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Indignation Grows in U.S. Over British Prewar Documents

Critics of Bush call them proof that he and Blair never saw diplomacy as an option with Hussein.

by John Daniszewski

LONDON - Reports in the British press this month based on documents indicating that President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair had conditionally agreed by July 2002 to invade Iraq appear to have blown over quickly in Britain.

But in the United States, where the reports at first received scant attention, there has been growing indignation among critics of the Bush White House, who say the documents help prove that the leaders made a secret decision to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein nearly a year before launching their attack, shaped intelligence to that aim and never seriously intended to avert the war through diplomacy.

The documents, obtained by Michael Smith, a defense specialist writing for the Sunday Times of London, include a memo of the minutes of a meeting July 23, 2002, between Blair and his intelligence and military chiefs; a briefing paper for that meeting and a Foreign Office legal opinion prepared before an April 2002 summit between Blair and Bush in Texas.

The picture that emerges from the documents is of a British government convinced of the U.S. desire to go to war and Blair's agreement to it, subject to several specific conditions.

Since Smith's report was published May 1, Blair's Downing Street office has not disputed the documents' authenticity. Asked about them Wednesday, a Blair spokesman said the report added nothing significant to the much-investigated record of the lead-up to the war.

"At the end of the day, nobody pushed the diplomatic route harder than the British government... So the circumstances of this July discussion very quickly became out of date," said the spokesman, who asked not to be identified.

The leaked minutes sum up the July 23 meeting, at which Blair, top security advisors and his attorney general discussed Britain's role in Washington's plan to oust Hussein. The minutes, written by Matthew Rycroft, a foreign policy aide, indicate general thoughts among the participants about how to create a political and legal basis for war. The case for military action at the time was "thin," Foreign Minister Jack Straw was characterized as saying, and Hussein's government posed little threat.

Labeled "secret and strictly personal - U.K. eyes only," the minutes begin with the head of the British intelligence service, MI6, who is identified as "C," saying he had returned from Washington, where there had been a "perceptible shift in attitude. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the

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conjunction of terrorism and [weapons of mass destruction]. But the intelligence and the facts were being fixed around the policy."

Straw agreed that Bush seemed determined to act militarily, although the timing was not certain.

"But the case was thin," the minutes say. "Saddam was not threatening his neighbors, and his WMD capacity was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran."

Straw then proposed to "work up a plan for an ultimatum to Saddam" to permit United Nations weapons inspectors back into Iraq. "This would also help with the legal justification for the use of force," he said, according to the minutes.

Blair said, according to the memo, "that it would make a big difference politically and legally if Saddam refused to allow in the U.N. inspectors."

"If the political context were right, people would support regime change," Blair said. "The two key issues were whether the military plan worked and whether we had the political strategy to give the military plan the space to work."

In addition to the minutes, the Sunday Times report referred to a Cabinet briefing paper that was given to participants before the July 23 meeting. It stated that Blair had already promised Bush cooperation earlier, at the April summit in Texas.

"The U.K. would support military action to bring about regime change," the Sunday Times quoted the briefing as saying.

Excerpts from the paper, which Smith provided to the Los Angeles Times, said Blair had listed conditions for war, including that "efforts had been made to construct a coalition/shape public opinion, the Israel-Palestine crisis was quiescent," and options to "eliminate Iraq's WMD through the U.N. weapons inspectors" had been exhausted.

The briefing paper said the British government should get the U.S. to put its military plans in a "political framework."

"This is particularly important for the U.K. because it is necessary to create the conditions in which we could legally support military action," it says.

In a letter to Bush last week, 89 House Democrats expressed shock over the documents. They asked if the papers were authentic and, if so, whether they proved that the White House had agreed to invade Iraq months before seeking Congress' OK.

"If the disclosure is accurate, it raises troubling new questions regarding the legal justifications for the war as well as the integrity of our own administration," the letter says.

"While the president of the United States was telling the citizens and the Congress that they had no intention to start a war with Iraq, they were working very close with Tony Blair and the British leadership at making this a foregone conclusion," the letter's chief author, Rep. John Conyers Jr. of Michigan, said Wednesday.

If the documents are real, he said, it is "a huge problem" in terms of an abuse of power. He said the White House had not yet responded to the letter.

Both Blair and Bush have denied that a decision on war was made in early 2002. The White House and Downing Street maintain that they were preparing for military operations as an option, but that the option to not attack also remained open until the war began March 20, 2003.

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In January 2002, Bush described Iraq as a member of an "axis of evil," but the sustained White House push for Iraqi compliance with U.N. resolutions did not come until September of that year. That month, Bush addressed the U.N. General Assembly to outline a case against Hussein's government, and he sought a bipartisan congressional resolution authorizing the possible use of force.

In November 2002, the U.N. Security Council approved a resolution demanding that Iraq readmit weapons inspectors.

An effort to pass a second resolution expressly authorizing the use of force against Iraq did not succeed.

Times staff writer Paul Richter in Washington contributed to this report.

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