

## How Rice Uses History Lessons

By NEIL KING JR.

LONDON -- U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice often calls herself "a student of history." And increasingly, she is using history -- or her chosen slice of it -- both to explain and justify the Bush administration's Middle East policy.

When Ms. Rice talks about the challenges the U.S. faces across the Mideast, she points, somewhat surprisingly, to Europe after World War II and to the West's decades-long face-off against the Soviet Union, which happens to be her area of expertise. It is a penchant that has scholars scratching their heads.

Citing the Cold War's denouement as context for today's bloodshed and tumult may seem far-fetched to some. But Ms. Rice uses the analogy both to beg for patience -- the Cold War, after all, consumed decades -- and to try to elucidate a diplomatic strategy that is increasingly assailed for its lack of assertiveness.

While traveling this week through the Middle East and Europe, Ms. Rice engaged in several long historical tutorials with reporters in tow. Her point in referring back to the Cold War, she said, isn't to argue that history repeats itself or that the analogy is exact.

"The reason that I cite some of these other times, like Europe, is that it is so clear in everybody's mind that the United States and its allies came out victorious at the end of the Cold War," she said in Kuwait. "But if you...look at the events that ultimately lead to that, you would have thought that this was failing every single day between 1945-1946 and probably 1987 or 1988."

Her contention is while things may look bad now in Iraq and elsewhere in the region, history is on the administration's side. She pushed a similar argument to reporters last month. The Middle East is "moving toward something that I am quite certain will not have a full resolution and that you will not be able to fully judge for decades," she said.

Critics dismiss Ms. Rice's references to the Cold War as both convenient and a sign of her limited frame of reference. The challenges facing Europe in 1946, they say, bear little similarity to those of the Middle East in the 21st century.

"The administration's reservoir of historical analogies seems limited to the 1914-1991 period. And it's all about Europe," said Adam Garfinkle, a former Rice speechwriter who edits the foreign-policy journal *The American Interest*. "No one in a senior position in this administration seems to have even the vaguest notion of modern Middle Eastern history."

When asked this week about what moments in Arab history inform her thinking, Ms. Rice said she had read about "the British experience" in Mesopotamia in the 1920s, which led to the founding of modern Iraq and the withdrawal of British forces. "I know a number of things that went right, and I know the things that went wrong," she said.

But Ms. Rice cleaves to her Cold War history to try to drive home a bigger point about the administration's diplomatic approach, which is seen by many as detached and lacking urgency. For six years, the administration has stayed out of direct efforts to push a peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians. Today, despite widespread calls to talk with Iran and Syria, Ms. Rice rejects such action as ill-timed.

She tends to portray events, particularly the clash between what she calls "moderation" and "extremism" in the Middle East, as driven by huge, almost inevitable forces that make diplomacy impractical, or even irrelevant. Critics say such a view has made Washington's top diplomat less flexible in policy making -- and less adept in old-style negotiation and hand-holding, whose results also can be hard to quantify in the short term.

Those who clamor for sitting down with Syria and Iran are out of touch with what Ms. Rice calls "the underlying forces."

"There's a tendency to think about diplomacy as something that is done untethered to the conditions underlying it or the balance underlying it," she said. "In fact, that's not the way that it works. You aren't going to be successful as a diplomat if you don't understand the strategic context in which you are actually negotiating. It is not deal-making."

On this trip, which wrapped up in London, Ms. Rice has portrayed her main mission as firming up what she calls "a new alignment" of moderate states allied with the U.S. to push back against Iran. Ms. Rice also has shown a new interest in trying to promote an Arab peace deal with Israel after years of inactivity.

Four years ago, the administration theorized that the U.S. invasion would spawn a democratic Iraq, on good terms with Israel, that would break the regional mold and compel erstwhile enemies to end hostility toward the Israelis. Now, Ms. Rice says it is the Iranian ascent wrought by the war that makes Arab states more open to negotiations.

To her thinking, there has been a shift in underlying forces -- as opposed to events the U.S. might have influenced. Again, she points to a favorite historical analogy: the reunification of Germany. "If you had tried to negotiate German unification for any period of time until 1990, you would have not been able to do it because the underlying circumstances were not there," she said.