

A REPORTER AT LARGE

## A CASE NOT CLOSED

*The White House's decision to bomb Baghdad in June was based on an F.B.I. report concluding that the Iraqi government ordered the alleged plot to assassinate George Bush in Kuwait. The attack was hailed as a crucial foreign-policy victory for Bill Clinton—despite the deaths of eight civilians. But how solid was the F.B.I.'s evidence?*

BY SEYMOUR M. HERSH

ON Saturday, June 26, 1993, twenty-three Tomahawk guided missiles, each loaded with a thousand pounds of high explosives, were fired from American Navy warships in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea at the headquarters complex of the Mukhabarat, the Iraqi intelligence service, in downtown Baghdad. The attack was in response to an American determination that Iraqi intelligence, under the command of President Saddam Hussein, had plotted to assassinate former President George Bush during Bush's ceremonial visit to Kuwait in mid-April. It was President Bill Clinton's first act of war.

Three of the million-dollar missiles missed their target and landed on nearby homes, killing eight civilians, including Layla al-Attar, one of Iraq's most gifted artists. The death toll was considered acceptable by the White House; after all, scores of civilians had been killed in the Reagan Administration's F-111 bombing attack on Muammar Qaddafi's housing-and-office complex in Tripoli, Libya, in 1986. Clinton Administration officials acknowledged that they had been "lucky," as one national-security aide put it, in that only three of the computer-guided missiles went off course. Nearly three hundred Tomahawks had been fired during the Gulf War, with a higher rate of inaccuracy.

The media and a majority of the American public saw the American raid on Baghdad as a success, and as evidence that the struggling new President had finally demonstrated toughness when toughness was needed. Public-opinion polls showed that Clinton's approval rating climbed by eleven percentage points on June 27th, the day after the attack; more than two-thirds of those polled approved of the bombing.

President Clinton and those aides who supported his decision may have been right: the Iraqi intelligence service may have developed and put in motion a plot to assassinate George Bush during his triumphant visit to Kuwait to celebrate the Gulf War victory over Iraq. And if such a plot did exist Saddam Hussein may have known of it, or should have known, and thus would have been personally responsible for not preventing it. But my own investigations have uncovered circumstantial evidence, at least as compelling as the Administration's, that suggests that the American government's case against Iraq—as it has been outlined in public, anyway—is seriously flawed.

THE Administration, with its well-meaning but floundering leadership, spent two months investigating and debating the alleged assassination attempt, and then ordered the bombing just one day after receiving a written intelligence report on it. That report, delivered on June 24th by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, provided what the President and his advisers concluded was compelling evidence of Iraqi complicity at the top.

A senior White House official recently told me that one of the seemingly most persuasive elements of the report had been overstated and was essentially incorrect. And none of the Clinton Administration officials I interviewed over a ten-week period this summer claimed that there was any empirical evidence—a "smoking gun"—directly linking Saddam or any of his senior advisers to the alleged assassination attempt. The case against Iraq was, and remains, circumstantial. Nonetheless, on June 24th the F.B.I.'s intelligence report was accepted at face value by the President and his senior aides, and some of those aides

told me that the mere existence of the report and the expectation that it would be leaked to the press were what drove the President to act. "We had to move quickly," one diplomat said, with rancor. "Bill Safire obviously would have the report for a weekend column." Safire, the *Times* columnist and a frequent critic of Clinton policy, had bedevilled the White House that spring with his ability to obtain restricted information from the Justice Department.

The last-minute Presidential concern over press leaks was valid, for throughout the two months of internal debate over the alleged assassination attempt the White House policymakers were constantly bombarded—and eventually persuaded, perhaps—by news leaks about the evidence against Iraq. The *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post* were among the many newspapers that praised the President's firm leadership in the aftermath of the bombing of Baghdad and his willingness to send potential adversaries a message of American resolve. "Mr. Clinton is learning on the job," the *Journal* said. The newspaper was not reflecting the reality of White House decision-making, however, but merely praising a decision that it and other newspapers had been manipulated to help bring about.

As it happened, the policy was driven not by Bill Clinton and his senior staff but by those men and women in the bureaucracy who from the outset viewed the alleged assassination plot as imposing a responsibility to strike hard at the hated Saddam while also providing a quick fix for the President, who was then mired in controversy over his failure to use force against the Serbs in Bosnia. These aides told everyone in Washington who would listen that bombing Baghdad would improve Clin-

ton's political standing at home and his diplomatic standing in the Middle East. Among the officials making such arguments were two key members of the White House staff—Samuel R. (Sandy) Berger, the deputy assistant to the President for national-security affairs, and Martin Indyk, senior director of the National Security Council Division of Near East and South Asian Affairs. Both men were privately asserting by early May—long before the delivery of the official F.B.I. report—that the intelligence implicating Iraq in the assassination attempt was overwhelming; both men remained strong advocates of the use of force.

The crisis had its beginnings in the last few days of April, when the Kuwaiti government announced that it had arrested a group of seventeen Iraqis and Kuwaitis on charges of "destabilizing" Kuwait; that one Iraqi had confessed, under interrogation, to having been sent by Iraqi intelligence to assassinate George Bush; and that a powerful bomb, weighing nearly two hundred pounds and capable of killing everyone within four hundred yards, had been found hidden in a car that had been driven across the border from Iraq to Kuwait.

The announcement produced little reaction in Washington or anywhere in Europe, essentially because the Kuwaiti government was known for making self-serving pronouncements about its adversaries. Three years ago, during Iraq's six-month occupation of Kuwait, there had been an outcry when a teen-age Kuwaiti girl testified eloquently and effectively before Congress about Iraqi atrocities involving newborn infants. The girl turned out to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to Washington, Sheikh Saud Nasir al-Sabah, and her account of Iraqi soldiers flinging babies out of incubators was challenged as exagger-

ated both by journalists and by human-rights groups. (Sheikh Saud was subsequently named Minister of Information in Kuwait, and he was the government official in charge of briefing the international press on the alleged assassination attempt against George Bush.) In a second incident, in August of 1991, Kuwait provoked a special session of the United Nations Security Council by claiming that twelve Iraqi vessels, including a speedboat, had been involved in an attempt to assault Bubiyan Island, long-disputed territory that was then under Kuwaiti control. The Security Council eventually concluded that, while the Ira-

was credible evidence linking the Iraqi government to the assassination attempt. The officials, who were not named, provided the newspaper with three elements of that evidence. One key fact, the *Post* said, was the ease with which the alleged Iraqi assassination team had crossed the border area between Iraq and Kuwait: "U.S. officials said the transit of . . . explosives . . . would have been difficult without official sanction." The newspaper also quoted an official as explaining that the bombs and the detonator recovered in the Iraqi-owned car were "way too sophisticated, involving things too sophisticated, to be just some

crazies with a complaint against the president." Finally, the newspaper quoted Clinton Administration officials as saying that they were in the process of tracing the explosives in question "to the source." To further buttress its story, which was splashed across the front page in a banner headline, the *Post* quoted Mohammed Sabah al-Sabah, the new Kuwaiti Ambassador to Washington, as saying that one of the arrested Iraqis had confessed to being "a colonel in the Iraqi secret intelligence service, the Mukhabarat, stationed in Basra." Each of those assertions has now been shown to be factually incorrect.

The *Post* article named Berger and two other high-level Clinton Administration officials—R. James Woolsey, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and Frank G. Wisner, now an Under-Secretary of Defense—as being among those who advocated "direct retribution" against Iraq. By this time, too, Martin Indyk was hard at work, telling selected journalists, "We've got it"—that is, highly reliable intelligence tying Iraq to a plot against Bush. Indyk also said that Saudi Arabia, which had been the most important American and Kuwaiti ally in the Gulf War, was pressuring the



*The President tended toward caution while some of his aides advocated force, but he issued the bombing order one day after receiving the F.B.I. report.*

qis had been provocative, there had been no Iraqi military raid, and that the Kuwaiti government knew there hadn't. What did take place was nothing more than a smuggler-versus-smuggler dispute over war booty in a nearby demilitarized zone that had emerged, after the Gulf War, as an illegal marketplace for alcohol, ammunition, and livestock.

This year, leaks about Iraqi interference in Kuwait's doings began in early May. On Saturday, May 8th, the Washington *Post* quoted Administration officials and others as saying that there

Administration to take harsh action. The Saudi argument to the Clinton Administration, as it was relayed by Indyk, was that "if people think they can get away with this, you'll have no credibility" in the Middle East.

A significant factor in the campaign against Saddam Hussein was simple animosity, stemming from the Iraqi leader's occupation of Kuwait in August of 1990 and his near-suicidal defiance of American pressure, which resulted in the brutal and disastrous Gulf War in early 1991. A former American ambassador in the Middle East recalled his surprise when a colleague, who holds a high post in the Clinton Administration, told him that he had started arguing for retaliation on the day after the first reports of an assassination attempt reached Washington from Kuwait. "I was shocked, because I view him as a normally very responsible and sober person, who understands about power and how to use it," the former ambassador said. "He just hates Saddam—a visceral hatred." Another former senior official said that many officials in the Pentagon and the State Department had become increasingly angry with Iraq in the early months of the Clinton Administration, feeling that Saddam Hussein had been "getting away with things" because of Washington's preoccupation with events in the former Yugoslavia.

The May 8th Washington *Post* story

inevitably led to congressional pressure on the White House. Lee H. Hamilton, Democrat of Indiana, who is the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, went on NBC's "Meet the Press" on the morning of Sunday, May 9th, and said that the United States "should retaliate" if the evidence cited by the *Post* was determined to be valid. "We cannot tolerate that kind of an action against a former President of the United States," Hamilton, a political moderate, said. "It's just outrageous."

The official White House view was articulated by Thomas S. Foley, the Democratic Speaker of the House, also on "Face the Nation." Foley urged restraint and caution until there was clear evidence that an assassination attempt had taken place and had been sponsored by Iraq. "It isn't, at least in the public sphere, clear that the evidence is overwhelming or without any ambiguity," he said.

A number of senior White House aides, supporting Foley's view, told me that the President was anything but eager to plunge into a military operation against Iraq without receiving hard evidence and without carefully reviewing his options. "He always wants to see the good and the bad sides of everything," one close associate said. Like any well-trained attorney, the associate added, Clinton wanted to understand "the pros-

ecution case and the defense case." Another Presidential observer, discussing the President's attitude toward the Kuwaiti allegations, noted, "Clinton is always looking at the downside. He's a pol—a domestic-policy wonk, who does not get off on foreign policy. He was worried about what could go wrong." Clinton's approach was reflected in the official White House response to the Washington *Post* disclosures. "We're still in the middle of the investigation," George Stephanopoulos, the White House communications director, told reporters.

The President was not alone in his caution. Janet Reno, the Attorney General, also had her doubts. "The A.G. remains skeptical of certain aspects of the case," a senior Justice Department official told me in late July, a month after the bombs were dropped on Baghdad. Ms. Reno had, however, approved the F.B.I. report sent to the White House on June 24th.

Two days after Stephanopoulos made his statement, the President's instinct for caution and deliberateness was challenged by a further leak—this time to the Washington bureau of the *Times*. On Tuesday, May 11th, the *Times*, citing "American officials," reported that there was "powerful evidence" pointing to Iraqi sponsorship of the assassination attempt. According to the *Times* report, federal investigators who had travelled to Kuwait found that components of the car bomb discovered by the Kuwaiti police were "almost exactly the same" as those of Iraqi car bombs recovered by American intelligence during the Gulf War. That assertion, too, was incorrect.

Two weeks later, what amounted to open warfare broke out among various factions in the government on the issue of who had done what in Kuwait. Someone gave a Boston *Globe* reporter access to a classified C.I.A. study that was highly skeptical of the Kuwaiti claims of an Iraqi assassination attempt. The study, prepared by the C.I.A.'s Counter Terrorism Center, suggested that Kuwait might have "cooked the books" on the alleged plot in an effort to play up the "continuing Iraqi threat" to Western interests in the Persian Gulf. Neither the *Times* nor the *Post* made any significant mention of the *Globe* dispatch, which had been written by a Washington correspondent named Paul Quinn-Judge, although the story cited



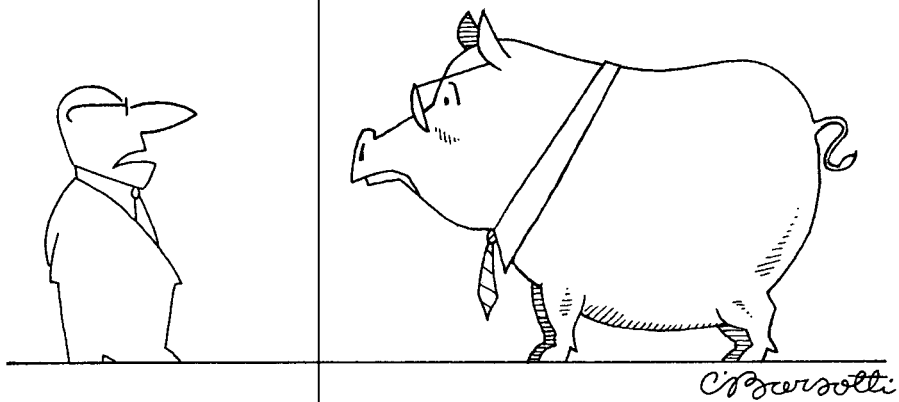
"Darling, let's forget all those things we said about each other on Sally, Oprah, and Joan Rivers."

specific paragraphs from the C.I.A. assessment. The two major American newspapers had been driven by their sources to the other side of the debate.

Also in late May, the *Post* obtained a copy of a speech that Martin Indyk delivered before the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, in which he said that the Clinton Administration's conclusion was that the leadership of Iraq would remain hostile to American interests and aims for the foreseeable future. The Administration does not "seek or expect a reconciliation with Saddam Hussein's regime," Indyk said. Before joining the White House, Indyk had served as executive director of the institute, which was established in 1985, with financial backing from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. This organization is considered the strongest pro-Israel lobby in Washington.

On June 10th, the *Post* returned anew to the alleged Iraqi plot, reporting once again that "the Clinton Administration has found evidence implicating the Iraqi government in a plot to assassinate former President George Bush." The *Post* further quoted its sources, described as American officials and senior intelligence analysts, as saying that, despite the consensus on Iraqi involvement, no final judgment would be issued by the government until after the trial of the alleged assassination plotters, which had begun on June 5th in Kuwait.

By late June, the White House had lost any semblance of control over the media debate, and it was widely known among Washington journalists that the F.B.I.'s final report would conclude that Iraq and Saddam Hussein himself were directly involved in the assassination attempt. "FOR THE PRESIDENT, IT'S DECISION TIME ON ATTACKING IRAQ," a *Wall Street Journal* headline announced on June 23rd. The story stated, correctly, "Within the next few days, a confidential report will hit President Clinton's desk, pushing him toward one of the toughest decisions of his young presidency: whether to order new military action against Iraq." In discussing the President's options, the article noted, "There are few actions against Iraq that would arouse strong domestic opposition, and little reason to think Iraqi air defenses yet pose much of a deterrent." The *Times* weighed in on the eve of the bombing, with Thomas L. Friedman, its expert on the Middle East, writing that



*"Basic economics—sometimes the parts are worth more than the whole."*

a plot against George Bush and the arrest of Muslim militants accused of plotting terrorist attacks in New York City "are beginning to pose a serious foreign policy question for President Clinton: How long can his Administration get by with responding to these incidents by saying, 'We're looking into it.'"

**W**HEN Clinton finally acted, on the afternoon of Saturday, June 26th, he was not leading the nation, as was widely assumed and reported, but merely following the path of least bureaucratic and political resistance. He had authorized the bombing the day before, barely twenty-four hours after the well-publicized F.B.I. report arrived in the White House. The President, who had served as Attorney General in Arkansas, and his aides, many of whom were experienced attorneys and experts at evaluating evidence, took the F.B.I.'s assessment at face value, although it was that agency's planning and intelligence which had given the Presidency its worst public moments in the aftermath of the ill-conceived F.B.I. tear-gas assault on the redoubt of the cult leader David Koresh, in Waco, Texas, which led to the deaths of eighty-six cult members, including twenty-four children.

In a televised speech to the nation on Saturday night, Clinton explained that he had been presented with "compelling evidence that there was in fact a plot to assassinate former President Bush. And that this plot . . . was directed and pursued by the Iraqi intelligence service." The President strongly suggested that Saddam Hussein was personally responsible: "Saddam has repeatedly violated the will and conscience of the interna-

tional community, but this attempt at revenge by a tyrant against the leader of the world coalition that defeated him in war is particularly loathsome and cowardly. . . . The Iraqi attack against President Bush was an attack against our country and against all Americans."

Clinton's staff, seeking, not unnaturally, to maximize any possible political advantage from the bombing, treated the Tomahawk attack on Baghdad as a personal triumph for the President. Aides told reporters that the President, having made his address and received early damage-assessment reports, watched a movie with his wife, Hillary, and then got a solid eight hours of sleep. The President was said to be "relaxed and calm." On his way to church services the next morning, he expressed regret over the loss of life but added, "I feel quite good about what transpired. I think the American people should feel good." The White House also found cause for celebration in the fact that the Saturday-night bombing had come as a surprise to the media. "ADMINISTRATION FINDS JUST KEEPING A SECRET CAN BE A TRIUMPH," one headline proclaimed. There was, the article said, "a near-defiant sense of pride" among the President's staff, and a "buoyant mood." W. Anthony Lake, the President's national-security adviser, and Sandy Berger, Lake's deputy, were warmly praised for their handling of the operation.

At a background briefing in the White House late on Saturday night, Lake explained that the President had concluded that the failed assassination attempt in Kuwait, though it had taken place in mid-April—two months earlier—amounted to "a real and present

danger," and that "if we failed to act and act now, the Iraqis might continue attempting such acts of state-sponsored terrorism." The American missile launchings were initiated, he said, under the self-defense provisions of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which give member nations the right to respond in self-defense to armed attacks. (Lake did not say, however, that most legal authorities note that the threat must be instant and overwhelming and leave no moment for deliberation.) Lake also said that the President had ordered the attack without intending "to pass individual judgment" on the Kuwaitis and Iraqis then being tried for the alleged assassination attempt. He did not try to explain how a Presidential determination that Iraq was guilty of ordering the assassination of George Bush, and the subsequent bombing of Baghdad, could fail to escape the notice of judicial officials in Kuwait.

As the briefing continued, the national-security adviser, accompanied by Philip Heymann, deputy attorney general, and Admiral William Studeman, deputy director of the C.I.A., outlined the "compelling evidence" that sealed the government's case against Iraq. And much of the material provided that night to the press was dramatically made public the next day at the United Nations by Madeleine Albright, the American Ambassador to the U.N.

Lake and his colleagues spoke first about what they said was forensic evidence tying crucial components of the bomb recovered in Kuwait, including its remote-control detonator, to bombs previously recovered by the American intelligence community and known to have been put together by the Iraqi intelligence service. Here Lake was essentially restating what the *Times* had reported in its May 11th story—that there was unmistakable evidence showing that the components recovered in Kuwait had been built by the same person or persons who built the Iraqi bombs. In other words, the soldering techniques and modifications in the Kuwaiti car bomb—a characteristic way of twisting wires, for example—amounted to a "signature" linking it to a specific designer or technician who had also worked on Iraqi bombs.

Lake and his colleagues then discussed what they said was the second key category of evidence—the suspects themselves. Early in the inquiry, the

## ANTLION

Beneath your shoe soles there's a beautiful concavity of sand, a symmetrical funnel the width of a small boy's thumb. It looks expertly smooth. Precarious sand grains have been set to slide whenever a plodding ant's insouciance pitches it down that soft declivity. The owner of the pit abides down there, a drab predator the color of quarry rock, old spackle, gypsum, slate; earth-colored, with the shadows of the earth, it snugs down in the hollow of its snare.

At night, in childhood, I would sometimes dream of the panicky scrambles of a slipping ant, its scurrying despair that swept it down irresistibly along the volatile sand. The way that dreams deceive you the ant fell, and I, asleep, felt falling, too, through filmy floorboards, into avalanche as the heart-stopped terror of my helpless dream tossed me to the soft mouth of the pit.

There, with bristling jaws, the antlion wiggled out of ambush, rushed to hug me, its frantic victim, in its grip. That, too, had the horrible embrace of dream where you choke those you love, or they choke you, and everything takes place mechanically despite the shrieked beseeching of your will.

Even in dream I couldn't follow down to where the flinching victim had been tugged beneath the dirt, and yet the antlion's prompt return was even more terrible for being miniature: there's a proprietary fussiness, meticulous, almost suburban, as the little killer scrapes its whirlpool smooth.

—ERIC ORMSBY

F.B.I. had sent a team of agents to Kuwait to interview the fourteen Iraqi and Kuwaiti citizens who had been formally charged in the case, and there had been at least one more follow-up visit. The F.B.I. eventually concluded that none of the defendants, including the Iraqi who confessed to having been ordered by Iraqi intelligence agents to kill Bush, had been beaten or in any other way coerced to give evidence. No physical evidence of torture was found.

In an interview in early August at the White House, a senior official told me,

"When you listen to them all"—the various defendants—"it clearly establishes that the car went from Basra to Kuwait when Bush was there. I think it is beyond a reasonable doubt that the intent was to kill Bush." Basra, the largest city in southern Iraq, is a hundred miles from Kuwait City.

However, other knowledgeable officials in the Clinton Administration, as well as current and former members of the intelligence community, had provided me with information that challenged the official's confident assess-

ment. My examination of what is known about the recovered car bombs and of the F.B.I.'s interviews with the alleged assassins in Kuwait raises fundamental questions concerning the validity of the government's evidence, how prudently and objectively it was handled, and how the President and the men around him—experienced as many of them were in making legal judgments—reached their standard of "reasonable doubt."

THE most glaring weakness of the Administration's case is its assertion that the remote-control firing device found in the Kuwaiti car bomb has the same "signature" as previously recovered Iraqi bombs. In making its case, the Administration released a series of color photographs comparing, among other things, the circuit boards of the radio-controlled firing device seized in Kuwait and the circuit boards of what was said to be a similar Iraqi device. The photographs were made public by Ambassador Albright. "Even an untrained eye can see that these are identical except for the serial numbers," she said, holding up one of the photographs of the two devices. "Next, we have a similar comparison of the insides of the two firing devices. . . . As you can see, the selection of the components and the construction techniques in the two devices—including soldering, the use of connectors, and the wiring techniques, et cetera—are also identical."

The Iraqi government heatedly denied the Administration's allegations, but most reporters—and the public—found the photographs, with their obvious similarity, convincing. One notable exception was the editorial page of the *Times*, which raised questions about the "compelling evidence" cited by Clinton and also about Albright's assurances that it was the "firm judgment" of the C.I.A. that Iraqi intelligence was involved in the alleged assassination attempt. The information Ms. Albright presented "was not conclusive enough for a reasonable citizen to join her in being 'highly confident' that force—rather than criminal trials and diplomatic measures—was the wisest course," the *Times* noted, and it went on, "Let's hear the evidence, rather than assertions of officials who say they have it."

The *Times* editorial led to no reassessment by the public or by the news-

paper's Washington bureau, whose staff had so avidly reported the firm judgment of some members of the Administration that Iraq had sought to kill former President Bush. There is no published evidence known to me of any effort by the *Times* to verify independently the Administration's specific claims against Iraq. No reporter, for example, has written of getting in touch with any of the many independent experts in electrical engineering and bomb forensics to ask what they thought of the photographs released by the White House.

When I asked seven such experts about those photographs last summer, they all told me essentially the same thing: the remote-control devices shown in the White House photographs were mass-produced items, commonly used for walkie-talkies and model airplanes and cars, and had not been modified in any significant way. The experts, who included former police and government contract employees and also professors of electrical engineering, agreed, too, that the two devices had no "signatures." They said there was no conceivable way that the Clinton Administration, given the materials made public at the United Nations, could assert that the remote-control devices had been put together by the same Iraqi technician.

The fact that the two devices were similar is simply not that significant, I was told by Donald L. Hansen, a twenty-eight-year veteran of the bomb squad of the San Francisco Police Department. Hansen, who has served as

the director of the International Association of Bomb Technicians and Investigators, is now an instructor at the State Department's school for foreign police officers, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and is widely considered to be one of the top forensics experts in the field. "They're very generic devices," he told me, after analyzing the photographs of the electronic circuit boards. "To establish a signature, you've got to find unique characteristics. It's not the equipment itself—there are millions of them. You can buy instruction manuals—for the construction of the devices—in New York and Chicago, and the instructions could be exactly the same. But that doesn't mean that the two were built by the same man. There are no signs of modification. If these circuit boards are what they're hanging their signature issue on, they're really stretching the envelope. All they can say is there's a strong similarity."

Another expert, Paul A. Eden, who is an electrical engineer at the University of Miami, estimated that individual components of the devices were manufactured no later than 1983. He concluded that both mechanisms were mass-produced, most likely in Taiwan, or Japan, or South Korea, and were of a type sold all over the world. "I saw nothing that would make them any different from anything bought off the shelf from any electronics store," he said. "The design is used by everybody in the world. All it does is receive a signal and decode a tone. I can't see anything that would make it say, 'Yes, this was done by the



"Yes, Harold, I do speak for all women."

Victoria Roberts

same person.'” Eden, who has nearly forty years of experience in electronics and now runs a satellite field station for the university, suggested that the Clinton Administration had been “grasping at straws” in its presentation at the United Nations. He also said that he objected to the White House’s notion, repeatedly expressed by Anthony Lake and others in their briefings and public statements, that the car bomb found in Kuwait was extremely sophisticated. “Anybody with half an ounce of electronics training could have done what they did and make something go boom.”

A third expert, Robert H. Shaw, who has worked as a computer engineer and a systems analyst in the “black,” or classified, community in Washington, expressed disappointment that the Administration had relied on “signature” to justify the bombing of Iraq. “There’s no signature,” Shaw told me. “Just a close coincidence that worked real bad for Saddam. You couldn’t make a case,” he said, referring to the legal implications of a signature finding. “I wouldn’t take this to the World Court. They might throw it out and make you pay court costs. I would have just said, ‘We got one, and the other guy’s looked like it. They’re similar enough, so goodbye Saddam.’”

In interviews with me in late July, however, two law-enforcement officials who played important roles in assembling the government’s case against Iraq stated emphatically that the standards used for assessing the evidence were the same as those used in criminal investigations and prosecutions. “We had a hands-on examination by our bomb expert,” said Neil Gallagher, chief of the F.B.I.’s counterterrorism section, and he went on to say that the bureau had held the expert to the standards that would be used “if he were to testify in court.” Similarly, Mark Richard, a deputy assistant attorney general, told me that “the F.B.I. presented its case to Justice as if it were in front of a very skeptical A.U.S.A.”—assistant United States attorney.

The problem with such statements is that the investigative findings of the F.B.I. and the Justice Department ended up being exposed only to a political process, with senior White House planners who were worried about domestic reaction, press spin, and international reac-

tion, and were also subjected to pressure from selective leaks to the news media. The far more rigorous procedures associated with the federal-court process—trial by jury and questioning by opposing counsel—were not used. If they had been, the outcome might have been different. In one recent bomb-signature case in which federal bomb experts testified, the results were disastrous for the government’s witnesses.

This happened on July 19th, when the signature issue was the focus of a hearing held, with the jury excluded, in the United States District Court trial, in Boston, of Thomas A. Shay, who was accused of conspiring in 1991 to plant a car bomb in an attempt to kill his father; a Boston policeman had been killed while attempting to defuse the device. Shay’s co-defendant, Alfred W. Trenkler, had been charged with unlawful possession of an explosive connected with a bombing in 1986. A federal bomb expert from the Treasury Department’s Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms testified that he had been able to match the signature of the bomb that Shay was alleged to have planted to the 1986 bomb that Trenkler was alleged to have built. A second A.T.F. witness claimed that a computer analysis of more than fourteen thousand bomb incidents had further established the link between the 1986 and 1991 devices. The defense witness for Shay was Donald Hansen, the former San Francisco bomb-squad officer, and he repeatedly made the point that the A.T.F. forensic experts had emphasized only the similarities between the two devices, ignoring the many differences. Hansen told the court that there were only generic similarities between the two bombs—that his examination found “no particular method of twisting wires or no real distinct technique employed.”

In a bench ruling the next morning, Judge Rya W. Zobel said that the government could not put forward any testimony in an attempt to link the 1986 and 1991 bombings. The two devices were similar, “without question, but I am not persuaded that they are identical,” Judge Zobel concluded. “That is, I do not think, and find, that it is not so unusual and distinctive as to be like a signature.”

When I spoke with Nancy Gertner, Shay’s attorney, this summer, she re-

called that before the judge’s ruling there had repeatedly been newspaper stories citing federal officials as saying “that these were signature bombs.” She added, “It’s very, very frightening that foreign policy is being made on this.”

**I**N the spring and summer, I had a series of background conversations with an old friend who is now serving as an intelligence analyst inside the government. The analyst, who has seen much of the classified reporting on the alleged assassination attempt, conceded in our most recent talk that a stringent cross-examination of the F.B.I.’s experts would have uncovered a number of distinctions between the two bombs, the most significant being that the two-hundred-pound car bomb carefully hidden in Kuwait was dramatically different in appearance from all previously known Iraqi car bombs. Most Iraqi car bombs that have been recovered by the American intelligence community are extremely primitive devices—essentially, the analyst said, “sticks of dynamite wrapped together, with a timer and a detonator.” The bomb found in Kuwait, he added, used a state-of-the-art plastic explosive that, while safer than dynamite to handle, was far more powerful.

The analyst told me that, nonetheless, he was convinced that the bomb in Kuwait was of the same manufacture as the Iraqi bombs, because they all had the same components. “Why get into signature?” he asked rhetorically. “It’s a technical issue, and the people handling it in the White House didn’t have the expertise. It’s like you and me talking about nuclear physics. We know just enough to endanger ourselves. The White House oversold the signature issue”—in its press briefings. “They didn’t understand what they were selling.”

I relayed the analyst’s complaints to a senior White House official in a telephone conversation in late July, and, during an extended interview a few weeks later, the official acknowledged that he had raised the signature issue anew with the F.B.I. He was subsequently informed, he went on, that “you could not judge signature on the basis of the pictures” that the White House released after the bombing.

“I’m not a forensics expert,” the official went on, with a shrug. “At some



*"I guess it's no big deal anymore."*

point, you have to rely on the F.B.I.'s technical expertise. You have to push them hard and probe them about anything that seems to be unclear or uncertain. By the end of their investigation, there was no question in their minds that this car bomb came from Iraqi intelligence." He believed the F.B.I., the official said, and he added that there were aspects of the car bomb and its trigger mechanism that were not made public. When I asked why not, he said, "We're not going to show what parts of their bomb make it similar to bombs coming from Iraqi intelligence. Why let Iraq know where the thumbprint is?"

The F.B.I.'s Neil Gallagher had told me, similarly, "What was made public was not the best case. There are other photographs." He refused to describe the additional evidence, and said that it would be impossible to permit outsiders to view the unpublished photographs or other data.

In subsequent interviews, officials sought to explain Gallagher's cryptic comment by revealing that some of the Iraqi bombs and detonators used in the F.B.I.'s analysis of the Kuwaiti car bomb had not been obtained in Iraq, as had been widely assumed and reported; they had been retrieved by the American intelligence community during a clandestine entry into an Iraqi Embassy in the Middle East during the Gulf War. In

addition, the F.B.I. had access to components from other suspected Iraqi bombs that had been recovered in recent years from the Philippines, after an explosion at an American cultural center in Manila, and from Indonesia, where an unexploded bomb was found in a flower pot at the residence of the American Ambassador in Jakarta. The detonators in those devices and in the Kuwaiti car bomb were "put together the same way," one American official said.

Of course, the fact that the Iraqi bombs were clandestinely recovered does not alter the possibility that the various components were similar because they were similarly mass-produced, or rule out the possibility that the car bomb and detonator found in Kuwait were planted there by Kuwaitis. (Iraqi-manufactured bombs and detonators surely were abandoned in large quantities, along with tanks and weapons, after the American liberation of Kuwait in early 1991.) Nor does it have any bearing on the "smoking gun" issue of the bombing of Baghdad.

In fact, an American diplomat who was involved in the discussions of Saddam's role told me in an interview this summer that the linking of high officials in the Iraqi intelligence service to the events in Kuwait was simply "a political judgment," based, in large measure, on the pattern of behavior of the

men arrested in the incident. "I don't think Saddam ordered it," the diplomat said, "but it was an Iraqi-intelligence-service attempt to assassinate an American President." Mark Richard also acknowledged, in an interview, that I was in possession of "ninety-nine per cent of the facts." Richard, a distinguished career Justice Department official, who has been assigned to many of the government's most difficult international criminal cases, explained that the final determination of Iraqi complicity in the alleged assassination attempt was a result of "process"—the careful analysis of possible scenarios—and did not stem from any specific information.

Moreover, other current and former high-ranking officials with access to intelligence, whose information has been extremely reliable in the past, specifically told me that the National Security Agency, which is responsible for electronic intelligence, had produced no significant high-level intercepts from Iraq in years. American intelligence experts have concluded that the Reagan Administration's policy of providing satellite and communications intelligence to Iraq in the mid-nineteen-eighties had an unwelcome side effect: the Iraqi intelligence service learned how to hide its important communications from the N.S.A.'s many sensors.

Finally, my old friend inside the intelligence community has repeatedly expressed his amazement at the notion, suggested by the White House, that the F.B.I.'s final report to the President on June 24th contained new and definitive information. "There's a big mystery as to why we finally went Saturday," he said a few days after the bombing. "It's not as if we suddenly had more intelligence driving it. There was nothing else. What we knew Saturday night we knew two months ago."

**I**N essence, the Clinton Administration, by its suggestion of still secret intelligence, is saying "Trust me" in response to the lingering questions and doubts about the forensic evidence linking the Kuwaiti car bomb to Iraq. The Administration is also saying "Trust me" in its assurances that the account provided by the Kuwaiti government was accurate. Fourteen men are now on trial in Kuwait, at least ten of them facing possible death sentences, for their role in the alleged assassination attempt. In late

July, the trial proceedings were suspended until the end of October.

There is now, in fact, critical information that is known to the F.B.I. and the White House and has not been made public: that there was a crucial four-day gap between the arrest of the alleged assassins and their first mention of a car bomb and a plot to kill an American President.

The key members of the alleged Iraqi assassination team were seized while they were walking in the desert on the evening of Thursday, April 15th, one day before George Bush concluded his visit to Kuwait. Some of them had spent as many as three days roaming through Kuwait City, and had spent their nights in different apartments. The suspects had smuggled whiskey across the border, and there had evidently been much drinking during that time. No alcohol is sold legally in Kuwait, a Muslim state, and there is a booming black market between Iraq and Kuwait; there is also a steady flow of people and vehicles—all illicit—between Basra and Kuwait City. At least six of the seventeen men initially

arrested had simply been ferried across the border, for a fee, and were en route to visit friends and relatives in Kuwait. Such trips were routine before the Gulf War. Four days after the men were jailed, according to their defense attorneys, one of them, Wali al-Ghazali, told the Kuwaiti authorities that he had been sent into Kuwait by Iraqi intelligence to kill Bush. A second prisoner, Ra'ad al-Assadi, testified that he knew that their car, a Toyota Land Cruiser, had been carrying a bomb. It was only at that point that the Kuwaiti authorities searched the Land Cruiser, which was in police custody, and found the bomb.

Clinton Administration officials acknowledged that the long delay between the arrests and the recovery of the bomb lent weight to the possibility of Kuwaiti duplicity—something that had been encountered more than once in the past. "It'd be foolish to suggest that these were issues that didn't occur to us," Mark Richard said. "We played it against all scenarios: Did Kuwait do it? Make it up? Did Saddam do it? Was it some rogue operation? This was not a rush to judg-

ment." In the end, it was decided that Kuwait had more to lose by falsifying an assassination plot—and being exposed in doing so—than Saddam Hussein did by sending in a team of amateurs who might succeed or might not.

Saddam has repeatedly made moves against his best interests—his decision to invade Kuwait was one of them—and nothing can be ruled out. Yet the White House, in working through its scenarios, apparently did not include the fact that by mid-April Saddam was engaged in desperate negotiations with the United Nations concerning the U.N. ban on importing Iraqi oil. The Saddam regime was bankrupt, and could not feed its people without hard currency and credits obtained from foreign oil sales.

Another factor, also ignored in the White House deliberations, was President-elect Clinton's assertion, made shortly before he took office, that he—unlike George Bush—was not "obsessed" with Saddam Hussein. In an interview on January 13th with the *Times*, Clinton said that he could imagine maintaining a normal diplomatic rela-



*"May I remind you that our prenuptial agreement called for me to take the plants?"*

# Wannabes



Ru Phil



Ru Murray



Ru Bernie

Blitt

tionship with the Iraqi leader. "All he has to do is change his behavior," Clinton said. He subsequently disavowed his statements, but the C.I.A.'s Counter Terrorism Center, in its debunking of the alleged assassination attempt, reported, nonetheless, that the Kuwaiti government had expressed "frustration" because of the failure of the Clinton Administration and its European allies to take a tougher line against Iraq. The Kuwaiti leadership also feared, the C.I.A. concluded, as cited in the *Boston Globe*, that Clinton might abandon Kuwait in favor of better relations with Saddam Hussein. Kuwait, the report said, "has a clear incentive to play up the continuing Iraqi threat."

Also open to question is the F.B.I.'s conclusion that none of the defendants were beaten or coerced after their arrest. The F.B.I. rested its case on the fact that its agents did not personally see any signs of mistreatment. No medical examinations of the men were conducted, officials conceded, nor were lie-detector tests used. The F.B.I.'s assessment may be correct, but it has to be weighed against other evidence.

On July 3rd, the fourth day of the trial in Kuwait City, Ali Khadair Baddai, who, at seventy-three, was the oldest defendant, testified that he had been severely beaten after his arrest, according to the German news agency D.P.A. In a dispatch filed with D.P.A., a freelance journalist named Miriam Amie, the only American reporter who has attended the trial regularly thus far, quoted Baddai as stating that when he was arrested the police "hit me in the head and on my side," and going on to say, "I was bleeding over my eyes. They beat me and somebody kicked me in the side." On being asked by the presiding judge why he had not complained earlier about the beatings, Baddai responded, according to Amie, "Every day I wanted to complain to you. But then I said no." Asked by the judge why he had confessed to smuggling, he said, "Since the police beat me, I told them to write anything and I would sign it." Despite his signed guilty plea, he publicly proclaimed his innocence from the witness stand. In a subsequent interview, Amie told me that Wali al-Ghazali, who has repeatedly told the court and the F.B.I. that he was ordered by Iraqi intelligence to assassinate Bush, showed up on the first day of

the trial, in June, with "a fresh scar on his forehead and a blackened nail on his thumb," and she added, "No one could talk to him." Ra'ad al-Assadi, one of the two major defendants in the case (the other being al-Ghazali), told the media after Baddai's testimony that he, too, had been beaten.

The defendants' claims were repeated by Najeeb I. al-Waqayan, the attorney for two of them. "Definitely they were beaten," al-Waqayan told me during an interview in Kuwait in July. "This is the way of the Kuwaiti police." Al-Waqayan, who studied law at San Diego State University and is one of three privately retained defense attorneys in the case (the other lawyers were retained by the state), also said that he had been unable to confer privately with his clients until the first day of the trial.

Questions about the use of torture in Kuwaiti prisons and fair trials in Kuwaiti courts have been raised often since the end of the Gulf War by two of the world's leading human-rights groups—Amnesty International, whose headquarters are in London, and Human Rights Watch, of New York. In November of 1991, Amnesty International issued a statement saying that it had "received reports that many of the people being detained by the Kuwaiti authorities had been ill-treated and tortured," and adding, "Amnesty International delegates had personally interviewed and medically examined prisoners who bore signs of torture." The group has issued a number of special reports about the trial of the alleged assassins, noting that if they are convicted "twelve of the defendants may be sentenced to death," and that "the organization is also concerned that the necessary measures to protect the defendants from torture or ill-treatment during interrogation may not have been taken, and that 'confessions' extracted under duress may later be used to convict them." Similarly, Human Rights Watch, in its World Report roundup for 1992, concluded that "arbitrary arrest and detention are still prevalent" in Kuwait, and "torture remains common."

Finally, in interviews, former American diplomatic officials and intelligence officers who had served in the Middle East expressed amusement and amazement at the F.B.I.'s categorical assurances that none of the defendants were tortured. "Either the investigators were

idiots or they were lying," said James E. Akins, a former United States Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, who is now a consultant in the Middle East and elsewhere. "It boggles the imagination. There's no way the Kuwaitis would not have tortured them. That's the way the Kuwaitis are, as anybody who knows the Kuwaitis or the Middle East can tell you."

**P**RECISELY what did happen in Kuwait during George Bush's ceremonial visit remains in dispute, with senior officials in the White House, the Justice Department, and the F.B.I. acknowledging that the assassination plot had something of an Abbott-and-Costello quality. "You could say these guys were really not that well trained," one counterintelligence official told me, with a laugh. "Not exactly like Chuck Norris coming across the border. More like 'The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight.'"

The story begins with Wali al-Ghazali, a male nurse from the Iraqi holy city of An Najaf, who testified in the trial that he had been approached in early April—roughly a week before the scheduled Bush visit—by an Iraqi intelligence agent while at work and pressured to take part in the assassination mission against Bush. The next day, he was taken to a garage and given a briefing on the car bomb and its remote-control components, and was also provided with a suicide belt and a photograph of a building at Kuwait University where Bush was expected to make an appearance. In case all else failed, al-Ghazali said, he was to put on the belt, get as close to Bush as possible, and detonate it—blowing up both the former President and himself.

His chief collaborator, al-Ghazali testified, was Ra'ad al-Assadi, who was the owner of a coffee shop in Basra and an acknowledged longtime smuggler of alcohol, arms, and other goods into Kuwait City. Al-Assadi was also one of many people in the Basra area who operated what amounted to an informal bus service across the surprisingly open border between Iraq and Kuwait. A round trip—usually for a weekend—cost each passenger about three hundred dollars. Being a smuggler, al-Assadi, not unexpectedly, knew many Iraqi police and intelligence officials, and he testified that he was paid about four hundred and twenty dollars in advance and given

merchandise—five cases of whiskey and six kilos of what he was told was hashish—in return for participation in the al-Ghazali mission. (Kuwaiti police later determined that the "hashish" was of dubious quality and had no resale value.) Al-Assadi testified that he had met with Mohammed Jawad, an Iraqi intelligence agent, in his coffee shop, and had been provided with ten sticks of explosives and a bag of weapons and detonators. The bombs, Jawad told him, were to be used against targets of opportunity in Kuwait City—automobile showrooms, marketplaces, and the like—in an attempt to disrupt the Bush visit and embarrass the Kuwaiti government. Al-Assadi further testified that Jawad had offered him an American-made four-wheel-drive Jeep for the mission, but that he rejected it as substandard. Instead, he drove his own car, an eight-passenger van, into Kuwait. The van turned out to have been stolen from Kuwait City during the Iraqi occupation, and had Kuwaiti tags.

Al-Assadi and al-Ghazali were the only defendants to plead guilty in connection with the alleged plot; the two men were named in a six-hundred-page indictment, along with twelve others, that accused them of car theft and of working with the Iraqi regime, entering Kuwait illegally, transporting weapons and alcohol, and plotting to kill former President Bush. The other defendants in the case have consistently denied any knowledge of or connection with the alleged plot.

There remains a serious conflict between the testimony of the Kuwaiti—and American—government's two star witnesses. Al-Ghazali claimed, in his confession, that al-Assadi knew everything there was to know at the outset; before taking off for Kuwait, the two men had met in a parking lot in Basra to talk over the plan to murder George Bush. But al-Assadi, in his testimony, insisted that no such information had been shared with him. He knew nothing of any plan to assassinate Bush. "I am a smuggler," he said.

The account gets much murkier at this point: there is no evidence that any of the alleged assassins took any overt steps to deploy any bombs. Sometime before dawn on April 13th, al-Ghazali and al-Assadi, accompanied by two Iraqi accomplices and six paying passengers,

took off for Kuwait in al-Assadi's van and in al-Ghazali's Toyota Land Cruiser, which was then allegedly carrying the Iraqi-made car bomb. They crossed the border near Salmi, where Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia meet. The tristate-border area is the site of a flourishing black market. Al-Assadi claimed that once he was across the border he buried some of the bombs in the sand and threw away the bag of detonators and weapons.

At some point, al-Assadi and al-Ghazali decided to leave their paying passengers, who included al-Assadi's uncle and a cousin by marriage, and parked the van in the desert. The uncle refused to stay behind and came along with al-Assadi and al-Ghazali and the accomplices as they drove off in the Land Cruiser to look for sleeping accommodations. They made their way to the sheep farm of Bader al-Shimmari, a known smuggler, with a police record, and hid the whiskey, some weapons, and their vehicle in a sheep pen. Other members of the al-Shimmari family showed up, along with the passengers left in the van, and two days and nights of smoking, drinking, womanizing, driving around, and telephoning ensued. (Everyone in Kuwait has a car telephone, it appears.) According to al-Ghazali's account, he spent one of those nights in the apartment of a friend in Kuwait City, twenty miles to the east,

watched a television report about Bush's planned visit to Kuwait University, and asked to be taken there. No one offered to take him, and Bush never went to the main campus of the university anyway. That act—asking for help in casing the joint—was as close as anyone came to an overt act aimed at assassinating Bush. There was also no attempt to plant a bomb in an auto showroom, a marketplace, or anywhere else in Kuwait during the Bush visit. Al-Ghazali testified that he did not even know the location of Kuwait University—allegedly the main target of opportunity in the Bush assassination plot. Al-Assadi, he told the court, "was supposed to show me how to get there."

The al-Shimmari farm—long suspected of being a depot for smugglers and their goods—was under round-the-clock surveillance by the Kuwaiti police. The police waited less than a day before



seizing the two vehicles parked there—one of which, they would later learn, contained the car bomb. At some point, according to the testimony of al-Ghazali, he got rid of his suicide belt in the desert. Al-Ghazali, al-Assadi, and at least two other Iraqis, unable to get to their cars and whiskey in the surrounded sheep pen, stole a white Mercedes, apparently thinking that it would eventually get them back to Basra. They filled the car's tank with the wrong fuel, and it broke down, forcing the men to begin walking toward the Iraqi border. They were spotted by Kuwaiti citizens—walking in the desert is highly unusual—and the police were notified. The police did nothing. More citizens made calls, and the police finally began tracking the Iraqis, who were seized without a struggle on April 15th. Eleven others, including five members of the al-Shimmari family, had been arrested a day earlier. The Kuwaiti government—to the acute embarrassment of police officials—later handed out cash awards to those citizens who reported the intruders.

Complicating the basic confusion of the various stories, in which defendant contradicted defendant, was a claim by the Kuwaiti government that it had known of the assassination attempt for more than a month. That claim was made on the second day of the trial, by Police Colonel Abdul Samad al-Shatti. He told the court that the police had learned in mid-March, from "a secret source inside Iraq," that some Iraqi "terrorists" were plotting to infiltrate Kuwait and plant bombs. No evidence to support that claim has been made public, and no warnings were given by Kuwait at the time either to George Bush or to the Clinton Administration. Furthermore, a former high-ranking Kuwaiti military officer assured me during an interview in Kuwait that there had been no significant penetration of Iraqi intelligence before the Bush visit. Colonel al-Shatti's testimony, the Kuwaiti officer explained, had been concocted out of embarrassment, after public criticism of the inept performance of the police in arresting the alleged plotters.

The C.I.A., in the Counter Terrorism Center report obtained by the Boston *Globe*, noted that its investigators had been informed by Kuwaiti security officials of the infiltration of a smuggling ring—clearly tied to the al-Shimmari

family—that had been transporting weapons and other goods from Iraq to Kuwait early in the year. C.I.A. analysts, in attempting to explain the origins of the alleged assassination plot, theorized that the Kuwaiti government "may have then decided to claim this [smuggling] operation was directed against Bush."

ONE American counterintelligence official, on being asked about the abject performance of the alleged assassination team, conceded, "I don't think their heart was in what they were doing. So it might not have been the crack front-line Republican Guard—Iraq's best-trained military force—but their mission was to try and get a car bomb as close as possible to kill Bush. They weren't highly motivated, and they weren't real careful, and I think they performed their duty like the White House staff performs its."

Other officials, including members of the White House staff and the Justice Department's Mark Richard, have repeatedly pointed out that Wali al-Ghazali, in private interviews with the F.B.I., continued to maintain that he was recruited by Iraqi intelligence and sent into Kuwait to kill George Bush. They have further asserted that C.I.A. analysts have been able to verify al-Ghazali's descriptions of Iraqi intelligence facilities in Basra, and have apparently corroborated his identification of some known Iraqi intelligence personnel. But these officials have also acknowledged that, since al-Ghazali is facing a death sentence, he could obviously testify—as one intelligence official put it—"to being the Pope." And they concede that the Kuwaiti officials have been unable to recover the suicide belt that al-Ghazali claimed he discarded in the desert. The bombs, detonators, and weapons allegedly thrown away by al-Assadi have not been found, either.

"Yes, some elements are extremely amateurish," Mark Richard says. "But others are not." He argues that Iraqi intelligence had "nothing to lose" by using the al-Ghazali group. "It's a win-win situation. What are these guys going to give up"—if they're captured. "The operations of the Iraqi intelligence service in Basra? They don't know it." Anyway, Richard says, the operation was obviously set up to kill al-Ghazali and the other members of the assassination team

who carried out their orders and detonated the bomb.

In interviews over the summer, many past and present American intelligence officials expressed little surprise that the Clinton Administration had predicated the bombing of Baghdad on such conflicting and dubious evidence. One C.I.A. analyst explained, "Of course nobody wants to say, 'There's nothing to it, Mr. President,' especially when other guys are pushing it. The President asks the intelligence analysts for the bottom line: Is this for real or not? You can't really lose by saying yes." That hard-line attitude—"hanging tough" in a crisis—has marked many of America's intelligence failures since the beginning of the Cold War.

Thus, on a Saturday in June, the President and his advisers could not resist proving their toughness in the international arena. If they had truly had full confidence in what they were telling the press and the public about Saddam Hussein's involvement in a plot to kill George Bush, they would almost certainly have ordered a far fiercer response than they did. As it was, confronted with evidence too weak to be conclusive but, in their view, perhaps not weak enough to be dismissed, they chose to fire missiles at night at an intelligence center in the middle of a large and populous city.

"What you're trying to do is go after the people responsible," Secretary of Defense Les Aspin told reporters at a Pentagon briefing after the bombing. There was no chance that Saddam Hussein would be inside the intelligence complex at the time of the attack, he said, "but it's like any intelligence building." He went on, "You've got people who are there twenty-four hours watching communications. You presumably might have some people in there who are involved in maintenance, and cleanup crews of one kind or another. I wouldn't want to guess a number."

Anthony Lake, in his briefing that night, explained, in language eerily reminiscent of the Vietnam War, that the bombing of Baghdad "is an action, I hope, that will potentially save many Muslim as well as non-Muslim lives, both in the Middle East and elsewhere." It is no longer quite permissible to speak of destroying villages in order to save them, but maintenance men and cleanup crews had better beware. ♦