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Op-Ed

From Darth to diplomat

By H.D.S. Greenway

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THERE IS a spring in the step of the State Department these days. "I feel it," says Nicholas Burns, the new undersecretary for political affairs. "There is a feeling of excitement in this, believing that State is back at the center."

What Condoleezza Rice is doing to put diplomacy front and center is the talk of the town among foreign policy buffs. Kurt Campbell at the Center for Strategic Studies, for example, calls it "almost a revolution." Even Democrats, such as Richard Holbrooke, have praise for Rice, whose job he would dearly have loved to have. "She seems to be a pragmatic conservative," oriented toward problem-solving, nonideological policies, Holbrooke wrote in *The Washington Post*.

What Burns describes is a tight-knit team running the department; Robert Zoellick as No. 2, himself as No. 3, Philip Zelikow as counselor, and others, all of whom have worked together before. Rice and Burns served in the administration of President Bush's father, and, indeed, if there is a model for today's State it might be James Baker's pragmatic department.

What Burns didn't say is that Rice replaced a hopelessly failing first term foreign policy. The key is the extraordinarily close relationship Rice has with the president -- something that Colin Powell never had. In the first administration the president never seemed to be able to make up his mind on how to settle the inevitable bureaucratic fights, and Powell found himself too often cut off at the knees and out-manuevered by Donald Rumsfeld at Defense and even Vice President Cheney. Rice in those days seemed to play more the role of provost, which she was at Stanford University -- trying to juggle the president and the faculty -- rather than as a bold national security adviser.

The other key is that President Bush has said it is now time to "do diplomacy." If the first term was taken with Afghanistan and Iraq, the second would have to mend relationships and pay attention to matters too long neglected.

Rice will have done more traveling in her first six months than any other secretary of state in the first half year, says Burns. She has traveled to every major region and will visit Africa in the summer. Powell hated to travel and depended too much on the telephone. Rice meeting with a sumo wrestler in Japan or going to a piano concert in Paris may seem merely superficial photo-ops, but they "show she is trying to identify with each country and show respect for their cultures," says Burns. "She does a public event in every place she goes."

If Rice is having some success in lifting America's image in the world, she has started from a very low base line. "No one is satisfied with how we are understood in the world," says Burns in a classic diplomatic understatement. Global polls show that our "soft-power" is lower than China's, says Campbell.

Burns sees the decision to abstain, rather than veto, a UN effort to bring Darfur killers to justice at the International Criminal Court a major change. In the old days the United States would have vetoed anything to do with the ICC. "But we wanted to ensure that the international community spoke with one voice on this important moral issue," he says.

Another major shift was to join the British, French, and German efforts to coax Iran out of an atomic bomb, while still remaining the tough cop. Burns points to the decision to sell Iran spare parts for their civilian airliners, as another meaningful gesture.

Letting Pakistan have jet fighters without hopelessly alienating India was also a skillful maneuver, and the emerging strategic relationship with India will get a boost this summer with high-level Indian visits to this country.

Burns is deeply involved with getting all the parties together to decide the future of Kosovo, with a major role for the UN, something that was completely neglected in the first administration.

For all the good news, the North Korea policy is still incoherent, and it is too early to say if the Rice transformation can hold. As Campbell says, US diplomacy tends to be like children's soccer: You tell the kids to cover their areas and pass, but in the end everyone crowds around the ball leaving too much of the field uncovered. But if she can continue the present momentum the republic will be well served.

H.D.S Greenway's column appears regularly in the Globe.