

The Sullivan Summit
(Ambassador Young)

Friendship is holding a nation together in Nigeria. The President and Vice President are friends despite being as different as are the Nigerian people. President Obasanjo is from Southern Nigeria and is a devout Christian. The President grew up on a farm, and became a soldier, General, and was the first African Head of State to relinquish power to democratic elections and a civilian government.

Vice President Attiku Abubakar is from the North and a devout Muslim. He is a well educated public servant and a successful businessman who helped organize a National Nigerian political movement to return the country to democracy after fifteen years of military exploitation of the country's wealth and power.

They were brought together by the tragic assassination of a colleague they both loved and respected: Athaij Shahu Yardua. Both Obasanjo and Abubakar believed that Yardua was the right man to lead a united Nigeria. Their resulting friendship and mutual respect has overcome a multitude of differences in style, heritage and opinion.

Obasanjo is an idealist who is determined to push Nigeria and Africa into the twenty-first century. Abubakar is much more the pragmatist that is trying to mold a political consensus amid an oration of 130 million people who speak 400 or more dialects and must use English as the "lingua franca" of the nation.

These two men are holding together a nation of paradoxes. Like many African nations, Nigeria has a powerful, wealthy, well-educated upper class, but many of its citizens live in dire poverty. The population of Nigeria is split nearly evenly between Christians and Muslims who at times have clashed violently, yet the nation is being led by these unlikely friends.

Most Americans cannot locate Nigeria on a map of the world, yet the events in Nigeria have very real impact on the lives of everyday Americans as we import more and more oil from Nigeria and the other oil rich nations in West Africa. More oil comes from Nigeria than Kuwait. When you add Angola, the Congo, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Algeria, you are looking at almost a third of our Nation's oil supply.

Although an uninterrupted oil flow is an immediate concern for the US, Nigeria (and Africa as a whole) is now being looked at by the US as not just a vast repository for natural resources, but as a possible growth stimulant for a sluggish world economy. Africans are already consumers and as the African economy grows, so will African consumption. Nigerians already consume more Coca-Cola than New Yorkers. There is no reason why they could not purchase Dell Computers on a similar scale.

The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a truly bi-partisan effort, has sparked an admirable zealotry in U.S. Trade Representative Bob Zoeflick. From AGOA, he has launched a regional trade negotiation with the countries of the Southern African Trade Union. The Exim-Bank and OPIC have begun to realize that the African Continent needs roads, ports of power generation, telecommunications, cars and trucks. Distance learning is big in Africa -many of her leaders having studied in prison- so computer use will grow with power generation and distribution.

Africa is not unlike the United States during the first 50 years of our independence and the leaders are as courageous and visionary as our founding fathers.

It appears that President Bush is on the way to Nigeria and Africa. Like his Mother and Father, Bush '43 is a "people person." He relates well, he listens and yet very confidently expresses his own views.

He will need those communication skills as he steps from the oval office with White Papers and briefing books and comes face to face with the paradoxes and ideological clashes that are African reality. The ideologues will tell a story of greed and need. The poverty and misery are real in Africa, but this is not a humanitarian crusade for the President. The pragmatists understand that this trip is about geopolitics, national security and sound economics. In the long term, Bush's strategy for dealing with Africa may have more impact on how his Presidency is viewed by historians than Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Bush will be impressed flying over a land three times the size of the U.S., and whether in South Africa, Botswana, Uganda, Nigeria or Senegal the possibilities will loom as large as the problems. Having already met with twenty-five or more of Africa's leaders in Washington or at the U.N., he will be meeting them on their own turf, and he is bound to sense the dreams and aspirations of visionary leaders who are struggling with massive problems and limited resources.

But this is the stuff of which leaders are made; Mr. Bush will likely meet some leaders today who, 100 years from now, will be studied like the founding fathers in this country. Mr. Bush's ability to build bridges with key leaders and discern the differences between their rhetoric and reality while securing America's interest will be no easy job.

But Mr. Bush will not be without help. In Nigeria, the President will not only meet African leaders. He will also be met by a distinguished group of Americans who have been involved with the African Continent. These are the sons and daughters of Africa who have struggled to find freedom in America and who are helping their institutions, businesses, social agencies and professional associations to come to grips with the African possibilities.

This is Dr. Leon Sullivan's sixth African-American Summit in Abuja, Nigeria's newly built federal capital. They will spend July 12-20 with the leaders, businesses and universities of Africa.

They are carrying on Dr. Sullivan's dream of building a bridge between Africa and America which will enhance the development of each.

In spite of AIDS and poverty, exploitation and misrule, Africa is the missing link in the global economy. Africa's need is the world's opportunity. Despite being shunned by most American businesses, most well planned, and well-executed investments have been profitable and European companies continue to profit from Africa. Although African nations have paid several times the principal payments on their debts, the interest payments continue to stifle growth.

If the press will do its homework and research the history, listen to the leaders and the people, and truly cover Mr. Bush's trip to Africa (not just treat it as a photo op from the doorway of Airforce One or with children in native dress on the tarmac) they will realize that this is a truly historic visit. Even if the press misses this story, those of us who will attend the Sullivan Summit with President Bush already know that we are about to see history in the making.