

5. Case Study 2

The trace of Condoleezza Rice: a moral quest

I am a realist....Power matters. But there can be no absence of moral content in American foreign policy, and, furthermore, the American people wouldn't accept such an absence. Europeans giggle at this and say we're naive and so on, but we're not Europeans, we're Americans – and we have different principles. (Rice quoted in Kettmann 2000)

Nicholas Lemann's¹ 'Without Doubt' (*Good Weekend* 15/2/2003), the story of Condoleezza Rice, has many of the classic themes of the hero's journey – through passing a series of tests the determined hero ends up rewarded at the heart of power. But this very topical tale is told in a knowing speculative way that contrasts markedly with the expressed certainties of its subject. It is a clear example of the way journalism retells contemporary stories with reference to both traditional archetypal patterns and the emergent modernist and post-modern stories.

In his presence

The introductory strap sets up one of the key dialectics of the article: the battle between the human and the super human.

She was just eight years old, it's said, when she first set her sights on the White House. Four decades on, the supremely self-assured Condoleezza Rice is a fixture there – not only as George Bush's national security advisor, but as his close friend. Nicholas Lemann traces the relentless rise of a stranger to doubt. (p 22)

We are immediately presented with competing images of innocence (“she was eight years old”) and determined ambition (“set her sights”). Rice is characterised by strong directed language: “supremely self assured”, “a fixture”, “relentless rise” “stranger to self doubt” but she is also a friend and a child. The child and the fixture are mediated by time – the four decades, which form the subject of this tale.

The author is said to “trace” this figure. To trace implies a much more cautious posture than to examine or to investigate. It implies seeking interpretations from clues left in the subject's wake rather than the easy presentation of a clear and unambiguous story. Or perhaps it suggests production of an outline

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only, rather than an embodied drawing. In Derridian terms the trace is that which haunts language but is never revealed or a process of revelation where meaning is constantly deferred. (Derrida 1982)

Lemann adopts a number of strategies or journalistic postures from psychoanalyst, seeking keys to her personality in childhood and upbringing, to detective, gathering together explanatory texts and anecdotes from a variety of sources. But throughout he consistently adopts a bardic posture telling the story of the hero in the context of her ancestors and her tribe. He is almost hagiographic in his approach sowing together the story with a series of exemplary anecdotes collected from various friends/acolytes and matching these with short, often enigmatic “sayings” from the subject.

In terms of the traditional hero’s journey we start at the end point: Rice stands as a privileged initiate in the circles of power. She is the one closest to the president/king she stands most often “in his presence” (p22). But this is not just a power relationship, she is his friend, she has been adopted as part of the family. While in a traditional hero’s tale such a privileged hero may be brought into the family by being offered the ruler’s daughter in marriage here the communion is sealed through being awarded keys to the kingdom – access to the private presidential retreats.

We are introduced to Rice through a series of contrasting positive/negative definitions: she is not a “Kissingerian” schemer but she does convey importance; she is an orphaned only child, she does have close friends but she is not part of the “Washington social circle”. Lemann will return to this critical insider/outsider theme.

Dynamics of power, access, public and private are foregrounded from the beginning. She often makes public statements beginning “The president believes that...” But she won’t reveal the content of their discussions or possible disagreements: “Our discussions about my views are private,” (p. 22) she tells Lemann.

The introduction is brought to an end by the first “hagiographical” testimony: Friends reveal that she is open in private about “her adoration of the president”. “I can’t find the Archimedean point outside her love of Bush,” (p.22) one friend says.

Archimedes a third century Greek philosopher mathematician is famous for saying: “Give me but one firm spot on which to stand, and I will move the earth.” Her strength, for the Herculean tasks ahead, lies in the solidity of her relationship with the leader. This is a story in which hero and king are inextricably intertwined.

Personal Destiny

The first section situates Rice in the context of her ancestors, her time and her tribe. It relates an “unusual set of circumstances [that] produced a sense of personal destiny.”

We begin with her naming by her mother after the Italian musical term ‘*con dolcezza*’ – with sweetness. But any mythical quaintness this naming may convey is immediately swept away by the even more portentous place and time of her birth, Birmingham Alabama, 1954: a town synonymous with the fight for civil rights in the 1960s. Here we are introduced to the two competing storylines that will play themselves out in Rice’s life: the story of her tribe and the story of her nation.

Lemann tells us that Rice “dislikes any attempt to shoehorn her into the prevailing white-liberal storyline about civil rights,” (p.22) he goes on to say that Rice is insistent that her family was “proud accomplished, self reliant and not in need of anybody’s help, thankyou.” She adopts the general storyline of American self-reliance rather than any specifically black version of this story.

This is the first of several references by Lemann to “storyline”, “versions of the story,” “oft-told story” and other expressions where he clearly foregrounds that this is a story rather than a life and one of a number of possible versions

of that story. This is also evident in the author's theatrical description of Rice as being born to "well-established parents, with a large supporting cast of relatives" (p.22).

In the traditional hero's tale the hero encounters, riddles and tests that mark progress of the journey. The first set in Rice's journey is her demanding set of childhood extra-curricular activities. She is marked out early on.

It may have been typical for children in her neighbourhood to go to church and to be put on track for college and to take piano lessons – but not to perform in church and take lessons aimed at a career as a concert pianist, in addition to flute lessons and ballet lessons and French lessons and violin lessons and skating lessons and skip two grades in school and have unusually close instructions in dress and grooming and manners (p.22)

In the ensuing tale we see Rice engage in other tests and pass other "milestones" such as becoming the first black, first female provost at Stanford, her move from academia to politics, her transformation from Democrat to Republican and more recently her transformation from a "realist" to a "moralist" in her geopolitical thinking.

If Lemann's story is marked by its return to the anecdote as a way of revealing the character of his subject, his Ur myth is the story of the eight year old referred to in the opening strap.

Rice often remarks that her parents told her she could become president – at a time when most black people in the South couldn't vote. In one version of the story, her father took eight year old Condi to Washington and as they stood in front of the White House, she said, "One day, I'll be in that house." (p.23)

Here is the aetiological story which grounds Rice's belief in absolute possibility and the strength of self-reliance. As Lemann goes onto note, Rice

believes “firmly that the individual (or at least the extraordinary individual) can triumph over imposed limitations” (p.23). If this is one modern American version of the hero myth there is also another that is revealed in Lemann’s portrait of Rice.

Transformation

As Campbell (1993) has noted the hero’s journey is about “transformation”. But while this has been traditionally worked out physically, spatially and practically the modern emphasis is on psychological transformation. Here the portrait of Rice becomes more complex.

The key anecdote in this stream of the story is a quote from Connie, Rice’s second cousin, who shared a similar upbringing and who became friends with Rice in adulthood. Commenting on the national security advisor’s reserve and self-reliance and her failure to advocate for blacks as a group she has this to say:

It isn’t so much a lack of empathy – it’s that the synaptic connection is blocked. Think about what it took to grow up in ‘Bombingham’ and not let it affect your self-confidence. All the presumption of inferiority – you have to build a wall against that stuff. How do you come through that untouched? You have to create fortresses. I have five moats; she probably has 12 – formidable titanium-level defences. (p.25)

At another point we are shown vulnerability and reserve in one anecdote. Her friend Chip Blacker tells of Rice’s reaction to her mother’s death.

She called me at about 12.30 in the morning and asked if I could come over and stay for a while. She was pretty broken up. I stayed there overnight, and at seven I drove her to the airport. She was totally composed. I asked her how she could be. She said, ‘It’s because I honestly believe I will see my mother in heaven.’

While resolve and strength are characteristics of the hero, contemporary stories of inspirational leaders emphasise empathy and vulnerability as essential balancing qualities. Here Rice is shown to be weak. It could be the flaw that gives way to tragedy and although her imperviousness to self-doubt seems to have shielded her from that fall so far.

Although her religious upbringing is detailed – her father and grandfather were preachers - this story of her mother's death is one of the few explicit references to her religious faith. But there is a tone of moralism throughout, both personal (she characterises the sixties dismissively as “chaotic and self-indulgent”) and professional (the pro-war Bush cabinet are characterised as “moralists and world-remakers”). The narrative's real story of belief and conversion is not religious in the traditional sense but political.

Conversion

There are two conversion narratives in the story. One details Rice's transformation from Democrat to Republican the other from a foreign policy “realist” to “moralist”.

The later story is the more central. It is presented as a personal story, a national story (“September 11 has changed the way everyone thinks about the world”) and a story of court politics and power alliances.

It is also intimately linked to the relationship between Rice and the president. It is here that the influence is reciprocal, here their worlds begin to merge. Lemann comments wryly: “When you hear Rice speaking, that is what Bush would sound like if he was as articulate as she was.”

Though Rice and Bush would appear to be an unlikely pair, the common ground between them encompasses religious faith and football fandom and a sardonic sense of humour; more broadly, an outsider-inside-the-establishment feeling and a tendency to see life in terms of good guys and bad guys; even more broadly, a complete absence of self doubt.

In some ways it seems that Rice has been won over to the President's "grand ambition and broad simple way of seeing the world". But at another level her ability to change and specifically to make *this* change is inherent in the blueprint of her family story.

She tells Lemann the story of her Grandfather becoming a Presbyterian and a minister to get a college scholarship, then she proudly says: "My family has been Presbyterian and college educated ever since. This is not just my grandfather's story – it is an American story." Lemann comments:

On the surface, the story is about the value of taking an opportunity when it is presented, but look closer and you will see that it is also reveals a proud Rice family ethic in changing something as fundamental as your religious affiliation if the result will be a chance to do more in the world.

Condoleezza Rice's story is indeed an American story but it is much more than that it is what Lule (2001) would call an "eternal story". The hero, the journey, transformation, conversion, the flaw, the negotiation of morality and ambition these are recurrent themes of human storytelling. Lemann tells the story adroitly through use of an anecdotal narrative structure interspersed with reflection, he draws on classic themes but puts them in a specifically American, contemporary context. The "eternal story" does not provide a static model it provides a background against which contemporary elements of the Rice saga – feminism, the development of the psychological self, race and international geopolitics – are measured. The concurrent frameworks allow for the emergence of contradiction and drama in this multi-layered portrait of Rice.

The readers' tale

The story of Condoleezza Rice as presented by Lemann is at once inspirational, tragic and cautionary. It can be mobilised by the reader as a

story of personal inspiration toward achievement and ever expanding possibilities. It can also be read as an ideological story in which the reader situates themselves as a player in the court of politics between the “moralists” and the “realists”.

The readers who wrote into the letters section of the magazine in the following weeks seem to have mainly used it as a way of defining their identity in opposition to the story told. As Jon McMillan writes:

Nicholas Lemann’s portrait of the prodigiously gifted Condoleezza Rice should have been inspirational. Depressingly, however, the life of this overachiever emerges as a US version of the grocers daughter from Grantham village, Margaret Thatcher; a person whose lack of empathy for those of lesser ability, together with a quasi religious faith in “self-reliance,” is ultimately chilling. Typical of many at the conservative end of the spectrum, such individuals have the whiff of the despot about them. (*Good Weekend* 8/3/2003 p.6)

However another reader, Ian Swann, produces a very different reading:

Congratulations *Good Weekend* on your profiles of Condoleezza Rice and Camilla Crowley [a local campaigner for Afghan asylum seekers profiled in the same issue]. At first glance one would assume them to be two different women from opposite ends of the scale. But not so. Scratch the surface and both have much in common: a belief that education is key to personal advancement, that good should prevail over evil and that the protection of minority groups over dictators and unjust governments is a cause worth fighting for. (*Good Weekend* 8/3/2003 p.6)

Lemann has produced an open text that deftly weaves a number of threads together producing a compelling narrative while not foreclosing on its ultimate meaning.