



# What Would Better American Engagement Across Africa Look Like?

Howard W. French | Wednesday, July 17, 2019

Earlier this month, The New York Times

(<https://www.theafricareport.com/15078/the-new-york-times-shows-how-to-write-about-an-africa-job-advert/>) created a mini furor on the internet with

a job listing for someone to lead its coverage of East Africa. The

announcement described it as an opportunity “to dive into news and enterprise across a wide range of countries, from the deserts of Sudan and the pirate seas of the Horn of Africa, down through the forests of Congo and shores of Tanzania.” It went on to speak of the region’s “many vital story lines, including terrorism, the scramble for resources, the global contest with China,” among others. Whether as afterthought or sop, it added that the job of Nairobi bureau chief offered “the chance to delight our readers with unexpected stories of hope.” Nowhere did one get the sense that East Africa is, in fact, a highly diverse collection of countries that encompasses more than 400 million people and includes some of the world’s fastest-growing economies.

The response from many African Twitter users was merciless, with thousands of comments and retweets, from substantive critiques by intellectuals to bitter sarcasm and even theatrical parody. Although the international editor of The New York Times later apologized, sort of

(<https://twitter.com/meslackman/status/1147980092343312384/>), for this misstep, I’m not highlighting it to begin a column about press criticism at all. Instead, the episode was only the latest reflection of the much deeper problems in framing Africa that have long stood at the heart of the United States’ distant and generally disinterested relations with the continent.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has steadily grown more and more disengaged with Africa. This is not a defense of the kind of relations that existed during the Cold War, in which Washington backed many horrible dictatorships. But back then, at least, one can say the United States competed for the friendship, loyalty and attention of African countries, and sometimes even did the right thing when it came to issues like democracy, governance and certain human needs, such as public health.



*First lady Melania Trump walks with Ghana's first lady, Rebecca Akufo-Addo, as she arrives at Kotoka International Airport in Accra, Ghana, Oct. 2, 2018 (AP photo by Carolyn Kaster).*

Nowadays, by contrast, putting aside the fact that there is a president in the White House who notoriously dismissed much of the continent as “shithole countries,” most of America’s diplomacy in Africa seems to be run out of the Pentagon, while tepid U.S. economic engagement is dominated by extractive industries, especially oil and gas. Only very belatedly does the United States seem to have become aware that its arm’s length relationship with Africa has left the continent almost entirely open to China. And even then, Washington doesn’t seem to be able to muster much of a response beyond chagrin-fueled, mean-spirited warnings to African countries to be aware of this supposedly tricky Asian interloper

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28036/trump-s-prosper-africa-strategy-is-fixated-on-a-cold-war-like-view-of-china>).

Given this sad state of affairs, how might America better focus its energy and efforts with the continent and begin reengaging?

There is an insidious and longstanding instinct among American policymakers when dealing with Africa, and that is to see bad news and calamity everywhere. Expect that dynamic to carry over to one of most important topics of our time: demographic change. The projected increase in the human population in the coming decades will overwhelmingly occur in Africa. According to the United Nations Population Division (<https://population.un.org/wpp/>), Africa is on track to roughly double its population by the middle of this century, surpassing 2 billion people, and it could even potentially double that again by 2100. So most of the world’s new young people will come from the African continent, as will an ever greater portion of the global workforce. The traditional Washington way of dealing with news like this is to treat it as an outright catastrophe, and one can expect the cries of alarm to grow very loud.

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But if Africa’s huge expected population growth poses serious challenges, it also presents significant opportunities, if only they are not lost amid the coming din. The highly developed world, for one, is going to need workers of all kinds in the future to compensate for its own demographic crisis as its populations age. A deep aversion to Africa, either as a focus of serious, concerted political attention, or in prevailing public attitudes, will cut the United States off from Africa’s vital human resources. At the same time, Africa’s fast-rising and young population will represent an increasingly important class of consumers, especially where middle classes continue to grow, as they are in many countries on the continent, from Egypt to Kenya, Ethiopia to Ivory Coast.

The United States completely missed the boat in the last major boom of foreign opportunity in Africa, namely the massive and ongoing effort by China and its engineering and construction companies to build road, rail and other infrastructure across the continent. It will miss other opportunities, for which it is even better suited to compete, unless it completely changes the way it thinks about and engages with African countries.

Africa's population growth is making the continent the stage for the fastest and largest-scale urbanization anywhere on the planet (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/07/how-africas-new-urban-centers-are-shifting-its-old-colonial-boundaries/277425/>), which also represents an extraordinary opportunity for American expertise to help Africa's new or newly giant cities get things like planning and development right.

The rise in the numbers of young Africans will also create an extraordinarily large and almost entirely untapped market for another field, one in which American excellence is universally recognized: higher education. Today, American universities and high-tech industrial centers like Silicon Valley that employ their graduates abound in workers from China and India. The untapped frontier for such brainpower is in Africa, but American schools, never mind the American government, has given little thought to cultivating these markets.

In terms of both business and economics, much of Africa's future will depend on energy. According to one recent study, online gamers in California by themselves will soon use more electricity than all of Ethiopia (<https://www.energyforgrowth.org/blog/bitcoin-gaming-and-the-chasm-of-global-energy-inequality/>), a country of 100 million people, while global Bitcoin mining already consumes more electricity than Nigeria, with its 200 million people. The scarcity and poor distribution of electricity in Africa is crippling the continent, sharply limiting its potential and driving chaotic emigration. This is a human problem of the highest order—and a development opportunity, too—that the American government and U.S. companies should be in the race to address. Doing so well, though, will mean finding solutions that involve renewable energies that don't destroy the African environment and the rest of the planet along the way, unlike, for example, all the coal power plants being built with Chinese money (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/09/when-coal-came-to-paradise-china-coal-kenya-lamu-pollution-africa-chinese-industry-bri/>) across the continent.

In terms of America's absentee African diplomacy, there are two key areas where enormous progress could be made if only political energy were focused and sustained. Africa has many problems, to be sure, but one of its biggest is its largest states, such as Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which are badly underperforming. They will determine the destiny of entire vast regions, for better or worse, and yet the State Department traditionally favors deep engagement and public diplomacy with a collection of smaller countries, places like Rwanda and Ghana. Achieving better governance and economic performance in places like Nigeria or Congo is, of course, first and foremost the duty of these countries' leaders and people, and under any scenario, what an outside power can accomplish is limited. But given

the stakes involved for hundreds of millions of Africans, spanning many national borders, U.S. engagement with the countries that will shape the rest of the continent is woefully inadequate.

If helping shift the fortunes of big, developing nations in positive ways is especially difficult, there is something else that's genuinely easy. One of the worst problems of governance across Africa, affecting countries large and small, is a growing tendency of heads of state to alter election and succession rules in ways that allow them to effectively maintain themselves in power indefinitely, if not for life. This trend is badly eroding democratic rule in many African countries, deepening corruption and preventing the generational renewal that is vital to keeping up in a fast-changing world. One of the most notorious examples is 86-year-old Paul Biya (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/26205/the-old-don-t-let-go-36-years-of-rocky-stability-in-paul-biya-s-cameroon>), who became president of Cameroon in 1982. Every year since then, he has run his country for months at a time from a luxury hotel in Geneva.

Whether by introducing new laws or sanctions or through other diplomatic pressure, the United States could freeze ties with leaders who tinker with their constitutions in order to retain power for more than two terms, and it could rally other countries to follow its example in doing so. That is, if Washington is paying attention, and even cares.

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