

# **MAKING CONNECTIONS FOR AFRICA:**

## **Constituencies, Movements, Interest Groups, Coalitions, and Conventional Wisdoms\***

**A**frica's marginalization within the US foreign-policy process is widely acknowledged. Those of us who think Africa does deserve more attention can easily identify one remedy: build a larger, better organized and more powerful constituency for Africa that demands response from policymakers because of its political clout. Spelling out in practical terms how to do this, however, is no easy matter.

Thinking on this topic has often been shortcircuited by the misleading model of the lobby for Israel, with its image (not entirely deserved) of consistent success.<sup>1</sup> That model is too simple. 'Africa' is not one country. To think of all Africans as having only one agenda is to accept a stereotype that wrongly distinguishes the continent's people from the rest of humanity. The agendas coming from Africa are as multifaceted as from any other world region. At times they are contradictory.

Moreover, the constituencies for Africa in the US are diverse, both within and beyond the African American community. To put it bluntly, there will be no AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) for Africa as a whole. Lobby(ies) for Africa must build their strength on unity in diversity, not pursue the will-o'-the-wisp of one centrally directed line in support of one easily defined cause.

The model(s) for success must be complex enough to match the complexity of the reality. They must consider the multi-decade efforts of the anti-apartheid movement and other cause-oriented foreign policy campaigns as well as the mixed record of 'ethnic' lobbies. They must also reckon with obstacles rooted in inequalities both within and between countries. And they must take account of the variety of interests among those in the US who care about US relations with the continent and its peoples.

This paper aims to pose questions and lay out hypotheses. I have tried to state them clearly, freshly, and at times provocatively, in order to focus discussion and move our debates beyond generalities. It is a measure of our collective ignorance<sup>2</sup> that almost all the generalizations below are impressions from participant observation rather than conclusions from organized empirical data. This brief essay is more an agenda for debate than a finished analysis. Even so there are many important aspects not included here.

### **Constituencies and Connections**

'Constituency' is narrowly defined as 'a body of voters in a specified area who elect a representative member to a legislative body.' Even for elected officials, it is often ambiguous who their 'constituency' really is. It can be everyone in their district, the fraction that votes, only the voters who voted for them, or their campaign donors. For groups and individuals claiming to speak 'for Africa,' the definition is even more confusing. Who 'represents' whom? On what do they base their legitimacy? If one is talking about influence in the US political arena, potential constituencies 'for Africa' must be individuals or groups satisfying two criteria. They must (1) have weight (as decision-makers, voters, opinion-makers, or donors) within the US political system, and (2) have some link to the African continent giving them reason to use their voice, whatever that may be, 'for Africa.'

There are many such individuals and groups that fit within the broad definition of the previous paragraph. Unlike members of the AARP (American Association of Retired Persons), however, they are not all listed in

\* This paper was prepared by Africa Policy Information Center (APIC) Senior Research Fellow William Minter for the Constituency Builders' Dialogue organized by the Africa Policy Information Center, held at Airlie House, Warrenton, Virginia, over the weekend of January 10-12, 1997. The Dialogue was designed as an opportunity for a diverse group of activists from different sectors of Africa advocacy work in the United States to step back, reflect and engage in dialogue on the strategic directions for grassroots Africa constituency-building in the current period. The Dialogue was made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with additional assistance from the United Nations Development Programme.



anyone's consolidated database. Nor do they all speak with one voice, or even at all, on African issues. Diverse constituencies in the US relate to similarly diverse constituencies in Africa. And they may reflect those African agendas more or less faithfully. The dialogue across the Atlantic is still hampered by practical difficulties in communication as well as divergent views and interests.

So we are talking primarily about 'potential' constituencies for Africa, rather than ones already mobilized and standing up to be counted in favor of a particular agenda. We should not take it for granted that the many US-based groups or individuals with interests in Africa all share common agendas. These issues, moreover, rarely reach the public as ones that demand a response. As a result, public opinion on most African issues is latent and general rather than firmly consolidated.

The potential for mobilization depends on many factors. These include



Representative Ronald Dellums speaks to a rally on the steps of the Capitol building in Washington at National Anti-Apartheid Action and Lobby Day, June 16, 1988

kinds of connection to Africa, generalized values on issues affecting Africa, and the opportunities (information, appeals) presented to individuals and groups to respond to. All of us have our own impressions based on our personal experience. However, there is little systematic empirical data on the relative effects of these different factors. ■

are diverse in terms of current relationships to the continent. Some, whose ancestors' journeys passed through Latin America, may identify as Latino or Hispanic rather than African American or black. Many, probably most, still share much disinformation and stereotypes about Africa communicated by the mass media and educational system. Many have a cultural identification, but have had no opportunity for first-hand links to the continent. Despite the significant potential in rising identification with pan-African and Afrocentric themes, cultural identity still rarely carries over into policy advocacy on African issues. The high cost of travel, and the deficiencies of the US educational system, also limit access to information about African issues.

Black Americans, while not monolithic, do tend to have distinctive perspectives on world affairs. As historian Brenda Plummer has recently stressed, however, this interest has not been limited to Africa or to the African diaspora.<sup>3</sup> There has been a broader tendency to be identified with the op-

---

**Proposition 1: Ancestral connection to Africa is an extremely important component for potential mobilization of individuals on African issues. But it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition. Whatever the racial or ethnic background, some people will be involved and others not.**

(a) Among US citizens and residents, some were born in Africa or are separated from the continent by only one or two generations. This rapidly growing group ('neo-diaspora') has the most direct connection with Africa. Many, however, have reasons to concentrate on personal agendas or to avoid involvement in policy issues. Some may identify primarily (or be identified by others) not with "Africa"

as a whole but with a specific country or ethnic group, or even as Arab, Asian, British or American. In addition, their access to the US political arena may be limited by lack of experience or confidence, by restricted channels of influence, or by policymakers' suspicions of special pleading.

(b) Those with ancestral links to Africa dating to the slave trade, stretching back six, ten or more generations,



pressed and issues of justice wherever the location of the struggle.

(c) Other ('non-black') Americans, are in ancestral terms separated from Africa by 600 or more generations, with more protracted journeys through other continents.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless they share the generally unacknowledged influence of African culture, through its ancient and medieval impact on Europe and through cultural interpenetration in the Americas over the last 500 years. Significant numbers have been influenced by participation in the anti-apartheid movement or other personal contacts with Africa.

(d) Whatever the ancestral connec-

tion to Africa, the potential of individuals for involvement in organized advocacy for Africa is likely to vary significantly by other factors. These include values, personal experience, professional and organizational responsibilities, opportunities to travel to or live on the continent, and general experience with and confidence in political advocacy and other organizational skills. Whether broader constituencies not actively involved have more or less sympathetic attitudes is another relevant factor. But foreign policy issues, including Africa, will be highly salient for at best a small fraction of the attentive public.<sup>5</sup> ■

educational institutions, religious denominations and businesses have significant African connections and programs, often predating those of their historically white counterparts. The scope of these has, however, been constrained by institutional resources. As a result the current scale of African involvement is not necessarily proportionally more (in relation to domestic concerns) than that of their historically white counterparts.

(c) In practice the organizations that make up the core 'constituencies for Africa' are either (1) those with an Africa-specific mandate or (2) those with particular agendas (human rights, environment, development, relief, missions, etc.) in which Africa figures prominently enough to support the assignment of personnel to Africa-specific departments or programs. Some of the Africa-specific organizations (e.g. TransAfrica, Africare, International Foundation for Education and Self-Help, Constituency for Africa) are specifically based in the African American community. Others (e.g., African American Institute, American Committee on Africa/Africa Fund, Washington Office on Africa/APIC) are historically multi-racial. The paid personnel and members/supporters of the non-Africa-specific historically white organizations engaged with Africa are, to varying degrees, more diverse than in the past in terms of race and national origin. But there is still a major challenge for historically white development, human rights, and other issue-focused groups to address diversity issues.

(d) Whatever their racial composition, degree of Africa-specific mandate, or sector, all the US-based groups concerned with Africa are in need of much

**Proposition 2: US-based organizations with an institutional stake in relations with Africa are equally or more important than individuals in defining operationally the 'constituencies for Africa.' This includes private sector, not-for-profit and governmental institutions.**

(a) The number of such Africa-interested organizations is almost certainly much less than those with comparable institutional stakes in Europe, East Asia, the Middle East, Latin America or other major world regions.<sup>6</sup> The substitution of globally thematic focuses for area studies or regional focuses, increasingly common in academic and foundation circles, runs the danger of contributing in practice to further marginalization of Africa. If this is not to happen, it must be complemented by area-specific emphases and affirmative action for historically disadvantaged world regions, including Africa in particular. This applies equally within the government, private sector and voluntary sectors.

(b) Organizations within the African American community (educational,

religious, social service, advocacy, commercial) likely have a greater tendency to be interested in Africa—as compared to other world regions—than their historically white counterpart institutions. But the historical legacy of inequality has an opposite effect. Focus on domestic issues and general lack of opportunities for international involvement may result in less involvement on Africa than their historically white counterparts.

Most of the large or prominent African American organizations (e.g. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Urban League, Congressional Black Caucus), focus primarily on domestic affairs. They pay only very limited program attention to the African continent or foreign affairs more generally. Many historically black



greater accountability and transparency. It should be openly acknowledged that there is an element of self-interest not only in the business sector but also in the institutional interests of government agencies and non-governmental groups. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. In fact the 'constituencies' for Africa will be stronger for

acknowledging that they are also constituencies for their own specific institutional agendas. There should be no automatic assumption, however, that what is good for a specific company, NGO or government agency is necessarily also good for 'Africa.' That should be a subject of public debate and open evaluation. ■

and in government also have profound effects on the policy options that are taken into consideration.

For all the sectors of Africa constituencies, therefore, their links to the rest of society — at community, elite and policy-making levels — are just as important as their numerical weight and internal coherence.

(c) The anti-apartheid movement provides the major example in US history of a foreign-policy-oriented constituency-based social force which cut across racial, sectoral and other barriers to have a profound impact. It is notable that throughout the phases of its history, the constituencies involved consistently included a mix of South Africans in exile, black Americans and other Americans, long- and short-lived groups with varying compositions and agendas, as well as a wide range of institutional sectors. Its experience is unlikely to be duplicated, and contains its fair share of negative as well as positive examples. But it is still one of the major sources to be probed for possible paradigms for future Africa constituency-building.

## Movements

Movements, in the sense of broadly encompassing and mobilizing social formations, are historically specific. In recent US experience, among the most prominent are the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the environmental movement. Those focused on foreign policy issues are relatively few (anti-Vietnam war movement, anti-nuclear movement, anti-apartheid movement, Central America movement). Their impact is generally less pervasive than those dealing with domestic issues. The anti-war move-

**Proposition 3: The extent to which these constituencies for Africa have a political impact depends on the number of people willing to be involved. It also depends on the kind of links made (a) among Africa-interested constituencies and (b) of Africa-interested constituencies with the wider society and polity. The anti-apartheid movement provides an exceptional instance of how diverse connections can come together to produce a powerful political impact.**

(a) Relationships among Africa-interested constituencies are fragmented along many different lines. To name only a few, there are racial and national divisions within the US, geographic focus within Africa, and institutional focus (human rights, development, relief, private business, church, government, education and others). Many Africa-interested persons and groups are primarily interested in only one country or one issue, and difficult to mobilize on other countries or issues. While simple lack of coordination is more common than open conflict, there are issues (e.g. sanctions against the Nigerian military regime, the rights and wrongs of market-oriented structural adjustment programs, and others) on which there are diametrically opposed perspectives.

This diversity should be no surprise, and is not in itself any cause for lamentation. It is potentially a strength as well as a weakness. But it does pose the fundamental issue as to how and when these diverse interests

and concerns can cumulate to make an impact equal to or greater than the sum of their parts. This is vital for public perception as well as for the political weight that can be brought to bear at one time in a policy debate of decisive importance, such as, in 1994, the issue of US response to genocide in Rwanda. In extreme cases, moreover, there are US institutions with high interest in Africa (e.g. multinational oil companies with investments in Nigeria) whose inclusion among constituencies 'for Africa' must be questioned.

(b) Public impact on Africa policy also depends fundamentally on the broader public, opinion-makers and policy-makers who do not have a specific Africa interest or involvement. The general climate on such issues as, for example, the US role in the UN, foreign aid, trade, and human rights, sets the context for the policy community's reactions to specific African issues. General assumptions about Africa in the media



# Conceptual Map of Africa-interested Constituencies

The map of Africa-interested constituencies can be envisaged as three concentric circles, each divided into six sectors. The operational definitions are only suggestive—illustrating how one might begin to put numbers to these divisions, if data were available.

## Circles

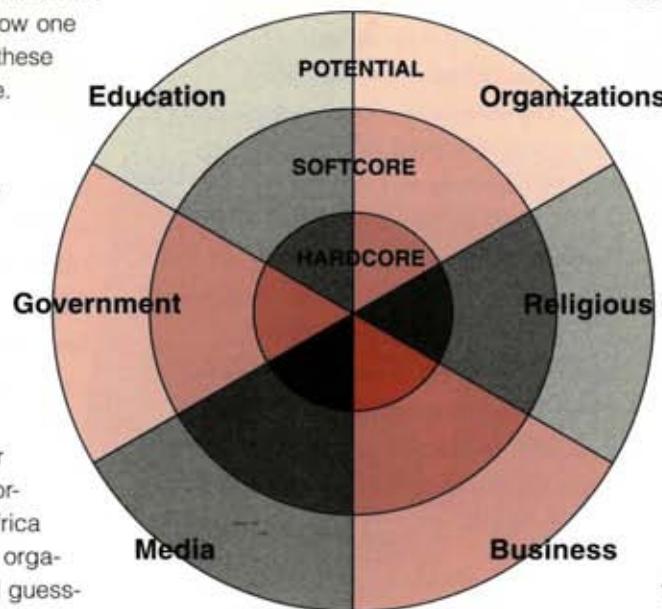
**HARDCORE** The inner circle consists primarily of people having jobs with Africa-focused organizational responsibilities. It could be operationally defined as people spending more than half their working time dealing with African issues, whether employed by Africa-focused organizations or as staff with Africa responsibilities within broader organizational structures. An initial guess-timate is that there may be as many as 3,000-5,000 such individuals resident in the US, including, for example, staff of non-governmental organizations such as African American Institute, Africare, staff of US and multilateral agencies and embassies, teachers of African studies. A broader definition of the HARDCORE would include people who would like to spend more than half their working time dealing with African issues, if they could find a job that would let them do this.

**SOFTCORE** The second circle includes the inner circle, plus individuals with significant involvement in African issues as indicated by, for example, subscribing to an Africa-focused publication, being a member of or a regular contributor to an Africa-focused organization, being a repeat buyer of books on Africa, teaching one course on Africa a year, having significant business relations with Africa, or significant if still part-time professional involvement with Africa. This core Africa-interest group might, on an initial guess-timate, include as many as 20,000-25,000 additional individuals.

**POTENTIAL** The outer circle extends outward to include all those US residents with some organizational or media-atten-

citizens who have worked in, lived in or visited African countries.

Together these categories might include as many as 10-20 million additional individuals.



tion factor making them significantly more likely than the average to have some occasional interest in African issues. Only a fraction would be expected at any given time to respond to offers of information or challenges to be involved. But their likelihood of response can be hypothesized to be much greater than of a general audience. Examples include members of African-American civic, civil rights, or social welfare organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Council of Negro Women, or Alpha Kappa Alpha; members of international affairs interest groups such as the Foreign Policy Association, UN Association, World Affairs Councils; teachers of international affairs, current issues and social studies courses in secondary schools as well as colleges and universities; subscribers to African-American magazines such as *Emerge* and to public affairs magazines such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy* and *Current History*; immigrants from African countries; US

## Sectors

The constituency map can also be divided up by sectors, each of which has different information needs, and a different potential relationship to advocacy and constituency mobilization.

Some individuals, of course, may be active in more than one sector at the same time, or over time. The audience for Africa-focused communication media, such as the Africa News web site, includes individuals and organizations from all the sectors. But despite overlap, the best communication channels for reaching the different sectors are unlikely to be identical.

Although further research may indicate an alternative breakdown, six sectors seem initially to be sufficiently distinct to warrant separate consideration: government, business, education, media, organizations, and religious groups.

## Demographic data

For each of the 18 pieces of this circle it would be useful to know background demographic or other data that might be relevant to their information needs, communication channels by which they might be reached, and so on. It might be useful to develop a standard set of variables that different organizations could use in constituency research, such as, obviously, geographic location, age, gender, race, national origin, education, income, occupation, experience in Africa, level of interest in Africa or specific regions or countries within Africa, access to e-mail and fax and so on.



ment is an exception, since once troops are dying overseas, an international issue quickly becomes domestic. The fol-

lowing comments focus specifically on the anti-apartheid movement and possible future counterparts. ■

**Proposition 4: The anti-apartheid movement, as a movement, is over. It has left a rich legacy of personal experience, connections and values which can contribute to building stronger constituencies for Africa. However, only a small portion of that contribution will be in specific involvement with Southern Africa in particular. Most involvement in Southern Africa will be on an interest-group or professional level rather than in a movement mode (see next section). Equally if not more important will be the involvement of former anti-apartheid movement participants in other African issues. In addition, one can build on understanding of African issues among former anti-apartheid movement participants whose energies are now engaged in other international and domestic issues and institutions. Any strategy to utilize the movement legacy should take this range of diverse options into account.**

(a) The history of the anti-apartheid movement, or Southern Africa solidarity movement, is still relatively unexplored for positive and negative lessons. It featured decentralization and diversity, accompanied by generally weak organizational structures and lack of coordination. But it also embodied sustained interaction between the struggle in Southern Africa and the development of the movement in the United States. It built linkages among grassroots groups, national organizations and a wide range of other groups in civil society. It developed a broad consensus on major aims and strategies, and its central message resonated with the values of the society at large.

(b) Like all movements, and particularly those connected with specific foreign policy issues, the anti-apartheid movement's history had a beginning and an end.<sup>7</sup> With the obvious enemy

removed, the coherence of a movement which was never organizationally centralized disappeared. Some analysts argue that significant opportunities were lost for greater engagement by movement organizations in post-apartheid US/South African relations because of the lack of flexibility of movement leadership in the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

Whether that is the case, or whether the organizational decline was an inevitable result of historical developments, US/South African relations in the post-apartheid period have moved rapidly to an interest-group rather than movement model. Diverse interests and institutions in the two societies are building more particularistic ties not integrated by any common movement theme. Those groups and individuals with roots in the movement experience are a minority among the forces driving the US/South African relationship. Among

many who were active in the movement, there is still an understandable but also unproductive bitterness at the prominence of newcomers who were absent or even others who were collaborators to a lesser or greater extent with the previous apartheid order.

Many individuals or groups coming out of the anti-apartheid movement are still struggling to find appropriate niches in relations with South and Southern Africa under the new circumstances. There are many individuals placed within a variety of institutions which are actively engaged. A number of existing groups trace their current involvement to the anti-apartheid legacy. But without a common symbolic or movement link, it is likely that successful engagement will be primarily in specialized sectoral arenas.

(c) The relevance of the anti-apartheid movement is not limited, however, to continued active engagement with South and Southern Africa in particular. Just as veterans of the civil rights movement moved into other arenas after the height of the movement in the 1960s, so the experience of the anti-apartheid movement is available for other Africa-related issues which similarly evoke the need to fight injustice. Openness to new directions on US relations both with South Africa and the rest of the continent should also be enhanced by the presence of people with anti-apartheid movement experience in other societal institutions, whether or not their current job and political commitments mandate active engagement on Africa. ■



**Proposition 5: A variety of African issues may energize and involve constituencies in movement-like action on specific countries, issues (e.g., landmines), or crises. It is possible that no single African issue will evoke sustained engagement from US constituencies on a broader movement model. If one Africa-specific issue does gain such prominence, however, it is likely to be the Nigeria pro-democracy movement.**

(a) The Nigerian crisis lacks the easy clarity of the race-based political and economic oppression of the apartheid system. There are many reasons, nevertheless, to think that a significant international solidarity movement may emerge. Nigeria is central to the African struggle for a 'second independence' from oppressive post-colonial systems. The size and weight of the country make it unavoidably prominent, whatever happens. The extremism and crudity of its current military regime, as symbolized by the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, carries with it the potential for repeatedly discrediting itself in world opinion, as did the South African regime. The odds that current transition programs will resolve the structural crisis are low to non-existent.

The Nigerian diaspora is relatively well-educated and engaged. There are diverse international constituencies already involved, from human rights and environmental groups to Africa-specific advocacy organizations. The movement and individual movement organizations admittedly have multiple weaknesses. But it should not be forgotten that the South African liberation movement and its overseas supporters in the 1960s and 1970s suffered from many similar weaknesses.

(b) It is also important to consider the role of Africa within non-geographi-



**The execution of activist Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Nigerian military regime evoked world-wide protest and raised awareness of the Nigerian struggle for democracy. As earlier in the case of the anti-apartheid struggle, foreign companies like Shell became the target of boycott campaigns.**

cally-specific "movements" with an international focus. To what extent are broad sectoral movements (women's rights, environmental, human rights, gay and lesbian rights, and so on) to be the likely vehicle for engagement of US citizens with international issues? What

about issue-specific campaigns, such as banning landmines or reducing Third World debt? How do such movements and organizations address the issue of sustaining a focus on particular African countries and the African continent? How do Africa-specific organizations relate to these movements and their constituencies? To what extent can productive structural links be built between Africa-specific organizations and organizations with issue rather than geographically defined mandates? ■

### **Interest groups**

The concept of interest groups can be understood in many different ways. At one extreme it refers simply to categories of people who may share or be assumed to share common interests (women, blacks, middle class, media executives, immigrants, Republicans, etc.). At the other extreme it refers specifically to organized groups or associations, with offices, staff, budgets and defined positions on issues. Defining what constituencies for Africa mean in terms of interest groups can vary significantly depending on the definition used. What should be clear, however, is that it is absolutely essential to consider a wide range. In terms of interest in and mobilization around African issues, there is significant variation not only between categories, but also within almost any category one might name. Organized groups probably are the most significant in operational terms. How closely they represent the constituencies they claim to represent, however, varies widely.



In a rough breakdown of national associations, based on two surveys in the 1980s, Jack Walker identifies three major clusters, very distinct in their funding, operations and patterns of political action.<sup>9</sup> These are profit sector groups (e.g., a chamber of commerce), nonprofit sector groups (e.g., an association of social work professionals) and citizen groups (e.g., Amnesty International, or the NAACP). Although not included in Walker's survey, individual non-profit or profit institutions (e.g. a university or an oil company) could also fit in his 3-part division.

Trade unions, religious denominations, and media institutions are each probably distinct enough to form additional clusters on their own.

Those individuals, organizations or departments within organizations interested within Africa in any of these broad sectors operate in terms of their particular Africa concerns (which may be very specific in terms of geographic or issue focus). They also are constrained by their particular institutional environments. They have distinct relationships to the political process as embodied in party politics and government agencies. It should be no surprise, therefore, that it is difficult to discern a coherent message on most Africa issues from this vast arena of US civil society.

The key issues then become (a) to what extent these groups share common or divergent interests and views with respect to US involvement in Africa or with a particular African issue, and (b) to what extent these commonalities are demonstrated in practice, and made visibly relevant to policy formation. Can such diverse interests ranging from church members supporting a particular mission hospital in an African vil-



The International Campaign to Ban Landmines involves groups in Africa and around the world. This banner reads "Ban landmines now!"

lage through large multinational companies to a student Boycott Shell group set up by someone who spent a summer in Nigeria to (fill in the blank yourself) come together to project an effective political voice? If so, how? If not, which

fraction(s) of these interests can really come together for what specific objectives? The following propositions are only a few of those that need to be debated and studied before there can be good answers to these questions. ■

---

**Proposition 6: There are organized expressions of interest in Africa in virtually every institutional sector of US society, particularly the profit, nonprofit and citizen group sectors identified above. The most glaring vacuum is within the media sector, where Africa-specific media initiatives have been consistently marginalized. For the trade union movement, international issues raised by NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and Asian competition seem far more prominent on the public agenda than is Africa. Even among sectors with more Africa-specific engagement, the level of coordination is extraordinarily weak.**

Efforts to build a stronger voice for Africa must find a way to build the widest possible consensus(es) around a range of issues among the many diverse and even opposed interests and interest groups already concerned with Africa. The forthcoming National Summit process holds the potential for contributing to this goal, but only if it recognizes that consensus(es) cannot be built by inside-the-beltway agreements at elite

level. If that does not happen, the Summit will become simply another one of the competing interest groups, adding to the cacophony rather than aiding the chorus to sing with some degree of harmony.

It is highly unlikely that one massive and sustainable coalition can be built 'for Africa.' Less ambitious but still wide coalitions around specific issues, programs or causes, however, are absolutely essential if there is to be any

significant new impact on policy. Identifying which coalitions can be built, and then carrying out the delicate and time-intensive work of building the necessary consensus(es), are central challenges for pro-active Africa constituency building. Without this, it will not be possible to mobilize large num-

bers of new constituents.

Even if a critical mass of Africa's constituencies are 'on message' and singing in harmony, however, probably the most significant obstacle to wider diffusion of the message(s) is the lack of basic understanding among the media gatekeepers and gatekeeper institutions. ■

**Proposition 7: There are significant cultural and political gaps with respect to Africa, as on other domestic and international issues, between, broadly speaking, the business sector on the one hand, and the non-profit and citizen group (movement) sectors on the other. There are many individuals and groups that are beginning to bridge these gaps, or have the potential for doing so. Polarly opposed views, however, are still very common on both sides of the divide. On the one hand there is a simplistic free-market, anti-state perspective that assumes that trade and investment are automatically beneficial to all parties involved. On the other, there is the reflex assumption that all private business interests are indifferent to and will run roughshod over human rights, environment and social equity.**

This gap cannot be bridged over by pious affirmations of "all the above." In fact the policy options dictated by expanding unregulated free markets, democracy, human rights, etc., are often incompatible, at least in the short- and medium-term. There are stereotypes and prejudices that can and should be undone. Different viewpoints, however, also reflect real differences of political views, values, interests and class positions. The changing world order holds hope for some but increased insecurity and inequality for others, both at home and abroad. These differences manifest themselves on domestic policy issues as well as international issues. It would be naive to assume that they would or should be suspended for Africa-specific issues alone.

The search for common ground by different stakeholders, nevertheless, is necessary. Compromises and common understandings may be possible on many issues. Reaching such understandings—or even seeing if they are possible—requires detailed examination of specific issue areas and debate involving diverse constituencies. On some issues, it should be recognized, there will be confrontation of viewpoints. There was little common ground between most businesses invested in South Africa during the apartheid era and the anti-apartheid movement. Whether or not there is common ground in the current African context will vary according to circumstances and particular national situations. ■

**Proposition 8: The mobilization of ethno-racial constituencies for African issues, both from black Americans in general and country-specific immigrant groups, has great potential for influence on US policy towards Africa. These efforts will be most effective when coupled, as was the case in the anti-apartheid movement, with appeals to common American values and alliances with multi-racial organizations and coalitions. To date such mobilization suffers the same weakness as efforts to coordinate Africa constituencies dispersed in various US institutional sectors. There is still a failure to build policy consensuses that are widely-enough shared and specific enough to have significant policy impact.**

Policymakers have multiple reasons for neglecting black American views on African issues. Given the present configuration of US politics, disregard is common even on domestic issues where opinions are well-formed and clearly articulated by African American opinion leaders. This pattern is even more exaggerated when it is known that views on specific African issues are not strong and clear among black American leadership circles, and at times little known to grassroots African American opinion.

The primary focus of black American organizations on domestic issues is understandable and appropriate. Increased attention to Africa and other international issues, however, would hold potential for increased leverage on domestic issues as well. This could be



coupled with new alliances with multi-racial organizations and coalitions with an international focus. The prominence in the news of Asian and Asian American funding in the 1996 campaign—paralleling the recognition of rising Asian influence on the world scene—holds negative as well as positive lessons. But positive changes in the reality and image of Africa in the world could significantly affect the position of Americans of African heritage. In an earlier period, under very different circumstances, the rise of African countries to independence added its impetus to the contemporaneous civil rights movement in the US. ■

## Conventional Wisdoms

Whatever happens with the Africa-specific constituencies, their impact will be fundamentally affected by the dominant conventional wisdoms, which are profoundly biased in multiple ways against African grassroots interests. There are three important arenas in which conventional wisdom is reinforced and reformulated, with substantial feedback loops among them that are extremely effective in blocking new creative thinking. These are (a) academic and policy think-tank institutions, (b) the policy establishment of politicians, officials and their reference groups, and (c) media gatekeepers.

In each arena pervasive myths about Africa and Africa-related issues pose formidable obstacles to understanding and policy formation. Public misinformation and prejudice about Africa is built on a strong foundation of misinformation and prejudice among precisely those sectors of society who consider themselves to be the intellectual leadership on foreign affairs.

Among the most striking examples, among many, are the hearing and acceptance among opinion-makers given to articles such as Robert Kaplan's 1994 *Atlantic Monthly* article, Samuel Huntington's 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article, and Michael Mandelbaum's 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article,<sup>10</sup> all displaying, in different ways, both unabashed ignorance and disdain for the role of Africa

in US foreign policy.

Each arena requires its own strategy, with the media establishment probably the most set in its ways and resistant to reform. But many of the myths involved are common, pervading not only establishment views but also public opinion and even many among the potential constituencies for Africa. Among the most important (an incomplete list):

---

### **Proposition 9: The myth of Africa as unimportant in hard-headed realistic terms is fallacious even on its own terms, as well as reflecting a simplistic and outdated vision of the role of the US in the global community.**

This myth is pervasive. As a result Africa advocates sometimes argue for attention to Africa in humanitarian terms only, allowing their position to be dismissed by self-styled realists as "social-work foreign policy." The challenge to this perspective must encompass several parallel arguments. First, in economic terms, generally recognized as key to power and status in the new world order, Africa is already far more important than is generally recognized, and potentially even more so. Sub-Saharan Africa, even without including South Africa, accounts for more total trade with the US than the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe combined.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, the end of the Cold War mandates a reexamination and broadening of the concept of security. Even within classical US concepts of security priorities, developments in Northwest Africa are vitally relevant to Europe, as is Northeast Africa to the Middle East. Sub-Saharan Africa may not retain the classical relevance of the simplistic Cold War period. It is clearly relevant, however, in terms of global security concerns about drugs and other crimi-

nal activities, the environment and human migration. These are not less important simply because they do not fit the classical model of inter-state military threats.

Thirdly, the appropriate role of the US in the post-war international community, in which globalization in some form is an inescapable reality, has not yet been addressed by the US foreign policy community. In this necessary re-thinking, involving the US role in a host of multilateral institutions, Africa is unavoidably prominent on the agenda. The debate over whether the US will engage seriously with African issues is not just a bilateral question. It is intimately tied up with reconceptualizing a US role as responsible world citizen rather than as world policeman or inward-looking rogue state. It is unlikely that any constituency can adequately mobilize response to crises such as Rwanda in 1994 or Eastern Zaire in 1996, for example, unless there is an adequate international framework in place, with a base level of support from the US, that can guide response to new crises as they emerge. ■



---

**Proposition 10: The myth of one homogeneous African society takes many forms, some more nefarious and others even seemingly benevolent. But all are damaging to the building of an informed advocacy-oriented Africa constituency or the formulation of appropriate policy options on particular issues. Unless the histories and current dilemmas of African peoples are understood in historically specific terms, rather than in terms of some mythologized racial essence, it will be impossible to develop policies that apply to real-world African problems.**

The stereotypes of Africa as one country, beset by chaos, poverty and primitive conflicts, still dominate much popular (and elite) perception of the continent. There is little awareness of the diversity within the continent, the range of economic and social conditions, or even the simple fact of distance. Developments in the Great Lakes region can affect international market evaluations of investment potential in South Africa, as far removed from each other as St. Louis from Mexico City. At the worst this is accompanied by still live racial prejudice and jungle images, reinforced by simplistic media coverage.

Other variants may be less pernicious, but still have negative impact by their distance from reality and promotion of misleading simplistic views.

Some versions of Afrocentric views present romantic images of African culture, as do some versions of anthropological idealizations of traditional cultures. Undifferentiated identification of African regimes with their peoples, leading to labelling criticism of oppressive regimes such as the Nigerian or Sudanese military regimes as anti-African, does a profound disservice to African aspirations for human rights. In another way, using the label 'black on black violence' to interpret African conflicts is profoundly dehumanizing and misleading, since it implies that there is something unique about conflict between people with black skins, unlike conflicts between people of other colors (would World War II, or even the conflict in Northern Ireland, be so easily referred to as 'white-on-white' violence?). ■

---

**Proposition 11: The myth of 'ancient tribal hatreds' is particularly damaging to the prospects for informed international response to historically specific conflicts in particular African countries and regions.**

If African conflicts, as conflicts in many other parts of the post-Cold War world, are conceived as inevitable outcomes of centuries-old hostilities, the possibility of developing appropriate policy responses is ruled out in advance. For Africa, this tendency is made much worse by the pervasive currency of la-

belling all African conflicts as 'tribal,' with the misleading connotations that they are all traditional, primitive and basically the same. Mobilization of hatred on the basis of ethnicity or 'tribe' is indeed deadly, and its roots in earlier history are certainly relevant. But to regard it as unchanging and inevitable is

as fallacious as it would be to blame the Holocaust in Europe simply on 'ancient religious hostility' between Christians and Jews.

This does not mean going to the other extreme of assuming that all conflicts could be resolved if only the antagonists would try to understand each other, follow the Mandela example, or take the advice of international conflict-resolution specialists. That would also be a dangerous illusion. Each conflict has its specificity. But Africa constituency-builders will continue to be handicapped in responding to any of them unless overarching frameworks are found which can credibly challenge the pervasive and demobilizing fallacy of 'ancient tribal hatreds.' ■

---

**Proposition 12: Among the most dangerous myths for Africa in the US political arena is the assumption that a minimalist state focused exclusively on creating space for trickle-down market economics is good for Africa, as for everywhere else. Indiscriminate downsizing rather than rightsizing both national and multilateral governmental institutions is a recipe for disaster except for a favored few, with particularly damaging consequences for Africa.**

There are efforts underway to lay out frameworks which allow for the complementarity of private, state and voluntary initiatives in sustainable development. Equity is paired with growth, rather than pitted against it.<sup>12</sup> Yet US political discourse remains stuck for the most part in the liberal-conservative debates defined by the far-right offensives



of the 1980s and 1990s. Development of productive policy frameworks depends on the development of new metaphors as well as new arguments. This applies to Africa, as to international issues in general and indeed to domestic issues of racial and class equity.

Challenging any of these myths is extremely difficult because each builds on master metaphors that resonate widely, beyond the specifically African arena. They cannot be 'refuted.' They must be challenged by alternate metaphors that are just as compelling, while simultaneously more truthful and less damaging to Africa's future. It is not simply a matter of replacing Afro-pessimism with Afro-optimism. We must build visions which have room both for tragedy and for hope, and shape messages that are nuanced enough yet powerful enough to have policy relevance. This is a major intellectual task as well as a communications task. It can only be addressed by collective efforts to develop alternative paradigms and ambitious consensus-building efforts around them. ■

*William Minter, the Senior Research Fellow at the Africa Policy Information Center, is the author of a number of works on African issues, including King Solomon's Mines Revisited: Western Interests and the Burdened History of Southern Africa (Basic Books, 1986) and Apartheid's Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique (Zed Books, 1994).*

## Endnotes

1. See, for example, the discussion in *Foreign Policy*, 15 (Summer 1974), with articles by Martin Weil, Roger Wilkins and Donald McHenry; Kenneth Longmyer, "Black Ethnic Demands," in *Foreign Policy*, 60 (Fall 1985); and Eric M. Uslaner, "All Politics are Global:

Interest Groups and the Making of Foreign Policy," in Allan J. Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis, *Interest Group Politics* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1995).

2. Or, more optimistically, perhaps just my personal ignorance. I would be very pleased to have my attention called to data sources or analyses that have not yet come to my attention. Despite the extensive literature on political participation by different sectors of society, and recent more sophisticated studies of public opinion on foreign policy, there seems to be very little that is specific enough on either opinion or participation with respect to Africa issues in particular.

3. Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and US Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1996).

4. Paleoanthropologists are still debating the issue, but one recent study dates the migration of *homo sapiens* out of Africa to only 20,000 years or so ago (*The New York Times*, June 4, 1996).

5. One of the most detailed surveys of political participation (from 1989), found that of issue-based activities (contacting policy-makers, protests, etc.), international issues accounted for 3% of all such activities for Anglo-Whites, 1% for African Americans and 4% for Latinos. Sidney Verba et al., *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

6. I am not aware, however, of any systematic statistics that have been compiled on this point.

7. See Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The US Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) for a case from roughly the same time period.

8. See, in particular, the most careful study to date of the movement: Ellen J. Dorsey, *Human Rights Strategy for a Changing International Environment: The United States Anti-Apartheid Movement in Transition*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1992.

9. Jack L. Walker, Jr., *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America: Patrons, Professions and Social Movements* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

10. Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1994); Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993); Michael Mandelbaum, "Foreign Policy as

Social Work" *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 1996).

11. See APIC Background Papers "The US and Africa's Trade," by Robert Browne (1995) and "Thinking Regionally," by Salih Booker (1996).

12. Among many examples: the annual series of Human Development Reports from the UNDP; World Bank, *Taking Action for Poverty Reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa: Report of an Africa Region Task Force*, Report No. 15575-AFR, May 1996; Howard Stein, ed., *Asian Industrialization and Africa: Studies in Policy Alternatives to Structural Adjustment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

**Additional copies** available at \$3 ea., \$2.40 ea. for 20 or more. Add 15% for postage and handling. May be freely reproduced with attribution to APIC.

A full report from the Constituency Builders' Dialogue will be published by APIC later this year. It will include, in addition to this paper, essays by Doug McAdam of the University of Arizona and Linda Williams of the University of Maryland on the implications of social movement and interest group research for Africa constituency building, a summary of the dialogue proceedings, a list of participants, and suggestions for further reading.



Produced by the  
Africa Policy Information Center  
110 Maryland Ave. NE #509  
Washington, DC 20002  
Phone: (202) 546-7961  
Fax: (202) 546-1545  
E-mail: apic@africapolicy.org  
Web: <http://www.africapolicy.org>

This series of background papers is part of a program of public education funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Ford Foundation.

