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Charles Stith - the American African

US Ambassador (retired) Charles Stith has become a very familiar figure accompanying the African continent, engaging with leaders and ordinary people and building vital connections with the US. Andrew Nye, who has known Stith for many years, pays tribute to one of the US's best representatives in the continent.

I have met Ambassador Charles Stith (US Ambassador) many times over the years, often when he is called up out of the blue and invited to lunch. The main reason I met him was to meet with him in London, where I was then working for the US. The last time I met him was in 2011, when he was in London, where I was then working for the US. The last time I met him was in 2011, when he was in London, where I was then working for the US.

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Looking beyond the obvious

The ambassador has also brought me to see the US with a host of US government officials, including the Secretary of State, and he has been instrumental in building strong relationships between the US and Africa.

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The challenge for leaders during the liberation was 'how do they get their countries back?' The challenge for current leaders is 'how do we make them work?'

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I asked him what he considered the main achievements of the month.

"The month has been a very busy one for me, and I have been able to meet with many of the continent's leaders. I have also been able to build strong relationships between the US and Africa, and I have been instrumental in building strong relationships between the US and Africa."

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in-Residence Programme provides an opportunity for democratically retired African leaders to transition out of office."

This was the diplomat speaking – self-effacing and understated. In reality, Ambassador Charles Smith and his centre have done more for US-Africa relations than years of official diplomatic ties. I pointed out to him that while US perceptions in Africa were mixed, China was regarded more favourably. Was this a worry?

"While China's involvement on the continent does get mixed reviews, overall that involvement is being viewed as a net benefit. I think the difference between how the US is viewed versus China ultimately comes down to China being more vigorously involved and more focused on policies, programmes, and investment that are mutually beneficial. Security issues, like piracy, are as important to Chinese interests as they are to Western interests. Interestingly, it is in the area of security interests where there has been the most multilateral cooperation."

With Africa seen as one of the most attractive growth poles in the world, why have US companies been so slow in terms of investments? Have they missed the train?

"I think it would be premature to suggest that the US has missed the train either bilaterally or in terms of business opportunities. It is important to note that the train has left the station and will keep going. It is up to the US to get to the next stop. The US has an enormous amount of goodwill on the continent with policies like AGOA, PEPFAR, and the Millennium Challenge Initiative."

"The election of Barack Obama has also positively touched African sensibilities. Having said this, because of the challenge that current African leaders face to make their countries work, China's presence on the continent has added an important alternative in the options to further African development. The same can be said for the implications of India's increased involvement on the continent."

What is the most important aspect of the US-Africa relationship and how can this be made stronger? I asked him. "I would suggest that there are three key areas of engage-

ment that have significant mutual implications: (i) transnational security threats, (ii) trade and investment, and (iii) governance and humanitarian concerns. From Al Qaeda to Al Shabaab, these terrorist organisations pose threats to Africa's development and Western security. Capital is a coward. Fragile or failed states are not attractive venues for investment. In addition, such states are breeding grounds for terrorists that would pose transnational security threats for the West."

"African development and US economic growth hinge on African access to US capital markets and consumers and US growth depends on more fully exploiting Africa's potential as a market. In the 16 countries that APC tracks, there is an aggregate population of some 650m people. These people live in countries with democratic regimes and free market economies. They are primed to be potential markets for US investment and imports."

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Personal perspectives

Finally, I wanted to know what Africa meant to him personally.

"In many ways, I've come of age as Africa has over the past 50 years. My first trip to Africa was in 1968. I was a part of a short-term mission to Kenya to build churches and facilities for ministry in Kenya. The mission was organised by the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA). The experience inspired everything, from my curiosity about life on the other side of Mt Kilimanjaro (Tanzania) to an ongoing commitment to working on Africa issues. That was the first of what was a number of subsequent engagements in Africa."

"In 1982 I organised and conducted a fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe (which was two years after independence) and South Africa (which was still gripped in the throes of apartheid). Members of the delegation included a Northeastern University dean, Boston Globe managing editor, and a former Harvard colleague and Long Island, NY, Pastor. In 1994 I was a member of President Clinton's official delegation to monitor South Africa's first democratic multiracial election. Rev Jesse Jackson and Assistant Secretary for African Affairs George Moose were among those on the delegation."

"In 1998 came my appointment as US Ambassador to the United Republic of Tanzania. In a sense, this was my coming full circle in terms of my first visit to the continent."

"I remember very distinctly wondering, during my time in Kenya in 1968, looking Mt Kilimanjaro in the distance, wondering what life was like on the other side of the mountain. Little did I know that in 50 years I would be on the other side of the mountain helping to heal a breach between the US and Tanzania. From 2001 and beyond, since my retirement as US Ambassador to Tanzania, the continent has become my life's work."

Indeed, I have rarely met anyone from outside the continent who has worked with as much zeal and dedication to improve conditions for the ordinary people of Africa and who has shown as much respect and understanding of the continent and its leaders. While Ambassador Smith is every inch as patriotic an American as you can hope to find, he is also very much an African by choice. ■



Right: Ambassador Smith with English Banda, former President of Zambia.