

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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## **Dissing Rice Left Margin By Carl Bloice**

**BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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Let's see if I got this right. The prime minister of an allied government disses the U.S. secretary of state, says he went over her head and got her boss, the President of the United States, to countermand her intention to vote for a resolution at the United Nations and gloats over the fact that she was "left pretty embarrassed." The president remains silent on the matter and the State Department calls said foreign leader a liar. Yet the controversy lasts barely a 48-hour new cycle; two days after this probably unprecedented chain of events, most major U.S. media pretty much dropped what the *Washington Post* had described as a "rare public dust-up between the Bush administration and the Israeli government."

On January 14, Israeli radio reported that the office of Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, was sticking by the original allegation that 10 minutes before the scheduled UN Security Council vote, he phoned the President of the United States and told him, "You can't vote for it" and Bush quickly contacted Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and "gave an order to the Secretary of State." "She was left pretty embarrassed, abstaining on a draft resolution she organized herself," Olmert said.

"I said, 'Get me President Bush on the phone'," said Olmert. "They said he was in the middle of giving a speech in Philadelphia. I said I didn't care: 'I need to talk to him now'. He got off the podium and spoke to me."

Rice later called the account "fiction."

Did it really happen that way? Who knows? In the murky world of Middle East diplomacy - especially Washington's dealings with Tel Aviv - the truth could lay anywhere. One thing is certain, however, for an allied government leader to publicly undercut an African American woman in Rice's position should be a serious matter to the U.S. ... and to her.

"Rice's decision not to vote on the resolution surprised some U.S. allies in the Arab world, who later said they had been told the Americans were going to support the resolution, which ultimately passed the Security Council 14-0," reported the *Post*. "Just before the Security Council convened to consider the resolution, senior British and Saudi officials indicated they believed the vote would be unanimous."

The day after the UN vote, Julian Borg, diplomatic editor at the *Guardian* (UK) wrote that "The US change of mind came at the last moment, as a result of White House intervention following a call from Olmert. Rice was overridden and in the final vote, the US abstained. In her remarks afterwards, Rice made clear she backed the resolution, saying the US "fully supports" its goals, text and objectives. She said the US had abstained because Washington "thought it important to see the outcomes of the Egyptian mediation ... in order to see what this resolution might have been supporting." However, that was an argument the US had made when the text was drafted."

"The incident marks the latest in a long line of issues on which the White House has overruled the State Department, both under Rice and her predecessor, Colin Powell. The hard line taken in support of Israel by George Bush and his vice-president, Dick Cheney, has been maintained until the last days of the administration."

(Two black secretaries; two overrides.)

Last week, Rice told *Bloomberg* news she had been "quite aware" of the President's call to Prime Minister Olmert." (Who called whom?) "Of course, Prime Minister Olmert is not at all aware of what the President said to me," she said. "And I repeat, his rendering of this is fiction - if, in fact, that was his rendering of it. And I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps it's not exactly what he said."

"That's Olmert's story, or Israeli megalomania, presented to the Israelis with pride, but unlikely to be received by Americans with pleasure," commented Columnist William Pfaff.

Although the word from the Administration is that Rice intended to abstain on the vote from the beginning, her own account makes that a lot less clear. "The President and I talked about the resolution, about the importance of allowing the Council to send a signal even though the United States believed that the resolution was premature. And I had made very clear that I thought the resolution was premature, and there were also concerns about a resolution that had Israel, a member-state of the United Nations, and Hamas, which is a terrorist organization, you don't ever want there to be any equating those two."

"And so we talked. We talked about abstention as a good option." Sounds like they

hadn't really made up their minds.

If the Administration had indeed never intended to go along with the resolution it would have been in keeping with its stance over the weeks since the assault on Gaza began. It had held the threat of a veto over the Security Council while the carnage proceeded. It was in keeping with Rice's performance during fighting between Israel and the Lebanese Hezbollah movement when she refused to endorse a halt in the Israeli attack that killed more than 1,000 Lebanese and turned more than a half million into refugees

No question Olmert did explain what happened the way it was reported; no one has claimed he was taken out of context. The question is why? If, as the Bush Administration maintains, it didn't happen that way, why did he lie? If he's telling the truth, the question is: why did he go public with it?

One theory being advanced in the Israeli media is that Olmert was incensed that Tzipi Livni of the Kadima party (the country's largest) had claimed credit for having successfully twisted the arm of the U.S. President. If that's the case, the Israeli leadership is acting both petty and reckless in a matter touching on the world's most explosive crisis at the moment.

In all likelihood the charges and countercharges are indeed related to Israeli politics. There's an election coming up in the country. Forces far to the right of the incumbent coalition government appear to be in striking distance of assuming power.

"The second objective has to do with Israel's coming elections, wrote Israeli Neve Gordon in the *Guardian* (UK). "The assault on Gaza is also being carried out to help Kadima and Labor defeat Likud and its leader Binyamin Netanyahu, who is currently ahead in the polls. It is not coincidental that Netanyahu's two main competitors, Livni and Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, were invited to the press conference - since, after the assault, it will be more difficult for Netanyahu to characterize them as 'soft' on the Palestinians. Whether or not the devastation in Gaza will help Livni defeat Netanyahu or help Barak gain votes in the February elections is difficult to say, but the strategy of competing with a warmonger like Netanyahu by beating the drums of war says a great deal about all three major contenders."

The assault on Gaza, planned over six months and executed with perfect timing, was designed largely "... to help the incumbent parties triumph in the forthcoming Israeli elections," commented veteran Middle East commentator Tariq Ali. "The dead Palestinians are little more than election fodder in a cynical contest between the right and the far right in Israel. Washington and its EU allies, perfectly aware that Gaza was about to be assaulted, as in the case of Lebanon in 2006, sat back and watched. "

The Rice-Olmert spat has "stirred up old debates about the role of the Israeli government and the so-called "Israel lobby" in formulating Middle East policy in Washington," wrote Daniel Luban of the *Inter Press Service* (IPS) January 13. Indeed, it may well turn out that President Bush was really pressured on the Security Council vote not by Olmert but by people in the U.S. allied with the territorial expansionists in Israel.

A report by Nathan Guttman in the *Jewish Daily Forward* January 15 throws a somewhat different light on this strange affair. "Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert

didn't do anything wrong - but he should have kept his mouth shut," he wrote January 15. "That was the reaction of several Jewish leaders to Olmert's public boast January 11."

"Olmert's call to Bush aside, there were hints of internal wrangling within America's administration over the resolution," Guttman. In a January 11 *CNN* interview, Vice President Dick Cheney voiced disbelief in the U.N.'s ability to end the fighting in Gaza. "I think we've learned, from watching over the years, that there's a big difference between what happens at the United Nations in their debates and the facts on the ground in major crises around the world," Cheney said.

"Israel and Jewish groups, including AIPAC, the ADL and the American Jewish Committee, opposed the draft's language, which they saw as one-sided. They also felt that the draft stood in contrast to Israel's demand not to give it equal standing with Hamas in the resolution.

"During a January 5 conference call with Jewish activists, Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, gave special priority to blocking the international body from taking a stand on the Gaza issue. 'We need to work hard to ensure the Security Council doesn't pass a resolution,' Hoenlein said."

According to Guttman, Rice's decision not to outright veto the resolution "triggered angry and unusual criticism from Jewish groups that have praised Bush during most of his eight-year White House tenure." AIPAC issued a statement January 6 condemning the U.N. resolution and criticizing the Bush administration for not using its veto power and instead "succumbing to pressure exerted by Arab states."

Then, Guttman got down to what is probably the crux of the matter. "The tough words from Israel and Jewish groups toward the outgoing administration will make little difference for Bush and Rice, who leave office January 20," he wrote. "But they will serve as a message to the incoming administration led by President-elect Barack Obama and his choice for secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton.

"This is a battle that needed to be taken," Guttman quoted Abraham Foxman as saying. "We don't win all our battles, but we can't simply accept that the Security Council is what the Security Council is."

Guttman's story is clearly one the *Times's*, the *Chronicles*, the *Posts*, *ABC*, *CNN*, *NBC* and *NPR* must have decided they didn't want to touch with a 10- foot pole.

The lobby groups in this country who buttress the schemes of those in Israel intent on perpetuating the occupation, and the media elements that ignore their misdeeds and treat their propaganda handouts like news, aren't doing the people of the U.S. or the people of Israel or the Palestinians or the cause of peace any good. We and the incoming administration would do well to heed the advice Philip Stephens, associate editor of the *Financial Times* and a senior commentator, offered January 9: "Israel will never turn armed might into strategic security. If need be, it could win a war against all its enemies combined. But if it wants peace it must face the decision it has avoided for 40 years: withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories. Military victory and land grabs are futile. Security will come only with political resolution."

On December 30, the *New York Times* editors offered their opinion that "Ms. Rice once hoped to make a Middle East peace her legacy," but added: "It is too late for that. But she should do her job. That means getting on a plane for Cairo and Riyadh - now - to enlist their help in brokering a new cease-fire." She didn't. Now, one month later, she leaves the scene under a cloud, dissed by a loudmouthed foreign official bent on scoring political points and people here at home determined to box in the new Administration.

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