

# George Bush's Petro-Military-Commerce Mission

By Patrick Bond | July 21, 2003

In addition to the pomp and ceremony associated with the second post-apartheid state visit by a U.S. president, a string of protests greeted George W. Bush when he met South African president Thabo Mbeki in Pretoria on July 9. It was a complicated welcome from many perspectives. South Africa had not joined the “coalition of the willing” against Saddam Hussein, and former president Nelson Mandela remains a staunch opponent of Bush’s foreign policy. On the other hand, Pretoria profited nicely from the hostilities, not merely through selling arms but also by taking advantage of Bush’s attempt to restore some legitimacy on this trip. Mbeki’s muddled reaction to the U.S.-led war on Hussein’s Iraq deserves a review, because continuing ambivalence in the political sphere is contradicted by closer U.S.-South African economic relationships that threaten the rest of Africa.

Most constructively, perhaps, a few leaders from the ruling African National Congress (ANC) engaged in occasional anti-war picketing at U.S. consulates in Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg during the invasion of Iraq. On July 9, several hundred demonstrators from the ANC and its allies protested U.S. policies in Pretoria. However, this represented a far smaller number than the broader, and more radical Anti-War Coalition, whose gathering of more than 2,000 at the U.S. embassy, and 700 at the ANC office in Johannesburg a few days earlier, sent the explicit message that Bush should leave Africa.

Although South Africa was officially opposed to the war, had Washington’s bullying of several Security Council swing votes been successful, Pretoria would have fallen into line. In the days prior to the U.S./UK bombing, Mbeki deployed deputy foreign minister Aziz Pahad and a technical team to assist the UN with inspections for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. None were located.

Mandela offered a tough critique as early as January: “All Bush wants is Iraqi oil... Their friend Israel has got weapons of mass destruction but because it’s their ally they won’t ask the UN to get rid of it... Bush, who cannot think properly, is now wanting to plunge the world into a holocaust. If there is a country which has committed unspeakable atrocities, it is the United States of America... They don’t care for human beings.”

In June, Mandela met French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin and condemned Bush again: “Since the creation of the United Nations there has not been a World War. Therefore, for anybody, especially the leader of a superstate, to act outside the United Nations is something that must be condemned by everybody who wants peace. For any country to leave the United Nations and attack an independent country must be condemned in the strongest terms.”

Notwithstanding the Security Council’s laudable opposition to the invasion itself, the merits of the UN as a site for adjudicating U.S. power were thrown into serious question after Saddam’s regime collapsed and reconstruction control was debated. A commentator in the *Jordan Times*, Hasan Abu Nimah, explained: “The latest Security Council resolution on Iraq, 1483, has been a flagrant betrayal of the UN Charter, a scandalous resultant of power politics and opportunistic superpower compromises, and a dangerous submission to the fait accompli of war and aggression, at the expense of principle and international legality. Earlier, in the weeks leading to the war, the council had stood firm in the face of immense American and British pressure, boldly refusing to prematurely undercut the arms inspection program in favor of a resolution providing legal international cover for the military action against Iraq which was already planned by the U.S. and Britain... It is amazing how, on May 22, the council dramatically abandoned its steadfast position by suddenly legitimizing aggression, endorsing devastation of an innocent country and its weary people, and by licensing their indefinite, unwarranted occupation.”

Thus Pretoria’s official opposition to U.S. militarism is not taken terribly seriously in South Africa, as reflected in tensions with the independent-left activists. Leadership of the anti-war movement was initially claimed by the ANC, SA Communist Party, Congress of SA Trade Unions, and SA Council of Churches, which convened a “Stop the War Campaign” just before the war began. One of the coordinators, ANC policy director Michael Sachs, rightly argued the need for “uniting around the broadest possible alliance in opposition to war and imperialism... George W. Bush has drawn a line in the sand, and we must all decide on which side we stand.”

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However, South Africa's new left—a coalition of independent community and solidarity groups—quickly formed the Anti-War Coalition and won the endorsements of 300 organizations. The left did far more mobilizing for demonstrations and regularly pulled many thousands into the streets in the largest cities. Sachs told a February meeting aiming to reconcile the two groups that ANC leaders were uncomfortable with the more vigorously anti-imperialist language of the Anti-War Coalition. Then, once Sachs claimed credit for the February 15 protest in the media, the Coalition drew its own line in the sand, refusing to allow ANC speakers on the stage at the Johannesburg rally of 15,000.

The line was so stark because Pretoria had so obviously decided to stand on the side of war profits, ignoring Anti-War Coalition calls to withdraw permission for three Iraq-bound warships to dock and refuel in Durban, and to halt sales of sophisticated armaments to the U.S./UK regimes. Pretoria's state-owned arms manufacturer Denel often stated its vision of being "an acknowledged global player." In the months before the war, it contracted to deliver \$29 million in ammunition shell-casing, \$169 million in artillery propellants, and 326 hand-held laser range finders to the British army. Denel also sold the U.S. Marines 125 laser-guidance sights.

Although Bush canceled a few million dollars worth of military cooperation funds to Pretoria on July 1, because of Mbeki's failure to agree to a non-extradition treaty with the U.S. designed to sabotage the International Criminal Court, the Pentagon has ambitious plans for Africa and needs Pretoria's support. NATO's Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, Gen. James Jones, confirmed U.S. interests in a May briefing to defense industry journalists: "The carrier battle groups of the future and the expeditionary strike groups of the future may not spend six months in the Mediterranean Sea but I'll bet they'll spend half the time down the West Coast of Africa."

Within weeks, that coast was graced by 3,000 U.S. troops deployed offshore from Liberia, with potential bases planned for Ghana, Senegal, and Mali, as well as the North African countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. The oil-rich Gulf of Guinea is particularly compelling as a site where off-shore drilling rigs may need protection. Another military base in the small Horn country of Djibouti was occupied by 1,500 U.S. troops. Although Botswana and Mozambique also play a role in the Pentagon's strategy, South Africa remains the crucial southern African partner, in part because the U.S. is so wary of sending troops to Africa (e.g. in Liberia, where

calls for peace-building forces continue amidst carnage). Already in Central Africa, Pretoria is lining up as the main proxy for western geopolitical interests.

But there are many more African victims of U.S. economic power. The Bush regime's attitude to Mbeki's "philosophically spot-on" New Partnership for Africa's Development has not been matched by serious trade, aid, and financial concessions. Bush clearly only wants Pretoria to continue wrenching open the continent's markets, as he hinted during a June 2003 Corporate Council speech: "I look forward to going to South Africa, where I'll meet with elected leaders who are firmly committed to economic reforms in a nation that has become a major force for regional peace and stability." Mbeki's commitment to Washington-friendly "economic reforms"—blunt neoliberalism that drove unemployment up from 15% to 30%, made white people 15% richer, and black people 19% poorer since liberation—is unquestioned.

Since the World Trade Organization's November 2001 Doha ministerial summit, Washington has set up its own unfair-trade rules. Treasury undersecretary John Taylor explained the Bush regime's hypocrisy on the subsequent steel tariffs and agricultural subsidies quite casually: "You take steps forward and move back. That's always the case." Just before the June 2003 G8 Summit at Evian, France, Bush announced opposition to a French plan to halt dumping of subsidized Western food in Africa. Yet he proposed increasing his own government's aid-related subsidies on agricultural exports and also argued that "European governments should join—not hinder—the great cause of ending hunger in Africa," by both dropping their internal agricultural subsidies and permitting trade in genetically modified foodstuffs.

As a result, according to six leading African global justice movements that met near Evian, "The 2003 G8 was ultimately a disaster for African farmers. It failed to adopt even limited proposals for a moratorium on reducing European and American tariff duties and subsidies for U.S. and European agriculture. These policies are perverse. While millions of African farmers' livelihoods are ruined by these policies, European livestock are ensured major state subsidies."

Ironically, at this very point of maximum U.S. hypocrisy, South Africa's neoliberal trade minister Alec Erwin emphasized bilateralism with Washington: specifically, a U.S.-Southern African Customs Union free trade area that U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick began promoting energetically in early 2003 at a Mauritius trade conference. Yet that arrangement would give Pretoria and its

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neighbors practically no additional benefit beyond the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) agreement in existence—and in any case, the gains to South Africa from AGOA far outstripped those of other African countries, whose trade to the U.S. increased by only a quarter as fast as South Africa's (10% from 2001-02). In 2001, 84% of all exports from sub-Saharan African countries—which total just 1% of all U.S. imports—emanated from only four countries: South Africa, Nigeria (oil), Kenya, and Angola (oil).

The AGOA, which in mid-2003 applied to 39 countries (the others being ineligible for various reasons), has come under intense criticism. Washington's conditions included adopting neoliberal policies, privatizing state assets, removing subsidies and price controls, ending incentives for local companies, and endorsing U.S. foreign policy. On the latter point, Burkina Faso was ruled ineligible because, according to Washington, the country "undermined... U.S. foreign policy interests." Numerous civil society groups across Africa and the U.S. have opposed the deal, many decrying it as a vehicle for U.S. imperialism. Most AGOA job creation is short-term, low-paid, and unstable, especially where it involves Asian firms relocating merely for trade benefits. Practically no backward-forward linkages exist between the new exports and the rest of the economy.

Another example of the Bush regime's imposition of unsustainable development on Africa was the genetically modified (GM) food controversy. The EU, Australia, Japan, China, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia had banned GM trade and production, so Bush was clearly desperate for new markets in Africa, as he revealed to the U.S. Africa Business Summit shortly before his July 2003 trip: "To help Africa become more self-sufficient in the production of food, I have proposed the initiative to end hunger in Africa. This initiative will help African countries to use new high-yield biotech crops and unleash the power of markets to dramatically increase agricultural productivity. But there's a problem. At present, some governments are blocking the import of crops grown with biotechnology, which discourages African countries from producing and exporting these crops."

Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, interpreted: "The Bush administration is not straightforward. It is not poverty in Africa that is the most important issue for the administration, but business considerations on behalf of the U.S. technology and agricultural sector." As InterPress Service reported, "Zambia, citing health concerns, rejected GM corn in both grain and

milled forms. One year later, President Levy Mwanawasa announced last week that this year Zambia will nearly double the 600,000 tons of grain it harvested last season, providing new fuel to the argument that GM technology is not necessary for reducing hunger in Africa."

The most important example of how U.S.-dominated trade rules generate underdevelopment—indeed mass death—must be the application of intellectual property patent rights that prevent widespread use of affordable medicines. In South Africa alone, 600 people die each day from AIDS because they cannot afford to buy anti-retroviral medicines which would keep them alive. According to a *Johannesburg Business Day* newspaper report shortly before Bush's visit, Erwin conceded that "a key issue for the developing world was agreement to allow developing countries to import or manufacture generic drugs to deal with major public health crises without running into patent problems. Erwin urged those pharmaceutical companies which were applying pressure to block a deal to come on board. The U.S. government is holding up a deal, under pressure from its pharmaceutical lobby."

Even if Erwin himself has been unwilling to challenge international corporate power by licensing local production and import of generics, this was a fair criticism. Although Bush promised \$15 billion in new AIDS funding from 2003-06, this would be mainly to the benefit of U.S. pharmaceutical corporations. In any case, Bush quickly backpedaled on his pledge by cutting the 2003-04 allocation in half and under-funding the Global Fund set up to combat AIDS, Malaria, and TB by the United Nations.

A few weeks earlier, the main NGOs active on medicine access accused the Bush regime of having "an almost blind belief in the Intellectual Property system, without regard for the reality for patients in desperate need of newer, more effective health technologies and access to existing essential medicines. In view of the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the massive problems expressed by many World Health Assembly delegates in guaranteeing equitable and sustainable access to affordable antiretroviral medicines, this text gives the impression that the U.S. has lost touch with reality." While the U.S. insisted that intellectual property protection was the best way to promote pharmaceutical research and development, according to NGO critics, "Of the 1,393 new drugs approved between 1975 and 1999, only 16 (or just over 1%) were specifically developed for tropical diseases and tuberculosis, diseases that account for 11.4% of the global disease burden."

In addition to these problems, the oppressive roles of the World Bank and IMF continue, in part because Bush's

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Treasury Department maintains micro-managerial control. (As chair of the Bretton Woods Institutions' Development Committee, Mbeki's finance minister Trevor Manuel has manifestly failed to raise the Third World voice.) In relation to the contradictory problem of Zimbabwe, both Bush and Mbeki favor a top-down, elite approach to pseudo-democratization, even though they have been on opposite sides of the divide. In spite of hot anti-Mugabe rhetoric by Bush and secretary of state Colin Powell in the days before the Africa trip, Mbeki won an endorsement on July 9 by apparently falsely claiming progress in talks between Mugabe and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. That party's leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, once again accused Mbeki of prolonging Mugabe's tyrannical rule, and Bush is now complicit as well.

For progressive internationalists, the point of this review of the issues and political maneuvers is that Pretoria continues to be among the least reliable opponents of the Bush regime in practice, notwithstanding fine rhetoric from Mandela and even Mbeki. Pretoria makes repeated calls for global economic transformation, democratization of the UN and other multilateral agencies, regional autonomy for African development, and more general Third World political leadership. Yet since liberation in 1994, a great many opportunities have arisen to put words into action. In their first seven years of democratic nation-state power and legitimacy, South African officials presided over the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Commonwealth, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of African Unity and African Union, the Southern African Development Community, the board of governors of the IMF and World Bank, the Bretton Woods Institutions' Development Committee, the World Commission on Dams, and many other important inter-

national and continental bodies. But little came of these, save to reinforce neoliberal policies and power relations.

Since September 2001, South African politicians have had hosting or leading roles at the Durban World Conference Against Racism, the World Trade Organization's Doha ministerial, the UN's Financing for Development Conference in Monterrey, and the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. In addition, the New Partnership for Africa's Development was launched by Mbeki to great acclaim in late 2001 and given standing at the annual G8 summits, the Davos World Economic Forum, and other important meetings of the world's political and business elites during 2002-03.

None of these initiatives have begun to alter what even Mbeki terms "global apartheid." That is why the most advanced social forces in South Africa and across the continent will not trust Mbeki and his colleagues to speak truth to Bush in future meetings. Moreover, the U.S. delegation left Pretoria with backslapping statements of mutual admiration, and a clear sense that Mbeki has agreed to tighten the relationship between imperialism and subimperialism that Bush's father—first as CIA director, then Ronald Reagan's vice president, then president—helped maintain during the apartheid era.

On the other hand, with the recent protests and many more to come, the world's progressive community has a worthy proxy in South Africa, one which turns its rage at inequality, injustice, and environmental destruction against the Bush and Mbeki regimes alike.

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