

Rumblings of War

By DER SPIEGEL

Remarks by Fijihosting: This article appeared around 17th March 2003 on www.spiegel.de. It is the complete translation of a German article titled "Krieg der Diplomaten" [war of the diplomats]. In our opinion and given the fact that a week later the Iraq war started it makes excellent reading. A must-read for every person interested in politics!)

Enticements, threats, bribes - the U.S. wants to force a majority in the Security Council to vote in favor of war against Iraq. The struggle for power at the U.N. is moving toward a decision - How much credibility will the parliament of nations still have after that? A chronology of the battle of the diplomats.

In the war of the diplomats the battlefield is the horseshoe table in the conference room of the U.N. Security Council in New York. It has seats for 15 countries. They send their representatives to fight for peace there. It is a silent battle of seduction, enticement, and arm-twisting, persuasion, bargaining, and haggling. Every word, every handshake, counts.

That's how it was last Friday, too, when Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix once again summed up the status of Saddam Hussein's disarmament. Once more, perhaps for the last time, he gave one of his famous on-the-one-hand-and-on-the-other-hand speeches. Yes, Blix said, "there has been an acceleration in initiatives." But the significance of these steps must be measured by "how many question marks have been removed. That is not yet clear."

Sometimes Blix gave the impression he had given up.

The previous evening, in a dramatic press conference, President George W. Bush had announced that there would be a second U.N. resolution in the next few days and that his country would do everything it could to get a majority to vote for it. And that America would go to war against Iraq whether the resolution receives majority support or not.

So next week might be Saddam Hussein's last. And it could also be that he may nevertheless celebrate his last great triumph: He has succeeded in splitting the world.

For weeks the heads of European governments have gone at each other because of a dangerous, probably megalomaniac, and perhaps only second-rate dictator. Because of a

down-at-the-heels ruler of a down-at-the-heels empire they have put at risk decades of work devoted to achieving European unity. Because of one oriental potentate they are willing to risk losing America's friendship.

Privately, politicians and strategists in the chancelleries of the Old Europe speak of a junta gone crazy that has apparently taken over power in Washington. The path to war was characterized as "surreal stubbornness" by France's Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin.

In contrast, his colleagues on the other side of the Atlantic have only cold disdain for their ungrateful allies. The mere name of the German chancellor arouses visible disgust among U.S. officials.

Therefore the decision about war or peace in Iraq has also become a decision about the future order of the world. "It is possible that we stand before an epochal break," Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said before the Security Council meeting on Friday.

At stake is whether, after fifty years, the unity of the western community of nations will come to an end, and whether the global security system of the United Nations will now be replaced by an international power system dominated by the U.S., a super power which knows that it no longer has any rivals, but which still feels vulnerable.

If George W. Bush were to win, it would mean an end to the concept that international law brings about and preserves peace. It also does away with Europe's favorite idea that submission to international law can prevent wars between nations much more effectively than military force.

Once it becomes clear that the U.S. - incontrovertibly the most powerful nation on earth - is going to reject legitimization by the world community, the 4,000 U.N. diplomats and staff who work at the world organization's headquarters on the shores of New York's East River, can pack their suitcases and go home. Back to a world in which the right of the stronger will once again prevail uncontested.

Yet at the start of this conflict there was still unanimity. In November the Security Council, by a vote of 15 to 0 threatened Iraq with "serious consequences" if it did not disarm actively and completely. The U.S. considered Resolution 1441 sufficient legal grounds to

go to war. It was Tony Blair of Britain and José María Aznar of Spain who persuaded the U.S. President to introduce another resolution declaring that Saddam Hussein had not fulfilled the requirements of Resolution 1441. That was the war resolution. All the diplomats in New York saw it as such. Last Friday the U.S., Great Britain, and Spain finally presented a revised draft they had jointly worked out which was to be submitted to a vote on Tuesday and which gives Iraq a final deadline of March 17.

The text is printed in blue ink on white paper. A "Blue Paper." That means: "Urgent." Then the game begins. "Colin Powell will look his colleagues in the eye and say, 'Show me your hand,'" a diplomat says. It's like playing poker.

And the gaming table is fully occupied. On one side are the D-4 "The Decided 4," they of course include the U.S., Great Britain, Spain, and probably Bulgaria. They have already decided and are courting the favor of the M-6, "The Middle 6," the professedly undecided states, Angola, Chile, Guinea, Cameroon, Mexico, and Pakistan. In the camp of the opposition, of course, are Germany and Syria. It has not yet been conclusively established what position France will take when Russia and China raise their hands to vote. The Americans need nine votes and no veto for their resolution to be accepted. These days anyone walking through U.N. headquarters hears shorthand expressions on all sides, just as if a ship were sinking. D-4, M-6, also P-5 - that refers to the permanent members. And E-10 - those are the ones elected for one term.

Anyone walking through the U.N. building can hear grumbling about the arrogant manner in which the U.S. wants to draw the rest of the world into a war. If the Security Council will not finally punish Saddam by military means, then the U.N. will have lost "its last chance for credibility," George W. Bush told the international representatives the week before the vote.

When Blix took the floor at the start of the Security Council meeting last Friday, the time had arrived for the crisis to be resolved, the climax of a week no less dramatic than the week the Berlin Wall fell.

Monday, March 3, 2003. U.N. inspectors in Iraq witness the destruction of 16 "Samud 2" rockets +++ Discovered near Bagdad, 157 R-400 bombs with anthrax bacillus +++ New marching orders: Now in the Persian Gulf, 235,000 U.S. soldiers, 40,000 British soldiers +++ Washington's plans for Iraq "after the war" +++ The Persian Gulf states meet in Sharm el Sheikh.

Today Mamady Traoré arrived at his embassy earlier than usual. He walks past shiny black garbage bags on 39th Street. Breathing hard, Mamady Traoré drags himself up the stairs to his office. It is only a few blocks from the U.N. building. The light illuminating a picture of his head of state that hangs over his desk has been on all night. Traoré has forbidden his people to turn it off. Certainly not now. This is "the" week of his country, the Republic of Guinea. This is Mamady Traoré's month, his week.

At midnight on Saturday, March 1st the presidency of the Security Council passed to Guinea. And His Excellency, Ambassador Mamady Traoré will now be chairing the sessions. He is wearing a light blue silk burnoose and the little cap of a tribal chief. "I shall work to achieve wisdom," he says. "There is still hope. For in Guinea we still have something not everyone has, a soul."

Guinea also has a reputation as a transit station in the smuggling of children in West Africa, and is considered one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Amnesty International cites "Murder, torture, and arbitrary arrests" by government troops. Head of state, Lansana Conté, the man in the illuminated picture, came to power after a putsch and changed the Constitution to assure his reelection.

The newspapers say the U.S. promised Guinea money. "And what if they did," Traoré says. On his desk is an ashtray from the firm "Fiedler's Roofing." "The U.S. may have promised us 2.1 million dollars for our refugee problem. But good Lord," he says, "two million seems to me to be a ridiculous amount as long as other countries are demanding 40 billion. Do you think the president of the Security Council would change his position for two million dollars?"

Flailing his arms Traoré leaves his embassy and climbs into his Lincoln to be driven to the U.N. building a few blocks away. It is situated behind a row of flagpoles on the East River and, viewed in profile, it looks very fragile.

Ambassador Traoré takes the escalator to the second floor and is pleased to see that the German flag has already been taken down and the red, yellow, and green flag of Guinea has been raised.

The Security Council chamber next door looks somewhat toil-worn. Perhaps because it always has to be ready for use. The members might decide to meet at any time to save the world. Above their heads hangs an oil painting by the Norwegian Per Krogh. In its dim center, a phoenix rises from the ashes.

Every month each of the 15 members sitting at the table moves over one chair. Today Guinea moves from the left to the chair that Germany had occupied for a month. Ambassador Gunter Pleuger also had to give up his little presidential office. He thanked the security staff by offering them Oktoberfest beer and gave each of his colleagues Zeiss Jena binoculars.

Whether the name of the Council president is Pleuger or Traoré doesn't make a lot of difference, neither within the Council nor on the outside. Out there in New York, in the U.S., the United Nations has about as much prestige as a student parliament. In the White House they talk of the U.N. as a "debating society." On one of the popular TV late shows, the last meeting of the Security Council was portrayed as a round table of cheese-eating expense account types. Nevertheless, the mobile units of all the major American TV networks are parked in front of the U.N. building. The Security Council makes a good backdrop for special broadcasts with titles like "Showdown: Iraq."

And it produces the sort of material from which spy films are made. An NSA (U.S. National Security Agency) memorandum was passed along to the British publication, Observer. In it the head of a department indicates that the undecided M-6 are to be kept under surveillance. Information is to be obtained that would "give U.S. politicians an advantage in achieving their goals or avoid any surprises."

Nobody denies the report; nobody protests. "It is flattering to be monitored by the CIA," says one of the ambassadors affected by it. "You have to be pretty naïve to be surprised," says the representative from Pakistan. In the German mission to the U.N., Room 1111 is "bugproof." There are no windows and it is as quiet as an Ikea sauna. That is where the Germans and the French met for their discussions. It's like the Cold War.

In the afternoon the limousines of the non-permanent members, the E-10, stand in front of the Millennium Plaza Hotel on 44th Street. Adolfo Aguilar Zinser of Mexico has invited his colleagues up to the 28th floor to hear more about a Canadian suggestion for a compromise: precise disarmament steps to be taken by Iraq tied to a time schedule that has March 31st as the possible deadline.

Only two cameras have been set up. Traoré rustles past the journalists in his sky-blue burnoose. Chile's ambassador is annoyed. He doesn't see why the non-permanent members should have to reach an agreement when the big P-5 won't change their position. He says, "We should study an alternative." Even in U.N.-speak this isn't a sentence bubbling with optimism. The U.S., Great Britain, and Spain have already turned the suggestion down as "totally unacceptable."

This is the week of the telephones. President Bush has a black AT&T push-button phone and makes his calls in the presence of a bust of Churchill lent him by Tony Blair. Bulgaria's ambassador has a silver Motorola and says, "At the moment I'm an extension of my telephone. We're like one body." Spain's Prime Minister Aznar says that his ears are red from all the phoning.

The decisive sentences are not spoken in public. Outside, nobody speaks in plain words; everything is artfully encoded. Inside, the language changes, behind closed doors they speak in whispers, on bug-proof telephones, and in secured rooms. Monday evening, an ambassador sits in his residence in midtown Manhattan. Are they still talking about war in the Council?

"Do you want my answer officially or off the record? Officially I say we're working seriously and carefully against any possibility of a war in Iraq." And unofficially? Will there be a war, Mr. Ambassador? "Yes. Without the slightest doubt."

Tuesday, March 4, 2003. At the White House U.S. General Myers says: "A two-front war is doable even without Turkey." +++ New York Times: Two dozen U.S. bombers within range of North Korea. +++ U.S. Presidential Press Secretary Fleischer announces imminent U.N. vote on question of war. +++ Employees at U.S. airports are now equipped with radiation detectors +++ Guinea's cabinet discusses Iraq. +++ British Foreign Minister Straw meets with his Russian colleague Ivanov in London.

The arrival of Kofi Annan is heralded in many ways. Barricades divide the lobby on the ground floor of the U.N. tower, behind them are the camera teams and people with clipboards, speaking too loud into their telephones. A guard stands with legs apart in the open door of Elevator Number One that goes up to the 38th floor. A woman from CNN speaks into a walkie-talkie. To judge from the audio exchanges the cable network is occupying three exits so as not to miss anything. When a heavy dark-colored BMW drives up, slate gray like the U.N. building itself, she uses her walkie-talkie to say: "Annan is here. I'm on top of it."

The Secretary General is a surprisingly short man. As he enters - back from Cyprus, back from Turkey, from Greece, and from France - four countries in four days - the CNN woman calls out, "Welcome back, Mister Secretary General." Then, uninvited, she asks four questions, then just one more, five.

Annan's small feet stand behind two sky-blue microphones in front of the sky-blue U.N. flag. He seems tired; his shoes look dusty; his dark gray, pin-stripe suit hangs on him as though it were damp.

Annan says the many suggestions for the solution of the Iraq crisis were an "expression of the democratic process in the Security Council." He is in contact with governments throughout the world to find a "peaceful solution." Like Chief Inspector Blix he sees "a positive development" in progress, but "these are critical, difficult days for the United Nations. We are dealing with the preservation of peace, and that worries us all very much."

Will the same thing happen to the U.N. that happened to the League of Nations? Unable to resolve conflicts? Irrelevant? "I believe," Annan says, "the U.N. will not take that road. If it succeeds in solving this crisis it will be proof of the U.N.'s credibility and the strength of the organization."

He speaks softly, the perfect voice for a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, but his right hand holds the microphone stand in a tight grip. Annan is holding on tight in these crazy times, so tight that the veins on the back of his hand pop out. After nine minutes he says, "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," and disappears into the elevator to the 38th floor. The CNN woman speaks into her walkie-talkie, "Kofi's finished."

The meeting of the Security Council to decide what will be discussed on Friday is scheduled for 10 a.m. Only Mamady Traoré arrives punctually. John D. Negroponte appears at 10:27 p.m. While they wait, the other ambassadors whisper to each other, standing around in small groups, keeping up with the latest, for the world outside is for the moment a vortex compared to their little monthly game of musical chairs.

Paris and Berlin have already been on the telephone. "We have to exploit the existing momentum now," someone from the German delegation describes the tactic to be used Friday. Joschka Fischer and Dominique de Villepin have agreed to appear in person.

They are afraid that Hans Blix's report may not be encouraging. All the good things that have happened in the past few days - the destruction of the Al Samoud rockets, the discovery of the bio weapons - are not yet contained in the written report. For that reason, the opponents of the U.S. resolution want to place the future work schedule for the inspectors on Friday's agenda and have their best speakers take the floor in order to "exploit the momentum." To talk about the future of the inspectors, while others are already talking war.

Protocol, however, provides that only under special circumstances can the foreign ministers attend the public sessions. After some cell phone calls a letter arrives in Council President Traoré's office in which the Malaysian ambassador, speaking for the 116 unaligned countries, brings up the great importance they attach to this. These circumstances are sufficiently special.

The representative of China is ready with what he claims is an old Chinese proverb, "Even though one has only a one percent chance for success, one must make a one hundred percent effort."

A pale attendant tiptoes up and down the rows of seats distributing papers that hardly anyone looks at. The diplomats have large, grayish-white earphones hanging over their

temples, like tumors. Above them there are boxes for the interpreters and photographers. A higher row is closed off by yellowed curtains as though it were a place where transactions occurred about which it's better not to ask questions.

When things get serious, members of the 15 delegations escape from the dim museum atmosphere into a small adjacent room where the seats are closer together. On the other side of the curtains one can even see a piece of the outside world. Furthermore, the chairs are more comfortable. The Germans are responsible for that. They paid for the new seats.

It cost 35,000 dollars, but Germany knows what a chair like that is worth. For years the German diplomats had to wait for a couple of crumbs of information outside in the so-called "loafer lounge." While inside they were arguing about war and peace. Germany wants to be comfortable for the two years it sits on the Security Council.

One feels closer to the others in the small conference room than in the large hall; the mood is different; clearer, because you can feel the knees of your neighbor and those of the person sitting across from you. While the Germans held the presidency, John D. Negroponte sat at the end of the table. Now he has moved one seat away to the other side and can again feel the knee of his British colleague and no longer that of the Angolan delegate. The Americans and the British are sitting together again. Diagonally across, at the other end of the table the Germans sit next to the French. Coincidence has arranged things perfectly.

Everything turns out to be symbolic, one way or the other. Outside the room where the diplomats and foreign ministers face the cameras after each session there hangs a wall carpet version of Picasso's anti-war painting Guernica. Shortly before Colin Powell made his appearance in the Security Council the picture was covered with a blue cloth. And the flags of the Security Council member countries were temporarily placed in front of the wall hanging, but that really didn't look good.

Now the painting is visible again. At the moment, the French ambassador, Jean-Marc de la Sablière is standing in front of it, speaking about a peaceful outcome of the crisis. The other way out of the room is to go behind the Guernica and past the toilets. That's how John D. Negroponte has chosen to leave today.

The American ambassador's eyes are focused on the Madeira red carpeting; he carries a slender briefcase; the pants legs of his dark blue pinstriped suit flutter as he walks; to his right and left are his spokesmen, Richard Grenell and Robert Wood.

Wood says they are having trouble selling the shy Negroponte to the media. It looks as though the ambassador is escaping. You can only speak to him while he's on the go. Is the Secretary of State coming to the Security Council on Friday? "Oh, I don't know what the Secretary of State is going to do," Negroponte says. He stands still a moment, rethinks his words. "I mean, I don't know the details of Colin Powell's appointment book," Negroponte says. That's better. "Not yet." Still better.

He walks on. It's noon. He has to wait briefly for the elevator that will take him to lunch with his colleagues. Once a month all the ambassadors meet for lunch with Kofi Annan.

Five minutes ago Russia's permanent representative, Sergei Lavrov and his German colleague Pleuger were waiting here for the elevator. Lavrov tried to find out exactly what his foreign minister, Igor Ivanov had said on his visit to London. "He didn't talk about a veto," he murmured and rubbed a finger over the printed minutes of the conversation. "He only said we will probably not abstain." - "That's decent," Pleuger said.

But Negroponte is standing there by himself. His fingers are drumming on his small square briefcase. Jean-Marc de la Sablière gets there just before the elevator door opens. The elevator is full; the short Frenchman gets on; Negroponte reflects for a moment, then he pushes in as well. They smile at each other. The doors shut. Later, it's reported that what they discussed at the lunch was the post-Saddam era.

Mamady Traoré makes his first appearance in the press room. He is wearing an even more sweeping gown than yesterday. The Security Council had decided that the Friday session would take place at the ministerial level and the first half would be open to the public. In his address, Hans Blix would go beyond the scope of his quarterly report.

That doesn't sound like much. For the German delegation it is reason for celebration. "Since Foreign Minister Fischer is also vice chancellor and the Syrian foreign minister is also a deputy head of government they will draw lots to see who will speak first." The "momentum" will be exploited. Fischer can set the mood.

During the 2 p.m. lunch in the Delegates' Dining Room on the 4th floor, the Secretary General gets up. He has invited the P-5, the M-6, and the E-10 to join him. Fifteen representatives sit at the table. Kofi Annan says, "A real dialogue is needed. Up to now the partners have talked past each other." He speaks about the "humanitarian catastrophe" that would occur in case there is a war, of the millions of Iraqis who would be dependent on the U.N. for food aid. He talks about what is at stake.

No one contradicts him. One diplomat said later there was a high level of intensity at the lunch: "great seriousness." The German and the Russian sat next to Kofi Annan. The food was the same as always on such occasions: salad, soup, fish.

All the U.N. representatives pale somewhat when their foreign ministers come to visit the Security Council. John D. Negroponte however seems to literally dissolve. He walks stooped, speaks softly, would prefer to withdraw to the colorless building that houses the American mission to the U.N., as into a fortress. It is said that from his office he has the most beautiful view in the house.

Negroponte exemplifies the value his government places in the U.N.. Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld consider the U.N. an administrative jungle they will never find their way out of. In the beginning George W. Bush had listened to Secretary of State Powell who advised him they shouldn't do anything without the U.N.. Bush probably does not believe that anymore.

"John Negroponte is a typical diplomat. He's nothing like Richard Holbrooke, his predecessor, who was unable to pass up a photo opportunity. He prefers to remain in the background," Robert Wood, his spokesman says, and after a short pause, "And that's the way it ought to be."

His boss is now sitting somewhere upstairs in the building, exactly where, Robert Wood is not at liberty to say "for security reasons." Robert Wood has served at American embassies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia; he has now been here for one-and-a-half years; in another year and a half he will be leaving again, preferably for NATO, another "hot seat," he says.

When he speaks about the U.N., he does so only in the third person, as though talking about something strange, something he doesn't know what to make of. "The U.N. has to

watch out it doesn't become superfluous now," Robert Wood says. "Above all our European, uh, friends are not aware what's at stake. Look, the French foreign minister probably felt very good after his appearance here. He was applauded. But he didn't understand that he only strengthened Saddam Hussein. Our Secretary of State went back to Washington with the feeling that nobody was listening to him. Yet he had very good arguments."

Wood reaches down into one of the big cardboard boxes next to his chair and takes out a CD-ROM. "Take this along, it's all on there," Wood says. "Please do."

On the CD-ROM it says, "Iraq - the failure of disarmament." It contains the pictures that Colin Powell showed the Security Council on February 5th. That was more than a month ago.

Has it already been decided there will be war? "If in the next two or three days we see that Saddam Hussein really intends to disarm, really and honestly, yes, then there would be no need to wage a war. But under his regime there will be no disarmament. We are more and more convinced of it."

Who is?

"Great Britain, Spain, Bulgaria, and others," Wood says.

Which others?

"We'll see."

One has the impression that his thoughts are elsewhere.

In the end Wood talks only about his President; Colin Powell no longer casts much of a shadow. The entire diplomatic machinery of America is rapidly being reduced to the measure of George W. Bush.

Robert Wood stays behind with his boxes full of evidence. Thursday night his President will repeat everything that's on the CD-ROM, "Iraq - the failure of disarmament."

For Negroponte's opposite number, Iraq's Ambassador Mohammed al-Duri, the war has already begun - as soon as he leaves the U.N. building. He is an intellectual - the strands of hair carefully in place - who moves rapidly through the hallways. But certainly not in the manner of one who has the plague or is a leper. On his way to the lounge he is greeted several times by colleagues. Today's Wall Street Journal lists which of his superiors would be eliminated by the U.S. in case of war.

"They have cut my fax connection. They are trying to woo my people away from me." Al-Duri makes no attempt to express outrage in his voice. "I live in an enemy country. They don't reply to our visa applications. My telephones are bugged round-the-clock, and they know that I know."

Mohammed al-Duri holds prayer beads in his left hand. He is supposed to represent Saddam's cause before the U.N., in the heart of the U.S. There are easier jobs. The British and the Americans don't speak to him, and he hasn't been invited by any of the Europeans for a long time either. His family lives in Baghdad. But he says, "The U.S. is all alone; we are not. There is a worldwide peace movement. We have already won psychologically. We'll see who wins on the ground." Mohammed al-Duri gets up. His Motorola cell phone didn't ring even once.

Next to the Palestinians, Iraq is the most persistent repeat offender in the Security Council. In 1990, the year of the Kuwait invasion, a regime of sanctions began under U.N. management with new wordings, drafts, and resolutions. Resolution 661 banned all trade with Iraq. Resolution 665 called for a maritime blockade. Resolution 670 banned take-offs and landings in Iraq. These were resolutions formulated during war.

Since the liberation of Kuwait, Iraq has been in the clutches of Resolutions 687, 700, and 1284. They put an end to the state of war, established weapons controls, and imposed far-reaching trade embargoes. Whenever one of the by-now 40 inspection reports appears, an argument breaks out about whether "peaceful" sanctions are working or not. "Working" means keeping the dictator Saddam Hussein in check. "Peaceful" means, among other things, accepting the figures of a Canadian study, which says the mortality rate of Iraqi children up to five years of age has increased 2.5-fold since 1990. Last year 106,000 children under the age of five died.

In 1995, Resolution 986 established the "Oil for Food" program and permitted Iraq's re-entry into the crude oil market. In 1998 U.N. weapons inspections stopped. The UNSCOM observers left the country - some were thrown out, some just left.

For four years, from 1998 to 2002, there were no weapons inspections, until Blix arrived. Did Saddam rearm during that time? Didn't he? Is his weapons arsenal dangerous? These questions are what it's all about.

The international community is trying hard to deal with Saddam Hussein. The U.N. bookstore in the basement of U.N. headquarters, sells the "Blue Book Series" - volumes of documents with explanations. The U.N. and the Iraq-Kuwait Conflict: 1990 - 1996 is almost 900 pages long and is the fattest volume on the shelf. U.N. Briefing Papers: Human Rights Today is 300 pages shorter.

Wednesday, March 5, 2003. New Marching Orders for U.S. Reservists +++ U.S. President Bush meets with war cabinet +++ On Ash Wednesday the Pope calls for fasting against the war +++ Vatican Nuncio at the White House +++ TV Stations report alleged 72-hour deadline set for foreigners to leave Iraq +++ Meeting of Islamic States in Katar ends in a row +++ Pakistan's government says Osama Bin Laden is alive +++ 225,000 U.S. soldiers in Persian Gulf region now +++ Fischer, Ivanov in Paris on a quick visit +++ Bitter debate on Iraq in Pakistani parliament

The voices are getting sharper. "We don't know whether we have nine votes now or ten or more," Colin Powell said on television yesterday. Is he bluffing? Is he being provocative? The mood of the German delegation is very bad. Ambassador Gunter Pleuger is attending a meeting of the G-8 group on the AIDS catastrophe in southern Africa and wonders, "Have the six undecided delegates allowed themselves to be bought? Is M-6 still on board?"

Officially the figure still stands at 11 to 4 against the new resolution. But word is making the rounds that Pakistan and Mexico have buckled. It is rumored that the U.S. and Japan have pointed out to Chile what could happen if they were to block possible IMF credits even though they are in the minority. But why doesn't John Negroponte put the resolution before the Council for a vote today, immediately?

It isn't just one clock that's ticking. Parallel to the diplomatic timeline there is the military one, and it seems to some delegates as though diplomacy were moving in a time bubble which might burst at any moment - as soon as the Pentagon generals are back on schedule with their plans.

Then Pleuger is handed a piece of paper. It is the French text of a statement that has been created by a French initiative. Dominique de Villepin, Sergei Ivanov, and Joschka Fischer will soon declare in Paris: "France and Russia will assert their responsibility as permanent members" in the event the new resolution is put on the table. This is the threat of a veto.

It is an open challenge to the U.S. The New York Times writes about it the following morning: "The declaration...may go down as the loudest 'No!' shouted across the Atlantic in a half century or more."

Pleuger and de la Sablière request that Council President Mamady Traoré circulate the declaration as an official document. They don't know that work on the text has been going on for two days and that Berlin was already informed the day before. Sometimes "Number One U.N. Plaza, New York" is very far removed from world events.

At any rate the M-6 in the Council feel relieved. It was in order to stabilize them that Paris, Berlin, and Moscow started the process. If France and Russia use their veto then the wobbly powers are relieved of their responsibility. Very much off-stage, in the men's room at the Security Council, an M-6 diplomat says to a colleague: "Well, this saves our ass."

Hans Blix is the inspector between the fronts in this war of the diplomats. His reports are confusing; they serve many masters. They are a constant "On the one hand and on the other hand," a constant "Yes, but." They are a little bit like Hans Blix himself.

He has a small 160-square-foot office on the 31st floor. On the wall are aerial color photographs on a scale of 1:7500 on which one should be able to see what Saddam is doing on the ground. Neat, flat buildings. It looks like an advertisement brochure for an Industrial Park in Brandenburg. From his desk Blix has a view of the "Church Center" across the way. A banner hangs there day in, day out: "No war on Iraq."

At noon they serve Chinese duck with broccoli in the U.N. cafeteria. Blix sits two floors above the cafeteria under the sky-blue coat-of-arms of the U.N. correspondents club. On it an olive branch is crossed by a quill pen. Also there are 120 people, writers, radio reporters, and female television correspondents made up as if for the circus.

At this moment, Blix is still the most famous official on earth. He has no idea that an hour from now U.S. Secretary of State Powell will hold a political funeral oration for him and his people. As he has done for weeks, Blix sits there, in a storm of photo flashes, at the center of rare power. It is precisely one o'clock.

Is Iraq cooperating? Are the inspections working? How much more time will Blix need? Will there be a final report? What do you think about the division in the Security Council? Can war be avoided? For an hour Blix answers questions. On the one hand, on the other hand. Yes, but. Even though he personally has always minimized it, he really did have power over war or peace. Had Blix repeatedly - and not just in his January report - sharply

insisted: Saddam is not cooperating, we are being deceived, then there surely would already be war.

The Americans wanted it that way; now they just roll their eyes when the conversation turns to the weapons inspector. But Blix is not the type of person who grants wishes. His courage consists in being undecided. His bravery shows itself in his hesitation.

Between one and two p.m. on Wednesday Blix makes minor headlines. He contradicts America's representation that Saddam was now destroying rockets whose existence he had denied only months before. No, Blix says, the Al Samoud missiles "had in fact been declared"; the inspectors were informed by Iraq and had known they existed.

Blix is afraid of a false peace and even more afraid of war. "War would prove that we failed," he says, clutching the papers on his knees.

The end of the press conference looks as though it had been dreamed up by a scriptwriter. At the very moment Hans Blix, wearing soft, soundless suede shoes, leaves the room, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell is beginning his speech about where things stand; his face appears on a television screen to the left of the door. Blix, in New York, passes Powell in Washington. The Secretary will deliver the inspector's obituary. He is giving a war speech.

The television pictures show him before the blue curtain in the famous "Center for Strategic and International Studies." At first the tone of the speech is not unusual; it has been the mantra of the U.S. government for weeks now: Iraq is not cooperating; Iraq is hiding weapons; Iraq is deceiving us and lying to us, taking the world for stupid.

But this is not an everyday speech. It follows the rules of classical rhetoric too closely; its course is too finely knit as though the speaker knew precisely what the significance of the moment is; he is not speaking for just the moment, but for the history books.

He dismisses the weapons inspections in one sentence. Praises Blix for his wonderful, excellent, professional work - this is suspicious. Then he says (it is now 2:30 p.m. Wednesday): "Unfortunately however, the inspections are not working." Also not a new assessment, but this time one can see it in Powell's face, this time it is serious.

It is serious because Powell admits that the international community of nations is divided and that the division could become deeper. It is serious because he speaks of the "horrors of war," of murder, of death - something no politician in the United States does unless it is necessary. "I have seen the horror of war," Powell says, "I was there when the killing was over. I can understand the hesitation." A 'but' hovers in the air. Behind it lurks war.

Once again Powell interprets Resolution 1441, the new draft; he gives Saddam Hussein a final deadline - "a few days." "Then we'll see whether Saddam understands his position or not. In case he doesn't, the consequences will be very, very real." The television networks frame his appearance with the headline "Showdown: Iraq." Now the end game has started.

Almost at the same time the foreign ministers of France, Germany, and Russia are meeting in Paris. Ivanov has warned that Russia will not abstain from voting in the Security Council, and the Russian ambassador to the U.N. has received the message in New York and is spreading the word. Sergei Lavrov is decided, you might say, morosely decided.

The Russian ambassador to the U.N. is sitting in front of a colorful glass wall that gives off light like a child's lantern on St. Martin's day. To his right, a black grand piano, to his left sits his short, bald secretary, Trepelkov, who never says anything, but smiles all the time.

At the Russian Mission to the United Nations one can forget New York. One enters a slow world in which an elderly gentleman takes one's coat, a young man in a faded suit uses a pencil to write down telephone numbers and addresses. The walls of this world are covered with silk wallpaper; chandeliers hang from the ceiling. Cell phones don't work here anymore, nor does Sergei Lavrov's Voice Stream telephone.

Are you satisfied with the cooperation between the Iraqis and the weapons inspectors?

"There's a Russian proverb: You're not fully satisfied until you're lying in your grave," Sergei Lavrov says.

Sometimes he raises his voice; sometimes his eyes sparkle; sometimes his hand waves a question aside. He does not answer any questions, but he indicates where he stands.

Do you care about the people in Iraq? a journalist asks.

"Why only Iraq? Do you care about the other people in the world who are not doing well?"
Lavrov says.

Sergei Lavrov is playing a game, setting up threatening scenarios. He can't do anything else.

An American reporter describes for him how important the threatening scenario is which the Americans are sticking to. He asks how the Russians are participating.

Lavrov looks at him. His upper lip is shiny. He came to New York for the first time in 1981 to represent the Soviet Union. At that time he represented a superpower at the United Nations. He has been Russia's ambassador to the U.N. for nine years. These are different times. You can feel it at a moment like this. Russia no longer has the power; it only has a seat on the Security Council now.

"It is costing the U.S. taxpayers a lot of money to put this pressure on Iraq," the journalist says into Lavrov's silence.

"I'm hardly the one to comment on that," Lavrov says coolly.

His short, fat spokesman wags his head. Then there is vodka and caviar for the journalists. Iraq isn't the only problem. Sergei Lavrov puts out his cigarette and leaves this little Russian world. He must go where he can be reached by phone.

The Russian mission has tacked up pictures of Chechnya on the silk wallpaper in the small salon. They show Russian soldiers playing with children, Russian soldiers unloading bags of grain for the populace, a Russian soldier petting a little goat. War can be so beautiful.

Thursday, March 6, 2003. Schröder meets Berlusconi in Bremen - Russia has 150 of its citizens flown out of Iraq +++ Bulgaria pulls its diplomats out of Baghdad +++ Rumsfeld does not exclude possibility of war on two fronts in Iraq and North Korea +++ Bush announces a second U.N. resolution +++ U.S. soldiers have taken down sections of the border fence between Kuwait and Iraq

Heavy, wet snow has fallen outside the U.N. building, and two men with shovels of the same blue as the U.N.'s blue helmets are making sure that no one will slip. The New York Times speaks about a deepening rift in the Security Council, about mutual deceptions and tricks.

The U.N. ambassadors in the Security Council are on familiar terms and some have known one another for years. John and Jean-Marc have no problems whatsoever on the personal level, even if the sale of French cheese has dropped markedly in the U.S. "We're one family," Gunter Pleuger says. "We're like an English club," says Cameroon's representative. Everyone plays the role he has been assigned, and afterward they go to eat at Le Périgord.

But today visitors are coming. In the hallways of the Security Council all are waiting for their foreign ministers. They are on their way to New York. Fischer arrives in the evening, Ivanov late at night, Jack Straw ought to be here already. The British foreign minister arrives late because it has started to snow again. The hall is half dark; the cameramen are dozing. Negroponte's spokesman, Wood, is sprawled in one of the beige leather chairs.

Will Bush declare war tonight?

"No comment," Wood says.

Has an alternative resolution been drafted jointly with the British?

"No comment."

An American journalist says there's a rumor that the Americans have captured Osama Bin Laden; no one believes it.

The Chilean ambassador to the U.N. Gabriel Valdés walks almost unnoticed down the long corridor. His nose is red, the shoulders of his trench coat are wet.

Is he under the impression that the Americans and the British still have time to act?

"Oh, yes," the Chilean says.

Can his country agree to the resolution in its present form?

"No," Valdés says.

A clear answer. The first in many weeks. It is hard to imagine. But he sticks to it. No. The Chileans won't go along. Valdés in his wet trench coat vanishes like an apparition. It is almost twelve o'clock. Straw is still stuck out there in the slush.

On Thursday Jack Straw is the first foreign minister to appear at the U.N.. Now, just before the end of the week his seems to be the most difficult role. Russia, France, Germany, and China are holding hands. Nobody really takes Bulgaria quite seriously; the others are wavering, and the Americans are doing whatever they want to do. Only England, Merry Old England, is left standing there practically without a vision.

Straw bounces up onto the stage like a ball.

He leafs through Blix's most recent report. It says there that Saddam Hussein is not ready to disarm, Straw says. He cites a few examples. He says that South Africa demonstrated how to cooperate with inspectors. He wrings his hands, and occasionally he laughs, but it does not come from the heart. Up there on the stage, the British Foreign Minister sometimes reminds one of George W. Bush. He too laughs during his speeches as though he had rehearsed laughing beforehand. The lips laugh, but the eyes don't.

Straw says it is of course possible to modify the resolution.

"Even at this late stage in diplomacy we shall do everything to reach a peaceful solution," he says. Not many words can be wedged in between the present, very late stage of diplomacy and war. Straw has reached the end of his verbal options. Here, at the edge of the abyss, the foreign minister takes a stand and says Great Britain is not aiming for a regime change at any price.

"If Saddam Hussein seriously and completely disarms we are prepared to let him stay in office," says Straw. At the moment that is Great Britain's position. Its own vision, if you like. A small, rather rhetorical difference.

Among the M-6, the undecided nations, Pakistan is perhaps in the most difficult position. Domestic opposition is growing to the alliance that was forged with the Americans during the war in Afghanistan, and its tone is daily growing more "Islamic." "We don't want this war," says Pakistan's U.N. Ambassador, Munir Akram. "We are concerned about the Iraqi people, and we are afraid of the unforeseeable consequences. Great unrest will come to our countries. Really, we are hoping for peace."

Munir Akram is a refined gentleman with elegant eyeglasses, slicked-down hair, and a Verizon Triband cell phone. He speaks so softly that one has to lean over to hear him. He is sitting in the Indonesian lounge in a cream-colored armchair and speaks about the principle of give and take. "It is not unknown in international relations, right?"

The Indonesian lounge is named after two wooden figures the island nation once gave to the U.N. as a gift. They are mounted on pedestals that stand on a green floor. The room measures some 550 square yards; the ceiling is about 30 feet high. A bar and a disc jockey could turn this room, at the other end of the Security Council lobby with its wall of windows, into a New York night-life sensation. But it is intended for daytime affairs. For the art of delivering threats in a chatty tone of voice. For conversations about money that don't mention the word "money." The Indonesian lounge belongs to the lobbyists.

What does "give and take" mean, Ambassador Akram?

"We are speaking of good relations."

About bribery? Buying votes?

"It has to do with possibilities for military cooperation and trade contacts, with political and cultural exchange, things like that." And it's on this basis that the decision for war or peace is made?

"No, you can't put it like that. But, you know, on principle the Iraq question isn't important enough to risk one's good connections."

Relations between Pakistan and the U.S. have been splendid since last weekend, since the news came in that Qaeda's number three man, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, was arrested near Islamabad. Bush and Pakistan's ruler Musharraf were on the phone about the capture first thing Monday. Ambassador Akram says, "there was no talk about Iraq." But presumably about "good relations," yes.

Nobody has any doubt that Pakistan will go along with the Americans in the end. "If I get the order to do so from my president," he said to his colleagues from France and Germany, "then that is what I must do." They reply that they will still be able to dine together, "no problem, Munir."

That evening Joschka Fischer is on an airplane circling over New York. He has a date at 7:00 p.m. with Colin Powell; there are reservations at the Waldorf Astoria, but the plane can't land. The airport is iced over.

For 27 minutes the German foreign minister's plane is in a holding pattern. Fischer seems convinced that the Americans won't introduce their resolution. He sits in the rear of the plane, among the journalists who have come with him on the flight, and in the gloomiest of colors he paints the unimaginable consequences of a war in Iraq. He speaks of asymmetrical wars between terrorist groups and nations, of shocks to the global markets, and the dangers to open societies. Then at last his plane is cleared for landing.

The journalists drive to the "German House" near the U.N. building where George W. Bush's news conference has been broadcast live on television since 8:00 p.m. It is one of the rare prime-time White House news conferences. Bush held his first one after becoming President shortly after Afghanistan was attacked in October 2001.

Bush is preparing his country for war - and for the news that the U.S. has lost its battle in the Security Council. He says, "We really don't need anybody's permission." He says, "I will not leave the American people at the mercy of the Iraqi dictator and his weapons." Shortly before 9:00 p.m. the American president says his country will introduce the new resolution no matter what. Come what may.

Fiftieth Street between Park and Lexington Avenues is closed off after 8:00 p.m. and is crowded with heavily armed police, fire fighters, and National Guard troops. Colin Powell is

holding court at the Waldorf Astoria; the area cordoned off around the side entrance of the hotel is wide enough to make you think a bomb is being defused there.

At 9:00 p.m. Powell's guest Joschka Fischer arrives in a black Cadillac along with his entourage of two dozen people wearing winter coats. The sidewalk has not even been cleared for them. The foreign minister goes through the revolving door at the main entrance, like a hotel guest, only much faster. Powell is waiting up in the Waldorf Towers. He has allotted 20 minutes for Fischer.

At 9:20 p.m. Fischer comes downstairs again, Pleuger at his side; they try to look like people in a good mood, but they look even more tired than 20 minutes before. Baroque flute music trickles down from the ceiling. Fischer maintains an iron silence, even when a female reporter from a camera crew asks him what message Powell gave him.

Because it was a private conversation, no one will find out exactly what happened. But perhaps the American told him about the problems he is having with his own people. The New York Times speculates that in the White House a search has started for someone to blame for the disaster in the Security Council. Maybe Powell will be out of a job soon. Later, on his way back from the Waldorf Astoria, Fischer tells those closest to him, "It would be too bad if Powell, who understands Europe better than the rest of them, were to go."

Friday, March 7, 2003. Stock markets all over the world under pressure: Japanese Nikkei Index at a 20-year low; Dax falls to 1996 level +++ Report of U.S. troops massing in Turkey without permission of the parliament +++ 50 Israeli tanks enter Gaza Strip after suicide attack +++ Osama Bin Laden's sons allegedly captured in Pakistan +++ Bush and Putin talk on the telephone and agree to "continue the dialogue about the situation in Iraq" +++ Japan closes its embassy in Baghdad

Some students stand in line outside the U.N. building. They have little signs hanging from their necks and are supposed to speak soon in the hall of the General Assembly. Today's subject: "The future is in our hands." They are very excited.

In the hall behind the Guernica wall hanging, Mamady Traoré had to yield the President's chair to his boss. Guinea's Foreign Minister Hadja Mahawa Bangoura Camara opens the 4,714th session of the U.N. Security Council at 10:38 a.m. with three strokes of the gavel. He also is wearing a cap and a festive burnoose, and if he is excited he doesn't show it.

Up to that point there had been a hectic ringing of cell phones in the room, laughter, the lively exchange of greetings of the diplomats, and a hum of voices. Now it is quiet. The air-conditioned air smells slightly of after-shave lotion.

Dominique de Villepin and Joschka Fischer sit next to each other. Colin Powell and Jack Straw directly across from them. The alphabet has arranged it this way. That morning the "Peace Camp" (that's what the opponents of a new resolution are calling themselves) agreed to reject the British compromise. It is still unclear, however, how the M-6, the worldlings in the middle, will react to Jack Straw's plan to give Iraq a very short, final deadline.

The president asks whether Iraq's ambassador may take a seat at the table. There is no objection and so Mohammed al-Duri sits down at the far end of the table. He sits on the edge of his chair. Those ridiculous earphones and the thin strands of hair make him look like a perfect scapegoat.

Hans Blix reads his report. The spoken words count. The Chief Inspector's voice is hoarse. He frequently clears his throat. He has left his wrinkled suits in the closet and is wearing a pressed suit, steel gray. He speaks of "significant efforts by Iraq," of "active and even pro-

active" conduct in the disarmament process. No subterranean laboratories, no mobile biological weapons factories have been found.

But Blix remains true to his role as scout for many masters. He also speaks of the possibility of biological weapons material still being there. He says Iraqi cooperation could have been better. The same old game. Yes, but. In any case on Friday he asks in a rare clear statement for more time, more staff; he demands that the inspections continue, something he has never done before. It sounds like despair.

Joschka Fischer is still editing his speech. His speech writer is the man who is most on the go at times like this. The speech arrived only three minutes before it was Fischer's turn to speak. No one is to have more than seven minutes. Fischer speaks for six minutes and 58 seconds. The German delegation gloats about all the "momentum," becomes the champion of the Inspector's demands. It conjures up the horrors of war, saying, "Peaceful means have not been exhausted by far." Diagonally behind Fischer, Ambassador de la Sablière nods enthusiastically; once he even grips Pleuger's arm, nodding as though he wanted to say, "Well done, Gunter."

When Colin Powell begins to speak the room becomes quiet. Everyone comes to attention, a small jolt goes through Fischer's body. But after a while, the humming sound begins again; Powell's speech spreads over the room like a heavy blanket. Powell speaks like a beaten man. No feeling of power emanates from the Secretary of State of the most powerful country in the world.

He speaks five minutes longer than the allotted time. But why? Colin Powell is repeating the same old arguments; nothing new. All that's left for him is to speak louder or softer; he has already tried everything else.

The speakers of the officially undecided nations stand by their reputation. They change tack. Certainly, they speak for peace, but they also refer to the wording of the resolution. Mexico sounds like an abstention. Pakistan's ambassador says, "The task of this Council is peace, not war." But how influential will these sentences be when America sends out its call to arms?

De Villepin says four times that France will not agree to a war resolution. He paints a word picture of the horrors and the insanity of war; he praises the success the inspectors have

had, the diplomatic pressure on Iraq. His voice does not tremble with doubt. He almost finishes on time. In conclusion he asks that the heads of state be present next week at the decisive vote. It takes a moment for this to sink in. The heads of state. No one can imagine George W. Bush in this company. It seems to be over.

Immediately after de Villepin sits down the buzzing begins again. Scarcely anyone is listening as the Chinese foreign minister says his country also will not agree to a war resolution. Joschka Fischer starts writing. It looks as though he is editing the transcript of an interview with one of the Sunday papers. He is still writing when Jack Straw begins to speak, but he soon stops. Straw is fighting the battle that Colin Powell apparently is no longer able to fight. After everything has run its course, and all the roles have been distributed, Jack Straw once more tries to change their minds.

"My dear friend Dominique," Straw calls across the table to de Villepin. Fischer looks up from his paper work. "With all due respect, but I think you're wrong." Straw will call the French foreign minister by his first name three more times. He will suggest a new time frame for the draft of the resolution. He will be the only speaker to receive applause from those in the gallery, but it changes nothing.

All he accomplishes is that Dominique de Villepin immediately storms out of the room in order to have the last word, at least before the media.

"I like my colleague Jack Straw, and I must assume that he believes what he says. But the new time frame is only another war ultimatum to which we will not agree."

Later, standing in front of the Guernica wall hanging Powell looks ill and tired. De Villepin looks almost too well. Tanned and healthy. "A country may be able to win the war in Iraq, but to establish peace one needs the U.N.," he says. He answers reporters' questions in French and in English. At the end he asks for a question in Spanish. A short Chilean journalist is brought forward and asks something. De Villepin can also speak Spanish.

The "Peace Camp" has - publicly and in the presence of the foreign ministers - proven that inspections can work, and that at the least they are "promising", and that in any case they are an argument against an immediate war. The rift in the Atlantic Alliance is widening. The words change. History turns in circles. It circles the horseshoe table of the Security Council. They were all there again. One can't say much more than that.

At the end Fischer says, Nothing has changed. But outside the news reports are not subsiding. The U.S. President, who spoke to his people the night before in a prime-time news conference, is quoted the following morning as having said that Saddam is a cancerous growth. He is not only the President. He is also the commander-in-chief of almost a quarter million soldiers in the Persian Gulf. Is it conceivable that he should have ordered one sixth of his fighting force flown halfway around the world just to have them brought back home now because U.N. officials are measuring aluminum tubes and moving through hangars and palaces with isotope detectors? In addition to a diplomatic "momentum" there is also a military momentum. Which of the two will change history?

At 6:00 p.m. the airplane of the German foreign minister takes off from John F. Kennedy airport. His colleagues fly to their respective capitals, and it is as if they were flying into another world. A world in which the center of events is not a slate gray building on the East River in New York, but a place simply called the White House located in a city on the Potomac.

The week of the diplomats has come to an end. Now it is the turn of George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, Tommy Franks, and perhaps of Saddam Hussein, to decide about war.

Goodbye, New York.

Good morning, Vietnam.

ULLRICH FICHTNER, OLAF IHLAU, ALEXANDER OSAN, ALEXANDER SMOLT CZYK

[translated from the German by Margot Bettauer Dembo]