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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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To: H
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From: Toiv, Nora F
Sent: Wednesday, August 29, 2012 11:19 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
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POLITICO

Condoleezza Rice's political comeback

By: Alex Isenstadt

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TAMPA, Fla. — Condoleezza Rice is back.

Nearly four years after leaving the White House, the former secretary of state is injecting herself into the center of the heated 2012 political season. She's raising money for female congressional candidates, dishing endorsements in key races and is poised to become even more involved in Republican politics than at any moment since she left the Bush White House.

On Wednesday night, she'll take on the full glare of the national spotlight with a prime-time speech here at the Republican National Convention. A Rice aide said the former secretary of state would outline her view of American exceptionalism while calling on Republicans to rally around Mitt Romney. The address will come one week after Rice, an avid golfer, became one of the first two women admitted into the exclusive Augusta National Golf Club, vaulting her into the national headlines.

It's a surprisingly prominent role for Rice, who has spent her post-White House years at Stanford University, shunning the political spotlight while the cloud of the Bush administration and an unpopular war hung over her legacy as secretary of state.

(PHOTOS: Condoleezza Rice & George W. Bush)

The unanswered question for Rice — even for her adoring fans in the bubble of the national convention — is whether she still harbors any real political ambition or is just grabbing some publicity for a moment as she dabbles in the 2012 election.

"Dr. Rice is taking a more public role in GOP politics, but that doesn't surprise me," said Matt Schlapp, who served as George W. Bush's political director during his first term in the

White House. "She has always had an astute understanding of her image and impact, and I'm glad she is willing to step up and help the party."

Mark McKinnon, another former top Bush political adviser, called Rice's activity striking.

"Condi is GOP royalty. She can do whatever she wants, whenever she wants," he said. "I think she just needed a little time out of the spotlight to regenerate. But now that she's back, she's throwing a lot of wattage."

Rice has directed much of her capital toward assisting female candidates. She endorsed Florida Rep. Sandy Adams in her unsuccessful post-redistricting primary campaign against fellow GOP Rep. John Mica and recently threw her backing to Utah congressional hopeful Mia Love – like Rice, a black Republican. In February, Rice flew to Illinois, where she held a fundraiser for GOP Rep. Judy Biggert.

The speech she gave at the event, Biggert recalled, seemed to have a political dimension.

"She gave one of the best speeches I ever heard," Biggert said. "It sounded like a perfect stump speech."

In June, the former secretary of state traveled to Capitol Hill, where she headlined a fundraiser for ShePAC, an Arlington, Va.-based group that describes its mission as "electing and supporting principled conservative women to federal office." Rice's chief of staff, Georgia Godfrey, serves on the organization's advisory council.

She is also rewarding those with ties to the Bush family. Last month, she endorsed Arizona Rep. Ben Quayle, the son of former Vice President Dan Quayle who's embroiled in a bitter primary battle against a fellow Republican incumbent. She later traveled to Scottsdale to host a fundraiser for the younger Quayle.

"She's one of the most intelligent people on issues of national security, and she's got incredible energy," Ben Quayle said in an interview, adding that the event was a big draw and that those in attendance came away impressed. "She really is just that dynamic."

Rice's political ambition during her tenure in the administration was an open secret to those who worked with her. She often seemed hungry, jumping at opportunities to hit the road — particularly in California, where she has long been mentioned as a potential candidate for statewide office.

"Dr. Rice was everyone's dream candidate in California and she was often encouraged to run, but her focus was to honorably serve President Bush," said Schlapp, the former Bush political director. "It would be impossible for someone as shrewd as her to not have considered how to transition from confidante to candidate."

To some Bush advisers, the timing of Rice's turn in the limelight is intriguing. A little less than a year ago, she found herself under criticism from former Vice President Dick Cheney, who wrote in a memoir that Rice had misled Bush in advising him on negotiations with North Korea. At the time, Rice called Cheney's claims an "attack on my integrity."

Now, the Bush advisers suggested privately, Rice had taken on a more public role in order to repair whatever damage she had sustained from the episode.

Still, some Bush veterans express doubt that Rice, now immersed in Palo Alto's world of academia, would launch any kind of campaign. There are questions about how Rice, a moderate on social issues who supports abortion rights, could appeal to the tea party set.

To some, that moderation is what makes a Rice endorsement a valuable one.

"If you're a moderate Republican in a district that leans Democratic, she has a softer edge," said Sara Taylor Fagen, a former Bush political director. "She has a softer touch than many other figures in the party."

Biggert, who faces the tall hurdle of seeking reelection in a Democratic area in the Chicago suburbs, made that very calculation in having Rice campaign for her.

"She's not a real conservative. She's more of a moderate Republican, if I had to say," Biggert said. "She appeals to everyone because of her command of the issues."

Others are skeptical Rice would seek office because, they say, she simply doesn't have the ambition to do so.

Godfrey, Rice's chief of staff, said Rice had been clear that she had no interest in waging a campaign after eight rough and tumble years in the White House.

"I think she enjoys her time out of office," Godfrey said.

Months before Rice's name was floated as a possible vice presidential pick, Biggert asked Rice whether she would be interested in the job.

"She said, 'No, no, no,'" Biggert recalled. "It was always kind of evident she didn't want it."

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