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TIME TO FACE UP TO

The war drums are sounding in Washington and London but as Tony Blair arrived for talks at Camp David, the world was waiting to hear the case against Iraq. Tony Allen-Mills and Nicholas Rufford report

SADDAM'S

SECRETS

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Whatever the differences between America and Europe on the danger of Saddam Hussein, Tony Blair agrees with President George W Bush in one crucial respect, according to Condoleezza Rice, the president's national security adviser.

"We now know what happens when evil people have the means to attack you and are determined to do it," she told The Sunday Times in her only interview with a British newspaper to mark the September 11 anniversary. "[The next target] wouldn't have to be New York or Washington," she said. "It could indeed be London or Berlin. And I think that is what President Bush and prime minister Blair both see."

In an extensive review of the administration's response to the terror attacks one year ago, the most powerful woman in America warned against international inaction in dealing with the threat from Iraq. "Saddam Hussein is a figure

national community for over a decade," she said. "If we aren't prepared to deal with his defiance now, will we be

more prepared to deal with his violence when he is capable of delivering a nuclear weapon against either the United States or Great Britain?"

To British and other sceptics who complain that no new evidence justifies an attack, Rice retorted: "How long do you want to wait to deal with this problem? Do you want to

retreat at Camp David, where Blair was due to arrive yesterday for three hours of talks. For a senior presidential

aide who has spent the past year grappling with spualing international crises — from the ousting of Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan via global warming, protectionist steel tariffs and missile defence to the prospect of another war in Iraq — Rice appeared uncomonly relaxed as she leant back in a blue armchair and

ing squad of television cameras lined up on the White House lawn outside her windows attests to the daunting pressures of her job.

While it has not always been clear where Rice stands on the ideological fault line dividing Republican hawks such as Vice-President Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, the defence secretary, from multilateralist figures such as the secretary of state, Colin Powell, her remarks on Friday left little doubt that she and the president are ready to march on Baghdad if the international community fails to find an alternative means of curbing Saddam.

"The sad truth is, we know what happens when tyrants, dangerous tyrants, are left to their own devices and left unchallenged," she said. "We know what happens when democracies cannot make a decision to act. We know what happens when international institutions are defied and don't act. We have a history with that and it is never good, a lot of

Rice's disgust with Saddam was palpable as she tore into the argument that "he won't bother us if we don't bother

him." "There is simply no experience with him to suggest that," she said, shifting in her seat and staring fiercely at her hands.

"He has invaded his neighbour

twice, he has gassed his own people and tried to assassinate a former president of the United States. He pays

\$25,000 to suicide bombers, one of whom bombed Hebrew University [in Israel] and killed five Americans."

Rice smiled thinly, and there was little doubt that she

feels genuinely outraged by Saddam's inhumane actions. "This is an aggressive dictator," she concluded, "and the argument that he somehow can be trusted not to act [in a hostile manner] seems to me to be not sustainable."

She insisted that the president had not decided that military force was the only option, and she dismissed suggestions that discussions about a possible return of weapons inspectors amounted to no more than camouflage for an impending military attack.

"That's simply not true," she said. "The president is reviewing all options and we will certainly want to discuss any possibility that might deal with the threat we are facing."

At the same time, Rice questioned "the very strange situation" with the weapons inspection debate. "The key is to remember that the purpose of the weapons inspectors was to certify [Saddam's] disarmament," she said.

"He signed on to disarmament, and then he's managed to frustrate all the efforts to be sure he is disarming. It's not as if he doesn't know what to do, it's not as if he hasn't been told repeatedly what to do, it's not as if he hasn't been given ultimatum after ultimatum. So I think we have to ask ourselves how to get a different result this time, in terms of dealing with the threat."

Is the president considering a deadline for the readmission of weapons inspections, backed up by the threat of force? "I think we are listening to a lot of ideas right now, and we'll see where we come

out," said Rice.

She insisted that "this is an administration that values alliances, it values coalitions." She appeared keen to challenge any facile European

notions that Bush remains a Texan cowboy prone to shooting wildly from the hip.

"You know, there was a view expressed to me shortly after the September 11 attacks that there was a fear President Bush would sort of wake up one day and start firing cruise missiles at people, because, after all, we'd been attacked and we had the right to do it," said Rice.

"Well, he did quite the opposite, in a very deliberate fashion he talked to people, put together a plan, worried a great deal. This administration is not one that just believes it ought to act on its own. There will be times when we have policy disagreements with our friends, but by no means is the United States simply running off on its own."

As for Osama Bin Laden, Rice can shed little new light. "I think the president may have said it best when he said, if he's dead we got him, and if he's alive, we'll still get him," she said. "All of us would love to be certain about Bin Laden's fate, but we're a patient country and eventually justice will be done for him, too."

Towards the end of the interview a buzzer sounded and Rice picked up a phone. "I'm sorry, my boss wants to see me," she said. She was gone a few minutes with the president, and when she returned she picked up her previous train of thought as if she had never left the room.

It was a brief but compelling display of the focus and intellectual polish that make Rice such a formidable force in an administration otherwise

dominated by middle-aged male business executives.

When Blair sat down with Bush at Camp David, he knew it would be Rice he really needed to persuade.

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At the White House on Friday afternoon, there wasn't a four-star general in sight. Any visitors hoping for a glimpse of a presidential war machine gearing smoothly for action must have been taken aback — the West Wing was full of clergymen.

At his final meeting before departing to Camp David and last night's mini-summit with Tony Blair, President George W. Bush sat down for a chat with a Presbyterian vicar, several Baptist reverends, a rabbi, a Buddhist and a mufti.

The meeting was "about prayer, not policy," a presidential aide announced. And no, the clergymen hadn't arrived to provide a multi-denominational blessing for any future military campaign.

After a week of extraordinary political, military and diplomatic intrigue, Bush's clerical cabal provided only a brief respite from the relentless pressure of an increasingly fractious international debate about America's plans for a change of regime in Iraq.

Minutes after the meeting ended, a short helicopter ride carried the president to the Calocum mountains of northern Maryland in readiness for a brief but crucial encounter with the one European leader who has been prepared publicly to support Bush's threat of a military campaign against Baghdad.

Blair's presence at Bush's side, appeared to signal a united transatlantic front committed to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. But behind the cosy banter of George and Tony lies a torrid tale of arm-twisting, anger and ultimatums. The bruises may not have been visible at Camp David, but the battle continues for a genuine American commitment to "a consensus approach on Iraq."

On Thursday, Bush will take an important step in his newly launched strategy of consultation and communication by addressing the United Nations general assembly in New York.

After months of bellicose threats by senior administration officials and the continuing rattle of US military preparations in the Gulf, Bush's UN visit may prove to be the moment he finally spells out his strategy — will he give weapons inspectors one last chance to dismantle Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, or will he heed the urging of America's hawk and move immediately to war?

If one thing was clear amid the chaotic chatter of clashing political factions last week, it was that the time for phoney warmongering is over. Bush must finally make a choice between the unilateral preemptive strike on Saddam favoured by Dick Cheney, the vice-president, and Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defence, and the search for international consensus supported by Colin Powell, the

secretary of state, and now insisted upon by Blair. Official sources said last week that the British prime minister had agreed to back military action against Iraq only if the president committed himself to exhausting diplomatic options first. One US senator complained: "We practically had to break Blair's arm" to secure last week's statements of public support for Bush.

Another Washington official said there were "preconditions in place" for Blair's outspoken promise that Britain was ready to pay "a blood price" to maintain its relationship with America. "The White House has got to exhaust the UN process before it can go to war," the official said. "It has got to go through the inspectors' hoops. That is what the British have been telling Bush."

Perhaps so, but such political gameplay is not the same thing as seeking an official mandate for action. Nor will it forestall military action should the UN dither.

Speaking to The Sunday Times last week Geoff Hoon, the defence secretary, made it plain that UN approval was not a prerequisite of any strikes against Iraq. "Certainly it is important that we continue the process of engaging the UN, but there are 27 UN obligations dealing with Iraq Iraq is in breach of 23. If we are not careful another resolution will just add to the pile of paperwork in New York."

While stressing that no decisions had been taken about military strikes, Hoon added that "it is perfectly possible to take action under international law without a specific UN resolution. It was done in the Balkans and Afghanistan. Whatever we do will be consistent with international law."

Such a hawkish stance will set Hoon at odds with many of those in his own party and in the wider international community, where the case against Iraq is regarded as yet to be proven. To that end,

British officials are working on a dossier that will attempt to outline Saddam's efforts to increase his weapons of mass destruction despite the effects of Gulf war destruction and years of UN-imposed sanctions.

The result of months of work by MI6 and the Joint Intelligence Committee, which reports to the prime minister, the dossier may be published at the moment Blair faces potentially his strongest backlash at home — during next month's Labour party conference in Blackpool, where delegates are expected to try to force a debate on Iraq.

Sources who have seen the dossier say it contains no "smoking gun" or startling new evidence of weapons capability. But it might still have a valuable public relations effect.

"To the experts in the field, most of it will not be new," one source who has seen the dossier admitted. "But for the ordinary public who doesn't study these things, most of it

will be impressive."

Iraq watchers agree that Saddam has only a fraction of the military might he possessed in the late 1980s, what was not destroyed by allied bombing during the Gulf war was blown up, burned and bulldozed by previous teams of UN weapons inspectors who spent seven years combing through the remains of his military programme.

UN-imposed sanctions have since prevented the export to Iraq of most sophisticated military technology, but the dossier reveals that Saddam is still buying equipment and material through front companies for a nuclear programme. This includes electrical components that could be used for nuclear triggers and atoms for manufacturing fissile material, though most experts believe remains a long way from constructing a working nuclear device.

Saddam is also said to have bought ballistic missile technology from North Korea and may be refurbishing or

upgrading Russian-built Scuds — around 12 of which were unaccounted for when UN weapons inspectors left the country in 1998.

One possibility, discussed in a draft of the dossier, is that he could convert remaining aircraft into unmanned drones that could function as crude but deadly long-range missiles. The satellite navigation systems installed in modern cars might be converted into a primitive guidance system that could steer the missile into densely populated areas.

YET what the dossier does not contain is any proof linking Iraq to the events of September 11. And without conclusive new evidence that Saddam has been working on weapons of mass destruction, Bush and Blair will have a difficult time persuading international leaders to back their cause without giving Iraq one last chance to allow the weapons inspectors back in. One senior official said last

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weak that Saddam agreed to the unrestricted return of inspectors as he would have to do to avert an immediate American invasion — the process might stretch out for at least a year, making military action unlikely until November 2003.

Yet despite the prospect of an extended period of cat-and-mouse negotiations the Pentagon is taking no chances, discreetly routing military supplies through Qatar and other Gulf states to Kuwait, where a brigade of more than 6,000 US soldiers is already on war alert.

There have also been persistent reports that civilian cargo ships are being chartered to carry yet more military equipment. "We have gone a lot with pre-positioned stocks in the Gulf, making sure they are accessible," Thomas White, the US army secretary, acknowledged last week.

The stealthy build-up appeared to support speculation that the Pentagon is still preparing for a so-called

Gulf War II force of between 50,000 and 80,000 troops capable of striking directly at Baghdad.

The scheduled departure from San Diego next month of the USS Constellation will give the Pentagon potential use of up to six aircraft carriers in the Gulf region by early November. That is when the desert climate becomes bearable for US troops clad in stinking chemical and biological protection suits.

It is also clear that the White House still hopes Saddam will fall victim to a palace coup, and that the constant drumbeat of US military threats will encourage his generals to revolt. CIA agents and US special forces are reportedly working undercover to encourage internal upheaval.

Last week's attacks on fragile defence sites and continuing leaks about military options suggest that Washington intends to maintain military pressure whatever the state of progress on a diplomatic front.

Blair and his advisers are pressing British politicians to approve a new war-cracking task force for all the national agencies and during telephone negotiations over the past month officials in London do not appear convinced that Powell and Blair have conclusively won the argument for a new round of inspections.

Questions remain about deadlines, ultimatums and how far Bush is ready to bend to secure the support of crucial allies such as Vladimir Putin of Russia and Jacques Chirac of France. There is still a suspicion, one official suggested, that Bush may be using the inspections issue as "camouflage" for a surprise attack.

One British cabinet minister summed up another dilemma facing planners in both London and Washington. "The moment you start arguing the case for military action, it looks as though you are about to do it," he said.

"But if you don't argue the case for action you give the argument away to those who are opposed to it. You are in a cleft stick on this one."

A new secure video link is being installed between Downing Street and the White House, and this will at least enable Blair to look the president in the eye in the future without having to make a 21-hour round trip to Camp David. British officials are also happy that "we are having a substantial level of input," one minister said. "At the moment our view is that we are being listened to."

Yet the coming weeks will continue to be testing for the transatlantic relationship. British officials anxious to divert America from war might do well to follow Bush's example and resort to the power of prayer.

Additional reporting
David Cracknell

STATE OF THE NATIONS: WHICH WAY WILL WORLD LEADERS JUMP IN THE EVENT OF WAR?

Russia	China	France	Germany	Saudi Arabia	Israel
President Vladimir Putin has been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq. He has also been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq.	China's leadership has been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq. It has also been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq.	France's leadership has been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq. It has also been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq.	Germany's leadership has been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq. It has also been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq.	Saudi Arabia's leadership has been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq. It has also been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq.	Israel's leadership has been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq. It has also been seen to be a strong supporter of the US in the event of a conflict with Iraq.

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