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Timeline: the road to war in Iraq

Oliver King and Paul Hamilos
Thursday February 2, 2006

Tonight's revelations about Tony Blair and George Bush's White House meeting on January 31 2003 show that the prime minister was prepared to go to war in Iraq before he had tried to get a second UN resolution. Given that the attorney general and Foreign Office lawyers believed at this time that war would be illegal without one, the story throws further doubt on the legality of the conflict.

Below we set out the key diplomatic and political developments in the run up to the controversial March 2003 conflict.

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2001

• **November 21:** According to Bob Woodward in Plan of Attack, the US president, George Bush, says to the secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfeld: "Lets get started on this."

• **December 28:** General Tommy Franks briefs Mr Bush on current Pentagon Iraq war planning.

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2002

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- **March 18:** Sir David Manning, Mr Blair's foreign policy adviser, writes to prime minister confirming he has told Condoleezza Rice that "you would not budge in your support for regime change".
- **March:** Senior officials in Whitehall advise ministers that "regime change of itself" has "no basis in international law".
- **April 6:** Mr Blair visits Mr Bush at Crawford where Iraq is discussed. Mr Bush tells Trevor McDonald of ITV: "I made up my mind that Saddam needs to go."
- **Mid-July:** At a meeting of ministers, the attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, confirms that claiming authorisation for use of force from UN security council will be difficult.
- **September 12:** In a speech to the UN, Mr Bush says world leaders must get tough with Iraq or stand aside as the US acts.
- **September 16:** Iraq announces weapons inspectors are welcome to return unconditionally after nearly four years.
- **September 24:** Britain publishes dossier saying Iraq could produce a nuclear weapon within one or two years, if it obtains fissile material and other components from abroad. Includes now famous "45 minutes from attack" claim.
- **November 8:** UN security council unanimously approves US-drafted resolution aimed at getting Saddam to disarm, after eight weeks of negotiation. The resolution says Saddam will face "serious consequences" if he does not comply with weapons inspectors. France argues that UN resolution 1441 does not give US and UK an automatic right to attack Iraq.
- **November 13:** Iraq accepts UN resolution 1441 unconditionally, while denying that it has any banned weapons programmes.
- **November 18:** First UN weapons inspectors arrive in Baghdad.
- **December 7:** Iraq hands a 12,000-page declaration of its arms programmes to UN inspectors, a day before a deadline set by the UN resolution.
- **December 18:** Britain says a first assessment of Iraq's weapons declaration to the UN shows it is not the "full and complete declaration" requested by the security council.
- **December 19:** The chief UN weapons inspector, Hans Blix, says gaps remain in Iraq's declaration, although it is cooperating well with the inspectors. US ambassador John Negroponte says the omissions mean Iraq is in "material breach" of Resolution 1441 and has "spurned its last opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations".

2003

- **January 9:** Mr Blix says his teams have so far found no "smoking gun" in Iraq but adds Baghdad has failed to answer "many questions" about its weapons programmes.
- **January 14:** Mr Bush says he is "sick and tired" of Iraq's deception over its suspected weapons and warns time is running out for Baghdad to comply with UN demands to disarm.
- **January 16:** Mr Blix says UN inspectors have found illegally imported conventional arms materials in Iraq and only fuller cooperation with his team could avert the option of war.
- **January 20:** Iraq promises UN weapons experts more help and says it will form its own teams of inspectors to search for banned weapons after two days of talks with chief UN arms inspectors.
- **January 27:** Mr Blix and fellow weapons inspector Mohamed ElBaradei, reporting to the UN security council, outline the gaps in information that Iraq should have delivered by now. But Mr Blix says those gaps could not lead him to conclude Baghdad possessed prohibited arms.
- **January 28:** Britain declares Iraq in "material breach" of UN disarmament demands and says the chances of averting war are receding.
- **January 31:** Mr Bush meets with Mr Blair at the White House where the prime minister presses for a new UN resolution authorising military force against Iraq, for British political reasons. Mr Bush recalls to Bob Woodward that he told Mr Blair: "If that's what you need, we will go flat out to try and help you get it."
- **February 5:** The US secretary of state, Colin Powell, addresses the UN security council, laying out what he says is evidence of Iraq's ongoing weapons of mass destruction programmes. He says: "how much longer are we willing to put up with Iraq's noncompliance before we, as a council, we, as the United Nations, say: 'Enough. Enough.'"
- **February 11:** Lord Goldsmith meets John Bellinger, legal adviser to White House, in Washington. Mr Bellinger reportedly says of the meeting: "We had trouble with your attorney, we got him there eventually."
- **February 14:** Mr Blix tells security council his team has not found any weapons of mass destruction and interviews with scientists have been useful. The French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, drawing rare applause from security council colleagues, said weapons inspections "are producing results" and there was no justification yet for war.
- **February 23:** Mr Blair tells the Commons they were giving "Saddam one further final chance to disarm voluntarily". He later says, "and even now, today, we are offering Saddam the prospect of voluntary disarmament through the UN. I detest his regime - I hope most people do - but even now, he could save it by complying with the UN's demand. Even now, we are prepared to go the extra step to achieve disarmament

peacefully."

- **February 24:** Mr Blix delivers a list of some 30 unresolved questions about Iraqi disarmament in preparation for his report. - Washington, London and Madrid introduce new draft resolution declaring Iraq has squandered its "final opportunity" to disarm. A French counter-proposal, endorsed by Germany and Russia, calls for more UN inspections.

- **February 27:** Security council members open discussion of the US-British-Spanish draft that lays the groundwork for war.

- **February 28:** Iraq says it will obey UN orders to destroy its al-Samoud 2 missiles, drawing reactions that underscore the deep rift in the security council.

- **March 1:** Iraq crushes four al-Samoud 2 missiles, meeting a UN deadline to begin a destruction programme.

- **March 5:** The foreign ministers of France, Russia and Germany release a joint declaration stating that they will "not allow" a resolution authorising military action to pass the UN security council. The hardening stance from the anti-war bloc increases the pressure on the US and Britain to compromise on their draft UN resolution.

- **March 7:** Mr Blix delivers a new report to the UN security council saying Baghdad has made some progress on disarmament recently but has still not cleared up key questions about chemical and biological weapons programmes.

- **March 7:** The US, Britain and Spain present a revised draft resolution giving Saddam an ultimatum to disarm by March 17 or face the possibility of war. France, heading opposition to any US-led rush to war, says it could not accept the March 17 ultimatum.

- **March 7:** Lord Goldsmith produces an early draft of his legal advice, equivocating on whether an invasion of Iraq was legal without a second United Nations resolution. This advice, not publicly known at the time, was published by the Guardian during the 2005 election. Lord Goldsmith warned Mr Blair: "I remain of the opinion that the safest legal course would be to secure the adoption of a further resolution to authorise the use of force." He also said: "We would need to be able to demonstrate hard evidence of [Iraqi] non-compliance and non-cooperation."

- **March 10:** Britain announces "six key tests" for Iraq to comply to if it is to avoid war, including President Saddam making a TV address admitting having weapons of mass destruction. The idea galvanises some diplomatic support, but not enough to suggest the US/UK could win a second UN resolution, effectively authorising an attack.

- **March 13:** Phillippe Sands reveals in Lawless World that Lord Falconer and Lady Morgan met Lord Goldsmith in Downing Street to discuss the legality of war. The attorney general then "communicated" his clearer view that war would be legal without a second resolution. It remains unclear if he decided this before the meeting took place.

- **March 14:** The French president, Jacques Chirac, removes any lingering doubts about France's intentions on Iraq, confirming to Mr Blair in a brief phone call that France was willing to seek a compromise on disarming Saddam but would not accept any UN resolution that set an ultimatum.
- **March 17:** The US, Britain and Spain abandon efforts to get international endorsement for war against Saddam. Mr Bush later gives Saddam 48 hours to leave the country.
- **March 17:** Lord Goldsmith's gives his legal advice to cabinet. Clare Short later claimed she was not informed at the meeting that he had changed his view. Unusually a summary of Lord Goldsmith's advice is published arguing that the war is legal without a second resolution based on a decade of non-compliance by Saddam.
- **March 17:** The leader of the Commons, Robin Cook, resigns in protest at the government's decision to back a war without "international authority nor domestic support".
- **March 18:** Commons vote on the war. The prime minister says in the Commons that: "The UN should be the focus both of diplomacy and of action ... [and that not to take military action] would do more damage in the long term to the UN than any other single course that we could pursue." Yet it appears that the prime minister was committed to war since at least January 2003: the will of the United Nations was irrelevant.
- **March 20:** The war begins.

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