

“ALL OF A SUDDEN, THE SHERIFF SHOT FIRST”: Three American Diplomats Explain their Resignation

*An Interview with John Brady Kiesling, John Brown,
and Mary Ann Wright*
by *Ionut Lacusta*

In less than a month, between February 27 and March 20, 2003, three career diplomats resigned from the U.S. Foreign Service in protest of Bush Administration policies, explicitly the decision to go to war with Iraq. John Brady Kiesling, John Brown, and Mary Ann Wright have been in public service for as long as 30 years, but each found it unacceptable to continue to serve an administration whose actions they did not see as coinciding with the interests of the American people. Their resignation letters received a good deal of media attention in the weeks leading up to the war. At the beginning of July, two months after the end of “major combat operations” in Iraq, *BardPolitik* asked each to elaborate on their reasons for resigning.

A former member of President Bush’s Foreign Service Corps and a Political Counselor to the American Embassy in Athens, Greece, John Brady Kiesling has been a diplomat for twenty years, serving four presidents.

BardPolitik In your letter to the Secretary of State you say, “I am resigning because I have failed to reconcile my conscience with my ability to represent the current U.S. administration.” Could you elaborate?

Kiesling Although it’s clear that some good can come out of the war with Iraq, the United States simply did

not enjoy the legitimacy that was required to be able to improve the situation there, to achieve the goal of establishing democracy and a reasonable kind of government at a cost that the American taxpayer is willing to pay. We simply did not have the ability to achieve what we wanted to achieve.

I have been very skeptical about the evidence that we have presented on weapons of mass destruction. Nothing that we have presented was conclusive to show that Saddam had ongoing programs, and we have managed to seriously damage our credibility with our allies.

BardPolitik How much was your decision to resign in reaction to a shift in foreign policy?

Kiesling A couple of points: the first point is that the United States plays the leadership role in the world partly because of its economic and military power, partly because we, more than any other country, have in the past articulated a positive, optimistic vision of the world. We now have a president who cannot articulate that kind of vision. He is reduced to appealing to a very narrow, domestic, populist, nasty vision of the world: a fear-and-blame version of politics which works well enough for domestic political reasons but is a catastrophic choice for our interests around the world. I think he has recognized that some since the war, and he has moderated his rhetoric and he is also making an effort now to build the relationship with foreign governments that he had somewhat despised before then.

A second point is that, in large measure, the war with Iraq was the direct result of a struggle for bureaucratic power, for resources, within the cabinet. Our Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, won that battle essentially by misleading the President, by misleading the American people. He deliberately antagonized our allies, because he has managed to assemble a domestic political coalition whose whole basis was: “we did not need allies, we did not need international law.” This idea is total nonsense. It worked very well for short-term bureaucratic reasons, but it is essentially a form of unilateral disarmament of America’s primary diplomatic and political weapon – that is, America’s legitimacy.

BardPolitik Why do you believe Article Five of the NATO Charter - that member parties will assist each other in concert against armed attack - was invoked immediately after the events of September 11?

Kiesling Article five was an attempt by our allies to signal that they were with us, that there were genuine multilateral mechanisms that could be used to protect the United States. It was a gesture of support, psycho-

logically; it was also a gesture of fear, fear that the United States would lash out blindly.

The goal was to make clear universally that terrorism is not a legitimate weapon – that the world has joined forces against it. Unfortunately, we chose to see the war against terrorism as a narrow military war, which it is obviously not.

If we had succeeded in persuading the United Nations, the military force that occupied Iraq would genuinely have been seen as a liberating force.

BardPolitik Do you see the UN’s loss of legitimacy mirroring a political generation lacking concern for multilateralism? Is this the same characteristic as that of the generation President Bush describes, one that, as he says, should prepare itself for war?

Kiesling I would argue, on the contrary, that our current mess in Iraq underscores, in fact, the importance of the United Nations. The UN is a very frustrating instrument. It is very slow; it is very bureaucratic; it is very inefficient. But it does one thing that no other organization does: it is a source of legitimacy outside of successful violence, which is the main source of legitimacy in the world. If we had succeeded in persuading the United Nations, the military force that occupied Iraq would genuinely have been seen as a liberating force. The resources of the world would have been mobilized towards reconstruction. We did not have the intelligence we needed to justify the war. We did not have urgency; there was no humanitarian emergency. Without a sense of urgency we could not successfully mobilize the United Nations. However, we are gradually going back to them. They will be the source of legitimacy for whatever emerges in the future and so, I’m hoping that in the long run we will strengthen the UN rather than weaken it.

BardPolitik In regards to Europe, do you believe the Bush administration has initiated a final split?

Kiesling Almost all of the leaders of Europe are determined to maintain a strong transatlantic relationship. They have signaled that a number of times, most recently with the transatlantic summit in Washington on the 25 of June. The Europeans, by and large, recognize that U.S. – EU partnership is vital to preserving the political and economic stability of the planet. Meanwhile, the President has realized that he made a mistake, and is now making a real effort to rebuild ties with Europe – we are getting into a more realistic and practical approach.

John Brown, a Princeton Ph.D., joined the Foreign Service in 1981 and has served in London, Prague, Krakow, Kiev, Belgrade, and, most recently, Moscow. A senior member of the Foreign Service since 1997, he has focused his diplomatic work on press and cultural affairs.

BardPolitik Since writing a letter of resignation, you have subsequently listed several reasons for your decision, among them President Bush's failure to explain to the public the reasons massive force was needed, and your own sense of obligation to speak out against the lack of justification for such a policy. Would you comment further on your position?

Brown Well, I still am not convinced by the justifications for this war. I was teaching at Georgetown University at the time that I submitted my resignation, under a State Department program, and in preparation for my courses I read extensively official reasons for the war, and I simply did not find a rationale for this adventure and I still do not. The American public, and the world at large, was not really told what the consequences of this war would be.

BardPolitik When did you begin to grow wary of the President's agenda?

Brown It was in September, when I read a statement by a White House chief of staff in essence saying that this war was like a product to be sold to the American public.

BardPolitik How exactly do you see the role of America's legitimacy worldwide as part of its foreign policy?

Brown I think you are asking a very good question and, having served abroad for over twenty years, I think many non-Americans on the one hand see Americans as vulgar, without culture, without a sense of what civilization is all about; but on the other hand they felt and I hope to some extent still feel - after the adventure in Iraq - that, when the chips are down, Americans believe in fair play, and that they are, quite simply, a decent people. To put it rather crudely, the sheriff doesn't shoot first, and now, all of a sudden, the sheriff shot first. And I think this, from many parts of the world, and based on my experience abroad, was a shock for people outside of America – that America could be so unfair.

BardPolitik The post 9/11 era has seen a tremendous shift in the international system. Do you believe the question of the UN's legitimacy and the U.S.-European rift suggest the system has been irreparably damaged?

Brown Let me focus on the U.S. - European relationship, on which I am somewhat competent to comment. I think it is going through a crisis. Foremost at this point is the Bush policy: not only its contents, but its, if you will, gestures, show a complete disregard for the sensitivities of our European allies. All throughout Europe, including Eastern Europe, I think enlightened public opinion has strong doubts about the adventure in Iraq. But one of the questions that both Europeans and Americans have to face - and I do not know if Europeans are really facing this question - is the fact that America has changed tremendously in the past

thirty to forty years. As a result Europe is no longer the only reference point for many Americans, and not only those involved in foreign affairs.

Of course, there has been a long history of U.S.-European tensions - the eternal saga of the New World versus Old World - but still, I would say that in the past people in charge of U.S. foreign policy looked to certain parts of Europe for standards and guidance. But there has been a tremendous demographic change in the United States; there have been tremendous economic changes. And the point is that the younger generation in America no longer sees Europe as the only reference point to look to for answers, explanations, and inspiration.

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I'm strongly opposed to the Bush foreign policy, which is unilateral, parochial, and driven by domestic considerations. Moreover, as someone who served in Europe as a foreign service officer, I'm greatly concerned by the rift between Europe and the United States - on the one hand the United States forgetting about Europe and not thinking about Europe, and on the other Europe not accepting the fact that this is happening, refusing to accept that the U.S. has changed since the days of the Marshall Plan.

BardPolitik Lastly, in the context of changing U.S.-EU relations, how should the UN redefine itself?

Brown Well, the UN is a wonderful idea that was implemented after the Second World War. But, again

speaking as a U.S. citizen, I think the UN has to see the U.S. perspective on its problems. The fact and the matter is that the average American does not get up in the morning and think about the UN, and that is another reality that has to be faced. The UN is a tremendously important institution, not so much for what it does but for the idea that it stands for, which is that nations cannot act unilaterally, that, in a sense, we are all in it together in the twenty-first century. Having said this, I believe that as a bureaucracy the UN is an enormous problem. As a structure, as a system of implementing decisions, how efficient is it in this new century? I think it's all too easy to blame U.S. provincialism and U.S. lack of interest in the UN for the UN's own failures, which are really considerable. I think the UN has to do a certain amount of self-examination as well. And so does the U.S., because certainly the unilateralism of the Bush administration in no way can be justified.

Mary Ann Wright was most recently the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. She helped open the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, in January 2002 and was awarded the State Department's Award for Heroism during the evacuation of the U.S. Embassy in Sierra Leone in 1997.

BardPolitik In your resignation letter you mention several reasons for choosing your course of action. Will you go further into those issues now, four months later?

Wright The primary reason for my resignation was the decision by the Bush administration to go to war in Iraq without allowing the UN inspectors more time to see if they could find the weapons of mass destruction. The administration's "evidence" that there was imminent danger from the weapons of mass destruction, did not convince even me, one of its own diplomats.

I thought that for the U.S. and a few allies to go to war, without the agreement of the members of the UN Security Council, was going to put the United

States in much greater danger than whatever the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) posed. Waging war in Iraq would be a tremendous religious and cultural reason for many groups throughout the world to dislike the American government even more than they already did. Over time the administration gave other rationale for waging war, none of which convinced me that we needed to have immediate military action. I did not want to represent an administration that went to war for the reasons I thought to be wrong. Four months later, I feel even more strongly that going to war in Iraq when we did was wrong and has made the world more dangerous.

In my resignation letter I also suggested that the Bush administration should focus more effort on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, should begin a dialogue with North Korea on its nuclear program, and should re-look the needless curtailment of civil liberties in the Patriot Act. Since my resignation, the administration rolled out its roadmap for peace, but the roadmap has not been followed up with strong, consistent effort. On North Korea, at least the administration has mobilized regional countries and is having talks, rather than continuing a dangerous standoff.

The effects of the Patriot Act are still of very great concern to me. No federal judge - much less the American people - knows how many Americans or citizens of other countries have been or are detained under the Patriot Act. At a minimum, the Executive branch of government should have to provide a designated Federal judge with the names of persons detained and the evidence that lead to the detainment. As persons one by one are released or deported, we find that individuals have been held for eighteen months or more without notification to their families, without access to legal advice, without any of the basic protections on which U.S. government has historically prided itself. I strongly believe the lack of accountability for law enforcement and the Justice Department under the Patriotic Act is unconstitutional.

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— decisions that I believe have made America's security more dangerous, not safer.

BardPolitik Regarding the outcome of the war in Iraq: there are many voices comparing it already with the conflict in Vietnam. What do you think can be done to avoid another Vietnam, if this is, or can become, another Vietnam?

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Wright Four U.S. administrations were dishonest with the American people about the war in Vietnam. Likewise, the Bush administration has been dishonest with the American people on virtually all aspects of the war in Iraq, from the rationale of why it was critical to wage war when we did, to the probable costs of the military operation and the civil reconstruction -- from the numbers of U.S. military troops the operation would take, to the type of opposition our troops would face.

And as in Vietnam, in Iraq we were not prepared to fight the probable war. Despite having threatened war for a year, the Bush administration miscalculated in its planning. Its policies needlessly sacrificed the lives of many Iraqi citizens, American and coalition military members, and civilians in international organizations. I believe the civilian leadership of the Bush administration undercut the war planning expertise of the U.S. military and allowed domestic political considerations to jeopardize the ability of the U.S. military to prosecute the war.

To invade and occupy another country, the U.S. military has a set methodology to cover all contingencies. Having been in the military myself for over twenty-six years (active and reserves) and having

helped write a number of operations plans, I know that these plans are required to address all aspects of the post-combat environment.

In order to prevent chaos and looting after combat ends, military planners must provide sufficient military police and civil affairs units to follow directly on the heels of combat troops.

It appears from the level of looting and destruction by Iraqi civilians without U.S. military capability to deter it, that the original military plans were changed at the senior civilian levels of the Department of Defense. General Eric Shinseki, former Chief-of-Staff of the Army, officially told the administration and Congress a year ago, that the Army could not accomplish the missions it was required to do with the small number of soldiers in Rumsfeld's operations plans. Shinseki said that to have an occupation force inside Iraq, the U.S. military would need at least fifty to one hundred thousand more troops in the operations plan. That figure was unacceptable to Rumsfeld and the senior leadership of the Department of Defense (DOD) as it would require the call-up of tens of thousands of men and women in the Reserves and National Guard. The administration did not want to have a large reserve and national guard mobilization as it would indicate to the American public how much more difficult the war was than the administration had lead the public to believe.

DOD's civilian leadership opted to go for a "leaner and meaner" operations plan, which meant, eventually, there were not enough people to provide law and order to prevent the looting and the lawlessness that is occurring right now. This was a terrible miscalculation by the administration. This miscalculation created the environment where priceless antiquities were looted, where costly infrastructure was stolen, and where guerilla elements now terrorize the "best" military in the world and cause unnecessary civilian and military deaths.

This miscalculation insured that the rebuilding of Iraq would cost billions of dollars, dollars that would be funneled through non-competitive contracts to huge companies that were allied with the adminis-

tration. Many of these companies got their starts by jumping into the lucrative logistics contracts of the Vietnam War and then continued with huge contracts for Gulf War I and Somalia. It is said that a "good war" is needed to buck up America's giant military-industrial complex when the economy goes down. The timing of the Iraq War tragically seems to fit that model. Additionally, the individual and small group tactics (roadside bombs against convoys, suicide bombers against buildings, and rocket propelled grenades against helicopters), now used so effectively against coalition forces, were predictable and predicted. No one except Rumsfeld and his civilian aides ever thought the Iraqi army would stand up and fight the biggest and best equipped military in the world. The Iraqi army was demolished twelve years ago and, because of the UN sanctions, was not reequipped. Not to be prepared for the most likely scenario of the Iraqi military (to include its leader Saddam) shedding its uniforms and filtering back into the community to cause trouble later was an inexcusable miscalculation.

BardPolitik Many interpreted the Bush administration's decision to go to war without the approval of the UN Security Council as signaling a decline of multilateralism. Is, or was, the United Nations this administration's main barometer, and how do you see the future of the UN as a significant world player?

Wright The United Nations is only as strong as its member states want it to be. Whenever you reach a point when one of the key member states starts undercutting the UN then of course it is not going to be as strong or as effective as it might have been. The Bush administration definitely has undercut the UN, both in word and deed.

The United Nations is not an organization designed for speedy decisions. That is its strength in some events and its weakness in others. Yet the United Nations, as a deliberative international organization, when it acts, has the legitimacy that U.S. unilateralism lacks (the participation of the governments of the UK, Australia, Spain, and Italy despite the protest of large

numbers of their respective citizens does not make this a multilateral operation in my opinion). Working through the UN spreads decision-making risk, spreads conflict and post-conflict implementation risk, and spreads the "who is to blame" risk if elements of the plan go awry. By its words and actions, the Bush administration did not want multinational decision-making or multinational conflict/ post-conflict implementation in Iraq. The administration consistently disparaged publicly the possibility of its plans going awry.

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As a diplomat I could not (and still cannot) understand why the administration would want to assume such risks in such a volatile region and in such a dangerous time, with the real war on terrorism, the unfinished war against *Al Qaeda* in Afghanistan and Pakistan and its elements in other parts of the world, still raging.

To wage war in Iraq at the time the administration did and for the various reasons given by the administration provides further fuel to the embers of suspicion that smolder throughout the world that the United States invaded Iraq for access to Iraqi oil and fans anti-American sentiment that one would expect would lead to further terrorist attacks against the United States.

Despite its arrogant dismissal of the United Nations, the Bush administration needs the UN's help in Iraq. Were it not for the tragic plight of many innocent Iraqi civilians caught in the tangle of international bickering, I suspect the non-coalition members of

the United Nations would gladly let the Bush administration and the American taxpayer bail themselves out of the dangerous predicament they are in. However, with sufficient humility and acknowledgement from the Bush administration that the United Nations might be the only organization that can bring permanent peace to Iraq, I am firmly convinced the UN will be there for the people of Iraq.

As a final comment, I would like to mention the issues of dissent and resignation. I strongly believe that those who do not agree with policies of an administration have the responsibility to make their concerns known. I think it is one's professional and patriotic obligation to make one's thoughts known when you see your government going down the wrong path on something with such serious consequences as going to war. Dissenting from U.S. policies or resigning over U.S. policies does not mean one is unpatriotic. I am no Washington armchair quarterback. I put my life on the line for my country in Grenada, Somalia, Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan. It is with this background and experience that I believe I have the responsibility to disagree with the administration's war in Iraq.

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