

# Condoleezza Rice - bull in a china shop?

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South China Morning Post

March 18, 2005

And so, this week, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is visiting Asia. By any logic, and in all fairness, I should applaud. And I do. But the truth is that good things do not always happen when American secretaries of state visit Asia.

In our recent era, for example, Madeleine Albright, as secretary of state in president Bill Clinton's second term, tended towards tone-deafness when interacting with the Chinese (who she might lecture), the Japanese (who she sometimes did not understand) and the Koreans (who she tended to irritate) when on their own home ground.

As for Dr Rice, she is capable and hard-working. But, of late, she is being held up by the American press for her toughness, bluntness, decisiveness and instinctive aversion to silly things like nuance.

In other words, Dr Rice is being depicted as the feminine version of President George W. Bush. A recent profile by Paul Richter on the front page of the Los Angeles Times typifies the be-nice-to-Rice spin. The headline read: "Rice reshaping foreign policy: the secretary of state is displaying an affinity for quick action and a dislike for nuanced talk."

While overshadowed by secretary of state Colin Powell and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld during Mr Bush's first term, Dr Rice is now the administration's foreign-policy star.

I do not particularly view her as a testosterone female. Rather, she increasingly comes across as simply a more compliant reflection of, and alter ego to, Mr Bush than was Mr Powell, who in his heart of hearts became the general who operationally and philosophically leaned towards an understandable pacifism. Dr Rice is no Mr Powell, for certain.

For our new secretary of state, therefore, I have three wishes. I do hope that she turns out to be good for Asia and the rest of the world; I wish her only the best; and I wish she could somehow find the time to read Kishore Mahbubani's new book, *Beyond the Age of Innocence*. With warmth and caring, Mr Mahbubani, now dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy after years as Singapore's UN ambassador, spells out why the world both loves and hates America and why the US must work harder to engage the intellectual affections and political support of those with whom it disagrees. He also reveals why the rest of the world needs to understand that without an America that is properly, energetically and globally engaged, world order, for the foreseeable future anyway, will be difficult to maintain.

This book should be required reading for all important people in America, especially its secretary of state. "Until recently, America has served as a powerful beacon, pointing to a future for all of humankind," Mr Mahbubani writes. "That is its essence, its real mission: to remain true to its soul and remain an extraordinary society. Over time, all of mankind will emulate the best features of American society. All that America has to do for the next 100

years is to keep the flame alight. If it does, it will receive humankind's resounding applause and thanks at the end of the 21st century."

To stay on course, America has to do more than stay true to itself; it must listen, very carefully, to others. The US monopoly on wisdom and morality can be very easily overstated. However, if we are all going to get along on this crowded, interconnected planet, the need to observe with care any of a number of necessary nuances cannot be easily overstated.

Is Dr Rice the right person for a position that perhaps can best be described as secretary of nuance? Her trip to Asia, a continent of nuances, should begin to tell the story.

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