

Syria and Germany were just about certain to line up with France. Pakistan's General Musharraf, having taken a huge risk in supporting the Americans against the Taleban, had served notice he would not be open to persuasion again. Spain and Bulgaria – the former Soviet satellite state now known in the White House as the 'quiet American' – were guaranteed to line up behind the Americans and British. Of the five floating votes two came from Latin America – Mexico and Chile – and three from Africa – Guinea, Angola and Cameroon. On 24 February Blair despatched his junior Foreign Office minister, Baroness Amos, to Africa. Hot on her heels in the chase for votes came De Villepin. Blair himself focused on Chile's Ricardo Lagos, the country's first left-wing leader since the CIA-backed overthrow of Salvador Allende, and Mexico's President, Vicente Fox, who had been given such privileged treatment by Bush back in 2001.

Over the next few weeks, the two Latin Americans blew hot and cold. The Africans proved enigmatic. Blair became increasingly frustrated at what was, in spite of all the protestations to the contrary, half-hearted American diplomacy. The moral high ground that Blair sought was being lost amid the unseemly scramble for votes. Bribes and threats from the big powers to smaller ones became the currency. In the Commons, for all his private fears about the state of diplomacy, Blair continued to give commanding performances. It was not too late, he insisted, for Saddam to disarm and for the UN to show resolve. 'This is not a road to peace but folly and weakness that will only mean the conflict when it comes is more bloody, less certain and greater in its devastation.'

Underlying the message all the way through was a deliberate misreading of the second resolution. Blair led his MPs and the country to believe, time and again, that it might provide a route out of war. It was nothing of the sort. He needed the second resolution to provide political, diplomatic and even legal authority for a military conflict to which he was already committed. This resolution would make an almost-certain war certain. It would give Blair the

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imprimatur he needed. That is why the French and others refused to give it.

On Friday 21 February Labour MPs received pager messages. Out of the blue they were told by Hilary Armstrong, the Chief Whip, that they were required to vote the following Wednesday on a motion concerning Iraq. This would be a ‘three-line whip’ when support was obligatory. The anti-war backbenchers had begun to organise themselves. One ringleader, Graham Allen, was so incensed by Armstrong’s cursory instruction that he tabled a parliamentary motion. It took him less than an hour to gather sixty names for his amendment stating that ‘the case for military action is not yet proven’. Worry in Downing Street was tempered by the knowledge that most Labour MPs who threatened to rebel usually fell into line at the last minute. Through the usual mixture of cajoling, coercion, the dangling of patronage – and argument – Sally Morgan, Blair’s party fixer, had managed to keep the previous revolt in September 2002 down to fifty-six. She was looking at a figure a little higher, perhaps up to eighty, or ninety at most. That would be awkward but manageable.

On the morning of the vote, 26 February, Morgan, Campbell and Powell went to Blair’s flat above 11 Downing Street for breakfast. They agreed the hard message on Saddam should not change. Jack Straw and Mike O’Brien offered meetings with rebels in the Commons. MPs were paged to ask if they ‘would like a briefing’ from the FCO on any ‘outstanding issues’. Blair invited in two groups of six, in his room behind the Speaker’s chair. The result that evening exceeded their worst expectations. Some 121 Labour backbenchers voted against the government. The debate was passionate and well informed. Blair’s decision to disappear early to do a television discussion in his office with voters increased the determination of some waverers to rebel. When Joschka Fischer, the German foreign minister, had been in to see him the same afternoon, Blair told him there would be fewer than 100 rebels, and he was confident he could cut that down to 50.

with growing discomfort in parts of the UK intelligence community. At that time a classified intelligence briefing from the Defence Intelligence Service was leaked, warning that not only had there been no link between Iraq and al-Qaeda but that Bin Laden regarded Saddam and his secular regime as 'infidels'.

Within hours of Blix's presentation, Bush had dismissed it out of hand. He urged members of the Security Council to 'show their cards'. Blair invented a new concept, the 'unreasonable veto'. Various deadlines were now being mooted for Saddam to comply or face war. Canada, which was trying to act as a broker behind the scenes, suggested three weeks. That was rejected. Straw began working on a new version of the draft. Day and night he, his Political Director, Peter Ricketts, and Greenstock e-mailed versions to and fro. Some of the language was softened. The demand that Saddam disarm was changed to 'yield possession of weapons'.

The bottom line for Blair was that he needed to show Bush he was making progress on the vote. Britain needed at least nine of the fifteen Security Council members to vote in favour, and to ensure that none of the permanent five cast their veto. Blair despatched Manning and Scarlett on a secret mission to Santiago and Mexico City to try to persuade Lagos and Fox. Lagos told them he needed more time, and he needed Fox's backing. Fox said he was not prepared to give it. He then retired hurt to undergo a back operation. These countries resented being thrust on to the diplomatic front line and being seen as pawns in a nineteenth-century colonial game.

Blair sought solace in the relative seclusion of Chequers, where he secretly received a visit from Bill Clinton. Blair needed his help, and the two men discussed Iraq several times during that period. Most of the weekend Blair spent on the phone. He talked to Lagos several times. He even promised to make the 7,000-mile journey himself. Lagos declined. He said the British deadline of the end of March was too soon. 'That was the point when we realised Chile wasn't going to vote with us,' recalls one of his team. The conversations were so sensitive that the Foreign Office was instructed not to

the UK intelligence community. The briefing from the Defence Intelligence Committee was that not only had there been al-Qaeda but that Bin Laden was seen as 'infidels'.

When Bush had dismissed it out of the Security Council to 'show their backs to an unreasonable veto'. Various attempts were made for Saddam to comply or face a no-fly zone as a broker behind the scenes, but it failed. Straw began working on a plan to fight him, his Political Director, and various versions to and fro. Some of the arguments were that Saddam disarm was in his own interests.

But he needed to show Bush he had the votes he needed at least nine of the votes in favour, and to ensure they would not veto. Blair despatched a mission to Santiago and Mexico City. Lagos told them he needed a UN mandate. Fox said he was not prepared to undergo a back operation. The focus was on the diplomatic front line and the 19th-century colonial game.

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brief about discussions with the Mexicans. In Washington, Colin Powell said the US government was still confident of passing the resolution.

Buoyed by their moral victory last time around, the anti-war lobby in the Parliamentary Labour Party were gearing up for a second vote that Blair, under duress, had promised them. The talk was of a rebellion of up to 200 Labour MPs. Blair would be in the virtually untenable position of having to rely on the Conservatives to get through. Hilary Armstrong, the chief whip, told Blair: 'Without a second UN resolution I cannot guarantee the party vote.'

As the diplomatic efforts ran into the ground, the atmosphere at Westminster was fevered. There was talk of mass resignations from party activists, of meltdown in the local elections, of several resignations from the Cabinet – perhaps even of Blair having to stand down.

On Sunday afternoon, 9 March, Alastair Campbell took a few hours off from the crisis to watch his favourite team, Burnley, play in the FA Cup against Watford. When he got back to his north London home, he received a call on his mobile. He was told that Clare Short had just done a BBC radio interview and had made it clear she would resign if Blair went to war without a new UN mandate. Campbell phoned Blair at Chequers to tell him. He was furious and nervous. If she really did go she might take others with her and galvanise the party into open revolt. He tried to keep his mind on the job of salvaging that UN vote. He talked again to Lagos, the Chilean president.

Had Blair been reckless, the show's host, Andrew Rawnsley, asked Short? 'I think the whole atmosphere of the current crisis is deeply reckless, reckless for the world, reckless for the undermining of the UN in this disorderly world – which is wider than Iraq – which the whole world needs for the future, reckless with our own government, reckless with his own future, position and place in history. It's extraordinarily reckless. I'm very surprised by it.' Blair didn't listen to the programme. But shortly after he did call her. He had

Iraq thirty days to complete the six British benchmarks. Within half an hour Fleischer had knocked it down. His words exuded exasperation. 'I was asked several days ago about whether or not the President would be open to extending the deadline thirty to forty-five days – now you could say that's twenty-six to forty-one days. If it was a non-starter then, it's a non-starter now.' The proposal had been killed off even before it had been formally presented to the Security Council. Chile's President Lagos sought solace in humour. He asked Kofi Annan's advisers whether he should apply to the *Guinness Book of Records* for the shortest time in UN history – twenty-one minutes, to be precise – between the tabling of a resolution and its rejection. Blair was upset at Bush's studied disdain of his efforts. The State Department was upset that Blair was being damaged further. But the die was cast. Greenstock then phoned the Prime Minister. He used one of his favourite phrases. The process, he said, had 'no traction'. He could now rely only on the original four votes – Britain, the US, Spain and Bulgaria. The waverers would no longer support them. Britain was close to becoming a figure of fun. Sergei Lavrov, Russia's envoy to the UN, an experienced diplomatic with a laconic turn of phrase, turned to Greenstock and asked in his impeccable English: 'How are those benches? Are they leaving marks?'

At that point Blair told Bush he accepted that war should begin the following week. He agreed that they should meet to present a united front. They agreed to meet halfway, at a US military base on the Portuguese Azores islands, together with the Spanish and Portuguese leaders. Blair asked for one final favour in return, to help him save his skin. Bush had indicated in Washington at the end of January that he would publish the long-awaited road map towards settling the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It wasn't an absolute promise, but Blair had been led to believe that he would do it. He didn't. Blair was forced to recast his version of events, saying it would be produced once the Palestinians had a new Prime Minister, leaving Arafat as little more than a figurehead. The man Britain and

America invested their hopes in was Abu Mazen, who had been instrumental in negotiating the Oslo accords at Michael Levy's home ten years earlier. Mazen was a pragmatist, and had called for an end to the latest *intifada*. The question was: could he deliver the militant groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad? On 8 March the Palestinian Authority approved his nomination. Arafat did not want to transfer most of his powers, but eventually relented.

Blair said that before they got to the Azores, he needed a commitment to the road map. Manning told Rice, and Straw told Powell, that Blair's future depended on it. 'If Bush reneges on the road map, Blair could be finished,' one minister said, urging the President to ignore the co-ordinated opposition of Ariel Sharon and Dick Cheney. On the afternoon of 14 March Bush stepped out on to the lawn of the White House and, flanked by Powell and Rumsfeld, announced his readiness to publish the road map as soon as Abu Mazen was installed as Prime Minister. 'We have reached a hopeful moment for progress,' he said.

For Blair, that was a lifeline. If he could no longer get a UN sanction for the war, at least he could try to present it in a more palatable way. The following day, as Unmovic prepared to leave Baghdad, Blair held an early morning meeting with Prescott, Brown and his inner team to go through the final stages.

It was with some trepidation that Blair and his small circle of confidants – Manning, Powell and Campbell – set off that Sunday morning for the remote islands perched in the mid-Atlantic. The location had been designed to demonstrate that Blair was not running to the White House. Morgan stayed behind to co-ordinate the intensive lobbying of Labour MPs ahead of an imminent debate in parliament. For once Blair did not step down the plane to talk to the press. He knew he was now a hostage to events beyond his control. He had failed to keep the UN united. He had failed to bring France, Germany and Russia on board. He had failed to convince many smaller countries of the merits of his case. He had failed to win around the doubters in his party and in the country. What was left