

Swinging the Bear: More from the 'Manning Downing Street Memos'

Written by

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The Nation - David Corn - How could Bush get Putin on board -- or at least persuade him not to veto a Security Council resolution authorizing an invasion of Iraq? Berlusconi was Bush's answer, according to the Manning memo.

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Bush's Prewar Putin Strategy David Corn

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David Corn discusses a lesser-known passage in the recently disclosed "Manning Memo" of the 31 January 2003 Bush-Blair war discussion. It was George Bush's idea to have Silvio Berlusconi convince Vladimir Putin of the necessity of the Iraq war by lecturing him on free-market economics.

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It was January 31, 2003. George W. Bush was moving toward war in Iraq, and he was meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the Oval Office to discuss various war-related matters.

Last week, The New York Times disclosed portions of a secret memo -- written by Blair's senior foreign policy adviser, David Manning -- that summarized what the two leaders covered at this session, which Manning also attended. Blair, according to the memo, wanted Bush to fight for a United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing military action against Saddam Hussein. Bush agreed to try for such a resolution, but he told Blair that the start date for the war, win or lose at the UN, would be March 10. Bush also proposed provoking a confrontation with Saddam's regime that would justify attacking Iraq.

The pair chatted about postwar Iraq, agreeing that sectarian violence was unlikely.

And according to a previously undisclosed portion of this memo -- a passage obtained by The

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Nation -- Bush and Blair discussed what to do about Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was opposed to a war in Iraq. Bush told Blair he had come up with a possible solution: send Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to lecture Putin on free-market economics.

In the weeks prior to the Bush-Blair meeting, Putin had been calling for a diplomatic resolution regarding Iraq. And Russia mattered. Moscow could veto a second resolution in the Security Council, which previously in November, had passed a resolution demanding that Saddam disarm and revive weapons inspections in Iraq.

With Bush aiming to invade Iraq in six weeks, Putin was far from ready to sign on to a war on Iraq. On January 27, Putin spoke with Blair on the telephone and told the British prime minister that weapons inspections should continue, and Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov said that day that there was "practically no chance" that the UN Security Council would support the use of force. On January 28, Putin publicly insisted that the Iraq problem be resolved through the United Nations and not by U.S. military action. Two days later, he called for "international and diplomatic efforts" to deal with Iraq. And Ivanov dismissed one of the Bush administration's chief rationales for invading Iraq: "For the time being, neither Russia nor any other country has information about ties between Iraq and al Qaeda."

How could Bush get Putin on board -- or at least persuade him not to veto a Security Council resolution authorizing an invasion of Iraq? Berlusconi was Bush's answer, according to the Manning memo.

Berlusconi, the conservative businessman leader of Italy, was a firm backer of Bush's position on Iraq. He had already agreed to allow U.S. forces to use Italian airbases for an assault on Iraq. On January 30, he met with Bush in the Oval Office and pledged his support to the president. That day, he and the prime ministers of England, Spain, Portugal, Hungary, Poland and Denmark released a statement that asserted that the "Iraqi regime and its weapons of mass destruction represent a clear threat to world security" and that called on the Security Council to take action. Berlusconi was due to visit Putin in Moscow on February 3.

During his White House meeting with Berlusconi, Bush tapped the Italian to win over Putin by teaching him about fundamental economics. The Manning memo -- according to sources who reviewed parts of the document and took notes -- records how Bush described this idea to Blair the next day:

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For Putin, the problem was oil. He had convinced himself, quite wrongly, that military action against Iraq would lead to the collapse of the oil price. Bush had encouraged Berlusconi to go and explain a thing or two to Putin about the laws of supply and demand.

Did Bush truly believe that oil was Putin's primary concern -- not, say, American unilateralism -- and that a lecture from Berlusconi on economics would turn around the Russian leader? How did Berlusconi react to Bush's suggestion? How did Blair respond to this "explain a thing or two" strategy? The memo says nothing else about this part of the Bush-Blair conversation.

On February 3, Putin and Berlusconi did meet in Russia. (The two enjoyed a close relationship; the previous year Putin's daughters had vacationed with the Berlusconi family in Italy.) After their talks, there was no sign that Berlusconi had made much progress with Putin. The Russian did say that "a meaningful part of the responsibility" for the crisis "lies on the Iraqi side," but Putin also maintained that the UN weapons inspectors should be given more time: "Are the inspectors working? They're working. Have they found anything? No, they haven't found anything yet." As for a second resolution that might authorize military action against Iraq, he was noncommittal: "We'll think about it -- so far there is no need, but I do not rule it out." A Russian television correspondent noted, "It is possible that Berlusconi will leave with an impression of Russian hospitality but with empty hands." The next day Ivanov was unambiguous: "There is no basis for using force against Baghdad."

The major media coverage of the Putin-Berlusconi talks did not indicate whether Berlusconi had acted upon Bush's suggestion, discussed the political economy of the global oil industry with Putin, and explained a thing or two to the Russian leader.

Had Berlusconi accepted Bush's assignment? Had the controversial Italian media baron, one of the richest people in the world, attempted to persuade Putin to go along with a war in Iraq by laying out the laws of supply and demand? Or had he ditched Bush's suggestion?

Berlusconi faces elections on April 9 and 10. An enterprising Italian reporter might want to ask him and his aides about this episode. It could turn up an interesting anecdote -- perhaps one about the American president and his simplistic assessment of Putin's position. Maybe there's even a separate memo about the Berlusconi-Bush meeting.

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