

BLACKSTONE AUDIOBOOKS

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READ BY ROBERT WHITFIELD



THE
GREATEST
THREAT

IRAQ, WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION, AND
THE GROWING CRISIS OF GLOBAL SECURITY

UNABRIDGED

A GLIMPSE OF TERROR

SOMETIMES IT IS THE SIDESHOW, not the main act, that is most revealing. Such a moment occurred late one evening in Baghdad in March 1998, almost a year after I had begun the job of leading UNSCOM—the UN effort to remove Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. Yet another day of inconclusive talks between the government of Iraq and UNSCOM representatives was coming to a close. I was feeling tired, a bit tense, and increasingly frustrated with Iraq's relentless efforts to defeat our mission.

All our meetings had been hostile in tone, but this session had been among the most heated. Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, whom Saddam had appointed to lead the anti-UNSCOM effort, had evidently decided to step up the level of combat in his dealings with UNSCOM and in particular with me. He'd spent the evening hurling insults and insinuations across the table, accusing me of wanting to prolong the disarmament process, of capriciously shifting UNSCOM's demands, of seeking to indefinitely extend the UN sanctions against Iraq in a deliberate effort to harm the Iraqi people. Evidently, he hoped to provoke an angry response from me, to be captured on tape by one of the five video cameras silently recording the action around the huge, dim conference room. Footage of an outburst by the man whom the state-controlled Iraqi media had dubbed "Mad Dog Butler" would be useful propaganda.

It was tempting to fight back, to try to break out, but there was nowhere to go. I refused to rise to the bait.

The hemmed-in atmosphere in the conference room was no help. Located on the seventh floor of the grim concrete-block structure that housed the offices of the Iraqi Foreign Ministry, the room was a huge

space, some 10,000 square feet, inadequately lit by strip lights and dominated by a large, open-centered rectangular table covered in green baize. Along the Iraqi side of the table sat ten men in olive uniforms decorated with a variety of insignia I never quite learned to decipher—combinations of oak leaves, eagles, seven-pointed stars, and crossed scimitars. Tariq Aziz sat at the center of his frontline. Behind the ten at the table were twenty-five or thirty supporters in ranks of chairs that vanished backward into the increasing gloom of the outer edges of the conference room, a mixture of men in military garb and business suits and a single woman, the notorious Dr. Rihab Rashida Taha, once dubbed by a Western tabloid “Dr. Germ” because of her role in directing Iraq’s program of biological warfare. This half-lit room, through which the periodically moving video cameras floated with their red indicator lights, had no decorations other than an Iraqi flag beside the inevitable grandiose portrait of Saddam Hussein in military uniform.

Across the table from Aziz and his entourage, the UNSCOM party numbered about a dozen. I sat directly opposite Aziz with my deputy, the determined, if somewhat taut Charles Duelfer, at my right side. Duelfer was provided to UNSCOM by the U.S. State Department. There were also policy officers—Gustavo Zlauvinen from Argentina, Eric Fournier from France, and Nikita Zhukov from Russia. These men were there to provide advice and counsel to me. They were all professionals, but the Russian and French officers clearly had the responsibility of seeking to influence my decisions toward the Russian and French viewpoints, which by this time had begun to distinctly favor Iraq. So the challenge I faced did not originate solely from the other side of the table.

Also in attendance were my legal adviser, John Scott, a Briton, and leaders representing each aspect of UNSCOM’s tripartite mission: Nikita Smidovitch, a Russian, head of missile disarmament; the German Dr. Horst Reeps, who ran the chemical weapons group; and Dr. Gabrielle Kraatz-Wadsack, another German, who led our biological weapons work. Three commissioners, members of UNSCOM’s twenty-one-person advisory body representing sixteen nations, were also present as observers.

In Baghdad, it was typical for us to meet with the Iraqis twice a day: in the morning and then, after a break during the period of the extreme afternoon heat, at an evening session starting around eight o’clock. On this particular occasion, little of substance was discussed. The more we

pressed for answers to our questions about the nature, extent, and purposes of the Iraqi weapons-manufacturing programs, the more Tariq Aziz spat out his abuse. In fact, Reeps and Smidovitch, both longtime staff members, had commented to me, during a break, that the level of hostility on the part of Iraq was now greater than they'd seen at any time during the commission's seven-year history.

The hostility wasn't merely unpleasant. A veiled threat of physical violence was always signaled, if only subliminally. This was not simply because of Saddam's well-known propensity to use violence as a way of seizing and consolidating power, but because of actual attempts to intimidate and harm us. Two months before, an Iraqi rocket-propelled grenade had been fired into UNSCOM headquarters—fortunately killing no one. We'd stepped up our security precautions as a result, but the undercurrent of anxiety among our staff in Baghdad had heightened thereafter.

When it became obvious that the evening's discussions were proving fruitless, we agreed to call a halt. Clearly, Iraq was going to give us nothing of the materials and evidence we had asked for. For our part, we were in no mood to be sucked into a theatrical confrontation. It was time for me to return to New York, to report Iraq's continued intransigence to the Security Council, and to plan future surprise inspections in the hope of uncovering the evidence of what we knew to be their programs for making and retaining weapons of mass destruction.

I rose, along with the rest of the UNSCOM team, and prepared for the usual phony, polite, formal leave-taking. Stepping around to the Iraqi side of the conference table, I extended my hand to Aziz. He then began the unexpected sideshow. Rather than shake my hand, Aziz signaled to a group of figures barely discernable in a dark corner of the room. Two uniformed men strode up into the light, pulling between them a third man. He was a slight fellow dressed in the typical garb of an Iraqi farmer: an open-necked shirt, rough cotton trousers, and a pair of much-worn sandals. He had the gnarled skin and dark complexion of one long exposed to the harsh Mideast sun, and he wore the black moustache affected by nearly all Iraqi men in imitation of Saddam Hussein. But what struck me most forcibly was his obvious, intense fear. 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 men in uniform held this man firmly and thrust him toward me. Aziz declared, "Mr. Butler, I want to show you something important. You have accused us of testing biological weapons on human beings. It's an outrageous lie. In particular, you have shown a photograph of the forearm of a person on which there were sores. You said the sores were caused by the testing of weapons. You asked for an explanation. Well, here's your explanation! This man is the man in your photograph. Look at his arm!" Aziz yanked up the left sleeve of the farmer's shirt, exposing an unmarked forearm. "So much for your claims!"

I felt deep pity for the farmer. *Aziz has had his thugs grab you off the street and drag you up here for this charade*, I thought. *God only knows what you think is happening or fear what will be done to you if the foreigner doesn't like what he sees on your arm, or if in some other unknown way you fail this test.* He must have known how cheap a life like his had become in Saddam's Iraq.

As evidence of anything real, the charade was ludicrous. We'd heard from Iraqi defectors that inmates at the Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad had indeed been used as subjects of biological weapons testing. The photograph we'd obtained was consistent with such reports. Our efforts to inspect the prison and study inmate files that might prove or disprove these allegations had been illegally rebuffed. Aziz's answer to this was to present a randomly selected man and, incredibly, insist that his was the forearm shown in our photo. It was horrible and a travesty.

Such behavior was typical of Iraq's treatment of UNSCOM: a mixture of bluster, brazenly inept lies, and thinly veiled threats of violence. Under the circumstances, I decided not to argue with Aziz; why further frighten his poor victim? I simply said, "I see what you're seeking to demonstrate. Good night."

THIS EPISODE has haunted me, mainly because of its cynical cruelty, but also because it encapsulated some central truths about the regime of Saddam Hussein, the nature and importance of the struggle by the world community to deprive him of weapons of mass destruction; and why the loss of control over the spread of such weapons poses the greatest threat to world peace and security, to life on earth.

First, the regime of Saddam Hussein. Its brutal and tyrannical nature has been documented elsewhere in detail for almost two decades. The

political currency of his regime is homicide, frequently threatened and often delivered. But there was something particularly chilling about the relatively minor display of this fact we saw that night: It evidently did not trouble Aziz or his henchmen that we saw it firsthand. Far more important was that they act out their lie about their biological weapons program, no matter how cruelly or implausibly.

The incident also illustrated the callousness of the regime toward its own people—a quality we witnessed daily in our dealings with Iraq, something that gives the lie to Saddam's public protestations that his primary goal is to lift the awful burden of international sanctions from the backs of the Iraqi people. Because the United Nations has tied the removal of those weapons to the removal of the sanctions on 22 million Iraqis, he could achieve sanctions relief at any time by giving up his weapons. He has resolutely refused to do that, thus trading off the welfare of the Iraqi people—of which that night's victim was a small but perfect example—for his own power and weapons.

The intimidating aspect of that night's charade, directed at UNSCOM, was also clearly not lost on Aziz. His actions that night, coded through their handling of one of their own, sent a calculated message to us: *This is how we deal with those who oppose us.*

We'd discussed with Tariq Aziz the photo of the scarified forearm because we believed it represented evidence that the Iraqi government had not only developed chemical and biological weapons—facts already established—but also tested them on living humans in violation of every code of human rights. Iraqi defectors we'd interviewed had told us that Iraq tested biological agents on Iranian soldiers taken prisoner during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, as well as on the Abu Ghraib inmates during 1994 and 1995. To this day, the full facts are obscure. But when we sent an inspection team early in 1998 to the prison to search for the documentary evidence, all the inmate files were there except those covering the two crucial years. And when Iraq realized what we were looking for, it abruptly terminated the whole inspection.

This is Saddam Hussein's regime: cruel, lying, intimidating, and determined to retain weapons of mass destruction—weapons capable of killing thousands, even millions, at a single blow.

In fact, while Tariq Aziz was stage-managing his hideous charade that night, developments in the UNSCOM search for Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capabilities were coming to a head. A smoking gun we'd long sought was about to fall into our hands. I learned of its

existence, two months later, in June 1998, at the start of my next visit to Baghdad.

AS USUAL, I arrived in Iraq by way of the Habbaniyah air base, accompanied by several key UNSCOM staff members and technical experts. We disembarked into the painful glare of a Baghdad summer's day and were greeted by the Iraqi government protocol people and an Iraqi TV crew wanting to ask me about our visit. The latter never involved anything remotely like a Western-style news conference. Journalists working for the Iraqi media mainly make statements rather than ask questions. These would include "questions" like, "When do you plan to stop murdering Iraqi babies through your cruel sanctions?"

As I addressed such questions and then chatted with my Iraqi government handlers, two of our technical experts—Horst Reeps and Igor Mitrokhin—were drawn aside by Tim Blades, one of our chemical experts then in Baghdad. Blades appeared agitated. He'd met us at the airport because it was the earliest moment at which he could present us with a newly completed laboratory report. Reeps read it immediately. The look on his face made plain that its contents were very serious.

When our luggage had been loaded into the cars and we were ready for the ninety-minute ride into Baghdad, Reeps and Blades approached me. "There's something you must see *now*," Reeps said, handing me a thin sheaf of papers. It contained the results of an analysis recently conducted in a Maryland laboratory, one of thirty such laboratories in the world registered under the Chemical Weapons Convention (the treaty banning chemical weapons) as a source of verification of chemical weapons data. At UNSCOM's request, the laboratory had analyzed a collection of metal fragments, remnants of missile warheads deliberately destroyed by explosion by Iraq and buried in a pit at a place called Nibai, forty kilometers outside Baghdad. The question we'd posed was: What sorts of weapons agents, if any, had been loaded into these warheads before their destruction?

It hadn't been easy arranging these tests. The warheads had been unilaterally and secretly destroyed by Iraq, not under international supervision as required by the UN resolutions. The intent, obviously, was to conceal the number of warheads destroyed as well as their nature and content. The only way UNSCOM could verify the truth of Iraq's claims