James Sutterlin: This is a YUN interview with Ambassador Richard Butler in New York on July the 25th 2001. The interviewer is Sutterlin.

Mr. Ambassador, I want to first express Yale’s gratitude for your agreement to participate in this Oral History Project, and given your extraordinary experience with UNSCOM, about which we are doing an entire segment, I would like to begin by going over various questions in this regard. But first of all, perhaps you have some general comments you would like to make about your experience.

Richard Butler: Thank you, I’m very happy to participate. I’ll make a couple of general comments to begin. The first and central points I want to make are these: when the Security Council adopted Resolution 687, it imposed upon Iraq some highly specific and objective requirements for disarmament. Of course, the resolution was done in a political context; everything the Security Council does is in such a context. But 687 was extraordinarily specific with regard to the identification of prohibited weapons, the description of them, the requirement that all of them be, and I quote, “destroyed, removed, or rendered harmless.” Secondly, it tied Iraq’s complete compliance with this requirement to the removal of the sanctions that had previously been imposed upon Iraq, beginning when it invaded Kuwait some six months earlier.

JS: Could I just ask if you mean Article 22? Is that what you’re talking about?
RB: Yes, Article 22 of 687 states that when the Council is satisfied that Iraq has taken all the actions required of it, then the sanctions that had been imposed on it previously would be removed. It is important in this context to make this point that what is at issue in paragraph 22 of 687 is actually not a sanctions decision. There is an implied automaticity about that, but a decision by the Council that it is satisfied that Iraq has complied with its disarmament obligations, would have the consequence that the sanctions would as it were almost automatically fall away. This is a very important point. I’ll go back to what I was saying. [Resolution] 687 imposed upon Iraq some highly specific disarmament requirements. Paragraph 22 of that resolution had within not a sanctions decision, but a decision by the Council that in its judgment, Iraq had taken all of the actions required of it on disarmament, and then sanctions would fall away.

The second main point I want to make is that what in my view was fundamentally at issue was a set of highly objective or objectifiable events, and these were subsequently spelled out in the working methodology of UNSCOM, and the associated requirement of Iraq to cooperate with UNSCOM. By these highly specific events, I mean: 1) full, complete declarations by Iraq of its holdings of those illegal weapons; 2) verification by UNSCOM of the veracity and accuracy of those declarations; and 3) action taken by UNSCOM with Iraqi cooperation to “destroy, remove, and render harmless” what had thus been revealed by that process of declaration and verification. There was a fourth step, which did not have to do with disarmament. Disarmament had to do with the past and the present; that is, the weapons that had been created in the past, and that existed in the present. The fourth step had to do with the future: namely, the construction by
UNSCOM, again with Iraqi cooperation, of a long-term monitoring system to see that Iraq did not reconstitute weapons that were prohibited, which presumably had been destroyed, removed, or rendered harmless. Now this second point I’m making is the highly objective character of what was involved: presumed honest declaration, presumed accurate verification, and then physically observed destruction or removal of the weapons. Again, while this was done in a political context, what was at issue in substance was of a highly objective character.

The third point I want to make, and then close these opening remarks, is that all of this was to rely on Iraq’s cooperation. This cooperation was required by the Security Council, and I point out that Security Council’s decisions were taken under Chapter VII of the Charter, and thus pursuant to Article 25 of the Charter, were binding on all states in international law. That’s what Article 25 says: not even member states at the UN, but that all states will comply with the legitimate decisions of the Security Council. So my third point is that all of this—the specific weapons involved, the objectivity of the process of removal of them—was predicated on a third requirement, namely that Iraq would cooperate with the process. And as you will see, as we talk further, it was the refusal by Iraq to ever offer that cooperation from the beginning, which I claim became a fundamental determinant of all subsequent events. And if there are lessons to be drawn from the UNSCOM experience for the future, they must begin, I think, with this notion of the necessity of any sovereign state finding itself in a position such as Iraq did, or indeed with respect to other arms control agreements, to actually cooperate. Absent a central government decision by the government of Iraq, in this case, to comply with the law, to offer full cooperation to the process, the possibility that it would ever be done
successfully, or done objectively, was immediately reduced, if not removed. And no matter what others have said in this program of Yale, or at the Security Council, or in the media, any statement which seeks to either ignore or reduce that fundamental obligation upon Iraq, or any statement which seeks to misrepresent Iraq’s failure to cooperate, to seek to characterize that failure as in fact some kind of cooperation, is deeply misleading, because I assert here and now that this was the third and very important condition of what was established, and that it was a key one, which was never fulfilled.

It may become clearer as we go into some of these questions, but the ways in which Iraq did not fulfill that basic requirement began ab initio. Iraq’s very first declaration of its weapons was false. And then this extended for years, beyond false declaration into outright concealment, blockage of inspections, forgery of documents, suborning of witnesses, and so on. I came to form the view that Iraq considered itself to be at war with the United Nations, whose instrument was UNSCOM, and it mounted a major governmental effort to defeat UNSCOM’s purposes. I formed the impression in my visits to Iraq that one of the largest enterprises of the government of Iraq was actually the anti-UNSCOM industry, second perhaps only to its oil industry and its military. A most senior political figure in the government, Tariq Aziz, no matter what his title was—Foreign Minister or Deputy Prime Minister—was essentially in charge of the anti-UNSCOM industry. A major governmental effort was entered into to ensure that Iraq never complied with this fundamental requirement that it obey the law. I’ll make this last point: had it obeyed the law, it would have been disarmed in about a year, and sanctions would have been released. If you look at the time frames in the Security Council resolutions, they justify what I say. Do you know that the first declarations were required
within fifteen days? That implies the belief that then existed, that after they had been received it would take about six months to verify them, another few months to destroy what was revealed, and it would all be over in about a year. But instead, it took almost eight years and was never concluded, and the fundamental reason for that was that Iraq made it so. And what Saddam Hussein was bitterly, cynically trading off there was the welfare of the Iraqi people, the continuation of sanctions, as against maintaining his weapons of mass destruction capability. If I formed a single, central impression from my time in dealing with them, it was this: that Saddam’s fundamental attachment was to maintaining a weapons of mass destruction capability, and for that he was prepared to trade off everything, including the continuation of sanctions with their impact upon twenty-two million ordinary Iraqis. This is what I wanted to record at the beginning of these words with you.

JS: Good, that’s very interesting, and it leads to a couple of immediate questions. One is that it is often said that in fact the United States, in particular, confused this whole question by seeming to expect more than the elimination of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction in order to bring about the removal of sanctions. In other words, the United States really was looking for the elimination of the regime. What was your impression on this score, and when did you think it was clarified?

RB: I agree with your contention that the United States seemed to want more than what was provided in 687, notwithstanding the fact that it was one of the key drafters of 687. And even if United States representatives were to reject that contention, I believe
they would be wrong, because the evidence of public discourse, from political circles to
the media, demonstrates, I think, beyond question—and I’m leaving aside Iraqi
propaganda about this—but demonstrates beyond question that the widely held view was
that the United States was actually interested in more than the simple objective
fulfillment of 687 leading to the implementation of paragraph 22. That what they in fact
wanted was the removal of the Saddammist regime. Now this was something in my
discussions in Baghdad, that the Iraqis often contended. It was always difficult to know
how to distinguish between what they really felt and believed and what they were saying
for propaganda purposes, but I believe about half way through my term I started to form
the view that indeed, there was some merit in the contention that if I were to go to the
Council with a paragraph 22 report saying that I believed Iraq was substantially disarmed,
that it was not impossible that the United States would say, “We don’t share that view,
it’s not enough,” and that their motivation for that would be their hostility to the
Saddammist regime rather than their simply objective consideration of such a report. My
anxieties on that score were compounded when, at a certain point during my term,
Madeleine Albright actually made a statement, when she had become Secretary of State,
she made a statement to the effect that what was substantially at issue was the removal of
Saddam. And I think she came fairly quickly to recognize that that had been a bit of a
mistake. I actually raised it with senior Americans saying that that had been a very
unhelpful remark, and she subsequently sought to clarify it. But in the way of political
propaganda, the way it operates, the Iraqis had just simply pocketed her remarks, and
repeated them and repeated them, because it served their purposes, and damage was done.
At a certain point, I sought agreement from Ambassador Richardson, who was a member of the Clinton cabinet, that in a subsequent visit to Baghdad I could privately give the Iraqis assurance that if they complied with final disarmament requirements I had given to them that they would not encounter that difficulty from the United States. Richardson authorized me to say that and to say to the Iraqis the words that this was something that I was authorized to say to them at the level of the cabinet of the government of United States. Now, in the event, our talks broke down; Iraq indicated it was not going to comply with those final disarmament requirements; and I made the judgment that it was irrelevant to pass on that assurance to them.

JS: That’s interesting, because both Ambassador Lavrov and Charles Duelfer have concluded that at a certain point in 1998 the Iraqis changed their attitude, because they gave up, so to speak. They decided that there was no hope that the United States would ever fail to veto a resolution lifting the sanctions.

RB: As long as Saddam was there.

JS: As long as Saddam was there.

RB: I don’t know if their view is correct. A judgment is involved and their judgment may be right. I have a little difficulty with the idea of Iraq “giving up hope.” It sounds a bit benign to me, because I see that in rather stark contrast to what I said earlier, that the regime is not so much driven by hope but more by determination to retain weapons of
mass destruction capability. I think “given up hope” is a touch benign, but certainly, I do confirm that it was in that timeframe, in mid-1998, that the difficulty caused by Madeleine Albright’s statement arose, and that I had gone to Richardson to seek the assurance that I got—it was in precisely that timeframe that I went to Baghdad believing that as appropriate I would be able to give that assurance to Tariq Aziz.

JS: Let me go back now to your beginning, so to speak. You had the advantage of the experience of Ambassador Ekeus, of six years or so. What did you really expect that you could accomplish, given your very comprehensive views on Resolution 687, taking over at that point?

RB: Rolf Ekeus sold the job to me with great vigor. He told me that it had been the most fascinating job he had ever had. And by the way, he and I had known each other for about ten years prior to that. We had been colleagues together in Geneva for five years at the Conference on Disarmament, worked closely together, knew each other well, and I think I can say [we] liked each other. Our families knew each other. When the Secretary-General offered me the job, one of Kofi Annan’s main recommendations to me to encourage me to accept it was to “Go immediately and talk to Rolf, Rolf will tell you all about it.” And Rolf did, and he worked assiduously to persuade me to take it. He said it was a fascinating job, the most fascinating job he’d ever had. It involved, he said, enormous personal power, extensive international travel, the opportunity to meet with leaders of the world—he mentioned King Hussein of Jordan and others. I was a little bit surprised at the things that he sought to tantalize me with, that I would somehow rise to
the bait of hob-nobbing with the great and good, and traveling all the time, and so on. But I certainly did get the impression that he had had what he called a fascinating time.

When I sought to speak with him about less glittering, more objective parts of the job, he gave me mixed signals. He referred to the recent passage of a resolution I can’t recall at the moment, a resolution by the Security Council that he thought gave the incoming Executive Chairman a new or renewed or greater opportunity to get the job finished. He actually said to me, “You’re going to be poised to really bring this to conclusion and given your, Richard Butler’s, background in arms control, you should relish that. This will be a signal achievement for you to pull off.” I suppose I’m just illustrating further that he worked very hard on persuading me to take it.

I asked him about the dangers involved, and he referred to some of them, and minimized some others. I actually formed the view that there were limitations to what I would get out of talking with Rolf about this. He was clearly in the mode of wanting to be somewhere else; he was going to become Swedish Ambassador to the United States. I know that his wife was tired of the grind of UNSCOM. And I know that Kofi Annan—this is something he let slip, to which I should have perhaps paid more attention—that Kofi Annan wasn’t going to be in a position to agree to his resignation until he had someone that he thought could fill his shoes. And so it was important to Rolf and his family that I say yes, so that he could actually move on. I was a little bit put off by the extent to which he was selling me the job, and in contrast, the inadequate extent to which he was willing or able to answer my more objective questions about what remained to be done, what he thought might be possible. There were some briefings when I agreed to take the job. There were some subsequent briefing appointments where I would go and
call on him and hear in more detail from him, and perhaps look at some papers as a way of transiting into the job, and I did some but not all of those. The reason why I didn’t do all of them, and cancelled some of them was two-fold: one was that I actually found them of limited use, and secondly, I just did get a bit swamped by the business of winding up a twenty-eight year career in the Australian foreign service. But I’m sorry to say that the first of those two reasons was actually the more important one. I formed the view that I had gotten all that I was going to get out of Rolf from his both salesmanship and briefings, and that the better thing for me to do was to wind up my other career and get into the job as quickly as possible, and learn more that I needed to learn from within, directly, and from UNSCOM’s staff, rather than from the briefings from Rolf.

JS: In that connection, Rolf Ekeus appears in this film that Scott Ritter has made, and at least to me rather surprisingly, he says that he considers that his tenure was a failure, and that he was in fact glad to get out. It was a failure, he said, because his objective had been to bring about a situation where the sanctions could be lifted, and he had failed to do that. Was this your impression of Rolf Ekeus’ attitude as you talked to him at that point?

RB: That’s very interesting. I declined to appear in the Ritter film. I asked him to tell me who he was interviewing, and what sorts of questions he would ask. He took some time to get back to me on that, and when I saw a list of those he was asking to interview, including the very substantial number of concerned people who actually declined, and the questions that he proposed to ask, which weren’t questions at all but were interpretive or propagandist statements of his own position, I declined to take part in it. I’ve not seen
the film. What I’ve heard of it, though, strongly suggests to me that I took the right
decision. I was a bit surprised that Rolf did decide to take part in it.

Now more to the point of your question, I’m surprised to hear that Rolf declared
himself to be a failure, and more surprised that he does so in terms of removal of
sanctions. I want to emphasize this: the job of Executive Chairman of UNSCOM had
nothing to do with sanctions, no responsibility for it whatsoever, and any suggestion that
it did distorts the facts. This was key in the way I conducted the job. I never, ever made
a statement on sanctions while I was in the job. I only ever took questions on that subject
when I was freed from it. Rolf is wrong when he describes his job as having to do with
relief of sanctions. If that’s his personal view, even his moral concern, I can respect that.
But as Paragraph 22 of the resolution displayed, it was about a decision by the Council
that Iraq had been disarmed. That’s what the job was. Sanctions was connected to that,
but it was a separate issue, and I was always aware when I was in the job that had I ever
gone to the Council and sought to talk about sanctions that I would have been shot down.
I would have been quite readily told, “You’re out of order, it’s not your job, leave that to
us,” which would have been correct. So that Rolf considers himself to be a failure is
something that surprises me a bit; I thought he did a substantially good job, although I
had a major disagreement with him subsequently over the modalities for inspection of
sensitive sites. That he defines that failure in terms of release of sanctions is something
that I can only say I take note of it, but I don’t share that view. The job was not about
relief of sanctions; it was about weapons of mass destruction and the removal of them.
JS: Let me just say here that I had the feeling that the interview with Ekeus in this film was, let’s say, edited, in a way to give certain impressions.

RB: I suspect strongly that that would be the case, so let’s give Rolf the benefit of the doubt there. Indeed, they may have edited it in a way that brought him to this sanctions point rather than pay adequate attention to the arms control issues.

JS: Let me go to one other question that did arise in this film.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

JS: In the film, Ritter describes a meeting that you had in the White House when he, Ritter, was present. He claims that at that meeting you were discussing with the Americans a particular inspection that was being planned, which he suggests you planned with the Americans, and that the timing came up, and that the Americans insisted that the inspection had to take place within a certain timeframe because they could not mount a bombing campaign after Ramadan had begun, and that you agreed to this. Could you give your interpretation of that meeting, if it took place?

RB: This is a very sorry business. Scott Ritter has shredded his credibility by many of his actions, and it seems that as time has passed, he has felt more and more compelled—I don’t know why, but compelled from within—to describe situations that never occurred. There never was such a meeting at the White House. This is a fabrication by Ritter. I haven’t seen the film and the exact terms of what he claims took place, but there was
never a situation of the kind that you’ve just described, where I sat with the Americans and planned a passage of inspection events in a way that would fit with a decision by them to bomb or not to bomb. That is simply without foundation. I gather he talks about lines on blackboards or whiteboards and someone setting out timetables. It didn’t occur.

Now the basic problem that Scott Ritter’s current behavior raises is the following. And I don’t actually want to spend a lot of time talking about Ritter, because I think he’s a sad and sorry case of a person who has lost his way. But the basic problem that his current behavior raises is this: either when he worked for me he flagrantly sought to mislead me, or in his public positions now he is flagrantly seeking to mislead the public. It has to be one or the other, because when he worked for me, he wrote to me, he stated in private meetings his absolute certainty that Iraq continued to hold prohibited weapons, that they were concealing them, and that it was essential that we went out there and, in his words, “kicked in the door,” and got those weapons. Indeed, in his letter of resignation, that stance is reflected, because the main reason he gave for resigning was that we were being prevented by others, and he names the United States, from doing our job of getting hold of illegal weapons. He said something like, “Phony disarmament is worse than no disarmament.” So even as he resigned, fundamental to his view was that Iraq continued to hold prohibited and dangerous weapons. That was the firm advice he gave me. Whether or not I accepted that advice was my decision. But that was his stance. I remember a meeting where he thumped his fist on the table and said, “They’re liars! They’re liars! They’ve got these weapons, we must go and get them.” Two and a half years later, he’s standing in front of the public, I gather including in this film, and saying Iraq is disarmed and that has been the case since 1995, and that the continued
oppression of Iraq through sanctions and pursuit of them by the United States is an offense.

Now I ask you, on which occasion is he flagrantly misrepresenting the facts? Was it when he worked for me? Because these advices that he gave me were after the period that he now claims in which Iraq was identified as disarmed, which is 1995. He was giving me those advices in 1997 and 1998. Or is it now, when he stands in front of the public and says, “These are the facts.” If they are the facts, that Iraq has been substantially disarmed since 1995, then he spent a lot of time in UNSCOM flagrantly misleading its Executive Chairman. He has to make up his mind what the truth is.

Now I’ll tell you what the truth is. The truth is that Iraq is not disarmed, and that leaving his hyperbole aside, and he goes in for hyperbole, his basic advice to me in 1997 and 1998 was correct. What he’s saying to the public now is nonsense—dangerous nonsense. Especially as Iraq has been free of any arms control or monitoring for over two years, and there is evidence that they are back in the business of making new and acquiring new weapons of mass destruction. Scott Ritter is today very seriously misleading the public. I don’t know why; I’m not a professional analyst, I can’t work that out. But I do know that it’s wrong and dangerous.

JS: Let’s get away from Scott for a minute and go back again to your beginning. I want to know whether you had—having the advantage of the previous years’ experience—had you devised a kind of a strategy that you would follow in approaching the Iraqis? And if so, how did that evolve.
RB: Yes, I have. Having listened to some extent to Rolf Ekéus, having looked at the relevant reports, and decisions of the Security Council, I gave very serious thought to a strategy, or how I should deal with the issues. I went to see Tariq Aziz in New York immediately before I took up the job. I think it was a week or so before I was actually to take up the job. He happened to be here, and we agreed to meet, and I called on him at the Iraqi Mission to the UN in New York, and I laid out that approach to him at our first meeting.

The centerpiece of it was the word and concept “objectivity.” It told him that I believed that what was at issue in the remaining disarmament task was a set of physical objects and government programs which could be objectively described almost exclusively in technical and scientific terms. I made clear that what I meant by that was that they would not be properly dealt with or described in purely political terms. I argued to him quite strongly that from my long experience in dealing with arms control and weaponry I knew that what was at issue could be very substantially objectified. And I meant literally, for example, the characteristics of a missile, the number of missiles. These were things that could be done in numbers rather than words. I remember saying that to him. And that’s what I would be about. I would be about finding the objective reality of what remained of Iraq’s prohibited weapons, getting rid of them, and then seeing Iraq return to normal membership of the international community.

Tariq Aziz was quite taken by this. He turned immediately to a paragraph of one of Rolf Ekéus’ last reports to the Security Council, in which Rolf Ekéus had spoken in the harshest terms about Iraq’s lying and cheating, and their intentions with their weapons. And Aziz said, “You see? None of this was objective. This is Ekéus’ political
ruminations, his political posturing, none of it’s objective. But what you have just said is that you won’t be talking like that, and that you’ll be talking numbers, not words.” I said, “Exactly, I would prefer to never have to make any political statement. I’ve spent a lifetime in arms control; I know it can be objectified. You give me the correct numbers, and I’ll say that they are correct. If we’re satisfied they are, I’ll say that they are correct, and that that’s all there is, and I won’t make any political or predictive or critical statements. I prefer never to have to give a press conference, other than to talk about numbers. My approach will be objective, and my wish will be to get this over with as soon as possible. I said to him, “If I wake up one morning—six, nine, twelve months from now—and find myself out of a job, I will be the happiest of men because it will be over. And with your help, I believe we can do that.”

Aziz said he agreed completely, he was very happy with that apolitical approach. I know that he said subsequently, for example, to the then foreign minister of Egypt, Amre Moussa, whom I knew, that he had been very impressed with our first meeting. He thought that this is a person that he could work with, this objective approach was right, and he subsequently incorporated into his vocabulary for months, if not years, this notion of objective. Even when, a year later, we were having terrible arguments, he would say, “Our approach,” meaning Iraq’s, “is the objective one; yours is not.” So in what I learned was a classic Iraqi tactic, he appropriated my language and concept, and then subsequently deployed them against us. I also found just a few months into the job that my wish not to involve in public-political discourse was in vain, because by September-October of 1997—and I had started in June, or was it the first of July, I can’t remember, I guess we’ll need to check that as a fact, whether it was the first of June or the first of
July—but only a couple of months into my job they—the Iraqis, Aziz—had taken to
public statements about UNSCOM and its attitude and its performance that I assessed
needed a reply. And as you will know, in the subsequent year, there was quite a lot of
public jousting between us.

I will make a flat assertion here that I suppose might have one or two
exceptions—one would have to go back and check the whole record. But I don’t believe
I ever made a direct personal or political attack upon the Iraqis in what I said in public. I
always focused on the state of the weapons, notwithstanding what they said about us.
Interestingly, in the press conference that the Secretary-General’s spokesman held to say
farewell to Rolf Ekeus and to introduce me into the media, I was asked a question: it was
“You’ve always been a very outspoken person, as Australian ambassador. How’s it
going to be in this job?” And I said, my answer was, “People change.” The contrast was
drawn between nice, soft Swedish diplomat Rolf Ekeus, and blunt, outspoken Australian
Richard Butler. What do you say? I said, “People change.” Interestingly, this nice, soft
Swedish diplomat in that same press conference, in public, described the Iraqis as liars
and cheats. I turned to the Secretary-General’s spokesman, as an aside, this was not
heard in public, but on the rostrum, and I whispered behind my hand, I said, “This is the
nice guy? This is the soft guy?” Rolf had reached the point where he was actually
fighting with them in public in very polemical and very abusive language. I had decided
not to do that. I had decided to make the centerpiece of my own strategy this concept of
the objectivity of the weapons involved; that they could be objectively described, and that
that’s what we would be about, and that’s all I would ever talk about, and that’s how I
would conduct the job. At the beginning, Aziz seemed very happy with this, and welcomed this fresh, new approach.

JS: It’s interesting, because this impression, despite what you say, seems to have persevered and continued. Even the Secretary-General, in the interview we had with him, refers to a distinction between the first period and the second period, and I think he used the word ‘cowboys’ not in the interview on record with us, but elsewhere. How do you explain that this impression exists?

RB: Which is the impression?

JS: That in fact you were much more aggressive in your approach, much more prone to go to the press, much more a ‘cowboy’ than Ekéus.

RB: Well, first of all, let’s deal with the concept of cowboy.

JS: All right.

RB: The sorry fact of the matter is, and this is all out there on the record, that the word ‘cowboys’ was used by Tariq Aziz, and he used it to Kofi Annan. Kofi Annan came back to New York from a visit to Baghdad, and I was at his side in the Security Council and in the press conference afterwards, where he used that term. To be fair, I would have to say on that day I don’t think I had seen a human being so tired; Kofi was just wretchedly tired
from what he’d been through in Baghdad, and the long flight home. I think it was a bit of an error to go immediately into the Security Council and then to the media. He would have been better; he would have lost nothing had he gone home and had a good long sleep and done it the following day. But he did repeat Aziz’s charges that UNSCOM inspectors behaved like cowboys. By the way, that needs to be clarified: I was never described as a cowboy. It was the UNSCOM inspectors who were, who went about in blue jeans, t-shirts, American cowboy hats and boots and so on, “kicking down doors,” to use Ritter’s phrase, behaving in a way that the Iraqis claimed they found offensive. And to introduce the American aspect of this behavior, Aziz very cleverly chose an American concept, namely ‘cowboys.’

Annan repeated that concept on the day that he arrived back from Baghdad, and when this was complained of, including by me to him privately, he did clarify publicly that it wasn’t his word, [and] that he was merely conveying the complaint that the Iraqis had voiced to him. He tried to distance himself from it.

But I think your question has more elements in it than the specific use of this word ‘cowboys.’ Yes, there was a difference between the way in which Ekeus conducted himself and the way in which I did. There’s a difference in our personalities; there’s a difference in the way in which we speak, especially in the English language, and I mention that factor because English is not Rolf’s mother tongue. On all accounts, I speak it directly and clearly; Rolf Ekeus is extraordinarily circumlocutory. In fact, journalists and some staff of UNSCOM used to refer to Rolf’s descriptions of things as ‘Swenglish,’ a mixture of Swedish and English. His briefings to the Security Council took hours, and were eye-glazing. One of the ways that Rolf dealt with the problems that the job brought
was, I think, to kill everyone with length and detail. I didn’t do that. I always spoke much more directly, much more to the point, in a far less embroidered fashion. That difference was real, and it was certainly noted: some favorably, by the way, some not. I mean, there were many people who said, “This is a breath of fresh air, we actually understand what you’re saying.”

A second reason why the contrast was noted was because from September-October 1997 I found myself plunged into a period of great conflict with Iraq. I don’t think there’s any doubt, and I think you’ll see this in my book, that in October 1997, when Russia abstained on an important resolution in the Security Council involving Iraq’s non-compliance with its obligations, the signal went out to Iraq that the tide had turned, that permanent member unity had broken, and that henceforth they could expect Russian support. They could bring their war with UNSCOM to its final and concluding stage. And then a whole variety of things unfolded, from the nonsense of inspection of presidential sites to the deep attacks on UNSCOM as an institution, increasing attacks upon me personally, the issue of the sincerity of the United States, et cetera, et cetera. A period unfolded, which we can now recognize as the concluding period of the Iraq-UNSCOM conflict. And they sought desperately to recruit to their support, to their side, the Secretary-General of the United Nations. And may I say, for a period at the end of 1997 and the beginning of 1998, they succeeded. A direct line of contact was opened up with the Secretary-General. Over and over again, phone calls between Aziz and the Secretary-General, which the Secretary-General entertained, which constituted bypassing me and the independent organization that I led. And the Secretary-General heard endless complaints about that organization, and about me, and the fact of him being prepared to
listen to them was all Iraq wanted. There was a period when Annan defended me; there
was a period when he stopped defending me. But all Iraq really required was that the
channel of communication be direct to the Secretary-General. This was the beginning of
the marginalization leading to the removal of UNSCOM, which the Secretary-General
was willing to entertain, through this direct line of communication, in the name of trying
to solve a problem, doing his job as a peacemaker, and so on. It was all Iraq wanted, and
actually they got everything they wanted. And I think it would have been inhuman to
expect Kofi Annan to hear the flow of complaint that he heard about me without some of
it sticking.

What was fundamentally involved was a strategic decision by Iraq to end the
UNSCOM period.

JS: To destroy UNSCOM.

RB: To get UNSCOM out of its life. Its object was to get UNSCOM out of Iraqi life,
to get this business of inspection and monitoring control over its weapons aspirations
ended. And the tactics employed to give effect to this policy included a root and branch
attack upon UNSCOM. From the end of 1997 to when the end came at the end of 1998,
that attack was relentless and increased, and it was increasingly aided by Russia.

Russia involved itself in outright deception of the Security Council, with respect
to UNSCOM’s activities. Russia focused heavily on UNSCOM as the problem, rather
than Iraq. Russia insisted to me that I accept Russian staff in my executive office so that
they could keep a watch over me. And I accepted one of them. Russia came to me
repeatedly with a shopping list of things that I should do for Iraq. I asked them repeatedly for help with bringing to account weapons programs on which they had previously given Iraq assistance, in particular the biological weapons program. Russia gave me no such assistance, and they flagrantly lied to me about the assistance they had given Iraq in the past.

There is no question that a major strategy, or tactic, rather, of shooting the messenger, of destroying UNSCOM, had been entered into by fair means or foul. And a part of that was to attack Butler personally, and a part of that attack was to say, “Oh, he’s too blunt, he speaks too directly.”

I point out to you that rarely, if ever, was dispute entered into what I had said in substance, because there was no answer. We discovered Iraq’s VX program. It was a fact. The elaborate deception on the biological weapons program was a fact. We discovered an Iraqi air force document that called into question the whole declaration on the extent to which they had weaponized chemical and biological weapons in the past. That was seized back from us. The Security Council demanded that Iraq return it to us. Iraq refused. And what Russia started to do was to say that Iraq was right; that the way in which we had conducted ourselves in getting that document had been distasteful.

Can’t you see, it’s called “Shoot the Messenger?” What about the document? What about the substance of the law requiring Iraqi compliance with arms control? And what this document showed had substantive data on it that was of importance. But it got sidelined by saying that our behavior in getting hold of that document—which had not been particularly offensive, or offensive at all; it had been completely legal and not offensive—but it was sidelined by claims that the way in which we had gone and
obtained that document was consistent with our being cowboys and disrespectful of Iraq’s dignity and so on. The whole notion of Iraqi dignity—and I’m sure there is such a thing as Iraqi dignity—but the notion of Iraqi dignity in this context was just dramatically deployed to draw attention away from the single salient fact that I had referred to as my third opening point. That is, Iraq’s obligation to comply with the decisions of the Council was being violated root and branch.

JS: Right. I know you don’t have much time, and therefore I want to go on to this important question of modalities. I know in your book that you report that at one point, when the subject really first came up, you told Tariq Aziz that you did not really think they were determining. However, what was your view of the modalities agreement that was reached by Ekeus?

RB: Well, it’s not a question of my view; these are just facts, and this is in the realm of objectivity. There was a problem in 1995, and Ekeus went to Baghdad—or was it ’96?

JS: It’s June ’96; that’s the date of his report.

RB: Ekeus went…

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

…I was saying that Ekeus had rushed to Baghdad in June 1996 because there had been obstruction of inspections and breakdown. I was about to say that I do marvel a bit now
at how readily the fact of Iraqi noncompliance and resistance to Ekeus under Ekeus’ time seems to have disappeared into the mist of time, and all the bad stuff happened while I was there. The record, and future researchers will show this, the record just doesn’t justify that. There was the extraordinary business of the car park hold-up for four days. And what was at issue there was Iraq’s nuclear program—terribly important stuff. This is why I am surprised at Rolf saying that he was a failure. They must have edited that film negatively from his point of view. Rolf did an extraordinary job in many respects.

Anyway, he went to Baghdad in 1996 because there was this problem, and sat down and negotiated with Tariq Aziz two documents. One was modalities for inspection of sensitive sites, and another one was a future program of action. The two documents were objectively of a completely different status. One was a negotiated document; the program of action was a document that had been negotiated by the two sides and signed by them as a pledge of future…as a description of future work. It was a bilateral agreement. The modalities document was, of course, the subject of discussion, but it was drawn up following those discussions, by Rolf Ekeus, and handed unilaterally to the Iraqis. It was not signed; it was not a negotiated bilateral document; it was a unilateral document. Had it been otherwise, Rolf would have been more or less in violation of his own mandate. The Americans in fact thought that he had violated his mandate. They were very critical of the modalities document. And if you want evidence, more objective evidence of what I’m claiming here, although what I’m saying is objective in the fact that it was a unilateral document given by the Chairman to the Iraqi side, look at the document itself. The last paragraph states that if this doesn’t work out, the UNSCOM Chairman reserves the right to change it. It is a unilateral document.
Now as my experience lengthened, and as Iraqi blockages using the modalities document increased. In one case there was a ludicrous instance where our people were held up at the front gate of an important site, only to witness trucks driving out the back gate taking away documents and materials, and we could see this from the helicopters overhead. They were held up on the ground that this was a sensitive site, and for several hours while the site was sanitized, and then were told two or three inspectors could get in. There were places that were ten square kilometers that we were allowed to inspect with three people, because the modalities had provisions in them for limitation on numbers of inspectors, the ability of Iraq to unilaterally declare any site sensitive, and then we’d have to wait at the front gate until a senior Iraqi person came and negotiate the nature, duration, and size of the inspectorate, and so on. Theoretically. But practically, Iraq could have declared a telephone booth to be sensitive, and it virtually did. And so in September-October—again around that period in 1997, I think I was in Baghdad in August or September, I think September—I told Aziz that I was concerned about the way in which Iraq, and I want to be very precise about this, the way in which Iraq was applying the modalities document in practice. He then contended that this had been a firm agreement reached between him and my predecessor, and that it was engraved in stone. I said, “That is not true; it is a unilateral document, and it has within it a provision for change, depending upon experience of its application.” He said he disagreed. Well, he could say he disagreed until the cows come home, but that is not the fact, and he knew it was not the fact. I told him, “You must stop applying this document in the way that you are to prevent us from doing our work. If you do not,” I said, “I will take advantage of that last paragraph, and I will change the document, and I will take this to the Security
Council.” And he got very angry about that, because he knew he was wrong, because he knew it was not a bilateral document, it was unilateral. He knew that the chances were good that their ploy would be destroyed. And I think, tactically, possibly that was a mistake by me. I think it sent them an early signal that I was going to be tough on things that they thought they could rely on to cushion their concealment effort. I think that rang alarm bells. I think it ended my honeymoon with them.

Now around that time, I met Rolf Ekeus in New York, completely privately. It was actually in my own home, with wives; we were there as family friends. But in the conversation that took place there, I told him of my concerns, and he became agitated about that. I then realized that he saw the negotiation of those two documents, and the promulgation of the modalities, as one of his great successes. There is an important principle at stake here, which is diplomatic attenuation of conflict, irrespective of what it does in substance. But nevertheless, even though he became a bit agitated, I went on to say this to him: I said, “I know why you did it; I can understand the predicament that you were in. Please don’t take this personally, but I’m telling you now that the Iraqis are abusing what you did, and it’s become a real millstone around my neck, and I now think it was probably a mistake to give them this instrument called modalities, and I believe I’ll have to change it.” He then got angry with me, surprisingly so, as we knew each other well. But the anger signaled to me how deeply attached he was to this achievement. I wouldn’t say that the meeting ended in a hostile fashion, but it ended shortly thereafter. And no, we didn’t then decide to proceed on to dinner somewhere, which was on the cards. We just left it at having a drink together, and he and his wife departed. I said to my wife, “I’ve hit a really sensitive point there.” And I learned subsequently within the
organization that I was dead right—that Rolf considered the modalities document to be one of his great achievements.

What he had done is provided Iraq with another instrument that they could use to avoid their obligations. I’m not accusing him of seeking to do that. The fundamental point, which you will hear over and over from me, the fundamental point at issue is a central government decision taken in Baghdad to refuse to obey the law, to avoid their responsibilities. But the modalities document, as it turns out, it wasn’t Rolf’s intention, but it provided Iraq, with a fabulous instrument through which to continue to avoid their responsibilities. And my decision to tell them that I knew this, and to say, “You stop it now, or I’m going to withdraw that document or change it,” caused them great alarm. It led Aziz to say, “You can’t do that; this is a bilateral agreement.” I said, “It’s not, and you know it.” And, “You can’t take this to the Security Council, this is a done deal, it’s written in stone.” I said, “It’s not, and you know it.”

And what then happened was that we actually agreed subsequently, a few months later, on new ways in which this document...the document would remain, but it would be applied differently. I got out of Aziz a larger number of inspectors, a shorter period of delay, et cetera. I actually got the modalities to be improved in their application, provided I didn’t actually seek to withdraw them. That was the trade-off I made.

I disagree with Rolf Ekéus that his document was beyond criticism. I told him that day in my apartment that I understood how this came about, but you know, it’s not the bloody treaty of Westphalia or something like that. It was something that was done for good reasons, but on subsequent sight, needed to be reviewed, and that’s what I did. The principle at issue, and this is an assertion I will make strongly, that diplomatic
agreement, and no matter whether it papered over substantive differences, even big cracks in the wall, was somehow more important than substance. I subsequently discovered there in a lot of Rolf’s work, not all of it, but a fair portion of it, certainly in a good portion of Kofi Annan’s work in late ’97 and early ’98 on Iraq, certainly my failure to adhere to this principle drew a distinction between my approach and that of Ekéus and Annan.

I quite specifically warned Kofi Annan before he went to Baghdad that the Iraqis were lying to him on a couple of key issues. I have this in writing. I said, “They are lying to you, and I believe that you, as Secretary-General, should tell them that you know that. If you don’t, you will set yourself up for an even worse fate when you actually are in the lion’s den, when you actually go to Baghdad.” I said, “They should not lie to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. You should tell them you know that they are, and that you won’t come and negotiate and play those games. That it is about substance.” He rejected that advice, because he believed that the problems involved could be solved by diplomatic agreement, and he was wrong, with a capital “W.” They could not; he was duped in the agreement that he signed with the Iraqis. As he was flying home, they tried to change it, before the ink was dry on the page. They never complied with it, and it never adequately addressed any arms control reality.

So I return to what I said at the beginning. This job was about weapons, and there was an objective way of dealing with those weapons, but Iraq’s refusal to do so prevented us from getting the job completed. And now I’m saying that at key moments, beginning in the mid ’90s, down to the end of the UNSCOM period, a succession of characters sought to deal with the problem of Iraq’s noncompliance by doing diplomatic agreements
with them, the hallmark of which was that those agreements did not address noncompliance, and did not address the weapons issues. And this is my strongest objection, the idea that you can paper over real substance with mere diplomacy. You cannot, and in this case with Iraq, repeated attempts to do so failed, leading to continuing danger.

JS: One final question on modalities, just to clear the record. Did you, in the case of one or two of the final inspections, instruct the inspectors not to follow the modalities document?

RB: No, I didn’t. I know that Ritter has said that, and sought to prove it by showing some pictures. No, I didn’t. Tariq Aziz and I had agreed that the modalities would be applied in a new way. What I instructed the inspectors to do was to insist on that. That’s exactly what I instructed. I said, “If they say to you that the modalities as written is what will apply here, and you can have no more than two or four people go into a site, you must insist no, there is an agreement now between Aziz and the Chairman that we can now have a discussion here in situ on how many people we need to go into a certain site. And that you must have that discussion.” And we did. There was one key site where instead of four, we got sixteen people in—where we found the Iraqi air force document. So no, I did not instruct them to violate what had been agreed; I instructed them to refuse a deceptive insistence on what had been agreed, and to insist instead that we were now working under newly established conditions, and that that’s what they should insist on.
JS: That’s important. We’ll let you go. And if we can, we’ll continue…

RB: We must, in September.

[End of Interview, Tape 2, Side 1]