

Africa: Off the Agenda?

By Salih Booker, ACOA/The Africa Fund/APIIC

Will Africa be “off the agenda” of a Bush administration? In the first week of Bush’s term, we can answer that question with a resounding *no*. It’s far worse than that. After four days, Bush in effect declared war on Africa and Africans.

Bush’s very first foreign policy action—and one in which it appears the Secretary of State was not consulted—has been to defund international public health and family planning services. He did this by withdrawing U.S. money from service providers who also provide reproductive health and abortion services—even if that money comes from other sources. In light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, this is criminal. It amounts to throwing gasoline on the fire that is AIDS.

Next, Bush placed under review the May 2000 executive order by Clinton that supports African rights to import or produce generic versions of HIV/AIDS medications that are still under U.S. patent. The impending reversal of this order is an anti-African measure of immense proportions.

We have predicted a return to the blatantly anti-African policies of the Reagan era, characterized by a general antipathy toward black people and a fabricated perception of Africa as a social welfare case. We were not being pessimistic, but were trying to draw attention to the public record of Governor Bush and his team. For instance:

During the campaign, Bush and his advisers repeatedly stressed that Africa did not “fit into the national strategic interests” of America. During the televised debates, Bush said that Africa was not a priority and that he wouldn’t intervene to prevent or stop genocide in Africa should such a threat—as occurred in Rwanda in 1994—develop.

Dick Cheney’s perspective on Africa is epitomized by his 1986 vote in favor of keeping Nelson Mandela in prison, and his opposition to sanctions against apartheid in South Africa. More recently, as CEO of Haliburton—the world’s largest oil services company—he was complicit in sustaining the Nigerian dictatorship of the late General Sani Abacha.

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice was until this year on the board of directors at Chevron, another oil company that buttressed military rule in Nigeria, and literally hired the regime’s soldiers to fire on unarmed protesters at its operations sites. A Chevron tanker ship bears her name.

The selection of Colin Powell as the first African American secretary of state, along with Rice (the first African American national security adviser), will not cloud the base racism that remains the major determinant of U.S. policies in Africa. Neither has demonstrated any particular interest in or knowledge of African issues (Powell’s role as a Nigeria election observer notwithstanding). Moreover, both are loyal Republicans with a shared conventional orientation toward international affairs that comes from a narrow militaristic understanding of human security.

Then, there is the matter of race. The basic illegitimacy of the Bush administration in the eyes of the vast majority of African Americans has foreign policy implications. It will make it more difficult for the White House or State Department to be taken seriously if they choose to support democratization in Africa—something that was missing during the Clinton years and which should be central to U.S. Africa policies.

Under a Bush administration and a divided Congress, it will be impossible to break through the systemic American disdain for Africa—



unless there are shifts in public perceptions comparable to those that happened in the 1980s regarding apartheid. Perhaps in this sense, the AIDS pandemic—which has immense implications for Africa—might serve a similar function:

- The AIDS epicenter is Africa and is a consequence and feature of global apartheid, an international version of Jim Crow segregation.

- Pharmaceutical companies continue to protect their profits with a campaign against African production and importation of generic anti-retroviral drug alternatives.

- African countries are spending more on debt payments to rich countries than on health and education for their own people.

But it remains to be seen whether the Bush administration responds to *any*

opportunity or morality to change its policy toward Africa. Until then Africans, and Americans, will pay a very high price.

(This commentary by Salih Booker <apic@igc.org> was presented at a FPIF press conference on Bush's foreign policy at the National Press Club on January 25, 2001.)

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