
Interview with Ambassador Barbara Bodine

Ambassador Barbara Bodine, a career member of the U.S. Senior Foreign Service, served as ambassador to Yemen from 1997 to 2001. Currently Senior Advisor for Security Negotiations and Agreements to the Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs, Bodine was the first senior U.S. diplomat deployed to Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. From March to May 2003, she served in Iraq as Coordinator for Baghdad and the Central Region, for which she received the Department of State's Superior Honor award.

After initial tours in Hong Kong and Bangkok, Bodine spent her career working primarily on the Middle East and Southwest Asia, with a focus on security and counterterrorism issues. She was Deputy Chief of Mission to Kuwait during the Iraq invasion and spent five months as a hostage in the U.S. embassy in Kuwait.

Bodine spoke to The Fletcher Forum's Rebecca Kinyon from Washington, D.C. on April 9, 2004, one year after the liberation of Iraq. Bodine discussed her experience in Iraq, life in the besieged embassy in Kuwait, the joint investigation into the USS Cole attack in Yemen, and the 9/11 commission.

FORUM: What were your first impressions upon your arrival in Iraq, such as the mood of the Iraqis and the troops, the scene, the state of economic activity, for example?

BODINE: My first impression was that it was a city still recovering from the trauma of the war. It was not a hostile environment, but it was not jubilant. I felt the Iraqis were unsure of what was going to happen next. They were in a waiting mode, and did not know what to expect of us or from us. They were delighted that Saddam was gone; I don't know of anybody who seriously thought that that was a bad thing. But they were not at all sure what we were going to bring and what we were going to do. Our troops were also in a sense recovering from the end of the invasion and the fall of Baghdad. Again, I would say they were wary and cautious, not knowing exactly what was going to happen next.

FORUM: In such an overwhelming atmosphere, what did you identify as the first steps that needed to be taken, and how did you go about assessing what those steps were?

BODINE: Even before we arrived, my priority was to reach out to the Iraqis, or

in my case to the Baghdadis, to identify government technocrats and civic leaders who could get the city up and running, to open up a dialogue on what they were looking for and needed. A priority was to begin to develop local governance, such as city or neighborhood councils. We wanted to get all the services and the infrastructure, such as water and electricity, operating. But it was just as important to try to reach out to the people. I went to a hospital, Yarmouk Teaching Hospital, on my first day, for example, to meet with the doctors and get an idea what we could do to help.

FORUM: What was the state of the hospital, and what did you think needed to be done?

BODINE: Yarmouk is their leading teaching hospital. First, they needed just basic supplies. There were no sheets, no towels, and very little medicine. No glass was on the windows, and Baghdad is a very dusty city. The other issue though, and this foreshadowed what we were going to face elsewhere, was the number of groups in the neighborhood who were seeking to assert their authority over the management of the hospital. One was a group of mullahs affiliated with Muqtada al-Sadr. There were other personalities, political and sectarian, also usurping control of key elements and key services in the city. The doctors asked that we preempt these usurpers, and provide protection as they managed the hospital themselves. The problem of usurpers was clear from the first week.

FORUM: Did you actually identify al-Sadr then as someone who might cause as many problems as he is now?

BODINE: I'm not sure that we fully anticipated how many problems he was going to cause, but yes. The—I don't know what to call them, we'll just call them the Sadr loyalists, I don't want to give them a fancier title—were already very

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active in the city, trying to take control of schools and hospitals, entire districts. What had been known as Saddam City had already been renamed Sadr City, after his father, in Muqtada's attempt to secure a base in the city—and a rather large base. Sadr City is 2 million people, possibly one-third the population of Baghdad.

FORUM: Had he captured the support of people in Sadr City?

BODINE: I don't think that he had the full support of people, no. And you have to remember, his father was a revered figure, a martyr to Saddam, so naming the district after his father in the beginning was something that a lot of people, particularly the Shi'a in this district, would sup-

port. His exploitation of his father's memory for his own political gain was something that evolved. Renaming the district was not a problem in and of itself, but it was clearly a prelude to his political ambitions countrywide.

I do want to add that there were a lot of neighborhoods and districts where the local mullah, the local imam, had taken over neighborhood governance. The mosques provided social services: food, shelter, organized people to direct the traffic and pick up the trash. There was a complete breakdown in both the civil services and security, and in most cases these local imams and mullahs were not trying to usurp civil authority, but filled a vacuum. As the situation stabilized and we got local governance up and running, they were willing to fold these ad hoc arrangements into the broader process. I don't want to leave the impression that the mullahs and imams were writ large the problem; most of them were part of the solution. It was primarily Sadr and his followers who were the problem. They were not alone. One declared himself mayor of Baghdad and went so far as to appoint government ministers as well as municipal leaders.

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FORUM: After the recent major outbreak of fighting in Falluja on April 7, *Al Jazeera* reported that all the mosques in the city called for a *jihad* against the occupying forces. On the same day, the U.S. announced that it would delay bringing home 25,000 troops who were scheduled to return. In light of all this anti-U.S. sentiment, how should or might the U.S. modify its strategy?

BODINE: You can get into a cycle of violence that seems almost impossible to get out of. We can't expect our troops not to defend themselves. At the same time, you can conduct urban warfare in a way that creates as many new enemies as it destroys old ones. I think, unfortunately, we may be in one of these cycles—and I'm not entirely sure how you get out. The Brits and the Aussies and some others have operated in urban civil disorder environments rather successfully. I would work with them on how to walk a situation back. There was, for example, a period in Northern Ireland where the British faced rather grotesque terrorism and, unfortunately, some rather heavy-handed British military responses. I would go to them and ask, "How can we start to defuse this?"

FORUM: You have a theme in your work of internationalizing what you do, to gain strategies from other countries, as in your work with local councils in Iraq. Can you talk more about your endeavor to establish local councils, both on how the people reacted to this opportunity for democracy and also the methods that you found to be most successful?

BODINE: That was actually great fun, and it is, from what I understand, very successful. We did want to find a way to bring the population in Baghdad into the governance of the city, for a number of reasons. The best way to build democracy is definitely from the bottom up. Where I went first, on the political side, was to the mayoralty of Baghdad, and met with the director generals who ran the city services. They're not politicians; they're technocrats, mostly engineers. In one meeting, I said that the first thing I really needed, before we could even discuss governance, was to understand from them how the city is structured. The next morning, we sat down with these gentlemen, and were given probably one of the best briefings on a city structure that I had ever heard. Considering this is a city that evolved over a couple of thousand years, which looked completely inexplicable and chaotic to us, [it] had a great deal of structure and logic to it. What was fascinating was that at the end of this briefing, one of the director generals then laid out a proposal for local councils and local governance in the city that was extremely sophisticated, well thought out, and detailed how you would start, how you would build it up. We had somebody

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from a democratization consultancy with us, and he was extraordinarily impressed. It was also very clear that these Iraqis hadn't worked out this plan overnight. This was a very sophisticated concept—they obviously had been working on it for some time. Theirs became the blueprint for the city's governance programs.

I recruited onto my staff several coalition diplomats, including a very senior Romanian diplomat who spoke superb Arabic. He had been involved in the development of local governance in post-

Ceausescu Romania. He was wonderful; he was the perfect person to work with the Iraqis. He had gone through this kind of transition from Ceausescu, whose regime was not unlike Saddam's. This diplomat understood firsthand what the problems were, where the pitfalls were. He was far more credible than I think most Americans would be. We know what the end result should be, based on what we've evolved over 200 years. He's actually been through the transition.

I also had a Czech diplomat working with me, who had been involved in the transition of their media from a communist media to a post-communist media. So, like the Romanian diplomat, she had been through a transition. I found that bringing in coalition partners who had those kinds of experiences made it a lot easier for the Iraqis to believe it was possible.

FORUM: Can you talk about the coordination efforts for reconstruction between the State Department and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD)? And, in what ways is it relevant to distinguish OSD from the military?

BODINE: First of all, it is important to distinguish OSD from the uniformed military. OSD is the civilian leadership, and the military, of course, are the professional military. They're two different organizations with different cultures, and, in some ways, different approaches to problems and solutions. We [the State Department] were not only working with OSD, we were seconded to OSD. OSD does not have a great deal of expertise in—I know we're not supposed to talk about nation-building, but—nation-building. It's not the Department of Defense's normal mandate. And it is something that the State Department, USAID (United States Agency for International Development), and other elements of our government do regularly. We call it democratization and develop-

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ment. One of the major elements in ORHA (Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance), which was the precursor to the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority), was a large contingent of people from USAID with expertise in education, development, governance—the whole range of nation-building components.

One underlying difference between our approach and that of some of the others in ORHA, was that those who have done democratization and development understand that it is a long-term process—if it's ever finished. It's a work in progress. It's not something that can be imposed. It's not a matrix that you can give somebody else. It's not something that's done in a couple of months. While some of us were looking at reconstruction as a long-term commitment, the initial [OSD] plan for post-war Iraq was in terms of months.

FORUM: Imagine that the U.S. were to say, "We're withdrawing from Iraq, pulling out all troops effective June 30, and leaving maybe 20 people in the U.S. embassy." What would the consequences be?

BODINE: Afghanistan. You would have a failed state, and a very violent one. I think there would be a deadly combination of the warlords battling each other as we experienced in Mogadishu in the early '90s, while the rest of the country withered. I am not sure Iraq as a unitary state would survive, and I don't think that the moderate middle would survive politically, possibly even physically. Unfortunately, right now it looks like the Sunni insurrection and the Shi'a may find common cause; if we were to pull out precipitously and entirely, the old fissures would re-emerge. It

would also be possible that the Kurds would look at this and say, "We were better off before liberation. We're going to go off on our own." Add to that, unlike Afghanistan or Somalia, Iraq has oil resources and is strategically placed in the center of the Arab World. It would be absolutely ghastly.

FORUM: Do you think that Iraq can truly come together as a democratic nation in the future if we stay long enough?

BODINE: I think it can. I met enough Iraqis who want that and can see how to get there. I think it's possible, eventually. There are times when, reading the newspapers, I'm not sure how we get to it in the short term. I'm not entirely sure how the Iraqis get to a stable democratic state, but I can guarantee that if we were to leave in June, we would not have one. We would have a failed state. It is important, though, to lower the American profile. What we're saying is on June 30, the

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occupation ends and the Iraqi sovereignty begins. And what we need to do is change the visuals for the Iraqis, so that it isn't just a paper change.

FORUM: Senator Edward Kennedy recently said, "Iraq is George Bush's Vietnam." What's your reaction to that statement?

BODINE: I'm always wary of historical analogies. You can only take them so far. One mistake that some commentators make

on Iraq is that they're constantly trying to make it fit some historical analogy. They talk about Germany or Japan, or they talk about Vietnam. They're trying to make it someplace else. I think this has been a bit of a problem. We need to sit down and look at Iraq as Iraq.

FORUM: Okay, let's move on to Kuwait. You were the deputy chief of mission (DCM) in Kuwait when Saddam Hussein's troops invaded. Did the invasion come as a complete surprise? How did you learn about it, and what was your and the U.S. embassy's reaction?

BODINE: It didn't come as a complete surprise. Kuwait is very small, and the topography of Kuwait is such that once you leave Kuwait City—and that's not very large itself—you go up an escarpment, and when you get to the top of the escarpment, the northern half-moon of Kuwait, it's flat and treeless, almost all the way to Baghdad. When there were 200,000 Iraqi troops massing on the border, you couldn't miss them. We knew full well they were there. There were some oil field workers up in northern Kuwait, whose job it was to monitor the fields from towers. They could see the Iraqis. We in the embassy were more pessimistic than others. We suspected that Saddam was more than just rattling his sword. There were parallels

between the political ground work Iraq had laid in the six months leading up to the invasion of Kuwait, and what it had done in the six months leading up to the invasion of Iran, building the case that the invasion was preemptive self-defense. At the same time, there were ongoing efforts to diffuse the situation, including talks sponsored by the Saudis in Jidda. There was an assumption that at the end of the day Kuwait would make some concessions on oil fields and port access and the Iraqis would then pull back. We in the U.S. embassy were less sanguine.

How did I find out about the invasion? My dog told me. My dog woke me up at 4:00 the morning of the invasion. I didn't want to get up, but when a dog wants to go out, you ultimately have to. I staggered the length of my house to the kitchen door, opened the back door to let the dog out in the backyard, and heard automatic weapons

fire within a block or so of my house. Obviously what had awakened my dog was the invasion. I still have a bullet I took off the back step of my kitchen door. Then, of course, I had to convince my dog that she needed to come inside, now—which she didn't understand. I went inside, got dressed, and I think I was at the embassy by probably 5:00 in the morning. Except for brief visits to pick up supplies, the dog and the cats, I never went back to my house.

FORUM: You decided to stay in Kuwait, essentially as a hostage within the U.S. embassy. What compelled you to make that decision?

BODINE: I think Saddam had planned, as part of the invasion, to set up a puppet government in Kuwait. There had been a movement called Democracy Now in Kuwait to get the parliament reopened. Saddam, incapable of understanding the concept of a loyal opposition in a semi-democratic state, contacted these people and offered them the government. The story has it that these Kuwaitis explained to Saddam that they were part of the Kuwaiti opposition, with the operative word being Kuwaiti, and turned him down. Next, Saddam appointed a new Republic of Kuwait government. We took a look at the names and realized that every name on the list was Iraqi. The international community just guffawed. And so, with two failed options, Saddam declared Kuwait the 19th government of Iraq, with little credible historical basis.

Since Kuwait was not a sovereign state, he further declared that embassies were inappropriate. All embassies had to shut down, or become consulates, or, he threatened, we would lose our diplomatic immunity. He could not guarantee our safety. Power, water, phones—all services would be cut on August 24th, two

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weeks away. The universal response was that virtually every embassy was directed to stay open. It was understood that to close our embassies would be to acknowledge the annexation. There was also the simple fact that, even though diplomats were guaranteed safe passage out, we had something like 3,000 American citizens trapped in the city. We did not feel that we could leave them behind. The decision was to evacuate our dependents and nonessential personnel, but leave a skeleton staff to keep the flag flying, literally, and also do whatever we could to assist our citizens. It was in a sense funny that we stayed to help our citizens,

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because we were the ones locked in the compound. We couldn't get out; we didn't have phones; we didn't have water; we didn't have electricity. On one level, the people we were protecting were living better than we were. But it was a moral decision not to abandon our citizens.

I still am extraordinarily proud of the fact that when the Department decided that eight of us would stay—out of a normal embassy staff of about 60—the ambassador and I, having decided that we were both part of the eight, sat down and separately came up with our list of who the other six would be. When we compared our lists, they were the same people. We then called each of these people in individually and told them that eight of us would stay after the evacuation, that we would like to have them stay as part of this group, but if they declined no one need know. Each of the six said yes without hesitation. Afterwards, when we announced to the embassy community that eight of us would stay and the rest would leave in a convoy for safe passage to Jordan, many people on my staff demanded to stay...I said, "Guys, I don't even know what I'm asking someone to do." We didn't know if we would be there for two weeks or two months. It turned out to be five months. We didn't know, to be perfectly honest, if we would get out of there alive. But the only people who were truly angry and upset were those who were not allowed to stay at their post, at the embassy.

FORUM: How did you continue your job as a diplomat? How does a DCM's job description change upon becoming a hostage?

BODINE: In a bizarre way, my job didn't change, although the details did. The DCM's job is basically to run the embassy. It's the chief operating officer, if you like. Obviously we were not doing demarches to the host government. But among the eight diplomats and 19 private citizens who ended up staying with us, we did have to run the embassy and manage the compound. There was a division of labor. Everybody had a job. My job was to manage. I was also the point of con-

tact with the other embassies that had defied the Iraqi order and stayed. I had the unenviable job of liaison with the Iraqi occupation authorities, spending time on the phone with them trying to negotiate someone's release, or just confirm that they were in Iraqi custody. I was also the point of contact for the international wardens, an informal group of third country nationals who stayed in Kuwait voluntarily to help the Americans, British, French, Germans, and Japanese who were in hiding in the city.

FORUM: What kinds of bargains were struck when negotiating for someone's release?

BODINE: A lot of times I was just trying get the Iraqis to admit that they had picked up someone. That was 95 percent of what I was doing. We would find out that an American or another national had disappeared, and try to get hold of the Iraqis, get them to admit that they had them, try to find out where they were, try to find out where they were sending them. I spent a great deal of time on the phone. Some were released. Saddam modified the rules as he went along. The Iraqis would decide that people who needed medical attention could leave, that women and children could leave, and at one point that Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans could leave.

FORUM: The embassy operated a kind of underground railroad. Can you say a few words about that?

BODINE: The Iraqis had designated Brits, Americans, French, Germans, and Japanese to be human shields at Iraqi installations, originally women and children and later just adult men. The men in the city went into deep hiding. They needed food, they needed water, they needed books and videos. Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, Danes, etc., were in an anomalous situation where they were not subject to being picked up and made human shields, but they couldn't leave Iraq and Kuwait. They had freedom of movement, up to a point. They organized themselves to provide support to those in hiding. Every once in a while, beyond providing food and supplies, these "international wardens" as they came to be called, might move some of these groups around. These wardens put themselves in danger to provide support to strangers.

We did evacuation flights as well, for American women and children, and these wardens helped us organize those. The wardens would meet the Americans, and others to be evacuated, at the collection sites—grocery store parking lots—get everyone on buses, escort them to the airport, and run interference with the Iraqis. They were very much extensions of what we were doing. These weren't Special Forces guys who had been infiltrated into Kuwait. They were otherwise ordinary men and women who rose to an extraordinary situation. One of them was a Canadian architect and another one was an Australian CPA (Certified Public Accountant). They were truly remarkable. Real heroes.

FORUM: You were ambassador to Yemen during the October 2000 attack on the USS Cole. How did you react when you learned about the attack? What were the first steps you took, and to whom did you look for help?

BODINE: I think my first reaction was everybody's reaction, which was that it had to be an accident. Then, of course, the realization that it clearly wasn't; it was terrorism. I had been in the States on consultations, on an airplane on my way back to Sana'a, when the Cole was hit. I didn't learn of the attack until my plane landed in Sana'a at midnight that night. The first thing I did was get on the phone to Washington to find out everything they knew, and talked to as many people as possible in my own embassy who were already working the problem. By 3:00 a.m. I was on a plane down to Aden. By 5:00 in the morning, when the sun came up, I went out to the ship to see exactly what happened and talk with the captain.

At that point, it was crisis management. The first priority was the casualties. The embassy doctor had already arranged for the most seriously wounded to be transported to a French army hospital in Djibouti. The less critical were cared for at a Yemeni hospital that worked with our de-mining program in Aden. At

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5:00 that afternoon, all of the various crisis support teams from Washington—State, FBI, Naval Criminal Investigations, and the like—and a Marine security unit from Bahrain began to arrive.

We had four missions. One was to recover the ship and the crew. One was to provide force protection, security, for the growing contingent of Americans in Aden. We went from no American presence in Aden to about 300 Americans in maybe 36 hours. Another was facilitating the joint investigation between the Yemenis and FBI

to find the perpetrators. And finally, to make the other three missions happen, to work with the Yemeni government. These were not in priority or sequential order but were simultaneous and interrelated missions.

FORUM: Regarding the joint investigation, the media reported a great deal about the difference of opinion between you and John O'Neill, the FBI director of counter-terrorism. What were your main objections to the way the FBI wanted to conduct its investigation in Yemen?

BODINE: Louis Freeh arrived maybe a day or two after the Cole, and publicly announced that it would be a joint investigation. One problem was that there were FBI officials in Yemen who did not have a great deal of experience operat-

ing in another culture, in a sovereign state. They would make demands of, rather than work with, the Yemenis. At the end of the day, we did have Yemeni cooperation. But there was not always an appreciation that these were not only different cultures, but that the technological level at which we did investigations was so different that the Yemenis often didn't even know what we were talking about.

One example of standard operating procedures that just won't work in another environment was a request that FBI investigators go door-to-door to interview people in the neighborhood. One problem was that the FBI didn't have sufficient Arabic speakers to do this. I don't know how they thought they were going to do interviews. Second, Aden had been a British colony for more than 100 years, and then it was under a communist regime, basically being run by the East Germans and the Soviets for 25 or 35 years. The Adeni people were not easily disposed to being interviewed by Westerners, particularly if the Westerner didn't speak Arabic. Finally, this was something that the Yemenis could do. We bring other talents to the table, such as forensics and computer databases. The Yemenis know what neighborhoods to go to, they know who to talk to, so let's make this a cooperative venture.

FORUM: At that time, were you having interactions with Richard Clarke, who was then national coordinator for security infrastructure protection and counterterrorism?

BODINE: I didn't have direct contact with him. But every morning in Washington, there was an interagency conference call. Earlier in the morning, I would brief a number of the participants on that conference call to get them up to speed on what had happened during my day. Included on my call list were, among others, the Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the State Department, the Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security, and the Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East. I talked with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Tom Pickering, and people at DOD (Department of Defense). But I would not normally have talked with Dick directly.

FORUM: Regarding the 9/11 Commission: the general tone of what's going on right now is to find out what the Bush administration knew and when. Do you think that this is a useful way for us to spend our resources and energy, or would you recommend a different approach?

BODINE: If the question is: did the Bush administration know that there was a plot to fly airplanes into the World Trade Towers and not do anything about it, I don't think that's the right question. You rarely get intelligence with that kind of specificity. I'm obviously going to leave the answers to the commission, but I don't think that the question should be, "Did they know about the Towers and not act?" I don't think anyone could possibly have known that and not acted. But are there systemic problems and issues of emphasis that need to be addressed? I

think we need to ask the right question. If we're asking the right question, then I think the commission's work and the public sessions are useful. There are problems within the FBI in getting information to the center and disseminated within the Bureau to field offices. There is a problem of coordinating information, particularly between the FBI and CIA, which I

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saw when I worked on the Cole. There is tremendous compartmentalization. I'm not sure that the agents working on the Cole at the New York field office would necessarily have been in touch with the agents in Milwaukee, or would have known what the agent in Phoenix picked up.

FORUM: Given that you had seen that connection with the Cole, do you think there could have been more done if this had been

recognized at the time in order to change the nature of the systemic problems?

BODINE: Yes, personally, I do. The compartmentalization is an issue. We have to be careful about issues such as the rights of American citizens, but I do think that more sharing of information and coordination should have been done. There are legal and policy restrictions, but I think that it went beyond just the legal to the cultural. That is something I hope will be changed.

FORUM: But that was evident from the USS Cole onward?

BODINE: Yes. It was even evident before. I had worked on counterterrorism in the early 1990s, and we worked very hard on interagency coordination. I was a member of the CSG (Counterterrorism Support Group), which three weeks ago no one in the world had heard of. We met every two weeks even if nothing was going on, and more often otherwise. You do keep the tree shaking if you meet face-to-face often, if the informal lines remain open.

FORUM: Thank you very much for your time, Ambassador Bodine. ■