YJIA: You have stated that your first trip to Somalia over 25 years ago inspired you to try to change US foreign policy toward Africa. In your view, how has US policy and ideology evolved since then? What are your current policy prescriptions for US relations with Africa?

Prendergast: US policy toward Africa has shifted dramatically over the last quarter century. When I first went, it was at the height of the Cold War, and everything was tradable on the African continent in the service of anti-Communism. Ideology drove our policy. With the end of the Cold War and with the various impingements on US national interests over time—particularly with respect to counterterrorism—we have seen a fairly dramatic shift. US priorities have moved away from a purely exploitative relationship with Africa—using it for economic and strategic purposes—to more of an equal relationship, with cooperative agreements related to trade, investment, development assistance, and governing institutions. These matters have become more of a real conversation with African states, rather than a cookie cutter imposition of our approach. On that level, the difference is pretty profound.

But the concern that I have now is that in some parts of Africa, with the perceived threat of terrorist organizations, you start to see some of the same US foreign policy patterns that developed during the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. We find stable governments, the
governments that are firmly in power, and provide them with a lot of security assistance in order to erode the capacities of the terrorist groups in question; and at the same time we undermine the democratic and human rights principles that should be equally important in US foreign policy. I feel like we have seen some slippage backwards over the last decade since 9/11, particularly in the Horn [of Africa], but now also in Nigeria and the first-tier of countries in the sub-Saharan belt and North Africa. I’m worried that through the trend of supporting countries that are on our side in some global standoff, we will give them a pass on the basic human rights and democracy issues that should be equally important US priorities.

YJIA: In the United States, much of the discussion surrounding recent humanitarian emergencies in Africa has centered on implications for homeland and national security. To what extent has the increased global focus on security been helpful or harmful to African states and citizens? How has it impacted the response of the international community to crises?

Prendergast: The counterterrorism rhetoric is all good. You saw Condoleezza Rice roll out the national security strategy that was all about building good governance in failed states—rogue states—and investing in development and diplomacy, as well as strengthening defense: the three d’s. These are all the kinds of things you want to hear if your objective is long-term capacity building of governments so that they can deal with their own security problems.

In practice, we often do not see that kind of comprehensive approach. It’s often articulated, but rarely followed. Sometimes we just don’t have the resources or the patience or the vision to carry it out on a state-by-state basis. In the Horn over the last decade, you have a policy that is predominantly military. If you look at the resource imbalance, most of the money that we spend on military operations against individual terrorist targets dwarfs anything that we’ve spent in terms of finances or human resources for the reconstruction of some kind of legitimate administration in Mogadishu or beyond. For example, we have done little to invest in the social service delivery capacity of the existing administrative entities that are opposed to al-Shabab. So, in any kind of a counterinsurgency or counterterrorism effort, where everyone gives lip service to a “hearts and minds” campaign, we’re doing very little on the hearts and minds, and we’re doing a lot with missiles and drones. It’s not enough to make speeches and write annual reports to Congress saying how important all this other stuff is, and then not do it.

In Somalia, that gross imbalance between military and non-military reactions to extremism or terrorist organizations has a counter-productive impact on our long-term
Our across-the-board policy, of course, is to not negotiate with terrorists. But in the case of a famine in which tens of thousands of people will potentially die, the question is whether that philosophy and principle can be set aside for the purpose of saving lives.

YJIA: You have spoken of the lack of “magic bullets” or even palatable solutions to the current challenges in Somalia. You have, however, proposed a three-layered approach focusing on Somalis first, then neighboring African countries, and finally the international community, including the US government and non-state actors. Who is responsible for implementing this approach? Considering the extremely complex nature of the Somali crisis, where do you see the real opportunities for collaboration between these various actors?

Prendergast: I talk about different strategies that can break the back of this famine, the first one being a diplomatic approach. Our across-the-board policy, of course, is to not negotiate with terrorists. But in the case of a famine in which tens of thousands of people will potentially die, the question is whether that philosophy and principle can be set aside for the purpose of saving lives. I think that we seriously ought to consider a major diplomatic push aimed at getting the Shabab to lift restrictions on assistance in their areas and getting the TFG [the Transitional Federal Government] to prosecute some of the guys who are stealing and diverting food aid.

The second gambit is to look at the whole range of consequences and accountability tools. Can we ramp up the individual target sanctions against Somali officials or high-ranking people in the Shabab or the TFG who are most responsible for war crimes or violations of the Geneva Conventions? Then we move up the ladder to the crème de la crème of accountability: the referral of some of these cases to the International Criminal Court for the use of starvation as a tool of war, or whatever legal justification the prosecution can come up with.
If all else fails, the third arena of potential action would be going up the ladder of consequences and options of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. We could look at the military options for creating humanitarian corridors and breaking the logjam of assistance in some of these areas. But it would be a major fight. You can’t look at that as something that would be a passive operation. We’d have to fight our way in. That’s why I don’t think it would happen, but you never know, if the African Union changes its mandate.

Those are three pretty different scenarios, and my hope is that we don’t just think that appealing publicly to these guys to do the right thing is going to produce any kind of constructive response. We’re going to have to be very proactive going down one of those three paths, or some other path I may not have envisioned. If we continue down the road we’re on right now without major alterations, my fear is that a worst-case scenario in terms of civilian deaths will come true.

YJIA: Section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Act, which requires US companies to disclose use of conflict minerals in their products, has been criticized for its oversimplification of a complex challenge, and for its potential to bring about unintended negative consequences for Congolese civilians. What is your perspective on this act? Is targeting US corporations a legitimate and effective means for bringing about change in the Congo?

Prendergast: To deal with the mineral issue in most wars, you’ve got to follow the money. You’ve got to understand the roots of the conflict, particularly the economic roots. Although there are always a diverse set of historical and current factors, there are usually just one or two things that keep the fire burning. No matter what the reasons were for the violence in eastern Congo in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide and the free-for-all that took place inside Congo after that, the constant that maintains and fuels the violence today is the struggle for lucrative resources in a state with total impunity. If you do not deal with the primary driver of the conflict, then you’re never going to get anywhere with other contributors to violence, which involve an incomplete state, a predatory military, a lack of justice system, land disputes, ethnic divisions, and so on. You cannot address any one of these interlocking factors without addressing the fuel for the conflict. I truly don’t understand the argument that you need to deal with state formation first, then the minerals.

I hold even more contempt for the recent rash of blogging critiques, which have begun to seep into the wider consciousness of people following the issues, and their assertion that the bill is impoverishing Congolese miners. The bill hasn’t even been implemented yet. The bill is still sitting pathetically at the Securities and Exchange Commission, potentially locked up for years in a threatened lawsuit by the companies that are afraid to have the way they do business exposed. Secondly, the bloggers waltzed into a situation where people were already working in slave-like conditions and said, “This bill has macerated the Congolese miners.” There is so much history and political context that they’re apparently either willfully ignoring or not understanding. You have to have been on the ground for years to see the degeneration of this sector into the hands of these...
militias who brutalize people into submitting to the predatory economic framework they have constructed. This legislation is an attempt to shine a light on one of the most predatory economic systems in the world, with arguably more damage done to civilian populations than anywhere in the world.

I really am enraged, frankly, by the way this debate has gone, because it’s not focusing on solutions. For two centuries, the world has been looting the Congo for everything it can get—slaves, uranium, timber, rubber, ivory—and the civilian cost has been massive, from Leopold to the present, to Apple. For the first time, somebody tries to do something and says that it’s not right that these companies and consumers just use products like cell phones and laptops without any concern for the harmful effects they have on the people in the areas from which these materials come. That’s all this bill says: “Tell us where this stuff comes from, and prove it.” It doesn’t ban it.

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We’re trying to regulate in a small way some of the most abusive commercial behavior in US corporate history. But to make an omelet, you’re going to have to break an egg or two. There is going to be some disruption to the mafia economy, and that’s going to lead to short- to medium-term lessening of income for some people in the mining sector. That has to be addressed; but this was in the legislation, with alternative livelihood development strategies. We’re vilifying members of Congress who want our companies to be fair in the way that they source raw material? Let’s vilify the militias that are raping, pillaging and otherwise controlling the means of production inside eastern Congo, and are continuing to churn one the most deadly conflicts in the world.

**YJIA: How can the international community support state-building in South Sudan? What are the models we might look to? What are the greatest challenges?**

**Prendergast:** I think the two biggest challenges are conflict resolution within Sudan, between the South and North, as well as transparency and anti-corruption. Those are challenges in which the international community, led by the United States, can play a role. On the conflict resolution front, we need to redouble our efforts to try to strike a deal between the North and South on oil and the border and Abyei. Internally within the South, the US needs to encourage the government of South Sudan to embrace inclusiveness and allow other ethnic groups to fully participate in the decision-making mechanism of the state. On the anti-corruption and transparency front, we need to invest heavily through the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United Nations, and make a full-court press for the greatest transparency possible in the oil and minerals sector in South Sudan. If South Sudan is left to fester and becomes a cesspool of corruption, it could have very direct consequences for a potential
return to conflict in Sudan. These two crucial objectives go hand in hand—the peace agenda and the anti-corruption agenda are almost one and the same. There needs to be a push on both fronts to give South Sudan a chance in the coming decade.

**YJIA:** What are some of the challenges that the Enough Project faces as a US-based advocacy and activism organization trying to effect change in Africa?

**Prendergast:** The biggest challenge is the belief that these problems in African war zones are intractable and that we can’t really influence their outcome, which is closely tied to a belief in the impotence of America or of American citizens in effecting change abroad. People have to be engaged. They have to be convinced that change is possible and that the United States can play a very positive role in promoting and supporting progress in Africa and around the world. Many people have simply given up on a belief in the potential of doing good in the world. Yet in fact, there are numerous examples of good news stories that just need to be disseminated and amplified.

**YJIA:** Do you think that being honest about the complexity of some of these challenges plays into the perception of intractability among the American public?

**Prendergast:** I totally reject that premise. The premise is—and you hear this all the time—that the advocacy entities that are working on these issues are being dishonest or overly simplistic. Advocacy groups do their best to try to explain what the problems in these places are, but because people are busy or don’t live it, they can’t get into the details like a university professor potentially would in a class over a semester. Rather, you pick one of the main issues that people can relate to, and you focus on that and help them understand a little better what is going on.

I think that activists give a series of options: light, medium, and heavy. If you don’t have time and you just want to know the basics to get on with your little activism, you go light. If you want to learn more, there are ways to do it. If you really want to become an expert, there are plenty of resources and materials. I just generally don’t understand—it’s one of these vague critiques that has very little substance.

**YJIA:** How does the Enough Project measure success?

**Prendergast:** I think that until war is resolved, it’s impossible to view us as having any success. I reject the idea that you can have all these benchmarks—you know, more assistance has been provided, or peace talks have been started, or things like that. That’s

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not a success. Success is if war has been concluded. I think we have a preliminary suc-
cess, for example, in the birth of South Sudan as a peaceful environment, because last
year everyone was predicting that there was going to be a very tumultuous and violent
start to this new state. I think the fact that it has defied many of these prognostications
and that in its first few months of existence it isn’t really at war internally is a success
in some way. It now has to be sustained, but at least one can note the progress that
has been made there. But anything else short of war to peace is not a success to me. 🍀

— Interview conducted by Charles Faint and April Williamson.
April Williamson served as Lead Editor.