

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Will Rice Wreck Obama's Presidency?

By Doug Bandow – July 1st, 2013

Barack Obama may be president because he criticized the invasion of Iraq. From that, leftish Democrats assumed he was one of them, opposed to military intervention. But instead he proved to be a cautious liberal hawk ready to use military force and expand the national-security state. He accepted George W. Bush's withdrawal schedule from Iraq, twice increased force levels in Afghanistan, and initiated war against Libya.

Nevertheless, there have been no new grand crusades or grandiose pronouncements. He declined to take up Madeleine Albright's famous challenge to Colin Powell to more often use America's "superb military." For instance, despite applying significant economic and diplomatic pressure on Iran, President Obama has resisted insistent demands for air strikes. Even more pronounced was his reluctance to intervene in Syria, which illustrates the tension between his innate prudence and his liberal sensibility.

His previous national-security adviser, Tom Donilon, seemed to share this perspective. While Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was no shrinking violet when it came to military action, she also demonstrated little enthusiasm for joining the Syrian killfest. But the president has been changing his foreign-policy team. New secretary of state hire John Kerry appears more inclined to activism. Even more dramatic was his choice to replace Donilon with UN Ambassador Susan Rice, who this week begins her new position in the West Wing.

No doubt, her loyalty to the president was an important factor in her appointment. Moreover, President Obama is simultaneously rewarding her and sticking it to Republican critics who effectively blocked her ascension to secretary of state.

Nevertheless, her views are important. Both she and Barack Obama are proponents of multilateral institutions and processes as well as abundant foreign aid. Both back sanctions against Iran and North Korea. She also has repeated the administration mantra about keeping "all options on the table, including the military option," regarding Iran.

However, elsewhere her approach toward military intervention appears to differ from that of the president. In particular, both she and Samantha Power, chosen to replace Rice as UN ambassador, are strong advocates of humanitarian intervention. It's essentially the antithesis of prudent realism: Washington should intervene when it is *not* in America's interest to do so. Doing so both is good and makes one feel good.

Humanitarian intervention invites cynicism. First, what criteria govern? Odious regimes in North Korea, Burma, Zimbabwe, Bahrain and Central Asia have murdered, tortured, jailed and oppressed with wild abandon. Victims-turned-victors in Kosovo and Rwanda have mimicked the

behavior of their persecutors. Yet the champions of humanitarian intervention typically have been absent.

Second, humanitarian intervention rarely lives up to its sales pitch. As Paul Pillar has noted, trying to cram current battles into historical templates

ignores or discounts the aforementioned complexities about mixtures of good and bad and the trade-offs among different interests. It overstates the similarity between the historical episode that has had the searing effect and whatever is the policy problem of today. Swearing in advance to take a particular side in a future policy debate without knowing the details of the problem that will be debated is a very bad way to make policy. To the extent that emotion and guilt over some past horror come into play, this gets even farther away from careful examination of policy options and makes bad policy even more likely.

Third, intervention advocates almost never help prosecute the wars they advocate. Promiscuous crusaders like former vice president Richard Cheney always seem to have “other priorities” as they plot when and where everyone else should fight and die. Moral satisfaction comes easily while treating military personnel like gambit pawns in a global chess game.

Indeed, self-professed humanitarians seem to demonstrate surprisingly little concern for those stuck doing the dirty work. As Christopher Orlet noted in *The American Spectator*: “What distinguishes such statesmen is their ability to care. [But not] about the Missouri and Tennessee and Alabama sons and daughters who will lose limbs or lives in some Arabian desert for the sake of a people who hate us.”

Nevertheless, Rice’s views appear genuine. And the Rwanda genocide helped form her philosophy. She worked on Africa for the Clinton administration and was accused of ignoring the mass killing. Afterwards Rice declared to journalist Power that in the future she would “come down on the side of dramatic action, going down in flames if that was required.” (Ironically, she became friends with Rwanda’s postgenocide president, Paul Kagame, and helped protect his brutish authoritarian regime from international sanction.)