

# THE RICE DOCTRINE

CONDOLEEZZA RICE HAS THE OPPORTUNITY TO RESTORE REALISM IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY. THE ALTERNATIVE COULD PROVE RUINOUS.

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BY CHRISTOPHER PREBLE

**T**he departure of Colin Powell as Secretary of State marks the formal end of the Powell Doctrine. That doctrine, originally attributed to Caspar Weinberger, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Defense, called for the United States to engage in foreign military interventions only when there was broad, bipartisan support for the use of force. The force was to be deployed with a clear, obtainable objective and applied massively so as to easily overwhelm any potential adversaries. The military was expected to accomplish its goals quickly, and then leave.

The series of hurdles that would have to be cleared under the Powell Doctrine in order to deploy such power were often seen as an attempt to discourage political elites from resorting to the use of force in a reckless or haphazard way. Critics interpreted Powell's warnings about the limits of American power as an effort to unduly constrain civilian policy-makers. This frustration was perhaps best encapsulated in Madeleine Albright's complaint, as Powell recorded in his memoir *My American Journey*, "What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?"

The Clinton administration failed to silence Colin

Powell, but the precepts of his doctrine did not deter Clinton from sending the military on missions to far-flung places with little strategic or economic relevance. Many of these missions also lacked widespread popular support or a clear exit strategy (for example, Somalia, 1993, Kosovo, 1999).

The Bush administration tried a different approach toward Powell. From his position within the Bush inner circle, Powell failed to dissuade the president from launching an ill-considered invasion of Iraq. His warnings that America would "own" Iraq if it "broke" Iraq were eerily similar to George Herbert Walker Bush's reasoning for not seeking to topple Hussein in 1991. In his memoirs, Bush Senior warned that there was no viable "exit strategy" and that, by invading Iraq, the United States would have been seen as "an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land."

It is unclear whether Condoleezza Rice appreciates the lessons of Iraq, both those from 1991 and those that the country is still learning from the current invasion and occupation. What is clear, however, is that an overly ambitious foreign policy, such as that articulated in the Bush national security strategy, is unsustainable. If Rice is not already acutely aware of this fact, she soon will be.

**An Ambitious, Amorphous Strategy**

For all intents and purposes, the Rice Doctrine is the Bush Doctrine, an ambitious and amorphous strategy that is perhaps best summarized in a single passage from the National Security Strategy of 2002. The aim of U.S. foreign policy, the document declares, is to “help make the world not just safer, but better.” Implied, but left unsaid, is that the United States will decide what is better. In practice, U.S. policy-makers operate on the presumption that the United States is entitled to take action against

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regimes that do not treat their people humanely — even if such states do not pose a threat to the United States.

This policy stance is not dramatically different from those of previous administrations, both Republican and Democratic. A broad, bipartisan consensus has emerged since the end of the Cold War, based on the belief that the existence of American power obligates the United States to take action on a global scale.

Consider, for example, the precedent set by the Clinton administration in the Balkans. Various voices on both the left and right of the political spectrum urged Clinton to wage war against the Serbs. A series of NATO-sanctioned air attacks, which resulted in an estimated 1,500 civilian deaths, were couched in strictly humanitarian terms. The military and diplomatic pressure on Slobodan Milosevic’s government was deemed necessary to avert an even greater human tragedy.

The humanitarian aspects of the Balkan interventions pose a special challenge to many of the current critics of the Bush Doctrine, because many of them criticized a war



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against a sovereign country that posed little if any threat to the United States (e.g., Iraq, circa 2003) yet were fully supportive of attacks against another country that posed absolutely no threat to the U.S. (Yugoslavia, circa 1999).

Many Americans are committed to the principle of humanitarian intervention. They see war as a necessary evil, but they also see the U.S. military as an effective tool for promoting change abroad. They are less clear about the true costs of such interventions. Accordingly, although there is popular support for deploying U.S. military personnel to places, and in ways, that are not directly related to defending vital interests, there is precious little support for paying the costs for these operations. If Rice pushes the Bush Doctrine to its logical conclusions, and makes good on her own pledge to transform the Middle East, she will both test the patience of the American people and further arouse the ire of those in the region who prefer to be left alone.

### **An Instinctive Realist?**

The Bush administration, we now know, is not content to leave well enough alone. A standard line in the president's speeches contends that the spread of democracy around the globe is a national security concern for the United States because terrorism cannot flourish within democracies. Undemocratic regimes, therefore, are legitimate targets for overthrow.

Rice herself has become a leading advocate for this position. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post* in August 2003, Rice called for a long-term commitment for transforming the Middle East, similar to that made toward Europe in the post-World War II era, to close the "freedom deficit" that contributes to hopelessness and despair in the region.

Rice argued that Hussein's Iraq posed a threat to the United States, and his removal from power was warranted on those grounds. At the same time, however, Rice echoed President Bush in arguing that a just and humane Iraqi government, one "built upon democratic principles," could become a linchpin for transforming the entire region, much as a democratic Germany was at the center of Europe's revival following World War II.

This worldview is all the more remarkable given that Rice cut her intellectual teeth studying the Soviet Union and the dynamics of the Cold War. In the context of that great struggle, ideology was important but secondary to the preservation of U.S. security. Peripheral concerns were routinely ignored, and tacit alliances cut with unde-

mocratic tyrants, to advance perceived U.S. interests.

Following the end of the Cold War, however, the foreign policy coalition within the Republican Party cracked and broke apart. As Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke explain in their recent book, *America Alone: The Neoconservatives and the Global Order*, realists and neo-conservatives waged an ideological battle in the 1990s, both seeking to claim credit for the peaceful end of the Cold War, and to craft a narrative that reflected most favorably on their ideology.

For a while, Condoleezza Rice seemed content to side with the realists. She was openly disdainful of the types of military operations that would divert the focus of U.S. forces away from defending U.S. national interests. She was particularly scornful of the use of the American military for nation-building, famously declaring at one point that it was not the business of the 82nd Airborne to escort schoolchildren to kindergarten.

Rice's initial instincts were sound, but she erred in believing that the U.S. military could restrict itself to war-fighting, with minimal post-conflict obligations. We have learned in Iraq that our allies are not content to assume responsibility for cleaning up after us. But a foreign policy organized around the principle of destroying illiberal governments by force as a means for improving American security is flawed on at least two other levels.

First, even the "cleanest" wars that produce the smallest possible number of casualties, and thus require a minimal level of post-conflict stabilization, can only perform the first of two tasks necessary for democratization to take hold. Brute force may succeed in removing tyrants from power, but cannot teach people to "elect good men," as Woodrow Wilson declared he was going to do, starting with his invasion of Veracruz, Mexico, in 1914.

Second, any military intervention, even when practiced with the precision and skill of the U.S. military, involves killing. Such killing can never be limited solely to the supporters of the regime that is being punished, particularly given that so many of these regimes force people to serve the state against their will. Each victim of this violence leaves behind a legacy of bitterness: parents, spouses, children, friends — few of whom may have actively supported the former regime, but all of whom may well forget the noble intentions of the invading force.

### **The Wages of Pre-emption**

The limits of American power have been obscured by the euphoria of America's post-Cold War "unipolar

moment.” Since Sept. 11, 2001, the debate has turned on whether the United States must maintain a dominant position throughout the globe in order for Americans to be safe and secure here at home. The Bush administration has succeeded in persuading the public that American security is threatened by the existence of undemocratic regimes. Accordingly, pre-emptive military action against such regimes is warranted, even if those nations pose no direct threat to American security.

The perception that autocracy leads to global instability, which, in turn, threatens the United States, has dramatically lowered the threshold governing the use of force. As stated in the Bush administration’s National Security Strategy, the doctrine of pre-emption — more accurately described as prevention — holds that America “will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed.” But if threats to the United States are to be pre-empted, it is not immediately clear how grave they are, or might have been. Who decides which future or potential threat is most urgent? Why pre-empt Iraq but not North Korea? What about Iran? Syria? Pakistan? In the end America may find itself paradoxically encouraging world instability by attempting to control the internal affairs of countries that have neither the means, nor the inclination, to seriously disrupt American security.

The preventive war aspects of the Bush-Rice Doctrine are inherently dismissive of the continued value of deterrence. Again, given Rice’s academic experience during the Cold War — when the brutally hostile, nuclear-armed, undemocratic regimes of the Soviet Union, and later China, were prevented from ever attacking the United States, or any of our major allies, solely by dint of our threat to retaliate if they did so — this is strange. It is doubly striking that Rice herself, as late as January 2000, believed that deterrence was the best means for dealing with Saddam Hussein. Rogue states, she explained in *Foreign Affairs*, might develop WMD, but they must understand that such weapons could never be used, because to do so would “bring national obliteration.”

The trauma of 9/11 did nothing to alter this central reality, but it should have focused our attention on the most pressing threats to national security. Deterrence still works against state actors, including even bizarre tyrants like North Korea’s Kim Jong Il. Deterrence is manifestly incapable of preventing non-state actors such as al-Qaida from perpetrating acts of terrorism.

By calling for the removal of undemocratic regimes,

the Bush administration has set a very dangerous standard governing the use of force, one that threatens to replace undemocratic regimes with undemocratic non-state actors operating within the chaos of post-war environments.

### **Theory into Practice**

Rice will be responsible for translating the Bush administration’s commitment to the transformational effect of democracy into practical policies. She will also be responsible for explaining these policies to her counterparts abroad. She may ultimately be more successful than President Bush has been, and, if she is, it may be more a function of style than of substance. Many outsiders look upon the president as a stubborn unilateralist who doesn’t care what others think. It will now be up to her to convince the world that we do care, even if we don’t. This is the very essence of diplomacy.

Still, her task is complicated by the fact that an interventionist America is viewed with suspicion and fear abroad. Many foreign governments worry that the United States does not intend to be tied down by treaties, or beholden to multilateral institutions, if vital U.S. interests are at stake. Because the United States spent most of the past 60 years defending others, particularly democratic states in Europe and Asia, these practices contributed to the mistaken notion that the United States would always subsume even its own national interest in the defense of an abstract greater global good. The concern around the world today is not that the United States acts unilaterally, but rather that such actions, inadvertently or inevitably, will someday threaten the very nations that this power was once used to protect.

In a speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in June 2003, Rice seemed not to comprehend the level of international unease toward U.S. power. “Power in the service of freedom is to be welcomed,” she explained, “and powers that share a commitment to freedom can — and must — make common cause against freedom’s enemies.” As the events of the past two years attest, the world does not work that way. Rice’s good intentions will not be sufficient to ease international concerns about unfettered American power.

### **The Central Challenge**

In her article in *Foreign Affairs*, published in early 2000, Rice castigated the Clinton administration for its

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peripatetic foreign adventures. She called instead for “a disciplined and consistent foreign policy that separates the important from the trivial.” “It takes courage,” she went on to say, “to set priorities because doing so is an admission that American foreign policy cannot be all things to all people.”

Indeed, it cannot. As Secretary of State, she will be better placed than ever before to make good on her earlier rhetoric.

In this context, the logic of humanitarian military intervention, combined with the related premise of promoting democracy by force of arms, poses the central challenge for Rice in her new role. As Secretary of State, Rice must either prioritize America’s strategic interests and aims, coddling some dictators while confronting others, which will open her and the Bush administration to charges of hypocrisy; or she will make good on the Bush administration’s implicit pledge to support democratic movements anywhere in the world, which will lead to imperial overstretch and ruin for the United States.

The just-completed presidential campaign did not prompt the fundamental debate concerning the object and direction of U.S. foreign policy that we should have had in this country soon after the end of the Cold War. Must we rid the world of brutal dictators, invading and occupying sovereign states solely on the grounds of what the leaders of these countries do to their people? If the answer is yes, that we do have an obligation to liberate all of the oppressed, that we must remove or destroy all undemocratic governments (not just the ones that are not useful to us), and remain in place until a liberal democracy takes root, then we have a very long, hard fight ahead of us.

There are alternatives, however. If any single person were capable of refocusing the president’s attention, and returning U.S. foreign policy to its realist roots, Rice is that person. If she will not or cannot do that, she will bear the burdens of selling a grandiose foreign policy to an increasingly cautious and skeptical public. And she will share the blame, with the other members of the Bush foreign policy team, if the policy goes awry. ■

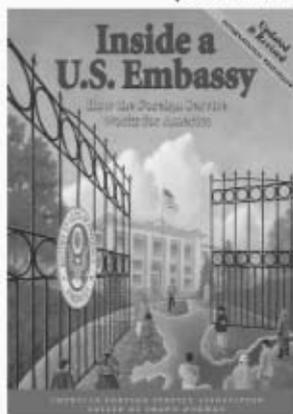
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