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Richard Perle and the inside battle against SALT

CLOSE-UP

CIA 604 Sullivan,
David
CIA 601 Turner,
Adm.
(orig under
SALT)

By Lynn Rosellini
Washington Star Staff Writer

Nelson Rockefeller called him a Communist. Henry Kissinger tried to get him fired. Gerald Ford and Stansfield Turner both irately denounced him to his boss.

One U.S. senator accused him of spreading scurrilous stories, and another suggested he leaks classified information. "Ah, Perle," said a senior American statesman recently, "he's the blackest, most insidious figure."

In fact, all over town, whenever members of the disarmament community get together to hash over the problems of the upcoming Senate debate on SALT II, someone is apt to mutter glumly:

"Perle. If only we could get rid of Perle!"

"There are all kinds of people angry at me," says Richard Perle, Sen. Henry M. (Scoop) Jackson's right hand man in the battle against SALT. Feeding flour and eggs into a Pastamatic machine, which is making spaghetti in his kitchen, Richard Perle certainly doesn't look villainous at the moment.

"I can't help that," continues the soft-spoken, wiry-haired Perle. "You can't get anything done in Washington without being controversial." He opens the oven door to check a pan of braised endive. "They (administration arms control experts) would much prefer to make decisions in the absence of informed criticism."

As the Senate prepares to take up the recently concluded arms agreement, Jackson's powerful and controversial aide is

smack in the center of the hard-liners' determined opposition. And when his work is done, Perle predicts that the treaty as it now stands will never pass the Senate.

"I can't find 67 votes (the number required for ratification) for this thing, no matter how hard I try," he says.

Almost everyone agrees that Richard Perle, 37, is one of the most knowledgeable people in town on SALT. They also agree on one more point. "He intimidates a lot of people in town," says one administration official, who, like many sources in the sensitive arms control field, asked not to be named. "They're scared to do things because Perle might get them."

But there the agreement ends. Because depending on whom you talk to, Richard Perle is either an arrogant, dangerous dogmatist or a warm-hearted, patriotic hero.

To his detractors, he is a supremely condescending, abrasive, win-at-all-costs zealot who doesn't hesitate to use distortion, threats and dangerous leaks to achieve his ends. He is a man who once got so angry at Sen. Gaylord Nelson that he threatened to travel to Wisconsin and personally campaign against him in his re-election race.

He is a man who is said to have supplied — and then bragged about — a hit list of enemies who were subsequently purged from the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. A man whose reputation for leaking to the press so angered Sen. John Culver that he denounced the practice before a Senate subcommittee.

"To this day, I've never heard of a staffer doing the things that Richard does," says a veteran Senate staffer in awe. "I'd be fired if I did the things he does."

Nonsense, says Richard Perle.
Ridiculous, says Scoop Jackson.

"The whole controversy," says Jackson, "is over one word: jealousy. Richard Perle can take Cabinet officers and their best experts and stand them on end. They know it. They would like to see him out of the picture."

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To Jackson and other hard-liners, Perle is a tireless, selfless true believer who eschews personal gain to pursue the cause of American military parity with the Soviets. He is a brilliant thinker who knows the issues cold and can debate an adversary to a standstill. He is a warm human being who supports a retarded brother in California. He is a charming and witty friend.

Above all — and no one disagrees about this — Perle is a consummate Washington operator. His story begins in a cramped, out-of-the-way committee office on the first floor of the Old Senate Office Building. . . .

* * * *

They are an odd couple. Side by side they sit, wedged into the back corners of the Senate Permanent Investigations subcommittee room: she, the staff director; he, a professional staff member.

"Look, you really *must* come in earlier," Dorothy Fosdick, who likes to mother Perle, tells him on frequent mornings (he often works nights). When he suggests a particularly outrageous idea, she says: "Richard! You can't do that! There's no way you can do that!"

Dr. Dorothy Fosdick, 65, certainly didn't have to spend the last 25 years of her life anonymously squirreled away in a cramped back office. The daughter of noted pacifist minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, she was raised in a prominent New York family and years ago had a love affair with Adlai Stevenson.

But Fosdick, who once rejected an offer to be the first woman on the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations ("I wasn't going to be a token"), has no use for social convention. Neither does Scoop Jackson. And neither did a bright young student who showed up in Jackson's office one day in 1969.

Richard Perle was from Los Angeles, where his father, the son of Russian Jewish emigres, operated a textile business. The elder Perle was a high school dropout, and while the family was close-knit, the atmosphere at home was "anything but intellectual." Yet Richard, the eldest of two brothers, grew up with an insatiable intellectual curiosity.

At Hollywood High, he was known as a very bright but shy boy who always dressed formally — in shirts, sweaters and neckties — in contrast to his more casual classmates. "He was a pudgy but goodlooking boy," recalled high school pal Ken Margolis. "Richard always looked like somebody had bathed him with olive oil: sleek, dark and smooth."

Perle joined the debating team and surrounded himself with leftist friends — some of them children of Hollywood's much-publicized Communists. By the time he entered the University of Southern California, Perle was a political liberal who founded a chapter of the ACLU, helped organize a demonstration for a stay of execution for Caryl Chessman and wrote a liberal column for the campus newspaper.

"I had quite left-wing views at the time," he recalled. "All the things I believed about international politics were the standard left-wing views: the power of world public opinion to discipline states that were aggressive or repressive, disarmament as a means of assuring peace, diplomacy as a means of control."

But then Perle, an English major, stumbled into an international relations course. "I gradually saw all my cherished notions overturned," he said.

Perle began to seek out the best authorities on the subject. He befriended the daughter of Albert Wohlstetter and spent hours at the Wohlstetter home, listening to the noted hard-liner's views. He read a book skeptical of arms control by London School of Economics professor Hedley Bull, and enrolled in the school for one year.

By the time he returned to the U.S., Perle was a confirmed believer — to his friends' dismay — in military strength as a means of maintaining international stability. "He was a hawk," says longtime friend Dan Gallen. "Most of his friends were disarmament types. We used to have long debates into the night."

In 1969, after graduate work at Princeton and a brief stint at a Westinghouse think tank, Perle accepted Wohlstetter's invitation to campaign for the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) in Washington. Shortly afterward, he met Scoop Jackson, who promptly hired him.

"He had this unique combination," recalls Jackson, "of being an outstanding scholar and having excellent judgment in strategic matters."

Like Fosdick, Perle didn't care one whit about climbing the foreign policy status ladder. He had little interest in fellowships from Brookings or the Council on Foreign Relations (he later joined the Council, hoping to change it "from inside"), or in paying the requisite social and professional amenities to higher-ups.

"In the disarmament community," says a Senate staffer who admires Perle, "they didn't understand someone willing to sit here years and years and years in a filthy pit, buried under books, working through the night."

Like Fosdick, Perle's only loyalty was to Jackson. And Jackson returned it, treating him like a son. He was forever sending Perle off to see physicians, or reminding him to get his income tax in or leaving him little gifts (once, a bag of pistachios). And later, when Perle would come under attack, Jackson would say: "I'm a loyal person. I stand by my people. Nobody's going to intimidate me."

It was precisely this trust, coupled with Jackson's own influence, that would eventually make Perle a power. Perle had the time — which the busy Jackson didn't always — to master complicated defense issues. He could brief Jackson coolly, rationally and effectively on a moment's notice.

If Jackson was called to the White House, Perle could tell him what questions the President would be likely to ask, and what recent figures would support his replies. By the time he got downtown, Jackson would know as much as the President — often more.

(In fact, some members of the disarmament community began to suspect that Jackson was Charlie McCarthy to Perle's Edgar Bergen. "Jackson is Perle," insisted one. "Don't ever assume any different. Perle has his hand up Jackson's back and is working him." Jackson scoffs at this notion, pointing out that his basic positions on defense predate his involvement with Perle. "That's nonsense," he says. "They better go back and look at my record").

But his closeness to Jackson was only part of Perle's power. Over the years, he meticulously cultivated an alliance of disenchanting hard-liners throughout the executive branch. One was a CIA analyst who gave Perle top-secret SALT reports.

Another was an anonymous Carter administration source who would meet Perle for lunch under an assumed name. There were many more, and they all offered information.

"To do anything on the hill," Perle explained, "you have to have information. You have to be able to see behind arguments. That often means being told by someone inside an agency that, for instance, a statement made by the secretary (of state) obscures a certain fact. Sometimes, if you know an action is being taken, you can stop it, or influence it."

A Democratic Senate staffer who has no affection for Perle put it this way: "What he has done for years is take the coin of his realm — bureaucratic gossip in the form of executive studies and documents provided by his friends — and use it to intimidate elements of the executive branch to accept his view, and his Senator's view."

That might mean a well-timed plant with the Evans-Novak column: ("Richard plays the press like a violinist," says Peter Lakeland, an aide to Sen Jacob Javits). Or an embarrassing question by Jackson to a high ranking official at a Senate hearing. Or a carefully managed legislative coup.

"He was the sparkplug from the beginning on the Jackson-Vanick amendment (withholding trade advantages from countries that restrict immigration)," says John Lehman, a close friend and former ACDA deputy director. "I was working for Kissinger on the other side. I know the guy who beat us — it was Richard. He masterminded the passage of the Trident submarine program. And the 40 votes against (Paul) Warnke — that was purely Richard."

But while his methods brought success, they did not always make Richard Perle a popular guy.

"He's an idea guy," says Robert G. Old, Senate armed services committee minority counsel. "He's extremely persistent and tenacious . . . But at times, Perle can be an SOB to work with."

Dorothy Fosdick explains it this way: "Maybe some people don't take to Richard," she says, "because he's not very tolerant of sloppy thinking, or of people who don't think at all. He's not tolerant of people who haven't done their homework, who don't know an issue, who haven't seen it through."

Jackson was so outraged when Nelson Rockefeller implied in his much-publicized 1976 remarks that Fosdick and Perle were Communists, that he extracted an apology from the then-vice president on the Senate floor.

But Perle himself is unruffled by the criticism. "Arms control has always been confined to a small number of experts," he says. "They're not used to criticism from within."

"The implication that I have been responsible for leaking classified information is extremely unfair," he continues. "I am extremely careful. But if I learn through my sources of things that are going on, I don't feel compelled to keep them from the public."

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine this polite, charming man "getting" anyone. Richard Perle, gourmet cook, is sipping a glass of Beaujolais in the living room of his Capitol Hill townhouse. The spaghetti is made, the veal chops await the broiler and dinner guests aren't expected for a few more minutes.

"No one has ever explained," he chuckles, "how it is that I'm supposed to have had these powers."

As it turns out, Richard Perle's most cherished dream has nothing to do with backfire bombers or SS-17's. As it turns out, Perle wants to open a restaurant specializing in souffles (cheese, chocolate, grand marnier, seafood and lemon).

"I've come up with an idea to mechanize the production of souffles," he says wistfully. "It would make a luxurious and exotic dish available to everyone for the price of a hamburger. I went to the trouble of establishing a corporation, Le Souffle, Inc. But then I got bogged down in other things."

A short while later, Perle hauls out blueprints for another long-awaited plan: a kitchen he has designed for his new home in Chevy Chase. "We'll have an indoor barbecue with a gas jet, here," he begins, tracing a finger across the plans. "And over here, a restaurant-sized stove with six burners and an oversized oven, and over here, room for the espresso machine . . ."

If there is malevolence in Richard Perle, it is well-hidden. "He really is a study in contrasts," says close friend Howard Feldman. "There's a sweet side of him that people don't know."

Perle is happy as a chipmunk when he discusses the impending birth of his first child (pre-natal tests show it will be a boy). But he has also been scarred by personal tragedy: the deaths from cancer of both parents, a failed first marriage (he remarried Leslie Barr, a Department of Energy staffer, in 1977), and a retarded younger brother whom he supports in California.

"He's always getting in trouble," Perle says sadly of his brother. "Every couple of months I have to go out there and find him a new apartment or bail him out of jail."

But lately, of course, Perle's main preoccupation has been SALT. He has spent hours briefing Senators and their staffers and writing letters from Jackson to President Carter. Soon, he will begin drafting amendments dealing with verification and other "problems" with the treaty.

"It (SALT II) is a treaty that accomplishes none of our objectives," he says. "It doesn't limit the growth of Soviet forces, yet it imposes some limits on the growth of U.S. forces. In important areas, it can't be verified. And in balance, it's a failure for arms control."

Some Perle-watchers suggest that this time, Perle will meet his match. The Jackson/Perle supremacy on Capital Hill, they say, is finally being challenged by pro-SALT Senators like Gary Hart (D-Colo.) and John Culver and their staffers.

But as the SALT debate looms, it is doubtful whether anyone will play as hard and as skillfully as Perle. "There's been a lot of preliminary skirmishing," an administration official says gloomily, "In a year, we will know for a fact how good Perle is."