

CONSIDERING COLIN POWELL AND AFRICA

Recently, former United Nations Ambassador Andrew Young was introducing Secretary of State Colin Powell at a newly appointed ambassador's State Department swearing-in ceremony: "I'm a Democrat," the former Carter administration diplomat, who is still actively engaged with Africa, said, turning toward the Bush administration's Powell, "but I sleep better because *you* are here."

For a split second, eye contact and almost imperceptible nods were exchanged between many of the African diplomats present in the crowd. They recognized in Ambassador Young's words a subtle but pointed reference to the loud sound of war drums beating in many quarters of official Washington. Young's words resonated with them. For they, too, had some hope that Secretary Powell and his State Department could address their concerns.

This comes back to me while trying to think about Secretary Powell and Africa, because at this same event, when I asked an African diplomat what he thought of current U.S. Africa policy, he told me emphatically that as far as he was concerned, the more Colin Powell is involved, the better: "It should be Mr. Powell's policy!" The department's role in trying to facilitate Sudan peace negotiations as well as its role in the hunt

for Rwandan war criminals come immediately to mind as reflecting an unexpected engagement with Africa, he said.

Since taking office, Powell has prodded the administration to put more money into Africa. He's also pushed African governments to create a better climate for trade and investment, even convening a sovereign credit ratings conference for two dozen African central bankers and finance ministers at the State Department last April. He links competence and honest government as the stabilizing factors that will slow and finally turn around the flight of investment from Africa. "Money is a coward," he frequently says.



SECRETARY POWELL GETS
CREDIT FOR THE
ADMINISTRATION'S UNEXPECTED
DEGREE OF ENGAGEMENT WITH
AFRICA. BUT AFRICANS REMAIN
UNSURE OF U.S. GOALS.

BY CHARLES COBB JR.

"Powell's Policy"

There is much about Africa policy under the Bush administration that has surprised many in Africa. Not much was expected at first. Many on the continent remembered and worried that that when he was a congressman, Vice President Dick Cheney consistently opposed sanctions against apartheid South Africa and, in 1986, voted against a resolution calling for the release of Nelson Mandela. Candidate George W. Bush hadn't seemed much interested in Africa either. "Honest indifference," was how one writer described his attitude.

There are raised expectations now. Although obviously more is involved than just his own efforts, Powell gets the credit for a changed tone that articulates official proactive interest in Africa. "That's Colin Powell!" an African

journalist friend exclaimed, after hearing President Bush, in this year's State of the Union address, speak strongly of the need to fight the "death sentence" HIV/AIDS has imposed on Africa, even pledging an extra \$10 billion to do it. (One of the leaders in the global battle against the pandemic, Dr. Peter Mugeny of Uganda, sat next to Mrs. Bush as a special guest.)

Much of the world I observe remains unsure and nervous about the foreign policy goals of the current U.S. administration, but has tended to make an exception for Powell, giving him the benefit of the doubt and almost unfairly expecting his efforts alone to satisfy their expectations. Perhaps this is because as a military man and statesman, he has long been a familiar figure on the international stage. So, more than with most secretaries of State, any consideration of his effect on Africa policy has to begin with the man. Powell is liked and respected in state houses and parliaments across the continent. His interest in Africa is considered genuine. Few in the African diplomatic corps here failed to

note that as secretary of State-designate, his first meeting at the State Department was with Foreign Service officers specializing in Africa. "He is the only secretary of State I can remember who has ever had any intimate contact with African leaders," says C. Payne Lucas, former president of the NGO Africare, who adds, after a slight pause: "His values don't come from other actors in the administration."

And it is worth noting — though not directly related to Africa — that Powell is popular among State Department personnel, not least because of the considerable credibility he brings to "diplomacy." As exercised by Powell, it is more effective in a suspicious and fractious world than gunboats. But of course, this is diplomacy whose first priority remains the advancement of U.S. interests. These aren't always completely, or even mostly, synonymous with African interests.

A Genuine Interest in Africa

But ask almost any African official, in Washington or on



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the continent: There is no tradition of U.S. secretaries of State having any significant interest in Africa, although before the collapse of the Soviet Union, some countries like Angola or Zaire were fairly important Cold War battlegrounds. Africa was met with disinterest, and often disdain, by most who held the position before Powell. But now, says one diplomat, "If we want something we can say, 'Let's go to the secretary.' We might not get it, but this is very different, very good." The assistant secretary of State for African Affairs was as far as they used to get, he says.

So, although it's not enough to eliminate policy criticisms of, for example, the slow flow of money to the AIDS fight, what appears to be an emphasis on counterterrorism and oil, and the imposition of conditionalities in the name of governance — it counts a lot that Powell is interested in Africa. Certainly it's unusual. Twenty-five African heads of state and government have met with President Bush, so far. This has long been a key priority of Africa: getting the ear of the United States. Rightly or wrongly, African leaders credit Powell.

The easy way — the temptation, really — is to try to explain the man, especially with regard to Africa, in terms of race. He is, after all, the first African-American secretary of State, and though a New Yorker, one with roots in the "Third World" — his parents were Jamaican immigrants. And, among Africans, there was pride and expectation on seeing that someone who might be considered "kith and kin" had secured such a powerful position in the U.S. government.

During his first official trip to Africa in May 2001, Secretary Powell told *allAfrica.com's* Ofeibe Quist-Arcton: "There is a little bit of additional pressure and there are the expectations that are placed upon me because I'm black. But I'm secretary of State of the United States of America first So, I try to do what is right as secretary of State of the United States. But it will always be shaped, to some extent, by the fact that, even though my parents came from Jamaica, their

parents came from somewhere off the west coast of Africa. So, there is a connection here and I'm sure that connection will always give me that little bit of added pressure to do what I can for Africa."

On that trip, Powell linked hands with young victims of HIV/AIDS in South Africa's Soweto township to sing, "Lean on Me."

No Free Pass

But while this may be a necessary part of understanding Secretary Powell, especially in terms of his relationship with Africa, it is not sufficient. He does not get a free pass because of race. At the September 2002 Earth Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, he was booed and heckled by a vocal minority during his speech. There, as President Bush's emissary, he had opposed targets and timetables on the use of renewable energy resources, and had criticized Zimbabwe's land policies and Zambia's rejection of genetically engineered corn.

That same year, "with regret" Secretary Powell also pulled out of the Durban World Conference Against Racism. In a brief statement, Powell said he didn't think a successful conference was possible. "I know that you do not combat racism by conferences that produce declarations containing hateful language, some of which is a throwback to the days of 'Zionism equals racism,' or supports the idea that we have made too much of the Holocaust; or suggests that apartheid exists in Israel; or that singles out only one country in the world — Israel — for censure and abuse."

Powell is, as he frequently notes, and as most who deal with him in an official capacity recognize, the secretary of State of the United States of America. There is a certain irony in the fact that the very position that elevates his stature and the hopes associated with his greater clout, also continually raises the question as to whether Africa's interests are being best served.

"He is the spokesman for a very insecure administration that is selling a crock of promises to Africa in a vain attempt to stall the rising discontent of the African people," wrote one African editorialist, noting that for all of Powell's criticism of Zimbabwe, he embraced Kenya's Daniel Arap Moi, who "has ruled with an iron fist while his regime is mired in corruption. But we must understand the rules of the game as it is played and directed by the United States."

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On Crucial Issues: Disappointment

Critical voices and analysis on Powell and U.S. policy are easy enough to find and hear, for on the issues Africa considers most crucial, there has been disappointment. Debt remains a crippling burden for African nations and the U.S. is thought to be ducking the issue, especially with the failure of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative that was supposed to provide effective relief.

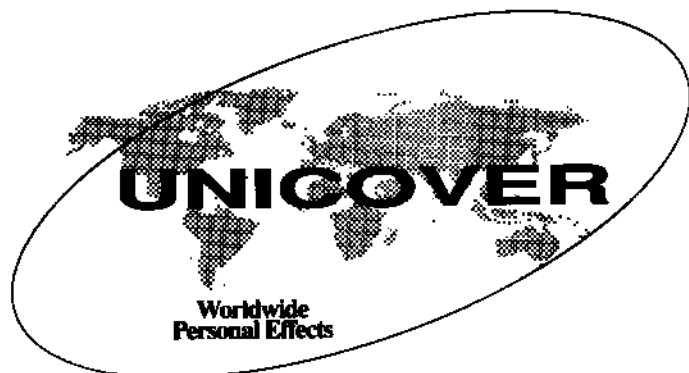
And there is still what African leaders and civil society groups alike consider hypocrisy in U.S. policies, which helps sustain African suspicion of the American commitment. Let market forces prevail, Africans are told; end protection and open up. But U.S. and E.U. agricultural subsidies continue to handicap African agricultural exports. There was also disappointment at last June's G-8 meeting in Kananaskis, Canada. Though both South African President Thabo Mbeki and Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo came for a day that was to focus on a concrete commitment to African needs, they felt they walked away with little more than expressions of sympathy.

But it's the campaign against terror and the looming war on Iraq that earn Powell the grade of "incomplete" on his Africa report card. Will U.S. Africa policy be defined by the requirements of these efforts in the same way the Cold War defined U.S.-Africa relations three decades ago? War, almost certain to be accompanied by oil price shocks, could have a devastating effect on fragile African economies. Already, despite their publicly expressed commitment to the U.S.-led war on terror, in African nations there is simmering resentment at how crucial resources that Africans feel would be better spent on development assistance are being spent for the war on terror. U.S. policy in some parts of Africa appears to be determined more by the Defense Department than the State Department.

In the end, what is Secretary Powell's continuing role likely to be? In Africa he remains a kind of beacon on the still uncertain seas of administration policy. Africans would rather have him there than not there. At least with Colin Powell, they've got a chance, they say. ■

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