

Obama Snubs Africa, Then African Americans

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Many people believed that after Bush had left the White House, rampant arrogance combined with stunning hypocrisy had also gone. Events have proven otherwise. A recent speech delivered in Africa — and one later directed specifically at African Americans — carried with them all the baggage of the Bush years, to the extent that one could safely claim that absolutely nothing had changed. And although Obama is able to give a more compassionate and intelligent speech than was possible with Bush, the essence of their policies is identical. Both Africans and African Americans can expect no help from the U.S. government in addressing their serious and specific grievances, themselves the result of past and current U.S. government policy. Instead, both were given the same solution: if you want help, help yourselves, “no excuses.”

In Africa Obama gave brief mention to the Continent’s tragic past in regards to slavery and colonialism, but prescribed a cure that fell short of inspirational, when he said, “Africa’s future is up to Africans,” which essentially means not to expect too much help from the U.S. The Economist magazine correctly noted that “there was little in the speech that could not have been said by George Bush...” (July 16, 2009).

What Obama failed to mention was the active role the U.S. government played in ensuring that resource-rich Africa remains a continent plundered by foreign powers. This continued ransacking happens not only through U.S. corporations, the IMF and World Bank, but through U.S. sponsored proxy wars, such as the current ones in Somalia and Congo, and the recent conflicts in Kenya, Sudan, Rwanda, etc.

The successful proxy war in Sudan achieved a Bush-led plan to eventually partition the country so that the oil-rich south could be exploited by western corporations. The president of Sudan, Omar el-Bashir, has close links to China, which the U.S. cannot tolerate. Bashir is therefore labeled a war criminal for his actions against the U.S. backed militia that sought to undermine his government.

Obama is continuing the Bush-era campaign of undermining Bashir, demanding that he be tried for war crimes. Obama was clear in his speech: “We will stand behind efforts to hold war criminals accountable.” Obama is hypocritically ignoring the fact that his predecessor is by far the world’s biggest war criminal; and Bush has absolutely no worries about being prosecuted for his crimes. Interestingly, the African Union does not agree with Obama that Bashir is a war criminal, creating the conflict that prompted Obama’s comments.

Also troubling in Obama’s speech was the promise that only countries that achieved “good governance” would receive aid from the U.S. The fact that the most vicious dictatorship on earth — Saudi Arabia — continues under Obama to be a “very close” U.S. ally, puts to

question the definition of “good governance.” Especially since other extremely repressive governments — Israel, Colombia, Egypt, etc. — also receive enormous sums of U.S. financial and military aid. When applied to Africa, “good governance” refers simply to those governments that do exactly as the U.S. wishes.

Most revealing for Obama’s real plans in Africa is his support for Bush’s blueprints for AFRICOM, a planned U.S. military command specifically dedicated to U.S. “conflicts” in Africa. One can assume that such a command was planned with future U.S. military intervention in mind.

Although Obama is correct when he said, “I have the blood of Africa in my veins,” he unfortunately shares the political views of a conservative Republican.

For example, when Obama gave a recent speech in front of the N.A.A.C.P, his main message was “personal responsibility.” Obama is very fond of this catchphrase, which is in fact at the foundation of conservative philosophy.

The reason that “personal responsibility” is such a lynchpin in Conservative thought is its implications: it strongly justifies the status quo, and those who benefit from it. Thus, the rich deserve their place atop society, while those at the bottom are likewise “responsible” for it.

All the factors that create generational poverty and generational wealth are ignored, especially the fact that there exists a tiny class of people who own the banks and other corporations, and another much larger class actually doing the work; assuming they’re lucky enough to have a job.

In making his point, Obama said that, “growing up poor can’t be an excuse to get bad grades.” The many difficulties that come with being poor needn’t be “excuses,” but mere facts of existence, including: demoralization, general instability, anxiety, poor nutrition, inadequate resources, lack of safety, no health insurance, poor public schools, etc.

Obama surely knows that economic opportunities in predominantly black communities are more than scarce, especially given the present state of the economy and the widespread disease of racism. If one wants to have enough money for both food and to pay their rent, resorting to the informal economy is often a very reasonable choice.

When it came to the issues of racism and discrimination, Obama spoke very little: “Make no mistake, the pain of discrimination is still felt in America.” But while recognizing that these evils still exist, his solution was to all but ignore them. “No excuses” was the mantra — the right-wing media publications were all very impressed.

For Africans and African Americans, the especially high expectations that came with Obama’s presidency are destined to become colossal letdowns. Correcting the past and present wrongs to Africa and African-Americans would take great structural changes in U.S. government policy; away from benefiting a tiny privileged elite and working towards policies that benefit the great majority of people.

For African American communities, giant government investment is needed in education, housing, health care, and public works so that living-wage jobs are created that allow an actual route out of poverty. This, combined with an increase in affirmative action programs, is a way to enact real change; much more than Obama’s encouraging words will provide.

Of course, the people who actually control the Democrats and Republicans — the big banks, health care industry, oil companies, weapons producers, etc. — want no such change. They greatly benefit from the cheap labor that racism and discrimination provide them. Organizing outside of the realm of the two-party system is therefore a necessary first step towards change in action, not in words.

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