



Book Review by Charles Gesheker

BEATING PLOUGHSHARES INTO SWORDS

The Fate of Africa: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair,
by Martin Meredith. PublicAffairs, 752 pages, \$35



AFRICA IS THE LEAST DEVELOPED AND hungriest continent on earth. Its 54 countries, comprising 680 million people with a great diversity of habitats, ethno-linguistic affiliations, colonial heritages, and local cultures, cluster consistently at the bottom in rankings of income, school enrollments, civil rights, and health. With 13% of the world's population, Africa accounts for less than 2% of global trade; and roughly 75% of its people live on less than \$2 a day.

It wasn't always this way. During the 1960s, Africa's myriad peoples enjoyed improvements in education, declines in death rates, increased life expectancy, and a new infrastructure of roads, ports, and railways. But despite these and shared "hopes of freedom," in the succeeding decades war, famine, banditry, and mass murder afflicted countries across the continent. To explain this wretched cavalcade, British journalist and historian Martin Meredith focuses on the grotesque, high-level corruption of Africa's leaders, who systematically fleeced their populations while squandering foreign aid.

Relying on personal memoirs, African-studies scholarship, and his own experiences, Meredith reconstructs the historical forces and personalities that caused Africa's postcolonial descent. Each chapter in *The Fate of Africa* oozes with examples of rank dishonesty and disregard for law. The accounts of the Rwandan genocide, the savage children's wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone, and the homicidal thuggery in Uganda,

Congo, Central African Republic, and Equatorial Guinea are particularly grim.

Although the bitter history of European colonialism will never absolve African tyrants of responsibility for their crimes, Meredith could have laid more blame for today's suffering on the legacy of imperialism. As it is, he observes that colonial administrations often were conceived in violence and maintained by more of the same. They were not run for the benefit of their inhabitants, and hardly provided a model of good government. Consequently, he argues, many early African nationalists regarded the state "as a foreign institution that could be used for personal and community gain without any sense of shame or need for accountability." These habits replicated themselves among African elites long after the colonial authorities had departed.

Nonetheless, it was the Africans themselves who produced three generations of demagogues, "flamboyant replacements of the old colonial order," in the words of Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka. The book provides fascinating, occasionally hilarious biographies of Africa's deplorable "Big Men," like Francisco Nguema of Equatorial Guinea and Jean-Bedel Bokassa of Central African Republic, who imagined themselves to be infallible and invincible, even protected by supernatural forces. In summarizing the extent of personal and professional corruption, Meredith leaves no doubt that African countries have regressed strikingly over the past

decades thanks to massive graft, patronage networks, and bureaucracies packed with cronies, crooks, and the functionally illiterate.

Other parts of Africa became proxy battlefields for Cold War conflicts. Corruption and embezzlement afflicted every country that competed for superpower attention because Cold War patrons rarely demanded accountability, only loyalty. In Somalia, for instance, local politicians played a dangerous, high-stakes game of trying to manipulate *both* superpowers. Once the Cold War ended and Somalia lost its geopolitical allure, the Russian and American ambassadors fled the war-torn capital of Mogadishu in 1990 aboard the same helicopter. A year later, the long, intravenous financial drip line that had stretched from Western capitals into Somalia's arm was yanked, and the country collapsed.

THE CHAPTERS ON HAILE SELASSIE'S overthrow in Ethiopia and on his Marxist successor, Mengistu Haile Meriam, offer a gripping account of the implosion of Africa's oldest continuous monarchy after it failed to deal with famine, droughts, and internal demands for political reform and democratization. The revolution turned sour under Mengistu, who initiated a brutal campaign to silence critics. The Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s was caused by further severe droughts, state-run agricultural boards that depressed prices for peasant products, and Men-

gistu's scorched-earth policy against his anti-Communist enemies. As a result, a country that had been one of Africa's legendary food producers became a mass of ragged, starving beggars. By 1984, 5 million people were at risk of starvation while Mengistu continued to maintain his huge army of 300,000 soldiers. In Meredith's words, "inflicting hunger became a key military strategy." Eventually, a million Ethiopians perished. An eyewitness BBC account, broadcast in October 1984, caused a wave of international horror. Oblivious to the regime's systematic corruption, the Irish pop singer Bob Geldof (with his fund-raising single, "Do They Know It's Christmas?") joined "USA for Africa" efforts by Harry Belafonte, Michael Jackson, and Lionel Richie (with their song, "We Are the World"). Together, they raised over \$1 billion for relief assistance.

Many African leaders insisted that their one-party states were needed to forge national unity, but what they actually produced was national misery. In Guinea, Sekou Toure's economic strategies helped ruin a country known for its wealth of bauxite and iron ore. Tanzania, in the 1970s, received \$3 billion in foreign aid; yet by 1981 Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere was forced to admit that his country was "poorer now than we were in 1972." In the Congo, Joseph Mobutu stole a fortune

in property and investments (estimated to be worth \$5 billion) from the national budget and state mining revenues. Meanwhile, Congolese "[h]ospitals closed for lack of medicine and equipment.... A fraction of the rural road network remained usable for motor traffic...[and] the level of employment was lower than...[at] independence."

MEREDITH RECKONS THAT "MORE THAN \$300 billion of Western aid has been sunk into Africa...with little discernible result," yet somehow believes that "the prospects of Africa escaping from precipitous decline remain heavily dependent on western assistance." How would that work, exactly? He admits that he does not know, because "the sum of Africa's misfortunes...presents a crisis of such magnitude that it goes beyond the reach of foreseeable solutions. At the core of the crisis is the failure of African leaders to provide effective government."

There may, however, be cause for hope. After the Cold War, Africans began to challenge their predatory rulers by demanding economic and political reforms and launching grassroots non-governmental organizations. Today, there is talk of "an African renaissance," as government leaders here and there encourage private investment, reduce state intervention, and de-

nounce military regimes. One-party systems have been dismantled in Mali and Zambia, and some dictators (Mengistu, Samuel Doe, and Siyad Barre) have been killed or ousted. But the continent has a long way to go: when Senegalese President Abdou Diouf was defeated in an election in 2000, he became only the fourth African peacefully turned out of office in 40 years. In 2004, the British High Commissioner in Kenya claimed that the "names of honest ministers and senior officials" in that country "would fit on the back of a postage stamp."

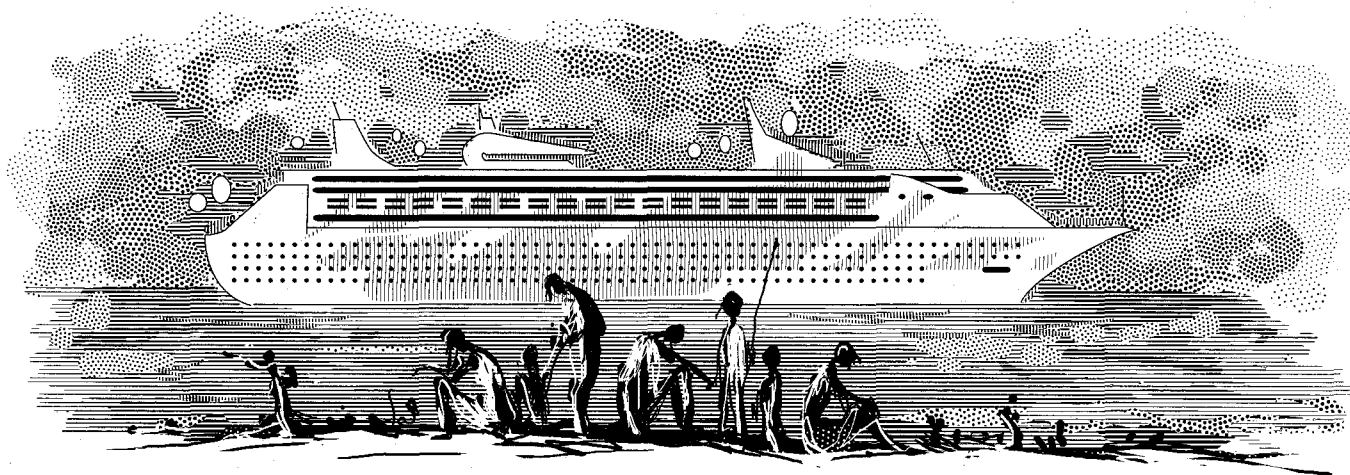
The African Union has established new goals for its members, calling for transparency, accountability, fiscal and economic discipline, respect for human rights, and the empowerment of women. We wish them well. In the meantime, there are many modest, sensible things that donors *can* do to ameliorate suffering—e.g., purchase and make available mosquito nets, distribute oral rehydration solutions to prevent infant diarrhea, and provide inexpensive micronutrients. But Africa will never be "saved" by Western philanthropy. Africans themselves must eliminate their dictators, and enable citizens who work hard and honestly to improve their lot.

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Book Review by Gerard Alexander

THE COST OF GOOD INTENTIONS

The White Man's Burden: Why The West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good,
by William Easterly. Penguin Press, 400 pages, \$27.95



A TRAGEDY OF OUR WORLD IS THAT HUNDREDS of millions of people perform backbreaking labor but still live in dire poverty. Through no fault of their own, young lives are regularly cut down by malnutrition, disease, and predators called presidents. Our ancestors lived no better, to be sure, and sometimes worse. But the survival of such poverty into our times is a heartbreaking reality, one that tugs at the conscience. The problem is that we don't know what to do about it, though that has not stopped us from trying.

In his important new book, *The White Man's Burden*, William Easterly estimates that advanced industrialized countries gave one trillion dollars in official development assistance (measured in constant 1985 dollars) to poor countries between 1950 and 1995. And that doesn't include billions more in subsidized loans, forgiven debt, and private charity (the latter an especially significant source of American giving). This has been one of the most ambitious collective aid projects in human history, and also, sadly, one of the most ineffectual.

Having cut his teeth as a World Bank economist, Easterly is able to provide a true insider's guide to what went wrong. In his first book, *The Elusive Quest for Growth* (2001), Easterly described the long series of economic-development theories that informed successive anti-poverty policies from the 1940s on. At first the economists thought the problem was mere lack of technical expertise, and so they urged rich countries to share their technology. When this did not produce the desired result,

economists suggested that the real problem was lack of investment in machinery and other "means of production." When this also failed to do the trick, they shifted their focus to reforms in government, e.g., reducing corruption. They introduced the idea of "structural adjustment" programs that offered loans in return for political improvements. But when many countries failed to implement genuine reform and couldn't pay back the loans, donors often forgave the debt anyway, which only served to reward the recipients' bad faith and bad policies.

The record suggests that the development economists never got it right, but this hardly slowed them down. As each theory succumbed to bitter experience, they replaced it with another. By contrast, Easterly seems to have taken away exactly the right lesson, that we should be skeptical of all such theories in this area. As he points out in *The White Man's Burden*, the foreign aid community's "utopian agendas" are as intellectually arrogant as they are operationally doomed.

The urgency of this message cannot be exaggerated, since massive international aid schemes frequently have downright deleterious effects. We now know (as some wise minds had reason to anticipate) that in many cases our large-scale aid plans assisted corrupt and abusive despots to outfit militaries and co-opt leading reformers. Their unjust rule was deepened and perpetuated by our aid programs, while their already weak economies were made even more dysfunctional.

Easterly doesn't flinch from citing studies suggesting that foreign aid, above certain levels, is associated with negative effects on growth. He tackles the issue of whether failure pre-dated aid—whether aid got sent to places because they were already disasters, instead of aid causing the disasters—and concludes that, in any event, large-scale aid seldom helps. Some major aid recipients never improve (some even get worse). Most of the recent success stories are countries "that did *not* get a lot of foreign aid and did *not* spend a lot of time in IMF [International Monetary Fund] programs."

NOW, IF A LOT OF THIS SOUNDS FAMILIAR, it should. Over four decades ago, the political scientist Edward C. Banfield warned that the reigning "doctrines" of foreign aid would prove counterproductive, underestimating the many prerequisites of development and overestimating our own ability to address these problems. Not long afterward, the economist Peter Bauer warned that government-to-government development assistance tended to politicize economies, fuel growth-choking bureaucracies, and retard development, protracting the poverty of millions. Since then, dozens of market-oriented scholars and commentators have expanded on Banfield's and Bauer's warnings and applied them to specific countries and development projects.

Beyond adding to that line of argument, Easterly has a positive case to make. We should not necessarily throw up our hands just because hugely transformational projects are fruitless