

Ronnie and Saddam

By Neil Mackay

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It was just before Christmas 1983 that Donald Rumsfeld, then US presidential envoy to Iraq, slipped quietly into Baghdad to come face to face with the man who would become one of America's greatest enemies within two decades.

The trip by the current US defence secretary, to pledge US support for Saddam Hussein, marked one of the lowest points of the entire Reagan presidency, and symbolically represents the real legacy of the "Great Communicator". For Reagan was a president who allowed the US to secretly arm the Iraqi dictator with weapons of mass destruction (WMD), supported Iraq's military expansion, turned a blind eye to Saddam using chemical weapons against Iran and thereby set in train the events that would lead to George W Bush's disastrous decision to invade the country in 2002.

While America was selling WMD to Iraq, Reagan was also telling Saddam to increase his brutal campaign against the Iranian fundamentalist regime, even while Iraqi poison gas was falling on Persian battlefields. The Reagan presidency made America complicit in Saddam's war crimes.

Just weeks before Rumsfeld's meeting with Saddam, Reagan had underlined the importance of securing US relations with Iraq, which was engaged in a bloody war with Iran at the time. The Iran-Iraq war began when an opportunistic Saddam decided to attack his neighbouring country, following the Islamic revolution which installed the Ayatollah Khomeini as leader.

Reagan's November 26, 1983, National Security Decision Directive (NSDD 114), entitled US Policy Toward The Iran-Iraq War, stated: "Because of the real and psychological impact of a curtailment in the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf on the international economic system, we must assure our readiness to deal promptly with actions aimed at disrupting that traffic."

The secret State Department account of the Rumsfeld-Saddam meeting, written in a staccato telegram-style, reads: "Saddam Hussein showed obvious pleasure with ... Rumsfeld's visit ... Rumsfeld told Saddam US and Iraq had shared interests in preventing Iranian and Syrian expansion. He said the US was urging other states to curtail arms sales to Iran and believed it had successfully closed off US-controlled exports by third countries to Iran."

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The State Department said: “Our initial assessment is that meeting marked a positive milestone in development of US-Iraqi relations and will prove to be of wider benefit to US posture in the region.”

Rumsfeld then told Saddam: “Our understanding of the importance of balance in the world and the region was similar to Iraq’s.” The briefing goes on: “Regarding war with Iran, Rumsfeld said, US agreed it was not in interests of region or the West for conflict to create greater instability or for outcome to be one which weakened Iraq’s role or enhanced interests and ambitions of Iran. We thought conflict should be settled in a peaceful manner which did not expand Iran’s interests and preserved sovereignty of Iraq.”

After discussing the possibility of two oil pipelines, Rumsfeld and Saddam moved on to discussions about nations selling arms to Iran. Rumsfeld told Saddam: “Countries which acted in such a manner were short-sighted, looking at a single commercial transaction while their more fundamental interests were being harmed.”

The US had publicly declared itself “officially neutral” in the Iran-Iraq conflict when Saddam attacked the newly Islamic state, but investigative research undertaken at George Washington University’s National Security Archive shows that this declaration was a complete lie.

In 1982, as the Iran-Iraq war began to hot up, the USA quietly took Iraq off the State Department’s list of states that supported terrorism. This allowed money to start flowing from America into Saddam’s coffers.

Both the White House and the State Department bullied the Export-Import Bank to provide Iraq with financing. This made Saddam’s balance sheet look so healthy that he was able to get loans from other international banks. Unsurprisingly, Saddam spent most of his new-found wealth on weapons – which he bought from Britain and America. Joyce Battle, of the National Security Archive, says: “Although official US policy still barred the export of US military equipment to Iraq, some was evidently provided on a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ basis.”

When a Congressional aide asked in March 1983, whether heavy trucks sold to Iraq were intended for military purposes, a State Department official said: “We presumed that this was Iraq’s intention and had not asked.” America officially restored full formal relations with Saddam’s Ba’athist Iraq in November 1984, despite months of Iranian complaints to the world that its troops were being attacked with chemical weapons by Iraq’s army. Some 600,000 Iranians died in the war, compared with 300,000 Iraqis.

America was fully aware of Saddam’s war crimes. A November 1983 US memorandum from the bureau of politico-military affairs to the then secretary of state George Shultz, headed Iraqi Use Of Chemical Weapons, confirms that America knew that Saddam was

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using chemical weapons on an “almost daily basis”. Another State Department memo, also written in November 1983 – this time from the office of the assistant secretary for near Eastern and South Asian affairs – says the US should tell Saddam that America knows about the use of poison gas, as that would “avoid unpleasantly surprising Iraq through public positions we may have to take on this issue”. However, State Department documents also reveal that America decided to limit its “efforts against the Iraqi CW [chemical weapon] programme to close monitoring because of our strict neutrality”.

Other State Department cables sent around this time show that America knew Iraq used chemical weapons in October 1982 and in July and August 1983, “and more recently against Kurdish insurgents”. Reagan also knew by the end of 1983 that “with the essential assistance of foreign firms, Iraq has become able to deploy and use CW and probably has built up large reserves of CW for further use”.

Iraq’s use of chemical weapons was not discussed at all during Rumsfeld’s meeting, an omission entirely consistent with US policy. On November 1, 1983, the State Department noted in a memo that Saddam had acquired “CW capability”, possibly from the USA. But two sentences later, the same memo says: “Presently Iraq is at a disadvantage in its war of attrition against Iran. After a recent meeting on the war, a discussion paper was sent to the White House for a National Security Council meeting, a section of which outlines a number of measures we might take to assist Iraq.”

Rumsfeld was accompanied on his Baghdad trip by Howard Teicher, the then US National Security Advisor. In 1995, Teicher lodged a sworn declaration in the US district court in the Southern district of Florida, saying: “While a staff member to the National Security Council, I was responsible for the Middle East and for political-military affairs. During my five years’ tenure on the National Security Council, I had regular contact with both CIA director William Casey and deputy director Robert Gates ... Casey personally spearheaded the effort to ensure that Iraq had sufficient military weapons, ammunition and vehicles to avoid losing the Iran-Iraq war ... In 1986, President Reagan sent a secret message to Saddam Hussein telling him that Iraq should step up its air war and bombing of Iran. Similar strategic advice was passed to Saddam Hussein through meetings with European and Middle Eastern heads of state.”

After Rumsfeld’s visit, a buoyant Saddam issued a public threat in February 1984, to use CW against the Iranians, saying: “The invaders should know that for every harmful insect there is an insecticide capable of annihilating it, whatever the number, and Iraq possesses the annihilation insecticide.”

After this, America was compelled to issue a condemnation of Iraq’s CW programme. A month later the USA put out this rather weak reprimand: “While condemning Iraq’s

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chemical weapons use ... the United States finds the present Iranian government regime's intransigent refusal to deviate from its avowed objective of eliminating the legitimate government of neighbouring Iraq to be inconsistent with the accepted norms of behaviour among nations and the moral and religious basis which it claims."

Joyce Battle said that after this gentle scolding, the State Department was asked if Iraq's CW programme would have "any effect on US recent initiatives to expand commercial relationships with Iraq across a broad range". A State Department official said: "No. I'm not aware of any change in our position. We're interested in being involved in a closer relationship with Iraq."

That was quite evident from a US State Department memo dated May 9, 1984, which said that the US was reviewing its policy "on the sale of certain dual-use items to Iraq nuclear entities" and that "preliminary results favour expanding such trade to include Iraqi nuclear entities". A dual-use item can be a part for a heart machine, which is also used in the construction of nuclear bombs.

By September 1984, the USA's Defence Intelligence Agency found Iraq was continuing to develop its "formidable" CW arsenal and would "probably pursue nuclear weapons".

Iran lodged a draft resolution with the UN asking the world to condemn Saddam for his use of poison gas, banned internationally by the Geneva Protocols. US diplomats began asking friendly nations to go for a "no decision" ruling. The US also said it was ready to abstain.

Iraqi diplomat Nizar Hamdoon, who later became Iraq's ambassador to the UN, met the US deputy assistant secretary of state, James Placke, telling him that Saddam could live with a Security Council presidential statement which did not name any individual country for using chemical weapons.

That was exactly what happened .

Battle trawled the National Security archives for secret documents like these, which detail the hidden history of American support for Saddam. She says that during the years when Iraq really was using WMD "actual rather than rhetorical opposition to such use was evidently not perceived to serve US interests; instead, the Reagan administration did not deviate from its determination that Iraq was to serve as the instrument to prevent Iranian victory".

She adds: "Chemical warfare was viewed as a potentially embarrassing public relations problem that complicated efforts to provide assistance. The US was concerned with its ability to project military force in the Middle East, and to keep the oil flowing."

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