

# American Foreign Policy Toward Burundi

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## Introduction

During the past decade, the Great Lakes region of Africa has been one of the worst places on Earth to live. News reports of political assassinations, coups, civil wars, and genocidal campaigns have almost become commonplace to Western observers. Most notably, the crises have plagued the countries of The People's Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), Rwanda, and Burundi. These political and humanitarian disasters in the region and elsewhere in Africa have required the United States to develop a new post-Cold War foreign policy for the continent. Because of the egregious human rights offenses, the United States has not been allowed to hide behind its customary rhetoric. Instead, it has had to decide if it should provide money, troops, and political support to the region.

When dealing with these issues, the United States' main question is whether Africa is a national interest. A great debate exists between realists and idealists over this issue. Throughout the eight years of the Clinton Administration, the foreign policymakers have struggled to find a coherent answer. While the United States has always claimed Africa to be a national interest, its actions have argued differently. In an attempt to change the dualistic, two-faced approach to Africa, the United States has constructed a new plan for Africa: African Solutions for African Problems. By its existence, this strategy recognizes the importance of Africa; although, its implementation limits the involvement of the United States. Theoretically, this plan solves the United States' dilemma that it has battled since the end of the Cold War.

This paper will argue that American foreign policy in Africa, especially Burundi, has been inconsistent and often times hypocritical. The paper cites the contrasts of idealist and realist objectives as the cause of the disunity in policy and speech. The paper states that the Administration's new policy of African solutions for African problems will reconcile these differences. Yet, it argues that peace and stability in Burundi can only be achieved by the United States having a strong commitment to this new foreign policy strategy.

## The Realists

In a realist's foreign policy, Africa is a non-issue for the United States. The realists believe that Africa is of very little concern because the United States has no national interests on the continent. This bold stance is derived from the realists' interpretation of national interest, which is confined primarily to national security. Terry Nardin states that in the traditional doctrine of realism intervention is only "necessary to preserve the vital security of the state."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since the conflicts in Africa, which are usually internal in nature,<sup>2</sup> pose little direct effect to American lives, the realist contend that Africa should be a minor issue in American foreign policy.

In general, the realists argue that their approach is the most constructive form of American foreign policy because of its defined goals<sup>3</sup>. They continually criticize "wooly-minded idealists" who they believe, because of their lack of definite national interests, "will overstretch American resources and mire the United States in endless debilitating brawls."<sup>4</sup> Nowhere is this fear more prominent than it is in Africa, which is host to an unending list of political and humanitarian problems. Thus, to avoid entrapment in unprofitable commitments,

the realists believe foreign policy in Africa should be based on “our interests rather than our sensibilities.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The Idealists**

On the other hand, the idealists support intervention in Africa because they have different definitions (than the realists) of national interests. In this age of global interdependence, the idealists believe that national security threats are not as obvious as they once were. For this reason, they feel that growth and stabilization of democracy around the world is a primary national interest. As Assistant Secretary of State Strobe Talbott asserts, “Only in an increasingly democratic world will the American people feel themselves truly secure.”<sup>6</sup> By helping democracies grow, the United States can help prevent conflicts it might be forced to deal with in the future. In his book U.S. Foreign Policy and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Andrew S. Natsios declares that problems such as nuclear proliferation, drug trafficking, counterfeiting, destruction of the environment, and the growth of the AIDS epidemic are “sectorial interests” which are rampant in non-democratic regimes.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the idealists use these broad definitions of national security to support intervention in places like Africa where democratic governments are unstable and often times nonexistent.

Furthermore, the idealists believe in other national interests which are not as easily attributed to national security. First, idealists believe that world opinion is very important when conducting foreign policy. Andrew Natsios states “goodwill generated by moral leadership should not be treated so lightly.”<sup>8</sup> He argues that it is a force in diplomacy. Thus, if the United States abandons Africa, it sends a message to the international community that it has no commitment to any part of the world that does not directly threaten American prosperity. Is this message good for American foreign policy?

Equally important, what message is being sent to the American public? Another national interest of the idealists is the self-image of the United States. Some idealists argue that the promotion of democracy is part of the United States’ national interests.<sup>9</sup> Because the United States regards itself as moral nation, refusing to aid humanitarian crises or intervene in violent political conflicts is “contrary to its specific interest.”<sup>10</sup> Again, this line of thought necessitates American intervention in troubled Africa.

### **The Best Mixture: Idealism Based on Realism**

These two perspectives appear to be dynamically opposed to one another by their very nature; however, a foreign policy that uses both is the most successful. Most adherents on either side recognize the fruits of compromise. When realism becomes less rigid in its definition of national interest, it becomes more morally based; whereas, when idealism narrows its goals, it becomes more popular with the American public because it places limits on American commitments.<sup>11</sup> The Clinton Administration has struggled to find a balance; the new foreign policy of African solutions for African problems (discussed below) is an example of a productive, harmonious mix.

### **Clinton’s African Foreign Policy**

During the past eight years, the Clinton Administration’s public statements about Africa have remained constant. The State Department and the White House have constantly affirmed that peace and stability in Africa are in the United States’ national interests. As far back as his first campaign for the presidency, Bill Clinton has been publicly committed to helping Africa. In

fact, while on the campaign trail at Georgetown University, he gave a foreign policy speech which highlighted the spread of democracy as key to his foreign policy plans in Africa and in other parts of the world.<sup>12</sup> In his first year in office, it appeared the promises of the campaign trail would be kept. However, the debacle of Somalia derailed Clinton's plan of providing humanitarian aid to Africa through military and political intervention. After the disaster, the declaratory foreign policy remained the same, but the actions of the operational foreign policy argued otherwise.

The first African nation to encounter the change in American foreign policy was Rwanda in 1993. As an estimated 500,000 Rwandan Tutsis were killed, more than three-fourths of their population, the United States did nothing but reprimand the Hutu government. While United States military intervention may have been feasibly impossible,<sup>13</sup> the United States could have attempted some form of diplomatic initiative to help halt the killing. Instead, the United States did nothing for fear of criticism from the realist media pundits and members of Congress. Thus, while it was admonishing the Hutus for their inhumane campaign of killing, the White House refused to take action.

The Rwandan disaster, unlike the Somali, did not change United States policy or rhetoric. For the most part, the White House displayed little regret for not intervening in the genocide. On the contrary, it continued to make strong claims about the importance of Africa. In 1996, President Clinton made a heralded trip to the Dark Continent. He spent twelve days visiting the "Africa that works."<sup>14</sup> Clinton's parade through Africa was the longest overseas trip of his presidency and the most extensive visit to Black Africa of any sitting United States President.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, it was an attempt to say worldwide: Africa matters. However, the United States' actions continued to oppose their noble words. For example, foreign aid to Africa reached its lowest level since 1950.<sup>16</sup> Despite the facts, Clinton's public objective held firm: "How can we bring Africa into both the global economy and global political structure as an effective player?"<sup>17</sup>

### **Background to the Burundian Conflict**

The United States' African foreign policy had this attitude and behavior, when the Burundian conflict erupted violently in 1996. Like in Rwanda, a clash between two major ethnic groups, the Hutus and the Tutsis, is central to the political problems. In Burundi, the Tutsis, the minority,<sup>18</sup> ruled the country from its independence from Belgium in 1962, until they unexpectedly lost political power in a 1993 multi-party election. Despite the Tutsis loss, they maintained control of the military. This political and military division of power was unstable from its initial formation and led quickly to violence. Five months after Melchior Ndadaye became Burundi's first elected president, he was assassinated by Tutsi army officers. For the next three years, as the Hutu government defended itself from the Tutsi military, the country was in turmoil. Finally, in 1996, the besieged government fell to a coup led by Colonel Pierre Buyoya who assumed power. Consequently, this reversal of power radicalized the Hutus who began guerilla attacks on the new minority led government.

To this current date, the militant groups organize and attack the authoritarian government of Colonel Buyoya. The main movement is the National Council for the Defense of Democracy, or Palipehutu and Frolina, who assemble and carry out their raids from neighboring Congo and Tanzania. Since 1993, over 200,000 Burundians, mostly civilians, have been murdered. Of the eighty-one members of the elected parliament in 1993, twenty-three have been murdered, while the majority of others have fled into exile. Equally disturbing, the Tutsi government has

scattered over 300,000 Hutus across the country as part of a “regroupment” plan. This act is an open attempt by the government to weaken the power of the majority.<sup>19</sup>

### **United States Response to the Events in Burundi**

For the past seven years, the White House and the State Department have intensely observed and commented on the downward spiral of events in Burundi. Throughout this time period, the United States has continually expressed its shock and condemnation of actions committed by both sides. Over this time period, the Administration’s statements have been remarkably similar. First, the statements display the United States’ disgust: “The United States deplors the continuing instability and violence in Burundi.”<sup>20</sup> Then, the statement proceeds to announce the United States’ hopes for the future: “The United States continues to call for a ceasefire and all-party talks to restore the stability to Burundi.”<sup>21</sup> These responses are mainly to major military actions by either the government or the militant groups. They are powerful assertions by the world’s lone super-power. Yet, Burundians and the dominant players in Africa ignore them. The reason is that the Burundians see no actions connected with the United States’ claims and, thus, view them as meaningless words.

The United States’ declarations calling for the protection of civilians and the encouragement of the peace process have been equally as ineffective. Once again, the Burundian leaders recognize the difference between the United States’ declaratory policy and their operational policy. For instance: “The United States condemns all attacks on civilians, from whichever side, government or rebel, that has provoked the spiraling cycle of violence.”<sup>22</sup> Even if the rebels or government officials heard this statement, or others like it, by the press secretaries at the White House and State Department, their actions would not be deterred because of the lack of compulsion by the United States’ government. Similarly, the requests for increased and productive dialogue between the factions carries little weight: “We encourage those participating in the peace talks to stay the course of dialogue and reconciliation.”<sup>23</sup> This claim holds no bearing because throughout the peace process the United States has sent only one representative, Henry Wolpe, to aid in the Burundian peace talks. Besides this man, the United States has been noticeably absent from the talks in Arusha which will be discussed below.

### **African Solutions for African Problems**

The United States’ verbal responses and contradictory actions regarding Burundi are the ultimate examples of the conflicting principles of its foreign policy towards Africa. President Clinton idealistically claims, “The United States wants to build a common future with all of Africa.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, this argument for intervention yields no results. Military intervention, substantial amounts of aid, and United States diplomatic leadership are absent from the United States’ foreign policy directed towards Burundi and the continent as a whole. Instead, the heart of the strategy has been to publicly scold violence, while privately resist involvement. As has already been discussed, these actions are based on the opposing theoretical viewpoints in the Administration.

In the last few years, in an attempt to reconcile its difference and construct a cohesive foreign policy plan in Africa, the White House has advocated a new strategy for Africa: African solutions for Africa problems. This new plan has goals of the idealists, but uses the methods of the realist. By simply having a plan to help Africa, the Administration recognizes the importance of Africa to the United States’ national interests. Providing solutions to political, ethnic, and economic problems is central to this approach. However, unlike other attempts to aid

the continent, this attempt limits the responsibility of the United States. Rather than relying on active intervention, this policy is based on American support of African initiatives. These new ground rules allay the worries of the realists who fear over intervention by United States personnel, both diplomatic and military. While not eliminating United States involvement, it limits direct intervention by encouraging African nations to search for local answers that the United States can support. Indeed, Strobe Talbott, mentioned earlier as an idealist in the Clinton foreign policy team, calls this new idea “partnership instead of paternalism.”<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, ideas that are generated in Africa for Africans are likely to be more effective and, at the same time, different from the usual American approach. For the sake of the overall policy, the Administration has had to accept solutions which cannot be characterized as American. For example, “no party states” have developed in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Congo. These states have strong leaders who favor stability and economic growth over the whims of political pluralism. Ostensibly, they are not the democratized Africa, President Clinton had envisioned, but they are part of the “Africa that works.” Thus, the Administration ignores the undemocratic policies to highlight the progress of these countries. In 1998, Madeline Albright visited these countries and, more or less, gave them the United States’ seal of approval. She praised these new governments by, when stating, “They share an energy, a self-reliance, and a determination to shape their own destinies.”<sup>26</sup>

This new policy has great possibilities to help the people of Africa; however, it also gives the United States a means to ignore Africa altogether. Under this new strategy, the United States can conveniently avoid Africa by placing the responsibility solely on the Africans. This result is not the intent of the new policy. The goal is to create peace, stability, and prosperity for Africans based on self-developed plans that the United States can support. The realists are correct in stating that the United States should not be given the burden of building nations in Africa. However, the Africans cannot achieve progress alone. This new policy, if followed, incorporates both views.

### **Burundian Solutions for Burundian Problems**

Thus far, the Clinton Administration has used its new foreign policy plan as an excuse to resist involvement in Burundi. Africa has tried to handle the Burundian conflict itself, but, because of lack of United States and Western support, their attempts have failed. The Burundians and other African nations have felt the continued “cynical disengagement” of the United States, despite the new claims by the Clinton Administration for the promotion of African solutions for African problems.<sup>27</sup>

Before and after the coup of 1996, the major powers of central Africa stepped in to initiate talks between the Tutsi government and the Hutu militant groups. From 1996 to 1997, five Presidential Summit Meetings were held involving Tanzania, Rwanda, Congo, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda. The two sides at these meeting agreed upon little, but they helped ease some of the tensions between the two groups. More importantly, the regional powers display a cohesiveness and determination that had rarely been seen before by African nations. In essence, this was the Clinton plan in action, long before White House or State Department officials had actually stated it.

The selection of former President Nyerere of neighboring Tanzania as the facilitator of the peace talks was one of the most significant achievements of the first two summits. Well respected throughout Africa, Nyerere’s appointment was accepted by both sides. Not only was he a mediator for the Burundian parties, but also he was a “principal advisor to the regional

presidents, helping to ensure continuing priority for the Burundi crisis.”<sup>28</sup> In June of 1996, he assumed his role at the third Presidential Summit held in Arusha, Tanzania, which was dedicated entirely to the Burundi crisis. At the summit, the two sides accepted plans for a regional peacekeeping force, but the coup of 1996 caused the agreements to break down. Despite the major setback, the African countries were proving that they had the capability to establish their own vehicles for peace.

At the second Arusha peace conference, sanctions were imposed by the regional states against the government of Burundi. These were conditioned upon the restoration of the National Assembly, the unbanning of political parties, and the immediate and unconditioned negotiations with all political parties and armed factions. These measures were the strongest taken against the minority government by any outside force and they showed signs of working. The Tutsi government increasingly displayed an interest in negotiations in order to ease the sanctions.<sup>29</sup>

While the sanctions were the greatest accomplishment of the regional powers, they were also their greatest failure of the United States and the West. The United States and her allies refused to abide by the sanctions. They argued that more moderate steps were needed to ensure lasting peace. The failure to support the actions of regional leaders directly contradicts the Administration’s new policy of African solutions to African problems. At the time of the refusal of support, the White House had not publicly adopted this new plan. Notwithstanding, the effects of the non-support were still felt in Burundi. The sanctions, which “suffered from lack of sufficient Western power,” ultimately failed to have a significant impact on the Tutsi government. This foreign policy blunder by the West provides a great example for the United States of what not to do today.<sup>30</sup>

Even with the new policy and lessons from the past, the United States continues to drag its feet to support the regional efforts for peace. Stephen R. Weissman of the Institute of Peace states that France, the European Union, and the United States have failed to back African decisions with their own measures “to offer the region technical assistance in implementing them.” Furthermore, he declares, “the regional African states have demonstrated the clearest grasp of the elements in peacekeeping,” but they do not have the resources to implement their agreements. These comments are remarkable when contrasted to those of Madeline Albright, who in 1998 said, “No place matters more in Africa than the Great Lakes.”<sup>31</sup> Even more astonishing, after listening to President Clinton promise Nelson Mandela in February, “The United States and our partners will do all we can to ensure that these talks succeed.”<sup>32</sup> Currently, the United States and its allies have been the greatest cause for failure in the region by not providing the support needed by the Africans to move forward in the peace process.

In Burundi, the United States must realize the new role it has created for itself in the strategy of African solutions for African problems. If it wants a foreign policy representing both the idealist and realists, the United States must adhere to its new policy. This means allowing the regional forces in Burundi to lay the groundwork for peace and, as long as they do not egregiously oppose American virtues, supporting their decisions. For success, the idealists must accept distant involvement, while the realists must accept other nations’ solutions.

Furthermore, the greatest chance of establishing peace is now, and, thus, the United States must not drift from its African policy. In January of 2000, the possibility of peace was dramatically increased, when former South African President and continental leader Nelson Mandela took over as peace facilitator. The United States could not ask for a more qualified person as the chief negotiator of peace. Mandela understands Africa and the problems his continent faces. Indeed, the United States must offer him their full support. President Mandela

is asking the political leaders of Burundi to “join the modern world.”<sup>33</sup> This request is appropriate, for only Burundians control their destiny, just as only Africans can determine their future. President Clinton appears to finally understand this concept. He announced, “the people of the United States are prepared to walk with you.”<sup>34</sup> However, only the actions of the United States will provide proof.

### **Conclusion**

In August, President Clinton visited Burundi, where he hoped to witness the signing of a peace settlement between the government and the militant groups. Instead, the extremists boycotted the ceremony and refused to sign the agreement. Some international observers blamed President Clinton for forcing the historic deal to coincide with his trip to Africa, which they believe rushed the peace process and precipitated the writing of an unsatisfactory peace accord. Hopefully, the claims against the President are false because, once again, they run counter to the new African foreign policy initiatives for Africa. It is imperative that the United States not obstruct Nelson Mandela’s efforts for peace. At the same time, the United States must assist the revered negotiator whenever he desires the help of the United States. These are the only actions that correspond with the Administration’s plan of African solutions for African problems. While this policy may seem to limit its options, it is the only non-contradictory strategy that appeases both the idealists and the realist African policymakers.

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<sup>2</sup> William Demars. "War and Mercy in Africa." World Policy Journal 17 (2000): 2.

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<sup>4</sup> Strobe Talbott. "Democracy and the National Interest." Foreign Affairs 75 (1996): p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Nardin and Mapel, 104.

<sup>6</sup> Talbott p. 63

<sup>7</sup> Andrew S. Natsios. U.S. Foreign Policy and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Humanitarian Relief in Complex Emergencies. Westport: Praeger, 1997 ( )

<sup>8</sup> Natsios, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Nichols and Gil Loescher. The Moral Nation: humanitarian and U.S. foreign policy today. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989. p. 20

<sup>10</sup> Nichols and Loescher p. 22

<sup>11</sup> Natsios p. 22

<sup>12</sup> Talbott p. 47

<sup>13</sup> Alan J. Kuperman. "Rwanda in Retrospect." Foreign Affairs 79.1 (2000): 94-118. He explains, in detail, the military options, or lack of them, the United States had during the Rwandan crisis.

<sup>14</sup> "Clinton embraces Africa." The Economist 21 Mar. 1998. ([http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?Story\\_ID=157970&CFID=299872&CFTOKEN=12225877](http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?Story_ID=157970&CFID=299872&CFTOKEN=12225877))

<sup>15</sup> Frank Smyth. "A New Game: The Clinton Administration on Africa." World Policy Journal 15 (1998): 82.

<sup>16</sup> Dave Petersen. "Finding African Solutions to African Problems." Washington Quarterly 21 (1998): 149.

<sup>17</sup> Smyth p. 82

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Tutsis make up 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the Burundi population. The Hutus make up 5/6<sup>th</sup> of the population.

<sup>19</sup> The Burundian events from 1993 to 1996 can be found in three articles of The Economist:  
"The Hutu-Tutsi divide. Spreading poison in the Great Lakes." The Economist 24 Jan. 1998. (Internet: No Longer Available)  
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- <sup>26</sup> Petersen p. 155
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- <sup>29</sup> Weissman p.18
- <sup>30</sup> Weisman p. VI
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