

## Late but not empty-handed

*America's president visits the continent of his father after four years away*



*The first family's African outing*

Africans have been used to visitors with big entourages and exotic baggage, at least since European explorers first traipsed through their savannahs at the head of long trains of porters laden with trunks full of florid crockery, even libraries. But when Barack Obama sets foot in Africa on June 26th he will do better still. Warships accompany the first African-American commander-in-chief, equipped with state-of-the-art hospitals should he fall ill, fighter jets patrol the skies non-stop, and three lorries carry bulletproof glass for hotels where he beds down. But official reluctance to employ snipers against cheetahs and lions has led to the cancellation of a presidential safari.

Mr Obama's election in 2008 was celebrated across the continent. The Nigerian foreign minister wept, Kenya declared a national holiday and Nelson Mandela said Mr Obama proved Africans should "dare to dream". Soon after his inauguration, he repaid the compliment by showering the continent with public affection. "I have the blood of Africa within me," he declared on a 20-hour stopover in Ghana in 2009 (pictured), raising hopes he would be Africa's global champion. But he has not visited since. Some Africans resent his long absence, suggesting he neglected them.

That is understandable but unjustified. Relations between America and much of Africa have deepened, regardless of Mr Obama's travel schedule. The Pentagon, fretful about a growing list of African terrorist groups, is much more present. Since he became president, the list of places harbouring American drones—Djibouti, Ethiopia and Niger, to name a few—has grown. They dot the Sahel region, run by a new Africa Command that became operational at the start of the Obama presidency. About 3,000 American military trainers are in Africa this year, more than ever before. The air force has seen action in Libya and Mali, special forces in Uganda and Somalia.

At the same time, America is expanding its soft power. A growing number of diplomats and local staff are engaged in national politics across the continent, aiding, advising, cajoling and enticing local elites. America played midwife to the new state of South Sudan in 2011 and helped bring Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire back from the brink of prolonged strife in 2009 and 2010. It promotes democracy and furnishes aid with greater gusto than any other nation. New embassies are being built and more visiting American officials from Washington climb into

Africa's nooks and crannies. Some are frustrated by the Pentagon's emphasis on security at the expense of political goals. Others point to American military shortcomings: a coup leader in Mali was trained by American soldiers.

On the whole though, the Obama team has handled Africa judiciously. It might have overreacted to the rise of Boko Haram, the Nigerian terror group—but didn't. By contrast, some of President George Bush's senior officials are said to have suffered fits of paranoia as well as naive infatuations. They "fell in love", so says an insider, with African leaders such as Paul Kagame of Rwanda, Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, admiring their dynamism but overlooking their undemocratic tendencies. Mr Obama's lot have been less friendly, suspending military aid to Rwanda, instead focusing on backing institutions.

Hence the countries Mr Obama has chosen to visit on his African trip starting on June 26th. Senegal held exemplary elections last year. South Africa, with its special history and well-entrenched democracy, is still the continent's leading country. Tanzania's reward of a visit is viewed as a slap in the face of Kenya, its more important neighbour and birthplace of Mr Obama's father, which the president won't see, probably because its new president, Uhuru Kenyatta, is facing charges at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

America's weak spot in Africa is investment, a main point of the president's trip. American firms have long operated on the continent but failed to keep up with China, Africa's biggest trading partner, which buys and sells about \$200 billion a year. American trade is half that, though still up fivefold in the past decade, much of it in oil imports from Angola and Nigeria.

Mr Obama will lobby for more American participation in infrastructure projects. But American fears that China is taking over Africa are exaggerated. America and its Western allies are still more influential across the board, whereas Chinese knowledge and political engagement remain shallow. America has 51 embassies in Africa to China's 41, of which many are largely limited to commerce. Still, China plainly wants to catch up; its new president, Xi Jinping, visited the continent on his first foreign trip this year. His predecessor went there five times during ten years in power and held Africa summits every three years.

Hillary Clinton, who visited 15 African countries on four trips as secretary of state, last year lashed out at those she saw as being too cosy with China. America, she said, would stand up for human rights "even when it might be easier or more profitable to look the other way, to keep the resources flowing. Not every partner makes that choice, but we do and we will." Asking Africa to choose between prosperity and democracy is not only a false choice but also an unattractive one. The more America trades with Africa, the more political influence it is likely to gain. That, it seems, is also the view of Mr Obama.

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