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HEADLINE: It's not about Rice

BYLINE: Richard Cohen

BODY:

In 1953, an Army officer by the name of Irving Peress was promoted from captain to major. Peress was a leftist, possibly a communist, and word of his advancement in rank reached Sen. Joseph McCarthy in Washington. He asserted that the promotion proved the Army was "soft on communism," and he launched an investigation that transfixed the nation. Peress, by the way, was a mere dentist. He was the Susan Rice of his day.

Rice, of course, is a much more substantial figure. She is the U.N. ambassador, a friend of Barack Obama's and a member of his Cabinet. Still, the attack on her is so disproportionate to what she is accused of having done - just what was it, exactly? - that as in the Peress case, you have to conclude that there is something more at work.

At first, I thought we were witnessing just another example of Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) doing his Rumpelstiltskin number - throwing a fit and stomping his feet. It was McCain who first leveled the solemn charge that Rice had lied to the Sunday TV shows about the attack on the U.S. consulate in *Benghazi, Libya*. She had characterized it as a spontaneous riot when it was, in fact, a planned attack by a local al-Qaeda affiliate. But Rice was hewing to the early line established by the intelligence community. If the CIA and others were wrong - or deceptive - then so, inevitably, was she.

Just as surely as day follows night, McCain's broadside was echoed by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.). It was soon taken up by 97 Republicans in the House who found Rice unqualified to become secretary of state - a post to which she has not been nominated. "Ambassador Rice is widely viewed as having willfully or incompetently misled the American public," they bellowed.

I think Rice would make a dandy secretary of state. She's close to the president, and that matters a great deal. But she is also seen as overly political and that, as much as her version of *Benghazi*, is what troubles some others. Oddly enough, Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), a former presidential candidate and another potential secretary of state, is seen as much more of a statesman. He is indeed an independent foreign-policy thinker who has, as in days of old, restored the prestige and importance of the Foreign Relations Committee, of which he is chairman.

But the awful truth is that it hardly matters who Obama chooses. Foreign policy is run from the White House and not the *State Department*. Hillary *Clinton* is about to retire, and while she has done a commendable

job at Foggy Bottom, we cannot expect the inevitable book by her to reveal a Clinton Doctrine. For the most part, she executed, not initiated, foreign policy.

So what is this fuss all about? Not Rice, that's for sure. It has turned instead into an expression of unease about Obama's foreign policy and its politicization. The unfortunate Peress came to personify the government's alleged indifference to the (equally alleged) communist infiltration of the military and virtually everything else (with the possible exception of the American Legion). Similarly, Rice has become the personification of unhappiness with the use of intelligence leaks to buff Obama's foreign policy image and the conducting of an amorphous foreign policy. Like Churchill's famous pudding, it lacks theme.

Syria is an example. U.S. inaction has allowed the crisis to fester. Bashar al-Assad's regime might be dusting off its formidable arsenal of chemical weapons, further evidence of how chaotic this crisis has become, but much of the time the White House has just trailed after Turkey or France. The war has spread, a refugee calamity has developed, 40,000 people have died, and jihadists have come to play a prominent role. The Obama administration has been as lethargic on Syria as it initially was with *Libya*.

This sense of an aimless foreign policy, one lacking any moral fervor (or fiber) irritates conservatives much more than liberals. It certainly enrages McCain, who cannot stomach the big guys kicking little guys around. He sees an administration that will not engage the American people on matters of foreign policy - make a case for intervention, not just say it's too hard to do.

The attack on Rice is unfair and excessive. But the issue is not the person but what she represents - in this case, the administration's inability to articulate a foreign policy that marries American morality to American power, not merely American politics.