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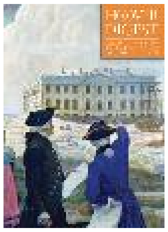

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AFRICA:
Bush’s Quiet Successes

By Mvemba Phezo Dizolele

The outgoing administration’s unheralded accomplishments in Africa. By ***Mvemba Phezo Dizolele.***

“We Africanists expect a great deal from the Democrats and are often disappointed. We expect nothing of the Republicans and are pleasantly surprised.”
—Andrew Young, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations

At a time when there is constant talk of America’s bad image around the world, former President Bush can take comfort in his legacy in Africa. Approval ratings for the United States, according to the Pew Foundation’s poll data, exceed 80 percent in many African countries. Gallup polls in 139 countries found that the 62 percent approval rating of U.S. leadership in sub-Saharan Africa is 30 percent higher than in other parts of the world.

Foreign policy analysts and historians will debate the merits of Bush’s foreign policy for the next several years; they will decide how much damage his administration has inflicted on America’s standing abroad and how much time and money will be required to restore it. The Africans themselves, however, will have a different debate. They found an unlikely but invaluable partner in Bush, who did much to rebuild Africa’s faith in the United States.

During the 2000 presidential campaign, Africans had low expectations of candidate Bush, who apparently did not know the name of Pakistan’s president. Africa, too, was not a priority to him. Africans were not surprised, considering what they had experienced during President Bill Clinton’s eight years. But the problem long predated Bush and Clinton.

Africa’s low expectations of the United States stemmed from the past five decades, going back to the anticolonial movements of the 1950s and ’60s. As various liberation movement leaders across the continent looked to the United States for support in their struggles for independence from Europe, the United States looked the other way and sided with the colonial powers. Tepid U.S. reaction to the emergence of African nationalism encouraged revolutionaries to seek Soviet assistance. As Russia seized the opportunity to expand its sphere of influence, America realized its blunder. With their support of various dictators from Siad Barre to Mobutu Sese Seko to Mengistu Haile Mariam to Samuel Doe, the two superpowers and their allies turned Africa into a Cold War battleground where their strategic and tactical considerations trumped African aspirations for independence, freedom, and progress.

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The collapse of Somalia, following Siad Barre's fall in 1991, provided Washington with a critical opening for substantial change in the Horn of Africa. Fighting between various Somali clans had caused a complete breakdown of the state, endangering millions of civilians. But despite the region's strategic security and commercial importance, the world did not intervene quickly. As America weighed its options, the situation worsened, and the ensuing famine and humanitarian crisis claimed half a million lives.

Right before he left office, President George H. W. Bush committed nearly 30,000 U.S. soldiers to Somalia under Operation Restore Hope in 1992. The mission, later named Operation Continue Hope, signaled U.S. determination to help stabilize the subregion. But that determination and related optimism had dissipated by 1994: Clinton, succumbing to domestic pressure, pulled out the U.S. forces after eighteen soldiers were killed in a running battle in Mogadishu memorialized in the book and film *Black Hawk Down.* Friends and foes of the United States interpreted the pullout as a cut and run. Intelligence experts now say Al-Qaeda elements were active in Somalia at the time and were emboldened by the U.S. lack of resolve. To Africans, the Somalia debacle confirmed what they had feared: nothing would change in the post–Cold War era.

As the first post–Cold War president, Bill Clinton had a unique opportunity to design a comprehensive strategy that would redefine U.S. engagement with Africa. Instead, his administration seemed to stumble from crisis to crisis. Some of Africa's worst disasters of the twentieth century happened during the Clinton years. For instance, Clinton did not see how the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which killed close to 1 million people, fit into U.S. strategic interests. But Clinton's guilt over the genocide and lack of a strategic and principled approach to Africa led to two U.S.-sanctioned invasions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo by Rwanda and Uganda, which have subsequently killed more than 5.4 million people. In addition, conflicts and tensions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia were fanned by the Clinton administration's ill-conceived Africa policy and drive-by diplomacy.

Clinton's policy was partly based on a utopian "African renaissance" concept that relied on a handful of leaders picked by the White House, including Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, Rwanda's Paul Kagame, Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi, and Eritrea's Isaias Afewerki. But to the average African, these leaders' records did not justify hope for any renaissance.

After several years of trial and error, Clinton delivered a landmark initiative known as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), whose goal is to encourage African countries to open their economies and build free markets. In addition to giving qualified African countries access to U.S. markets, credit, and technical expertise, AGOA works to bring about economic and commercial reforms that provide better market opportunities and stronger African commercial partners for U.S. companies. U.S. imports under AGOA had grown to $51.5 billion a year by 2006 (according to the latest available data from the International Trade Administration). With forty-one eligible countries, AGOA remains Clinton's most important African initiative, yet the administration could have achieved more had the president's advisers approached Africa at the outset with a clear strategy and sense of direction.

BUSH'S SUMMONS TO ACTION

Driven by a mixture of genuine humanitarian concern, hubris, mistrust of international aid bureaucracies, and lobbying by rock star Bono, President George W. Bush, seizing on the September 11 aftershocks, decided to launch a foreign aid revolution to fight terror and make the world a better, safer place.

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In March 2002, a little more than a year into his presidency, Bush spoke before the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C., and the United Nations Financing for Development Conference in Monterrey, Mexico. Those speeches defined his development aid policy. In Monterrey, Bush faced the world and declared: “We fight against poverty because opportunity is a fundamental right to human dignity. We fight against poverty because faith requires it and conscience demands it. And we fight against poverty with a growing conviction that major progress is within our reach.”

Bishops and preachers may talk freely of faith and conscience, but heads of states tend to shy away from such words and stick to their dense, often undecipherable diplomatic speeches. Bush’s faith gave him clarity of expression and the confidence to challenge the traditional premise of foreign aid, whereby “the success of development aid was measured only in the resources spent, not the results.” Most important, Bush challenged the leaders of developed nations to stop subsidizing the failures of the past and start building institutions of freedom, insisting that “we must do more than just feel good about what we are doing, we must do good.”

Developed nations have a duty not only to share our wealth, but also to encourage sources that produce wealth: economic freedom, political liberty, the rule of law and human rights. . . . We must tie greater aid to political and legal and economic reforms. And by insisting on reform, we do the work of compassion. The United States will lead by example.

Faith being the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen, Bush announced a 50 percent increase in U.S. core development assistance during the next three budget years. “This,” he said, “will mean a $5 billion annual increase over current levels.”

“We fight against poverty because opportunity is a fundamental right to human dignity,” Bush said in 2002. “We fight against poverty because faith requires it and conscience demands it.”

Moreover, because faith without works is dead, Bush moved to commit and rally the United States to his revolution. “And to jump-start this initiative,” he said, “I’ll work with the United States Congress to make resources available over the twelve months for qualifying countries.”

THE MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION IS BORN

In January 2004, Congress established the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), whose primary mission was to administer the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), funds devoted to projects in low-income countries that govern justly, invest in their people, and encourage economic freedom. In a twist of history, it had taken an event of September 11 proportions for a U.S. administration to truly focus on the African aspirations of independence, freedom, and progress.

With the advent of the MCA, Africa was thrust to the fore of the Bush foreign aid revolution. To date, the MCC has signed eighteen development assistance compacts, eleven of those with African countries, worth a total of $6.2 billion. The funds are disbursed as grants, alleviating recipient countries’ debt load.

The paternalistic nature of the traditional foreign aid model gives donor countries and their aid agencies the power to determine development priorities for the recipient country, whether or not that government agrees. Bush's revolution sought to empower the recipient country and let its government (with popular input through national consultations) decide where the money goes. It is a partnership between donor and recipient that emphasizes local ownership of projects, good policies, and investment in the people.

The old development aid approach often benefited squeaky wheels— objectionable leaders with powerful lobbies—to the detriment of governments that worked hard for the welfare of their people. The old approach undermined Africa's faith in the United States. The MCA's rigorous selection process, built around seventeen well-defined, independent, and transparent indicators, has made it possible methodically to separate performing countries from weak performers. The MCA, in other words, is based on a meritocracy.

As a result, countries such as Mali and Benin, which were virtually ignored by U.S. policy makers despite their impressive democratic and good-governance records during the past two decades, finally received longawaited attention. Before September 11, neither country fit into U.S. "national security interests" as then defined, but today these two democracies are emerging as privileged partners.

Mali, Africa's largest cotton producer, has signed a five-year, $461 million compact to improve the productivity of the agriculture sector and regional enterprises. Benin's five-year, $307 million compact aims to increase investment and private-sector activity. A substantial portion of the grant will be used to improve traffic and the flow of goods through the Port of Cotonou, a critical trade outlet for West Africa's subregion. Bush visited Benin on his final African trip, offering a strong expression of U.S. support for democracy.

Ironically, some countries, such as Uganda or Ethiopia, that enjoyed greater attention from Washington under the old foreign aid regime have not qualified for MCA funding. But former socialist countries such as Mozambique and Tanzania are now reaping the benefits of years of reform and good governance. In February 2008, Bush visited Tanzania and signed the largest compact to date, $698 million for the rehabilitation of road and water infrastructures.

NOT JUST GOOD WORKS

The Bush administration has presided over the largest U.S. foreign assistance program in fifty years, doubling worldwide development aid from $10 billion in 2000 to $22 billion today. Furthermore, the administration successfully pushed for a $34 billion debt relief package for nineteen African countries in the past six years. Bush's resolve has helped turn African aid into a bipartisan endeavor.

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Among the most visible consequences are health improvements. According to the World Health Organization, nearly 22 million Africans are infected with HIV, and malaria kills 3,000 African children a day. In 2003, only 50,000 Africans received antiretroviral drugs. During the past five years, the $15 billion President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief has provided antiretroviral drugs to 1.73 million HIV/AIDS patients, of whom 1.7 million are Africans. As of July 2008, Congress had approved $48 billion in new funding for treatment of HIV/AIDS as well as tuberculosis and malaria during the next five years. In addition, the $1.2 billion President's Malaria Initiative has sought since 2005 to reduce malaria deaths 50 percent in fifteen countries.

Good works notwithstanding, Africa offers more than a platform from which to stem anti-American sentiment and its implications. The United States should treat Africa as a serious strategic trade partner as well. According to the World Bank, sub-Saharan African economies registered an estimated growth of 6.1 percent in 2007, up from 5.7 percent the previous year. This increase, which represents the region's fastest pace in more than three decades, reflects many of the positive developments, political and economic, across the continent during the past decade. There are now more democracies and more regional market initiatives, and support from the world's largest economy will only add to African growth.

American businesses have not yet fully tapped into the African market. According to the International Trade Administration, U.S. total trade with sub-Saharan Africa increased 15 percent in 2007. U.S. exports grew 19 percent, to $14.4 billion, whereas imports increased 14 percent, to $67.4 billion. Still, although the United States is Africa's largest single-country market, purchasing 29.5 percent of the continent's exports in 2006, the United States accessed only 5.6 percent of the African market share with its $12.1 billion in exports to the continent. China, on the other hand, is Africa's second-largest single-country market, purchasing 12.6 percent of African exports in 2006, but China is the largest exporter to sub-Saharan Africa, claiming an 8.9 percent market share and $19 billion in exports (a 41.8 percent increase from 2005). With China's economic foray into Africa, U.S. businesses may be at a disadvantage when they decide to pursue opportunities on the continent.

Bush's work of compassion has created a new problem for Africa—a good problem. With so much money devoted to development aid, it is no longer a question of lack of interest but of coordination. The various U.S. agencies and organizations, from the Millennium Challenge Corporation to the Defense Department to the U.S. Agency for International Development, must make sure that the money is not wasted in project redundancies and that recipient countries develop the capacity to absorb the funds and bring about good works. At least a dozen studies have been conducted in Washington alone for that sole purpose. Bush's successor should carefully read their recommendations.

At the White House Summit on International Development in October 2008, Bush warned Americans to resist the temptation to turn inward during these times of economic crisis. "This will be a serious mistake," he said. "America is committed, and America must stay committed, to international development for reasons that remain true regardless of the ebb and flow of the markets."

The Africans welcome Bush's conviction but join their faith to Winston Churchill's realism. The former British prime minister once said, "You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing after they have tried everything else."

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