

SECTION 7

CONCLUSIONS: PRE-CONFLICT STRATEGY AND PLANNING

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Conclusions

- 1.** After the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 and the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in November, the US Administration turned its attention to regime change in Iraq as part of the second phase of what it called the Global War on Terror.
- 2.** The UK Government sought to influence the decisions of the US Administration and avoid unilateral US military action on Iraq by offering partnership to the US and seeking to build international support for the position that Iraq was a threat with which it was necessary to deal.
- 3.** In Mr Blair's view, the decision to stand "shoulder to shoulder" with the US was an essential demonstration of solidarity with the UK's principal ally as well as being in the UK's long-term national interests.
- 4.** To do so required the UK to reconcile its objective of disarming Iraq, if possible by peaceful means, with the US goal of regime change. That was achieved by the development of an ultimatum strategy threatening the use of force if Saddam Hussein did not comply with the demands of the international community, and by seeking to persuade the US to adopt that strategy and pursue it through the UN.
- 5.** President Bush's decision, in September 2002, to challenge the UN to deal with Iraq, and the subsequent successful negotiation of resolution 1441 giving Iraq a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations or face serious consequences if it did not, was perceived to be a major success for Mr Blair's strategy and his influence on President Bush.
- 6.** But US willingness to act through the UN was limited. Following the Iraqi declaration of 7 December 2002, the UK perceived that President Bush had decided that the US would take military action in early 2003 if Saddam Hussein had not been disarmed and was still in power.
- 7.** The timing of military action was entirely driven by the US Administration.
- 8.** At the end of January 2003, Mr Blair accepted the US timetable for military action by mid-March. President Bush agreed to support a second resolution to help Mr Blair.
- 9.** The UK Government's efforts to secure a second resolution faced opposition from those countries, notably France, Germany and Russia, which believed that the inspections process could continue. The inspectors reported that Iraqi co-operation, while far from perfect, was improving.
- 10.** By early March, the US Administration was not prepared to allow inspections to continue or give Mr Blair more time to try to achieve support for action. The attempt to gain support for a second resolution was abandoned.

11. In the Inquiry's view, the diplomatic options had not at that stage been exhausted. Military action was therefore not a last resort.

12. In mid-March, Mr Blair's determination to stand alongside the US left the UK with a stark choice. It could act with the US but without the support of the majority of the Security Council in taking military action if Saddam Hussein did not accept the US ultimatum giving him 48 hours to leave. Or it could choose not to join US-led military action.

13. Led by Mr Blair, the UK Government chose to support military action.

14. Mr Blair asked Parliament to endorse a decision to invade and occupy a sovereign nation, without the support of a Security Council resolution explicitly authorising the use of force. Parliament endorsed that choice.

15. This Section sets out how the choices made by the UK Government resulted in that outcome.

The UK decision to support US military action

16. President Bush decided at the end of 2001 to pursue a policy of regime change in Iraq.

17. The UK shared the broad objective of finding a way to deal with Saddam Hussein's defiance of UN Security Council resolutions and his assumed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programmes. However, based on consistent legal advice, the UK could not share the US objective of regime change. The UK Government therefore set as its objective the disarmament of Iraq in accordance with the obligations imposed in a series of Security Council resolutions.

UK policy before 9/11

18. Before the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 (9/11), the UK was pursuing a strategy of containment based on a new sanctions regime to improve international support and incentivise Iraq's co-operation, narrowing and deepening the sanctions regime to focus only on prohibited items and at the same time improving financial controls to reduce the flow of illicit funds to Saddam Hussein.

19. When UK policy towards Iraq was formally reviewed and agreed by the Ministerial Committee on Defence and Overseas Policy (DOP) in May 1999, the objectives towards Iraq were defined as:

“... in the short term, to reduce the threat Saddam [Hussein] poses to the region including by eliminating his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programmes;

and, in the longer term, to reintegrate a territorially intact Iraq as a law-abiding member of the international community.”¹

20. The policy of containment was seen as the “only viable way” to pursue those objectives. A “policy of trying to topple Saddam would command no useful international support”. Iraq was unlikely to accept the package immediately but “might be persuaded to acquiesce eventually”.

21. After prolonged discussion about the way ahead, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1284 in December 1999, although China, France and Russia abstained.²

22. The resolution established:

- a new inspectorate, the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) (which Dr Hans Blix was subsequently appointed to lead);
- a timetable to identify and agree a work programme; and
- and the principle that, if the inspectors reported co-operation in key areas, that would lead to the suspension of economic sanctions.³

23. Resolution 1284 described Iraq’s obligations to comply with the disarmament standards of resolution 687 and other related resolutions as the “governing standard of Iraqi compliance”; and provided that the Security Council would decide what was required of Iraq for the implementation of each task and that it should be “clearly defined and precise”.

24. The resolution was also a deliberate compromise which changed the criterion for the suspension, and eventual lifting, of sanctions from complete disarmament to tests which would be based on judgements by UNMOVIC on the progress made in completing identified tasks.

25. Iraq refused to accept the provisions of resolution 1284, including the re-admission of weapons inspectors. Concerns about Iraq’s activities in the absence of inspectors increased.

26. The US Presidential election in November 2000 prompted a further UK review of the operation of the containment policy (see Section 1.2). There were concerns about how long the policy could be sustained and what it could achieve.

27. There were also concerns over both the continued legal basis for operations in the No-Fly Zones (NFZs) and the conduct of individual operations.⁴

¹ Joint Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and the Secretary of State for Defence, 17 May 1999, ‘Iraq Future Strategy’.

² UN Security Council Press Release, 17 December 1999, ‘Security Council Establishes New Monitoring Commission For Iraq Adopting Resolution 1284 (1999) By Vote of 11-0-4’ (SC/6775).

³ UN Security Council, ‘4084th Meeting Friday 17 December 1999’ (S/PV.4084).

⁴ [Letter Goulty to McKane, 20 October 2000, ‘Iraq’](#).

28. In an Assessment on 1 November, the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) judged that Saddam Hussein felt “**little pressure to negotiate** over ... resolution 1284 because the proceeds of oil smuggling and illicit trade have increased significantly this year, and more countries are increasing diplomatic contacts and trade with Iraq”.⁵

29. The JIC also judged:

“Saddam would only contemplate co-operation with [resolution] 1284, and the return of inspectors ... if it could be portrayed as a victory. He will not agree to co-operate unless:

- there is a **UN-agreed timetable for the lifting of sanctions**. Saddam suspects that the US would not agree to sanctions lift while he remained in power;
- **he is able to negotiate with the UN in advance to weaken the inspection provisions**. His ambitions to rebuild Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programmes makes him hostile to intrusive inspections or any other constraints likely to be effective.

“Before accepting 1284, Saddam will try to obtain the abolition of the No-Fly Zones. He is also likely to demand that the US should abandon its stated aim to topple the Iraqi regime.”

30. In November 2000, Mr Blair’s “preferred option” was described as the implementation of 1284, enabling inspectors to return and sanctions to be suspended.⁶

31. In December 2000, the British Embassy Washington reported growing pressure to change course from containment to military action to oust Saddam Hussein, but no decision to change policy or to begin military planning had been taken by President Clinton.⁷

32. The Key Judgements of a JIC Assessment in February 2001 included:

- There was “broad international consensus to **maintain the arms embargo** at least as long as Saddam remains in power. **Saddam faces no economic pressure to accept ... [resolution] 1284 because he is successfully undermining the economic sanctions regime.**”
- “Through abuse of the UN Oil-for-Food [OFF] programme and smuggling of oil and other goods” it was estimated that Saddam Hussein would “**be able to appropriate in the region of \$1.5bn to \$1.8bn in cash and goods in 2001**”, and there was “scope for earning even more”.

⁵ [JIC Assessment, 1 November 2000, ‘Iraq: Prospects for Co-operation with UNSCR 1284’.](#)

⁶ [Letter Sawers to Cowper-Coles, 27 November 2000, ‘Iraq’.](#)

⁷ [Letter Barrow to Sawers, 15 December 2000, ‘Iraq’.](#)

- “**Iranian** interdiction efforts” had “**significantly reduced smuggling down the Gulf**”, but Saddam Hussein had “compensated by **exploiting land routes** to Turkey and Syria”.
- “**Most countries**” believed that economic sanctions were “**ineffective, counterproductive and should now be lifted**. Without active enforcement, the economic sanctions regime” would “continue to erode”.⁸

33. The Assessment also stated:

- Saddam Hussein needed funds “to maintain his military and security apparatus and secure its loyalty”.
- Despite the availability of funds, Iraq had been slow to comply with UN recommendations on food allocation. Saddam needed “**the Iraqi people to suffer to underpin his campaign against sanctions**”.
- Encouraged by the success of Iraq’s border trade agreement with Turkey, “**front-line states**” were “**not enforcing sanctions**”.
- There had been a “**significant increase in the erosion of sanctions** over the past six months”.

34. When Mr Blair had his first meeting with President Bush at Camp David in late February 2001, the US and UK agreed on the need for a policy which was more widely supported in the Middle East region.⁹ Mr Blair had concluded that public presentation needed to be improved. He suggested that the approach should be presented as a “deal” comprising four elements:

- do the right thing by the Iraqi people, with whom we have no quarrel;
- tighten weapons controls on Saddam Hussein;
- retain financial control on Saddam Hussein; and
- retain our ability to strike.

35. The stated position of the UK Government in February 2001 was that containment had been broadly successful.¹⁰

36. During the summer of 2001, the UK had been exploring the way forward with the US, Russia and France on a draft Security Council resolution to put in place a “smart sanctions” regime.¹¹ But there was no agreement on the way ahead between the UK, the US, China, France and Russia, the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council.

⁸ [JIC Assessment, 14 February 2001, ‘Iraq: Economic Sanctions Eroding’.](#)

⁹ Letter Sawers to Cowper-Coles, 24 February 2001, ‘Prime Minister’s Talks with President Bush, Camp David, 23 February 2001’.

¹⁰ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 26 February 2001, column 620.

¹¹ [Minute McKane to Manning, 18 September 2001, ‘Iraq Stocktake’.](#)

37. Mr Blair told the Inquiry that, until 11 September 2001, the UK had a policy of containment, but sanctions were eroding.¹² The policy was “partially successful”, but it did not mean that Saddam Hussein was “not still developing his [prohibited] programmes”.

The impact of 9/11

38. The attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 changed perceptions about the severity and likelihood of the threat from international terrorism. They showed that attacks intended to cause large-scale civilian casualties could be mounted anywhere in the world.

39. In response to that perception of a greater threat, governments felt a responsibility to act to anticipate and reduce risks before they turned into a threat. That was described to the Inquiry by a number of witnesses as a change to the “calculus of risk” after 9/11.

40. In the wake of the attacks, Mr Blair declared that the UK would stand “shoulder to shoulder” with the US to defeat and eradicate international terrorism.¹³

41. The JIC assessed on 18 September that the attacks on the US had “set a new benchmark for terrorist atrocity”, and that terrorists seeking comparable impact might try to use chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear devices.¹⁴ Only Islamic extremists such as those who shared Usama Bin Laden’s agenda had the motivation to pursue attacks with the deliberate aim of causing maximum casualties.

42. Throughout the autumn of 2001, Mr Blair took an active and leading role in building a coalition to act against that threat, including military action against Al Qaida and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. He also emphasised the potential risk of terrorists acquiring and using nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, and the dangers of inaction.

43. In November 2001, the JIC assessed that Iraq had played no role in the 9/11 attacks on the US and that practical co-operation between Iraq and Al Qaida was “unlikely”.¹⁵ There was no “credible evidence of covert transfers of WMD-related technology and expertise to terrorist groups”. It was possible that Iraq might use WMD in terrorist attacks, but only if the regime was under serious and imminent threat of collapse.

44. The UK continued actively to pursue a strengthened policy of containing Iraq, through a revised and more targeted sanctions regime and seeking Iraq’s agreement to the return of inspectors as required by resolution 1284 (1999).

¹² Public hearing, 21 January 2011, page 8.

¹³ The National Archives, 11 September 2001, *September 11 attacks: Prime Minister’s statement*.

¹⁴ JIC Assessment, 18 September 2001, ‘UK Vulnerability to Major Terrorist Attack’.

¹⁵ [JIC Assessment, 28 November 2001, ‘Iraq after September 11 – The Terrorist Threat’](#).

45. The adoption on 29 November 2001 of resolution 1382 went some way towards that objective. But support for economic sanctions was eroding and whether Iraq would ever agree to re-admit weapons inspectors and allow them to operate without obstruction was in doubt.

46. Although there was no evidence of links between Iraq and Al Qaida, Mr Blair encouraged President Bush to address the issue of Iraq in the context of a wider strategy to confront terrorism after the attacks of 9/11. He sought to prevent precipitate military action by the US which he considered would undermine the success of the coalition which had been established for action against international terrorism.

47. President Bush's remarks¹⁶ on 26 November renewed UK concerns that US attention was turning towards military action in Iraq.

48. Following a discussion with President Bush on 3 December, Mr Blair sent him a paper on a second phase of the war against terrorism.¹⁷

49. On Iraq, Mr Blair suggested a strategy for regime change in Iraq. This would build over time until the point was reached where "military action could be taken if necessary", without losing international support.

50. The strategy was based on the premise that Iraq was a threat which had to be dealt with and it had multiple diplomatic strands. It entailed renewed demands for Iraq to comply with the obligations imposed by the Security Council and for the re-admission of weapons inspectors, and a readiness to respond firmly if Saddam Hussein failed to comply.

51. Mr Blair did not, at that stage, have a ground invasion of Iraq or immediate military action of any sort in mind. The strategy included mounting covert operations in support of those "with the ability to topple Saddam". But Mr Blair did state that, when a rebellion occurred, the US and UK should "back it militarily".

52. That was the first step towards a policy of possible intervention in Iraq.

53. A number of issues, including the legal basis for any military action, would need to be resolved as part of developing the strategy.

54. The UK Government does not appear to have had any knowledge at that stage that President Bush had asked General Tommy Franks, Commander in Chief, US Central Command, to review the military options for removing Saddam Hussein, including options for a conventional ground invasion.

55. Mr Blair also emphasised the threat which Iraq might pose in the future. That remained a key part of his position in the months that followed.

¹⁶ The White House, 26 November 2001, *The President Welcomes Aid Workers Rescued from Afghanistan*.

¹⁷ [Paper \[Blair to Bush\], 4 December 2001, 'The War against Terrorism: The Second Phase'](#).

56. In his annual State of the Union speech on 29 January 2002, President Bush described the regimes in North Korea and Iran as “sponsors of terrorism”.¹⁸ He added that Iraq had continued to:

“... flaunt its hostility towards America and to support terror ... The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens ... This is a regime that agreed to international inspections – then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.”

57. President Bush stated:

“States like these [North Korea, Iran and Iraq], and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction these regimes pose a grave and growing danger.”

58. From late February 2002, Mr Blair and Mr Straw began publicly to argue that Iraq was a threat which had to be dealt with. Iraq needed to disarm or be disarmed.

59. The urgency and certainty with which the position was stated reflected the ingrained belief that Saddam Hussein’s regime retained chemical and biological warfare capabilities, was determined to preserve and if possible enhance its capabilities, including at some point in the future a nuclear capability, and was pursuing an active policy of deception and concealment. It also reflected the wider context in which the policy was being discussed with the US.

60. On 26 February 2002, Sir Richard Dearlove, the Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, advised that the US Administration had concluded that containment would not work, was drawing up plans for a military campaign later in the year, and was considering presenting Saddam Hussein with an ultimatum for the return of inspectors while setting the bar “so high that Saddam Hussein would be unable to comply”.¹⁹

61. The following day the JIC assessed that Saddam Hussein feared a US military attack on the scale of the 1991 military campaign to liberate Kuwait but did not regard such an attack as inevitable; and that Iraqi opposition groups would not act without “visible and sustained US military support on the ground”.²⁰

62. At Cabinet on 7 March, Mr Blair and Mr Straw emphasised that no decisions to launch further military action had been taken and any action taken would be in accordance with international law.

¹⁸ The White House, 29 January 2002, *The President’s State of the Union Address*.

¹⁹ Letter C to Manning, 26 February 2002, ‘US Policy on Iraq’.

²⁰ [JIC Assessment, 27 February 2002, ‘Iraq: Saddam Under the Spotlight’](#).

63. The discussion in Cabinet was couched in terms of Iraq's need to comply with its obligations, and future choices by the international community on how to respond to the threat which Iraq represented.

64. Cabinet endorsed the conclusion that Iraq's WMD programmes posed a threat to peace and endorsed a strategy of engaging closely with the US Government in order to shape policy and its presentation. It did not discuss how that might be achieved.

65. Mr Blair sought and was given information on a range of issues before his meeting with President Bush at Crawford on 5 and 6 April. But no formal and agreed analysis of the issues and options was sought or produced, and there was no collective consideration of such advice.

66. Mr Straw's advice of 25 March proposed that the US and UK should seek an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein to re-admit weapons inspectors.²¹ That would provide a route for the UK to align itself with the US without adopting the US objective of regime change. This reflected advice that regime change would be unlawful.

67. At Crawford, Mr Blair offered President Bush a partnership in dealing urgently with the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. He proposed that the UK and the US should pursue a strategy based on an ultimatum calling on Iraq to permit the return of weapons inspectors or face the consequences.²²

68. President Bush agreed to consider the idea but there was no decision until September 2002.

69. In the subsequent press conference on 6 April, Mr Blair stated that "doing nothing" was not an option: the threat of WMD was real and had to be dealt with.²³ The lesson of 11 September was to ensure that "groups" were not allowed to develop a capability they might use.

70. In his memoir, Mr Blair characterised the message that he and President Bush had delivered to Saddam Hussein as "change the regime attitude on WMD inspections or face the prospect of changing regime".²⁴

71. Documents written between April and July 2002 reported that, in the discussion with President Bush at Crawford, Mr Blair had set out a number of considerations in relation to the development of policy on Iraq. These were variously described as:

- The UN inspectors needed to be given every chance of success.
- The US should take action within a multilateral framework with international support, not unilateral action.

²¹ [Minute Straw to Prime Minister, 25 March 2002, 'Crawford/Iraq'](#).

²² Letter Manning to McDonald, 8 April 2002, 'Prime Minister's Visit to the United States: 5-7 April'.

²³ The White House, 6 April 2002, *President Bush, Prime Minister Blair Hold Press Conference*.

²⁴ Blair T. *A Journey*. Hutchinson, 2010.

- A public information campaign should be mounted to explain the nature of Saddam Hussein's regime and the threat he posed.
- Any military action would need to be within the framework of international law.
- The military strategy would need to ensure Saddam Hussein could be removed quickly and successfully.
- A convincing "blueprint" was needed for a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq which would be acceptable to both Iraq's population and its neighbours.
- The US should advance the Middle East Peace Process in order to improve the chances of gaining broad support in the Middle East for military action against Iraq; and to pre-empt accusations of double standards.
- Action should enhance rather than diminish regional stability.
- Success would be needed in Afghanistan to demonstrate the benefits of regime change.

72. Mr Blair considered that he was seeking to influence US policy by describing the key elements for a successful strategy to secure international support for any military action against Iraq.

73. Key Ministers and some of their most senior advisers thought these were the conditions that would need to be met if the UK was to participate in US-led military action.

74. By July, no progress had been made on the ultimatum strategy and Iraq was still refusing to admit weapons inspectors as required by resolution 1284 (1999).

75. The UK Government was concerned that the US Administration was contemplating military action in circumstances where it would be very difficult for the UK to participate in or, conceivably, to support that action.

76. To provide the basis for a discussion with the US, a Cabinet Office paper of 19 July, 'Iraq: Conditions for Military Action', identified the conditions which would be necessary before military action would be justified and the UK could participate in such action.²⁵

77. The Cabinet Office paper stated that Mr Blair had said at Crawford:

"... that the UK would support military action to bring about regime change, provided that certain conditions were met:

- efforts had been made to construct a coalition/shape public opinion,
- the Israel-Palestine Crisis was quiescent, and
- the options for action to eliminate Iraq's WMD through the UN weapons inspectors had been exhausted."

²⁵ [Paper Cabinet Office, 19 July 2002, 'Iraq: Conditions for Military Action'](#).

78. The Cabinet Office paper also identified the need to address the issue of whether the benefits of military action would outweigh the risks.

79. The potential mismatch between the timetable and work programme for UNMOVIC stipulated in resolution 1284 (1999) and the US plans for military action was recognised by officials during the preparation of the Cabinet Office paper, 'Iraq: Conditions for Military Action' for Mr Blair's meeting of 23 July.²⁶

80. The issue was not addressed in the final paper submitted to Ministers on 19 July.²⁷

81. Sir Richard Dearlove reported that he had been told that the US had already taken a decision on action – "the question was only how and when"; and that he had been told it intended to set the threshold on weapons inspections so high that Iraq would not be able to hold up US policy.²⁸

82. Mr Blair's meeting with Ministerial colleagues and senior officials on 23 July was not seen by those involved as having taken decisions.²⁹

83. Further advice and background material were commissioned, including on the possibility of a UN ultimatum to Iraq and the legal basis for action. The record stated:

"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 [the Chief of the Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce] should tell the US military that we were considering a range of options."

84. Mr Blair was advised that there would be "formidable obstacles" to securing a new UN resolution incorporating an ultimatum without convincing evidence of a greatly increased threat from Iraq.³⁰ A great deal more work would be needed to clarify what the UK was seeking and how its objective might best be achieved.

85. Mr Blair's Note to President Bush of 28 July sought to persuade President Bush to use the UN to build a coalition for action by seeking a partnership between the UK and the US and setting out a framework for action.³¹

86. The Note began:

"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.

²⁶ Paper [Draft] Cabinet Office, 'Iraq: Conditions for Military Action' attached to Minute McKane to Bowen, 16 July 2002, 'Iraq'.

²⁷ [Paper Cabinet Office, 19 July 2002, 'Iraq: Conditions for Military Action'](#).

²⁸ Report, 22 July 2002, 'Iraq [C's account of discussions with Dr Rice]'.

²⁹ [Minute Rycroft to Manning, 23 July 2002, 'Iraq: Prime Minister's Meeting, 23 July'](#).

³⁰ [Letter McDonald to Rycroft, 26 July 2002, 'Iraq: Ultimatum' attaching Paper 'Elements which might be incorporated in an SCR embodying an ultimatum to Iraq'](#).

³¹ [Note Blair \[to Bush\], 28 July 2002, 'Note on Iraq'](#).

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

87. Mr Blair stated that getting rid of Saddam Hussein was:

“... the right thing to do. He is a potential threat. He could be contained. But containment ... is always risky. His departure would free up the region. And his regime is ... brutal and inhumane ...”

88. Mr Blair told President Bush that the UN was the simplest way to encapsulate a “casus belli” in some defining way, with an ultimatum to Iraq once military forces started to build up in October. That might be backed by a UN resolution.

89. Mr Blair thought it unlikely that Saddam Hussein intended to allow inspectors to return. If he did, the JIC had advised that Iraq would obstruct the work of the inspectors. That could result in a material breach of the obligations imposed by the UN.

90. A workable military plan to ensure the collapse of the regime would be required.

91. The Note reflected Mr Blair’s own views. The proposals had not been discussed or agreed with his colleagues.

Decision to take the UN route

92. Sir David Manning, Mr Blair’s Foreign Policy Adviser, told President Bush that it would be impossible for the UK to take part in any action against Iraq unless it went through the UN.

93. When Mr Blair spoke to President Bush on 31 July the “central issue of a casus belli” and the need for further work on the optimal route to achieve that was discussed.³² Mr Blair said that he wanted to explore whether the UN was the right route to set an ultimatum or whether it would be an obstacle.

94. In late August, the FCO proposed a strategy of coercion, using a UN resolution to issue an ultimatum to Iraq to admit the weapons inspectors and disarm. The UK was seeking a commitment from the Security Council to take action in the event that Saddam Hussein refused or subsequently obstructed the inspectors.

95. Reflecting the level of public debate and concern, Mr Blair decided in early September that an explanation of why action was needed to deal with Iraq should be published.

96. In his press conference at Sedgefield on 3 September, Mr Blair indicated that time and patience were running out and that there were difficulties with the existing policy of containment.³³ He also announced the publication of the Iraq dossier, stating that:

³² Rycroft to McDonald, 31 July 2002, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Phone Call with President Bush, 31 July’.

³³ The National Archives, 3 September 2002, *PM press conference* [at Sedgefield].

“... people will see that there is no doubt at all the United Nations resolutions that Saddam is in breach of are there for a purpose. He [Saddam Hussein] is without any question, still trying to develop that chemical, biological, potentially nuclear capability and to allow him to do so without any let or hindrance, just to say, we [sic] can carry on and do it, I think would be irresponsible.”

97. President Bush decided in the meeting of the National Security Council on 7 September to take the issue of Iraq back to the UN.

98. The UK was a key ally whose support was highly desirable for the US. The US Administration had been left in no doubt that the UK Government needed the issue of Iraq to be taken back to the Security Council before it would be able to participate in military action in Iraq.

99. The objective of the subsequent discussions between President Bush and Mr Blair at Camp David was, as Mr Blair stated in the press conference before the discussions, to work out the strategy.³⁴

100. Mr Blair told President Bush that he was in no doubt about the need to deal with Saddam Hussein.³⁵

101. Although at that stage no decision had been taken on which military package might be offered to the US for planning purposes, Mr Blair also told President Bush that, if it came to war, the UK would take a significant military role.

102. In his speech to the General Assembly on 12 September, President Bush set out his view of the “grave and gathering danger” posed by Saddam Hussein and challenged the UN to act to address Iraq’s failure to meet the obligations imposed by the Security Council since 1990.³⁶ He made clear that, if Iraq defied the UN, the world must hold Iraq to account and the US would “work with the UN Security Council for the necessary resolutions”. But the US would not stand by and do nothing in the face of the threat.

103. Statements made by China, France and Russia in the General Assembly debate after President Bush’s speech highlighted the different positions of the five Permanent Members of the Security Council, in particular about the role of the Council in deciding whether military action was justified.

104. The Government dossier on Iraq was published on 24 September.³⁷ It was designed to “make the case” and secure Parliamentary (and public) support for the Government’s policy that action was urgently required to secure Iraq’s disarmament.

³⁴ The White House, 7 September 2002, *President Bush, Prime Minister Blair Discuss Keeping the Peace*.

³⁵ Minute Manning to Prime Minister, 8 September 2002, ‘Your Visit to Camp David on 7 September: Conversation with President Bush’.

³⁶ The White House, 12 September 2002, *President’s Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly*.

³⁷ *Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction. The Assessment of the British Government*, 24 September 2002.

105. In his statement to Parliament on 24 September and in his answers to subsequent questions, Mr Blair presented Iraq's past, current and potential future capabilities as evidence of the severity of the potential threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. He said that at some point in the future that threat would become a reality.

106. Mr Blair wrote his statement to the House of Commons himself and chose the arguments to make clear his perception of the threat and why he believed that there was an "overwhelming" case for action to disarm Iraq.³⁸

107. Addressing the question of why Saddam Hussein had decided in mid-September, but not before, to admit the weapons inspectors, Mr Blair stated that the answer was in the dossier, and it was because:

"... his chemical, biological and nuclear programme is not an historic left-over from 1998. The inspectors are not needed to clean up the old remains. His weapons of mass destruction programme is active detailed and growing. The policy of containment is not working. The weapons of mass destruction programme is not shut down; it is up and running now."

108. Mr Blair posed, and addressed, three questions: "Why Saddam?"; "Why now?"; and "Why should Britain care?"

109. On the question "Why Saddam?", Mr Blair said that two things about Saddam Hussein stood out: "He had used these weapons in Iraq" and thousands had died, and he had used them during the war with Iran "in which 1 million people died"; and the regime had "no moderate elements to appeal to".

110. On the question "Why now?", Mr Blair stated:

"I agree I cannot say that this month or next, even this year or next, Saddam will use his weapons. But I can say that if the international community, having made the call for his disarmament, now, at this moment, at the point of decision, shrugs its shoulders and walks away, he will draw the conclusion dictators faced with a weakening will always draw: that the international community will talk but not act, will use diplomacy but not force. We know, again from our history, that diplomacy not backed by the threat of force has never worked with dictators and never will."

Negotiation of resolution 1441

111. There were significant differences between the US and UK positions, and between them and China, France and Russia about the substance of the strategy to be adopted, including the role of the Security Council in determining whether peaceful means had been exhausted and the use of force to secure disarmament was justified.

³⁸ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 24 September 2002, columns 1-23.

112. Those differences resulted in difficult negotiations over more than eight weeks before the unanimous adoption of resolution 1441 on 8 November 2002.

113. When President Bush made his speech on 12 September, the US and UK had agreed the broad approach, but not the substance of the proposals to be put to the UN Security Council or the tactics.

114. Dr Naji Sabri, the Iraqi Foreign Minister, wrote to Mr Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, on 16 September to inform him that, following the series of talks between Iraq and the UN in New York and Vienna between March and July 2002 and the latest round in New York on 14 and 15 September, Iraq had decided “to allow the return of United Nations inspectors to Iraq without conditions”.³⁹

115. The US and UK immediately expressed scepticism. They had agreed that the provisions of resolution 1284 (1999) were no longer sufficient to secure the disarmament of Iraq and a strengthened inspections regime would be required.

116. A new resolution would be needed both to maintain the pressure on Iraq and to define a more intrusive inspections regime allowing the inspectors unconditional and unrestricted access to all Iraqi facilities.

117. The UK’s stated objective for the negotiation of resolution 1441 was to give Saddam Hussein “one final chance to comply” with his obligations to disarm. The UK initially formulated the objective in terms of:

- a resolution setting out an ultimatum to Iraq to readmit the UN weapons inspectors and to disarm in accordance with its obligations; and
- a threat to resort to the use of force to secure disarmament if Iraq failed to comply.⁴⁰

118. Lord Goldsmith, the Attorney General, informed Mr Blair on 22 October that, although he would not be able to give a final view until the resolution was adopted, the draft of the resolution of 19 October would not on its own authorise military action.⁴¹

119. Mr Blair decided on 31 October to offer significant forces for ground operations to the US for planning purposes.⁴²

120. During the negotiations, France and Russia made clear their opposition to the use of force, without firm evidence of a further material breach and a further decision in the Security Council.

³⁹ UN Security Council, 16 September 2002, ‘Letter dated 16 September from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq addressed to the Secretary-General’, attached to ‘Letter dated 16 September from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council’ (S/2002/1034).

⁴⁰ [Minute Straw to Prime Minister, 14 September 2002, ‘Iraq: Pursuing the UN Route’.](#)

⁴¹ [Minute Adams to Attorney General, 22 October 2002, ‘Iraq: Meeting with the Prime Minister, 22 October’ attaching Briefing ‘Lines to Take’.](#)

⁴² [Letter Wechsberg to Watkins, 31 October 2002, ‘Iraq: Military Options’.](#)

121. The UK was successful in changing some aspects of the US position during the negotiations, in particular ensuring that the Security Council resolution was based on the disarmament of Iraq rather than wider issues as originally proposed by the US.

122. To secure consensus in the Security Council despite the different positions of the US and France and Russia (described by Sir Jeremy Greenstock, the UK Permanent Representative to the UN in New York, as “irreconcilable”), resolution 1441 was a compromise containing drafting “fixes”. That created deliberate ambiguities on a number of key issues including:

- the level of non-compliance with resolution 1441 which would constitute a material breach;
- by whom that determination would be made; and
- whether there would be a second resolution explicitly authorising the use of force.

123. As the Explanations of Vote demonstrated, there were significant differences between the positions of the members of the Security Council about the circumstances and timing of recourse to military action. There were also differences about whether Member States should be entitled to report Iraqi non-compliance to the Council.

124. Mr Blair, Mr Straw and other senior UK participants in the negotiation of resolution 1441 envisaged that, in the event of a material breach of Iraq’s obligations, a second resolution determining that a breach existed and authorising the use of force was likely to be tabled in the Security Council.

125. Iraq announced on 13 November that it would comply with resolution 1441.⁴³

126. Iraq also re-stated its position that it had neither produced nor was in possession of weapons of mass destruction since the inspectors left in December 1998. It explicitly challenged the UK statement on 8 November that Iraq had decided to keep possession of its WMD.

The prospect of military action

127. Following Iraq’s submission of the declaration on its chemical, biological, nuclear and ballistic missile programmes to the UN on 7 December, and before the inspectors had properly begun their task, the US concluded that Saddam Hussein was not going to take the final opportunity offered by resolution 1441 to comply with his obligations.

128. Mr Blair was advised on 11 December that there was impatience in the US Administration and it was looking at military action as early as mid-February 2003.⁴⁴

⁴³ UN Security Council, 13 November 2002, ‘Letter dated 13 November 2002 from the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iraq addressed to the Secretary-General’ (S/2002/1242).

⁴⁴ [Minute Manning to Prime Minister, 11 December 2002, ‘Iraq’](#).

129. Mr Blair told President Bush on 16 December that the Iraqi declaration was “patently false”.⁴⁵ He was “cautiously optimistic” that the inspectors would find proof.

130. In a statement issued on 18 December, Mr Straw said that Saddam Hussein had decided to continue the pretence that Iraq had no WMD programme. If he persisted “in this obvious falsehood” it would become clear that he had “rejected the pathway to peace”.⁴⁶

131. The JIC’s initial Assessment of the Iraqi declaration on 18 December stated that there had been “No serious attempt” to answer any of the unresolved questions highlighted by the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) or to refute any of the points made in the UK dossier on Iraq’s WMD programme.⁴⁷

132. President Bush is reported to have told a meeting of the US National Security Council on 18 December 2002, at which the US response to Iraq’s declaration was discussed, that the point of the 7 December declaration was to test whether Saddam Hussein would accept the “final opportunity” for peace offered by the Security Council.⁴⁸ He had summed up the discussion by stating:

“We’ve got what we need now, to show America that Saddam won’t disarm himself.”

133. Mr Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State, stated on 19 December that Iraq was “well on its way to losing its last chance”, and that there was a “practical limit” to how long the inspectors could be given to complete their work.⁴⁹

134. Mr Straw told Secretary Powell on 30 December that the US and UK should develop a clear “plan B” postponing military action on the basis that inspections plus the threat of force were containing Saddam Hussein.⁵⁰

135. In early 2003, Mr Straw still thought a peaceful solution was more likely than military action. Mr Straw advised Mr Blair on 3 January that he had concluded that, in the potential absence of a “smoking gun”, there was a need to consider a “Plan B”.⁵¹ The UK should emphasise to the US that the preferred strategy was peaceful disarmament.

136. Mr Blair took a different view. By the time he returned to the office on 4 January 2003, he had concluded that the “likelihood was war” and, if conflict could not be avoided, the right thing to do was fully to support the US.⁵² He was focused on the need

⁴⁵ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, 16 December 2002, ‘Prime Minister’s Telephone Call with President Bush, 16 December’.

⁴⁶ The National Archives, 18 December 2002, *Statement by Foreign Secretary on Iraq Declaration*.

⁴⁷ [JIC Assessment, 18 December 2002, ‘An Initial Assessment of Iraq’s WMD Declaration’](#).

⁴⁸ Feith DJ. *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism*. HarperCollins, 2008.

⁴⁹ US Department of State Press Release, *Press Conference Secretary of State Colin L Powell, Washington, 19 December 2002*.

⁵⁰ Letter Straw to Manning, 30 December 2002, ‘Iraq: Conversation with Colin Powell, 30 December’.

⁵¹ [Minute Straw to Prime Minister, 3 January 2003, ‘Iraq – Plan B’](#).

⁵² [Note Blair \[to No.10 officials\], 4 January 2003, \[extract ‘Iraq’\]](#).

to establish evidence of an Iraqi breach, to persuade opinion of the case for action and to finalise the strategy with President Bush at the end of January.

137. The UK objectives were published in a Written Ministerial Statement by Mr Straw on 7 January.⁵³ The “prime objective” was:

“... to rid Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their associated programmes and means of delivery, including prohibited ballistic missiles ... as set out in UNSCRs [UN Security Council resolutions]. This would reduce Iraq’s ability to threaten its neighbours and the region, and prevent Iraq using WMD against its own people. UNSCRs also require Iraq to renounce terrorism, and return captured Kuwaitis and property taken from Kuwait.”

138. Lord Goldsmith gave Mr Blair his draft advice on 14 January that resolution 1441 would not by itself authorise the use of military force.⁵⁴

139. Mr Blair agreed on 17 January to deploy a UK division with three combat brigades for possible operations in southern Iraq.⁵⁵

140. There was no collective discussion of the decision by senior Ministers.

141. In January 2003, there was a clear divergence between the UK and US Government positions over the timetable for military action, and the UK became increasingly concerned that US impatience with the inspections process would lead to a decision to take unilateral military action in the absence of support for such action in the Security Council.

142. On 23 January, Mr Blair was advised that the US military would be ready for action in mid-February.⁵⁶

143. In a Note to President Bush on 24 January, Mr Blair wrote that the arguments for proceeding with a second Security Council resolution, “or at the very least a clear statement” from Dr Blix which allowed the US and UK to argue that a failure to pass a second resolution was in breach of the spirit of 1441, remained in his view, overwhelming; and that inspectors should be given until the end of March or early April to carry out their task.⁵⁷

144. Mr Blair suggested that, in the absence of a “smoking gun”, Dr Blix would be able to harden up his findings on the basis of a pattern of non-co-operation from Iraq and that that would be sufficient for support for military action in the Security Council.

⁵³ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 January 2003, columns 4-6WS.

⁵⁴ [Minute \[Draft\] \[Goldsmith to Prime Minister\], 14 January 2003, ‘Iraq: Interpretation of Resolution 1441’.](#)

⁵⁵ [Letter Manning to Watkins, 17 January 2003, ‘Iraq: UK Land Contribution’.](#)

⁵⁶ Letter PS/C to Manning, 23 January 2003, [untitled].

⁵⁷ Letter Manning to Rice, 24 January 2003, [untitled], attaching Note [Blair to Bush], [undated], ‘Note’.

145. The US and UK should seek to persuade others, including Dr Blix, that that was the “true view” of resolution 1441.

146. Mr Blair used an interview on *Breakfast with Frost* on 26 January to set out the position that the inspections should be given sufficient time to determine whether or not Saddam Hussein was co-operating fully.⁵⁸ If he was not, that would be a sufficient reason for military action. A find of WMD was not required.

147. Mr Blair’s proposed approach to his meeting with President Bush was discussed in a meeting of Ministers before Cabinet on 30 January and then discussed in general terms in Cabinet itself.

148. In a Note prepared before his meeting with President Bush on 31 January, Mr Blair proposed seeking a UN resolution on 5 March followed by an attempt to “mobilise Arab opinion to try to force Saddam out” before military action on 15 March.⁵⁹

149. When Mr Blair met President Bush on 31 January, it was clear that the window of opportunity before the US took military action would be very short. The military campaign could begin “around 10 March”.⁶⁰

150. President Bush agreed to seek a second resolution to help Mr Blair, but there were major reservations within the US Administration about the wisdom of that approach.

151. Mr Blair confirmed that he was “solidly with the President and ready to do whatever it took to disarm Saddam” Hussein.

152. Reporting on his visit to Washington, Mr Blair told Parliament on 3 February 2003 that Saddam Hussein was not co-operating as required by resolution 1441 and, if that continued, a second resolution should be passed to confirm such a material breach.⁶¹

153. Mr Blair continued to set the need for action against Iraq in the context of the need to be seen to enforce the will of the UN and to deter future threats.

The gap between the Permanent Members of the Security Council widens

154. In their reports to the Security Council on 14 February:

- **Dr Blix reported that UNMOVIC had not found any weapons of mass destruction and the items that were not accounted for might not exist, but Iraq needed to provide the evidence to answer the questions, not belittle them.**

⁵⁸ *BBC News*, 26 January 2003, *Breakfast with Frost*.

⁵⁹ [Note \[Blair to Bush\], \[undated\], ‘Countdown’](#).

⁶⁰ Letter Manning to McDonald, 31 January 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Conversation with President Bush on 31 January’.

⁶¹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 February 2003, columns 21-38.

- **Dr Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), reported that the IAEA had found no evidence of ongoing prohibited nuclear or nuclear-related activities in Iraq although a number of issues were still under investigation.**⁶²

155. In the subsequent debate, members of the Security Council voiced widely divergent views.

156. Mr Annan concluded that there were real differences on strategy and timing in the Security Council. Iraq's non-co-operation was insufficient to bring members to agree that war was justified; they would only move if they came to their own judgement that inspections were pointless.⁶³

157. On 19 February, Mr Blair sent President Bush a six-page Note. He proposed focusing on the absence of full co-operation and a "simple" resolution stating that Iraq had failed to take the final opportunity, with a side statement defining tough tests of co-operation and a vote on 14 March to provide a deadline for action.⁶⁴

158. President Bush and Mr Blair agreed to introduce a draft resolution at the UN the following week but its terms were subject to further discussion.⁶⁵

159. On 20 February, Mr Blair told Dr Blix that he wanted to offer the US an alternative strategy which included a deadline and tests for compliance.⁶⁶ He did not think Saddam Hussein would co-operate but he would try to get Dr Blix as much time as possible. Iraq could have signalled a change of heart in the December declaration. The Americans did not think that Saddam was going to co-operate: "Nor did he. But we needed to keep the international community together."

160. Dr Blix stated that full co-operation was a nebulous concept; and a deadline of 15 April would be too early. Dr Blix commented that "perhaps there was not much WMD in Iraq after all". Mr Blair responded that "even German and French intelligence were sure that there was WMD in Iraq". Dr Blix said they seemed "unsure" about "mobile BW production facilities": "It would be paradoxical and absurd if 250,000 men were to invade Iraq and find very little."

161. Mr Blair responded that "our intelligence was clear that Saddam had reconstituted his WMD programme".

⁶² UN Security Council, '4707th Meeting Friday 14 February 2003' (S/PV.4707).

⁶³ Telegram 268 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 15 February 2003, 'Foreign Secretary's Meeting with the UN Secretary-General: 14 February'.

⁶⁴ Letter Manning to Rice, 19 February 2003, 'Iraq' [attaching Note \[Blair to Bush\], \[undated\], 'Note'](#).

⁶⁵ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, 19 February 2003, 'Iraq and MEPP: Prime Minister's Telephone Conversation with Bush, 19 February'.

⁶⁶ Letter Cannon to Owen, 20 February 2003, 'Iraq: Prime Minister's Conversation with Blix'.

162. On 24 February, the UK, US and Spain tabled a draft resolution stating that Iraq had failed to take the final opportunity offered by resolution 1441 and that the Security Council had decided to remain seized of the matter.⁶⁷ The draft failed to attract support.

163. France, Germany and Russia responded by tabling a memorandum, building on their tripartite declaration of 10 February, stating that “full and effective disarmament” remained “the imperative objective of the international community”.⁶⁸ That “should be achieved peacefully through the inspection regime”. The “conditions for using force” had “not been fulfilled”. The Security Council “must step up its efforts to give a real chance to the peaceful settlement of the crisis”.

164. On 25 February, Mr Blair told the House of Commons that the intelligence was “clear” that Saddam Hussein continued “to believe that his weapons of mass destruction programme is essential both for internal repression and for external aggression”.⁶⁹ It was also “essential to his regional power”. “Prior to the inspectors coming back in”, Saddam Hussein “was engaged in a systematic exercise in concealment of those weapons”. The inspectors had reported some co-operation on process, but had “denied progress on substance”.

165. The House of Commons was asked on 26 February to reaffirm its endorsement of resolution 1441, support the Government’s continuing efforts to disarm Iraq, and to call upon Iraq to recognise that this was its final opportunity to comply with its obligations.⁷⁰

166. The Government motion was approved by 434 votes to 124; 199 MPs voted for an amendment which invited the House to “find the case for military action against Iraq as yet unproven”.⁷¹

167. In a speech on 26 February, President Bush stated that the safety of the American people depended on ending the direct and growing threat from Iraq.⁷²

168. President Bush also set out his hopes for the future of Iraq.

169. Reporting discussions in New York on 26 February, Sir Jeremy Greenstock wrote that there was “a general antipathy to having now to take decisions on this issue, and a wariness about what our underlying motives are behind the resolution”.⁷³ Sir Jeremy concluded that the US was focused on preserving its room for manoeuvre while he was

⁶⁷ [Telegram 302 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 25 February 2003, ‘Iraq: Tabling of US/UK/Spanish Draft Resolution: Draft Resolution’.](#)

⁶⁸ UN Security Council, 24 February 2003, ‘Letter dated 24 February 2003 from the Permanent Representatives of France, Germany and the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council’ (S/2003/214).

⁶⁹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 25 February 2003, columns 123-126.

⁷⁰ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 26 February 2003, column 265.

⁷¹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 26 February 2003, columns 367-371.

⁷² The White House, 26 February 2003, *President discusses the future of Iraq*.

⁷³ Telegram 314 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 27 February 2003, ‘Iraq: 26 February’.

“concentrating on trying to win votes”. It was the “middle ground” that mattered. Mexico and Chile were the “pivotal sceptics”.

170. Lord Goldsmith told No.10 officials on 27 February that the safest legal course for future military action would be to secure a further Security Council resolution.⁷⁴ He had, however, reached the view that a “reasonable case” could be made that resolution 1441 was capable of reviving the authorisation to use force in resolution 678 (1990) without a further resolution, if there were strong factual grounds for concluding that Iraq had failed to take the final opportunity offered by resolution 1441.

171. Lord Goldsmith advised that, to avoid undermining the case for reliance on resolution 1441, it would be important to avoid giving any impression that the UK believed a second resolution was legally required.

172. Informal consultations in the Security Council on 27 February showed there was little support for the UK/US/Spanish draft resolution.⁷⁵

173. An Arab League Summit on 1 March concluded that the crisis in Iraq must be resolved by peaceful means and in the framework of international legitimacy.⁷⁶

174. Following his visit to Mexico, Sir David Manning concluded that Mexican support for a second resolution was “not impossible, but would not be easy and would almost certainly require some movement”.⁷⁷

175. During Sir David’s visit to Chile, President Ricardo Lagos repeated his concerns, including the difficulty of securing nine votes or winning the presentational battle without further clarification of Iraq’s non-compliance. He also suggested identifying benchmarks.⁷⁸

176. Mr Blair wrote in his memoir that, during February, “despite his best endeavours”, divisions in the Security Council had grown not reduced; and that the “dynamics of disagreement” were producing new alliances.⁷⁹ France, Germany and Russia were moving to create an alternative pole of power and influence.

177. Mr Blair thought that was “highly damaging” but “inevitable”: “They felt as strongly as I did; and they weren’t prepared to indulge the US, as they saw it.”

⁷⁴ [Minute Brummell, 27 February 2003, ‘Iraq: Attorney General’s Meeting at No. 10 on 27th February 2003’.](#)

⁷⁵ [Telegram 318 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 28 February 2003, ‘Iraq: 27 February Consultations and Missiles’.](#)

⁷⁶ Telegram 68 Cairo to FCO London, 2 March 2003, ‘Arab League Summit: Final Communique’.

⁷⁷ [Telegram 1 Mexico City to Cabinet Office, 1 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Mexico’.](#)

⁷⁸ Telegram 34 Santiago to FCO London, 2 March 2003, ‘Chile/Iraq: Visit by Manning and Scarlett’.

⁷⁹ Blair T. *A Journey*. Hutchinson, 2010.

178. Mr Blair concluded that for moral and strategic reasons the UK should be with the US and that:

“... [W]e should make a last ditch attempt for a peaceful solution. First to make the moral case for removing Saddam ... Second, to try one more time to reunite the international community behind a clear base for action in the event of a continuing breach.”

179. On 3 March, Mr Blair proposed an approach focused on setting a deadline of 17 March for Iraq to disclose evidence relating to the destruction of prohibited items and permit interviews; and an amnesty if Saddam Hussein left Iraq by 21 March.⁸⁰

180. Mr Straw told Secretary Powell that the level of support in the UK for military action without a second resolution was palpably “very low”. In that circumstance, even if a majority in the Security Council had voted for the resolution with only France exercising its veto, he was “increasingly pessimistic” about support within the Labour Party for military action.⁸¹ The debate in the UK was:

“... significantly defined by the tone of the debate in Washington and particularly remarks made by the President and others to the right of him, which suggested that the US would go to war whatever and was not bothered about a second resolution one way or another.”

181. Following a discussion with Mr Blair, Mr Straw told Secretary Powell that Mr Blair:

“... was concerned that, having shifted world (and British) public opinion over the months, it had now been seriously set back in recent days. We were not in the right position. The Prime Minister was considering a number of ideas which he might well put to the President.”⁸²

182. Mr Straw recorded that Secretary Powell had advised that, if Mr Blair wanted to make proposals, he should do so quickly. The US was not enthusiastic about the inclusion of an immunity clause for Saddam Hussein in the resolution.

183. Mr Straw reported that Secretary Powell had told President Bush that he judged a vetoed resolution would no longer be possible for the UK. Mr Straw said that without a second resolution approval for military action could be “beyond reach”.

184. Mr Straw told the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) on 4 March that it was “a matter of fact” that Iraq had been in material breach “for some weeks” and resolution 1441 provided sufficient legal authority to justify military action against Iraq if it was “in further material breach”.⁸³

⁸⁰ [Note \(handwritten\) \[Blair\], 3 March 2003, \[untitled\]](#).

⁸¹ Minute Straw to Prime Minister, 3 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Second Resolution’.

⁸² Letter Straw to Manning, 4 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Conversation with Colin Powell, 3 March’.

⁸³ Minutes, Foreign Affairs Committee (House of Commons), 4 March 2003, [Evidence Session], Qs 151 and 154.

185. Mr Straw also stated that a majority of members of the Security Council had been opposed to the suggestion that resolution 1441 should state explicitly that military action could be taken only if there were a second resolution.

186. Mr Blair was informed on the evening of 4 March that US military planners were looking at 12 March as the possible start date for the military campaign; and that Mr Geoff Hoon, the Defence Secretary, was concerned about the apparent disconnect with activity in the UN.⁸⁴

187. Baroness Amos, Minister of State, Department for International Development (DfID), advised on 4 March that Angola, Cameroon and Guinea were not yet ready to commit to a “yes vote” and had emphasised the need for P5 unity.⁸⁵

188. Sir Christopher Hum, British Ambassador to China, advised on 4 March that, if the resolution was put to a vote that day, China would abstain.⁸⁶

189. Sir John Holmes, British Ambassador to France, advised on 4 March that France’s main aim was to “avoid being put on the spot” by influencing the undecided, preventing the US and UK mustering nine votes, and keeping alongside the Russians and Chinese; and that there was “nothing that we can now do to dissuade them from this course”.⁸⁷ Sir John also advised that “nothing the French say at this stage, even privately, should be taken at face value”.

190. Mr Igor Ivanov, the Russian Foreign Minister, told Mr Straw on 4 March that Russia had failed in an attempt to persuade Saddam Hussein to leave and it would veto a resolution based on the draft circulated on 24 February.⁸⁸

191. France, Germany and Russia stated on 5 March that they would not let a resolution pass that authorised the use of force.⁸⁹ Russia and France, “as Permanent Members of the Security Council, will assume all their responsibilities on this point”.

192. The British Embassy Washington reported overnight on 5/6 March that “barring a highly improbable volte face by Saddam”, the US was now firmly on track for military action and would deal firmly with any efforts in the UN to slow down the timetable.⁹⁰

193. The Embassy reported that the only event which might significantly affect the US timetable would be problems for the UK. That had been described as “huge – like trying

⁸⁴ Letter Watkins to Manning, 4 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Timing of Military Action’.

⁸⁵ Minute Amos to Foreign Secretary, 4 March 2003, [untitled].

⁸⁶ Telegram 90 Beijing to FCO London, 4 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Lobbying the Chinese’.

⁸⁷ [Telegram 110 Paris to FCO London, 4 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Avoiding a French Veto’](#).

⁸⁸ Telegram 37 FCO London to Moscow, 3 [sic] March 2003, ‘Iraq: Foreign Secretary’s Meetings with Russian Foreign Minister, 4 March’.

⁸⁹ *The Guardian*, 5 March 2003, *UN war doubters unite against resolution*. *The Guardian*, 6 March 2003, *Full text of Joint declaration*.

⁹⁰ [Telegram 294 Washington to FCO London, 6 March 2003, ‘Personal Iraq: UN Endgame’](#).

to play football without the quarterback”. The US was “therefore pulling out all the stops at the UN”. The US fully understood the importance of the second resolution for the UK.

194. Sir Jeremy Greenstock advised that the US would not countenance the use of benchmarks. That risked delaying the military timetable.⁹¹

195. Mr Blair told Cabinet on 6 March that the argument boiled down to the question of whether Saddam Hussein would ever voluntarily co-operate with the UN to disarm Iraq.⁹²

196. Mr Blair concluded that it was for the Security Council to determine whether Iraq was co-operating fully.

197. In his discussions with President Lagos on 6 March, Mr Blair stated that the US would go ahead without the UN if asked to delay military action until April or May.⁹³

198. In his report to the Security Council on 7 March, Dr Blix stated that there had been an acceleration of initiatives from Iraq since the end of January, but they could not be said to constitute immediate co-operation.⁹⁴ Nor did they necessarily cover all areas of relevance; but they were nevertheless welcome. UNMOVIC was drawing up a work programme of key disarmament tasks, which would be ready later that month, for approval by the Security Council. It would take “months” to complete the programme.

199. Dr ElBaradei reported that there were no indications that Iraq had resumed nuclear activities since the inspectors left in December 1998 and the recently increased level of Iraqi co-operation should allow the IAEA to provide the Security Council with an assessment of Iraq’s nuclear capabilities in the near future.

200. There was unanimity in calls for Iraq to increase its co-operation. But there was a clear division between the US, UK, Spain and Bulgaria who spoke in favour of a further resolution and France, Germany, Russia and China and most other Member States who spoke in favour of continuing to pursuing disarmament through strengthened inspections.

201. The UK, US and Spain circulated a revised draft resolution deciding that Iraq would have failed to take the final opportunity offered by resolution 1441 (2002) unless the Council concluded, on or before 17 March 2003, that Iraq had demonstrated full, unconditional, immediate and active co-operation in accordance with its disarmament obligations and was yielding possession of all weapons and proscribed material to UNMOVIC and the IAEA.

⁹¹ [Telegram 353 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 6 March 2003, ‘Iraq: 5 March’.](#)

⁹² Cabinet Conclusions, 6 March 2003.

⁹³ Letter Cannon to Owen, 6 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Conversation with President of Chile, 6 March’.

⁹⁴ UN Security Council, ‘4714th Meeting Friday 7 March 2003’ (S/PV.4714).

202. President Putin told Mr Blair on 7 March that Russia would oppose military action.⁹⁵

203. Mr Straw told Mr Annan that military considerations could not be allowed “to dictate policy”, but the military build-up “could not be maintained for ever”, and:

“... the more he had looked into the Iraq dossier [issue] the more convinced he had become of the need for action. Reading the clusters document [a report of outstanding issues produced by UNMOVIC on 7 March] made his hair stand on end.”⁹⁶

204. Mr Straw set out the UK thinking on a deadline, stating that this was “Iraq’s last chance”, but the objective was disarmament and, if Saddam Hussein did what was demanded, “he could stay”. In those circumstances, a “permanent and toughened inspections regime” would be needed, possibly “picking up some earlier ideas for an all-Iraq NFZ”.

205. Lord Goldsmith sent his formal advice to Mr Blair on 7 March.⁹⁷

The end of the UN route

206. When Mr Blair spoke to President Bush at 6pm on 7 March he emphasised the importance of securing nine positive votes⁹⁸ in the Security Council for Parliamentary approval for UK military action.⁹⁹

207. Mr Blair argued that while the 17 March deadline in the draft resolution was not sufficient for Iraq to disarm fully, it was sufficient to make a judgement on whether Saddam Hussein had had a change of heart. If Iraq started to co-operate, the inspectors could have as much time as they liked.

208. In a last attempt to move opinion and secure the support of nine members of the Security Council, Mr Blair decided on 8 March to propose a short extension of the timetable beyond 17 March and to revive the idea of producing a “side statement” setting out a series of tests which would provide the basis for a judgement on Saddam Hussein’s intentions.

209. The initiative was pursued through intensive diplomatic activity to lobby for support between London and the capitals of Security Council Member States.

⁹⁵ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, 7 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Conversation with President Putin, 7 March’.

⁹⁶ [Telegram 366 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 7 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Foreign Secretary’s Meeting with UN Secretary-General, New York, 6 March’](#).

⁹⁷ Minute Goldsmith to Prime Minister, 7 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Resolution 1441’.

⁹⁸ The number of votes required, in the absence of a veto from one or more of the five Permanent Members, for a decision to take action with the authority of the Security Council.

⁹⁹ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, 7 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Conversation with Bush, 7 March’.

210. Mr Blair told the Inquiry:

“It was worth having one last-ditch chance to see if you could bring people back together on the same page ... [W]hat President Bush had to do was agree to table a fresh resolution. What the French had to agree was you couldn't have another resolution and another breach and no action. So my idea was define the circumstances of breach – that was the tests that we applied with Hans Blix – get the Americans to agree to the resolution, get the French to agree that you couldn't just go back to the same words of 1441 again, you had to take it a stage further.”¹⁰⁰

211. In a discussion on 9 March, Mr Blair told President Bush that he needed a second resolution to secure Parliamentary support for UK involvement in military action.¹⁰¹ He sought President Bush's support for setting out tests in a side statement, including that the vote in the Security Council might have to be delayed “by a couple of days”.

212. President Bush was unwilling to countenance delay. He was reported to have told Mr Blair that, if the second resolution failed, he would find another way to involve the UK.

213. Mr Blair told President Bush the UK would be with the US in taking action if he (Mr Blair) possibly could be.

214. Sir Jeremy Greenstock reported that Dr Blix was prepared to work with the UK on identifying tests but had reminded him that UNMOVIC still lacked clear evidence that Iraq possessed any WMD.¹⁰²

215. Mr Blair spoke twice to President Lagos on 10 March in an attempt to find a path that President Lagos and President Vicente Fox of Mexico could support.

216. In the second conversation, Mr Blair said that he thought it “would be possible to find different wording” on the ultimatum to Iraq. Timing “would be difficult, but he would try to get some flexibility” if the first two issues “fell into place”.¹⁰³

217. Mr Straw reported that Secretary Powell thought that there were seven solid votes, and uncertainty about Mexico, Chile and Pakistan.¹⁰⁴ If there were fewer than nine, the second resolution should not be put to the vote.

218. Mr Straw replied that “he was increasingly coming to the view that we should not push the matter to a vote if we were going to be vetoed”; but that had not yet been agreed by Mr Blair.

¹⁰⁰ Public hearing, 29 January 2010, page 127.

¹⁰¹ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, 9 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister's Conversation with Bush, 9 March’.

¹⁰² Telegram 391 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 10 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Second Resolution’.

¹⁰³ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, 10 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister's Phone Calls with Lagos, Bush and Aznar, 10 March’.

¹⁰⁴ Letter Straw to Manning, 11 March 2003, ‘Conversation with US Secretary of State, 10 March’.

219. By 10 March, President Bush’s position was hardening and he was very reluctant to delay military action.

220. When Mr Blair spoke to President Bush, they discussed the “seven solid votes” for the resolution.¹⁰⁵

221. Mr Alastair Campbell, Mr Blair’s Director of Communications and Strategy, wrote that Mr Blair had done most of the talking.¹⁰⁶ President Bush thought President Jacques Chirac of France was “trying to get us to the stage where we would not put [the resolution] to a vote because we would be so worried about losing”.

222. Mr Blair had argued that if Chile and Mexico could be shifted, that would “change the weather”. If France and Russia then vetoed the resolution but the “numbers were right on the UN”, Mr Blair thought that he would “have a fighting chance of getting it through the Commons”. Subsequently, Mr Blair suggested that a change in Chile and Mexico’s position might be used to influence President Putin.

223. President Bush was “worried about rolling in more time” but Mr Blair had “held his ground”, arguing that Chile and Mexico would “need to be able to point to something that they won last minute that explains why they finally supported us”. President Bush “said ‘Let me be frank. The second resolution is for the benefit of Great Britain. We would want it so we can go ahead together.’” President Bush’s position was that the US and UK “must not retreat from 1441 and we cannot keep giving them more time”; it was “time to do this” and there should be “no more deals”.

224. Sir David Manning sent the UK proposals for a revised deadline, and a side statement identifying six tests on which Saddam Hussein’s intentions would be judged, to Dr Condoleezza Rice, President Bush’s National Security Advisor, and to President Lagos.¹⁰⁷

225. Mr Blair wrote in his memoir that President Bush and his military were concerned about delay.¹⁰⁸

“It [the proposal for tests/more time] was indeed a hard sell to George. His system was completely against it. His military were, not unreasonably, fearing that delay gave the enemy time – and time could mean a tougher struggle and more lives lost. This was also troubling my military. We had all sorts of contingency plans in place ... There was both UK and US intelligence warning us of the risk.

“Nonetheless I thought it was worth a try ...”

¹⁰⁵ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, 10 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Phone Calls with Lagos, Bush and Aznar, 10 March’.

¹⁰⁶ Campbell A & Hagerty B. *The Alastair Campbell Diaries. Volume 4. The Burden of Power: Countdown to Iraq*. Hutchinson, 2012.

¹⁰⁷ [Letter Manning to Rice, 10 March 2003, \[untitled\]](#).

¹⁰⁸ Blair T. *A Journey*. Hutchinson, 2010.

226. Mr Blair also wrote:

“Chile and Mexico were prepared to go along, but only up to a point. Ricardo made it clear that if there was heavy opposition from France, it would be tough for them to participate in what would then be a token vote, incapable of being passed because of a veto – and what’s more, a veto not by Russia, but by France.

“Unfortunately, the French position had, if anything, got harder not softer. They were starting to say they would not support military action in any circumstances, irrespective of what the inspectors found ...”

227. In a press conference on 10 March, Mr Annan reiterated the Security Council’s determination to disarm Iraq, but said that every avenue for a peaceful resolution of the crisis had to be exhausted before force should be used.¹⁰⁹

228. Mr Annan also warned that, if the Security Council failed to agree on a common position and action was taken without the authority of the Council, the legitimacy and support for any such action would be seriously impaired.

229. In an interview on 10 March, President Chirac stated that it was for the inspectors to advise whether they could complete their task.¹¹⁰ If they reported that they were not in a position to guarantee Iraq’s disarmament, it would be:

“... for the Security Council alone to decide the right thing to do. But in that case ... regrettably, the war would become inevitable. It isn’t today.”

230. President Chirac stated that he did not consider that the draft resolution tabled by the US, UK and Spain would attract support from nine members of the Security Council. In that case, there would be no majority for action, “So there won’t be a veto problem.”

231. But if there were a majority “in favour of the new resolution”, France would “vote ‘no’”.

232. In response to a question asking, “And, this evening, this is your position in principle?”, President Chirac responded:

“My position is that, regardless of the circumstances, France will vote ‘no’ because she considers this evening that there are no grounds for waging war in order to achieve the goal we have set ourselves, that is to disarm Iraq.”

233. By 11 March, it was clear that, in the time available before the US was going to take military action, it would be difficult to secure nine votes in the

¹⁰⁹ United Nations, 10 March 2003, *Secretary-General’s press conference (unofficial transcript)*.

¹¹⁰ [The Élysée, Interview télévisée de Jacques Chirac, le 10 mars 2003. A translation for HMG was produced in a Note, \[unattributed and undated\], ‘Iraq – Interview given by M. Jacques Chirac, President of the Republic, to French TV \(10 March 2003\)’.](#)

Security Council for a resolution determining that Iraq had failed to take the final opportunity offered by resolution 1441.

234. Mr Straw wrote to Mr Blair on 11 March setting out his firm conclusion that:

“If we cannot gain nine votes and be sure of no veto, we should not push our second resolution to a vote. The political and diplomatic consequences for the UK would be significantly worse to have our ... resolution defeated ... than if we camp on 1441 ...”¹¹¹

235. Mr Straw set out his reasoning in some detail, including that:

- Although in earlier discussion he had “warmed to the idea” that it was worth pushing the issue to a vote “if we had nine votes and faced only a French veto”, the more he “thought about this, the worse an idea it becomes”.
- A veto by France only was “in practice less likely than two or even three vetoes”.
- The “best, least risky way to gain a moral majority” was “by the ‘Kosovo route’ – essentially what I am recommending. The key to our moral legitimacy then was the matter never went to a vote – but everyone knew the reason for this was that Russia would have vetoed.”

236. Mr Straw suggested that the UK should adopt a strategy based on the argument that Iraq had failed to take the final opportunity offered by resolution 1441, and that the last three meetings of the Security Council met the requirement for Security Council consideration of reports of non-compliance.

237. Mr Straw also identified the need for a “Plan B” for the UK not to participate in military action in the event that the Government failed to secure a majority in the Parliamentary Labour Party for military action.

238. Mr Straw concluded:

“We will obviously need to discuss all this, but I thought it best to put it in your mind as event[s] could move fast. And what I propose is a great deal better than the alternatives. When Bush graciously accepted your offer to be with him all the way, he wanted you alive not dead!”

239. There was no reference in the minute to President Chirac’s remarks the previous evening.

240. When Mr Blair and President Bush discussed the position late on 11 March, it was clear that President Bush was determined not to postpone the start of military action.¹¹² They discussed the impact of President Chirac’s “veto threats”. Mr Blair considered that President Chirac’s remarks “gave some cover” for ending the UN route.

¹¹¹ [Minute Straw to Prime Minister, 11 March 2003, ‘Iraq: What if We Cannot Win the Second Resolution?’](#)

¹¹² Letter Cannon to McDonald, 11 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Conversations with Bush and Lagos, 11 March’.

241. Reporting discussions in New York on 11 March on the draft resolution and details of a possible “side statement”, Sir Jeremy Greenstock advised that the draft resolution tabled by the UK, US and Spain on 7 March had “no chance ... of adoption”.¹¹³

242. When he discussed the options with Mr Straw early on 12 March, Mr Blair decided that the UK would continue to support the US.¹¹⁴

243. During Prime Minister’s Questions on 12 March, Mr Blair stated:

“I hope that even now those countries that are saying they would use their veto no matter what the circumstances will reconsider and realise that by doing so they put at risk not just the disarmament of Saddam, but the unity of the United Nations.”¹¹⁵

244. In a telephone call with President Bush on 12 March, Mr Blair proposed that the US and UK should continue to seek a compromise in the UN, while confirming that he knew it would not happen. He would say publicly that the French had prevented them from securing a resolution, so there would not be one.¹¹⁶

245. Mr Blair wanted to avoid a gap between the end of the negotiating process and the Parliamentary vote in which France or another member of the Security Council might table a resolution that attracted the support of a majority of the Council. That could have undermined the UK (and US) position on its legal basis for action.

246. The FCO assessed on 12 March that the votes of the three African states were reasonably secure but Pakistan’s vote was not so certain. It was hoped that the six tests plus a short extension of the 17 March deadline might deliver Mexico and Chile.¹¹⁷

247. The UK circulated its draft side statement setting out the six tests to a meeting of Security Council members in New York on the evening of 12 March.¹¹⁸

248. Sir Jeremy Greenstock told Council members that the UK “non-paper” responded to an approach from the “undecided six”¹¹⁹ looking for a way forward, setting out six tasks to be achieved in a 10-day timeline.¹²⁰ Sir Jeremy reported that France, Germany and Russia all said that the draft resolution without operative paragraph 3 would still authorise force. The UK had not achieved “any kind of breakthrough” and there were “serious questions about the available time”, which the US would “not help us to satisfy”.

¹¹³ [Telegram 417 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 12 March 2003, ‘Personal Iraq: Side Statement and End Game Options’.](#)

¹¹⁴ Public hearing, 21 January 2010, page 105.

¹¹⁵ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 12 March 2003, column 288.

¹¹⁶ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, 12 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Telephone Conversation with President Bush, 12 March’.

¹¹⁷ [Telegram 33 FCO London to Riyadh, 12 March 2003, ‘Personal for Heads of Mission: Iraq: The Endgame’.](#)

¹¹⁸ [Telegram 429 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 13 March 2003, ‘Iraq: UK Side-Statement’.](#)

¹¹⁹ Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Guinea, Mexico, Pakistan.

¹²⁰ [Telegram 428 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 13 March 2003, ‘Iraq: UK Circulates Side-Statement’.](#)

249. Mr Blair told Cabinet on 13 March that work continued in the UN to obtain a second resolution and, following the French decision to veto, the outcome remained open.¹²¹

250. Mr Straw described President Chirac's position as "irresponsible".

251. Mr Straw told Cabinet that there was "good progress" in gaining support in the Security Council.

252. Mr Blair concluded that the French position "looked to be based on a calculation of strategic benefit". It was "in contradiction of the Security Council's earlier view that military action would follow if Iraq did not fully and unconditionally co-operate with the inspectors". The UK would "continue to show flexibility" in its efforts to achieve a second resolution and, "if France could be shown to be intransigent, the mood of the Security Council could change towards support for the British draft".

253. Mr Blair agreed the military plan later on 13 March.¹²²

254. On 13 March, Mr Blair and President Bush discussed withdrawing the resolution on 17 March followed by a US ultimatum to Saddam Hussein to leave within 48 hours. There would be no US military action until after the vote in the House of Commons on 18 March.¹²³

255. Mr Blair continued to press President Bush to publish the Road Map on the Middle East Peace Process because of its impact on domestic opinion in the UK as well as its strategic impact.

256. Reporting developments in New York on 13 March, Sir Jeremy Greenstock warned that the UK tests had attracted no support, and that the US might be ready to call a halt to the UN process on 15 March.¹²⁴ The main objections had included the "perceived authorisation of force in the draft resolution" and a desire to wait for UNMOVIC's own list of key tasks which would be issued early the following week.

257. President Chirac told Mr Blair on 14 March that France was "content to proceed 'in the logic of UNSCR 1441'; but it could not accept an ultimatum or any 'automaticity' of recourse to force".¹²⁵ He proposed looking at a new resolution in line with resolution 1441, "provided that it excluded these options". President Chirac "suggested that the UNMOVIC work programme might provide a way forward. France was prepared to look at reducing the 120 day timeframe it envisaged."

¹²¹ [Cabinet Conclusions, 13 March 2003.](#)

¹²² [Letter Rycroft to Watkins, 13 March 2003, 'Iraq: Military Planning'.](#)

¹²³ Letter Cannon to McDonald, 13 March 2003, 'Iraq: Military Timetable'.

¹²⁴ Telegram 438 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 14 March 2003, 'Iraq: 13 March'.

¹²⁵ [Letter Cannon to Owen, 14 March 2003, 'Iraq: Prime Minister's Conversation with President Chirac, 14 March'.](#)

258. In response to a question from President Chirac about whether it would be the inspectors or the Security Council who decided whether Saddam had co-operated, Mr Blair “insisted that it must be the Security Council”.

259. President Chirac agreed, “although the Security Council should make its judgement on the basis of the inspectors’ report”. He “wondered whether it would be worth” Mr Straw and Mr Dominique de Villepin, the French Foreign Minister, “discussing the situation to see if we could find some flexibility”; or was it “too late”?

260. Mr Blair said, “every avenue must be explored”.

261. In the subsequent conversation with President Bush about the French position and what to say when the resolution was pulled, Mr Blair proposed that they would need to show that France would not authorise the use of force in any circumstances.¹²⁶

262. President Lagos initially informed Mr Blair on 14 March that the UK proposals did not have Chile’s support and that he was working on other ideas.¹²⁷ He subsequently informed Mr Blair that he would not pursue his proposals unless Mr Blair or President Bush asked him to.

263. Mr Tony Brenton, Chargé d’Affaires, British Embassy Washington, reported that President Bush was determined to remove Saddam Hussein and to stick to the US timetable for action. The UK’s “steadfastness” had been “invaluable” in bringing in other countries in support of action.¹²⁸

264. In a declaration on 15 March, France, with Germany and Russia, attempted to secure support in the Security Council for continued inspections.¹²⁹

265. At the Azores Summit on 16 March, President Bush, Mr Blair and Prime Minister José María Aznar of Spain agreed that, unless there was a fundamental change in the next 24 hours, the UN process would end.¹³⁰

266. In public, the focus was on a “last chance for peace”. The joint communiqué contained a final appeal to Saddam Hussein to comply with his obligations and to the Security Council to back a second resolution containing an ultimatum.

267. In his memoir, Mr Blair wrote:

“So when I look back ... I know there was never any way Britain was not going to be with the US at that moment, once we went down the UN route and Saddam was in breach. Of course such a statement is always subject to *in extremis* correction.

¹²⁶ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, 14 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Conversation with Bush, 14 March’.

¹²⁷ Letter [Francis] Campbell to Owen, 14 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Conversation with President Lagos of Chile, 14 March’.

¹²⁸ [Telegram 350 Washington to FCO London, 15 March 2003, ‘Iraq’](#).

¹²⁹ UN Security Council, 18 March 2003, ‘Letter dated 15 March 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Germany to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council’ (S/2003/320).

¹³⁰ Letter Manning to McDonald, 16 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Summit Meeting in the Azores: 16 March’.

A crazy act of aggression? No, we would not have supported that. But given the history, you couldn't call Saddam a crazy target.

"Personally I have little doubt that at some point we would have to have dealt with him ..."¹³¹

268. At "about 3.15pm UK time" on 17 March, Sir Jeremy Greenstock announced that the resolution would not be put to a vote, stating that the co-sponsors reserved the right to take their own steps to secure the disarmament of Iraq.¹³²

269. The subsequent discussion in the Council suggested that only the UK, the US, and Spain took the view that all options other than the use of military force had been exhausted.¹³³

270. A specially convened Cabinet at 1600 on 17 March 2003 endorsed the decision that the diplomatic process was now at an end and Saddam Hussein should be given an ultimatum to leave Iraq; and that the House of Commons would be asked to endorse the use of military action against Iraq to enforce compliance, if necessary.¹³⁴

271. In his statement to the House of Commons that evening, Mr Straw said that the Government had reluctantly concluded that France's actions had put a consensus in the Security Council on a further resolution "beyond reach".¹³⁵

272. As a result of Saddam Hussein's persistent refusal to meet the UN's demands, the Cabinet had decided to ask the House of Commons to support the UK's participation in military action, should that be necessary to achieve the disarmament of Iraq "and thereby the maintenance of the authority of the United Nations".

273. Mr Straw stated that Lord Goldsmith's Written Answer "set out the legal basis for the use of force".

274. Mr Straw drew attention to the significance of the fact that no one "in discussions in the Security Council and outside" had claimed that Iraq was in full compliance with its obligations.

275. In a statement later that evening, Mr Robin Cook, the Leader of the House of Commons, set out his doubts about the degree to which Saddam Hussein posed a "clear and present danger" and his concerns that the UK was being "pushed too quickly into conflict" by the US without the support of the UN and in the face of hostility from many of the UK's traditional allies.¹³⁶

¹³¹ Blair T. *A Journey*. Hutchinson, 2010.

¹³² [Telegram 465 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 18 March 2003, 'Iraq: Resolution: Statement'](#).

¹³³ [Telegram 464 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 18 March 2003, 'Iraq: Resolution'](#).

¹³⁴ [Cabinet Conclusions, 17 March 2003](#).

¹³⁵ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 17 March 2003, columns 703-705.

¹³⁶ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 17 March 2003, columns 726-728.

276. On 17 March, President Bush issued an ultimatum giving Saddam Hussein 48 hours to leave Iraq.

277. The French President's office issued a statement early on 18 March stating that the US ultimatum was a unilateral decision going against the will of the international community who wanted to pursue Iraqi disarmament in accordance with resolution 1441.¹³⁷ It stated:

“... only the Security Council is authorised to legitimise the use of force. France appeals to the responsibility of all to see that international legality is respected. To disregard the legitimacy of the UN, to favour force over the law, would be to take on a heavy responsibility.”

278. On the evening of 18 March, the House of Commons passed by 412 votes to 149 a motion supporting “the decision of Her Majesty's Government that the United Kingdom should use all means necessary to ensure the disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction”.

279. President Bush wrote in his memoir that he convened “the entire National Security Council” on the morning of 19 March where he “gave the order to launch Operation Iraqi Freedom”.¹³⁸

280. In the Security Council debate on 19 March, the majority of members of the Security Council, including France, Russia and China, made clear that they thought the goal of disarming Iraq could be achieved by peaceful means and emphasised the primary responsibility of the Security Council for the maintenance of international peace and security.¹³⁹

281. UNMOVIC and the IAEA had provided the work programmes required by resolution 1284. They included 12 key tasks identified by UNMOVIC where progress “could have an impact on the Council's assessment of co-operation of Iraq”.

282. Shortly before midnight on 19 March, the US informed Sir David Manning that there was to be a change to the plan and US airstrikes would be launched at 0300 GMT on 20 March.¹⁴⁰

283. Early on the morning of 20 March, US forces crossed into Iraq and seized the port area of Umm Qasr.¹⁴¹

284. Mr Blair continued to state that France was responsible for the impasse.

¹³⁷ Telegram 135 Paris to FCO London, 18 March 2003, 'Iraq: Chirac's Reaction to Ultimatum'.

¹³⁸ Bush GW. *Decision Points*. Virgin Books, 2010.

¹³⁹ UN Security Council, '4721st Meeting Wednesday 19 March 2003' (S/PV.4721).

¹⁴⁰ Letter Manning to McDonald, 20 March 2003, 'Iraq'.

¹⁴¹ Ministry of Defence, *Operations in Iraq: Lessons for the Future*, December 2003, page 12.

285. At Cabinet on 20 March, Mr Blair concluded that the Government:

“... should lose no opportunity to propagate the reason, at every level and as widely as possible, why we had arrived at a diplomatic impasse, and why it was necessary to take action against Iraq. France had not been prepared to accept that Iraq’s failure to comply with its obligations should lead to the use of force to achieve compliance.”¹⁴²

Why Iraq? Why now?

286. In his memoir, Mr Blair described his speech opening the debate on 18 March as “the most important speech I had ever made”.¹⁴³

287. Mr Blair framed the decision for the House of Commons as a “tough” and “stark” choice between “retreat” and holding firm to the course of action the Government had set. Mr Blair stated that he believed “passionately” in the latter. He deployed a wide range of arguments to explain the grounds for military action and to make a persuasive case for the Government’s policy.¹⁴⁴

288. In setting out his position, Mr Blair recognised the gravity of the debate and the strength of opposition in both the country and Parliament to immediate military action. In his view, the issue mattered “so much” because the outcome would not just determine the fate of the Iraqi regime and the Iraqi people but would:

“... determine the way in which Britain and the world confront the central security threat of the 21st century, the development of the United Nations, the relationship between Europe and the United States, the relations within the European Union and the way in which the United States engages with the rest of the world. So it could hardly be more important. It will determine the pattern of international politics for the next generation.”

Was Iraq a serious or imminent threat?

289. On 18 March 2003, the House of Commons was asked:

- to recognise that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles, and its continuing non-compliance with Security Council resolutions, posed a threat to international peace and security; and
- to support the use of all means necessary to ensure the disarmament of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, on the basis that the United Kingdom must uphold the authority of the United Nations as set out in resolution 1441 and many resolutions preceding it.

¹⁴² Cabinet Conclusions, 20 March 2003.

¹⁴³ Blair T. *A Journey*. Hutchinson, 2010.

¹⁴⁴ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 18 March 2003, columns 760-774.

290. In his statement, Mr Blair addressed both the threat to international peace and security presented by Iraq's defiance of the UN and its failure to comply with its disarmament obligations as set out in resolution 1441 (2002). Iraq was "the test of whether we treat the threat seriously".

291. Mr Blair rehearsed the Government's position on Iraq's past pursuit and use of weapons of mass destruction; its failures to comply with the obligations imposed by the UN Security Council between 1991 and 1998; Iraq's repeated declarations which proved to be false; and the "large quantities of weapons of mass destruction" which were "unaccounted for". He described UNSCOM's final report (in January 1999) as "a withering indictment of Saddam's lies, deception and obstruction".

292. Mr Blair cited the UNMOVIC "clusters" document issued on 7 March as "a remarkable document", detailing "all the unanswered questions about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction", listing "29 different areas in which the inspectors have been unable to obtain information".

293. He stated that, based on Iraq's false declaration, its failure to co-operate, the unanswered questions in the UNMOVIC "clusters" document, and the unaccounted for material, the Security Council should have convened and condemned Iraq as in material breach of its obligations. If Saddam Hussein continued to fail to co-operate, force should be used.

294. Addressing the wider message from the issue of Iraq, Mr Blair asked:

"... what ... would any tyrannical regime possessing weapons of mass destruction think when viewing the history of the world's diplomatic dance with Saddam over ... 12 years? That our capacity to pass firm resolutions has only been matched by our feebleness in implementing them."

295. Mr Blair acknowledged that Iraq was "not the only country with weapons of mass destruction", but declared: "back away from this confrontation now, and future conflicts will be infinitely worse and more devastating in their effects".

296. Mr Blair added:

"The real problem is that ... people dispute Iraq is a threat, dispute the link between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, and dispute in other words, the whole basis of our assertion that the two together constitute a fundamental assault on our way of life."

297. Mr Blair also described a "threat of chaos and disorder" arising from "tyrannical regimes with weapons of mass destruction and extreme terrorist groups" prepared to use them.

298. Mr Blair set out his concerns about:

- proliferators of nuclear equipment or expertise;
- “dictatorships with highly repressive regimes” who were “desperately trying to acquire” chemical, biological or, “particularly, nuclear weapons capability” – some of those were “a short time away from having a serviceable nuclear weapon”, and that activity was increasing, not diminishing; and
- the possibility of terrorist groups obtaining and using weapons of mass destruction, including a “radiological bomb”.

299. Those two threats had very different motives and different origins. He accepted “fully” that the association between the two was:

“... loose – but it is hardening. The possibility of the two coming together – of terrorist groups in possession of weapons of mass destruction or even of a so called dirty radiological bomb – is now in my judgement, a real and present danger to Britain and its national security.”

300. Later in his speech, Mr Blair stated that the threat which Saddam Hussein’s arsenal posed:

“... to British citizens at home and abroad cannot simply be contained. Whether in the hands of his regime or in the hands of the terrorists to whom he would give his weapons, they pose a clear danger to British citizens ...”

301. This fusion of long-standing concerns about proliferation with the post-9/11 concerns about mass-casualty terrorism was at the heart of the Government’s case for taking action at this time against Iraq.

302. The UK assessment of Iraq’s capabilities set out in Section 4 of the Report shows:

- The proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and their delivery systems, particularly ballistic missiles, was regarded as a major threat. But Iran, North Korea and Libya were of greater concern than Iraq in terms of the risk of nuclear and missile proliferation.
- JIC Assessments, reflected in the September 2002 dossier, had consistently taken the view that, if sanctions were removed or became ineffective, it would take Iraq at least five years following the end of sanctions to produce enough fissile material for a weapon. On 7 March, the IAEA had reported to the Security Council that there was no indication that Iraq had resumed its nuclear activities.
- The September dossier stated that Iraq could produce a nuclear weapon within one to two years if it obtained fissile material and other essential components from a foreign supplier. There was no evidence that Iraq had tried to acquire fissile material and other components or – were it able to do so – that it had the technical capabilities to turn these materials into a usable weapon.

- JIC Assessments had identified the possible stocks of chemical and biological weapons which would largely have been for short-range, battlefield use by the Iraqi armed forces. The JIC had also judged in the September dossier that Iraq was producing chemical and biological agents and that there were development programmes for longer-range missiles capable of delivering them.
- Iraq's proscribed Al Samoud 2 missiles were being destroyed.

303. The UK Government did have significant concerns about the potential risks of all types of weapons of mass destruction being obtained by Islamist extremists (in particular Al Qaida) who would be prepared to use such weapons.

304. Saddam Hussein's regime had the potential to proliferate material and know-how to terrorist groups, but it was not judged likely to do so.

305. On 28 November 2001, the JIC assessed that:

- Saddam Hussein had "refused to permit any Al Qaida presence in Iraq".
- Evidence of contact between Iraq and Usama Bin Laden (UBL) was "fragmentary and uncorroborated"; including that Iraq had been in contact with Al Qaida for exploratory discussions on toxic materials in late 1988.
- "With common enemies ... there was clearly scope for collaboration."
- There was "no evidence that these contacts led to practical co-operation; we judge it unlikely ... There is no evidence UBL's organisation has ever had a presence in Iraq."
- Practical co-operation between Iraq and Al Qaida was "unlikely because of mutual mistrust".
- There was "no credible evidence of covert transfers of WMD-related technology and expertise to terrorist groups".¹⁴⁵

306. On 29 January 2003, the JIC assessed that, despite the presence of terrorists in Iraq "with links to Al Qaida", there was "no intelligence of current co-operation between Iraq and Al Qaida".¹⁴⁶

307. On 10 February 2003, the JIC judged that Al Qaida would "not carry out attacks under Iraqi direction".¹⁴⁷

308. Sir Richard Dearlove told the Inquiry:

"... I don't think the Prime Minister ever accepted the link between Iraq and terrorism. I think it would be fair to say that the Prime Minister was very worried about the possible conjunction of terrorism and WMD, but not specifically in relation

¹⁴⁵ [JIC Assessment, 28 November 2001, 'Iraq after September 11 – The Terrorist Threat'](#).

¹⁴⁶ [JIC Assessment, 29 January 2003, 'Iraq: The Emerging view from Baghdad'](#).

¹⁴⁷ [JIC Assessment, 10 February 2003, 'International Terrorism: War with Iraq'](#).

to Iraq ... [I] think, one could say this is one of his primary national security concerns given the nature of Al Qaida.”¹⁴⁸

309. The JIC assessed that Iraq was likely to mount a terrorist attack only in response to military action and if the existence of the regime was threatened.

310. The JIC Assessment of 10 October 2002 stated that Saddam Hussein’s “overriding objective” was to “avoid a US attack that would threaten his regime”.¹⁴⁹ The JIC judged that, in the event of US-led military action against Iraq, Saddam would:

“... aim to use terrorism or the threat of it. Fearing the US response, he is likely to weigh the costs and benefits carefully in deciding the timing and circumstances in which terrorism is used. But intelligence on Iraq’s capabilities and intentions in this field is limited.”

311. The JIC also judged that:

- Saddam’s “capability to conduct effective terrorist attacks” was “very limited”.
- Iraq’s “terrorism capability” was “inadequate to carry out chemical or biological attacks beyond individual assassination attempts using poisons”.

312. The JIC Assessment of 29 January 2003 sustained its earlier judgements on Iraq’s ability and intent to conduct terrorist operations.¹⁵⁰

313. Sir David Omand, the Security and Intelligence Co-ordinator in the Cabinet Office from 2002 to 2005, told the Inquiry that, in March 2002, the Security Service judged that the “threat from terrorism from Saddam’s own intelligence apparatus in the event of an intervention in Iraq ... was judged to be limited and containable”.¹⁵¹

314. Baroness Manningham-Buller, the Director General of the Security Service from 2002 to 2007, confirmed that position, stating that the Security Service felt there was “a pretty good intelligence picture of a threat from Iraq within the UK and to British interests”.¹⁵²

315. Baroness Manningham-Buller added that subsequent events showed the judgement that Saddam Hussein did not have the capability to do anything much in the UK, had “turned out to be the right judgement”.¹⁵³

316. While it was reasonable for the Government to be concerned about the fusion of proliferation and terrorism, there was no basis in the JIC Assessments to suggest that Iraq itself represented such a threat.

¹⁴⁸ Private hearing, 16 June 2010, pages 39-40.

¹⁴⁹ [JIC Assessment, 10 October 2002, ‘International Terrorism: The Threat from Iraq’.](#)

¹⁵⁰ [JIC Assessment, 29 January 2003, ‘Iraq: The Emerging view from Baghdad’.](#)

¹⁵¹ Public hearing, 20 January 2010, page 37.

¹⁵² Public hearing, 20 July 2010, page 6.

¹⁵³ Public hearing, 20 July 2010, page 9.

317. The UK Government assessed that Iraq had failed to comply with a series of UN resolutions. Instead of disarming as these resolutions had demanded, Iraq was assessed to have concealed materials from past inspections and to have taken the opportunity of the absence of inspections to revive its WMD programmes.

318. In Section 4, the Inquiry has identified the importance of the ingrained belief of the Government and the intelligence community that Saddam Hussein's regime retained chemical and biological warfare capabilities, was determined to preserve and if possible enhance its capabilities, including at some point in the future a nuclear capability, and was pursuing an active and successful policy of deception and concealment.

319. This construct remained influential despite the lack of significant finds by inspectors in the period leading up to military action in March 2003, and even after the Occupation of Iraq.

320. Challenging Saddam Hussein's "claim" that he had no weapons of mass destruction, Mr Blair said in his speech on 18 March:

- "... we are asked to believe that after seven years of obstruction and non-compliance ... he [Saddam Hussein] voluntarily decided to do what he had consistently refused to do under coercion."
- "We are asked now seriously to accept that in the last few years – contrary to all history, contrary to all intelligence – Saddam decided unilaterally to destroy those weapons. I say that such a claim is palpably absurd."
- "... Iraq continues to deny that it has any weapons of mass destruction, although no serious intelligence service anywhere in the world believes it."
- "What is perfectly clear is that Saddam is playing the same old games in the same old way. Yes, there are minor concessions, but there has been no fundamental change of heart or mind."¹⁵⁴

321. At no stage was the proposition that Iraq might no longer have chemical, biological or nuclear weapons or programmes identified and examined by either the JIC or the policy community.

322. Intelligence and assessments were used to prepare material to be used to support Government statements in a way which conveyed certainty without acknowledging the limitations of the intelligence.

323. Mr Blair's statement to the House of Commons on 18 March was the culmination of a series of public statements and interviews setting out the urgent need for the international community to act to bring about Iraq's disarmament in accordance with

¹⁵⁴ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 18 March 2003, columns 760-764.

those resolutions, dating back to February 2002, before his meeting with President Bush at Crawford on 5 and 6 April.

324. As Mr Cook’s resignation statement on 17 March made clear, it was possible for a Minister to draw different conclusions from the same information.

325. Mr Cook set out his doubts about Saddam Hussein’s ability to deliver a strategic attack and the degree to which Iraq posed a “clear and present danger” to the UK. The points Mr Cook made included:

- “... neither the international community nor the British public is persuaded that there is an urgent and compelling reason for this military action in Iraq.”
- “Over the past decade that strategy [of containment] had destroyed more weapons than in the Gulf War, dismantled Iraq’s nuclear weapons programme and halted Saddam’s medium and long range missile programmes.”
- “Iraq probably has no weapons of mass destruction in the commonly understood sense of the term – namely a credible device capable of being delivered against a strategic city target. It probably ... has biological toxins and battlefield chemical munitions, but it has had them since the 1980s when US companies sold Saddam anthrax agents and the then British Government approved chemical and munitions factories. Why is it now so urgent that we should take military action to disarm a military capacity that has been there for twenty years, and which we helped to create? Why is it necessary to resort to war this week, while Saddam’s ambition to complete his weapons programme is blocked by the presence of UN inspectors?”¹⁵⁵

326. On 12 October 2004, announcing the withdrawal of two lines of intelligence reporting which had contributed to the pre-conflict judgements on mobile biological production facilities and the regime’s intentions, Mr Straw stated that he did:

“... not accept, even with hindsight, that we were wrong to act as we did in the circumstances that we faced at the time. Even after reading all the evidence detailed by the Iraq Survey Group, it is still hard to believe that any regime could behave in so self-destructive a manner as to pretend that it had forbidden weaponry, when in fact it had not.”¹⁵⁶

327. Iraq had acted suspiciously over many years, which led to the inferences drawn by the Government and the intelligence community that it had been seeking to protect concealed WMD assets. When Iraq denied that it had retained any WMD capabilities, the UK Government accused it of lying.

328. This led the Government to emphasise the ability of Iraq successfully to deceive the inspectors, and cast doubt on the investigative capacity of the inspectors. The role

¹⁵⁵ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 17 March 2003, columns 726-728.

¹⁵⁶ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 12 October 2004, columns 151-152.

of the inspectors, however, as was often pointed out, was not to seek out assets that had been hidden, but rather to validate Iraqi claims.

329. By March 2003, however:

- The Al Samoud 2 missiles which exceeded the range permitted by the UN, were being destroyed.
- The IAEA had concluded that there was no Iraqi nuclear programme of any significance.
- The inspectors believed that they were making progress and expected to achieve more co-operation from Iraq.
- The inspectors were preparing to step up their activities with U2 flights and interviews outside Iraq.

330. When the UK sought a further Security Council resolution in March 2003, the majority of the Council's members were not persuaded that the inspections process, and the diplomatic efforts surrounding it, had reached the end of the road. They did not agree that the time had come to terminate inspections and resort to force. The UK went to war without the explicit authorisation which it had sought from the Security Council.

331. At the time of the Parliamentary vote of 18 March, diplomatic options had not been exhausted. The point had not been reached where military action was the last resort.

The predicted increase in the threat to the UK as a result of military action in Iraq

332. Mr Blair had been advised that an invasion of Iraq was expected to increase the threat to the UK and UK interests from Al Qaida and its affiliates.

333. Asked about the risk that attacking Iraq with cruise missiles would “act as a recruiting sergeant for a young generation throughout the Islamic and Arab world”, Mr Blair responded that:

“... what was shocking about 11 September was not just the slaughter of innocent people but the knowledge that, had the terrorists been able, there would have been not 3,000 innocent dead, but 30,000 or 300,000 ... America did not attack the Al Qaida terrorist group ... [it] attacked America. They did not need to be recruited ... Unless we take action against them, they will grow. That is why we should act.”¹⁵⁷

334. The JIC judged in October 2002 that “the greatest terrorist threat in the event of military action against Iraq will come from Al Qaida and other Islamic extremists”; and they would be “pursuing their own agenda”.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 18 March 2003, column 769.

¹⁵⁸ [JIC Assessment, 10 October 2002, 'International Terrorism: The Threat from Iraq'](#).

335. The JIC Assessment of 10 February 2003 repeated previous warnings that:

- Al Qaida and associated networks would remain the greatest terrorist threat to the UK and its activity would increase at the onset of any military action against Iraq.
- In the event of imminent regime collapse, Iraqi chemical and biological material could be transferred to terrorists, including Al Qaida.¹⁵⁹

336. Addressing the prospects for the future, the JIC Assessment concluded:

“... Al Qaida and associated groups will continue to represent by far the greatest terrorist threat to Western interests, and that threat will be heightened by military action against Iraq. The broader threat from Islamist terrorists will also increase in the event of war, reflecting intensified anti-US/anti-Western sentiment in the Muslim world, including among Muslim communities in the West. And there is a risk that the transfer of CB [chemical and biological] material or expertise, during or in the aftermath of conflict, will enhance Al Qaida’s capabilities.”

337. In response to a call for Muslims everywhere to take up arms in defence of Iraq issued by Usama Bin Laden on 11 February, and a further call on 16 February for “compulsory jihad” by Muslims against the West, the JIC Assessment on 19 February predicted that the upward trend in the reports of threats to the UK was likely to continue.¹⁶⁰

338. The JIC continued to warn in March that the threat from Al Qaida would increase at the onset of military action against Iraq.¹⁶¹

339. The JIC also warned that:

- Al Qaida activity in northern Iraq continued.
- Al Qaida might have established sleeper cells in Baghdad, to be activated during a US occupation.

340. The warning about the risk of chemical and biological weapons becoming available to extremist groups as a result of military action in Iraq was reiterated on 19 March.¹⁶²

341. Addressing the JIC Assessment of 10 February 2003, Mr Blair told the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) later that year that:

“One of the most difficult aspects of this is that there was obviously a danger that in attacking Iraq you ended up provoking the very thing you were trying to avoid. On the other hand I think you had to ask the question, ‘Could you really, as a result

¹⁵⁹ [JIC Assessment, 10 February 2003, ‘International Terrorism: War with Iraq’.](#)

¹⁶⁰ [JIC Assessment, 19 February 2003, ‘International Terrorism: The Current Threat from Islamic Extremists’.](#)

¹⁶¹ [JIC Assessment, 12 March 2003, ‘International Terrorism: War with Iraq: Update’.](#)

¹⁶² [Note JIC, 19 March 2003, ‘Saddam: The Beginning of the End’.](#)

of that fear, leave the possibility that in time developed into a nexus between terrorism and WMD in an event?’ This is where you’ve just got to make your judgement about this. But this is my judgement and it remains my judgement and I suppose time will tell whether it’s true or it’s not true.”¹⁶³

342. In its response to the ISC Report, the Government drew:

“... attention to the difficult judgement that had to be made and the factors on both sides of the argument to be taken into account.”¹⁶⁴

343. Baroness Manningham-Buller told the Inquiry:

“By 2003/2004 we were receiving an increasing number of leads to terrorist activity from within the UK ... our involvement in Iraq radicalised, for want of a better word ... a few among a generation ... [who] saw our involvement in Iraq, on top of our involvement in Afghanistan, as being an attack on Islam.”¹⁶⁵

344. Asked about the proposition that it was right to remove Saddam Hussein’s regime to forestall a fusion of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism at some point in the future, and if it had eliminated a threat of terrorism from his regime, Baroness Manningham-Buller replied:

“It eliminated the threat of terrorism from his direct regime; it didn’t eliminate the threat of terrorism using unconventional methods ... So using weapons of mass destruction as a terrorist weapon is still a potential threat.

“After all Usama Bin Laden said it was the duty of members of his organisation or those in sympathy with it to acquire and use these weapons. It is interesting that ... such efforts as we have seen to get access to these sort of materials have been low-grade and not very professional, but it must be a cause of concern to my former colleagues that at some stage terrorist groups will resort to these methods. In that respect, I don’t think toppling Saddam Hussein is germane to the long-term ambitions of some terrorist groups to use them.”¹⁶⁶

345. Asked specifically about the theory that at some point in the future Saddam Hussein would probably have brought together international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction in a threat to Western interests, Baroness Manningham-Buller responded:

“It is a hypothetical theory. It certainly wasn’t of concern in either the short-term or the medium-term to my colleagues and myself.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Intelligence and Security Committee, *Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction – Intelligence and Assessments*, September 2003, Cm5972, paragraph 128.

¹⁶⁴ *Government Response to the Intelligence and Security Committee Report on Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction – Intelligence and Assessments*, 11 September 2003, February 2004, Cm6118, paragraph 22.

¹⁶⁵ Public hearing, 20 July 2010, page 19.

¹⁶⁶ Public hearing, 20 July 2010, pages 23-24.

¹⁶⁷ Public hearing, 20 July 2010, page 24.

346. Asked if “a war in Iraq would aggravate the threat from whatever source to the United Kingdom”, Baroness Manningham-Buller stated that that was the view communicated by the JIC Assessments.¹⁶⁸

347. Baroness Manningham-Buller subsequently added that if Ministers had read the JIC Assessments they could “have had no doubt” about that risk.¹⁶⁹ She said that by the time of the July 2005 attacks in London:

“... an increasing number of British-born individuals ... were attracted to the ideology of Usama Bin Laden and saw the West’s activities in Iraq and Afghanistan as threatening their fellow religionists and the Muslim world.”

348. Asked whether the judgement that the effect of the invasion of Iraq had increased the terrorist threat to the UK was based on hard evidence or a broader assessment, Baroness Manningham-Buller replied:

“I think we can produce evidence because of the numerical evidence of the number of plots, the number of leads, the number of people identified, and the correlation of that to Iraq and statements of people as to why they were involved ... So I think the answer to your ... question: yes.”¹⁷⁰

349. In its request for a statement, the Inquiry asked Mr Blair if he had read the JIC Assessment of 10 February 2002, and what weight he had given to it when he decided to take military action.¹⁷¹

350. In his statement Mr Blair wrote:

“I was aware of the JIC Assessment of 10 February that the Al Qaida threat to the UK would increase. But I took the view then and take the same view now that to have backed down because of the threat of terrorism would be completely wrong. In any event, following 9/11 and Afghanistan we were a terrorist target and, as recent events in Europe and the US show, irrespective of Iraq, there are ample justifications such terrorists will use as excuses for terrorism.”¹⁷²

The UK’s relationship with the US

351. The UK’s relationship with the US was a determining factor in the Government’s decisions over Iraq.

352. It was the US Administration which decided in late 2001 to make dealing with the problem of Saddam Hussein’s regime the second priority, after the ousting of the Taliban

¹⁶⁸ Public hearing, 20 July 2010, page 31.

¹⁶⁹ Public hearing, 20 July 2010, page 33.

¹⁷⁰ Public hearing, 20 July 2010, pages 33-34.

¹⁷¹ [Inquiry request for a witness statement, 13 December 2010, Qs 11c and 11d page 7.](#)

¹⁷² Statement, 14 January 2011, page 16.

in Afghanistan, in the “Global War on Terror”. In that period, the US Administration turned against a strategy of continued containment of Iraq, which it was pursuing before the 9/11 attacks.

353. This was not, initially, the view of the UK Government. Its stated view at that time was that containment had been broadly effective, and that it could be adapted in order to remain sustainable. Containment continued to be the declared policy of the UK throughout the first half of 2002.

354. The declared objectives of the UK and the US towards Iraq up to the time of the invasion differed. The US was explicitly seeking to achieve a change of regime; the UK to achieve the disarmament of Iraq, as required by UN Security Council resolutions.

355. Most crucially, the US Administration committed itself to a timetable for military action which did not align with, and eventually overrode, the timetable and processes for inspections in Iraq which had been set by the UN Security Council. The UK wanted UNMOVIC and the IAEA to have time to complete their work, and wanted the support of the Security Council, and of the international community more widely, before any further steps were taken. This option was foreclosed by the US decision.

356. On these and other important points, including the planning for the post-conflict period and the functioning of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the UK Government decided that it was right or necessary to defer to its close ally and senior partner, the US.

357. It did so essentially for two reasons:

- Concern that vital areas of co-operation between the UK and the US could be damaged if the UK did not give the US its full support over Iraq.
- The belief that the best way to influence US policy towards the direction preferred by the UK was to commit full and unqualified support, and seek to persuade from the inside.

358. The UK Government was right to think very carefully about both of these points.

359. First, the close strategic alliance with the US has been a cornerstone of the UK’s foreign and security policy under successive governments since the Second World War. Mr Blair rightly attached great importance to preserving and strengthening it.

360. After the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001, that relationship was reinforced when Mr Blair declared that the UK would stand “shoulder to shoulder” with the US to defeat and eradicate international terrorism.¹⁷³ The action that followed in Afghanistan to bring about the fall of the Taliban served to strengthen and deepen the sense of shared endeavour.

¹⁷³ The National Archives, 11 September 2001, *September 11 attacks: Prime Minister’s statement*.

361. When the US Administration turned its attention to regime change in Iraq as part of the second phase of the “Global War on Terror”, Mr Blair’s immediate response was to seek to offer a partnership and to work with it to build international support for the position that Iraq was a threat which had to be dealt with.

362. In Mr Blair’s view, the decision to stand alongside the US was in the UK’s long-term national interests. In his speech of 18 March 2003, he argued that the handling of Iraq would:

“... determine the way in which Britain and the world confront the central security threat of the 21st century, the development of the United Nations, the relationship between Europe and the United States, the relations within the European Union and the way in which the United States engages with the rest of the world. So it could hardly be more important. It will determine the pattern of international politics for the next generation.”

363. In his memoir in 2010, Mr Blair wrote:

“I knew in the final analysis I would be with the US, because it was right morally and strategically. But we should make a last ditch attempt for a peaceful solution. First to make the moral case for removing Saddam ... Second, to try one more time to reunite the international community behind a clear base for action in the event of a continuing breach.”¹⁷⁴

364. Concern about the consequences, were the UK not to give full support to the US, featured prominently in policy calculations across Whitehall. Mr Hoon, for example, sought advice from Sir Kevin Tebbit, MOD Permanent Under Secretary, on the implications for the alliance of the UK’s approach to Iraq.¹⁷⁵

365. Although there has historically been a very close relationship between the British and American peoples and a close identity of values between our democracies, it is an alliance founded not on emotion, but on a hard-headed appreciation of mutual benefit. The benefits do not by any means flow only in one direction.

366. In his memoir, Mr Blair wrote:

“... I agreed with the basic US analysis of Saddam as a threat; I thought he was a monster; and to break the US partnership in such circumstances, when America’s key allies were all rallying round, would in my view, then (and now) have done major long-term damage to that relationship.”

¹⁷⁴ Blair T. *A Journey*. Hutchinson, 2010.

¹⁷⁵ [Minute Tebbit to Secretary of State \[MOD\], 14 January 2003, 'Iraq: What If?'](#)

367. The Government was right to weigh the possible consequences for the wider alliance with the US very carefully, as previous Governments have done. A policy of direct opposition to the US would have done serious short-term damage to the relationship, but it is questionable whether it would have broken the partnership.

368. Over the past seven decades, the UK and US have adopted differing, and sometimes conflicting, positions on major issues, for example Suez, the Vietnam War, the Falklands, Grenada, Bosnia, the Arab/Israel dispute and, at times, Northern Ireland. Those differences did not fundamentally call into question the practice of close cooperation, to mutual advantage, on the overall relationship, including defence and intelligence.

369. The opposition of Germany and France to US policy in 2002 to 2003 does not appear to have had a lasting impact on the relationships of those countries with the US, despite the bitterness at the time.

370. However, a decision not to oppose does not have to be translated into unqualified support. Throughout the post-Second World War period (and, notably, during the wartime alliance), the UK's relationship with the US and the commonality of interests therein have proved strong enough to bear the weight of different approaches to international problems and not infrequent disagreements.

371. Had the UK stood by its differing position on Iraq – which was not an opposed position, but one in which the UK had identified conditions seen as vital by the UK Government – the Inquiry does not consider that this would have led to a fundamental or lasting change in the UK's relationship with the US.

372. This is a matter of judgement, and one on which Mr Blair, bearing the responsibility of leadership, took a different view.

373. The second reason for committing unqualified support was, by standing alongside and taking part in the planning, the UK would be able to influence US policy.

374. Mr Blair's stalwart support for the US after 9/11 had a significant impact in that country. Mr Blair developed a close working relationship with President Bush. He used this to compare notes and inject his views on the major issues of the day, and it is clear from the records of the discussions that President Bush encouraged that dialogue and listened to Mr Blair's opinions.

375. Mr Blair expressed his views in frequent telephone calls and in meetings with the President. There was also a very active channel between his Foreign Affairs Adviser and the President's National Security Advisor. Mr Blair also sent detailed written Notes to the President.

376. Mr Jonathan Powell, Mr Blair’s Chief of Staff, told the Inquiry:

“... the Prime Minister had a habit of writing notes, both internally and to President Clinton and to President Bush, on all sorts of subjects, because he found it better to put something in writing rather than to simply talk about it orally and get it much more concretely ... in focused terms.”¹⁷⁶

377. Mr Blair drew on information and briefing received from Whitehall departments, but evidently drafted many or most of his Notes to the President himself, showing the drafts to his close advisers in No.10 but not (ahead of despatch) to the relevant Cabinet Ministers.

378. How best to exercise influence with the President of the United States is a matter for the tactical judgement of the Prime Minister, and will vary between Prime Ministers and Presidents. In relation to Iraq, Mr Blair’s judgement, as he and others have explained, was that objectives the UK identified for a successful strategy should not be expressed as conditions for its support.

379. Mr Powell told the Inquiry that Mr Blair was offering the US a “partnership to try to get to a wide coalition” and “setting out a framework” and to try to persuade the US to move in a particular direction.¹⁷⁷

380. Mr Blair undoubtedly influenced the President’s decision to go to the UN Security Council in the autumn of 2002. On other critical decisions set out in the Report, he did not succeed in changing the approach determined in Washington.

The legal basis for military action and the authority of the UN

381. There was a vigorous debate in late 2002 and early 2003 about the legal effect of resolution 1441 and the question of whether military action against Iraq could be undertaken without the Security Council having first considered, and then assessed, whether or not Iraq was in breach of its terms.

382. Many distinguished jurists have expressed opinions on that question and the debate will no doubt continue. The Inquiry received many opinions from experts in international law which demonstrate the complexities of the issues.

383. The Inquiry has reviewed the debate that took place within the Government and how it reached its decision.

384. The circumstances in which it was ultimately decided that there was a legal basis for UK participation were far from satisfactory.

385. It was not until 13 March 2003 that Lord Goldsmith advised that there was, on balance, a secure legal basis for military action.

¹⁷⁶ Public hearing, 18 January 2010, page 38.

¹⁷⁷ Public hearing, 18 January 2010, pages 77-78.

386. In the letter of 14 March 2003 from Lord Goldsmith's office to No.10, which is addressed in Section 5 of the Report, Mr Blair was told that an essential ingredient of the legal basis was that he, himself, should be satisfied of the fact that Iraq was in breach of resolution 1441.

387. In accordance with that advice, it was Mr Blair who decided that, so far as the UK was concerned, Iraq was and remained in breach of resolution 1441.

388. Apart from No.10's response to the letter of 14 March, sent the following day, in terms that can only be described as perfunctory, no formal record was made of that decision and the precise grounds on which it was made remain unclear.

389. The Inquiry was told, and it accepts, that it would have been possible at that stage for the UK Government to have decided not to go ahead with military action if it had been necessary to make a decision to do so; or if the House of Commons on 18 March had voted against the Government.

390. Although there had been unanimous support for a rigorous inspections and monitoring regime backed by the threat of military force as the means to disarm Iraq when resolution 1441 was adopted, there was no such consensus in the Security Council in March 2003. If the matter had been left to the Security Council to decide, military action might have been postponed and, possibly, avoided.

391. The Charter of the United Nations vests responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security in the Security Council. The UK Government was claiming to act on behalf of the international community "to uphold the authority of the Security Council", knowing that it did not have a majority in the Security Council in support of its actions. In those circumstances, the UK's actions undermined the authority of the Security Council.

392. A determination by the Security Council on whether Iraq was in fact in material breach of resolution 1441 would have furthered the UK's aspiration to uphold the authority of the Council.

Decision-making

393. The way in which the policy on Iraq was developed and decisions were taken and implemented within the UK Government has been at the heart of the Inquiry's work and fundamental to its conclusions.

394. The Inquiry has set out in Section 2 of the Report the roles and responsibilities of key individuals and bodies in order to assist the reader. It is also publishing with the Report many of the documents which illuminate who took the key decisions and on what basis, including the full record of the discussion on Iraq in Cabinet on five key occasions pre-conflict, and policy advice to Ministers which is not normally disclosed.

Collective responsibility

395. Under UK constitutional conventions – in which the Prime Minister leads the Government – Cabinet is the main mechanism by which the most senior members of the Government take collective responsibility for its most important decisions. Cabinet is supported by a system of Ministerial Committees whose role is to identify, test and develop policy options; analyse and mitigate risks; and debate and hone policy proposals until they are endorsed across the Government.¹⁷⁸

396. The *Ministerial Code* in place in 2003 said:

“The Cabinet is supported by Ministerial Committees (both standing and ad hoc) which have a two-fold purpose. First, they relieve the pressure on the Cabinet itself by settling as much business as possible at a lower level or, failing that, by clarifying the issues and defining the points of disagreement. Second, they support the principle of collective responsibility by ensuring that, even though an important question may never reach the Cabinet itself, the decision will be fully considered and the final judgement will be sufficiently authoritative to ensure that the Government as a whole can properly be expected to accept responsibility for it.”¹⁷⁹

397. The Code also said:

“The business of the Cabinet and Ministerial Committees consists in the main of:

- a. questions which significantly engage the collective responsibility of the Government because they raise major issues of policy or because they are of critical importance to the public;
- b. questions on which there is an unresolved argument between Departments.”

398. Lord Wilson of Dinton told the Inquiry that between January 1998 and January 1999, in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of Operation Desert Fox in December 1998 (see Section 1.1), as Cabinet Secretary, he had attended and noted 21 Ministerial discussions on Iraq: 10 in Cabinet, of which seven had “some substance”; five in DOP; and six ad hoc meetings, including one JIC briefing.¹⁸⁰ Discussions in Cabinet or a Cabinet Committee would have been supported by the relevant part of the Cabinet Secretariat, the Overseas and Defence Secretariat (OD Sec).

399. Similarly, Lord Wilson stated that, between 11 September 2001 and January 2002, the Government’s response to international terrorism and the subsequent military action against the Taliban in Afghanistan had been managed through 46 Ministerial meetings.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ *Ministerial Code*, 2001, page 3.

¹⁷⁹ *Ministerial Code*, 2001, page 3.

¹⁸⁰ Public hearing, 25 January 2011, page 11.

¹⁸¹ Public hearing, 25 January 2011, page 11.

400. The last meeting of DOP on Iraq before the 2003 conflict, however, took place in March 1999.¹⁸²

401. In April 2002, the MOD clearly expected consideration of military options to be addressed through DOP. Mr Simon Webb, the MOD Policy Director, advised Mr Hoon that:

“Even these preparatory steps would properly need a Cabinet Committee decision, based on a minute from the Defence Secretary ...”¹⁸³

402. Most decisions on Iraq pre-conflict were taken either bilaterally between Mr Blair and the relevant Secretary of State or in meetings between Mr Blair, Mr Straw and Mr Hoon, with No.10 officials and, as appropriate, Mr John Scarlett (Chairman of the JIC), Sir Richard Dearlove and Adm Boyce. Some of those meetings were minuted; some were not.

403. As the guidance for the Cabinet Secretariat makes clear, the purpose of the minute of a meeting is to set out the conclusions reached so that those who have to take action know precisely what to do; the second purpose is to “give the reasons why the conclusions were reached”.¹⁸⁴

404. Lord Turnbull, Cabinet Secretary from 2002 to 2005, described Mr Blair’s characteristic way of working with his Cabinet colleagues as:

“... ‘I like to move fast. I don’t want to spend a lot of time in kind of conflict resolution, and, therefore, I will get the people who will make this thing move quickly and efficiently.’ That was his sort of characteristic style, but it has drawbacks.”¹⁸⁵

405. Lord Turnbull subsequently told the Inquiry that the group described above was “a professional forum ... they had ... with one possible exception [Ms Clare Short, the International Development Secretary], the right people in the room. It wasn’t the kind of sofa government in the sense of the Prime Minister and his special advisers and political cronies”.¹⁸⁶

406. In July 2004, Lord Butler’s Report stated that his Committee was:

“... concerned that the informality and circumscribed character of the Government’s procedures which we saw in the context of policy-making towards Iraq risks reducing the scope for informed collective political judgement. Such risks are particularly significant in a field like the subject of our Review, where hard facts are inherently

¹⁸² Email Cabinet Office to Secretary Iraq Inquiry, 5 July 2011, ‘FOI request for joint MOD/FCO memo on Iraq Policy 1999’.

¹⁸³ [Minute Webb to PS/Secretary of State, 12 April 2002, ‘Bush and the War on Terrorism’](#).

¹⁸⁴ Cabinet Office, June 2001, *Guide to Minute Taking*.

¹⁸⁵ Public hearing, 13 January 2010, page 28.

¹⁸⁶ Public hearing, 13 January 2010, pages 45-46.

difficult to come by and the quality of judgement is accordingly all the more important.”¹⁸⁷

407. In response, Mr Blair agreed that:

“... where a small group is brought together to work on operational military planning and developing the diplomatic strategy, in future such a group will operate formally as an ad hoc Cabinet Committee.”¹⁸⁸

408. The Inquiry considers that where policy options include significant military deployments, particularly where they will have implications for the responsibilities of more than one Cabinet Minister, are likely to be controversial, and/or are likely to give rise to significant risks, the options should be considered by a group of Ministers meeting regularly, whether or not they are formally designated as a Cabinet Committee, so that Cabinet as a whole can be enabled to take informed collective decisions.

409. Describing the important function a Cabinet Committee can play, Mr Powell wrote:

“Most of the important decisions of the Blair Government were taken either in informal meetings of Ministers and officials or by Cabinet Committees ... Unlike the full Cabinet, a Cabinet Committee has the right people present, including, for example, the military Chiefs of Staff or scientific advisers, its members are well briefed, it can take as long as it likes over its discussion on the basis of well-prepared papers, and it is independently chaired by a senior Minister with no departmental vested interest.”¹⁸⁹

410. The Inquiry concurs with this description of the function of a Cabinet Committee when it is working well. In particular, it recognises the important function which a Minister without departmental responsibilities for the issues under consideration can play. This can provide some external challenge from experienced members of the government and mitigate any tendency towards group-think. In the case of Iraq, for example, the inclusion of the Chancellor of the Exchequer or Deputy Prime Minister, as senior members of the Cabinet, or of Mr Cook, as a former Foreign Secretary known to have concerns about the policy, could have provided an element of challenge.

411. Mr Powell likewise recognises the importance of having written advice which can be seen before a meeting, allowing all those present to have shared information and the opportunity to digest it and seek further advice if necessary. This allows the time in meetings to be used productively.

412. The Inquiry considers that there should have been collective discussion by a Cabinet Committee or small group of Ministers on the basis of inter-departmental advice

¹⁸⁷ *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction* [“The Butler Report”], 14 July 2004, HC 898.

¹⁸⁸ Cabinet Office, *Review on Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction: Implementation of its Conclusions*, March 2005, Cm6492.

¹⁸⁹ Powell J. *The New Machiavelli: How to wield power in the modern world*. The Bodley Head, 2010.

agreed at a senior level between officials at a number of decision points which had a major impact on the development of UK policy before the invasion of Iraq. Those were:

- The decision at the beginning of December 2001 to offer to work with President Bush on a strategy to deal with Iraq as part of Phase 2 of the “War on Terror”, despite the fact that there was no evidence of any Iraqi involvement with the attacks on the US or active links to Al Qaida.
- The adoption of the position at the end of February 2002 that Iraq was a threat which had to be dealt with, together with the assumption that the only certain means to remove Saddam Hussein and his regime was to invade Iraq and impose a new government.
- The position Mr Blair should adopt in discussions with President Bush at Crawford in April 2002. The meeting at Chequers on 2 April was given a presentation on the military options and did not explore the political and legal implications of a conflict with Iraq. There was no FCO representative at the Chequers meeting and no subsequent meeting with Mr Straw and Mr Hoon.
- The position Mr Blair should adopt in his discussion with President Bush at Camp David on 5 and 6 September 2002. Mr Blair’s long Note of 28 July, telling President Bush “I will be with you, whatever”, was seen, before it was sent, only by No.10 officials. A copy was sent afterwards to Mr Straw, but not to Mr Hoon. While the Note was marked “Personal” (to signal that it should have a restricted circulation), it represented an extensive statement of the UK Government’s position by the Prime Minister to the President of the United States. The Foreign and Defence Secretaries should certainly have been given an opportunity to comment on the draft in advance.
- A discussion in mid-September 2002 on the need for robust post-conflict planning.
- The decision on 31 October 2002 to offer ground forces to the US for planning purposes.
- The decision on 17 January 2003 to deploy large scale ground forces for operations in southern Iraq.
- The position Mr Blair should adopt in his discussion with President Bush in Washington on 31 January 2003.
- The proposals in Mr Blair’s Note to President Bush of 19 February suggesting a deadline for a vote in the Security Council of 14 March.
- A review of UK policy at the end of February 2003 when the inspectors had found no evidence of WMD and there was only limited support for the second resolution in the Security Council.
- The question of whether Iraq had committed further material breaches as specified in operative paragraph 4 of resolution 1441 (2002), as posed in Mr Brummell’s letter of 14 March to Mr Rycroft.

413. In addition to providing a mechanism to probe and challenge the implications of proposals before decisions were taken, a Cabinet Committee or a more structured process might have identified some of the wider implications and risks associated with the deployment of military forces to Iraq. It might also have offered the opportunity to remedy some of the deficiencies in planning which are identified in Section 6 of the Report. There will, of course, be other policy issues which would benefit from the same approach.

414. Cabinet has a different role to that of a Cabinet Committee.

415. Mr Powell has written that:

“... Cabinet is the right place to ratify decisions, the right place for people to raise concerns if they have not done so before, the right place for briefings by the Prime Minister and other Ministers on strategic issues, the right place to ensure political unity; but it is categorically not the right place for an informed decision on difficult and detailed policy issues.”¹⁹⁰

416. In 2009, in a statement explaining a Cabinet decision to veto the release of minutes of one of its meetings under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Mr Straw explained the need for frank discussion at Cabinet very cogently:

“Serious and controversial decisions must be taken with free, frank – even blunt deliberations between colleagues. Dialogue must be fearless. Ministers must have the confidence to challenge each other in private. They must ensure that decisions have been properly thought through, sounding out all possibilities before committing themselves to a course of action. They must not feel inhibited from advancing options that may be unpopular or controversial. They must not be deflected from expressing dissent by the fear that they may be held personally to account for views that are later cast aside.”¹⁹¹

417. Mr Blair told the Inquiry that:

“... the discussion that we had in Cabinet was substantive discussion. We had it again and again and again, and the options were very simple. The options were: a sanctions framework that was effective; alternatively, the UN inspectors doing the job; alternatively, you have to remove Saddam. Those were the options.”¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Powell J. *The New Machiavelli: How to wield power in the modern world*. The Bodley Head, 2010.

¹⁹¹ Statement J Straw, 23 February 2009, ‘Exercise of the Executive Override under section 53 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 in respect of the decision of the Information Commissioner dated 18 February 2008 (Ref: FS50165372) as upheld by the decision of the Information Tribunal of 27 January 2009 (Ref: EA/2008/0024 and EA/2008/0029): Statement of Reasons’.

¹⁹² Public hearing, 29 January 2010, page 22.

418. Mr Blair added:

“Nobody in the Cabinet was unaware of ... what the whole issue was about. It was the thing running throughout the whole of the political mainstream at the time. There were members of the Cabinet who would challenge and disagree, but most of them agreed.”¹⁹³

419. The Inquiry has seen the minutes of 26 meetings of Cabinet between 28 February 2002 and 17 March 2003 at which Iraq was mentioned and Cabinet Secretariat notebooks. Cabinet was certainly given updates on diplomatic developments and had opportunities to discuss the general issues. The number of occasions on which there was a substantive discussion of the policy was very much more limited.

420. There were substantive discussions of the policy on Iraq, although (as the Report sets out) not necessarily of all the issues, in Cabinet on 7 March and 23 September 2002 and 16 January, 13 March and 17 March 2003. Those are the records which are being published with the Report.

421. At the Cabinet meeting on 7 March 2002, Mr Blair concluded:

“... the concerns expressed in discussion were justified. It was important that the United States did not appear to be acting unilaterally. It was critically important to reinvigorate the Middle East Peace Process. Any military action taken against President Saddam Hussein’s regime had to be effective. On the other hand, the Iraqi regime was in clear breach of its obligations under several United Nations Security Council resolutions. Its WMD programmes posed a threat to peace. Iraq’s neighbours regarded President Saddam Hussein as a danger. The right strategy was to engage closely with the Government of the United States in order to be in a position to shape policy and its presentation. The international community should proceed in a measured but determined way to decide how to respond to the real threat represented by the Iraqi regime. No decisions to launch military action had been taken and any action taken would be in accordance with international law.

“The Cabinet, ‘Took note, with approval.’”¹⁹⁴

422. Cabinet on 17 March 2003 noted Mr Blair’s conclusion that “the diplomatic process was at an end; Saddam Hussein would be given an ultimatum to leave Iraq; and the House of Commons would be asked to endorse the use of military action against Iraq to enforce compliance, if necessary”.

423. In Section 5 of the Report, the Inquiry concludes that Lord Goldsmith should have been asked to provide written advice which fully reflected the position on 17 March and explained the legal basis on which the UK could take military action and set out the risks of legal challenge.

¹⁹³ Public hearing, 29 January 2010, pages 228-229.

¹⁹⁴ [Cabinet Conclusions, 7 March 2002.](#)

424. There was no substantive discussion of the military options, despite promises by Mr Blair, before the meeting on 17 March.

425. In his statement for the Inquiry, Mr Hoon wrote that by the time he joined Cabinet, in 1999:

“... the pattern of the organisation and format of Cabinet meetings was ... well established. Tony Blair was well known to be extremely concerned about leaks from Cabinet discussions ... It was my perception that, largely as a consequence of this, he did not normally expect key decisions to be made in the course of Cabinet meetings. Papers were submitted to the Cabinet Office, and in turn by the Cabinet Office to appropriate Cabinet Committees for decisions.”¹⁹⁵

426. Mr Hoon wrote:

“At no time when I was serving in the Ministry of Defence were other Cabinet Ministers involved in discussions about the deployment of specific forces and the nature of their operations. Relevant details would have been circulated to 10 Downing Street or other Government departments as necessary ... I do not recall a single Cabinet level discussion of specific troop deployments and the nature of their operations.”¹⁹⁶

427. The Inquiry recognises that there will be operational constraints on discussion of the details of military deployments, but that would not preclude the discussion of the principles and the implications of military options.

428. In January 2006, the Cabinet discussed the proposal to deploy military forces to Helmand later that year.

429. The Inquiry also recognises that the nature of foreign policy, as the Report vividly demonstrates, requires the Prime Minister of the UK, the Foreign Secretary and their most senior officials to be involved in negotiating and agreeing policy on a day-by-day, and sometimes hour-by-hour basis.

430. It would neither be necessary nor feasible to seek a mandate from Cabinet at each stage of a discussion. That reinforces the importance of ensuring Cabinet is kept informed as strategy evolves, is given the opportunity to raise questions and is asked to endorse key decisions. Cabinet Ministers need more information than will be available from the media, especially on sensitive issues of foreign and security policy.

431. In 2009, three former Cabinet Secretaries¹⁹⁷ told the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution:

¹⁹⁵ Statement, 2 April 2015, page 1.

¹⁹⁶ Statement, 2 April 2015, page 2.

¹⁹⁷ Lord Armstrong of Ilminster, Lord Butler of Brockwell and Lord Wilson of Dinton.

“... each of us, as Secretary of the Cabinet, has been constantly conscious of his responsibility to the Cabinet collectively and of the need to have regard to the needs and responsibilities of the other members of the Cabinet (and indeed of other Ministers) as well of those of the Prime Minister. That has coloured our relationships with Number 10 as well as those with other Ministers and their departments.”¹⁹⁸

432. Lord Turnbull told the Inquiry that Mr Blair:

“... wanted a step change in the work on delivery and reform, which I hope I managed to give him. Now ... how does the Cabinet Secretary work? You come in and you are – even with the two roles that you have, head of an organisation of half a million civil servants and in some sense co-ordinating a public sector of about five million people. You have to make choices as to where you make your effort, and I think the policy I followed was not to take an issue over from someone to whom it was delegated simply because it was big and important, but you have to make a judgement as to whether it is being handled competently, whether that particular part is, in a sense, under pressure, whether you think they are getting it wrong in some sense, or they are missing certain important things.”¹⁹⁹

433. The responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary to ensure that members of Cabinet are fully engaged in ways that allow them to accept collective responsibility and to meet their departmental obligations nevertheless remains.

Lessons

434. In a democratic system, public support and understanding for a major military operation are essential. It is therefore important to guard against overstating what military action might achieve and against any tendency to play down the risks. A realistic assessment of the possibilities and limitations of armed force, and of the challenges of intervening in the affairs of other States, should help any future UK Government manage expectations, including its own.

435. When the potential for military action arises, the Government should not commit to a firm political objective before it is clear that it can be achieved. Regular reassessment is essential, to ensure that the assumptions upon which policy is being made and implemented remain correct.

436. Once an issue becomes a matter for the Security Council, the UK Government cannot expect to retain control of how it is to be discussed and eventually decided unless it is able to work with the interests and agendas of other Member States. In relation to Iraq, the independent role of the inspectors was a further dimension.

¹⁹⁸ Fourth Report from the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, Session 2009-10, *The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government*, HL Paper 30.

¹⁹⁹ Public hearing, 13 January 2010, page 3.

437. A military timetable should not be allowed to dictate a diplomatic timetable. If a strategy of coercive diplomacy is being pursued, forces should be deployed in such a way that the threat of action can be increased or decreased according to the diplomatic situation and the policy can be sustained for as long as necessary.

438. The issue of influencing the US, both at the strategic and at the operational level, was a constant preoccupation at all levels of the UK Government.

439. Prime Ministers will always wish to exercise their own political judgement on how to handle the relationship with the US. It will depend on personal relationships as well as on the nature of the issues being addressed. On all these matters of strategy and diplomacy, the Inquiry recognises that there is no standard formula that will be appropriate in all cases.

440. Whether or not influence has been exercised can be difficult to ascertain, even in retrospect. The views of allies are most likely to make a difference when they come in on one side of an internal debate, and there are a number of instances where the UK arguments did make a difference to the formation and implementation of US policy. The US and UK are close allies, but the relationship between the two is unequal.

441. The exercise of influence will always involve a combination of identifying the prerequisites for success in a shared endeavour, and a degree of bargaining to make sure that the approach meets the national interest. In situations like the run-up to the invasion of Iraq:

- If certain measures are identified as prerequisite for success then their importance should be underlined from the start. There are no prizes for sharing a failure.
- Those measures that are most important should be pursued persistently and consistently.
- If it is assumed that a consequence of making a contribution in one area is that a further contribution would not be required in another, then that should be made explicit.
- Influence should not be set as an objective in itself. The exercise of influence is a means to an end.