

## My Role in the Gulf War

by Shelly Williams

I have never served in the US military and I have never been to the Middle East, but in 1990 I inadvertently played a role in the first Gulf War. Every summer since 1981, usually in the first two weeks of August, I conduct the Summer Symposium on Foreign Policy. We have been fortunate over the years to hear major policy makers like Colin Powell, Robert Gates, Madeleine Albright, Nicholas Burns and others plus a few controversial figures like Oliver North and Joseph Wilson. The topper to them all, however, was Mohamed Sadiq Mashat. Don't recognize the name? He was the Iraqi ambassador to the United States from 1988 to 1991.



President Bush speaking on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait

On August 2, 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait. During the course of the first part of the Symposium that year, President Bush drew a line in the sand and the US political system began debating what response beyond protecting Saudi Arabia might be necessary, if any. Everyday, the Symposium had a busy schedule, but major US policy makers simply didn't have time to visit us to explain what options they were pondering. I could not allow the Symposium go by without having a major session on the impending crisis. Then a thought occurred to me. The Symposium is held annually at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, just off Dupont Circle, and not two blocks away at 18th and P is the Embassy of Iraq. Maybe someone there would speak to us. I decided to issue an invitation to the top guy, Mohamed Sadiq Mashat, and expected to get some lower level functionary, if anyone.

My friend and colleague, Stephan Bierling, professor at the University of Regensburg, and I simply walked into the Embassy and requested a meeting with the ambassador. While we were sitting in the lobby waiting, two Iraqi security guys observed us menacingly and three TV sets blared CNN news about the "Rape of Kuwait." Finally we were ushered in to meet the Executive Assistant to the Ambassador and I felt certain that we had wasted our time. I just knew we'd hear the Wizard of Oz line: "Go away!" Instead the assistant asked me to explain exactly what I wanted the ambassador to do. After hearing my request, he said: "Will it be on TV?" "Yes, of course," I said. "Live TV?", he inquired. "Absolutely," I said. "All right, leave your number and we'll get back to you," he concluded as he got up and walked out of the room.



Stephan Bierling (right) and Michael O'Hanlon at the 2007 Symposium

Walking, well maybe semi-running, away from the Embassy, Stephan asked me exactly when I had contacted CSPAN about covering the ambassador's possible talk. Of course, I had not done so yet, but I was sure they would want to if he came. I underestimated. Once the ambassador agreed to speak, CNN, CBS, NBC, and all the major newspapers requested permission to attend the event. The auditorium was filled to capacity and TV cameras took up a full row. The dapper ambassador pronounced himself pleased with the surroundings and launched into a forty-five minute speech/tirade. At its conclusion, I told the audience that this was a public event so I would allow questions from the press, but I would alternate them with questions from my students. Stephan asked the first: "Mr. Ambassador, your comments about Zionism, the decline of the West, and the arrogance of the great powers sound like the rhetoric coming out of my country in the 1930s. What other parallels would you draw between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Hitler's Germany?"

The odd thing is that such provocative questions from the audience did not unsettle the ambassador. Nor did any of the questions from the press impress him. The media types could not extract anything newsworthy from him at all. We were just about the wrap up when I called upon a young female student from Texas. I knew her well. She was not an IR major. She was a sophomore. She was worried about conflict. She asked the ambassador if perhaps the people of Iraq might not be worried about the possibility of a war with the United States. Mashat instantly responded to her question by slamming his fist on the podium, looking directly at the TV cameras, and declaring: "If the US intervenes in the Gulf, American boys will come home in body bags."

CNN Headline News played that clip every twenty minutes for forty-eight hours. CSPAN played the entire session five times over the weekend. US public opinion may or may not have been affected by that specific incident, but over the course of the weekend, public opinion went from 50-50 on intervention to largely in favor of it. A friend of mine at the Pentagon told me that he was with a team monitoring the speech on TV and the mood in the room went from cursing me for giving the ambassador a forum to congratulating me for "setting a trap" for him. Neither was my intention, but both occurred.

There is a postscript to the story. In January 1991, Mashat told reporters that he had been recalled to Baghdad. However, when he got to Vienna, he told reporters there that he had come to seek medical attention for his wife. Soon thereafter he walked into the Canadian Embassy and requested (and received) asylum. He is still in Canada.