



## Transformational Diplomacy Ambassador Robert P. Finn

Presented at  
Princeton University  
Saturday, June 3, 2006  
as Part of the Closing Events Celebrating the  
Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the  
Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs

A Webcast of this Presentation is Available at  
[http://www.wws.princeton.edu/events/webmedia\\_75thAnniversary.html](http://www.wws.princeton.edu/events/webmedia_75thAnniversary.html)

Secretary Rice's eloquent speech at Georgetown last January outlined a vision for a refocusing of United States diplomatic efforts to make them conform to the realities of politics and population in the twenty-first century. She stated the vision as one of working in partnership with people to help them build their own democratic societies and transform their own futures. These are sentiments that I think most Americans would share. She wants to move diplomats to places like India, China and Lebanon to answer the needs of the new century, giving as an example the opening of new embassies in the former countries of the Soviet Union and the effects they have had. I opened one of those embassies in Azerbaijan, and was ambassador in another, Tajikistan, so I can attest to the accuracy of her analysis and the utmost importance of diplomats who are fluent, flexible and present to represent the United States. People in Azerbaijan still remember vividly a midnight New Year's TV talk I gave with my very aged pug Boadicea sleeping on my lap in which I spoke about democracy and the rule of the people. They remember what I said, and even more, that I said it to them in their own language and not in English or the Russian of their colonial experience. So I'm very much in favor of this kind of transformational diplomacy, visible, open and American.

Diplomacy is an art and a craft that has many dimensions. Everyone knows about quiet consultations in back rooms, and they are an essential and important part of diplomacy. One of the goals of diplomacy is not only to effect change, but to have the other party take ownership of that change. This often takes place privately. But public appearances,

showing the flag, are very much part of the work as well. In countries where democracy does not exist, or is limited, the presence and support of American diplomats can be of critical importance. Contact with the U.S. Embassy has been essential and even life-preserving for political dissenters in many countries. It can also, as we have seen in those same former states of the Soviet Union, lead to change in government in some cases, and to greater governmental control in others. The line between partnership and interference is perceived very differently according to the particular circumstances, which themselves are constantly changing. That's one of the reasons why you need people on the ground and in the know. You also need to have a message that is credible and implementation that supports that message.

The plan that Secretary Rice sketched in her speech and which has since been elaborated, will necessitate an alteration in attitudes and practices beginning in Washington that will be difficult to implement. Former AID administrator Alexander Natsios pointed this out in an article in last week's Weekly Standard, noting that the recent practice of building fortress embassies has both isolated American diplomats from the people and sent an ominous signal to the citizens of the countries where those embassies were built that the U.S. is remote, fearful of them and itself threatening. Even American citizens find it increasingly problematic to enter our embassies abroad.

Secretary Rice's plan, however, would accelerate the program that Secretary Powell instituted of having individual diplomats in small one-man posts in places removed from capitals. The idea is to have diplomats and locations that are open and accessible. The more visible those posts are, however, the more sensitive they will become in terms of security. Professor Natsios asked in his article how ready the Washington bureaucracy will be to accept such changes.

Other parts of the plan, such as requiring diplomats to master two languages and serve in hardship posts, are already part of the State Department career program. Public diplomacy is a critical aspect of transformational diplomacy. The establishment of American Corners in universities and public spaces, as well as internet websites and chat corners, are good attempts at bringing a U.S. presence, but they cannot take the place of the American libraries that, in a calmer age, provided decades of access to the atmosphere of an American space with Americans in it. Public opinion polls around the world clearly show that the U.S. is not convincing people of its intentions. I read the other day that, except for Germans, more Europeans now trust China than the U.S. The State Department's new public diplomacy effort has a lot of work to do.

The reorganization of the assistance structure in the government was recognized by many in the community as an earnest effort to rationalize a structure that has been fragmented. Debate over who does what and why has been part of Washington for years, and the

addition of the Department of Defense as a principal in the debate has further complicated things. There is no question that assistance is a major tool for change; the question is what kind of change that tool will make. Political, economic and ideological considerations all play a role in shaping how aid is allocated and how it is used. Centralizing oversight could be a help or a hindrance in this.

In her speech, Secretary Rice spoke of the need for the Department of State to empower diplomats to work with other agencies, specifically with the military in post-conflict situations. Of course, U.S. embassies today include representatives of many other parts of the USG, from the Drug Enforcement Administration to the Center for Disease Control, and the country team that meets in each embassy, presided over by the ambassador, representing the President, is a reflection of this. Greater cooperation between and among agencies is a desirable goal. The Secretary called for more diplomats to be ready and eager to work with the military in post-conflict situations, because, as she pointed out, in the last fifteen years, “we have not had the standing civilian capacity to play our part fully.” The new State Department Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization might have changed that, but instead, Congress chose to authorize the Pentagon to transfer up to \$100 million to this office in the event of a post-conflict operation. As any administrator knows, if you do not have the budget, you do not have the power.

I ran an Embassy office in southeastern Turkey during Operation Provide Comfort, when several hundred thousand Kurds fled Saddam Hussein after the First Gulf War in 1992. The Special Forces were brought in for the first time to help during that operation. I recall soldiers, many of them reservists, telling me how difficult it was for them to do the relief work that was necessary, when their training and skills were geared to fight wars. In the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, our soldiers are still faced with the difficulties of divisive and sometimes contradictory responsibilities. These wars will end, and we hope there will be no further ones, but the needs of global availability for relief and reconstruction to help build democratic societies will continue, and they should not be the primary responsibility of the Department of Defense. The administration should go back to the Congress and have them directly fund the State Department to fulfill this critical function.

The State Department should continue to work closely with the military. In this, the situation in the field is often more cooperative than in Washington, where bureaucratic rivalries sometimes obscure relations. In the clear light of action situations, it has been my experience that U.S. officials abroad cooperate and support one another fully to advance policy goals. We are all Americans. Having diplomats work with the military, and vice versa, only enhances expertise and cooperation.

Secretary Rice stated that transformational democracy will take a generation to implement, in bureaucratic terms. Her admirable vision for making our diplomats be in touch with the real world, both physically and virtually, is an inescapable imperative. It will require boldness, bravery and a commitment to change in the usual ways of doing business in Washington. It also requires that the message we give is reflected in the actions we take. Our shared values of democracy, equality and freedom have become clouded by actions and attitudes, perhaps only by a few, that do not ring true, and our enemies have successfully applied them to the whole. Secretary Rice accurately stated that “in this world, it is impossible to draw neat, clear lines between our national security interests, our development efforts and our democratic ideals.” In order to advance the first two, we must also make sure that the last is unquestioned. For the next few years, that will be the most difficult task of transformational diplomacy.