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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

OPINION: POTOMAC WATCH | DECEMBER 12, 2008

Condi On the Record

Barack Obama is lucky he isn't inheriting Saddam Hussein.

By KIMBERLEY A. STRASSEL

"Obama to inherit an international mess," blares Politico. "Mr. Obama has inherited a world of pressing troubles," moans the Economist. "It's pretty difficult to think that any administration left its successor a worse situation in [the Middle East]," analyst Anthony Cordesman laments to the Washington Times.

As the Bush administration prepares to hand off foreign policy to Barack Obama, it has become an article of faith that our new president is inheriting something akin to a global Superfund site. It isn't clear if Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is reading these epitaphs. But over lunch in the State Department, it's clear she has a different view of the world.

For starters, Ms. Rice is of the opinion that any talk of "inheritance" has to start with a consideration of what the Bush administration itself "inherited."

Sipping her soup, talking in her measured voice, the Secretary of State begins with the broad point that they inherited a terrorism problem that had been ignored for years and allowed to grow until it exploded on 9/11.

"Not just that, but we inherited a law enforcement mentality where you punished the crime after it happened, instead of trying to prevent the crime," she says. The new team is in fact getting a national security structure that has, over eight years, been retooled to deal with the terrorism threat. No small thing.

Ms. Rice then begins a world tour. "What *we* inherited were the failed Camp David Accords, and as a result the Second Intifada." She recalls Palestinian bombings of clubs and pizza parlors, the shelling of the Bethlehem Church of the Nativity. "Yasser Arafat was in power, stealing people blind and working with terrorists. Ariel Sharon was elected not to bring peace, but to defeat the intifada."

Fragile as the situation remains, Ms. Rice notes that last year Bethlehem was the site of a huge investment conference, hosted by Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayad, aided by Israel, and held in the open air. She riffs on last year's Annapolis conference to further peace negotiations. She argues that certain Bush principles are now more accepted in the region, including Israel's right to defend itself, and the need for a Palestinian state.

She moves on. "We inherited a Lebanon with Syrian forces there for 30 years. Now, Syrian forces are out. There is a democratic government in power -- yes, being challenged by Hezbollah -- but the prime minister has survived and they've elected a president. The Lebanese army is out in the country for the first time. And," she says, "they are friendly to the United States."

Iraq. "Then? Saddam Hussein dragged the region into a war and lost over a million lives. It dragged the U.S. into war. He murdered his own people, terrorized his neighbors and sought weapons of mass destruction. Today? You have a multiethnic, multiconfessional democracy that isn't threatening its neighbors."

"So, I just don't understand this argument that it is so much worse. I always say, 'as opposed to *what?*' Syrian forces in Lebanon and no democracy. Saddam Hussein in power, threatening his neighbors and us. The Taliban in Afghanistan. The Palestinians and Israelis in an open intifada. *That* was the better Middle East? And it wasn't as if politics wasn't going on -- it was just going on in radical mosques and the madrassas, whereas now it is going on in the open. And yes, once in a while the Hamas of the world will win, but frankly I'd rather have them out in electoral politics trying to explain how they will fix the sewer system than running the streets with their faces covered, being the glorious resistance."

She even argues the Bush administration has succeeded in its goal of fundamentally altering the course of the Middle East. "Is it done? No. But we'd have never gotten on this different path without Iraq. You have to secure the gains, you have to keep working at it, but we are moving in an undeniably different direction in what is, some would say, geostrategically, the most important country in the Arab world."

Of course, there is another important country in the region, Iran, which even Ms. Rice would have to admit is a big, ugly and growing problem. She concedes that "the Iranians have been more insistent than one would have expected given the level of isolation." She nonetheless makes the case that "strategically, the United States is in a stronger position," given its forces in countries that border Iran, and its security relationships throughout the Gulf. She also remembers that "when we came in, people wouldn't accept that Iran might be seeking a nuclear weapon. Now it is international policy that Iran has to stop enriching and processing."

True, though this knowledge or policy has yet to stop Iran from doing as it pleases. It is unclear what the U.S. decision to cede the matter to the E-3 -- Germany, Britain and France -- and to the International Atomic Energy Agency, has yielded. Ms. Rice runs through the many sanctions, and suggests some of it is a matter of time. "They are paying a heavy cost. When that cost will finally result in a change of policy, I don't know. But the cost shouldn't be underestimated. And with oil prices coming down, the cost will be even more acute."

This leads to that other (former) member of the Axis of Evil, North Korea. She correctly notes that the policy the Bush team inherited, based on the 1994

"Agreed Framework," was a fiction. "It was a situation in which they were able to unfreeze immediately; in which they were cheating on the Framework; in which we had spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the light-water reactor and fuel-oil deliveries, and nothing happened," she says. Critics would of course argue the administration's own recent policy has been just as big a leap of faith, taking North Korea off the list of terror-sponsoring states in return for yet more promises of inspections.

Ms. Rice grants "it was a very close call for me, taking them off the list." Her rationale is that the U.S. "didn't lose anything of value. The North Koreans get a symbolic benefit I suppose, but we continue to hold fuel-oil delivery, which is what they really need. We can return to the sanctions path at any time we wish, though, by the way, they are already the most heavily sanctioned country in the world -- so there's not much we're getting."

This unfortunate point leads Ms. Rice to one more observation, which might say more about the administration's diplomatic roundabouts with Iraq and North Korea than anything else. "Unless you really have a plan for regime change in the short term, then your goal just has to be to do everything you can about their nuclear weapons programs." This blunt assessment of the limits of "diplomacy" is one the new administration has yet to acknowledge.

Asia now more than ever means China. Nearly forgotten is that the Bush administration's first international incident, in early 2001, involved a downed spy plane in a China that was far poorer, far more insular, and far touchier about its sphere of influence. Eight years of slow integration into the world community -- from WTO membership to the Olympic Games -- have made a difference. It matters, says Ms. Rice, that "we have been able to say what we want to say about Tibet, about human rights, and still keep a fundamentally sound relationship with China." She argues the administration is also bequeathing a China that is more open to a role in policing the region.

Latin America? Ms. Rice suggests Venezuela strongman Hugo Chavez is digging his own grave. "Everybody talks about him, but low oil prices will take care of him. He's losing referendum after referendum." She points to the stronger ties with countries on both the left and the right. Perhaps with Colombia on her mind, the secretary pointedly adds: "By the way, being multilateral means being able to trade with people. When we hold talks, we probably talk about economic circumstances as much as anything."

And what about the no-longer-sleeping bear? Russia is a problem, she allows, though primarily on issues of its periphery. She is optimistic its recent foray into Georgia was a teaching moment. "I recently told [Russian Foreign Minister] Sergei Lavrov, 'You know, Sergei, you did something I could never have done. You made [Georgian President] Misha Saakashvili into the darling of the international community. The Georgians now have more money than they can spend. And your forces are in South Ossetia and Abkhazia with the resounding support of Nicaragua and Hamas. Congratulations.' Everybody is now questioning Russia's worthiness as a partner. Their economy is in very deep

trouble. They've come out of this badly. And I think it could help deter them from trying something like that again."

Bottom line: "The world is tough, but it's no tougher now than when we came, and some pockets of it are a lot, lot better," she says. With this she pushes away from the table and sweeps off to catch a plane to another part of the world.

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