

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH THE UNITED STATES
DEFENCE SECRETARY, 15 OCTOBER

The Prime Minister had an hour's talk this afternoon with Secretary Cheney. The Defence Secretary was also present. The talk was concerned entirely with the military situation in the Gulf.

Secretary Cheney said that the matters which he was proposing to discuss with the Prime Minister were held within a very small circle indeed in Washington, consisting of the President, himself, Secretary Baker, General Scowcroft and General Colin Powell. He would be grateful if they could be restricted to a similarly small circle on the British side. The Prime Minister confirmed that this was also our practice.

The Prime Minister said she would like to set out her views about the military option in the Gulf. First, she found no difficulty in setting the objective. She did not believe that Saddam Hussain would withdraw from Kuwait. We would have to eject him, and that would mean destroying targets in Iraq. This would be essential in order to protect our own forces. If Saddam Hussain were against expectations to withdraw, we must demand reparations, the dismantling of his CW and BW capability and an end to his military nuclear programme. We had to insist on these conditions, otherwise we should all be sitting here in President Bush's second term discussing how to achieve what we ought to do now.

Secondly, there could be no question of the US forces returning to the United States without achieving the aim of removing Saddam Hussain from Kuwait and enforcing the conditions which she had listed. If they failed in this, the United States would have no standing left in the world.

Third, the US and the UK must be clear between themselves about the dates for implementing the military option. As she had told President Bush, we had to decide what dates would suit us

militarily, and then work backwards from there to deal with the politics. The period from mid-November to mid-February looked the most suitable from the point of view of climatic conditions. That meant we could not allow another three months or so for sanctions to work, otherwise we would run up against the return of the hot weather. We must decide on the moment that would be most advantageous from our own point of view.

Fourth, she saw no difficulty at all in devising a reasonable justification for military action. Every day Saddam Hussain was in Kuwait was a fresh crime. We did not have to wait for him to undertake some further provocation: we should move when we were ready.

Fifth, she saw no need to go back to the United Nations for authority to use force. We had all the powers we needed under Article 51. Moreover, a return to the United Nations would reveal our intentions, giving Saddam Hussain warning and therefore putting our forces in danger.

Sixth, she was very worried about Iraq's CW and BW capability. She believed that Saddam Hussain would use them, and we had to decide what our response would be. If we wished to deter a CW attack by threatening to retaliate in like manner, we must have CW weapons available. Above all, it was vital to work out in advance exactly how we would respond to the use of such weapons by Iraq.

Lastly, we must work out and agree arrangements for handling the press. The press had been one of the main factors which prevented the United States from winning the war in Vietnam: their interest was exclusively in criticism and exposure. They must at all times be kept behind the action rather than up with it, so that they could only report on what had actually happened, not leak plans.

Secretary Cheney said he would try to deal with most of these points. They had been discussed in the very small circle which he had mentioned. But not all of them had yet been resolved. It was crucial to maintain secrecy, particularly in

the event the decision was made to launch a pre-emptive strike against Iraq. As the Prime Minister would know, the Americans had devised a four phase plan, with the first three phases involving an air campaign and the fourth envisaging action by ground forces. There would be no sanctuaries from the air campaign: the Americans would strike at a very wide range of targets in Iraq, including the Iraqi Air Force, the air defence system, the SCUDs and other ballistic missiles, Iraqis CW and BW capacity, its nuclear research centres, command and control facilities, telecommunications and logistic capabilities. This would all be in phase one. In phase two they would attack other military targets in Iraq. Phase three would comprise air action against Iraqi targets in Kuwait, in particular their armoured units. Throughout all three phases, the Americans would hold back enough aircraft - some 200 in all - to defend against any attempt by Iraq to move southwards. The United States Force Commander would need 72 hours notice to launch this action. He believed the intention to move could be kept secret during this period (the Prime Minister was sceptical). Phases one and two would last some six or seven days, but phase three could last considerably longer.

Secretary Cheney continued that phase four was much more problematic. In the best case it would not be necessary: the first three phases might so undermine Iraqi morale that they simply packed up. But clearly the United States could not count on this and would have to be prepared to send in ground forces. This would be a very much more difficult operation. The Iraqi forces in Kuwait were well dug in: they had constructed substantial defences against amphibious attack: they had a tactical reserve in the northern part of Kuwait and a strategic reserve in southern Iraq. In all there were some 400,000 forces, protected by anti-tank ditches and other obstacles. The roads in Kuwait had been improved to provide greater mobility. The Americans simply did not know to what extent they could degrade these defences by air attack. In a way, it would be easier if Iraqi forces went on the offensive, because their forces would then be more vulnerable. General Powell's advice, at this stage at least, was that a ground campaign might not work. That was why it was necessary to

continue to build up the numbers of American forces.

Secretary Cheney continued that the Americans had little confidence in the capability of other units of the multinational force except those of the United Kingdom. For example, the French had logistical support for only two or three days of action. The Egyptians no logistical support at all. The Syrians were still not present and it might be two months before they arrived. The Americans therefore had to make their calculations on the basis of their own forces and British forces alone.

Secretary Cheney continued that no final decision had been taken on how to respond to an Iraqi CW attack. The President had a particular aversion to chemical weapons. The US military commanders were not keen on them, because American forces had no experience of using them and many of the weapons themselves were outmoded. Their inclination, therefore, was to rely on massive conventional response to a CW attack. They were confident that they could eliminate most of Iraq's CW capability during the initial air strikes.

Secretary Cheney asked whether the Prime Minister could contemplate the use of nuclear weapons in a Gulf conflict. The Prime Minister said she would be most reluctant to consider this, indeed she would rule it out, although nuclear weapons were always there as the ultimate deterrent. Her main concern was to deter the Iraqis from using CW, since it would have a very demoralising effect on our forces and on their families. Personally, she believed it would be justified for the United States to use CW against Iraq armoured formations in Kuwait if the Iraqis themselves used it first. Secretary Cheney repeated that the Americans were relatively less concerned about the CW threat to their forces in Saudi Arabia. The Iraqis had no experience of using CW strategically, only as a tactical battlefield weapon. The American military were confident of their ability to prevent Iraqi attempts to use air-delivered CW against them. The key was to pre-empt their use.

The Prime Minister commented that she found the prospect of

Possible use
of CW +
nuclear
weapons by
UK / US

Iraqi use of BW even more fearsome than CW. Secretary Cheney agreed that we had little information about Iraqi capabilities in this area. But the risk that they might use such weapons against soft targets must be there.

The Prime Minister asked about American targetting policy. Did they envisage the bombing of cities and civilian targets? Secretary Cheney said there was no intention to attack cities as such, although there were military targets within Baghdad and Basra which they would strike. They did not exclude attacking targets which could effect the civilian population like dams and power stations.

The Prime Minister asked whether the Americans expected Turkey to attack Iraq from the north west as part of a coordinated strike. Secretary Cheney said he was unaware of any inclination on the part of the Turks to do this. The Prime Minister pointed out that they appeared to have territorial ambitions in northern Iraq.

The Prime Minister said she thought it was unrealistic to expect military action to last only three weeks or so: it was bound to be longer. Secretary Cheney asked how the Prime Minister would react to the idea of a campaign which involved implementing the first three phases of the American plan, then pausing for a month or two. The Prime Minister said it would be a mistake to give Saddam Hussain time to recover and regroup, and possibly counter-attack. Secretary Cheney said that the Americans were confident they could defend Saudi Arabia during such a pause, they already had enough forces to guarantee that. The plan he had mentioned would enable the Americans to inflict massive damage on Iraq, and give the Iraqis the opportunity to withdraw from Kuwait without a land battle. The Prime Minister remained sceptical whether this would work. At the least, it would be necessary to keep up air attacks during the so called pause. Her instinct was that it was unwise to go ahead with the first three phases until we were ready to go in on the ground as well if necessary.

Secretary Cheney asked what the Prime Minister thought would

happen to the international coalition against Iraq in the course of a conflict. Would it hold together? The Prime Minister said that we would have to work hard to keep it together, stressing all the time that the conflict could end immediately if Iraq withdrew from Kuwait. We had to think not only of our own position but that of our friends like President Mubarak, who had committed themselves to securing Iraqi withdrawal. The key was to succeed: Arabs would always support success.

Secretary Cheney asked whether the Prime Minister was concerned at the prospect that King Hussein might be toppled. The Prime Minister said she sometimes wondered these days whether an alternative would be much worse. But any upset in Jordan might draw in Israel. On reflection, she reached the conclusion that it was better to have no change.

The Prime Minister remarked that we must not make it look as if we were being more assiduous about solving the Arab/Israel problem because of Saddam Hussain. Secretary Cheney agreed, but commented that he expected there to be more violent incidents in the Occupied Territories.

The Prime Minister said it was important that Britain and the United States should agree on ROE for use in a war. The Defence Secretary said it was also vital to establish a clear procedure for keeping each other informed about the timing of a decision to resort to military action. The necessary steps must be sorted out in advance so that all concerned knew what had been agreed. He and Secretary Cheney were agreed on the importance of this. The Prime Minister added that it was also important to work closely together on targetting policy, given that our forces would be so closely enmeshed with those of the United States.

As Secretary Cheney left, the Prime Minister observed there must be no retreat now: we had to win.

C.D.P.
C. D. POWELL, 15 October 1990