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

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.

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 by 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.

Walter LaFeber is the Tisch University Professor at Cornell, and author of America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-2002. He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted March 2, 2006.