

GRAND ILLUSIONS

BY DAVID SAMUELS

THE ATLANTIC, JUNE 2007

With Rumsfeld and Powell gone, and Cheney's power diminished, this is Condoleezza Rice's moment. Can she salvage America's standing in the Middle East—and defuse the threat of a nuclear Iran? Behind the curtain in Washington and Jerusalem with the secretary of state

I met Condoleezza Rice for the first time in August of last year, at the height of the recent war in Lebanon. Having failed to get the French to agree to a UN resolution that would send peacekeepers to disarm Hezbollah, and having failed to get Israel to give up the disputed Shebaa Farms area (she had hoped to hand the Sinoira government a consolation prize for the destruction in Beirut), the secretary of state, who is usually vibrant and gracious, looked tired and wan. Rice ushered me into her study, past portraits of her Cold War heroes, Dean Acheson and George Marshall. Impeccably dressed, in a lemon-meringue-colored wool suit, she settled into a corner of a creamy white settee and pointed me toward a chair. Then I asked our country's second-ranking sports nut why Americans play baseball and football, while the rest of the world prefers soccer.

"I'm not going there!" Rice said, with a laugh that betrayed a bit of discomfort at having been asked such a weird question. Her curiosity got the better of her, and she began to muse. "I think the explanation for why we play sports that are not played in other places, and why perhaps we don't take to the sports that are played in other places, is this is a big continental-sized country," she said, curling up against the arm of the sofa. "If you look at Australia, they play Australian-rules football, which nobody else in the world plays."

Rice's obsession with sports makes it easier for her to function in a world of men who may not be immediately comfortable taking direction from a younger black woman, but who will respect anyone who can name the winning quarterback for every Super Bowl off the top of her head. Rice works out regularly with a trainer, has dated NFL All-Pro receivers Rick Upchurch and Gene Washington, is a talented classical pianist, and wears sophisticated clothes that show off her long, athletic legs, facts that may seem trivial, but actually provide valuable clues to an underlying truth about the secretary of state: She is an extreme personality who dresses with a degree of flamboyance that hasn't been seen in the State Department since the high-collar days of John Hay.

Which is not to say that she doesn't have a bureaucratic, boring side. Ten years before she became the president's chief foreign-policy adviser, she was a junior

Sovietologist on his father's National Security Council, and she retains the ability to master briefing books and speak in bullet points that makes a good staff person invaluable. When she talks about big ideas and important moments in history, her expression becomes solemn and fixed, and she leans forward, holding her shoulders back a little as she speaks.

"I think we are just at the beginning of great historical flux, and I think it's even much more dramatic and much more profound than I thought in 2000," Rice says, when I mention an article she published that year in *Foreign Affairs*, laying out her vision of a global democratic future guaranteed by the United States. Most articles about foreign policy are op-ed pieces masquerading as political philosophy, and Rice's is no exception. But it does describe a coherent view of the world that places a great deal of emphasis on the determined exercise of military and diplomatic power and has little in common with the humble, neo-isolationist platform on which George W. Bush ran for president. The world as Rice understands it is both a welcoming and a dangerous place, in which America plays a special role. The sunny and scary parts of her worldview are woven tightly together.

"There has been a triumph of the broad institutional consensus about what it takes to be effective and prosperous or successful," Rice says, pointing to the interest that all states share in obtaining access to markets and ensuring domestic stability. Unlike Donald Rumsfeld's finger-wagging, Rat Pack-era version of *realpolitik*, or Dick Cheney's paranoia about mushroom clouds and sleeper cells, Rice's views are the kind of optimistic stuff that mothers might wish their children were being taught in school. Threats to the emerging global order of liberal states come from what Rice calls "transnational forces," "violent extremists," or sometimes "terrorists," locutions that share in common a studied avoidance of the word "Islam."

"When we liberated Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan, we found Nigerians and Chinese and Malay and American people who essentially deny nationality in favor of a philosophy—a violent extremist philosophy to which they are committed," she says. "It reminds me in some ways of the way that 'Workers of the world, unite!'—Karl Marx," she adds helpfully—"was a slogan that meant that an American worker had more in common with a German worker than an American worker would have with the American leadership." When she is thinking hard about something, she furrows her wide brow and scrunches up her mouth in an unselfconscious way that suggests a schoolgirl determined to ace a test.

Questions about Rice from policy types usually begin with the all-important matter of whether she is an "idealist" or a "realist," a distinction that she herself regards as academic and meaningless. As she wrote in her *Foreign Affairs* article, "There are those who would draw a sharp line between power politics and a principled foreign policy based on values. This polarized view—you are either a realist or devoted to norms and values—may be just fine in

academic debate, but it is a disaster for American foreign policy. American values are universal.”

A related question is whether Rice is a “neocon,” a term originally coined to describe a tight-knit group of mostly Jewish intellectuals in New York City who split from the doctrinaire left in the 1960s on a series of issues, beginning with whether or not the Soviet Union was a totalitarian state. The current usage of the term, while popular, is quite misleading, because it flattens the distinction between those who believe in the aggressive use of American military force and those who believe that the United States should champion democracy. In doing so, it imposes a retroactive coherence on administration policies that evolved on the fly, as the outcome of battles between opposing bureaucrats, none of whom got exactly what they wanted. In Iraq, some, like Vice President Cheney, appear to have been eager to depose Saddam Hussein without caring much about what system of government might replace him. Others, like former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, cared passionately about bringing democracy to the Middle East. A third group, which includes Condoleezza Rice and George W. Bush, supported the invasion of Iraq on the grounds that Saddam Hussein was a menace, and then, only after that decision was made, supported the idea of building a democracy instead of installing a new dictator and going home.

Rice’s role as national-security adviser during Bush’s first term was ostensibly to referee the clash of opinions among what some White House staff called the “bull elephants”—Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Colin Powell. “I didn’t know that she had any strong views,” says Richard Armitage, Powell’s deputy, who did not think highly of her performance. “I mean, she was an expert in one country that no longer exists.”

And yet, when the dust settled late last year, those who had dismissed Rice as a glorified appointments secretary were in for a surprise. With Powell and Rumsfeld gone, and Cheney’s influence constrained by aggressive legal proceedings against his chief of staff, I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, the secretary of state has emerged as the foreign-policy linchpin of an administration that is largely staffed and run by colleagues from her days in Brent Scowcroft’s NSC during the administration of George H. W. Bush. Stephen Hadley, who worked with Rice on German unification between 1989 and 1991, has succeeded her as national-security adviser. Rumsfeld, Rice’s leading bureaucratic rival (a colleague described their relationship as that of “an older uncle and a headstrong niece”), has been replaced by Robert Gates, Scowcroft’s deputy at the NSC.

With Rice, Gates, and Hadley in place at State, Defense, and the NSC, it seems clear that President Bush has embraced at least one part of his father’s legacy—not the more cautious, deal-making side exemplified by Scowcroft and Secretary of State James Baker, but the side embodied by the younger staffers who urged the first President Bush to take clear, decisive action to end the

Cold War, a course that many of their elders believed was unwise, if not impossible.

One of Rice's closest colleagues at the State Department, Nicholas Burns, a handsome, soft-spoken Boston Red Sox fan, was her assistant at the NSC. "She was allowed to hire one person. That was me," Burns remembers. "She was 34, and I was 33. We were in these positions of great responsibility. It was a very exciting and historically significant time."

Burns believes that Rice's distinct management style was born of her experience with fast-moving events at the end of the Cold War. She holds daily strategy meetings in the morning and evening, and keeps in constant phone contact with the "issues managers" she has appointed to make and implement her big-picture decisions. For Iran and India, the issue manager is Burns. For Iraq, it is Rice's new deputy, John Negroponte. For Korea, it is Christopher Hill, who recently concluded a disarmament deal with North Korea that was roundly criticized by hard-liners, including Deputy National Security Advisor Elliott Abrams, the tight-lipped poster boy for neoconservative-haters inside and outside the administration. Rice's success in getting the president to sign on to the North Korea deal without giving Abrams and other opponents time to object, and without allowing other Cabinet departments and agencies the opportunity to review the terms, is a sign of how far the bureaucratic balance has shifted in her favor.

Rice's ideas matter more today than they have at any point since she began her tenure as the chief foreign-policy adviser to a president whose vision of America's role in the world underwent a dramatic change after the al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001. Her influence is strengthened by the fact that she and President Bush are personally close. Rice frequently eats dinner with the Bushes on Sunday nights and sometimes watches movies with the first couple before they go to bed, an arrangement that, if set in New York or L.A., might be a worthwhile premise for a sitcom. Rice is also close to Laura Bush, who believes the secretary shares her protective attitude toward her husband, rather than pushing a separate agenda at the president's expense.

"He's had as much effect upon my foreign-policy views as I've had on his," Rice told me. "It is in part, in large part, his unshakable belief in freedom. And his unshakable belief that human beings have not just a right to it, but they're at their best when they have it." Like the president, Rice is a regular churchgoer who embraced religious practice later in life—in Rice's case, after returning from Washington, D.C., to her teaching job at Stanford University, where she served as provost from 1993 to '99.

Rice's detractors, and even some of her close friends, see her worldview, which is both intellectually coherent and heartfelt, as deterministic and lacking any real appreciation for the influence of local factors on big historical events. A common term for the core of her thought among her colleagues, past and

present, is “the theology,” a reference to her bedrock faith in the likelihood, or inevitability, of progressive historical change. Her views have evolved since she witnessed firsthand the end of the Cold War.

“Back then, Condi Rice was much more of a realist,” one former senior Bush administration official told me. “Some of those traits are still there, but she’s gotten some religion. I don’t mean religion in the evangelical sense. I mean that view of life and optimism and larger forces, and the contest of good and evil, and the idea that time is on our side. It fits with a notion of historical inevitability, and a notion of American progress or a special mission in the world.”

Philip Zelikow, another friend and colleague from the Eastern European section at the NSC, is often described as the secretary’s “intellectual soul mate.” They have written a book together, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, as well as academic papers about European history and the lessons of the Cold War. “She would put a heavier emphasis on circumstance than many would, because she is less prey to the conceit that ‘My choice can change history,’” Zelikow told me.

Rice’s writing and speeches share many of the optimistic assumptions of Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 essay “The End of History.” Where Rice sharply differs from Fukuyama is in her vision of a strong tension between a beneficent order of liberal states and the “transnational forces” that seek to tear down the global system. Her worldview is therefore trickier and more idiosyncratic than it first appears. “Democracy, for Secretary Rice, I think, and for them,” Zelikow says, speaking more generally of the administration, “is a universal safety valve for social conflict. And as they confront parts of the world in profound social and political crisis, they prescribe democracy.”

Toward the end of our first interview, I asked Rice whether the hopeful narrative of Arab countries holding free elections and moving forward toward democracy risks ignoring 500 years of tragic history in the Middle East.

“It’s not hopefulness,” she said crisply, interrupting me. “It’s a sense of what is possible, and optimism about the strength of democratic institutions.

“Let me ask you this,” she continued, wagging her head back and forth, taking pleasure in the clash of ideas. “Not that long ago—you said 500 years, but not that long ago, say, 1944, or maybe even 1946—would anybody have said that France and Germany would never go to war again? Anyone?”

THE ALLIANCE AGAINST IRAN

In November, the Democratic Party swept both houses of Congress. The ensuing talk of a quick withdrawal from Iraq emboldened Iran and panicked Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and other Arab states. Suddenly, a strategic

landscape whose most prominent feature was the horrifying failure of the American effort to stabilize Iraq, and the reluctance of America's Arab allies to embrace our military presence in the region, was turned on its head. Arab leaders found themselves supporting the administration, instead of trying to sabotage what they had seen as an attempt to challenge their control over their own restive populations and to destroy the regional status quo. Meanwhile, two camps emerged in Washington: One believed in the hope of a stable, democratic Iraq and insisted that the administration get tough with Iran; the other, led by James Baker, wanted to negotiate with Iran and Syria as a prelude to an American withdrawal from Iraq.

Those who believed in the continuing wisdom of a muscular presence in Iraq also tended to agree with Rice that the United States was involved in a "generational struggle" against radical Islamists that in length and intensity might be akin to the Cold War. The Baker types tended to believe this was nonsense.

"Look, 9/11 was a huge traumatic shock to us," Colin Powell told me when I visited him in Arlington, Virginia, last year. "But the Cold War is gone. All the theologies and ideologies that were going to supplant ours are gone. The communists, the fascists—get serious! The few authoritarian regimes that are left around are peanuts!" And here he ticked off a short list that included Venezuela, Cuba, and Belarus. Leaning forward, he added, "We can't let terrorism suddenly become the substitute for Red China and the Soviet Union as our all-encompassing enemy, this great Muslim-extremist, monolithic thing from somewhere in Mauritania all the way through Muslim India. They're all different. It's not going to come together that way."

As the debate between the two camps heated up last fall, Rice and her colleagues in the administration decided to embark on a daring and risky third course: a coordinated campaign, directed with the help of the intelligence services of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. While the "get tough" crew favored direct military action against Iran, the administration chose a more subtle mix of diplomatic and economic pressure, large-scale military exercises, psychological warfare, and covert operations. The bill for the covert part of this activity, which has involved funding sectarian political movements and paramilitary groups in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories, is said to amount to more than \$300 million. It is being paid by Saudi Arabia and other concerned Gulf states, for whom the combination of a hasty American withdrawal from Iraq and a nuclear-armed Iran means trouble.

The Saudis agreed to cooperate with the United States not because they were enamored of American policy in the region but because they felt they had no choice. "Our major concern," a source inside the Saudi security establishment told me recently, "is to make sure that the Iranians don't start acting on their delusional rhetoric." The Saudis have traditionally dealt with potential foes in

the region by buying them off. Faced with the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran, they decided to play a more active role. "The king realized that the Arab world is a disaster," my source explained, speaking of the Saudi leader, King Abdullah. "Egypt is completely consumed by its domestic problems, and has turned inward. Jordan is a very small, weak country. Syria is a basket case. Iraq is a disaster, and the central government there has no credibility."

Nicholas Burns, who as undersecretary of state for political affairs is in charge of the American side of the European-led effort to persuade Iran to stop processing uranium, confirmed the existence of a broad political and military strategy to counter Iran that began just after the recent war in Lebanon.

"We felt at the end of this past autumn and the beginning of January of this year that the Iranians were proceeding on a lot of different fronts without any opposition," he said. "So we pushed them back in Iraq by detaining their paramilitary operatives. We stationed the two carrier battle groups in the Middle East, to show them this was not a Persian lake but an international waterway." Then he ticked off other actions recently taken, including imposing sanctions on two major Iranian banks and putting pressure on Western financial institutions not to lend money to Iran.

Sources in the United States and the Middle East familiar with the covert side of the American-led effort to "push back" Iran explained that these efforts have been accompanied by other, more active measures. They pointed to an upsurge in antigovernment guerrilla activity inside Iran, including a bomb in Zahedan, the economic center of the province of Baluchistan, that killed 11 soldiers in the elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on February 14; the mysterious death of the Iranian scientist Ardashir Hosseinpour, who worked on uranium enrichment at the Isfahan nuclear facility; and the defection of a high-ranking Iranian general named Ali Asgari, a former deputy minister of defense who was also the Revolutionary Guard officer responsible for training and supplying Hezbollah during its war against the Israelis in southern Lebanon in the 1980s. Iran's oil infrastructure may be another likely target. "People focus altogether on the nuclear facilities and how difficult they would be to take out," former Secretary of State George Shultz told me in his office at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. "But it's not difficult for somebody to sabotage those refineries."

There was no Iran desk at the State Department when Rice got there, and she has been working hard to build the department's expertise. "I get a little worried when I find out that we don't have that many people around who have that kind of deep knowledge," she told me. "I don't understand the system very well, and I don't think anybody really does," she said, speaking of the leadership in Tehran. "You can sit five people down, and you'll get different readings on what that system is like."

When I asked Rice to name a book that influenced her thinking about the Middle East, she hesitated. "I probably read dozens of books on the Middle East, but several of them I'd read before," she said. "I'm actually, believe it or not, for an academic, an aural learner. So I tend to have people in and talk about places. And to engage people who know those regions very, very well." She finally mentioned the UN Human Development Report, which she said had opened her eyes to the dearth of patents issued in Muslim countries.

The key to Rice's new Middle Eastern strategy, which some administration officials hope will end in a "grand bargain" that will stabilize Iraq, keep the Syrians out of Lebanon, and force Iran to give up its ambitions to build a nuclear bomb, lies in a renewed drive to create a Palestinian state. This is the price that Saudi Arabia and other Arab states are demanding if they are to support the administration's stance on Iraq and Iran. For this diplomatic gambit to succeed, Rice will need to make swift progress toward solving a conflict where the prospects for peace look dimmer than they have at any point in the last 20 years, and where administration policy has lurched from failure to failure since she began her tenure as secretary of state.

"The Iranians are either going to be out in a year or so, or they'll be in forever," Henry Kissinger told me, when I asked him what he thought about the prospect of Iran's membership in the circle of nations with nuclear weapons. "And if they're in forever, that means Turkey, Egypt, everybody will be in. And then we live in a world that is uncontrollable." What that means, Kissinger suggested, is that Rice has perhaps one year to strengthen the U.S. position in the Middle East and to reach a deal with Iran. "I'm of the view that the president, vilified as he is, ridiculed as he is by many people, is basically right about the nature of the danger. Not necessarily about all the steps that he has taken. But there is a global danger. It is implacable. It needs to be defeated."

In the fall of 2005, as part of a new push for democracy in the Middle East, Rice insisted that legislative elections be held in the Palestinian territories, against the strong advice of the Israelis, the ruling Fatah party, and the neighboring Arab states. Rice believed that elections would help precipitate a "changing of the guard" inside Fatah, the party founded by Yasir Arafat, whose older generation of leaders was flagrantly corrupt. A Fatah win would give added legitimacy to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, a colorless moderate who seemed willing to reach some kind of peaceful accommodation with Israel but lacked support among his own people.

To Rice's surprise, the elections in January 2006 were won by Hamas, the Islamist party that has been responsible for the majority of suicide bombings against Israeli civilians. "Did we adequately assess the probability of the outcomes here?" said David Welch, the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, a career foreign-service officer and former ambassador to Egypt whose sharp, birdlike appearance is at odds with his exceedingly calm demeanor. "Probably not, in retrospect."

The United States, the European Union, and Israel met the news of Hamas's victory with a declaration that they would not transfer funds to the new government until it agreed to fight terrorism, recognize the state of Israel, and abide by other commitments under the Oslo Accords and the "road map," the diplomatic plan whose choreographed sequence of moves is supposed to lead to the creation of a peaceful Palestinian state. While the United States and the EU continued to meet with Abbas and actually increased aid to Palestinians, the money went to NGOs and other social-welfare agencies. The Hamas government was left diplomatically isolated and broke.

Eager to reverse the results of the election, Rice decided on a new plan of action that resulted in fighting in the streets of Gaza between Hamas and Fatah gunmen. The plan, which she developed after speaking to President Bush, was to put pressure on the Hamas government by providing the Palestinian security forces loyal to Abbas with training, intelligence, and large shipments of supplies and new weapons, paid for by the United States and by Saudi Arabia. The hope was that Hamas, faced with a well-armed, well-trained force of Fatah fighters, might be cowed into moderating its positions or relinquishing the power it had won through elections. Alternatively, Hamas might be pressured into an escalating series of gun battles, in which case Abbas, as head of the Palestinian security forces, would have an excuse to crush Hamas by force. This approach cast some doubt on the administration's faith in democracy, and it, too, was a failure. Hamas won the clashes, which left more than 140 Palestinians dead, and the Hamas government remained in power.

This past February, King Abdullah, tired of seeing Palestinians fighting Palestinians (and concerned that Hamas was drifting toward Iran, which had been providing Hamas with money, weapons, and military training), invited Hamas and Fatah to Saudi Arabia, where he brokered a power-sharing deal known as the Mecca agreement. Saudi Arabia also promised to deliver \$1 billion to keep the new Palestinian government afloat. The Saudi deal is widely seen as a defeat for Rice, because it created a Palestinian unity government that does not recognize past agreements with Israel and whose prime minister, Ismail Haniyeh, a member of Hamas, proclaims the Palestinian "right" to "resistance in all its forms, including popular resistance to occupation," which extends to suicide attacks against Israeli civilians.

Rice was caught on the horns of a fateful dilemma. The United States could choose to do business with the Palestinian unity government, pleasing the Saudis and gaining Arab support for future diplomatic and military moves in Iran and Iraq, at the cost of legitimizing terrorism. Or the United States could refuse to deal with Hamas, angering the Saudis and risking the collapse of its strategy. The road that Rice chooses to take is likely to determine the course of our relationships in the Middle East for years to come.

When I was invited to accompany her on a 72-hour visit to Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Amman beginning on February 17, her 10th trip devoted to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since becoming secretary of state, I was more than eager to tag along.

OPENING NIGHT IN JERUSALEM

The David Citadel Hotel in Jerusalem, where Condoleezza Rice is scheduled to spend three nights, is part of a series of new developments in what, until 1967, was a no-man's land separating Israeli West Jerusalem and Jordanian East Jerusalem. Built of Jerusalem stone, in a style that might be called "Crusader modern," the hotel was designed by the Israeli architect Moshe Safdie, who is also responsible for the Mamilla-Alrov residential complex going up across the street, which promises "Soho-style lofts in Jerusalem stone with views of the Old City and New York-style interiors." Together, the two developments form a stone umbilical cord connecting West Jerusalem to the disputed heart of the Old City.

In the basement of the hotel, yellow "cable path" tape on the floor marks the windowless room that has been wired for the traveling press. On the tables are little white signs done up with custom fonts for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, the Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, Reuters, Bloomberg News, and CBS. CNN gets two places. Each seat has a new phone with a paper wrapper to hold the receiver in place, like the band on a freshly sanitized toilet. At the front of the room is a briefing podium. A worker from the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv arrives to survey the scene.

"It looks like crap," he says, with satisfaction.

I find a copy of Friday's State Department Rapid Response sheet lying on the ground. "Message: Americans do not want to see Palestinians killing Palestinians. Palestinians should be living in peace among themselves and with Israel," the document instructs, quoting Rice. "We will wait until the government is formed and then we'll make a decision about how to deal with that government."

I wander back upstairs and park myself outside the entrance to the hotel garage, where I am stopped by a young Russian-born man in a gray suit with a black-and-red pin on his lapel that identifies him as a member of Shabak, the Israeli internal-security service.

"Why don't you wait with all the other reporters in front of the hotel?" he asks. When I tell him I want to see the security preparations, he has me escorted to my room. From the window, I watch the scene below. A man walks by carrying two sniper rifles in long black soft-sided cases. Plainclothes security teams move up and down the other side of the street. Three men stop in front of the

Mamilla-Alrov construction site, open the gate, and spend the next half hour examining each floor of the new building. A plainclothes security agent with a flashlight beats the tall grass between the sidewalk and the street with a thin collapsible rod, looking for wires or a glint of metal.

At 7:55 p.m. a police motorcycle pulls up, followed by a police car, and then by Secretary Rice's motorcade, a series of perfectly spaced SUVs that click into the garage one by one, like beads on a string—black, black, silver, black, black, silver, black, black, silver, white. For the next three days, the secretary of state will not venture out of the hotel except when her motorcade takes her to meet with President Abbas in Ramallah, or Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister, in Jerusalem.

I join the reporters clustered downstairs and wait for the secretary to emerge with Tzipi Livni, the Israeli foreign minister. After a brief appearance in front of the cameras, the two women will enjoy a private dinner in Rice's suite. Mindy Sofen, the diminutive State Department flack, lays down the rules: "Guys, we may or may not get a question."

"Glenn's got it," says David Millikin, the high-strung virtuoso of the Agence France-Presse.

"Glenn's been trying to ask this question for three days," adds Janine Zacharia of Bloomberg News.

Glenn Kessler of *The Washington Post*, a youthful-looking reporter in an open-necked blue-striped shirt, is Rice's favorite. Week after week, Kessler asks the best questions, and the most questions, at the secretary's press conferences. He is also completely ignorant of popular culture and baffled by sports metaphors, which the secretary uses often.

At the beginning of each trip, he tells me, the reporters generally decide on two questions that they will try to get Rice to answer. "On this trip, it has to do with what is she trying to do with this process," he explains. "Is this really the beginning of a new U.S. initiative in the Middle East? Is it for show? How can she surmount the problems created by the Palestinian unity government?"

Earlier in the day, Rice made a surprise visit to Baghdad. Standing behind the rope line, the three wire-service reporters who made it onto her plane are talking about how depressing the Green Zone is.

"It looks terrible," one says.

"There's garbage piled up everywhere," another says.

"Once, they came out at a press conference in Baghdad and sprayed us with air freshener," Zacharia says, looking around the room. "We deserved it, too."

A beeper goes off, signaling that the secretary is on her way. The room falls silent for a beat and a half, and then the whispering starts again. Rice appears, followed by a tall middle-aged woman, her blond hair in a shoulder-length bob. Now that Ariel Sharon is gone, Tzipi Livni, the foreign minister, is the most popular politician in Israel. A former Mossad agent, she is bashful in public and has the bad posture of a tall girl who had to pretend to be shorter than she was in order to get dates. The close relationship between the two women was mocked in a skit last year on the Israeli television show *Eretz Nehederet (A Wonderful Country)*, the Israeli equivalent of *Saturday Night Live*, which showed Livni trailing Rice around like a lost puppy and saying “yes” to whatever the secretary proposed.

Taking her place in front of the microphone, Rice stands up straight, with her shoulders even and her back slightly arched. She is dressed in a striped jacket and pants, and is wearing flats. She looks tired from her afternoon in Baghdad.

“It only seems right that you have to recognize the right of your partner to exist,” she says somewhat plaintively, explaining her demand that the Hamas-led government recognize Israel before negotiations can proceed. Her purpose here will be “exploring, probing the political horizon.” She speaks for less than two minutes, then turns away and starts walking toward the door, with Livni by her side.

The sound of clattering plastic laptop keys fills the pressroom like rain on a Hefty bag. The seals on the telephones have been broken, and the reporters are previewing their stories by phone with the desk back home.

“She arrived in Israel and had dinner with the foreign minister, Tzipi Livni,” Millikin says.

“They’re holding page one for this,” Helene Cooper of *The New York Times* tells Kessler.

Kessler turns his head to the side. “Really?” he asks. His other blind spot is his inability to tell when he is being teased.

“No. They said 200 words,” Cooper says sadly.

THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

The next morning, the daily summary of the Palestinian press compiled by the American Consulate General in Jerusalem does not make for cheery reading:

Leading with reports that President Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Olmert have decided to boycott the Palestinian unity government if it does not meet the Quartet’s requirements, the Palestinian papers quoted Palestinian President Abbas telling

assistant secretary David Welch the world must learn to coexist with the national unity government even if its program does not include recognition of Israel.

The Quartet, the diplomatic grouping of the United States, the UN, the EU, and Russia, is responsible for implementing the road map. Missing from this account is any mention of Rice's visit, which has been overshadowed by a phone call from Bush to Olmert, who in the wake of the failed war in Lebanon is now the least-popular prime minister in Israel's history. Olmert's single-digit favorable ratings, combined with a raft of recent corruption charges against leading members of his government, make him an unlikely partner for any peace deal. According to Olmert, Bush promised that the diplomatic freeze would continue until Hamas recognized Israel.

After a meeting with Amir Peretz, the Israeli defense minister, who is widely blamed for the failure of the war in Lebanon, Rice is bundled off with her retinue and a string of reporters to Ramallah, where she has an appointment with Abbas. In a convoy of 15 four-by-fours with tinted windows and two vans full of reporters, we pass the Israeli settlement of Pisgat Zeev—a city of 40,000 people with concrete houses, large apartment blocks, and shopping malls—and cross the new “separation barrier” at a special checkpoint that allows cars with diplomatic plates to avoid the inconvenience of waiting in line for hours like the Palestinians. Soon we approach the Palestinian checkpoint, where the guns switch from M-16s to AK-47s. “All right, flip it,” the young security guard in the front seat tells the driver, who flips the sign on his dashboard from Hebrew to Arabic.

It is a wet, rainy day in Ramallah. Professional-looking soldiers in crisp uniforms with new weapons and black paratroop boots stand in pairs on every corner as the motorcade makes its way to the Muqata, the former British police station that became Yasir Arafat's headquarters and is now the seat of the Palestinian Authority. The streets are empty. Surrounded by a large wall topped with barbed wire, the Muqata looks even worse than it did when I was last here two years ago, in the months after Arafat's death. The simple glass pavilion that housed his body has been demolished, and his mausoleum stands unfinished.

Upstairs in Arafat's old meeting room, Abbas and Rice sit side by side in off-white armchairs, a crappy coffee table and a Palestinian flag between them. Above Rice's head are twinned portraits of Arafat and Abbas, who is also known as Abu Mazen. The dreary floor-length drapes are closed to keep out the light and discourage snipers. The coffee table has been dressed with a little American flag, and the requisite box of tissues.

The beige sofa to Abbas's left hosts his top advisers: Yasir Abd Rabbo, who dresses like a British Marxist academic; Saeb Erekat, one of the lead Palestinian negotiators at Oslo and Camp David and a frequent guest on CNN;

Mohammed Dahlan, the leader of the security forces in Gaza that are still loyal to Fatah; and Nabil Abu Rudeinah, Abbas's spokesman, each of whom occupied the exact same position when Arafat was alive. So much for the American-led program of political reform. At the suggestion of the Americans, I am told, all of the Palestinians had their cell phones taken away before the meeting and were issued legal pads on which to take notes.

The secretary of state has been given two sofas for her advisers, one beige, and one an orange Creamsicle color. Perched on the arm of the beige sofa, which is closest to Rice, is Gamal Helal, the State Department's Arabic-language senior diplomatic interpreter. On the couches are Karen Hughes, the undersecretary of state in charge of America's public-relations effort in the Arab world; Sean McCormack, Rice's press secretary; Jacob Walles, the American consul in Jerusalem; David Welch; and Elliott Abrams, who looks a bit out of his element.

Abrams wears the Wall Street lawyer's uniform of a dark gray pin-striped suit, a blue-and-white striped shirt, and a blue tie. He sits with one foot propped on his knee, macho-style, and fiddles with his BlackBerry as Rice speaks to reporters. His e-mails have recently been the subject of a front-page story by Glenn Kessler in *The Washington Post*, headlined "Conservatives Assail North Korea Accord." According to the story, Abrams "fired off e-mails expressing bewilderment over the agreement and demanding to know why North Korea would not have to first prove it had stopped sponsoring terrorism."

The attention paid to Abrams's e-mails is also a measure of the appetite for speculation as to whether Rice, or Cheney, is actually in charge of U.S. foreign policy. While the guessing game is fun, it illustrates that the Bush administration has been successful at keeping its secrets. No one thinks Cheney is as close to Bush as he was at the height of his power, during the first term. But it is also true that we are definitely in a Cheney moment. Then again, Rice is the president's chief foreign-policy adviser; she represents the president directly and is much more influential than Colin Powell ever was. Of course, for all we know, Cheney and Rice play good cop/bad cop for reporters, and even for foreign leaders, and then laugh about it afterward on a secure phone. It is also possible that the president is firmly in charge of his own foreign policy. Stranger things have been revealed once government archives have finally been opened 25, or 35, or 50 years hence.

Wearing a mauve pantsuit and a pearl choker, Rice delivers her usual lines about probing the diplomatic horizon. Abbas expresses his admiration for the secretary of state. They sit facing a photo of the Old City of Jerusalem at night. The room next door is set up for lunch, with little French rolls and folded white napkins.

The hallways are lined with depressing abstract art, long Oriental runners, and men with guns. I sit in the cold briefing room downstairs with the other

reporters, one of whom is phoning in his story. “She thanked him for his personal commitment,” he says. “That’s it.” Then he hangs up.

The room we are in, with a camera-ready blue backdrop, professional briefing podium, and powerful overhead television lights, looks nothing like the room I remember from my previous visits. “Look behind the curtain there,” says Charlie Wolfson of CBS, pointing to a 15-foot-high blue fabric screen. “That’s the old backdrop,” he adds, as I walk around the screen to see the familiar portrait of Arafat and the wall-size mural of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. “It wouldn’t do to have Rice standing there with Abu Mazen,” Wolfson cackles.

Two other reporters are arguing over whether the Muqata has WiFi. “I get decent WiFi sitting over here,” Glenn Kessler says, looking up from his laptop.

The man responsible for bringing WiFi to the Muqata is Jim Wilkinson, Rice’s old press aide, a conservative Christian activist from a small town in East Texas. Once named one of the 50 hottest bachelors in America by *People* magazine, Wilkinson is now the chief of staff for Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson. One of the big problems with the march toward Palestinian democracy, Wilkinson told me, was that the visuals were lousy. “Secretary Rice would show up at the Muqata, and you had broken glass, bars on the windows, people with AK-47s running everywhere.”

His solution was to spend a million dollars to remove the scary, chaotic scenes from the evening news, and from the eyesight of the secretary of state. By airbrushing the reality of a corrupt and dysfunctional state, his million-dollar makeover may have done more harm than good. “I brought over Scott Sforza, who does visuals for the president, who’s obviously the best in the world,” Wilkinson says proudly. “Abu Mazen always looked disordered on TV,” he explains. “That’s because once you get over 40 feet on the throw for a camera, the autofocus kicks in in a weird way. We fixed that.”

In the meantime, the small but hard-won steps toward accountable government that were taken in the last two years of Arafat’s life have all been undone. “Please write this,” the new Palestinian finance minister, Salaam Fayyad, told a reporter recently. “Where is the control? It’s gone. Where is all the transparency? It’s gone.”

HISTORY LESSONS

In the evenings, Rice meets regularly with the 10 to 15 reporters who accompany her on foreign trips. These meetings, called “roundtables,” are conducted on the record and give Rice an opportunity to engage in an intimate, conversational setting with the traveling press. At a quarter to six, the reporters gather by the elevators in the basement of the David Citadel. We are then whisked up to the 10th floor, where a conference table decorated with

an American flag and bowls of red, white, and blue flowers is waiting, along with Stuart from the embassy in Tel Aviv.

While the transcripts of Rice's roundtables, which can be found on the State Department website, are mostly filled with slightly less-formal versions of the administration's public positions, occasional clues as to the secretary's thinking do slip through. One of Rice's most revealing recent answers came at a roundtable held on January 16 in Kuwait City. Thanks to the generosity of the al-Sabah family, which rules Kuwait and remains grateful to the United States for saving its throne from Saddam Hussein, reporters accompanying the secretary of state stay free of charge in the royal guesthouse complex. The men are accommodated in rooms covered in tan-and-green marble from floor to ceiling and enjoy a steady service of classical French cooking. (Female reporters are housed in the servants' quarters, which are much less luxurious.) Rice's answer came in response to a "ponderous, rainy-day" question from Neil King of *The Wall Street Journal*.

"You mentioned several times on this trip being a student of history, and you often recite 1948 and Dean Acheson and the Cold War and 1989," King began, before asking if there were any moments in Arab history that had informed Rice's thinking about the region. In response, Rice mentioned the British colonial practice of drawing national borders in a way that created the maximum amount of tribal and religious friction. She name-checked Rabin and Sadat, and then returned to one of her favorite themes: the lessons of the Cold War.

As late as 1987 or 1988, Rice said, the American policy of democratic change in Europe would have looked like a failure. What her answer suggested was that the Bush administration's policy of encouraging democratic change in the Middle East might appear to fail for 50 years, and then might be judged to have been a farsighted success.

"You aren't going to be successful as a diplomat if you don't understand the strategic context in which you are actually negotiating. It is not deal making. It's not," she said, taking a deliberate jab at the editorial writers who have been admonishing the administration for refusing to "engage" Iran and Syria. "And again, not to analogize, but my favorite case of this is if you had tried to negotiate German unification for any period of time until 1990, you would have not been able to do it, because the underlying circumstances were not there."

Rice enters the room for the night's roundtable with her usual perfect posture, her walk somewhere between a march and a glide, wearing shimmery violet eyeliner to hide her fatigue. The reporters shift around in their chairs, a vestigial gesture of respect that functions as a kind of unspoken apology for the bad manners enforced on them by the ethos of the modern press corps. As she

takes her place, we slide our handheld recorders down the length of the table, where they come to rest in front of the secretary of state.

Kessler, seated to her left, says that plenty of American diplomats have been down the peacemaking road in the Middle East before.

Rice nods. “Yes,” she says, “they certainly have. And let me remind you all of that.”

If nothing she says is particularly new or informative, it is hard not to be captivated by the secretary’s mastery of the improvised sign language that briefers use to add emphasis and keep their audiences awake through lengthy stretches of officialese. Rice’s hands speak with a force and eloquence that her words often lack, and that can amplify or contradict the literal meaning of her sentences.

“There is an awful lot in the road map that can provide a guide,” she says, turning her hand on its side and effecting a quick series of knifelike gestures on the table in front of her, promising swift and clear action—cutting a deal. To a follow-up question about the conditions of the road map, she notes the old view that “you had to fulfill everything in the road map before you could have discussions of the destination,” crossing her arms defensively in front of her chest to indicate that the idea she has just expressed is now seen as a form of Israeli intransigence. When she mentions the “unity government,” she holds her index fingers parallel to each other, to indicate that the government consists of two separate entities, one led by Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, which we will boycott, and the other led by President Abbas, whom we will continue to talk to. At the same time, she says, the Palestinians do have “obligations, certain responsibilities.” Here she accompanies her words with the most elaborate pantomime of the night, a three-part display in which she opens her eyes wide, points with her index finger, and then jabs hard at the air three times.

With the clock winding down on the night’s roundtable, I ask Rice how her remarks in Kuwait City might apply to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to which there appears to be no immediate, clear solution.

“I think the more favorable side is that you have a broader base of support in the Israeli body politic for a two-state solution than you’ve ever had before,” she says. “And that is thanks in large part to Prime Minister Sharon.” The Israelis, she points out, have left Gaza.

“Now, that raised other problems,” Rice continues, “because it’s not as if Gaza has been lawful and peaceful since the Israelis withdrew, and so I understand that that raises questions about capacity in the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian institutions to actually govern.” On the other hand, Rice adds, “you also have a more democratic leadership in the Palestinian territories than you

did when Yasir Arafat was there.” Here she turns her palms facedown and sweeps them across the table, as if to smooth troubled waters.

“It’s not like German unification, where, frankly, it was all going in one direction,” she says. She lowers her eyes, and then looks wistfully off into the middle distance. “The Soviet Union was collapsing. East Germany was collapsing. That was an extraordinary time.”

A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

After the roundtable, Rice goes back to her suite, where she is joined, in an unreported meeting, by Danny Ayalon, the Israeli ambassador to Washington under Ariel Sharon, and Dov Weissglas, Sharon’s fixer in chief.

In a weird way, it makes sense that Rice is having dinner with Ayalon and Weissglas, who are as close as she can get to having dinner with the former prime minister. Now in a coma, Sharon was a perverse and anarchic man who would have made sense as a character in one of the secretary’s favorite Dostoyevsky novels. His mythic standing in Israel, and his bold initiative to uproot Israeli settlers from Gaza, protected him from a slew of indictments, as prosecutors sought to expose the ugly realities of the government he ran with his sons and cronies from his beloved Sycamore Ranch. Sharon was accused of accepting loans, bribes, and illegal money from a motley cast of characters, including the South African millionaire Cyril Kern; Martin Schlaf, an Austrian casino magnate; and David Appel, a real-estate developer and amateur Kabbalist who sought to buy a Greek island where he planned to build a 100,000-room hotel.

“The great contribution of Sharon was he united the people in favor of dividing the land with the Palestinians and against the idea of Greater Israel, whose standard-bearer he was for so many years,” Shimon Peres told me of his bitter rival and, more recently, his partner in government. To further his plan to unilaterally withdraw from parts of the Palestinian territories, Sharon replaced police and army officers who disagreed with his strategic assessments with more-pliable officers. He also opened a diplomatic back channel between Weissglas and Rice that would rewrite the rules of the Israeli-American relationship.

At the height of this exchange, in 2003 and 2004, the two advisers talked as often as three or four times a day. In 2003, Rice used the back channel to encourage and help shape Sharon’s plan to withdraw from Gaza, known as the “disengagement plan.” The relationship culminated in an exchange of letters between Bush and Sharon in which Israel agreed to obey the terms of the road map, and the United States promised that the road map would not move forward until the Palestinian Authority renounced terrorism and actively worked to dismantle terrorist organizations. If the two parties did make progress on the road map, the United States committed itself to backing

Israel's desire to retain major settlement blocs in the West Bank and agreed that Palestinian refugees would be resettled in the future state of Palestine, and not in Israel.

In a bizarre and boastful interview published on October 8, 2004, in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, Weissglas revealed that he and Rice had met more than 20 times since May 2002, and that the shortest of these meetings lasted an hour and a half. She called him Dubi, and he called her Condi. "When my conversation with Rice ends," he explained, "she knows that I walk six steps to Sharon's desk, and I know that she walks 12 steps to Bush's desk."

In the interview, Weissglas came off as an alternately comic and unsettling character, drunk on his own importance and desperate for approval. But the most famous and controversial part came when he described the intent of the letters that he and Rice had drafted for their bosses' approval. It was Sharon's view, he explained, that Palestinian terrorism was not the result of specific political grievances but of a deep-seated and eternal Arab hatred of Jews, and that no arrangements for Arab sovereignty over a slice of Palestine would end terror.

From Israel's perspective, the real purpose of the exchange of letters, and by extension of the entire disengagement plan, could be found in the diplomatic sequence they established: Since Palestinian terrorism would never end, Israel would never be obliged to withdraw from the West Bank. "The disengagement is actually formaldehyde," Weissglas told *Haaretz*. "It legitimizes our contention that there is no negotiating with the Palestinians."

"There will be no timetable to implement the settlers' nightmare," Weissglas boasted, "and the rest will not be dealt with until the Palestinians turn into Finns. That is the significance of what we did. The significance is the freezing of the political process. And when you freeze that process you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state and you prevent a discussion about the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem."

For Rice, who believes in the primacy of underlying historical circumstances, the exchange of letters was hardly so important. It was simply a ratification of an existing understanding. By putting that understanding in writing, however, she had made it much more difficult to act if and when circumstances changed. With the Saudi king pressing the United States to pressure Israel, Rice found herself bound by handcuffs that she herself had fashioned.

Unlike Weissglas, Ayalon is a calm man not generally given to superlatives. "I believe these letters are no less important than the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which recognized for the first time the birthright of the Jews to their homeland," he told me. "The Balfour Declaration was the basis for Israel's future existence as a country. This letter from Bush fixes the borders of the state. Condi's role was absolutely critical."

On Monday morning, American protocol officers supervise the setup in the ballroom of the David Citadel for a three-way meeting between Rice, Olmert, and Abbas. Two American flags are flanked by two Israeli flags to the left and three Palestinian flags to the right. Someone finds another American flag and subtracts a Palestinian flag.

Outside the ballroom, a young Shabak man is opening the display cases to check for bombs. Soon it will be time for the most important photo shoot of the week. The photographers are standing around with their gear, dressed in the kind of cast-off clothes you see on mustered-out child soldiers. “First, we will have the video, then the stills,” a tall blond woman from the American consulate instructs. “So don’t rush the doors.”

The lens men separate into two groups, and the photographers turn their cameras on the video guys and start snapping pictures. The video guys swing their heavy equipment onto their shoulders and follow suit. After a minute or two, everyone gets bored. “There is no future here,” an Israeli cameraman informs a Swede. “If you could tell me it will all be over by October 23, 2007, I would stay. But it won’t ever be over.”

A few minutes later, something shifts in the air—it is hard to say what.

“OK, *chevra*,” one of the Israeli cameramen calls out, addressing his colleagues. Without a moment of hesitation or warning, the pack stampedes toward the door.

“Stop! Stop now!” a 6-foot-3 crew-cut guard commands, assuming a door-blocking posture and imposing himself on the crowd as he was taught. But this is the Middle East, and the photographers simply ignore him. They charge down the corridor toward the meeting room, well over a hundred strong, Israelis and Palestinians together, carrying their heavy equipment and the American diplomatic security personnel with them.

“Pop the doors! Pop the doors!” one of the security guards shouts. Once inside the room, the photographers immediately assume their positions and shoot. *Click click click click click*. This is the money shot, the three-way handshake, Carter and Begin and Sadat on the White House lawn. No other sound is audible inside the room. *Click click click*. It’s Clinton, Rabin, and Arafat when the Oslo agreement was signed. *Click click click click click*. It’s the same shot being reenacted for the umpteenth time. Rice, Olmert, and Abbas hold the three-way handclasp posture far longer than seems comfortable, to make sure everyone gets the picture.

“And the flowers are still standing,” one of the security guards mutters in relief, as the photographers file out of the room. I follow them upstairs and outside, past the rows of satellite trucks that will broadcast the meaningless proceedings to the rest of the world.

And yet, while the meetings themselves may be empty of substance, the satellite trucks will play an important part in what happens in the Middle East over the next year. Rice's visit can best be understood as a command performance by the Bush administration's foreign-policy prodigy for an audience of one: the 83-year-old king of Saudi Arabia. For King Abdullah's peace of mind, and for the Iranian business to continue, the ugly pictures from Palestine need to stop.

Tired of the circus and eager for some air, I walk up the street until I reach the King David Hotel, where I meet Efraim Halevy, the former head of Mossad. Born to an Orthodox Jewish family in Great Britain, Halevy shares certain mannerisms with George Smiley, the fictional intelligence chief played by Alec Guinness in the BBC miniseries *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. He wears a blue shirt and a gray jacket, speaks in a cultivated English accent, and looks away when he talks, perhaps to disguise a vehemence and a habit of fierce concentration that conflicts with his natural shyness. Because he is shy, or because he is more accustomed to shadows than to light, or because he is being polite, it takes him nearly 20 minutes to look me in the eye. We sit in the lobby on a purple-striped couch, beneath a poster-sized 1931 photograph of the King David Hotel, which served as the British military headquarters in Jerusalem until the Irgun, the clandestine organization led by the future Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, blew it up.

"I used to deal with Condi when I was head of Mossad and she was national-security adviser, and I had a great respect for her, and admiration," Halevy says. "I still do. But I think that in her role of secretary of state, things are not going too well. The main problem is that Condi Rice was never an expert on the Middle East. That's not her area of expertise. And therefore, she has to rely on others. And the others in this case is a lawyer who is an ideologue"—meaning Elliott Abrams—"who believes that you can promote a certain ideology anywhere and everywhere around the world if you think it's the right ideology. And you really don't have to know very much about the basic facts in the region that you're dealing with, because you have to tailor the region to your ideology."

Halevy spent four decades in what was regarded as the best intelligence service in the Middle East, and he has only disdain for what he sees as the loony idea that American-style democracy can be implanted here. As an intelligence professional, he believes that the only path to understanding the Middle East, or anywhere else, for that matter, is to look as deeply as one can into the specifics of individual personalities, their hopes, dreams, and weaknesses, their bank accounts, the stories of their families, their tribes, the histories of their friends and enemies—the kind of material a novelist might use. By substituting ideology for local knowledge, he says, the Bush administration chose fantasy over reality, a choice that can only end in disaster.

“To believe that you can promote democracy on the one hand,” he says, staring down at the table and glumly stirring his tea, “and on the other hand, having a parallel system of providing guns and equipment to one warlord and to another warlord, and combining these two different programs in some way and sort of monitoring them in a way which is totally unrelated to the situation on the ground, because the situation on the ground doesn’t matter. Because what you need to do is change the situation on the ground.” Halevy stops stirring his tea and leans back on the couch. “I think that this whole idea of democratization was a flawed concept,” he says, finally making eye contact. “Democracy in Israel evolved from within. It didn’t come because somebody in Washington waved the wand and said, ‘Israel should be democratic.’”

The worst thing about the administration’s active fantasy life, Halevy believes, is that it has sucked Israel into a realm of illusion, where it cannot afford to live. He has nothing but scorn for the letters exchanged between Bush and Sharon, and suggests that by the time Weissglas took control of relations with Washington, Sharon was already old and sick and increasingly disconnected from reality.

According to Halevy, the letters were a concrete artifact of a relationship that included other understandings, some oral, that together prevented Israel from taking any independent diplomatic or military action without fully informing the United States. Contrary to what Americans often believe, the United States had very little to do with the Israeli-Egyptian peace negotiations in 1977, the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that led to the Oslo Accords, or the peace treaty that Halevy helped negotiate between Israel and Jordan. In each case, the peace treaties that were signed on the White House lawn marked the ceremonial end of years of contacts and negotiations, of which the United States was unaware until months or weeks before the final agreements were signed.

“Israel today will not do anything, take no initiative whatsoever,” Halevy says, “unless the United States approves it. It was never that way before.” The retired spymaster sips his tea, and looks me in the eye as he searches for an appropriate way to define how the relationship has changed.

“Insemination is an act of two, not of three,” he finally says. “As a result of what happened in 2003 and 2004, the natural act of insemination between Israel and its neighbors is no longer possible.”

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

When he came into office in January 2001, George W. Bush resolutely turned his back on the ostentatious shuttle diplomacy in which his predecessor, Bill Clinton, had been so passionately engaged. While it is possible to imagine that the Bush administration has now decided to embrace the diplomatic strategies of the Clinton era, I saw no indication of any such philosophical about-face.

What I witnessed in Jerusalem and Ramallah was a show put on for the television cameras, starring Condoleezza Rice. Thanks largely to circumstance, and to her talents on the public stage, Rice has succeeded where Colin Powell and Dick Cheney, pulling in opposite directions during Bush's first term, failed. She has assembled an alliance of Arab states working to help the United States contain Iran, stabilize Iraq, and keep Syria out of Lebanon. Her success becomes even more paradoxical when one realizes that she is not a classic believer in process diplomacy—in fact, she loathes it. Rice is the product of a structuralist academic background and has a deep personal belief in the primacy of “underlying historical forces,” a conviction in direct conflict with the optics of her current role as the public face of America's new coalition-building effort in the Middle East.

Practically, Rice is torn between her strong belief in the necessity and the inevitability of democratic change in the Middle East and the fact that America's coalition depends in large part on the goodwill of Saudi Arabia, which insists that the United States downplay its desire for change. Rice is torn between her long-term commitment to democracy and the actual short-term results of democracy. She is trying to have things both ways, a fact that she understands, because she is not stupid. At the same time, she believes she can have things both ways, because she believes that history is on her side.

While it is Rice who understandably captivates reporters and cameramen, in her retinue, largely unobserved, is a man who has witnessed every high-level attempt at negotiating a solution to the Arab-Israeli problem for the past 16 years. In a blue shirt, yellow tie, and slightly boxy gray suit, Gamal Helal does his best to look like an ordinary bureaucrat, but there is something essentially bohemian in his nature that even the State Department will never be able to erase. He has the soulful eyes of a young poet, and he gazes in a calm, unhurried way through a pair of expensive rimless eyeglasses.

Helal, a Coptic Christian who was born in Egypt in 1954, moved to the United States in the mid-1970s and studied cross-cultural communication at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. He joined the State Department in the mid-1980s and became a senior diplomatic interpreter in 1993. Helal was so good at his job that he was named a senior policy adviser to the special Middle East coordinator, Dennis Ross. After Bush dismantled the Office of the Special Middle East Coordinator, Helal continued his work as an interpreter and an adviser.

When I ask him what it is like to translate conversations between Rice and the Palestinian president, he says, “President Abbas is somebody who did not go through formal education in English. So he understands things, but you are dealing here with a different level of English. He prefers to speak Arabic. He quietly will ask me if what he understood in English was correct or not. Because every nuance makes a huge difference.”

What Arab leaders hear when presidents and secretaries of state speak, and vice versa, is the core of Helal's professional life. "I don't believe that logic is universal," he says thoughtfully. "I happen to believe that logic is local. You believe in things that make sense to you and are logical to you because of your education, your background, your upbringing, what you believed in." English words may exist in Arabic-language dictionaries, but the universe of concepts that determines their meaning is different. "When we say we will 'look into' an issue, OK, that could mean many things," he says. "It could mean, 'Forget it, it's never going to happen.' But there is a difference between 'We will look into it' or 'We will reconsider it.'" Likewise, the Arabic *inshallah*—"God willing"—which in general usage can be the equivalent of "We'll look into it," can also mean that the speaker will rely on God's will to make something happen. "It depends on so many variables, and you will not be able to get the right message unless you are familiar with everything—the body language, with the way the phrase is being said," he explains. "Because words without meanings are meaningless."

In Helal's telling, the Oslo negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians fell short not because the participants did not try hard enough, or because the timing was off. Rather, the progress in the '90s toward a Palestinian state and an Israeli state living side by side in peace was ultimately a dance of illusions in which each party might have approached the other's positions forever without any real likelihood of a deal. "I think Arafat, in his own mind, had a blueprint for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement," Helal says. "And I don't think he believed for a second that the Israelis were willing to pay that bill."

The Bush administration's answer to the collapse of the Camp David negotiations was to let the two sides shoot it out until one side won or both sides got tired. Yet even if one accepts the unpleasant idea that the only thing to do with the conflict is to manage the violence, it seems clear that the illusions of the Oslo years were less deadly than the reality check that followed.

Helal enjoys working with Rice. He appreciates her interest in hearing all points of view on a given subject and her understanding of the details. When I ask him what he makes of the words he often translates for her, like "freedom" and "democracy," he is polite, but wary. "I cannot imagine that you can go anywhere in the world and ask people, 'Do you want to be free?' and they will say, 'No, we really love to be prisoners,'" he says. The problem is not with freedom but with democracy, a concept that evolved in differing and idiosyncratic ways in the Western historical experience. "In the Middle East, they look at things and ask, Is it *halal* or *haram*," he explains. "Is it approved by the religion or not? If you go to a Bedouin society and you tell them that the state will determine how you're going to settle a conflict between you and your cousin, you must be out of your mind, because the most important and powerful tool to them will be tribal law, which is unwritten."

OFF THE RECORD IN AMMAN

There will be nothing to see at Rice's next stop, in Amman. Flight schedules are tight, so, after another roundtable and a private off-the-record dinner with the secretary of state, most of the reporters fly ahead to cover her meeting with the Quartet in Berlin. In the hope of getting closer to the content of American diplomacy in the Middle East, I fly instead to Amman, where Rice is ushered into a meeting at the headquarters of Jordanian intelligence, known as the GID.

Later, I am told that she was joined by Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, the Saudi intelligence chief and the youngest surviving son of the founder of the Saudi state; Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi national-security adviser; Omar Suleiman, the Egyptian intelligence chief; Sheikh Hazza bin Zayed al Nahyan, national-security adviser for the United Arab Emirates; and General Mohammed Dhahabi of Jordan's GID. The operational part of the U.S.-Arab relationship—which includes active operations in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza—is led on the American side by General Michael Hayden, the head of the CIA, but Rice has control of the larger architecture of the political-military effort. Her frequent trips to the region, her history at the NSC, and her academic background in Soviet military affairs make her quite comfortable with discussions of military strategy.

According to American and Saudi sources, Rice spoke to the gathered intelligence chiefs about diplomatic and security developments in the West Bank and Gaza. The group then discussed the infiltration of Iranian weapons into Iraq and Lebanon and the movement of al-Qaeda and Hezbollah trainers across the region. Part of Rice's job is to help coordinate intelligence sharing between the Arab states and the U.S.-backed Palestinian security forces, the one hard asset Abbas can offer the United States and a useful check on the reported infiltration of Iranian agents and al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists into the Palestinian territories.

My one quotable meeting in Amman takes place at the Jordanian foreign ministry, located in a field of rubble off the highway on the way back to the airport. The building is oddly hot and humid, and has a labyrinthine layout, with long hallways branching off empty glassed-in courtyards. Someone explains to me that this was originally supposed to be the headquarters for the department of agriculture. The courtyards were intended to be hothouses for crops. My host is His Excellency Abdelelah al-Khatib, the foreign minister, who attended a meeting earlier that morning with Rice and King Abdullah of Jordan.

The foreign minister's office looks like a suite at the Four Seasons, with bright abstract paintings on the walls and clay pottery displayed on shelves. Khatib himself is a middle-aged man with a reputation for speaking honestly. He wears a gray suit, blue shirt, black shoes, and wire-rimmed glasses, and has the large head of an intellectual in a newspaper cartoon.

“This region is really under severe stress because of the lack of solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” he says, repeating for my benefit the message that was delivered this morning to the American visitor. I ask him about a cartoon I saw in the paper, which showed a baby in a cradle marked “United government” and Condoleezza Rice standing beside the cradle, holding a hangman’s noose. He shrugs apologetically.

I ask him what he thinks of the failed American strategy to overthrow the elected Palestinian government by force. “Well, you are a journalist,” he says, with a sigh accompanied by a friendly smile. “I am a diplomat. I read very carefully the announcement. And the announcement actually spoke of nonlethal material, if you remember,” he adds, speaking of the careful distinction the State Department made in describing the help provided to Abbas.

I ask Khatib if there is a perception that Rice speaks directly for the president in a way that Colin Powell did not. “Yes,” he answers. “The perception is that she fully represents the political will of the president.”

The foreign minister concedes that the meeting of the intelligence chiefs is essential to the security and well-being of the region. “First of all, I want to say that the sectarian rift is a very dangerous issue,” he says. “Nobody should think that they can ride this tiger. And by the way, nobody in the region is immune from this kind of activity in their own country.”

Like Kissinger, Khatib fears that if Iran were to get a nuclear bomb, other Arab states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia would be forced to follow suit, and the entire Middle East would go nuclear. “We know from experience of the world community in other regions that when a race for acquiring weapons of mass destruction is opened, it’s very difficult to close. Different partners will feel the need to go in that direction, and this is not for the interest of the region,” he says. “Or the world community. Or world peace and stability.”

INTERMEZZO

I met Condoleezza Rice for the last time in the middle of March, three weeks after her return from Berlin. The snow had fallen all morning outside the tall windows of her study, blanketing the city, and this had put her in a reflective mood. The trip was fairly intense, she says, curling her legs underneath her on the sofa. “The national unity government, the trilateral with Abbas and Olmert, and all that.” I ask her what she makes of the expectation that she will negotiate a grand bargain that will solve the problems of the Middle East.

“I don’t think there’s any doubt that the region as a whole is in the midst of a big transformation, and therefore you have these problems that are in a sense linked,” she says. “But I think it would be a mistake to say, ‘Oh, we have to have a huge omnibus solution to this.’ I don’t think you’ll get anywhere,

because the histories of these problems, the circumstances, the actors, are very different.”

When I ask her to clarify this answer, she says carefully that “as a practical matter of diplomacy,” it would be hard to cut a deal that would persuade Iran to renounce its nuclear ambitions, and would stabilize Iraq, guarantee Israel’s security, and create a functioning Palestinian state.

While some of America’s allies may not be models of democratic practice, she still believes that democracy is the solution to many of the problems of the Middle East. Elections aren’t the only answer, she concedes, but without them, “it’s kind of hard to imagine how else people get to exercise their preferences for who will govern them.” When I ask Rice to explain the administration’s policy of putting money and guns on the streets of Gaza to destabilize the elected Hamas government, she demurs.

“No, it’s not putting money and equipment—it is the professionalization and the training and equipping of Palestinian forces,” she says.

“But it’s both, isn’t it?” I ask.

“No, because the state—well, they happen to go together,” she finally admits. “You don’t train and equip a force without ...”

“Without putting guns on the street?” I suggest.

“But the fact is, it’s not just putting guns on the street,” she says. “There’s a very careful plan that General Dayton, but also Canadians, Brits, others who are working on this, for the professionalization of those forces, so that they’re actually able to defend the Palestinian people, so that they’re actually able to fight terrorism. That’s the goal.”

A few days earlier, I had been to see Henry Kissinger in his offices on Park Avenue, where, at 83 years old, he still reports regularly for work and occasionally offers counsel to the president and the vice president. Kissinger’s career as an academic, and journey from national-security adviser to secretary of state, suggests some interesting parallels with Rice’s own trajectory, including the ability to win and keep the trust of an isolated president. America’s most famous and reviled diplomat doesn’t believe that history is a story of human progress. In part this may be because he is a European Jew who lived through Hitler’s rise to power in Germany and fled with his parents to America as the world they had grown up in destroyed itself and half of Europe. Kissinger left me with the strong impression that he considered Rice’s insistence on holding elections in Iraq and in the rest of the Middle East to be naive and impractical.

“Whom could they vote for after 40 years of Saddam?” he asked. “The people they were closest to, which were their ethnic or religious group. That then confirmed the divisions, it did not create a consensus.” On my right, in silver picture frames, was a cozy selection of world leaders like Nelson Mandela and Helmut Kohl, smiling at Kissinger. Rather than look to the model of American democracy, he said, developing nations might emulate the more gradual evolutions of countries like Chile, South Korea, and Singapore. “We’re applying the experiences of parliamentary-type democracy, 19th-century bourgeois democracy, to areas that have a much more complicated history, or a much different history,” Kissinger said.

I asked him why the answers we draw from our own historical experience so often prove destructive to other countries. He rested his famous jowls on the collar of his blue shirt and began to rumble. “We’ve never had to deal with contingent issues in the sense that our problems have had absolute answers, or at least answers we considered absolute,” he said. “So with very little preparation, most of our problems have proved soluble. They have always yielded to the application of resources and ingenuity, and to finite time scales. Much of this is not true in the rest of the world.”

When I describe my conversation with Kissinger to Rice, she firmly rejects the idea that America might look to “soft authoritarian” regimes as a model for peaceful development. “I still believe that, however complex and sometimes chaotic democratic processes and democracies are, they’re still preferable,” she says with a vigorous nod. “If you start settling for the way stations along the way, that’s a problem.” Chileans and South Koreans don’t see the authoritarian periods in their recent histories as part of a transition to democracy, she adds. “They see those as periods of time that had to be overcome.”

By historical standards, it is too early to tell whether the big choices that Rice and the president have made will turn out right or wrong, and whether the Middle East will embrace democracy. What seems clear is that much of the damage we have done to ourselves and to our friends was avoidable. The prospect of a grand bargain, one that will rejigger a complicated region of the world to America’s satisfaction, seems like yet another illusion, whose price is likely to be high.

We talk for a while about other things, until Rice arrives at the story with which she wants to conclude our last interview.

“When we arrived in Berlin, there was a piano in my suite,” she remembers. “And I thought, ‘Oh, isn’t that nice, there’s a piano.’ And on the music stand, there was a book of Brahms’s piano music.”

The sheet music was for the second intermezzo of Brahms’s Opus 118, which she played at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations conference last July. It’s a sad and lovely piece, which Rice calls “reflective.” The image of the

secretary of state playing the piano is useful in interviews because it suggests discipline. But it is also true that she has a deep feeling for music, and plays well.

“I thought, ‘Well, that’s pretty nice.’ So I sat down. I played for probably an hour. And everything just melts away.”