

# The folly of giving way to Saddam

## The Greatest Threat

Iraq, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the Growing Crisis of Global Security  
By Richard Butler  
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**R**ichard Butler's book tells the story of the final 18 months and eventual demise of UNSCOM, the organization of international weapons inspectors created after the 1991 Gulf War and charged with destroying what remained of Iraq's unconventional-armament programs.

UNSCOM, or United Nations Special Commission, which Butler headed, had an important, unimpeachable mission; it was virtue itself. Nonetheless, it was abandoned and eventually betrayed by the two key Western powers responsible for carrying out the war — the United States and Britain, which failed to provide the agency with the necessary political support after the war. It was betrayed by Israel, which worked vigorously and successfully to shift international attention away from Iraq to Iran. And UNSCOM was betrayed by perfidious powers on the Security Council — Russia, France, and China — which hoped to exploit the US confrontation with Iraq for their own benefit. Butler believes we will pay — perhaps quite dearly — for this general fecklessness.

"The Greatest Threat" is from weapons of mass destruction, manmade and extraordinarily lethal. They are not supposed to be in the hands of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. The Gulf War ceasefire, UN Resolution 687, required Iraq to turn over those weapons to UNSCOM. But Saddam never did. And their lethality, along with Saddam's extreme brutality, constitute a very serious danger.

Butler has an acute understanding of Saddam's ruthlessness. He offers a personal experience with that brutality, as demonstrated by Tariq Aziz, Iraq's first deputy prime minister, and far from the most thuggish figure around Saddam. UNSCOM obtained information that Baghdad had tested biological agents on prison inmates in 1994 and 1995, in violation of every code of hu-



man rights. UNSCOM sought to pursue that issue, as it was essential to understanding the state of Iraq's proscribed biological program.

In March 1998, Butler's meetings in Baghdad were particularly acrimonious. At one point, a man was brought before him: "He was hunched as though to shield his body from expected blows, he was trembling all over, and when he glanced at me, I saw in his eyes the look of terror. The man was thrust forward, as Aziz protested that Butler had asked about the photograph of a man's forearm, scarred in such a fashion as to cause UNSCOM to suspect that unconventional agents have been tested on that person. Aziz claimed that this was the man in the photo, pulling up his shirt sleeve, exposing an unmarked forearm. "So much for your claims," Aziz asserted.

Aziz spoke nonsense, but it did not matter. That was Iraq's position. Butler rightly suggests that the episode was highly revealing of a deeply ingrained attitude of the Iraqi leadership. The man's cowering fear did not bother Aziz in the least. Nor was he troubled by the implications of revealing that to the UNSCOM chairman. If anything, the episode was also intended to intimidate Butler, the lesson being, "This is how we deal with those who oppose us."

Butler warns that as long as Saddam has weapons of mass destruction, "the likelihood that they will be used remains high." Indeed, under Butler's chairmanship, UNSCOM learned that Iraq had filled SCUD missile warheads

**Richard Butler warns that as long as Saddam has weapons of mass destruction — and he says the Iraqi leader has many — 'the likelihood that they will be used remains high.'**

with the highly lethal chemical agent VX. A single drop of VX constitutes a fatal dose, and a single warhead contains enough of the chemical "to kill up to 1 million people." Moreover, Baghdad can carry out terrorism using biological or chemical agents and kill nearly as many people.

How is it possible that such material was left in Saddam's hands? Butler does not really address that question. "The Greatest Threat" deals with Butler's tenure as UNSCOM chairman, from summer 1997 through summer 1999, and is essentially the chronicle of UNSCOM's demise. Baghdad quickly recognized that Butler, the Australian ambassador and permanent representative to the UN in the five years previous to his UNSCOM appointment, would be no different than his tough-minded predecessor, Rolf Ekeus, and was not going to give Iraq a clean bill of health on its weapons programs. So starting in the fall of 1997, Saddam initiated a series of crises over UNSCOM that had the effect, a year later, of terminating its presence in Iraq.

Yet the stage was set some years before, by the indifference shown toward the dangers posed by the proscribed weapons Baghdad retained. After the Gulf War, it was assumed that the intensive US bombing campaign had destroyed most of those weapons. And for four years thereafter, it was assumed that UNSCOM was slowly but surely mopping up what little remained. Indeed by the summer of 1995, UNSCOM believed it had pretty much taken

care of Iraq's chemical and missile programs and had only one more program to address — Iraq's biological effort. (The International Atomic Energy Agency, responsible for Iraq's nuclear program, similarly believed that program, too, had been dismantled.)

But in August 1995, Saddam's son-in-law, Hussein Kamil, who headed Iraq's unconventional-weapons programs, defected. Kamil's defection precipitated a host of stunning revelations about Iraq's retained unconventional capabilities. For four years, Baghdad had been turning over to UNSCOM its least significant weapons, while retaining the most dangerous. Suddenly, it became apparent that none of Iraq's weapons programs had been dismantled. Iraq had produced an estimated 3,9 tons of VX. It had produced SCUD missiles. Its biological program was far greater than it had acknowledged. And its nuclear program was far more advanced than it had admitted. All Iraq needed for a nuclear bomb was the fissile material, which it might obtain on the black market. Instead of being defanged, Iraq was suddenly revealed to be a considerable threat.

Strangely, the Clinton administration was in many respects relieved. Its goal had been to maintain sanctions on Iraq. Before Kamil defected, that was increasingly difficult. Not so afterward. And because sanctions would stay on, Iraq ceased to be a concern. It fell off the United States' agenda, precisely when the danger that Saddam posed became generally known. And the US position was reinforced by Israel.

Butler asks, "Is Iraq as dangerous as it was a decade ago?" His answer is yes. And he reminds us, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Or perhaps to do nothing, or to do the wrong thing, on the basis of knowledge that is flawed and assumptions that are mistaken. This important book sets the record straight. It is essential reading.

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