

More than a Few Campaign Stops

How Rice Has Changed the Role of National Security Adviser

by Ivo Daalder and Mac Destler

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In making the rounds to give speeches in support of President Bush's foreign policy, Condoleezza Rice continues, in disturbing ways, to redefine the role of the national security adviser. Contrary to the advice of her mentor, former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, who in 2001 admonished that the adviser should be "seen occasionally and heard even less," she has become the most publicly visible holder of this office since Henry Kissinger.

Rice spent much of September and October on the road, with talks made or scheduled in the battleground states of Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Washington, and Michigan. None of her predecessors, Kissinger included, was involved this way in presidential campaign politics. Of those who filled her job in the past quarter century, none gave more than two foreign policy speeches during the two months prior to a presidential election. And those talks were given in traditional venues in New York and Washington.

This change has been part of a broader pattern. Over the past four years, Rice has become a principal administration spokesperson on the national stage. The number of her appearances on the Sunday morning talk shows is comparable to that of Secretary of State Colin Powell (84 vs. 102 since January 2001). By contrast, the great majority of her predecessors, who served presidents from Kennedy through Clinton, appeared once or twice a year on the Sunday shows. The two exceptions were Scowcroft (who was interviewed 35 times during the first Bush administration) and Sandy Berger (who appeared 27 times during Clinton's second term) — still a fraction of Rice's which averaged every two weeks.

She has also been atypically active diplomatically. Not since Kissinger's secret missions to China and elsewhere has a national security adviser traveled so much for diplomacy. In August 2001, Rice visited Moscow accompanied by various Cabinet officials — but not Secretary Powell, who had yet to make his first visit to Russia. Last year, President Bush appointed Rice as "his personal representative" for the Middle East peace process, bypassing the secretary of state who traditionally performs this role. And earlier this year Rice traveled to East Asia for state-like visits in China, South Korea, and Japan.

Her predecessors traveled mainly in exceptional circumstances, to communicate urgent presidential concerns. Scowcroft flew to Beijing in 1989 to prevent a rupture in US-Chinese relations after Tianamen Square. Anthony Lake twice went to Europe to convince NATO allies of the need for a common strategy to end the war in Bosnia. And Berger flew to Moscow in 2000 to determine whether a deal on missile defense was possible.

All of Rice's activity would be of secondary importance had it not undercut her ability to do her primary job. The traditional separation from overt partisan politics helps foreign policymakers

maintain credibility, which is why secretaries of state and defense do not normally engage in political activity. (Neither Powell nor Rumsfeld attended the Republican National Convention in New York this year.) Their interlocutors need to know that their work reflects national, not partisan interests.

The gravest consequence, however, has been the adverse impact on policy. Time spent preparing for and engaging in public activity is time not spent on the job only the national security adviser can do — managing the process by which effective foreign policy is made. This function is particularly critical when an administration is as internally divided as the current one.

Unfortunately, this process broke down at crucial points over the past four years. Prior to 9/11, Rice failed to push for a coordinated, government-wide response to growing indications of a pending terrorist attack. After 9/11, the NSC process failed to examine the opportunity costs of going to war against Iraq — including the costs of diverting resources, attention and energy away from the real and growing nuclear threats in North Korea and Iran and the pursuit of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and beyond.

And once Bush decided on war, the NSC failed to ensure that the postwar strategy for Iraq would consider all possible contingencies and engage all those within the U.S. government that would have to be involved in ensuring its success. Instead, postwar strategy was delegated to a group of Pentagon ideologues. The cost of their monumental mismanagement is being paid every day in American—and Iraqi—blood.

In defending her recent speaking engagements, Rice's spokesman explained that "at the risk of stating the obvious, part of the job today of national security adviser is to discuss our nation's national security policy." Perhaps — but never at the expense of maintaining a well-functioning national security policymaking process.

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