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Prexy Nesbitt

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# GETTING BEYOND THE ELEPHANTS: Africa in the 90's

An Address to the  
*Africa in the 90's Conference*

by  
Prexy Nesbitt  
Senior Consultant  
Mozambique Government

Sponsored by  
The Center for Urban Education  
DePaul University  
Chicago  
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## GETTING BEYOND THE ELEPHANTS: AFRICA IN THE 90'S

(Keynote address given by Prexy Nesbitt on Saturday, February 29, 1992, at the Africa in the 90's Conference sponsored by the Center for Urban Education, DePaul University.)

I would like to thank Adrian Capehart, my years-long friend Patti Adachi, Rob Reynolds, Dr. Fassil Demissie, Dr. Delores Woodtor, and the Center for Urban Education for the invitation to speak to you today.

A lot about Africa is "images" -- images that reveal and images that obfuscate. There is the image, for instance, of the continent of Africa on maps. They are often wrong (I believe in the accuracy of the Pedersen projection myself), often with countries placed in the wrong location. There is the widely shared image in the United States that Africa is one country, one undifferentiated land mass consisting of Egypt and South Africa. This cartographical image of Africa is often symmetrical to the "Tarzan"- "King Solomon's Mines"- "Elsa the Lion Born Free"- "Out of Africa" conceptualization. Then there is the currently en vogue image of Africa, i.e., the one that sees Africa as nothing but negativity, despair and violence. We might call it the gloom and doom view.<sup>1</sup> It is an image that has elements of Alcohol and Drug Administration chief czar Frederick Goodwin's now well-known "monkeys and inner-city jungles" (a racist motif posing as scientific theorem) theory.

"Dr. Frederick K. Goodwin, the Bush Administration's top mental health official...director of the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration, spoke of the administration's new 'violence initiative'...He focused on new primate studies and said, 'If you look, for example, at male monkeys, especially in the wild, roughly half of them survive to adulthood. The other half die by violence. That is the natural way of it for males, to knock each other off and, in fact, there are some interesting evolutionary implications of that because the same hyperaggressive monkeys who kill each other are also hypersexual, so they copulate more and therefore they reproduce more to offset the fact that half of them are dying. Now, one could say that if some of the loss of social structure in this society, and particularly within the high impact inner-city areas, has removed some of the civilizing evolutionary things that we have built up and that maybe it isn't just the careless use of the word when people call certain cities jungles, that we may have gone back to what might be more natural, without all of the social controls that we have imposed upon ourselves as a civilization over thousands of years in our own evolution." (New York Times, Feb. 22, 1992)

In this view, Africa, once the "dark," "mysterious," "sleeping," "unknown," "giant" continent, becomes Africa "the nightmare," "troubled Africa," "grim Africa," "starving babies Africa," "Africa in crisis," "rusty hair and bulging eyes and bellies Africa," "Africa on the "precipice." And this is the panorama with which we are daily barraged if we are shown any image at all!

Today, as we look, examine, and speculate about Africa in the 90's, I urge that we bear in mind that we must go "beyond the elephants." (I am here responding to a recent New York Times article - the only recent in-depth comment by the Administration on South Africa - where the Bush Administration says it is now going to back renewed elephant hunting.<sup>2</sup> We must transcend the easy generalizations (How we're going to analyze all of Africa this morning is beyond me. Can we do this as a series of conferences?) and try to understand what's happening behind the images. This so that we can explain (not describe), explain Africa to this generation and to future generations.

Having said all that, let me begin this talk by saying that Africa, strong Africa, liberatory Africa, is today "up against the wall." (You know the expression - made famous by law and order representatives like Chicago's finest, "up against the wall, M \_\_\_ F \_\_\_!")

It is an uncontestable fact that over 30 million people face starvation and that there are another 450 million who live on the "cusp" of survival. Africa's infant mortality rate, measured in 1990, hovered around 107/1000 births, while the U.S.'s (which is not a good one) was at 10/1000 births. The 630 million people of Sub-Saharan Africa (according to a recent article in Third World Economics magazine) live on the income of Belgium's 10 million people, surviving on 50% less caloric intake per person.<sup>3</sup> A conservative guess of the HIV-positive population in Sub-Saharan Africa is at least 7 million, and it is estimated that one in every 40 adults is already infected. South Africa today is buttressing for the worst, since it is predicted today that by the year 2000, one million or more South Africans will have died from the vicious virus.<sup>4</sup>

Africa today is similar to growing numbers of U.S. consumers and workers. It lives on loans and credit from various multilateral banking institutions like the World Bank and the IMF. From 1981-85, the World Bank loaned Sub-Saharan Africa \$1.9 billion. In 1990 and 1991 respectively, the World Bank's lending reached \$3.9 billion and \$3.4 billion.<sup>5</sup> The 1980's were the decade of Africa's pauperization. Average per capita income fell by 25% to an approximately \$260/year. The ubiquitous (at best) World Bank says in its 1991 Development Report that "even by 2000, average income in Africa will be less than 1980." In the meanwhile, the World Bank has noted that 29 of the 42 countries in the world labeled as "least developed" are situated in Sub-Saharan Africa.

While many of the difficulties Africa faces are the legacy of colonialism and structures geared toward extraction and super-exploitation, some problems have resulted from overly-ambitious and perhaps naive state strategies and patterns of state corruption similar to the corruption in Western capitals. Spiraling patterns (the phrase "trick bag" comes to mind) of debt and terms of trade imposed upon all Third World countries have left Africa naked and devoid of resources - especially the recuperative resources to bounce back from natural calamities like the drought currently zapping Southern Africa, and especially the former breadbasket country of Zimbabwe.

The structural adjustment programs that are now automatically the condition for aid from most multilateral economic bodies like the World Bank and IMF seem to me to constitute the application of a new form of warfare against Africa - economic warfare!

Armed conflicts (what our papers dub "civil wars" and "tribal wars"), many of them the result of intervention by various Western countries (led especially by the U.S.A., Israel, West Germany and the West's continental surrogate gendarme state - South Africa), have been another major source of putting Africa "up against the wall."<sup>6</sup>

Then there is throughout Africa an indigenous elite, many of them educated, groomed and trained in Western - especially U.S. - schools and colleges who have no loyalties except to the accumulation contest in the cave so eloquently depicted in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's wonderful novel Devil on the Cross.<sup>7</sup> These voracious vultures have become willing accomplices to the processes which I've been describing as the roots of Africa's crisis.

Finally, there are the unrecorded holocausts. As I have written in a paper entitled, "Tarzan and Unrecorded Holocausts: U.S. Policies Towards Africa with Special Reference to Southern Africa":

"Today, the peoples of Southern Africa face an 'unrecorded holocaust,' especially the Mozambican people who are the object of a systematic campaign of destabilization waged by the South African government as it desperately seeks to maintain the regional dominance of its system of racism, known as apartheid. This war of destabilization by the South African government against its neighbors has had an impact with Holocaust-like consequences. The United Nation's Economic Commission for Africa states that between 1980 and 1988 alone, South Africa's war caused directly and indirectly 900,000 Mozambican deaths. A senior U.S. State Department official, Roy Stacy, characterized the South African-led war against the Mozambican people carried out by the bandit group called RENAMO (Mozambique National Resistance Movement) as '...one of the most brutal holocausts against ordinary human beings since World War II.'

Since 1980, South African state violence against its neighboring states has resulted in a minimum of 1.6 million lives being lost; more than 11 million people, largely women and children, being made homeless (directly or indirectly); over 750,000 children being orphaned, abandoned or otherwise traumatized; and at least \$60 billion in war damage to precious schools, hospitals, bridges, highways and development projects. Additionally, South African warring has meant that the Front Line States of Mozambique, Angola, Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Tanzania have had to channel millions of dollars into defense needs instead of into developing more and better education, health, water and food systems."

What is the U.S. role in all this? Let me put forward "our" foreign policy towards Africa succinctly and clearly. From the 1950's to the 1980's, in all seven presidencies, there have been four dominant themes in U.S. governmental (and non-governmental) policies towards Africa:

- (1) Africa is viewed within the framework of the East-West Cold War confrontation.
- (2) Economic considerations are central in shaping U.S. policies.
- (3) The apartheid government of South Africa has been viewed as the major ally and friend to the U.S.A.
- (4) The same systemic racism which permeates U.S. society at large shapes and motivates the policies, structure, personnel and practices of successive U.S. administrations in their foreign policy interactions with Africa.

The result of this Africa policy is and has been much like the average white (and some black) traveler going down the Dan Ryan and passing Chicago's four miles' worth of skyscraper housing projects: Africa is passed by and forgotten (unless there's some diamonds, or manganese, or oil, or something else lying there in the street for easy taking). A recent Africa Confidential article (11 Jan 1991) quotes a top State Department official as saying, "I doubt if Jim Baker spends 5% of his time thinking about Africa."<sup>8</sup> U.S. development aid to the 48 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa) was \$800 million in 1991 out of a total foreign aid allocation of \$18.8 billion. To put our aid to Africa in perspective, recall that one country alone, Israel, received \$1.2 billion. To further understand the aid which we've sent to Africa, recall that one country, Morocco, which in 1975 militarily invaded an illegally-annexed, what was the Spanish Sahara on the eve of its independence, has been rewarded ever since with one-fifth of all U.S. aid going to the African continent during the period 1975-1980.

We will be hearing specifically this morning about Liberia, South Africa and Zaire. They represent three excellent examples of what U.S. policies have helped to create. Like denim jeans, like Ford and General Motors cars of old, Liberia, South Africa, and Zaire deserve a MADE IN THE USA label slapped on them. If today Zaire is a "mess" (the Washington Post of February 27 this year said "Zaire Seen Headed for Catastrophe"), the seeds of that mess were sown by the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations when they "neutralized" Patrice Lumumba and installed their asset, Mobutu.

As the U.S. today pulls its continental military surveillance and listening post satellites, other equipment, and UOA stations out of Liberia and switches to Botswana, we should recall that the crisis of Liberia is at least in part derived from years of U.S. government and Firestone control and manipulation of Liberia's destiny and fortune.

As we talk today about South Africa, I hope we will mention the strikingly important aspects about developments in Southern Africa. The first is the difficult challenges before the ANC in the struggle in South Africa. Secondly, the direction and rationale of U.S. government and non-governmental funding which is flowing into South Africa and Angola through such entities as the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the Heritage Foundation and U.S. A.I.D. (a particular concern I have is the latter and its current 40 million A.I.D. fund going to a classified (secret) list of recipients in South Africa).<sup>9</sup> And lastly, the increasingly difficult war of terrorism being faced by the country of Mozambique, a war which in ten years has seen more than one million Mozambicans lose their lives.

"Freeing South Africa is Freeing Ourselves" is the slogan of a wonderful poster done by the renowned and late Chicago artist, Norrie Davis. It should probably have been worded more comprehensively: Freeing Africa is Freeing Ourselves. For the struggle in Africa through the end of this century is integrally intertwined with the struggle for justice and a better order in the U.S.A.

In closing, I would like to postulate that historically, U.S. foreign policy towards Africa has been predicated upon the maintenance of an uninformed, misinformed, and abysmally silent populace. Even today, as we meet, the basic assumption in Washington is that except for a few rare occasions (one being when the black American community is stirred up or maybe students and a few children), and except for the South Africa question (when it is a soundbite on the major networks), Africa is not a part of the world that matters to the American people.

One of our ongoing tasks is to make Africa known to the U.S. people. And in that line, I thank you, the Mozambican Embassy thanks you - thanks you for your program today. I think further that in working on overcoming the ignorance and isolation of the average Chicagoan from Africa and all Third World issues, we contribute to the struggle against racism in this city and country, and we contribute as well to our own political empowerment.

Despite all that I have said, I am not daunted, faint-hearted or cynical. Africa is in a grim situation, but struggle continues - the struggle for "democracy" in Kenya, Zaire, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, Malawi, Cameroon. The popular struggles, manifestations of a civil culture of struggle, which are all over but which are most dramatic in the most critical arena, the South Africa struggle - these struggles are appearing steadily in various formats:

- trade unions
- peasant, consumer, handicraft cooperatives
- women's and children's organizations
- writers, folk theater, and other cultural groups
- prophetic churches
- community-based action groups
- students mobilizing and demonstrating
- environmental groups

the growing South-South relations on governmental and organizational levels (e.g. Mozambique's solidarity with the East Timorian people, Angola's "solidarity" with the Yanomamis in Brazil)

the emphasis being placed by some countries on taking "regional" approaches like SADCC, the Southern African Development Coordination Conference encompassing all 14 of the countries in the region - except South Africa.

And finally, the will, strength, warmth, hospitality, clarity (e.g. about non-racialism) of the African people, despite the odds, despite being up against the wall - make me firmly believe that unlike many other parts of this world, specifically the West, Africa lives.

Africa yet lives.

## NOTES

1. For more information on this point, see "Press and Prejudice" in Lee, Martin and Solomon, Norman, Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media, Lyle Stuart, New York, 1991. See also Kalter, Joanmarie, "The Untold Stories of Africa," TV Guide, May 24, 1986; and "Capturing the Continent: U.S. Media Coverage of Africa," Africa News, Special Report, 33, 10-11, June 18, 1990.
2. Schneider, Keith, "Bush May Back Renewed Elephant Hunting," New York Times, February 27, 1992, p. A11.
3. Brewster, Havelock, "Third World's Prospects in the World Economy in the 1990's," Third World Economics, July 31, 1991, p. 7.
4. "Africa: AIDS Prevention Programs Stress Education," Africa News, Dec. 9023, 1991, p. 3. See also Stein and Zwi, ed. Action on Aids in Southern Africa: A Report from the April 1990 Maputo Conference on Health in Transition in Southern Africa. This excellent document is available in the Northwestern University (Evanston) Africana Library - the best library on Africa in the Chicago region.
5. Annual Report, World Bank, 1991, p. 111.
6. More and more information is available about some of the military exercises which the Western powers have performed in Africa and elsewhere. Two very readable books are (1) Intervention in the 1980's: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Third World (1989) edited by Peter Schraeder, and Endless Enemies: The Making of an Unfriendly World (1984) by ex-Wall Street Journal reporter Jonathan Kwitny.
7. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Devil on the Cross, Heinemann, 1982. One of Africa's most respected and prolific writers, novelists, playwrights and commentators, Ngugi lives exiled from his native country Kenya because of the Moi government's repressive policies.
8. "USA/Africa: Policy? What policy?" Africa Confidential, 32, 1, January 11, 1991, p. 1. An insightful little publication from London, Africa Confidential is available in most large university libraries.
9. See the February 1992 report "AID's Current Program of Assistance to Disadvantaged South Africans," available from the Washington Office on Africa (WOA), 110 Maryland Ave N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, (202) 546-7961. See also WOA's excellent new paper A History of U.S. Assistance Programs in South Africa. The Washington Office on Africa, a church-backed research and advocacy organization in Washington, D.C. has invaluable information about Africa. I urge all of you to get on WOA's mailing list. Two other national organizations whose mailing lists you should join are (a) The American Committee on Africa, 198 Broadway, New York, NY 10038, (212) 962-1210, and (b) TransAfrica, 545 8th Street S.E., Suite 200, Washington, D.C. 20003 (202) 547-2550.