

Do We Want to “Kill People and Break Things” in Africa?

A Historian’s Thoughts on Africa Command

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A COMMON mantra within the military is that the mission is “to kill people and break things.” The military is ultimately a heavily armed organization dedicated to the protection of the United States by killing enemies and destroying their means to wage war. This certainly played out many times during World Wars I and II, but what about Vietnam or even Iraq right now? Was Vietnam won by completing this mission? Can Iraq be won this way? While this slogan motivates the military, the task to “kill people and break things” is not the mission the US government gives the military most of the time.

Let me juxtapose this view with a poignant insight from my time in West Africa at the US Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria. In December 2001, during the military operations in Afghanistan, I worked in the Office of Defense Cooperation. Besides the military cooperation aspects of my job, I oversaw the completion of two humanitarian assistance projects started under my predecessors. One of these projects entailed building a small extension to a maternity clinic run by the Catholic Church on the outskirts of Abuja. When it came time to open the project, I helped the diocese of Abuja arrange a large grand-opening celebration with the local archbishop as one of the speakers. At the end of his speech, the archbishop grabbed not only the audience’s attention but mine as well when he explained how he had never thought the US military “did anything except bomb people. I now know you also build clinics to help people.”

Break things or help? This is a significant question to consider in light of the formation of the new Africa Command (AFRICOM). President Bush

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has given Secretary of Defense Robert Gates the responsibility for creating the new command. Gen William E. Ward has already been named the first commander, and AFRICOM should be fully operational as a unified command by October 2008. Break things or help? These two views on the mission of the US military must ultimately agree on one all-encompassing goal—the new organization should, in all cases, support the attainment of US foreign policy. The archbishop's view illustrates how US policy will be better served by a new AFRICOM, which is based on multilateral operations with the African conditions in mind rather than relying on the long-standing, somewhat erroneous view of the US military as an armed instrument only to wage the big wars. To support these multilateral operations, the command needs to truly be an interagency construct rather than a military organization with a few actors from other agencies included for effect. It is imperative that the policymakers recognize this and shift the organization's emphasis during the initial stages of AFRICOM's development before it becomes a solidified military organization with a life of its own—hence, on a path not easily altered.

Why? and How?

The two important questions that need to be answered are “why” and “how” the complete organization should be created and structured. From the beginning, the goal should be to establish an organization that not only supports American foreign policy but that also takes into consideration the unique African conditions. We cannot simply adapt a structure or method of operations from another part of the world with minimal alterations (e.g., recreating European Command or Pacific Command) without looking at regional history, culture, and diversity. Only then can we propose a coherent, logical structure.

Why do we need an AFRICOM? The simple answer is “to support American policy in Africa.” US African policy, across the government, has been disjointed in the past due to the fact that few officials in the US government felt the continent was strategically important. While this may change in the future, we should not anticipate a great transformation of policy. Such a transformation would mean that the United States would shift its emphasis away from the traditional ties with Europe, the growing ties to Asia, and the conflicts in the Middle East. Since this is not likely to happen, the best we can hope for is that Africa would be an important element within the realm

of *expanded* American interest abroad. Certainly an AFRICOM that coordinates the *military* policy across the continent is valuable, but this is only one small element of the whole US interaction with Africa.

In the March 2006 *National Security Strategy*, President Bush emphasizes that in Africa “our strategy is to promote economic development and the expansion of effective, democratic governance so that African states can take the lead in addressing African challenges.”¹ These goals rest on effective interaction through many elements of foreign policy, not just the military. African countries that are democratic and economically prosperous will not require as much security assistance and will make better American partners when we need support, political or otherwise. Thus, AFRICOM’s sole concentration on Africa should help weave many disparate elements of US foreign policy into one more-coherent package, but this is only possible when AFRICOM’s structure includes all important elements of this policy.²

How do we establish an AFRICOM? The most important issue here is consideration of current and future financial means. The whole US government has a limited budget, and a new command in a less strategically important area of the world (at least from the American standpoint) would not likely be any different. The importance of Africa will likely fluctuate based on the policies of the day, but for consistency and planning purposes, we should make the realistic assumption that financial means will be limited. Therefore, it will be imperative to maximize efficiency and cooperation with other nations. These would include our European allies and our historically close friends like Senegal and Kenya, as well as the regional powers of Nigeria and South Africa, which quite consciously follow their own interests.

With these two facts in mind, I would propose two principles (or “realities”) on which AFRICOM should be structured:

Principle 1: American interests and efforts must coincide with those of our traditional allies and partners in Africa.

Principle 2: The military effort must be integrated with the political and developmental efforts across the continent.

In general, the second principle emerges from the first based upon the realistic assumption of constrained financial resources. This assumption is especially valuable for it forces the new command to work synergistically within the US government and with foreign partners.

Interagency Command

With these two principles in mind, my first proposal is for AFRICOM to be established from the beginning not as a military command with a few nonmilitary trappings but as a *true interagency command*. This command would have three equal main components: the military, a political element, and a section devoted to development (see figure). Despite the military title of “command” and the current focus of the secretary of defense on creating AFRICOM, we must refocus the effort to include all important elements of foreign policy equally. If there were a better word to replace “command” in AFRICOM, it should emphasize the nonmilitary missions and deemphasize the military aspects. Perhaps one should begin with the organizational model of an embassy rather than a military organization! While this may not be easy at this stage of the game, congressional or presidential action could enable the formation of a new type of organization with a larger or even dominant civilian role. Higher-level action is imperative sooner rather than later, for once the command’s bureaucracy is in place, changing the structure will become very difficult, if not impossible.³

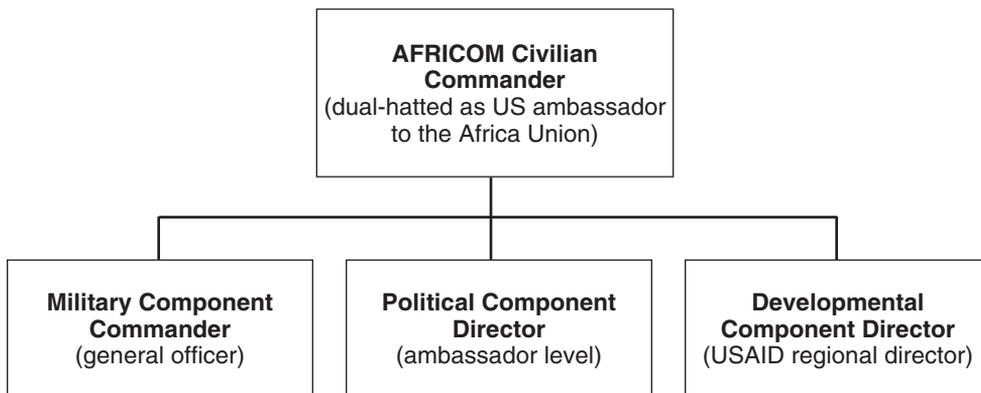


Figure. Proposed AFRICOM Organization.

Within the AFRICOM structure, other offices that deal with such issues as trade, legal, or environmental cooperation will likely be included, but at a lower organizational level than the three main branches of military, political, and developmental. For example, the emphasis on business relationships (e.g., in the guise of Department of Commerce attachés) would fit well under the umbrella of the developmental organization. The private interests would buttress development and expand it into many sectors that

the government cannot hope to enter with its limited means. Similarly, an organization such as the Environmental Protection Agency working within the developmental component would be able to assist with environmental problems accompanying African industrial development.

Ultimately, the military component must understand that it supports the political goals in US foreign policy, and in AFRICOM these goals (referring to Principle 1 above) will likely be tempered and shaped by those with whom we work. For example, fighting terrorism is one of our top priorities, but most African countries see terrorism as less pressing, and many do not see it as an important issue—in most instances development trumps everything else. Although the developmental efforts of the US government currently fall under the State Department in the guise of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), one must consider giving USAID’s efforts equal footing with the political efforts. This move would give USAID its full significance in a place where it can achieve maximum impact and do the most good—for the African countries and thus, by extension, for US policy.

A second example concerns the US need for resources. The United States is concerned about access to raw materials in Africa, particularly oil. This is a hot-button topic for the rest of the world; much of the world believes we are in Iraq only for the oil. Unfortunately, US politicians have not done much to allay this accusation. Resources are important, but most governments—regardless of political persuasion—will continue to sell to the highest bidder. This is especially true with resources available from multiple suppliers. Thus, we can regard access to oil and other natural resources as merely a second-tier priority and not emphasize it. On the other hand, African countries are generally interested in guaranteed markets for their agricultural products, something we can potentially assist with, but outside the military structure.

Based upon and expanding from the two stated principles above, six factors clearly call for this proposed macro-organization of AFRICOM: budget, access, trust, operations, example, and history. Each of these factors clearly argues for a true interagency command synergistically combining the strengths of each of the three main elements—military, political, and developmental.

1. *Budget.* This will be constrained; thus, all attempts should be made to make operations as synergistic as possible (Principle 1). We must be ready to work with allies more than in name only in actual operations, basing, and planning. On one hand, we must coordinate our activities

with NATO allies traditionally active in Africa. This would primarily be the French and, to a lesser extent, the British, along with other allied European nations increasingly devoting resources and manpower to the continent. In general, many American interests in Africa, such as promoting stability and democracy while providing emergency humanitarian assistance, parallel those of European nations. On the other hand, we should work closely with our African partners, accepting their assistance and guidance at appropriate times. This will not only help to conserve our resources, but working with our African partners will also help us to assist them in furthering their own interests.

A good example here would be US cooperation that facilitates peacekeeping operations (PKO). As in many past PKOs under the United Nations or other organizations, African nations tend to be willing to contribute troops but need assistance with logistics—equipment, supplies, and transportation. The United States could potentially save money by getting African nations to contribute in support of US-favored PKOs, but only if we reciprocate by assisting in PKOs that African nations would like to undertake themselves but are not as important in US foreign policy. If we look back at the West African peacekeeping operations in Liberia beginning in 1990, the US military directly assisted in airlifting troops into Liberia only in 1997 in preparation for the elections.⁴ Arguably, the West African peacekeepers could have been more effective had they had more direct access to reliable logistical support.

An interagency command could assist budgetary efforts by combining the short-term military efforts with the long-term efforts of other US government organizations. In the realm of peacekeeping, USAID has often been involved in post-conflict demobilization and reintegration, something which naturally follows from the PKOs and would more efficiently use funds if all the stages, from initial deployment of troops to final reintegration of the combatants, were planned together.

2. *Access.* For any operation we need access to people, facilities, and partners' willingness. The French have established air bases in central and western Africa that they have used in the past; we could likely use these if we would cooperate with the French. Furthermore, access to ports, other airports, and additional infrastructure would be eased when we work alongside our African partners in helping to solve their problems. An America which appears to be a neo-imperial power will not be greeted as

warmly or willingly (except with large payments—see budget point above) as someone who will help them solve what they see as their problems.

Additionally, working closely with the French or other partners would give us access to networks that we might normally find difficult to join. The French, over the years, have developed personal networks in French-speaking Africa, which could be useful in the achievement of American foreign policy goals if we partner with them. For example, the various American antiterrorism operations in the Sahel have been fairly effective in cooperation with the local governments, but their effectiveness would likely have been increased had we had long-term relationships with the African partners and the French, all of whom have been in that region much longer than the United States has even shown interest. Similarly, easy access to nonmilitary organizations, specifically nongovernmental organizations, would likely be eased with significant civilian participation in the command.

3. *Trust.* Not only will frequent contacts over long periods of time increase interpersonal trust and, by extension, trust of US motives in Africa, but an organization that is not purely military will inspire trust by bringing different American viewpoints and capabilities to the table. The US military is known for coming in, solving a problem, and then leaving. Numerous American military operations in Africa have been short-term and only partially solved the problems. For example, in Somalia the US military quickly left after a small number of US Army Rangers were killed in October 1993. In 1994 the US military helped evacuate Western nationals from Rwanda but withdrew rather than intervening in the genocide. In 2003 American Marines briefly landed in Liberia to provide security but left after only two months. The American military, while effective at the designated mission, provided little lasting assistance to the local people.

If we look at the period from 2001 to the present, the US European Command (EUCOM) conducted 14 exercises and seven different named operations in Africa to support African nations.⁵ Six of the exercises were short-term medical assistance missions (e.g., MEDFLAG), which provided needed assistance but ended after a short period of time—hardly the basis for establishing relationships for long-term cooperation. Similarly, EUCOM's two earthquake relief operations (to Algeria and Morocco) certainly assisted people but established no long-term contacts. On the other side of the coin, the number of military-to-military training operations (two) and exercises (six) provided a limited amount of contact, which would neither

allow relationships to fully develop nor continue over time, except in very limited circumstances. EUCOM similarly has a number of ongoing efforts with African nations (such as humanitarian assistance projects and humanitarian mine action, the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative, and other basic support to regional organizations), providing limited additional contact. One could argue that a military-dominated AFRICOM might expand these efforts, but with the budget constraints this would be unlikely.

Not surprisingly, officials in many countries are inherently suspicious of American military capabilities. We have the military capability to do much, ranging all the way from the large land operations of the first Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom to precision strikes launched from B-2s flying halfway around the world, to small, covert operations. While we may not have the desire to intervene in African nations in such ways, a purely military organization brings up images of past US operations. For example, many Africans know our history of overt military interventions in Latin America and the less overt governmental changes supported by the United States, such as the US-supported coup in Iran in 1953 that brought the Shah to power. Similarly, US military capabilities for surveillance (i.e., spying) are publicly known and raise eyebrows with the suspicion that they might be directed at our African partners. In his essay, Dr. Abel Esterhuysen echoes the very real fear within some circles in Africa that the creation of AFRICOM could signal the militarization of American policy in Africa and emphasizes the charge that the United States is using the war on terror to get access to African resources.⁶ These are two fears that a military organization cannot easily dispel.

Conversely, the civilian State Department and USAID are known more for their long-term focus and the training of their personnel to work with foreign partners, including the acquisition of better language skills, than those within the military. Both of these agencies are comfortable in taking time to build personal relationships with other officials, and they tend to remain in the region longer, maintaining these personal bonds and facilitating work between nations on a civilian basis. The military can capitalize upon the long-term perspective of the other American elements to gain and maintain the trust of its African partners and expand contacts from just military-to-military (Principle 2). In many countries, the military is not always very popular due to the history of coups, military rule, or civil wars (e.g., Congo, Uganda, and Liberia), so US-African operations will

often be met with skepticism without the trust generated by the civilian US officials working alongside.

4. *Operations.* Historically, very few US operations in Africa have been strictly force-on-force fighting but instead have been operations of mixed character, such as humanitarian assistance, noncombatant evacuations, or training (as discussed above for the period since 2001). All of these mixed operations have a significant political and developmental component to them; thus, the military needs to work with other sectors of the US government and also diverse sectors of our partners’ governments (Principle 2). An AFRICOM built to integrate the three American components will maintain coherency in the operations and serve the interests of the local African partners without much more cost on our part. Furthermore, the military can, and often does, function as an enabler of the other two elements of American power—politics and development (especially with, but not limited to, airlift). Ultimately, the military’s structure must be built to support American foreign policy, not just to operate autonomously.

Somalia in 1993–94 provides a good example to support this point. Operation Restore Hope began as a humanitarian assistance mission, carried out by the military, which then became a military mission of hunting down clan leaders. The military mission failed, and President Clinton essentially cancelled the whole mission. Understanding the situation better and being more willing to talk to the clan leaders, both diplomatic tasks, might have prevented the escalation of military violence, which led to eventual mission failure.

5. *Example.* On a continent with a history of military coups, we do not want to demonstrate that a pure or overwhelmingly military structure in Africa can work alone (Principle 2). An American military organization locally subordinated to a civilian boss and working with civilian organizations provides an American example of the place of the military in society and would help to discourage military interventions. On the more practical side, when the US military’s operations are closely coordinated with the American political and developmental components, the span of contact within the partner African government will be wider, strengthening the other governments against the power of their own militaries.

During the 1960s and ’70s, many within Africa and abroad saw the military as a modernizing force in African society. Thus, segments of African populations supported military coups, and the United States often looked away when they occurred. Subsequently, the militaries proved not to be

as capable at governing as believed. Currently, the US military is very proficient at accomplishing even civilian taskings (e.g., policing, distributing food assistance, providing medical services, advising governments). Despite this capability, we do not want to encourage African militaries to believe they can do everything alone and thus potentially encourage political intervention. An AFRICOM with a civilian leadership will show the proper place of the US military in society.

6. *History.* Unlike in Europe after World War II where the United States was establishing a command (the eventual EUCOM) in a defeated Germany, the United States will be attempting to work with many proud, independent African governments. To successfully base US forces in Africa, the United States must approach the Africans as equals and work with them so that the relationship is mutually beneficial (Principle 1). The United States cannot be seen as an occupying power as the colonial era still remains fresh in the minds of many Africans. Additionally, the images of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the ongoing counterinsurgency in Iraq will remain relevant in Africa for a long time, illustrating suspected American colonial intentions. Thus, the best plan combines political and developmental operations that deemphasize the military component.

We must remember that struggles and wars of liberation remain fresh in the minds of many African leaders, and the United States often stood on the “wrong side” of the conflict. During the Cold War, the United States supported the white-majority government in South Africa, afraid that the African National Congress (ANC) had communist sympathies. Now the democratically elected ANC is in power, and many within the party remember our support of the other side. Similarly, the United States supported Portugal in its ill-fated attempt to quash the liberation struggles in Mozambique and Angola and then supported unpopular but “anticommunist” insurgent movements: RENAMO in Mozambique and UNITA in Angola. The generations of African leaders are changing, but the United States is remembered more as a supporter of the colonial status quo rather than as an anticolonial power.

Esterhuyse makes the point that the US creation of AFRICOM “is driven by negative considerations from Africa rather than by positive interests,” which includes a potentially renewed great-power competition in Africa between the United States and China, harkening back to the Cold War days.⁷ This fear just reemphasizes the importance of an AFRICOM with the emphasis across all three pillars—military, political, and developmental.

Competition between the United States and China in the developmental (and perhaps political) realms could be used by African nations to advance their own aspirations and improve their economies, while military competition would likely just lead to militarization and destruction as during the Cold War proxy conflicts.

Location: Addis Ababa

Focusing on the recent history of independent Africa, at least the headquarters of AFRICOM should be located in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Intra-African squabbles aside, this city has been the focus of the African pursuit of independence and unity. Ethiopia was never colonized, and the red, yellow, and green of the Ethiopian flag are recognized as the Pan-African colors. Addis Ababa best embodies the concept of “Africa” as a single continent with its own unique African interests. The African countries themselves chose this city as the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 and its successor organization, the African Union (AU), at its establishment in 2001. American policy supports the regional and Pan-African efforts of the AU, including its attempts at peacekeeping.

On the practical side, relations between the United States and Ethiopia are good, which would help to ease establishment of a nascent headquarters. Certainly one could argue that the infrastructure in Ethiopia would not easily support a large command structure, but the headquarters does not necessarily have to be a large organization—only big enough to provide effective interaction with the African Union. Addis Ababa is already the location of many embassies; therefore, another embassy-sized structure would not place too much additional burden on this city.

The civilian commander of AFRICOM should be the US ambassador to the African Union. Not only is this diplomat already representing the United States at the continental level but, as discussed above, is also a civilian and would emphasize the American tradition of civilian control of the military. While the appointment of this diplomat to lead a partial military organization may call for congressional or presidential action and the change to US laws, it is hardly a new concept since both the president and the secretary of defense, the two top leaders of the military, are civilians.

While the headquarters of AFRICOM would be in Addis Ababa, the various diplomatic, military, and developmental subcomponents could be spread throughout the continent, closer to the more functional regional

groupings. All military subcomponents would necessarily be colocated with diplomatic and developmental elements, emphasizing cooperation and civilian oversight. At the lower levels, the military components would ideally be paired with countries where similar capabilities exist to encourage cooperation (Principle 1).

Taken as an example, the air subcomponent should be headquartered in a country with a robust capability to support American and partner operations, probably a country with its own operational air force. This headquarters could simply be a minimally-manned standby base like those in Eastern Europe or have a small number of permanently stationed aircraft. Above all else, the air subcomponent would need transport aircraft to best support the policies of the United States and its partners. Transport, instead of fighter or reconnaissance aircraft, would emphasize cooperative projects and deemphasize militarization. Needless to say, the number of American assets stationed in Africa would likely be very low at any time, but permanent basing of some sort would cement the US relationship with the African countries, signal our intention to remain involved over the long term, and enable the command to operate independently.

Expanding from this central hub, the air subcomponent should perhaps have representation in each regional area (i.e., West Africa in cooperation with the Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS] or southern Africa working with the Southern African Development Community [SADC], etc.) to support partner operations. If the United States were to permanently base C-130 transport aircraft in Africa, it would make sense to station them with another air force operating the same aircraft. US and African personnel could share experience and training and assist each other during periods of high operations.⁸ This would be valuable for both the US and African air forces. US forces could perhaps provide a greater quantity of equipment and higher technical proficiency, while the forces of the African nations would provide language skills, regional knowledge, and an enthusiasm for operating in the local area.

Conclusion

The formation of AFRICOM is currently underway, but as it evolves it must come out from under the purview of the secretary of defense (hence, a military-centric organization) and become a true interagency organization.

It will hopefully then be an organization that meets not only American needs but also those of our partners in Africa—a true multilateral effort.

What sort of perception of the United States do we want to give to Africa? In the spring of 2003 during military operations in Iraq, I was in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and talked to many regular Tanzanians while doing my own historical research.⁹ One subject which often came up was the impending US military operations in Tanzania. Many believed the new, very spacious US Embassy under construction was meant to be a military base. While my observations were hardly scientific, I got the impression that many Tanzanians saw the United States as a potential threat. Tanzania is an area of the world where we would objectively have little reason to interfere. However, the Tanzanians from their perspective saw their country as, naturally, very important to the United States and a potential target! Policymakers and AFRICOM planners must never forget that popular consciousness and local perceptions will always overrule announcements and press releases.

As we move away from Operation Iraqi Freedom and the international perception of the United States as a unilateral actor, we should try to return to the American image produced after World War II. After this cataclysm, the world did not see the United States as a conquering behemoth, intent on imposing its views on the rest of the world, but instead as a country willing to work multilaterally to solve the world's problems. The United States earned this reputation through its participation in the establishment of many consultative and functional bodies with representation from many nations. Above all, the United Nations served as a beacon of hope, but so too did international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, military alliances, and the Marshall Plan in Europe. The United States helped to establish many of these organizations to contain the Soviet Union; but through the often nonmilitary focus, it generated goodwill and achieved other-than-military objectives, thus advancing American security policy. For example, the Marshall Plan led to exactly the result we wanted—a stable, prosperous, democratic Western Europe. This prosperous Europe could, incidentally, support the United States in the security realm through NATO. While the situation is not quite the same in Africa today, our expanding relationship with African countries deserves the same dedication across the spectrum of the government so that it expands positively into the future. As the *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (September 2006) declares: “In the long run,

winning the War on Terror means winning the battle of ideas.”¹⁰ In this vein, we want the African countries to see the United States as coming to help, not to break things, for only in this way will the relationship grow and stay strong in the years ahead! 

Notes

1. The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, March 2006), 37.

2. See Abel Esterhuysen, “The Iraqization of Africa? Looking at AFRICOM from a South African Perspective,” pp. 111–30 of this issue. Esterhuysen looks at the realist perspective of the creation of AFRICOM. This perspective is key since policy makers usually sell new initiatives like AFRICOM to the American public based on how they will benefit the United States (e.g., the importance of Nigerian oil to the US economy). This is perhaps unavoidable, but we also must realize that military officials tend to share this realistic perspective. Thus, they will approach the construction of the new command to serve these ends and therefore emphasize the security issues.

3. I realize that this simple schematic will likely raise many more questions than it answers. Similar diplomatic posts in Europe, for example the US Mission to NATO and the US Mission to the European Union, already offer some insight into the possibilities and challenges this proposal for AFRICOM might face. Additionally, an important issue not discussed here includes AFRICOM’s relationship to the various US embassies throughout Africa. These are all important questions to be addressed but do not detract from the argument here for a *true* interagency organization.

4. See the historical summary of US European Command operations at <http://www.eucom.mil/english/Operations/history.asp>.

5. *Ibid.*; and <http://www.eucom.mil/english/Exercises/main.asp>. Note: I have not counted the two 2002 noncombatant evacuation operations (Central African Republic and Côte d’Ivoire) since they are designed to rescue Americans and not to assist the African countries.

6. Esterhuysen, “Iraqization of Africa?” 111–30.

7. *Ibid.*, 114.

8. The basing pattern here could mirror the experience gained in the USAF’s “Total Force Initiative” in which the USAF stations various active duty, reserve, and Air National Guard units together. In this way, for example, the active duty units benefit from the experience resident in the reserve forces.

9. That I was doing historical research on a topic unrelated to military or defense issues is important since I did not initiate the conversations about the US military or US-Tanzanian relations.

10. Executive Office of the President, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Office of Homeland Security, September 2006), 7.