Agents provocateur: the activities of Richard Butler and UNSCOM

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The United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) and its chairman Richard Butler have been crucial in establishing a political pretext for the US and Britain to launch their devastating aerial bombardment of Iraq using hundreds of warplanes and cruise missiles in the last week. Yet neither Butler nor UNSCOM have been subjected to any critical scrutiny in the international media, which has acted as little more than a conduit for the press releases of the White House and the Pentagon and their counterparts in Britain.

The activities of UNSCOM in Iraq have a highly partisan character. Formally charged with the destruction of biological, chemical or nuclear weapons and long-range missiles in Iraq after the gulf war, UNSCOM has stretched its charter to the limit, demanding the right of access to buildings, documents and Iraqi personnel no matter how tenuously connected with weapons programs.

Since Richard Butler took over as chairman from Swedish diplomat Rolf Ekeus in May 1997, UNSCOM's activities in Iraq have become particularly provocative. In January and February 1998, Iraq's rejection of Butler's initial demand to inspect the Iraqi presidential palaces became the excuse for a substantial US military build-up in the Persian Gulf and threats of military strikes. Subsequent inspection teams found nothing in the presidential sites remotely linked to banned weapons programs.

In November, a breakdown of relations with Butler led to an Iraqi call for his removal as UNSCOM chairman and the lifting of the UN oil embargo. Again US air attacks were threatened. On November 11, Butler's decision to withdraw UNSCOM inspectors--a move clearly linked to US plans for air attacks--without consulting the UN Security Council drew sharp protests from China, France and Russia.

On his return to Iraq, after the attack was narrowly averted, Butler immediately set about establishing the basis for a new military assault. His stated aim was not to map out the means for finalising the seven-year-long inspection program but 'to test Iraq's cooperation'. Just two weeks after re-entering Iraq, UNSCOM publicly accused Iraq of failing to hand over a file of chemical weapons documents before an UNSCOM-established deadline.

During November and early December, UNSCOM teams visited or revisited hundreds of sites with the cooperation of Iraqi officials. The pretext for a military confrontation was finally manufactured on December 9, when an UNSCOM team attempted to enter the headquarters of the ruling Ba'ath Party and was blocked. The following day, US Defense Secretary William Cohen warned Iraq that it was subject to US attack at any time.

Five days later, on December 15, Butler presented a report to the UN Security Council claiming a lack of cooperation by Iraqi officials. Russia's UN envoy Sergei Lavrov described the report as inaccurate and 'outrageous' and along with China and France has called for Butler's removal.

On December 16, before the UN debate on the report had been concluded, Butler ordered the withdrawal of UNSCOM inspection teams to coincide with the US and British attacks on Iraq. As during the November crisis, Butler, who is supposedly answerable to the UN Security Council, did not inform its members of his decision.

Butler, an Australian career diplomat, has emerged as the crucial linchpin of the Clinton administration's military plans against Iraq. Born in Sydney, educated at a state secondary school and the University of Sydney, he entered the department of Foreign Affairs in 1965, serving in Vienna in the late 1960s and at the UN as Australian first secretary from 1970 to 1973.

His political connections lie with the Australian Labor Party. For a period after Labor was dismissed from office by the Governor General in November 1975, Butler, then only 34, served as the principal private secretary to the ousted Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam.

In 1983, after Labor won office, he was appointed to the key position of Australia's permanent representative on disarmament to the United Nations in Geneva. In the late 1980s, as Australian ambassador to Thailand, he worked closely with Labor Foreign Minister Gareth Evans in orchestrating the UN deal in Cambodia and was rewarded with the prominent post of Australian ambassador to the United Nations.

Butler's affiliations with the Australian Labor Party, far from being a barrier to his actions as UNSCOM chairman, are fully in line with ALP policy. In 1990, the Hawke Labor government gave its wholehearted support to the US-led military assault on Iraq and endorsed the draconian terms of the cease-fire arrangements establishing the trade sanctions that have resulted in widespread death and deprivation in Iraq through lack of food and medicines.

Last week, Australian Liberal Prime Minister John Howard was one of the very few national leaders to unequivocally endorse the latest bombardment of Iraq. He was joined by Labor Opposition Leader Kim Beazley, who stated that the US resort to military force was inevitable. None of the so-called left-wing Labor MPs

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have uttered a word of criticism either of Beazley, the US or the activities of UNSCOM.

Butler's report to the UN demonstrates that no action on Iraq's part could possibly fulfil the endless demands of UNSCOM. Iraq is being asked to prove the unprovable. Thousands of site inspections and mountains of Iraqi documents are unable to 'prove' that Iraq does not possess anywhere on its territory the capacity to produce nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Yet any delay in responding to UNSCOM's demands and any intervention by Iraqi officials is immediately seized upon as obstruction.

The objections of Iraqi officials to an UNSCOM team interviewing postgraduate science students, a request for the presence of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General during the examination of a document, and an Iraqi request for special procedures during the inspection of a particularly sensitive site were all cited by Butler as examples of obstruction.

UNSCOM's inspections flout the sovereignty of Iraq in a manner that would provoke a storm of opposition in any country. One only has to consider what the response would be from the US administration if UN teams were demanding access to every military base, industrial site and government office remotely connected either in the present or past with America's vast nuclear, chemical and biological warfare programs, as well as access to scientists, technicians, officials and all documentation.

Over the last seven years, UNSCOM has built up an extensive apparatus in Iraq. Approximately 100 personnel--including specialists in biology, chemistry, nuclear physics and missile technology--have been stationed at the Baghdad Monitoring and Verification Centre. Not only have UNSCOM teams scoured the country to ferret out and destroy any weaponry and equipment deemed in breach of UN guidelines, but they have inspected scores of unrelated factories and laboratories.

Any scientific or laboratory equipment which has the potential of being converted to weapons production is branded as 'dual use' and subjected to a rigid monitoring regime. A system of sensors and detectors, as well as some 150 video cameras, are linked to UNSCOM's headquarters in Baghdad to provide direct round-the-clock observation of equipment use, technicians and officials.

A report in the Christian Science Monitor earlier this year described the character of these monitoring operations. Iraq's General Establishment for Animal Development, which used to produce 1 million veterinary vaccines a year, is now virtually inoperable. Its two large fermentation vats, considered 'dual use,' have been removed, an industrial-sized autoclave for sterilising equipment has been rendered unusable, its piping for heating and cooling units has been destroyed, and hardening foam pumped into the ventilation system and capped with concrete.

Other 'dual-use' equipment has been tagged and cameras and motion detectors monitor the movement of people in and out of the establishment. According to veterinarian Montasir al-Ani, 'Nothing is functioning now. They destroyed everything.' UNSCOM inspectors were still visiting the laboratory once a month and technicians periodically changed videotapes and checked the security seals on the cameras.

Site inspection has been just one aspect of UNSCOM's operations. It maintains extensive checks on the limited imports and exports permitted under UN sanctions, has conducted extensive intelligence operations outside Iraq into past equipment and technology sales and monitors the movements and activities of Iraqi scientists and personnel suspected of being involved in weapons programs. UNSCOM had access to aerial surveillance provided by US spy satellites and special high altitude reconnaissance flights using U2 aircraft as well as from its own fleet of helicopters stationed in Iraq.

In an interview last year, former UNSCOM chairman Rolf Ekeus outlined its close links with the intelligence organisations of the major powers, including the US. Through a special intelligence unit UNSCOM has access to 'a broad stream of data supported by multilayered cooperative efforts'. 'The confidence in UNSCOM's competence in this area has grown quickly so that now several governments allow the sharing of information on a large scale involving high-quality intelligence,' he said.

'Intelligence sharing' is, of course, a two-way process. The vital and highly sensitive firsthand information gained by UNSCOM through its broad and intrusive access to military facilities, industrial sites and government offices has been fed straight back into the US and British 'intelligence communities' and used to draw up the lists of targets for warplanes and cruise missiles.

If the CIA, MI5 or any other spy body had deliberately set out to create an agency to carry out the multiple functions of industrial sabotage, military intelligence and agent provocateur against Iraq, it could not have asked for more than UNSCOM and its chief Richard Butler.

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