

Condoleezza Rice not running, but wants California to rebuild

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Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice gestures while speaking before the California Republican Party 2014 Spring Convention Saturday, March 15, 2014, in Burlingame, Calif.

BEN MARGOT — AP Photo

BURLINGAME — Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told Republican activists Saturday that while California has always been on the leading edge of the country, the nation's most populous state is in dire need of rebranding.

“California has always had a certain sheen, a kind of exceptionalism of its own,” Rice told a lunchtime gathering of the California Republican Party on Saturday. She urged the crowd “to rebuild this party, to rebuild our nation, and to rebuild our world.”

Yet in a state in which the GOP is hard-pressed to field competitive candidates for statewide office – much less win one – Rice is the highest-profile figure that just about every Republican wishes would help reshape California by running herself.

Rice's remarks Saturday, which touched on everything from education to foreign policy, came as the state party looks to reverse decades of voter registration and electoral losses. The main two Republicans challenging Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown, Assemblyman Tim Donnelly of Twin Peaks and former U.S. Treasury official Neel Kashkari, face significant odds.

"This is a party that, whether we like it or not, has been in decline for over two decades in this state," Jim Brulte, chairman of the state party, told reporters Friday. "We have a significant rebuilding operation on our hands."

Rice has repeatedly said she is not interested in running for elected office, but she was mentioned as a potential vice presidential pick in 2012, and California Republicans have longed for a candidate of her caliber to run for statewide office.

"I think that you could legitimately make an argument that everybody wishes she was running in probably all 50 states," said Mitch Zak, a Republican political consultant based in Sacramento. "She's that big of a positive influence on our party, in terms of her personality, her personal journey and the tremendous achievements she's made both in politics and outside of politics."

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin, a Republican candidate for state controller, said she has long been impressed with Rice's grasp of foreign and domestic policy.

"She has a lifetime of experience in dealing literally with worldwide issues," Swearengin said. "She lends so much credibility to anything that she takes on. I think she would be outstanding at whatever she chooses to do."

The sense of political hunger reached new levels after Rice delivered a deeply personal speech at the Republican National Convention in 2012. Rice described her childhood in Jim Crow Birmingham, the segregated city of the South where her parents could not take her to a movie theater or to a restaurant, but had her "absolutely convinced" that she could be president of the United States.

That year, Steve Schmidt, the Republican political consultant who ran former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's 2006 re-election campaign, predicted on MSNBC immediately following the speech that Rice would be courted for a statewide run, saying "there are stars lining up in that California delegation tonight looking at someone who can potentially restore the Republican Party to office in California."

Ron Nehring, a former California Republican Party chairman, wrote a rapid-fire blog post in 2012 under the headline "Condi for Governor? Ten Reasons to Seriously Consider It." He called Rice an electrifying figure who challenges the Republican stereotype while earning GOP respect and support.

But he was more circumspect Saturday when asked about the prospect of her running.

“She has so denied any notion of running for so long that sooner or later people are going to believe her,” said Nehring, now a candidate for California lieutenant governor.

In his 2012 book, “Total Recall: My Unbelievably True Life Story,” Schwarzenegger wrote that on a trip to the White House in early 2003, political adviser Karl Rove introduced him to Rice, then national security adviser, as “someone here who is interested in running for governor ... and I wanted you to meet her because this is our candidate for 2006.”

When the book came out, Rice’s office said she had no recollection of that conversation.

Rice, now a professor at Stanford University, called Saturday for the state to embrace the principles of individual responsibility and liberty, private-sector led growth and a private space that is respected by, and in which people “respect the choices of each other.”

She also recalled a 1988 excursion to the far reaches of Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, when they pulled into a military city. A young soldier boarded the train and asked to review her passport. Rice told him she was from the U.S., but he wanted to know which state.

In an approving tone, “He said, ‘Oh, California.’ ”

The crowd stood and began to clap.

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