Tales of the Foreign Service: In Defense of April Glaspie

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Special Report

By Andrew I. Killgore

The U.S. Foreign Service has its full quota of intriguing tales, many of them funny—especially to insiders—but some etched in acid and betrayal. That’s where April Glaspie comes in.

Having served as U.S. ambassador to Iraq since 1987, Glaspie unexpectedly found herself on July 25, 1990 meeting for the first time with Iraqi President Saddam Hussain in Baghdad. She knew Saddam never received foreign ambassadors but there she was just the same, sitting across the desk from the Iraqi strongman.

Glaspie’s own career odyssey as the first American woman ambassador to an Arab country was itself an improbable tale. When she entered the Foreign Service in 1966, her chances as a woman of becoming an ambassador were virtually nil. The State Department “culture” was against it.

Somewhere along the way, however, the Department “discovered” that it had very few woman ambassadors, and even fewer deputy chiefs of missions (DCMs, or deputy ambassadors). So the gender gap was narrowed, and Glaspie, who had an outstanding record (DCM in Damascus and a top political reporting officer citation for 1975), was sent to Baghdad as U.S. ambassador.

Glaspie had had barely a minute’s notice that she would be seeing the Iraqi president. She already was deeply versed in Middle East affairs, however, and particularly on the high tension, and the details of its causes, then roiling relations between Iraq and Kuwait.

She reflected on Iraq’s longstanding grudge against Kuwait which went back to 1899, when Britain took Kuwait “under its protection.” The trouble was that Kuwait was then a part of Iraq’s Basra district, ruled by a tottering Ottoman Empire. When Iraq became independent in 1932, Basra, the newly independent country’s main seaport, no longer included Kuwait. So Iraq felt cheated.

Reflecting on the current crisis, Ambassador Glaspie mentally reviewed Saddam’s case against Kuwait: that it was pumping more oil than its OPEC quota allowed, thus depressing oil prices—and, consequently, Iraq’s income from oil exports. The emirate also was impinging on claimed Iraqi territory in the rich North Rumaila oil field and (not stated publicly) had refused to grant “loans” to Iraq or explicitly cancel loans made to Iraq during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. (In 1988 this writer asked Iraqi Deputy Foreign Minister Nizar Hamdoon if Iraq had to repay. “They have never mentioned it,” he replied.)

Glaspie knew that Saddam had three army divisions mobilized in the south toward Kuwait. She also recalled that 30 years earlier, in 1961, Iraqi leader Abdul Karim Qassem had provoked a major crisis by publicly proclaiming that Kuwait, just then announcing its independence, could not be independent because it was part of Iraq. Qassem had backed down and that crisis had subsided.

Glaspie remembered Saddam’s reassuring words to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who had visited Baghdad to mediate the Kuwait-Iraq crisis. She recalled that Mubarak had returned to Cairo via Kuwait and Riyadh to report that Saddam had sounded reassuring. And she knew that Iraqi and Kuwaiti representatives were to meet in Jeddah under the auspices of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia.
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At their meeting, the American ambassador explained to Saddam that the United States did not take a stand on Arab-Arab conflicts such as Iraq’s border disagreement with Kuwait. She made clear, however, that differences should be settled by peaceful means.

Glaspie’s concerns were greatly eased when Saddam told her that the forthcoming Iraq-Kuwait meeting in Jeddah was for protocol purposes, to be followed by substantive discussions to be held in Baghdad.

In response to the ambassador’s question, Saddam named a date when Kuwaiti Crown Prince Shaikh Sa’ad Abdullah would be arriving in Baghdad for those substantive discussions. (This appears in retrospect to have been Saddam’s real deception.)

Ambassador Glaspie then told Saddam that she was planning to go to the United States. In fact she did leave Baghdad a few days later for a vacation with her mother. She learned in London on Aug. 1 that Iraq had invaded Kuwait.

The July 31 Iraq-Kuwait meeting in Jeddah had broken off almost immediately when Kuwait appeared to offer no concessions to Iraq. Kuwait Ruler Shaikh Jaber’s instructions to Crown Prince Sa’ad Abdallah—as contained (explicitly) in Khadduri and Ghareeb’s War In the Gulf: 1990-1991—were adamantly against any concessions to Iraq. In the past, Kuwait always had propitiated the two giants (Iran and Iraq) on its borders. Its hard line in this instance was a disastrous miscalculation.

For her part, Ambassador Glaspie had handled everything “by the book.” She already had received the State Department’s permission to leave Iraq on vacation before the crisis blew up. After her meeting with Saddam Hussain she again sought, and received, State Department approval to proceed with her vacation plans. Ever since, however, the Department—in an effort to avoid any responsibility for the Iraqi attack on Kuwait—has cruelly disavowed Glaspie.

A Cruel Disavowal

The State Department never offered Glaspie another job requiring confirmation by the U.S. Senate. It never refuted or even commented on Baghdad’s misleading version of the Glaspie/Saddam conversation where Saddam tried, entirely dishonestly, to make it appear that the U.S. had not really opposed the Iraqi attack.

In 1993, then-U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright struck a gratuitously cruel blow against Glaspie when she ordered Ambassador Glaspie to be out of her office at the U.S. Mission in New York, where Glaspie was then assigned, by the end of that day.

April has recently retired from the State Department. She does not know these words are being written. But she needs someone to speak out for her. Her loyalty to the system is notable. She has never spoken a word against the Department of State or against Secretary of States James Baker, he of the diamond-hard eyes, who might have said—but did not—"We all misjudged Saddam Hussain, and ‘we’ includes me."

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