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FRANCE: IRAQ  
From: PARIS

TO IMMEDIATE FCO  
TELNO 127  
OF 131721Z MARCH 03

CABINET OFFICE FOR MANNING AND RYCROFT  
SUMMARY

1. Complaint from the Elysee about our beginning to criticise France more openly, particularly Chirac's remarks about the veto. I make clear the French can hardly be surprised, given the positions they have adopted, while confirming our desire to go on working together afterwards. Abortive Villepin/Powell effort to find common ground last night.

DETAIL

2. Gourdault-Montagne (MGM - diplomatic adviser at the Elysee) telephoned me at lunch time today to complain about the increasingly polemical approach the French saw us taking in public. This ran counter to the understanding hitherto that we should try to minimise the bilateral fall-out and avoid mutual or personalised criticism. Errera would be making the same point to Ricketts (presumably a reference to the rather different conversation last night?). The French were particularly upset by our repeated taking out of context of the President's remarks on the veto in all circumstances. We must be well aware that he had been talking about the particular position that evening, with the draft then on the table. It was not reasonable to distort what he had said in this way. Your reaction to Villepin's statement also seemed excessively sharp.

3. I said that our intention remained not to pollute the rest of the relationship. But the French could hardly be surprised if it became harder to avoid criticism of the French position when they had spelled out their intention to veto the draft of their allies, apparently whatever it said. The French were doing everything they could to block us, not least in our attempt to give a last chance to Saddam Hussein to disarm peacefully and to achieve the second resolution which could reunite the international community and make international participation in the next stage easier. Villepin's statement of this morning attacking our proposals had been particularly hard to take. The conditions we were putting forward were taken from the Blix report on the many unanswered questions. They were precisely the questions which needed answering if we were to conclude that Saddam Hussein had taken a strategic decision to disarm.

4. MGM said that the idea of Saddam going on TV to apologise was a nonsense. We knew the Arab world better than that. And we were still on the line of an ultimatum with an absurdly short deadline. France's position had been consistent and coherent throughout, and they had warned us clearly not to underestimate their determination to carry this position to its logical conclusion. I responded that I respected the French right to have a different position, but there had been no need to go as far as a veto, and a deliberate move to declare it in advance to try to influence others against our ideas. Moreover France seemed to be forgetting what was in 1441 - Saddam had to make an immediate and accurate

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declaration, and cooperate fully and immediately with the inspectors, or face the consequences. He had done neither of these things. We could not simply let things drift. MGM responded that the inspectors had made clear their process was working, even if cooperation was not total. In these circumstances it was not right to rush to war.

5. The conversation, which was not quite as sharp as the above account may make it sound, concluded with MGM repeating, in a spirit of friendship, as he put it, that what we were now doing was against what the French had been thought was agreed between us. The French had been very careful to avoid any such thing, for example all the emphasis the President had put on his respect and friendship for the US in his Monday broadcast. I said that I understood his message. But he should appreciate that the extent to which the French had pushed her position, against her closest allies, was hard to understand in London. We had offered to try to find common ground several times but to no avail. Nevertheless we still wanted to contain the effects of the dispute.

6. Separately the US Ambassador told me today that he had seen Villepin the previous evening to enquire what lay behind the President's words on the veto. Villepin had claimed US and French positions were really quite close, but the problem was the lack of flexibility in the US stance. The Ambassador had advised him to speak to Powell if he really believed positions were close. Villepin and Powell had subsequently spoken at length, but the truth was that positions were too far apart on the questions of timescale and automaticity, and nothing had come of it. Like us, the Americans judged that Chirac was not really looking for a way out.

#### COMMENT

7. Predictable that the French would react in this way. There is a clear danger of an upward spiral of polemics which could make working together afterwards harder. But our position can hardly surprise the French, nor the fact that we are using Chirac's words against him when the stakes are so high - he did say them, even if he may not have meant to express quite what we have chosen to interpret.

HOLMES

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