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What Makes Condi Run

By Ann Reilly Dowd, September & October 2005

Condoleezza Rice is an intriguing mix of boots, brains, and bravado. Here's the true story of how a little black girl from Birmingham rose to become the most powerful woman in the world

Fiftieth birthdays are not typically the stuff fairy tales are made of. But then there is nothing typical about Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. There she was: the woman Forbes dubbed the "most powerful...in the world," dressed casually in slacks and a suede jacket, heading with Genoa Ray McPhatter, her Aunt G, to what was supposed to be a laid-back dinner with friends. Suddenly, her Secret Service limo swooped unexpectedly into the entrance of the British Embassy, where Ambassador David Manning was waiting in a tux.

"G, something is going on here," said Condi, "and we're not dressed."

"That's right, babe," her aunt chuckled. "Get out of the car."

Inside the embassy, both sides of the grand double staircase were packed with more than a hundred friends. Guests included former secretary of state George Shultz and then-secretary of state Colin Powell, former national security advisor Sandy Berger, Bush advisor Karen Hughes, plus a smattering of football stars, including former San Francisco 49er and now NFL executive Gene Washington, Condi's rumored heartthrob—all decked out in tuxedos and ball gowns, singing "Happy birthday to you!"

Utterly astonished, the first fashionista of the elite national-security community—who's more often spotted in Armani than in Levi's—screamed, "Look what I'm wearing!" to loud laughter and applause. But not to worry. Minutes later she was whisked upstairs where awaited a gorgeous scarlet ball gown created for the occasion by her favorite designer, Oscar de la Renta (the British ambassador had secretly gotten her measurements), and, of course, her hairdresser, maintainer of the signature flip, which, after her European charm offensive in February, has become the rage in Spain; Madrid señoritas call it the Condi flip. (She recently updated it to a more sophisticated pageboy.)

By the time she descended, Cinderella-like, the President and First Lady were waiting. World-renowned pianist Van Cliburn played the national anthem. And the nation's future first black female secretary of state danced the night away amid tables named for her favorite football teams.

When the clock struck midnight, however, her fairy tale didn't end.

Born in 1954 in Birmingham, Alabama, during the heart of racial darkness when little black girls couldn't eat at Woolworth's, Condoleezza—named after the Italian musical term *con dolcezza*, to

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perform "with sweetness"—has spent a half century breaking molds and busting stereotypes: child-prodigy pianist; competitive ice skater; top Soviet advisor at age 34 to President George H. W. Bush; Stanford University's youngest, first female, and first nonwhite provost; George W's premier national-security and foreign policy advisor; and now many Republicans' dream presidential candidate for 2008. She is jokingly referred to these days as the Hillary Killer.

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You just have to venture out briefly with Madame Secretary to see that she's become a political rock star. Take her May visit to San Francisco to deliver a major foreign policy address to the prestigious Commonwealth Club on "transformational diplomacy," the Bush administration's aggressive drive to spread freedom to the Middle East and beyond. Outside Davies Symphony Hall, police with nightsticks and Secret Service agents with bugs in their ears held at bay some 250 protesters wielding signs saying STOP THE WAR and LIAR, LIAR.

Inside, Rice was mobbed by admirers at a private reception. "She might be the most powerful woman in history," says a graying Commonwealth board member. On the other side of the room, two women strained to see if she was wearing the sexy black boots she sported while reviewing U.S. troops in Wiesbaden, Germany, in February. That caused a global sensation and landed the legs that Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon once blamed for making it "hard for me to concentrate" on the front page of *The Washington Post*.

Onstage at the packed Davies hall, Rice outlined her foreign policy vision: why she believes America is now at a pivotal moment of opportunity similar to after World War II, when the foundations were laid for a free Europe. Suddenly, out of the audience sprang three women in long, black hooded gowns, arms outstretched, reminiscent of the infamous photos of detainees who were abused by U.S. military police at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison. "Stop the torture! Stop the killing! U.S. out of Iraq!" they screamed repeatedly. But before the alarmed audience could figure out what was going on, Rice took control. "Ladies and gentlemen, isn't it a wonderful thing that people can speak their minds in our democracy? In Baghdad, in Kabul, and soon in Beirut, they too will be able to speak their minds. What a wonderful thing!" By now, a police SWAT team was ushering out the protesters—and the audience was on its feet, wildly applauding.

So who is this phenomenon called Condi, really? What's behind her rocketlike rise to the very top of a white man's world? Why does anyone think this 50-year-old black woman could actually be the first female president of the world's only superpower? I had the opportunity to meet her at a mutual friend's wedding in the mid-1980s, where she first shared with me her love of fashion, foreign policy, and football.

We reconnected again in the spring of 2000, several months before President Bush named her his national security advisor, while I was writing a profile of her for *George* magazine. I was interviewing her father when, in one horrifying moment, he collapsed with a serious heart arrhythmia. I immediately called 911, and then Condi.

Rice spent more weekends with the President and First

When she arrived, the Reverend John Rice was on the floor getting shock treatments. I was trembling, but she was almost serene. "Thank God you were here," she told me, putting her arms around my shoulders. "God works in strange ways." Then, leaning over her father, she whispered, "Daddy, it's Condoleezza. I'm here... We're

going to take good care of you."

Lady than any other national security advisor in history.

The peace of mind that Condi carries with her is contagious; one feels when she shows up that all will be okay. "Condoleezza takes everything in stride," says Aunt G. "She sees a problem and works on a solution. Nothing seems to bother her."

For that she can thank her parents, John and Angelena Rice, second-generation college grads with a devotion to learning and a fierce desire to protect their gifted girl from the indignities—and dangers—of Jim Crow Birmingham. Police chief "Bull" Conner, with his storm troopers, ferocious dogs, and high-pressure hoses, terrorized black protesters. The Ku Klux Klan pitched homemade bombs into African American storefronts and homes in the middle of the night. Tragically, in 1963 a bomb devastated a Baptist church in Birmingham, shaking the floor of the Reverend Rice's church two miles away. Four little girls were killed—including Condi's playmate Denise McNair.

Somehow John and Angelena shielded their daughter from the madness. At night the Reverend Rice would join other neighborhood men in patrolling the streets with rifles to ward off bomb-toting Klansmen. For her part, Condi's mother kept her daughter close to home as much as possible, going so far as to buy Condi's allotment of Girl Scout cookies rather than expose her to the danger of walking door to door to sell them.

She was less successful at shielding her daughter from public ignorance, but she was masterful at teaching her how to deal with it. Once, when a salesperson scolded Condi for touching hats that might soon touch a white head, Condi's mother told her daughter: "Condi, you touch every hat in the place!"

Strangely, Rice feels that not even the horrific Baptist church bombing left her with lasting scars. "I remember wondering why this man Bull Conner hated us so much. But I was not really angry," she told me a few years ago over a take-out lunch at Stanford. "My parents were optimistic and hopeful. So I didn't feel like I was carrying the weight of it on my shoulders."

The son of slaves, Condi's grandfather, John W. Rice Sr., earned a degree from historically black Stillman College, partly with money he made picking cotton and partly with a scholarship in return for his promise to become a Presbyterian minister, which he did. In 1951 his son—Condi's father—took over his congregation in Birmingham. John Rice Jr. later became dean at Stillman, as well as assistant vice chancellor at the University of Denver. He passed away on Christmas Eve 2000—just six days after Bush chose Rice to be his national security advisor—with his daughter at his side.

Condi's mother, Angelena, who died of breast cancer in 1985, descended from slaves and slave owners, including an Italian émigré who came to America to buy slaves just five years before Emancipation. "That may give you a clue as to why so few of us have any business sense," Condi once quipped to me. After graduating from college, Angelena taught math, science, and oratory at a Birmingham high school where she met Condi's father, who was a football coach.

With plenty of money and no one better to spend it on, they indulged their only child, who inherited her taste for fancy clothes from her mother, who loved to shop. She joined the Girl Scouts, took private language lessons (French and Spanish), and read stacks of books. And there was her music: even while Birmingham was plunged into racial torment, she was taking advanced classical piano at the Birmingham Conservatory—a first for a black youngster—and practicing hours a day. Even back then her discipline was extraordinary. At St. Mary's Academy in Denver, the first integrated school Condi attended, she was a straight-A student and a competitive ice skater. Her typical day: up at 4:30 a.m., hit the rink at 5, practice until 7, then school, piano, back to the rink for an hour, then more piano.

Religion played a pivotal role in Condi's upbringing as well. Her grandmother Ray wouldn't let her children or grandchildren leave the house without reminding them to take the name of Jesus with them. "Her faith is absolutely fundamental to who she is," says Condi's close friend Randy Bean. "It's part of her fiber."

But at 17, she found a new love: geopolitics and, in particular, all things Soviet—the language, the culture, the weaponry, the diplomacy (she even named her car Boris). Her inspiration was a political science professor at the University of Denver, where she was able to enroll at the age of 15, having skipped both first grade and seventh grade. He was former secretary of state Madeleine Albright's father, Czech diplomat and political refugee Josef Korbel, an ardent advocate of balance-of-power realism in relations among nations. By then Condi had decided she was not a "phenomenal talent" as a pianist. "She marched in and said she was through with music," her father told me. "We never argued with her."

By the late '90s Rice had again been a witness to history, having advised the first President Bush on the Soviet Union just before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The senior Bush was so impressed with Rice's talents that he cooked up a rendezvous with her for his son at the family retreat in Kennebunkport, Maine. The two talked politics, sports, and the Christian faith they share. They jogged, played tennis, and worked out. (At that point, she could bench-press 145 pounds 45 times.) And thus began a new Bush-Rice chapter, as she became the 43rd president's teacher in all things international.

Rice fast became a "member of the family," spending more weekends with the President and First Lady than any other national security advisor in history, perhaps explaining her Freudian slip when in April 2004 she referred to Bush as "my husband." Now colleagues say she is so close to W that it's hard to tell what's his idea and what's hers. "At this point, it's a chicken-and-egg thing," says one Republican close to the White House. "The rap on Condi when she was national security advisor was that she'd look at the President's face and his words would come out of her mouth before they came out of his."

How has she changed? Well, from a policy point of view, her thinking has evolved dramatically. In 2000 she and Bush were talking about a retreat from foreign entanglements, insisting: "We will not be the world's 911." But September 11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq changed all that. Now the two are focused on transformational diplomacy, designed to push nations toward democracy through incentives (such as the Millennium Challenge Account, which ties aid to political reforms) and big sticks (the threat of armed force). Professor Charles Fairbanks at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University calls it "far more energetic and all-embracing than the limited moral agenda embodied in Reagan's Evil Empire speech."

The jury is still out on whether it will work. Roadside bombs killing Americans and Iraqis alike make it hard to be jubilant about Iraq's progress. And despite Rice's European charm offensive, many of our allies remain skeptical about Bush's so-called freedom agenda. Still, Rice is confident. "After World War II, it didn't seem like freedom was on the march," she told the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco. "But we put in place institutions and stayed true to our values. Now you can't imagine another world war in Europe. If we stay true to our values now and our friends join us, I believe we will see a democratic Middle East."

She seems exhilarated by the challenge. Washington insiders are watching to see if she crosses swords with Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld or Vice President Cheney, the other two giants in the foreign policy ring. "Sooner or later there will be a substantive debate among them," says a former high-ranking White House official. "It will be Queen Condi against the Princes."

So will Condoleezza Rice run for president in 2008? "Nyet, nyet," she told the Russian press. "I won't do

it," she told ABC's *This Week* in March. "I don't know how many ways to say no." Likewise, many friends and family dismiss the notion. "I don't think she'll run for office," says Aunt G. "Teaching is her first love." Also dubious are many political pundits. "This is about as serious as Laura Bush running," says political scholar Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution, noting that the last person to win the presidency without experience in elective office was General Dwight D. Eisenhower. "I think it's silly, and frankly, I think she does too."

All the same, the President has been quietly pushing her into the limelight and, some believe, encouraging a run. And at least one former Republican National Committee chair thinks a Rice candidacy could prove a GOP masterstroke. "She tips the tables," he says, noting that if by 2008 Bush's gambit in Iraq looks like a success and national security is at the epicenter of the presidential debate, Rice could jump in late and prove the Republicans' white knightess. "Sometimes in politics," he says, "there are genuine cases of spontaneous combustion."

Her power and fame have not come without personal sacrifice—she has never been married and has no children. On occasion she laments not having much of a personal life, noting that she has little free time these days.

She still gets up early (5 a.m.) to lift weights or hit the treadmill, her headphones often blaring heavy metal legend Led Zeppelin. She also plays tennis and is taking golf lessons (really). And while she's had some awesome musical moments—playing a Brahms duet with cellist Yo-Yo Ma at Constitution Hall and now being wooed to play with the National Symphony Orchestra Pops by conductor and composer Marvin Hamlisch—she still finds time to play chamber music with a group of friends. And yes, she watches TV. Her favorite shows: *Law & Order* and *Cold Case Files*.

Plus, there's always football. She was disappointed when a Middle East mission this year forced her to miss the Super Bowl kickoff for the first time since the Super Bowl began way back in 1967, though she did tape it. She is attracted both to the warlike tactics of the game and to the players: she once dated former Denver Bronco all-pro kick returner Rick Upchurch, and today she is seen frequently with former San Francisco 49er Gene Washington.

Of course, with Rice, even football can turn into a deeper, more meaningful experience. On New Year's Eve 2002 she and a group of friends headed to Jacksonville, Florida, to see Notre Dame (where she earned a master's in international relations) play in the Gator Bowl. At midnight, after dinner and more football talk, the group gathered in Condi's room, where they joined hands, sang "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," and prayed for the world and the future. It is a future that—for better or worse—increasingly is in the hands of one brainy black girl from Birmingham.

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