The Right Gets Africa Wrong

By Conn Hallinan | July 9, 2007

When President George W. Bush announced the formation of a military command for Africa (AFRICOM) this past February, it came as no surprise to the Heritage Foundation—the powerful right-wing organization designed it.

The Heritage Foundation, founded in 1973 by ultra-conservatives Paul Weyrich and Joseph Coors and funded by such right-wing mainstays as the Scaife Foundation, has a strong presence in the Bush administration. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao and former Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton both came out of the Heritage Foundation. Kay Coles James, who helped pack the administration with Heritage recommendations in her powerful post as the director of the Office of Personnel Management, serves on Heritage's Board of Trustees. While not as influential as the older and wealthier American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Heritage has a higher profile when it comes to Africa policy.

In October 2003, Heritage fellows James Jay Carafano and Nile Gardiner laid out a blueprint for how to use military power to impose U.S. will on that vast continent. "Creating an African Command would go a long way toward turning the Bush administration's well aimed strategic priorities for Africa into a reality," wrote the two analysts in their Heritage backgrounder, entitled "U.S. Military Assistance for Africa: A Better Solution" (October 15, 2003).

The purpose of AFRICOM will be humanitarian aid and "security cooperation," not "war fighting," according to Ryan Henry, principal deputy undersecretary of defense for policy (*Washington Post*, May 28, 2007). However, the Heritage analysts were blunter with their opinions on using military power: "Pre-emptive strikes are justified on grounds of self-defense. … America must not be afraid to employ its forces decisively when vital national interests are threatened." Carafano and Gardiner were also quite clear about what U.S. vital interest Washington might have in Africa: "The United States is likely to draw 25% of its oil from West Africa by 2015, surpassing the volume imported from the Persian Gulf."

The hardline nature of their projections is perhaps not surprising given the authors' backgrounds. Carafano is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, a former lieutenant colonel in the army, and a senior fellow on defense and homeland security at Heritage. Gardiner is a former foreign policy researcher for British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and is now director of Heritage's Washington-based Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom. The center was formed by Heritage in 2005 to "advance the vision and ideas of Lady Thatcher," the most conservative British Prime Minister since Winston Churchill. According to the organization's website, its primary purpose is to examine how the United States and Britain "can lead and change the world."

In their 2003 Heritage study, the two authors also proposed increasing military aid to African regimes friendly to the United States and confronting "enabler" and "slacker" states that threaten U.S. security. "Enabler" states, according to the authors, are those that directly aid terrorists (like Libya has in the past), and "slacker" states are failed nations where terrorists can base their operations (like Somalia).

The Heritage recommendations are almost precisely what the administration decided on, although the White House wrapped its initiative in soothing words like "cooperation," "humanitarian aid," and "stability."

In a way, AFRICOM simply formalized the growing U.S. military presence on the continent; the United States already has 1,800 soldiers in Djibouti as part of its Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa. Special Forces and air units operating from Djibouti were instrumental in supporting Ethiopia's recent invasion of Somalia. U.S. Naval forces shelled towns in southern Somalia, and AC-130 gunships pounded suspected terrorist targets. U.S. Special Forces accompanied Ethiopian troops, and airborne warning and control systems called in air strikes by the Ethiopian air force (*New York Times*, January 13, 2007; *Guardian*, January 13, 2007; Agence France Press, January 10, 2007).

According to a recent Congressional Research Service report, the United States has bases in Africa in Gabon, Kenya, Mali, Morocco, Namibia, Sao Tome-Principe, Senegal, Tunisia, Uganda, and Zambia. The Sao Tome-Principe base lies 124 miles off the coast of Guinea—and close to the oil fields of Angola, Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea (*Washington Post*, May 28, 2007).

Through the Trans-Sahal Initiative aimed at supposed terrorist groups operating in the Sahara, the U.S. Defense Department has roped Mali, Chad, Niger, and Mauritania into an informal alliance. The initiative, formed in June 2005, came out of the 2002 Pan-Sahal Initiative that provided aid and training to 10 countries bordering the Sahara. According to the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, however, the Sahara is "not a hotbed of terrorism." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, December 27, 2005). One of the 2005 initiative's first actions was to organize "Operation Flintlock," a military exercise that mixed 5,100 troops from Saharan countries with 700 U.S. Special Forces soldiers. Two of the countries in the alliance, Chad and Mauritania, have significant oil and gas deposits, making them obvious targets of U.S. interest.

The Pentagon's Africa Contingency Operation Training and Assistance program also supplies weapons and training to several African nations: Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia (*Washington Post*, May 28, 2007).

Exactly as the Heritage study recommended, the United States has recruited "client regimes" like Ethiopia, Chad, and Uganda, which are willing to support U.S. policy goals. A case in point is the U.S.-sponsored invasion of Somalia, in which Ethiopian troops overthrew the Islamist regime and Ugandan soldiers helped occupy the country.

The Bush administration's other strategy for shaping African affairs, free trade, has also been promoted by Heritage.

In a major Heritage lecture in 2005, "How Economic Freedom is Central to Development in Sub-Saharan Africa," Brett Schaefer of the Thatcher Center argued that developing countries must lower their trade barriers in order to grow (Heritage Lectures, November 28, 2005). The Bush administration's Millennium Challenge Account ties aid to such reduced barriers.

However, as Walden Bello, University of the Philippines sociologist and director of the nonprofit Focus on the Global South, pointed out in his analysis of last year's failed Doha talks on international trade, "free trade" is a Trojan horse that ends up overwhelming the economies of developing countries ("The Debacle of Doha," *Foreign Policy In Focus* Commentary, July 28, 2006).

The trade barrier issue, however, appears to be a one-way street agenda. Because of subsidies, U.S. wheat sells for 46% below production costs, and corn at 20% below cost. And recent trade talks in Potsdam, Germany, collapsed when the United States and the European Union refused to compromise on tariffs (*Financial Times*, June 22, 2007). The World Bank and Oxfam estimate that the developed countries' trade barriers cost developing countries $100 billion a year, twice what the latter receive in economic assistance.

The impact of such one-way free trade has been to collapse rural economies. U.S. subsidized corn has driven some two million southern Mexican farmers off their land, accelerated rural poverty, and helped fuel immigration to the United States. U.S.-subsidized soybeans and rice respectively control 99% and 80% of the Mexican market.

Such subsidies have a particularly devastating impact in Africa, where 50% of a country's GNP may be in agriculture. A 2007 study by Oxfam, "Cultivating Poverty: The Impact of Cotton Subsidies on Africa," estimated that cutting U.S. cotton subsidies would raise world prices by 10% (*New York Times*, June 21, 2007).

According to Bello, a 2005 study by the World Bank found that while the effect of developing countries dismantling trade barriers would increase their income by $16 billion over 10 years, that would translate to a grand total of $2 a year for each of the world's one billion poor. And there might well be a net loss.

"For example," says Bello in his 2006 commentary, a recent UN trade and development study "predicts that the losses in tariff income for developing countries under Doha could range between $32 billion and $63 billion annually. This loss in government revenues—the source of developing country health care, education, water provision, and sanitation budgets—is two to four times the mere $16 billion in benefits projected by the World Bank."

Bello cites research by the Carnegie Endowment and the European Commission suggesting that the impact of free trade on Africa will be profound, and quotes Aileen Kwa of Focus on the Global South on its impact: "The majority in Africa, will be faced with losses in both agricultural and industrial goods," and small African farmers will be unable to compete, exactly what happened to small corn farmers in Mexico.

Bello also points to a December 2005 study commissioned by Aprodev, the Association of World Council of Churches Related

Development Organizations in Europe, "Trade Liberalization in Agriculture—Lessons from the First 10 Years of WTO," which suggests the best strategy for developing countries is exactly the opposite of the Heritage Foundation's formula. According to the analysis, countries like Japan and South Korea were successful because rather than embracing "free trade," they protected their industries from outside competition.

The AFRICOM initiative is creating some unease in both the United States and Africa. "Some initial reaction to the locating of the African Command on the continent has been negative," says a May 16, 2007 Congressional Research Service report, "Africa Command: U.S. Strategic Interests and the Role of the United States in Africa," because some African countries see it as a device to increase troops there. "Negative," however, seems to be an understatement. According to Simon Tisdall, writing in the June 26, 2007 *Financial Times*, a recent trip to Africa by U.S. Under Secretary of Defense Henry encountered "a wall of hostility from governments in the region" who feared U.S. intervention on the continent and had little interest in the White House's war on terrorism. The trip included stops in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Dijbouti, and included consultations with the African Union. One State Department official told Tisdall: "We've got a big image problem down there. Public opinion is really against getting into bed with the United States. They just don't trust the United States."

Nicole Lee, executive director of the TransAfrica Forum, called AFRICOM "neither wise nor productive," telling the *Washington Post* that the United States should instead focus on "development assistance and respect for sovereignty" (May 28, 2007). That, however, might be a long shot, as long as U.S. policy in Africa is driven by think tanks like the Heritage Foundation.

Conn Hallinan, a contributor to Right Web (rightweb.irc-online.org), is an analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus, a freelance writer, and a former provost at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

The Right Web
"Exposing the architecture of power that's changing our world"

Recommended citation:
Conn Hallinan, "The Right Gets Africa Wrong," Right Web Analysis (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, July 9, 2007).

Web location:
http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/4368

Production Information:
Writer: Conn Hallinan
Editor: Right Web
Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz