

THE RECORD OF THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA

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William Jefferson Clinton was the president of the United States from January 1993 to January 2001, a period when Africa was the scene of a series of internal political and devastating armed conflicts. The cold war had ended earlier in 1989 and was capped by the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. There no longer, therefore, was the perceived threat of the spread of communism and Soviet ideological expansionism. Thus, it was no longer necessary to contain the communists and the Soviet Union, a major goal of U.S. foreign policy in Africa and elsewhere for nearly fifty years. Instead, there was a deliberate decision to promote a new world order in which the United States, now the unrivaled global power, cooperated with, and assisted, its former ideological and political rivals. Indeed, the result of the decision was such that the former rivals—the former communist Eastern European nations and the new Commonwealth of Independent States—became competitors with African states for U.S. foreign assistance. Some U.S. consulates in Africa were closed in order to open new ones in the areas of the new interest.

There were also, in addition to the above, isolationist feelings in America on the part of individuals who believed that after the cold war the United States should reduce its involvement in world affairs and focus more of its attention at home in order to address domestic needs. Thus, domestic economic and social needs—concern with the entitlements (social security and healthcare) and with a surging national debt and huge budget deficits—contributed to this feeling and the new international environment to place Africa on the periphery of American foreign policy priorities.

While this was the situation in the United States during the Clinton administration, the political realities in Africa were completely different. Political instability, clan and ethnic wars, widespread corruption, economic mismanagement, and human rights abuses, collectively generated negative press coverage of Africa in America. This, in turn, produced Afro-pessimism in the American polity where already there was no relatively powerful African constituency. Accordingly, African states, for the most part, were left to fend for themselves.

This study examines the Clinton administration's response to the political realities in Africa by looking at its policy and record on the resolution of a selected number of political conflicts in the continent. Specifically, four conflicts are selected: clan wars in Somalia, civil war in Sierra Leone, genocidal acts in Rwanda, and the transition to majority rule in the Republic of South Africa.