

# Obama And U.S. Policy Towards Africa

By [Prof. Horace Campbell](#)

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*As Obama takes over the presidency of the United States, Horace Campbell contextualizes an Obama presidency in the realities of Africa and the ongoing global finance crisis. He argues that “capitalism should not be reconstituted and rebuilt on the backs and bodies of Africans.” For Campbell, the crisis is not simply a cyclical crisis of capitalism; it is a fundamental shift in the global political and economic order. In light of this fast changing world, Campbell is also interested in the possibilities and our responsibilities in bringing about change in and for Africa.*

Writing at the end of September 2008, the chief policy adviser to the candidate Senator Barack Obama spelt out the foreign policy goals as they related to Africa in this way:

“Barack Obama understands Africa, and understands its importance to the United States. Today, in this new century, he understands that to strengthen our common security, we must invest in our common humanity and, in this way, restore American leadership in the world.

“As a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he has engaged on many African issues. He has worked to end genocide in Darfur, to pass legislation to promote stability and the holding of elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to bring a war criminal to justice in Liberia and to develop a coherent strategy for stabilizing Somalia.”

From this broad outline the adviser (who had been trained in one of the elite African Studies Centers in the United States) went on to outline three goals of the candidate:

- One is to accelerate Africa’s integration into the global economy.
- A second is to enhance the peace and security of African states.
- And a third is to strengthen relationships with those governments, institutions and civil society organizations committed to deepening democracy, accountability and reducing poverty in Africa.

## THE REALITY

The contradictions between the goals and the stated strategic objective of “investing in a shared humanity” brings to the fore the tensions and contradictions between the campaign of Senator Obama and the mindset of the thinking behind achieving goals for the United States and for the peoples of Africa. Between the time of the statement of this adviser in September and the elections in November, the realities of the global capitalist crisis had become very clear for the citizens of the United States. Citizens of Africa were always aware

of the exploitation, hunger and death that came with capitalist relations of production. When Julius Nyerere had called for a revolution embedded in the African values of Ujamaa and self reliance, there was a political and ideological war against the peoples of Tanzania and any society in Africa that dared to be independent. Nationalization of the people's wealth to ensure equal opportunities was rubbished by US policymakers.

Yet, in ten weeks between September and November 2008, the US government moved to nationalize banks, insurance companies and to invest billions of dollars (to bail out) the automobile industry. When the campaign ended and Senator Obama became President-elect Obama, it became clearer that neo-liberalism was dead or was dying. Neo-conservatives and the gurus of market fundamentalism were on the retreat, but in the Obama transition, there was no real break from the old mindset of US policymakers in relation to Africa. From the names and institutions that appeared in the transition process it was clear that the transition to an Obama Presidency will not, in the short term, reflect the kind of change that was promised in the election campaign. Instead of a future of sustainable peace and transformation, one saw a re-emergence and recycling of the same militarists such as Susan Rice emerging as a top official of the US foreign policy establishment. Lawrence Summers, who wrote the memo that it was more economical to dump toxic waste in Third World Countries, emerged as a major economic adviser.

A clear reading of five subject areas with international relations components in the transition team process indicates that Africa in general is likely to be a minor area of focus in their research process. These areas are:

1. State Department and Foreign Policy
2. International Economic Policy (USAID, World Bank, IMF, Treasury, Commerce, US Trade, OPIC, Ex-IM Bank, Agriculture)
3. Health/Human Services (HIV-AIDS)
4. National Security (DoD, AFRICOM and War on terror)
5. Energy (African oil)

In terms of operation, the team took its findings from each department and developed the Obama's administration's first internal white papers for each branch of government. Outside groups and entities with long-term interest in African resources were also submitting white papers on individual subjects into the transition team process. Hence, the final papers of the transition represented a product of both internal research and external contributions.

## **WHO TRAINED THESE POLICYMAKERS?**

From the website of the transition process and the public relations web page of the Obama, one can see that the individuals and organizations that have been involved in the formulation of foreign and domestic policies were the same ones complicit in the think tanks, corporations, governmental agencies and Universities that devalued the lives of Africa. Of the eight major teams for the transition, this author zeroed in on the five areas of the transition that were directly related to the formulation of US policy under Obama.

The same lack of confidence that there will be a changed relationship with Africa emerges from the Cabinet choices that have been made by Barack Obama subsequent to the

clarification of the road from transition to assuming power. Not even the African Americans who are touted to be the internal brains trust inspire confidence that there will be a change. The New York Time has reported that three persons- Valerie Jarrett, Martin Nesbitt and Dr. Eric Whitaker- are the closest advisers of Barack Obama.

While transition team operatives maintained that US policy towards Africa was at present a low priority (insofar as the US is preoccupied with the crisis of the economy and the questions of war and peace in Iraq and Afghanistan) there is no let up on the ground in Africa in the promotion of US 'national interests' through the State Department, the Department of Defense, the Treasury Department, the Department of Energy and a multitude of groups who are supporting AID projects. The day-to-day operations of the US bureaucrats continue to promote the neo-conservative and neo-liberal policies of the western imperial ideation system.

Examples of where these policies are being pursued include: The full speed attempt to militarize Africa under the guise of the so called war on terror. This is manifest in the transition pledge to continue the establishment of the US Africa Command and a US led international naval force off the coast of Somalia.

The second area where this is clear is that despite the fact that neo-liberalism and the market fundamentalism has been discredited in the USA, these policies are still being promoted by the IMF, the World bank and the host of US agencies that are now operating in Africa. In September 2008, when this global capitalist crisis was becoming evident to the world, Alan Greenspan testified before Congress. He said, "I have found a flaw. I don't know how significant or permanent it is. But I have been very distressed by that fact."

What Greenspan was politely saying was that the thinking behind the neoconservative oriented economic policies that had been promoted in the United States and overseas is wrong. During the hearing, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), was not satisfied by the use of the word 'flaw.' Waxman wanted a stronger term. He then asked Greenspan to clarify his words:

"In other words, you found that your view of the world, your ideology, was not right, it was not working," Waxman said.

"Absolutely, precisely," Greenspan replied. "You know, that's precisely the reason I was shocked, because I have been going for 40 years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well."

This admission that for forty years the underlying assumptions, rationales and thinking which served as the foundation of the economic policies of the United States in the USA and overseas was wrong, must be discussed at every level in Africa. Will African governments be comfortable with accepting this statement that they were being bullied into adopting wrong policies? Or will African intellectuals, trade unionists, policy makers and ordinary citizens redouble the efforts to end the domination of the International Financial Institutions over the lives of the people?

Obama's policy towards Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) particularly regarding medicines will be important. Already, Democrats in the Congress led by Charles Rangel have said that the USG should not put the interests of IPR holders in US trade agreements, over the human health interests in poor nations.

Will Obama push that position further or will he fight against it?

It now devolves to the oppressed in Africa to join forces with others in the Global South to push for the dismantling of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The dollar as the currency of World Trade is coming to the end of an inglorious period. It is not in the interests of the people of Africa for the Euro and for the European Union to be the beneficiary of the collapse of US capitalism. It is the task of Africans to work for the overthrow of capitalism in Africa and beyond. Capitalism should not be reconstituted and rebuilt on the backs and bodies of Africans. This crisis is not simply a cyclical crisis of capitalism; it is a fundamental shift in the global political and economic order.

While progressive African peoples at home and abroad were excited about the election of Barack Obama, it was clear that the alternatives to US government policies for Africa had to emerge from the combined efforts of the social forces within Africa who had a vested interest in making a break with the plunder and looting of Africa. From the actions and activities of the dominant groups in the United States that interact with the elites of Africa, the emphasis is on the 'strategic' resources of Africa, without a real consideration for the quality of lives of the people. Walter Rodney had identified this class of Africans who were allies of imperialism in the book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Since the era of neo-liberalism and IMF structural adjustment, the conception of 'underdevelopment' and 'exploitation' has been replaced by the language of 'donor agencies' partners for development and 'democratic governance.' The brightest from the institutions of higher learning were seduced into the multi billion dollar aid sector called the 'humanitarian' and 'non-governmental organization' sector. Many of these international NGO workers in Africa are now caught at a crossroads where there is fear that 'donor funds' will be drying up because of the global capitalist crisis.

It is urgent that the progressives on both sides of the Atlantic call for a full exposure of the 'other flawed' policies of the United States such as the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act and the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Under the Bush administration the apartheid health policies associated with the conservative ideas about reproductive rights have been trumpeted as a success in Africa. So tenacious has been the propaganda about the health policies of the Bush administration in Africa that even within the Obama transition there is an acceptance that the PEPFAR of Bush has been beneficial for Africa. For those who want to continue to accept propaganda that "the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), holds a unique place in the history of public health for its size and scope," I would only want to urge a read of the book, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*.

Health and peace are inextricably linked in all parts of the world, The African traditional healers, cultural workers and caregivers are joining the mass of 6 billion citizens of the planet earth who are calling for investment in caring, not killing. It is a major contradiction to trumpet the support for the recovery of health delivery services in Africa while supporting the remilitarization of Africa.

Will progressives accept that the US policies were 'flawed' or symbolic of the structural relations of US imperialism in Africa? One of the by-products of the neo-liberal discourse was the reality that the understanding of imperial exploitation and plunder had been replaced by the new 'humanitarian imperialism' that was presented behind the international non-governmental infrastructure. Can the Obama administration justify an Economic Recovery program for the United States of over US \$700 billion while advocating the use of 'market

forces' to shelter the plunder of African resources?

## **OBAMA MUST REPUDIATE THE PLANNED US AFRICA COMMAND**

If the economic and diplomatic policies of the USA prior to Barack Obama had been 'flawed', then one needs an appropriate formulation to properly describe the US security policies towards Africa. In December 2008, Larry Devlin joined the ancestors. Before he departed this land, Devlin wrote a book entitled, Chief of Station, Congo: A Memoir 1960-1967. This was a book celebrating the role played by Devlin while he was the Chief of the Station of the Central Intelligence Agency in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. There was no remorse in this book about the role of the United States in the destabilization of the Congo subsequent to the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the support for Mobutu for thirty five years. If anything, Devlin was celebrating the work of the US military and economic agencies. In his logic, everything that the US did during the Cold War was justified in the name of fighting communism.

This logic of Devlin is the same logic of the intellectual institutions of the United States. Peace and conflict resolution centers abound in order to promote the distorted logic of Larry Devlin or other writers who then complain about state failure in Africa. Progressive African Intellectuals must begin to document the criminal actions that perpetuated war and instability in every region of Africa. Not only did the USA support destruction and apartheid under this logic, but today there is support for private military contractors who are operating to protect the oil companies that are polluting Africa's rivers and communities.

Today the peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are reaping the full harvest of the long term investment in militarism and destruction. Yet, instead of a full retreat from the history of military engagement, the members of the US foreign policy establishment continue to call for the establishment of the US Africa Command. It would appear from the public statements of those around the Obama team that the question of change does not apply to Africa and Africans.

## **RESIST AFRICOM AT HOME AND ABROAD**

This is not to suggest that there are no forces within the United States working to dismantle the plans for the US Africa Command. There is such a force within the broad alliance of activists who are pledged to ensure that the Obama administration abandon the plans for the Africa Command. Thus far, the Resist Africom forces in the United States have not been able to achieve their objective of scrapping the Africa command, but the work to end militarism in Africa is tied up with the domestic opposition to militarism and the prison industrial complex in America.

It should be repeated that the foreign policy of a state is a reflection of the domestic political structures of the state. Up to the present, the domestic policy of the United States has been to oppress and exploit Africans and peoples of color. It then stands to reason that one could not expect the foreign policy of the United States toward Africa to be different from the domestic policy of institutionalized racism.

From the period of the transatlantic slave trade, the leaders of the United States have viewed Africa as a treasure trove to be plundered. In this enterprise of looting and plunder, the US experts on Africa thus far had an alliance with the rulers in Africa. This intervention is to link with those forces in Africa who want to turn the global capitalist crisis into an

opportunity for strengthening the social classes in Africa with a vested interest in making a break with the traditions of looting. Every region of the world now sees Africa as the place where there are real resources. Hence China, India, the European Union, Brazil and the United States have all embarked on new ventures to “accelerate Africa’s integration into the global economy.”

## **IMPERIAL RIVALRIES IN AFRICA**

The irony is that each of these societies seeks to embark on larger economies of scale while working to undermine efforts at continental unity among the peoples of Africa. The leaders of the European Union have been the most active in their plans to intensify the exploitation of Africa. From North Africa, France promises to further weaken and divide Africa with a planned Mediterranean Union. Libya opposes this plan by France and, in order to compete with France, the USA is strengthening its ties with Libya. Progressives in the Pan-African world must oppose the French plan, but they must also oppose the opportunism and cynicism of the US foreign policy ‘forward planners.’ Cooperation and competition between the USA and Europe is intended to weaken the African Union. In the past, US policy makers have identified client states such as South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda as partners. It is in the interest of the peoples of Africa and the peoples of the United States that a government that wants to move beyond the imperial past engage with the continent as a whole and strengthen the progressive forces who are working for the establishment of the African Union.

In the past year, there have been open editorial campaigns for the US and the EU to form an alliance against China in Africa. Centers for strategic studies in the USA continue to blow hot and cold as to whether the USA should cooperate with China in Africa or confront China in Africa.

It is well known that capitalist competition leads to war. In the present crisis of global capitalism, there are policymakers in both the United States and Europe who are overtly calling for a military confrontation in Africa. The frontline for this proposed war against China is in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In this enterprise of seeking a pretext for war, the western imperialists have willing allies in Eastern Africa in both Rwanda and Uganda. Thus far, the drumbeat for this confrontation is being hidden under the call for the expansion of the United Nations monitoring forces in the DRC.

Sustainable peace in Africa and a transformation of the militarized institutions that have been established in Africa since the colonial era requires a break with the old US security policies. This author has joined in the forces of peace who are working to build a new Pan Africa peace infrastructure for Africans and peace loving peoples all over the world. Such an infrastructure project must break with the pre-occupation with strategic minerals and energy that is based on the extraction of petroleum resources. Peace and transformation in Africa is inseparable from a break with environmental destruction in Africa. Just as how there is now an understanding in the USA that the society needs an Economic Recovery program that is based on the ‘Green collar economy’, there is also an understanding in Africa that African economic transformation must be built around the provision of food, clothing, shelter and health care for the peoples of Africa.

## **REPARATIONS AND JUSTICE**

It is on the question of reparations and the building of a strong Union of the peoples of Africa



where the progressive forces in the United States will have to pressure the new Obama administration to support reparations and sustainable peace in Africa. Already, Bishop Desmond Tutu has called on Obama to apologize on behalf of the American state to the peoples of Iraq for the invasion and destruction caused by the neo-conservatives of the past Bush administration. This author wants to support that call for reparations along with calling on representatives such as John Conyers to revive the legislation for reparations and reparative justice. On the website of one of the most senior lawmakers in the USA there is the declaration that:

In January of 1989, Mr. Conyers first introduced the bill H.R. 40, the Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act. He has reintroduced H.R. 40 every Congress since 1989, and will continue to do so until it's passed into law.

This author is calling on all progressives to join in the call to extend this assertion by Conyers so that, in the short run, the government of the United States re-engages with the process of the World Conference against Racism, when it convenes in Geneva in April 2009.

### **FAILURE, FLAWS OR CRIMES IN AFRICA**

It is now clear from the transition team of Obama that there is no new thinking on Africa. On the web site of the Obama election campaign, the adviser on Africa boasted that Obama:

“As a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he has engaged on many African issues. He has worked to end genocide in Darfur, to pass legislation to promote stability and the holding of elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to bring a war criminal to justice in Liberia and to develop a coherent strategy for stabilizing Somalia.”

Who will be able to educate the Obama Presidency that the road to peace in Darfur and in the DRC is linked to demilitarization globally? Obama cannot continue the duplicity of the Bush administration that continues to have security and intelligence sharing with the government of the Sudan while maintaining that it is working to end the genocide in Darfur. Peace in Africa and demilitarization in the United States are two sides of the same coin.

Barack Obama is the son of a Kenyan immigrant. His father met an early demise from the deformed politics of division and manipulation in Kenya. Obama is going into the White House with a keen sense of the realities of the impoverishment of the people of Africa. It is the same Obama who understands that change can only come through organization. After all it was Senator Obama who campaigned on a pledge:

“I don't want to just end the war,” he said early this year. “I want to end the mindset that got us into war.”

Africans at home and abroad must inspire a new mindset so that all of the differing agencies, foundations and academic institutions in the USA can move to a new vision of relating to Africans as full human beings. By every measure, the victory of Obama is historic. Obama will either be a great President moving the society beyond the traditions of militarism and support for dictators or be another imperial President who happens to have a father from Kenya. The choice is not up to Obama. The choice is dependent on the extent to which the progressive forces use the opening provided by the election of Obama to bring about the change we want.

**Horace Campbell**, is professor of African American studies at Syracuse University, and

*author of Rasta and Resistance, from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney, and Reclaiming Zimbabwe: The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of Liberation.*

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