The Wilsonian Conception of Democracy and Human Rights: A Retrospective and Prospective

KORWA G. ADAR

INTRODUCTION

The principles of democracy and human rights have been persistent, if at times secondary, themes within the rhetoric of American foreign policy toward Africa since the end of World War II. The linking of such Wilsonian precepts with foreign policy practice, however, has been an altogether different story. US policy makers consistently followed the dictates of realpolitik in the era of the Cold War, leaving concerns for democracy and human rights aside. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, conditions are now in place for the tangible and coherent pursuit of an American foreign policy based on democracy and human rights. In the current era, the question emerges as to the resonance of such Wilsonian principles in US foreign policy towards Africa. This essay examines the salience of Wilsonian precepts in United States foreign policy towards Africa in the past and in the current era of Clinton’s visit to Africa.

In his foreign policy pronouncements vis-a-vis the European colonial powers President Woodrow Wilson advocated for the pursuit of democracy and human rights conceptualized within the context of self-determination for the colonized peoples. The idea of universal morality was central for Wilson. In his view, the realization of individual freedom, limited government, and legitimacy of power held the key to both international peace and the emancipation of humanity from injustice. It was within this philosophical context that he advocated for the need to make the world safe for democracy. This, he argued, would promote America’s long term interests.

Wilsonianism emerged as a distinct policy philosophy at the end of the First World War. One of the central concerns at the time was how to avoid war and conflict in general. For Wilson, the crucial priority was the need to establish people-oriented internal and international democratic institutions that would act as the custodians of democracy and human rights as conceptualised within the general rubric of self-determination. This idealism culminated in the formation of the League of Nations in 1919. Thus, Wilsonianism was not only internationalised...
but also institutionalised. Although the United States did not become a contracting party to the League, Wilsonianism had a global impact.

Such thinking would go on to inform the founding fathers of the United Nations. The UN system tangibly paved the way for the process of decolonization in Africa through the UN General Assembly resolutions, with African countries which were independent at the time as well as India and the socialist countries taking the lead. In this respect, Wilsonianism not only challenged dictatorial and authoritarian systems worldwide but it also helped oppressed people become aware of their rights. For the colonized peoples of Africa, democracy and human rights (or self-determination in general) was equated with the absence of colonialism. Moreover, the momentum on the issues of democracy and human rights was evidenced with the appointment of Eleanor Roosevelt to Chair a Commission on Human Rights. The results of Roosevelt's Commission were the establishment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its corollaries the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

President Wilson's global campaign as the champion for the silent majority also set the stage for a United States democracy and human rights foreign policy in the twentieth century. Wilsonian precepts resonated clearly in the message of the Atlantic Charter which, although promulgated by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Wilson's intellectual heir, manifestly indicated US dissatisfaction with the lack of sovereignty for colonised peoples.

The concern for the promulgation of democracy and human rights is thus part of the legacy of United States foreign policy towards Africa. The salience of these moral principles in foreign policy practice, however, has always stood in the face of a more realist agenda guiding US policy. This was particularly evident during the Cold War. The status of such ideas in the post-Cold War foreign policy of the United States remains an open question.

WILSONIANISM SHELVED: THE COLD WAR AND US POLICY TO AFRICA

In the spirit of Wilsonianism, the US welcomed decolonization and independence in Africa in the 1960s. However, with Cold War prism taking a centre stage, emerging American national interests became defined in terms of combating communism in Africa and other parts of the world. Indeed, such concerns were evident even prior to much of Africa's independence. After his visit to Africa, Vice-President Nixon in his report to Eisenhower explained that "the course of Africa's development...could well prove to be the decisive factor between the forces of freedom and international communism".

To be sure, the concerns with democracy and human rights occasionally surfaced in the discourse of US foreign policy. For instance, the US Congress, particularly since the 1960s has enacted legislation linking economic and military aid to democracy and human rights. Section 116 of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act prohibited the President from providing development assistance "to the government of any country which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights". Similarly, the 1976 Congressional Foreign Assistance Act stipulates, among other things, that the US is "to promote and encourage increased respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms throughout the world." US security assistance was to be given in a manner which will "provide and advance human rights
and avoid identification of the United States, through such programs, with governments which deny their people internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

These episodic legislative efforts should not blind us to a more general pattern wherein US foreign policy actually worked against the precepts of Wilsonianism. The overall history of US activity in Africa during the cold war reads like a litany of anti-Wilsonian practices justified in the name of containing communism. This included US support of such brutal dictators as Mobutu, Moi, Barre, Nimieri, and Selassie, whose human rights records were among the worst in Africa. Billions of dollars were spent to roll back communism. Indeed, US weapons played major roles in conflict situations in Angola, Ethiopia, Liberia, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo-DRC), Namibia, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, and Sierra Leone.

The more specific chronology of US foreign policy further confirms US reluctance to support Wilsonianism. President Kennedy, guided by US strategic interests, was unable to support anti-colonial forces in Portuguese colonies in Africa due to his concern for the strategic North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bases in the Azores. Even the 1960 decolonization and self-determination-oriented UN Resolution 1541 (XV), in which Wilsonianism was clearly inscribed, was not supported by the Eisenhower Administration. The US was one of nine countries (Australia, Belgium, Britain, the Dominican Republic, France, Portugal, South Africa, and Spain) to abstain during the voting in the UN General Assembly. The abstention clearly indicated that the US sanctioned oppression, racial discrimination, and the violation of human rights in Africa by the colonial powers, if to do so meant containing communism. US ambivalence on the Rhodesian question was also a clear manifestation of a reluctance to pursue democracy and human rights policies in Africa. Although the administrations of Presidents Kennedy (1961-1963) and Johnson (1963-1969) were generally concerned with the issue of apartheid in South Africa, the Vietnam war occupied most of their time.

Whereas the Johnson Administration upheld the UN economic sanctions against the white regime in Rhodesia because of its human rights violations, President Nixon permitted the US company Union Carbide to import 150,000 tons of chromium ore from that country. Similarly, the Nixon Administration also increased military aid to South Africa, violating the UN embargo. This policy clearly placed the US on the side of the white regimes in southern Africa and in support of the violation of human rights policies that were part of the systems. The Nixon and Ford Administrations’s policies of replacing Wilsonianism with national security only enhanced the status quo in the region. These trends in foreign policy behavior underwent a gradual, though inconsistent, shift during the Carter Administration (1977-1981).

Carter defeated the Vietnam War weary and Watergate scandal plagued Republican Administration by building on a domestic constituency rife with Cold War disillusionment. His new vision de-emphasized the view that conceptualized conflicts in Africa within the prism of communist adventurism. For Carter, conflicts arose as a result of domestic disorder or simply socio-economic and political stress. Carter, like Wilson, brought to the White House religious and moral virtues which translated into his foreign policy-making process. One of his concerns was how to bring about democracy in Africa. To help him achieve this objective, he appointed a number of African-Americans, in addition to others, who shared his views to key foreign policy-making positions. It was during the Carter Administration that a real
qualitative leap in the prominence of American human rights foreign policy was reactivated. Carter was able, at least initially, to move America away from the realpolitik of the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger years to a vision of Wilsonianism. Specifically, he made the issues of democracy and human rights the subject of international diplomatic discourse. This policy initiative was pursued more vigorously in his first two years in office, raising the hopes of pro-democracy and human rights advocates both in the US and Africa. For example, export and import restrictions were imposed on South Africa, Ethiopia, and Uganda. By linking economic and military aid to human rights violations, the Carter Administration intended to influence the policies of the repressive regimes in Africa.

Carter’s idealism was aimed at encouraging countries in Africa considered to be progressive. His Administration dismissed the Kissinger plans in southern Africa as inconsistent with democracy and human rights principles and supported instead the anti-apartheid efforts of the Front-Line States. Carter also increased diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the Angolan, Mozambican, and Namibian questions. Racism and dictatorship rather than communism were seen as the main threat to American interests in Africa. The Carter Administration also nullified the 1971 Byrd Amendment which allowed American companies to import chrome from Rhodesia and signed U.R. 1746 to law prohibiting US companies from dealing in trade with the white minority regimes in southern Africa and limiting military sales restrictions on countries in Africa that violated human rights in general.

These moves placed the Carter Administration on the side of the pro-democracy and human rights movements in the region and the anti-apartheid advocates in the US. President Carter’s shift from Wilsonian idealism to realpolitik became apparent during the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the taking of American hostages in Iran. Carter hurriedly negotiated for military bases in Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan in 1980 at a time when human rights violations were rampant in these countries. Carter needed logistical support for the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) which was established as a result of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US hostage crisis in Iran. His Administration’s inconsistency, however, was displayed on a number of occasions. Whereas he was concerned with the Soviet intention in Africa, his Administration was also insistent on the issue of the observance of human rights. In Fiscal Years 1980 and 1981, for example, Zaire became one of the first victims in Sub-Saharan Africa whose military aid was reduced by Congress during the Carter Administration. Ethiopia and South Africa also were earmarked for sanctions and denial of military aid.

The Reagan and Bush Administrations viewed the issue of democracy and human rights largely within the context of the containment of communism in Africa. This was clearly symbolized in their continued support for what Reagan called freedom fighters such as the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). The Contact Group of Western countries established during the Carter Administration to oversee the Namibian transition to independence was relaxed by the Reagan Administration. Instead, Reagan established the policy of constructive engagement which accommodated the views of the apartheid regime. The US-USSR rapprochement that began in 1984 with the Reagan-Gromyko meeting set the stage for the close of the Cold War. These developments paved the way for the Reagan Administration’s accommodative approach to human rights that was expanded under the Bush Administration.
THE END OF THE COLD WAR: A NEW TREND IN US FOREIGN POLICY?

The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in great opportunity for the pursuit of foreign policy based on Wilsonianism. We find such an emphasis emerging in the foreign policy orientation of both the Presidency and Congress. To be sure, it will take some time, perhaps decades, before such a policy becomes meaningfully established. Our aim here is to try to demonstrate that a trend is emerging within the US foreign policy-making establishment in favor of the pursuit of democracy and human rights policy in Africa. The linkage of Wilsonianism to foreign policy and development acquired a central theme under President Bush following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The US advisor to the UN Commission for Human Rights, Marc Northern, clearly articulated President Bush Administration's foreign policy on democracy and human rights. In his address to the Commission, Northern stated that "the US makes no apology for insisting that where human rights are concerned, every nation, including my own must be held to the highest standard... . We stand ready to help those governments committed to human rights move ahead" 26. He further emphasized that "the division in the world today is not between East and West... . The real division in the world is between those committed to democracy and liberty and those against" 27. This trend of thinking, did not however, manifest until in the 1990s. In 1989 the Bush Administration opposed aids cuts to some of the leading African old guards-cum-dictators such as Moi (Kenya), Barre (Somalia), and Mobutu (Zaire, now DRC). The same dictators were to face political conditionalities in the 1990s imposed by the US and other donor countries.

In Kenya, for example, relations with the US and other donor countries in general began to deteriorate in 1989. The years 1989-1991 witnessed great internal and international pressure on the Kenyan Government to allow multipartyism. The US Ambassador to Kenya, Smith Hemstone, brushing diplomatic ethics aside, stated publicly that US assistance would be directed to countries that "nourished democratic institutions, defended human rights and practised multiparty politics" 28. In conformity with Section 116 of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act and other democracy and human rights legislation, President Bush acquiesced to the Congressional freezing of $25 million in military aid to Kenya 29. Kenya's foreign aid was subsequently withheld by the US and other donors in 1991 forcing the Moi regime to allow multipartism. The other African countries which were victims of Congressional legislation in the late 1980s to early 1990s included, Cameroon, Malawi, Sudan, Togo, and Zaire. The Bush Administration was also involved directly or indirectly in peace initiatives in Sudan, Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia, and Zaire among others. These efforts were augmented by Congressional support.

The effort of Bush Administration on the issue of human rights and democracy were carried on by President Clinton who acknowledged that when he became President, the US had no policy towards Africa. The policies existing at the time, he argued, focused mainly on specific countries. He stated that "for decades we viewed Africa through Cold War prism...We supported leaders on the basis of their anti-Communist or anti-apartheid rhetoric perhaps more than their action ... And... the United States... simply ignored the realities of Africa" 30. He further emphasized that the United States would like to "see more prosperity and more well-
functioning economies and democracy...We’d like to see sustainable development that promotes the long-term interest" defined in terms of global stability. This Wilsonian liberal internationalism constituted part of Clinton’s foreign policy orientation.

In one of his public speeches, the American Secretary of State at the time, Warren Christopher, emphasized that "promoting democracy and human rights is a pillar of American foreign policy" conceptualized within what he called the "moral and strategic imperative of the 1990s". The concern of the Clinton Administration, rhetoric or otherwise, on these issues is centred on the need to establish viable internal and international stability defined in terms of democracy and human rights. These values are increasingly being linked to foreign aid by donors. This foreign policy framework is based on the thesis that liberal democracy and free markets are the best guarantors of world peace, stability and development. Financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) in particular, have joined the bandwagon in supporting the emerging donors’ perspectives on the issues of democracy and human rights. These policies are bound to enhance internal and international pro-democracy efforts.

A further example of Clinton’s commitment to human rights is witnessed in the Administration’s response to the cancellation of election and killings of innocent people by the Abacha regime in Nigeria. The Clinton Administration cut off $450,000 aid for military training and $11 million in grants. The US, the European Community, the Commonwealth Countries, and some members of the UN also imposed sanctions against the Abacha regime following the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a human rights advocate, and eight other Ogonis. In her address to the UN General Assembly on November 28, 1995, the US Ambassador to the UN at the time now Secretary of State Madeleine Albright singled out Nigeria and Sudan as countries in Africa whose governments are associated with dictatorship, coercion and violation of international recognized human rights principles.

However, concerns with democracy and human rights did not supplant more fundamental American interests. The US, however, as one of the major importers of Nigerian crude oil, did not impose stiff economic sanctions against Nigeria. This indicates that realpolitik still guides important aspects of US foreign policy. Indeed, this is a clear indication that regardless of a President’s avowed politics, US economic interests always take precedence over other issues.

Moreover, stability in Africa is increasingly understood within the context of Wilsonianism. This is evidenced by the steady decline in military procurement to the continent, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, the US arms deliveries to Sub-Saharan Africa started to show a steady decline from 1985 to 1994. Under the Clinton Administration, the term Security Assistance since 1994 has been changed to Assistance for Promoting Peace and Building Democracy. This shows a clear shift in the Administration’s policy on security issues in relation to Africa. The focus by his Administration is on the peace-building military training in conjunction with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the individual African states. This new concept, under the name African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI), introduced in 1996 by the Clinton Administration, is designed to prepare African countries’ military personnel for future peace-keeping missions in trouble-spots in the continent. While Botswana, Uganda, and Zimbabwe participated in this joint military training program with the US Marines in late 1997, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania did so in 1998. What is emerging within the US foreign policy-
making establishment is the inclusion of democracy and human rights even on matters pertaining to security.

To augment its peace-building initiatives in Africa the Clinton Administration has also supported the concept of denuclearization of Africa. The US played an active role in drafting the final text of the African Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone Treaty also known as the Treaty of Pelindaba which was opened for signature in April 1996 in Cairo, Egypt. During the Cold War the US was persistently opposed to this concept, particularly in relation to the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace proposed by the African and Indian Ocean littoral states.

CLINTON’S VISIT AND WILSONIANISM: RHETORIC OR REALITY?

One of the central questions which needs to be asked is the extent to which President Clinton’s March 1998 visit to Africa helped solidify the US policy of Wilsonianism? Or was his visit influenced largely by narrow American realpolitik perspectives thus missing the opportunity to lay the foundation for a well established Wilsonian idealism?

While in Uganda President Clinton emphasized that "if we work together to strengthen democracy and respect for human rights, we can help this continent reach its full potential in the 21st century -- its true greatness, which has too long been denied" 36. This was the message Clinton re-emphasized during his official tour of the continent. President Clinton also stressed a number of things, which according to him, are different from the course US took during the Cold War period. First, he emphasized the importance of good governance, accountability, freely elected governments, and the need for African governments to provide democratic space. Second, he stated that African stability, security, and prosperity are consistent with US interests. Third, he stressed that respect for democracy and human rights constitutes the centre stage of US interest in Africa. Clinton's US-Africa foreign policy pronouncements centred on trade, security, and democracy and human rights 37. These statements were carefully chosen and linked to Clinton's priorities and strategies at home and in Africa.

Within the domestic context it can be argued that the Clinton Administration’s main objective was designed to enlarge its domestic constituency, particularly among African-Americans. His recent recognition of the role played by the American slaves during the Civil War and his apology for the US transAtlantic slave trade can be understood in this context. An expanded domestic constituency would enhance support for the Democratic Party in future elections. Louis Farrakhan’s visit to Africa earlier, particularly to Libya and Sudan(dubbed terrorist nations by the US), could not be taken lightly given his increasing influence in the US 38. Clinton also wanted to enhance his Administration’s image in Africa by engaging in a mutually beneficial human relationship with Africans, or simply a comprehensive form of "neo-constructive engagement". This was an important aspect of his visit. It was an attempt to move Africa away from marginalisation and mere US stereotypes to a continent that needs to be engaged in a reciprocal partnership. In other words he brought America to Africa by way of focusing the attention of Americans on the African continent. Clinton may have succeeded in these areas at home-gaining support of the African-Americans and establishing a different image of Africa among the American people—but what are the potential ramifications in the African context?
With the exception of Rwanda, Clinton visited countries (Ghana, Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, Botswana and Senegal) considered by the Administration to be democratizing and promoting market-oriented economies. But what package did he bring? His trip was boosted, at least by the perspectives of his Administration, with the passage of the African Growth and Opportunity Act on March 11, 1998 by the US House of Representatives. Yet, to some observers the Act "poses significant threats to Africa's long term interests in sustainable economic development and democracy-building." The central displeasure with the Act is that it imposes certain conditions - a form of "trickle down theory" - on the African countries. For example, the African countries must comply with IMF rules which require the privatization of their assets through divestiture; they must acquiesce to World Trade Organization rules such as tariff cuts and the removal of import restrictions and adopt currencies and investment deregulations which allow foreign investors to establish ownership over natural resources in the continent. The initiative is obviously a good one and it indicates a willingness on the part of the Clinton Administration and Congress to engage in meaningful economic relations with Africa. The Act in its present form, however, constitutes a threat to the sovereignty of the African states and renders the idea of mutual respect and reciprocal partnership entailed in some of Clinton's speeches nugatory.

Whereas Clinton emphasized that US-Africa economic policy is to be based on trade as opposed to foreign aid, he failed to offer a historic package to the debt plagued continent. Economic development and more so Wilsonian idealism inscribed in his speeches cannot thrive in a continent trapped in debt. Currently, sub-Saharan Africa alone has foreign debts totaling over $200 billion. Clinton's message could have had great impact for generations to come in the new millennium if it contained a plan for writing-off the 48 sub-Saharan African states' debts, 31 of which are classified as severely indebted and low-income. Something of great foreign policy magnitude like the 1948 Marshall Plan could have made a difference. Even if the plan (or let us call it Clinton-Albright African Plan) were to target only some of the African countries perceived by the US leaders to be in the processes of nourishing democratic ideals, good governance, and respect for human rights, it could have set the stage for a tangible and historic US-Africa policy. The fact that the US and its allies managed to mobilize about $100 billion debt relief under the 1996 Highly Indebted Poor Country Initiative (HIPC) to salvage the East Asian countries trapped in economic crisis, make Clinton's rhetoric in Africa suspect. After all, even under the debt choking conditions, about eleven sub-Saharan African countries managed to experience 6% growth rates in the period 1996-97, faster than their 3% population growth rates. It is along these lines that Clinton could have made his visit more historic which in turn could have served long term US-Africa interests. Instead, US aid to Africa has undergone a steady decline in recent years. Whereas sub-Saharan Africa received an average of $700 million from the US between 1990-98, down from $841 million in 1992, Israel's aid increased from $3 billion to $5.5 billion in the same period. What is more revealing is that in Fiscal Year 1999, Sub-Saharan Africa is allocated only $155 million compared to $225 million for Bosnia alone.

Clinton's strategic initiative in Africa conceptualized within the context of peacekeeping missions or simply "African solutions to African problems" sounds more like a new form of the Nixon doctrine of the early 1970s, a policy based on the strategy of transferring arms to regional American proxies to enhance their military capabilities to guard US interests. If the Clinton
Administration’s decision to withdraw American troops from Somalia in 1994 is anything to go by, then the idea of introducing African peacekeeping forces (ACRI) only re-enforces my interpretation. Compare the decision by the US to withdraw from Somalia to its commitment in the former Yugoslavia? The NATO peacekeeping forces are still busy patrolling the area a few years after they were deployed. This is not to argue that the US should become a policeman in Africa. The central point is that even in the post Cold War era the US commitment to Africa is still questionable. It remains at the level of rhetoric defeating the objective of promoting Wilsonian idealism, a policy that would serve US long term interests. The same level of political will established to combat communism in Africa and elsewhere during the Cold War era should be directed toward "rolling back dictatorship and oppression" from the continent and replacing it with Wilsonian idealism. President Clinton had the best opportunity to put such a policy in place while he was in Africa. Although his speeches in Africa were coached in Wilsonian conceptions, they will continue to be interpreted as mere political rhetoric. An inclusive and tangible US-Africa foreign policy orientation can still be put in place by the Administration before the new millennium. After all this was the central thrust of Clinton’s keynote address at the White House Conference on Africa in June 1994. In my view, such a policy, would catalyse and solidify the political and institutional reforms that are dubbed "the African Renaissance”sweeping across the continent.

Notes

1. See generally, Stanley Hoffmann, "The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism", Foreign Affairs, 98(Spring 1995):159-177. Wilsonianism is hereinafter used interchangeably with democracy and human rights


27. Ibid., p.1.

31. Ibid.


