

## OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Scandal With No Friends

By **WILLIAM SAFIRE**

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**W**ASHINGTON — How fares the multination cover-up of the richest rip-off in world history?

Obstruction of justice has never had it so good. Last month, after some badgering in this space and elsewhere, the House International Relations Committee announced it would look into the \$5 billion kickback scandal in the United Nations' six-year Iraqi oil-for-food program, the largest humanitarian aid effort ever undertaken.

Our State Department, eager for U.N. help in Iraq, wants no revelations of U.N. ineptitude and corruption. It waltzed the committee staff around.

Senate Foreign Relations, however, not wanting to be upstaged by its House counterpart, called instant publicity hearings to blow off steam. Chairman Dick Lugar asked if some countries turned a blind eye to the rampant theft of aid that should have gone to hungry Iraqis because they "saw a money-making opportunity."

Senator Joe Biden chimed in, demanding that our ambassador to the U.N., John Negroponte, release the names of the U.S. companies that State has known for years have been part of the kickback scheme. Negroponte, soon to be our man in Baghdad working with the U.N., said that no such list had been compiled.

Meanwhile, because U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan's son was on the payroll of the Swiss company hired to monitor the imports, and because Kofi's right-hand man had been in charge of the program rife with 10 percent kickbacks, the world's foremost diplomat announced he would appoint an independent panel to investigate.

He chose men of integrity: Paul Volcker, former U.S. Fed chairman; Judge Richard Goldstone, the first Balkans war crimes prosecutor; and Mark Pieth, a Swiss lawyer said to be an expert on money laundering.

End of cover-up, right? Wrong. Volcker properly required a Security Council resolution, which would presumably empower his panel to take sworn testimony and gain access to the U.N.'s corrupt contracts that enabled Saddam to build palaces instead of providing food to his people.

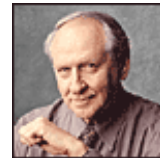
But such a U.N. resolution would reveal dealings with companies in Russia, France and China — all

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Security Council permanent members whose nationals had their hands in the till. As Senator Lugar suggested, some nations had secret profiteering reasons to keep Saddam in power.

To nobody's surprise, Vladimir Putin's government was the first to say nothing doing. Russia's U.N. spokesman said, "We understand the reputation of the secretariat is in question, but we do not think it is possible to adopt a resolution on the basis of mass media reports."

Of the 270 suspected kickbackers and recipients of illegal allocations of oil whose names were revealed by Al Mada, the Iraqi newspaper, one-fourth were Russian, including a member of the Russian Parliament and a former Russian ambassador to Baghdad. No wonder Putin wanted no "regime change," and now resists any serious investigation.

And what of those "mass media reports" about the scope of the corruption, which are backed by the initial findings of Congress's General Accounting Office? Editorialists have dutifully tut-tutted. Reporters have passed along some details of what the G.A.O. estimates is a \$5 billion fraud (not counting \$5 billion more in smuggled oil). The Financial Times, working with Italy's Sole, recently advanced the story, interviewing a middleman to show how an apologist for Saddam got \$400,000 to finance a film.

But outrage that drives coverage is selective, and there is little establishment appetite to pursue this complex scandal. Speaking power to truth, Newsweek headlines "Anti-U.N. Campaign," and reports dark suspicions by U.N. bureaucrats that the scandal was "drummed up" by the doves' Iraqi villain, Ahmad Chalabi.

France's U.S. ambassador writes under "Oil-for-Food Lies" in The Los Angeles Times that "unfounded accusations . . . have been spread by a handful of influential, conservative TV and newspaper journalists in the U.S." He noted that all 15 members of the Security Council approved all the oil-for-food contracts, and "the complete contracts were only circulated to the U.S. and Britain, which had expressly asked to see them. . . ." (And State shut its eyes — and has no list?)

Lawyers and accountants hired by Iraq's Governing Council will appear before Chairman Christopher Shays' national security subcommittee on Wednesday. The Connecticut congressman offers journalists a useful briefing memo, but expect little coverage; this scandal has no friends.

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