

CHAPTER ONE

DEBUT

*I spend a lot of time thinking about how best to defend America against threats to her values, threats to her society, but sometimes my greatest fear is that when we finish paying for and thinking about how to defend ourselves with military forces, we will have very little left to defend.<sup>1</sup>*

CONDOLEEZZA RICE

Class Day Speech  
Stanford University  
June 1985

She stood out for what she was not. As a little girl, she didn't fidget. "She never had to go to the bathroom like children do."<sup>2</sup> When Brent Scowcroft, President George H. W. Bush's future national security adviser, visited Stanford in 1984 for a talk with arms control experts, she stood out because she wasn't old. "More than [being] attractive and black, it was that she was young—and a comer," said Scowcroft twenty years later.<sup>3</sup> In 2000, Condoleezza Rice stood out at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, at least at first, because out of 2,022 delegates, she was one of eighty-five African Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Governor George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore had been locked in a brutal race for the White House. Bush's challenge was to get the country to cast off Democratic leadership after eight relatively halcyon years of Bill Clinton. The governor had two principal strategies. One was to constantly highlight the differences between Gore, the political heir to Clinton—a philanderer who had had

sex with an intern in the White House—and Bush’s own upright character. Bush promised a new age of moral certitude—not preachy but plainspoken—a time of optimism and honor, in contrast to the Clinton years that he portrayed, economic prosperity aside, as a long nightmare of national disgrace.

Bush’s other theme was aimed at voters who weren’t convinced Clinton’s moral failings should affect their vote in 2000. They were centrists less persuaded by appeals based on Bush’s rectitude alone; Clinton was leaving anyway. To reach them, the Bush campaign heralded a new era of “compassionate conservatism,” a middle ground between the Democrats’ reliance on big government to solve the woes of individuals and the Republican tendency, Bush’s slogan implied, to uncompassionately blame the unfortunates’ problems on themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Compassionate conservatism was making inroads with the moderates that the governor needed to take the White House.<sup>6</sup> But his political strategists were taking nothing for granted; Bush wanted to not only reinvigorate the Republican Party but build the foundation for a permanent majority,<sup>7</sup> one that would unite moderates and conservatives, including minorities.<sup>8</sup>

Gore’s message was aimed at the same middle-class, middle-of-the-road voter Bush so coveted. The voter who even after the sordid Monica Lewinsky scandal was still more concerned about her own affairs than Bill Clinton’s. Gore hammered away at the Republicans for being ideologically extremist *men* determined to abolish “a woman’s right to choose,” removed from the concerns of everyday Americans.

But by the summer of 2000, it still wasn’t clear who would capture the middle-class moderates.<sup>9</sup> Then onto the stage of the First Union Center in Philadelphia stepped Condoleezza Rice.

Convention chairman Andy Card had been promising “a different kind of convention for a different kind of Republican.” In contrast to 1992, when conservative culture warriors had scared moderates away from Bush’s father’s candidacy, Card guaranteed “an upbeat message that highlights citizens who personify the ideas and principles of the Republican Party.”<sup>10</sup> He couldn’t have hoped for a better exemplar than Condi Rice: a black woman who had been a National Security Council staffer under President Bush, the former provost and vice president of Stanford University, and now W.’s chief foreign policy adviser.

With regal bearing, Rice took the stage in an exquisitely tailored suit, smiling broadly. She waved to the crowd and patiently waited for the applause to

subside. Then, with the fluency of a college professor and the assurance of a woman accustomed to briefing the most powerful man in the world, she began.

Thank you for that warm welcome. Thank you, Governor, for . . . that . . . generous introduction. [Governor Bush had introduced Rice remotely on a giant video screen.]

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, fellow delegates from the G-o-o-oldden State of California [cheers] . . . fellow delegates from across the country. Tonight, we gather to reflect on America's unique opportunity to lead the forward march of freedom and to fortify the peace.<sup>11</sup>

Rice rushed through "to lead the forward march of freedom," robbing the phrase of its accelerating tempo—whether because she was nervous at the start of the most important speech of her life, which was unlikely; or because she was famously a proponent of Realpolitik, which argued that interests, not ideals, drove international relations.

We offer special thanks to all those Private Ryans who served over the decades—so that tyranny . . . would . . . not . . . stand. [applause]

We remember those great Republican presidents who sustained American leadership through the decades, ended the Cold War, and lifted our nuclear nightmare. Thank you, Gerald Ford, thank you, Ronald Reagan, thank you, George—Herbert—Walker—Bush. [applause]

And tonight, we gather to acknowledge this remarkable truth: The future belongs to liberty—fueled by markets and trade, protected by the rule of law, and propelled by the fundamental rights of the individual. Information and knowledge can no longer be bottled up by the state. Prosperity flows to those who can tap the genius of their people. [light applause]

We have, ladies and gentlemen, a presidential nominee who knows what America must do to fulfill the promise of this new century. We have a nominee who knows the power of truth and honor.

With the last phrase, spoken with her eyes narrowed into a searing gaze as though in judgment of Bill Clinton, the country received a taste of the steeliness it would come to know in Condi Rice.

Over hoots and hollers, she continued, “We have a nominee . . . we have a nominee who will be the next great president of the United States of America—Texas Governor George W. Bush.” The convention boilerplate led to sixteen seconds of sustained applause. But it was followed, less than two and a half minutes into her speech, with a story that had never been told on “national security night” from the rostrum of a Republican National Convention.

It is fitting that I stand before you to talk about Governor Bush’s commitment to America’s principled leadership in the world, because that is the legacy and tradition of our party—because our party’s principles made me a Republican. [applause]

The first Republican that I knew was my father, John Rice, and he is still the Republican I admire most. My father joined our party because the Democrats in Jim Crow Alabama of 1952 would not register him to vote. The Republicans did.

The line was delivered with a flatness and a force that claimed retribution, as if this night in Philadelphia was payback time. Then, whether to be heard above the din or in a rare moment of personal anguish—Rice was known for her perpetual poise—she almost yelled, “I want you to know . . . I want you to know that my father has never forgotten that day, and neither have I!”

The crowd erupted. It was the sound of chains clanking to the stadium floor. The Republican Party, which had been saddled for two generations with the smear that it was the party of whites and the rich, was watching an articulate and appealing black woman not only sing its praises on national television but contrast it favorably to a racist Democratic Party.

Dropping her voice back to its normal register, Rice continued.

I joined the party for different reasons. I found a party that sees me as an individual, not as part of a group.

I found a party that puts family first. I found a party . . . I found a party that has love of liberty at its core. And I found a party that believes that peace begins with strength.

Then she described Bush’s character and the impact it would have on American foreign policy: “It all begins with integrity in the Oval Office . . . Friend and foe—friend and foe—will know that he keeps his word and tells the truth.”

George W. Bush believes that America has a special responsibility to keep the peace—that the fair cause of freedom depends on our strength and purpose.

He recognizes that the magnificent men and women of America's armed forces are not a global police force. They are not the world's 911. [applause]

. . . And I want to assure you if the time ever comes to use military force, President George W. Bush will do so to win—because for him, victory is . . . not . . . a . . . dirty . . . word. [During a fourteen-second ovation, she stared intensely over the crowd.]

. . . But most importantly, George W. Bush, the George W. Bush that I know, is a man of uncommonly good judgment. He is focused and consistent. He believes that we Americans are at our best when we exercise power without fanfare and arrogance. He speaks plainly and with a positive spirit.

Nine minutes into her speech, Rice returned to the theme of race.

In America, with education and hard work, it really does not matter where you came from—it matters only where you are going. [She would use the same phrase when referring to her father at his memorial ceremony four months later.] But that truth cannot be sustained if it is not renewed in each generation—as it was with my grandfather.

George W. Bush would have liked Granddaddy Rice. He was the son of a-a-a . . . farmer in rural Alabama . . . [she stutters for the first time in the speech, perhaps over the change from the released text, which included a description of her great-grandfather as “poor”], but he recognized the importance of education. Around 1918, he decided he was going to get book learning [The distributed copies of the speech read “he decided it was time to get book learning”; the spoken version eliminates the passive voice, conferring greater agency on Granddaddy Rice], and so he asked, in the language of the day, where a colored man could go to college. He was told about little Stillman College, a school about fifty miles away. So Granddaddy saved his cotton for tuition, and he went off to Tuscaloosa.

After the first year, he ran out of cotton, and he needed a way to pay for college. Praise be—as he often does, God gave him an answer. My grandfather asked how those . . . other . . . boys were staying in school. And he was told that “they had what was called a scholarship,” and they said, “If you wanted to be a Presbyterian minister, then you could have one, too.” Granddaddy Rice said, “That’s just what I had in mind.” [light laughter and applause] And my family has been Presbyterian and college educated ever since.

Rice received the longest ovation of her speech: a full nineteen seconds of applause and cheers. Notably, it was not in appreciation for anything she had said about candidate Bush or the promise of a Bush presidency but for a story she told about the Rice family.

But you know, that’s not just my grandfather’s story—that’s an American story. The search for hope. The search for opportunity. The skill of good hard work.

My friends, George W. Bush challenges us to call upon our better selves—to be compassionate toward those who are less fortunate; to cherish and educate every child, descendants of slaves and immigrants alike, and to thereby affirm the American dream for us all. [light applause]

On that firm foundation, confident of what we are defending, confident of who we are, we will go forth, we will go forth, to extend peace, prosperity, and liberty beyond our blessed shores.

Thank you.

Let’s go out and elect George W. Bush and Dick Cheney!

Good night. God bless you, and God bless America.

The speech lasted just over thirteen minutes. Without applause, Rice had spoken for about ten minutes, devoting almost a third of that time to her family history and, both subtly and not, to race.

The media loathed Bush’s contention-free coronation. Through every grudging minute of network airtime and for hundreds of column inches, journalists complained about the lack of discord inside and outside the arena:<sup>12</sup> the high level

of orchestration that eliminated what little spontaneity could be hoped for in a modern political convention<sup>13</sup> and, especially, the diversity “window dressing.”<sup>14</sup>

But Condoleezza Rice had enthralled even the gimlet-eyed journalists. A reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle* summed her up as simply “a class act.”<sup>15</sup> The *Philadelphia Inquirer* decreed her “the most important of the new GOP stars.”<sup>16</sup> Wrote a minister and political rhetorician in the *Dallas Morning News*, “It may have been John McCain’s evening, but it was Ms. Rice’s moment.” Conservative columnist George Will called her address “noble” and “deftly written (that ‘Praise be’ sentence is particularly masterful), drily funny, devoid of claims to victim status.”<sup>17</sup>

Discussion of Rice’s race and what it said about the Republicans generated far more ink than her foreign policy views: “Ms. Rice, an African American preacher’s kid from Alabama and a former provost and professor from Stanford, epitomized personally and rhetorically what the whole Republican convention has been trying to present to the world—we’re diverse, we care, we’re smart, and we’re on top of things,” read one column. “She rocked the place.”<sup>18</sup> The editorial page of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* exclaimed, “We challenge critics to ask Powell or [Rice] . . . if they feel as if they were paraded before the cameras merely to fool the public about the GOP’s attitudes about minorities. That suggestion is an incredible insult to these two intelligent, accomplished African Americans.”<sup>19</sup> And noting Rice and Colin Powell’s prominence both at the convention and as potential high-level administration officials, Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* observed it was “both striking and ironic that the Democrats can manage nothing similar.”<sup>20</sup>

More important, Bush’s “brainy African American adviser” had done her job. The needle started to move more resolutely in the direction of Bush among moderates and centrists.<sup>21</sup> So much so that some of the Republican faithful complained about the “sweetness and light” convention.<sup>22</sup> They said the party had worked so hard to be inclusive that it had hidden its conservative values. “There must be some contrast [with the Democrats], otherwise it is hard for people to become passionate,” said a frustrated Iowa delegate.<sup>23</sup>

That lack of passion—and a last-minute revelation that Bush had been arrested on drunk-driving charges when he was thirty years old<sup>24</sup>—would lead many true believers to stay home on election day,<sup>25</sup> costing Bush the popular vote and nearly the election.

But one thing was certain: The loss of the popular vote had nothing to do with Condi Rice. Through her intensive tutoring and coaching sessions, she had transformed the ill-traveled governor into a credible leader of the free world. In her convention address, she had laid out the foundations of a Bush foreign policy (to the unexacting standards of political conventions at least), explaining what would distinguish it from a Gore or, more accurately, a Clinton foreign policy: not using the military as “the world’s 911” to solve humanitarian problems; the unapologetic exercise of American power; close cooperation with Congress; a prohibition against using foreign policy for “partisan political gain”; and the embrace of the Powell Doctrine, which dictated that when you go to war, you go to win with overwhelming force and then get out.

Rice had described in soaring rhetoric a foreign policy that mixed idealism with realism, avoiding both Clinton’s international meddling and the isolationism preached by some congressional Republicans.<sup>26</sup>

But Rice had something far more important that night in Philadelphia—international issues, after all, were literally at the bottom of voters’ concerns in 2000.<sup>27</sup> She had made George Bush look smart. In poll after poll, Bush’s Achilles heel had been that voters believed Gore was smarter than the Texas governor.<sup>28</sup> By association, Rice lent her candidate her aura of intelligence.

Her other principal triumph was the message her presence and presentation sent to white moderates. Rice had not only given flesh to the idea of the Republican “big tent,” she had intimated that the Democrats, both historically and today, were the truly racist party: In 1952, they wouldn’t register her father to vote; nowadays, they saw her as “part of a group,” not an individual. It was the very definition of prejudice. The message to white centrists was that this *was* a different Republican Party; they didn’t need to fear that a vote for Bush would be vote for intolerance . . . and maybe if they voted for the Democrats, they did. Rice was so convincing, along with Powell, that even skeptics like Richard Cohen conceded a Bush administration wouldn’t be “your old man’s GOP.”<sup>29</sup> Some pundits speculated that African Americans could turn to the GOP in unprecedented numbers, predicting Bush’s percentage of black support could reach into the high teens.<sup>30</sup>

It was a dramatic turnabout in perceptions of Bush and race. Just six months earlier, during the winter primary season, as Senator John McCain closed in on front-runner Bush, winning New Hampshire, a whispering campaign had infected the now all-important fight for South Carolina: McCain had a “black child.”<sup>31</sup>

Governor Bush's team denied any part in the race baiting, but Bush's very first stop<sup>32</sup> after his loss in New Hampshire had been a visit to Bob Jones University, a school that banned interracial dating<sup>33</sup> and whose founder had called Catholicism "a cult."<sup>34</sup> McCain had labeled Bush a Falwell and Robertson Republican and had charged him with running an uninclusive campaign.<sup>35</sup> By the convention, Powell's and Rice's roles in resuscitating Bush's image as a tolerant centrist were crucial.

The rhetoric that Rice wielded to do it was surprisingly strident, especially given her biography. For a woman who had never been considered highly partisan, she had delivered a highly partisan address. But Condoleezza Rice had traveled a long road from Birmingham to the podium of the Republican National Convention, longer than most people watching inside or outside the hall knew. And she had come to win.

As a young professor at Stanford, Rice had been so moderate that many of her colleagues didn't believe she was a Republican at all. Others assumed she was a "foreign policy Republican," devoted to the tough line that Ronald Reagan pursued toward the Soviet Union, but on social issues, like them a Democrat or at least a libertarian.

It was true that her speeches in the eighties suggested a very different philosophy than the one Rice espoused in Philadelphia. She was so popular at Stanford that four times graduating seniors asked her to be their Class Day speaker,<sup>36</sup> the professor from whom they wanted to hear one last lecture before leaving "the Farm."<sup>37</sup> In one Class Day address in June 1985, she said, "I hope that we've taught you . . . there are other cultures to be accommodated and understood and that America herself could do with a bit less arrogance . . . [I hope] that you will remember that our institutions are very, very fragile . . . that even today, it makes a great deal of difference whether you were born in [affluent] Menlo Park or [impoverished] East Palo Alto, and [the] American dream is going to have to be delivered to all if we are going to be a country worth the paper on which our Declaration of Independence and our Bill of Rights are written."<sup>38</sup>

In her Class Day speech three years later—her face a little less rounded, her hair taking on the more sophisticated look of a grown-up—Rice spoke even more resolutely and at even greater length about the importance of diversity: "No set of experiences could be more important for your entry into the world

out there than . . . acceptance of and respect for diversity . . . Look back on what you have learned to see that dominance is not a license to exploit because it is not a gift from God. Dominance is a matter of circumstance.”<sup>39</sup>

Then, speaking overtly to the minorities in the audience (“I would like now to say a word to those of you who by matter of race, gender, religious belief, physical disability, or sexual orientation find yourselves in the minority”), Rice delivered perhaps the most powerful and personal part of any speech she has given. In it, the beginnings of the message she would deliver to the GOP twelve years later were plainly visible.

I feel certain that we have taught you to call prejudice and bigotry by name and to challenge it in our institutional structures . . . But have we equipped you to deal with bigotry in your daily lives? Do you understand that prejudice is not an impenetrable force field that cannot be overcome? The will to succeed may be your most potent weapon against the prejudice that is still deeply ingrained in [the] fabric of our country and our world.

Prejudice and bigotry are brought down . . . by the sheer force of determination of individuals to succeed and the refusal of a human being to let prejudice define the parameters of the possible.

If your first reaction to failure is that prejudice is to blame—if your first thought when you or another minority succeeds is that race or gender or physical disability must have been the patron—if when someone disagrees with you or stands in your way, you immediately suspect that that person is a bigot . . . bigotry and prejudice are winning because their mere existence has begun to define your successes, your failures, and your relationship to others. You have become a part of the pernicious dismissal of individual will. You are sanctioning the belittlement of the efforts of generations of nameless minorities—women who scrubbed floors to send children to college, men who were spat upon but kept their dignity—people who suffered and sacrificed so that step by step, victory by victory, the walls of prejudice would be brought down, and one and then two and then many minorities could pass through and achieve.<sup>40</sup>

At the Republican National Convention, of course, Rice played a different role—it was a political convention, after all. Still, her partisan fervor was so

pronounced that some commentators questioned whether it was “unseemly” for someone who could possibly occupy a diplomatic post in the near future.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, the speech’s impact was magnified because Rice was not just another partisan. She was a black woman and a product of the segregated South. And because of that background, she held a privileged place as a judge of racial rights and wrongs. No one with that pedigree and Rice’s combination of prominence and promise had graced the stage of a national political convention in a generation.<sup>42</sup> In less than a quarter hour, Rice had inverted the conventional wisdom about race and politics in America, casting the GOP as the defenders of black equality and the Democrats as racist.

Had Rice’s perspective evolved since she first registered as a Democrat before the 1976 election, the first presidential contest she was old enough to vote in? Had she only subsequently decided that the other party saw her as a color and not an individual? Was she ignoring her own personal history in service of a political goal? After all, Democratic president Lyndon Johnson had been a hero in the Rice household after he signed the Voting Rights Act in 1965.<sup>43</sup>

Certainly Rice liked to flex her rhetorical muscle; she was a champion debater. Nearly three years after Philadelphia, when the September 11 commission would fail to wrench from her any acknowledgment that Bush administration oversights or mistakes had contributed to the likelihood of the terror attacks on New York and Washington, Rice would tell her Palo Alto hairdresser, Brenda Hamberry-Green, who was proud of how well Rice had withstood hours of interrogation, “I can outtalk anybody. Nobody is going to beat me talking.”<sup>44</sup>

As politics, the address was masterful: It painted sharp contrasts with the opposition, laid out broad philosophies, and even offered a few specifics. Its tone was personal yet reasoned, passionate yet logical. But in the end, it may have said more about Condoleezza Rice than it did about George W. Bush or the Democrats. That night, the exotic-sounding name of Condoleezza Rice rolled off the tongue of every political commentator in America as if they had been born to speak it. And two days later, at the conclusion of Bush’s wildly successful convention, Rice joined the newly minted nominee onstage for his postacceptance celebration. As the cameras rolled and the balloons danced around them, Rice was the aide closest to the man who would soon assume leadership of the most powerful nation in human history.<sup>45</sup>