US foreign policy toward the Horn of Africa between 1945 and 1990 was guided by a series of Cold War rationales that viewed the region as a means for solving non-African problems. Specifically, US policymakers did not perceive the countries and peoples of the Horn of Africa as important in their own right but, rather, as a means of preventing the further advances of Soviet communism. As a result, US relationships with various regimes in the region evolved according to their perceived importance within an East-West framework. Emperor Haile Selassie, for example, was courted from the 1940s to the 1970s because of the importance of Ethiopia as part of a worldwide telecommunications network directed against the Soviet Union. After the US-Ethiopian security relationship was shattered in the aftermath of the 1974–77 Ethiopian revolution and the rise to power of a Soviet-backed regime headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam, the Somali regime of Siad Barre achieved greater status in Washington because of Somalia’s importance as an access country from which the United States could counter militarily any perceived Soviet threat to Middle Eastern oil fields. The US preoccupation with anticommunism not only was manipulated by these leaders to obtain greater levels of US economic and military aid—more than $600 million for the Selassie regime and nearly $800 million for the Siad regime—it also served as an important rationale for Washington’s general disregard for the authoritarian

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excesses of these regimes, as well as for a host of interventionist practices designed to maintain US influence within the region.1

Radical changes in the Soviet bloc during the 1980s dramatically called into question these Cold War rationales and the policies they generated. In 1985, President Mikhail Gorbachev emerged as the undisputed leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and his intention to alter significantly Soviet economic and political structures was captured in a variety of buzz words—perestroika (economic restructuring) and glasnost (political openness)—which quickly became part of the lexicon of the West. Of greatest importance to US policymakers was Gorbachev’s desire to move beyond the conflictual confines of the Cold War and seek a form of international cooperation reminiscent of President Franklin Roosevelt’s vision of a post-World War II international order. Gorbachev’s adherence to the theme of novoye myslenye (new political thinking) was the crucial ingredient for what became increased US-Soviet cooperation at the end of the 1980s.

In the case of Eastern Europe, Gorbachev’s policy approach entailed Soviet tolerance for the fall of single-party communist states and a recognition of the need to allow the peoples of Eastern Europe to determine their own political paths independent of Soviet control. Throughout the various regions of the Third World, this new political thinking entailed a rejection of revolutionary struggle and, instead, the need for political negotiations and compromise to resolve ongoing regional disputes and civil wars.2

The irony of Gorbachev’s radical initiatives is that they unleashed a variety of forces that ultimately led in 1991 to the fragmentation of the Soviet Union into a host of smaller independent and non-communist countries. Although the largest of these—the Russian Republic—pledged to seek further cooperation with the United States in a variety of realms—including a resolution of regional conflict in Africa—the reality of the fragmentation of the Soviet Union was a significant shift in the international balance of power as a former superpower ceased to exist. Most important, this event underscored the end of the Cold War and the irrelevance of its related anticommunist rationales. Consequently, US policymak-

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ers at the beginning of 1992 were embroiled in a fierce debate over how best to ensure future cooperation with Russia and the other newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union. As debates focusing on US-Russian cooperation continue to replace the former antagonistic relationship, Washington’s Cold War-driven policies in the Horn of Africa have changed, and will continue to change, accordingly.³

REASSESSING COLD WAR ASSUMPTIONS

In a move cautiously supported by the Department of State’s Bureau of African Affairs, and an important first step on the path to regional peace, Ethiopia’s Mengistu and Somalia’s Siad signed a historic accord on April 3, 1988, in which both leaders agreed to reestablish diplomatic relations and withdraw their respective forces from the frontier of the Ogaden—the disputed territory claimed by Somalia and controlled by Ethiopia that served as the focal point of the 1977–78 Ogaden War, as well as a variety of other minor military skirmishes between Ethiopia and Somalia.⁴ The overriding concern of both leaders, however, was not the resolution of the Ogaden conflict, but a shared desire to defuse conflictual external relations in order to free military resources for effectively dealing with internal, regime-threatening guerrilla insurgencies.

In the case of Somalia, the stability of the government had been threatened since 1981 by the rising military successes of the Somali National Movement (SNM), a northern-based guerrilla insurgency deriving the majority of its support from the Isaak clan, as well as by smaller insurgent groups, such as the Hawiye-dominated United Somali Congress (USC) and the Ogadeni-dominated Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM).⁵ In the case of Ethiopia, the Mengistu regime found itself increasingly threatened by what eventually became known as the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of three regionally, and largely ethnically, based guerrilla armies that included the Tigrean People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), the smaller and less active Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), a secessionist movement dating back to 1961.⁶

⁵ For the best description of the evolution of these guerrilla groups, see Daniel Compagnon, “The Somali Opposition Fronts: Some Comments and Questions,” Horn of Africa 13, nos. 1–2 (1990).
⁶ For a discussion of these and other guerrilla conflicts within the Horn of Africa, see John Markakis, National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). See also a special edition of Africa Today, “Eritrea: An Emerging New Nation in Africa’s Troubled Horn” 38, no. 2 (1992).
Somalia

The April 1988 Ethiopian-Somali accord would have generated little, if any, change in US foreign policy toward the Horn of Africa had it not been for the unforeseen developments that accompanied implementation of the agreement. Faced with the loss of their base of operations in Ethiopia, SNM guerrillas entered the Somali city of Burao on the evening of May 27, 1988, and assassinated all senior government and military officials. The first stage of a previously planned "final offensive" designed to force the collapse of the Siad regime, the guerrillas initially scored stunning successes against the Somali armed forces; most notable among these victories was the capture of large portions of Hargeisa, the second largest urban area in the country. When faced with trading hit-and-run tactics for the need to defend fortified positions, the SNM was devastated by Somali counterattacks in July and August that virtually destroyed Burao and damaged three-quarters of all the buildings in Hargeisa.

In a wave of terror that followed the initial military assault, the Somali armed forces reportedly engaged in a "systematic pattern" of attacks against unarmed Isaak villages, as well as summarily arresting and executing an unknown number of suspected SNM supporters.7 "It is conservatively estimated," noted one Department of State-commissioned study of the conflict, "that at least 5,000 unarmed civilian Isaaks were purposefully murdered by the Somali Armed Forces between May 1988 and March 1989, in the absence of resistance and in contexts which presented no immediate danger to these forces."8

The intensification of Somalia's seven-year-old civil war did not attract the attention of the highest levels of the US policymaking establishment. Rather, the initial US response was handled at the level of the "national security bureaucracies" comprising the executive branch: the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and, particularly, the Department of Defense. At a critical stage in the conflict, the Department of Defense on June 28, 1988, delivered $1.4 million in lethal aid to the Somali armed forces, including 1,200 M-16 rifles and 2.8 million rounds of ammunition.

Although originally authorized by the Department of Defense in November 1986, delivery of the aid had been delayed repeatedly because of the unwillingness of traditional carriers to ship such a small amount of cargo.9 Thus, when the Somali government requested air shipment on June 4, 1988, and paid the extravagant price that such transport required, the matter was handled routinely

8. Ibid., p. 61. A more critical report places the number killed at 50,000. See Africa Watch, Somalia: A Government at War with Its Own People; Testimonies about the Killings and the Conflict in the North (London: Africa Watch, 1990).
at the lowest levels of the bureaucracy. As far as the Department of Defense was concerned, Somalia’s status as an important regional state providing access to US military forces left little, if any, doubt that Washington should quickly respond to Mogadishu in its hour of need. In this regard, the US response reflected the Department of Defense’s bureaucratic mission of ensuring the maintenance of stable, pro-US African governments through the transfer of military equipment and the training of local forces in its usage.

Longtime critics of the US-Somali relationship in the US Congress, most notably the House Subcommittee on Africa, did not accept the military rationale of coming to the aid of a strategic ally. Rather, congressional critics complained of US weaponry being used by the Somali armed forces to bomb urban areas indiscriminately and to execute civilians whose only crime was belonging to the Isaak clan. The Somali government’s response to the northern uprising merely strengthened preconceived notions of Siad’s regime as a gross violator of human rights that had lost the support of its people. In a hearing of the House Subcommittee on Africa hastily convened during the civil conflict, Chairperson Howard Wolpe noted that the uprising in the north was the outcome of “years of political repression.” Having never fully accepted the idea of a US-Somali security relationship, critics within the Africa subcommittee seized upon the intensification of Somalia’s extended civil war as a vehicle for terminating any further US security assistance to the Siad regime.

With the House Subcommittee on Africa threatening to cut off all US aid to Somalia, the Department of State touched off a bureaucratic conflict with the Department of Defense in July 1988 by “voluntarily” placing a hold on any further “lethal” military aid to the Siad regime. Unwilling to do battle with Congress against the backdrop of widespread abuses on the part of the Somali armed forces, the Department of State rationalized the hold by underscoring the need to protect the far more substantial levels of economic assistance. “It simply did not make good bureaucratic sense,” explained a Department of State official involved in the decision, “to take a chance on losing all the economic assistance for a small amount of military assistance.”

In the eyes of the Department of Defense, however, the Department of State had caved in too quickly to the demands of the House subcommittee. Having been the most active proponent of the US-Somali access agreement during the 1980s, the Department of Defense wanted to stand behind Washington’s promises to Mogadishu, especially during a crisis period in which US credibility was on the line. “Either we’re allies or we’re not,” explained one proponent of continued military aid. “What is the sense of having this program if we’re not going to give

them the military support when it counts the most?" 13 Despite such rhetoric, the combination of congressional pressure and Department of State acquiescence finally led the Bush administration to reprogram $2.5 million of military aid originally targeted for Somalia in fiscal year (FY) 1989.

In addition to the suspension of military aid, Economic Support Fund (ESF) security assistance to Somalia beginning in FY 1988 was subjected to "notification" demands of Congress. In short, the Department of State was legally required to give a 15-day notification to Congress of any intent to disburse funds to Somalia, during which period any congressperson could request a "hold" on the funds pending further discussion. Although the Department of State legally can disburse funds in the absence of binding legislation, congressional holds are generally honored as concerns those countries in Africa, particularly Somalia, that are subject to notification requirements. 14 "Since Somalia is not of the highest political interest in Washington," explained a desk officer in the East Africa bureau, "the State Department will not override the request and force a battle." 15

As a result of this Department of State policy, $21 million in suspended FY 1988 ESF funds ultimately were reprogrammed, in September 1989, to other African countries to avoid their complete deletion from the Bush administration's cash-starved FY 1990 foreign aid budget. Similarly, in a compromise supported by the House Subcommittee on Africa, $15 million in FY 1989 funds were paid directly to the International Monetary Fund after Somalia agreed in May 1989 to release a certain number of political prisoners. As of December 1990, there was a hold on all security assistance pending a significant movement on the part of the Siad regime toward greater respect for internationally recognized human rights. The Africa subcommittee hoped that such a hold would place pressure on the Siad regime to seek some form of "national reconciliation" with the guerrilla opposition.

The escalating civil war in Somalia that continued in the aftermath of the SNM's failed offensive in May 1988 contributed to an ongoing debate within the national security bureaucracies over the future of the US-Somali security relationship. Officials within the Department of State and the Department of Defense who favored continuation of the relationship pointed to several political reforms as goodwill intentions of the Siad regime to seek some sort of national reconciliation. These reforms included the creation of a constitutional committee to investigate the ongoing war in the north, the release of roughly 300 political prisoners identified by the Department of State's Africa bureau, and Siad's announced intention to establish a multiparty political system complete with parliamentary elections.

14. Countries in Africa subject to notification requirements during FYs 1990 and 1991 were Burundi, Liberia, Somalia, and Sudan.
Despite these actions, even Foreign Service officers (FSO) within the Africa bureau admitted that, aside from the initial release of several hundred political prisoners and some economic reforms, there was a significant gap between what the Siad regime said it would do and what actually occurred in the political sphere. These same officers, nonetheless, noted that, despite continued human rights abuses within Somalia, even gradual movement toward reform, when combined with strong Department of Defense pressures for ensuring continued US access to the port of Berbera, demanded continued US support. "We're stuck with the relationship," explained one FSO, "and we'll stick with it and see it through."^16

Proponents of disengagement from the Siad regime pointed to no less than four major reports—including one commissioned by the Department of State—that underscored the severe human rights problem in Somalia. In July 1989, for example, approximately 450 civilians allegedly were killed when, in the aftermath of the arrest of four prominent Muslim leaders, Somali armed forces fired on demonstrators emerging from the principal mosques in Mogadishu. This occurred just prior to the Bush administration's request for approximately $20 million in ESF aid to Somalia for FY 1990. Not surprisingly, congressional critics seized upon this event and successfully blocked the administration's aid request. Indeed, members of the House Subcommittee on Africa, perhaps the most vocal and influential opponents of continued US aid to Somalia, described Siad's reform package as "meaningless" in the absence of a sincere effort to meet the legitimate demands of the SNM and other guerrilla insurgencies seeking the overthrow of the government.^18

In the words of a member of the Department of State's Africa bureau, the net result of the congressional-executive deadlock over the US-Somali security relationship was a "muddle-through" policy. While opponents were unable to sever completely the relationship, proponents were also constrained in what they could do. In short, the United States continued to occupy an uneasy middle ground that neither completely supported nor opposed the Somali regime, while hoping that political conditions in Somalia would improve. "It's fine to say let's cut off aid, even if that's what the American people want," explained one member of the Africa bureau in attempting to justify having the United States remain politically engaged with the Siad regime. "But then what are the consequences?" Reflecting the bureaucratic mindset, which usually favors the maintenance of established ties with a particular country, this official explained that the inevitable result of cutting aid would be a loss of US influence.^19

Ethiopia

The controversy surrounding the US-Somali security relationship was paralleled by an ongoing debate over the future of US-Ethiopian relations. The primary proponent of enhancing the extremely cool, but correct nature of US-Ethiopian ties not surprisingly was the Department of State’s Bureau of African Affairs, that portion of the US policymaking establishment that pressed the hardest for strengthening ties with the Selassie regime from the 1950s to the 1970s. As explained by a country desk officer within the Africa bureau, Ethiopia was still considered the “most attractive” of all the countries of the region, inclusive of Somalia. Among the reasons cited were Ethiopia’s large population and economic potential, the historic nature of US-Ethiopian ties, the efficient ability of the Ethiopian bureaucracy (unlike “others” in Africa) to “get the job done,” a strategic location bordering the Red Sea, a Christian heritage that could serve as a bulwark against Islamic movements, and Ethiopia’s role as host to the permanent headquarters of the Organization of African Unity.

It was for reasons such as these that official US policy consistently reflected the Africa bureau’s position of supporting the territorial integrity of Ethiopia and, especially in the aftermath of the 1985–86 famine relief effort, the separation of humanitarian efforts from the overall context of political relations between Washington and Addis Ababa. Among the actions that demonstrated the Africa bureau’s continued interest in promoting a thaw in US-Ethiopian relations was the August 1989 visit to Addis Ababa of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen. Cohen’s visit constituted part of the Africa bureau’s sporadic efforts to find a diplomatic settlement to Ethiopia’s ongoing civil war, an issue that also engaged the mediation efforts of former President Jimmy Carter in the late 1980s.

The mere suggestion of enhancing US-Ethiopian ties inevitably was challenged, however, by a conservative-based coalition within Congress seeking to place the spotlight on the human rights violations of the Mengistu regime. Led by Republicans Toby Roth and Jerry Soloman, this coalition expressed great frustration with the House Subcommittee on Africa’s unwillingness to seek economic sanctions against the Marxist regime of Ethiopia while at the same time seeking additional sanctions against the apartheid regime of South Africa—especially when both grossly violated the human rights of their respective populations. In an April 28, 1988, hearing on proposed sanctions against South Africa—the Roth-Gray sanctions bill, or HR-588—Roth reminded the House Committee on Foreign Affairs of the “double standard” that existed concerning

the issue of human rights when applied to Africa.22 This same theme had been broached one week earlier by Representative Dan Burton in a special Africa subcommittee hearing devoted to the unfolding 1988 famine in Ethiopia. Accusing the Mengistu regime of pursuing policies that had resulted in the deaths of thousands and "possibly millions" of its own people, Burton claimed that it was "inconceivable" that Congress would consider additional sanctions against South Africa while taking "virtually no action" against the Mengistu regime.23

Despite their failure to push a comprehensive sanctions bill against Ethiopia through a largely disinterested Congress, congressional activists continued efforts to place the Mengistu regime in a negative light. For example, an extremely watered down version of HR-588 finally was passed in September 1988 as Section 1310 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 1989. Indicative of the difficulties of passing a bill in the absence of a crisis drawing substantial public and, thus, congressional support, the amendment only required the Department of State to provide quarterly reports over a period of two years on the human rights abuses of the Mengistu regime. This relatively non-controversial legislation received a boost as a result of an attempted military coup d'état against the Mengistu regime in May 1989. Responding to the widespread repression and killings of political dissidents and university students that followed the failed coup attempt, several congresspersons known for their activism on the issue of South Africa joined with the TransAfrica lobby to denounce publicly the Mengistu regime. Yet, in sharp contrast to the conservative coalition's opposition to Mengistu's brand of Marxism, this same group one month later indicated a willingness to consider a renewal of US aid to Ethiopia. The conditions for renewed aid were an improvement in human rights conditions and some progress in seeking a negotiated settlement of the country's ongoing civil war.

Rather than seeking a negotiated settlement to what Assistant Secretary of State Cohen in April 1990 described as the "most destructive conflict in the world today," the Mengistu regime continued to seek a military solution, most notably with the support of Israeli advisors and weaponry.24 Israel traditionally had supported the Ethiopian central government as part of a more than two-decades long strategy of preventing the creation of an independent Eritrea. The reason for this support stems from a belief shared by many Israeli policymakers, especially prior to the 1990s, that an independent Eritrea undoubtedly would become

another Arab-oriented (and anti-Israeli) state effectively turning the Red Sea into a hostile "Arab lake." In short, the Eritrean conflict became a southern extension of the Arab-Israeli conflict.25

The critical element of an Israeli-Ethiopian rapprochement in 1990 grew out of Israeli humanitarian and political concerns over the evacuation and resettlement of Ethiopia's minority Jewish population, the Falashas, more than 43,000 of whom had successfully found a permanent home in Israel by June 1991. A notable episode in this process was a late 1984 secret airlift—dubbed Operation Moses—of more than 7,000 Falashas who had fled to the Sudan as a result of the 1983–85 Ethiopian famine; a smaller airlift, Operation Joshua, evacuated some 800 more in March 1985.26 At the beginning of the 1990s, the more than 14,000 remaining Falashas, particularly those who had fled to Addis Ababa to escape growing civil conflict in the north, were at the center of an "arms-for-visas" exchange designed by the Mengistu regime to obtain greater levels of much-needed military weaponry from Israel.

The renewal of traditional Israeli-Ethiopian relations was notable in that it signified Mengistu's growing problems with his primary patrons within the rapidly changing Eastern bloc. In addition to the withdrawal from Ethiopia of Cuban troops and East German advisors, the Soviet Union informed Mengistu that the Soviet-Ethiopian military agreement would not be renewed after 1990. As a result, the Ethiopian government began looking, once again, to forge closer ties with the United States. "We realize a superpower is a superpower," explained Foreign Minister Tessfaye Dinka, "and there is no conflict of interest with the U.S."27

As far as Washington was concerned, however, several factors restrained the extension of a warm reception to Ethiopian diplomatic overtures at the end of October 1990, resulting in a "wait-and-see" attitude that strengthened the continuation of the established bureaucratic status quo. First, several conservative members of Congress continued to oppose any opening to Ethiopia because of the Marxist orientation of the Mengistu regime. Then, after Mengistu's March 5, 1990, announcement that his regime was abandoning its commitment to Marxism, congressional critics discounted the move as the superficial ploy of an increasingly threatened leader.

Even if it had been possible to overcome this ideological opposition, such as was the case in the Reagan administration's willingness to work with the self-proclaimed Marxist regime of Mozambique, the issue of Ethiopia's internal civil wars—most notably in Eritrea—remained an important stumbling block.

25. For a good analysis of Israel's role in the Horn, see Lefebvre, Arms for the Horn, pp. 42–3, 133, 161–3, 261, 263. See also, Victor Levine, "The African-Israeli Connection 40 Years Later," Middle East Review 21 (Fall 1988); and Mitchell Bard, "The Evolution of Israel's Africa Policy," Middle East Review 21 (Winter 1988/89).
Although willing to make minor concessions, such as accepting Eritrea’s long-standing demand that UN observers be present at the negotiating table, the Mengistu regime nonetheless was unwilling to budge on the matter of Eritrean independence. As a result, negotiations with the Eritreans, especially in the aftermath of renewed military cooperation with Israel, broke down in favor of both sides continuing to seek a military solution. As long as Mengistu refused to seek some sort of negotiated settlement designed to bring a just peace to Ethiopia, even US proponents of responding to Ethiopia’s diplomatic initiatives, such as the House Subcommittee on Africa, continued to underscore the necessity for restraint.

A final concern of critics centered on what was perceived as Mengistu’s blatant manipulation of Falasha desires to emigrate in order to obtain greater levels of money and military weaponry from Israel. A coincidence of interests in both Tel Aviv and Addis Ababa toward preventing Eritrean independence, however, ensured that Israel was far from being a hapless victim of the Mengistu regime. For example, the House Subcommittee on Africa expressed concern that Israel illegally had transferred 100 US-supplied cluster bombs to Ethiopia as part of a secret deal to ensure the continued flow of Jewish refugees.28 More important, influential members sympathetic to the repatriation effort denounced the sporadic halting of an already tenuous process, which was handling about 500 refugees a month. As underscored by Representative Wolpe, it was obvious that Mengistu was using the Falashas as “pawns” to replace stocks of weaponry that the Soviet Union would no longer supply.29

AN ALTERED COLD WAR ENVIRONMENT

A new chapter in the international relations of the Horn of Africa began unfolding at the beginning of 1991: First the Siad and, subsequently, the Mengistu regimes were overthrown by guerrilla insurgencies, followed by the secession of northern Somalia and the creation of a provisional government in Eritrea pending a national referendum on independence. These tumultuous events began on January 26, 1991, when Siad fled to his birthplace of Garba Harre as victorious elements of the USC guerrilla army captured the capital. The entry of the USC followed nearly four weeks of increasingly brutal urban warfare in Mogadishu, in which a total breakdown of law and order resulted in the deaths of thousands of people.30

The departure of the Siad regime, however, did not mean the end of conflict in the country. Rather than abide by an October 2, 1990, accord in which the major guerrilla groups agreed to decide the shape of a post-Siad political system,

29. Quoted in ibid.
the USC, by virtue of its control of the capital, unilaterally named a Hawiye, Ali Mahdi Muhammad, president of the country. This move heightened the already tense relations between the Isaak-dominated SNM, the Hawiye-dominated USC, and the Ogadeni-dominated SPM, as well as among scores of other, less organized clan groupings.

In a move based on a strongly held Isaak belief that the north would continue to be victimized by a southern-dominated government, the SNM announced on May 17, 1991, that the former British Somaliland territory was seceding from the 1960 union and henceforth would be known as the Somaliland Republic. This announcement was followed by the intensification of clan conflict in the southern portion of the country between the USC and the SPM, which, in turn, was exacerbated by a regrouping of Siad's Daroud clan groupings under the military banner of the Somali National Front (SNF). In short, once the common political enemy no longer existed, traditional clan differences, exacerbated by the dictatorial divide-and-conquer practices of the Siad years, made any hope of national reconciliation highly unlikely.

Somalia: The US Response

The intensifying civil war prior to the departure of the Siad regime from power had the potential of becoming a crisis situation at the highest levels of the US policymaking establishment, especially after US ambassador James K. Bishop sent an urgent cable on January 3, 1991, warning that the lives of embassy personnel were being threatened by armed looters surrounding the 40-acre compound. (All non-essential personnel had been ordered out of the country on December 12, 1990.) Hastily moving up an evacuation planned for 5 January, two rescue helicopters and 70 Marines were dispatched from the USS Trenton, a warship stationed in the Indian Ocean as part of Operation Desert Storm in the 1991 war against Iraq. In a 460-mile flight that twice required mid-air refueling in the middle of the night, the Marine detachment took up positions at the US embassy and airlifted 62 people out of the country on 4 January. The following day, nearly 200 more people were evacuated by five helicopters launched from the USS Guam. At the end of the operation, nearly 260 people from 30 countries had been airlifted.31 US officials were quick to note, however, that the operation constituted a humanitarian rescue mission and that, under no circumstances, were US troops to become involved in fighting between government forces and the guerrilla opposition.32

Despite the fact that President Bush had to authorize the humanitarian rescue mission, the decline of Cold War tensions ensured that the escalating civil war

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31. French helicopters took part in another rescue mission in which 47 people were evacuated from the town of Merca and transferred to a French frigate.

never constituted a crisis situation with the potential of attracting the ongoing attention of the White House.33 Unlike the 1970s and the 1980s, when the region had become an East-West flashpoint—such as during the 1977–78 Ogaden War, in which the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt supported Somalia, and the Soviet Union and Cuba supported Ethiopia—the Soviet Union was pursuing a policy of disengagement that underscored the importance of superpower cooperation in settling the various conflicts in the region. In addition to ongoing discussions, primarily at the level of the assistant secretary of state for African affairs and its counterpart in Moscow, a significant example of how superpower cooperation was replacing superpower conflict in a rapidly developing post-Cold War era was the evacuation of the Soviet ambassador and 35 members of his staff by the aforementioned US rescue mission. As aptly summarized by one US official, superpower competition had become a “thing of the past” in the Horn of Africa.34

The net result of White House inattention was the delegation of policy toward the Horn to the Africa specialists in the national security bureaucracies, particularly the Department of State’s Africa bureau. Severely constrained by ongoing congressional displeasure with the human rights abuses of the Siad regime, the bureau basically presided over a reactive policy that emphasized the internal roots of the conflict and the need for national reconciliation through peaceful means. This stance was reinforced by the simple reality that the guerrilla groups opposed to the Siad regime professed strong desires to maintain and, in fact, enhance Somalia’s relationship with the United States should they emerge victorious. “In short,” explained a former member of the Department of State’s Africa bureau, “a kind of ‘win-win’ situation prevailed in which risk-averse bureaucrats could count on maintaining US influence regardless of whether the Somali government or the guerrilla opposition emerged victorious.”35

A decline in the perceived need for military access to Somalia in the wake of decreased Cold War tensions constituted another important reason for the less-than-enthusiastic bureaucratic arguments for shoring up the Siad regime. In an interesting conclusion to a long-simmering policy debate over Somalia’s strategic importance to the United States—which began in the mid-1970s and heated up following the Carter administration’s decision during the late 1970s to seek a security relationship with the Siad regime (a process that was only halfheartedly implemented by the Reagan administration)—the US naval facility at Berbera turned out to be completely unnecessary for the massive deployment

33. For a discussion of this theme, see Maina Kiai, “‘Perestroika’s Impact on U.S. Policy toward Somalia,’” *TransAfrica Forum* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1990).


of US troops and matériel associated with Operation Desert Storm.\(^{36}\) Indeed, although at first glance Somalia’s strategic location—the cornerstone of globalist-inspired arguments seeking close US-Somali security ties—made it a potentially important player in what in 1991 constituted the largest US military operation abroad in the post-Vietnam era, the Berbera base was simply stripped of its fuel stocks and left dormant by military planners of Operation Desert Storm. This turn of events seemed to validate the position of critics who asserted throughout the 1980s that, even if one accepts globalist rationales for ensuring US military access to the region, the Somali bases were unnecessary in light of other, more extensive, facilities readily available in the region.\(^{37}\)

The changing fortunes of the Siad regime within the national security bureaucracies was perhaps best demonstrated by growing criticism within the Department of Defense, one of the staunchest proponents during the 1988 SNM guerrilla offensive of sending a strong signal of support to the Somali government. For example, Colonel Alfred F. Girardi, a retired military attaché, who served at the US embassy in Mogadishu from 1987 to 1989, argued in congressional hearings against any further aid to the Siad regime on the basis that the Somali armed forces were “poorly motivated” and “poorly led by inept officers.”\(^{38}\) This increasingly poor perception of the Somali military was matched by a growing respect in some quarters for the military successes and the pro-Western leanings of guerrilla leaders, such as Omar Jess, the renegade military leader of SPM. According to another military attaché who served in Somalia, the desire of the guerrilla leadership to ensure a continued favorable relationship with the United States was clearly displayed by an unwritten agreement with the SNM that neither Berbera nor US military personnel would ever serve as the targets of guerrilla attacks.\(^{39}\) Such arguments notwithstanding, few, if any, career officers within the Department of Defense foresaw an end to the internal fighting in Somalia that could lead to a beneficial US relationship with any future government. As Colonel Girardi presciently warned in 1989, the most likely outcome of a post-Siad Somalia was continued “turmoil and instability” as opposing clan factions vied for control.\(^{40}\)

In September 1991, a third round of fighting broke out in the southern portion of the country. Unlike the first round (to overthrow Siad) and the second round (inter-clan fighting) of the Somali civil war, this third round of fighting was between warring factions of the Hawiye-based USC guerrilla army. Specifically, a brutal intra-clan power struggle erupted between forces loyal to interim

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36. For a discussion of the evolution of the policy debate over Somalia’s strategic importance, see Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn*, pp. 175–264.


President Mahdi, a member of the Abgal subclan of the Hawiye, and those led by General Mohamed Farah Aidid, a member of the Habar Gedir subclan of the Hawiye. Despite the efforts of outside mediators and, particularly, UN undersecretary-general James Jonah to establish a series of cease-fires, the fighting as of February 1992 continued unabated and had resulted in more than 30,000 (mostly civilian) casualties in the Mogadishu region. Although a UN-sponsored truce of March 3, 1992, remained partially implemented as of August 1992, security problems were rampant, primarily because of actions by the militias of small clans who did not take part in the agreement, as well as a thriving arms market in which even private merchants hired personal militia squads. These problems were indicative of the disintegration of the Somali state and the subsequent de facto control of local areas by a variety of clan-based politico-military movements.41

Whose Responsibility?

A growing debate in the US administration over who should assume primary responsibility for resolving Somalia’s ongoing civil conflicts demonstrated the country’s decreased fortunes within the national security bureaucracies in a rapidly changing post-Cold War international system. Several members of Congress who from the beginning of the 1980s had never desired to pursue a security relationship with the Siad regime decried the administration’s unwillingness to take a more proactive stance. “It is a clear failure of American policy, and we should bear some responsibility,” explained Representative Wolpe. “Now what you are seeing is a general indifference to a disaster that we played a role in creating.”42 In sharp contrast, career officials within the national security bureaucracies placed the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the Siad regime and the former European colonial powers. “You know, it’s easy to blame us for all this,” explained one policymaker, “but it’s also a situation where you have another African leader who just wasted a tremendous opportunity. . . . They have chosen to spend the [aid] that way, to hurt people and destroy their own economy, and now they are reaping the consequences.”43 An important element of this argument, which intensified in the aftermath of Siad’s departure from office, was that Britain and, especially, Italy, should take the lead in their former colonial territories.

The growing tendency of official US policy to follow the lead of the former European colonial powers was demonstrated by Washington’s response to the secession of northern Somalia as the independent Somaliland Republic. The

Department of State, as underscored by the sending of an official US observer to "national reconciliation" talks held in Djibouti during 1991, favored the diplomatic resolution of conflict between northern and southern Somalia in order to preserve the Republic of Somalia as originally constituted in 1960. In this regard, Department of State officials carefully avoided statements that went beyond the desires of either Britain or Italy, the two countries taking the lead in seeking an end to clan fighting. Indeed, since neither European country had recognized the independence claims of the Somaliland Republic, Department of State officials continued to emphasize during the first half of 1992 that they were seeking first to normalize relations with a government of national unity that ideally would come to power in Mogadishu. "We'll deal with a legally constituted government in Mogadishu first because this is what the Europeans and especially Italy wants," explained one official associated with the Africa bureau. "The most likely scenario in which we would recognize northern independence," this official continued, "is if both the north and the south extend mutual recognition of the internal legitimacy of both governments, and this decision is diplomatically recognized by both Italy and Great Britain."44

The extent to which the national security bureaucracies sought to avoid taking the lead in Somalia was clearly demonstrated by the US response to the intensification of clan conflict in southern Somalia during the first half of 1992. In addition to following the lead of both Britain and Italy, US officials strongly endorsed the growing efforts of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to make the United Nations the cornerstone of future reconciliation efforts in Somalia. In a move sharply criticized by African nations, however, the US representative at the United Nations endorsed a Security Council resolution on the civil war only after language specifically calling for a new UN-sponsored peacekeeping mission had been removed. Although a Department of State official claimed that congressional concerns over "dramatically rising costs" associated with peacekeeping operations throughout the world was a major factor in the US position, Africans accused the United States of adopting a double standard concerning Africa.45 Specifically, noting decisive US support for a UN peacekeeping mission in war-torn Yugoslavia, Ike Nwachukwu, Nigeria's foreign minister and chairman as of 1992 of the OAU, declared that "Africa must receive the same qualitative and quantitative attention paid to other regions."46

**Ethiopia: The US Response**

In sharp contrast to the largely reactive US response to events in Somalia, policymakers adopted a much more proactive approach to resolving Ethiopia’s civil war. When guerrilla advances during the first four months of 1991 made it increasingly clear that Mengistu’s days were numbered, the United States intensified its involvement in negotiations between the Ethiopian government and the guerrilla opposition by sending a high-level delegation to Addis Ababa that included Irving Hicks, deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs, Robert C. Frasure, a member of the National Security Council, and Rudy Boschwitz, a former Republican senator from Minnesota who acted as President Bush’s personal envoy. In addition to meeting with Mengistu, both Hicks and Frasure traveled to Khartoum to meet with Isaias Afwerki, leader of the EPLF, and Meles Zenawi, the head of the TPLF. The level of US involvement in these negotiations intensified when, in the aftermath of Mengistu’s departure from power on May 21, 1991, Assistant Secretary of State Cohen flew to London to mediate personally between the guerrilla factions and a rapidly collapsing Ethiopian government led by Mengistu’s vice president, Lieutenant General Tesfaye Gebre-Kidan.

The net result of US involvement was a significant contribution to a transfer of power, which largely avoided the bloodshed and clan conflict still evident in Somalia more than a year after Siad’s departure from power. As part of an agreement that received the personal blessing of the United States in the form of a public announcement by Cohen on 28 May, the TPLF took control of Addis Ababa and began putting together a broad coalition government that largely was in place by the beginning of July. The most critical element of the May agreement, however—which ultimately led to rioting in Addis Ababa—was US support for a UN-supervised referendum in Eritrea within a period of roughly two years to determine if the people of the territory desired independence. The US decision to support regional self-determination through the ballot box—fully cognizant of the fact that the outcome most assuredly would be an independent Eritrea—represented a significant change in US foreign policy. Rather than giving unquestioned support for the territorial integrity of the Ethiopian empire as had been the case from the 1950s to the 1980s, the United States became associated with a policy that seemingly was calling into question the hallowed OAU concept of the inviolability of frontiers. Regardless of the referendum’s outcome, the Africa bureau made it clear that further US involvement and, most important, the establishment of a foreign aid relationship that went beyond humanitarian relief, was dependent on the establishment of some type of legitimate democracy in

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Ethiopia. As succinctly summarized by Cohen: "No democracy, no cooperation."48

Several factors accounted for the extremely activist US responses that periodically engaged the highest levels of the policymaking establishment, including President Bush, despite the fact that Washington never perceived events in Ethiopia as constituting a crisis situation in the Cold War mold. First, both the Mengistu government and the guerrilla opposition favored a greater role for Washington as a mediator between their conflicting claims. For example, in an effort to demonstrate its willingness to seek some sort of compromise position, the Mengistu government announced on November 14, 1990, that it was willing to revive previously stalled peace talks, subsequently agreeing on 18 December that the guerrilla-held port of Massawa could be used to transport UN relief supplies. "I was very pleased in my discussions with the foreign minister [Dinka] and the president [Mengistu] to learn that there is a continuing commitment to the peace process," explained an appreciative Cohen.49 This cooperative spirit continued even as the Mengistu government was confronted with growing numbers of military defeats on the battlefield. As noted by a senior member of the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry less than two weeks prior to Mengistu's departure from power, "There's a big role the United States can play to mold our peace process and even our future political system."50

Positive signals from the Ethiopian government coincided with rising pressures within the national security bureaucracies, particularly the Department of State's Africa bureau, to pay greater attention to events in Ethiopia.51 Despite the reluctant recognition of Somalia by US policymakers as Washington's closest ally in the Horn of Africa during the 1980s, Ethiopia consistently retained a core number of supporters who continued to look upon this "lost ally" as the prize piece for a rational foreign policy beyond the Mengistu years. The Department of State's courtship of Ethiopia as an important player in what became the UN-supported military invasion of Iraq in 1991 offers a simple, yet telling example of why this was so even during the final months of the Mengistu regime. In addition to noting Ethiopia's UN membership and seat on the Security Council, its Christian heritage, and its shared Red Sea coastline with Saudi Arabia—all variations of historical rationales for seeking closer relations—Department of

State officials desirous of enhancing growing US-Ethiopian ties especially touted Addis Ababa’s quick support of US-sponsored resolutions against Iraq.52

An equally important reason for the Africa bureau’s active lobbying for greater US attention to Ethiopia was a desire to avoid duplicating the policy disasters that had occurred in Liberia and Somalia. In both cases, US-supported leaders were driven from power by coalitions of guerrilla forces which, after achieving initial victories, presided over the escalation of ethnically or clan-based violence. Having ‘‘learned’’ that policies of inaction potentially entail far greater costs than initially may have been apparent, career diplomats argued for a more proactive policy stance that would avoid yet another disaster in Africa. ‘‘We want to see law and order,’’ explained a senior US diplomat stationed at the US embassy in Addis Ababa during 1991. ‘‘What we want to do is facilitate a soft landing and prevent the kind of bloodshed that has affected Liberia and Somalia.’’53

Implications of the End of the Cold War

The decline of Cold War competition in the Horn of Africa was an important element in the calculations of Ethiopian and US officials. As far as several segments of the policymaking establishment were concerned, the hardline Marxist positions of both the Mengistu regime and the guerrilla opposition made support for either side highly unlikely during the 1980s. The decisions of both sides to modify their attachment to Marxism in the face of Soviet retrenchment at the end of the 1980s, however, suddenly removed a major obstacle to the reestablishment of closer ties with Washington. ‘‘If this had happened five years ago, we wouldn’t have been involved because in the Cold War, it would have been hard to work with the Marxists,’’ explained Cohen. ‘‘Even two years ago,’’ he continued, ‘‘it was hard for me to work with SWAPO [South West African People’s Organization],’’ a reference to the difficulties of dealing with the guerrilla organization that maintained a strong attachment to Marxism prior to taking power in Namibia. ‘‘The big difference now,’’ he concluded, ‘‘is that people talk about Marxism and people laugh.’’54

The end of the Cold War was also an important reason for the new US position concerning the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. During the height of the Cold War era, when unimpeded access to the Kagne new telecommunications station and other intelligence and military installations in Eritrea guided US foreign policy toward Ethiopia, support within the national security bureaucracies for the

territorial status quo remained virtually unquestioned. It was greatly feared that an independent Eritrea would terminate access to what at the time was considered to be one of the most valuable US telecommunications centers in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Even after Kagnew ceased to be important during the mid-1970s, as the result of advances in satellite technology and the development of the US base at Diego Garcia, a variety of Cold War-inspired political rationales, such as Selassie’s staunch anticommunist credentials, moved to the forefront of a foreign policy stance that still underscored the necessity of ensuring the territorial integrity of Ethiopia.

With the decline of the Cold War, however, the bureaucratic justifications for Ethiopia’s territorial integrity no longer rang true. Although portions of the national security bureaucracies, particularly the CIA and the Department of Defense, argued that an independent Eritrea would be financially insolvent and, thus, susceptible to “radical” foreign powers (such as Libya), the Africa bureau successfully argued for a policy that supported the pursuit of self-determination through legal means—especially when one took into account that the EPLF, which had been fighting for Eritrean independence for nearly 30 years, militarily controlled the entire region, and that the TPLF, although in favor of maintaining the territorial integrity of the country, was willing to recognize Eritrean independence if a majority of the population truly desired that.

An equally important aspect of the proactive US response to events in Ethiopia was the periodic consideration of the area at the highest levels of the US policymaking establishment, including President Bush and his most trusted foreign policy advisers: Secretary of State Baker and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft. The involvement of the White House, however, was not the result of the perception of a crisis in the Horn of Africa that required ongoing, high-level attention. Indeed, the demise of the Cold War—combined with the pressing issues associated with the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, the decline of communism, and the fragmentation of the former Soviet Union—favored White House delegation of the proper US policy response to the Africa specialists within the national security bureaucracies. White House involvement, instead, resulted from practical domestic political considerations associated with humanitarian relief efforts and the emigration of the Falashas.

The need to create an orderly transfer of power in Ethiopia captured the attention of the White House, particularly Scowcroft, when it became clear that a humanitarian disaster on a par with the 1983–85 famine was in the making. Already faced with a growing domestic uproar over the plight of Iraq’s Kurdish population—a group for whom no domestic constituency existed—the White House sought to avoid the domestic outcry that accompanied the Reagan administration’s slow response to the conditions contributing to the 1983–85 famine. An integral aspect of this approach was a political calculation that domestic demands for greater levels of US humanitarian aid to Ethiopia, already annually topping $150 million since 1984, would multiply dramatically in the event
of ongoing civil war and bloodshed similar to Liberia’s or Somalia’s in a post-Mengistu era.55 "There are no geopolitical stakes in Ethiopia or the Horn of Africa anymore," explained one Department of State official involved in the policymaking process. "Our mission is to try to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe."56

Perhaps a more important reason for a direct White House role in the policymaking process was the delicate political issue surrounding the emigration of Ethiopia’s Falashas, approximately 14,000 of whom found themselves stranded in Addis Ababa while awaiting departure for Israel. The White House began paying greater attention to this issue not only because of ongoing congressional concerns with the Mengistu regime’s practice of trading visas for arms, but also due to a private appeal to President Bush from Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir. Desirous of avoiding the political fallout that could have accompanied any deterioration of the personal safety of the Falashas stranded in Addis Ababa, President Bush dispatched Senator Boschwitz as his personal envoy and, in the aftermath of Mengistu’s departure from power, sent a letter to acting president Tesfaye asking that the group be allowed to emigrate. The highly dramatic and publicized outcome of this and other appeals was a two-day airlift on May 24–25, 1991, dubbed Operation Solomon, in which more than 14,000 Falashas were flown to Israel in exchange for $35 million in “exit” fees.57

CONCLUSION

The evolution of US foreign policy toward Ethiopia and Somalia from 1988 to 1990 demonstrates the type of bureaucratic-congressional stand-off that can result from low-level African conflicts that are severe enough to cause internal debate within the policymaking establishment, but not important enough to warrant the attention of the president and his closest advisors. In the case of Somalia, the fashioning of a correct policy response to the intensification of the Somali civil war was left to the Africa specialists within the national security bureaucracies. As a result, the Department of Defense initially resupplied the Somali military in accordance with established bureaucratic routines. Yet, the 1988 crisis also attracted the attention of a small, but highly vocal group within Congress that consistently sought to limit US involvement with what it perceived as a corrupt and illegitimate regime.

Although unable to rupture completely US ties with the Siad regime, the House Subcommittee on Africa, nonetheless, was successful in forcing the Department of State to declare a voluntary hold on US military aid. This outcome was significant in that it was not the result of a highly attentive and motivated Congress overturning a strongly supported White House policy. Indeed, if the White House had chosen to make an issue of Somalia and double the levels of military aid, it is highly doubtful that Congress would have been able to muster the number of votes necessary to defeat such a policy. Rather, the hold on military aid indicated the unwillingness of both the White House and the Department of State to expend valuable political capital on a regime that had become only marginally important to US interests in Africa.

The evolution of US foreign policy toward Ethiopia during 1988–1990 similarly was marked by a congressional-executive deadlock that essentially resulted in the continuation of status quo policies. Despite small, albeit growing, pressures within the national security bureaucracies to seek a renewal of links with what constituted a historical US client in Africa, any such openings were thwarted by a small group of congresspersons concerned with Ethiopia’s intensifying civil war and gross human rights abuses. An irony of this congressional attention was that it was sparked by the periodic famines in Ethiopia, particularly the 1983–85 disaster that resulted in one of the greatest outpourings of US popular support for a humanitarian relief program. Similar to the case of Somalia, it is highly doubtful that Congress could have mustered the requisite number of votes to derail an executive branch initiative if that initiative had been strongly supported by the White House. Yet, in the absence of some sort of crisis situation capable of attracting the extended attention of the White House, US foreign policy toward Ethiopia continued to evolve slowly within the bureaucratic and congressional confines of the established status quo.

As it became increasingly clear during 1991 and 1992 that the Cold War for all practical purposes had come to an end, events within the Horn of Africa provided the backdrop for a significant change in US foreign policy toward the region. In less than six months, pressures within the national security bureaucracies and Congress for a closer relationship with Ethiopia, Washington’s historic ally in the Horn, were realized as a result of the overthrow of the Mengistu regime. The renewal of these ties was accompanied by a significantly altered official stance that supported Eritrean independence if the people of that region chose that option in a legal referendum scheduled to be held sometime in 1993. Similarly, growing pressures to downgrade security ties with Somalia, a country historically distrusted and disfavored within the national security bureaucracies, reached their apogée with the overthrow of the Siad regime. Similar to a position advanced prior to 1974, when Ethiopia constituted the closest US ally in the Horn of Africa, the national security bureaucracies at the beginning of the 1990s increasingly portrayed Somalia and its internal clan conflicts—most noted by the secession of the
north—as the responsibility of the former European colonial powers and the international community, particularly the United Nations.

The most notable aspect of the unfolding political upheavals in the Horn of Africa at the beginning of the 1990s is that these upheavals did not create a crisis atmosphere at the highest levels of the policymaking establishment as would have been the case 10, or even 5, years earlier. Rather, the end of the Cold War had relegated policy to the Africa specialists within the national security bureaucracies unless events touched upon a politically sensitive domestic nerve, such as was the case when the White House concerned itself with the fate of Ethiopia’s Falashas. Most important, the termination of a host of Cold War-driven bureaucratic missions no longer required policies that once led Washington to disregard the internal nature of either regime in favor of that country’s role within a global East-West framework.