cheney advanced the view that going to the United Nations would itself be dangerous:

A return of inspectors would provide no assurance whatsoever of his compliance with UN resolutions. On the contrary, there is great danger that it would provide false comfort that Saddam was somehow "back in the box."

Cheney, like other administration "hard-liners," feared "the UN

route" not because it might fail but because it might succeed and thereby prevent a war that they were convinced had to be fought.

As Woodward recounts, it would finally take a personal visit by Blair on September 7 to persuade President Bush to go to the United Nations:

For Blair the immediate question was, Would the United Nations be used? He was keenly aware that in Britain the question was, Does Blair believe in the UN? It was critical domestically for the prime minister to show his own Labour Party, a pacifist party at heart, opposed to war in principle, that he had gone the UN route. Public opinion in the UK favored trying to make international institutions work before resorting to force. Going through the UN would be a large and much-needed plus.<sup>[3]</sup>

The President now told Blair that he had decided "to go to the UN" and the prime minister, according to Woodward, "was relieved." After the session with Blair, Bush later recounts to Woodward, he walked into a conference room and told the British officials gathered there that "your man has got cojones." ("And of course these Brits don't know what cojones are," Bush tells Woodward.) Henceforth this particular conference with Blair would be known, Bush declares, as "the cojones meeting."

That September the attempt to sell the war began in earnest, for, as White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card had told *The New York Times* in an unusually candid moment, "You don't roll out a new product in August." At the heart of the sales campaign was the United Nations. Thanks in substantial part to Blair's prodding, George W. Bush would come before the UN General Assembly on September 12 and, after denouncing the Iraqi regime, announce that "we will work with the UN Security Council for the necessary resolutions." The main phase of public diplomacy—giving the war a "political context," in Blair's phrase—had begun. Though "the UN route" would be styled as an attempt to avoid war, its essence, as the Downing Street memo makes clear, was a strategy to make the war possible, partly by making it politically palatable.

**A**s it turned out, however—and as Cheney and others had feared—the "UN route" to war was by no means smooth, or direct.

Though Powell managed the considerable feat of securing unanimous approval for Security Council Resolution 1441, winning even Syria's support, the allies differed on the key question of whether or not the resolution gave United Nations approval for the use of force against Saddam, as the Americans contended, or

whether a second resolution would be required, as the majority of the council, and even the British, conceded it would. Sir Jeremy Greenstock, the British ambassador to the UN, put this position bluntly on November 8, the day Resolution 1441 was passed:

We heard loud and clear during the negotiations about "automaticity" and "hidden triggers"— the concerns that on a decision so crucial we should not rush into military action.... Let me be equally clear.... There is no "automaticity" in this Resolution. If there is a further Iraqi breach of its disarmament obligations, the matter will return to the Council for discussion as required.... We would expect the Security Council then to meet its responsibilities.

Vice President Cheney could have expected no worse. Having decided to travel down "the UN route," the Americans and British would now need a second resolution to gain the necessary approval to attack Iraq. Worse, Saddam frustrated British and American hopes, as articulated by Blair in the July 23 meeting, that he would simply refuse to admit the inspectors and thereby offer the allies an immediate *casus belli*. Instead, hundreds of inspectors entered Iraq, began to search, and found...nothing. January, which Defence Secretary Hoon had suggested was the "most likely timing in US minds for military action to begin," came and went, and the inspectors went on searching.

On the Security Council, a majority —led by France, Germany, and Russia —would push for the inspections to run their course. President Jacques Chirac of France later put this argument succinctly in an interview with CBS and CNN just as the war was about to begin:

France is not pacifist. We are not anti-American either. We are not just going to use our veto to nag and annoy the US. But we just feel that there is another option, another way, another more normal way, a less dramatic way than war, and that we have to go through that path. And we should pursue it until we've come [to] a dead end, but that isn't the case. <sup>[4]</sup>

Where would this "dead end" be found, however, and who would determine that it had been found? Would it be the French, or the Americans? The logical flaw that threatened the administration's policy now began to become clear. Had the inspectors found weapons, or had they been presented with them by Saddam Hussein, many who had supported the resolution would argue that the inspections regime it established had indeed begun to work—that by multilateral action the world was succeeding, peacefully, in "disarming Iraq." As long as the inspectors found no weapons, however, many would argue that the inspectors "must



be given time to do their work" —until, in Chirac's words, they "came to a dead end." However that point might be determined, it is likely that, long before it was reached, the failure to find weapons would have undermined the administration's central argument for going to war—"the conjunction," as 'C' had put it that morning in July, "of terrorism and WMD." And as we now know, the inspectors would never have found weapons of mass destruction.

**V**ice President Cheney had anticipated this problem, as he had explained frankly to Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector, during an October 30 meeting in the White House. Cheney, according to Blix,

stated the position that inspections, if they do not give results, cannot go on forever, and said the US was "ready to discredit inspections in favor of disarmament." A pretty straight way, I thought, of saying that if we did not soon find the weapons of mass destruction that the US was convinced Iraq possessed (though they did not know where), the US would be ready to say that the inspectors were useless and embark on disarmament by other means. [\[5\]](#)

Indeed, the inspectors' failure to find any evidence of weapons came in the wake of a very large effort launched by the administration to put before the world evidence of Saddam's arsenal, an effort spearheaded by George W. Bush's speech in Cincinnati on October 7, and followed by a series of increasingly lurid disclosures to the press that reached a crescendo with Colin Powell's multimedia presentation to the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003. Throughout the fall and winter, the administration had "rolled out the product," in Card's phrase, with great skill, making use of television, radio, and all the print press to get its message out about the imminent threat of Saddam's arsenal. ("Think of the press," advised Josef Goebbels, "as a great keyboard on which the government can play.")

As the gap between administration rhetoric about enormous arsenals— "we know where they are," asserted Donald Rumsfeld—and the inspectors' empty hands grew wider, that gap, as Cheney had predicted, had the effect in many quarters of undermining the credibility of the United Nations process itself. The inspectors' failure to find weapons in Iraq was taken to discredit the worth of the inspections, rather than to cast doubt on the administration's contention that Saddam possessed large stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction.

Oddly enough, Saddam's only effective strategy to prevent war at

this point might have been to reveal and yield up some weapons, thus demonstrating to the world that the inspections were working. As we now know, however, he had no weapons to yield up. As Blix remarks, "It occurred to me [on March 7] that the Iraqis would be in greater difficulty if...there truly *were* no weapons of which they could 'yield possession.'" The fact that, in Blix's words, "the UN and the world had succeeded in disarming Iraq without knowing it"—that the UN process had been successful—meant, in effect, that the inspectors would be discredited and the United States would go to war.

President Bush would do so, of course, having failed to get the "second resolution" so desired by his friend and ally, Tony Blair. Blair had predicted, that July morning on Downing Street, that the "two key issues were whether the military plan worked and whether we had the political strategy to give the military plan the space to work." He seems to have been proved right in this. In the end his political strategy only half worked: the Security Council's refusal to vote a second resolution approving the use of force left "the UN route" discussed that day incomplete, and Blair found himself forced to follow the United States without the protection of international approval. Had the military plan "worked"—had the war been short and decisive rather than long, bloody, and inconclusive—Blair would perhaps have escaped the political damage the war has caused him. A week after the Downing Street memo was published in the *Sunday Times*, Tony Blair was reelected, but his majority in Parliament was reduced, from 161 to 67. The Iraq war, and the damage it had done to his reputation for probity, was widely believed to have been a principal cause.

**I**n the United States, on the other hand, the Downing Street memorandum has attracted little attention. As I write, no American newspaper has published it and few writers have bothered to comment on it. The war continues, and Americans have grown weary of it; few seem much interested now in discussing how it began, and why their country came to fight a war in the cause of destroying weapons that turned out not to exist. For those who want answers, the Bush administration has followed a simple and heretofore largely successful policy: blame the intelligence agencies. Since "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy" as early as July 2002 (as "C," the head of British intelligence, reported upon his return from Washington), it seems a matter of remarkable hubris, even for this administration, that its officials now explain their misjudgments in going to war by blaming them on "intelligence failures"—that is, on the intelligence that they themselves politicized. Still, for the most part, Congress has cooperated. Though the Senate Intelligence Committee investigated the failures of the CIA and other agencies before the war, a promised

second report that was to take up the administration's political use of intelligence—which is, after all, the critical issue—was postponed until after the 2004 elections, then quietly abandoned.

In the end, the Downing Street memo, and Americans' lack of interest in what it shows, has to do with a certain attitude about facts, or rather about where the line should be drawn between facts and political opinion. It calls to mind an interesting observation that an unnamed "senior advisor" to President Bush made to a *New York Times Magazine* reporter last fall:

The aide said that guys like me [i.e., reporters and commentators] were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."<sup>[6]</sup>

Though this seems on its face to be a disquisition on religion and faith, it is of course an argument about power, and its influence on truth. Power, the argument runs, can shape truth: power, in the end, can determine reality, or at least the reality that most people accept—a critical point, for the administration has been singularly effective in its recognition that what is most politically important is not what readers of *The New York Times* believe but what most Americans are willing to believe. The last century's most innovative authority on power and truth, Joseph Goebbels, made the same point but rather more directly:

There was no point in seeking to convert the intellectuals. For intellectuals would never be converted and would anyway always yield to the stronger, and this will always be "the man in the street." Arguments must therefore be crude, clear and forcible, and appeal to emotions and instincts, not the intellect. Truth was unimportant and entirely subordinate to tactics and psychology.

I thought of this quotation when I first read the Downing Street memorandum; but I had first looked it up several months earlier, on December 14, 2004, after I had seen the images of the newly reelected President George W. Bush awarding the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor the United States can bestow,

to George Tenet, the former director of central intelligence; L. Paul Bremer, the former head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq; and General (ret.) Tommy Franks, the commander who had led American forces during the first phase of the Iraq war. Tenet, of course, would be known to history as the intelligence director who had failed to detect and prevent the attacks of September 11 and the man who had assured President Bush that the case for Saddam's possession of weapons of mass destruction was "a slam dunk." Franks had allowed the looting of Baghdad and had generally done little to prepare for what would come after the taking of Baghdad. ("There was little discussion in Washington," as "C" told the Prime Minister on July 23, "of the aftermath after military action.") Bremer had dissolved the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police and thereby created 400,000 or so available recruits for the insurgency. One might debate their ultimate responsibility for these grave errors, but it is difficult to argue that these officials merited the highest recognition the country could offer.

Of course truth, as the master propagandist said, is "unimportant and entirely subordinate to tactics and psychology." He of course would have instantly grasped the psychological tactic embodied in that White House ceremony, which was one more effort to reassure Americans that the war the administration launched against Iraq has been a success and was worth fighting. That barely four Americans in ten are still willing to believe this suggests that as time goes on and the gap grows between what Americans see and what they are told, membership in the "reality-based community" may grow along with it. We will see. Still, for those interested in the question of how our leaders persuaded the country to become embroiled in a counterinsurgency war in Iraq, the Downing Street memorandum offers one more confirmation of the truth. For those, that is, who want to hear.

—May 12, 2005

---

## The Secret Downing Street Memo

**SECRET AND STRICTLY PERSONAL  
—UK EYES ONLY**

**DAVID MANNING**  
From: Matthew Rycroft  
Date: 23 July 2002  
S 195 /02

cc: Defence Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Attorney-General,  
Sir Richard Wilson, John Scarlett, Francis Richards, CDS, C,  
Jonathan Powell, Sally Morgan, Alastair Campbell

## IRAQ: PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING, 23 JULY

Copy addressees and you met the Prime Minister on 23 July to discuss Iraq.

**This record is extremely sensitive. No further copies should be made. It should be shown only to those with a genuine need to know its contents.**

John Scarlett summarised the intelligence and latest JIC assessment. Saddam's regime was tough and based on extreme fear. The only way to overthrow it was likely to be by massive military action. Saddam was worried and expected an attack, probably by air and land, but he was not convinced that it would be immediate or overwhelming. His regime expected their neighbours to line up with the US. Saddam knew that regular army morale was poor. Real support for Saddam among the public was probably narrowly based.

C reported on his recent talks in Washington. There was a perceptible shift in attitude. Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy. The NSC had no patience with the UN route, and no enthusiasm for publishing material on the Iraqi regime's record. There was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action.

CDS said that military planners would brief CENTCOM on 1-2 August, Rumsfeld on 3 August and Bush on 4 August. The two broad US options were:

- (a) Generated Start. A slow build-up of 250,000 US troops, a short (72 hour) air campaign, then a move up to Baghdad from the south. Lead time of 90 days (30 days preparation plus 60 days deployment to Kuwait).
- (b) Running Start. Use forces already in theatre (3 x 6,000), continuous air campaign, initiated by an Iraqi casus belli. Total lead time of 60 days with the air campaign beginning even earlier. A hazardous option.

The US saw the UK (and Kuwait) as essential, with basing in Diego Garcia and Cyprus critical for either option. Turkey and other Gulf states were also important, but less vital. The three main options for UK involvement were:

- (i) Basing in Diego Garcia and Cyprus, plus three SF squadrons.
- (ii) As above, with maritime and air assets in addition.
- (iii) As above, plus a land contribution of up to 40,000, perhaps with a discrete role in Northern Iraq entering from Turkey, tying down two Iraqi divisions.

The Defence Secretary said that the US had already begun "spikes of activity" to put pressure on the regime. No decisions had been

taken, but he thought the most likely timing in US minds for military action to begin was January, with the timeline beginning 30 days before the US Congressional elections.

The Foreign Secretary said he would discuss this with Colin Powell this week. It seemed clear that Bush had made up his mind to take military action, even if the timing was not yet decided. But the case was thin. Saddam was not threatening his neighbours, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran. We should work up a plan for an ultimatum to Saddam to allow back in the UN weapons inspectors. This would also help with the legal justification for the use of force.

The Attorney-General said that the desire for regime change was not a legal base for military action. There were three possible legal bases: selfdefence, humanitarian intervention, or UNSC authorisation. The first and second could not be the base in this case. Relying on UNSCR 1205 of three years ago would be difficult. The situation might of course change.

The Prime Minister said that it would make a big difference politically and legally if Saddam refused to allow in the UN inspectors. Regime change and WMD were linked in the sense that it was the regime that was producing the WMD. There were different strategies for dealing with Libya and Iran. If the political context were right, people would support regime change. The two key issues were whether the military plan worked and whether we had the political strategy to give the military plan the space to work.

On the first, CDS said that we did not know yet if the US battleplan was workable. The military were continuing to ask lots of questions. For instance, what were the consequences, if Saddam used WMD on day one, or if Baghdad did not collapse and urban warfighting began? You [i.e., David Manning] said that Saddam could also use his WMD on Kuwait. Or on Israel, added the Defence Secretary.

The Foreign Secretary thought the US would not go ahead with a military plan unless convinced that it was a winning strategy. On this, US and UK interests converged. But on the political strategy, there could be US/UK differences. Despite US resistance, we should explore discreetly the ultimatum. Saddam would continue to play hard-ball with the UN. John Scarlett assessed that Saddam would allow the inspectors back in only when he thought the threat of military action was real.

The Defence Secretary said that if the Prime Minister wanted UK military involvement, he would need to decide this early. He cautioned that many in the US did not think it worth going down the ultimatum route. It would be important for the Prime Minister

to set out the political context to Bush.

### Conclusions:

(a) We should work on the assumption that the UK would take part in any military action. But we needed a fuller picture of US planning before we could take any firm decisions. CDS should tell the US military that we were considering a range of options.

(b) The Prime Minister would revert on the question of whether funds could be spent in preparation for this operation.

(c) CDS would send the Prime Minister full details of the proposed military campaign and possible UK contributions by the end of the week.

(d) The Foreign Secretary would send the Prime Minister the background on the UN inspectors, and discreetly work up the ultimatum to Saddam. He would also send the Prime Minister advice on the positions of countries in the region especially Turkey, and of the key EU member states.

(e) John Scarlett would send the Prime Minister a full intelligence update.

(f) We must not ignore the legal issues: the Attorney-General would consider legal advice with FCO/MOD legal advisers.

(I have written separately to commission this follow-up work.)

**MATTHEW RYCROFT**

### Notes

[1] The latter charge might have been given as a reason for intervention in 1988, for example, when the Iraqi regime was carrying out its Anfal campaign against the Kurds; at that time, though, the Reagan administration— comprising many of the same officials who would later lead the invasion of Iraq—was supporting Saddam in his war against Iran and kept largely silent. The second major killing campaign of the Saddam regime came in 1991, when Iraqi troops attacked Shiites in the south who had rebelled against the regime in the wake of Saddam's defeat in the Gulf War; the first Bush administration, despite President George H.W. Bush's urging Iraqis to "rise up against the dictator, Saddam Hussein," and despite the presence of hundreds of thousands of American troops within miles of the killing, stood by and did nothing. See Ken Roth, "War in Iraq: Not a Humanitarian Intervention" (Human Rights Watch, January 2004).

[2] See Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (Simon and Schuster,

2004), p. 162.

[3] See Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, pp. 177–178.

[4] See "Chirac Makes His Case on Iraq," an interview with Christiane Amanpour, CBS News, March 16, 2003.

[5] See Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq* (Pantheon, 2004), p. 86.

[6] See Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004.

---

[Home](#) · [Your account](#) · [Current issue](#) · [Archives](#) · [Subscriptions](#) · [Calendar](#) · [Newsletters](#) · [Gallery](#) · NYR Books

Copyright © 1963-2005 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved. Nothing in this publication may be reproduced without the permission of the publisher. Illustrations copyright © David Levine unless otherwise noted; unauthorized use is strictly prohibited. Please contact [web@nybooks.com](mailto:web@nybooks.com) with any questions about this site. The cover date of the next issue of *The New York Review of Books* will be July 14, 2005.