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NOTE FOR THE RECORD

12(a-)
Shown to
Defense Secretary
and CDS on
2 October, on the
Prime Minister's
instructions.

PRIME MINISTER

THE GULF CRISIS: THE MILITARY OPTION

The Prime Minister and President Bush had a very private talk in New York this evening about the military option in the current Gulf crisis. General Scowcroft and I were present throughout. Secretary Baker was with us for part of the time.

CDS
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The Prime Minister said that she was struck by certain similarities in the decision-making on military issues between the Gulf crisis and the Falklands conflict. You tended to assume that you had more time at your disposal than was actually the case. In practice, there had only been a very brief 'window' for launching the military operation to recover the Falklands. The same might be true in the Gulf. We had a relatively limited period during which the temperature was suitable for military operations, probably from November through to March/April. We had to squeeze into that period both time for sanctions to work and time for a resort to the military option if they did not. If the window was missed, we would probably have to wait until next autumn for another chance: and in practice that probably meant never. So in a sense you had to fit the politics to the military requirement. Above all, you had to keep in mind that our forces were being asked to risk their lives: you had to be ready to let them take action at the time which was best for them.

As for justification for military action, that existed already. Saddam Hussain was in effect at war with Kuwait, even though he did not have an opponent. Every day brought new information on atrocities there. No further pretext was needed. The Prime Minister added that she was against going to the United Nations to secure backing for the military option. We already had all the legal entitlement which we needed. The UN would only try to put constraints on it, which could put our forces at risk. We had no right to subject them to that.

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Much of this clearly struck the President as new. The US military had not mentioned such time constraints to him. Nor had he got a date in mind for military action: all planning was a contingency basis. His thoughts continued to focus on an Iraqi provocation, as the most likely cause of conflict, with a massive American response. He was worried in particular by the extent to which Iraq was dabbling with terrorism. The US had warned Saddam Hussain that this would meet with a severe reaction. More generally, he thought military liaison between the US and the UK was going very well. The Prime Minister would be familiar with the details of US military planning, although the plans were subject to alteration in the light of the changing deployment of Iraqi forces. The Prime Minister said her point was that the military option might be realistic only for a relatively short period. It was no good saying that sanctions must be given time to work, if the consequence was to take us past the military window of opportunities. The President said that he saw the force of this, but was surprised that the Pentagon had not mentioned it.

The President asked how the Prime Minister assessed public opinion in the UK on the Gulf. The Prime Minister said she was confident we could hold public opinion, which saw Saddam Hussain as a dictator, even in the event of military action.

The President said that Secretary Baker thought the United States should go back to the United Nations for another resolution to endorse use of force. He himself was not persuaded. The Prime Minister repeated it would be a mistake, especially to try for a resolution under Article 42. The UN would insist on defining the amount of force which was 'necessary' to recover Kuwait. We had all the authority we needed under Article 51 and a letter from the Amir, and should not risk argument and delay. The worst outcome would be to seek such a resolution and fail to get it.

The Prime Minister repeated that we should not let the opportunity to use the military option go by, or be so eroded that we could not use it effectively. The whole reputation of

the US and the UK was on the line. She was increasingly convinced that Saddam Hussain would not withdraw as a result of sanctions. Indeed our assessment was that sanctions would have little effect on Iraqi decisions over the next few months. We could not afford to come out of the present situation without having done the job effectively, by one means or the other. Her concern was that Saddam Hussain would try to provoke us before we were ready.

The President said that the US was already in a position to respond to any provocation by implementing Phase 1-3 of its overall strategy, that is to use its overwhelming air power to 'decapitate' the Iraqi command structure by destroying its communications and strategic assets. But they were not yet ready to follow up with land forces. The Prime Minister said she saw some danger in this: if we went right through Phases 1-3 before we were ready to implement Phase 4 and 5, we would be vulnerable to an Iraqi counter-attack. The President doubted this was a great danger. If there was an Iraqi provocation tomorrow, the US would respond with devastating punishment from the air. It would go into Iraq and hit a lot of targets there: 'all the stuff Dugan got fired for'. The US would control the air and Iraq's options would be limited: they had no experience of mounting ground operations without air superiority. This was as far as US thinking had gone. They had not yet thought out use of the military option except as a response to Iraqi provocation. The Prime Minister said she still had doubts whether it was wise to use Phases 1-3 without being ready to go on to Phases 4 and 5. Phases 1-3 on their own were unlikely to recover Kuwait. Moreover, there would be strong international pressure 'for a 'limited and proportionate' response to an Iraqi provocation, rather than going the whole way. We ought to work out some options which were more limited than Phases 1-3 in their entirety.

The President said he remained very worried about the response of the Arab world if Iraq were to attack Israel. He thought this remained a real possibility, although some of the speculation about it was being fuelled by the Israelis

themselves. Arab support for action against Iraq was likely to fall away rapidly if Saddam Hussaian played the Israel card. The Prime Minister noted that the Israelis had been restrained so far. She suspected from what Crown Prince Hassan had said to her that they were in close touch with the Jordanians. She thought they would not move unless compelled to do so.

The Prime Minister asked what we would do in the event of an Iraqi attack with CW or BW. The President said that world opinion would eat Saddam Hussain for lunch if ~~he~~ he resorted to this. The Prime Minister doubted whether Saddam Hussain would be deterred by world opinion. Did the US itself have CW in the area to act as a deterrent? The President said that use or threatened use of CW would only put the US in the wrong with world opinion. It would be better to launch an all-out conventional attack and wipe Saddam Hussain off the face of the earth. He was not twenty feet tall. There was intelligence that Iraq's CW and BW capability were not very effective, although the US did not really know. Moreover, there were some signs that Saddam Hussain was beginning to realise the full enormity of what he had unleashed. The President added that he did not think stories, like the one attributed to a defence source in the British Sunday papers about the possible use of nuclear weapons, were at all helpful.

The Prime Minister asked whether the President was confident of US ability to destroy Iraq's nuclear facilities.

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The Prime Minister cautioned the President against believing that everything would work out precisely as planned on the military front. It hardly ever did. Talk of getting Iraq out of Kuwait in three weeks was unrealistic: it would probably take much longer and there would be heavy casualties. You would not liberate Kuwait by air strikes alone.

The President said that the main point which he retained from the discussion with the Prime Minister was that the US had initially defined its objectives too narrowly by limiting them to Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait and restoration of the legitimate government. He was now convinced 'this guy is going to have to go' if the problem was ever to be resolved. The status quo ante was not good enough. The Prime Minister agreed with this. The President said that General Scowcroft should keep in close touch with me about the issues which he and the Prime Minister had discussed.

C.D.P.

C.D. POWELL

30 September 1990

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C. D. POWELL

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