

CUTTING THE NIXON TAPES

*How easily Nixon bashers like Stanley
Kutler forget that this was a war president.*

BY JOHN H. TAYLOR



The Nixon-haters have finally had their bacchanal. In November 1996, 201 hours of Watergate tapes—every minute of the 3,700 hours of Nixon White House recordings that archivists believed related to a presidential abuse of power—were opened to journalists and researchers by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Before a second of tape was heard about China, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, radical dissent, the Mideast, the Environmental Protection Agency, the economy, or obstreperous Democrats, we were invited once more to wallow in Watergate.

Thanks to a year-long media romp through the record of a scandal wrenched brutally out of its historical context, Richard Nixon's reputation may be lower than at any time since his resignation. Well-placed opinion leaders are doing their best to keep it there. To advertise a Watergate retrospective program last fall, National Public Radio used an announcer who imitated Nixon's voice, which would have been beyond the pale for any other late president but for Nixon must have seemed permissible, or perhaps necessary. In pre-Christmas ads for its collection of tape transcripts, the Free Press, a division of Nixon's own ex-publisher Simon & Schuster, trumpeted a blistering *Los Angeles Times* review by Robert Scheer, who, after either ignoring or miscon-

struing most of the Watergate evidence in the book, called it "grotesque and riveting: Nixon raw, in his own words, a President unmasked." Still carefully masked is Scheer, who rarely if ever reminds readers of his shilling for Hanoi as editor of *Ramparts*.

The explosive release of the last Watergate tapes, with its grossly distorted coverage, was the high-water mark, the Pickett's Charge, in a campaign to lay on Nixon all the iniquities of a troubled era. The scandal-only complexion of the release was a product of the time bomb planted by the Democratic Watergate Congress of 1975-76, which directed the National Archives to release all tapes about Watergate before anything else. This requirement turned archivists into junior prosecutors, listening to the tapes over and over for conversations that seemed to fit the bill. Until six years ago an informal understanding existed between President Nixon and NARA that the "abuse of power" tapes would be defined as the 63 hours used by the Watergate special prosecutor in 1973-74. But then we were told that the Hardy Boys at NARA had kept a little list—201 additional fun-filled hours of their own greatest hits.

At the same time they were listening to tapes, by order of the Supreme Court the archivists were also supposed to be returning to President Nixon all tape segments containing strictly personal conversations. The Court's directive seemed unambiguous to us, but the archivists were loath to alter the holy of holies, the original tapes, so they returned copies they had made and promised that the material on the originals, including the president's conversations with members of his family, would never be played publicly. (Yeah, right.) Meanwhile NARA allies of the dean-for-life of the Nixon-haters, Professor Stanley Kutler of the University of Wisconsin, secretly dished him the news of the 201 hours, and he enlisted Ralph Nader's law firm in Washington, Public Citizen, to sue the then-archivist, Don Wilson, for failing to release them. Angered by the archivists' bait-and-switch on the abuse-of-power issue and their refusal to return what he and the courts regarded as his property, the former president countersued, demanding an immediate return of the personal tapes before any more tapes were released.

Soon after his death in 1994, the Nixon estate, with the blessing of his family, began negotiating with NARA and Kutler. In April 1996, we agreed to release all the tapes even though the government refused to back down on the personal tapes. Had we refused to carve that matter out of the negotiations, we might have bottled up the release indefinitely. Instead, we decided that it was time to get the release process underway, knowing that the public would never see tapes about the substance of the president's work until after the last Watergate tapes were out.

Kutler's media sycophants have given him all the credit for the release, ignoring the tough decision the Nixon family had to make. For instance, Dan Rather reported on November 18, 1997, "Until the day he died, the thirty-seventh President of the United States fought to keep these tapes from ever being

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made public. His Estate battled against it, but finally lost.” That’s two lies in two sentences. The Nixon family didn’t lose; they bravely and voluntarily compromised so that history—and, they hoped, the president’s reputation—would win. As for President Nixon, he knew all the tapes would eventually be released; he said so time and again. Since he never listened to them nor felt any more guilty about Watergate than his writings and statements evinced, he wasn’t trying to block release of the tapes to protect himself. He just wanted to protect his family’s privacy. If NARA had followed the Supreme Court’s instructions about the personal tapes, the entire collection could have been released more than a decade ago.

Richard Nixon was Republican in a Democratic town, looking for an honorable end to a messy war nobody wanted anymore while at the same time endeavoring, often through secret channels, to make the world safer and more stable for billions of people. His were tough, ideologically charged times, and his tapes make tough reading. As with so many men and women in his profession—one of cycles and seasons, ins vs. outs, and wildly swinging ideological pendulums—President Nixon practiced the fine art of giving as good as he got. What angered him most was seeing the double standard flying high. His taxes had been audited under the Kennedys, and he hadn’t forgotten. Who does? In September 1971, after Billy Graham told him he had been grilled by the IRS, he said to his chief of staff, Bob Haldeman, “Please get me the names of the Jews, you know, the big Jewish contributors of the Democrats... Could we please investigate some of the c---suckers?... Here IRS is going after Billy Graham tooth and nail. Are they going after Eugene Carson Blake [president of the liberal National Council of Churches]?” As one who never heard Nixon utter an anti-Semitic word in ten years of almost daily conversation, I find this to be a classic example of Nixonian political theology. He was thinking: When I was out, their government audited my friends and me. When I’m in, my own government is auditing my conservative Baptist friend. Why isn’t it auditing liberal Jews? As a politician, Nixon recognized that American Jews tended to be liberal and to vote against him, just as Southern Baptists tended to be conservative and to vote for him. Virtually every reference to Jews in the tapes is understandable when viewed through a political prism. As an intellectual and statesman, he was surrounded by trusted Jewish advisers, and his counterpart in Israel, Golda Meir, said he saved her country in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. His historian son-in-law David Eisenhower calls him the “most ardently pro-Israel president of the postwar era.”

Never mind what he did, of course. Let’s revel in what he said. And indeed much sanctimoniousness has attended the new Watergate tapes. But in all the coverage one important subject has been neglected: Watergate. Perhaps that’s because the new tapes, as transcribed under the direction of none other than Stanley Kutler and published in edited form in a book titled *Abuse of Power* (Free Press, 675 pages, \$30), end up being a brief for the defense. While Kutler argues the tapes prove that “the President knew virtually everything about Watergate and the imposition of a cover-up, from the beginning,” in fact they prove

he was as much in the dark about Watergate and the cover-up as he always said he had been between June 1972, when the burglary occurred, and the famous “cancer on the Presidency” conversation with counsel John Dean in March 1973.

Understanding the president’s perspective on Watergate requires one to accept his moral distinction between the Watergate break-in and the activities of the Plumbers, who were assigned to stop the leaks that had dogged his course-changing, wartime administration throughout its first two years, culminating with ex-Pentagon aide Daniel Ellsberg’s theft and leak of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. And that depends upon whether one gives him credit for being a war president who had both the right and the obligation to stop self-serving federal employees from giving self-serving journalists access to the nation’s secrets in a way that could hurt our interests or endanger the lives of military personnel.

Kutler baldly discloses that he is not among those who believed it was possible to perceive the most prodigious leaker of state secrets in human history as a national security threat. In his introduction to *Abuse of Power*, he writes that the president and his aides argued that the momentous Plumbers break-in at the Los Angeles office of Dr. Lewis Fielding, Ellsberg’s psychiatrist, “was dictated by ‘national security’ considerations, when, in fact, it was designed to discredit Ellsberg (who had leaked the Pentagon Papers).” Kutler is so wedded to this point that he repeats it four pages later.

Historians of the Cold War intelligence services must yet decide whether Ellsberg’s actions damaged U.S. interests or could have, including by helping the Soviets break our security codes. Many observers, some friendly to Nixon, believe he and national security adviser Henry Kissinger overreacted to the leak—an understandable view, since the Plumbers helped sink the president. But Kutler overreaches when he suggests that the Plumbers had set out to discredit Ellsberg for political reasons. They proposed a covert examination of his shrink’s records (with the written approval of White House aide John Ehrlichman, who said later he hadn’t known that by covert they meant a black-bag job) to learn whether he had told Fielding about his motives and contacts, either domestic or foreign. The Plumbers’ mind-set was that he was a disloyal, dangerous man who had put the security of a nation in peril and might do even more damage.

It does not justify this ill-conceived but patriotic effort to state the real reason it was undertaken. When Kutler, who knows as well as I do what the record shows about the Fielding break-in, willfully misconstrues it, it means he’s still intent on forcing the thick, newly spun fabric of the burgeoning Nixon record through the narrow eyelet of his get-Nixon mentality.

Clearly dismayed by the exculpatory content of many of the new conversations, Kutler habitually distorts them in summaries that appear with the transcripts. In a May 20, 1973 conversation in which President Nixon is checking the details of a report he plans to make to congressional leaders, he said to Haldeman, “Will you narrow that one down for me [whether Nixon was told about the Fielding break-in at the time], because I don’t want to say it unless it’s true.” In his summary, Kutler writes that the two men were “coordinating their stories.” On

September 10, 1971, during a discussion about obtaining Vietnam documents from the National Archives, then a division of the General Services Administration, aide John Ehrlichman suggests that GSA Administrator Robert Kunzig obtain the papers after sending the archivist out of town. Kutler refers to this byzantine but not remotely illegal idea as a proposed "break-in."

Lacking the resources of Simon & Schuster, the Nixon family has not been able to afford to make its own transcripts of all the conversations. But we have established that Kutler's transcripts are not honest. In view of his polemical stance the serious scholar must be suspicious of the large number of ellipses in the transcripts. What additional exculpatory material lies on the editor's floor? Kutler, who found himself in a transcribing race with the *Washington Post*, also rushed his book out too quickly. When preparing its own transcripts of hard-to-follow White House tapes, NARA takes up to a hundred hours on one hour of conversation. Kutler's team could not possibly have devoted that much time. Who knows how many errors have been placed in the historical record thanks to this hurried effort to manufacture yet more nails for a president's coffin?

Kutler sometimes un-deletes the wrong expletives. Anyone familiar with RN's idiom knows that he frequently talked about "bucking up" friends who were discouraged. When the phrase comes up during one conversation about Sen. Howard Baker, Kutler changes the "b" to "f," which of course alters the meaning of the phrase in a manner that happens to militate in favor of Kutler's portrait of the president. He is also artful in his manipulation of the prior record. To the new transcripts he adds three or four that have been available for nearly a quarter-century, including a meeting with Dean on September 15, 1972. During the talk Dean mentions that one of the Watergate defendants' attorneys believed that the break-in might have been linked to potentially embarrassing sexual secrets in the DNC offices. The famous DNC call-girl ring is at the heart of the Watergate analysis contained in *Silent Coup* by Len Colodny and Robert Gettlin, who say Dean himself dispatched the Watergate burglars to see if the Democrats had derogatory information about his wife-to-be, Maureen Biner. The Deans have denied the charges. Kutler, who with the other ayatollahs of the conventional wisdom about Watergate has virtually ignored *Silent Coup*, helpfully leaves Dean's comment about sex and the DNC out of the version of the transcript he includes in *Abuse of Power*.

Yet in spite of all the Kutlerizations, *Abuse of Power* is an exciting first step toward a more balanced understanding of the president's role in Watergate. While the new tapes bolster many of his own statements, they undermine those of some of his aides. John Ehrlichman, for instance, who did time for the Fielding break-in, has borne Nixon a very public grudge ever since, earning the privileged status of the media's second-favorite Watergate felon after Dean, whom they portray as a flawed but

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ultimately heroic whistleblower for fingering the president in the spring of 1973. In his 1982 memoir Ehrlichman, besides trashing the president's family and friends, wrote that unnamed Nixon associates (*pace* Deep Throat) said that he had come to the conclusion that he had ordered the Fielding job. Ehrlichman thus contends that he went to jail for his boss's crime. The new tapes contain no evidence to bolster Ehrlichman's view, although they do show him ensuring plausible deniability for his chief. "We had one little operation," he told the president on September 8, 1971, a few days after the Fielding break-in. "It's been *aborted* [emphasis added] out in Los Angeles which, I think, is better that you don't know about. But we've got some dirty tricks under way."

Ehrlichman writes that he first told the president about the Fielding break-in during a walk on the beach in San Clemente in July

1972 (thus explaining why his moment of candor wouldn't appear on tape, since in the early 1970's only Disney possessed the technology to plant microphones in seagulls). Again, the new tapes do not substantiate his claim, and to a dramatic extent they further undermine it by revealing that he didn't always tell his beach tale. In May 1973, after Haldeman and Ehrlichman had resigned but when the president was still in regular touch with Haldeman, the tapes show that the former chief of staff told the president, "He [Ehrlichman] doesn't believe you knew about that [the Fielding break-in] until February or March [1973]."

How desperately the president's corps of critics must wish there were evidence in the new tapes of Nixon's early knowledge of either the Watergate or Ellsberg break-ins. Finding none as he prepared *Abuse of Power*, Kutler brazenly manufactured it by selectively editing the transcript of a crucial conversation between Nixon and political aide Chuck Colson a month after the Watergate break-in. If the June 23, 1972 tape was the president's smoking gun, Kutler's transcript of the July 19, 1972 conversation is his—proof positive of blinding malice toward the thirty-seventh president that disqualifies him as a scholar.

Kutler's summary of the conversation promises much. "Colson is full of praise for his friend [E. Howard Hunt, arrested at the Watergate], knowing that he had broken into Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office," writes Kutler. "They weren't stealing anything," Colson rationalized. "They had broken and entered with an intent not to steal, [only] with an intent to obtain information." Kutler then alters the rest of the conversation to make it appear as if it concerns the Fielding break-in. The casual reader will conclude that the president knew about the Fielding burglary months before he admitted he had. The more sophisticated reader, aware of Ehrlichman's still unproven claim that he had told the president on the beach that same month, might well conclude that this conversation proves the beach story.

But all it proves is that Kutler can't be trusted. His transcript begins with the president and Colson discussing Hunt's background and effort to compile a reliable psychological profile of Ellsberg, which later accounts show involved serious-minded collaboration among the White House, the CIA, and British intelligence. They ponder whether this work for the Plumbers might be drawn into the Watergate investigation. According to Kutler, the conversation proceeds as follows:

President Nixon: You've got to say that's irrelevant in a criminal case.

Colson: It clearly will be irrelevant in the civil case, because it has nothing to do with the invasion of privacy. I'm not sure in a criminal case whether it is a sign that will be relevant or not. Of course, before a grand jury there's no relevance...

They weren't stealing anything. Really, they trespassed. They had broken and entered with an intent not to steal, with an intent to obtain information.

The ellipses after the word "relevance" look utterly innocent to the trusting reader. In fact, they are Stanley Kutler's 18-minute gap. Here is what the tape really says:

President Nixon: You've got to say that it's irrelevant in a criminal [unintelligible].

Colson: Clearly—the civil case has to do with the invasion of privacy, for information. I'm not sure in the criminal case whether these assignments [for the Plumbers] will be criminal [Kutler has "relevant"; tape is unclear] or not. Of course, before a grand jury, those would be irrelevant. I wouldn't worry about it.

President Nixon: It's none of his [the prosecutor's?] damn business.

Colson: He knows it has nothing to do with Watergate. [Pause.] Magruder obviously would — [12-second deletion for privacy] They weren't stealing. Really, they trespassed.

Nixon re-election committee official Jeb Magruder had nothing to do with the Fielding break-in but was up to his ears in Watergate. That the discussion has shifted to the Watergate break-in is even more clear from a Colson reference a moment later to "push[ing] the prosecution" toward appreciating the nature of the break-in. There was no prosecution underway of the Fielding break-in. Colson goes on to advocate full disclosure about Watergate: "Just, whatever it is, slice it off, get it over."

"I edited the conversations," Kutler writes, "with an eye toward eliminating what I believe insignificant, trivial, or repetitious." In this case, he eliminated his conscience. By removing the reference to Magruder he stooped to the level of Wyle E. Coyote, reversing a directional sign on the highway in a pathetic attempt to corner his prey. It goes without saying that Kutler also ignored the true meaning of this same July 19 conversation, which could be the most significantly exculpatory evidence about the president yet to emerge. Remember that the conventional indictment of President Nixon published and broadcast countless times in classrooms, in biographies, and in self-congratulatory media retrospectives depends upon his being obsessive about covering up the Plumbers. And yet here are two lawyers talking desultorily about Hunt's situation. There's no talk of cover-up, no reference to hush money, no sug-

gestion of fear or guilt—only evidence that the president thought Hunt was a patriot who had done good work attempting to understand the threat posed by Ellsberg but who had become involved in a separate effort at Watergate for which he would have to take the consequences.

It's true enough that in the new tapes the president tells his aides that investigators shouldn't draw the Plumbers into the Watergate burglary just because Hunt had been involved in both. But the president is stating a matter of principle, not a rationale for cover-up. When Haldeman reminds the president on June 30, 1972, that Hunt and fellow burglar G. Gordon Liddy were both tied to the Plumbers, he replies, "You mean in the Pentagon Papers? What the hell is the matter with that?" On the separate issues of what Hunt might actually say if pressed or the possibility that the FBI might already know about the Plumbers, the president wasn't concerned, because he wasn't ashamed of his efforts to protect American troops by trying to keep secrets away from nosy reporters. In another exchange whose real significance Kutler either misses or ignores, Haldeman tells the president, again on June 30, 1972, that Colson has already told the FBI "the straight truth" that he had worked with Hunt—not on Watergate but on other matters, by which he must mean the Plumbers. Yet again, upon hearing that Hunt could be implicated for his Plumber efforts the president doesn't sound worried, nor does he call in Dean with his hush-money checkbook.

The tapes do show that Nixon believed that while the Plumbers were legitimate, a break-in, at least in retrospect, was probably not—or at least was impossible to explain persuasively in the post-Vietnam atmosphere. There is no evidence here or anywhere else, Ehrlichman's later speculations aside, that Nixon ordered it. But the possibility that he might have nagged at him for years. Remembering his anger at Ellsberg's despicable conduct, before and after his resignation he probed for evidence that he had known of the Fielding break-in at the time. "You see, because if I was informed," he told Haldeman on May 20, 1973, "then, frankly, I am derelict... [T]hey've got to blame me for not firing Hunt and that bunch right then." Nixon's agonizing is potent and moving evidence of his willingness to step up to those aspects of Watergate in which he was or might have been culpable. But after countless hours of rumination, culminating in an hour-by-hour reliving of Watergate with post-presidential editorial aide Diane Sawyer in San Clemente, he finally wrote in his memoirs, "I do not believe I was told about the break-in at the time."

In all fairness, President Nixon did order a break-in at the Brookings Institution, the then-liberal (Kutler says it was "centrist," which tells you a lot about Kutler) think tank which Nixon was told might have been involved in a Pentagon Papers conspiracy. No break-in occurred. But there's no denying that right after the Ellsberg leak, the president who was signing scores of condolence letters each week to families whose loved ones had died in Vietnam was piping mad at Robert McNamara's ex-golden boy and those who might have helped him. That by 1971 the Zeitgeist had abandoned the war launched by Kennedy, McNamara, Johnson, and Ellsberg did not lessen the obligation Nixon felt to

national honor and the men and women under his command. If anything, controversy over the war deepened Nixon's sense of mission. As he said to his aides on July 1, 1971, "Our people should [unintelligible] that the press now is putting their right to make money, to profit from the publication of stolen documents... under the First Amendment and that that overrides the right of an American who is fighting for his country." In a meeting the next day he elaborates the point: "The press must think of it in terms of circulation. We understand that they have to print everything. I have to look at it in terms of the life of American men and their glory." Either one believes that the commander-in-chief is a better judge than Katharine Graham or Arthur O. Sulzberger of what should be secret about a war in wartime, or one doesn't. But people's opinions on that subject, Kutler's included, still dictate on what side of the Nixon divide they stand, just as in the matter of Daniel Ellsberg.

On Brookings, the new tapes are again at odds with the self-exculpatory Ehrlichman. As the Associated Press reported this January following an Ehrlichman speech in Atlanta, "The unreleased tapes will show the president's enlistment of Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy... to get a copy of the Pentagon Papers... Ehrlichman said. He said he stumbled onto Hunt and Liddy's plot to break in and set fire to the Brookings Institute [sic] to get the papers and asked the president about it." First, there are no more unreleased Watergate tapes; the archivists have done their worst. Second, the new tapes contain nothing on the subject besides the president telling his aides to blow the Brookings safe and his aides ignoring him. Third, is Ehrlichman, now at work with Tom Clancy on a TV series delving into Watergate, really saying his sleuthing uncovered the Brookings plot? If so, he and fiction's reigning spy-master had better scope out *Abuse of Power*. There's Ehrlichman on page 3, sitting in the June 17, 1971 meeting at which the exasperated commander-in-chief first gave the order.

In the red-hot core of the Watergate firestorm in the spring and summer of 1973, with our troops home from Vietnam and the U.S. betrayal of its friends in Saigon well underway, the pro-McGovern, anti-war media ridiculed any defense based on national security to the extent that the term became a virtual synonym for cover-up. Eventually the realities of politics and public relations and the manipulations of the president's foes in Congress and the media no longer permitted the observance of the president's moral distinction between the Plumbers' work and his re-election committee's botched job at Watergate. His critics thus deprived him of his status as a war president, and history as manipulated by commentators such as Robert Scheer, for whom the Vietnam war is a metaphor for American evil, perpetuate the distortion. Kutler's cynical meshing of the two break-ins in his July 19, 1972 transcript is the academic analogue of the corrupt Vietnam-Watergate mythology of director Oliver Stone.

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Meanwhile, as for the Watergate investigation itself, in instances too numerous to list completely, the new tapes show the president urging his aides to avoid a cover-up. June 30, 1972: "I think the best thing to do is cut your losses in such things, get the damn thing out." July 19: "[Magruder] can't contrive a story, then. You know, I'd like to see this thing work out, but I've been through these. The worst thing a guy can do, the worst thing—there are two things and each is bad. One is to lie and the other one is to cover up." September 8: "The cover-up is what hurts you, not the issue. It's the cover-up that hurts." On October 16, he interrogates Haldeman forcefully. "I don't want to have any goddamn lying," he says. "I just want to know whether [Appointments Secretary Dwight] Chapin or you guys were involved in Watergate.... I don't want anybody to lie about Watergate, do you know what I mean?... If we are,

we've got to admit it, you know what I mean, because I have said it and I'm out on a limb." Nonplused by the interrogatory Nixon, Kutler presents this helpful note: "[Nixon and Haldeman] periodically had conversations that seem to have been contrived and staged for taping to reiterate what they did or did not know." But this was Nixon's line throughout 1972. The tapes show he was aware that money was being raised for the Watergate defendants' legal and living expenses, but there is no hint that he considered it hush money.

What John Dean was doing in Richard Nixon's name and evidently without his knowledge is another subject altogether. The prior record shows him constructing a massive cover-up whose true purpose, although perhaps partially illuminated by the theories contained in *Silent Coup* and endorsed in part by Nixon biographers Jonathan Aitken and Joan Hoff, remains obscure. But as far as Nixon was concerned, once his aides had assured him that they had not been involved with the Watergate break-in, he did little or nothing to hinder the investigation.

His only moments of equivocation came when contemplating the possible role of his friend John Mitchell, who had helped nurture his nascent campaign organization in the mid-1960's and had only reluctantly and in spite of family troubles agreed to serve as Nixon's first attorney general. In the tapes the president speaks about him with abiding affection but mounting frustration. The famous "smoking gun" conversation of June 23, 1972 occurred when John Dean informed Nixon, through Haldeman, that Mitchell had endorsed the idea of having the CIA pressure the FBI to limit the investigation because of ostensible national security concerns. Approving the short-lived Dean plan was not a difficult choice for a president who had already decided that the Plumbers had nothing to do with Watergate, either legally or morally. But Dean (who Colodny and Gettlin argue hadn't actually cleared the idea

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by James Ring Adams

Iraq's Yellow Rain

The weapons behind the latest crisis.

What terror weapon is Saddam Hussein hiding from U.N. inspectors, even at the risk of renewed U.S. bombing? The evidence points to a new form of one of the nastiest villains of the Cold War, Yellow Rain.

This blistering, highly lethal agent, scientifically a "mycotoxin," a form of poison produced by microscopic fungi, emerged at the beginning of the 1980's in Soviet surrogate attacks on anti-Communist insurgents in Laos and Afghanistan. Strong complaints from the Reagan State Department apparently persuaded the Soviet Union to stop using it. But U.S. diplomats were scarred by a loud counterattack from Western apologists unwilling to admit that Moscow was violating a major treaty against biological weapons. This threat is back, along with a more widely acknowledged range of biological weapons, but the psychological denial by the disarmament lobby has left the West largely helpless to deal with it.

The arms inspectors at the U.N. Special Commission (UNSCOM) now say outright they were on the trail of a major biological weapons system when Saddam Hussein cut them off this January. But they clam up when pressed for more specifics. UNSCOM spokesman Ewen Buchanan explains that they don't want to tip Iraq to what they know, which he hints is quite a lot.

The Aflatoxin Bomb

But it was Iraq itself which put Yellow Rain back on the terror weapon hot list and presented UNSCOM with its great-

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est mystery. In July 1995, officials in Baghdad revealed to the inspectors that not only had they experimented with a substance called Aflatoxin, but they had loaded it into missile warheads and gravity bombs during the Gulf War and given commanders pre-delegated authority to use it. After the cease-fire, their stockpile was destroyed, the Iraqis added.

Nothing about this story added up. Baghdad's count of the number of munitions loaded with Aflatoxin kept changing, fluctuating up and down from the original report of four al-Hussein missiles and seven R-400 gravity bombs. Then the reported production facility at Fudaliyah seemed totally inadequate to growing the quantity Iraq said it held. But the biggest question of all was: Why Aflatoxin?

It was simply a lousy candidate for a battlefield weapon. The toxin could ruin your peanut crop, as it sometimes does in the U.S., and in the long run might cause liver cancer in humans. But it didn't have the immediate drop-dead action that could make a difference in a fight. It was no cinch to handle, either. It was hard to dissolve, even for a mycotoxin, so you wound up making a munition filled with solvent. As one UNSCOM specialist was fond of saying, you would get hurt by an Aflatoxin bomb mainly if it fell on your head.

Yet there's a plausible report that an agent of this sort was turned on American forces during the Gulf War, and it did harm. At 3 a.m. on January 19, 1991, a flash of red light and a loud shock wave woke nearly 750 Seabees of the 24th Naval Mobile Construction Battalion camped near al Jubayl in northern Saudi Arabia. A general alarm sounded, with a

radio message warning of "a confirmed chemical agent." As troops struggled into their masks and rubberized suits, they noticed a "dense yellowish mist" floating over the camp. Those who didn't suit in time began to choke and felt a burning on their skin. Exposed areas later broke out in rashes and blisters, which turned to ulcerating sores. The *New York Times* surveyed 152 veterans of the unit in September 1996 and found that 114 reported chronic post-war illness.

The Pentagon said Patriot missiles caused the explosion and blamed the symptoms on a toxic propellant released from an Iraqi SCUD as it broke up in the air. But the details don't fit. For one thing, the nitric acid propellant should have corroded the rubber suits, but they were unaffected. According to a paper by Jonathan Tucker of the Monterey Institute of International Studies in California, no SCUD attacks were reported that night. Tucker finds it possible instead that Patriot missiles were launched against an aircraft equipped to spray a biological weapon. Unit veterans strongly suspect a cover-up. A communications officer later stated in an affidavit that radio operators in the command bunkers were ordered to burn the log pages covering the incident.

Explanations of these mysteries were lacking until this spring, when a former UNSCOM inspector named Terry Taylor spilled the beans. At a symposium in London, he remarked that Iraq's "Aflatoxin bomb" looked like a cover for another agent, a quick-acting battlefield toxin, that was produced with the same fermenting process. UNSCOM officials don't hide their annoyance that their hand was tipped even this much. When one asks them about the likely candidate for the secret substance, one or more of the trichothecenes, they roll their eyes.