The Scapegoat Ambassador: 
April Glaspie and the 1990 
Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait

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INSTRUCTOR FOREWORD

Despite significant research hurdles, Catherine Lechicki’s essay “The Scapegoat Ambassador” expertly and methodically walks readers through a brief study of Ambassador April Glaspie, her fateful 1990 meeting with Saddam Hussein, and her subsequent ordeal. Catherine incisively compares the two extant records of this meeting and then goes on to situate the meeting against the backdrop of the first Bush administration’s post-Cold War policy toward Iraq. Powerfully, compellingly, she concludes that Glaspie – while by no means a perfect representative – was hung out to dry by an administration embarrassed to admit that she was only carrying out official policy.

Throughout the quarter, Catherine proved to be both an industrious and inventive researcher, and I was particularly impressed by her incisive dissection of the C-SPAN broadcast of Glaspie’s congressional testimony. Above all, I am struck by the thoroughness, power, and cogency of her reasoning. Although the Glaspie episode is now, perhaps, somewhat obscure, it emerges powerfully here as an instance of a government sacrificing one of its own for the sake of its own self-preservation. In its ambition, scope, and execution, “The Scapegoat Ambassador” represents the kind of paper I hope to see in IR174; it is an impressive historical study by a brilliant student.

—Robert B. Rakove
The Scapegoat Ambassador: April Glaspie and the 1990 Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait

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Introduction

On July 25, 1990, U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie met privately with the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, at the Presidential Palace in Baghdad; on August 2, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait, thus precipitating the Persian Gulf War. As U.S. policymakers attempted to make sense of the root causes behind the invasion, public scrutiny increasingly turned to Glaspie, the last U.S. official to meet with Hussein, a mere eight days before Iraqi forces descended on Kuwait. Some observers speculated whether Glaspie approved the invasion. Others said she could have done more to encourage Hussein to resolve the dispute with Kuwait peacefully. And still others said she was unduly blamed for the ineffectiveness of U.S. foreign policy.

This historical episode raises a number of questions regarding individual ambassadors’ roles in international conflicts. In this paper, the
principal consideration is whether Ambassador Glaspie was scapegoated by her superiors for her role in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The paper uses the available evidence — articles, books, interviews, and government documents — to determine whether Glaspie was undeservedly blamed for U.S. policy missteps that were beyond her control.

Subsequent sections of this paper include an introduction to Glaspie and a summary of her career prior to her posting in Baghdad; a review of U.S.-Iraq relations and the Bush administration’s foreign policy at the time of Hussein’s invasion; details of Glaspie’s July 25 meeting with Hussein and the resulting cable and transcript; an examination of post-invasion media responses and Glaspie’s congressional testimony; and, finally, an analysis of her superiors’ reactions in the aftermath of the crisis.

My final conclusion is that, although Glaspie misread critical signals during her meeting with Hussein, in general she dutifully carried out U.S. policy toward Iraq. The available historical evidence demonstrates Glaspie was a competent and dedicated diplomat who remained unwaveringly loyal to the State Department at the expense of her own reputation and career. Meanwhile, through their silence, Glaspie’s superiors — and more specifically President George H. W. Bush, Secretary of State James Baker, and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs John Kelly — scapegoated her for the Iraqi invasion.

Glaspie’s Road to Baghdad

April Glaspie was born in Vancouver, Canada, in 1942. She received her undergraduate degree at Mills College in California and her master’s at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland; immediately thereafter, she entered the Foreign Service.¹ Between 1966 and 1988, Glaspie worked her way through a series of posts in the Middle East. She spent her first years with the Foreign Service in Jordan and Kuwait. In the early 1970s, she polished her language skills at the Field School of Arabic

Language and Area Studies in Beirut, Lebanon. From there, she went to Egypt, and, later, to Tunisia and Syria.\(^2\)

Glaspie’s career with the Foreign Service was promising. She took her postings seriously and dedicated herself to her projects. To Glaspie, work came first; she never married and instead brought her mother and dog for companionship on many of her overseas tours.\(^3\) Professionally, she excelled in her fieldwork. When she was posted to Egypt in the 1970s, Glaspie was recognized as “a top political reporting officer.”\(^4\) In 1983, while she was a political counselor at the U.S. embassy in Damascus, Syria, Glaspie’s superiors at the State Department praised her negotiation efforts to release David Dodge, the president of the American University of Beirut, who had been taken hostage by Shiite extremists.\(^5\) Two years later, she received additional accolades for negotiating the release of 104 American hostages during the Lebanese hostage crisis.\(^6\)

In general, Glaspie was well-regarded by her colleagues at the State Department. Her peers at the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) favorably described her as “fun” and “effervescent” and praised her for being “dynamic and aggressive and supremely confident.”\(^7\) Others who knew her in a professional capacity remembered she was widely respected for her regional expertise and many accomplishments as a Foreign Service Officer.\(^8\) She was intense and intrepid; those who were less familiar with Glaspie sometimes mistook her blunt style for abrasiveness.\(^9\)

\(^5\) Kaplan, *Arabists*, 188.
\(^7\) Kaplan, *Arabists*, 282-283.
\(^9\) Sciolino, “Envoy No Longer Silent.”
When it was announced that Glaspie would take over the embassy in Iraq, some officials voiced their concerns that the appointment was a mistake because it would be difficult for a female ambassador to strong-arm Hussein, and that the appointment could signal weakness on part of the United States. Despite these criticisms, the State Department recognized Glaspie’s streak of professional accomplishments and designated her as the first female ambassador, not only to Iraq but to the Middle East. She assumed her post in Baghdad in 1988.

**NSD 26 and the Changing Political Climate in Iraq**

By the time Glaspie arrived in Iraq, U.S. officials had assumed a largely conciliatory approach toward Hussein’s regime. This “friendly” policy developed in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when U.S.-Iran relations collapsed. In July 1979, Hussein succeeded Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr as President of Iraq. By September of 1980, Iran and Iraq were at war. Given the American sentiment toward Iran at the time, American decision-makers sharply pivoted toward Iraq and, in 1984, the Reagan administration restored diplomatic relations with Baghdad. From the 1980s onwards, U.S. officials believed a closer U.S.-Iraq alliance would contain Iranian influence in the Middle East and promote regional stability.

After he was elected, President Bush continued the Reagan administration’s policy of cooperation with Baghdad. In October 1989, he approved National Security Directive (NSD) 26, which shaped U.S.

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15 Ibid., 89.
policy toward Iraq until Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. As per the document, U.S. vital interests in the Middle East were “[access] to Persian Gulf oil and the security of key friendly states in the area.” With respect to Iraq, NSD 26 instructed policymakers to build “normal relations” (i.e. closer cooperation), and to “propose economic and political incentives for Iraq to moderate its behavior and to increase [American] influence with Iraq.” The document also communicated that “Iraq should be urged to cease its meddling in external affairs,” but did not provide details as to how or when this pressure should be applied. This policy directive was circulated among U.S. government officials, and it formed the basis for subsequent instruction Glaspie received from the State Department.

Meanwhile, during the spring and summer of 1990, political tensions escalated in Iraq. Hussein lamented the post-war domestic situation in his country. Iraqi oil production decreased drastically as a result of the Iran-Iraq War, the country was billions of dollars in debt, and many Iraqis were disenchanted with Hussein’s totalitarian regime. On his end, Hussein blamed foreign powers for causing domestic problems in Iraq, and publicly accused the U.S., Israel, and Kuwait of conspiring to “cut off [the Iraqis’] livelihood.” In his rhetoric, Hussein was especially aggressive toward Kuwait. He alleged Kuwait overproduced oil and consequently deflated Iraqi oil prices, and he demanded concessions from the wealthy Gulf country to cover Iraqi debts. Furthermore, Hussein rekindled Iraqi territorial claims to Kuwait on the grounds that the Iraq-Kuwait border was imposed on Arabs by colonial powers. As Hussein became increas-

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Steven Hurst, The United States and Iraq since 1979: Hegemony, Oil and War (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 83-84.
22 Tariq Aziz, “Letter to Arab League Secretary on 15 July 1990,” in Iraq
ingly belligerent, some members of the Bush administration pushed for a more assertive foreign policy toward Iraq.\textsuperscript{23} Despite these suggestions, Bush, Secretary of State Baker, and a number of National Security Council (NSC) members felt Hussein was making hollow threats to force concessions from Kuwait, and upheld NSD 26.\textsuperscript{24} Even after July 19, when U.S. intelligence officials warned Bush that Hussein had started moving troops to the Iraq-Kuwait border, U.S. policy remained fundamentally unchanged.\textsuperscript{25} However, the State Department instructed American diplomats in the Middle East to remind their Arab counterparts that “disputes should be settled by peaceful means,” and that while “the United States takes no position on the substance of bilateral issues concerning Iraq and Kuwait...We remain committed to ensure the free flow of oil from the Gulf and to support the sovereignty and integrity of the Gulf States.”\textsuperscript{26} Importantly, these were the exact policy guidelines communicated to Glaspie in the days before her meeting with Hussein.

**The Glaspie/Hussein Meeting: Glaspie’s Cables vs. the Iraqi Transcript**

On July 25, 1990, Glaspie was summoned to the Presidential Palace for a meeting, unaware that she would have a private audience with Hussein. As such, she did not have time to ask the State Department for explicit instructions before seeing Hussein, but she referred to the most recent policy guidelines, which she had received on July 19.\textsuperscript{27} At the palace, Glaspie met with Hussein, the Iraqi foreign minister, Hussein’s office

\textit{Speaks}, 5-6.

\textsuperscript{23} For example, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Robert Kimmitt and Director of Policy Planning Dennis Ross urged senior officials to reconsider NSD 26; see Baker, \textit{Politics of Diplomacy}, 269.

\textsuperscript{24} Hahn, \textit{Missions Accomplished?}, 90.


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

director, an Iraqi interpreter, and two Iraqi notetakers. Immediately after the meeting, Glaspie summarized the key points of the two-hour conversation in a cable to the State Department. After securing her permission for leave from the State Department, she traveled to the United States for a week of policy briefings. Meanwhile, the Iraqi government drafted its own transcript of the meeting, which the Iraqis later leaked to the American press. This latter document formed the basis for the media backlash against Glaspie, while Glaspie’s own cable to the State Department was not made available to the public or to the U.S. Congress until the summer of 1991.

Although the two documents were similar in substance, there were several key differences between Glaspie’s cable and the Iraqi version of the meeting. Most importantly, while Glaspie’s cable took a more optimistic tone and emphasized her adherence to U.S. foreign policy toward Iraq, the Iraqi transcript instead highlighted Hussein’s clear threats to Glaspie and suggested the U.S. ambassador failed to sufficiently warn him about the repercussions of an attack on Kuwait.

In her own cable, which she optimistically titled “Saddam’s Message of Friendship to President Bush,” Glaspie relayed Hussein’s grievances toward Kuwait, the United States, and Israel. In the cable, she made it clear that she had directly asked Hussein about the Iraqi military units he had dispatched to the Iraq-Kuwait border. Glaspie communicated to the State Department that Hussein had assured her that his intentions were peaceful and that he was trying to maintain friendly relations with the United States. As per her cable, Glaspie judged these statements to

be sincere, as “Iraqis [were] sick of war.”\(^{31}\) Finally, Glaspie emphasized that she reiterated official U.S. policy to Hussein: on the point of the Iraq-Kuwait border dispute, Glaspie cabled that she told Hussein “she had served in Kuwait 20 years before; then, as now, we took no position on these Arab affairs,” but added that she “made clear that [the U.S.] can never excuse settlement of disputes by other than peaceful means.”\(^{32}\) Observably, Glaspie’s statements in her July 25 cable aligned with the U.S. foreign policy toward Iraq as expressed in NSD 26, and also with the instructions she had received from the State Department on July 19.

But according to the transcript of the meeting issued by the Iraqi government, Glaspie never indicated to Hussein that an Iraqi invasion would be inexcusable from the perspective of the U.S. government. First, the transcript quoted a number of Hussein’s threatening comments. He appears to have told Glaspie, “We know that you can harm us although we do not threaten you. But we too can harm you.”\(^{33}\) Furthermore, in response to Glaspie’s inquiry about the Iraqi troops stationed at the Kuwaiti border, Hussein was recorded to have ominously said: “If we are unable to find a solution [with the Kuwaitis], then it will be natural that Iraq will not accept death.”\(^{34}\)

In the Iraqi transcript, it appeared that Glaspie largely ignored Hussein’s threats and instead told him she had “direct instruction from [President Bush] to seek better relations with Iraq.”\(^{35}\) Then the transcript quoted her explanation of U.S. policy toward Iraq:

> [We] have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait. I was in the American Embassy in Kuwait during the late 60s. The

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31 Telegram, Baghdad 4237, 7.
32 Ibid, 6; 2.
34 Ibid., 16.
instruction we had during this period was that we should express no opinion on this issue and that the issue is not associated with America. [Secretary of State] James Baker has directed our official spokesman to emphasize this instruction.  

Herein lies the fundamental difference between Glaspie’s June 25 cable and the Iraqi transcript: while Glaspie maintained that she accurately communicated U.S. policy to Hussein and told him the U.S. would only tolerate a peaceful resolution of the Iraq-Kuwait dispute, the Iraqi document only emphasized the first part of her statement — that the U.S. had no opinion on intra-Arab conflicts — and glaringly omitted her injunction that the resolution be peaceful.

Media Responses and Glaspie’s Congressional Testimony

To Glaspie’s detriment, it was the Iraqi transcript and not her own cable that leaked to the American press on September 11, 1990. National papers, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, immediately circulated the story, and Glaspie skyrocketed to international infamy. Some sources hinted Glaspie “was not tough enough” with Hussein, and implied she “abandoned her post on the eve of a crisis.” Others were incredulous that Glaspie appeared not to respond to Hussein’s aggressive rhetoric and speculated her misreading of Hussein’s intentions may have “emboldened him to commit an act of aggression.” On a similar note, others suggested that, after the Glaspie meeting, Hussein felt he had the green light to invade Kuwait. For the next several months, Glaspie was paraded not only as an inept ambassador but as the face of a failed U.S. foreign policy (even though she had no hand in creating this policy in the

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36 Ibid., 12.
38 Elaine Sciolino, “Deskbound in U.S.”
first place). Puzzlingly, as the press theorized about Glaspie’s role in the Iraqi invasion, Glaspie herself was silent.

Seven months after the August 2 invasion, Glaspie emerged from obscurity to testify before the U.S. Congress on March 20 and 21, 1990. It should be noted that, at this point, no senator or congressman had read her July 25 cable, and she was questioned exclusively on the basis of the Iraqi transcript; the State Department did not release Glaspie’s cable at that time — neither to the congressional committees that questioned her, nor to the press. For the purpose of this paper, the most important highlights of Glaspie’s March 20-21 testimonies were her claims that she firmly reiterated U.S. policy to Hussein during their meeting; that the Iraqi transcript was inaccurate; and that she and her superiors rightfully waited to publicly redress any confusion over her role in the Iraqi invasion. And while she made clear in these testimonies that her account of the meeting was different from (and more accurate than) the Iraqi transcript, she did not offer her cable as evidence in her defense; Glaspie’s actions on this point will be discussed below. First, throughout her testimony, Glaspie categorically denied allegations that she took a conciliatory tone with Hussein during their July 25 meeting and maintained that she repeatedly signaled to the Iraqi President and to other high-ranking Iraqi officials that the United States would not tolerate aggression toward Kuwait. Her one mistake, in her words, was that she misjudged Hussein. On March 21, she said, “We foolishly did not realize that he was stupid, that he did not believe our clear and repeated warnings that we would support our vital interests.”

Second, when probed about her specific statements that appeared in the Iraqi transcript — especially her statement that the U.S. government

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41 The State Department released Glaspie’s July 25 cable to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in early July 1991, approximately three months after Glaspie testified before Congress; see Sciolino, “Envoy’s Testimony on Iraq is Assailed.”

had no opinion on Arab-Arab disputes — Glaspie said sharply, “Yes, that was one part of my sentence, the other part of my sentence was, ‘But we insist that you settle your disputes with Kuwait non-violently.’” Indeed, Glaspie maintained that the Iraqi transcript was “edited to the point of inaccuracy” by Iraqi authorities. However, when members of Congress suggested that it would be useful to corroborate Glaspie’s statements with her own communications to the State Department (and, more specifically, with her July 25 cable), Glaspie vehemently protected her department’s confidentiality: When asked whether she would object to turning the cable over to the Foreign Affairs Committee, she said, “Yes, sir, I would...Once you start issuing memoranda of conversation with chiefs of state, I think it damages the confidentiality of a very, very important process.”

Finally, members of Congress asked Glaspie two key questions: why she had not come forward sooner to clear speculations of her wrongdoing, and why, if the Iraqi transcript was indeed fabricated, her superiors at the State Department never publicly refuted it. On these points, Glaspie stated she was never “explicitly instructed not to say anything [about the transcript]” but added that her department made a collective choice not to divert “national energies” from more important issues, such as building a coalition to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Congressman Stephen Solarz countered that he found Glaspie’s explanation “inherently implausible” because the Iraqi transcript deteriorated public support for the Bush administration and added that he felt it would have been more logical for either the State Department or Glaspie to publicly announce that parts of the transcript were fabricated.

43 Ibid., 0:47.
46 Glaspie, “Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,” 2:08:54.
and misleading. In response, Glaspie curtly replied, “I have provided to you the logic and the conclusion that the department employed... I can’t make any other response.”

In retrospect, these final two inquiries revealed the most puzzling aspects of the Glaspie/Hussein scandal: why she waited so long to come forward, why her superiors never disputed the authenticity of the transcript, and why they refused to release her cable to Congress or to the press. Implicitly, it appeared either as if Glaspie had done something wrong, or, alternately, that through their silence her superiors tacitly allowed American media to scapegoat Glaspie for the affair.

**Scapegoated by her Superiors: Official Responses to the Glaspie/Hussein Affair**

The central question of this paper is whether Glaspie’s superiors deliberately caused her to be scapegoated by the press. On this point, Glaspie’s congressional testimony brings two key puzzles to the fore: first, the State Department’s collective decision to delay Glaspie’s public hearing and not to release her cable to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee or to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee at the time of her testimony; and, second, that her superiors never publicly contested the validity of the Iraqi transcript. This section specifically analyzes President Bush’s, Secretary Baker’s, and Assistant Secretary Kelly’s individual responses in the aftermath of the conflict. Bush and Baker were the primary force behind the failed policy Glaspie communicated to Hussein, and Kelly was Glaspie’s direct superior at the NEA. While the decision to postpone Glaspie’s congressional testimony and withhold her cable from the public does, upon closer review, appear plausible, Bush, Baker, and Kelly’s silence on the Iraqi transcript is highly suspect. With no compelling evidence that Glaspie misrepresented U.S. policy or that she otherwise failed in her ambassadorial duties, it appears that Bush, Baker, and Kelly used Glaspie as a media

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
scapegoat to divert attention away from their own policy missteps in U.S.-Iraq relations.

In the seven months between the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and Glaspie’s congressional testimony, her reputation and likely career prospects were destroyed by the press. But when she was asked why she had not testified sooner, Glaspie supported the State Department’s decision to postpone her hearing until after the U.S. had formed its coalition to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Furthermore, she also supported the State Department’s decision not to declassify her cable. As mentioned previously, one senator expressed his view that Glaspie’s explanation was implausible. However, in the greater context of the Persian Gulf War, Glaspie’s explanation holds. In the months following the Iraqi invasion, U.S. officials scrambled to devise an appropriate response to Hussein’s invasion. For the next three months, the U.S. government, in close collaboration with the UN, demanded that Hussein withdraw from Kuwait. Hussein ignored these demands and, consequently, on January 17, a U.S.-led coalition launched air attacks to forcibly remove the Iraqi military from Kuwait. Given the scale and momentum of these events, it is plausible that, from August 2 to at least the end of February, when Bush declared a ceasefire and a victory for the coalition powers, the U.S. government was too preoccupied to address “the Glaspie issue” in depth. As Glaspie indicated in her testimony, it is understandable that, at the time, it was necessary for the State Department to direct its energies elsewhere. And, observably, less than a month after the U.S. military victory in Iraq, Glaspie was given the chance to defend herself publicly. Moreover, it is unsurprising that the State Department wanted to maintain confidentiality and was unwilling to release Glaspie’s cable publicly, especially in the direct aftermath of the Persian Gulf War. Therefore, on these counts, it does not appear that the State Department’s decisions to postpone Glaspie’s

50 Ibid., 223.
testimony until after the war and to withhold her cable from Congress and the press for several months were covert attempts to scapegoat her for the August 2 invasion.

The more damning indication that Glaspie’s superiors scapegoated her in the Iraq affair was the fact that Bush, Baker, and Kelly never contested the Iraqi transcript — neither in the immediate aftermath of Hussein’s invasion, nor in the years following the ordeal. As indicated previously, the American media largely based criticisms of Glaspie on the details of the Iraqi transcript, which she maintained was maliciously edited. Assuming that Glaspie’s communications to the State Department and her congressional testimony were accurate and honest, there was no reason for Bush, Baker, and Kelly not to publicly contest the accuracy of the Iraqi transcript. Even though they were preoccupied with the war efforts, it would have sufficed to release a statement indicating the transcript was inaccurate, and it is puzzling why none of them did so.

First and foremost, there is a dearth of information on Bush’s own reaction to the Iraqi transcript specifically or to Glaspie’s general handling of her July 25 meeting with Hussein. As the media railed against Glaspie, some officials indicated that Bush allegedly had “warm feelings” for the dishonored ambassador. However, Bush himself never spoke publicly about the matter. Furthermore, it was Bush’s decision not to send Glaspie back to Baghdad after the invasion; instead, the deputy chief of mission at the embassy took over direct communications with Hussein in the months leading up to the January U.S. airstrikes. Thus, through his inaction, Bush tacitly contributed to Glaspie’s public downfall, and more or less fired her from her post — thereby indicating she was somehow at fault in the affair.

Observably, Baker played a more direct role in scapegoating Glaspie after the invasion. Reporters described that Baker, who allegedly had presidential ambitions, kept “an usually low profile” for a secretary of state at critical times in the crisis; while Glaspie and Kelly took “the brunt

52 Sciolino, “Envoy No Longer Silent.”
of the criticism of the United States policy toward Iraq,” in press conferences Baker “refused to say whether this criticism was justified or whether it should be directed at him and not at Mr. Kelly and Ms. Glaspie.”

Furthermore, in 1995, Baker published an autobiography, in which he referenced Glaspie and her role on the ground in Baghdad. And although he never implied that Glaspie departed from official U.S. policy in her meeting with Hussein, and instead remarked approvingly that “by diplomatic custom” her July 25 cable to the State Department “was properly weighted toward Saddam’s rambling monologue,” he glaringly omitted the Iraqi transcript in his summary of events. If Baker did in fact have an eye on the White House, it would have made sense for him to protect his own reputation and deflect public criticism to Glaspie and Kelly. This would explain why he never publicly questioned the Iraqi transcript. In this sense, the historical record suggests that Baker had a vested interest in tacitly scapegoating Glaspie for his own policy missteps, and this appears to be precisely what he did by distancing himself from her in public discourse.

Finally, Kelly, Glaspie’s direct supervisor, also remained silent on the Glaspie/Hussein meeting and the Iraqi transcript. Shortly after Glaspie assumed her ambassadorship in Baghdad in 1988, Kelly succeeded Richard Murphy as Assistant Secretary of State for the NEA. Interestingly, as media attacks on Glaspie escalated, it was her old boss, Murphy — and not Kelly — who defended her in press interviews. The closest Kelly came to defending Glaspie was during his own congressional testimony on September 18, 1990, when he was questioned about U.S. policy toward Iraq. Although he eventually admitted that U.S. policy toward Iraq “did not succeed” and said Glaspie was an “extremely competent” ambassador, much like Bush and Baker before him, he did not

57 Sciolino, “Deskbound in U.S.”
comment on her July 25 meeting with Hussein, or on the Iraqi transcript of that meeting (which had been leaked to the press one week before Kelly’s testimony).\(^{58}\) Kelly’s silence can likewise be attributed to his personal desire to protect his reputation by redistributing accountability for the administration’s ineffective policy. As such, it appears likely that Kelly deliberately saddled Glaspie with the brunt of the negative media attention, especially as he, Baker, and Bush came under increasing congressional scrutiny for their respective roles in formulating the failed foreign policy approach to Iraq.

To be clear, this is not to say Glaspie was completely blameless in the affair. The historical evidence indicates that she misread Hussein’s threats and overestimated the likelihood of a peaceful settlement of the Iraq-Kuwait dispute. Not only during her meeting with Hussein, but in the months prior, she misjudged Hussein’s belligerent rhetoric, as well as his decision to amass Iraqi troops at the Iraq-Kuwait border. On these counts, as the highest-ranking U.S. official on the ground in Baghdad, she failed to signal to the Bush administration the seriousness of political developments in Iraq.

Nonetheless, seeing as much of the criticism directed at Glaspie implied she had personally failed to discourage Hussein from invading, there are two important points to be made in her support. The first point is that it was outside Glaspie’s purview to threaten Hussein; the best she could do was to repeat U.S. foreign policy to him, and U.S. foreign policy at the time was to accommodate Iraq. Then there is, of course, the question of whether or not Glaspie’s own cable credibly reported that she did reiterate the U.S. policy position to Hussein. On this point, it is useful to defer to Glaspie’s spotless record of service. Furthermore, throughout the ordeal, she fiercely protected the confidentiality of the State Department and defended her superiors’ policies and actions. Presumably, at this early stage, Glaspie may have defended the State Department only to salvage her career. But even after her retirement, Glaspie still refused to criticize her

\(^{58}\text{Kelly, “Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee,” 1:28:00-1:31:23; 1:18:32.}\)
superiors. As such, Glaspie’s actions are indicative of her lifelong dedication to the State Department, and suggest she was an altogether sound character, and a credible and trustworthy source. It is therefore highly unlikely that she deceived the State Department in her cable. As such, it is puzzling why Bush, Baker, and Kelly never disputed the Iraqi transcript, which clearly conflicted with Glaspie’s account of events. In doing so, they gave Hussein more credibility than they gave Glaspie — which appears to have been a deliberate choice in an effort to downplay their own accountability and instead scapegoat Glaspie for the unfortunate turn of events on August 2.

Ultimately, it was Glaspie who paid the price for her superiors’ silence. She became the face of a failed foreign policy and, although she remained with the State Department until her retirement in 2002, she was never offered another posting that would require her to be confirmed by the Senate.

Conclusion

This study has several limitations. The first is that there is no video or audio recording of Glaspie’s July 25 meeting with Hussein. Consequently, there is no way to obtain complete information about the exact exchange between her and Hussein. Second, it is impossible to categorically prove that Glaspie’s superiors deliberately scapegoated her to protect their own careers, as these kinds of personal admissions would be unlikely to appear in the available historical evidence. Rather, this paper examined the key factors that emerge from the evidence surrounding Glaspie’s role in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and constructed plausible explanations for why Glaspie’s superiors acted the way they did.

From the historical record, it is clear Glaspie was an experienced, intelligent, and dedicated diplomat who did her best to communicate the official U.S. position to Hussein. And, although she misread a number of

60 Killgore, “Tales of the Foreign Service,” 49.
Hussein’s signals during their July 25 meeting, she was disproportionately blamed for her role in the August 2 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Furthermore, it appears that President Bush, Secretary Baker, and Assistant Secretary Kelly had significant motives to direct media attention away from themselves, and toward Glaspie — which, through their silence (especially on the point of the Iraqi transcript), is effectively what they accomplished. As a result, Glaspie, who upon her arrival in Baghdad was a respected and promising diplomat, ended her career as an unfortunate footnote in U.S. diplomatic history.
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