

## Think Again: Condoleezza Rice

By Marcus Mabry

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May/June 2007

**She is considered the ultimate team player, a woman of intelligence and poise whose loyalty to President George W. Bush is unwavering. But a closer look reveals that Condi is less intellectual, politically savvy, and far more formidable than people realize.**

### “Condi Is a Bush Loyalist”

**For now.** One of the secrets to the spectacular rise of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is that every boss she has ever worked for was convinced that she shared his worldview. And each, after she left his employ, was left scratching his head as he saw Rice make a 180-degree turn away from the core beliefs he thought they shared. It happened with former National Security Advisor (NSA) Brent Scowcroft, who thought Rice was a rock-ribbed realist only to see her become the most ardent acolyte of idealist President George W. Bush and his “Freedom Agenda.” It even happened with former Stanford University President Gerhard Casper, for whom Rice served as provost and vice president—Stanford’s number two—and with her college political science professor Alan Gilbert, a leftist who says of Rice, “[Her interest] wasn’t really Great Power realism. If I had to put her in a category, I’d say she was closer to Marxist.”

More surprising than Gilbert’s assertion that Rice was a radical is the frequency with which you hear the same refrain: Across the political spectrum, many of Rice’s former bosses now question whether she ever identified with them at all. Rice’s central philosophy is power—not realist or idealist or Marxist, but personal power. She does what she has to in order to achieve it in whatever situation she finds herself, and, throughout her career, some would argue, opportunistically conformed to her mentors’ opinions in order to rise. “She did this with me and .... she’s doing it with Bush now,” says Gilbert. “I don’t think she doesn’t believe [what she espouses], but she believes what is in her interest and what advances her.” It’s a *modus operandi* that has worked for Rice for almost all of her nearly 30-year career in academia and government. Don’t be surprised if some time after Bush leaves office, Rice makes another strategic about-face.

### “Condi Is a Realist”

**Yes and no.** The conventional wisdom is that 9/11 changed everything for Rice. She first studied international affairs as an 18-year-old junior at the knee of Josef Korbel, the father of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and founder of the Graduate School of International Studies at the University of Denver. Korbel taught Rice realism from the Hans Morgenthau school. Before Morgenthau’s theories came to prominence in the 1940s, international relations was centered around the study of diplomatic history and international law. But Morgenthau argued that international

politics was really a struggle for power. Countering the idealists who dominated U.S. foreign policy, he said that every state is out to pursue its interests, and the United States was no exception. Korb was a realist, and Rice became one, too. As a result, she fit in happily with the foreign-policy team of President George Herbert Walker Bush and Scowcroft.

But realism—with its hyper-secular, values-neutral concentration on power and interests—always conflicted with the idealism of Rice's devout Christianity. For most of her career, it didn't matter; she was a comparative politics specialist focusing on the details of Soviet and Eastern European civil-military relations, not theory. And, not a social conservative, Rice kept her religious faith separate from her view of international politics.

Instead of altering Rice's beliefs, 9/11 pointed out the intellectual failings of Morgenthau. The father of realism concentrated on nation-states and interests to explain the world, but the jihadists who attacked the United States were not nation-states and had no interests as realists commonly understood them—and no territory, population, or infrastructure that could be targeted to deter them or force them to sue for peace. As a result, Rice decided, like George W. Bush, that the internal dynamics of the Middle Eastern Arab nations had to be transformed.

However, Rice never became an idealist in the pure sense. Unlike the neoconservatives, Rice didn't believe that America's values, combined with its military might, meant that it had a duty to transform the world. Instead, she decided that for the United States to be safe, it had to change the Middle East. Rice advocated an idealist foreign policy to achieve realist ends.

### **“Condi Is Brilliant”**

**Actually, no.** When Scowcroft first met Rice in 1984 and decided to catapult the then junior Stanford professor onto the A-list of America's foreign-policy establishment, what impressed him was not what Rice said, but how she said it; it was her poise and confidence. According to several members of the political science department and two members of her tenure committee, Stanford awarded her tenure on the same basis. As Rice's close friend and fellow political scientist Coit “Chip” Blacker says, “People were betting on her as someone who was going to be a very lively presence. And sometimes you take risks.” Adds another foreign-affairs expert, who declined to be identified because he didn't want to insult his close friend, “She's a conventional mind. Except for the book she did with [Philip] Zelikow on Germany, the stuff she [wrote] herself is mediocre.”

Rice's strength is performance, presentation, and distillation of disparate facts and complex realities, all the things that made her an extraordinary teacher and a great tutor to Bush during his first campaign for president in 2000. But the ultimate judgment of Rice as secretary of state will depend on what she accomplishes in her last two years as secretary. Just as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's tactics and motives in the Nixon administration have been overshadowed by his strategic legacy (particularly the decision to establish relations with “Red China”), Rice's stature as a historical figure will be determined by the kind of world she leaves behind. Luckily, that legacy will depend on her personal power in the White House more than on her ability to come up with original ways of thinking about the world.

### **“Condi Was No Match for Cheney and Rumsfeld”**

**Dead wrong.** There’s an old saying among National Security Council (NSC) watchers that each president gets the national security “process” that he wants. And Bush always loathed dissension in his own ranks; he didn’t want his national security advisor hauling Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld into the Oval Office for the president to settle their disputes. The perception that in the first term Rice was somehow “rolled” by Rumsfeld is unfair; Rumsfeld rolled everyone in the administration, including President Bush.

So Rice did what she could: seeking consensus in NSC principals’ meetings, or, if she couldn’t do that, sharpening the differences to bring them to the president. If Rumsfeld refused to discuss issues, Rice punted. As a result, many issues were never hashed out—including, for instance, the postwar political transition plans for Iraq. But there was little Rice could do about “the first MBA president,” as Bush’s campaign touted in 2000, not wanting to settle his fractious lieutenants’ disputes. And, even more important, Rice was hamstrung structurally by Bush’s decision to give Dick Cheney unprecedented power in foreign policy, usurping much of the authority that traditionally accrued to the NSC.

Rice’s way of dealing with obstacles—as her parents had taught her as a little girl growing up in segregated Birmingham, Alabama—was to go around them, not to whine. So, she didn’t interfere with the Defense Department’s postwar planning or complain to Bush about Rumsfeld; instead, she told her staffers to skirt Rummy and his deputies to get the information they needed from the Pentagon. But the growing chaos in Iraq finally convinced Rice that she had to adapt, and she did. By 2004, she was taking control of critical policy areas from State and Defense, on everything from the political transition and rebuilding in Iraq to North Korea and Iran. Rice could have done none of these things without Bush’s approval.

Once Rumsfeld was ditched after the 2006 midterm elections, Rice pushed the North Korea six-party agreement around Cheney, proving that her weaknesses as NSA were not because of her inability to go toe to toe with Dick and Don, but because she had chosen not to. As secretary of state, she has—so far at least—won some big battles. Iran will be the next test.

### **“Condi Is a Skilled Diplomat”**

**True, but irrelevant.** As Robert Blackwill—who served as Rice’s boss during the George H.W. Bush administration in the NSC’s European and Soviet office, and later as Rice’s employee at the White House—put it, “Her diplomacy, in a classic Metternichian sense, is quite skillful,” referring to the 19th-century Austrian statesman known for his astute realism. But Blackwill believes the war in Iraq will rob Rice of her considerable potential to change the world as America’s top diplomat. “What is Condi as secretary of state and national security advisor without the Iraq War? It’s different,” he sighs. “It’s different.”

Despite the correlation of forces arrayed against her, Rice was able to pull off the six-party agreement over North Korea. Regardless of whether you believe the deal achieved anything more than the Clinton-era bargain with Pyongyang, it was a diplomatic masterstroke that wouldn’t have come about without Rice’s leadership

both inside and outside the administration. Likewise with the recent sanctions against Iran, which by January were already beginning to be felt in Tehran.

Iraq, on the other hand, was her failure almost as much as Bush's, and none of her accomplishments will matter if Iraq is mired in civil war when the president leaves office. Similarly, if the hawks inside and outside the administration succeed in convincing Bush that the only way to ensure that a nuclear Iran is not a part of his legacy is to launch military strikes on Iran's nuclear reactor, then all of Rice's diplomatic skill will be for naught. Finally, events in the Middle East may prevent Rice from accomplishing what she and Bush have made her principal goal for the remainder of their time in power: establishing the foundations of a peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians. It's not Rice's fault that internal political tensions among Palestinians have made it nearly impossible for further peace talks to occur with Israel. That's just bad luck.

### **“Condi Is Trying to Fix Bush's First-Term Mistakes”**

**No.** Rice believes that, fundamentally, the administration got what Bush calls “the big decisions” right, such as overthrowing Saddam even though he didn't have weapons of mass destruction. What the world has seen in the second term is Rice's attempt to correct the tactical, not strategic, errors of the first. Accordingly, her first trip after she became secretary of state was a mission to Europe to repair the trans-Atlantic alliance damaged by Iraq. In fact, Rice didn't want to be secretary of state; she had told at least one friend, bluntly, “No way. I don't want that job!” But in the end, Rice told me, she decided to stay on for the second term because she believed the Bush administration had torn down the old order and she owed it to the president to help him rebuild a new one. “I've been very cognizant of the need to put [the Middle East] back together in a different configuration, but one that lays a foundation. And so I thought, well, I'll try to do that.”

And that's what she's been doing for the past two years. All the chaos that critics of the administration see as the negative results of Bush's foreign policy, Rice continues to see as the “birth pangs of a new Middle East,” as she put it during the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah last summer. For example, she told the *Washington Post* in December, “When the international system starts rearranging itself the way that it is rearranging itself currently, it's turbulent and it's often violent.”

Far from considering the Bush policy a failure, Rice considers it a success, and she compares events in Iraq and the larger Middle East to the end of World War II, when America's role was to be the promoter and protector of freedom. We won't know whether Rice genuinely believes this—or whether her insistence is merely part of her unshakable discipline for staying on message—until after Bush leaves office, if Rice decides to join up with a boss who has different beliefs.

### **“Condi Wants to Run for President”**

**Not unless it's God's will.** Rice believes that God directs our paths: a faith in predestination that she inherits from her Presbyterian upbringing. Since her dream of being a concert pianist (the one goal she worked toward her entire young life) evaporated when she was 17 years old, Rice never set another long-term goal. With no defined destination, Rice followed the true north of the men who inspired her: Hans Morgenthau, Josef Korbel, both President Bushes. In a sense, Rice seems to

have stopped dreaming, at least as most of us dream: for the distant, the transcendent, the impossible. If she didn't dream, then she couldn't be denied. What drove Rice was drive itself. Hope—whether for a political office, a changed world, or a relationship—usually depends on external forces. Discipline, on the other hand, depends solely on the will of the self.

Rice's future will undoubtedly be one of still more accomplishments. As opportunities inevitably present themselves, her résumé will lengthen with new titles—all impressive, some probably history making. Her friends believe she would make a stellar private-sector CEO or governor of California. They even think she would be a willing candidate for vice president. But, given her refusal to set long-term goals, she will likely never attain the greatness that comes from setting one's sights on a far horizon and trudging toward it, like the presidency. Says Rice's friend Chip Blacker, "This isn't someone who goes home and, in the privacy of her bedroom, whistles 'Hail to the Chief.'" As with every decision in her life, Condi's next step will be guided by wherever her faith and opportunity meet.

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