

# How Bush and Blair Plotted War in Iraq: Read the Secret Memo in Full

Published for the first time, the 'exceptionally sensitive' letter revealing what was really discussed at Bush's Texas ranch

By [Middle East Eye](#)

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*In April 2002, Tony Blair, the British prime minister, visited US President George W. Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas.*

*The weekend meeting has long been identified as a key moment in the buildup to the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, but details of what was discussed between the pair have remained a matter of speculation.*

*Middle East Eye has seen a copy of a secret memo about the meeting written by David Manning, Blair’s chief foreign policy adviser, who accompanied him to Crawford.*

*It was sent to Simon McDonald, principal private secretary to foreign secretary Jack Straw, and shared with five other senior British officials: Jonathan Powell, Blair’s chief of staff; Mike Boyce, chief of defence staff; Peter Watkins, principal private secretary to defence secretary Geoff Hoon; Christopher Meyer, UK ambassador to the US; and Michael Jay, permanent secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.*

The text of that memo is published below for the first time.

Subject: Prime Minister’s visit to the US April 5 – 7 2002.

Sent: April 8, 2002

From: David Manning

To: Simon McDonald

CC'd: Jonathan Powell, Sir Mike Boyce, Peter Watkins, Christopher Meyer, Sir Michael Jay

The Prime Minister and Mrs Blair were the guests of President and Mrs Bush at Crawford, Texas, from April 5 - 7.

Much of the [Blair-Bush] discussions were *tete a tete*. However, Jonathan Powell and I joined the President and the PM at Crawford ranch for informal talks on the morning of Saturday April 6.

Condi Rice [Bush's national security advisor] and Andy Card [Bush's chief of staff] accompanied Bush.

Among the issues discussed was Iraq and other topics separately.

This letter is exceptionally sensitive and the PM instructed it should be very tightly held, it should be shown only to those with a real need to know and no further copies should be made.

Bush said he and the PM had discussed Iraq on their own over dinner the previous evening.

At present Centcom had no war plan as such. Thinking ahead so far was on a broad and central level, though a very small Centcom cell had recently been established in conditions of great secrecy to look at the detailed military planning.

Condi Rice said 99 per cent of Centcom were unaware of this.

When it had done more work Bush would be ready to agree to UK and US planners sitting down together to examine the options. He wanted us to work through the issues together. Whatever plan emerged we had to ensure victory. We could not afford to fail.

But it would be essential to ensure that acting against Saddam enhanced rather than diminished regional stability. He had therefore reassured the Turks that there was no question of the break-up of Iraq and the emergence of a Kurdish state.

But there were nevertheless a number of imponderables.

He didn't know who would take Saddam's place if and when we toppled him.

But he didn't much care. He was working on the assumption that anyone would be an improvement.

Nevertheless Bush accepted we needed to manage the PR aspect of all this with great care.

He accepted we needed to put Saddam on the spot over the UN inspectors, we should tell him that we wanted proof of his claim that he was not developing WMDs. This could only be forthcoming if UN inspectors were allowed in on the basis that they could go anywhere inside Iraq at any time.

Bush added that Saddam could not be allowed to have any say over the nationality or composition of the inspection team.

He said the timing of any action against Saddam would be very important. He would not want to launch any operation before the US Congressional elections in the autumn. Otherwise he would be accused of warmongering for electoral benefit.

In effect this meant there was a window of opportunity between the beginning of November and the end of February.

‘Although we may not decide to do it this year at all.’

The PM said no one could doubt the world would be a better place if there were regime change in Iraq. But in going down the inspectors route, we would have to give careful thought to how we framed the ultimatum to Saddam to allow them to do their job.

Saddam would very probably try to obstruct the inspectors and play for time. This was why it was so important we insisted they must be allowed in at any time and be free to visit any place or installation.

The PM said we needed an accompanying PR strategy that highlighted the risks of Saddam’s WMD programme and his appalling human rights record. Bush strongly agreed.

The PM said this approach would be important in managing European public opinion and in helping the President construct an international coalition.

The PM would emphasise to European partners that Saddam was being given an opportunity to co-operate.

If, as he expected, Saddam failed to do so, the Europeans would find it very much harder to resist the logic that we must take action to deal with an evil regime that threatens us with its WMD programme.

We would still face the question of why we had decided to act now, what had changed?

The answer had to be that we must think ahead, this was one of the lessons of 9/11: failure to take action in good time meant the risks would only grow and might force us to take much more costly action later.

The President agreed with Mr Blair’s line of argument.

It was also Bush’s view, though he would not be saying this publicly, that if a moderate secular regime succeeded Saddam in Iraq this would have a favourable impact on the region particularly on Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Comment:

The PM later commented to me privately that he had spoken again to Bush about the issue of UN inspectors. Bush had acknowledged that there was just a possibility that Saddam would allow them in and go about their own business. If that happened we would have to adjust our approach accordingly.

Meanwhile it was worth ramping up the pressure on Saddam and making it plain that if he didn’t accept the inspectors we reserved the right to go in and deal with him.

The PM also told me that Bush had been clear that he wanted to build a broad coalition for his Iraq policy. This had apparently persuaded him to dismiss those on the American Right who were arguing there was no need and no point in bothering with UN inspectors.

George Bush senior may have been influential on this point. Bush told the PM separately that the US must construct a coalition for dealing with Iraq whatever 'Right wing kooks' might be saying.

It is clear from these exchanges that military planning is not yet advanced very far. Only when more progress is made will Bush be ready to allow our own planners to discuss the options with Centcom. It also seems clear that Bush has still not finally decided that military action will be feasible at the end of this year, even if he has provisionally earmarked the November-February period for a possible campaign.

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