

9-2016

America's Legendary Ignorance about Africa Persists

Julius A. Amin

University of Dayton, jamin1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub

 Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Public Policy Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Amin, Julius A., "America's Legendary Ignorance about Africa Persists" (2016). *History Faculty Publications*. Paper 125.
http://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub/125

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

America's legendary ignorance about Africa persists

September 19, 2016 3:27pm EDT



Author



Julius A. Amin

Professor, Department of History,
University of Dayton

Americans' ignorance about Africa persists despite efforts by presidents Kennedy and Obama to forge stronger ties with the continent. Jason Reed/Reuters

Fifty six years ago, John F. Kennedy made 479 references to Africa during the US presidential campaign. He observed that America had lost ground on the continent because of failures to meet the “need and aspirations of the African people”.

President Kennedy charted a new path in US-Africa relations. He created the Peace Corps, and the United States Agency for International Development. And, unlike his predecessors, he began to show more respect and dignity for African leaders.

To African people, Kennedy was the “great one,” and a “friend of the coloured man everywhere”. He began the process to change the “ugly American” image which characterised his predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower’s, foreign policy towards the Third World.

But the new directions initiated by Kennedy were short-lived as his successors reverted to previous policies. While Lyndon Johnson labelled Africans “cannibals”, Richard Nixon ridiculed blacks as “genetically inferior” to whites. And, Ronald Reagan’s pro-Apartheid policy of Constructive Engagement was consistent with his overall African policy.

Though more recently during President Barack Obama's presidency there was a shift in policy, there continues to be immense and sometimes shameful ignorance in America about Africa.

Popular notions range from seeing the continent through a monolithic lens to depicting it as suffocated with disease, tribal wars, famine, corruption, cannibals and crime.

Even the Peace Corps and university students, both a hallmark of American idealism, were not immune. While some Peace Corps officials talked of "primitive mud huts" all over Africa's landscape, college students imagined the region to be a

place of destruction, primitive conditions, and injustice, and where people practice strange religions.

Though scholars have long discarded those images and corrected the historical record, the negative perceptions have persisted, and continue to dominate the thinking of major political leaders in America.

In an increasingly interconnected and technological global environment, ignorance of Africa is no longer acceptable. This, especially from major political leaders. Yet, examples of such ignorance are evident in the current American presidential campaign. Neither the Republican nominee Donald J. Trump nor the democratic nominee Hillary R. Clinton has articulated any concrete vision for an African policy.

During the primary season, Africa came up and when it did it was either in the context of terrorism or as an afterthought. There seems to be little realisation by both candidates that in the current fluid and interdependent global environment, Africa has emerged as a strategic partner in trade, peace, and security. A case in point is the US African Command which collaborates with African governments and regional organisations to combat terrorism.

Africa in perspective

Africa, the second largest continent, is over three times the size of the US and has 54 nations. It is the ancestral home of roughly 13% of America's population; namely African-Americans.

Its complex cultures, languages, and religions have contributed to global cultures. It is the ancestral site of humankind. It is home to renowned economic, social and educational institutions including the University of Cape Town, University of Ghana, and the University of Ibadan. Its other impressive institutions include the Dangote Group businesses and the Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation. It is also the land of vital minerals such as coltan, essential for the world's software and telecommunication industry.

Africa's raw materials are vital to the global economic system. Its rising consumer culture has transformed the continent into a major market for manufactured goods.

Two years ago at the US-African Leaders Summit President Obama called for the creation of "genuine partnership" in US-Africa relations. Africa is now a key battleground for the US and China where both nations are locked in a struggle to gain a competitive edge.

From Cairo to Cape Town, China through its Forum of China Africa Cooperation and other endeavours, has surpassed US investments on the continent.

Embracing Africa

Engaging Africa in a much more serious way, particularly within the foreign policy discourse in the American presidential campaign, would be an important step. Both candidates must build on the foundation started by Kennedy and later continued by Obama which sees Africa as a "fundamental part of our interconnected world," and seek a relationship based on mutual "responsibility" and "respect".

Both things are doable. Trump and Clinton should articulate a concrete vision and means by which they will implement it. Development is not just about economic imperatives, and other quantitative things, it also entails informed knowledge.

The time has come for developed nations to eliminate the large pockets of ignorance which exist in their society about Africa and other peoples. Globalisation demands that people ask new questions, seek new answers, and think differently. For all the challenges, African communities are coming together. It is, indeed, a continent on the rise and can no longer be ignored or marginalised.



Barack Obama

Foreign policy

Hillary Clinton

John F Kennedy

Donald Trump

Cape Town

African politics

USAID

China-Africa

Cairo

Focac

US presidential campaign

Globalisation