

Former UN arms inspector denounces Iraq sanctions

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29 May 2000

Scott Ritter, formerly a leading weapons inspector in Iraq for the United Nation Special Commission (UNSCOM), denounced the economic blockade of the Middle East nation at a rally opposing sanctions held May 13 in the Detroit suburb of Southfield, Michigan. The former US Marine officer resigned his post in August 1998 citing interference by the UN with the work of inspectors.

The pacifist group Metro Detroit Against Sanctions called the rally, which concluded with a picket of a local television station to protest the media blackout of reports documenting the suffering of the Iraqi people. Also on the platform was former US diplomat Edward Peck, local religious leaders and Iraqi-Americans.

Speaking before an audience of some 300 Ritter declared, "The termination of economic sanctions must be our number one priority. It is a sad fact that 500,000 babies dying hasn't moved the American people ...

"The US government has created a myth about Saddam Hussein as the Middle East equivalent of Adolf Hitler. The only way you will deal with the Middle East situation is based on fact. You will only have disarmament if there is contact. It is not America's job to get rid of" Hussein.

Ritter went on to expose the claims of the Clinton administration that Iraq posed a military threat to neighboring states: "By 1998 Iraq's biological and missile plants were destroyed. In terms of the intent of the UN Security Council resolutions, Iraq had been disarmed. The world is blind to this reality. Even though Iraq has been disarmed, sanctions will remain until Hussein is gone."

Edward Peck, who served as US Chief of Mission in Iraq and worked as a coordinator of covert intelligence programs at the State Department, also spoke in opposition to the sanctions. "What happens if the country implodes? No one benefits," Peck said. He warned that the sanctions policy was eroding support for the United States among its former Gulf War allies, the Arab states in

particular. "We look inhuman," he said, "we look racist."

Ritter and Peck join a growing number of former US and UN officials who have publicly opposed the Iraq sanctions. In the fall of 1998 Dennis Halliday, the coordinator of the UN's "Oil for Food" program, quit, calling the sanctions "a bankrupt concept." Last February two UN officials resigned—Hans von Sponeck, Halliday's successor as humanitarian relief coordinator, and Jutta Burghardt, head of the World Food Program in Iraq. In announcing his resignation von Sponeck declared, "I do not want to be associated with a Band-Aid that is inadequate to end the plight of the civilian population."

In the case of Ritter and Peck, however, it is not simply revulsion over the humanitarian catastrophe produced by the blockade in Iraq. Both men are longtime foreign policy operatives who have concluded that a different policy is required to defend the interests of American imperialism in the Middle East. That they now oppose the Clinton administration over sanctions highlights the disarray in US foreign policy.

Ritter's team was involved in attempts by the US government to destabilize the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. He led a series of highly intrusive inspections of Iraqi governmental sites which the Clinton administration hoped would provoke a hostile Iraqi response that could serve as the basis for rallying domestic and international support for military action. It later came to light that these inspections were aimed at tracking the movements of Hussein in preparation for a possible assassination. In Iraq Ritter had close contact with officials of the American CIA and it was alleged, but not proven, that he had ties to Israeli intelligence.

Before joining UNSCOM Ritter served as an aide to General Norman Schwarzkopf during the Gulf War. He has called at various times for the use of the US military to overthrow the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

In his book *Endgame*, published in 1999 following his departure from UNSCOM, Ritter describes the growth of his disillusionment with US policy toward Iraq. One event he cited was the botched attempt by the Clinton administration to rally public support for military action against Iraq at a Columbus, Ohio town meeting in February 1998. The meeting turned into a nationally televised debacle for the Clinton administration when Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Secretary of Defense William Cohen and National Security Adviser Sandy Berger became visibly flustered under intense questioning by opponents of military intervention.

The failure of the Clinton administration to rally public support for military action against Iraq and the growing divisions among the former Gulf War allies of the US led Ritter to the conclusion that a military solution to the Iraq problem was untenable.

In *Endgame* he accuses the Clinton administration of having no workable policy toward Iraq. He decries economic sanctions as a “morally reprehensible policy” which has discredited the US internationally. He says of Iraq's military, “The Iraqi army is in total disarray, capable of little more than manning security pickets along the Iran-Iraq border, in northern Iraq (Kurdistan), and in Southern Iraq.” The Iraqi air force, Ritter asserts, “would be shot out of the sky by any of the modern air forces of its neighbors.”

Ritter has also called for a halt to the ongoing bombing of Iraq by the United States and Britain. He has called the air strikes, which have taken the lives of numerous civilians, a violation of international law.

Following the publication of Ritter's book his name dropped out of the news in line with the unstated policy of the American news media of blacking out all opposition to the sanctions policy of the Clinton administration. Similarly Ritter's remarks to the rally in Michigan were not reported by any of the local television stations or newspapers.



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