

**The United States and Africa in the  
Obama Era:**  
New wine in old bottles, old bottles for a  
new beverage - Or a new label on an old  
brew?

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## Introduction

This policy brief takes as its basic position that, historically, American policy - or, more properly, policies - towards Africa have been an extension of how the US characterises its national interest - in the same fashion as policies towards European or Asian nations. This includes a mix - varying over time and in response to specific circumstances - of trade, economic development and strategic security interests, as well as humanitarian/civil and human rights perspectives.

Further, American involvement with the continent has traditionally been secondary to US relations with Europe, or they have served as proxies for American - Soviet (or perhaps, now, American - Chinese) rivalry. Further, the author takes the view that in the wake of 9/11 and subsequent challenges to social and political order on the continent, security issues are again paramount for the US in its relationship with this continent.

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When Barack Obama was elected president of the US, however, expectations on the continent for a great revival of interest and involvement with Africa grew quickly. While the incoming Obama administration may well have had such ideas in mind, the budgetary and financial realities that came in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession have decisively turned the new president and his government away from major international initiatives (and especially those directed towards Africa) that could or would carry real, significant financial implications for the American government or economy.

## The Historical Foundations for a Relationship

Africa's relationship with America stretches back to the beginning - and even before there was an actual United States. In 1619, a Dutch trading ship arrived at Jamestown, less than twenty years after the settlement's founding by a small group of English adventurers, to sell its cargo of African slaves to the small settlement. Thus began two centuries of the forced movement of slaves from Africa to America - and nearly 250 years of slavery as the prevailing economic model for the southern half the United States. In the country's major 19<sup>th</sup> century initiative towards Africa, Liberia was created as a homeland for manumitted, repatriated former slaves.

Beyond the slave trade, there were a number of other American connections with Africa. Chief among these were missionary efforts, the protection of the Mediterranean Sea trade routes from piracy by the Barbary States (what are now

Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya), and a modest trade in exotic hardwoods and ivory.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, Africa became a key source for materials like natural rubber and iron ore, and the continent was a strategic location in World War II for the transshipment of men and material to the North African war front and then beyond.<sup>2</sup> Africa was also a crucial source for uranium (for the manufacture of the atomic bomb in Project Manhattan) and the continent offered opportunities for investment in the mining industry and in agro-business such as Liberian rubber plantations. However, these investments generally were more significant for Africa's economy than for the United States. Trade between the US and Africa (as a whole) has generally been a minor part of the totality of US international trade as African import/export patterns historically have been oriented towards colonial, then former colonial nations such as France, the UK, and Belgium.

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## The Cold War and a New Equation

After World War II, American relationships with Africa began to assume an increasingly geo-political, strategic texture. First was the increasing importance of international trade lanes for a revitalised international trade regime - via the Suez Canal route and the passage around the Cape of Good Hope. Second was the place of Africa as a supplier of strategic materials - gold, chromium, diamonds, copper, petroleum and rubber, among others. Third was Africa's increasing position as a stand-in or proxy for the increasingly global US - Soviet conflict. This had a number of aspects. African states with histories of conflict or unresolved post-colonial border issues sought (or were sought out) external support from the US or the Soviet Union to gain an upper hand in their respective, more local disputes. Examples include the conflict between Algeria and Morocco and Ethiopia and Somalia - and pre-eminently the southern African conflict zone.

To gain influence (or to counter western influence and relationships), the Soviet Union and China gave increasing political, financial and military support to anti-colonialist forces attempting to end remaining colonial or settler regimes in central and southern Africa. On the other side, the US often supported colonial regimes to bolster them in their roles within NATO as supporters of the US in its confrontation with the Soviet Union. Later, the US attempted to find a way of

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<sup>1</sup> AFRICOM's website, <http://www.africom.mil/getArticle.asp?art=1796>, carries a comprehensive historical chronology of US military actions on the continent, entitled: "FACT SHEET: History of U.S. Military Involvement in Africa", prepared by the non-partisan US Congressional Research Service, in a 12 June 2008 report.

<sup>2</sup> A concise history of the US - Africa relationship, from the African-American - African perspective, can be examined in an essay such as "Black Internationalism: African Americans and Foreign Policy Activism", William R. Scott, in *An African-American Reader - essays on African-American history, culture and society*, edited by William R. Scott and William G. Shade, US Dept. of State, Washington, DC, 2005. A useful, more specialized volume, focusing on Ethiopianism in America and the African-American response to the Italo-Ethiopian War, is William R. Scott's *The Sons of Sheba's Race*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1993.

supporting settler regimes even as it held them at arms' length over the racial policies that increasingly made them objects of international disrepute - as well as with significant parts of America's own political and social system.

Underlying this process was yet another strategic issue that brought America into growing connections with Africa. This was the important role Africa could play internationally as a supplier of raw materials, strategic minerals and metals, and, increasingly, petroleum.

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A further connection concerned a growing awareness and sense of relationship between African Americans and Africa. This sometimes took the shape of a connection with the idea of an imagined Africa (more than with actual continental realities) such as the appeal of the ideology of Marcus Garveyism - or to Abyssinia as the "sons of Sheba's race". As former colonial territories gained independence, this began to take the form of an interest in the African Diaspora - via literary and cultural roots and the connections therein.

Perhaps its strongest expression came with a growing American national interest in supporting the anti-apartheid struggle inside South Africa, support that built upon models of opposition to the Vietnam War and from America's civil rights revolution. More recently, concerns over the social impacts of famine (Ethiopia), civil strife (first Biafra, then the Congo/Zaire, Rwanda and the Sudan) and the HIV-AIDS pandemic have all gained American attention about Africa. Often, this concern has been more about Africa as victim rather than as a substantive partner.

However, American interests in or concerns about Africa rarely reached far beyond core constituencies - whether based on strategic or racial solidarity grounds, for religious motivations, or from business interests. Larger concerns in other geographic areas: the post-war reconstruction of Europe, the Cold War and then the aftermath of the Cold War; conflicts in China, Korea, then Vietnam; the Mid-East in all its manifestations; then concern Cuba might represent (regardless of which party held the presidency or congress) possible socialist penetration into Latin America, all remained higher strategic issues for the US.

## **The Post-Cold War Relationship**

If the Cold War (roughly 1945-1989) represented the pre-eminence of global strategic perspectives in American thinking about Africa<sup>\*</sup>, the immediate post-

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<sup>\*</sup> In 1973, as a young American diplomat, I witnessed the universal explanation of the Nixon/Kissinger doctrine. This came from a senior State Department staffer, briefing Indonesian political leaders on an interlocking system of regional powers essentially delegated responsibility for maintaining order in respective parts of the globe by an America dealing with the East-West divide and the nuclear face-off. Key nations of this informal system were Brazil, Indonesia, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya and (somewhat more dubiously) South Africa. South Africa had a somewhat anomalous status by virtue of its domestic political arrangements, but, regardless, it

Cold War period drew American attention further from Africa (with the exception of euphoria over the end of apartheid in South Africa) as the US turned to the restructuring of Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History and Europe's Last Man"<sup>3</sup>, a statement of the final triumph of capitalist economics and the political order that supported it, became the underlying principle for American international relations, coupled with an increasingly inward focus on the American domestic economy. In that context, American relations with Latin America, Asia and Africa (save for the Middle East) took increasingly subordinate positions in the Bush administration (1989-1993) and then, similarly, on into the Clinton administration (1993-2001).

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The Clinton administration consciously advocated a less engaged foreign policy in regions like Africa, South and East Asia - placing more emphasis on Eastern and Southeast Europe (as Yugoslavia continued to fragment) and with the Middle East - especially after the collapse of the American humanitarian intervention in Somalia, as civil order dissolved in that country. Members of the Clinton administration have subsequently explained it declined to address aggressively the outbreak of communal genocide in Rwanda in part because of the dismal outcome from America's earlier intervention in Somalia - so harrowingly dramatised for the larger public in the film, "Black Hawk Down".

Of course, South Africa was a key exception. International and American enthusiasm for the Mandela administration led to a range of bilateral engagements - the bilateral commission led by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki and Vice President Al Gore, key among them - and an understanding by the Clinton administration that South Africa would exercise its natural leadership and location to serve as regional hegemon.<sup>4</sup> This was especially true with regard to Robert Mugabe's rule in Zimbabwe. American policy makers saw Zimbabwe as something best left to South Africa, the UK, or bodies like the OAU (then, later, its successor body, the AU), the SADCC and its successor body, the SADC<sup>5</sup>.

Beyond these efforts, the Clinton administration looked to innovative foreign assistance-style programs as the preferred way to build or modernise Southern Africa's infrastructure. The Southern African Enterprise Development Fund (SAEDF) - established in late 1994 - was designed to promote and stimulate indigenous business development in the Southern Africa region, including the Republic of South Africa. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was designated to provide USG funding to the SAEDF, as part of a multi-year

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had responsibilities to protect the Cape of Good Hope sea-lanes and to take responsibility for southern African territories sliding away inexorably from Portuguese control - and therefore it could not be ignored.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Fukuyama: *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, New York, 1992

<sup>4</sup> For more on this point, see, among other studies of the international aspects of the transition, Princeton Lyman's memoir as ambassador during the transition, *Partner to History: The US Role in South Africa's Transition to Democracy*, US Institute for Peace, Washington, D.C., 2002. Also, see Christopher Landsberg's *The Quiet Diplomacy of Liberation: International Politics and South Africa's Transition*, Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2004; and RW Johnson's "South Africa: the first man, the last nation", Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Information on SADCC, now SADC, can be found at: <http://www.sadc.int/>

assistance package to South Africa - and South Africa was to receive half of the \$100 million allocated to SAEDF.<sup>6</sup> Later, as initiated by the Clinton administration, and strongly supported by the Bush administration (2001-2009), the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)<sup>7</sup> promoted duty-free access to American markets for exports from qualifying African nations. These efforts demonstrated a growing interest in the use of markets, trade and investment as key development components.

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However, growing concern about Islamic fundamentalist terrorist activity, after the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, the 1998 bombings of two American embassies in Africa (in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam), and the attack on the USS Cole in Aden's harbour in 2000 began to refocus American attention on Africa. This renewed focus on the continent came as Africa was now seen as a site for terrorist acts, or as the site of refugees and operational bases for those connected with an upswing in terror activity. For the Clinton administration, one response was cruise missile attacks on a site in Sudan presumed to have links to Africa-based terror groups (although later it was admitted the site was almost certainly the site of pharmaceutical and powdered milk production).

American foreign policy was beginning to demonstrate a new strategic geopolitical vision of Africa. In contrast to Cold War thinking, it would not be a locus for proxy warfare with the Russians - rather, the concern was that African states could be the location where state collapse could make it a preferred base for terrorism or terrorists. Such activity would have to be combated vigorously and aggressively. This approach drew significantly on the impact of Robert D. Kaplan's essay in "The Atlantic" in 1994 (and then later expanded into the book, "The Coming Anarchy"<sup>8</sup>).

## **Bush II and Afterwards**

Such ideas gained further impetus from the Global Trends 2010, 2015, 2020, and 2025 analyses prepared by the National Intelligence Council<sup>9</sup>, the CIA's in-house think tank. These reports posited a world - and especially an Africa - increasingly afflicted by trans-national problems, including pandemics, cyber-crime, terrorism, climate change and forced population migrations. Such analyses helped encourage US government thinking that linked economic growth with government effectiveness, transparency, governance, and relatively low levels of corruption as key requisites for African stability. These approaches underpinned advocacy for AGOA and other Bush II measures such as the

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<sup>6</sup> Full information on SAEDF is found at <http://www.saedf.org.za/>

<sup>7</sup> Information on AGOA can be found at <http://www.agoa.gov/>

<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War*, Random House, New York, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> The respective websites for these surveys, in sequence, are:

[http://www.dni.gov/nic/special\\_globaltrends2010.html](http://www.dni.gov/nic/special_globaltrends2010.html), [http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC\\_globaltrend2015.html](http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_globaltrend2015.html), [http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC\\_globaltrend2020.html](http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_globaltrend2020.html), and [http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC\\_2025\\_project.html](http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_2025_project.html).

Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a new aid effort, established in 2004. The MCC was to form partnerships with some of the world's poorest countries, but only when they committed to good governance, economic freedom and investments in their citizens.<sup>10</sup> Some twenty African nations now participate. In recent weeks, several countries' MCC privileges have actually been revoked because of internal developments in the respective countries.

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Another element of this new paradigm was directed against one of the crucial public health issues affecting Africa, becoming a concrete organisational effort during the Bush administration. Building on the coincidence that one person was Bush's White House "envoy" to Christian fundamentalists (a key political support bloc), the White House monitor on HIV/AIDS, and its informal Africa watcher - as well as Bush's chief speech writer - Michael Gerson's signal contribution was to advocate a White House initiative on HIV/AIDS to appeal to all these constituencies, the result becoming the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR.<sup>11</sup>

PEPFAR has now been authorised at the \$48 billion level over a five-year period that began in FY2009. Through FY2013, PEPFAR managers say they plan to work in partnership with host nations to support treatment for at least 3 million people, prevent 12 million new infections and care for up to 12 million people, including 5 million orphans and other vulnerable children. A mark of the growing cooperation between the US and South Africa on HIV/AIDS, in addition to the annual PEPFAR budget for South Africa (where PEPFAR support from 2004-2009 has totalled more than R10 billion), is the recent commitment of R880 million to support more intensive anti-retroviral provision in South Africa.<sup>12</sup>

Like SAEDF, the MCC and other special aid vehicles, PEPFAR is an American assistance program established outside the traditional American foreign assistance structure, the US Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID continues to carry out the majority of traditional aid programs - and adjusting them to meet changing circumstances. In a recent presentation to Obama administration policy makers, USAID provided its most current version of its explanations of its work and justifications for its continued importance as a part of US - Africa connections. This presentation represents USAID's definition of its central tasks in Africa. These comprise efforts directed towards democracy building, conflict reduction and peace building, economic growth, environmental support, water resources, education and health and population

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<sup>10</sup> For information on the MCC, see: <http://www.mcc.gov>

<sup>11</sup> For full background on PEPFAR, see <http://www.pepfar.gov>. For the newest PEPFAR budget proposals for the FY2011, see: "Statement of Amb. Eric Goosby, MD, US Global AIDS Coordinator, US Department of State, Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations," Washington, DC 23 March 2010 (<http://www.pepfar.gov/press/remarks/2010/138916.htm>).

<sup>12</sup> <http://southafrica.usembassy.gov/press091201.html> provides background on this agreement for additional funding.



assistance - with a major share of the total directed at health issues - most prominently HIV/AIDS programs.<sup>13</sup>

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American foreign involvement in Africa is not limited to foreign assistance or State Department programs. Over the past decade, the American Defence Department began to direct its extensive resources - far more than those available to the State Department and USAID - towards building a series of regional commands, with attendant policy study centres for third-world officers, joint exercises and planning activities and other activities.

Sometimes controversial International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs are also an important part of Defence Department activities in Africa, as they are in Latin America and Asia. According to the program's own website, key objectives of the program are: to further the goal of regional stability through effective, mutually beneficial military-to-military relations which culminate in increased understanding and defence cooperation between the United States and foreign countries and to increase the ability of foreign national military and civilian personnel to absorb and maintain basic democratic values and protect internationally recognized human rights.<sup>14</sup> IMET is actually a component - albeit a key one - of the overall US military assistance effort internationally. According to the Department of Defence, the principal components of the overall military assistance programme are Foreign Military Sales (FMS), Foreign Military Financing (FMF), International Training Programs, and transfers of Excess Defence Articles (EDA). As the Defence Department defines its activities (although critics may well disagree - see comments in the referenced CRS study), "all components of the military assistance program enable friends and allies to acquire U.S. equipment, services, and training for the legitimate self-defence and for participation in multinational security efforts".<sup>15</sup>

By the middle of the Bush administration, in response to the trans-national destabilising trends noted earlier, the Pentagon sought to bring together all its African operations under one specific coordinating structure, rather than under three disparate commands dealing with Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia (and then from there on through to the Indian Ocean littoral). The official website of this new command, AFRICOM, provides substantive background and rationales.<sup>16</sup> The resulting command structure quickly generated considerable

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<sup>13</sup> "Trends in Africa" (A presentation prepared by USAID's Bureau for Africa, the Office of Sustainable Development, November 2009, for briefing the incoming head of USAID about its Africa programs. The document is not available on the Internet but it was made available to the author for review.)

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.dsca.osd.mil/home/international\\_military\\_education\\_training.htm](http://www.dsca.osd.mil/home/international_military_education_training.htm)

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.dsca.mil/home/military\\_assistance\\_p2.htm](http://www.dsca.mil/home/military_assistance_p2.htm), and further reports such as <http://www.fas.org/asmp/campaigns/training/IMET2.html> or the US Congressional Research Service's report: <http://web.mit.edu/annakot/MacData/afs/sipb/contrib/wikileaks-crs/wikileaks-crs-reports/RS20506.pdf>; "International Military Education and Training Program, 28 October 2004.

<sup>16</sup> The US Defence Department's website on AFRICOM is: <http://www.africom.mil>. For a local, Southern African perspective, read SA Institute of International Affairs Research Fellow Tom Wheeler's article at: <http://www.saiia.org.za/diplomatic-pouch/africom.html>. Also, see the US Congressional Research Service's 2 October 2009 report on AFRICOM, "Africa Command: U.S. Strategic Interests and the Role

controversy in Africa (although AFRICOM, like the other regional commands of the Pentagon, is not an operational military command structure but a specialised regional planning structure, without actual troops or equipment under it).

Much of AFRICOM's intellectual underpinnings derived from those growing US concerns about dealing with trans-national geo-strategic issues, especially the growing threats of internationally active terrorist organisations and the kinds of national meltdown that could provide opportunities and increasingly convenient bases for operations for such groups in an African context. Thomas Barnett's influential book, "The Pentagon's New Map", provided a thorough examination and analysis of this thinking and it was published just as the Pentagon began working out its rationale for this new African command.<sup>17</sup>

As originally conceived, AFRICOM was to secure a headquarters location in a friendly African nation such as Ghana or Liberia to be on the continent, to build relationships, negotiate its way through developments and secure long-term working ties with the continent's military and security elites. However, such was suspicion about the motives behind AFRICOM - fuelled by resentment over the Bush intervention in Iraq - that no country was prepared to host this regional military command and it remains based in Germany.

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## **An Obama Policy Revolution - or More of the Same?**

The Bush administration came to an end when Illinois Democratic senator Barack Obama was elected America's 44<sup>th</sup> president on November 4, 2008. The son of a Kenyan exchange student and an American student who were both studying at the University of Hawaii, Obama's parentage, his Hawaiian and Indonesian upbringing, his bi-racial personal circumstances, an inspirational life history and his rhetorical power all generated a belief he would be able to fix the ills of American foreign policy -- and many of the globe's problems at the same time. More so than people in many places, by virtue of his personal heritage, many Africans truly expected extraordinary things from Barack Hussein Obama. Countries declared the American presidential inauguration day a national holiday and people throughout the continent looked for Obama to set things right in Africa.<sup>18</sup>

Readers of his first book, his very personal memoir, "Dreams From My Father,"<sup>19</sup> could be forgiven for thinking Barack Obama had a major interest in Africa's problems - and in America's relationship with that continent. Readers of his

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of the U.S. Military in Africa" by Lauren Ploch, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL34003.pdf>. The Congressional Research Service is the non-partisan research arm of the US Congress.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: war and peace in the twenty-first century*, Penguin, New York, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> See Stephanie Hanson's "Imagining Obama's Africa Policy", 22 December 2008, for the Council on Foreign Relations in [http://www.cfr.org/publication/18006/imagining\\_obamas\\_africa\\_policy.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/18006/imagining_obamas_africa_policy.html)

<sup>19</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father*, Three Rivers Press, New York City, 2004.

next book, “The Audacity of Hope”, however, could note that in a several hundred-page book, Africa figures hardly at all - whereas so much of the book focuses on American domestic political, social and economic issues. In “Audacity”, Obama’s prescriptions relevant to Africa focused most clearly on evening up the international economic and trade playing field. As Obama the author and candidate would write:

If we want to win the hearts and minds of people in Caracas, Jakarta, Nairobi, or Tehran, dispersing ballot boxes will not be enough. We’ll have to make sure that the international rules we’re promoting enhance, rather than impede, people’s sense of material and personal security.<sup>20</sup>

Obama added that US foreign assistance needed to foster an international form of “tough love” that responded positively to African nations that built legal systems that incorporated transparency and equality, that built hope into the continent’s respective political dispensations to counter the challenge that “disorder breeds disorder.”<sup>21</sup> This perspective would become even more apparent in his major address in Accra, Ghana, when he visited that country after becoming the American president.

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Similarly, in setting out what he saw as his administration’s core objectives, were he to win, in his article in “Foreign Affairs,”<sup>22</sup> Obama again gave relatively sparse consideration of African policy. In writing about Africa, Obama focused primarily on how to build better ties with nations like Nigeria<sup>23</sup> and South Africa to deal with trans-national terrorism. He would add, “We need effective collaboration on pressing global issues among all the major powers - including such newly emerging ones as Brazil, India, Nigeria, and South Africa.”

But the only other major reference to Africa in his then-authoritative statement referred to building a more secure human rights regime in such places as Darfur and Zimbabwe, even as the US rebuilds its own relationship with the UN.<sup>24</sup> This was despite the fact several of his key foreign policy advisors were Africanists academically or professionally - figures such as Susan Rice, Anthony Lake, Witney Schneidman and Samantha Power.

In fact, after the Obama administration took office, in describing its primary interests towards Africa, the State Department’s Bureau of African Affairs would assert: “The Bureau’s priority is conflict resolution. With U.S. support, since 2002 violent conflicts have ended in Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic

<sup>20</sup> Barak Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, Three Rivers Press, New York City, 2006, p. 317,

<sup>21</sup> Barak Obama, 2006, Op. Cit., p. 319.

<sup>22</sup> Barack Obama, “Renewing American Leadership”, *Foreign Affairs*” July-August 2007, Vol 86, No. 4, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/62636/barack-obama/renewing-american-leadership>

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the latest developments in Nigeria as they affect international security, see Amb. (ret.) John Campbell’s paper, “Nigeria’s Leadership Vacuum”, 30 December 2009, [http://www.cfr.org/publication/21085/nigerias\\_leadership\\_vacuum.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/21085/nigerias_leadership_vacuum.html)

<sup>24</sup> Barak Obama, 2007, Op. Cit.

of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the North-South element of the Sudan crisis.”<sup>25</sup> And, most recently, Obama’s Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Johnnie Carson, in his 24 February 2010 Foreign Press Center Briefing on his most recent African visit, spent almost his entire conversation on the continuing security issues on the continent, especially with regard to Nigeria and Darfur.<sup>26</sup> As the Obama administration took hold, it also began to issue other, increasingly strong, interlinked human rights/anti-corruption messages, especially in the context of Kenya’s continuing ethnic group-based political instability, the Congo’s civil war and varied insurgencies that preferentially target women and children, or the pervasive corruption and potential for further instability in Nigeria.<sup>27</sup>

But, before Barack Obama had taken office, but by the time Obama’s campaign ignited, the international financial/banking crisis had overwhelmed almost every other issue. Despite Obama’s international popularity, his crucial challenge was to convince American voters that he was the right man to deal with financial and economic crises.

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In an article this author co-wrote with U. of the Witwatersrand political scientist Gilbert Khadiagala for “The Cape Times” on December 8, 2008, entitled, “Best thing that Obama can do for Africa is deal with urgent global concerns”,<sup>28</sup> the authors argued the incoming Obama administration’s first responsibility was to address the global financial crisis so as to restore global demand for Africa’s primary export commodities. Moreover, the many other pressing international issues meant Africa’s concerns would not replace US relations with China, with Latin America, with Russia or the Middle East, or Afghanistan or Iraq as key issues. In this environment, Africa gained a policy presence - for the most part - only as a part of global, trans-border concerns like terrorism, global warming, international crime, and pandemics.<sup>29</sup>

Six months into the Obama era, commentators (and sometime-Obama critics) such as Josh Gerstein and Zachary Abrahamson could argue that “But as Obama returns home [from Ghana], it’s not at all clear that the force of his message will be converted into major changes in U.S. policies toward the continent, or, ultimately, to the dismal conditions of life on the ground for millions in

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.state.gov/p/af/index.htm>, Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs’ current website.

<sup>26</sup> <http://fpc.state.gov/137225.htm> Assistant Secretary Carson’s Recent Two Week Tour of Africa, FPC Briefing, Johnnie Carson, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Foreign Press Center, Washington, DC, 24 February 2010.

<sup>27</sup> For recent statements on Kenya see: “Remarks by Secretary Clinton, Kenyan Foreign Minister Wetangula, Officials discuss opportunities to build on bilateral relations, August 5, 2009”, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/August/20090805144413eafas0.4838613.html>;

on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, see Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks on the 15th Anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development, January 8, 2010”, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135001.htm> and “What I Saw in Goma,” 21 August 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/08/128317.htm>;

and on Nigeria, see: “Examining the U.S.-Nigeria Relationship in a Time of Transition” by Johnnie Carson, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of African Affairs, “Opening Statement: Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Subcommittee on African Affairs”, Washington, DC, 23 February 2010 <http://www.state.gov/p/af/rls/rm/2010/137243.htm>, among other statements.

<sup>28</sup> Gilbert Khadiagala & Brooks Spector, “Best thing that Obama can do for Africa is deal with urgent global concerns”, The Cape Times, 8 December 2008.

<sup>29</sup> For more on these points as raised by the authors, see the Cape Times article as cited above.

Africa.”<sup>30</sup> And, by the end of 2009, there was, as yet, still little concrete evidence to demonstrate any major, substantive shift in the Obama administration’s foreign policy priorities and initiatives directed towards Africa.

In fact, when the Obama administration took office a little over a year ago, they clearly felt the enormous pressure of domestic economic issues. Obama’s inaugural address was mostly a message of reassurance to a shaken nation, rather than a line-by-line recitation of specific foreign policy policies. It was only when Obama made his first presidential trip to sub-Saharan Africa, to Accra, Ghana, on July 11, 2009, that he spoke directly about African issues.<sup>31</sup> His perspectives were echoed, as would be expected, in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s remarks at the AGOA Forum, a short while later, on August 5, 2009 in Nairobi, Kenya.<sup>32</sup>

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***The Obama administration argued for more responsibility taken by Africans who would find a partner in America, rather than a perpetual dispenser of aid or of a nation that would parachute in to solve the continent’s problems***

The Obama administration argued for more responsibility taken by Africans who would find a partner in America, rather than a perpetual dispenser of aid or of a nation that would parachute in to solve the continent’s problems. In recent weeks, American Ambassador to South Africa, Donald Gips (a political, as opposed to career diplomat, who is understood to have strong contacts with other Obama administration officials in Washington and to understand their thinking) underscored and elaborated this same understanding with regard to US-South Africa connections. As Ambassador Gips said in his recent interview, posted on “The Daily Maverick” website:

South Africa’s accomplishments over the past 15 years have been a miracle, yet there is still a lot to be worked out and we want to be partners in it. Not necessarily with more money, but where we can create more technical assistance, more partnerships, more connections between American and South African businesses, NGOs and government organisations to drive that relationship forward.<sup>33</sup>

Speaking more generally about the entire African continent, Obama had asserted in his Accra speech, that this “partnership must be grounded in mutual responsibility and mutual respect.... We must start from the simple premise that Africa’s future is up to Africans.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0709/24813.html>, Josh Gerstein and Zachary Abrahamson, “Barack Obama’s Africa: more talk than policy”, 17 November 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Barack Obama’s full Accra speech is available at: <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/July/20090711110050abretnuh0.1079783.html>

<sup>32</sup> For Secretary of State Clinton’s full AGOA Forum address in Nairobi, Kenya, see: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/08/126902.htm>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.thedailymaverick.co.za/article/2010-03-03-interview-us-ambassador-donald-gips-the-cheerleader> “INTERVIEW: US Ambassador Donald Gips, the cheerleader”.

<sup>34</sup> All quotes from Barack Obama’s speech can be found in the citation, above, loc cit.

Obama went on to say that Africa's future would not derive from the "giants like Nkrumah and Kenyatta who will determine Africa's future.... Instead, it will be the young people brimming with talent and energy and hope who can claim the future that so many in previous generations never realized."

Obama then moved on to his underlying theme, that "we must first recognize the fundamental truth that you have given life to in Ghana: Development depends on good governance.... And that is a responsibility that can only be met by Africans."

While pledging more aid, Obama argued that the "the true sign of success is not whether we are a source of perpetual aid that helps people scrape by -- it's whether we are partners in building the capacity for transformational change."

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*A number of observers have commented on the fact that Obama chose to visit Ghana, just as Ghana had discovered significant exploitable petroleum reserves*

Obama reiterated the need for strong and sustainable democratic governments as well as partnership that gives more opportunities for more people, even as foreign assistance programs must work themselves out of existence by their success. Moreover, Obama argued trade and investment must be promoted with open markets. And finally, inter- and intra-state conflict must be ended because they serve as "a millstone around Africa's neck" and "we must stand up to inhumanity in our midst. It is never justified -- never justifiable to target innocents in the name of ideology."

A number of observers have commented on the fact that Obama chose to visit Ghana, just as Ghana had discovered significant exploitable petroleum reserves. While that clearly was not the only reason - Ghana had also completed two "free and fair" election cycles - discovery of oil there brought into the picture a further major - and growing factor in US - Africa relations: America's growing reliance on African oil (see, for example, among other studies, Brett Schaefer's Heritage Institute backgrounder or Alex Perry's "Time" essay on this topic).<sup>35</sup>

While the full implications of this growing dependence are beyond this essay, it is clear America's relations with oil-producing regimes along the western coast of Africa, as well as Sudan, are a growing complication for America's Africa relations, often running cross-grain to other important goals. The domestic politics and levels of corruption of oil-producing states such as Equatorial Guinea and Angola complicate the Obama administration's efforts to foster transparency and good governance as keystone provisions for its African policy agenda.

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<sup>35</sup> Brett Schaefer, "America's Growing Reliance on African Energy Resources", Backgrounder #1944, 20 June 2006, <http://www.heritage.org/research/africa/bg1944.cfm>, and Alex Perry, "Africa's Oil Dreams", "Time", 11 June 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/asia/0,9263,501070611,00.html>

Similarly, Sudan's ongoing campaign against the people of the Darfur region, the country's presumed ties with international terrorism groups, and Sudan's position as a key partner with China for oil exploitation further complicate the Obama administration's efforts to maintain influence in the region, to foster a positive human rights climate and to balance Chinese interests in Africa. Moreover, the ongoing levels of corruption and a lack of transparent governance in Africa's most populous state, Nigeria, along with the continuing potential for political instability there - and now, most recently - the implications for international terrorism of the role of disaffected Nigerian youthful Muslims, bring additional complications for any Obama Africa agenda.

***As a result, Barack Obama the foreign policy innovator is hedged in by major financial constraints***

Obama's team has now stated its framework on African democracy, international and food security and signed strategic partnership or dialogue agreements with Nigeria and South Africa<sup>36</sup>. But, trying to balance security concerns, the need for new energy resources, an insistence on open, transparent governance, the nurture or creation of opportunity societies, creative responses to trans-national issues like HIV/AIDS, and an effective response to the human rights challenges of regimes like Sudan or Zimbabwe (these latter two nations, both among the small number of African issues consistently raised by Barack Obama the senator, the candidate and the president) and growing concerns about food security on the continent<sup>37</sup> would surely tax an American leader not simultaneously dealing with the continuing international and domestic financial crisis - as well as efforts to carry out fundamental reforms of the US' health care system, respond to the growing challenges of an ascendant China and carry out military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq - not to mention the usual evergreens like the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As a result, Barack Obama the foreign policy innovator is hedged in by major financial constraints. At best, his administration will find the resources to continue supporting bipartisan successes like PEPFAR or the Millennium Challenge Corporation and to fund and support modest new initiatives on open governance, education, trade expansion and food security. This author's view

<sup>36</sup> Johnnie Carson, "U.S.-Africa Policy Under the Obama Administration", Bureau of African Affairs at "Reimagine, Redefine, Reinvent: A New Paradigm for African Leadership", 5 April 2010, [http://www.implu.com/government\\_news/464/136094](http://www.implu.com/government_news/464/136094). Remarks by Hillary Rodham Clinton at the Signing Ceremony for the U.S.-Nigeria Binational Commission, Washington, DC, April 6, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/04/139571.htm>; Remarks by Hillary Rodham Clinton and SA International Cooperation and Development Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane at the signing of Memorandum of Understanding Establishing the U.S.-South Africa Dialogue, Washington, DC, 14 April 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/04/140237.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Food security in Africa is the subject of a set of proposals and commitments evolving from USAID program reviews as well as agreements from the G-8 in L'Aquila summit. Food security is increasingly gaining impetus during the Obama administration, although there has yet to be tangible budget support for a major impact. The evolving US government logic says that food security is increasingly a concomitant part of the larger security environment for Africa. Food insecurity undermines government stability, instability feeds the conditions that encourage the breakdown of government capacity that, in turn, provides a fertile climate for the aspirations of Islamic insurgency or other collapses of civil order. For further reading on this issue, among other materials, see: <http://www.america.gov/st/develop-english/2009/August/200908201234061ejrehsiF0.8892481.htm> (Clinton Focus on Food Security in Africa Extends Worldwide); [http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=events.event\\_summary&event\\_id=600737](http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=events.event_summary&event_id=600737) (Wilson Center conference: Promoting Regional Integration and Food Security in Africa); [www.gao.gov/new.items/d081007r.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d081007r.pdf) (Food Insecurity Persists in Sub-Saharan Africa); [http://www.g8italia2009.it/G8/Home/G8-G8\\_Layout\\_locale-1199882116809\\_Atti.htm](http://www.g8italia2009.it/G8/Home/G8-G8_Layout_locale-1199882116809_Atti.htm) (L'Aquila G-8 summit final documents and declaration); [http://www.cfr.org/publication/20020/obamas\\_food\\_security\\_initiative.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/20020/obamas_food_security_initiative.html) (Council on Foreign Relations' Laurie Garrett's evaluation: Obama's Food Security Initiative in Africa, 12 August 2009).

as Barack Obama assumed the presidency - the best effect his administration could have on Africa is probably a successful effort to reignite economic growth to build strong demand for Africa's primary commodities - still stands.

## A Final Note

As Barack Obama came into power, people around the world - and perhaps most especially those in Africa - began to believe his personal impact could be powerful and positive. Recent polling data says that has already occurred globally to a considerable degree - albeit not uniformly so in every country.<sup>38</sup> But, an important element of improving America's image could also come from a relatively inexpensive investment in increasing the number and variety of international student and cultural exchanges, in reviving the place of American cultural centres and libraries throughout the continent, and in supporting innovative African university collaborations and cooperative programs - via the "distance killing" power of the Internet.

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Obama has, himself, made this point in the past, although the actual US governmental bureaucracy has yet to deliver in any major way. A veritable shelf of reports have argued the increasing importance and impact of "soft power" and that an application of such soft power could have a major impact on Africa, perhaps on this continent more than in most places, precisely because of the relative paucity of libraries, limited access to the Internet and overcrowded, decaying universities.<sup>39</sup> And it could be a cost-effective process that could give a concrete manifestation of the very promise Barack Obama, the man, exemplified in his campaign for the presidency. In the absence of major new funding for broad, over-arching, continent-spanning programs, such more modest activities may yet help deliver on Obama's audacious promise of hope.

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<sup>38</sup> See Pew Global Attitudes Project surveys: "Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World", 23 July 2009, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1289/global-attitudes-survey-2009-obama-lifts-america-image>; and its "Indonesia: The Obama Effect," 17 March 2010, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1529/indonesian-views-america-image-president-obama-trip>.

<sup>39</sup> Access a wide range of these studies at: <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/debate.htm>