Old wine in new barrels

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The Bush administration's record spending promises on combating Aids in Africa have pleased liberals and conservatives alike. But a closer look reveals that these programmes have less to do with a new era in US foreign aid but rather a strategic interest in diversifying its oil resources.

During his campaign for president, George W Bush said that even though it was “a country with many problems,” Africa was not an area of strategic importance to the United States. But Bush’s recent actions have proved to speak much louder than his words. Late last year, his administration secured a dramatic increase in funding to fight the global HIV/Aids pandemic and established a new, robust foreign aid fund targeted to the world’s poorest countries. Much of this new aid funding will go to Africa. Contrary to candidate Bush’s previous assertions, the continent has assumed strategic importance as the focus of two of the Bush administration’s primary policy goals – fulfilling the agenda of “compassionate conservatism” and the pursuit of new supplies of oil.

Although Americans contribute to private charities at commendable levels, official foreign aid has never been popular in the US. Funds allocated by Congress to foreign aid programmes are commonly viewed as competing with domestic spending, and most Americans believe that the US spends far more on international development than is actually the case. The annual negotiations between the legislative and executive branches of government over the foreign operations budget do little to build public confidence, as they traditionally feature sharp attacks on the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and battles over the “earmarks” that allow members of Congress to target aid to specific projects or constituencies. These battles reached fever pitch in the mid-1990s, when arch conservative Senator Jesse Helms attacked the Clinton administration for pouring taxpayer dollars down “foreign rat holes”.

There was initially little indication that the new Bush administration would move the ball forward. But midway through his term, President Bush dropped two surprise announcements. The first came at the March 2002 Conference on Financing Development in Monterrey, where he announced the “Millennium Challenge Account”, a US$5 billion dollar fund designated for the developing world’s poorest yet best economic and political “performers”. In his State of the Union speech nine months later, Bush stunned critics and fans alike by following his take-no-prisoners stance on Iraq with the announcement that he would triple US spending on global Aids.
The president’s announcement marked a significant departure from his administration’s earlier stance. Six months before his State of the Union announcement, Bush had announced a 3-year, US$500 million international Aids programme focused on mother-to-child-transmission, thus undercutting a proposal by Senators John Kerry (Democrat) and Bill Frist (Republican) to provide US$2.1 billion in international AIDS funding in fiscal year 2003 and S$2.5 billion the following year. Meanwhile, when it came time formally to request its newly proposed funds from Congress, the Bush administration undercut its own pledge, asking for less funding than had been forecast by the President’s announcements.

Activism and advocacy by development and Aids organisations, Bono and key members of Congress, brought the numbers up, and almost one year later, Congress was set to approve a new foreign operations budget for 2004 and provide the administration with US$2.4 billion for HIV/Aids programmes in 12 African and two Caribbean countries, and US$1.3 billion to launch the Millennium Challenge Account.

No doubt, these are aid levels that set historic precedents, define George W Bush as a champion of foreign aid and mean more money for Africa. And given how hard it has been to increase US development spending since the end of the Cold War, the Bush administration deserves credit for doing what many had thought impossible. But consistent with his other grand gestures, Bush’s new aid policies bear the trademark of his administration: the triumph of ideology over facts.

The conservative side of George Bush’s global compassion was evident from the first day of his administration, when he reinstated what is called the “Mexico City” policy, less charitably referred to as the “global gag rule”. Originally announced by President Ronald Reagan at the Second International Conference on Population in Mexico City in 1984, this provision dictates that US aid cannot be provided to foreign non-governmental organisations that use funding from any source to provide abortions or abortion counselling, or which lobby to make abortion legal in their countries of residence. These restrictions remained in place throughout the Reagan and first Bush administrations, but were rescinded by President Clinton. In 1998, leaders in the Republican-dominated House of Representatives conditioned the payment of US back dues to the United Nations on imposition of the global gag rule. Clinton vetoed the legislation, but caved-in to congressional demands a year later in order to pay US$900 million in outstanding dues to the UN; he subsequently exercised his authority and waived the restrictions.

George W Bush went further than his father, however, and coupled the reinstatement of the global gag rule with the requirement that one-third of new US spending on international HIV/Aids programmes be allocated to abstinence programmes. The highly regarded American Medical Association and US National Institutes of Health have for long backed comprehensive sex education. But supporters of abstinence from among conservative think tanks and the US radical right carry more weight with the Bush administration, and the weight they carry is substantial. Congress has allocated more than US$100 million to domestic abstinence programmes; the Centers for Disease Control has removed a page from its website that reviewed effective, comprehensive sex education programmes; US NGOs that do not advocate abstinence-only programmes, or have criticised the global gag rule, report an unusual number of audits by the federal government; the Bush administration has allied itself with Pakistan, Libya, Saudi Arabia
and other non-democratic regimes to oppose references to “gay men” or “sex workers” in UN resolutions, and with members of Congress to ensure that USAID avoids the same references in its own public materials.

Bush’s conservatism is fast trumping the effectiveness of his compassion, particularly in Africa. The gag rule has forced the closure of clinics in Kenya, curtailed community outreach programmes in Ethiopia, Zambia and Uganda, and forced established family planning organisations to close or reduce services. According to recent reports by the Center for Reproductive Rights and Population Action International, USAID – once the world’s leading provider of condoms to the developing world – has terminated condom shipments to 16 developing countries whose family planning associations are affiliated with International Planned Parenthood and to another 13 countries whose main, but not only, family planning organisation will not sign on to the gag rule.

It is unlikely that the Bush administration will back down, however, as one of its core constituencies is the radical American right. According to the New York Times, 40 per cent of those casting their votes for Bush in the 2000 presidential elections hail from historically “evangelical” denominations. In recent years, they have expanded their focus from a purely domestic agenda to the international arena. It was to this constituency that Bush directed his comment, in 2002, that new funding for mother-to-child-transmission would help “the innocent victims of HIV/Aids”, and his references to sex trafficking in his 2003 speech before the UN General Assembly. Having struck common cause with traditionally liberal foreign aid advocates, conservative America has become a key actor in campaigns to increase Aids funding, particularly in Africa. The Bush administration enjoys the best of both worlds, receiving the praise of liberal advocates for increasing the quantity of foreign aid, and from conservative pundits for ensuring that its quality reflects their particular values.

If compassionate conservatism is one leg of the Bush administration’s Africa strategy, then calculated consumption is the other. Early in its term, the Bush administration made clear its intent to diversify US oil supplies, and an administration task force, headed by vice president Dick Cheney and informed largely by the US oil industry, concluded in 2001 that Africa would soon emerge as a leading supplier to the US. Driven more by industry than by innovation, the Bush administration has given far less attention to alternative sources of energy or conservation than it has to securing these new oil supplies. And the need is urgent: the US burns an estimated 19 million barrels of oil per day and consumption is growing.

It is estimated that Africa today provides the US with between 12 and 14 per cent of its oil supplies; industry experts estimate that the continent could provide as much as 25 per cent within the next 15 years. (The Persian Gulf states today provide an estimated 26 per cent, with Canada and Mexico combined providing close to 30 per cent. Middle Eastern oil reserves, however, are estimated to be much larger than those in Africa.) US imports now draw heavily on Nigerian and Angolan oil supplies, but are slated to expand to a new generation of producers in West Africa including Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome & Principe.

African oil, meanwhile, is of particular appeal. Transportation of West African oil to the US takes just over two weeks, as compared to the six weeks it takes oil to move from the
Middle East to US shores; major oil supplies in West Africa are within reach of US military forces positioned in the Atlantic; and because much of Africa’s oil is off-shore, exploitation requires neither stability nor a highly-visible industry presence. Finally, a majority of Africa’s oil exporters are not members of OPEC, and are thus unconstrained by OPEC price controls and free to tie their revenues to the US dollar.

US interest in African oil is not new. While US support for UNITA forces in the Angolan civil war was ostensibly rooted in the global fight against communism, it had at least as much to do with preventing the Soviet Union from monopolising that country’s oil reserves. George Bush Senior facilitated introductions of African leaders to oil industry magnates in Texas. And the strong support by the Clinton administration for the democratic transition in Nigeria was not unrelated to consideration of Nigeria’s prominence as a leading oil supplier.

What is new is the alliance between the White House and the oil industry. George W Bush was himself an oilman; Dick Cheney left a position as CEO of Halliburton to join the Bush administration; National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice served on the board of Chevron before assuming her position; and a host of White House advisors earned the lion’s share of their personal wealth from investments in the industry. Policy, therefore, gives due consideration to the industry’s interests, and less to the administration’s oft-stated desire to promote “American values” around the world. The State Department recently opened a new embassy in Equatorial Guinea, not because that country has reformed but because it has begun to exploit significant reserves of oil. Angola has been given the equivalent of a political free pass despite its failure to pursue promised reforms following the death of Jonas Savimbi. Former assistant secretary of state for African affairs Walter Kansteiner made several visits to Sao Tome while Secretary Colin Powell stopped off in Gabon. Neither state can be said to be among the “good performers” that the Bush administration has identified as its priority.

The Bush administration has abandoned the Clinton administration’s emphasis on a new US “partnership” with Africa, making clear its disdain for a “soft” policy that reeks of liberal hand-wringing and opting instead for a hard-headed policy rooted in the realities of a world it believes to be more cruel than collaborative. That this has allowed Africa to gain status as “strategically important” is not all bad, for the fact of the matter is that the allocation of US attention and resources derives directly from its perception of strategic interests. But it is also a setback. Even if it does signal heightened US compassion, an HIV/AIDS strategy that delivers dollars but closes clinics is unlikely to bolster Africa’s ability to fight this or future epidemics. And the Bush administration’s reversion to the realpolitik of the Cold War, even if it is buttressed by a significant investment in the fight against HIV/AIDS, means that the US need for oil will trump Africa’s need for progress.

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