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'Failure is not an option, but it doesn't mean they will avoid it'

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The Prime Minister knew the US President was determined to complete what one senior British official had already described as the unfinished business from his father's war against Saddam Hussein.

There was no way of stopping the Americans invading Iraq and they would expect Britain, their most loyal ally, to join them. If they didn't, the transatlantic relationship would be in tatters. But there were serious problems.

A Secret UK Eyes Only briefing paper was warning that there was no legal justification for war. So Mr Blair was advised that a strategy would have to be put in place which would provide a legal basis for war. It was also vital that the Prime Minister should be able to persuade the public that war was justified and, just as importantly, convince those among his backbench MPs who were becoming increasingly vocal in their opposition to another US-led war.

Sir David Manning had briefed Sir Christopher Meyer, the British ambassador, and outlined the strategy to Mr Bush's National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice.

He had been stranded in Washington on September 11 and he and Ms Rice had forged a good working relationship dealing together with the immediate aftermath of the al-Qa'eda attacks.

If he could persuade her that the British plan would work, then the Prime Minister would have a much less difficult task in getting Mr Bush to hold off until they could make it legal, until they could

persuade the UN Security Council to give them the mandate for war.

The memo arrived in Downing St late on the evening of Wednesday, March 14, and was immediately sent by secure fax to Barcelona where Mr Blair and his Foreign Secretary Jack Straw were preparing for a two-day EU summit on economic reform.

Mr Straw clearly had grave reservations about the whole idea of toppling Saddam.

Any British action had to be "narrated with reference to the international rule of law", Mr Straw insisted. He warned that his legal advisers were telling him that it would almost certainly need a fresh UN mandate to make it legal, a mandate the Americans didn't feel was necessary and the rest of the Security Council was unlikely to give. He questioned the rationale behind the whole enterprise. Whatever the allies put in Saddam's place, it was unlikely to be much better. But the problem for Mr Blair was that he knew there was no stopping the Americans. That much was clear from the Secret UK Eyes Only "options paper" on Iraq given to him on Friday, March 8, 2002.

The Prime Minister was at Chequers when he sat down to read it and in need of some good news. He and other ministers had repeatedly told MPs and television interviewers that no decision had been made to go to war but the increasingly belligerent talk coming out of Washington was making even members of his Cabinet jittery.

Mr Bush had reportedly told one aide: "F*** Saddam. We're taking him out". It no longer seemed to be a question of if; all the discussion was of how soon, with increasing talk of an invasion that autumn when conditions on the ground in Iraq would be ideal.

The discussions in the previous day's Cabinet meeting had been more heated than at any time previously during Mr Blair's tenure, with several ministers urging him to push for a diplomatic solution to avoid a US-led war.

More than 60 Labour MPs had signed an early day motion expressing deep unease at the prospect of British support for any attack on Iraq

and were claiming that two Cabinet ministers would resign if Britain went to war.

It was an open secret that they were Robin Cook, the Leader of the House, who had described talk of military action as "ludicrously premature", and Clare Short, the International Development Secretary, who resigned from the Labour front bench over the 1991 Gulf War.

Mr Blair had asked officials to prepare a dossier of declassified intelligence that would remind the public and the opponents in his own party quite how nasty Saddam was.

The options paper the Prime Minister was reading was prepared by the Cabinet Office Overseas and Defence Secretariat. It was clearly seen by Lord Butler's review of the intelligence on weapons of mass destruction. His report quoted it as saying that while regime change per se was illegal, a full-scale ground invasion was the only way of being sure that Saddam would go.

But the paper was much more candid than that. It went far further than anything Lord Butler revealed, and for Mr Blair it didn't make good reading. The intelligence was poor but it was apparent that sanctions were not preventing Saddam from developing weapons of mass destruction. He had used them before and he could use them again.

There were essentially two options: a strengthening of the containment policy that was already in place, or regime change. But tougher sanctions and inspections would not be enough to get rid of Saddam.

More importantly, it would not be enough for Washington. "The US has lost confidence in containment," the paper warned.

There was increasing pressure within the administration to invade Iraq and it had less to do with the War on Terror than a desire to finish the job that the president's father had begun in the Gulf War.

"The success of Operation Enduring Freedom, distrust of UN

sanctions and inspection regimes, and unfinished business from 1991 are all factors," the paper said.

But there would be major problems finding a legal justification to use military force. "Subject to law officers' advice, none currently exists," it warned starkly.

There was no greater threat that Saddam would use chemical or biological weapons now than there had been at any time in the recent past; regime change had no basis in international law; and there was no evidence that Iraq was backing international terrorism that might justify an action based on self-defence, as in Afghanistan, the options paper said.

"This makes moving quickly to invade legally very difficult."

The problem was that the Americans had no such qualms.

"Washington believes the legal basis for an attack on Iraq already exists," the paper said.

"Nor will it necessarily be governed by wider political factors. The US may be willing to work with a much smaller coalition than we think desirable."

Britain needed to slow things down, to give itself time to find a legal justification. Mr Blair should "consider a staged approach, establishing international support, building up pressure on Saddam, and developing military plans."

The policy should be to push hard for the return of the weapons inspectors, "winding up the pressure on Iraq". If Saddam refused to admit the inspectors, or if they were admitted and subsequently expelled, that could provide legal justification for large-scale military action. "Saddam would try to prevent this, although he has miscalculated before," the paper said. No one doubted that America could invade Iraq successfully on its own if it so chose, but the likely long term cost of rebuilding the country, laid out in detail in the Cabinet Office options paper, must have come as a shock to Mr Blair.

The only certain way of ensuring success was to keep large numbers

of forces on the ground for "many years".

Even so there was no guarantee that regime change would produce the desired effect. While both Iran and Israel had weapons of mass destruction, even a representative Iraqi government would probably try to acquire its own.

The defence chiefs would also need to be given time to prepare for war. "If an invasion is contemplated this autumn, then a decision will need to be taken in principle six months in advance," the options paper said.

With many in Washington pressing for an autumn invasion, the Prime Minister would have to make a decision by early April when he was due to hold talks with Mr Bush at the president's ranch in Crawford, Texas. The Iraq options paper confirmed Mr Blair in his view that regime change was the only option and, despite the increasing concerns within his Cabinet, his party and the country at large, he stepped up the rhetoric.

Three days later, on Monday, March 11, the Prime Minister held talks in Downing St with the US Vice-President Dick Cheney, who was visiting London before touring Arab states trying to build a coalition against Saddam.

The weekend's papers had been full of speculation that Mr Bush wanted 25,000 British troops for his invasion force. At a Downing St press conference, Mr Blair reiterated that "no decisions have been taken" on how to deal with the threat from Iraq, "but that there is a threat from Saddam Hussein and the weapons of mass destruction that he has acquired is not in doubt at all."

Mr Cheney limited his comments to an insistence that UN weapons inspectors be allowed back in with "a go anywhere, any time kind of regime".

The Prime Minister stepped in to cut short the press conference. He knew that he and Mr Cheney were only the warm-up act.

A few minutes later, Mr Bush would step up to a podium in the White

House Rose Garden to address 1,300 guests assembled to mark six months since the September 11 attacks. The President did not talk specifically about Iraq but he did warn that the War on Terror was about to get more difficult. "Inaction is not an option," he said. "Men with no respect for life must never be allowed to control the ultimate instruments of death." The audience included relatives of those killed in the attacks and foreign diplomats, among them the British ambassador, who was already embroiled in discussions with the administration about Iraq. A memo from Sir Christopher warning that Mr Bush's desire to get rid of Saddam should not be underestimated was said to be circulating in Whitehall.

It was now that Mr Blair sent Sir David Manning to Washington to try to impress on the Americans the problems they faced. Despite the fears in London over US belligerence, Sir David's memo was relatively optimistic.

"Prime Minister," it began. "I had dinner with Condi on Tuesday; and talks and lunch with her and an NSC [National Security Council] team on Wednesday (to which Christopher Meyer also came). These were good exchanges, and particularly frank when we were one-on-one at dinner. We spent a long time at dinner on Iraq. It is clear that Bush is grateful for your support and has registered that you are getting flak.

"I said that you would not budge in your support for regime change but you had to manage a press, a Parliament and a public opinion that was very different than anything in the States. And you would not budge on your insistence that, if we pursued regime change, it must be very carefully done and produce the right result. Failure was not an option. Condi's enthusiasm for regime change is undimmed. But there were some signs, since we last spoke, of greater awareness of the practical difficulties and political risks.

"From what she said, Bush has yet to find the answers to the big questions: how to persuade international opinion that military action against Iraq is necessary and justified; what value to put on the exiled Iraqi opposition; how to coordinate a US/allied military campaign with internal opposition (assuming there is any); what happens on

the morning after?

"Bush will want to pick your brains. He will also want to hear whether he can expect coalition support. I told Condi that we realised that the Administration could go it alone if it chose. But if it wanted company, it would have to take account of the concerns of its potential coalition partners."

Sir David said he had warned Ms Rice that the weapons inspectors issue was key and had to be handled in a way that would persuade Europe in particular that America realised the war had to be legal.

"Renewed refusal by Saddam to accept unfettered inspections would be a powerful argument," he said, adding that he had told her it was of "paramount importance" that the allies also dealt with the Middle East issue.

Unless they did, they could find themselves "bombing Iraq and losing the Gulf". There were signs that the Prime Minister's visit to the ranch would be useful. "No doubt we need to keep this in perspective. But my talks with Condi convinced me that Bush wants to hear your views on Iraq before taking decisions.

"He also wants your support. He is still smarting from the comments by other European leaders on his Iraq policy. This gives you real influence: on the public relations strategy; on the UN and weapons inspections; and on US planning for a military campaign. This could be critically important. I think there is a real risk that the Administration underestimates the difficulties. They may agree that failure isn't an option, but this does not mean that they will avoid it."

Mr Blair spent his time in Barcelona fighting off attempts by the Belgians to place Iraq on the summit agenda and holding one-on-one discussions on the sidelines with key European players, such as the French President, Jacques Chirac, and Gerhard Schröder, the German Chancellor.

It was clear that there would be little if any backing within Europe for toppling Saddam without a UN mandate while, at home, the number of Labour MPs signing the early day motion opposing war had risen

to more than 100.

At the end of the summit, a tired Mr Blair was caught by the television cameras telling Mr Straw sardonically that it had been "as ever, a joy".

The following day, Sunday, March 17, the US deputy defence secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, was invited to lunch at the British ambassador's residence.

Mr Wolfowitz was the most hard-line of those within the administration advocating an attack on Iraq, one of the key players the British would have to win over if they were to have a chance of persuading the Americans to wait for the UN backing Mr Blair needed to sell another American war to Britain.

If he bought the secret plan to ensnare Saddam, it was odds-on that everybody else in the administration would too. The Prime Minister would be happy to see the back of the Iraqi dictator, Sir Christopher told Mr Wolfowitz. But they had to make it legal.

Earlier that day, Ms Short had gone on British television denouncing the idea of "blind military action against Iraq" and hinting she would resign from Cabinet if Britain backed a US invasion. It epitomised the problems Mr Blair faced, Sir Christopher told his guest. The British ambassador described his discussions with Mr Wolfowitz in a letter to Sir David Manning. "I opened by sticking very closely to the script that you used with Condi Rice. We backed regime change, but the plan had to be clever and failure was not an option.

"I then went through the need to wrongfoot Saddam on the inspectors and the UN Security Council Resolutions and the critical importance of the Middle East peace plan. If all this could be accomplished skilfully, we were fairly confident that a number of countries could come on board." A day later, Iain Duncan Smith, the Conservative Party leader, went one step further than Mr Blair in backing a US invasion. "Saddam must go," he said.

An ICM poll found that, with more than half the country against Britain supporting a US-led invasion, Conservative voters were

marginally more opposed than Labour voters.

Mr Blair was going to have to wait for the dossier he wanted to win over the Left of the party. Mr Straw told the Prime Minister there was no way that any meaningful declassified report on Iraq could be published.

MI6 opposed revealing details of its intelligence and, at any event, it didn't back up the claims Mr Blair wanted the dossier to make. The latest Joint Intelligence Committee assessment, dated Friday, March 15, said information on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction was "sporadic and patchy".

It was barely able to back up the claim that Saddam had any sort of weapons programme, confining itself to concluding: "We believe Iraq retains some production equipment, and some small stocks of chemical warfare agent precursors, and may have hidden small quantities of agents and weapons. There is no intelligence on any biological agent production facilities."

Mr Straw was to spend the weekend composing a note for Mr Blair ahead of the Prime Minister's visit to Texas.

Peter Ricketts, his policy director, offered the Foreign Secretary some advice in a confidential memo dated Friday, March 22. "By sharing Bush's broad objective, the Prime Minister can help shape how it is defined, and the approach to achieving it," he said.

"In the process, he can bring home to Bush some of the realities which will be less evident from Washington. He can help Bush make good decisions by telling him things his own machine probably isn't."

But broad support for regime change brought two real problems, Mr Ricketts said. The first was the threat. "The truth is that what has changed is not the pace of Saddam Hussein's WMD programmes, but our tolerance of them post-11 September. I am relieved that you decided to postpone publication of the unclassified document.

"My meeting yesterday showed that there is more work to do to

ensure the figures are accurate, and consistent with those of the US.

But even the best survey of Iraq's WMD programmes will not show much advance in recent years on the nuclear, missile or chemical weapons/biological weapons fronts: the programmes are extremely worrying but have not, as far as we know, been stepped up.

"US scrambling to establish a link between Iraq and al-Qa'eda is so far frankly unconvincing.

"To get public and Parliamentary support for military options we have to be convincing that the threat is so serious/imminent that it is worth sending our troops to die for."

The second problem was "the end state". What sort of Iraq would we be left with? "Regime change does not stack up. It sounds like a grudge match between Bush and Saddam."

What was to stop any new leader acquiring weapons of mass destruction? "It would be almost impossible to maintain UN sanctions on a new leader who came in promising a fresh start."

That weekend, a new poll by Mori found that 52 per cent of the country was opposed to joining a US attack on Iraq. There were also claims that disaffected colleagues were planning a leadership challenge to Mr Blair.

More than 130 Labour MPs had now signed the early day motion and the numbers were still rising. The Foreign Secretary's note, marked "Secret and Personal", was delivered to Downing St on the following Monday, March 25. Like the Cabinet Office options paper, it did not make encouraging reading. "The rewards from your visit to Crawford will be few," Mr Straw warned the Prime Minister. "The risks are high, both for you and the Government.

"I judge that there is at present no majority inside the Parliamentary Labour Party for any military action against Iraq, (alongside a greater readiness to surface their concerns).

"Colleagues know that Saddam and the Iraqi regime are bad. But we

have a long way to go to convince them as to: the scale of the threat from Iraq and why this has got worse recently; what distinguishes the Iraqi threat from that of eg Iran and North Korea so as to justify military action; the justification for any military action in terms of international law; and whether the consequence of military action really would be a compliant, law-abiding replacement government."

Neither the extent of the threat nor the reasons for tackling it now were clear, Mr Straw said. It was doubtful that America would be considering military action if the September 11 attacks had not occurred.

But at the same time there was "no credible evidence" to link Iraq to Osama bin Laden and al-Qa'eda.

The British strategy had to be based on international law and that meant using Iraq's "flagrant breach" of the UN-imposed obligation to allow the weapons inspectors unfettered access. It should concentrate initially on toughening the sanctions regime and insisting that the weapons inspectors be allowed the "go anywhere, any time" regime Mr Cheney had demanded.

"I know there are those who say that an attack on Iraq would be justified whether or not weapons inspectors were readmitted," the Foreign Secretary said. "But I believe that a demand for the unfettered readmission of weapons inspectors is essential, in terms of public explanation, and in terms of legal sanction for any military action."

But there were two "potential elephant traps", he warned. The first was the point that regime change per se was no justification for military action.

The second, the question of whether or not it would require a new mandate. "The US are likely to oppose any idea of a fresh mandate," Mr Straw said. "On the other side, the weight of legal advice here is that a fresh mandate may well be required."

The Government would eventually rely on UN resolution 1441, which condemned Iraq for its failure to work with the weapons inspectors,

saying it allowed the allies to fall back on the original mandate for force from the 1991 Gulf War.

There was one other very big question. "What will this action achieve? There seems to be a larger hole in this than anything. Most of the assessments from the US have assumed regime change as a means of eliminating Iraq's WMD threat.

"But none has satisfactorily answered how that regime change is to be secured, and how there can be any certainty that the replacement regime will be any better. Iraq has no history of democracy so no-one has this habit."

A sombre Mr Blair flew into Mr Bush's Prairie Chapel Ranch on board a presidential helicopter late on Friday, April 5. He was wearing a black suit and tie in mourning for the Queen Mother who had died the previous week.

President Bush, wearing blue jeans and work boots, drove him to the ranch house in a pick-up truck. The contrast could not have been starker, in more ways than one.

The Prime Minister was cautious when asked about Iraq in a pre-summit interview with a US network. His aides had been warning all week that the summit was not a "council of war".

Mr Blair told NBC that he and the President were "not proposing military action at this point in time". Mr Bush in his corresponding pre-summit interview with ITN said: "I made up my mind that Saddam needs to go."

There was, in fact, little doubt that the Crawford summit was a council of war. "I explained to the Prime Minister that the policy of my government is the removal of Saddam, and that all options are on the table," Mr Bush said later. "The world would be better off without him and so will the future."

Mr Blair, determined to keep the transatlantic alliance alive but desperate to get the UN backing that would make an invasion legal, persuaded Mr Bush to hold off going to war that autumn, to wait until

the following March, when weather conditions would again be ideal, in the hope of getting UN backing.

In exchange, he stepped up the rhetoric, adding a blunt warning to Saddam to a speech he gave in the George Bush Senior Presidential library on the Saturday night. The Iraqi dictator had to allow the weapons inspectors in "any time, any place". There would be no rush to war.

"But leaving Iraq to develop weapons of mass destruction in flagrant breach of no less than nine separate United Nations Security Council resolutions, refusing still to allow weapons inspectors back to do their work properly, is not an option."

By the time Mr Blair left Crawford on Sunday, April 7, to fly home for the Queen Mother's state funeral, the die was cast. The gamble could not have been for higher stakes.

He had persuaded President Bush to try to go through the UN, preventing the threat of a war that autumn. But short of the Security Council backing military force to topple Saddam - something few if any of his officials believed likely - the Prime Minister was committed to a war that was opposed by a majority not just within his own party, but among the population at large, and with no clear idea of what would happen "on the morning after".