



Benjamin Friedman: The real problem with Susan Rice

Just like her mentor Madeline Albright, she's supported most every U.S. military intervention over two decades.

By: BENJAMIN FRIEDMAN - November 27th, 2012

The problem with making Susan Rice secretary of state isn't Benghazi. It's war. Rice, like her "mentor," former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, and the current secretary, Hillary Clinton, has supported just about every proposed U.S. military intervention over the two decades. The president should nominate someone that occasionally opposes a war.

Of course, being reliably bellicose is no sin among either party's foreign policy elite – in Washington today, extramarital affairs get you bounced from top foreign policy jobs, and unconstitutional wars get you nominated for them. Congressional Republicans, led by Sen. John McCain of Arizona, oppose Rice's possible nomination because of her televised comments on the Benghazi attack in September, which killed four Americans, including Christopher Stevens, the U.S. ambassador to Libya. They say she was either lying or incompetent in arguing that the attacks were not premeditated terrorism but a spontaneous outgrowth of a protest against a silly anti-Islam video.

The problem with Republican complaints about Rice isn't that they're partisan; it's that they're trivial. We could have used more complaint and scrutiny, partisan or not, about the invasion of Iraq, the surge in Afghanistan and the bombing of Libya last year – actions which Rice quietly endorsed, supported, and championed, respectively. Instead, she gets attacked for a relatively minor issue where her main role was public relations.

There is nothing wrong with asking why security at the U.S. consulate and the CIA facility in Benghazi was lacking or why the White House rushed out its U.N. ambassador to discuss still-murky events. Maybe something more damning will emerge from the upcoming hearings. But so far, opposition to Rice's nomination mostly seems intended to publicize a controversy ginned-up to hype the fading al Qaeda threat and damage the White House. Those suggesting that there's a cover-up have not explained how hiding terrorism would have benefited the White House, given that terrorism typically helps incumbent presidents, especially ones that benefit from talking about dead terrorists rather than unemployed Americans. Nor is it clear what damage the temporary confusion and Rice's contribution to it did – surely nothing approaching what the last Rice on the road to being secretary of state contributed to by misleading the country about the relationship between al Qaeda and Iraq.

Susan Rice, as her backers note, is well-qualified to be secretary of state. But she isn't applying for an internship. Cabinet nominees' policy positions matter more than their resumes. The correct criticism of Rice is that, as someone who supported a batch of needless wars, she is likely to support the next one.

By Rice's account, the 1994 Rwanda genocide, which occurred while she served on President Clinton's National Security Council, was crucial to her views. Though it is questionable whether U.S. military intervention could have occurred in time to stop that slaughter, Rice says regret about U.S. inaction there convinced her to support dramatic action, including war, to prevent the recurrence of humanitarian atrocities. She seems to apply that lesson in quite disparate circumstances.

Since she left the Clinton administration, Rice has not publicly opposed any U.S. military intervention, unless you count her support for ending the war in Iraq while campaigning for Obama or her recent statements explaining the administration's reluctance to use force Syria. Otherwise, she has vocally supported some proposed interventions and been quiet about others. (It's possible my review missed an anti-war statement somewhere, but if so, it was not something she much repeated).

During the Bush administration, Rice, then at the liberal Brookings Institution, was a leading advocate for intervening in Sudan's civil war to protect civilians in the rebellious Darfur region. She suggested bombing various targets, an international peace-keeping force, and a naval blockade. She cited the bombing of Kosovo as an example of how U.S. and allied forces could intervene even without U.N. Security authorization, in contravention of international law.

Prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Rice said little about the merits of war there, but in December 2002, she offered support for the Bush's administration's handling of the situation, arguing that:

"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. ... Up to now, they're handling it largely the right way."

Subsequently, Rice criticized the conduct of the occupation but not the decision to invade. She became an advocate of nation-building in failed states. She took the standard Democratic hawk view on Iran: negotiate but threaten war to prevent nuclear weapons development. As Obama's campaign surrogate, she backed increasing troop levels in Afghanistan, and, in office, she defended the troop surge he implemented there.

And, of course, as U.N. ambassador, Rice was a leading force behind the U.S. intervention in Libya, which the administration justified through a series of arguments that bore little scrutiny then and have aged poorly. Contrary to the administration's claims, there was little indication of impending mass slaughter in Benghazi in early 2011. White House claims that military intervention would help make Libya a liberal country offend what we know about the sources of liberalism and seem even more dubious given conditions there today. Events in Syria and elsewhere have made a mockery of Rice and the administration's argument that bombing Libya would allow democratic revolutions in nearby countries to proceed without repression.

Because Congress had little interest in debating or authorizing the war and the administration did not ask for permission (except from the United Nations), these arguments avoided scrutiny, especially once Moammar Gadhafi fell, which seemed to vindicate the endeavor. Had Congress devoted the attention it is now giving Benghazi to

the war itself, it might at least have improved the conduct of the war and its aftermath. Congress' inaction makes it at least as culpable as Rice for what happened in Libya.

To be fair, Rice's opinions on all these matters are little different from most Democratic foreign-policy elites, including most of the other people advising Obama about wars. Their Republican counterparts differ only in having less use for multilateralism and being somewhat more belligerent. A small irony here is that, substantively, McCain and Rice differ little on these wars, probably less than he and Sen. John Kerry, also rumored to be in the running for secretary of state. Rice is just a notably successful exemplar of a foreign policy community where supporting war is generally better for one's career than opposing it.

That is why it would be good to see the president – who was elected the first time largely by opposing the Iraq war and this time around campaigned with a line about bringing nation-building home – chose a secretary of state who was generally anti-war. Polls suggest that the public, especially those who just voted for Obama, wouldn't mind. And by elevating a dove, our Nobel Peace Prize-winning president might show the next generation of foreign policy leaders that their ambition does not preclude expression of peaceful sentiment.