

SADDAM'S BEST FRIEND

How the C.I.A. made it a lot easier for the Iraqi leader to rearm.

BY SEYMOUR M. HERSH

LAST December, after Saddam Hussein threatened to end seven years of United Nations arms-control inspections, President Clinton ordered American attacks on Iraq. Once again, the world watched, on television, as missiles fell on carefully picked targets. The purpose of the attacks, Clinton

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told reporters, was to “degrade” Iraq’s capacity for waging war, and he added, “I gave the order because I believe we cannot allow Saddam Hussein to dismantle UNSCOM and resume the production of weapons of mass destruction with impunity.” The President was mistaken. The United Nations Special Commission for Iraq, known as UNSCOM, had already been effectively dismantled, by the shortsighted policies of his own Administration. Then, a few hours after Clinton spoke, William Cohen, the Secretary of Defense, appeared on television. “One thing should be absolutely clear,” he told reporters. “We are concentrating on mil-

itary targets.” That, too, was a misstatement, for two of the targets were sites where Saddam was known to entertain mistresses, and they were specifically struck in the hope of assassinating him. Saddam responded to the bombing—and the bungled assassination attempt—by formally ousting UNSCOM and turning

anew to Russia, historically his most important trading partner. Today, eight years after the Gulf War, American policy has collapsed in Iraq, and a Cold War mentality has returned. Saddam is unchecked by U.N. inspectors as he pursues his goal of becoming a nuclear power, with the aid of Russian strategic materials. Saddam’s ally in these efforts is Yevgeny Primakov, the Russian Prime Minister, a longtime friend who, according to highly classified communications intelligence, received at least one large payment from Iraq—by wire transfer—in November of 1997. The distrust of Primakov throughout the American intelligence commu-

nity is acute. One former C.I.A. operative told me, “I don’t know how many times we had to say this to Strobe”—Strobe Talbott, the Deputy Secretary of State—“but Primakov is just not a good guy.”

THE targeting of Saddam had grown, in part, out of an extraordinary intelligence coup by a team of UNSCOM arms inspectors. The team—headed by Scott Ritter, a former U.S. Marine Corps intelligence officer—had been trying for two years to unscramble the encrypted communications system that Saddam has used since the end of the Gulf War to hide the full extent of his strategic stockpile. Ritter and his UNSCOM colleagues knew that there were missiles and warheads to be found. They also knew that Saddam, who travelled frequently in and around Baghdad, lived in constant fear of attacks on his life—from both inside and outside Iraq—and had surrounded himself with a huge apparatus of bodyguards, known as the Special Security Organization. Saddam frequently communicated, through aides, with his entourage from secure telephones scattered around Baghdad and from a radio telephone in his car. UNSCOM also knew (from a high-level Iraqi defector) that these forces had orders to do more than protect Saddam: they were also responsible for safeguarding Iraq’s hidden weapons.

The encryption system on Saddam’s telephones, made in Sweden, was as sophisticated as any on the international market. The phones had a series of channels, and on each channel were algorithms that chopped the signals into hundreds of bits as the channels were switched. To get at the signals, Ritter’s people took the extreme risk of operating, under the cover of the U.N. flag, an interception station in UNSCOM’s offices in Baghdad and in a mobile unit.

Early in the spring of 1998, the gamble paid off. The algorithms were unscrambled, and Saddam’s most closely protected communications were suddenly pouring into UNSCOM. “It was one of the most valuable operations since the Cold War,” one informed U.N. adviser told me. But UNSCOM’s mission was to uncover Iraq’s complex system of concealing its weapons program; the mechanics of Saddam’s personal security were a benefit only if they could lead to hidden arms caches.

The Central Intelligence Agency, which had been helping UNSCOM inter-

pret its intelligence findings since 1991, had a different agenda. Its goal, authorized by President Clinton, was to work with Iraqi dissidents, in Saddam's Special Security Organization and elsewhere, to overthrow the regime, by any means possible. In the C.I.A.'s view, Ritter's intelligence unit was always in the way—and, in any case, could not be trusted with sensitive information; the C.I.A. felt that any important intelligence it might supply to UNSCOM would inevitably find its way back to the Iraqi regime. "There were killer fights about getting involved with the U.N.," one former C.I.A. official told me. "We don't get involved with international organizations."

In March of 1998, a high-tech team from the National Security Agency, which is responsible for American communications intelligence, flew to Bahrain to review the telephone intercepts. One official recalled that when the intercepts had been decrypted and translated, the Americans told themselves, "Here's the best intelligence that we've ever had!" The official went on, "Saddam is suddenly exposed for the first time. He's the Godfather! He gets drunk, starts raving like a madman, and his secretary will get on and say he's lost his mind—ordering murders. We never had him on this level before." Like Mafia leaders, Saddam rarely, if ever, uses the telephone himself, but relies on aides to relay his commands. The overheard "secretary" was Presidential Secretary Abid Hamid Mahmoud, Saddam's closest aide, who was much feared by Iraqis. At the same time, the official said, senior N.S.A. managers were "panicked," because the information from the telephone intercepts was "controlled by the United Nations."

The Americans felt that Ritter's intelligence was too important to be left to arms controllers. For the first time, with the aid of intercepts, Saddam's hour-to-hour whereabouts could conceivably be tracked—and even anticipated. Within a few months, the Clinton Administration persuaded Richard Butler, an Australian who in the summer of 1997 had been appointed the executive chairman of UNSCOM, to tell Ritter and his men in Baghdad that they would have to get out of the signals-intelligence business: Washington, and not UNSCOM, would now decide whom and what to listen to. (Butler disputes this account.)

Thus, in April of 1998, operational control of the Saddam intercepts shifted

to one of America's least publicized intelligence units, the Special Collection Service. The S.C.S., which is jointly operated by the C.I.A. and the N.S.A., is responsible for, among other things, deploying highly trained teams of electronics specialists in sensitive areas around the world to monitor diplomatic and other kinds of communications. Its operations are often run from secure sites inside American embassies.

The UNSCOM team in Baghdad felt betrayed, and believed that it would now be vulnerable to capture and prosecution by Iraq on espionage charges. The team's equipment was still intercepting crucial telephone calls, but the United States was controlling the "take." Ritter, desperate to keep the operation under U.N. control, asked the Israelis to process the telephone intercepts. (Israeli intelligence had been the first group to tell UNSCOM about the importance of Saddam's Special Security Organization.) The Israelis refused (under pressure from Washington), and the UNSCOM operation was shut down until July, when the Americans unilaterally installed their own collection devices in the UNSCOM offices in Baghdad.

Ritter was reluctant to discuss the specifics of the UNSCOM intelligence program with me, but in a series of interviews recently he stressed that there was an enormous difference between accumulating information on behalf of the United Nations and accumulating it on behalf of the United States. "Stuff was being collected"—by the Americans—"without our knowledge and without Butler's knowledge," Ritter said. "That's espionage. My team was worried. I told Butler about it"—the American operation—"and said we have to shut it down. It didn't happen."

Once the American technicians were in control, they focussed on Saddam—and not on his missiles and warheads. They eventually found a pattern in Saddam's movements, as tracked by intercepts, which they believed might lead to a successful attempt to eliminate him. Saddam regularly saw his mistresses in two sites—one a retreat at Auja, near his ancestral home, Tikrit, and the other at his daughter's villa in Babil, in suburban Baghdad. When the American forces

attacked Iraq in December, cruise missiles destroyed both targets.

Saddam, of course, survived. One senior Clinton Administration intelligence official acknowledged the failure, but he added, "In our business, you never have one-hundred-per-cent assurance. Let's assume you know he's there. You've got a time delay. How do you know a guy doesn't finish the business with his mistress and go on his way, or to the bathroom. It may be a double"—someone posing as Saddam—"or he may have changed locations. There's so much potential for a slip between cup and lip."

A Republican who served at a high level in the Reagan and Bush Administrations told me that he had learned before the December raid that the Administration had "a fix" on Saddam's whereabouts. Administration officials, he said, "were touting" the fact that they had good intelligence. "People treat Saddam as an idiot," he said, referring to Clinton and his senior aides. He added that the failure of the bombing was evidence that Saddam had been aware of the penetration of his telephones. In his opinion, the man said, "He was doubling or tripling on the coms"—intelligence jargon meaning that Saddam was deliberately generating misleading or incorrect statements.

Other high-level intelligence officials I spoke with had reservations about the Administration's eagerness to eliminate Saddam in the absence of any long-term strategic plan for dealing with the region. "I'm not against nailing the guy," one fully informed military officer said to me, "but then what do you do?" Assassination, he added, "is not a policy. It's a tool of policy." (Officially, of course, "assassination," which is barred by Executive Order, was not the purpose of the raids.) A former intelligence official who still consults at a high level in the Clinton Administration told me, "Eventually, they'll succeed. And then what do we get?"

The result of the American hijacking of the U.N.'s intelligence activities was that Saddam survived but UNSCOM did not. "The American government walked on its dick—and with golf shoes," a dispirited U.N. official told me. "They just goofed us."

IN retrospect, given the inherent conflict between the C.I.A. and UNSCOM, the remarkable fact is that UNSCOM lasted as long as it did. In early 1991, during the Gulf War, the member



states of the United Nations had helped the United States roll back the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The spirit of post-Cold War cooperation promised a miracle: UNSCOM, operating on behalf of the U.N. Security Council, would utilize the secret intelligence agencies of its member states, Communist and non-Communist alike, to investigate the Iraqi arsenal. Dozens of nations joined Washington in providing intelligence support—and their most sophisticated intelligence operatives—to the early UNSCOM inspections.

The first executive chairman of UNSCOM, Rolf Ekeus, of Sweden, was a diplomat and arms-control expert with an amiable personality that masked a determination to run UNSCOM as an independent U.N. operation, and not as an adjunct of American foreign policy. Ekeus did turn to an American, however, for help in setting up an intelligence unit. He chose Scott Ritter, who had served as an intelligence officer in the Gulf War. In the security-conscious world of intelligence, Ritter arrived at the U.N. with high-risk baggage: earlier, while serving in a top-secret Pentagon arms-control job in the Soviet Union, he had been suspected of being romantically involved with a Georgian national. (He subsequently married the woman.) With this shaky security file, he was nobody's choice in Washington for the UNSCOM job, and some C.I.A. officials chose to be skeptical of his bona fides. Initially, the agency insisted that Ritter be excluded from its own intelligence briefings to UNSCOM, although Nikita Smidovich, a former Russian diplomat and arms-control expert, who was also assigned to UNSCOM's intelligence unit, was allowed to attend them. An internal C.I.A. review by a senior intelligence official named Samuel Hoskinson, however, quickly concluded that Ritter was not a security risk, and the agency dropped its restriction. "I never thought Ritter was going to give anything away," Hoskinson told me. "Anyway, we're not stupid. We don't share everything with the U.N."

The proposed sharing of intelligence had some American proponents. "It was the first time we ever turned over [intelligence] assets to a group like the United Nations," recalled David C. Underwood, a retired Air Force colonel who in 1991 was assigned to serve as a State Department liaison to UNSCOM. "I'm a twenty-

six-year veteran—a Cold War warrior," he told me. "We had the greatest scientists and the great intelligence analysts of forty countries working together, with all hands on top of the table." He then described a dramatic early meeting of UNSCOM at which a Russian military expert briefed his counterparts from the Defense Department on how the Iraqis had camouflaged their fleet of mobile Scud missile launchers, with Russian help, before the Gulf War. (Only a few of the Scuds were destroyed by Allied bombing during the war.) "I had a colonel from Russian intelligence and one from the C.I.A. at the same table," Underwood said.

Not everyone in Washington shared Underwood's enthusiasm. "Some people in our government could not stand it," he explained, referring to the senior officers of the C.I.A.'s Directorate of Operations. "You have to understand the culture. People in the C.I.A. are a mixture of professionals and careerists overlaid with a Cold War mentality. The impulse is to spy." In the months before Iraq's August, 1990, invasion of Kuwait, however, Saddam had been relentless in driving potential American spies out of his government and military. "His counterintelligence blew them away," I was told by a former C.I.A. operations officer. "All the significant assets we had in Iraq died in 1989. The agency had zilch." The operators in the C.I.A. inevitably saw UNSCOM—if such an agency had to be tolerated—as a vehicle for collecting intelligence on Iraq. The U.N. inspectors were on the ground in Iraq, where the C.I.A. could not be.

THE struggle between UNSCOM and Washington intensified in September of 1991, when a U.N. inspection team was detained by Iraqi forces in a Baghdad parking lot for four days, after its leaders refused to return newly discovered documents dealing with efforts by Iraq to obtain nuclear weapons. To Ekeus's surprise, some details of the parking-lot standoff were made public by the Bush Administration—an American member of the UNSCOM delegation had been "signalling privately" to the United States via a secure satellite-telephone link. Ekeus upbraided the American for his back-channel reporting to Washington, and soon received an

angry telephone call from Richard Clarke, the director of the State Department's office of political-military affairs. "He said they"—the American inspectors—"should report to him and not to the United Nations," Ekeus recalled, adding dryly, "We had a nasty conversation." Ekeus held his ground, and refused to authorize any independent reporting from his inspection teams to Washington. "The Americans were irritated at us, because they could not control the flow of information," he said.

Before leaving office, President Bush, politically embarrassed by Saddam's defiance after the Gulf War, secretly authorized the C.I.A. to begin plotting a coup. When Clinton succeeded Bush, he and his national-security adviser, Anthony Lake, renewed that authorization. But the new President and his aides wanted to keep Iraq off the front page. Ekeus recalled, "Lake used to say to me, 'Don't give us sweaty palms'—that is, don't create any crises. Dealing with Iraq became a secondary issue for the Washington bureaucracy, and the day-to-day management was left to junior officers in the Pentagon and the State Department—and, of course, to the C.I.A. Lake and one of his senior aides on the National Security Council, George Tenet (who was named C.I.A. director in 1996), became fervent supporters of a quick fix—the elimination of Saddam Hussein by a bloody coup d'état. At various times, they suggested that it was to be triggered by the Iraqi exile movement or from within Saddam's immediate circle of advisers. The failure of the White House to understand the severe limitations of the C.I.A.'s Directorate of Operations—only a few officers in the Near East Division spoke Arabic, for example—would mar Iraqi policy and create enormous difficulties for UNSCOM.

One agency officer in particular, Steven Richter, who eventually took over Iraqi operations as head of the Near East Division, opposed UNSCOM's independence. Renowned inside the agency as a territorial and single-minded manager, Richter had grown up in the Directorate of Operations, and had served two decades abroad, much of it in the Middle East. Before he was recalled to Washington to run the Near East Division, he had been chief of station in Amman, Jordan, which was the overseas center for the C.I.A.'s coup plotting inside Iraq. Just before his promotion, Richter had been



deeply involved in the machinations of a group of high-level Iraqi defectors who he and his superiors thought provided the best hope of eliminating Saddam.

Richter was a controversial, and intimidating, manager—brilliant, but, as even his defenders acknowledge, with considerable faults. “Steven really knows his business,” one colleague told me. “He’s probably one of the savviest operational guys. But he’s still dealing with a deck from the Cold War era. It’s the D.O. mentality—very turfish.” Another colleague said that Richter’s insistence on making all decisions himself had been extremely destructive to the Near East Division. “He’s in control, and you don’t question him,” the intelligence officer told me. “He’s driven off the talented core of Arabists.” A former White House official similarly depicted Richter as consistently letting “his ego get in his way on the job,” and explained, “He takes any person with independence and says, ‘Get out of here.’ Everybody who has any clue—it’s ‘Out of here.’” The result, the former official added, was that Richter ended up surrounded by “tail-wagging idiots” and found himself constantly being outmaneuvered by Saddam.

The Near East Division was internally polarized as the result of an earlier Richter assignment, as the director of a secret operations center in Germany in the late nineteen-eighties. The center’s mission had been to collect intelligence from Iranians who were spying, at great personal risk, inside Iran. The operation was primitive. From Iran, the agents mailed their intelligence reports to a seemingly innocent private home or a mailbox in Germany—known in the trade as an “accommodation address”—to which the C.I.A. had access. “There were only two accommodation addresses” for Iran inside Germany, one of Richter’s former associates told me. “It was assumed that Iranian counter-intelligence was locked onto them and saw them.” Richter discounted the warnings of colleagues and ordered the agents to double their reporting. (At the time, as everyone involved understood, a basic measure of a station chief’s success was sheer volume of intelligence reports.) Astonishingly, as a subsequent internal C.I.A. counter-intelligence investigation showed, letters sent to Richter’s agents in Iran were often addressed in the same hand and mailed in batches that in-

cluded the return accommodation addresses. The Iranians quickly became suspicious and blew the network apart. More than thirty Iranian informants were seized and put to death. Many of Richter’s associates remain convinced that the requirement for more message traffic was their un-doing. One associate told me, “Everybody in the organization who has a memory of this knows that Richter was guilty of the worst sin a senior operations officer could be accused of—being sloppy.”

IN early 1994, Rolf Ekeus was privately approached by an Israeli intelligence official, and he agreed to open discussions with Israel on the sharing of UNSCOM information. The first meeting, in New York, provided an electric moment. The Israelis had turned over a stack of intelligence reports, and the UNSCOM staff began rapidly flipping through the pages. At first, the documents seemed humdrum—“mostly an account of Iraqi stockpiles,” Scott Ritter recalled. But one paragraph revealed the existence of the Iraqi weapons-concealment operation and the elite units in Saddam’s Special Security Organization that were assigned to it.

Ritter now saw an opportunity, and envisaged a joint Israeli-United Nations signals-intelligence (SIGINT) operation aimed at Saddam’s Special Security Organization. This prospect triggered acute anxiety at the C.I.A. What’s more, Ritter and his colleagues wanted Washington’s permission to share U-2 reconnaissance photographs of Iraq with the Israelis, whose photo interpreters were highly regarded. That was a hard sell, and it took more than six months. Ekeus himself had to intervene with John M. Deutch, who became C.I.A. director in May of 1995. Ekeus had enormous leverage in the dispute, for the U-2 flights were under the direct control of UNSCOM and could not be challenged by Saddam. If Washington rejected Ekeus’s request and insisted that the U-2 film not be shared with Israel, all parties understood that Ekeus would simply stop the U-2 flights. Ekeus got his way, but only after a bitter struggle.

The Directorate of Operations resisted the move. “I can’t tell you how much the D.O. sandbagged UNSCOM on the U-2 dispute,” one former C.I.A. official told me. “They used to spin Deutch up”—that is, raise constant

complaints about UNSCOM's intentions—"and get him to call Ekeus and Lake" with complaints. The D.O. also did not want UNSCOM to get involved with SIGINT at all. "Basically, they went to the Israelis and said, 'Don't help the United Nations'" with signals intelligence. "Why?" The C.I.A. man answered his own question in a bully's tone: "Iraq is my country. What in the hell are you doing in my country?"

Richter and his colleagues in the Near East Division had a special reason for resenting UNSCOM's efforts to collect intelligence from within the Special Security Organization. Richter had his own ambitions for Saddam's bodyguard and a second elite Iraqi unit, the Special Republican Guards: he hoped to persuade their leaders to mount, with his help, a coup against Saddam. Scott Ritter's targeting of both groups would inevitably attract the attention of Iraq's relentless counter-intelligence service, and make the C.I.A.'s recruiting job all the more difficult. Ritter and Richter, and the two agencies, were in each other's way.

ANOTHER open conflict between Ritter and Richter began with an August, 1995, Israeli intelligence report, provided to Ritter, which revealed that a Russian export company had been bringing Iraq sophisticated gyroscopes—guidance devices, salvaged from ballistic missiles in decommissioned Russian submarines, that could dramatically improve the accuracy of the Iraqi missile fleet. The report, based on intercepted telephone calls and other forms of intelligence, also provided additional evidence that Saddam had managed, despite UNSCOM's efforts, to hide advanced missiles somewhere in Iraq. The gyroscopes had been flown from Russia to Amman, and were picked up there by a Jordanian trucking company, operating on behalf of the Russian merchants, and driven across the border to Baghdad.

"The Israeli SIGINT was hot stuff" and provided invaluable specifics, Ritter recalled—"which flights, which shipments, which crates." At least one shipment of the Russian gyroscopes had been trucked to Baghdad by the time he got the intelligence, Ritter said, and another shipment was en route. UNSCOM had no operational capability inside Jordan, so Ritter turned to the C.I.A. His immediate goal was to get C.I.A. operatives

to open the gyroscopes in Jordan and implant beacons—homing devices—that would enable UNSCOM to find the secret site of a long-suspected major missile-assembly plant. The plant could then be targeted for a surprise inspection.

"I went to Richter's people first, and they turned it down," Ritter told me. The stated reason was security: UNSCOM could not be trusted. A former C.I.A. official, asked later about Richter's attitude, confirmed that the Directorate of Operations believed that "any use of Israeli SIGINT"—by Ritter—"was espionage," because Ritter was acting on intelligence supplied by a foreign entity. Ritter had a different explanation for the C.I.A.'s stance. "They were gunning for me," he said, because of his role in getting the U-2 photography into Israeli hands. "From then on, it was war," Ritter said of Richter. "He was always moving in on the UNSCOM intelligence, and I was always beating him back."

Nothing further happened until November, when the Israelis informed Ritter that two shipments of Russian gyroscopes had made their way to Iraq and that several shipments were sitting in a warehouse in Amman, awaiting delivery. Ekeus did more than approve an operation: he sent a fax to one of King Hussein's top advisers, asking for his support. Ritter was then put into the hands of a Jordanian officer who was responsible for the King's secret relations with Israel. A hundred and eighty sets of gyroscopes and test equipment were seized on the eve of their shipment to Baghdad. "It was our 'big victory,'" Ritter told me, recalling that he and his Jordanian colleagues celebrated by prying open one of the gyroscopes and marveling at its complexity. Ritter's goal, he said, was to persuade UNSCOM's newfound allies in Jordan to permit the next shipment to go into Iraq, but only after at least one beacon had been implanted.

Ritter left Jordan the next morning, and the operation fell apart. A C.I.A. team, Ritter says, claimed the gyroscopes and told the Jordanians that Ritter was untrustworthy. The gyroscopes ended up being shipped to a government labora-

tory in Suitland, Maryland. In the last weeks of 1995, Ritter said, he returned to his Jordanian contact with a list of Iraqi front companies operating out of Amman and was met with the accusation that he was "crooked." Ritter said he was told that Steven Richter had gone to his contacts in King Hussein's court "and sabotaged the whole thing"—that Richter "lied to the Jordanians." Ritter was subsequently approached by an operative who worked for the C.I.A.'s Non-Proliferation Center, whose mission is to monitor the spread of strategic weapons, and was given an apology for the alleged lies that had been told. In an interview for this article, a former high-level C.I.A. official with direct knowledge of the incident confirmed the gist of Ritter's account. Richter, who had excellent sources in Amman, had learned of Ritter's activity and had been eager "to get Scott out of it," the former official told me. "You have to understand," he added, "the D.O. thinks it can tell people to 'get the hell out of my country.'" Ritter himself says that the C.I.A.'s meddling "killed the use of beacons in gyroscopes."

Ritter struck back. He decided that the moment had come to debrief Iraqi defectors in Jordan on Saddam's weapons-concealment techniques. C.I.A. coup plotting, Ritter knew, was at its peak. "We asked for defector support"—the right to interview defectors—"and the C.I.A. said no," Ritter told me. "But the Jordanian government let us do it. The C.I.A. was pissed, because some of these guys were being used for coup plotting. I asked the defectors to report on organization—how they communicated, their covert cells, the family ties." Ritter understood, he said, that the requests were provocative and poorly timed. "Richter was very angry," he said.

BY early 1996, the UNSCOM office in Baghdad had begun running a burgeoning SIGINT operation in the hope of learning how Saddam's special security apparatus was concealing his weapons program. Ritter and Nikita Smidovich, the Russian arms-control expert in UNSCOM's intelligence unit, fashioned, with Ekeus's approval, an aggressive approach: they would lead a team on a series of surprise inspections and monitor every frequency in the area to "see who's talking to whom." The goal was to find a frequency full of encrypted traffic that was specifically reacting to the



UNSCOM inspectors. Once the frequency was found—itself an extremely difficult task—the signal could be recorded and sent off to N.S.A. headquarters, in Fort Meade, Maryland, for decryption and translation. Signals intelligence, if processed quickly and accurately, could help to unravel the Iraqi patterns of concealment and deception, and so make it possible to find the missiles and warheads that the UNSCOM inspectors sensed were being hidden. Eventually, after a few months of collection, Ritter recalled, UNSCOM was presented with the “take” from the intercepts, but much of it consisted of partial transcripts and summaries of Iraqi conversations “in the clear”—that is, unscrambled. There was little evidence of the encrypted conversations. “It was crap,” Ritter said. Washington was keeping the good stuff to itself.

UNSCOM’s response to the lack of cooperation, Ritter said, was to say, in essence, “Screw the Americans,” and to hand over its reels of tapes for processing to the Israelis and to British intelligence, with whom Ritter had established a working relationship. He went on, “I told the Brits, ‘You have to understand that the Israelis are players and would share the take.’ The Brits said it was up to Rolf.” Ekeus gave his approval, Ritter said, but UNSCOM’s SIGINT operation—not yet able to decipher encrypted telephone talk—merely “pissed along” until the breakthrough in the spring of 1998. The intelligence being collected, of high quality or not, was doing little to help UNSCOM keep Saddam from amassing a nuclear arsenal.

Ekeus initially refused to discuss details of electronic intelligence with me and warned me that Ritter often “fantasizes” about past events. But when I repeated Ritter’s account to him he acknowledged that “much of what Ritter says is true. We had the technology to get Saddam, and we did all the work. We asked the Americans to process it, and they gave us very little—chicken feed. The United States was not prepared to go out on a limb for us.”

SOMETIME in 1996, the C.I.A.’s Near East Division, with approval from a high-level authority, had begun a separate, illicit SIGINT operation inside Iraq, sending in teams disguised as UNSCOM inspectors, to install listening devices aimed at Iraqi military movements. The highly secret operation, which was pub-



“But that was long ago, before we dipped our bread in olive oil.”

licly disclosed early this month by Barton Gellman, of the *Washington Post*, used UNSCOM equipment throughout Iraq and UNSCOM office space in Baghdad.

Richter’s operation, revolving around a group of defectors from the ruling Ba’thist Party in Iraq, was apparently tied to its efforts to bring about the long-awaited coup, which was scheduled to take place that summer. The plan ended in spectacular failure when one of Saddam’s loyal officers contacted the C.I.A. station chief in Amman on a supposedly secure agency communications link and informed him that Saddam knew all the detailed plans of the coup and had rounded up and executed scores of those involved.

Ritter told me that he had eventually learned of the C.I.A.’s spying and had formally notified Charles Duelfer, the senior American in the UNSCOM chain of command. Ritter understood the seriousness of the issue: the C.I.A.’s intelligence-gathering, if it should be uncovered and made public by the Iraqis, would seriously erode UNSCOM’s standing inside Iraq and among members of the international arms-control community. Ritter, who had been sharing everything he knew with Ekeus, did not share this discovery with him, and he acknowledges that it was not his finest moment. “I was walking the line between being a good American, which I place above all else, and doing my UNSCOM duties with

full integrity,” he told me. “I knew that Charles was probably not going to tell Ekeus, but I—perhaps cowardly so—had washed my hands of the affair.”

When I talked to Ekeus, he derided “the stupidity of the C.I.A.” in using a U.N. arms-control mission as a shield for collecting intelligence. “The political judgment is beyond contempt.” He said he feared that the illicit unilateral intelligence-gathering in Iraq would damage future multilateral arms inspection. “How can arms inspectors be trusted?” Ekeus asked. “It makes it difficult to reestablish arms control.”

The collapse of UNSCOM has freed Russia, now the largest purchaser of Iraqi oil, from any constraints on the sale of arms and technology to Iraq. Saddam, with help from Moscow, is once again building up his strategic capabilities and his grandiose plans for domination of the Middle East. One U.S. arms-control expert says of him, “We’re looking at a guy whose ambition is not defined by the Manhattan Project”—which produced the two atomic bombs used during the Second World War. Saddam, he said, “wants to match the American and Russian bomb projects” of the Cold War era.

ROLF EKEUS and Scott Ritter are not alone in their complaints about the C.I.A.’s operations in Iraq. The agency’s inability to organize an effective coup against Saddam Hussein—Steven Rich-

ter's failure—is an open secret in Washington's foreign-affairs community. The major newspapers and the congressional intelligence committees are traditionally chary about publicly identifying senior officials of the Directorate of Operations, but Richter, in part because of his quarrel with Scott Ritter, has become a public figure.

Last October, Richard Perle, a foreign-affairs analyst who served as a high-level Defense Department official during the Reagan Administration, broke with tradition and publicly named Richter during a speech at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington think tank. "Steve Richter," Perle said, "has an unbroken record of mismanagement and incompetence, and yet as far as I can tell there has been no effort whatsoever, with failure following failure, to examine the internal effectiveness" of Richter's organization. Perle concluded that Richter, "the head of the Near East Division at the Central Intelligence Agency, unless he's got a story to tell that justifies his continuation in that job, should be removed on grounds of incompetence and lack of fundamental qualification to hold that position."

Similarly harsh criticism was voiced in interviews with past and present White House and C.I.A. officials. "There is no line drawn in the D.O.," one retired intelligence officer told me. "I've been lied to by Steve Richter." Arms-control concerns about Iraq's having nuclear bombs, he said, "are lost on the D.O." He added, "And we needed their support. It was in our interest to take whatever information came along and get it to UNSCOM." The underlying issue is institutional, he said.

He urged that an effort be made by the agency's leadership to instill "some ethics" in the Directorate of Operations, "so other people"—in the C.I.A.—"can deal with issues on a basis of knowledge and trust."

Richter refused a request for an interview, but two of his superiors at C.I.A. headquarters agreed to meet with me to defend their subordinate. "Steve's a tough, no-nonsense officer who does his job well," one official said. "We have a lot of driven people here." The official criticized Perle, saying, "I don't think we should have Richard Perle talking about what he thinks about Richter. Everybody thinks he can do our job better than most." The second official had praise for Scott Ritter, depicting him as a "folk hero" to many in the C.I.A., and described the dispute between Ritter and Richter as being equivalent to "two bulls in a pen." He said he wished that people could "get along or not get along, without it having international ramifications."

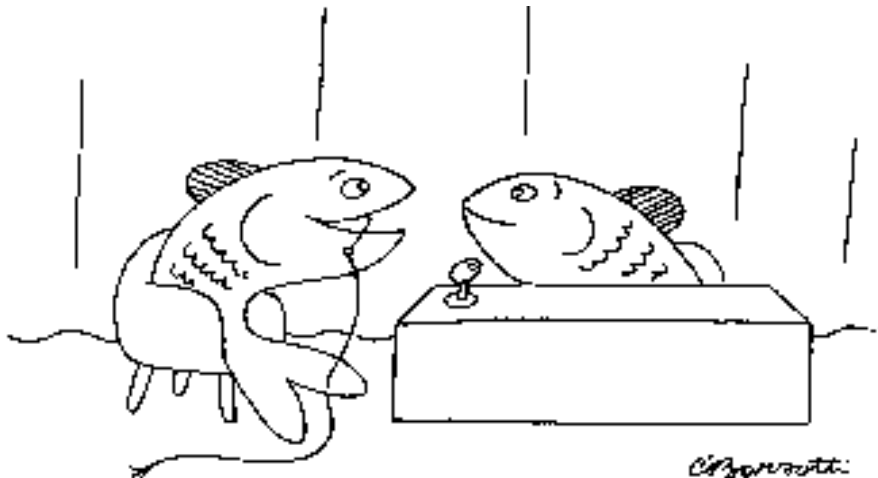
SADDAM HUSSEIN, confident after easily outmaneuvering the C.I.A.'s coup plotting, sought in the late summer of 1996 to derail the UNSCOM inspection schedule. Scott Ritter's unit, guided by its electronic intelligence, had targeted a cluster of Hussein's Special Republican Guard facilities that were believed to be shielding strategic materials. UNSCOM was getting close to the real thing, and Saddam provoked another crisis. Ritter's group refused to leave the entrances to inspection sites, and Iraqi guards refused to let them in. Ekeus flew to Baghdad. The White House had told him to get tough: Bill Clinton was ready

to bomb. Ritter, in his recently published book "Endgame," depicts the trip as Ekeus's finest moment. Washington "might have intended for Ekeus to be a messenger," Ritter writes, "but Ekeus was his own man and knew that he had a choice: be tough and lose the inspection process altogether, or seek a compromise and keep the inspection regime in place and functioning, even if flawed." He chose compromise, and bombs did not fall. "Ekeus saw a fatal flaw in the Clinton Iraqi policy," Ritter goes on to say. "Like the Bush Administration policy, it had no endgame. The Clinton team was willing to confront Iraq, but to what purpose?"

In an interview, Ekeus told me that one of his major concerns at the time was continued Russian cooperation with the U.N. disarmament process. The Soviet Union and Iraq had been trading partners since the early days of the Cold War, and Iraq owed Moscow at least seven billion dollars for its arms support during the eight-year war with Iran. It was understood by all that if Moscow lost faith in the integrity of UNSCOM it would begin to rearm Saddam. "Of course we had to have Russia satisfied," Ekeus said. "They had to be part of the process."

As head of UNSCOM, Ekeus had successfully balanced concern about Russia, the unceasing pressure from the Clinton Administration, and the inherent risks in the ongoing SIGINT program. Then, in July, 1997, Ekeus resigned from the U.N. to become Sweden's Ambassador to the United States. He says he left behind one urgent recommendation: that UNSCOM "should not continue the SIGINT, because the return was not worth it."

Ekeus was among those who had enthusiastically endorsed Australia's Richard Butler as the new UNSCOM executive chairman. It was, Ekeus told me later, a terrible misjudgment. "Butler lost control," he said. "He did not go into operations, and he wasn't interested in keeping the Iraqis on the defensive." Butler also failed to "see the warning signals" from Russia, Ekeus said. "If the Russians complain, he had to take it seriously." One of Butler's first acts was to formally create a Concealment and Investigations Unit—Ekeus had left matters informal—and put Ritter in charge. Butler also moved Charles Duelfer, the senior American UNSCOM



"Oh, definitely, I feel there's a reason I was given a second chance."

official, onto his management team, and, according to Ritter, began excluding Nikita Smidovich, the experienced Russian, from more sensitive matters. Butler has consistently maintained that he had “no knowledge” of an American turnover of UNSCOM’s intelligence operations in Iraq for its own purposes—a statement that was put into question by last December’s attempted assassination of Saddam. In an interview, one C.I.A. officer who worked closely with the UNSCOM intelligence operation agreed that Butler, unlike Ekeus, was not up to “challenging” the Administration when it came to Iraqi policy. “He’s a great speaker,” the C.I.A. man said of Butler, with a shrug.

By the spring of 1998, the C.I.A. had taken Ritter and UNSCOM out of the loop on signals intelligence, but Ritter still had authority, subject to Butler’s approval, to initiate inspections anywhere in Iraq, and he continued to do so, with his usual aggressiveness. “That’s what finally turned the Administration around on Ritter,” a former C.I.A. official told me. “Ritter felt he needed the confrontations to provide intelligence. He wasn’t clearing them in advance; he was doing his job. But Sandy Berger and Madeleine Albright—the national-security adviser and the Secretary of State—“couldn’t have their schedules dictated by when Ritter chose to have his confrontations with Iraq.”

Butler went along with the decision to rein in Ritter, and within months Ritter resigned. The U.N. inspection process began to unravel in public, and all that Saddam had to do to keep up with the story was to turn on CNN. There were immediate consequences. Intelligence reports began to pour into Washington describing the large volume of Russian arms and technical goods that were being trucked and flown into Iraq. The materials were believed to include spare parts for the surface-to-air missile systems that now defend Iraqi radar sites in the no-fly zones to the north and south of Baghdad, and also more sophisticated gear for Saddam’s missile systems.

THE Russian involvement has raised questions in the C.I.A. about Yevgeny Primakov, the Russian Prime Minister, who is considered a potential successor to Boris Yeltsin. Primakov, an Arabist who in 1991 became

the head of Russian foreign intelligence, had been posted to the Middle East in the nineteen-sixties as a *Pravda* correspondent, and he became friendly with Saddam Hussein. The two men grew closer after Saddam took over the Iraqi Presidency, in 1979. Just how close they remained became clear in 1996, when Ekeus attempted to enlist the help of Primakov’s Foreign Ministry in the gyroscope episode.

After the C.I.A. upset UNSCOM’s effort to intercept the Russian gyroscopes, Ekeus ordered the senior Russian on his staff, Nikita Smidovich, to present Primakov with a complete dossier of Russian front companies that were illegally trucking contraband goods into Iraq. Ekeus also saw to it that Primakov was informed, in writing, of “all the details” of how UNSCOM had learned about the firms—via intercepted telephone calls and other communications. Ekeus told me that he considered the material “proof of Russian smuggling to the Iraqi nuclear program,” but Primakov, he said, “insisted that there was no state organization involved”—that the shippers were operating on their own. What happened next, he said, was that “we requested that they conduct their own investigation, and UNSCOM never saw the results of that.” In a similar smuggling case involving a direct complaint to Primakov, he added with a wry laugh, “the Russians read the reports and, instead of arresting the guys, they changed their signals.”

In November of 1997, the American intelligence community was startled when a British intercept produced evidence of an eight-hundred-thousand-dollar payment to Primakov from Tariq Aziz, Iraq’s Deputy Prime Minister. (Britain’s signals-intelligence unit shares even its most sensitive intelligence with its colleagues in the National Security Agency, under a liaison agreement dating back to the early days of the Cold War.) “It was a bank transfer that was electronically monitored,” one informed source told me. “They scoop these things up like a vacuum cleaner now.” It is not clear how the intelligence community was able to identify Primakov as the beneficiary. (It was unlikely that, as a former high-level intelligence official, he would accept Iraqi payoff funds in a named account.) Nonetheless, in interviews with me, two officials who were

briefed on the British intercept depicted the information linking the Russian Prime Minister to the Iraqi funds as categorical. “A payment was made,” one informed American said. “This is rock solid—like John Gotti ordering a whack on the telephone. Ironclad.” A second official similarly recalled the intelligence as being of the highest quality. “There was a wire transfer to an account”—traceable to Primakov—“of eight hundred thousand dollars,” the official told me. He added that the report’s credibility was heightened by the fact that he and others in the intelligence community had heard “allegations” for years that Primakov “had been paid big time by Iraq.”

Intelligence officials said that earlier reports concerning Primakov had been discounted, including a specific allegation in September, 1993, from a secret informer in Moscow that Primakov, then the head of the Russian intelligence service, had received a \$1.2-million payment from Iraq. The intelligence had been greeted skeptically at the time because of the unreliability of human sources. Nonetheless, one fully informed C.I.A. official told me, the senior leadership of the agency has “believed for the longest time” that Primakov was “getting payoffs” from the regime of Saddam Hussein. (A spokesman at the Russian Embassy in Washington vehemently denied all charges of corruption on Primakov’s part.)

THE current standoff in Iraq, with no inspectors on the scene and American bombs falling daily in the no-fly zones, is a devastating setback for arms control—and the end of the dream for those who joined UNSCOM in the aftermath of the Gulf War. “There was a time when we thought this would provide a model for what you could do,” recalled Robert Galluci, dean of Georgetown University’s school of foreign service, who served as a deputy to Ekeus in 1991 and 1992. Now, he said, “there is no future for UNSCOM.”

“Russia is hopeless now—and maybe even dangerous,” a dejected Rolf Ekeus told me. “It’s clear that Russia is making a serious effort to control events. Saddam will get a bomb, because these materials are floating in. Every day, they are more advanced.” ♦

