

U.S. Let Firm Sell Computers to Iraq

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The Commerce Department authorized a Maryland firm to export computer equipment to Iraq in 1989, well after company officials had informed the government of their intention to help Iraq's military program, according to government documents and officials.

The equipment was sent to a state-owned automotive company in Iraq, but House Banking Committee investigators said yesterday that informants have told them Iraq diverted the equipment to a supergun project designed by arms builder Gerald Bull and meant to lob immense projectiles at Israel.

The documents are to be released today at a Senate Banking Committee hearing featuring a series of witnesses expected to criticize U.S.-Iraqi ties before the Persian Gulf War. National security adviser Brent Scowcroft and former secretary of commerce Robert A. Mosbacher were invited to testify at the hearing, but do not intend to appear, committee officials said.

The documents show that the Commerce Department approved the export license after a special review by an interagency committee chaired by a State Department official. The State Department had asserted in February 1991, after Bull's involvement with the Iraqi supergun was publicly revealed, that it did not approve "any exports to Iraq of equipment or technology by Bull

or companies associated with" him. A department spokesman said yesterday, however, that this statement was meant to cover only shipments of munitions, not items with either commercial or military use.

The documents indicate that the Sept. 22, 1989, export license was given to the Space Research Corp. of Maryland Inc., a firm incorporated by Gerald Bull's son, Michael Bull. The company operated out of the offices of the Baltimore law firm Hazel, Thomas, Fiske, Beckhorn & Hanes, according to a lawyer there, D. Christopher Ohly.

Ohly said he was unaware of any military application for the computer equipment, which was licensed for use in Iraqi truck design. He declined to comment further.

Gerald Bull's own firm, the Space Research Corp. of Brussels, obtained a separate Commerce Department license in 1989 for the export of computer software meant for "analysis of designs for . . . satellites, missiles." An investigator for the House Banking Committee said he believes this software, which was supposed to be used in Belgium, was diverted to Iraq for use with the computer equipment on the supergun design.

The investigator said he learned this from Christopher Cowley, a former employee with Space Research Corp., who told the British House of Commons last January that he helped supervise the Iraqi supergun project for Gerald Bull. Cowley could not be reached yesterday.

Michael Bull, Cowley and Ohly

met on several occasions in late 1988 and 1989 with an official of the State Department's defense trade office to discuss various foreign arms projects being pursued by Gerald Bull and affiliated firms, including Space Research Corp. of Maryland, according to a department official who asked not to be identified.

Cowley and Ohly have told the House Banking Committee they specifically informed the State Department of their intention to aid Iraq's military program, according to the committee investigator. But it is unclear if they specifically mentioned the supergun or if any of their information was passed to the Commerce officials who reviewed the export licenses for Space Research Corp.

"The Commerce Department has conducted and continues to conduct an extensive investigation into allegations of unlawful exports of U.S. technology in Iraq. We are precluded by statute, however, from discussing or commenting on any specific transaction," said spokeswoman Arlene Johnson.

Cowley, who resides in England, could not be reached for comment, but he has denied violating any laws. Charges brought against him by the British government for illegal arms exports were later dropped.