

Kids Abandoned On Ryan's Watch

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By Timothy W. Maier



Powell acted against Ryan after provocations including the "Visa Express" fiasco and failing to fight for abducted kids

Colin Powell has done what no one else had the guts to do during the Clinton years. The secretary of state fired the most senior woman in the U.S. Foreign Service, Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Mary Ryan, who oversaw the "Visa Express" program that allowed three of the 15 Saudi terrorists who attacked on Sept. 11 to enter the United States without so much as an interview. For the record, the State Department downplayed Ryan's dismissal by claiming Powell asked her to retire.

Some State Department employees and members of Congress privately are calling it a "long overdue action" to remove a careerist who was untouchable during the Clinton years, when she ran the State Department Office of Children's Issues. Ryan was a Clinton darling — she received the Presidential Distinguished Service Award twice, in 1992 and 1998, as well as the Arnold Raphel Award in 1996.

State Department sources say Maura Harty, special assistant to the secretary of state and executive secretary of state, will replace Ryan if Congress confirms her nomination. Critics of Ryan prefer an outsider to take over; they charge Harty will be a "Ryan clone" who will continue to provide misleading Hague reports, misallocate resources and not cooperate with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children or provide compassion to parents caught in international child-abduction cases.

Ryan may believe she was the sacrificial lamb after the "Visa Express" scandal erupted. But she had more than worn out her welcome with the way she ran the Office of Children's Issues, which parents charge mishandled thousands of international parental-abduction cases. In recent weeks her leadership of that office had come under fire in a congressional hearing held by the House Committee on Government Reform under the chairmanship of Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.). Burton's committee has followed the trail marked by Insight during three years of investigations that presented a disturbing picture of how American children kidnapped to foreign lands have been abandoned by the U.S. government [see "Stolen Kids Become Pawns in Terror War," Dec. 17, 2001; "All Talk, No Action on Stolen Children," June 18, 2001; "A Great Escape," Feb. 14, 2000; "Double Standard for American Children," March 6, 2000; and "Kids Held Hostage," March 8, 1999.]

Under Ryan, the children's office at State became the subject of several congressional investigations, including a review by a Justice Department task force and the General Accounting Office. Case files under Ryan's control, obtained by this magazine, often

made fun of parents, calling them emotionally unstable or stupid. The Ryan files showed a trail of lies and deceit, particularly when it came to the whereabouts of stolen children. The files show that the State Department knew where some of these kids were but denied this to frantic parents. Perhaps even more disturbing is that some of the files show caseworkers actually tried to advise the kidnappers. And the State Department stonewalled parents, refusing to release files on their children until Insight made more than a dozen formal requests under the Freedom of Information Act, demanding all documents pertaining to particular cases.

Ryan also angered parents by calling these kidnapping cases "custody disputes." The term infuriated parents who pointed out that in many cases courts formally had given custody to American parents from whom a child was kidnapped, and in others international warrants had been issued for the arrest of the kidnappers.

Margaret McClain, whose daughter Heidi was kidnapped to Saudi Arabia in 1997, says: "My daughter was stolen on Mary Ryan's watch. I asked Ryan what she could do. And she said there was nothing she could do to get back my son! She was so incompetent she didn't even know my kid is a girl."

Ryan was fired shortly before Burton's committee voted to remove visa authority from the State Department and transfer it to the Department of Homeland Security. Rep. Dave Weldon (R-Fla.), who introduced HR 5005, the Homeland Security Act of 2002, says, "The Visa Express program in Saudi Arabia is a gaping hole in that line of defense. I must caution, though, there is still much work to be done. The State Department has proven time and time again that its diplomatic culture is inconsistent with the security emphasis needed for our visa program."

Inconsistent may be an understatement. Ryan's deputy, Dianne Andruch, testified before the Burton committee that the Visa Express program had been stopped. But she either was misinformed, is incompetent or just lied. In a subsequent letter to House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas), Burton says the State Department now "admits that the program is still up and running, and that only 45 percent of Saudi visa applicants are being interviewed." Incredibly, Burton notes, the "State Department still refuses to recognize there is a problem with the program."

Pat Roush is a mother who has been fighting for the last 16 years to bring home her American daughters Alia and Aisha, now in their 20s and trapped in Saudi Arabia. Roush says Andruch should be "charged with perjury" for providing "deliberately deceitful" testimony to Burton's committee and lying to the American public. Action has yet to be taken against the State Department deputy.

What seems most to anger Burton and many parents of the kidnapped children is the policy during Ryan's tenure under which there was no plan to help the stolen American kids. Even the U.S. Marines were used against children and mothers, such as when Monica Stowers ran for refuge into the U.S. Embassy in Saudi Arabia with her two children. Stowers says the State Department then ordered two Marine guards to remove her and her children, Rasheed and Amjad, both of whom have been sexually and physically abused by the kidnapper's family. They were removed from the embassy and eventually returned to the abusive family.

When Insight contacted the Marines and asked if this reflected official policy, spokesman Andrew Davis indicated that such actions do not fall under the two main directives of

Marines stationed at embassies overseas. These are to provide internal security and to protect U.S. citizens and property. "I have great personal sympathy for Mrs. Stowers and her children," Davis says. And if it comes up again? He says the State Department and the U.S. Marines would meet to find an appropriate resolution.

This apparently is a signal to parents overseas that, should they run to their embassy with a recovered child, they will not be removed from the building with a Marine escort. What will happen to them now is unknown but, with Burton having warned the State Department about employing Marines to throw American mothers and children from their own embassy, it is unlikely to recur.

Meanwhile, Burton continues to fight for parents by pushing for the White House to block visas for immediate family members of foreigners involved in international abduction of American kids. McClain wants Burton to take the next step and extend it to employees of corporations that harbor fugitives, such as Aramco Oil, which employs Adbulbaset Ahmed Mohammed Al-Omary, the ex-husband who kidnapped her daughter.

McClain recently managed to see her daughter for the first time since the child's 1997 kidnapping on a visit to Saudi Arabia. The conversation was limited to a three-hour visit, but McClain says her daughter desperately wants to return to the United States. Asked what her next step will be in trying to bring Heidi home, she says sadly, "Without money to hire commandos, there's little or nothing I can do."

McClain is equally frustrated with Secretary Powell and his relationship with Saudi Arabia. "He calls Saudi Arabia his client," she says. "I'm disgusted with that. Powell should fire himself." However, the secretary of state has surprised other parents with a proactive approach when it comes to some of the abduction cases. In fact, days before Ryan was fired, Powell met with Tom Sylvester of Cincinnati, who has been trying to retrieve his daughter Carina, abducted to Austria in 1996 when she was 13 months old.

Sylvester won his custody case before the Austrian Supreme Court but, when authorities turned up at Carina's house to enforce the order, the child's grandmother slipped out the back door with the girl and fled. The Austrian court now says the child should not be returned to the father because it would be too upsetting after so much time has passed. "The child was not returned because the order was not enforced, and now the order will not be enforced because the child was not returned," says the exasperated Sylvester.

At the meeting, Powell promised "to be personally involved in my case and do everything in his power" to bring Carina home, Sylvester reports. Powell since has contacted the Austrian foreign minister, making clear that the United States is unhappy with the situation. But while Powell reached out personally, Ryan simply reclassified cases as "resolved" to appease Congress. Congress then wrongly assumed that meant the child either had been returned to the United States or that the American parent had been given visitation rights, declarations which in practice are seldom honored.

Parents want the State Department to classify international spousal-kidnapping cases as resolved only when the child is brought home. And they would like someone in Congress to ask two questions: How many children have been kidnapped and taken overseas, and how many have the State Department brought home? So far no one seems to want to ask those questions. Perhaps the answers are just too disturbing.

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