



Rice Goal: Keep the World From Getting Any Worse

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WASHINGTON — It is hard not to root for Condoleezza Rice to succeed. After all, if this intelligent, personable African-American woman excels as the nation's top diplomat, U.S. interests and its reputation are advanced throughout the world.

There are also personal reasons: I long have had friendly relations with Rice. More to the point, we both grew up in the segregated South, drawing from that experience many of the same global lessons about politics and the ability of people to change for the better.

Finally, Rice has to shoulder the burden of being secretary of state for a president whose attention to world affairs is episodic at best and who does not believe in the value of sustained diplomacy — what George Shultz calls the “gardening” tasks of foreign policy. She has always been out on a long limb which events have now conspired to snap.

The meager foreign policy legacy she has been nurturing is undermined — perhaps fatally — by Russia's invasion of Georgia and its threatening aftermath, which Rice has helped exacerbate. She has by turn seemed ineffective, petulant and overly tactical in responding to an unexpected crisis sparked by the Kremlin — the subject of her professional expertise.

History displays its wicked sense of irony: With Rice's urging, George W. Bush began his presidency deliberately minimizing Russia's importance as a U.S. partner. Driving home Moscow's weakness to Vladimir Putin would make him more pliable when Bush needed cooperation, it was thought. It has not worked out that way.

Russia's coup de grace to Bush's world leadership ambitions is ironic in another way: Bush is the first president to appoint two Cabinet members who hold doctorates in Soviet studies. The other Kremlin expert is Defense Secretary Robert Gates, a relative latecomer to the administration who now appears to have eclipsed Rice as a steady, strategic influence on Russian policy.

U.S. officials acknowledge that there was a serious intelligence failure in the initial phase of the Caucasus crisis, which began on Aug. 8 when Georgian troops poured into the disputed enclave of South Ossetia and Russia responded with its own brutal invasion.

Despite the presence of U.S. military trainers in Georgia and intelligence satellites overhead, the administration professes that it was shocked by the timing and scope of both actions. “It took us a few days to shift some assets and get a clearer picture of what was actually going on,” said one official who declined to elaborate.

Initial reports that Russian troops were slaughtering Georgian civilians wantonly and imposing a naval and air blockade fueled a sharp interagency debate in Washington. Rice's State Department pushed for rapid dispatch of U.S. ships and aircraft to signal American resolve, while Gates and the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged restraint until more reliable information became available, according to U.S. and foreign officials.

Gates was also on the telephone to his Russian and Georgian counterparts urging restraint on them,

while Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was ducking calls from Rice. When Rice and Lavrov spoke on Aug. 10, it was a confrontational conversation characteristic of the prickly relationship the two have established, according to Russian and U.S. accounts.

The two diplomats have continued to exchange barbs in public, and Rice flew to Warsaw last week to give high visibility to the signing of a U.S.-Polish missile defense agreement that was a slap back at the Russians. In the weeks leading up to the Aug. 8 clashes, State Department officials were talking to allied diplomats about the need to be ready to “punish” Russia if it took action against Georgia. That mind-set was said to reflect Rice’s.

Even admirers have become concerned that Rice sees this crisis in intensely personal terms that could blur her policy judgments. “Condi has dealt with Moscow for so long as an academic that she has adopted a very mechanical view of the kind of relations we should have,” says one associate.

In moving from the White House to State, Rice set an ambitious agenda for Bush’s second term. But her hopes for a Middle East peace settlement have foundered on the shoals of Palestinian and Israeli politics and Bush’s disinterest. Her openings toward North Korea and Iran have helped set the stage for progress, but it will not come before a new administration takes office — if then.

Rice argued to her senior staff recently that helping things not get worse is a worthwhile endeavor. Until Georgia exploded, it was a succinct, defensible assessment of her tenure as secretary of state.

Hoagland’s columns, including those not published in the Journal, can be read at abqjournal.com/opinion — look for the syndicated columnist link. Copyright, Washington Post Writers Group; e-mail: jimhoagland@washpost.com

