

# Resignation of American arms inspector sparks new demands for US military action against Iraq

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The resignation Wednesday of William (Scott) Ritter as the chief US weapons inspector in Iraq is the latest act in an escalating campaign, spearheaded by the media and backed by congressional Republicans, to demand that the Clinton administration take unilateral military action against Iraq.

In an action intended to embarrass the White House and the United Nations, Ritter made public his resignation letter, which denounced the US government, the UN Security Council and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for reining in weapons inspectors and failing to take military action following Baghdad's August 3 announcement that it would no longer comply with UN inspectors' demands. Ritter called the present policy on inspections 'a farce' and attacked it as 'a surrender to the Iraqi leadership.'

Ritter, a Marine intelligence officer during the Persian Gulf war, who also served as an arms control monitor for the Pentagon in the former Soviet Union, had been among the most prominent American members of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) since that agency was set up in April 1991 to monitor Iraqi weapons production as part of the sanctions imposed against the country.

Working closely with UNSCOM Chairman Richard Butler, Ritter's specialty was organizing surprise inspections of sensitive installations, which were calculated to inflame relations between Baghdad and the West. He became a symbol in Iraq of American arrogance, and was singled out by the Saddam Hussein regime as the most provocative of all the inspectors. Iraq repeatedly accused Ritter of working for the CIA and Israeli intelligence and demanded his removal from UNSCOM.

With his resignation Ritter has become a cause célèbre in the media and among those in the American political, military and intelligence establishment who are pushing for an even more bellicose foreign policy. Editorials and opinion columns in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* hailed the 37-year-old ex-Marine as a hero and echoed his denunciations of the Clinton administration.

Republican committee chairmen in both the House and Senate announced they would hold hearings early next month to probe Ritter's charges, at which Ritter will presumably be the star witness. Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas, who heads the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, called Ritter's allegations 'credible, specific and substantial,' and attacked the Clinton administration for showing 'little resolve in containing Iraq and removing Saddam Hussein from power.'

Such statements are the latest in an increasingly shrill chorus, which began within hours of the August 7 car bomb attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, lobbying for the East African explosions to become the pretext for a new round of US strikes against Iraq. Already on August 8 the *International Herald Tribune*, a joint publication of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, published a column which said the embassy bombings were 'acts of war and the United States could take reprisals against the bombers under international law without approval of the United Nations.' The column cited a British expert who declared, 'If Americans find Iraqi connections, that could lift the lid right off. If these were the case, I would not be surprised if there were a direct action against Saddam Hussein.'

Following the US missile strikes against Afghanistan and Sudan, numerous reports appeared suggesting that the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum that was leveled in the assault had been involved in Iraqi attempts to rebuild its chemical weapons capabilities. Ominously, the *New York Times* report on Ritter's resignation, published August 27, noted that over the past week 'the United States and its allies have quietly moved ships into waters near Iraq.'

According to press accounts of Ritter's resignation, differences between top UNSCOM officials and the Clinton administration began to emerge last October, after Iraq demanded the withdrawal of Ritter and all other American

inspectors. The State Department and Clinton's national security advisers apparently sought to curtail the most provocative inspections, in part because the US had become increasingly isolated within the UN Security Council, with France, Russia and China, in pursuit of their own interests in the Persian Gulf, reluctant to back further military action. Washington wanted to delay an immediate confrontation with Baghdad until it could build up diplomatic backing for new strikes against Iraq.

The conflict with Ritter intensified after last February, when the US pulled back from the carpet bombing of Baghdad and accepted a deal with Iraq brokered by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. At the time US officials warned that any new attempt by the Iraqi regime to hinder UN inspections would be met with immediate US military action. Ritter was apparently hell-bent on creating the pretext for just such a development, and US officials on several occasions intervened to block so-called 'concealment inspections' which he had organized. One of these, proposed by Ritter in July, would have targeted Saddam Hussein's personal office.

There may well have been other factors behind the conflict with Ritter. *Washington Post* foreign affairs columnist Jim Hoagland suggested in a commentary August 27 that the CIA may have considered Ritter's tactics detrimental to covert attempts to organize a coup against Hussein from within his Special Republican Guard. There may also have been concerns in the CIA and the administration that Ritter's loyalties were tied more closely to the Israeli Mossad than to American intelligence. CBS news has reported that Ritter is being investigated by the FBI for sharing classified documents with Israel.

In all of the media commentary, there has been no discussion of the most important issues raised by Ritter's resignation letter and the interviews he has given to the press. His revelations have, unwittingly, shattered the pretense that UNSCOM is a purely technical and politically neutral body of arms control experts, answerable only to the UN Security Council. By Ritter's own account, UNSCOM is an intensely political body that functions as an instrument of imperialist foreign policy, first and foremost, that of the United States.

In its reporting on Ritter, the *Washington Post* has made no attempt to conceal the UN inspector's connections to American and other intelligence agencies. In one article, the *Post* wrote: 'The departure of Ritter, a 37-year-old Gulf War veteran, deprives the commission of its crucial liaison to US and foreign intelligence.' In an accompanying piece, the *Post* explained that UNSCOM routinely briefs the CIA on impending inspections: 'Following a standard procedure that neither UNSCOM nor Washington officially acknowledges,

[UNSCOM Chairman] Butler's senior staff briefed a liaison officer from the Central Intelligence Agency, based at the US mission to the United Nations, on the intended target, sources said.'

Ritter's own statements, as reported by the *New York Times* on August 27, confirm that UNSCOM's activities are at every point organized in consultation with US officials, and tailored to Washington's tactics in its diplomatic and military offensive against Iraq.

The *Times* reports several occasions when, according to Ritter, US officials called on UNSCOM to hold off on certain inspections because they would cut across American efforts to build international support for US military action. According to the *Times*: 'Mr. Ritter said administration officials told the inspectors then [last October] that 'there was not enough military power in the region' for a confrontation with Iraq.'

The *Times* account goes on to describe a similar circumstance the following month: 'Mr. Ritter said administration officials told the inspectors that military action over the Christmas holidays was 'domestically unsustainable,' which was taken to mean it would be politically unpopular.'

The same story in the *Times* acknowledges that Ritter held meetings in the US State Department and the Pentagon to discuss tactics in the offensive against the Iraqi regime.

As these revelations demonstrate, the activities of the UN inspectors constitute an ongoing provocation against Baghdad. The exposure of the role of UNSCOM, moreover, unmasks the entire regime of sanctions which has been maintained for more than seven years. The unending search for 'weapons of mass destruction' is, in fact, a cover for keeping Iraq in a state of semicolonial submission, in order to further the imperialist interests of the US and lesser powers, such as Britain and Israel, in the Persian Gulf.

See Also:

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