

Why to Say No to Susan Rice

Exclusive: Key Republicans object to Susan Rice getting a promotion from UN ambassador to Secretary of State, citing her flawed account of the Benghazi assault. But a more legitimate concern is her lack of judgment on the Iraq War and other foreign policy decisions, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

President Barack Obama should ditch the idea of nominating U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice to be the next Secretary of State on substantive grounds, not because she may have knowingly or not fudged the truth about the attack on the poorly guarded CIA installation in Benghazi, Libya.

Rice's biggest disqualification is the fact that she has shown little willingness to challenge the frequently wrongheaded conventional wisdom of Official Washington, including on the critical question of invading Iraq in 2003. At that pivotal moment, Rice essentially went with the flow, rather than standing up for the principles of international law or exposing the pro-war deceptions.

In fall 2002, as President George W. Bush and his administration were pounding the drums for war, Rice wasn't exactly a profile in courage. A senior fellow at the centrist Brookings Institution, she echoed the neoconservative demands for "regime change" in Iraq and doubted the "need [for] a further [U.N. Security] Council resolution before we can enforce this and previous resolutions" on Iraq, according to a compilation of her Iraq War comments by the Institute for Public Accuracy.

In an NPR interview on Dec. 20, 2002, Rice joined the bellicose chorus, declaring: "It's clear that Iraq poses a major threat. It's clear that its weapons of mass destruction need to be dealt with forcefully, and that's the path we're on. I think the question becomes whether we can keep the diplomatic balls in the air and not drop any, even as we move forward, as we must, on the military side."

Rice also was wowed by Secretary of State Colin Powell's deceptive speech to the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003. The next day, again on NPR, Rice said, "I think he has proved that Iraq has these weapons and is hiding them, and I don't think many informed people doubted that."

After the U.S.-led invasion in March 2003, Rice foresaw an open-ended U.S. occupation of Iraq. In a Washington Post online forum, she declared, "'To

maximize our likelihood of success, the US is going to have to remain committed to and focused on reconstruction and rehabilitation of Iraq for many years to come. This administration and future ones will need to demonstrate a longer attention span than we have in Afghanistan, and we will have to embrace rather than evade the essential tasks of peacekeeping and nation building.”

Only later, when the Iraq War began going badly and especially after she became an adviser to Sen. Barack Obama’s presidential campaign, did Rice take a less hawkish position. She opposed President Bush’s troop “surge” in 2007, a stance in line with Obama’s anti-Iraq War posture. During Campaign 2008, she also mocked one of Sen. John McCain’s trips to Baghdad as “strolling around the market in a flak jacket.”

The Ambitious Staffer

In other words, Rice fits the mold more of an ambitious staffer ever mindful of the safe boundaries for permissible thought in Official Washington and eager to serve one’s political patron than of a courageous foreign policy thinker who can see around the corners to spot the actual threats looming for the United States and the world.

Though Rice’s defenders might say there is nothing unusual in an aspiring foreign policy operative following the consensus or the instructions of a superior, there are plenty of troubling examples of innocent people getting killed when careerism overwhelmed wisdom and judgment. For instance, in 2003, CIA Director George Tenet, a malleable former congressional staffer, helped pave the way for the disastrous Iraq War.

Ironically, Rice’s eagerness to play the Washington game also landed her in the middle of the current “scandal” over her statements regarding the Sept. 11, 2012, attacks on the U.S. mission in Benghazi which left four Americans dead, including U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens.

On Sept. 16, Rice appeared on five (count them) Sunday TV shows, adhering closely to the CIA-provided “talking points,” which cited the likelihood of a spontaneous protest preceding the violent assault but which alluded to the tenuousness of the evidence available at the time.

Blinded by the limelight, Rice seems to have blundered into the controversy, giving little thought to the possibility that she was being put out front by then-CIA Director David Petraeus and Obama’s counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan, who is the usual administration spokesman regarding terrorist attacks. Brennan immediately flew off to Libya on a fact-finding trip, leaving Rice in the unaccustomed role of ‘splaining the attack in Benghazi.

Rice also wasn't overly curious as to why Secretary of State Hillary Clinton begged off on grounds she was "not going to offer any hypothetical explanations."

Was Ambassador Rice too ambitious and/or too naive? For her it is a cruel irony that by letting her vision be blurred by the allure of five sets of klieg lights in one day, and the opportunity to embellish her persona for the top job at State, she has imperiled her own candidacy.

Loyal functionaries like Rice, with a penchant for doing whatever they are told do not expect to be mouse-trapped by their colleagues. But, if you can't see that kind of thing coming particularly when folks like Brennan and Petraeus are involved you should not expect to become Secretary of State.

Understanding Benghazi

It also might have been smart for Rice to have taken the trouble to learn what U.S. officials were doing in Benghazi. Did she know that, as House minority leader Nancy Pelosi has revealed, that the word "consulate" in the draft "talking points" was carefully changed to "mission"?

A prospective Secretary of State should know the difference. A "mission" is a group of officials abroad normally headed by a diplomat while a consulate is headed by a consul who normally handles commercial interests, serves the needs of citizens abroad and issues visas.

The difference between consulate and mission is more than semantic. Consulates, understandably, perform consular duties. Missions can do whatever. As my former CIA analyst colleague, Melvin A. Goodman pointed out in "[The Why Behind the Benghazi Attack](#)," the hidden reality in Benghazi was not the alleged deception by Rice or the inadequate security measures.

The key secret was that the U.S. government had transformed the Benghazi "mission" into an operational CIA base spying on and seeking to neutralize extremist militias operating in eastern Libya. Thus, the "mission" was an inviting target for attack. In a limited sense, one could say the primary security failure was in not adequately anticipating this risk.

The more significant point is that, because of the anger resulting from U.S. policy in the area and the CIA role in implementing it, there is great doubt that "missions" like the one in Benghazi can ever be protected from the kind of organized assault launched on Sept. 11, 2012. And that probably includes gigantic, fortified installations like the U.S. embassies in Baghdad and Kabul.

A month before the U.S. presidential election, House Government Affairs

Committee chair Rep. Darrell Issa, R-California, conducted a public hearing, in an attempt to prove that with adequate security measures the attack on the Benghazi "mission" could have been thwarted and American lives saved.

Issa's star witness, State Department Regional Security Officer Eric Nordstrom, joined others in bemoaning State's refusal to provide additional security (partly due to congressional refusal to appropriate all the requested funds).

But Nordstrom shot a wide hole in the notion that more security could have saved the day. A 14-year veteran of State's Diplomatic Security Service, Nordstrom said the kind of attack mounted in Benghazi could not have been prevented.

"Having an extra foot of wall, or an extra half-dozen guards or agents would not have enabled us to respond to that kind of assault," Nordstrom said. "The ferocity and intensity of the attack was nothing that we had seen in Libya, or that I had seen in my time in the Diplomatic Security Service." [See Consortiumnews.com's ["The Real Blame for Deaths in Libya."](#)]

Whether media pundits are conscious of this or not, the interminable focus on what Susan Rice said and when she said it, as well as the inadequate security, divert attention from what the CIA was doing in Benghazi. No Establishment figure or media pundit wants to focus on that. And, as Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, recently conceded, no politician wants to risk appearing reluctant to support covert action against "terrorism."

But a source with excellent access, so to speak, to former CIA Director David Petraeus, his biographer/mistress Paula Broadwell, said publicly on Oct. 26 that CIA was interrogating prisoners in Benghazi and that this may have been the reason the CIA base was so brutally attacked. More bizarre still, her comments were corroborated by Fox News!

If Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham were genuinely interested in what happened in Benghazi and why, would they not wish to look into that?

A C-Minus on Substance

President Obama has defended Rice against those who would "besmirch" her reputation, saying she "has done exemplary work. She has represented the United States and our interests in the United Nations with skill, professionalism, and toughness, and grace."

Obama also said she had "nothing to do with Benghazi." However, this does not appear to be entirely accurate. It is an open secret that Susan Rice, together with Hillary Clinton and Samantha Power, now ensconced at Obama's National Security Council, were big promoters of the so-called "responsibility to

protect” and thus acted as prime movers behind the U.S. excellent adventure in Libya.

The charitable explanation is that last year, with a thoroughly naive “Gaddafi-bad-guys-vs.-maybe-good-guys” approach, blissfully unaware of which elements they might be “protecting” or “liberating” in Benghazi, and with little planning regarding who might replace Gaddafi, they made their mark on Libya.

Are we to believe that they gave not a thought to the imperative felt by key NATO partners to exploit the fledgling “Libyan Arab spring” to ensure the continuing flow of high-grade crude? And did none of them take any lessons from the excellent adventure of going into Iraq with no serious plan for what might come next?

As for Ambassador Rice, as some have suggested, her judgment may be compromised by well-deserved guilt at having done nothing to stop the killing of 800,000 Rwandans in 1994 when she was White House referent for African affairs at the NSC under President Bill Clinton and acquiesced in his reluctance to call genocide “genocide.”

This presumably was why, when President Bill Clinton nominated Susan Rice to be Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in 1997, the Congressional Black Caucus objected to the nomination, citing her membership in “Washington’s assimilationist black elite.”

The caucus got that right. Susan Rice has moved up the ladder by demonstrating an uncanny ability to ignore the interests of the oppressed black or brown whether in Rwanda or in Gaza. Her selective judgment on when to intervene in a foreign crisis normally follows the conventional wisdom of Official Washington, such as with Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011.

Ignoring Palestine’s Plight

Thus, her empathy for the “good guys” (whoever they may be) in Libya does not extend to the Palestinians. Like other myopic policymakers and spokespersons, Rice ignores the misery in Gaza and the West Bank because to do otherwise would cast her outside Official Washington’s perceived wisdom, which holds that no smart politician or pundit confronts Israel too directly or too frequently.

However, the fact that last Thursday the United States could muster only eight votes (beside its own), from the 193 member states of the General Assembly, to oppose giving Palestine the status of non-member observer state is surely a harbinger of defeats to come on this key issue.

Rice’s one-sided defense of Israel as it pummeled the defenseless Gazans last

month was not only unconscionable, but in the long run counterproductive not only for the U.S. but for Israel. Granted, Rice was speaking for the Obama administration but there are no indications that she has used her influence with the President to reshape U.S. policy significantly.

Her failure to dissent, which would surely undo her careful construction of a Washington career, continues even as Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yashai has acknowledged that Israel's goal was to "send Gaza back to the Middle Ages" and other Israeli officials casually liken their periodic bloodletting in Gaza to "mowing the grass." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Likening Palestinians to Blades of Grass.](#)"]

Washington's public support for the carnage no doubt has left Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with a sense of invulnerability even in the face of the stinging vote in the U.N. Thus, he retaliated for the U.N.'s affront by authoring 3,000 new homes for Jewish settlers and plans for thousands more in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

On Friday, White House spokesman Tommy Vietor replied lamely, "We reiterate our longstanding opposition to settlement activity and East Jerusalem construction and announcements."

As the Biblical advice states: By their fruits shall you know them. So look at the fruits of Rice's policymaking, including her one-sided defense of Israel before a world audience increasingly aware of U.S. hypocrisy, particularly on the key issue of Palestine.

It can surely be assumed that Susan Rice is intelligent enough to understand the moral depravity of U.S. policy on Palestine. Then why does she fall so easily in with extreme pro-Israel hawks and neocons on such issues? Presumably, she understands that such positioning is how to get ahead.

In playing for support from her fellow hawks, Rice remains the ambitious staffer more than the wise diplomat. And like an ambitious staffer, she senses that hawkishness is usually a safer career path than thoughtful diplomacy. This is not the kind of person anyone should want as Secretary of State.

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