

IRAQ 1990

Ex-Envoy Details Hussein Meeting

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Nearly two decades ago, April C. Glaspie was the face of American incompetence in Iraq.

The career Foreign Service officer, who was U.S. ambassador to Baghdad when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, was blamed for failing to forcefully warn Iraqi President Saddam Hussein that the United States would oppose such aggression just days before it occurred.

But others argued that the widely respected diplomat — the first female U.S. ambassador in the Middle East — was mainly a scapegoat for the failings of the secretary of state at the time, James A. Baker III.

After nearly 17 years of silence, Glaspie has emerged to tell her story. She granted a lengthy interview, in English, to Randa Takieddine of the Lebanese newspaper Dar al-Hayat, which has posted the full transcript on the English-language version of its Web site.

After Iraq, Glaspie's career stalled. She is now retired but said she has no regrets about what happened.

"It is over," Glaspie said. "Nobody wants to take the blame. I am quite happy to take the blame. Perhaps I was not able to make Saddam believe that we would do what we said we would do, but in all honesty, I don't think anybody in the world could have persuaded him."

Portions of Glaspie's account of her meeting with Hussein on the eve of the invasion track with testimony she gave to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee shortly after the Persian Gulf War ended. But Glaspie, who declined to speak to The Washington Post, also provides new insight on an incident nearly lost to history.

During the run-up to the war, the Iraqi government released a transcript of Glaspie's meeting with Hussein on July 25, 1990, which suggested that she gave tacit approval for an invasion. Glaspie managed to convince lawmakers that the transcript was inaccurate and that she had forcefully warned Hussein not to invade. But her credibility eroded after the leak of her classified cable to the State Department about the meeting, which suggested a more conciliatory conversation with Hussein.

In the interview, Glaspie insisted that the Iraq transcript "was invented by Tariq Aziz," the deputy prime minister. "Tariq was a master

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ABC NEWS

April C. Glaspie, then the U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, met with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein just before Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

of words as a previous Minister of Information and editor of a newspaper," she said. Glaspie asserted that she told Hussein to "keep your hands off this country."

Glaspie's cable was declassified after a Freedom of Information Act appeal by the National Security Archive at George Washington University. The cable, along with others obtained by the archive, suggests that she was largely carrying out a policy, pushed by State at the time, of seeking to improve relations with Iraq.

Glaspie's cable says that President George H.W. Bush "had instructed her to broaden and deepen our relations with Iraq," adding that Hussein in turn offered "warm greetings" to Bush and was "surely sincere" about not wanting war.

In the interview, Glaspie recalls that her meeting with Hussein was interrupted when the Iraqi president received a phone call from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Hussein told her he had assured Mubarak that he would try to settle the dispute, she said. Her cable backs up this version of events, though the Iraqi transcript has Hussein saying that Mubarak called before he met with Glaspie.

Glaspie said the Mubarak call was crucial in convincing her that any sense of crisis had passed. She

said that she was "foolish" to believe that Hussein would not lie to both her and Mubarak, and that she left Baghdad to go on a short vacation. Before she left, she sent another cable titled "Iraq Blinks — Provisionally," also obtained by the archive.

Hussein, "a megalomaniac," thought "that my government did not have any guts, that we would not fight and certainly not for that little [piece] of desert that was Kuwait for him," Glaspie told al-Hayat.

Ever a diplomat, Glaspie sidestepped a question about Baker cutting her loose, answering simply that then-President Bush "was superb."

Asked what she thought of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Glaspie noted that the British Empire nearly 100 years ago had failed to control the country.

"You know, past is past; either we learn from it or we don't," Glaspie said. "The British, with extraordinary technology of their time, tried very hard, spoke more Arabic than the current coalition forces, were working within their old former mandate, they had all the maps, they knew every place in Iraq from north to south, and they could not do it. I think that the reasons that they could not do it are there for anybody to read."