

US POLICY TOWARDS AFRICA: THE BUSH LEGACY AND THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the Bush administration's African policy legacy and its implications for the Obama administration. Many have argued that the events of 9/11 led the administration to view the African subcontinent differently, and that the US has altered its conception of national interests in the region. The tripling of American foreign aid to the region is noteworthy. AFRICOM's creation also suggests a policy shift. The article is nonetheless sceptical that these changes represent a paradigmatic shift in policy towards Africa, rather than a partial and inconsistent adjustment made possible by a conjunction of quite specific circumstances. Indeed, these circumstances provided an opportunity to redefine US foreign policy towards the region, which the Bush administration largely failed to do. The article argues that the weight of the American diplomatic presence in the region has continued to decline, because of the worsening institutional fragmentation in the foreign policy apparatus, contradictions in policy, and the decline in the State Department's institutional capacity. As the Obama administration defines US policy in the region, it must address most of the same conundrums as its predecessors, but with less leverage than past administrations and constrained by the fiscal effects of the worst recession in sixty years.

SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR, THE MAIN DILEMMA for American foreign policy towards Africa¹ has been the difficulty in defining an overarching set of national interests that would justify the more proactive and interventionist policy from which many observers believe Africa would benefit. That Africa is a national interest backwater, not deserving of their limited attention, has been believed by top decision makers in successive administrations, often despite the best rhetorical efforts of the middle-level decision makers who have been in day-to-day charge of policy, and who typically have served as internal advocates for a more active US presence in Africa.

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1. Throughout this article, 'Africa' is synonymous with 'sub-Saharan Africa', and the two terms will be used interchangeably.

The absence of core US interests was an article of faith in the mid-1990s, which probably marked a low point in US–Africa relations. Adjusting to the end of the Cold War, and in the context of budget constraints, the Clinton administration’s Africa policy was one of retrenchment and timidity, despite often ambitious rhetoric.² In its first year in office, the administration withdrew the military force that President George H. W. Bush had sent to Somalia in the waning days of his own administration, after 18 US soldiers were killed in a firefight with a warlord militia on 3 October 1993 and then paraded through the streets of Mogadishu. When the Clinton administration failed to intervene to prevent or end the 1994 Rwanda genocide, American diplomats even appeared to undermine attempts at multilateral action to do so.³

Rather strikingly for the world’s self-proclaimed ‘last superpower’, this lack of ambition in the region was not contested by the American foreign policy establishment, which took a jaundiced view of the notion that US foreign policy might be akin to ‘social work’,⁴ intervening on behalf of people’s welfare in countries in which the US did not have key strategic interests. In the 2000 election, George Bush’s rhetoric of contempt for ‘nation-building’ efforts was broadly supported by this same Washington establishment, and put Vice-President and Democratic candidate Al Gore on the defensive, despite the fact that the Clinton administration had devoted comparatively little attention or resources to what might conceivably be defined as nation-building.⁵

Given these early rhetorical flourishes, the Bush administration’s actual record in office, from its substantial increases of foreign aid and a well-funded HIV/AIDS initiative to the ambitious nation-building programmes it developed in Iraq and Afghanistan, was noted by many observers, sometimes with irony. Bush garnered congratulations for his Africa policy, both from the left, where observers such as pop stars Bono and Bob Geldoff somewhat reluctantly praised his administration, and more enthusiastically from his own camp, for which his Africa policy constituted one of his most

2. See, for instance, Peter Rosenblum, ‘Irrational exuberance: the Clinton administration in Africa’, *Current History* 101, 655 (2002), pp. 195–202; Chris Alden, ‘From neglect to “virtual engagement”: the United States and its new paradigm for Africa’, *African Affairs* 99, 396 (2000), pp. 355–71; Marina Ottaway, ‘Rethinking US policy in Africa’ (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 2001); J. Stephen Morrison and Jennifer Cooke (eds) *Africa Policy in the Clinton Years: Critical choices for the Bush administration* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 2001).

3. Samantha Powers, *A Problem from Hell: America and the age of genocide* (HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2003).

4. Michael Mandelbaum, ‘Foreign policy as social work’, *Foreign Affairs* 75, 1 (1996), pp. 16–32.

5. See the discussion in William Minter, ‘America and Africa: beyond the double standard’, *Current History* 99, 637 (2000), pp. 200–10.

brilliant successes. As the Republican-leaning *New York Post* noted in 2008, during Bush's trip to Africa,

the President's disease-prevention program throughout the continent, and his economic-partnership incentives for nations that move toward democracy and attempt to end corruption, have been among the Bush administration's notable foreign-policy successes.⁶

That tripling aid to Africa, which a leading congressional Republican had characterized as 'throwing money down a rat hole',⁷ was viewed so favourably as Bush was leaving office suggests a sea change in the conventional wisdom about US policy towards Africa. Less noted, but perhaps more significantly, the administration's increasing military aid to the region and the creation in October 2007 of AFRICOM, a new US military command for Africa, signalled enhanced strategic interests in the region.

This essay will discuss the legacy of the Bush administration's African policy and its implications for the Obama administration. There is no denying that the events of 9/11 led the US administration to view the African subcontinent differently, and US policy makers have altered their conception of national interests in the region. The increase in American foreign aid to the region is noteworthy. AFRICOM's creation also suggests a policy shift. This article argues, nonetheless, that these changes represent a partial and inconsistent adjustment due to a conjunction of quite specific circumstances, rather than a paradigmatic shift in policy towards Africa. Indeed, these circumstances provided an opportunity to redefine US foreign policy towards the region, but the Bush administration largely failed to do this. The article also argues that the weight of the American diplomatic presence in the region has continued to decline, because of the worsening institutional fragmentation in the foreign policy apparatus, contradictions in policy, and the decline in the State Department's institutional capacity. The Obama administration must today address the same conundrums in its Africa policy as its predecessors, and it will have less capacity and leverage at its disposal, with greater fiscal constraints due to the worst recession in sixty years. The article is organized as follows: in the next section I summarize the record of the Clinton administration; I then review the Bush record before concluding with an assessment of the issues the Obama administration will have to address in the near future.

Declining ambitions in the 1990s

Following the end of the Cold War, US decision makers struggled to find a rationale for an active US foreign policy towards Africa. The absence of

6. 'Bush in Africa', editorial, *New York Post*, 19 February 2008.

7. Cited in Josh Kurlantzick, 'The ungiven gift', *The Boston Globe*, 31 August 2008.

nuclear weapons in the region, its low levels of economic activity, and its extremely modest role in international trade ensured that Africa would be assigned secondary importance in geo-strategic decision making. For its part, the Pentagon dismissed the region in a 1995 white paper: 'Ultimately, we see very little traditional strategic interest in Africa.'⁸ Washington foreign policy experts were willing to concede that humanitarian concerns should not be ignored completely; more cynically, they recognized that these concerns could not be ignored completely without a political cost in the age of 24-hour cable news. The African origins of more than a tenth of the US population also created a significant political constituency for US policy attention. Nonetheless, humanitarian and domestic constituency concerns were generally viewed as secondary to national security interests or to the domestic constituency concerns for other regions of the world, particularly in an era of foreign policy retrenchment.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, Congressional political dynamics were particularly hard on the so-called 150 account, the part of the federal budget devoted to non-military international matters, which declined from around 5 percent of the total budget in 1960 to 1 percent in 2000. The absence of political support on Capitol Hill led successive White House leaders to downscale policy ambitions in Africa, and to focus their attention and resources on other, more strategic regions of the world. In effect, Africa policy came to be made by mid-level officials with a hard-budget constraint. Any new initiative had to be funded by cutting an old programme. At the dawn of the Clinton era, Council on Foreign Relations Africa director, Michael Clough, thus stated flatly that

foreign policy strategies [towards Africa] that depend primarily for their success on the ability of the White House and State Department to set priorities, marshal resources and implement new policies are likely to fail. Senior officials . . . will always have too many other preoccupations, or too little interest in the continent, for them to take the lead on African issues.⁹

A direct result of these dynamics was the progressive erosion of the physical US presence in the region, and the scaling down of foreign policy objectives roughly between 1985 and 1998, across the end of the Reagan and Bush administrations and most of the Clinton administration. To be sure, the US Congress could be compelled to authorize billions of dollars in response to humanitarian crises, notably in Rwanda in the aftermath of the genocide, or in Liberia and Sierra Leone. But Africa typically was viewed

8. Cited in Lauren Ploch, 'Africa Command: US strategic interests and the role of the US military in Africa' (Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, 16 May, 2007), p. 25.

9. Michael Clough, 'Free at last? US policy toward Africa and the end of the Cold War' (Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 1992), p. 4. See also Peter Schraeder, *United States Foreign Policy toward Africa: Incrementalism, crisis and change* (Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, 1994).

through the lens of *ad hoc* humanitarianism, rather than in a strategic manner;¹⁰ successive crises seemed to surprise decision makers, and the American response was never defined in the context of a long-term regional strategy.

Other than its willingness to fund relief operations in complex emergencies, the US responded with surprising timidity to the violent conflicts in the region during the 1990s; after the 35 deaths sustained in Somalia in 1992–3, the clearest objective of US policy seemed to be to avoid American military casualties in the region. Domestic constituencies believed the Clinton administration would re-emphasize the continent, but that administration's efforts were largely limited to ambitious rhetoric about the need to engage the continent, and feel-good media events such as the 1994 'White House Conference on Africa', with little follow-up.

What might be called the US foreign policy infrastructure in the region declined during this period. Underfunding for American diplomacy was a global problem, but with particularly striking repercussions in the region, where several reports noted the growing number of senior and mid-level diplomatic positions going unfilled in US embassies, and the difficulties of recruiting qualified professionals for positions in the region.¹¹ By the end of the 1990s, the number of Peace Corps volunteers in the region had declined to roughly half the level funded in the late 1960s. In 1999, the Clinton administration closed down the United States Information Agency (USIA) and folded its scaled-down operations into the State Department. Greater efficiency and savings were the primary official motivation for closing what had been the main vehicle for US cultural diplomacy, including activities such as funding for translating English works of literature, overseas American cultural centres, and promoting scholarly and journalistic exchanges. Spending for this kind of cultural diplomacy had declined sharply after peaking during the Cold War. Finally, foreign aid to the Africa region stagnated in current terms and declined in real terms, falling to a historic low in 1996. The US had provided as much as a fifth of all foreign aid to sub-Saharan Africa, but by 2000 it accounted for under 10 percent. By then, USAID no longer had resident missions in 22 of sub-Saharan Africa's 48 countries.

Advocates of a more aggressive foreign policy towards the Africa region posited a causal linkage between economic development and international security. In other words, the low-income economies of the developing

10. Princeton Lyman, 'A strategic approach to terrorism' in Donald Rothchild and Edmond Keller (eds), *Africa-US Relations: Strategic encounters*. (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 2006), pp. 49–64.

11. Morrison and Cooke, *Africa Policy in the Clinton Years*; J. Stephen Morrison and Jennifer Cooke, 'Staffing shortfalls and ineffective assignment system compromise diplomatic readiness at hardship posts' (Report No. GAO-02-626, United States Government Accountability Office, Washington, DC, 18 June 2002).

world deserved the attention of US foreign policy because they were prone to political instability and violence, and tended to generate ‘global bads’ like environmental degradation and endemic disease that posed long-term security threats to the US. Preventive attention to these issues today, the argument went, would prove much less costly in the long run than the cost of attending to the inevitable complex humanitarian emergencies and peacekeeping that would result from inattention. During his tenure as head of USAID and facing cuts from a recalcitrant Congress, Brian Atwood made this argument in various public fora,¹² pointing to the cost to the international community of attending to the humanitarian consequences of conflict in places like Somalia and Liberia. That Congress continued to cut his agency’s budgets demonstrated in part how little traction this argument had in the US before 9/11.

One significant trend that began during the second Clinton term was the increasing emphasis on commercial links to Africa, often presented in a ‘trade not aid’ discourse. Several trade missions to the region by Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown eventually led to the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) of 2000. I return to AGOA below. Here, it needs to be said that one key reason that programmes like AGOA grew in importance in the 1990s was the political support they enjoyed from the business community, which either stood to benefit directly from these programmes – this was the case notably for American oil companies with operations in the Africa region, which would gain the lion’s share of AGOA benefits – or indirectly from the increased economic activity they promoted. AGOA probably marked the entry of the business community as a significant constituency in a more active US Africa policy.

Bush’s African policy: a brief review

As George Bush left office in January 2009, the general consensus appeared to be that his administration’s Africa policy constituted one of his unambiguous successes, as even relatively harsh critics of his administration grudgingly conceded.¹³ Over the course of the eight years of his administration, US engagement in the region had increased appreciably in a number of areas.¹⁴

The events of 9/11 probably constitute the main reason for the discontinuity that has marked US policy towards Africa over the course of the last

12. Brian J. Atwood, ‘Nation building and crisis prevention in the post-Cold War world’, *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 2, 1 (1994), pp. 11–17.

13. For instance, see ‘George Bush’s legacy: the frat boy ships out’, *The Economist*, 15 January 2009.

14. For recent reviews, see Jennifer G. Cooke and J. Stephen Morrison (eds), *Africa Policy Beyond the Bush Years: Critical challenge for the Obama administration* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 2009); Raymond Copson, *The United States in Africa: Bush policy and beyond* (Zed Books, London and New York, NY, 2007).

eight years. The bombing of the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam by Al Qaeda in August 1998 had alerted US officials to the militant Islamic presence in East Africa, and to the vulnerability of local governments to terrorist attacks. The need to counter this form of terrorism had been put on the foreign policy agenda by the Clinton administration before it left office in early 2001. Arguably, increases in foreign aid in fiscal years 1998–9 were in part a response to these events. The Clinton administration also stepped up various programmes of military assistance to the region, though these would be much expanded under the Bush administration.

Thus, the incoming Bush administration could take advantage of a policy change that had already started. Nonetheless, Bush's redefinition of US actions in this area as part of a broader 'war on terrorism' clearly provided the domestic impetus for a more ambitious response. Increases in funding for Africa could now garner Republican votes on the Hill, in a way that had never been possible for Clinton, while Democratic support remained fairly constant. Al Qaeda networks were obviously present in East Africa, but, in addition, reports of varying quality now appeared of activities by Al Qaeda and its various affiliated groups in the Sahel and West Africa. The combination of weak and failing states in the region, high levels of poverty and slow economic growth, and a substantial Muslim population, estimated at more than 300 million, suggested a fertile ground for militant Islam.

These concerns led directly to an increased US military role in the region.¹⁵ As early as October 2002, the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTTF-HOA) was launched: 1,800 US soldiers were based in Djibouti, with the objective of deterring and countering threats in Somalia, Kenya, and Yemen, and providing technical assistance in counter-terrorism to local armies. CJTTF-HOA would eventually set up a permanent base at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, and expand its activities to countries such as Eritrea, the Seychelles, and Mauritius. Camp Lemonier represents the first permanent US base on the continent in several decades.¹⁶

Similarly, the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), a programme funded by the State Department, was set up to enhance border capabilities throughout the region against arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and the movement of transnational terrorists in the northern African countries of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad. These efforts were enhanced in 2005 through the Defense Department's Operation Enduring Freedom – Trans Sahara (OEF-TS) and the State Department's Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism

15. See William Bellamy, 'Making better sense of US security engagement in Africa' in Cooke and Morrison (eds), *Africa Policy Beyond the Bush Years*, pp. 9–33; and Ploch, 'Africa Command'.

16. Lange Schermerhorn, 'Djibouti: a special role in the War on Terrorism' in Robert Rotberg (ed.), *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa* (Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2005).

Initiative (TSCTI). In 2008, most of these activities were transferred to the new military command established for Africa, AFRICOM, which was now to consolidate all of the counter-terrorism activities in the region, as well as more traditional training and technical assistance provided to African military units.¹⁷ AFRICOM began its operations in October 2007, with temporary headquarters in Germany. The budget request in the 2009 fiscal year totalled some \$389 million.

The increasing reliance of the US on oil imports from the African sub-continent supported the administration's re-evaluation of African security issues.¹⁸ Sub-Saharan African oil production increased from 5 to 7 percent of world production between 2001 and 2007, and now accounts for roughly a fifth of US oil imports (a quarter if North Africa is included). The growing importance of African oil to the American economy led Washington to worry about its continued flow, not least because of the perception that Africa's oil-rich states, grouped around the Gulf of Guinea, were among the least stable and poorly governed states on the continent. Ensuring stability and improving governance became the official reason for the increased diplomatic presence and foreign aid in countries like Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria, as well as occasional US navy tours to the region and increased technical cooperation to local navies.

In addition, the Clinton administration argument of a link between security and development gathered traction as a result of the example of Afghanistan, where state collapse had allowed the emergence of the Taliban and a base of operations for Al Qaeda. The theory that the US had a security interest to promote economic development and state building in the low-income world resonated with particular clarity in the Africa region, where a dozen states demonstrated a non-negligible risk of collapse. Such a direct link between development and security was soon given added momentum in Washington in the mid-2000s when a militant Islamic faction emerged to challenge for power in the collapsed state of Somalia.

Linking development to security helped increase political support for foreign aid to the region, which grew from \$2.5 billion in fiscal year 2000, to \$7.5 billion in 2007 (see Figure 1).¹⁹ In fiscal year 2008, five sub-Saharan African states were among the 15 leading recipients of US foreign aid. They were Kenya (\$599 million), South Africa (\$574 million), Nigeria (\$486 million), Ethiopia (\$455 million) and Sudan (\$392 million). By comparison, only Ethiopia had been in this select group ten years earlier. During this

17. Jean-Christophe Servant and Harry Forster, 'Africa: external interest and internal insecurity: the new Gulf oil states', *Review of African Political Economy* 30, 95 (2003), pp. 139–42.

18. See David Goldwyn, 'Pursuing US energy security interests in Africa' in Cooke and Morrison (eds), *Africa Policy Beyond the Bush Years*, pp. 62–90.

19. See the US Overseas Loans and Grants Greenbook, at <<http://quesdb.usaid.gov/gbk/>>.

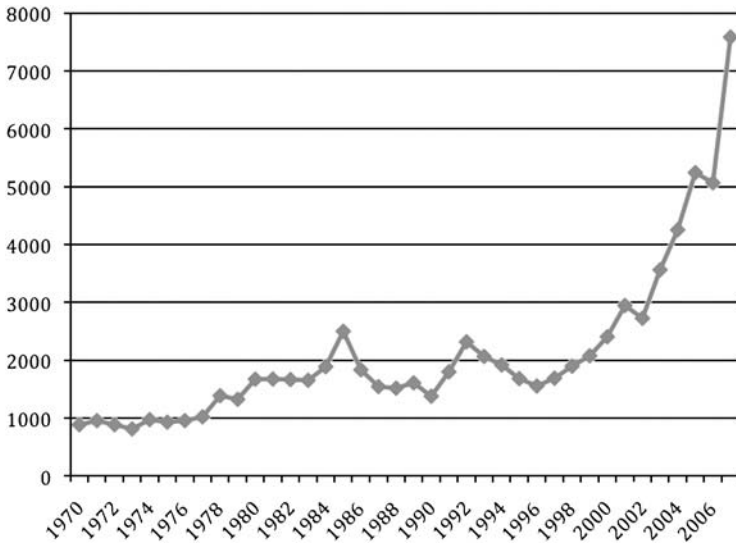


Figure 1. US aid to sub-Saharan Africa, 1970–2007 (in 2007 constant dollars). Source: US Overseas Loans and Grants Greenbook, at <<http://qesdb.usaid.gov/gbk/>>.

same period, the Bush administration substantially increased total foreign aid – in part to fund reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan, but increases to programmes in Africa were considerably more impressive, so that Africa’s share of total US aid increased from 13.3 to 28.6 percent during this period, though the US continued to provide a lower percentage of its overall aid to Africa than the other major donors, who were typically above 40 percent.²⁰

Roughly a third of total aid to Africa in 2007 was for humanitarian assistance and another fifth was for the President’s Emergency Program for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The Bush administration also created a new aid agency, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which would specifically reward low-income countries that promoted sound economic policies and good governance; the administration’s ambitious spending targets for the MCC have never been fully implemented, however, in part because of congressional reticence, and annual disbursements have never exceeded the 100–150 million dollar range, though commitments did substantially increase in 2007–8.²¹

20. The aid data are cited in Curt Tarnoff and Marian Lawson, ‘Foreign aid: an introduction to US programs and policy’ (Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, 10 February 2009).

21. David Gootnick, ‘Millennium Challenge Corporation: progress and challenges with compacts in Africa’ (Testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 28 June 2007, available from United States Government Accountability Office).

In addition to the events of 9/11 and the emergence of a 'war on terrorism' as an organizing principle for US foreign policy, other factors also shaped the specific contours of the Bush policy towards Africa. First, support for foreign aid in the developed countries has waxed and waned over the years, and it was perhaps inevitable that the decline in political support for aid during the 1990s was followed by a renewal of support in the following decade. A broad, international, non-governmental coalition that came to include the Pope, various movie and music stars, and the odd policy entrepreneur started to gather momentum in the late 1990s, notably over the issue of debt forgiveness, and the UN initiative to publicly link its development activities to the attainment of a small number of high-profile individual welfare targets in the Millennium Development Goals campaign proved very effective in gaining broader popular support for increases in aid levels.

To be sure, the pre-9/11 Millennium Summit at the UN headquarters in New York in September 2000 may not have had much impact on US policy to Africa, but by the following spring, in March 2002 when the Monterrey Summit was convened, the landscape had changed fundamentally. George Bush now agreed to increase foreign aid by \$5 billion over three years – the first indication that the administration would actually expand foreign aid.²²

A second and related motivation for the Bush administration to re-engage with Africa early in its first term had to do with domestic American politics, and the administration's claim to embody 'compassionate conservatism', in order to broaden its electoral base.²³ During the 2000 election Bush had campaigned as a moderate and continued to seek political support from independent and centrist voters, since registered conservative Republicans alone would not provide him with an electoral victory. Particularly during his first term, however, most commentators agree that the main issue areas were characterized by a conservative policy orientation that would not appeal to independent and centrist voters. In that context, policies to promote foreign aid in Africa, or to address the HIV/AIDS crisis, provided the administration with the opportunity to renew its appeal with the electoral language of 'compassionate conservatism' – and at so little cost, it might be added, that it would not derail the administration's more pressing priorities.

At the same time, a proactive anti HIV/AIDS programme proved attractive to the politically important evangelical Christian community that wanted to push the administration in a 'faith-based' policy direction. How influential this constituency proved to be in the implementation of PEPFAR

22. Mark Tran, 'Ministers and aid officials are gathering in Monterrey, Mexico, to discuss the aid and trade needs of the world's poorer countries', *The Guardian*, 18 March 2002.

23. Lael Brainard, 'Compassionate conservatism confronts global poverty', *Washington Quarterly* 26, 2 (2003), pp. 149–69.

need not concern us here.²⁴ The important point is that as a result Bush's foreign aid increases – unlike those of previous US administrations – were largely facilitated by broad bi-partisan support on Capitol Hill.

Flaws in Bush's Africa policy: increased means without increased coherence

The biggest success of the Bush administration in Africa was to generate substantial increases in aid. The numbers in Figure 1 suggest a sharp discontinuity with the 1980s and 1990s, even if one recognizes that the upward trend in aid had begun under the Clinton administration, and even if the difficulty of finding a few more billion dollars in a three-trillion-dollar budget is probably exaggerated in the Washington policy circles that have drawn attention to these increases. Despite them, the US remains the least generous OECD country in the size of its aid programme relative to GDP.

In several key respects, nonetheless, Africa policy under the Bush administration continued the weaknesses of past US administrations. A first striking characteristic of recent US policy in the region has been the absence of an overarching strategic vision that would integrate the different pieces described above and give them policy coherence. In other words, these budget increases were not the result of some careful strategic thinking about the region. Indeed, by the end of the Bush administration, it appeared almost as if the budget increases were an end in themselves, to be touted politically, and not the means to achieve explicit policy objectives. Some academic critics of the administration have argued that the Bush administration has shaped a highly strategic and integrated set of policies towards Africa, in which the growing US military presence and foreign aid are designed to serve the interest of American multinational corporations.²⁵ Administration pronouncements promoted the notion of a carefully thought-out integrated approach to the region. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's claim, in Bush's second term, that the administration was advancing a 'transformational diplomacy' echoed (not much more convincingly) the Clinton administration's ambitious rhetoric. An examination of the record suggests, instead, a piecemeal approach in which different agencies pursued commercial, humanitarian, military, and diplomatic objectives, with little coordination or integration.

The proliferation of uncoordinated agencies and programmes dealing with Africa is addressed below. Here, the argument is that the tensions and sometimes contradictions between agencies and objectives, given the weakness of policy coordination from the foreign policy leadership

24. Holly Burkhalter, 'Trick or treat', www.foreignaffairs.org (27 October 2004).

25. Sandra T. Barnes, 'Global flows: terror, oil and strategic philanthropy', *Review of African Political Economy* 32, 104–105 (2005), pp. 235–52.

in an administration that was focused almost entirely on Iraq, undermined both specific policies and the credibility of the US in the region. The political weakness of both the State Department and the National Security Advisor during the eight years of the Bush administration and the decline of the human resources, leadership, and physical presence of US diplomacy on the ground combined to lessen the ability of the administration to both formulate a coherent African policy and articulate it daily in African capitals.

Thus, for example, PEPFAR's ambitious programmes were never adequately integrated into an overall health sector development strategy, even though health is a major area of activity for USAID, and indeed for other donors. PEPFAR's sometimes impressive achievements are at risk because the recipient countries' domestic public health sectors – that should have been built up to sustain current efforts – have never received sufficient attention.²⁶

Similarly, particularly in the second Bush administration, good governance and democracy were held to be major objectives of policy in the region.²⁷ It was embodied in the policies of MCC, but that agency failed to achieve a prominent role in foreign aid under the Bush administration. At the same time, with several exceptions, governance objectives seemed to be secondary to other objectives in the overall allocation of military and economic aid to the region, particularly to key allies like Uganda, Kenya, or Ethiopia.²⁸ Governance criteria weighed less in the definition of Department of Defense (DOD) programmes in the region, or commercially minded programmes like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) of 2000, one of whose primary beneficiaries has been authoritarian Angola. Such contradictions are perhaps an inevitable feature of foreign policy, particularly in a region of secondary strategic importance, but the inconsistency of the administration's democracy agenda has exacted a reputational cost in the region, in part because the war in Iraq has caused the loss of much good

26. Janet Fleischman, 'Integrating reproductive health and HIV/AIDS programs: strategic opportunities for PEPFAR' (Report of the CSIS Task Force on HIV/AIDS, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 2006); see also Sheila Herrling and Steven Radelet, 'Modernizing US foreign assistance for the twentieth-first century' in Nancy Birdsall (ed.), *The White House and the World: A global development agenda for the next US President* (Center for Global Development, Washington, 2008), pp. 273–98; Phil Nieburg and J. Stephen Morrison, 'The United States's big leap on HIV/AIDS in Africa: what's the next act?' in Cooke and Morrison, *Africa Policy Beyond the Bush Years*, pp. 34–61.

27. Joel Barkan, 'Advancing democratization in Africa' in Cooke and Morrison (eds), *Africa Policy Beyond the Bush Years*, pp. 91–110.

28. *Ibid.* See also Susan B. Epstein, Nina M. Serafino, and Francis T. Miko, 'Democracy promotion: cornerstone of US foreign policy?' (Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, 26 December 2007).

will,²⁹ but also because new actors in the region like China have overtly downplayed issues relating to governance.

The different facets of US policy in the region are also not coordinated because each specific component is pitched narrowly, and not articulated centrally, by a single voice from Washington. Anti-terrorism and military security cooperation have focused primarily on North Africa, the Sahel, and the Horn region, while PEPFAR's Africa focus has been almost entirely in Southern and East Africa. Energy policy, for its part, has focused on the Gulf of Guinea in Central Africa, while AGOA has primarily benefited Southern Africa, with the exception of Nigeria. Thus, individual African countries have typically built very different relationships with the US, around the policies of specific agencies, and without an overarching logic.

One consequence of this situation has been the militarization of Africa policy, which appears incontrovertible. Much of the increase in foreign aid has been motivated by the 'war on terrorism', rather than economic development or poverty alleviation. Thus, a small number of US military allies get a disproportionate share of aid, and the US provides the lowest proportion of its aid to the lowest-income states of any major donor, again in contradiction to the administration's rhetoric of economic growth and poverty alleviation.³⁰ A causal linkage between security and development had been asserted for years by proponents of more development assistance. Ironically, under the Bush administration, it was used to expand the role of the military in the region.

With the emergence of AFRICOM, the DOD now accounts for a fifth of American foreign aid to the region, despite its lack of experience in an area that has never been considered part of its core mission.³¹ Arguably, the growing role of the DOD in Africa policy was the result of conscious choices in Washington.³² Clearly, the emphasis on security in the context of the 'war on terror' represented a choice on the part of the administration. Much of the current imbalance, nonetheless, appears to be the involuntary result of the weakness of overall policy leadership, the budgetary difficulties of civilian agencies, and the evident need to integrate security and development issues, all of which created a policy vacuum into which the DOD willingly ventured. The resources the DOD can and has mobilized for Africa, after all, are very significant in the region and huge compared to the

29. See Thomas Carothers, 'The backlash against democracy promotion', *Foreign Affairs*, 85, 2 (2006), pp. 55–68.

30. See Herring and Radelet, 'Modernizing US foreign assistance'.

31. Princeton Lyman, 'US foreign assistance and trade policies in Africa' in Cooke and Morrison (eds), *Africa Policy Beyond the Bush Years*, pp. 111–40 and William Bellamy, 'Making better sense of US security engagement in Africa', in Cooke and Morrison (eds), *Africa Policy Beyond the Bush Years*, pp. 9–33. See also Copson, *The United States and Africa*, pp. 110–20.

32. Barnes, 'Global flows'.

resources available to other federal agencies for African policy, yet represent a minuscule proportion of its own budget.

AFRICOM's roll-out in 2007 was a diplomatic disaster, seen with deep suspicion in much of Africa, where it was viewed as almost entirely about 'the projection of US interests' in the region, with little regard to African interests.³³ This view is held particularly strongly in South Africa, the regional economic power whose support is almost certainly critical to US diplomacy in the region. In part because of this negative response, the decision to base AFRICOM headquarters in Africa was shelved, and the US administration began to downplay the implications of the initiative.

Another more significant consequence of the inadequate articulation of an overall African strategy, most experts agree, is that the extra attention and resources extended to the region have not leveraged additional influence for the US, nor substantially changed the African landscape in terms of either security or development.³⁴ The emergence of a proactive and highly accommodating China policy in the region, the disastrous effects of the Iraq war, and the Bush administration's penchant for unilateralist rhetoric, particularly in the first term, weakened the US reputation in the region.³⁵

A second systematic weakness of African policy under the Bush administration has been organizational proliferation and institutional fragmentation, a long-standing process that now was exacerbated. Virtually every federal agency is now involved in some African activities. Significant new actors are emerging, displacing the traditional pre-eminence of the State Department and USAID in the making of policy towards Africa. In 2006, USAID managed only 45 percent of official development assistance, and agencies as disparate as the Treasury, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce, Health and Human Service, and the DOD had full-fledged development programmes.³⁶ By creating PEPFAR and MCC instead of charging and funding USAID to undertake their assigned missions, the Bush administration further contributed to this problem.

To be sure, the progressive incorporation of USAID into the State Department was justified in strategic terms by the Bush White House. Foreign aid, it was argued, needed to be better integrated into the making of American foreign policy. Yet, by itself, USAID's bureaucratic subordination to the State Department did little good, because USAID was still

33. Greg Mills, Terence McNamee, Mauro de Lorenzo, and Matthew Uttley, 'AFRICOM and African security: the globalization of security or the militarization of globalization?' (Discussion Paper 4/2007, Brenthurst Foundation, South Africa, 2007).

34. This is perhaps the central argument of the review of the Bush administration in Cooke and Morrison (eds), *Africa Policy Beyond the Bush Years*.

35. For instance, several of the contributions in Robert Rotberg (ed.), *China into Africa: Trade, aid and influence* (Washington, DC, Brookings Institution, 2008).

36. Lyman, 'US foreign assistance'.

micro-managed by Congress and its programming hampered through constraining earmarks that are essentially decided on Capitol Hill without regard to the State Department's changing policy priorities. Moreover, with half the professional staff that it had in the mid-1990s and serious gaps in technical positions, USAID continued to be starved of adequate resources and continues to lose institutional capacity.³⁷

The growing Pentagon role in the region has similarly been portrayed as the adoption of a very broad definition of security that extends into developmental areas traditionally quite foreign to the military. Much has been made of the fact that AFRICOM agreed to place a State Department official in the command structure, as one of two deputy commanders. In fact, inter-agency coordination remains highly imperfect and its benefits require policy direction from the White House, which was too often missing during the Bush administration. In its absence, the practical implications of the relationship between security and development would not help extremely different agencies forge a sensible common policy; the general principle of a linkage between development and security provides little actual guidance in specific situations on the ground. Should development serve the interests of security, as ultimately the Pentagon would no doubt prefer? Or should security be viewed as a prerequisite of development, USAID's probable preference? Which agency decides? Which agency should chair the process and set the agenda? In the absence of White House leadership, a long-term vision of policy needs will be less likely, as mid-level agency decision makers engage in turf protection.

At the centre of the policy apparatus, moreover, is a weakened State Department, a decline particularly striking in the first term of the Bush administration when it played second fiddle in decision making, behind the DOD of Secretary Rumsfeld and the Vice-President's office, as revealed by a number of journalistic accounts of decision making in the Bush White House.³⁸ This political weakness was exacerbated by the failure of the administration to address the organizational and personnel issues undermining the effectiveness of US diplomacy, a particular problem in the 'hardship' missions in Africa, and one that was exacerbated by the exodus of some of the region's most experienced diplomats to the burgeoning positions created to deal with the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite the recruitment drive orchestrated under Secretary Powell in Bush's first term, overall vacancy rates for foreign service officials in US embassies and consulates still totalled 15 percent in late 2008 and were

37. Carol Lancaster, *George Bush's Foreign Aid: Transformation or chaos?* (Center for Global Development, Washington, DC, 2008).

38. For instance, Robert Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (Simon and Schuster, New York, NY, 2004).

twice as high in the Africa Bureau.³⁹ The language skills of American diplomats continued to be inadequate: in 2006, 29 percent of language-designated positions in the field were staffed by officials who did not meet the department's own language proficiency requirements. In August 2009 the State Department's Inspector General released an extremely critical report of the management and leadership of the Africa Bureau under the Bush administration, arguing that the Bureau's longstanding deficiencies had worsened in recent years.⁴⁰

A final characteristic of the Bush Administration's African policy has been the low leverage it has exhibited relative to conflicts in the region. Despite the increase in resources brought to bear on Africa policy, the Bush administration's record at mitigating conflict in the region was actually quite mixed. Despite the success of American diplomats in helping to broker the 2005 peace agreement between the Khartoum government and the SPLA in Sudan, and its role in helping to end the Liberian civil war, what is striking is the intractability of a number of African conflicts throughout this period, and the timidity of US engagement in these conflicts. The civil wars in the DRC, the collapse and civil war in Somalia, the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, the Darfur debacle, the crisis in Zimbabwe – to mention only the region's most prominent conflicts – all would suggest the limits of American power in the region, if one was confident that that power had actually been leveraged to good effect in these countries. In Somalia, for instance, many observers believe active US attempts to undermine the Islamic Courts Union after 2006 worsened the conflict. Elsewhere, to be sure, mid-level US diplomats participated in various donor conferences and peace initiatives, and back-channel links were used, sometimes quite creatively, to engage with warlords and recalcitrant dictators. Presidential special envoys were identified to focus on seemingly intractable crisis areas. To be sure, also, the US government provided increasing financial support of UN and African Union peacekeeping efforts, although the most important of these, in DRC and Sudan, have been woefully underfunded relative to their mandates.

It nonetheless remains the case that the most senior officials of the Bush administration devoted little attention to these conflicts, in part because of their focus on events in the Middle East and Iraq. The main policy objective regarding military intervention, meanwhile, appears to remain the old Clinton administration one of avoiding casualties. Without the attention of the White House, US diplomacy was too weak and poorly funded, its presence on the ground too thin and isolated, to make a difference.

39. 'A foreign affairs budget for the future: fixing the crisis in diplomatic readiness' (Report, American Academy of Diplomacy, Washington, DC, 2008).

40. Office of the Inspector General, 'Report of Inspection: the Bureau of African Affairs' ('Report No. ISP-I-09-63, United States Department of State, Washington, DC, August 2009).

A new approach for the Obama administration?

Africa was barely mentioned during the 2008 campaign, and though Obama's pronouncements on Africa, to which he is personally linked through his father and which he has visited in the past, indicated an abiding interest and perhaps more knowledge than any recent president, his circumspection suggested the intention to temper expectations. As a result, the thrust of the administration's Africa policy remains ambiguous, even after President Obama's trip to Ghana in July 2009, and Secretary of State Clinton's subsequent seven-nation trip to the region.

Early appointment of Clinton administration Africa specialists suggested continuity with past Democratic administrations. Thus, Clinton's Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, Susan Rice, was named Ambassador to the United Nations, while Gayle Smith rejoined the National Security Council, where she had served in the late 1990s. Johnny Carson, a long time Africa hand and career diplomat, took over the Assistant Secretary slot, the first career foreign service officer in this slot since George Moose (1993–7).

As the first American head of state of African heritage, President Obama's July 2009 speech in Accra was rich in symbolism, but its themes did not suggest a radical change in the direction of policy.⁴¹ Its support for good governance and democracy was perhaps more strongly stated than usual, but such support has long featured in US official rhetoric. That commercial and strategic considerations more often than not will continue to contradict the rhetorical support for democracy was then supported by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's trip to the region in August 2009, which included participation in an AGOA conference and a visit to the oil giant Angola, designed to improve bilateral relations with that country's notoriously corrupt and authoritarian government.

The burgeoning fiscal crisis in the US during 2009 makes an expansive Africa policy less likely. Obama's Accra speech included no major new initiatives and its argument that 'Africa's future is up to Africans' not only evoked the Carter administration era's call of 'African solutions for African problems', but has also long been a standard diplomatic argument for modest ambitions. Though it focused more on trade issues, the Clinton trip also failed to generate any new initiatives, for instance, suggesting the administration has no intention of offering trade concessions to benefit the poorest economies in the region. Such reticence surely can be traced to the power of the anti-free trade sentiment within the Democratic caucus on Capitol Hill, also emboldened by the recession.

In any event, budgetary politics in Washington throughout 2009 did not seem particularly promising for largesse towards Africa. In the early discus-

41. 'Barack Obama and Africa: how different is his policy?', *The Economist*, 16 July 2009.

sions around the budget in his very first weeks in office, the Obama administration appeared to back away from the large aid increases his campaign had promised, in the context of the worsening economy and rising budget deficits. Indeed, the economic crash in the fall of 2008, the global recession and the mushrooming US fiscal deficits will almost certainly put downward pressures on the last decade's increases in foreign aid budgets to the Africa region, and at the very least the promises of more substantial increases no longer seem politically sustainable. The early evidence suggests that congressional Republicans are rediscovering their appreciation for fiscal discipline, so the Bush-era bipartisan base of support for aid increases may not last much longer.

This changing macro-economic context reminds us that President Bush's Africa policy benefited from excellent economic circumstances. The expansion of programmes to the region was possible, in political terms, because the growing US economy led to congressional complacency about the fiscal deficits that began accumulating early in his administration. In addition, with a real overall growth rate of over 4 percent during 2000–7, Africa probably enjoyed its best economic decade since the end of the colonial era, fuelled by macro-economic reform, good weather and high commodity prices. The emergence of a global recession in late 2008 immediately had a negative impact on commodity prices; thus oil prices peaked at \$147 a barrel in July 2008 but were down to \$58 by May 2009. Cotton prices were similarly down 40 percent over the same period. Given the reliance of African economies on commodity exports, the global recession is likely to have a chilling effect on the region's recent economic gains. Thus, even as the political climate may well be turning against a proactive US policy, the need in Africa for such a policy may well be increasing.

The three weaknesses of US policies under the Bush administration just described will set the agenda for the Obama administration. First, defining an overall strategic framework for the region, in which reasonable means and ends are roughly aligned, remains the main challenge for the administration. The relationship and balance between different American objectives in the region, from poverty alleviation, through commercial considerations, US security and anti-terrorism concerns, to democracy promotion and good governance, need to be refined, even though the ability of the US to influence events on the ground will remain limited in the foreseeable future. The Obama administration has apparently chosen to vocally downgrade the Bush administration's emphasis on security issues, but the early evidence suggests that many of the Bush policies in this area will nonetheless be maintained. Inconsistencies and tensions will no doubt always exist between commercial, humanitarian, and strategic considerations, but long-term principles, goals, and priorities must be clarified much more persuasively than has been done in recent years, and actions on the ground cannot be

manifestly at odds with the rhetoric coming out of the White House, without further damaging the reputation of the US in the region.

White House leadership needs to be exerted to limit the contradictions in US policy, since they often result from the absence of high-level arbitration between different interests in Washington, and from catering to narrow domestic, bureaucratic, and commercial interests. One example of these dynamics is American food aid, the effectiveness and efficiency of which have been undermined consistently by domestic commercial interests that are well-represented on Capitol Hill and have managed to prevent the reform most experts argue is unambiguously desirable.⁴² In essence, sound development policy has been hijacked by tawdry rent seeking and influence peddling, as successive US presidents have been unwilling to expend the political capital needed to promote reform. Another example is the fact that authoritarian oil producers like Angola have been among the main beneficiaries of AGOA, in a manner that contradicts Washington's rhetoric about democracy and good governance and the policy logic of AGOA, which was never designed to benefit middle-income oil exporters. AGOA should be reformed to become both a more effective promoter of economic growth and poverty alleviation in the region, and an instrument to promote democracy and good governance, in line with other explicit US objectives. But this is likely to happen only if the highest levels of the White House give their blessing and sustained attention to changing a policy that has also been beneficial to well-represented interests in Washington.

Second, it is difficult to see how the administration will be able to implement an effective strategy in Africa without significant organizational reform, to help coordinate the making of policy and arrest the institutional fragmentation that has characterized recent policy. As Lyman and others argue, however, there is no ready blueprint for reform, and little consensus regarding what direction it should take.⁴³ Proposals run the gamut from the elimination of USAID to its elevation to cabinet status. Some have advocated the rewriting of the venerable Foreign Assistance Act, written in 1961 and amended so many times it has lost any semblance of coherence.⁴⁴ Similar debates exist about AFRICOM's future status, and about the kind of inter-agency mechanisms to integrate the international activities of twenty or so federal agencies.

Institutional reform will involve complex politics across deeply entrenched bureaucratic interests in Washington, both within the executive

42. Christopher Barrett and Daniel G. Maxwell, *Food Aid after Fifty Years: Recasting its role* (Routledge, New York, NY, 2005).

43. Lyman, 'US foreign assistance'.

44. See Carol Lancaster, *George Bush's Foreign Aid*; and Herrling and Radelet, 'Modernizing US foreign assistance'. For a broader analysis, see also Richard Joseph and Alexandra Gillies (eds), *Smart Aid for African Development* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 2009).

branch, and between the executive and Capitol Hill. Previous attempts to 'reinvent government' suggest success is exceedingly difficult, while unintended consequences remain highly likely. The gravest danger may be that policy making is paralysed while institutional reform is pursued. Nonetheless, several principles can be identified to guide reform. First, the loss of institutional capacity within the State Department needs to be overturned, and its presence on the ground much strengthened. The reliance on high-profile envoys has its place but should not be a palliative to enhanced institutional capacity on the ground. Second, the balance of power and resources between the DOD and the State Department needs to change. Even the current Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, has argued that civilian diplomacy needs to be strengthened relative to military programmes, pointing out that the entire 150 account of non-military international activities of the federal government is currently less than what the Pentagon spends on health programmes for its employees.⁴⁵

Third, the fragmentation in foreign aid programmes to the region needs to be curtailed. How this is done, and whether this will mean the ultimate demise of USAID, or on the contrary its revitalization, is a question well beyond the confines of this essay. What is clear is that the proliferation of mostly uncoordinated aid programmes dedicated to single objectives makes little sense. At the very least, mechanisms for much more systematic coordination and integration need to be developed and promoted.

Finally, the region's main conflicts need to be addressed more proactively than has been the case for the last decade. Conflicts in the Horn of Africa, DRC, Chad, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Côte d'Ivoire continue to exert powerful externalities on the region, not only in terms of their directly damaging outcomes, from the excessive availability of small weapons, to refugee flows, environmental degradation, and endemic disease, but also in terms of outside perceptions regarding Africa and its ability to attract tourists and foreign direct investment. Africa's prospects for economic growth and stable democracy are clearly undermined by the continuing conflicts in the region. In addition, the return to peace in places like post-conflict Burundi or Sierra Leone remains tenuous, and must still be consolidated, even as the global recession is likely to have a powerfully negative effect on African economies.

These conflicts often have complex domestic causes and are not necessarily amenable to externally imposed solutions. However, more consistent diplomatic leadership on behalf of peace is desirable, as is greater support for the regional and international institutions that typically will play a leading role in mediation and peacekeeping efforts. Just as Cold War American foreign policy tended to place excessive importance on the Soviet influence in the region, so it would be a mistake to exaggerate the Islamist influence,

45. Cited in Herrling and Radelet, 'Modernizing US foreign assistance'.

or to define policy in the region in terms of some global 'war on terror' that is largely unrelated to the real causes of these conflicts.

Concluding remarks

This article has argued that US policy making towards Africa has often struggled with the equation of means and ends in a region that it has not viewed as central to national interests. Somewhat paradoxically, policy towards Africa suggests that the US is not adept at forging a coherent and strategic policy towards a region perceived to be of secondary importance. In the second term of the Clinton presidency and more clearly throughout the Bush administration, budgets for African policy were allowed to grow expansively – at least by historical standards – but contradictions and incoherence continued to characterize policy making. One reason was the imbalance between military and security spending and the resources devoted to the civilian dimension of policy making. I have suggested various ways in which a more strategic approach could be developed.

It may be appropriate to end with a note of caution. The Obama administration may well coincide with a period of retrenchment in US policy towards Africa. Economic crisis and fiscal deficits may well lead to greater cuts in policy areas that are viewed as secondary in political importance. Voices will no doubt be raised in Washington in the coming years expressing scepticism about programmes like PEPFAR, in the face of cuts to more politically influential programmes or the possibility of tax increases. Now, it is true that the sum total of US expenditures on behalf of Africa policy is decidedly minor in terms of the overall budget, but most of it is in the discretionary part of the budget that has come under assault in previous fiscal crises.

This reality suggests once again the importance of presidential leadership. Not only will it be necessary to protect programmes that do have a long-term importance to the US, despite their minor cost and political cost. In particular, American diplomacy needs to be buttressed because in the long run it provides the highest return on investment of any international expenditure undertaken by the US government. But, in addition, presidential leadership is necessary for the government to increase the effectiveness of its current policies by reforming programmes that are not efficient, increasing coordination and integration of different policy commitments, sustaining policy attention on critical issues, and – in many cases, given political realities – appointing and supporting the best available officials to address issues for which the President and Secretary of State lack the time.