

Obama's Kenya Visit: No Big Deal – And Why The Ordinary Nature of it Means Progress

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"Obama's three day visit will mark a historic moment in Kenya's 52 year history as it is the first time a sitting US President will be visiting the country....this is the perfect time to stock your cellars with Premium American wines and celebrate the madness..." From the monthly online newsletter of *The Wine Shop* in Nairobi, Kenya.

If you're at all interested in how the President trip to the homeland of his father will impact commerce between the two countries, or even, for that matter, Obama's Africa legacy, this will be a fascinating few days indeed.

Once the "madness" and excitement accompanying the events subsides, the Obama visit will set the stage for the next phase of the belated US commercial engagement on the continent.

Last year's "Africa Summit" in Washington, hosted by our President, was essentially Step One. It was the US saying to African

leadership, "okay, we're finally here and we're ready to engage."

Out of that summit came the creation of a high-level US apparatus for engagement, led by the Obama Commerce Secretary, Penny Pritzker and a committee of prominent Americans from both the private and civil society sectors.

That panel's membership reflects the seriousness of the US effort. Top leaders of companies like GE, Bloomberg, Hershey, Walmart and Carlyle, the private equity group, would have never showed up on such a committee a decade ago.

The Kenya media in the days leading up to the Obama arrival shows a country in high anticipation. But there is also an impressive ordinariness to the country's reaction. There will be no public holiday on Friday as the President crisscrosses the city.

And on the US side, trip planners have seemingly gone out of their way to have the two countries seen as engaging in interaction that is mature, developed and appropriately complex.

This will look more like a US President visiting Sao Paulo or Istanbul or Bangalore.

“You can tell this is more like interaction between two sophisticated societies,” Aubrey Hruby, who, along with Jake Bright, is the author of a soon-to-be-released book, “The Next Africa: An Emerging Continent Becomes A Global Powerhouse.”

“In the old days, a developing country would be visited by a US President and could look forward to getting one big gift, usually in the form of aid,” she said. “We’re way past those days. You can tell just by how complicated the discussions will be, as they are in any business-like back-and forth.”

Kenya will be brightly featured as a rapidly-growing, innovation-driven center of an East Africa region soon to be one of the powerhouse economic drivers in the world. And not only because a US president is there. The country will also be hosting the annual Global Entrepreneurship Summit where Obama will be a star attraction but by no means the biggest story.

None of this is to suggest the US and its companies have become as comfortable and reasonably agile as those from other countries in navigating the continent and prospering in it. US corporate leadership continues to be hugely risk averse, buoyed in that mindset by the reality that so much money can be made in so many more familiar and “safe” places. One leader said to me, “yeah, I get that it will probably be the place to be in a quarter of a century, but do I really care about that?”

I have a friend who is very wealthy. He might even be a billionaire. He’s originally from a Midwestern US city but now lives, as he says, on his private plane, crisscrossing Europe buying distressed energy assets that few others want to mess with. He’s a brilliant deal-maker and turn-around artist. Like other Americans in his firm, he’s seldom in the US.

When Americans like that start to show up in Africa, to *live and work* in Africa, that’s when we’ll know we’ve taken a giant leap forward. Brits and Brazilians are there, doing that sort of thing. So are Turks and Indians.

We not there yet, not even close. But this president, who seemed to be going out of his way in his first term to avoid all things “African,” has, in the past year particularly, moved our country into a new position, poised to exert influence, share innovation and become real and lasting partners for Africans and others as the continent continues its giant leap forward.

On the chance he stops at that Wine Shop before departing for home, he, perhaps, can get that bottle of Robert Mondavi Cabernet, originally 7740 shillings, now only 5418 (just over 50 bucks) and he and his team can pop the cork somewhere over the Atlantic and toast themselves on a job well done.

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To read the article on the Financial Times website, [click here](#).

Endnotes

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