

PRIME MINISTER

MEETING OF MINISTERS: THE GULF

You have a meeting of Ministers tomorrow morning to review developments in the Gulf.

The first item is your visit to Washington, on which it is suggested you make an oral report. You will want to be aware that neither the Energy Secretary nor the Attorney General will have received my note of your talk with the President: nor will Mr Hamilton who will be representing the Defence Secretary. You may therefore want to hold back a bit on some issues, in particular the starting date for military action (although that could come up under a later item).

The main points you might make:

- the President was very robust: he seems to have made up his mind that military action is virtually inevitable, and to be reconciled to this and the consequences of it. He is not prepared to be thrown off course by Congress.
- he is optimistic that the proposed air strikes against Iraq will be effective and a war relatively brief once the Iraqis have been deprived of their air cover.
- the President was also fairly certain that the Israelis can be restrained, although if they felt themselves threatened with imminent attack from Iraq it could not be ruled out that they would take pre-emptive action.
- he was not bothered by the Iraqis failure to fix a date for Secretary Baker to visit Baghdad, indeed seemed quite relieved that a visit was not in prospect (though this may be changing).

- he did not appear to have thought through fully the implications of partial withdrawal from Kuwait although was inclined to the view that the Iraqis should be given a fixed time to get all their men out, with the option of coming back later to retrieve their equipment.
- the President was concerned about the US Embassy in Baghdad and was inclined to think in terms of withdrawal of all staff, while making clear no final decision had been reached.
- he was perfectly relaxed on the question of immunisation of forces again BW and said that the Americans had also been going ahead with vaccinating some of theirs.
- he was evidently worried about the difficulty of preserving secrecy around the starting date for military operations, and in particular how to be sure of bringing the French along.

The Foreign Secretary will then report on wider international aspects. The particular focus is likely to be on the meeting of EC Foreign Ministers on Friday. Our objective is to thwart any proposal to send an EC mission to Baghdad, and to run instead our own idea that the Presidency, flanked by Britain and France as Permanent Members of the UN Security Council, should summon an Iraqi Ambassador. The purpose would be to deliver a clear statement that if Saddam Hussein does not leave Kuwait by 15 January, then force will be used: but that if he does leave, force will not be used. Initial contacts show that the Germans and Dutch at least seem prepared to consider our approach, and the Presidency are not averse to it.

Another international consideration is your own meeting with King Hussein later tomorrow and his role in the region. He will be visiting other European capitals and trying to secure support for

some unsatisfactory compromise solution, while spreading alarm and despondency about the environmental consequences of a war in the Gulf. There seems no alternative but for you to take a very firm line with him, while asking him to ensure that Saddam Hussein understands that withdrawal from Kuwait means that he will not be attacked. You will also want to caution the King about making military preparations which the Israelis interpret as hostile.

The third item is the question of our Embassy in Baghdad. You are familiar with the arguments on this. Reductions in the numbers of staff are already being made. We do not need to reach a final view tomorrow on whether or not to maintain a caretaker staff of one or two volunteers or to close the Embassy altogether. We need to see first what the other Europeans and the Americans intend (the latter have not made up their minds: see my separate note about my talk with General Scowcroft).

The fourth item concerns the current military situation. It is here that the question of the timing of military action is likely to feature. Our information remains that the Americans are inclined towards action fairly soon after 15 January, on the grounds that there is little to be gained from delay. Our own military are saying that they will find it hard to be ready for offensive ground operations until the end of January. But if told firmly that they have to be ready by a certain date, they will be. You might like to indicate that you think they should make every effort to be prepared for offensive action by the last week of January.

Other subjects which are not on the agenda which you might want to mention, following your talk with the Foreign Secretary at Chequers, are:

- encouragement of Ministers who have been specially briefed on the Gulf situation to give interviews. The FCO are preparing a briefing paper.
- making more use of the Amnesty International report.

- the best time for you to give interviews to newspaper editors.
- an eventual Prime Ministerial broadcast.
- arrangements for you to brief Opposition leaders. At present we are proposing to offer them dates in the week when Parliament returns.
- the case for and against offering a Parliamentary debate on 14 or 15 January. It was agreed that you would seek the views of the business managers on this.

You should also raise the matter of the matter of the loss of classified documents and ask where matters stand, both in relation to the police investigations and to the American reaction. (On the latter, I am told General Powell has now formally asked for a damage assessment.)

I have included in the folder my notes of your meeting with President Bush and your talk with the Foreign Secretary at Chequers.

C.D.P.

Charles Powell
2 January 1991

c: Meeting (MJ)