

The “George Bush” of Africa:

Pretoria Chooses Subimperialism

By Patrick Bond | July 13, 2004

The first week of July witnessed two important markers of Africa’s geopolitical trajectory. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, at the African Union (AU) summit, the South African government took major steps to influence the organization, by winning contests to host its parliament and to dominate its peace/security division (the AU’s New Partnership for Africa’s Development is already located near Pretoria). Meanwhile, in Washington, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) publicly launched a U.S.-Africa policy blueprint, requested by Colin Powell and the Congress.

The main controversy in Addis was a two-year old report on the Zimbabwean government’s systemic human rights abuses, which Robert Mugabe’s government dubiously denied having seen, although it had been circulating for four months. Harare’s delaying tactics won support from Pretoria’s foreign affairs minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who a year earlier had pronounced, “We will never criticize Zimbabwe.” As the disappointed Catholic archbishop of Bulawayo, Pious Ncube, concluded of the AU delegates, “All they do is back each other up and drink tea.”

The CSIS report on “Rising US Interests in Africa” emphasizes seven interventions: Sudan, whose oil is craved by Washington; Africa’s decrepit capital markets, which could “jump start” Bush’s gimmicky Millennium Challenge Account; energy, especially the “massive future earnings by Nigeria and Angola, among other key West African oil producers;” wildlife conservation; “counter-terrorism” efforts, which include “a Muslim outreach initiative;” peace operations, which can be transferred to African troops thanks to new G8 funding; and AIDS, whose treatment is feared by pharmaceutical corporations because it will require generic drugs.¹ In all but Sudan, South African cooperation will be crucial for the new U.S. imperial agenda.

This is a good time to assess Washington-Pretoria relations. In May, post-apartheid South Africa turned 10 years old. Delight can legitimately be expressed by

internationalists and anti-racists, including progressive U.S. activists who supported the African National Congress (ANC) and who pressed the U.S. Congress and the Reagan/Bush administrations to impose sanctions during the crucial 1980s.

The White House and State Department were, of course, weak and compromised when opposing apartheid, even during its death-throes, in the wake of many decades of explicit support. A reminder of the “constructive engagement” legacy was provided by Reagan’s death in June, based on Chester Crocker’s own 1980 assessment of his mandate as Assistant Secretary of State for Africa: “The only thing Ronald Reagan knows about South Africa is that he’s on the side of the whites.” However, political amnesia was recommended by South Africa’s president Thabo Mbeki, who traveled from the Sea Island, Georgia G8 Summit to the funeral and remarked to National Public Radio, “For those of us who were part of the struggle against apartheid, it was actually during Reagan’s presidency [that] the United States government started dealing with the ANC.”² (The CIA cooperated with the Pretoria regime *against* the ANC, throughout the Reagan era.)

In the new South Africa, however, a power-sharing compromise deal among a tiny fraction of black nationalist politicians and business cronies created an elite transition that endowed a few Africans with enormous stature and wealth, but impoverished the majority of ANC constituents. Internationally, the

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new governing elites struck deals with such multilateral institutions as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) that recall the subimperial designs of Victorian-era colonialist Cecil Rhodes. The result has been a substitution of class apartheid for racial apartheid. Today, thanks to a blueprint partially designed at the World Bank ranging from macroeconomics issues to policies impacting land, housing, and water, the government's own statistics agency reports a 19 percent decline in black household income from 1995-2000, while white people increased their income by 15 percent and conditions have deteriorated further subsequently. Although some state resources were redirected from white to black people, the doubling of formal unemployment and the onset of AIDS—ignored by the ANC until protest movements shook government officials into providing medicines this year—have created a huge domestic problem that helps to explain why South Africa's subimperial project is sometimes veiled with counter hegemonic, and even anti-imperialist, rhetoric.

1994-2001: The warm-up period

Historians of Pretoria's foreign policy will probably look at 1994-2001 as a warm-up period characterized by ambitious human rights rhetoric in multilateral, regional, and bilateral engagements. In at least one case, the banning of landmines, South African officials did indeed live up to their progressive rhetoric (via the 1997 Ottawa process). However, hypocrisy was a growing problem, ranging from flirtation with the Indonesian dictator Suharto—which facilitated a \$25 million contribution to ANC party coffers—and recognition of the Myanmar military junta as a legitimate government to ill-considered arms sales to countries that practiced mass violence (Colombia, Peru, Turkey, Algeria) and a hapless invasion of

neighboring Lesotho to prop up an unpopular regime.

In addition, the overall balance of forces around the world proved terribly hostile to Pretoria following the 1994 transition. Even a leader of Mandela's stature could not withstand the pressures of neoliberal economics and Western geopolitical realities. The first period, through 2001, witnessed the Western power bloc's quick dismissal of appeals for relief: from unfair trade rules, debt and financial squeezes, speculative attacks on the currency, foreign investment strikes, and disputed patents on AIDS medicines and on the names of geographically branded exports like port and sherry.

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Mandela's unsuccessful attempt to save Ken Saro-Wiwa from the Nigerian government's noose unveiled the other side of African politics: compliance with Washington by elites across most of the continent. To protect Western interests (e.g., oil companies in the Nigerian Delta), to apply structural adjustment policies, and to maintain

order in desperate countries, complicit African politicians and armies were notoriously repressive and deeply resentful of any human rights or democratic pressure, even from Mandela.

South Africa's first black president was a great anti-apartheid leader, to be sure, but he subsequently revealed the geopolitical swamp into which South Africa rapidly sunk under his rule. During a talk to business and social elites at Rhodes House in Cape Town last August, Mandela offered the single most chilling historical metaphor possible, "I am sure that Cecil John Rhodes would have given his approval to this effort to make the South African economy of the early 21st century appropriate and fit for its time."³

Rhodes made his fortune in diamonds during the 1870s and 1880s and for 30 years terrorized black mineworkers, black residents of the racially segregated Cape province (which he governed as prime min-

ister during the 1890s), and millions of black people across Southern Africa who were subjects of his invasions, including the area long-named Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe and Zambia). Under Rhodes' rule, the world's first concentration camps were established and were responsible for the deaths of 14,000 blacks and 25,000 Afrikaner women and children during the Anglo-Boer War.

While inaugurating the Mandela-Rhodes Foundation, Nelson Mandela took the opportunity to criticize as "outside interference" the lawsuits filed by Jubilee South Africa and apartheid-victims groups demanding reparations from U.S. corporations, along the lines of the recent Nazi-victims ancestors' banking and slave labor cases. Mandela's complaint that these civil cases challenged national sovereignty was considerably weakened when Pretoria's justice minister later conceded that he was pressured by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to submit an opposition brief to the New York courts.⁴ Among the friends of the court arrayed against Mandela were retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu, his successor, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, and economist Joseph Stiglitz.⁵

One might contemplate whether over the past decade Mandela, his successor, Thabo Mbeki, Trade Minister Alec Erwin, and Finance Minister Trevor Manuel have begun acting roles parallel to Cecil Rhodes' subimperial functions a century before. For Queen Victoria, substitute George W. Bush. Instead of the Victorian-era relations between the British state and Rhodes, read the New Partnership for Africa's Development and its many corporate backers. Likewise, the South African National Defense Force's invasion of Lesotho in September 1998, justified by Pretoria's desire to protect a controversial, corrupt mega-dam from alleged sabotage threats, is reminiscent of the British army's arrogance and power a century earlier.

Just as Rhodes had his media cheerleaders from Cape Town to London, so too do many Western publications regularly promote Mbeki as Africa's savior. Even a usually more critical outlet, the *Mail & Guardian*, provided a December 2003 "report card" giving Mbeki a C grade overall but praising his international activities: "As Mbeki nears the end of his

first term in office, it is in the area of foreign affairs that his legacy will rest... South Africa always has a reserved seat at the head table at powerful multilateral organizations and associations, and Africa is now a high agenda item at the summits of the G8 major economies. If Mbeki were to be rated on his performance on the international stage, he would pass with flying colors."⁶

New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)

The imperial head table has indeed welcomed Mbeki. The mainstay of South African foreign policy, NEPAD, was celebrated on the one hand by Washington, London, Berlin, and the Bretton Woods institutions. The Bush administration's main Africa hand declared it "philosophically spot-on,"⁷ and the ex-IMF managing director, Michel Camdessus, happily pronounced at the 2003 Evian G-8 meeting: "The African heads of state came to us with the conception that globalization was not a curse for them, as some had said, but rather the opposite, from which something positive could be derived. You can't believe how much of a difference this makes."⁸

On the other hand, though the criticism is not mentioned by most mainstream commentators, NEPAD is widely derided by African intellectuals—for example, within the highly regarded Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa—and by activists in the African Social Forum. They describe Mbeki's project as the re-legitimization of the Washington Consensus with only lip service to democracy and human rights.

Given NEPAD's purely destructive role in Zimbabwe, not to mention the absurd Nigerian election in April 2003, Mbeki and co-NEPAD leader Olusegun Obasanjo apparently did not take good governance seriously beyond the platitudes designed for G-8 donor governments. Those governments need NEPAD, as Camdessus' comment indicates, partly because it reinforces their capacity to manipulate African countries through the aid mechanism; NEPAD helps sell taxpayers the myth that Africa is "reforming."

As for the subimperial part of the equation, an increasingly important factor is the extractive, exploitative role of Johannesburg businesses across the continent.⁹ Illustrating the threat of a Pretoria-Johannesburg alliance of state and capital, Mbeki has successfully repulsed local opposition from human rights and arms control groups in order to purchase \$6 billion worth of sophisticated weaponry from European corporations.

Hence, many observers on the continent are wary of Pretoria's geopolitical interventions, including the way that the central African peace deal facilitated Johannesburg capital's penetration of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In 2002, the U.N. Security Council accused 15 South African companies of illegally "looting" the DRC during late 1990s turmoil, which left an estimated three million citizens dead. Some of those businesses gratefully accompanied Mbeki on a January 2004 visit that generated a \$10 billion trade/investment package and the chance to participate in \$4 billion worth of World Bank tenders. Meanwhile, the widespread influence-peddling scandals associated with the arms deal in late 2003 even briefly threatened Deputy President Jacob Zuma, who allegedly solicited a bribe from a French arms dealer in a manner that Pretoria's justice minister conceded was "prima facie corruption."

A few journalists have also picked up hostile vibes from the rest of the continent. In August 2003, South Africa's largest paper, the *Sunday Times*, remarked on Southern African Development Community delegates' sentiments at a Dar es Salaam regional summit, "Pretoria was 'too defensive and protective' in trade negotiations [and] is being accused of offering too much support for domestic production 'such as duty rebates on exports' which is killing off other economies in the region."¹⁰ More

generally, the same paper reported from the African Union meeting in Maputo the previous month that Mbeki is "viewed by other African leaders as too powerful, and they privately accuse him of wanting to impose his will on others. In the corridors they call him the George Bush of Africa, leading the most powerful nation in the neighborhood and using his financial and military muscle to further his own agenda."¹¹

How did the ANC government so rapidly acquiesce to the imperial project? South African neoliberalism was enforced by the IMF in a December 1993 loan agreed to by the ANC leadership. In addition to the standard menu of structural adjustment conditions, Camdessus insisted that Mandela reappoint apartheid-era Finance Minister Derek Keys and Central Bank Governor Chris Stals. However, at least four prior decisions were also crucial: to formally drop "nationalization" from ANC rhetoric (April 1992), to endorse the apartheid regime's intention to join the General

Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (June 1993), to repay \$25 billion of inherited apartheid-era foreign debt (October 1993), and to grant the South African Reserve Bank formal independence in an interim constitution (November 1993).

Various other international economic incidents deserve mention. In January 1995, privatization began in earnest, notwithstanding the ultimately fruitless attempt by the ANC's labor allies to lock Pretoria into a restrictive National Framework Agreement, which was often violated by the government. South Africa abolished its main exchange controls in March 1995, in the immediate wake of Mexican capital flight that destroyed the peso's value. This was equivalent to an act of unsafe international financial sex: Stals removed the country's exchange-control condom, so that wealthy white people—ben-

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eficiaries of apartheid-era looting—could skip the country to avoid the steady erosion of emerging market economies. South Africa's only protection was to raise interest rates to a record high, where they have remained ever since, which further weakened the economy's immune system. Later, during two episodes of rampant currency devaluation between 1998 and 2001, Finance Minister Manuel inexplicably granted permission to South Africa's biggest companies to shift their financial headquarters and primary stock market listings to London.

Even before September 2001, it became clear to ANC elites how difficult the transition from racial to class apartheid would be, given the meager rewards offered from the imperial financial and commercial hubs. The international political centers such as the United Nations and the World Bank were more forthcoming, at least, allowing Mandela, Mbeki, Manuel, and Erwin insider access. This was self-interested, of course, as these institutions came under attack and attempted to reinvent themselves with a dose of New South African legitimacy.

Thus in their first seven years of democratic nation-state power and legitimacy, Pretoria politicians temporarily presided over the U.N. Security Council, the board of governors of the IMF and World Bank, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Commonwealth, an international AIDS conference, the World Commission on Dams, and many other important global and continental bodies. From the standpoint of Third World leadership, Pretoria also headed the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of African Unity, and the Southern African Development Community during the late 1990s.

Then, during a frenetic period from September 2001 to September 2003, Mbeki and his colleagues hosted, led, or played instrumental roles at the following 15 major international conferences or events: the World Conference Against Racism in Durban (August-September 2001); the launch of the New Partnership for Africa's Development in Abuja, Nigeria (October 2001); the Doha, Qatar, ministerial summit of the World Trade Organization (November 2001); regular World Bank/IMF meetings (e.g., November 2001 in Ottawa); a World Economic

Forum meeting in New York City (February 2002); the U.N.'s Financing for Development conference in Monterrey, Mexico (March 2002); the G-8 summit in Kananaskis, Canada (June 2002); the Southern African World Economic Forum meeting in Durban (June 2002); the African Union launch in Durban (July 2002); the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (August-September 2002); a U.N. heads of state summit (September 2002); the Evian G-8 Summit (June 2003); the Cancun World Trade Organization ministerial (September 2003); the World Bank/IMF annual meeting in Dubai (September 2003); and the Socialist International in Sao Paolo (October 2003).

However, virtually nothing was accomplished through these opportunities. What might have been possible, had Mbeki and his lieutenants adopted liberal principles and approaches to the globalization of people, rather than of capital?

Alternative strategies

- Instead of selling \$250 million worth of arms to the Iraq War aggressors—the United States and United Kingdom—and warmly welcoming Bush a few weeks after his illegal occupation of Baghdad, what if Mbeki had explicitly affronted Bush (as, to his credit, Mandela did) and chose to strengthen anti-war resistance and even U.S./U.K. boycotts in venues like the Non-Aligned Movement and African Union?
- Instead of rejecting reparations struggles designed to punish international financiers, corporations, and the Bretton Woods institutions for supporting apartheid, what if Mbeki and his colleagues nurtured the anti-racism cause for the sake of repairing apartheid's racial and socio-economic damage and to discourage big capital from future relations with odious regimes?
- Instead of battling against protesters and African trade officials from Seattle through Doha to Cancun, what if Trade Minister Erwin tried uniting the continent and its allies behind an alternative trade agenda so as to meet popular needs, not those of global capital?

- Instead of pooh-poohing debt cancellation as a strategy, what if Finance Manager Manuel joined the Jubilee movement, denounced bogus World Bank and IMF plans for crumbs of relief in the midst of amplified neoliberalism, and helped to organize a debtors' cartel?
- Instead of a NEPAD considered friendly to neoliberals but irrelevant by Zimbabweans hoping for pro-democracy pressure, what if Pretoria helped establish a bottom-up African program for recovery based upon partnerships among Africans themselves?
- Instead of exacerbating the World Summit on Sustainable Development's orientation to market-dominated business as usual what if the ANC leaders tried to harmonize and genuinely implement the agendas of poverty-eradication and environmental sustainability?

In sum, Pretoria's reformers have shown a tendency to "talk left" but "walk right." They have served as both "compradors"—i.e., agents of the global establishment—and failures

when it comes to advancing their stated agenda. Consider Mbeki's remarks in Kuala Lumpur last September, just prior to Cancun, as reported in the *Strights Times*: "From South Africa's past experience, it helped to have strong anti-apartheid groups in developed countries to lobby its case. In the same way, [Mbeki] suggested linking up with groups in developed countries, which were concerned about the negative effects of globalization—which seemed to cause greater imbalances and disparity among the rich and poor nations. "They may act in ways you and I may not like and break windows in the street but the message they communicate relates."¹²

Mbeki's use of the term "global apartheid" is another indicator of the talk-left, walk-right tendency, because a week after opening the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in August 2002 with this phrase, his government banned a

peaceful protesting march at the summit headquarters. His police also fired stun grenades into a crowd of 800 people walking with candles outside the city's main university in protest against the state's repeated, illegal, preventive detentions of activists. Indeed, the scale of Mbeki's strategic failure in international arenas helps explain the paranoia that he and other ANC leaders exhibit when confronted on internationalist terrain by what they regularly term the "ultra-left," namely the various global justice movements who remain unimpressed by Pretoria's dance and who regularly demonstrate against NEPAD, the World Economic Forum, and other high-profile neoliberal events in South Africa.

Both South Africa and the rest of the continent have been incorporated into a crisis-ridden, parasitic, and neocolonial world economy. Would Cecil Rhodes indeed have "given his approval to this effort" to embroil Africa in such a volatile situation? The following three remarks, the first two from the neoliberal *Business Day* newspaper and the third from Mbeki's address to an ANC policy conference in September

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2002, provide a fair summary of the reasons why one might answer in the affirmative:

- First, "The government is utterly seduced by big business, and cannot see beyond its immediate interests."¹³
- The "abiding impression" left from George W. Bush's July 2003 Pretoria stopover was "of a growing, if not intimate trust between himself and President Thabo Mbeki. The amount of public touching, hugging and back patting they went through was well beyond the call of even friendly diplomatic duty."¹⁴
- As for the pesky critics: "Domestic and foreign left sectarian factions... accuse our movement of having abandoned the working people, saying that we have adopted and are implementing neoliberal policies. These factions claim to be pursuing a

socialist agenda. They assert that, on the contrary, we are acting as agents of the domestic and international capitalist class and such multilateral organizations as the World Bank and the IMF, against the interests of the working people.”¹⁵

These comments indicate why the tenth anniversary of South African freedom is no cause for celebration by the oppressed whether at home, elsewhere in Africa, or across the Third World. It is, rather, a moment for us to examine the contradictions associated with a decade of worsening class apartheid and to challenge victimist rhetoric about global inequality when it disguises status quo elite ambitions. Given the ability of South Africa’s progressive activists to consistently identify and protest the hypocrisy of their government talking left while walking right, it is fair to say that Pretoria’s strategy will soon be overtaken, not only by failure from above but by resistance from below.

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Left, Walk Right: South Africa’s Frustrated
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END NOTES

- ¹ Africa Policy Advisory Panel (2004), "Rising US Stakes in Africa," Washington, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, May, Executive Summary.
- ² Citation from Mike Fleshman, Southern Africa, 1980; Mbeki cite from National Public Radio, 14 June 2004; both at <http://www.kabissa.org/mailman/listinfo/debate>, 14 June 2004.
- ³ *Sowetan*, August 26, 2003. I was inspired to revisit this remark and all that it implies, and to provide this particularly sharp critique, because of an April 20 debate on Laura Flanders' "Your Call Radio.org" with Daniel Ngwepe, Pretoria's political counsellor at the South African embassy in Washington. Ngwepe at one point described South Africa's relations with the Bush regime as "brilliant." Indeed.
- ⁴ Reported on e-debate listserve, August 30, 2003, and subsequently in the mainstream South African media.
- ⁵ Details are provided in Patrick Bond, *Talk Left, Walk Right: South Africa's Frustrated Global Reforms* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004, Chapter 3).
- ⁶ *Mail & Guardian*, December 24, 2003.
- ⁷ Walter Kansteiner, cited in D. Gopinath, "Doubt of Africa," *Institutional Investor Magazine*, May.
- ⁸ http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/summit/2003evian/briefing_apr030601.html
- ⁹ J. Daniel, V.Naidoo, and S.Naidu, "The South Africans have Arrived: Post-Apartheid Corporate Expansion into Africa," in J.Daniel, A.Habib, and R.Southall, *State of the Nation: South Africa 2003-04*, (Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 2003).
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- ¹⁵ Thabo Mbeki, "Statement of the President of the African National Congress, Thabo Mbeki, at the ANC Policy Conference," Kempton Park, September 27, 2002.

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