

Giant cannon a giant con?

The mysterious assassination of Canadian scientist Gerald Bull and the unfolding drama of Iraq's monster gun have filled the world media for the last week with fevered speculation and a lot of ill-informed theories.

The link between Bull and Iraq's massive arms buildup was outlined two weeks ago in this column, including the assertion that the scientist was most likely murdered by Israeli agents. This view is now widely shared by intelligence officials.

Bull had worked for decades developing long-range artillery systems, including a U.S.-financed project in the 1950s and '60s to design a huge cannon capable of launching satellites into low Earth orbit. In later years, Bull collaborated with South Africa, Israel, Austria and Belgium in the production of guns and shells. Most recently, Bull was deeply involved in the murky business of helping Iraq set up arms manufacturing, industrial projects and, possibly, chemical warfare plants.

On April 11, British customs agents seized sections of a one-metre diameter steel pipe they claimed were parts of a gigantic gun the Iraqis were trying to build. Ensuing press reports, fuelled by planted stories from the British and Israelis, suggested the device would be capable of firing a rocket-boosted shell of more than 4,000 lbs. over 300 miles or more.

This was, in effect, almost a duplicate of the giant gun described by Jules Verne in his 1865 novel, *A Trip to the Moon*.

Behind all the speculation, however, serious technical questions remain unanswered. Rocket-assisted shells, for example, are notoriously inaccurate due to the irregular burning of their propel-

lants. Any shells fired at such long ranges would be driven off course by winds.

A gun or mortar of the size suggested by press reports would require long periods to reload and might very well blow up or crack from stress. Equally important, it would likely have to be fixed in position and supported by cables that would seriously hinder traversing and elevation.

If built, the purported Iraqi monster might resemble the massive bombards used by the Ottoman armies in their sieges of the 15th century. Because of their great weight, such guns were cast in place before the walls of besieged cities. They hurled metal balls or rocks weighing several tons over short distances and blew up with dismaying regularity. The inventor of the Sultan's giant cannon, a rogue Hungarian scientist named Urban, was blown to bits by one of his own creations.

Building a giant gun is technically possible. But what would it fire? A conventional, high-explosive shell would have little military value. During the world wars, both sides used 15 and 16-inch naval guns mounted on rail cars. The most famous, Big Bertha, proved a big disappointment. At best, Iraq might be able to use such a weapon to lob a few shells daily in the direction of Tehran, a desultory bombardment certain to do little more than infuriate the Iranians.

Clearly, a giant gun would only be useful if it fired nuclear or chemical shells. But why go through all the trouble and expense when Iraq already has plenty of Scud-B missiles that can reach Tel Aviv or Tehran? Iraq is also working on longer-range missiles that would be far more accurate and effective than a giant gun.

If the supposed Iraqi monster cannon was somehow built and pointed at Israel, its lifespan would be short indeed. Long before the gun could be activated, Israeli aircraft or commandos would turn it into scrap.

Concealing such a device is, of course, impossible. Sitting out in Iraq's bare western desert, it would stick out like the Empire State Building.

So from a military point of view, the whole business sounds bizarre in the extreme. Still, it's just possible the brilliant Bull, who always had a fascination with ultra-long-range guns, was trying to cap his career by building the world's largest Tinker Toy. Or, he might have sold the credulous Iraqis the harebrained project as one of history's most outrageous con jobs, a sort of Baghdad bamboozle on a giant scale that dwarfs the annual sale of the Pyramids to rubes from the Egyptian interior or the Brooklyn Bridge to hayseeds from Iowa.

All this makes a juicy, wonderful mystery and has allowed the press to turn Iraq's ruler, Saddam Hussein, into a modern version of the nefarious Dr. Fu Manchu and his Yellow Dust of Death. The West may now have to embargo the sale of rubber bands to the Iraqis, lest they begin construction of a giant catapult to hurl all sorts of nasty things at their fast-growing number of enemies.

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"OK, I'll tell you where it was built. But first you tell me if you want to 'Buy American' or if you want Japanese quality."