

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telcon with French President Chirac (U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
President Chirac

Interpreter: Carol Wolter
Notetakers: James Smith, Cindy Lawrence,
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DATE, TIME January 30, 1998, 11:59 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
AND PLACE: The Oval Office

The President and President Chirac exchanged opening pleasantries.

The President: Let me say also that I was really sorry to hear of the terrible deaths of the young people in the avalanche.
(U)

President Chirac: Thank you very much, Bill. It was an accident. Do you want to talk about Iraq? If so, I would like to do it through the interpreter. ~~(C)~~

The President: Have you put your interpreter on? (U)

President Chirac: Mine is on. (U)

The President: OK. First of all, the Chairman of UNSCOM, Mr. Butler, briefed the Security Council last week and made an important point, that it is clear it is impossible for UNSCOM to do its job any more, and that is very serious. I know that Foreign Minister Vedrine and Secretary Albright agreed on this in Paris yesterday and that Madeleine had good talks with Levitte. Saddam's challenge to UNSCOM is clearly the most serious since 1991. He is trying to destroy UNSCOM in order to

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protect his weapons programs, and to get sanctions lifted prematurely. (S)

We have pursued the diplomatic route carefully for months now. We have supported the Russian-brokered agreement from Geneva, but that has come undone. We actively sought Security Council statements and resolutions, but they have not compelled Iraqi compliance. I think we are reaching the point where the diplomatic options for obtaining Iraq's cooperation with UNSCOM are becoming exhausted. I think Saddam is toying with us, hoping to deflect attention away from his efforts to conceal his weapons of mass destruction. We cannot let him succeed. (S)

I know that your decision about whether to support military force is very difficult. It is difficult for me, as well. I am encouraged by Foreign Minister Vedrine's indication that you have not ruled out the use of force if Iraq doesn't change. (S)

It is counterproductive for Saddam to hear others rule out force; that eases rather than increases the pressure on him. Now, I am of course aware of the downsides of military action, they are considerable, including the risk that he will throw out the inspectors. But a phony, sham UNSCOM is no better than no UNSCOM at all. We simply cannot allow Iraq to rebuild its weapons of mass destruction and flout the will of the Security Council. There's too much at stake. (S)

If it comes to that, I hope that you will support a decision to use military force. In the meantime, it is very important to retain your public position that "all options are open;" that keeps more pressure on Saddam, and that keeps whatever chance we have, however narrow, to avert this. (S)

President Chirac: Well, Bill, I would like to express a few remarks to you. It would be in Saddam Hussein's interest to drive away UNSCOM. Military strikes thus would have two advantages for Saddam Hussein. First, they would make his people close ranks around him, and also Arab countries around him. (S)

Second, of course, is that he would have a reason to drive away UNSCOM. And this would allow him to continue, probably not in the nuclear area, but in the bacteriological and chemical area. So I'm not sure a military strike would be a reasonable solution vis-à-vis international public opinion. A military strike cannot help but have civilian victims. And already there have been a lot of victims due to the embargo, including children

with no food or medicine. If, on top of that, they are killed by bombs, then world public opinion will end up reacting very negatively. (C)

My third reflection is that the Security Council should not be divided in this respect. So, if we could find a formula whereby we could exert maximum pressure on the Iraqis, but that could also be signed by the Russians and the Chinese, that would be the best solution. (C)

The President: But what is your proposal? How would we do that? (C)

President Chirac: I have a two-fold proposal. In order to exert real pressure on Saddam Hussein, we should not talk about material breach. The Russians won't accept it -- I talked about this with Primakov the day before yesterday -- and neither will the Chinese. If the Security Council is divided that would be a big victory for Saddam Hussein. So I think we need to find a text that doesn't use the words "material breach," but would mean the same thing. Our diplomats in New York are experts in this sort of exercise. (C)

And secondly, we should exert maximum diplomatic pressure on Saddam Hussein. The Russians did it the day before yesterday by sending a special envoy to be received by Saddam, and this was something new. I intend also to send a special envoy, but only providing that I am sure he will actually meet with Saddam himself. The envoy would tell him clearly that if he doesn't allow UNSCOM to go on doing its work, then the worst will happen. (C)

But it is also necessary to do something to allow him not to lose face completely. The idea, which is a Russian idea, is to create a new element which really doesn't change things -- this would be to add to UNSCOM personal representatives from each of the five main states of the Security Council. It doesn't change anything, but it gives him a small exit door. My last point: I hear the Iraqi parliament is to meet next Sunday and this is not a very good sign. (C)

The President: Well, let me respond. Jacques, can you hear me? (C)

President Chirac: Yes, I hear you very well. (C)

The President: Okay. First, I agree we don't need a divided Security Council, but I wish we could get a material breach resolution. I don't think the Chinese would veto alone if the Russians go along. There is some precedent for Saddam changing course in the face of a material breach resolution; he's done it three times since 1991. We don't believe we need to have it to justify action, but if there's any way you could persuade Yeltsin to let it go, that would increase pressure on him and maximize the chances that military action will not be necessary. (C)

Now, on the second suggestion you made, about having members of the Perm Five with the team. We have always said we don't care where team members are from. They could be from Micronesia for all we care. We just wanted them to be professional and not political. The second issue is that it's not just the composition of the teams, but also the nature of their access, because to be able to certify what he has complied on the chemical and biological front requires a different level than the nuclear issue, because of the smaller space it takes. So access is the issue, and the integrity of the teams. I've never cared about the composition of the teams as long as they are professional and not political and free to do their job. (C)

President Chirac: We are going to make the maximum effort with Saddam Hussein once again, and on the other hand, deal with our Russian friends, because I really wouldn't like the Security Council to be divided. I think China would remain on the outside even if the Russians accept. We are going to be in contact with the Russians, but if Russia were to block a material breach resolution - which was what I had been led to understand thus far - it might be possible to find words that say the same thing but are slightly different and therefore acceptable to the Russians. My last point: in order to carry out a military strike over Iraq, it would be necessary to get authority to fly over certain countries that are neighbors of Iraq. Do you think that would not be a problem? (C)

The President: We are working on that and I think we have a good chance of working out the details. Let me comment on the resolution issue. I think the problem with a resolution that doesn't use the words "material breach," but has the same meaning, is that it would leave people who vote for it free to have different interpretations. I think the greatest chance of avoiding a military confrontation is if Saddam thinks we are prepared for one and that we have the authority to do it. (C)

President Chirac: Except if he feels it is in his interest to have a military strike. (S)

The President: Well, I think that is something you might discourage him from thinking. One possibility here is -- I would like it if this can be avoided -- but one possibility is for you to send a clear message that he needs to find a way out of it because you've talked to me and you think I am half crazy. (S)

I am prepared to explore anything, Jacques, but I want you to know my reading of the situation. I want a successful resolution and not to delay it forever. You explore what you just talked to me about in the UN, and let's keep talking and working and stay in close touch over the next few days. (S)

President Chirac: Bill, I'm going to do three things. First of all, I'll send an envoy to tell Saddam that the risks for him are very big. Second, I will be in contact with the Russians to exert some friendly pressure on them so they can accept a very firm and strong resolution. And we shall also approach the Chinese in order to try in any case not to have any division in the Security Council. And we will see in two or three or four days' time how things will have developed. (S)

On the other hand, I think it would be a good idea to double the amount relevant to Resolution 986. We have already been accused by international public opinion because of the huge suffering of the Iraqi people and this is not proper on the part of civilized nations. This has nothing to do with the conflict. This is something that is really inhuman. (S)

The President: Jacques, I strongly support increasing 986. We have a lot of data now on the average caloric intake for the children there and we know they are not getting enough nutrition. So I'm prepared to do that regardless. On the envoy, if you send an envoy there to see him, you can't mislead him that there is some kind of compromise that is unacceptable to those of us who want UNSCOM back in an unrestrained way. He needs to understand that he is at severe risk, that this is not something he can just take on and wind up ahead on. (S)

President Chirac: Well, we are going to intervene precisely along those lines. (S)

The President; Good, we will stay in touch over the next few days. Jacques, let me thank you for what you said publicly in my hour of need. I think we'll fight through it.

President Chirac: I am pretty sure of that and let me express to you my very warm friendship. ~~(C)~~

The President: Thanks, friend. (U)

President Chirac: And that of the French people. (U)

The President: Goodbye. (U)

President Chirac: Goodbye, Bill. (U)

-- End of Conversation --