

# Career Insight: 3 Honest Reflections from Foreign Policy Expert Susan Rice

**Date :** January 30, 2020

Susan E. Rice spent many years on the front lines of American diplomacy and foreign policy, which is basically a government's strategy for dealing with other nations. She held key posts during President Bill Clinton's administration and later served as National Security Advisor to Barack Obama and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. Rice left her post in the White House in January 2017, when President Donald Trump took office. She recently published her memoir, *Tough Love: My Story of Things Worth Fighting For*, in which she gives an insider's account of some of the most complex foreign policy issues in the U.S. in the past 30 years, including Black Hawk Down (when 18 U.S. service members were killed in Somalia, Africa), the genocide in Rwanda, Africa, the Ebola epidemic in West Africa and the conflict in Syria, which she refers to as "the toughest problem I faced as an advisor."

The University of Pennsylvania's Perry World House hosted Rice on January 22 in a conversation with Provost Wendell Pritchett. During that talk, Rice said of her memoir: "I try in the case of Syria...and a number of other issues to be candid about what I think we got wrong and what I think we got right...The only way to learn in the world is to be willing to be candid about it." Here are three more honest reflections that Ambassador Rice shared during her visit:

- 1. Studying international relations.** "In so many ways, my higher education and my secondary education helped give me the skills and the tools to end up doing the work that I did. When I was in college and even in graduate school, I had no plan or expectation that foreign policy or national security would become my career. For a long time, I thought I would be a lawyer and work in civil rights law or public interest law or some kind of social justice. I thought my initial two years at Oxford University [as a Rhodes Scholar] would be rounding me out and giving me some perspective on the larger world so that when I came back to the domestic side that I wouldn't be so one-dimensional. One thing led to another and I found an interest and a passion that I didn't know I had. My education opened extraordinary windows into different parts of the world."
- 2. Always asking the critical questions.** "After Black Hawk Down, Congress stepped in to mandate that U.S. forces withdraw from Somalia in six months. The last American troops had to get out of Somalia by March 31, 1994. On April 6 going into April 7, the genocide in Rwanda happened. An airplane carrying the Rwandan president was shot down and that was the key for the killing to begin. It lasted for 100 days or so, and up to 1 million people were killed...So, the plane is shot down, the killing begins, and the U.S. government does what it always does in a crisis like that – it gets its American personnel out safely...Once the Americans were out, we all breathed a sigh of relief... and for a period of time we lost our direct eyes and ears, and the killing intensified. Eventually, there were images on T.V. of bodies running down rivers and choking rivers. All throughout that, we never had a meeting that considered the question of whether or not the United States with others or to enable others or on our own should intervene to address the killing and try to mitigate its severity. The reason for that, in my judgment, was that in the context of the aftermath of Somalia, the idea of going back into an even more rural part of Africa that nobody had ever heard of to engage in peacekeeping and hope for Humanitarian protection when Congress had just mandated to get our troops out, nobody even thought of it. It was inconceivable. We never confronted the critical question. I'm not sure that the answer is yes we should have been there. But the big takeaway for me as a policymaker and one that has stayed with me for many years is: you can't not call the question. You've got to engage the question, and do so repeatedly."
- 3. The value of cautious decision-making.** "President Obama really pressure-tested decision-making and was suspicious of consensus. If you came to him with an important topic and all the cabinet-level principals agreed on the recommendation, you can be sure he's going to poke every possible hole in it to be satisfied he had really

thought it through. One of the things that I admired about him is that we would be sitting in the White House situation room around a tight table...The President would always make sure he got the full and unadorned opinions of his senior team. But on top of that, he would go around to the back bench, those sitting along the wall, the plus-ones for the principals who are the real experts on whatever the topic – they wrote the memo. He would ask each of them and engage them in a substantive exchange. He would take all of that, ask tough questions, and then usually take a day or night or two to think it through. He often didn't show his cards at the table. Then he would make a decision...We made our share of mistakes, but not for lack of trying. We really considered and analyzed the risks and the benefits.”