

Condi's charm enhances her power

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Forbes magazine has just published its ranking of the world's most powerful women. Condoleezza Rice ranks only fourth, behind German chancellor Angela Merkel, China's vice premier Wu Yi, and Ho Ching, chief executive of Temasek Holdings, Singapore's sovereign wealth fund (SWF). The rankings are based on a composite of visibility and economic impact, and it is arguable that the women it ranks ahead of "Condi" as she is best known, top her by those standards. And yet... it is difficult to imagine anyone possessing more power than the woman who so importantly influences the foreign policy of the only superpower, and who regularly reviews everything from the Middle East peace talks to the world economy with the US President - often between halves of a football game, while sequestered in the private quarters of the White House.

Alastair Campbell had no doubts about Rice's clout: he notes in his diaries that when it came to framing a position on the Middle East, "Condi was the key... I needed to get her on board to persuade Bush..." to shape his message in a way that would win support in the rest of the world. And Christopher Meyer, in his brilliant memoir of his time as Britain's ambassador to the US, describes Rice as "the most powerful woman in the world". So

with all respect to *Forbes*, my guess is that given a choice of dinner with any of its 100 power-women, most movers and shakers would pick Condi.

And not only because of the power she wields. The Secretary of State is an accomplished pianist, a world-class ice skater, a sports junkie whose only unrealised ambition is to be commissioner of the National Football League, and a charming dinner companion.

Her first stint with Bush was as his National Security Adviser, a post famously held by Henry Kissinger when Richard Nixon was in the White House. Unlike Kissinger, who briefed regularly against his president, Rice is a Bush loyalist through and through. But that has not shielded her from some harsh judgments. Most observers agree that she was unsuccessful in taming the feuds between Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Don Rumsfeld, on the one side, and the more dovish - or balanced, or realistic, if you prefer - Secretary of State, Colin Powell. The President inclined more in the direction of the Cheney-Rumsfeld team, and "Powell... usually found himself on the wrong side of the White House," says Marcus Marby in his new biography of Rice.

As NSC head she was expected to bring unity, or at minimum civility, to the discussions. For a while she succeeded. But in the



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end, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-Powell differences could not be bridged. As Meyer puts it: "Cheney, Rumsfeld and Powell did not have the kind of heads that would have been amenable to banging. They were just too big." Taming the three big beasts was a job only the President could do and, confident in his position as what he calls "the decider", he felt no need to do so.

Of late Rice has come under more serious fire, this time from the neoconservatives who are claiming that one reason Bush differs from them at times is that Rice has too much influence over the President. They now feel she has been captured by the State Department bureaucracy and has once again entered the United States into a worldwide popularity contest that it cannot win. This is

just another example; they say, of her lack of firm principle, reflected in her ability to move smoothly from the soft diplomacy of Bush senior to the more muscular policies of his son. Criticism comes not only from neocons. Some of Rice's staff resent what they call her celebrity, a result of the fact that she is a black woman, willing to travel widely for what her critics see as photo ops (Colin Powell rarely left America). One high-level deputy once said to me: "How would you like to show up at international meetings only to be asked, 'Where's Condi?'"

The disenchantment with Rice among Bush supporters runs deeper than questions of style. They feel that she is dangerously weakening American security by going soft on its enemies. The humiliation tolerated by Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, who sat patiently for days in Syrian strongman Hafez al-Assad's waiting room, hoping for an audience, still rankles. Ronald Reagan's rejection of *détente* and the Cold War status quo, a position Rice heartily supported, is still the neoconservatives' idea of what the foreign policy of a democratic superpower is all about. They want their Secretary of State to spread democracy, not pose for photo ops with dictators.

Neocons are making no secret of their fear that Rice, having moved from the White House

to the State Department, is undermining pro-democracy policies she once so articulately defended. Throw in mutterings that this former academic might be an expert on Russia, but knows little about the Middle East, and that she is just too close to her former mentor, Brent Scowcroft, and the foreign policy gurus of the elder Bush's administration, and you have a chorus of criticism that is held in check only by the neocons' need to support the President at a time when his Iraq policy is under attack.

The fact is that Rice is serving as a lightning rod for criticism many conservatives would really like to aim at the President. But the age of an expansive American foreign policy is over - at least for the moment. And now that Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder have been replaced with leaders more friendly to the United States, a bit of Rice charm might be more in America's interests than that old-fashioned Rumsfeld religion.

Style is as important as substance at times, as Tony Blair - one of the great political stylists of our age - well knows. Once, when under attack for being Bush's poodle, he asked me: "Can't the President send Condi over every now and then? My people will listen to her." That is power, and fortunately, still at Bush's service.

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