

Truman OK'd sabotage plot

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The U.S. government during President Truman's administration secretly planned to sabotage Middle East oil fields if the Soviet Union appeared poised to attack the Persian Gulf.

The plan _ top secret until now _ called for the United States and Britain to plug oil wells across the Middle East and then blow up refineries and storage tanks. With the oil denied the Soviets, the Americans and British would then flee.

For a brief time, the United States even considered using an exotic radiological weapon that would poison the oil fields by spreading radioactive pellets in the desert. Radiological weapons, tested but never deployed, would have made the oil fields uninhabitable without destroying them.

The plan progressed so far that U.S. and British oil companies were enlisted to help carry it out; U.S. troops were trained to blow up wells; and the Central Intelligence Agency secretly imported explosives to blow up Saudi oil facilities.

Revelation of the oil-denial plan today carries some irony. Five years ago, in the final days of February 1991, Iraq's army torched 750 oil wells as armies led by the United States drove it from Kuwait. The torching is remembered as a vindictive act worthy of the Dark Ages.

"We really went after Saddam Hussein for burning the oil fields after his withdrawal from Kuwait," explained Shibley Telhami, the director of Cornell University's Near Eastern studies program.

"Nothing in (this plan) talks about burning the oil fields like he did. But in any case, we're talking about withdrawing and destroying these installations." Those involved in the plan said it was abandoned, apparently in the early 1950s, because it dawned on officials that they had created an inextricable problem. U.S. and British officials began to fear that the Middle East countries, apparently never told of the plan, would realize that the Western countries were not serious about defending them but were instead planning to destroy their livelihood.

"The United States comes along and says, 'Well, we regard Saudi oil as our oil and we're going to blow up these wells because we want to keep it out of Soviet hands,'" said Douglas Little, an expert in U.S.-Middle East relationships.

He said Arab countries might ask: "Who are you to plug our wells and dynamite our refineries?" Officials at Saudi Arabia's embassy in Washington have not responded to telephone and faxed inquiries over the last two months.

Representatives for Iran, Iraq and Kuwait also have not responded to requests.

Concerned that the Middle East would be outraged by the plan, the United States kept it secret for nearly five decades.

In fact, when the Truman Library in Independence accidentally removed its "top secret" classification in 1985, the National Security Council took the rare step of reclassifying the plan.

However, microfilmed copies of the plan had lain unnoticed in a few places. The Kansas City Star/ found a copy at the University of Kansas library late last year. National Security Council officials declassified the plan earlier this month, partly because one of the copies had been discovered.

"Like a Hollywood script" Parker T. Hart remembers an unusual day in 1949. It was early spring in Washington. Hart, a U.S. Foreign Service agent, had just accepted a position as consul general to Dhahran, a village on the Persian Gulf in northern Saudi Arabia. But before he left, he was summoned to a mysterious briefing by a State Department official.

They met at the Metropolitan Club, a private club two blocks from the White House frequented by executives and government officials.

"We picked a quiet corner and he gave me a very confidential briefing," Hart said. "It was not to be shared with anybody." Hart was told about a plan to sabotage the oil fields.

Unknown to Hart, the National Security Council had secretly crafted the plan, officially called NSC 26//2, just a few months earlier and President Truman had signed off on it. NSC 26//2 instructed the secretary of state to designate an officer at Dhahran to prepare to carry it out. Hart was that officer.

A consul general's post is normally a sort of an embassy branch office, but the Dhahran consul general "was a very special post"

involved in "war planning of all kinds," Hart said.

Hart, now 85 and retired in Washington, agreed to discuss his role publicly for the first time because the plan was declassified.

Dhahran was a grassy area used by goatherds until Saudi Arabia's first oil well was drilled there in 1938. Quickly, it was transformed into ground zero for America's budding interest in the Persian Gulf.

An American airstrip was built nearby. Aramco, the partnership of four American oil companies that virtually owned all oil rights in Saudi Arabia, had its field headquarters there.

Hart, who even had a special telephone line to Washington dedicated to the oil denial program, said he talked with Aramco's top executives, now dead, about ways to plug the wells and dismantle or destroy the refinery and surface equipment. They were not enthusiastic about blowing up their own equipment, Hart said, and they wanted to inform the Saudi king.

But Hart said the plan was to be kept secret until they determined whether the plan would work.

Doubts about the plan cropped up immediately. Shutting down the oil wells and plugging the holes with concrete would be too time-consuming if a Soviet army was rushing in.

And then there was the problem of stockpiling explosives.

Central Intelligence Agency technicians secretly moved explosives into Saudi Arabia about 1949 or 1950, Hart said. A small amount, perhaps a few crates, was buried in the desert.

"They started to do it, sort of testing it out," Hart said.

"Then they stood back and began to shake their heads. " The problem: It would be impossible to secretly import large quantities of explosives and keep them out of sight of the nomadic Bedouin tribes.

"You'd never get away with it," said Hart, who's now writing a book called *Roots of Partnership* about the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

Meanwhile, the military was prepared to step in. Mike Ameen, a young Marine officer in the late 1940s, was part of a task force to destroy the wells in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, a small island nation off Saudi Arabia's coast.

The Marines trained in the United States, he said. Later, they were stationed on U.S. Navy ships in the Mideast. If the Soviets attacked, the Marines would be whisked to shore on small boats to demolish the oil facilities.

"It was like a Hollywood script," Ameen said recently.

The Marine task force was withdrawn in early 1950. Ameen went to work for Aramco in 1953 and became its vice president for government relations. He told his co-workers about the Marine plan, but they couldn't believe it.

"They were shocked," he said.

Top Aramco officials not only knew about the plan but were deeply involved in carrying it out.

The oil company selected L.T. Weathers, a former colonel in the Army Corps of Engineers, to coordinate the plan for Aramco.

Weathers, now retired in Vista, Calif., said Aramco engineers devised a method to plug the wells with concrete slurry. He said they also had plenty of explosives stockpiled, but he declined to provide more details.

"It had to be kept as clandestine as possible, but we knew it would work," he said last week.

A new weapon of warfare Back in Washington, top government officials were thinking of knocking out oil fields in a new way. The secretary of state was instructed to study using "radiological measures" to poison the oil fields.

Even now, few in the public know much about radiological weapons. They are not atomic bombs that explode and destroy targets in a blast of heat. Instead, they contaminate an area by spreading radioactive pellets or particles _ which could include wastes from a nuclear reactor _ that kill with radiation. Depending on the radioactive materials used, an area could be made uninhabitable for a few days to many years.

Radiological weapons were designed to create "an instant Chernobyl," said Charles A. Ziegler, a nuclear physicist and a Brandeis University professor. Ziegler has reviewed secret reports of radiological experiments and interviewed those who conducted them.

Radiological weapons were never publicly demonstrated on a battlefield. But for a time in the 1940s, they rivaled the atomic bomb for

their potential to revolutionize warfare.

In October 1949, tests commenced at the Dugway Proving Ground in Utah. Cluster bombs were used to spread radioactive particles, according to a federal report issued last fall.

The secret program got top-level attention. Truman was briefed in 1949 by the defense secretary about the radiological weapons program, according to government documents.

"This (oil-denial plan) is right in the middle of when radiological warfare was being considered," said Dan Guttman, executive director of a U.S. Energy Department advisory committee that investigated radiation experiments conducted on unwitting Americans that began in the 1940s.

But radiological weapons failed to meet their early promise.

Radioactive agents couldn't be transported and delivered without irradiating those involved. Gusts of wind made it difficult to spread the radioactive pellets uniformly.

"The military never fell in love with radiological warfare," said Gregg Herken, chairman of space history at the Smithsonian Institution.

Some documents about radiological warfare were declassified in 1993. But even today references to radiological weapons remain scant.

In the end, radiological weapons were rejected as impractical for use in the desert.

"I never heard that term used in my lifetime in the Foreign Service," Hart said. "I don't know what the term 'radiological' means." U.S. sought British help The United States was not alone in the oil-denial plan.

The plan, which was crafted by the National Security Council and approved by President Truman in January 1949, instructed the secretary of state and secretary of defense to begin discussions with the British.

British cooperation was mandatory. The British government controlled or influenced many Mideast countries outside of Saudi Arabia. And British petroleum companies were extracting oil in Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and Egypt.

A British Embassy spokesman recently said he couldn't comment.

"At the moment, it looks that if there are any papers, they aren't in the public domain yet," he said.

The plan was so secret that the official historian of the British military recently said he had never heard of it and was skeptical that the British would have agreed to participate.

"The British Foreign Office would have said, 'For Christ's sake, what are you trying to do; what if this gets out?'" said the historian, D.C. Cameron Watt.

However, top-secret American documents, now declassified, show that the British did participate.

In July 1950, the British told U.S. officials they were examining ways to destroy Iranian oil wells. Iran was particularly important because it bordered the Soviet Union.

Then British oil companies got sucked in. By August 1950, according to American Foreign Relations documents, British officials reported that planning had begun for destruction of oil facilities under the jurisdiction of British oil companies, six American military chiefs and two other U.S. officials.

The British stated that they were committed to the plan and that civilian experts from the oil companies _ not the military _ would do the demolitions.

During that meeting, Gen. Omar Bradley, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the wells would be plugged with cement but expressed doubt that the refineries would be destroyed before evacuation.

Other military men swaggered. "The Air representatives expressed full confidence that the refineries could be easily destroyed by bombing operations," according to the minutes of that meeting. The Soviets wouldn't even be able to fill up their tanks with fuel from Middle East oil.

Suddenly, however, the confident military talk gave way to doubt.

The minutes said that the officials began reflecting about "the harmful effect on morale in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries which would result if it became known, as it very likely would, that we are making detailed plans for demolishing the oil facilities.

“The discussion resulted in the conclusion that there is serious doubt whether we should in fact proceed with our plans for demolition.” Other government officials also were having second thoughts.

“The peoples we plan to abandon in war are the same peoples we must continue to work with upon liberation and in the post-war period,” according to a State Department analysis in November 1950.

A different strategy was hatched. One month later _ December 1950 _ George McGhee, the assistant secretary of state in charge of the Middle East, proposed that Turkey and Greece be brought into NATO.

The Soviet Union would have to sweep by, or through, Turkey to get to the Persian Gulf. And Turkey possessed a mighty army that could cut off the Soviets or counterattack.

“Getting Greece and Turkey in NATO saved the Middle East,” said McGhee, who worked two years to get them in. McGhee, who became U.S. ambassador to Turkey in December 1951, now lives in Washington.

The plan disappears from government records after that time. It is not publicly known whether any similar plan still exists, but the original _ NSC 26//2 _ could not exist today in part because the United States and British oil companies no longer own or control Middle East oil wells.

‘A lousy idea’ Even though the oil-denial plan apparently had been abandoned in the 1950s, its troubling legacy lingered for decades.

“It puts everyone in an awkward position,” said a former high-level military official who asked to remain anonymous.

David Long, a retired State Department official, said the Saudis and other Middle East countries have always questioned the willingness of the United States to aid them if they were attacked.

“There was a lot of insecurity about our intentions,” said Long, who is also the author of *The United States and Saudi Arabia: Ambivalent Allies*. Only after the Persian Gulf conflict five years ago were the Middle Eastern countries reassured.

Said Long: “When we came to the defense of Kuwait, that seemed to allay those questions _ at least for now.” Hart, who returned to Saudi Arabia as ambassador from 1961 to 1965, said he never told the Saudis about the plan. He suspects they were told, but he’s uncertain.

But he’s fairly certain that the plan was abandoned after he left Dhahran in August 1951. He believes that his replacement, Max W. Bishop, helped to kill it.

When Bishop, who is now dead, returned to Washington in the mid-1950s, he and Hart met. The two shared their thoughts about the plan.

“He told me he thought it was a lousy idea,” Hart said.

• Caption: Graphic (color) PhotoCAPTION: Cold war in the oil fieldsCAPTION: A U.S. plan to sabotage Middle East oil fields during the cold war has been compared to the Iraqi’s army’s burning in 1991 of 750 oil wells in Kuwait. A worker prayed as a fire burned near Kuwait City.

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