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**HUMANITARIAN AND DISASTER RELIEF OPERATIONS:
WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THE AFRICANS**

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to highlight the importance of U.S. humanitarian and disaster relief operations in Africa and the impact they have on the global image of the U.S. It will address why this is important strategically in carrying out the President's foreign policy objectives as defined in the National Security Strategy of the United States. To accomplish the task this paper will first look at the strategic importance of the African continent and the reasons why the U.S. should continue to be engaged going forward in the 21st Century. It will also examine the challenges the U.S. will face as it attempts to fulfill its strategic goals in Africa. Next, it will look at the role that the media plays in advertising U.S. relief operations and the importance of incorporating an effective strategic information operations campaign. To prove the worthiness of humanitarian and disaster relief operations as a viable method in achieving these goals, it will examine two case studies of previous U.S. relief operations and their effect on U.S. foreign policy objectives. It will conclude by looking at the mission of AFRICOM and recommend a path towards meeting the foreign policy goals as dictated in the National Security Strategy of the United States.

27 February 1998. Nairobi, Kenya. A U.S. C-130 rolls down the runway enroute to airdrop 16 tons of food to 4,600 flood victims in the remote village of El-Wak, Kenya, enough to feed them for an entire month.¹ The mission planners and crew performing this humanitarian mission put little thought to how it might affect U.S. foreign policy in the region. Instead, they were only concerned about the tactical success of delivering much needed food and supplies to victims of a natural disaster. However, incorporating an effective information operations campaign with proper planning and coordination with the media, this mission could have had a strategic impact on the people of Africa. A simple CNN or BBC headline with a picture of the U.S. aircraft supporting flood victims in a little known region in Africa, could reach millions of people around the world, influencing their opinion of America. Unfortunately, this event only received scant attention by relief organizations and the military press.

The purpose of this paper will be to highlight the importance of projecting a positive image of the U.S. in Africa, and how to improve it by engaging in humanitarian and disaster relief operations, while strategically using the media to advertise America's good will. To achieve this goal, first it will examine why the U.S. should be interested in Africa and the challenges it faces in engaging the continent. Then it will look at how American generosity can translate into an improved U.S. image and greater U.S. influence by making use of the media's rapid flow of global information. Next, evidence from two examples of previous U.S. humanitarian relief operations outside of Africa will support this claim with post-relief opinion polls and shifts in behavior. Finally, it will evaluate the AFRICOM mission and recommend a strategy to meet the goals of the 2006 *National Security Strategy of the United States* (NSS).

Why should the U.S. be concerned about Africa? Africa throughout history has had its share of foreign influence from the Muslim expansion West in the 7th Century, the European

colonization in the 19th and 20th Centuries and the Cold War competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.² With continuous civil, ethnic and border wars, military coups and genocides, the African continent has arguably seen more warfare than any other in the world has over the past 50 years. However, over the past decade the continent has seen relatively fewer conflicts leading to a more stable environment.³ This may be a strategic crossroads or a turning point in African history, one that brings in more positive foreign influence and investment to the continent. The 2006 NSS identifies Africa as “*a high priority*” and sees it as “*a place of promise and opportunity*” after a much more subdued outlook in the 2002 report.⁴ Africa has much to offer in the way of natural resources, a youthful population and a potential game-changing voice in international politics. The U.S. as well as other industrial nations has come to realize the importance of Africa’s oil reserves in their energy strategies. The U.S. already imports more oil from Africa than it does from the Middle East and anticipates an increase in African oil imports in its future attempts to reduce reliance on the volatile Middle East.⁵ Another natural resource worth noting is the enormous population of Africa. With just over 1 billion people, and expected to double by 2050, and an annual growth rate of 2.4%, there is a significant “*youth bulge*”, providing for a large workforce.⁶ Another important aspect of Africa is its 53 independent states, each with a vote in the U.N. This may be the most important factor of all when it comes to worldwide politics.

However, there are also many challenges in Africa. Decades of war and neglect have left the continent severely lacking the infrastructure and security necessary to attract foreign investment. Disease is another concern, with AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis still major factors to contend with. These problems will require enormous amounts of time and money to resolve and are beyond the scope of this paper. Another challenge is the “*youth bulge*” mentioned

above. If the African governments are unable to provide education and employment for this large group, instability will surely follow. The threat of terrorist organizations capitalizing on this group as potential recruits is worthy of concern. Finally, potentially the biggest challenge to U.S. influence in Africa is the increased competition from China in the region over the past decade. The amount of trade between Africa and China has increased ten-fold over the past eight years.⁷ Chinese investment in the African oil infrastructure is vast. However, this increased investment is providing them access to oil that the U.S. may need as well. Favorable deals are being made with numerous African countries, giving sole access to China instead of putting it on the open markets.⁸ This counters the free and open markets championed by U.S. democratic principles. More importantly is that the Chinese pay little attention to the way they distribute their money and are encouraging poor governance by African countries. This will lead to the continued degradation of the African people and a continuation of their problems. Failure to address these issues could have catastrophic affects that reach well beyond the borders of the African continent.

What is the best way to engage Africa? In previous strategic concepts, U.S. support of disaster relief operations in Sub-Saharan Africa had limited objectives, with the goal of getting in and getting out as quickly as possible.⁹ More recent guidance shows the value of providing much needed humanitarian and disaster relief in times of need, allowing the U.S. to meet one of the tasks laid out in the 2006 NSS of ‘*engaging the opportunities*’ and capitalizing on them at the strategic level.¹⁰ The NSS identifies environmental destruction as a force that can easily overwhelm underdeveloped countries and the need for international intervention to help them cope with the aftermath. It also recognizes the benefits that come along with this intervention in new partnerships, changes in the political landscape and reconciliation in conflicts. As we shall

see below, with a higher public opinion of U.S. image, comes greater U.S. influence, and ultimately a better chance of achieving U.S. foreign policy objectives in the region. With globalization bringing the world closer together and the amazing speed of information flow in the media, the ability to react quickly to these natural disasters can spread positive images of the U.S. to even the farthest corners of the earth.

So why focus so much attention on the media? Timing is everything, and the failure to act quickly or to act at all can negatively affect global opinions of the U.S. as much as they can positively, as evidenced by the slow response of the U.S. in supporting Mozambique during their floods in 2000.¹¹ Although military papers trumpeted the relief operations a success, contributing 900 personnel to deliver over 160 tons of food and supplies in a three-week period, at a cost of roughly \$1.5 million, CNN posted headlines with criticism of the sluggish U.S. support.¹² This surely had a negative impact on global opinion of the U.S. There are many other examples of relief operations performed by the U.S. that the world media was barely aware of. The floods in the Horn of Africa in late 2006 garnered over \$118 million from the U.S. government and the South African floods of 2008 received \$5 million, but neither one received any global media coverage about U.S. relief efforts.¹³ To be sure, there have been many other missed opportunities on the continent of Africa, most recently the floods in West Africa in September 2009, which displaced nearly 600,000 Africans from their homes. The U.S. donated about \$2.5 million to the affected countries, but provided no aircraft or supplies to the effort.¹⁴ These examples show the importance of including the international media in any relief operation from the beginning. A study conducted by the Institute for International Economic Studies, shows the influence that mass media has on public image of the U.S. government during times of natural disasters. It concludes that there is significant competition for news coverage based on

other events ongoing, and the media depends on outside influence to determine which stories will get the most airtime and whether it is in a positive or negative manner.¹⁵ This “*CNN effect*” shows the importance for the U.S. to take a proactive approach in using the media as a strategic enabler to influence global opinion.¹⁶ The 2007 *U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication* embraces this concept by focusing on the importance of preplanned public affairs operations to accompany foreign military operations, and communicating U.S. intentions of good will to the global community.

Can this approach really work? Over the years, the U.S. has been known for its generosity and compassion in assisting allies and adversaries alike when faced with humanitarian or natural disasters. Two cases highlighted are the relief efforts by the U.S. military in Indonesia following the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and in Pakistan following the earthquake in 2005. Each of these disasters resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and an outpouring of international support. The U.S. seized the initiative in both cases with quick reaction and the effective use of the media to advertise its involvement. First, in Indonesia the U.S. began operations less than 24 hours after the event and eventually invested over 16,000 military personnel, 125 aircraft and ships and delivered over 10 million pounds of food and supplies to the affected areas. The cost was significant, with nearly \$950 million invested in the operation, about a third of which went towards military expenditures.¹⁷ However, the resulting shift in sentiment by the Indonesian people, the world’s most populous Muslim democracy, was overwhelming positive towards the U.S. Public opinion polls conducted by the Terror Free Tomorrow organization in early 2005 showed that more than 65% of Indonesians had a more favorable opinion of the U.S. following the relief efforts.¹⁸ These operations also helped to improve relations between the U.S. and the Indonesian government, resulting in expanded international trade agreements, U.S. inclusion in

regional diplomatic partnerships and restoration of military-to-military ties with the U.S., all of which contributed to greater U.S. influence in the region.¹⁹ Secondary affects included the termination of the 29-year civil war in the Aceh Province, as well as measurable human rights improvements by the government.²⁰ Finally, a possible tertiary result was the removal of the military from politics and electoral vote changes in 2009 opening up the political process, thus making it more democratic.²¹

Similar results were experienced in Pakistan following U.S. earthquake relief efforts in the Northeast portions of the country, an area of conflict between U.S. forces and the Taliban. In this operation, the U.S. once again acted quickly beginning operations immediately following the event. Within 48 hours there were over 50 heavy-lift helicopters delivering food and supplies to the victims, resulting in the largest helicopter airlift in history. The final tally showed an investment of over \$510 million, of which about \$110 million was used for military operations.²² Following the operation, once again public opinion polls showed favorable marks towards the U.S. with 78% of Pakistanis coming out with a more favorable opinion of the U.S. More importantly, the polls showed that for the first time since 9/11, more Pakistanis gave support to the U.S. than they did for Osama Bin Laden.²³ This leads to the conclusion that American humanitarian assistance can effectively erode popular support for terrorist organizations, lending to its strategic importance and the necessity to include humanitarian operations in any strategic plans.

So what is AFRICOMs role in all of this? The perception is that the U.S. is militarizing its foreign policy in Africa to counter Chinese influence on the continent, assure access to oil and combat terrorist organizations.²⁴ Although it is true that these are all byproducts of increased US presence, they are not the primary reasons stated by AFRICOM. The mission statement on the

AFRICOM website states, “*AFRICOM...conducts sustained security engagement through military-to-military programs, military-sponsored activities, and other military operations ...in support of U.S. foreign policy*”.²⁵ The emphasis on the military as the leader is apparent and drives home the importance that the military establishment will have in Africa going forward. The new command is already working towards the goal of mil-to-mil partnerships by sponsoring disaster response exercises such as ‘*Natural Fire 10*’, which pairs U.S. and multiple East African militaries together to “*build capacity within partner nations and increase our ability to work together...in humanitarian and disaster relief efforts*”.²⁶ There are many other multinational military operations ongoing to achieve a number of objectives, to include fighting terrorism, disease and drug trafficking, however, one thing that continues to be a problem is that of sustainment. All of these operations are composed of temporary duty U.S. military members who are in the region for a limited amount of time and a limited amount of resources.²⁷ If the U.S. wants to build its credibility in Africa, this is not strong support of the ‘sustainment’ as described in the mission statement.

A recommendation for AFRICOM would be to establish a permanent presence with permanently assigned personnel and equipment on the continent. Former U.S. Ambassador to Kenya, William M. Bellamy stated that there is a “*great need for building mobility in Africa*” and “*the U.S. must continue to support U.N. and A.U. operations conducted in sub-Saharan Africa for them to be successful*”.²⁸ Based on these comments, a recommendation would be to base a small detachment of airlift assets in Africa. This would provide quick access to the much needed airlift capabilities in the event of a natural disaster or other humanitarian relief effort. To avoid having too large of a footprint, it could share basing with an established African partner at one of their airbases. This of course would require significant political intervention and a significant

amount of security and infrastructure improvements, but would send an important message to the continent that the U.S. is committed to helping the African cause. Finally, public affairs units should be placed in strategic locations around Africa, preferably in the same locations as the largest global and regional media outlets. This would provide better access to the news agencies and greater influence towards more favorable reports of U.S. military operations in Africa.

The flood relief mission in Kenya mentioned at the beginning of this paper cost approximately \$7 million.²⁹ The aircraft delivered over 294 tons of cargo, which equated to 18 missions.³⁰ That is a small price to pay in time, effort and money for the potential payback of an improved global image of the U.S. and the accompanying increase in American influence. As we saw in the two examples cited, humanitarian and disaster relief operations, carried out in conjunction with an effective information operations campaign using the media, can have a significant impact on public opinion in the supported region as well as on the global community. This improved image translates into increased American influence and greater ability to carry out U.S. foreign policy objectives. That is the ultimate goal of any operation carried out by the U.S. military. The strategic importance of Africa cannot be ignored and thus was the ultimate reason for creating AFRICOM; however, there are many challenges looming in its future. AFRICOM is taking an active role by engaging with African states at the military level, but it is equally important that it work with other agencies to incorporate a strategic information operations campaign any time there is a military mission in support of the African people. By continuing to participate in humanitarian and disaster relief operations, the U.S. can help win the hearts and minds of the African people, and over time increase American influence within Africa therefore coming closer to achieving its foreign policy objectives.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Barton and Davies *US aircraft help deliver food for World Food Programme flood operations in Kenya*.
- ² Curtin, *African History*, 62.
- ³ Human Security Center, *The Human Security Report 2005*.
- ⁴ The White House, *The National Security Strategy 2006*, 37.
- ⁵ Nivola, *Rethinking 'Energy Independence'*.
- ⁶ Ward, *United States Africa Command Posture Statement March 2009*.
- ⁷ Fraser, *China's chequebook draws African nations*.
- ⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, *National Security Consequences of U.S. Oil Dependency*, 56.
- ⁹ Metz, *Disaster and Intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa*.
- ¹⁰ The White House, *The National Security Strategy 2006*, 53.
- ¹¹ Annan, *Mozambique floods wash away economic gains*.
- ¹² Seydel, *Humanitarian Re-life* and USAID, *Summary Fact Sheet-Mozambique Floods 2000*.
- ¹³ USAID, *Horn of Africa – Floods & Southern Africa – Floods and Cyclones*.
- ¹⁴ USAID, *West Africa – Floods*.
- ¹⁵ Eisensee and Stromberg, *News Droughts, News Floods and U.S. Disaster Relief*.
- ¹⁶ Belknap, *The CNN Effect: Strategic Enabler or Operational Risk?*
- ¹⁷ The White House, *Continuing Support for Tsunami Relief*.
- ¹⁸ Terror Free Tomorrow, *Poll: Major Change in Public Opinion in Muslim World*.
- ¹⁹ The White House, *Joint Statement between the United States and the Republic of Indonesia*.
- ²⁰ IHS Global Insight, *Indonesia: Transition to Democracy*.
- ²¹ US Department of State, *Background Note: Indonesia*.
- ²² USAID, *Pakistan Quake Relief*.
- ²³ Terror Free Tomorrow, *A Dramatic Change of Public Opinion in the Muslim World*.
- ²⁴ Whelan, Theresa, *Transcript: Pentagon Africa Policy Chief Whelan Describes U.S. Objectives for Africa Command*.
- ²⁵ US AFRICOM, *Fact Sheet: United States Africa Command*.
- ²⁶ IRIN Africa, *East Africa: US troops help build disaster response capacity*.
- ²⁷ Kwiatowski, *Expeditionary Air Operations in Africa: Challenges and Solutions*, 27.
- ²⁸ Bellamy, *Africa: New Command, New Challenges Brief*.
- ²⁹ USAID, *BHR/OFDA Annual Report FY 1998*, p. 37.
- ³⁰ Barton and Davies *US aircraft help deliver food for World Food Programme flood operations in Kenya*.

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