

## **Wanted: A New U. S. Africa Policy**

by Merle Bowen and William Minter

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Almost 15 years after Nelson Mandela took office in South Africa, the United States still lacks a coherent Africa policy. There are pieces of such a policy—support for the war against AIDS is now a bipartisan consensus, and both presidential candidates have pledged to focus on Darfur. Neither candidate, however, has laid out a policy framework that can serve both African and American interests.

It is instructive that it was only this June that the U. S. government finally took Mandela and members of his party off the official list of terrorists, a legacy of past support for the apartheid regime. Still, the U. S. did aid the transition to democracy in South Africa in the 1990s. In recent years some other African issues have attracted attention, and activists have pressured Washington to act.

On AIDS, the results have been significant, even if still inadequate. President Bill Clinton, whose administration was missing in action on AIDS in Africa, became an effective campaigner on the issue after leaving office. President George W. Bush, whose USAID administrator initially dismissed antiretroviral treatment for Africans as impractical because "Africans can't tell time," now finds that the presidential AIDS program is one of the few accomplishments he can claim for history.

On other issues—conflict, human rights, debt, trade, and development—the record is less inspiring. The Clinton administration shared the international failure to act against genocide in Rwanda. On Darfur, the Bush administration has offered heady rhetoric but little effective action. More generally, neither the Clinton nor Bush years provide a good model. Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush raised the U.S. profile in Africa, but neither followed up the hopes they raised with consistent action.

This record looms large today given the absence of new proposals from the candidates and the projected makeup of their foreign policy teams. John McCain's Africa policy may well resemble the disastrous Reagan years, noted for U.S. collaboration with the apartheid South African regime and African dictators. One of McCain's top strategists, Charles Black, was a lobbyist for Angola's Jonas Savimbi and other U.S.-backed African warlords. Barack Obama's most prominent advisors, veterans of the Clinton administration, include Anthony Lake, who presided over the failure to respond to Rwanda, and Susan Rice, who has proposed direct U.S. troop intervention in Darfur—a step which would almost certainly escalate the killing.

Neither candidate has criticized the disastrous Bush policy on Somalia, where it encouraged Ethiopian military intervention and worsened one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Both have endorsed AFRICOM, a new military command that risks reinforcing an already over-militarized U.S. response to Africa. Opportunistic support for dictators continues, while crises and conflicts—some, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, surpassing Darfur in casualties—are ignored.

With his openness to multilateral cooperation and his personal connections, Senator Obama has the potential for crafting a constructive Africa policy. But without an alternative framework, and active public pressure, the path of least resistance will likely follow narrow conceptions of U.S. national interests, as in the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. Anti-terrorism, Africa's oil, and competition with China are all real concerns. But pursuing those goals without attending to Africa's own needs would be self-defeating.

A new policy must encompass the diversity of African countries and of U.S. interests. There are no magic formulas. Nevertheless, there are principles that should apply.

\* Build on the example of the response to AIDS, both multilateral and bilateral, to address African needs in health, education, food, economic infrastructure, and the environment, with all countries paying their fair share.

\* Open a genuine dialogue about trade and development policy, instead of imposing rigid free-market policies that are systematically biased in favor of rich countries.

\* Minimize bilateral military involvement in Africa, which risks sucking the U.S. into local conflicts, in favor of multilateral diplomacy and peacekeeping, including paying U.S. peacekeeping arrears at the United Nations (UN).

\* Stop aiding repressive regimes, and support democratic African solutions, as in the aftermath of the election in Kenya. This crisis, which threatened to turn into a civil war earlier this year, was peacefully resolved through African mediation led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The U.S. played a supportive rather than an ostentatious role.

\* Rely on skilled African diplomats, who include many distinguished former presidents, for dealing with other crises, as was done in Kenya. Despite the negative example of Thabo Mbeki's ineffective mediation in Zimbabwe, the fact remains that no initiative is likely to succeed unless African civil society and political leaders are in the forefront.

\* Support the large community of recent African immigrants to the U. S., many of whom are engaged in family and community projects to help their countries.

In short, if the United States takes a narrow view of Africa, as a recipient of "charity," a place to pump oil, and an arena for fighting terrorists, then African hopes being evoked by the Obama candidacy will almost certainly be disappointed. If, however, the United States takes a long view, understanding that its security depends on the human security of Africans, then there are real prospects for a new era of collaboration and good will.