

## September 5, 2023 Nixon Seminar Transcript

Mary: Good evening, and welcome back to the Nixon Seminar on Conservative Realism and National Security. I'm your host, Mary Kissel with Stephens Inc. I hope all of you had a great summer. Tonight, we're turning our attention to Africa, which has seen a series of coups in the Sahel and elsewhere. What role should the United States play in the region amidst these shifts? We're honored to have Ambassador Robert O'Brien, our former national security advisor, chairing the discussions with our distinguished seminar members. So, Amb. O'Brien, welcome back to the seminar series. It's great to have you with us.

Just last week, we saw another nation, Gabon, become the sixth former French colony and/or Western military ally on the continent to experience a coup d'etat over the past three years. What do you make of this? How do we make sense of it? Did we overestimate, for instance, the power of democracy? Over to you, Ambassador.

Amb. O'Brien: Well, thank you, Mary. It's great to be back with the whole group after, hopefully, everyone had a wonderful summer. And we're now heading into a busy fall with the Nixon Seminar and the Nixon Foundation Grand Strategy Summit in Washington. So, it's great to be back with you and with the team. Look, the situation in the Sahel and in West Africa has always been a little dicey. It's become an area where terrorists are trying to regroup. An affiliate to Al-Qaeda called JNIM is quite active in Niger and Burkina Faso, and Mali, and Chad. ISIS in the greater Sahel is also active in the region. A little rivalry between those two jihadist groups.

But something we need to keep an eye on as it affects American national security to the extent that terrorists can regroup and use that area for training, and then launch attacks on homeland. So, we need to keep a close eye on it. And it's worthy of us being involved. When we talk about Africa as a whole, you know, I think we need to keep in mind that Africa is 1.2 billion people. It's one of the fastest-growing areas in the world. Reports are by 2050, Africa will have 2.5 billion people. Most of the African population, 50% of the population is under 25. So it's by far the youngest region of the world. And so, there's a lot of promise with Africa.

Africa has minerals and oil and gas and agricultural resources that are really valuable to the world as we change into a more futuristic green economy. But at the same time, there's tremendous poverty in Africa. The countries that you mentioned in the Sahel, I visited in 2019. It was one of my last missions as a hostage envoy. It was just fighting, bitter poverty in Burkina and Niger and Mali. Timbuktu, which was once a thriving center of Islamic culture and a great trading post has been demolished in large part by ISIS and the jihadis in the region.

When I was there, there were 5,000 French troops keeping the peace in the region, 1,000 German troops, and 900 American troops using our exquisite capabilities to enable our allies in a burden sharing fashion. We were providing unmanned aerial vehicles and tanker support to help the French execute their mission and build capacity in the local governments and take the fight to the Jihadists. Unfortunately, as you noted in the intro, things have changed, and there've been coups. The, the pro-western governments have been deposed for the most part.

And unfortunately, the culprits we usually see in these situations, the malign actors, Russia and its private military companies, including Wagner, and China, are involved in those coups. We've gotta be carefully because American national interest is there, but, you know, how many troops we wanna spend in that region if the interest is high enough for us to commit military forces when we have greater needs in Indo-Pacific? We gotta weigh the challenge there that China and Russia are posing against our limited ability to be everywhere and fight everywhere. So, you know, we need to get our allies and the French re-engaged. But that's not always easy, and we will have to see what happens.

But for right now, we need to be careful around that region and the continent as a whole is quite important. We don't want these coups and these Russian and Chinese tactics to spread from there to bigger, probably those countries like Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and even down to the South and DRC and South Africa. So, we gotta keep an eye on it, but how much of an interest we've got in sending troops there and be more involved diplomatically is an open question at this point.

Mary: Well, it's hard to generalize about such a vast continent with so many different nationalities, cultures, democratic traditions, and histories. But nevertheless, let's try. You know, you've started out talking about theme of terrorism, Ambassador, and it's an important theme. It seems to be the most obvious immediate U.S. interest in Africa and many of these countries that have experienced unrest. We saw a very high ranking, U.S. official, Victoria Nuland, rush to Niger after their coup just some weeks ago, suggesting that it is an immediate concern for the administration. What does that say about the import to us of those relationships to see someone so high-ranking dispatched so quickly?

Amb. O'Brien: Well, look, there's an arc of terrorism with JNIM and ISIS that runs from West Africa on the coast to the Atlantic coast, all the way across to Central Africa, and then down the East Coast of Africa on the Indian Ocean down through the coast land of Kenya, Tanzania, and into Mozambique. In fact, there's been a large ISIS concentration in Northern Mozambique in a place where there's a major oil and gas find off the coast of Northern Mozambique. And it's very difficult for the oil companies and the extraction companies to operate in that environment because of the ISIS threat.

So, there's a vast arc of terrorism and jihadis in Africa. We've gotta make sure that that doesn't spread to the United States and affect our interest in the continent and beyond. But we're gonna need a lot of burden sharing from our allies. We're gonna need the Brits, the French, and other European countries as well as African partners, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, need to get involved. Of course, the bad actors in the world, Russia, China, Iran, have no interest in quelling this problem because they see it as a distraction for America. They want us involved in these fights whether it's Afghanistan, or Syria, or Africa, because every troop that is there is a troop that's not Papua New Guinea, or Marshall Islands, or Tuvalu, or Palau, or Guam, or the Aleutian Islands, or Hawaii confronting the Chinese.

So, it's an unfortunate situation that our near-peer competitors and adversaries of Russia and China have no interest in solving the problem in Africa. And that's, you know, to be expected, but it's an unfortunate situation.

Mary: Alex, I'm gonna come over to you here and get away a little bit from the terrorist threat and focus on why a lot of these coups have been met, really, with welcome from some of the local populations. Take Gabon, it's had, I think, three leaders over the last some 50 years. The family had been accused of very close ties in Paris and allegations of corruption. Given that, is it really possible for us to insert ourselves there? Is it in our national interest? Or are we better served to, you know, try to build up these countries and foster the institutions that make democracy stable and functional?

Alex: Right. No, it's a good question, because when we're seeing a trend of recent coups, you have to look at what are the underlying factors that are contributing to this. And like many complicated situations, it's multi-factor. I mean, let's go first to the security situation. There's been a situation where for years, stretching onto over a decade, there's been a very strong French presence meant to combat jihadism and secure security. But it hasn't really worked. And you look at the populations of these countries, and they're gonna ask question of, what is the point of these French troops that are on our [inaudible 00:09:18] population, and one that is taken advantage of by those who would like to see the democratically elected governments fall, whether that's internal opposition or whether that's external power such as Russia.

And you're looking at Russia's activities in the region, and they see an avenue here, an opportunity to use disinformation, use the corruption endemic in these countries to destabilize them and put France in particular, but overall, the EU in a bad position. So, we're seeing here, look, economic and security kind of domestic factors coupled with a Russian interest in stirring up...

Mary: Well, it's certainly a theme that we've seen, Russia and now China coming in to fill the gaps where, say, the United States and European nations like France have left a void. It's also, I think, notable that Emmanuel Macron is not sending in French troops to reverse any of these coups in former French colonies. I see we've got Congressman Mike Waltz on the line. Welcome back to the seminar, Congressman. I wanted to go to you. We've talked about terrorism, the U.S. interests in combating terrorism on the continent, particularly in the Sahel. And Alex referencing some of the more internal problems that these nations have had, corruption and the like, that see support for these coups. How does it look from the vantage point of Capitol Hill?

Rep. Waltz: Well, I'll just speak, Mary, very quickly to my own personal experience, I have had the opportunity to serve in Nigeria, to serve in Niger, and a few of the other West African nations. And it was quite fascinating twofold. One, you know, it was interesting after the wars of the Middle East to go to a place where we were cheered and welcomed, but then a French vehicle would drive by, and then they were booed and stones were thrown. So, I think, as Alex

was alluding to, there's a lot of history there and a lot of baggage from the colonialist days, point one.

Point two, the counter-terrorism cooperation has actually proceeded fairly well over the years. We have very willing partners because we have aligned interests, but you literally are sitting on that sub-Saharan African, and Northern African Arab divide. And helping those governments really manage that in a responsible way, I think, frankly, it's something our colleagues at State probably could have focused on a bit more. And then finally, look, at the end of the day, in terms of the competition, it's all about geography, and it's all about resources.

For example, in Niger, up in a tiny little town called Arlit, there are multiple uranium mines that account for probably 30 to 45%, depending on how you count it, of France's uranium supply chain. So, it's absolutely critical to their economy and to their energy supplies. And it does surprise me that Macron and the French government have been so, really, passive in their response. I'm sure there's people who are a lot smarter than I am on the natural resources competition that's going on, whether it's offshore oil down off the Cameroon or the uranium mines that I just mentioned.

But the other piece is geography, and it is a game changer. I can't stomp my foot hard enough. It's something that the Navy in particular is very worried about. If the Chinese establish a West African base on the Atlantic for their ballistic missile submarine fleet, in terms of the response time that we would have, which would literally be down to minutes, their ability to pressure us in the Atlantic should we have some type of conflict in the Pacific, it's something that we should be, and I fear that we're not in this administration, all hands on deck to prevent, diplomatically, you know, informationally, militarily, economically.

So, there's a lot at stake. Just a long way of answering your question, Mary, that I believe it's in our interest. And I think there, at least my experience there, a little bit of effort just a few special forces teams, some civil affairs, some decent foreign military sales, and some diplomatic and economic engagement goes a heck of a long way. We get a lot of bang for our buck there across the spectrum. But it does take some bit of focus from the administration, and I'm just not seeing it.

Mary: Yeah, I think that goes across Republican and Democrat administrations. Africa is not, unfortunately, seen as a prestigious place to go if you are a career diplomat at the State Department. You wanna go to Paris or Beijing or Tokyo. You just don't see the best and the brightest [crosstalk 00:14:53] in Africa.

Rep. Waltz: If I could throw one more thing in, you know, for all of our folks deploying over there, my favorite map that I would always be sure they saw was the map of Africa with the United States, China, India, West Europe, Japan, and almost every other country, you know, crammed into it. Just the tyranny of distance there, and really the size of what we're dealing with. I mean, we all know that we talk about Africa as though it was a singular country, but it is it is a massive,

massive piece of geography with a credibly rich and varied culture and a lot of different interests. And you're right, I just don't think we've been engaged in a way that we need to be.

Mary: You know, John Noonan, the Congressman raises... Yes, Ambassador, please.

Amb. O'Brien: Yeah. Sorry. We'll go to John. I wrote an article probably 10 years ago on the efforts by the Chinese to establish a naval base in Namibia. And Mike Waltz is 100% over target on this. Right now, we get away with patrolling the South Atlantic with one British destroyer frigate for about half a year. And it's worked well, it's allowed us to deploy our resources to the Pacific and other regions. But keep in mind that that's a critical piece of oceanic real estate. The first naval battles of both World War I and World War II were fought near the Falklands in the South Atlantic.

If the Chinese get even a small squadron or frigates, putting aside the boomers that Mike talked about, which would be, you know, extraordinarily difficult for us to track and to deal with. But even if they put a small squadron of three or four frigates in Equatorial Guinea or Namibia, it would create havoc for shipping and for our planning purposes and would tie down a lot of U.S. resources, which we, unfortunately, don't have in the small size of the Navy. So, you know, 100% on point, we need to keep the Chinese out of the Atlantic, the South and North Atlantic.

Again, that was a critical theater for submarine warfare and also for surface warfare in both world wars. So, it will be, again, if there's a major conflict with China, the best policy is to keep them out now rather than having to root them out later.

Mary: Well, it sounds a lot like the title of a book, "The Strategy of Denial," which one of our seminar members wrote about preventing China from invading Taiwan, I mean, Bridge Kolby. We will get to John Noonan. John, I haven't forgotten you. And Kim, I saw your hand raised. But Bridge Kolby, I think I just naturally have to come to you next here. I mean, are we really missing the boat, so to speak, and potentially ignoring what could be a strategy of denial that's being played out by Chinas and Russias in Africa?

Elbridge: Well, thanks, Mary, and great to be with you, with Amb. O'Brien, Congressman Waltz and friends and colleagues here picking up after the summer. I mean, I think, I think this issue is stressing for us on a number of levels. You know, we're obviously facing multiple crises around the world, of which I think that... You know, obviously, the one that's in the news the most is Ukraine. But in my view, the one that's most significant and severe is the looming one with China, of course, Korea and so forth. So, we don't have a superabundance of resources to allocate towards Africa. And I'm not even mentioning, you know, something we spoke about, I think in the last session, which was, you know, Mexico, Latin America. I know John spoke about that.

I think one of the ways that we had approached this in a kind of very Nixonian way was to try to support the Europeans who have a more natural, you know, focused interest there, obviously, the French, the uranium minds that Mike Waltz mentioned, but also just the legacy, the tradition

there, the British as well. And what's significant here is that Macron and France, and I think the United Kingdom as well, are not playing as active a role. And at the same time, China and others, like Mike know much, much more about Africa than I do, I'm not an expert by any stretch, but my distinct impression just reading the news and so forth over the years is the Chinese are incredibly active.

And there's a very natural interest there, which is, you know, China needs natural resources, it needs a lot of things that Africa has. And so there's been a lot of infrastructure and so forth. And of course, the Russians have been very active as well with things like Wagner. I think it's gonna be a real challenge to be able to come up, because the sort of economy of force model that we've been looking to, that Robert was talking about in terms of supporting the French with an a kind of an economy of force effort, I'm not sure that model's gonna work. I don't know what that means personally.

We can't pretend that we're in a better situation than we are. When the announcement was made when they sent Deputy National Security Advisor, Jon Finer a few years ago to Equatorial Guinea to try to convince them not to allow the Chinese to open a naval base. I think that should have been a real... I mean, there've been plenty of clarion calls and wake up calls, but that one was like a real, I mean, almost absurd levels of grandiosity in Chinese ambitions in the sense that... I mean, I think that completely undermines the idea that China's ambitions are confined to the First Island Chain or Taiwan or what have you.

I mean, there's no reason to be exploring building a base in Equatorial Guinea. My view is that the central theater remains the First Island Chain in the Western Pacific. If we can bottle the Chinese up there, then we'll be able to take care of any Chinese forces that are outside of that perimeter. But I think we can't delude ourselves that they're gonna be increasingly active. You know, they're building aircraft carriers, they're building air bases and naval bases. They're expanding in Djibouti. That tells you that their ambitions, and of course, they have great economic interests just like imperial powers of the past.

So, this is not surprising, but it's something we're gonna need to think through. I don't pretend to have the right strategy to deal with it, given the way the French and the British are acting, but it's an important issue.

Mary: Well, maybe that's the next book, Bridge. Going over to John.

Bridge: Light lift for me. Thanks, Mary.

Mary: Going over to John Noonan. John, of course you served in the U.S. Military and have thought about these strategic issues. It's not the first time, as Bridge raises, that we've had these kinds of concerns in Africa. Nixon himself wrote in, "The Real War." For those of you watching and wanna look it up, let me give you a quote. "The Western industrial nation's dependence on foreign sources of vital raw materials is one of our chief vulnerabilities. This, as

well as the inherent instability of many of the producing nations dictates Soviet's strategy in such areas as, guess what? Africa, among others."

John, we're be focusing too much on the leverage that these terrorists are trying to exert over us and not focusing enough on the deprivation we might have of, you know, raw materials. And if not us, then of our European allies.

John: Yeah, I mean, you're exactly right, Mary. Africa's home to something like 30% of the world's minerals, 8% of the world's natural gas, 12% of the world's oil reserves. They have 40% of the world's gold. And I think it's up to 90% of chromium based on the latest surveys, including massive reserves of cobalt, diamonds, platinum uranium, as we've talked about before. What you hear when we talk about Africa in a military context, whether it's dealing with terrorists in places like the Sahel, or Djibouti, I think we occasionally miss the forest for the trees.

As Bridge said, China is seeking a global military footprint. In order to have a global military footprint akin to the one that the United States painstakingly built over multiple decades, you need two things. You need basing agreements, and you need a lot of military kit. So, the linkage between this just massive board of wealth of natural resources and the military dimension is... This is how China builds its military out. This is how China helps maintain its control on what we call critical minerals or rare earth minerals, which are vital, everything from MRI machines to Tomahawk missiles or their variants of Tomahawk missiles.

A lot of this can be, frankly, traced back to bad foreign policy decisions. So, this is a mess. I think this is a foreign policy challenge, just Africa writ large, which I understand that's an oversimplification given the fact that the continent is profoundly diverse. But it goes back to, I think some bad decisions made in the '50s, '60s, '70s, including by the Nixon administration for that matter, in terms of how Europe decoupled itself from Africa. Colonialism was not a good form of government. We didn't like it here in the United States. We threw off our colonial power. Africa did the same thing.

But there's an old line that goes, essentially, "You know, the worst thing that happen to Africa was the white man coming. The second worst thing that happened to Africa was the white man leaving," in the sense that they left behind a series of dictatorships, tin-pot tyrannies, countries that very nakedly align themselves against Western and U.S. interests, not for, I think, particularly unfair reasons, given some of the more brutal colonial histories there. But what could have been is we could have had a more responsible handoff from the Europeans. And we could have had some, I think, fairly credible partners here in the 21st century.

Now we've got an Africa that's essentially operating as a critical mineral and resource depot for the Chinese military. And this is how the Chinese powers their global military expansion, is through Africa. So, let's not get too caught up on the Sahel. It's important. I think the French did...I think they did a good job in terms of the way they decoupled. There was a lot of improvement, but they did leave behind a presence. But there is a much wider global problem

here, and that is what to do with something like 20% of the world's landmass and almost 2 billion people.

Mary: Yeah. Well, it's a very tough challenge. And as you say, it's not a one-size-fits-all solution. Kim Reid, you chaired the Export-Import Bank of the United States. It's one of the institutions that does business in Africa. How did you see that region and U.S. economic strategy there? Did we have a strategy or, as our other seminar members have implied, including myself, State Department and others have really fallen down, there is no strategy?

Kim: Well, Mary, good to be back with everyone. I hope everyone had a wonderful summer. And absolutely, the Trump administration had a strategy as Robert O'Brien, Amb. O'Brien, knows so well, as does Congressman Waltz, who was extremely supportive of the Export-Import Bank. One of the very first things I did after being confirmed was President Trump asked me to lead the presidential delegation to the swearing in of the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa. And so, I'm on stage in 2019 with presidents and kings and queens from every country in Africa.

And then having our embassy in Pretoria host a round table, not only with U.S. businesses based in South Africa, but throughout the continent. They were thrilled to learn about the tools that we might be able to plug back in once the Export-Import Bank was reopened with my confirmation to help success happen. And so that was one of the very first things that I did. And I think it's telling that President Trump would send that message to Africa.

And then, the very last official trip that I did on January 7th, 2021, was to go to Sudan. And I met with the justice minister, the finance minister, the health minister. We had such great hope for that country as well. And during that time, we also had, in Washington, an initiative called Prosper Africa, which was an interagency and private sector effort on doing great things in Africa, and also the president's advisory council on doing business in Africa. I'm sure many of my colleagues here joined for various meetings for that. And then one of my favorite deals of all time that I did at Exim was actually in the Sahel region, in Senegal.

And we were able to approve a \$91 million financing project for renewable energy to bring energy to Senegal, which was important. And not only was it important for the dignity that you bring people by financing something like that, but also, this was one of the first projects that we did with our program on China and transformational exports. So, I know we've been talking about China, and I watch still to this day all the deals that are happening with the China Export-Import Bank and debt trap diplomacy in Djibouti. The port in Djibouti is like the highlight of, not only is it not good for the region, but it's not good for our national security as well.

So, I'm getting ready to go week after next to the UN General Assembly. And I know that we've all been there, attended events. And I just was thinking back to the discussions that I had a couple years ago with all the ambassadors from the African nations on the topic we're talking about today. Where are we gonna be in two weeks? And what hope is there? And I just really hope for better for the future. The Atlantic Council has a Center for Freedom and Prosperity, and they have an index that's out. And I'm gonna be sharing that in two weeks. And I don't know,



you can see it on my phone, but you can look at any country around the world, and there's a rating. And I will help share the story, with freedom comes economic prosperity. And you really need to encourage that thinking in every country.

And finally, I'll just say, looking again at President Nixon, because this is the Nixon Seminar, he had some goals in Africa in 1969. He gave a message to the Sixth Annual Assembly of the Organization of African Unity. And he had two big objectives. And I just wanted to share those for the group and those watching at home. And the first objective was that, "The continent be free of great power rivalry or conflict in any form. This is even more in Africa's interest than our own." And then secondly, "That Africa realizes its potential to become a healthy and prosperous region in the international community. Such an Africa would not only be a valuable economic partner for all regions, but also would have a greater stake in the maintenance of durable world peace."

So, I hope that those things continue on. And I wanna see EXIM, even though I'm not there now, take on more risk and use its program on China in transformational exports to help displace some of these deals that are happening in key countries, in the Sahel, and help China also understand that Africa's not there to be bought and owned by them. Thank you.

Mary: Wonderful. Thank you, Kim. You know, you raise many interesting points there. One of which is the interest, of course, that our European allies and we have in a prosperous and free Africa. And we have had that interest now for many, many decades. Alex Wong, you and I were talking before the seminar on the interest that the Italys and the Frances and other European nations have, not just because of the terrorism threat or the need for natural resources, but because they also face migration issues as well from places like North Africa.

We have very activist governments in places like Greece and Italy. Is it time to approach those capitals and say, "Look, we need to cooperate on this threat. None of us can do it alone." But you're literally seeing the upheaval from this coup d'état and other problems in Africa washing up onto your shores.

Alex: Yeah, that's definitely a conversation we need to have. I mean, I look, I think the migration issue from Africa, from the broader Middle East as well, that doesn't directly affect us. It indirectly affects U.S. interest in that it would destabilize, distract our key partners in Europe that are dealing with that issue and have been dealing with for a number of years. They need countries across the Sahel who they can work with on this problem. It's not so much that the particular countries of the Sahel are sources of the migration, but they are our way stations or avenues for migration from the rest of Africa.

And if you don't have governments in power who can work with the French, work with the Italians, work with the EU broadly, that exacerbates their migration problem, that distracts them. And then that begins to compromise our interests. So, that conversation needs to happen. And there is a certain amount of pragmatism we need to have. I'm the first to always say that we should put front and center democracy and human rights in our diplomacy and our national

security strategy. But I also abide by the saying that I learned from my former mentor, Rich Williamson, that, you know, you have to be a realist to take steps in every day, but an idealist to know which direction you're going.

So, we should engage and be realistic about who is in power and what kind of transition toward our principles of democracy and human rights that we can make while at the same time protecting our interests and those of our close allies in Europe.

Mary: Well, it's a tough question. Congressman Waltz, Kim referenced Prosper Africa, the economic program that the Trump administration had put forth to try to encourage private investment. You know, we can have one-off deals, but ultimately, we need closer ties. The current administration has seen very leanings when it comes to things like trade. Is that something that, you know, you or others of your colleagues in Congress would support? Is that even on the table? Is anybody thinking about that?

Rep. Waltz: Well, I would say yes, but. I do think to address Alex's point and Bridge's as well, my experience there is that the Chinese in many ways have overplayed their hands. The infrastructure that they have built is often pretty shoddy. Of course, they refuse to use local labor and literally bring in battalions of Chinese men. They have zero regard for any type of environmental standards and, you know, just heavy metal pollution in rivers. And they tend to, you know, show up with bags of cash, which works for a while until you really alienate and anger the other side of the political fence, so to speak.

So, there is definitely, I think, a void to be filled there from a government-to-government standpoint, and even from a business standpoint, we've received a lot of outreach as kind of delegations come through town. But I have to tell, I mean, the White House hosted a very significant Africa Summit, but number one and two on the agenda was climate and diversity. And they want to talk railroads, bridges, and development to elevate their people into the middle class. So, I think there's a real void, there's a yearning to move beyond kind of that initial sugar high, you know, that the Chinese brought.

And unfortunately, we're not filling it. And to Bridge's point, I don't know how much we're gonna have in resources to fill it. However, where I do think there's opportunity is twofold. One is with EXIM, and two is with DFC. I do think there would be an appetite if it were structured properly to fund those, some bilateral agreements rather than the broad multilateral. I think there could be an appetite there, particularly if it's centered around critical minerals and recapturing that supply chain. There's a lot of attention in Congress, and I've sponsored and passed legislation to push the Pentagon in particular, to expand its critical mineral stockpile much like the strategic petroleum stockpile until we kind of get this under control.

And then I think we need to look beyond the U.S.-Europe paradigm. I just got back from New Delhi. I know we're focused on the Sahel tonight, but they are very interested in enhancing their engagement in East Africa that borders the Indian Ocean, and expanding that engagement. And then you have other countries with critical interests and allies of ours like the UAE, Bahrain, and

Saudi that are incredibly dependent on East Africa for huge portions of their food supply that are flown in from places like Kenya, Sudan, and elsewhere. So, I think there's a lot of different levers we have to pull if we had some imagination in this administration, to be candid.

Mary: Well, you know, on that, let's pull in a guy who was at the top of U.S. Strategy, Amb. O'Brien. When you were thinking about the American approach to the continent and all its various parts, you know, were there ways that we could try something new, for instance, you know, rather than do simple trade deals, offer slots in universities to African students, train military leaders in American institutions of higher learning in West Point and other places? Are there ways that we can tie the emerging leaders of these countries to America to develop a love for our country and personal ties here that might bear fruit over time?

Amb. O'Brien: Well, it's a good question, Mary. And one of the things we did, because look, resources are limited, especially when it comes to the military and to Navy, is how do we engage the Africans with resources that we do have? So, when I was National Security Advisor, I hosted all the African countries' ambassadors at the White House. I think we had 52 of the 54 countries. It was the first time it was ever done. I didn't realize that. We did it twice. And I came and spent time with them. They couldn't believe that the National Security Advisor, because they'd been ignored for so long, actually came and spent time with 'em.

And what I did as part of my remarks, not to seek any credit for good work, so to speak, but we went through some of the things we were doing in Africa, the amount of money that we were spending for PEPFAR, for aids treatments, for humanitarian aid, food, for helping build wells, not just on the U.S. government's part, but also non-governmental organizations, churches and relief organizations. And the amount that we spend in Africa dwarfs what the Chinese spend, even with all their bribes and their infrastructure projects. But people don't know about it because, you know, look, part of it is kind of a Judeo-Christian ethic of the right hand not knowing what the left hand's doing when we're providing aid.

But part of it is we just haven't done a good job as a country explaining to our partners the value that America is putting into Africa. So, look, I've been to Africa over 30 times all over the continent, and anywhere you go in Africa, you see these giant billboards, "This road is being provided to you by People's Republic of China." "This road is being given to you, or this telephone line is being given to you by Xi Jinping." "Xi Jinping's [inaudible 00:40:34] railroads." Yet we do far more than China does and we don't ask for anything in return the way the Chinese do. There's no quid pro quo.

So, one of the things we did at the end of the Trump administration, we wanted to come up with a common branding and put an American flag and the signature of the President, not just President Trump, but it could be President Biden, on every bit of aid that goes, whether it's from USAID, or put it on the letterhead of OPEC or EXIM Bank or DFC. You know, well, whatever we're doing that we branded is coming from the United States of America with an American flag. So, the people of Africa know that, whether it's infrastructure project, or food, or water project, or

financing is coming from the people of America to show 'em we support 'em, that we're engaged.

Unfortunately, that was dropped by the Biden administration. One of the first things they dropped, they thought it was, you know, too nationalistic and too pro-American. So, people in Africa who are getting more aid from the United States than they are from China believe that China is far more engaged than we are. And so, one of the things we need to do is tell our story. And that's one of the things I try to do when we brought the ambassadors to the White House, is tell 'em the story that we care, that we're involved, that Africa's important to us, and that we're gonna be there for the long haul with them as a partner, not as the Chinese, not as a parasitic neo-colonial power, you know, trying to suck the resources out of Africa and give 'em nothing in return as Mike Wallace pointed out, and then Alex Wong pointed out, but, you know, we're there as a partner.

And so, I think we need to do a better job, doing the PR for what we are doing in Africa. And I think that would go a long way. And do it in a nuanced way, do it not, you know, self-aggrandizing, but let people know that we're involved and that we're there for 'em.

Mary: Well, that is one of course, the ironies, Ambassador, that when you meet U.S. diplomats, especially in places like Africa, many of them are not proud of America and they don't want to make that ideological value-driven human rights forward argument that our system of government is actually fantastic. It's much better than what you would get from totalitarian China, and yet you never hear them make those arguments. Congressman Waltz...

Amb. O'Brien: Happy they gives us the ability to help our friends in Africa because of that prosperity. And it allows us when there's a crisis like COVID to forgive debts and not collect. And at the outset of COVID crisis, while we were talking about with our European allies of forgiving the debts or delaying the payments of debts from African countries, the Chinese were literally flying planes around demanding hard currency for repayment of loans, demanding if the African countries couldn't give 'em a hard currency, diamonds, minerals, further concessions, and collateral. So, it was a very different approach.

I think the Africans are learning that as Congress Waltz pointed out. But, you know, at the same time, we need to be confident in our system of government, not in democracy. And the prosperity that it engenders as Kim noted, that, you know, democracy and the rule of law brings prosperity. And share that with our African friends and let 'em know that they're benefiting from our value judgments, our choices we're making, unlike the Chinese that are parasitic with respect to their economy.

Mary: Well, one of the ironies in a place like, it's way outside the Sahel, but Congressman, take South Africa. I mean, the ruling class there seems to view China as liberators because they were the ones that were against colonialism, and they threw out their oppressors. And so, we've never made the argument to the South Africans that, "You know what, we've done a lot more for you and can do much more for you than Beijing." They just hosted Xi Jinping for a BRICS

Summit. I didn't see any response from Washington. I mean, what are we doing here to make that values argument that the Ambassador says, and Kim rightly points out, that we should be making?

Rep. Waltz: Well, clearly we're not making it very well. And when you have the... Again, I just can't emphasize it enough because I hear it as folks come through DC and from my old colleagues, kind of go forward message, when the top message is that, "We're sorry for all of the climate harm that we as an industrialized nation have caused, and therefore, we're going to establish a climate reparations fund to make it up to you." So, I mean, you know, our first foot forward is all of the bad that we've caused in the United States. And when you have the Secretary of State apologizing to the United Nations for the U.S.'s role, then I think that sets the tone and tenor for our engagement.

I mean, you know me, Mary, I have no problem with being blunt and calling it like I see it, but this is what I'm hearing. And then you layer on top of that, unfortunately, a very corrupt system that's in place right now and only getting worse in South Africa, which is so resource-rich, yet they are suffering up to 30% a day rolling blackouts and getting worse. And when you have the Chinese and Chinese-backed companies that don't have bribery laws or don't have the same corruption issues, then, you know, I think that's essentially what we're seeing and what we're getting.

It's incredibly unfortunate because we all know that it was the United States that really led the way on apartheid, on the boycotts. I mean, the South African, not just South Africa itself, but the entire South African Olympic program was boycotted for 40 years over apartheid, yet we have an ongoing genocide in China, and we handled the Beijing Olympics with kid gloves. So, I think Amb. O'Brien is absolutely right. We need to puff our chests up a little bit. We do have the moral high ground. We need to be proud of American exceptionalism. Of course, we're not perfect, but, you know, as Winston Churchill said, "You know, American democracy's the worst system of government in the world, except all the others."

So, it's frustrating to see when I travel to our embassies abroad, and I see, you know, the first one, two, three talking points are essentially apologetic rather than loud and proud, and here's what we can do in accordance with international law, in accordance with human rights. And yes, it may be a little slower and take a little bit longer, but at the end of the day, as Amb. O'Brien said, it's not transactional, it's a long-term partnership in line with little I, liberal values.

Mary: It seems like there should be a way to strike a balance. Alex Wong, and then maybe I'll go over to you also, Amb. O'Brien. Nixon wrote about democracy that it can't be "transplanted." He said it must take root naturally growing stronger with work and time. So, isn't there a way, Alex, maybe we'll start with you, that we can appreciate the stability that some of these strongmen have imposed, and maybe they cooperate us on certain issues, but also publicly urging them to make these transitions to a cleaner, sustainable, better form of democracy where people in these countries have a real voice, where we speak over the leadership too, and we speak to the people of these African nations and encourage their aspirations?

Alex: Yeah. I think there's a lot of wisdom in President Nixon's remarks and his writings. You know, and of course, not just about Africa, but more broadly. And, you know, in his line about Africa not being, or a policy plank or a pillar of our policy there, of it not being an arena for great power competition, I think underlying that is kind of a principle that we should approach the Sahel Africa in general, or really any part of the emerging world, the developing world, whatever term you wanna use, that we have to treat them and treat these countries and these regions as, you know, countries qua countries, not as pawns or areas on a chess board.

Now, that is a cast of mind that you have to spread throughout the government, but that's also the tenor of the messaging. Because this really speaks to the desires of these countries. They want to deal with their interest and your interest, and not, again, as pieces on a chess board. And over time, what that provides us, you know, perhaps paradoxically, is balance in the competition with China. It neutralizes efforts by the Chinese to conduct their elite capture, their disinformation, their corruption, to exert their influence.

If we can speak again broadly to whether it's the populations, the governments themselves about democratic aspirations, about development, about developing their human capital, treating them as nations qua nations, people qua people, that really is the cast of mind and the avenue and the direction we need to go. And that takes some patience and that takes some effort. But that is really, I think, a strength of the United States if we can keep the national security and the diplomatic apparatus focused on it.

Mary: Amb. O'Brien, thoughts to add?

Amb. O'Brien: Well, look, I'm just encouraged, you know, that Kim's comments were very aspirational and encouraging, and Alex is, and you know, my Mike's point about us not always apologizing and offering to put in Tesla charging stations in the middle of the DRC where there are no roads, you know, it's all great to hear. And again, what I say every time I do Nixon Seminar, I'm encouraged because there's so many challenges facing the country. We're unfortunately, you know, not the strongest leadership in the country right now, the United States.

And again, I look at the people in the seminar, whether it's Noonan or Colby, or anyone, you know, Mike, who's in Congress now, and Kim, who I'm sure we'll be back, you, Mary, you know, play a big role in the future, Alex. It's a really wonderful group of, you know, Americans, that it gives me hope and confidence that when the pendulum swings and we win the election, and that the GOP takes control again, that we're gonna have a great group of people that are, you know, founded in the Nixon idea of conservative realism, but yet love democracy, and then the rule of law, and then our way of life and liberty and are gonna expound upon it.

So, you know, notwithstanding the challenge we have in Africa, just being here tonight with this group gives me a lot of optimism and faith in the future for the better of the country. So, thank you.

Mary: Well, that's very kind, Amb. O'Brien. Wish we could talk to you every week and hear things like that. One other thought from Nixon that I wanted to throw out there for the group before we say goodnight, we've got about five minutes left. And Bridge, maybe you can react to this as the cold, hard military strategist. Nixon wrote, "The Africa of the 1970s," which is when he was writing, "Will need schools rather than sympathy, roads rather than rhetoric, farms rather than formulas, local development rather than lengthy sermons."

For me, somebody who's in the private sector at a financial institution, it's really hard to get us to focus on investment in Africa. We don't have the tools and the structures there to do that. Instead, you've got, you know, multilateral institutions like the World Bank in there and aid groups like USAID in there. And my goodness, we're not gonna be doing business with them. So, how is it that Nixon was writing in the '70s, '80s, '90s about these problems and we still haven't figured out ways to get our most innovative business people and financiers into Africa?

Elbridge: Well, thanks, Mary. I don't wanna bring us down, but I do think it's interesting. I mean, one of the things that President Biden says that I generally disagree with but I think it may have some applicability here, is he emphasizes that, you know, democracy is under test, you know, it's being tested now. I mean, personally, whether or not democracy and republicanism are superior outcomes is less significant to me and I love being free. You know, I just think it's right. But, you know, he makes that point.

And I do think there is an element of truth in it in the sense that if you look at a place like Africa, and a lot of that rhetoric is very familiar to what we're saying right now. And I think that point is not lost on, I assume people in Africa or other places, Latin America that are still struggling in these parts of it. And that's something I think, you know, when we think of the sort of development agenda that we need to bear in mind, especially in the context of democratization or the rollback of democratization, is that, you know, I think Adlai Stevenson said, "You know, a hungry man is not a free man or person."

And so, that's something, I mean, I know Kim and others have thought a lot about this, but there's a lot of water under the bridge since decolonization and how to get sort of better results in a practical sense that delivers for people, I think is gonna be really important. And if you look at the waves of democratization, I mean, there's a huge positive wave of democratization after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but there has been some rollback, and presumably, those things are somewhat correlated. So, if we want as we should, we want more countries to become democracies, they are gonna have to deliver economically in the way that President Nixon was talking about, and you were referring to, Mary.

Mary: Well, it's almost as if many African nations need a second liberation, that they were liberated from colonialism, and now they need a kind of economic liberation that they've been denied that they can't make their lives better or their lives of their children or their grandchildren. Congressman Waltz, any final thoughts before we say goodnight?

Rep. Waltz: Well, you know, I think the only thing that I would add, I don't have a lot more to add, but I really think they tease the kingdom here are in the private sector and in those critical supply chains. I mean, we just look at the amount of raw material that we're going to need going forward. And it's just about helping these companies manage risk, whether it's government risk, whether it's regulatory risk. And that's where I think organizations like EXIM and DFC, relatively low amounts of dollars can be rich, whether that's within different types of insurance instruments or financing instruments, there's a real hunger to do business with the United States, we just have to help our multinationals take those risks. And/or, again, just because I'm fresh back from Delhi so it's fresh on my mind, you know, allied countries that share our values and aren't seeking to supplant and replace us.

Mary: Well, like the presidential debates, Kim Reed, you were mentioned. So, I'm gonna give you 30 seconds over to you to make a quick comment. Well, and then we'll go to Amb. O'Brien to close.

Kim: My comment is, it's great to have the Nixon Library members and supporters with us. Several of us were in-person at the library earlier this summer for the celebration of President Nixon's 50th anniversary of sending America's first energy report to Congress or energy plan to Congress. But Amb. O'Brien was talking, and I'm just gonna stop for one second. And I'm from West Virginia. So, Robert, I'm gonna embarrass you, but you're gonna have to help me pronounce this word correctly. I was so excited to see this news report, and I just want everyone at the Nixon Library who's watching to also know about it.

There's a news report, and the title of the article is, "The Most Powerful Utahn You've Never Heard of Could Be America's Next Vice President." And so, Robert, I'm just so proud of you, and you have a bright future as well. We thank you for co-chairing this seminar with us every month. And you're amazing. So, thank you.

Mary: Well, Amb. O'Brien, I don't know how you can top that, but I'm gonna give you the opportunity to give us one final thought before we close for the month.

Amb. O'Brien: Oh, thank you. Listen, one of the two national anthems of South Africa is "Nkosi Sikelele' iAfrika." God bless Africa. So, as we close, for any of our African friends who are watching, God bless Africa, we'll be there for you. And God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

Mary: Thank you, Amb. O'Brien. Thank you to the seminar members. Thanks to all the supporters of the Nixon Foundation for watching. I wanna put in the plug. You should join us October 18th and 19th for the Grand Strategy Summit in Washington. Put it on your calendars. And that's it for this month's Nixon Seminar on Conservative Realism and National Security. We will be back next month. I'm Mary Kissel. Thanks for watching. Goodnight.