

The Coming Apathy: Africa Policy Under a Bush Administration

By Salih Booker

“There’s got to be priorities,” George W. Bush responded when asked about Africa in the second presidential campaign debate. Africa did not make his short list: the Middle East, Europe, the Far East, and the Americas. A Bush presidency portends a return to the blatantly anti-African policies of the Reagan-Bush years, characterized by a general disregard for black people and a perception of Africa as a social welfare case. Vice President Dick Cheney is widely expected to steer the younger Bush on most policy matters—especially foreign affairs. Cheney’s perspective on Africa in the 1980s was epitomized by his 1986 vote in favor of keeping Nelson Mandela in prison and his consistent opposition to sanctions against apartheid South Africa.

In Africa, a Bush White House will likely concentrate on helping its oil industry friends reap maximum profits with minimum constraints, and it will have absolutely no sense of responsibility for past American misadventures, or for global problems like AIDS or refugees. But events and activism in Africa plus grassroots pressure in the U.S. and internationally could change all of that, as it did during the White House tenure of the last Republican Africaphobe.

Ironically, those chosen to set international priorities for Bush will likely include two loyal African-Americans, Colin Powell and Condolezza Rice, who will probably not deviate from the Bush-Cheney exclusion of Africa from the U.S. global agenda. Neither Powell nor Rice has shown any particular interest in or special knowledge of African issues. Both have repeatedly pledged their allegiance to a strong unilateralist view of the use of U.S. power, based on the traditional geopolitical concepts of the

national interest held by the white American elite. Africans are invisible on their policy radar screens—though all too visible on CNN for the Texas governor’s taste.

“No one liked to see it on our TV screens,” said Bush, when asked about genocide in Rwanda in 1994, but Clinton “did the right thing,” he argued, in deciding not to act to stop the slaughter. Bush ignored the fact that the U.S. also failed to support—and indeed blocked—multilateral action by the United Nations. This false dichotomy between bilateral intervention and noninvolvement is common among U.S. policymakers, but the concessions of Bush’s team to multilateral options are likely to be particularly scant.

The need for multilateral support for peace and security rather than continued expansion of unaccountable bilateral military ties is one of the highest priority issues affecting Africa. But hard-line U.S. unilateralism will likely make a bad situation worse. When not ignoring African security crises, the new administration will likely attempt to “delegate” African peacekeeping, using this as a rationale for expanding relationships with privileged partners, such as Nigeria, while denying resources for strengthening multilateral involvement. In fact, we may well see a repeat of this year’s abortive effort by congressional Republicans to cut funds for UN peacekeeping in Africa to zero.

On two other African priority issues, however—debt cancellation and the HIV/AIDS pandemic—public pressure has a chance to cross traditional political barriers and make unexpected breakthroughs, as did the struggle for sanctions against apartheid in the Reagan era. Action on both issues currently



receives nominal support across party lines, as evidenced in Bush's unexpected—though qualified—rhetorical endorsement of debt relief in the debates. But any significant action will require spending money and opposing vested economic interests, and therefore movement on these issues will initially become even more difficult than it has been to date. But there are openings.

Republican skepticism of multilateral institutions has even found some common ground with critics on the political left, as in the Meltzer Commission's criticism of international financial institutions and the recent congressional resolution mandating U.S. opposition to user fees for primary health and education in poor countries. More narrowly, many favor debt cancellation for practical business reasons (those with unpayable debts are unlikely to be good customers). If debt cancellation makes it high enough on the next administration's agenda, there will be room for debate on policy.

Complacency, however, is more likely. "We already did debt relief last year," policymakers may disingenuously conclude, "and now poor

countries should take care of their own problems." The fact that the majority of countries affected are African will make it easy for a Bush administration to give debt relief lower priority. In the context of a Bush presidency and a divided Congress, breaking through the systemic American disdain for Africa will not happen unless there are real shifts in public perceptions, comparable to those that happened in the 1980s regarding apartheid in South Africa. By any measure of catastrophic events in human history, the HIV/AIDS pandemic should serve as such a wake-up call.

At the end of the year 2000, there are more than 25 million Africans living with HIV/AIDS—more than 70% of the adults and more than 80% of the children who are infected worldwide. Almost four million Africans were newly infected during the year 2000. Yet almost no one in Africa is receiving the expensive treatments now available to people living with HIV/AIDS in rich countries. Pharmaceutical companies, under pressure, are offering discounts on drugs. But they are also continuing their campaign against the

production and import of generic alternatives. Congress approved the administration request for a little more than \$300 million in new funds for HIV/AIDS worldwide in fiscal year 2001. Yet the scale of the catastrophe has still not struck home. Nor has the awareness that AIDS' unequal impact both results from and reinforces economic inequalities, amounting to a global apartheid.

If we regard HIV/AIDS as just another disease, and those affected as excluded from our common humanity, then the odds of making Africa a priority in the years ahead are low indeed. If its horrors can serve to remind enough of us of our common humanity, then even those with the most exclusionary agendas will be forced to respond. For the Bush administration, it will be a clear choice between black gold and black people.

Salih Booker <apic@igc.org> is the director of both The Africa Fund in New York and the Africa Policy Information Center in Washington.

The Republican Rule

Visit our website to find this new page: <http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/>

Visit this new *Foreign Policy In Focus* feature, offering you news and analysis about what we can expect from a government controlled by the likes of George W., the Cheneys, Dick Armev, and Tom DeLay.

Military and Security

Bill Hartung	World Policy Institute
Chris Hellman	Center for Defense Information
Daryl Kimball	Coalition to Reduce Nuclear Dangers
Ian Williams	United Nations

Economy and Environment

Karen Hansen-Kuhn	Development Gap
David Hunter	Center for International Environmental Law
Carol Welch	Friends of the Earth

Regions

Bill Spencer	Washington Office on Latin America
Salih Booker	Africa Policy Information Center
John Gershman	Foreign Policy In Focus
Tomas Valasek	Center for Defense Information
Chris Toensing	<i>Middle East Report</i>