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In Book, Insider Recounts Hunt for Hussein's Weapons

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UNITED NATIONS -- During his final days in U.S. captivity, Saddam Hussein wrote poetry, flirted with American nurses, expressed his desire to restart a nuclear weapons program and asked to be put to death by firing squad like a soldier, not hanged like a common criminal, according to a new book by Charles A. Duelfer, who was the CIA's top weapons investigator in [Iraq](#).

"Hide and Seek: The Search for Truth in Iraq" chronicles Duelfer's decade-long hunt for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, first as a top U.N. weapons inspector in the 1990s and later as head of the CIA-led Iraq Survey Group, which concluded in fall 2004 that Iraq had essentially dismantled its deadliest weapons program years before the U.S. invasion.

The book -- which was held up for more than nine months by CIA reviewers -- includes fresh allegations about the Vladimir Putin government's corrupt oil dealings with Iraq and Putin's effort to persuade Hussein to step down to avert a U.S. invasion. It also describes a rudimentary program by Iraqi insurgents after the invasion to develop chemical agents, including ricin, a highly toxic poison derived from castor beans. The operation was shut down by coalition forces, Duelfer says.

Duelfer portrays the United States as a lumbering superpower whose top policymakers, particularly in the White House and the Defense Department, lacked any basic understanding of Iraq's history, motives and leaders. But he says Iraq also routinely misread American intentions and overestimated the capability of U.S. intelligence. He says that according to an Iraqi government account, Hussein once asked his top commanders if Iraq had any hidden weapons he didn't know about.

The book tracks Duelfer's political journey from his days as an obscure State Department official in the Reagan administration who organized arms shipments to Chad during its struggle against Libya.

His 1993 appointment as deputy chairman of the U.N. Special Commission on Iraq placed him at the center of a major international crisis. As a U.N. official, Duelfer gained access to Iraq's top officials and helped arrange a U.S.-backed spying operation that penetrated Hussein's inner circle. The revelations of U.S. spying led to the U.N. commission's ejection from Iraq in 1999.

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Duelfer said that on the eve of the 2003 U.S. invasion, he had more direct knowledge of Iraq's weapons programs and leaders than virtually any other top American official. But he had also presided over a U.N. inspection operation that had wrongly assumed that Iraq still possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Duelfer describes numerous requests from senior Iraqi officials to start a dialogue with the United States to improve relations. "Each time I passed on such entreaties to Washington, there was never an answer," he said. "If nothing else, they were missed opportunities for Washington to gain more knowledge."

After he left the United Nations in 2000, Duelfer went to a Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, where he began working informally with a unit in the CIA's Near East division, the Iraq Operations Group, which was tasked with regime change.

Duelfer assembled a list of more than 40 high-level officials who could help run Iraq following an invasion. He cultivated old contacts in the oil industry and the Iraqi government, meeting secretly with a top Iraqi official at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. He traveled to Vienna for OPEC meetings that included key Iraqi oil officials. But the plan to put together a team that would form the basis of a future government was shelved.

"Once U.S. forces were in Iraq, they used the lists as targets," he writes. "Those named would find their homes raided, and they would be thrown in jail. . . . We continued to make more enemies."

Duelfer was later selected by then-CIA Director George J. Tenet to head the Iraq Survey Group. Duelfer's hunt for weapons of mass destruction led him to Camp Cropper, a detention facility at Baghdad International Airport that held "high value" detainees, including Hussein and his top lieutenants.

Hussein spent his final months at the facility -- nicknamed the "petting zoo" -- in a solitary cell. His only visitor was a young Lebanese American FBI interrogator named George Piro, whom the former Iraqi leader came to regard as a son.

During sessions with Piro, Hussein said he would seek to reconstitute his nuclear weapons program as long as his regional enemies, [Iran](#) and [Israel](#), possessed such arsenals. Hussein also acknowledged that he had sought to persuade the world that he still possessed such weapons in order to show his powerful neighbors that he had not been fatally weakened by a decade of U.N. sanctions.

Duelfer writes that he interrogated Hussein's personal secretary, Abid Hamid Mahmud Tikriti, who described Hussein's meeting in early 2003 with Yevgeny Primakov, the former Russian foreign minister.

Primakov hand-delivered a letter from Putin "asking Saddam Hussein to step out of power and remain as the secretary general of the Baath Party. By this move, he would be able to convince the United States not to attack Iraq. Saddam Hussein walked out of the room."

Duelfer says then-Secretary of State Colin L. Powell sought to pressure him not to publicly divulge [Russia's](#) activities in his 2004 report, while other State Department officials warned it could harm

diplomatic relations with Moscow.

Powell said yesterday that it was only appropriate for him, as secretary of state, to "measure the potential diplomatic fallout with foreign countries" from the report. "It is incorrect to say we tried in any way to stifle his reporting," he said. "To the best of my knowledge, the Duelfer report contained everything related to the behavior of the French, Russians and others."

A spokesman for the Russian mission to the United Nations, Ruslan Bakhtin, declined to comment.

John E. McLaughlin, then the CIA's acting director, said he did not believe that Powell applied "undue pressure" to suppress evidence of foreign corruption. He said Powell rightly wanted to spare the United States embarrassment if the information turned out to be wrong.

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