US Policy Toward Africa: Eight Decades of Realpolitik

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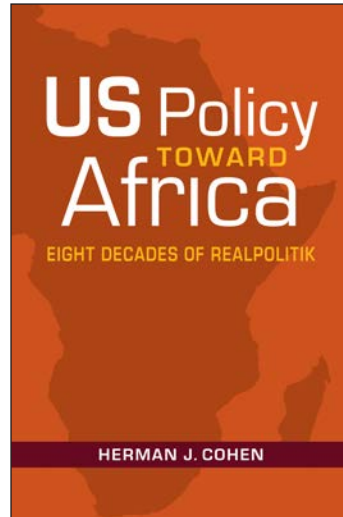
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The United States and Africa:
A Historical Perspective

The United States has been a colonial power, but never in Africa. That was a significant factor in the unfolding of positive US-Africa post–World War II relations. During the nineteenth century, between 1800 and 1885, there was a massive movement into Africa on the part of the Western European powers: France, Great Britain, Germany, Portugal, Belgium, and Spain. This so-called scramble for Africa resulted in the creation of fifty-four colonial dependencies. By the turn of the twentieth century, there were only two independent African nations: Ethiopia and Liberia. Approximately 90 percent of the African continent had been colonized.

What is striking about this aspect of African history is the absence of the United States. During the early years of the nineteenth century, the United States had a blue water navy. Its many East Coast ports were engaged in significant commerce with West Africa, including the slave trade and whaling. During the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, the United States fought and won the Barbary Wars against North African pirates based in Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya who had been engaged in predatory attacks on commercial shipping and coastal European communities for over a century.

So why did the United States refrain from establishing colonies in Africa? The answer lies in the Louisiana Purchase, the transaction through which President Thomas Jefferson negotiated the acquisition of France's vast lands west of the Mississippi River in 1803 for $15 million.

The territory contained 828,000 square miles, including the Port of New Orleans. The result of this significant enlargement of US territory was that the United States began to look westward for land and opportunity. Any possible interest in colonizing Africa disappeared. In addition, American Christian missionaries who ventured into West Africa during the first half of the nineteenth century suffered heavily from disease in what they called "the white man's grave."

The absence of US colonies in Africa did not prevent US companies from engaging in trade with Africa. US trade with Africa was sufficiently important for the US government to establish consulates and commercial agencies throughout the continent—in Port Louis (Mauritius) in 1794, Cape Town (South Africa) in 1799, Bathurst (Gambia) in 1834, and Luanda (Angola) in 1850, and by 1862 there were twenty-five consuls and commercial agents in Africa. US companies were interested mainly in importing ivory, palm oil, and hides.[1]

The US Navy was also active in patrolling in Africa's Atlantic waters. In the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842 between the United States and the United Kingdom, the United States agreed to cooperate in the suppression of the slave trade, despite the fact that slavery continued to be legal in the United States. That commitment required the United States to maintain active naval patrols along the African coast.[2]

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the United States fought a war with Spain that resulted in the acquisition of Spanish territories that became US colonies, notably the Philippine Islands and Guam in the western Pacific Ocean and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean Sea. Later the United States also acquired the Panama Canal Zone from Colombia by supporting the local Panamanian independence movement, as a prelude to the construction of the Atlantic-to-Pacific canal, and annexed the independent kingdom of Hawaii as being vital to US economic and naval interests. At the end of World War II, therefore, the United States could not claim to be unblemished from colonialism. Nevertheless, US policy in the postwar atmosphere was decidedly anticolonial.[3]

The US ideological turn against colonialism began with President Woodrow Wilson in 1918. In April 1917, the United States entered World War I against Germany on the side of France and England. Since Wilson had won reelection in 1916 with the slogan "He kept us out of war," he needed to develop an ideological justification for taking the United States into the war. This took the form of his famous "Fourteen Points," which presented an agenda for the postwar future in which all

disputes would be settled peacefully and transparently, with democracy serving as the necessary unifying element.

Within this document, President Wilson also addressed colonialism. His fifth point called for the "impartial adjustment of all colonial claims under the strict observance of the principle that the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined." He also called for granting autonomy to the European territories under Turkish rule and to the peoples in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He made no mention of African territories, but the basic implication of autonomy for colonial peoples was clear.[4]

Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" were far ahead of their time. While the US contribution to the war effort against Germany was crucial to the Allied victory, Wilson's formula for postwar peace, harmony, and democracy was totally ignored in the peace arrangements. But one senior US official in Wilson's wartime government, Franklin D. Roosevelt, took his president's "fourteen points" seriously and worked hard to implement them when he became president during World War II.

One of the earliest manifestations of Roosevelt's Wilsonian view of colonialism surfaced in August 1941, when the British were at war against Germany and Japan while the United States was still officially neutral. Roosevelt met with British prime minister Winston Churchill on a US naval ship near the coast of Newfoundland to discuss how the United States could be helpful to the UK war effort without actually entering the war. In addition to agreements regarding the loan of US war equipment, the two statesmen signed a document that came to be known as the Atlantic Charter, a statement of their joint view of postwar objectives.

Among the eight paragraphs in the document, the third was clearly Wilsonian: "They respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live, and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them."[5]

Churchill and his Conservative cabinet could not have been pleased with this third paragraph. It essentially constituted an invitation to peoples living under colonial dependency, a large percentage of whom were subjects of the British Empire, to demand self-government after the end of the war and the defeat of the Axis powers, Germany and Japan. At the time of the Atlantic Charter, the UK was clearly not thinking about the sun eventually setting on the British Empire. But the effort to bring

the United States into World War II was the highest priority at the time, and Churchill therefore must have accepted the third paragraph with his fingers crossed.

As further evidence of how seriously the United States considered the language of the Atlantic Charter, the State Department arranged for endorsement of the charter's language by the Inter-Allied Council in London on September 24, 1941. In addition to the United States and the United Kingdom, the council comprised the governments in exile of Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and the Free French forces based in London.

World War II ended in 1945, and the words of the third paragraph of the Atlantic Charter became a driving force in US policy toward colonialism, including colonialism in Africa. The fact that the United States never had colonies in Africa gave this vision of the postwar future even greater relevance to the early development of United States–Africa relations. In essence, the image of the United States in the minds of the embryonic African independence movements during the 1940s and 1950s was as the free world's champion of self-determination. This was in stark contrast to the absence of enthusiasm on the part of the European colonial powers for the idea of an early transition from colonialism to self-determination in the midst of their struggle to achieve reconstruction from the devastation of world war.