



WORLDVIEWS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

A Monograph Series

Africa: Progress Amidst Turmoil

A Conversation with
John Prendergast



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Program Offices:

University of Central Florida
Howard Phillips Hall, Room 202
4000 Central Florida Blvd.
P.O. Box 160003
Orlando, Florida 32816-0003
U.S.A.
(407) 823-0935/0688
(407) 823-0716 (fax)
global@ucf.edu

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Q: Most people tend to run away from the kinds of issues you work on, while you run towards them. Why is that?

John Prendergast: Ever since I was a kid, I had this feeling: If there's a fire and people are running away, then I'm running towards it. Early in my life, I became utterly immersed in the politics of Africa and wondered how such extraordinary human misery could occur in a continent that had so much and was so rich. So, I started visiting and working there, and really dedicated my life to the issues that underlie some of that suffering – the human rights and the governance abuses that drive many of the conflicts and crises that we see on television and in newspapers when Africa does come up.

Q: What was the first issue that caught your attention?

A: The Ethiopian famine – remember “We are the World” and “Live Aid,” and the horrible famine that took almost a million lives – catalyzed my own vocational path to respond to what I thought was the greatest human tragedy on the face of the planet at the time. I really never looked back.

Q: Does our news-media coverage really enable us to understand what is happening in Africa?

A: It's really hard, because Africa has over 50 countries that are all different. There's a great deal of diversity within the continent, and the majority of those countries are developing just fine. They are

democratizing, and their economic growth rates are higher than those of the United States and Europe. They're structurally adjusting their economies to take advantage of the globalizing trends. Our news cycle, though, is geared towards disasters – if it bleeds, it leads – so we're only going to see the worst-case scenarios. I think our attitude about Africa is a very skewed towards a place that seems hopeless and devastated, whereas the truth is that the vast majority of the continent is moving in the right direction for its age. Remember, Africa in the context of modern nation-states is only 60-70 years old. They're just getting started, as it were, in the modern state-building era.

Q: But you choose to do the bulk of your work in countries with the bigger challenges.

A: Yes, and they are big. They are operatic, pretty much unparalleled globally. If you look at the world since World War II, the two greatest human tragedies in terms of lives lost are the civil conflicts in Congo and Sudan. Those two wars have unfolded over decades, and have ripped those societies to shreds. For the last 25 years, I have felt compelled to search for solutions, to change the dynamics in those places.

Q: You just came from Congo. Can you provide a snapshot of the situation there?

A: It's almost unimaginable. You know, 5.25 million people have died there in the last dozen or so years, similar to the Holocaust in parts of Europe at the height of World War II. It's a largely rural society in Congo, and many people are displaced. Then, because it happens frequently – they call it “re-displaced” – assets, savings and possessions dwindle until there's really nothing left. People become completely dependent on the kindness of strangers, on charity. Sometimes, aid groups can't get into these areas because they are too dangerous, or troublemakers are blocking access because they are using food as a weapon of war. As a result, people starve to death, or they die of nutritional deficiencies or health issues that are

very easily preventable. That's why you get these huge death tolls, and people are constantly moving to avoid the terrible violence.

Q: Tell us about some of the progress you have seen.

A: It's very interesting to look at the situation through a broader historical context. When we consider our own country, the United States, at age sixty or so, we had a transatlantic slave trade that was fueling our economy. We were engaged in a fairly major ethnic-cleansing campaign against Native American populations. We hadn't yet fought our own civil war, which was one of the deadliest, in per capita terms, in the history of the world. Had there been a CNN watching us from afar, people would have said, "I don't know. That country seems pretty crazy, and there's a lot of terrible things happening. I don't give it a great chance of turning into a modern, progressive state." That's the historical cycle. Europe went through five or six centuries of terrible interstate wars to figure out what their modern national borders are. Africa is going through its own period now of building modern nation-states that is violent. It's been violent everywhere in the world. But they're coming out of it in many African countries.

Q: What are the results?

A: You're seeing second and third generation elections that are largely free and fair. And that's pretty early in the historical cycle. You're seeing a fairly substantial commitment to economic policies that are going to yield, in the long run, structural, positive economic growth. There are also efforts to try to deal with social service delivery. Again, this is something we were still working out 150 years into our history during the New Deal and after World War II. You're starting to see that already in some African countries, as they try to figure out how they can take care of the least economically advantaged in society. So, it's a beginning, and I'm really encouraged by where Africa is in the historical cycle.

Q: And the prospects for countries that aren't doing as well?

A: The reason I spend time working with the laggards, or the ones falling behind, is because I think, in large part, either they are in terrible conflicts – often over natural resources – or their governments are very bad, or they have dictatorships trying to maintain control over money and power. Again, you've got to get through the authoritarian cycle to move beyond and become a more representative government and state. So, African countries are experiencing pretty normal problems, and we just have to see how we can be helpful and accelerate the process.

John Prendergast, an Africa expert, is an author and humanitarian. He has worked, in various capacities, on behalf of peace in Africa for over 25 years. He is the former Director for African Affairs at the U.S. National Security Council, and a board member and strategic advisor to Not on Our Watch, an organization founded by George Clooney, Matt Damon, Don Cheadle and Brad Pitt. Prendergast is also the co-founder of the Enough Project, a 2007 initiative affiliated with the Center for American Progress, which aims to end genocide and crimes against humanity. He is the co-author of "Not on Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond," and "The Enough Moment: Fighting to End Africa's Worst Human Rights Crimes." This interview was conducted by Worldviews Editor John C. Bersia on January 29, 2013.