



## What Happened to Africa?

By J. Peter Pham

**The Fate of Africa: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair—A History of Fifty Years of Independence** by Martin Meredith. New York: Public Affairs, 2006. 752 pp.

### Explaining a False Start

Fifty-one years ago this year, delegations from fifty-six countries arrived in Accra to witness the rebirth of the British crown colony of the Gold Coast as the newly independent state of Ghana, the firstborn of what would soon be a veritable wave of nearly four dozen African nations which would achieve political independence in the space of a few years. The Duchess of Kent represented her niece, Queen Elizabeth II, while Vice President Richard Nixon stood in for President Dwight Eisenhower who broadcasted a special radio message, congratulating Ghanaians and expressing his “particular admiration [for] the manner in which you attained your independence,” while emphasizing that he spoke “for a people that cherishes independence, which we deeply believe is the right of all people who are able to discharge its responsibilities” (Heger 1999: 257).

On March 6, 1957, few doubted that Ghana, and the states which would follow in its wake, would be able to discharge the responsibilities they assumed on taking their place among the world’s sovereigns. As Martin Meredith notes in The Fate of Africa: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair—A History of Fifty Years of Independence, his monumental survey of the post-colonial history of the continent, rarely are states launched with as much promise as this West African country:

*Ghana embarked on independence as one of the richest tropical countries in the world, with an efficient civil service, an impartial judiciary and a prosperous middle class. Its parliament was well established, with able politicians in both government and opposition. The prime minister, himself, then only forty-seven years old, was regarded as a leader of outstanding ability, popularly elected, with six years of experience running a government. The country’s economic prospects were equally propitious. Not only was Ghana the world’s leading producer of cocoa, with huge foreign currency reserves built up during the 1950s cocoa boom, but it possessed gold, timber and bauxite. (27)*

Were one to have examined Ghana’s economic indicators in comparison with those of, say, South Korea, the African nation evinced better prospects hands down. At the very moment the departing British governor, Sir Charles Arden-Clarke, bequeathed Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah an unprecedented \$481 million in foreign reserves, South Korea’s Syngman Rhee was presiding over a nearly bankrupt country eking out an existence on U.S. aid, having endured the thirty-five years of

brutal Japanese occupation—in contrast to which the eighty-three year history of British rule in the Gold Coast colony was positively benign—only to subsequently suffer a devastating conventional war fought in its cities and countryside, which concluded in a military stalemate and armistice just four years earlier. In both aggregate and per capita terms, the gross domestic product of the Republic of Korea was lower than that of Ghana in 1957, with few prospects for improvement given the near-total lack of exploitable natural resources on the Northeast Asian peninsula. Yet half a century later, South Korea boasts the world’s thirteenth largest economy and is considered “highly developed,” ranking twenty-sixth on the Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), while Ghana, with its original endowment and all the natural bounty at its disposal, just barely makes the cut to qualify as a “medium developed” nation, ranking 136<sup>th</sup> out of 177 countries surveyed (UNDP 2007).

Even with its underwhelming economic performance, Ghana is far from the worst off among African nations—in all fairness, after a disastrous few decades marred by military coups and statist economic mismanagement, it has slowly, but steadily, turned itself around since the restoration of constitutional rule in the 1990s, making up for lost time through astonishingly rapid social, economic, and political progress. The same, however, cannot be said for Ghana’s neighbors: all twenty-two countries characterized by the UNDP as having “low human development” are in Sub-Saharan Africa; conversely, with the exception of Mauritius and Seychelles—two island states in the Indian Ocean that are members in the African Union—no African country placed among the seventy states having “high human development.” Why many of the hopes of half a century ago have come to end in bitterness and despair as nearly a billion people, far from advancing, are actually rather falling even farther behind the rest of humankind, and how the rest of the world responds stand out as one of the most critical questions of the twenty-first century. For while the future is uncertain, what one can be sure of is that not learning from the lessons of the past is a guarantee for continued failure. Hence, it would be useful to begin by examining some of the explanations which are often given to account for the failure of African states not only to live up to the hopes of their citizens at independence, but also to respect their aspirations for basic dignity and human rights.

### **Common Excuses**

Slavery is almost always among the first “causes” cited for Sub-Saharan Africa’s woeful performance on most indicators of well-being. There is no doubt that the slave trade is one of the most shameful episodes in the chronicle of humankind’s inhumanity to its fellows. From the dawn of the European “Age of Discovery” at the end of the fifteenth century to the interdiction by Great Britain, France, and the United States of the transatlantic slave trade in the early nineteenth century,<sup>1</sup> it is estimated that somewhere between eight and twelve million African men, women, and children made the horrendous journey westward in the “middle passage,” while countless others perished

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<sup>1</sup> Great Britain and the United States banned the transatlantic slave trade (but not slavery itself) in 1807 and 1808, respectively. France, under British pressure, agreed to the ban at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. In 1808, the Royal Navy established a West Africa Squadron to interdict slavers; between then and 1860, the force seized some 1,600 slave ships, freeing approximately 150,000 Africans. Between 1843 and 1861, the United States Navy deployed a more modest Africa Squadron, America’s first permanent military force in Africa, with a similar mission; the American force captured thirty-six slave ships. See Canney (2006).

before they reached the markets of the new world (Thomas 1997). Less often mentioned, but equally significant, are the comparable number of Africans who were trafficked into bondage eastward by Arab slavers, who remained active well into the late twentieth century—Saudi Arabia only abolished slavery in 1962 and Yemen and Oman did not get around to it until 1970. And almost never mentioned is the fact that *legal* slavery—as opposed to the officially unsanctioned variety of human bondage which human rights groups have repeatedly documented as persisting in a number of African countries—actually continues down to the present day in some African nations: as recently as 2005, the government of Niger was holding emancipation ceremonies (BBC News 2005), while Mauritania, which officially abolished slavery by presidential decree in 1981, was still debating legislation to actually enforce the ban by criminalizing the abuse in late 2007 (“Mauritanian Slavery Bill” 2007).

It is impossible to quantify the physical, psychological, social, economic, and political toll extracted by the institution of slavery on its victims, their families, and the communities they left behind when they were taken captive and marched to distant coasts to be shipped overseas. No one can stand at a place like House of Slaves on Gorée Island, Senegal, or the dungeons of Ghana’s Elmina Castle and not be deeply moved by the sight of each site’s “Door of No Return,” the final exit point in Africa for slaves being loaded onto the waiting ships, and the thought of the human suffering that thousands endured there over the centuries. However, the impact of this crime against humanity on those beyond the generations immediately affected is open to question. Keith Richburg, an African-American journalist who served as the award-winning Africa bureau chief for the *Washington Post* from 1991 to 1994, for example, has controversially argued that descendants of slaves are actually better off than their distant cousins who descended from those who were never taken captive:

*So let me drop the charade and put it as simply as I know how: There but for the grace of God go I. You see, I was seeing all this horror a bit differently because of the color of my skin. I am an American, but a black man, a descendant of slaves brought from Africa. . . . Sometime, maybe four hundred or so years ago, one of my ancestors was taken from his village, probably by a local chieftain. He was shackled in leg irons, kept in a holding pen or a dark pit, possibly at Goree Island off the coast of Senegal. And then he was put in the crowded, filthy cargo hold of a ship for the long and treacherous voyage across the Atlantic to the New World.*

*Many of the slaves died on that voyage. But not my ancestor. Maybe it was because he was strong, maybe just stubborn, or maybe he had an irrepressible will to live. But he survived, and ended up in forced slavery working on plantations in the Caribbean. Generations on down the line, one of his descendants was taken to South Carolina. Finally, a more recent descendant, my father, moved to Detroit to find a job in an auto plant during the Second World War.*

*And so it was that I came to be born in Detroit and that thirty-five years later, a black man born in white America, I was in Africa, birthplace of my ancestors, standing at the edge of a river not as an African but as an American journalist—a mere spectator—watching the bloated bodies of black Africans cascading over a waterfall. And that’s when I thought about how, if things had been different, I might have been one of them—or might have met some similarly anonymous fate in one of the countless ongoing civil wars or tribal clashes on this brutal continent. And so I thank God my ancestor survived that voyage. (Richburg 1998: xv-xvi)*

Even without going as far as Richburg, the historical institution needs to be put in its perspective. This does not mean excusing the abuse—far from it!—but rather asking for evidence of how it actually impeded the continent’s development centuries later or how it explains the contemporary failures in leadership and governance.

Historically, as well as in the order of explanations given for Africa’s retarded development, the experience of colonialism is often invoked. Once again, undoubtedly there were execrable instances, among which King Leopold II of the Belgians acquiring the entire Congo as his personal domain (Hochschild 1998), and the German slaughter of the Herero in what is now Namibia are just two examples (Madley 2005). However, one should be cautious about generalizing from these cases. Without accepting what the French saw as their *mission civilisatrice*, and the British viewed as the “White man’s burden,” justifying their imperial expansion as a means of “saving” the backward, underdeveloped and oppressed peoples of societies targeted for colonization by incorporating them into the “universal” civilization of the West,<sup>2</sup> one can still acknowledge that the reality of colonialism was neither always uniformly dark or monolithic as often depicted nor even that overbearing in every instance. Meredith gives examples of the modest imprint of colonial administration:

*Only a thin line of control existed. In northern Nigeria, Frederick Lugard set out to rule 10 million people with a staff of nine European administrators and a regiment of the West African Frontier Force consisting of 3,000 African troops under the command of European officers. By the late 1930s, following the amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria into one territory in 1914, the number of colonial administrators for a population of 20 million people was still less than 400. The Sudan Political Service consisted of 140 officials ruling over 9 million people. The whole of French Equatorial Africa in the mid-1930s was run by 206 administrative officers... With so few men on the ground, colonial governments relied heavily on African chiefs and other functionaries to collaborate with officials and exercise control on their behalf. (5-6)*

Others cite the dynamics of the next historical period, that of the Cold War, as the cause for Africa’s underdevelopment. Undoubtedly the alliances struck between the rival blocs and African elites were based on what each party thought was in its best interests. The United States and the Soviet Union both used financial and military assistance to secure political loyalty, access to natural resources, and, most importantly, geopolitical advantage over the other. Africa’s rulers, for their part, leveraged the superpower rivalry to extract the resources necessary to secure their positions. However, it could just as well be argued that overall Africa benefited more from the Cold War than either the Americans or the Soviets (Dunning 2004). While there were proxy conflicts in a few places—Angola, Ethiopia, and Mozambique, for example—there was never the risk of a direct confrontation between the two contenders on African soil. Despite the minimal risks, African states managed to get almost prodigious amounts of aid which might have not been otherwise forthcoming. Just off the airport runway in Conakry, for example, in a field long overgrown with weeds sit some dozen or so Russian-made snowplows which, for obvious reasons, have never been used in the West African country. Their rusted presence there more than four decades later is testimony to how much

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<sup>2</sup> On the “justification” of the colonial enterprise and its significance in the development of international law, see J. Peter Pham, “Beyond Power Politics: International Law and Human Rights Discourse in the Post-9/11 World,” *Human Rights & Human Welfare* 6 (2006): 203-216.

Guinea's brutal Marxist president, Ahmed Sékou Touré, could squeeze his Soviet friends, even to the point of having them ship the large tractors by air even when the donors had to have known that the vehicles would never be needed—all just to humor a fancy the mercurial despot happened upon while visiting Nikita Khrushchev, even though the latter failed to secure refueling rights for Soviet aircraft bound for Cuba from the former (Khrushchev 2007). In the early 1980s, Liberia, with a population of barely three million people, received over \$500 million in economic and military assistance from the United States (Pham 2004). That assistance literally dried up the year after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and is indicative that the money would not have been forthcoming were it not for the rivalry between the two superpowers.

After the scars said to be left by history, one of the most frequently voiced reasons for the failure of sustainable development in Africa is that the rules of the global economy are biased against African countries. There may be some truth here, as the World Bank's former international spokesperson for Africa, has acknowledged, although domestic policy may well bear the greater responsibility:

*There is little doubt that small agricultural products are at a disadvantage in international markets, and that measures that protect farmers in Western countries limit potential African exports or depress international prices (especially for cotton). But Africa has not been losing ground to competitors in rich countries; instead, it has surrendered markets to other tropical suppliers in Asia and Latin America. Most African countries have in fact let agriculture—their greatest wealth—decline steadily through over-taxation and other wrongheaded policies. African economies were certainly late-starters, but instead of pumping them up with steroids, governments have put shackles on their producers. (Calderisi 2006: 14)*

The fact remains that at independence in the 1960s, Africa was a net exporter of food. Before the recent worldwide spike in agricultural commodity prices, the continent imported \$18 billion of food each year (Okafor 2007). And even if the economies produced, the infrastructure in Africa is such that getting products to market is a Herculean, if not Sisyphean, task. To cite one example, Guinea, an Oregon-size country so lush that it is known as the “*château d'eau de l'Afrique*,” has barely 4,000 km of paved road surface and only one port terminal. The entire country only has one paved airport runway long enough to accommodate large aircrafts. Air traffic on the continent, incidentally, has a notorious safety record. While Africa accounts for less than five percent of global air traffic, it is the scene of twenty-five percent of the world's plane crashes (Michaels 2007). The continent's power shortage is yet another infrastructure obstacle to development: while home to one-sixth of the world's population, Africa generates only four percent of global electricity, and three-quarters of that is used either in South Africa or in Egypt and North African countries along the Mediterranean Sea. In hydrocarbon-rich Nigeria, only seventeen of the seventy-nine power stations work, generating barely 3,500 megawatts when the demand is estimated to be at least 7,600 megawatts (“The Dark Continent” 2007).

Finally, some argue that Africa's burden of international debt is the cause of its underdevelopment. While this theory is an attractive one for those seeking a simplistic answer, there is little evidence to date that debt forgiveness—a movement which, in point of fact, has been going on for several decades now, albeit without the attention that celebrities like Bono have brought to it in recent years—has had the desired positive effect on economic growth. Ironically, but perhaps not unexpectedly, some of the recipients of debt relief under the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative

(MDRI), introduced in the 2006 after the G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, the year before, as well as the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, begun in 1996 and enhanced in 1999, have found their debt write-offs an opportunity to borrow more. Ghana, for example, having had official debts worth more than \$2 billion cancelled, turned around and entered the Eurobond market in 2007, floating commercial paper in an attempt to generate between \$500 and \$750 million with the underwriting assistance of Citigroup and the Union Bank of Switzerland. Nigeria was even quicker on the draw: within months of getting the Paris Club of lenders to forgive \$30 billion in debt, the government of the oil-rich West African giant had offered a \$350 million corporate Eurobond issue through Guarantee Trust Bank with Standard Bank and Afrinvest of London acting as lead managers (“Foreign Direct Investment” 2007).

### Flawed Leadership

If one dismisses the most commonly conventional explanations for Africa’s failure to live up to the potential that its valuable natural resources and youthful population would predict, then how can the continent’s dismal political and economic performance be explained? Meredith, who brings to his work an intimate knowledge of the continent stretching back more than four decades to include fifteen years as a foreign correspondent based there, as well as a researcher at St. Antony’s College, Oxford, with an extensive record of scholarship on modern Africa, points the finger at the failure of post-colonial leadership. His massive, 35-chapter, 752-page tome “focuses in particular on the role of a number of African leaders whose characters and careers had a decisive impact on the fate of their countries,” which, the author insists, indicates “the reasons why, after the euphoria of the independence era, so many hopes and ambitions faded and why the future of Africa came to be spoken of only in pessimistic terms” (13-14).

After an introduction reviewing the colonial period, Part I of *The Fate of Africa* focuses on the struggle for independence with chapters dedicated to case studies of the national liberation struggles in Egypt and Sudan; North Africa; Francophone Africa; Anglophone Africa; the Belgian Congo; and “the White South,” including South Africa, South West Africa, Rhodesia, and the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique. In Meredith’s narrative, already discernable in the anti-colonial movements was the undemocratic streak which would wreck havoc with the aspirations of Africa’s oppressed masses. Part II chronicles the critical post-independence period when, after an all-too-brief “honeymoon,” the pattern for the future was set with the transformation of the leaders of liberation movements into tyrants:

*As founding fathers, the first generation of nationalist leaders—Nkrumah, Nasser, Senghor, Houphouët-Boigny, Sékou Touré, Keita, Olympio, Kenyatta, Nyerere, Kaunda, Banda—all enjoyed great prestige and high honor. They were seen to personify the states they led and swiftly took advantage to consolidate their control. From the outset, most sought a monopoly of power; most established a system of personal rule and encouraged personality cults. (162)*

Not surprisingly, during the entire period from the beginning of decolonization with the independence of Ghana to the end of the Cold War and the beginning of what Samuel Huntington calls the “third wave of democratization,” only *one* African leader, President Adan ‘Abdulle Isman of Somalia (1967), ever peacefully relinquished his office following electoral defeat. Over the course of the same time frame, only three African heads of state retired voluntarily: Léopold Sédar Senghor of

Senegal (1980), Ahmadou Ahidjo of Cameroon (1982), and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (1985)—and Ahidjo, apparently underwent a change of heart and subsequently tried (unsuccessfully) to shoot his way back into office a year after vacating the presidency (Diamond 1997). In particular, Meredith's chapter-long study of the tragic evolution of Ghana's Nkrumah who, in 1966, also became one of the first African leaders to be overthrown in a military *coup d'état*, is especially illustrative of what would become a recurring pattern:

*Surrounded by sycophants and praised daily by the press, he became increasingly remote from the realities of the crisis that Ghana faced, resenting even mild criticism, refusing to believe that anything had gone wrong. Every setback he attributed to imperialists and neocolonialists plotting against him. When ministers arrived bearing reports of economic difficulties, he was impatient and dismissive. Palace intrigues swirled around him. (188)*

Part III, with its dramatically narrated episodes and vivid sketches, gives the accounting for the bitter harvest yielded from what Africa's fatally-flawed "big men"—figures like Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic, whom Meredith describes as having "combined not only extreme greed and personal violence but delusions of grandeur unsurpassed by any other African leader" (224)—had sown. By the 1980s, Africa dropped further and further behind every other region of the world as it was battered by environmental stress, famine, and disease—and this was before the outburst of the AIDS pandemic was to claim millions across the continent—as well as being plagued by economic and political stagnation. According to Meredith:

*No other country demonstrated the decline of Africa so graphically as Ghana. Once one of the most prosperous tropic countries in the world, it had been reduced by 1980 to a pauper. Its per capita gross domestic product fell by more than 3 percent a year in the 1970s. Output declined in all major sectors—cocoa, timber, mining and manufacturing. The only sector that flourished was kalabule—the black market. The Ghanaian currency, the cedi, traded on the black market at up to twenty times below the official rate. The purchasing power of a laborer's wage fell during the 1970s to one-quarter of its previous worth: a loaf of bread now took two days to earn; a yam sufficient for a family meal cost as much as two weeks' wages. Crime rates soared. Public services disintegrated. (283)*

About the only sign that all was not lost was the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980 and the end of apartheid in South Africa a decade and a half later—and the hopes reposed in the former were quickly dashed as Meredith himself has documented in his earlier study of Robert Mugabe's (mis)rule (Meredith 2002).

Finally, Part IV of Meredith's book brings the reader up to date with broad accounts of some of the challenges that Africa has faced in more recent years, including Islamism and political violence, including terrorism, in Algeria, Egypt, and Sudan; the botched "humanitarian intervention" in the territory of the onetime Somali state and the continuing reverberations thereof;<sup>3</sup> the genocide in Rwanda and the ensuing conflict which swept the Great Lakes region up in "Africa's world war"; the interconnected civil wars which engulfed Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire in the last years of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first, part of which was financed

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<sup>3</sup> On the subject of "humanitarian interventions," see J. Peter Pham, "The Limits of Intervention—Humanitarian or Otherwise," *Human Rights & Human Welfare* 6 (2006): 13-30.

by the infamous “blood diamonds”; the uncertain transition from brutal military dictatorship to corrupted democracy in Africa’s most populous state, Nigeria; the conflicts in Sudan, first between the Arab-dominated Muslim north of the country and South Sudan, where the population is largely Christian or adherents of traditional African religions, and then in Darfur between the Arab pastoralists supported by the regime in Khartoum and the western region’s black African tribes, many of whom are agriculturalists; the civil war in Angola and the role of the country’s petroleum and diamond wealth in fueling the conflict, respectively, on the government and rebel sides; and the utter ruination of Zimbabwe under the brutal rule of Mugabe and his Zimbabwe Africa National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).

Even South Africa, the one country possessing significant enough natural and human assets which, once it shed the chains of apartheid, offered it the best chance of breaking out the vicious circle of poor governance and economic penury afflicting the continent, once Nelson Mandela departed government, despite his leaving as his legacy “a country which had experienced greater harmony than at any previous time in its history” (664). Mandela’s successor, Thabo Mbeki, could not have presented a greater contrast:

*While Mandela had presided over South Africa as a benign patriarch, floating above the burly-burly, Mbeki was known as a back-room operator, a shrewd intellectual who enjoyed quoting Shakespeare and Yeats but who lacked the common touch and who played his cards close to his chest. While Mandela took a broad-brush approach to government, Mbeki immersed himself in detail. (664-665)*

Unfortunately, some of the details in which Mbeki immersed himself, right up to his forced resignation in September 2008, were far from main stream. When he took office in 1999, already four million people, ten percent of the South African population, were diagnosed as HIV-positive. Despite the gravity of the crisis, Mbeki “became increasingly obsessed with the view of a small group of maverick scientists who questioned whether HIV existed at all or, if it did, whether it was not simply a harmless ‘passenger’ virus” (668). Although Meredith does not mention it explicitly, it would not be farfetched to acknowledge that millions of South Africans died of AIDS because Mbeki retained a political crony, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, as health minister. Not only did Tshabalala-Msimang fail to expedite the release of anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs to those infected with HIV, she questioned the efficacy of ARVs and exaggerated their side-effects, while simultaneously (and unconscionably) promoting the allegedly more efficacious curative benefits of beetroots, garlic, and African potatoes as substitutes for conventional pharmaceuticals (“In the (Beetroot) Soup, Again” 2007). At the very least this policy “vision” was at odds with the affirmation in the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights that “every individual shall have the right to enjoy the best attainable state of physical and mental health,” highlighting to a very real case where human welfare is indeed a human rights issue attributable the dereliction of an irresponsible government (African Charter 1981: art. 16).

In addition to his obduracy on HIV/AIDS, Mbeki’s coddling of Zimbabwe’s Mugabe—in stark contrast to the apartheid regime in South Africa’s eventual decision to bring pressure to bear on Ian Smith’s landlocked Rhodesia—in the name of what he termed “quiet diplomacy” was the other great failure of his tenure as president. The brutal theft of this year’s presidential election, after opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai was forced by a campaign of violence to withdraw from the run-off after winning the first round (HRW 2008), belied Mbeki’s claim that his discreet persuasion offered the



best prospect for bringing about a democratic opening. Meredith's assessment of this latest failure in leadership and its wider consequences is sobering:

*Mbeki's determination to back a brutal African dictator, rather than stand up for human rights, followed a long tradition by leaders in Africa of turning a blind eye to the nefarious activities of their peers for the sake of group solidarity. It won him support in Africanist circles in South Africa who celebrated Zimbabwe's example of giving the whites a good kicking and hoped for something similar in South Africa. But it caused apprehension among foreign investors, nervousness among the white population and aroused further misgivings about Mbeki's commitment to democratic values. Moreover, it sullied the reputation of the ANC [African National Congress], which received so much help in its own struggle for human rights and now remained indifferent to the struggle of others in the neighborhood faced. In a thinly veiled rebuke, Archbishop Tutu, forever the voice of conscience in South Africa, pronounced himself "baffled" by African leaders who supported dictators like Mugabe. "Human rights are human rights and they are of universal validity or they are nothing," he said. (673-674)*

### **Whither Africa?**

Meredith's final chapter is less a synthesis of those preceding it than an appendix, summarizing the state of the continent in terms of the dismal statistics which record its soaring poverty and income inequality rates, dreadful public health indicators, and general lack of sustainable development. While Africa is a continent of extraordinary diversity which make generalizations hazardous, African states, both in their colonial origins<sup>4</sup> and the challenges they face, have more in common than one would perhaps expect. Unfortunately, the anecdotes and insights skillfully woven across the many pages of *The Fate of Africa* show that one characteristic the fifty-three African states have shared is the colossal failures in leadership, resulting in the corruption and bad governance to which many of them have been subjected. The author approvingly quotes the speech which Nelson Mandela delivered to his fellow heads of state at the Organization of African Unity's annual summit less than two months after he was sworn in as South Africa's first post-apartheid president. After rehearsing the injustices which Africa had suffered from ancient times, Mandela then challenged his peers to acknowledge how the continent's post-independence leaders have themselves contributed to the suffering and how they could alleviate it:

*We must face the matter squarely that where there is something wrong in how we govern ourselves, it must be said that the fault is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are ill-governed... We know that we have it in ourselves, as Africans, to change all this. We must assert our will to do so. (676)*

Five decades after the great period of independence began with the birth of Ghana, most African nations remain largely ill-governed and, not surprisingly, woefully underdeveloped. While optimists assert that things have changed for the better and that the right conditions are present for new infusions of aid to be effective, there is little hard evidence that enough has changed by way of democratic governance, effective administration, sound economics, and transparent institutions that the increased transfers, like those advocated by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's blue-ribbon panel, would achieve sustainable development (Commission for Africa 2005). Certainly the

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<sup>4</sup> On the inherently unstable nature of the "imported states" bequeathed by colonialism, see J. Peter Pham, "Legitimacy, Justice, and the Future of Africa," *Human Rights & Human Welfare* 5 (2005): 31-49.

warm embrace that Zimbabwe's dictator Robert Mugabe received at the African Union summit in June 2008, on the very morrow of his swearing himself into another term of office, does not say much about for the reforming zeal of his homologues.

There have been some remarkable signs of progress, many indigenous efforts, which need to be recognized. Some of these initiatives, like the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a peer review mechanism at the interstate level adopted in 2001 (Pham 2008), operate on a continent-wide basis; many more are more localized efforts. All place the premium on institutions, rather than personalities, which Africa's modern history has shown to be all too prone to self-aggrandizement and eventual despotism. What former World Bank economist William Easterly noted about conflict resolution is equally true about development on the continent:

*In Somalia, the "international community" has sponsored fourteen rounds of fruitless peace talks since the collapse of the government in 1991, not to mention the failed U.N./U.S. military intervention. Meanwhile, without outside intervention, foreign aid, or even international recognition, the breakaway Republic of Somaliland in the north of Somalia has enjoyed peace, economic growth, and democratic elections over the same period. There can be awful military victors as well as good ones, but local actors are statistically more likely to find peace on their own. (Easterly 2006: 335)*

Ghana itself has been a model of a successful turnaround in Africa. From its acute economic and political crisis at the end of 1981 when Jerry Rawlings seized power for the second time, it has achieved macroeconomic stability and sustained annual economic growth averaging six percent since the early 1990s ("Ghana: 50 Years of Independence" 2007). Multiparty democratic politics was restored in 1992 and, in 2000, saw for the first time in Ghana's history, one democratically elected president was succeeded by another; the fifth presidential and parliamentary elections are expected later this year. Ghana also enjoys the distinction of being the second freest country in Africa, scoring a "one" on political freedom and a "two" on civil liberties (the scale is one to seven, with one corresponding to the highest and seven the lowest level of freedom) in Freedom House's scoring system (Freedom House 2008). The impetus for all this was not so much external pressure—although it certainly helped—as a confluence between the demand of elite elements in Ghanaian society for greater political participation and yearning of the masses for wider economic inclusion (Aidoo 2006).

Overall, for the foreseeable future, expectations need to be modest as Africa—aptly described by two scholars recently as "too long...a theater for Western ideologues' pet panaceas, with disastrous results for long-suffering Africans" (Lal & Rajapatirana 2007: 7)—slowly, but surely, breaks its own cycle of poor governance, poverty, and underdevelopment by unleashing the energy, talent, and enterprise long repressed by the regimes which are ultimately doomed to collapse under their own weight. Outsiders can only arm themselves with patience and knowledge (an excellent place to start on the latter objective is the damning account in Meredith's *The Fate of Africa*), seizing such small opportunities as may arise in order to reward progress and punish regress, and recognizing that dragging Africa out of the development doldrums is more than a generational undertaking for both Africans and their international partners.

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