Introduction

Amanda Warnock, Toyin Falola, and Alusine Jalloh

Today, communities of Nigerians flourish in major American cities such as Houston and Dallas. Sierra Leoneans attend college in the United States working part-time jobs in order to send remittances back to their families in West Africa. This year hundreds of African American tourists will visit Gorée Island, drawn by the weight of history and memory to uncover their African pasts. These scenarios speak to the larger narrative of modern U.S.–West African relations; the social, cultural, political, and economic bonds that date back for centuries and that have, in recent years, drawn these two world regions into increasingly closer contact. It is this complex, often contradictory, relationship that is the subject of this volume.

A Brief History of U.S.–West African Relations

U.S.–West African relations can be traced back to the era of the transatlantic slave trade, which saw between nine and thirteen million Africans transported to the American continent. Although the majority went to Brazil and the Caribbean, an estimated 400,000 slaves, or roughly 4 percent of the total, were carried to British North America. This group of Africans and their African American descendants established the basis for the relationship between the United States and West Africa.

While these early contacts brought enslaved laborers from West African shores to American plantations and left the enduring legacy of the African diaspora in the American continent, modern relations can be traced to the early-nineteenth-century development of the so-called “legitimate trade” on the West African coast and the establishment of the colony of Liberia in 1822. In the early nineteenth century, the American Colonization Society (ACS) formulated a political project that sought to repatriate Africans and African Americans to West Africa. Debates exist as to the motivations of the ACS, with scholars arguing over the extent to which the project was in favor
of or against slavery. Nevertheless, the emigrationist movement represented a singular moment in the history of U.S.–West African relations, and one that reverberates to the present day.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the expansion of trade between the United States and West Africa, with the deployment of consul officials aiding the expansion of relations between these two localities. An active commerce in strategic commodities such as kerosene and petroleum developed between the United States and Nigeria, in spite of the disapproval of colonizing power Great Britain.

From the late nineteenth century through the 1940s, the colonial presence in West Africa provided a backdrop to contacts with the United States. While economic exchange was relatively limited during this period, the revival of emigrationist sentiment provided the basis for African Americans to forge emigrationist sentiment provided the basis for African Americans to forge

The coming of World War II drastically altered the political and economic relations between the United States and West Africa. With the Pacific effectively blockaded, the United States increased its imports of strategic minerals, such as tin and manganese, from West Africa. In the case of Liberia, a historic ally, the United States established a substantial military presence, constructing an airfield and a port and even convincing the Liberian government to declare war on Germany.

But it was not exclusively in the political and economic realms that contacts between West Africa and the United States increased. African students educated in the United States became some of the earliest proponents of African independence. Prominent personalities such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria spent their formative years living and studying in the United States. The Pan-Africanist writings of W. E. B. DuBois, among others, influenced the development of their political ideology.

With the coming of the Cold War, African decolonization served to increase ties between West Africa and the United States. The departure of the colonial powers provided an opportunity for the United States to step in and exert its power in the region. In the battle over political and economic doctrines that occupied the East and the West, the United States and the USSR viewed the nascent African republics as pawns to be won over to one or the other camp. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the United States provided economic aid to the nations of West Africa while promoting its sociocultural agenda through organizations such as the Peace Corps and the U.S. Information Service.

While some of these programs, such as the Peace Corps, have continued to maintain a presence in West Africa, the 1980s and 1990s saw a significant shift in policy toward the region. During the political-military conflicts that raged in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, the United States assumed a stance of nonintervention. Largely inspired by the failed military mission in Somalia in 1992 and 1993, the government has been extremely reluctant to intervene in conflicts where its interests are not directly at stake. U.S. policy, particularly since the attacks of September 11, 2001, has been aimed at identifying potential terrorist threats and securing energy resources (especially in Nigeria) rather than at averting humanitarian disasters.

More recently, the United States has received criticism for downplaying the conflict and genocide in the Sudan and failing to come to the aid of its victims. Despite a denunciation of the belligerents and the imposition of sanctions against the Sudanese government, the United States has granted little in the way of material aid to alleviate the crisis plaguing the region of Darfur.

Organization and Structure of the Book

Over the last several decades, historians have conducted extensive research into U.S.–West African contacts during the era of the transatlantic trade. Yet we still understand relatively little about the more recent relations between the United States and West Africa. The reasons for this are at least threefold. First, scholars frequently employ nation states as their primary units of analysis. Thus, much of the research on U.S. relations with or policies toward Africa focuses on relationships between the United States and specific countries. While this constitutes an important effort in its own right, it fails to provide a broader picture of the U.S. role in the region. Second, studies of contemporary U.S.–West African relations that treat particular African national or ethnic groups in the United States often neglect to explore the broader context for African migrants as a whole. Many see the African migration to the United States as a discrete historical phenomenon, ignoring the linkages that Africans in the diaspora have forged with continental Africans and vice versa. The third reason speaks to the way most Americans conceptualize the African continent. As Curtis Keim has pointed out in his book, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*, the media and the educational system in the United States have socialized Americans to view Africa as a homogenous entity, lacking in ethnic diversity and individual political units. Even news commentators will frequently refer to U.S. policies in Africa without the caveat that policy toward Egypt, for example, will differ drastically from policy toward Botswana.

The essays contained in this work represent the first effort to provide a comprehensive treatment of U.S.–West African relations. We have divided them into four parts, each treating one facet of the U.S.–West African relationship.
Part 1, "Trade and Politics in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," examines the linkages that brought the United States and West Africa together during the era of European colonial rule of Africa. Six chapters treat the political and economic relations between the United States and West Africa, arguing that, despite the structures of colonialism, a relationship had begun to develop that would lay the groundwork for closer ties as the twentieth century progressed.

Adebayo Oyebade and Toyin Falola begin part 1 with a review of U.S.-West African relations from the West African voyages of Columbus until the present. They open with a discussion of the transatlantic slave trade, which brought to the Americas millions of Africans, who, through their labor and their culture, contributed significantly to the formation of the United States. While early contacts were largely unidirectional, bringing Africans to the Americas, the African colonization project, in establishing the colony of Liberia in 1822, represented the first effort to repatriate large numbers of Africans and African Americans to West Africa. Oyebade and Falola then compare the African colonization attempts of the nineteenth century with the Garveyism of the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that, in spite of their limited successes in promoting cooperation between African Americans and West Africans, these movements failed to win widespread support in either the United States or West Africa. The chapter continues by providing a review of the social, political, and economic linkages that have developed over the course of the twentieth century, demonstrating how, even in light of the profound historical bonds that they share, Africa has never featured high on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. The chapter closes with a summary of contemporary U.S. policy with regard to the region.

In chapter 2, Ibrahim Kargbo looks at the complex nexus of trading arrangements in Sierra Leone during the late nineteenth century. Following the lead of the European powers, which established consular posts in Sierra Leone during the 1840s, in 1858 the United States sent a representative to Freetown with the express mission of promoting U.S. commercial interests. The establishment of a consulate in Freetown altered the trade arrangements between U.S. traders and African middlemen as the former gained leverage in their negotiations with the latter. The 1860s and 1870s saw the United States extend its commercial activities in Sierra Leone, frustrating British attempts to control the region's foreign trade and leaving the consular officials and the U.S. Department of State to navigate this contested terrain.

Turning to the Liberian settlement project of the American Colonization Society (ACS), chapter 3, by John Wess Grant, discusses the obstacles to emigration faced by black families in Richmond, Virginia. Attempting to shift the discussion of the ACS's activities away from debate over whether the organization was proslavery or antislavery, Grant opts to look at the social and economic challenges faced by potential émigrés. He highlights the part played by the process of manumission in the decision to emigrate to Liberia. For, as the frequency of manumissions declined in the early nineteenth century, the number of families who counted both free coloreds and slaves among their members rose. Not wanting to leave enslaved relatives behind, free coloreds invested their limited resources in the purchase of family members rather than in the passage back to Africa.

Like Grant, Ibrahim Sundiata explores the possibilities and challenges facing African American emigration movements. In chapter 4, Sundiata situates Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) within the broader tradition of Pan-Africanism. Although many works have focused on the rise and fall of Garveyism, this chapter argues that one must understand the social and political conditions in post-World War I Liberia in order to fully understand the defeat of the Garveyist program. For Garvey's plan to promote the mass migration of African Americans to Liberia was met with trepidation, and at times open hostility, by the Liberian political elite. As a conservative, ingrown caste composed of the descendants of nineteenth-century émigrés, Liberian leaders overwhelmingly rejected Garvey's overtures. Ultimately, Sundiata explains, Liberia was a state divided between a small elite and the largely disenfranchised masses. This division, based on class rather than color, prevented the Garveyist project from achieving its aims.

While Sundiata explores the powerful legacies of the American Colonization Society in Liberia, Ayodeji Oluwoju in chapter 5 exposes the fractured nature of British colonialism in West Africa. Oluwoju discusses the increasing trade between the United States and Nigeria from 1900 to 1950. He contextualizes Nigerian-U.S. trade within the framework of the United States' post-World War I emergence as a global political and economic superpower. The chapter argues that, although the volume of trade was low, the strategic importance of U.S. imports to Nigeria, particularly kerosene and petroleum, made the relationship crucial for Nigerian development. In Nigeria, U.S. firms frequently found themselves at odds with British colonial policy. Yet, even amidst this conflict, the development of trade between the United States and Nigeria accelerated through the early twentieth century, propelling Nigeria's integration into the global economy even as it remained a British colony.

While the authors discussed above treat individual countries, in chapter 6 Hakeem Ibiyinka Tijani takes a regional view, treating U.S. political and economic activities in West Africa during the late colonial period. Tijani identifies anti-Communism and mineral exploitation as the two motives driving American interests in the region. As early as 1950, the United States recognized West Africa's strategic position and sought to develop further ties to the region. Throughout the 1950s, U.S. policy furthered the joint aims of
containing leftist political expression and securing cobalt, tin, industrial diamonds and palm oil, among other products. Tijani contends that West Africa was not, in fact, a foreign policy “backwater,” as other scholars have suggested, but rather a region of importance to the United States.

The second and third parts of this volume discuss the cultural linkages that have drawn America into Africa and Africa into America since the mid-twentieth century. Part 2, “Forging Cultural Connections: America in West Africa,” provides an in-depth exploration of the “American Presence in Africa,” each of the chapters speak to a different facet of U.S. involvement in the region, focusing on the contributions of individuals and institutions from the United States in shaping West African cultures. From the political posturing of the United States Information Agency (USIA) during the Cold War to the growth of the African American community in Ghana, the chapters in part 2 are a diverse representation of the most recent scholarship on U.S.-West African cultural exchanges.

In chapter 7, Karen B. Bell explores the political and cultural linkages that bound the United States and West Africa together during the Cold War. By examining the cultural agenda of the United States in Africa, an important but previously neglected topic, Bell demonstrates how policymakers sought to generate mutual goodwill, thus limiting the influence of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. The programs of the USIA, the main conduit of U.S. “cultural diplomacy” in Africa, used educational exchanges and various forms of media to present the USIA’s vision of American culture to the African continent. USIA programs downplayed the civil rights struggles of the era in an effort to promote racial harmony. To this end, they deployed “cultural ambassadors” such as musicians, actors, academics, and sports figures in the hope that their presence would generate positive associations with American culture, thus advancing U.S. political goals in the region.

Chapters 8 and 9 look at the social, political, cultural, and economic relationships that have developed between Ghanaians and African Americans over the past several decades. Kwame Essien illuminates the complexities of the ties between the two groups. Using the work of W. E. B. DuBois as a starting point, Essien emphasizes the “double consciousness” of African Americans as a means to understand why they would want to return to their motherland. Essien traces the history of African American migration to Ghana, explaining that three separate groups of migrants have had significant influence on Ghanaian development. Beginning in 1950, the first wave of African Americans arrived to aid President Kwame Nkrumah in implementing postindependence reforms. The second period of migration, from approximately 1970 until 1995, saw the arrival of only a small number of African Americans, as the political and economic hardships of the era, particularly during the military rule of Jerry Rawlings, discouraged potential returnees. Since the 1990s, however, the number of African Americans returning to live in Ghana has increased substantially. Essien argues that while tensions have certainly strained relations between black American returnees and native Ghanaians, contacts have been characterized far more by positive interactions than by negative interactions. In support of his point, Essien cites nongovernmental organizations established by African Americans, such as One Africa, that have benefited Ghanaians citizens and advanced the socioeconomic development of the country.

Using first-hand interviews, Harold R. Harris further explores the intricacies of ties between Ghanaians and African Americans, presenting a viewpoint different from that of Essien. Like Essien, Harris uses W. E. B. DuBois’ concept of “double consciousness,” but he uses it to argue that African Americans possess the trait of individualism, acquired as a result of their life in the United States, while at the same time they maintain a tendency toward communalism, a remnant of their African heritage. According to Harris, Ghanaians tend toward a more strongly communal outlook, often criticizing African American returnees for becoming mired in problems of their own creation. Harris’s analysis is grounded in a discussion of the history and culture of Ghanaians. He provides an overview of religion, social rituals, family life, gender, education, politics, and economics in Ghana. From there he moves on to the question, how do Ghanaians view African Americans? Based on his first-hand research Harris concludes that, due to the economic and cultural distance that separates the two groups, the relationship has been historically tense. In recent years, however, Ghanaians have adopted some African American religious traditions and cultural institutions. In conclusion, Harris suggests some potential solutions to the problems that have kept Ghanaians apart from African Americans.

Part 3, “Forging Cultural Connections: Africa in America,” moves across the Atlantic to the United States. The three chapters in this section explore aspects of the interconnectedness of people and cultures in America and the ongoing linkages to West Africa. Each author elaborates the diaspora paradigm, both historically and at the present day, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of relationships between Africans and African Americans.

In chapter 10, Fred Johnson challenges the reader to reexamine the historical relationship between Africans and African Americans by highlighting the intricacies of the legacy of slavery and the slave trade with regard to present-day identity formation. Johnson argues that the weight of history imposes itself on today’s struggles. For example, while African Americans have worked to achieve equality in a racist society, West Africans have been plagued by tribalism. Also, while African Americans have pressed the U.S. government to correct the injustices they have faced, West Africans have often sought relief from the repression of their governments. Returnees have frequently encountered an environment that appears to be divided by
Introduction

ethniciy, region, and religion rather than united by race. Within this con-
text, misunderstandings abound. Johnson points out the resentment that
many West Africans feel toward their American sisters and brothers, accus-
ing them of blaming about past injustices as excuses for their lack of suc-
sing. Johnson concludes that only by attempting to understand the
examples of how people have lived in the African environment, asking insulting questions
they can hope to alleviate the tension that
the historical roots of today's problems can we hope to alleviate the tension that
continues to exist between West Africans and Americans of African descent.

Bayo Lawal, in chapter 11, also probes the relationship between African
Americans and West Africans. As with Essien and Harris before him, Lawal
unique to African Americans but common to all diasporic groups. Lawal's
chapter begins with a discussion of the phenomenon of "double conscious-
ness," and the way it relates to African Americans. The author then recounts
the history of the Pan-Africanist movements aimed at bringing African
American Pan-Africanist movements aimed at bringing African
Americans into contact with African culture, explaining how contemporary
linkages are part of a longer lived trend that shows no signs of abating. Since
the establishment of Liberia in 1842, African Americans have actively par-
participated, and they continue to participate, in the cultural life of West Africa.
Similarly, recent West African immigrants have forged cultural contacts with
African Americans in the United States. Ultimately, explains Lawal, the
African American African American diaspora reflects the ongoing marginalization
of the continent in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy.

While Johnson and Lawal treat the region of West Africa as a whole,
Alousine Jalloh moves the discussion of diaspora to the specific case of Sierra
Leone. Jalloh examines the Sierra Leonean diaspora in the United States
from the 1960s through the 1980s. Migrants came for a number of reasons.
First, many came to pursue higher education during the 1960s and 1970s,
most planning to return to Sierra Leone to begin their professional careers.
This changed during the 1980s when an increasing number of migrants
opted to stay and work in the United States, establishing the basis of the
Sierra Leonean diaspora. Second, in the 1970s, political repression under
President Siaka Stevens prompted many to migrate to the United States.
Third, the marked economic decline since the 1970s, exacerbated by struc-
tural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund
(IMF), led to a further substantial migration, augmenting the Sierra
Leonean diaspora in the United States. With the arrival of larger numbers of
migrants, communities became fragmented, often dividing along ethnic and
regional lines. However, from the 1970s onward, the convergence of political
corruption, violence, and economic crisis inspired many Sierra Leoneans to
remain engaged with the politics of their homeland, organizing protests,
coordinating transnational action and at times returning to Sierra Leone to
work for change from the inside.

Part 4 of this book, "U.S. Political and Economic Interests in West Africa,"
discusses U.S. foreign policy with regard to West Africa from the Cold War
through the end of the twentieth century. The chapters in part 4 treat dif-
ferent areas of U.S. policy, ranging from economic assistance through the
United States Agency for International Development (USAID), to funding
for trade networks, to the Cold War political calculations surrounding the
potential spread of Communism.

In chapter 13, Peter A. Dumbuya chronicles the development of political
and economic relations between the United States and Africa, providing a
historical overview of the period between European colonization and the
early 1960s. Dumbuya explains that in the nineteenth century the United
States acceded to the European conquest of Africa, particularly after the
Berlin Conference of 1884-85. Then, following World War II, the United
States, fueled by the joint goals of limiting the spread of Communism and
furthering its own economic agenda, stepped in to replace the outgoing
colonial powers. Throughout the Cold War era, the United States voiced
support for the nascent African states while frequently propping up corrupt
regimes such as South Africa and Zaire under Joseph Mobutu. With the fall
of the Soviet bloc, U.S. interest in Africa waned, and thereafter the minimal
development aid pledged to African states reflects the ongoing marginalization
of the continent in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy.

In chapter 14, Andrew I. E. Ewoh also looks at U.S. foreign policy toward
Africa at the present day. He focuses on the interconnected, though often con-
tradictory goals of furthering geopolitical and economic objectives while
promoting political stability and economic development. Ewoh opens his
chapter with an explanation of how foreign policy is constructed in the
United States, employing the political subsystems approach, which stresses
the interconnectedness of interests among institutions and actors involved
in crafting policy. He then reviews the foreign policy records of each presi-
dential administration since the 1950s in order to establish the historical
background against which present-day policy is being constructed. As other
authors point out, the exigencies of forestalling Communist infiltration in
Africa shaped U.S. foreign policy toward the continent from the Eisenhower
through the Reagan administrations. Ewoh explains that, from the 1940s
until 1976 the U.S. maintained little involvement in African affairs. Under
Jimmy Carter, the primary policy goal remained the prevention of
Communist expansion in West Africa but also included the implementation
of trade embargoes aimed at castigating the government of South Africa for
its apartheid policies. This newfound focus on human rights in Africa did
not last long. Reagan was more concerned with fighting the Cold War than he was with engaging constructively with African governments. The George H. W. Bush administration shifted to the development of a more hands-on policy, however, occurred under Bill Clinton, with the promotion of a humanitarian agenda in Africa. George W. Bush has maintained some of his predecessor's objectives with humanitarian programs such as his AIDS initiative. Yet the majority of the administration's stated objectives focus on expanding democracy, trade, and security in West Africa. In his final assessment, Ewoh concludes that the U.S. government must take a regional approach in order to achieve its goals, crafting policy based on the potential shown by particular clusters of African countries in areas such as security, democracy, and free trade.

Abdul Karim Bangura also explores U.S. foreign policy and the concomitant financial assistance to West Africa. He provides a detailed examination of the factors that have shaped U.S. development aid to Africa, delving into the reasons behind and purpose of American aid and explaining the process by which the U.S. government makes foreign policy. U.S. policymakers, explains Bangura, are influenced by “American” values such as individuality, liberalism, and democracy but differ with regard to the goals of economic assistance. At the heart of U.S. policy toward Africa are the same strategic interests that shape foreign policy in many world regions: the need to maintain regional security and protect economic investments. But in comparison to other locations, Africa has not been a high priority for the U.S. government. Because of this limited commitment to West African development and the inconsistent nature of the dispensing of funds, individual nations have found it difficult to invest in long-term projects, stymied by the possibility that the aid pledged will not continue over time. Bangura asserts that the only true path to African development would be the implementation of a policy akin to the Marshall Plan, which helped to rebuild Europe following World War II. The chapter closes with a call for a policy that promotes regional integration while strengthening West African democracies.

Anita Spring's work complements that of Bangura by providing a specific example of how U.S. economic assistance has supported regional cooperation in West Africa. Spring highlights the role of USAID—one of a coalition of international donors—in offering support to the West African Enterprise Network (WAEN). She explains that in the early 1990s, U.S. policy shifted with regard to the promotion of international development. Recognizing the failures of West African governments to strengthen the private sector, USAID sought to deal directly with entrepreneurs in an attempt to facilitate the growth of business networks. Between 1993 and 2003, USAID helped to organize and implement the program. The goals of the project were to increase the volume of trade, both interregional and international, minimize government rent seeking, promote financial transparency, and support the growth of West African private enterprise. Having analyzed data collected during this period, Spring determines that, despite the constraints of poor infrastructure, inadequate capital, minimal security of investments, and low production capacity, WAEN was largely successful in accomplishing its goals.

While Spring provides an account of the success of one development program, Stephen Kande describes the weaknesses of another. Kande illustrates the failures of development programs in alleviating poverty in Sierra Leone, examining the role of institutions in preventing positive reforms. As one of the world’s poorest nations, Sierra Leone has, since independence, been plagued by illiteracy, high infant mortality, low life expectancy, and poor economic performance. Kande’s overview of Sierra Leone’s history reveals that the roots of many contemporary problems extend back to the precolonial era, when “multiple and disparate institutional structures and values” coexisted. With British colonization came indirect rule, which distorted traditional power structures. After the end of colonial rule Sierra Leone sank deeper into economic crisis. The civil war of 1992 to 2002 exacerbated the problems of underdevelopment. Despite receiving a substantial amount of foreign aid from the United States (and Great Britain), Sierra Leone continues to experience grinding poverty. Every development strategy attempted, from export-led growth to import-substitution industrialization, to structural adjustment, served to increase reliance on foreign aid while failing to alleviate conditions of poverty. Although scholars and policymakers have suggested that a large capital infusion, such as is recommended by the “poverty trap” model of development, would aid Sierra Leone, Kande argues that only a fundamental shift in social and cultural values would generate any serious progress. He suggests that we can use the “institutional trap model” to explain the failure of capital infusion to spur economic growth. In contrast to the supposition that foreign capital investment will spur economic growth, the “institutional trap model” presents an alternative analysis, arguing for radical social and cultural changes as a means to reshape the institutional structures of Sierra Leone.

Osman Gbla’s chapter also examines the difficulties experienced by Sierra Leone in the post–Cold War era, comparing U.S. policies toward Sierra Leone with U.S. policies toward Liberia. Gbla’s work challenges the previously held assumption that following the Cold War the United States would increase its involvement in West African states to ensure peace, democracy, and stability. Gbla argues that the West African nations of Liberia and Sierra Leone have remained on the back burner in terms of U.S. strategic calculations, despite the United States’ historical connections to both states. Liberia has historical ties to the United States and was, from its establishment in 1822 through the 1980s, considered a close ally of the U.S. Sierra Leone
Introduction

also shares elements of a common heritage with the United States. The Gullahs of South Carolina, for example, are direct descendents of slaves taken from the “rice coast” of Sierra Leone. With the end of British colonial rule in the 1960s, the U.S. sought closer relations with Sierra Leone, gradually augmenting its political and economic presence over the next three decades. Civil war began in Liberia in 1989 and Sierra Leone in 1991, causing a policy of limited engagement. In addition to providing an overview of the U.S. policy with regard to the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Gbla offers recommendations for building stable, democratic West African states, advocating a U.S. commitment to the promotion of poverty alleviation programs and peace-building efforts.

Part 5, “Looking toward the Future: U.S.-West African Linkages in the Twenty-first Century,” treats areas of particular salience in contemporary U.S.-West African relations. For the attacks of September 11 have altered the political and economic milieu of West Africa.

Ismail Olawale opens the section with an analysis of the involvement of the United States in the Liberian conflict in 2003. The relationships between the United States and the former colonial powers, the United States has long played a role in Liberian affairs. The author offers the example of the potential of U.S. intervention in Liberia. In addition to direct military action the U.S. was expected to strengthen democratic institutions, promote diplomacy, build security, and prevent or alleviate humanitarian disasters. The author argues that shifting geopolitical priorities, particularly West Africa’s strategic importance in the War on Terror and the increased reliance on the region for meeting U.S. energy needs, warrants an increase in resources devoted to conflict management.

Stephan A. Harman’s “Radical Islam in the Sahel: Implications for U.S. Policy and Regional Stability” also addresses U.S. policy within the West African region. In chapter 10, Harman discusses the currently relevant issue of the growth of radical Islam in the West African Sahel. Due to the purported influence of aggressive Islamic groups, the presence of foreign Islamic preachers, and the expansion of indigenous Islamic communities, the United States currently ranks the Sahel as number two on its list of African fronts in the War on Terror. Consequently, several U.S. agencies—including USAID and the State Department—have been active in the region, in an effort to limit the influence of foreign Islamist extremists. Harman suggests that radical Islamist groups have indeed seen an increase in membership in the Sahel in recent years. However, he explains that it is chronic poverty that has generated ethnic rivalries and authoritarianism and that the growth of radical Islam is merely a symptom of the economic dislocations experienced by West African states.

Ken Vincent’s chapter examines the recent development of oil infrastructure in the West African state of Chad. The Chad-Cameroon pipeline, at $3.7 billion dollars, represents the single largest foreign investment in African history. Heavily financed and overseen by the World Bank, the pipeline is estimated, will increase Chadian revenues by 45 to 50 percent. This contrasts with the considerably bleaker potential for growth in Cameroon, despite the fact that 85 percent of the pipeline lies in that nation. Estimates suggest that Cameroon would experience only a 2 percent increase in revenues. Vincent’s chapter outlines the scope of the project, comparing it to the hydrocarbon-development failures of Angola and Nigeria. In spite of the possibilities of failure, however, the extent of poverty in Chad makes the pipeline project a viable option. Overall, Vincent’s assessment is optimistic, as both domestic and international actors have worked to address issues of transparency, environmental impact, and respect for indigenous people who live and work in the region.

Chapter 22, by Christopher Ruane, closes the volume with a discussion of the U.S. foreign policy toward Africa today and in the near future. Ruane’s chapter asks the crucial question, why does West Africa barely feature on the U.S. foreign policy agenda for 2005 through 2009? The author explains that the United States devotes minimal attention to West Africa based on a conceptualization of the region as primarily (a) a resource supplier, (b) a terrorist base, and (c) a region of widespread human rights abuses. The proliferation of human rights abuses does not figure heavily in the calculus of U.S. policymakers, whose priorities are largely focused on combating the threat of terrorism. Within this framework, only those regions, such as the Middle East, that have experienced a substantial growth of radical Islam warrant U.S. attention. While the United States considers the West African Sahel to be a potential terrorist breeding ground, Ruane characterizes terrorist threats in West Africa as more rumor than fact. In closing, he identifies two cases in which the region could merit increased attention in the next few years. First, any threats of terrorism could prompt U.S. intervention. And second, the emergence of one or more strong democracies could lead the United States to lend more support as such democracies could serve as good examples or “model nations.” In the end, though, Ruane remains pessimistic about the possibility of West Africa’s rising to prominence on the United States’ priority list in the coming five years. Minimal threats of terrorism combined with a scarcity of desirable resources (other than oil) make it unlikely that U.S. policy will shift its focus to West Africa.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume constitute a major work devoted to interrogating the complex relationship—both historical and
contemporary—between the United States and West Africa. It is our hope that these essays will inspire controversy, debate, and ultimately, more research on the subject of U.S.–West Africa relations.

Notes

1. See chapter 1 in this volume.

Part One

Trade and Politics in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries
Less well known was a voyage by Columbus to the Gold Coast in West Africa in 1481, sponsored by King John II of Portugal. In contrast to the Eurocentric myth of disorder and barbarism prevalent in Africa, during this voyage Columbus encountered civilized communities and well-established trade routes. At the time of Columbus's visit, the most impressive medieval West African empire, the Songhay, was still in existence. Its noted center of scholarship, Timbuktu, the home of the world-renowned higher educational institution, the Sankoré, was a great deal of its splendor. Columbus, who visited Timbuktu, was impressed by the riches of the land, especially its gold. But as an explorer, Columbus learned valuable lessons in geography and oceanography. This undoubtedly sparked his interest in a voyage westward across the Atlantic, which he erroneously believed would take him to India and establish direct access to the coveted riches of the Orient. More importantly, Columbus's voyage to West Africa may have laid the groundwork for the first contact between that part of Africa and the Americas. A few West Africans were said to have returned with Columbus to Europe and eventually accompanied him on his voyages to the New World between 1492 and 1504.

Some scholars, however, have suggested the possibility of an African presence in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus. The argument is that some West African people, probably from the Senegambia area, were known to Native Americans prior to the arrival of Columbus. The most forceful argument along these lines has been provided by Rutgers linguist and anthropologist Ivan Van Sertima, who marshaled an array of archaeological, historical, and botanical evidence to argue his case.¹

The Era of the European Slave Trade in West Africa

Systematic transportation of Africans to the Americas as slaves began in the early sixteenth century and lasted until the early nineteenth century. The trade represented the most significant events in the history of interaction between West Africa and the United States. Not only did it bring about a direct and long-lasting connection between the two regions, but one of its most important repercussions was the planting of an African diaspora in America.² The Atlantic trade established a durable commercial collaboration between European or American and African merchants. In this collaborative venture, the primary role of African traders was to procure slaves, which were then sold to European dealers stationed at the coastal forts for onward transportation to the Americas. In the New World they were promptly put to work as slaves on the various plantations.

The expansion of the American plantation system, particularly in the eighteenth century, increased the volume of the Atlantic trade. More and more Africans, primarily from West Africa, were shipped annually to the New World. Apart from the Central African region of Angola and Kongo, the entire west coast of Africa, from Senegal to the Bight of Biafra, constituted the major source of slaves for the Americas. At least three distinct regions of West Africa constituted significant catchment areas for the Atlantic trade. Perhaps most prominent was the "Slave Coast," the region around the Bight of Benin extending from Grand Popo in the present-day Republic of Benin to Benin in Nigeria. The second major region was the Gold Coast, encompassing the region around present-day Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. The third was the Bight of Biafra, a region extending from the Niger Delta to the riverine area of southwestern Nigeria, all the way to the Cross River. Also important was the Senegambia valley, a region of the upper Guinea forest on the far western coast of West Africa.³ Thus, members of West African ethnic groups such as the Wolof, Serer, Mandingo, Asante, Yoruba, Igbo, and many others constituted a large proportion of the Africans exported to the Americas. A number of ports along the coast, such as Goree, Elmina, Cape Coast, Grand Popo, Porto Novo, Badagry, Lagos, Bonny, and Elem Kalabari (New Calabar), served at various times during the trade as important outlets for slave exportation. A number of major West African states such as the kingdoms of Dahomey, Oyo, Benin, and Asante were involved in the slave trade with the Europeans at the coastal forts.

The African Diaspora

The shipment of several million Africans, mostly from West Africa, across the Atlantic to the New World represented the largest forced migration in human history, one that would establish a permanent African presence in America. By the seventeenth century, enslaved Africans constituted a prominent part of the population in the American colonies that eventually became the United States; and by the eighteenth, they outnumbered whites in some counties in the South.

Slavery was, of course, fundamental to the success of European capitalist ventures in the New World. In the United States, the agrarian economy of the South was wholly sustained by the labor of enslaved Africans. Despite the hardships of life in servitude, enslaved Africans attempted as far as they could to construct communities in an oppressive system that sought to rid them of any cultural heritage. The literature has shown that elements of West African culture survived, particularly in the U.S. South.⁴ The forced migration of Africans to the New World was accompanied by the introduction of aspects of West African culture into the United States. While the slaves, having no choice, adopted the culture of their new environment, they equally imparted their own culture to the white community, to an extent that has not always been appreciated. Indeed, from the beginning, the enslaved...
The Back-to-Africa Experiments

Historical racial oppression in America persuaded many free American blacks that assimilation into white society with equal rights was unattainable, and consequently, persuaded them that colonization was the solution. But there were no two main perspectives on colonization. First, there was the notion that colonization could be achieved within the United States, where African Americans would be given territories of their own to settle. In the hope of realizing this dream, many free blacks seeking to escape racial oppression in the South moved west and established their own communities in Kansas and Oklahoma.

The other perspective on colonization was that African Americans would be expatriated to Africa and settled in a colony of their own. In America before the Civil War, many free blacks, particularly in the South, saw moving away from the United States as the only way they could truly experience freedom. Attempts at colonization were made in various locations in the U.S., including Canada and Mexico, with varying degrees of success. But more vigorously pursued was the establishment of a colony in Africa. Attempts were made to resettle American blacks in various parts of West Africa such as Yorubaland, in Nigeria.

The Foundation of Liberia

The most successful attempt to repatriate and resettle freed blacks in Africa took place when the colony of Liberia was established in 1822 on the west coast of the continent. This back-to-Africa experiment was the culmination of the anti-slavery and abolitionist campaign that had gained ground in America by the early nineteenth century. Various African Americans and leaders of the abolitionist movement campaigned for colonization, and the establishment of Liberia was sponsored by the American Colonization Society (ACS).

The Liberian project was the product of emancipation and the idea of colonization. The abolition of slavery was tied to the question of what would become of freed slaves after emancipation. Many abolitionists held the view that free blacks would never be given equal rights in America, and so true freedom could best be achieved if they were repatriated and settled in a colony of their own in Africa. For others, particularly whites who supported colonization, repatriation to a colony in Africa would rid the United States of the growing population of unwanted free blacks. The idea of repatriation was thus quite popular among whites.

The ACS established the first Liberian settlement, Monrovia, on Cape Mesurado, in January 1822. Following its expansion as a result of the establishment of other settlements, the colony of Liberia was later incorporated as the Commonwealth of Liberia. Monrovia, named for the U.S. president, James Monroe, became its capital.

Liberia grew steadily as increased emigration swelled its population. After the slave trade had been abolished in the United States, African captives rescued by American naval patrols aboard slave ships on the Atlantic still trafficking illegally in humans were resettled in Liberia. In 1847, the ACS relinquished its authority over the commonwealth, which declared its independence, ending its ambiguous status in the international community as neither a sovereign nation nor an American colony. By 1866, more than 13,000 American blacks had been settled in Liberia.

The young African nation faced a number of problems in its formative years. The settlers were constantly harassed by local African groups such as the Kru and the Grebo, who feared the colonists' encroachment on their lands. Also, Liberia was a victim of European imperialist ambitions of territorial aggrandizement. Surrounded by British and French possessions, Liberia was threatened by recurring incidents of encroachment on its territory. The United States responded to both of these problems and saved Liberia from oblivion. Washington provided military assistance to quell local uprisings and intervened to preserve Liberia's territorial integrity in the many border disputes that plagued its relations with its neighbors, the French territory of the Ivory Coast and the English colony of Sierra Leone.

Yet, for most of its early history, Liberia did not enjoy close or special relations with the United States as expected by many settlers. Inherent racial prejudice in America colored its relations with Liberia and attitudes toward the young nation. This prevented deeper American political engagement with its de facto informal colony, beyond missionary activities and some trading interests. The United States' less than profound interest in Liberia could be seen in its failure to recognize the country's sovereignty for fifteen years after the republic had declared its independence with a constitution and political institutions fashioned out of the American system.

Despite the success of Liberia, the African colonization project did not win broad approval in the African American community. Many notable black leaders, including the Harvard-trained scholar W. E. B. DuBois and the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, opposed the idea. Douglass once stated that blacks in America must be "counted upon as a permanent element of the population of the United States." Among his reasons for opposition to colonization were "the expense of removal to a foreign land, [and] the difficulty of finding a country where the conditions of existence are more favorable than here." Many African Americans correctly interpreted repatriation to
Africa as a ploy by racist whites and many white supporters of abolitionism to rid America of black people. As attested by ACS records, some slave masters desired to free their bondsmen on the condition that they would be repatriated to Liberia. Thus, among the vast majority of African Americans to whom Africa was already an alien land, repatriation to Liberia was not a viable proposition. Indeed, following the pioneering efforts of the ACS, subsequent attempts at repatriation to Liberia, such as that of Henry McNeal Turner, a notable black leader, in 1894 through his International Migration Society, were hardly successful.

**Garveyism**

The “Back-to-Africa” movement can be more readily associated with the Jamaican nationalist, Marcus Garvey, who championed the idea in the 1920s and 1930s. In the interwar years, Marcus Garvey led a mass organization called the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which among other things, called for the repatriation of American blacks to Africa. With its headquarters in Harlem, New York, Garveyism, a radical philosophy that has been variously termed “messianic,” “pseudo-fascist,” and “Black African Zionism,”

became a powerful movement among working-class African Americans, who were mesmerized by Garvey’s charisma and his message of black separatism and solidarity, racial pride, and race redemption.

Garvey’s purpose in espousing repatriation and colonization seemed to be to promote business cooperation between American blacks and Africans. The Black Star Line, Garvey’s steamship company created in 1919 to operate a shipping line between the United States and Africa, was partly designed to promote inter-Atlantic economic intercourse. In principle, the business class in black America and in West Africa, particularly in Liberia, was receptive to this. However, such enterprises rarely made significant headway.

While Garveyism made some waves in Liberia, in other parts of West Africa it did not have a significant impact, either in its economic component or in its anti-imperialist political message, which called for the liberation of African colonies. Although UNIA branches existed in some West African cities like Freetown in Sierra Leone and Lagos in Nigeria, as Judith Stein has remarked, “Garveyism in West Africa was [only] an occasional inspiration for Africans.”

**World War II and West Africa**

World War II marked a new phase in the United States’ perception of Africa. Prior to the war, except for episodic intervention in Liberia, the African continent hardly featured in America’s foreign policy. However, the war brought the continent, particularly West Africa, into the United States’ strategic planning in both military and economic terms.

West Africa entered America’s war effort in August 1941 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided that the United States would assume the operation of an air ferry service across West Africa to North Africa and the Middle East. The possibility that the hard-pressed British desert forces might capitulate to the German military machine in the North African theatre was unthinkable in Washington. It could lead to an Axis advance into West Africa, and consequently a threat to the security of the Western hemisphere. Thus it was urgent and imperative for the United States to aid the British North African forces with supplies of military hardware, and this was the primary consideration in America’s decision to take over the air ferry service across Africa. Through the ferry service, military supplies, particularly much-needed combat aircraft, were flown from Florida via Paramaribo air base in Natal, Brazil, to North Africa. West African ports such as Dakar in Senegal, Bathurst in the Gambia, Takoradi in the Gold Coast, and Lagos and Maiduguri in Nigeria served as transit points on the ferry route. Apart from ferrying bombers, this route eventually served to transport American troops to North Africa. The ferry service was a major military operation undertaken by the United States, although it was achieved under the auspices of a civil aviation company, Pan-American Airways (PANAM). This was necessary since at the commencement of the operation the United States was technically not yet a belligerent nation. The ferry service put the entire west coast of Africa within the framework of America’s strategic planning in the southern Atlantic.

America’s wartime economic needs also helped to define a strategic interest in West Africa. Before World War II the United States’ trade and investment in the whole of Africa were paltry. In West Africa, aside from the activities of the American rubber company, Firestone, in Liberia, the United States’ economic interest was insignificant. This drastically changed during World War II when the United States was forced to turn to the region as a source of strategic raw materials, agricultural and mineral, needed to fuel the war effort. This situation had been created by the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia, which deprived the United States of its traditional source of vital resources. A replacement for critical strategic commodities was found in mineral-rich and agriculturally productive West Africa. America’s wartime supply of much-needed mineral products came principally from various parts of West Africa: tin from Nigeria, manganese form the Gold Coast, and diamonds from Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast. In terms of agricultural products, the United States obtained natural rubber from Liberia; palm oil and palm products from the Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone; cocoa from Nigeria; and ginger from Sierra Leone. The increased demand for West African products during the war significantly raised the volume of the United States’ trade in the region.

America’s military and economic wartime presence in West Africa was particularly profound in Liberia. During the war, Liberia emerged as an ally of
the US, and even declared war on Germany at the prodding of Washington. In 1942, the United States signed a defense pact with Liberia, militarizing the country by permitting America's use of its territory for military purposes. The United States developed military bases in Liberia, constructing the country's first port, the Free Port of Monrovia, and the air base, Roberts Field and Field, using American financial assistance and expertise. Roberts Field and other American bases in Liberia were used as storage depots for the United States' military supplies and as transit points for onward dispatch to North Africa. A 5,000-strong all-black regiment from the 41st Engineers and Defense Detachment served in Liberia, manning military depots and maintaining inventories.

The strategic importance of Liberia to the United States during the war produced a special relationship between the two nations. Liberia's newfound status in America's foreign relations was underscored by President Roosevelt's visit to the country on January 26-27, 1943, on his way back from the Casablanca Conference in Morocco. During this visit, Roosevelt conferred with the Liberian president, Edwin Barclay, on war issues and other issues concerning bilateral relations.

America's wartime special relations with Liberia brought important benefits to the West African nation. Liberia's transportation system was modernized through airport and harbor development and road construction. The Liberian economy saw tremendous growth, significantly raising government revenue. The impact of American influence on the Liberian economy could be seen in Monrovia's replacement of the British West African currency with the American dollar as legal tender. The American-owned rubber company, Firestone, continued to play a major role in the political economy of Liberia in the postwar period.

Decolonization and Independence

West African nationalism greatly benefited from black nationalist thought in America during the interwar years. The writings and activism of W. E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and Booker T. Washington, to mention just a few prominent black leaders, inspired many West African nationalists. Although the three above-mentioned leaders differed considerably in approach and method, they all wanted an end to European colonial rule in Africa. DuBois was one of the earliest African Americans who through prolific writing sought to emphasize the importance of racial pride. As a scholar, indeed, the first African American to hold a PhD in history, he upheld black history as an integral part of the history of human civilization. Many of his books dealt with the history and culture of Africa including its diaspora. Also, DuBois wrote profusely about the need for black people to come together and fight for the advancement of the black race. "If the Negro were to be a factor in the world history, it would be through a Pan-Negro movement," he once wrote. As the editor of The Crisis, the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) between 1910 and 1934, DuBois used the paper to attack European imperialism in Africa. Beyond using writing as a weapon to advance the interests of the African world, DuBois was also an activist and a Pan-Africanist. In the interwar years he was instrumental in the organization of four Pan-African congresses. The first one, held in Paris in 1919, was attended by the Senegalese Blaise Diagne, a deputy in the French Parliament. With DuBois' help, more delegates from Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, attended subsequent congresses, particularly the last one, held in 1927.

Marcus Garvey's Pan-African activism in the United States influenced many nationalists. Garveyism preached at one point or another intense racial consciousness and pride, ultra-nationalism, militant anticolonialism, and economic self-reliance. Garvey's fiery speeches ignited the hope and expectations of many a black man. Elected the "Provisional President of Africa" at a 1920 convention organized by the UNIA, he was seen by many as the liberator of Africa. Garveyism as a political philosophy was influential in some urban centers in West Africa. Although local branches of the UNIA were not particularly strong in West African cities like Monrovia, Lagos, and Freetown, nevertheless, many West African nationalists were influenced by Garveyism. Azikiwe, for instance, was inspired by Garvey's radical Pan-Africanism.

Earlier, Booker T. Washington had been the dominant figure in African American intellectual circles and had also been involved in Pan-Africanism, although he eschewed the militancy of Garvey or the radicalism of DuBois. His approach to the question of colonial subjugation of Africa was through gradualism and caution. He convened the International Conference on the Negro at Tuskegee Institute in April 1912. The conference drew African delegates including one of the earliest West African nationalists, J. E. Casely Hayford of the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA).

During World War II, West African nationalism, particularly in British West Africa, gathered steam. One of the main reasons for this was the wartime American anticolonial policy demanding an end to colonial empires. This policy was directed particularly at Britain, the most formidable colonial power in Africa. Indeed, Washington was more than willing to irritate London, its major ally, over the question of the retention of British colonial possessions after the war. The president and other high-ranking Washington officials consistently warned that America was not fighting to preserve the British Empire. The anticolonial mood in the United States was expressed in Life magazine in late 1942. In an "Open Letter to the people of England," the magazine warned London that "[O]ne thing we are sure we are not fighting for is to hold the British Empire together."
West African students in the United States, mostly from the British colonies, contributed their quota to the burgeoning anticolonial movement at home during World War II. Goaded by American anti-imperialism, these students, whose numbers had begun to increase significantly in American institutions from the 1930s, mobilized and organized. Many of them had been radicalized by the racism prevailing in American society and the practice of racial segregation. At the same time, however, the political thought of these students was greatly influenced by American democratic ideals with their profession of the values of freedom, liberty, and justice. Some of them, including Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nsafor Orizu, and Kingsley Mbadiwe from Nigeria, and Kwame Nkrumah from the Gold Coast (later Ghana), wrote during the war expressing strong nationalistic fervor and condemning in no uncertain terms European imperialism in Africa. These budding nationalists became political giants in their respective countries after independence. In postcolonial Nigeria, Azikiwe emerged as the first president; Mbadiwe served as minister in various departments, and Orizu was at one time senate president. Kwame Nkrumah led the Gold Coast to independence and became the first prime minister of independent Ghana.

Particularly in West Africa, American wartime anticolonialism served as a catalyst for the escalation of nationalist activities. Nationalists were impressed and encouraged by American anticolonial rhetoric. When the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, declared that the Atlantic Charter, a joint British-American statement that called for national self-determination after the war, did not apply to African dependencies, he was roundly condemned and denounced in West Africa. The vibrant and politically conscious West African press wrote stinging editorials and articles to denounce Churchill's interpretation of the document. West African nationalists spared no effort in condemning the prevailing British perspective as well. Indeed, London was bombarded with delegations from British West Africa with demands for constitutional reform including a postwar order based on a system of representative government. In their condemnation of Churchill's view of the Atlantic Charter, West African nationalists were emboldened by Roosevelt's broad interpretation of the charter. The American president had on a number of occasions indicated that the principles enunciated in the charter were applicable to all dependent peoples of the world. For example, on February 29, 1942, Roosevelt stated categorically that the "Atlantic Charter applies not only to the parts of the world that border the Atlantic, but to the whole world."25

The United States, however, was not prepared to back up its anticolonial rhetoric with concrete action. America's disapproval of European colonial actions was not farther than rhetoric. The Atlantic rule in Africa in the final analysis went no farther than rhetoric. The Atlantic Charter raised the hopes of many in the colonial world for greater progress toward self-determination. But it proved to be nothing more than a scrap of paper. It was not a formally signed document, but only a vague press release designed to sway the public, especially anti-interventionists. As the world entered the postwar Cold War era, the dynamics of postwar East-West relations forced America, finally, to abandon the path of anticolonialism it had vainly pursued during the war.

Decolonization in Africa moved at a rapid pace in the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1960 alone, seventeen African nations achieved political independence, a great many of them former colonies in West Africa. In the Cold War atmosphere in which decolonization was taking shape, the Soviet Union sought to exploit the moment to further its ideological interest in the continent by fully supporting the African independence movement. As African states rapidly achieved independence, the question that faced Washington was how to preserve these states' loyalty to the West and insulate them from the Soviet bloc.

The Cold War

Consistent with America's postwar foreign policy, Washington's overriding interest in Africa during the Cold War was to prevent the burgeoning Soviet influence in the continent, an interest that had begun to manifest itself in the late 1950s. Apart from obvious Soviet satellite states in southern and eastern Africa, some states in West Africa provided ground in which Soviet interests could flourish. While in West Africa there were no pro-Soviet Marxist-Leninist regimes as were found in Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique, Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah and Ahmed Sékou Touré's Guinea flirted with Communism in the 1960s and became recipients of limited economic aid from Warsaw Pact countries.

Soviet influence in West Africa in the 1960s was not, however, perceived in Washington as dangerous to Western interests. First, West African recipients of Soviet aid were not wholly committed to the Kremlin. Indeed, at the same time, these countries also received military and economic assistance from Western countries. With the fall from power in Ghana of the socialist-oriented Nkrumah and his ruling Convention People's Party (CPP) in 1966 and the emergence of a pro-West military junta, the chances of Soviet infiltration in West Africa were considerably lessened. Also, although the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–70 offered the Soviet Union an opportunity to make inroads into the country through its military assistance to the federal government, the Kremlin was never able to capitalize on this. While professing a policy of nonalignment, Nigeria after its civil war was staunchly pro-West.26

The U.S. response to the possible advancement of Soviet interests in Africa in the early years of African independence was to rely on the erstwhile colonial masters to ensure a neocolonial relationship with their former
President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah further escalated the war. When the war ended in mid-2000, nine years after it had begun, Sierra Leone, like Liberia, had been reduced to one of the world’s poorest nations, with enormous postwar challenges such as the reintegration of child combatants into civil society.29

The United States’ attitude toward the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone reveals Washington’s post–Cold War policy of distancing itself from conflicts in which American national interests were not directly at stake. The disastrous U.S. intervention in the crisis in Somalia in 1992–93, code-named “Operation Restore Hope,” had altered America’s perception of its role in intractable African conflicts.30 A new American policy on multinational peace operations involving U.S. forces, Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD-25) of May 6, 1994, was a direct outcome of the failed American intervention in Somalia. This policy established new and stringent guidelines for the participation of American troops in future peacekeeping efforts around the world.31

Liberians, by virtue of historical connection with the United States, expected direct American intervention in the bloody civil war that was wrecking their nation. Rather than direct military intervention in the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, however, the administrations of Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush emphasized that the role of the United States would be to support the efforts of the West African regional organization, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to resolve the conflicts. Throughout the period of the crises in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the United States limited itself to providing financial and logistical support for the subregional peacekeeping force, the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), in its efforts to deal effectively with the conflicts.32 With American troops spread thin as a result of the wars in Afghanistan and then Iraq, in the renewed war in Liberia in 2002–3, President Bush adamantly refused the American military intervention that was demanded by most Liberians. The United States saw Charles Taylor’s continued presence in Liberia as president as the main impediment to peace. Thus, instead of engaging in military intervention, Washington pressurized Taylor to resign. Following Taylor’s forced resignation and exile in Nigeria, in August 2003, disappointingly to Liberians, the United States sent to Monrovia not a peacekeeping force but a “military assessment team . . . to begin gauging humanitarian needs and possibly to lay the groundwork for a deployment of U.S. peacekeeping troops.”33 No American peacekeeping force was ever deployed to Liberia.

To avoid sending American troops to deal with intractable African conflicts, the Clinton administration attempted in the 1990s to assist Africa to establish an all-African rapid-response peacekeeping force that could be deployed to conflict zones around the continent. A project called the
African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI), sponsored by the United States, was inaugurated in the mid 1990s as contingents of troops from a number of African states were trained to constitute the nucleus of the force. Washington emphasized the role of American troops in this project as "to train and equip peacekeeping troops from a number of African nations, stationed but ready in their nation of origin, for rapid deployment to areas of crises in Africa." Among the volunteers for the American-provided training were West African states such as Ghana, Mali, and Senegal. While troops from these countries participated in the project, Nigeria, the regional power with long-standing experience in regional and international peacekeeping, was opposed to the American initiative. The military administration of General Sani Abacha argued that rather than a new peacekeeping apparatus, what Africa needed was "financial and logistics support to enable the existing peacekeeping mechanisms [to] function effectively."  

The United States and a Regional Power, Nigeria

Nigeria understandably occupies an important place in America’s foreign policy in Africa. Despite its economic woes, Nigeria is still a regional power; it is the most populous black nation in the world with the potential to be the largest black democracy. Besides this, Nigeria is indispensable to the United States because a fifth of U.S. oil comes from the West African nation.

America’s oil interest in Nigeria demanded the creation of a stable democratic government in that country. After the end of the Cold War, Washington began to encourage democratic reforms in Nigeria and the country’s return to constitutional, elected government. During Abacha’s military dictatorship, the United States played a leading part in the international isolation of the regime as a result of its poor human rights record, extensive violations of basic civil rights, and failure to move the country toward genuine democracy. Not only did American criticism of the Abacha regime increase considerably after the execution of writer and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa and his Ogoni colleagues on November 10, 1995, but Washington also imposed limited sanctions on Nigeria. Also, the United States persuaded its allies to treat Nigeria as a pariah state. Thus, Western nations placed visa restrictions on Nigerian government officials wanting to visit the West.

However, while still opposed to the Nigerian dictatorship, the Clinton administration in the later years of Abacha’s regime refrained from pursuing a hard-line policy toward Abuja. This was in spite of persistent calls for a tougher stand against Nigeria, both within the United States, especially from African American constituencies, and from the pro-democracy elements in Nigeria. Thus, the United States resisted the pressure to impose comprehensive oil sanctions on Nigeria; a step that many believed would easily have forced the Abacha dictatorship to concede to the demand for popular democracy. Rather, the policy of the Clinton administration was akin to "constructive engagement" with Abuja. Perhaps the clearest demonstration of this policy was Clinton’s tacit approval of Abacha’s candidacy in the presidential election scheduled for August 1998. During his African tour, Clinton had indicated that an Abacha candidacy would be acceptable to the United States.

In 1999, Nigeria returned to democracy with the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo. Even though Obasanjo was reelected in 2003, Nigeria’s democratic experiment has been very fragile amidst incessant ethnic and religious conflicts and massive political corruption, which have threatened the very survival of the state. The United States continues to be concerned with the survival of democracy and a stable polity in Nigeria partly because of its oil interests. Already, ethnic violence against foreign oil interests and the Nigerian government in the oil-producing southeastern part of the country has had some adverse effects on the global oil market and thus the energy industry in America.

Aside from the issues of oil and democratic governance, the United States has also been concerned with drug trafficking from Nigeria to America. In May 1994, the U.S. State Department classified Nigeria as a major drug-trafficking country and called for concrete action by the Nigerian authorities. But Washington remained unsatisfied with Nigeria’s apparently poor drug-control measures, which did not succeed in curtiling the country’s drug-trafficking problem. In 1998, the State Department described Nigeria as "the hub of African narcotics trafficking," and blamed Nigerian traffickers for being "responsible for a significant portion of the heroin that is abused in the United States."

The War on Terrorism

Since the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001, the global war on terrorism has been the central element of the Bush administration’s foreign policy. West Africa was linked to terrorism when, in May 2005, the administration of former President Charles Taylor of Liberia was accused of harboring al-Qaeda militants who were sought as a result of alleged connections with the bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Generally, in Africa as in other parts of the world, Islamic fundamentalism is seen in Washington as detrimental to the defeat of terrorism. In Nigeria, in particular, constant religious violence fomented by Islamic militancy has been a major problem that has so far defied solution. Indeed, one of the most violent riots in early 2006 in the Islamic world against the Danish newspaper’s caricature of the Prophet Mohammed occurred in Nigeria. Yet, the United States sees Nigeria as a major partner in the antiterrorist war in Africa.
West African Cultural Influences on America

In contemporary times, particularly since the era of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s, African Americans have consciously and increasingly sought to promote an African identity and incorporate African values into their daily lives. An impressive example of the carryover of West African culture is the planting of a Yoruba community, the Oyotunji African Village, in Sheldon, South Carolina. This community, which describes itself as “the sacred village of Oyo-Tunji,” was established in 1970. Deriving its name from the famous ancient northern Yoruba town, Oyo, the community is modeled after traditional Yoruba towns and practices the culture and customs of the Yoruba people of West Africa, predominantly found in western Nigeria but also in parts of Togo and the Republic of Benin. The community’s founder and first oba (king, in the Yoruba language) was an African American cultural nationalist, Walter Eugene King, who, on his coronation as the oba, became known as Efuntola Oseijeman Adelabu Adefunmi I. It is noteworthy that the coronation in 1981, and the bestowing of the royal title on Adefunmi I, was performed by the paramount Yoruba king, Oba Okunade Sijuwade, Olubuse II, the ooni of Ile, the sacred Yoruba town in Nigeria believed to be the cradle of the Yoruba people. Oba Sijuwade himself is generally accepted as the representative of the Yoruba progenitor, Oduduwa.

Displaying of Yoruba culture is, indeed, quite popular in many African American communities. Cultural and social values have been widely displayed, whether in terms of ceremonies (for example, marriage or child naming) or in mode of dress (for example, wearing dinkhiki and agbada). The practice of different forms of Yoruba traditional religion by many American blacks is also known across the country. The Odunde festival held annually in Philadelphia since 1975 is intended as a replica of the famous Osun festival in Osogbo, western Nigeria: a celebration and worship of the Yoruba deity, Osun, the sea goddess.

African open-air street markets are becoming common in the black community throughout the United States. The market at the Odunde festival is the oldest and perhaps the most successful of these markets, which are popular in America’s major cities. Odunde features the vending of a wide variety of wares including clothing, jewelry, craft products, CDs of African music, and food by merchants from other parts of the United States, Latin America, and West Africa.

Elements of other West African cultures have also been incorporated into African American communities. The kente cloth of the Asante of Ghana is very popular in contemporary black America, and often represents African American cultural identity. One of its most popular uses is as decorative neck and shoulder ties worn by African American college students during their graduation ceremonies.

On personal level, many African Americans have adopted West African names as a symbol of their heritage and historical connection with the region. One of the earliest noted blacks in America to do this was the Trinidadian-born American, Stokely Carmichael, the creator of “Black Power,” the popular slogan and movement in black America in the 1960s. A frontline civil rights activist who was once the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and a member of the Black Panther Party, Carmichael relocated to Guinea in 1969 and changed his name to Kwame Toure, combining the first name of the first prime minister of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, with the last name of the first president of Guinea, Sékou Touré. In recent times other prominent African Americans have also changed their names. The Temple University scholar, versatile author, and most famous proponent of the Afrocentric theory, Molefi Kete Asante, formerly known as Arthur Lee Smith, derived his African name from the Akan ethnic group of Ghana. An intellectual cultural nationalist, in 1995, Asante was installed as the Kyelomhene of Tafo, Akyem, Ghana, with the traditional title of Nana Okr Asante Peasah.

Conclusion

America’s connections and intercourse with West Africa have been long and enduring, dating back to the period before the transatlantic slave trade. In historical perspective, despite the antiquity of this interaction, U.S. relations with Africa have never been of a level comparable to U.S. relations with Latin America and Asia. For the greater part of the period of connections, apart from periods of sporadic American presence in Africa, the continent remained insignificant in U.S. foreign relations. In his study of the Kennedy administration, renowned, Pulitzer Prize–winning historian and author Arthur M. Schlesinger stated this succinctly:

Of all the continents this one had stayed longest on the outer fringes of the American consciousness. As late as 1960, our direct interests in Africa, political or economic, military or intellectual, were meager. No traditional doctrines guided our African policies. No alliances committed our troops, our foreign aid programs made only token contributions to African development. Of $30 billion overseas investment, less than 3% was in Africa. Our very sense of the continent below the Mediterranean rim was vague and dim.

In contemporary times, the dynamics of global politics compel continued American interest in Africa, and, therefore, some sort of presence in the continent. As the basis of its presence in Africa and in pursuit of its interests, the United States has continued to emphasize partnership with the continent. America’s major post–Cold War interests in Africa are the
consolidation of democracy, economic reform, conflict resolution, and the prevention of the continent from becoming a haven for terrorists. As in the other parts of the continent, in West Africa, the United States continues to encourage democratic governance and economic growth, to support ECOWAS’s efforts in conflict areas, and to court governments’ support in the global war on terrorism.

Notes


10. In one instance, twelve slaves owned by one Timothy Rogers of Bedford County, Virginia, were to be freed in his will, provided they accepted repatriation to Liberia. See “Applicants for Passage to Liberia,” ca. 1852, Manuscript Division (21), ACSP.


13. Ibid., 219.


23. See, for instance, the Gold Coast newspaper, the *Spectator Daily*, June 22, 1943.

24. This was among the demands of a West African press delegation to London in August 1943. For details of their memorandum, titled, “The Atlantic Charter and British West Africa,” which was presented to the British, see its installment publication in the *Nigerian spokesman*, October 22–30, 1943.


27. There is an abundant literature on the Libyan conflict. See, for example, M. Weller, Regional Peacekeeping and International Enforcement: The Libyan Crisis (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998).

28. Taylor was indicted for war crimes by a UN special tribunal in June 1993 for his role in the Sierra Leone Civil War, especially his support for the RUF, which enabled the rebel organization to carry out an enormous number of atrocities.


36. See the letter to the White House by prominent African American leaders in Post Express (Lagos, Nigeria), May 23, 1998.


41. For more on this subject, see Oluseyi Akomolafe, “Nigeria, the United States and the War on Terrorism: The Stakes and the Stance,” in Nigeria in Global Politics, ed. Abegunrin and Akomolafe, 225–43.


