The Clinton Administration and Africa

The Beginnings of New Directions

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United States (US) foreign policy towards Africa during the Clinton administration's second year in office was significantly affected by three events: the emergence of genocide in Rwanda in April 1994; the holding of a historic White House conference on Africa in June 1994; and a Republican party victory in the legislative elections of November 1994. Together these three events embodied the emergence of new directions in US foreign policy towards Africa. The most important outcome was the emergence of a trade-oriented approach to the African continent. This newfound focus on the economic dimensions of US-African relations clearly signalled the end of ideologically inspired Cold War policies that were largely dependent on Washington's willingness to provide generous levels of foreign assistance.

THREE HISTORIC TURNING POINTS

Three historic turning points signalled the beginning of a shift in US foreign policy during the second year of the Clinton administration. In the aftermath of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana's death in a plane crash in April 1994, extremists among the Hutu ethnic group unleashed a reign of terror against the Tutsi minority (as well as against Hutu deemed sympathetic to the plight of the Tutsi) that resulted in the execution of hundreds of thousands of unarmed civilians. Fearful of becoming involved in a drawn-out civil war, the Clinton administration not only initially blocked the dispatch of 5,500 troops requested by United Nations (UN) Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, but also instructed administration spokespersons to avoid labelling the unfolding ethnic conflict as 'genocide', lest such a label further inflame American public sympathy and demand American intervention, or trigger international obligations under treaties dealing with genocide and its prevention. This response represented a sharp departure from early Clinton administration rhetoric that envisioned a significant expansion of US efforts in multilateral peacekeeping through the creation of a UN rapid deployment force.

The Clinton administration's response to genocide in Rwanda was sharply influenced by the series of US-led military interventions in Somalia under the auspices of the UN that are referred to as Operation Restore Hope. Senior Clinton administration policy makers had been deeply affected by the events of 3-4 October 1993, when 18 US soldiers were killed and 78 others were wounded in a fierce battle in Mogadishu. With the Cable News Network (CNN) providing almost instantaneous transmission to audiences in the US and abroad, the victorious Somali forces not only paraded a captured American helicopter pilot through the streets of Mogadishu, but also dragged the naked corpse of an American soldier past mobs of Somali citizens who vented their anger by spitting on, stoming and kicking the body. These dual media images triggered a firestorm of public debate that ultimately forced President Clinton to withdraw US forces from Somalia.

The lessons learned from the Clinton administration's 'debacle' in Somalia served as the cornerstone of a May 1994 policy directive, Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD-25), which outlined severely constrained conditions that had to be met before the US would agree to any further UN-sponsored military operations regardless of
THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION AND AFRICA

whether American troops took part. Among the most important conditions relevant to America's experience in Somalia were a 'realistic exit strategy' and the 'consent of the [warring] parties' before any forces are deployed.\(^3\) The simple message of PDD-25 was that the US 'cannot resolve the conflicts of the world, but does not believe that the United Nations is capable of making and keeping peace, particularly when hostilities among parties still exist.'\(^4\)

The most important result of PDD-25, which in essence rejected any future American involvement in UN-sponsored peacemaking operations designed to militarily impose peace among warring parties, was an overly cautious approach to ethnically and religiously based conflicts in Africa. Entering office at a period in which internal civil conflicts were multiplying throughout Africa, the Clinton administration was expected to formulate and adopt a comprehensive policy of conflict resolution that went beyond the sporadic policies of previous administrations. However, the newly elected Clinton administration was split between two currents of thinking. The first emphasized the classic belief that African issues unnecessarily distract the administration and potentially plunge the White House into unwanted domestic political controversies. According to this viewpoint, American involvement (even in terms of conflict resolution) should be restricted to avoid entanglement in 'future Somalias'.\(^5\)

A second, more activist approach to conflict resolution was also derivative of the Somali experience, but underscored that the massive costs associated with Operation Restore Hope could have been avoided by earlier, preventive action. 'The choice is not between intervening or not intervening', explained one policy maker in the incoming Clinton administration. 'It is between getting involved early and doing it at a cheaper cost, or being forced to intervene in a massive, more costly way later.'\(^6\)

As witnessed by the Clinton administration's cautious approach to the initial stages of the Rwandan conflict, the events of October 1993 in Somalia clearly strengthened the position of those warning against getting too closely involved in 'intractable' conflicts in Africa.

A second historic turning point with implications for the evolution of US foreign policy towards Africa was the White House Conference on Africa in June 1994 that brought together over 200 high-ranking administration officials and a variety of governmental and non-governmental representatives involved in African affairs. For the first time in US history, Africanists held the attention of and were greeted by the speeches of the highest-ranking members of the foreign policy establishment, including National Security Adviser Tony Lake, Vice President Al Gore and President Bill Clinton. In addition to capturing the attention of those responsible for formulating policy, an important underlying purpose of the conference was to forge a consensus among a growing and increasingly vocal African affairs constituency over the proper guidelines for US Africa policies in the post-Cold War era. 'For decades we viewed Africa through a Cold War prism and through the fight against apartheid', explained President Clinton. 'We often, I think, cured in past years more about how African nations voted in the United Nations than whether their own people had the right to vote... But now the prism through which we viewed Africa has been shattered', he continued. 'In the post-Cold War and post-apartheid world, our guideposis have disappeared ... we need a new policy'.\(^7\) Perhaps the most poignant characterization of the Clinton administration's break with the past was offered by Vice President Gore at the 1994 conference: 'Decades from now, when we look back on what we will [have] accomplished, let it be said that this was the generation that helped Africa achieve the peace and prosperity that has eluded it for so long.'\(^8\)

The foreign policy pronouncements of the Clinton administration are not unlike
those of their Democratic Party predecessors who also sought to underscore their 'fresh thinking' when it came to Africa. For example, President Jimmy Carter entered office on the campaign pledge of transcending his predecessors' preoccupations with anti-communism and containment of the former Soviet Union in favor of more positive goals, such as promoting human rights and basic human needs in the Third World. Reminiscent of the vision advanced by the New Frontiersmen during the Kennedy administration, this so-called 'regionalist' worldview recognized the potent force of African nationalism and the need to focus on the internal as well as the external dimensions of conflict on the African continent. In rhetoric that would resonate just as strongly with Africanists during the 1990s as it did during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Senator (and later President) John F. Kennedy derided what he perceived as Washington's inability to come to grips with the rising tide of African nationalism, and underscored the necessity of embarking on a 'bold and imaginative new programme for the development of Africa.'

Both the Kennedy and Carter administrations increasingly found themselves criticized by Africanists who argued that eloquent 'rhetoric' of change did not match the 'reality' of significant continuity with their Republican Party predecessors. During the Kennedy administration, Africanists sharply criticized the chasm between President Kennedy's denunciation of European colonialism and the keeping of close US military links with Portugal in order to maintain US access to the highly valued Portuguese-controlled bases in the Azores. Africanists also criticized the growing chasm between President Carter's human rights rhetoric concerning the need to weaken ties with authoritarian dictatorships and the reality of the continued close relationship with the Zairian regime of Mobutu Sese Seko. In both cases, the initial appointment of foreign policy teams that, in turn, were more vocal about the need for more enlightened US Africa policies, raised unfulfilled expectations among Africanists, and therefore led to rising criticisms among groups previously presumed to be each administration's closest allies.

Less than two years into its ruling mandate, the Clinton administration increasingly found its Africa policies criticized as being long on rhetoric and short on substance. One of the harshest critiques was offered at the beginning of the White House Conference on Africa by Representative Donald Payne, a New Jersey Democrat and foreign policy spokesperson for the Congressional Black Caucus. Payne claimed that no US administration, including that of President Clinton, had ever focused on Africa, and that US foreign policy toward Africa was in disarray. Although Payne's remarks were no doubt tinged with extreme displeasure with White House handling of conference preparations (many members of the Congressional Black Caucus were invited only days before the conference was scheduled to begin), they nonetheless captured a growing impression among many Africanists that the Clinton administration was following in the footsteps of its Democratic predecessors, and that rhetoric of change increasingly was laid bare by the reality of strong continuity with past policies. The most vocal critics of administration policies dismissed the conference as a poorly and hastily planned public relations exercise indicative of the Clinton administration's lack of true interest in Africa.

A third historic turning point with implications for the evolution of US foreign policy towards Africa was the Democratic Party's defeat in the November 1994 congressional elections that led to Republican Party control over both the House of Representatives and the Senate for the first time in decades. Throughout 1995 and 1996, a Democratic White House had to deal with an increasingly hostile, Republican-controlled Congress that was at odds with many aspects of White House foreign policy, including that directed towards Africa. On a number of occasions, this has led both branches of government to treat foreign policy issues in a partisan manner.
THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION AND AFRICA

manner and to seek to exploit differences over foreign policy for domestic political advantage', explained Daniel P. Volman, a specialist on the congressional role in US foreign policy towards Africa. 'One example of this that has particular importance for US relations with Africa is Republican legislators' use of public concern about the role of the United States in the United Nations ... to bolster their demands for cuts in US financial support for the international body and for the curtailment of UN peacekeeping activities in Africa and other parts of the world'.

An interesting convergence of White House and congressional interests nonetheless has emerged as concerns one aspect of US policies: the previous use of foreign aid as the pre-eminent tool of US foreign policy towards Africa. The traditional predilection of conservative Republicans to oppose foreign aid, combined with Africa's low priority compared to other regions of greater perceived interest at the level of the White House, has reinforced a post-Cold War trend of reducing US foreign aid commitments to Africa. According to one estimate, US aid to Africa (inclusive of development assistance, economic support funds, food aid and foreign disaster relief) decreased from a peak level of $1.93bn in 1992 to $1.24bn in 1996—a 36% decrease in overall aid. In short, although the Republican-dominated Congress has expressed support for the Clinton administration's rhetorical flourish in favour of greater US involvement on the African continent, both the White House and the US Congress have demonstrated a 'conspicuous unwillingness to provide the money' that would be needed for such an approach.

RISING CENTRALITY OF TRADE IN US AFRICA POLICIES

An important development related to declining levels of US foreign aid for Africa has been the emergence and strengthening of trade and investment as the preferred tools of US foreign economic policy. To its credit, the Clinton administration in 1996 unveiled the first formal, comprehensive trade policy for aggressively pursuing new markets throughout Africa. It included the formal launching of an interagency Africa Trade and Development Coordinating Group, which was jointly chaired by the National Economic Council (NEC) and the National Security Council (NSC). The centrepiece of this economic strategy was congressional legislation—the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act—designed to enhance US-African trade that was first introduced in 1996.

The formal announcement of the Clinton administration's trade policy was preceded by a series of highly publicized speeches rejecting Washington's past support for Europe's privileged economic role in its former colonies in favour of a more aggressive approach to promoting US trade and investment. 'The African market is open to everyone', explained former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen in a 1995 speech in Libreville, Gabon. 'We must accept free and fair competition, equality between all actors.' Towards this end, senior administration officials increasingly agree that foreign policy should serve as the facilitator of US private enterprise throughout Africa. According to what is often referred to as the 'big emerging markets' strategy, regional economic leaders—most notably South Africa in southern Africa and Nigeria in West Africa—are to be courted by US policy makers and private business.

An important outgrowth of the Clinton administration's aggressive trade policy is the intensification of economic competition between the US and the other northern industrialized democracies in their search for economic influence and markets throughout Africa. This economic competition has become especially pronounced in US-French relations, most notably in the lucrative petroleum, telecommunications and transport industries in Francophone Africa. In the eyes of French policy makers, the penetration of American and other Western companies constitute 'at best an
THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION AND AFRICA

intrusion' and 'at worst an aggression' into France's perceived domaine réservé (privileged realm) throughout Francophone Africa. All foreign observers agree, however, that southern Africa constitutes the richest future African market. It is precisely for this reason that the US, France and the other great powers increasingly focused their economic sights on southern Africa beginning in the 1990s.

An important aspect of the burgeoning US trade policy in southern Africa is the willingness of the US ambassador to serve as an advocate for US business. In the case of Botswana, former US Ambassador Howard F. Jester was recognized as a very effective advocate of the Clinton administration's trade priorities throughout the subregion. According to Michael A. Weaver, Manager of Plant Operations for a pipe-making subsidiary of Owens-Corning that opened in Gaborone in 1994, Ambassador Jester and the more aggressive policy of the Department of Commerce contributed in no small part to his company's decision to locate in Gaborone. 'In the past the US government was not as willing to serve as an advocate for business, and as a result Americans were here [Botswana] in name only, at least as concerns trade and investment', explained Weaver. 'This definitely has changed under the Clinton administration—they most notably aided us by helping to keep the local playing field level from the often unfair economic practices of our competitors, and working with and facilitating our access to key government officials interested in what we could bring to Botswana.'

For its part, the Clinton administration was equally effusive concerning the Owens-Corning decision to locate their pipe subsidiary in Botswana. As underscored by Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown when he visited Botswana in early 1996 as part of a five-country tour of Africa designed to promote US trade and investment, the creation of the Owens-Corning subsidiary in Gaborone constituted an example of 'true partnership' between an American company and the Botswana Development Corporation that would be financially lucrative for both countries—most notably due to the fact that Owens-Corning received a Botswanan government contract worth approximately $75m to fabricate all the pipes necessary for the completion of the North-South Carrier Project. In addition to the obvious job creation for Botswana and the financial benefits that will accrue to a US company, Brown was especially pleased to note the collateral impact on job creation in the US. 'I understand that the resin and the glass [for fabricating the pipes] come principally from the US', explained Brown. 'So here we have a situation where there has been investment in Botswana, creating jobs in Botswana, and raw materials coming from the United States creating jobs for Americans.'

A more aggressive business policy was especially highlighted by the Clinton administration's willingness to participate in a variety of high-profile regional events, such as the African/African-American Summit. Originally conceived by the Reverend Leon Sullivan as a vehicle for strengthening cultural ties between African Americans and their African counterparts, the African/African-American gathering has evolved into a burgeoning forum for encouraging trade and investment between the US and Africa. The inaugural summit was held in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in 1991, followed by summits in Libreville, Gabon in 1993 and Dakar, Senegal in 1995.

The Dakar summit was the largest and most successful gathering to date. In addition to hosting between 2,000 and 3,000 US participants, the summit organizers also welcomed several African heads of state and other high-level delegations from numerous African countries. An important component of the meeting was the organizing of an 'American Day'—a series of workshops and presentations by US government officials, including Secretary of Commerce Brown, whose agencies are promoting US-African trade and investment. The fourth African/African-American Summit is scheduled to be held in Harare in 1997, and promises to be the most
THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION AND AFRICA

The renewal of US trade ties with South Africa—perceived in Washington as the most advanced and lucrative economy on the African continent—served as a focal point of the Clinton administration's business initiatives in the southern African region. As discussed below, an important regional dimension of US foreign policy was to ensure that South Africa's economy is closely 'knitted' to those of the other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, thereby enhancing the rise of a regional market that would be more attractive to US investors and capable of absorbing greater levels of US exports. The economic logic behind such an approach, especially if we focus on the case of Botswana, is obvious, explained Steven M. Lauterbach, Public Affairs Officer (PAO) at the US Embassy in Gaborone. A market of only 1.4 million people cannot expect by itself to be a target of US trade and investment—the Botswanans and other members of SADC must realize that their economic futures are tied to that of South Africa, and that US businesses will be more likely to invest in a regional market offering more lucrative profits for US businesses. The Owens-Corning project is a case in point. Although based in Gaborone, this subsidiary is taking advantage of economies of scale throughout the SADC region. As a result, contracts were signed to provide pipelines to the Hartley Platinum Mine and the Pungwe Water Scheme in Zimbabwe, and to the Namibian Department of Water Affairs for a variety of national development projects.

An analysis of trade statistics clearly demonstrates why South Africa plays such an important role in US economic calculations for Africa as a whole. Since the easing in 1991 of economic sanctions associated with the 1986 Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, US exports to South Africa have increased dramatically, including a 25% increase in 1995, and are expected to continue at such a pace throughout the first decade of the new millennium. The 1995 export figure—$2.75bn—represented 51% of all US exports ($5.4bn) to Africa. The only other countries in southern Africa to even approach such trade levels were Angola and Zimbabwe, which absorbed $159m (2.9%) and $122m (2.3%), respectively, of US exports during the same period. In sharp contrast, Botswana absorbed approximately 0.5% ($29.5m) of US exports to the region, with only Lesotho, Swaziland and Malawi maintaining smaller bilateral trade relationships with the US.

REGIONALIZATION OF FOREIGN POLICY INITIATIVES

A second important development related to declining US foreign aid towards Africa has been the necessity of rethinking and restructuring a wide array of field programmes administered by various bureaus of the executive branch, most notably the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Department of Commerce, Pentagon, State Department and the Agency for International Development (USAID). US embassies during the second and third years of the Clinton administration have often been forced to do 'more with less'. One solution to this dilemma has been to pursue the 'regionalization' of US foreign policy initiatives.

In the case of southern Africa, for example, the Clinton administration moved the now defunct Southern Africa Regional Program (SAREP) from its original headquarters in Harare, Zimbabwe, to Gaborone, Botswana, and renamed it the Initiative for Southern Africa (ISA). SAREP was originally conceived as a vehicle for supporting crossnational development projects of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), a regional organization designed to enhance cooperation among the Front-Line States (FLS) and reduce their economic dependence on the apartheid regime of South Africa. With the end of apartheid, the ISA was presented as the cornerstone of US support for the Southern
THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION AND AFRICA

African Development Community (SADC), the regional successor to SADCC, which includes South Africa in its membership and is headquartered in Gaborone. According to Brian Atwood, former Director of USAID, the ISA reflects the US vision of the promise and potential of the southern Africa region upon the transition to democracy in South Africa, the end of the conflicts in Mozambique and Angola, and the movement towards more open economies and political systems throughout the region.27

The primary logic behind the creation of the ISA as the coordinator of US activities in the SADC region is to avoid the obvious duplication of activities and costs that would accompany the funding of major US initiatives in each of these countries. The ISA’s specific connection to SADC is also consistent with an emerging US tendency to rely upon regional African organizations to take the lead in a variety of economic, political and even military sectors. Unfortunately, the ISA and its predecessor, SAREP, remain confronted by the same budgetary logic leading to the decreased levels of US bilateral aid to individual southern African countries. Whereas funding for what in essence constitutes one on-going organization increased from roughly $50m in 1994 to a peak of $85.3m in 1995, funding declined to $32.4m in 1996.32

A noteworthy aspect of the ISA’s short history to date was the decision to move the headquarters of what was originally known as SAREP from Harare to Gaborone. Members of the Zimbabwean Ministry of Foreign Affairs were predictably unhappy with this decision, and their Botswana counterparts not surprisingly expressed praise.33 The official reason for ISA’s relocation is that Gaborone is the headquarters for SADC, and therefore should be the site of the principal US liaison office for regional cooperation. A more important, unspoken reason for the shift was the desire to counter the perception of the Botswana policymaking elite of declining US interest relative to other countries within the region, especially in light of declining aid levels, the closure of the bilateral USAID office and the termination of all bilateral development aid to Botswana. Although no US official admitted the need to ‘compensate’ Botswana for past ‘losses’, Wendy A. Stickel, deputy director of USAID’s Regional Centre for Southern Africa which administers the ISA, explained the decision to locate the ISA in Gaborone as part of a desire to ‘send a strong signal’ to the Botswanan policymaking establishment that they have played an ‘exemplary role’ within the region.34

It is interesting to note that the decision to move the ISA—which had significant implications for US relations with Botswana and Zimbabwe—not surprisingly was made by USAID Director Atwood after a period of internal bureaucratic debate. Whereas proponents of maintaining the centre in Harare underscored the need to reward Zimbabwe’s historic contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle, they simply did not carry the same bureaucratic clout as proponents of Botswana who could point to that country’s historic commitment to multi-party democracy and free-market enterprise—especially in the emerging post-Cold War/post-apartheid environment. As aptly explained by Peter Benedict, director of USAID in Harare, the transition to democracy in South Africa in 1994 meant that Zimbabwe’s perceived shortcomings, most notably the maintenance of an increasingly corrupt and authoritarian single-party regime, could no longer be downplayed in bureaucratic debates over allocating scarce resources.35

USAID’s decision to move the ISA is an example that captures the rising importance of US bureaucracies in the formulation and implementation of US foreign policy towards Africa during the second and third years of the Clinton administration. The White House and Congress historically have been uninterested in the day-to-day management of US foreign policy toward Africa relative to other...
regions of perceived greater concern, most notably Europe, the former Soviet Union and its successor states and the Middle East. As a result, their involvement in policymaking related to Africa has been sporadic, most notably during times of crisis and extended humanitarian crisis. In order to best understand continuity and change in US foreign policy towards southern Africa, one must focus on the policies and interactions of the African affairs bureaus of the traditional national security-oriented bureaucracies, such as the State Department, Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), as well as of their counterparts within the economic and cultural realms, most notably the Department of Commerce.

One important result of what can be referred to as bureaucratic dominance of the policymaking process is the tendency towards promotion of the status quo in favour of existing policies, even after a new administration takes office. The impact of this bureaucratic reality was clearly demonstrated by the Clinton administration’s early policy towards Angola. During the presidential campaign of 1992, candidate Clinton called for ‘strong’ US support for whoever emerged victorious in Angolan presidential elections to be held in September 1992. Yet when Jonas Savimbi rejected his initial defeat in these elections (which international observers regarded as ‘generally free and fair’) and returned the country to civil war, the newly elected Clinton administration delayed recognizing the Movimento popolar de liberacao de Angola (MPLA) government until 19 May 1994. The primary reason for the delay was the continuation of a failed pro-Savimbi policy advanced by one portion of the State Department that stood in sharp contrast to a growing recognition in other quarters of Savimbi’s unwillingness to accept anything short of total victory—if not in the electoral arena, then on the military battlefield. According to the latter interpretation, the proper policy response, which would have been warmly accepted by the Africanist community in both the US and abroad, should have been ‘prompt recognition’ of the Angolan government immediately following the elections to leave no doubt in Savimbi’s mind that the US ‘fully supported the democratic process’.  

CONCLUSION

The three historic turning points of 1994—genocide in Rwanda, the White House Conference on Africa and the Republican Party victory in the mid-term elections—underscored a growing gap between rhetoric and reality in US foreign policy towards Africa. Whereas the White House Conference suggested the need for a more proactive, coordinated approach to US-African relations, the Clinton administration’s response to genocide in Rwanda revealed an administration increasingly hesitant to become involved in African conflicts, and the Republican victory in the 1994 congressional elections heralded declining levels of US foreign aid for the African continent. Most important, the combination of these trends fostered a growing reliance on foreign trade and investment as the centrepiece of US-Africa policies. Indeed, promoting trade and investment constitutes a relatively low-cost strategy that is acceptable to both the White House and Congress, and therefore is capable of providing a new consensus for the future evolution of US foreign policy towards Africa during the post-Cold War era.

NOTES


THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION AND AFRICA

4. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
13. See chapter 3 of Peter J. Schraeder, United States Foreign Policy Toward Africa: Incrementalism, Crisis and Change (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), esp. 87-98.
17. Ibid., 15.
19. Mineo of Speech provided by the US Embassy in Libreville, Gabon.
22. Quoted in ‘Secretary Brown’s Visit to Owens Corning, Botswana—Saturday 24/02/96—08H00 AM’. Mineo of speech provided by the US Embassy, Gaborone, Botswana.
26. Figures provided by the US Department of Commerce.
27. Statement provided by the US Embassy, Gaborone, Botswana.
28. Statistics provided by USAID, Washington, D.C.
32. Schraeder, United States Foreign Policy ...