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The Point Guard

Susan Rice calls the plays for Barack Obama at the United Nations. Could she lead his foreign-policy team next? Should she?

BY JAMES TRAUB | SEPT/OCT 2012



Throughout the second week of March 2011, the vastly outgunned rebel forces in Libya fell back before an onslaught by troops loyal to Muammar al-Qaddafi. In the United Nations Security Council, Britain and France lobbied desperately for a resolution authorizing the establishment of a no-fly zone. But U.S. President Barack Obama, intent on withdrawing from the two Middle Eastern wars he had inherited, seemed loath to act, and his U.N. ambassador, the blunt and outspoken Susan Rice, stayed uncharacteristically quiet on the sidelines, sending her deputy to key council meetings and questioning whether a no-fly zone would ever work. "She was blocking, blocking, blocking, standing on the brakes on Libya," one Security Council diplomat recalls.



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As an official at the National Security Council under President Bill Clinton, Rice had lived through the horrendous American failure to stop the genocide in Rwanda, and later, as a fellow at the Brookings Institution, she had called for military intervention to stop atrocities in Darfur. But senior Obama administration officials, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Thomas Donilon, the national security advisor, were insisting that Libya was not strategically vital and advised the president to steer clear of another war. Despite their opposition and her own public stance, Rice agitated with the White House in favor of intervention in Libya, several aides told me. She also privately instructed her staff in New York to ready a resolution authorizing tough new sanctions and the use of force. She told neither fellow diplomats nor officials in Washington about the draft.

On Saturday, March 12, the Arab League called for military action, as Rice had been warning her colleagues it would. But it was obvious that a no-fly zone, by itself, would not stop Qaddafi's troops. When Obama gathered his principals for a decisive meeting that Tuesday night, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, having spoken to

Arab allies, was able to promise that some Arab countries would join a more robust campaign to bomb Libyan targets. Rice, on a secure video link in New York, said she thought she could move such a resolution through the council. The way Ben Rhodes, a deputy national security advisor, recalls it, Rice said that "she was going to call people's bluff" by proposing much more powerful military action than even France and Britain had sought. Just before the meeting, Rice had called key ambassadors to say the United States would not endorse a no-fly zone. But three hours later she called again to say the United States would push for a bombing campaign. Some of America's allies were so bewildered by the abrupt turnaround that they were half-convinced Washington was issuing impossible demands in order to cover its unwillingness to act.

The next morning, Rice took her resolution out of the drawer and introduced it at the Security Council. "I confess," she told me recently, "that I made something of a dramatic presentation." Rice normally shuns theatricality. Now, however, she told the council that Libya presented "as imminent and urgent a situation as this council has ever faced." Rice was brutally explicit. "I don't want to hear six months from now that we did a bait-and-switch on you people," she said. "It's airstrikes; it's aggressive use of air power." The presentation, a council diplomat recalled, produced stunned silence; it was itself a sort of aerial assault. And it worked. The next day, March 17, the Security Council voted 10-0, with five abstentions, to take "all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians.

The Libya resolution was a major achievement for Rice and a vindication of the Obama administration's commitment to multilateral institutions, above all the United Nations. Obama had concluded that stopping the violence was not a matter of core national security interests and had instructed Rice to tell the Security Council that the United States would not act at all absent council authorization. "It's up to you to decide," Rice told her colleagues. This reticence would later be stigmatized as "leading from behind," but perhaps it's better understood as leading without wishing to be seen as taking the lead -- a new model of multilateralism suitable to a post-hegemonic era. And because the intervention ultimately succeeded, it offered hope that the U.N. might finally become the authorizing agency for the "responsibility to protect," the doctrine stipulating that states have a duty to prevent or halt mass atrocities even outside their borders.

The multilateralist euphoria lasted all of a few weeks. By Oct. 4, Russia and China blocked even a mild resolution criticizing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who was brutalizing his own citizens as grossly as Qaddafi had. That was about 17,000 fatalities ago. The council's paralysis on Syria soon made Obama's strategic deference look like timidity, especially as months of ineffective Security Council diplomacy dragged on; this time, there would be no Susan Rice maneuver to break the logjam. Richard Williamson, one of "subcontracting" U.S. policy to former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, whose U.N.-backed peace plan dissolved amid a whirlwind of violence. The feeble half-measures on Syria offer a reminder of the inherent limitations of the Security Council, where the great powers have a veto and are prepared to wield it. They also demonstrate one of the organization's unspoken purposes: If you don't want to act or you don't know how to act, you can always blame it on the Security Council. Libya, as Rice herself would put it, was a "data point," not a "trend."

DURING THE 2008 presidential campaign, Obama sometimes said, "I want to stand in front of the U.N. and say, 'America is back!'" He meant not only that under a President Obama the United States would take the United Nations seriously again, but that the United Nations would be the right place from which to proclaim a new policy of "engagement" with institutions, with adversaries, and even with allies after eight years of what Obama saw as George W. Bush's unilateral high-handedness, not least his failure to secure Security Council approval for the Iraq war. Obama argued that transnational problems -- climate change, nuclear proliferation, epidemic disease -- could only be solved in multilateral bodies. He also thought that healing the breach at the U.N. and elsewhere had become a national security imperative. "The image of the U.S. was always our most important export," he told me in the summer of 2007, "and underwrote a lot of our security." Obama made, in effect, a hard-nosed case for what might otherwise be seen as a dangerously soft-nosed policy.

Bush had sent a message to the U.N. in 2005 when he appointed as ambassador John Bolton, who had publicly argued that the United States should not be bound by international law and had famously said that the U.N. could lose 10 floors of its 38-story headquarters without consequence. Obama sent a different kind of message

with Rice, who had written her doctoral dissertation on U.N. peacekeeping, worked with the U.N. in the Clinton administration, and strongly advocated Security Council action in a range of conflict areas. Rice was as stubborn a figure as Bolton, but with a radically different set of beliefs.

Rice, however, had not wanted to be U.N. ambassador. She had taken a huge risk with a promising career when she decided in 2007 to support Obama over his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton. Rice had served all eight years of Bill Clinton's presidency, first on the National Security Council staff and then as assistant secretary of state for African affairs. But when Obama decided to seek the presidency, Rice threw in her lot with him because, unlike Hillary Clinton, he had opposed the war in Iraq. What's more, as she told me at the time, she thought that Obama (and not Clinton) had a "21st-century view of the world." Rice became a leader of Obama's foreign-policy team and his most important surrogate on foreign affairs; early in the campaign, they emailed and spoke constantly. When Obama won, Rice hoped to be national security advisor, or at least deputy. But Obama was a young black man with no foreign-policy experience; in Gen. James Jones, his first national security advisor, he chose an older, tall, and craggy white man with many stars on his shoulders. Rice got the United Nations.

Rice now has, in effect, two separate jobs: As U.N. ambassador, she reports to the secretary of state and works with the State Department's Bureau of International Organization Affairs; as a member of the cabinet she reports to the president. In the Obama administration, foreign policy is made by the White House and carried out by the State Department, and Rice has hitched herself almost wholly to the former. This has contributed to her cool, if perfectly correct, relationship with Secretary Clinton, as has her primal act of rebellion in 2007. A "black belt in bureaucracy," as an admiring White House official says, Rice has constituted her office as a kind of shadow cabinet department. She often dispatches mid-level officials to the State Department to convey her wishes on subjects remote from her portfolio. One former administration official told me, "Susan's complete insistence on making the U.S. [mission to the] U.N. her own thing" has, unsurprisingly, led to friction with the State Department.

Rice was a prodigy; she had become an assistant secretary of state at the tender age of 32, and she has the semisocialized quality of many people who have known nothing but success. She had a "fearsome reputation" as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford University, says Elizabeth Cousens, who roomed with her then and later served as Rice's chief policy advisor at the United Nations. Cousens says that people who could only see Rice's argumentativeness and single-minded passion, rather than her kindness and intense loyalty, were baffled at their close friendship. Cousens was also awestruck by her friend's methodical intelligence: To write her dissertation, Rice placed hundreds of index cards on the floor and simply picked up each card as she wrote her way through.

As a very young official in the Clinton administration, Rice's confrontations were legend. She and Richard Holbrooke, who had the job she holds now in 1999 and 2000, squared off over policy toward Africa, and Rice is said to have told Holbrooke to screw himself, but in less gentle language, in the White House Situation Room. When I made the mistake of interrupting her once, she cried, "Let me finish!" And when, toward the end of one of our interviews, her assistant entered and silently handed her a card, Rice glanced at it and said, "I *know* what time it is. Thank you."

Washington is full of people who are very self-confident and very impatient, people who seem to be clad in sandpaper. Almost all, however, are white men; Rice is one of the few black women who belong to this particular club, and her membership can be seen as a sign that, at least in the elite world she has always occupied, neither race nor gender need be defining. Rice's father, the son of a South Carolina preacher, got a Ph.D. in economics from the University of California/Berkeley, taught at Cornell University, and moved to Washington before becoming a governor of the Federal Reserve. Rice's mother graduated from Radcliffe College and worked as an education researcher. Rice's father played tennis on Sundays with Joseph Albright, the husband of future Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and then the families would have lunch together. The young Susan went to National Cathedral School, where she was valedictorian, school president, and, at 5'3", point guard on the basketball team. Then she went to Stanford University and Oxford. Her story somehow mingles the self-confidence of the insider with the relentless drive, the sharp edge, even the distrustfulness, of the outsider. People born into privilege often have the gift of putting people at ease; Rice does not.

You might think that such an abrupt person would be ill-suited to diplomacy, but U.S. diplomats are expected to be blunt, and the position of power they occupy allows them to be. In fact, most of the diplomats with whom I spoke profess to like Rice. Hardeep Singh Puri, the U.N. ambassador from India, says, "Susan is easy to work with; there's no ambiguity. Most work around here gets done in informal conversation, and her style is well suited to that." What diplomats want most from a U.S. ambassador is the power to deliver what he or she promises. Here Rice is in a special category of her own, in no small part because of her close relationship to Obama. "When he sees her" outside the Oval Office, says a senior administration official, "he lights up." Several people suggested to me that she and the president share the experience of being black people who rose to the top of virtually all-white institutions, but Rice herself pooh-pooed the idea. What binds them, she told me, is age and a shared worldview. They also both love basketball and have children of about the same ages. (Rice's are 15 and 9.) Whatever the case, Obama clearly takes Rice's advice seriously. She was one of the few cabinet officers to be asked for input on his **June 2009 speech in Cairo**, and she is expected to weigh in on subjects far outside her ambit, like Afghanistan. Obama allows Rice a longer leash than most U.N. ambassadors -- a latitude that Rice has used to much effect.

WHEN RICE TOOK OVER as ambassador after eight years of Bush, the United Nations was in dire need of attention. The bitter feelings provoked by the debate over Iraq had faded, and the era of provocation had largely ended with Bolton's departure in late 2006. But Bush hadn't been terribly interested in using the institution, and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had proved to be an almost soporific figure. The U.N. felt increasingly marginal. So Rice and the administration ushered in a new era with a bang when Obama took office by vowing to pay the United Nations \$1 billion in back dues, which it did by the fall. Next, they tackled the confounding question of whether to join the U.N. Human Rights Council, something the Bush administration had refused to do. A number of senior officials at the State Department and the White House considered the organization incorrigible and worried that joining would make Obama look naive. The council was, as Tom Malinowski, Washington director for Human Rights Watch, puts it, "a place where good causes were delegitimized." Cuba and other serial human rights violators largely controlled the institution and blocked all attempts to censure any country save Israel.

But Rice and Clinton believed strongly that the new policy of engagement should not be, as Rice says, "a la carte." They argued that the United States could make the council better by participating. In March 2009, the White House agreed. And the risk has paid off. By taking part, the United States prevented Iran from also joining the council and even persuaded its members to appoint a special rapporteur to investigate the country's human rights record; the council has passed resolutions condemning violence in Libya and Syria, and it demanded an investigation into abuses allegedly committed by Sri Lanka in the 2009 war against Tamil rebels. As Malinowski says, "There's still a disproportionate focus on Israel, but it's also bashing a lot of countries that previously felt completely protected."

Then, at the annual meeting of the U.N. General Assembly in September 2009, Obama spent three days in New York to highlight America's renewed commitment to the institution -- seen as proof of Rice's capacity to "deliver" the president. He even agreed to chair a session of the Security Council, which no U.S. president had done before.

Rice and the White House used the session to advance the president's goal of moving toward a world without nuclear weapons, which he had articulated in Prague that year. After tough negotiations, Russia endorsed a text that called for strict controls on the export of nuclear materials and committed council members to treaties outlawing nuclear tests and the production of fissile material for weapons. Other states then fell into line. "Basically," says Brooke Anderson, Rice's former chief of staff, "we got the rest of the P5" -- the five permanent members of the Security Council (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States) -- "to raise their hands and endorse the Prague agenda." That agreement helped U.S. diplomats make headway at the five-year review conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty the following spring, and the U.S. willingness to take its own arms control obligations seriously helped Rice and the White House persuade reluctant countries to punish Iran for its illicit nuclear activities.

Rice spent the first six months of 2010 carrying out tense, tedious, and protracted negotiations on a resolution imposing harsh sanctions on Iran, which had been clandestinely building nuclear-enrichment facilities in

violation of nonproliferation rules. Russia, with its deep ties to Iran, was reluctant to toughen existing sanctions. China would not talk at all. Brazil and Turkey, says Rice, were conducting their own diplomatic bid to resolve the dispute (which the United States had not encouraged). Rice's aides say that she got down in the weeds of the resolution, battering her fellow diplomats with details of how Iran used foreign banks to obscure nuclear-related transactions. She was prepared to conduct her own foreign policy when necessary. When a fellow diplomat challenged her on a red-line issue, saying that Jones, the national security advisor, had laid out the administration's policy differently, Rice retorted, "I outrank General Jones." I asked the diplomat who recalled this tale whether he had been shocked. Not at all, he said. "It made us smile."

But issues as crucial to global security as Iran's nuclear program are ultimately settled well over an ambassador's head. China, for example, only joined the discussion after Obama pressed Chinese President Hu Jintao. Clinton also lobbied a range of foreign capitals. In late spring, the P5 plus Germany finally agreed on a resolution and presented it to the other members of the Security Council. In June 2010, the council passed **Resolution 1929**, imposing sanctions on Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, banning the sale to Iran of certain heavy weapons, and requiring states to inspect ships or planes heading to or from Iran if they suspected banned cargo was aboard.

The Iran resolution raised Rice's stock in the White House. "She got it done," says Michael McFaul, a National Security Council official who worked closely with her and now serves as ambassador to Russia. "That was giant, big, historic." Russia had agreed to measures it never would have accepted outside the U.N. framework. European allies were prepared to adopt tough sanctions of their own, including the embargo on purchases of Iranian oil that went into effect this July, because they were built on the legitimacy of council action. The measure also showed how the administration's multilateralism policy operated within its larger framework of "engagement": Russia was more inclined to work with the United States because of the administration's effort to "reset" relations (even if the reset wouldn't survive much beyond the Iran resolution). Other states came along in part because Obama, unlike Bush, had shown a willingness to work with Tehran.

Of course, for all the subtle diplomacy, Obama has not yet been any more successful than Bush was in actually stopping Iran's uranium-enrichment program. Multilateralism is a means to reduce friction among states, not a miracle cure -- a point that would be made painfully clear in Syria.

EVEN AS NATO PLANES roared over Libya in the spring of 2011, the Security Council struggled to respond when Assad's forces opened fire on peaceful protesters in Syria. Starting in May, the United States, France, and Britain pressed for a statement condemning the violence. Russia and China resisted. Then, as the death toll mounted into the thousands, the Western countries sought to craft a resolution threatening sanctions against the Assad regime. To ease passage, Britain and France watered down the resolution to the point where, Rice says, "It had become an embarrassment." Nevertheless, Russia and China vetoed the measure, and Lebanon and the big emerging states on the council -- Brazil, India, and South Africa -- voted against it.

What had happened? The Russians, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, complained that they had been betrayed on the Libya resolution, which had authorized force only to enforce a cease-fire -- not to overthrow Qaddafi's regime. This charge infuriates U.S. officials, who think that they could not have been more transparent. On the floor of the council, a visibly angry Rice declared, "This is not about Libya. That is a cheap ruse by those who would rather sell arms to the Syrian regime than stand with the Syrian people." Russia, of course, is Syria's chief arms supplier. One senior U.N. official, however, points out that Brazil, India, and South Africa have also complained of being misled on Libya and concludes that the institution is "paying the price in spades on Syria." India's Ambassador Puri has said bluntly that "the Libyan experience" turned many council members against coercive measures.

In January, the Arab League drew up a plan to ease Assad from power. The Obama administration sought the council's blessing for the plan, as a year earlier it had leveraged Arab opinion to gain support for the bombing campaign against Libya. In the first days of February, Russia's ambassador to the U.N., Vitaly Churkin, with whom Rice has a kind of cheerful frenemy relationship, seemed prepared to accept the resolution, but after a

meeting with Clinton, Lavrov **complained** that the document "left the door open to military intervention." Russia and China exercised their veto once again.

Annan briefly saved the international community from its humiliating inaction by proposing a peace plan that did not require Assad's departure and that Russia could thus embrace. In March, the council endorsed the Annan plan and agreed in April to send unarmed observers to Syria. Rice wasn't terribly enthusiastic but thought it was better than nothing, *saying*, "There is a risk it ends in more violence, which is why the last peaceful game in town is one worth pursuing, even if it's a low-probability game, which we readily admit it is." Annan himself conceded by early July that his low-probability gambit had failed. The United States, Britain, and France then submitted yet another resolution threatening sanctions if Syria did not comply with the terms of the Annan plan, and Russia and China vetoed that one too. Rice finally unloaded in front of the council's 15 members. "The Security Council has failed utterly in its most important task on its agenda this year. This is another dark day in Turtle Bay," *she said*. "The first two vetoes were very destructive. This veto is even more dangerous and deplorable."

Syria has arguably become the U.N.'s Waterloo, or at least its bridge too far. Russia has used the institution to protect a favored dictator. Countries like South Africa have peeked over the cliff of intervention and recoiled in dismay. No U.N. approval, so no action.

But in this case, the U.N. is more the scapegoat than the problem. After all, even if Russia and China endorsed a resolution threatening sanctions, Assad would be unlikely to call back his troops and relinquish power. Obama first called for Assad to step down fully a year ago but seems unwilling or unable to do more. And it seems doubtful that will change. Few if any senior officials inside the Obama administration favor the kind of military measures that might tip the balance between Assad and his opponents; a Libya-style assault against Syria could provoke sectarian warfare across the region. At a lunch for journalists I attended in May, Rice made it clear that she opposed airstrikes, humanitarian corridors, safe zones, or any of the other military fixes under discussion. Yet nothing short of such measures may dislodge Assad, at least not until after he has killed thousands more Syrians. This is a paradox that someone who believes strongly in the moral use of force might find tragic. But Rice does not resonate at such metaphysical frequencies. She is, she reminded me, a "pragmatist" and accepts the fact that what worked in Kosovo and Libya will not work in Syria.

OBAMA IS NO LONGER treated as the second coming, in the United States or anywhere else. He has not closed the Guantánamo Bay prison or ended many of his predecessor's more onerous counterterrorism policies. He has defended Israel almost as single-mindedly as Bush did. Obama is much less like a European social democrat than his global audience once thought: From the perspective of U.N. diplomats, he looks more like a pragmatic calculator of American national interests in the mold of the elder George Bush, and, when asked to name his favorite statesmen, Obama usually chooses "realists" like Brent Scowcroft and James Baker. Of course, that still puts him a long way from Mitt Romney, who at times has courted the folks who think the U.N. is coming to get them in black helicopters, as when he recently declared that he would not condone "turning to the United Nations to tell us how to raise our kids, or whether we can have the Second Amendment rights that our Constitution gave us."

What is true of Obama might be said even more explicitly of Rice. The U.N. ambassador has her boss's pragmatism without his gift of vision; she is a creature wholly of prose. "Susan is not about game-changing diplomacy," says a former administration official. "She approached the U.N. without much idealism, with a sort of reserve." Rice herself might not disagree. When I said that, like the president, she seemed to be an idealistic thinker with a highly practical streak, she shook her head. "'Idealistic' to me connotes believing in things or wanting things that are not achievable," she said. She prefers the word "principled."

Rice is held in high esteem in the place where it matters: the White House. One former administration official told me that at the outset of the administration, "the boys" -- deputy national security advisor Denis McDonough, an Obama confidant, and other senior officials -- "wanted her out of the White House -- out, out, out." If that was ever true, a current senior official insists ("Susan was one of the boys right from the beginning"), it almost certainly isn't now. With the exception of Syria, she has won every major battle she has

fought at the U.N., not just Iran and Libya, but resolutions imposing sanctions on North Korea, sending a robust peacekeeping force into Ivory Coast when it was torn by post-election conflict, and warding off, at least for the moment, a full-scale war between Sudan and the breakaway state of South Sudan. National Security Council senior staffer Samantha Power, a baseball fan, compares her to Mariano Rivera, the Yankee great who turns every close game into a win. When I told Rhodes that I had heard he was one of the early skeptics of Rice, he put me right. "I would walk through fire for Susan Rice," he said. "She may not be cuddly, but she's incredibly faithful and loyal and passionate on behalf of her friends and the people she's been through fights with." In the entertaining parlor game of "Who would be secretary of state in a hypothetical Obama second term?" Rice is now considered the leader, or perhaps tied with Donilon, though questions about his possible role in the recent disclosure of sensitive national security information to the *New York Times* could threaten his confirmability. (Handicappers now place both in front of Sen. John Kerry.) It's unclear that she'd be good at a job like that, though; her smile may be just a trifle too forced, her patience a bit too thin. A State Department official who has known her since the Clinton days says that though Rice is hard-driving, diligent, and effective, "There is a disconnect between that and wisdom." The president, a shrewd judge of character, may know this about her, but the fact that he trusts her may matter more.

Susan Rice is not to be denied. She has never faltered along the steep upward trajectory of her career. Some high-powered women have dropped out of the administration to tend to their families, and Rice says she is sympathetic to their plight; she just doesn't share it. At one point I asked Rice whether she had ever experienced a serious failure. She thought about it. No, she hadn't. "Some have tried to take me on," she murmured. Presumably, they lived to regret it.