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Some Lessons From the Past and Some Thoughts for the Future on U.S. Policy in Africa

by Martin Lowenkopf

In my last contribution to *CSIS Africa Notes* in May 1989 ("If the Cold War is Over in Africa, Will the United States Still Care?," issue no. 98), the conclusion was cautiously optimistic: "There are. . . sound reasons for continued U.S. interest in Africa. One is to keep it off the East-West chessboard by working to end old conflicts and to help avert new ones. A more peaceful Africa would also be an economically healthier one, capable of developing its own resources, defending its own economic interests, and getting off the international dole and back into the global marketplace. The traditional U.S. zeal to help the needy, respect self-determination, and support pluralistic (and any prospect of democratic) development will have new scope now that ideological considerations seem to be on the wane. There is much to be done to reconstruct and revivify Africa in its struggle against its natural and economic enemies. . . ." As of January 1992, this judgment warrants reexamination.

Thus far, at least, the end of the Cold War has had few benefits for Africa, which has suffered a new sort of global benign neglect even as more and more of its countries descend into civil warfare, anarchy, and economic near-ruin (e.g., Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, and Zaire, with Kenya and Congo perhaps next in line). And despite the peace agreement signed by Angolan factions in May 1991 and the promising negotiations now under way in South Africa, the longer-term outlook in these two key nations remains problematical. To its credit, the United States has sharply curtailed military aid (it would be nice if the Europeans—some of whom are pushing high-tech armaments in Angola, of all places—would do the same); played a conciliatory role in post-Mengistu Ethiopia; is actively supporting Mozambican peace efforts; provides emergency food and medical aid to refugees; and is helping finance a West African peacekeeping force in Liberia. But such actions, however exemplary, are relatively low-cost and risk-free. They may ameliorate but seldom go far enough to extinguish the brutal internal struggles that have sentenced millions of people to displacement and starvation (see "Africa's Uprooted: A Status Report" by Kimberly A. Hamilton, *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 117, October 1990), and they have not done much to reduce Africa's growth-limiting international debt. Nor has anything comparable to the United Nations' "humane intervention" on behalf of the Kurds in Iraq yet been sponsored in Africa.

Africa, moreover, is still reaping the bitter harvest of the Cold War. The industrialized nations of both East and West provided the means for the



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destructive wars that produced refugee calamities and escalating instability in those countries which became Cold War battlegrounds. Because it is no longer perceived as important—strategically, ideologically, or commercially—who sits in decaying presidential palaces, the Western powers (not to speak of the fragmented former Soviet Union) do not now even try to muster the level of resources or influence needed to help restore peace and stability in Africa.

U.S. Priorities in the 1990s

While the United States “won” the Cold War and remains the only surviving military superpower, its claim to be the dominant political and economic power in the world is under challenge from Japan and the European Community. Moreover, the path to a still undefined “New World Order” is strewn with the stumbling efforts of Eastern Europe and the diverse and often conflict-ridden republics of the former Soviet Union to get their nearly defunct economies and fragile new polities together; reactionary retrenchment or regression in much of East Asia and the Middle East; and the economically draining demands on Western financial institutions of new-wave democrats in Latin America and Africa who, if they cannot dig their nations out of stagnation and poverty, may well lose out to old-wave demagogues.

How, in this confusion, do we determine the guidelines on which to base U.S. policy in Africa? Any overarching policy or set of objectives is likely, as during the Cold War, to reflect U.S. global concerns and interests. And in such a scenario Africa, as usual, will get the least attention, the efforts of the Congressional Black Caucus and the handful of interested U.S. entrepreneurs notwithstanding. (See “The New Politics of U.S. Aid to Africa” by Carol Lancaster, *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 120, January 1991.)

Defining Africa’s Needs

How can Africa’s needs be reconciled with U.S. global interests? (Michael Clough offers some original and commendable ideas in this vein in *Free at Last? U.S. Policy Toward Africa and the End of the Cold War* [Council on Foreign Relations, January 1992]. Clough calls, *inter alia*, for “measures to encourage and capitalize on the growing interest of . . . private American groups in a variety of issues affecting the continent.”) The need for flexibility is obvious, because diversity and revolutionary change characterize the current disorderly state of Africa and the world. Moreover (as should be obvious), Africa is not a single coherent entity and its diverse sovereign components do not necessarily share similar problems or respond to the same remedies.

Some analysts see democracy and nationalism becoming the dominant ideologies of the post-Cold War world. Africa’s history since independence has been about these issues. With few exceptions, African countries were unable to sustain either, in part because the quest was distorted by the Cold War. Now some states are trying again. But deeper dependency on and subordination to foreign-controlled investment and enterprises are the

outlook for those states which, in order to survive, must enter into questionable commercial deals and accept strict conditionality on multilateral-agency credits and investments. (See “How the IMF and the World Bank Affect African Decision Making” by Carol Lancaster, *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 97, April 1989.) These strictures on economic sovereignty do not bode well either for self-determination or for democratic development.

Still, the United States presses on with demands for free-market economies and democratic reforms. But do we really want to try to recreate the Third World (and Africa) in our image? These days, in the wake of communism’s failure both as an experiment and as a model, some analysts are convinced that winning the Cold War is a victory for capitalism. Maybe so. But it may not unleash a headlong dash toward capitalism, though for many the replication of a U.S.-like consumer society would be revolution enough. There may still be traditional qualities in some societies that, preserved, would enrich their peoples as much as a healthier GNP. Of course, people must eat if they are to have the leisure to look into their souls and their inherited cultures, but as Algeria’s recent (aborted, for now) shift to the Islamic right suggests, the case for “authenticity” in African nations is not closed. You don’t have to be Muslim to fear ending up in a gaudy, Godless, capitalist heaven.

“Realism”

Henry Kissinger (as well as other “global realists” who define U.S. interests essentially in geopolitical terms) argues that human rights and democracy are not our problem. Although desirable, they are not essential; while possible, their realization probably is beyond our capacities. In any case, “it is not self-evident that the spread of democracy automatically produces peaceful conduct.” Writing in *The Washington Post* on December 3, 1991, Kissinger argues further that the United States

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EDITOR: Director of African Studies Helen Kitchen

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needs a definition of national interests that enjoys broad public support, not sentimental justifications for a disinterested foreign policy.

But national interests are what a nation's leaders at any given time say they are. Jimmy Carter's human rights agenda became policy, worked well in a number of places (e.g., Argentina), and was accepted by most Americans outside the Beltway. Problems arose basically in the unselective application of this policy in an era when Cold War imperatives constrained such broad application.

Other pundits have proposed that, in order to situate the United States favorably for twenty-first-century local instabilities that might threaten access to vital sea-lanes and suppliers of raw materials, Washington should establish security arrangements with strategically positioned client states. Such a broad, unfocused prescription leaves for later such questions as whether U.S. lives or property are genuinely threatened, and what the possible costs and damage may be to other interests. Although the United States anticipated the need for access rights in rear areas during the 1990-1991 Gulf war, for example, it ended up using none of the African facilities available through prior standby agreements.

There are manifestly good reasons *not* to involve the United States in cooperative security arrangements anywhere in Africa. Such arrangements would involve links with local militaries and with military regimes whose dedication to democratization and economic rationality is highly questionable.

Are there, then, any compelling reasons for Washington to be seriously concerned about the fate of Africa (or of much of the Third World for that matter), apart from the few countries that supply essential commodities or in which the United States has sizable investments? An answer to skeptics is that if Africa does not escape its current economic crisis, it will remain on the dole and strain the developed world's resources without offering much prospect of a meaningful return. Instead, its developmental stalemate will continue to inhibit access to resources, markets, and investment opportunities of potential value to European, Japanese, and U.S. entrepreneurs. Worse, Africa could plunge further into instability and human suffering. Although such a development would not pose a direct threat to the physical well-being of the United States, indifference to the fate of Africa's half a billion people would arouse domestic doubts about the quality of the U.S. claim to world leadership and engender deep cynicism abroad.

Issues other than these well-known arguments about global interdependence are also at stake, and here the African experience might prove instructive in connection with the formulation of U.S. policies for other parts of the world. In the early days of *glasnost*, a Soviet Africanist told me that the United States should not underestimate the moral aspect of the USSR's policy in Africa. I asked what he believed drove U.S. policy, and he replied without hesitation: "realpolitik." However doubtful the Soviet case, how do we describe that of the United States? Is it true (and if so does it matter) that it

was not morality that inspired the use of mercenaries in the Congo (Zaire) in the 1960s or the flip-flop from Ethiopia to Somalia in the Horn in the 1970s? And moral considerations apparently played a negligible role when Washington, by militarily assisting the UNITA guerrillas (and thus encouraging South Africa) in Angola, helped prolong a vicious civil war that wrecked the economy of that resource-rich country and killed and maimed tens of thousands.

Lessons from Zaire and Angola

In a limited sense, these hard-edged policies may be said to have succeeded. Zaire, for example, remained in the Western camp and Mobutu maintained for nearly 30 years a version of law and order in sub-Saharan Africa's third largest nation—but at what cost to the people of Zaire and the notion that the United States was the champion of freedom and democracy? Washington's difficulties in winning African support for its subsequent policies in southern Africa and in the international arena can be traced in large part to the cynicism engendered by its association with Mobutu.

Nor can the U.S. success in Angola be attributed to Washington's prolonged support for Jonas Savimbi's UNITA. That the United States ultimately engineered independence for Namibia followed by a resolution of the Angolan civil war was a formidable accomplishment. (See "Angola: The Road to Peace" by Shawn McCormick, *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 125, June 1991.) But it occurred *in spite of* Washington's pro-UNITA stance, which delayed a resolution of the conflict for several years.

From Angola's independence in 1975 to this day, the United States has withheld full diplomatic recognition as well as support for aid from international lending institutions. Washington's insistence on maintaining this stance until the MPLA government fully implements the terms of its agreement with UNITA to hold elections by late 1992 gives even *realpolitik* a bad name. Angola's future stability and orientation will depend much less on elections than on getting its economy back on track. A stake in development will better accomplish the integration of the country's diverse and competing elements (over a dozen parties may contest the election) than the likely paralyzing fracturing of political authority among so many forces in a political free-for-all.

... And Liberia

Invoking U.S. responsibility for the horrors afflicting Liberia, apart from the fact that it is Liberians doing it to Liberians, would seem to smack of retrospective wisdom. (See "Some Key Dates in Liberia's Political History" by J. Coleman Kitchen in *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 129, October 1991.) But Master Sergeant Samuel Doe would not have lasted as long, stirred up so much hatred and desperation, or developed the kind of security apparatus that compounded and prolonged the violence that eventually led to his downfall in 1990, had the United States not provided material support and political acceptance for 10 years. And Washington did so with eyes wide open to the

pettiness, cruelty, and venality of the Doe regime. No prophet or esoteric analysis was needed to warn that Doe would lead Liberia into disaster.

Pragmatists argued at the time that it was more convenient, if distasteful, to work with the devil the United States knew than to risk U.S. installations and investments in Liberia falling into the hands of those it didn't. Admittedly, the so-called opposition was divided and feckless. Precariously holding power in Monrovia today, that same group has proved itself far friendlier and more democratic than the late Doe or the armed thugs who may yet win the day in Liberia's current anarchy. Yet, the United States seems content to bring up the rear in the difficult peacekeeping efforts currently under way. To calls for a more vigorous policy, one can almost hear the White House saying: "not one American hostage, not one American soldier. . . ."

Zimbabwe: Where Morality Worked

Is Machiavelli correct, then, that in the complex utilitarian calculations of policy-making the statesman cannot save both his soul and his country, that morality and *realpolitik* do not blend? The examples cited would seem to support this view, although they also suggest a failure in both *realpolitik* and morality. But in the Rhodesia/Zimbabwe independence negotiations of the late 1970s, where U.S. objectives had a moral component (support for majority rule and democratic elections) and Washington's stance was essentially neutral, the United States registered a success far greater and more enduring than anything achieved in the *realpolitik* cases. Struggling to overcome suspicions about U.S. intentions generated by Washington's pro-Mobutu and pro-South Africa image, the Carter administration's impartiality finally won the confidence of the Zimbabwean protagonists, helped the British bring the long Rhodesian civil war to an end and guide the country to internationally recognized independence, and kept the Soviets and Cubans out of the fray.

Perhaps as important, the United States won the confidence of other key African players in the talks, including Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda and Mozambique's Samora Machel. Both leaders played critical roles in the Zimbabwe negotiations and supported subsequent efforts to find a peaceful outcome to southern Africa's other problems. This goodwill also facilitated Mozambique's own transition from pro-Soviet, statist policies to a more open, neutralist regime. Unfortunately, many of these gains—in southern Africa and elsewhere—were dissipated by the Reagan administration's waffling on South Africa and by its military support of UNITA.

Some Tentative Policy Guidelines

A renewed emphasis on morality in U.S. Africa policy could begin with two immediate priorities: (1) helping end internal wars and, while mediation is going on, helping war victims, especially refugees; and (2) stopping support of corrupt and repressive regimes, even those whose leaders are supposedly "our SOBs" (the example of Panama's Noriega makes one wonder how often these strongmen are

really "ours"), and mobilizing international pressure to that end.

Somalia and the protracted war in southern Sudan offer compelling cases of murderous civil strife begging for resolution. Unabated, these conflicts will continue the slaughter of countless civilians and constitute ongoing threats to neighboring nations. Regional, Organization of African Unity, and UN-sponsored peacemaking initiatives and refugee assistance programs are required, but they can succeed only with assertive U.S. and Western European interventions (as in the Gulf). The UN's December 1991 agreement on refugee assistance was a step toward establishing a right of humanitarian intervention, particularly in zones of civil strife. Some would complain that this represents a violation of sovereignty, but (as was true with Iraq) the pressure of world disapproval and the threat of punishment would help force compliance. Liberian rebel troops, for example, are highly unlikely to offer much resistance to UN forces if the latter include a few well-armed U.S. marines.

In Kenya, U.S. Ambassador Smith Hempstone's persistent criticism of the Moi government's violation of human rights, and some stringent financial pressure by international lending groups, have produced a new willingness to compromise on Moi's part. Another unprecedented event was a pro-U.S. rally in Nairobi by supporters of, of all people, Oginga Odinga—formerly high on Washington's "radical," "pro-Communist" enemies list. The pressure should be kept up and applied as well to Zaire's Mobutu and other dictators. At the same time, demonstrably reformist behavior (as in Madagascar) should be rewarded, while pressure for further positive changes should be maintained.

Where is the money for all this to come from? First, it can be argued that it will be cheaper in the long run to loosen tyrannical rule before it leads to civil strife and to help end existing internal conflicts before they spread beyond their country of origin (neglected areas of supposedly marginal global interest sometimes tend to demarginalize themselves). Second, the financial stringency currently afflicting the United States and Western Europe will, by all accounts, not go on much longer. Getting the peacemaking and rescue processes under way, in anticipation of a lengthy period of conciliation, is feasible. What is wanted now is not just the "wallet," but the will.

The above measures will not be easy to implement. But, insofar as they would satisfy both practical and moral U.S. interests, they are worth a try. The United States may do its soul some good in the process.

Martin Lowenkopf, whose experience with Africa spans three decades, retired in 1989 as director of the Office of Research and Analysis for Africa in the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR).