



The Flawed Rice Doctrine of 'Transformational Diplomacy' and American Global Policy

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By Walter LaFeber

In her January 18, 2006 [speech](#) at Georgetown University, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice attracted attention by arguing that U.S. foreign policy would henceforth be shaped by a “transformational diplomacy . . . rooted in partnership, not paternalism.” Her address was taken by some observers to mean that the neoconservative policy assumptions which have condemned the United States to the tragedy in Iraq and elsewhere were being replaced by a realist perspective taking American policy back to the more constructive days of the partnerships George Marshall and Dean Acheson (whom she singled out for praise in her question-and-answer session), formed with Western Europe and Japan. These partnerships aimed to institutionalize both the rebuilding of those war-devastated partners and the containment of the Soviet Union.



Condoleezza Rice

A closer reading of her speech leads to another conclusion: the address is mostly old, failed policy dressed in necessarily different rhetoric. Most significantly, Rice began the speech not by emphasizing partnership, but with George W. Bush's Second Inaugural Address from which she quoted that it is U.S. policy “to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” This “mission,” Rice added, is “transformational diplomacy,” and nowhere does she say this diplomacy came out of any partnership – which is well, because it didn't.

Nor could it. Only a person ignorant of human history could seriously discuss “ending tyranny in our world.” Rice's putative hero, Dean Acheson, told a group of military and diplomatic officers in 1949 that the idea that good and evil could not coexist in the world was the height of absurdity. Good and evil, Acheson noted in his own inimitable fashion, had coexisted ever since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, and given the historical record (and, one might add, nuclear weapons), such coexistence, this Cold Warrior believed, had to continue. The partners Rice has in mind tend to see the world through Acheson's eyes, not the President's or, apparently, her own.. Given Acheson and the partners' long historical view and insights into human nature, they did not, and do not, believe that “tyranny” can be eradicated everywhere; it is rooted in a human nature that cannot be changed, only contained. Bush and Rice's religious views, and the President's faith in American military power, may lead them to believe human nature can be universally cleansed to suit their idealism, but all of recorded history is on the side of Acheson and the partners.

“If you're relativist about right and wrong, then you can't lead,” Rice told the Georgetown audience in her question and answer session. That axiom indeed served Bush well in winning elections by overly simplifying security issues. But it became an albatross around the neck of U.S. diplomacy when the President bragged he would call evil by its proper name, proclaimed Iran and North Korea as parts of the Axis of Evil – and now, with Iraq in near civil war and U.S. strategic options disappearing, he finds it necessary to bargain with the Iranians to prevent civil war in Iraq and essentially turn the North Koreans over to China and South Korea who have quite a different approach to Kim Il Sung's regime than does, or did, Bush. Rice's remarks contain the kind of good/evil dichotomy that many Americans love to hear, but such a dichotomy has little to do with the world they have to deal with in 2006. Evil exists, but the lesson of the past three years leads to the conclusion that the evil of terrorism should have been dealt with not by holding elections or deploying U.S. Marine divisions in Iraq. It could have been better dealt with, as Professor Michael Howard argued in a remarkable (and remarkably ignored) article in the January/February 2002 *Foreign Affairs*, by covert, combined intelligence operations directed against terrorist cells. Among other implications, Howard's recommendation could have led to the killing or capture of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri (who has been linked to recent bombings in Europe) in Tora Bora during late 2001-2002, instead of pulling out the U.S. Special Forces and covert agents who were pursuing him and sending them to Iraq. The worst possible tactic, Howard warned, would be war (especially, one assumed, a virtually go-it-alone conflict falsely labeled a preemptive war) against an Islamic nation-state that would generate more jihadists than it eliminated.

Rice's two major proposals, spreading democratic regimes and forming new partnerships to do it, are contradictory. There is no obvious interest in Europe, Japan, or other U.S. allies to embark on a Wilsonian mission to the democratically deprived. A notable exception to this reluctance is Poland's deep involvement along with Washington's in the Ukrainian and Georgian regime changes. Democratizing Iraq, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Pakistan, to mention only some of the more important players in a broad region profoundly destabilized by the Iraq war, has drawn considerably less interest from Rice's hoped-for partners.

She gives away the central weakness of this “transformational diplomacy” by her use of history. At Georgetown Rice several times mentioned

the rebuilding of Germany and Japan between 1945 and 1951 as models for future regime changes. As some people tried to point out in the months before the invasion of Iraq (when the German and Japanese models were loudly proclaimed as universals by the neoconservatives and their then allies in the media), the experiences in Germany and Japan are the exceptions that prove the rule. Rebuilding worked in those two instances because of uniquely favorable circumstances: homogeneous populations, reliable military security, legitimate local administrators through whom the occupiers could work, legitimacy brought by allies who cooperated (sometimes unhappily) with Washington, and a full U.S. treasury used by officials willing to commit billions of dollars up front. These uniquely favorable circumstances stand in striking contrast to those found in all subsequent U.S. wars down to and including Iraq and Afghanistan. Rice noticeably never mentions Vietnam, that great effort of U.S. nation-building in the half-century after 1951, nor does she note the repeated failures of American attempts to impose stable democracies (teaching them how to elect good men, in Woodrow Wilson's instructive words), in the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, Cuba, and the Philippines over the past 120 years.

Americans have repeatedly tried Rice's "transformational diplomacy" and it has failed. Redoubling an effort based on bad history and false assumptions will not change the outcome. Nor will it be changed by Rice's other proposal at Georgetown: to increase rapidly the number of Foreign Service Officers and relocate them from traditional postings to the newly contested areas where culture clashes and terrorists breed. Such a turn would be welcome if policies were reconsidered and many billions of dollars more made available. But as Karen Hughes, among others, learned on her trip to the Middle East in late 2005, old U.S. policies delivered even with the smoothest of Madison Avenue's phrases get nowhere with local audiences. And Bush's devotion to tax cuts, along with huge deficits, make the scope of Rice's proposal a pipe dream rather than a budget line. On this issue Bush has made his decision: he prefers K Street and the interests it represents over C Street and its State Department. This has to be "the work of a generation," Rice declared. True, but if any of its goals are to be realized, the work will have to begin with the generation that follows the Bush administration.

Rice's Georgetown speech is less a movement back to the realism and multilateralism exemplified by her old mentor, Brent Scowcroft, than it is a repackaging of failed neoconservative policies that seeks to disguise regime change with the rhetoric of Wilsonian democracy, and that hides a lack of actual multilateralism (and badly needed legitimacy) with such misleading phrases as "coalition of the willing," or, in this case, "partnership." If the second Bush administration does understand the historic mistakes made by the first Bush administration, it cannot be proved by Rice's appearance at Georgetown. Acheson advocated the Marshall Plan and NATO. In stark contrast, Rice advocates nothing that might institutionalize "partnership." She offers only the suggestion that the United States "localize our diplomatic posture" and create more "virtual presence posts" in which American diplomats can exchange computer messages with the target audience. It is not a bad idea, just irrelevant to the need for rethinking and radically readjusting U.S. foreign policy. To rephrase, the Rice doctrine revealed at Georgetown never confronts the administration's failed assumptions about human nature, spreading Wilsonian democracy, and what true partnership with allies should mean.

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