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07 July, 2003

**"Sustaining Africa's Future"**

As summer begins in the northern hemisphere, U.S. President George W. Bush is speaking of his upcoming trip to Africa and his thoughts about how to solve the "problem" which Africa poses; it's generally agreed upon that Africa has many troubles and is itself a dilemma for the rest of the world. The president's remarks at the end of June preceded his African trip by nine days and were made to the Corporate Council on Africa's U.S.-Africa Business Summit. The president spoke at length in vague and non-specific terms, consistently implying that a brighter future for Africa is of paramount interest to the United States. But the tone of his remarks and the make-up of his audience seem to indicate that the primary interests of the United States when it comes to Africa are access to free and open markets.

The United States has engaged Africa only very gingerly in recent years. During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union saw African states as places where they could wield influence and power, in a proxy fashion, without causing any serious direct risk to each other. Since the U.S. arose as the only real superpower, many African governments have looked toward Washington for leadership. But following a disastrous engagement in Somalia in 1993, the U.S. has largely stayed away, leaving Britain and France to provide guidance for struggling African states. Although there is a much-hyped AIDS initiative and a modestly improved financial assistance package being touted by Washington, neither has received full Congressional funding approval.

In President Bush's recent speech, he spoke of his upcoming visit to Botswana, Senegal, Uganda, South Africa, and Nigeria. He said: "My trip should signal that I am optimistic about the future of the continent of Africa. After all, there's a generation of leaders who now understand the power of economic liberty and the necessity for global commerce. I also understand that freedom and prosperity are not achieved overnight. Yet the 48 nations of Sub-Saharan Africa have an historic opportunity to grow in trade, and to grow in freedom and stability, and most

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importantly, to grow in hope." The president's trip will take him to countries that are already moderately successful and where Washington's message will find the most sympathetic audiences.

Nevertheless, one would expect that Africans and others concerned about the continent to be grateful that the United States has decided to give it some attention. History shows, however, that the kind of attention being suggested by Bush has time and again proved devastating for Africa. He provided his audience with a lesson in African history and current affairs but continuously returned to the theme of free international trade, open markets, peace, and human rights as the solutions to all that ails Africa.

Human rights are a nebulous concept because the notion of what humans should be entitled to enjoy varies from place to place, culture to culture, and from time to time; though some basic principles can usually be agreed upon with little controversy. And while most observers recognize peace as the ultimate goal of societies, Bush believes that free trade and open markets are the keys to attaining peace. For Africa, at least, free trade and open markets have always meant foreigners taking their produce and products and leaving very little behind. Open markets have meant that African markets are open to foreigners while those of foreigners are at least partially closed to Africans. Most Africans can readily recognize that as they attained freedom from European colonialists in the mid-twentieth century and aligned themselves with the corporate and globalization trajectory, they merely exchanged one form of subservience for another.

Bush also spoke of the problem of hunger in Africa without ever acknowledging that it is the heavily subsidized agricultural production from the United States, in contravention of several international trade agreements, that helps put Africans in a position where they cannot sustain their own markets. African farmers cannot compete with imported produce that has been grown and transported for less than the cost of local production, owing to heavy subsidies in the rich countries exporting the goods. To be sure, Africa is plagued by drought, flooding and poor crop management, but they cannot hope to overcome those obstacles when even in good years their produce is undercut by heavily subsidized Western imports. To further aggravate this issue, Bush chastised those African states that oppose the concept of genetically modified crops and livestock; although there is massive disagreement worldwide on these matters, Bush confidently assured his listeners that the science is very sound and there is no need to worry.

But the present interest in African affairs displayed by the U.S. administration should be taken as genuine concern only with caution; the history of American involvement in African affairs has not been positive. It has always been one of subterfuge, with the CIA honing its skills on unsuspecting Africans, with persistent intervention in domestic African affairs through the not-so-subtle application of financial threats, with secret funding and training of multiple rebel armies and incendiary militias designed to help foment revolution in countries where governments were not American sympathizers. However, to be fair, the history of all other powers can be equally criticized; this is not solely an American tendency.

There are many foreign corporations doing business in Africa. In

some cases, their presence has earned them excellent profits and has benefited the local people. But in many more cases, profits have been taken with little return to the local citizens and, in some places, what can only accurately be described as slave-labor conditions exist. A huge push to privatize public services and utilities has been underway in Africa and has met with only sporadic resistance. Often, demands for such privatization are prerequisites in order to obtain assistance or loans from groups like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). While these might all seem reasonable business activities, most of Africa is far too underdeveloped to absorb these endeavors without making their situation worse.

Algeria, on Africa's northern coast, has long tried to act as a mediator in African affairs, and it presently finds itself as one of the prime movers of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which is one of the more hopeful initiatives to arise in Africa in recent years. That should entitle Algeria to expect at least a polite hearing from those interested in helping to rejuvenate Africa; but none of the Western powers appear to be listening, including to Algerian protests about France leading military expeditions into several central African countries.

Leading nations within NEPAD, such as South Africa, Nigeria, Algeria and Senegal, have been attempting to promote African solutions to African problems and development of effective African institutions. They are seeking to develop democracy across the region but perhaps most important are their efforts to try to develop an economic outlook that is pan-African. They seem to sense that the piecemeal trade between themselves and others, and the foreign manipulation of African resources has failed them consistently. They are looking to ways of obtaining development assistance that does not require them to trade away their resources and to allow others to constantly determine their fate, as history shows to be the norm in Africa.

The answers to Africa's problems are not as simple as freer trade and more foreign ownership. Instead, they are as NEPAD appears to have grasped: Africa needs control of its resources, it needs an adequate supply of electrical power, and it needs control of its water resources. And at least until African states become much more prosperous than they are now, they probably need to explore the option of becoming a single trading bloc, like the European Union, where they can play in the world marketplace with vigor and authority, and the collective clout that should devolve from being one-eighth of the world's population.

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