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Dear John

GULF: MEDIA ARRANGEMENTS

The Energy Secretary chaired a meeting at 12 Downing Street at 11.00 am today to discuss media arrangements during the Gulf crisis. The others present were the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Chief Whip, the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Mr Perks, Miss Spencer, Mr Johnston, Mr Hayes, Mr Verey, yourself and myself. The meeting had before it the Cabinet Secretary's minute of 4 January to Mr O'Donnell.

2. The Defence Secretary commented on the proposed timing of meetings of OPD(G). In the event of hostilities the daily briefing of the lobby group would be of great importance for influencing the lunchtime news bulletins and the provincial evening press, and for this reason could not easily be postponed beyond the present time of 11.00 am. The time difference needed to be taken into account; Saudi Arabian time was three hours ahead of GMT. On major issues the line to take would need to be determined by OPD(G), and from this point of view 10.30 am seemed too late a starting-time for the latter. It was left that I would report the Defence Secretary's view internally here.

3. The meeting agreed that the regular meeting of Information Officers to be chaired by Mr O'Donnell (paragraph 3(i) of the Cabinet Secretary's minute) would be essential. In principle it should take place early in the morning, and before OPD(G) met, though its precise timing should take account of the need to digest a great volume of information received overnight from the theatre of operations. The meeting also agreed that the Ministerial Group under the Energy Secretary's chairmanship (paragraph 3(ii)) would be valuable, subject to the proviso mentioned by the Cabinet Secretary that the Defence

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Secretary should take the lead on day-to-day operational news from the Gulf. (In further discussion after the meeting I was tasked with putting forward proposals for the structure of this Group). Part of its role would be to task Ministers and other Government supporters with responding to requests for media interviews. As regards Mr O'Donnell's attendance of the first part of OPD(G) meetings (paragraph 3(iii)), this was a matter for the Prime Minister to decide. He should be invited to approve these arrangements at the OPD(G) meeting on 10 January.

4. The importance of local radio and the local press was emphasised in discussion. It was agreed that the Government's backbench supporters in Parliament should be deployed on a regular basis to present the Government's case in these media. As a first step, the Foreign Secretary should write to selected backbenchers today to give them the bull points they should use in such interviews. The Chief Whip's Office would be in touch with the Foreign Secretary's Private Office this afternoon to supply a list of MPs to whom letters should go. The letters should begin "Dear X" rather than "Dear Colleague". The Chief Whip would endeavour to alert the MPs concerned personally. The key question to which the Government and its supporters needed to give an effective answer was why military action should not be further postponed. The Energy Secretary intended to respond robustly to criticisms made by Mr Tam Dalyell MP regarding environmental damage. (The JIC's assessment of this problem is expected to be issued today). A meeting of the International Energy Agency later in the week could result in turbulence in the oil markets, and it might prove necessary to issue a calming statement.

5. There was a preliminary discussion, which I am not recording, of the proposed debate on the Gulf in the Commons next week. This will need to be settled at Cabinet on 10 January.

6. I confirm that there will be a further meeting under the Energy Secretary's chairmanship at 9.30 am tomorrow, Tuesday 8 January, in 12 Downing Street, with the same attendance as today.

Jan Sively
Bill Reeves

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