

# Bagless ladies: the powerful new breed of politician

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An unencumbered Condoleezza Rice leaves others to deal with women's baggage, writes Anne Summers.

YOU never see Condoleezza Rice carrying a handbag. Not for her, arguably the most powerful woman in the world, the traditional trapping of feminine encumbrance. Madeleine Albright, the only other woman to serve as US secretary of state, did not carry one either. She had an aide do it for her. One often caught a glimpse of the poor guy, struggling gamely to retain his dignity while he lugged around the secretarial pocketbook.

Margaret Thatcher, when she was British prime minister, seemed to have her handbag permanently attached to her elbow. I used to wonder why she felt it necessary to carry one while she welcomed visitors to No. 10, her home as well as her office. For Thatcher it seemed to be an essential female prop, something to remind people that she was still a woman despite her propensity to reduce male cabinet colleagues to tears.

Rice has no such baggage.

I often don't agree with her politics, but as she strides around the world I can't help but be impressed by her extraordinary calmness and savoir faire - and her sartorial style. Two weeks ago, she was in the Middle East, head uncovered, telling the Saudis to lift their game and the Egyptians that the jig was up. In both cases she was greeted with barely concealed hostility.

"I am often asked whether I was condescended to by men as I travelled around the world to Arab countries and other places with highly traditional cultures," Albright wrote in her memoir, *Madam Secretary*. "I replied, 'No, because when I arrived somewhere, it was in a large plane with United States of America emblazoned on the side.' Foreign officials respected that. I had more problems with some of the men in my own government."

Rice travels in that same big plane, but she does not get the same benign reception that usually greeted the grandmotherly Albright. Rice is young, svelte, single, childless and, of course, black. She cops more than condescension. When Rice visited China a few months ago, local websites went into anti-Condi overdrive.

The commentary was vicious and much of it race-based. There were hideous comments along the lines of "How come the United States selects a female chimpanzee as Secretary of State?" and "She's so ugly she's losing face. Even a dog would be put off its dinner while she's being fed."

A *Herald* report by Hamish McDonald in March said the overall tone of the 800 monitored postings was hostile and about 10 per cent were racist, sexist or both. In a

country where emails are blocked for merely mentioning words like democracy, it looked as if these comments had some level of official sanction.

Even for someone as assured as Rice, it must be pretty hard to take.

If it weren't crystal clear that Rice is George Bush's close confidant as well as his appointee, she might find it more difficult to make a policy impact. But given her proximity to Bush - they supposedly often watch the football on television together, and she is a frequent weekend guest at Camp David - she can afford to face the hostility, even hatred, with equanimity and poise.

And does she ever. She strides out into the world dressed in a way that is unprecedented for a woman of her power. In what was described by *The Washington Post* as a "commanding" performance, Rice visited the Wiesbaden military base in February in an outfit consisting of a short black skirt, topped by a "black coat that fell to mid-calf [and which] with its seven gold buttons running down the front and its band collar, called to mind a marine's dress uniform or the 'save humanity' ensemble worn by Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*." The ensemble was completed with knee-high, high-heeled black leather boots that were revealed when the wind blew back her coat.

Not for her the usual power dress of the Washington woman. "She was not wearing a bland suit with a loose-fitting skirt and short boxy jacket with a pair of sensible pumps," the paper continued. "She did not cloak her power in photogenic hues, a feminine brooch and a non-threatening aesthetic. Rice looked as though she was prepared to talk tough, knock heads and do a freeze-frame 'Matrix' jump-kick if necessary."

She probably doesn't have quite the same effect on Saudi sheiks and Chinese chiefs but then, she is more likely to greet them wearing an elegant cream pants-suit. Nevertheless, she must make a huge impact, and it is pretty impressive to watch.

There is no doubt that Rice serves as the acceptable black face of an administration that's cutting back affirmative action. Nor can one forget her commercial links as a former director for 10 years at the oil giant Chevron, which has massive contracts with Halliburton, the company the Vice-President, Dick Cheney, used to run. (Chevron named an oil tanker the Condoleezza Rice in 2001 after she'd joined the Bush Administration, but quietly renamed it the Altair Voyager when there was a public outcry.)

Rice's accomplishments have vaulted her into an entirely different league. She's not just an accomplished concert pianist who has read *War and Peace* in Russian (twice) and seems intent on rewriting American foreign policy in the Middle East. She's someone who likes to recount, says a profile published in *The New Yorker* in October 2002, that her parents told her she could be president - even though most blacks in the south, where they lived, could not vote then. Perhaps in 2008 she will be a contender. That would be an amazing ride for a young female descendant of slaves who grew up in the segregation of the south.

Even more extraordinary is the possibility that the Democratic contender could be Hillary Clinton. Now that would be an exhilarating and unprecedented contest. Clinton does not carry a handbag, either.