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## A Tale of Two Divestments: South Africa, Sudan, and Howard University

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### Abstract

The anti-apartheid movement and Save Darfur campaign were important moments of African American activism towards Africa. Howard University played a central role by divesting from both South Africa and Sudan. This article examines each divestment within Howard University's history of engagement with Africa. While each divestment was linked by a concern to support oppressed African peoples, the roles of race and racism operated differently in each action. Such an analytic provides space to reconsider the role of US higher education in African-facing human rights activism during the age of Black Lives Matter.

**Keywords:** South Africa; Sudan; African Americans; United States; Howard University

### Introduction

On February 19, 2021, the Department of African Studies and Center for African Studies at Howard University hosted a symposium with the theme “Re-Shaping a New US-Africa Policy and the Role of HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities).” The event aimed to draw on lessons from African American participation in foreign policymaking and outline potential areas for HBCUs to engage President Joseph Biden's Africa policy. The symposium's background statement offered a sweeping treatise on the administration's Africa policy and the potential importance of HBCUs in shaping it. According to the background statement, “HBCUs are already busy connecting with African publics through student-to-student engagements, faculty partnerships and community outreach ... engaging with HBCUs,” the statement continued, “would support the

strengthening of principled partnerships with Africans, based on solidarity and respect of mutual interests” (Howard University Center for African Studies 2021).

The following year, police murdered George Floyd, an African American resident of Minneapolis, Minnesota. During the protests in the aftermath of Floyd’s murder, and that of other African Americans during this period, American institutions of higher education paired statements of solidarity with the protestors with actionable steps toward remedying historic injustices, such as hiring faculty of color, establishing centers devoted to issues tied to the study of the Black experience, and reforming curricula toward centering a “decolonized” pedagogy. While Cajetan Iheka and Benjamin Lawrance acknowledged that such efforts to wrestle with a problematic past and complicated present were important, they argued that “it is crucial that the renewed commitment to Blackness does not ignore the African continent” (Iheka and Lawrance 2021, 271).

The question remains—how have HBCUs historically engaged with the pressing issues that Africans and people of African descent have faced? Several scholars have examined the ways in which students and faculty at HBCUs have engaged Africa and African studies. Examples of book-length monographs on Tuskegee University’s influence in colonial Africa include Angela Zimmerman’s (2010) study of Tuskegee’s involvement in colonial Togolese cotton production, Kimberly Hill’s (2020) exploration of Alonzo and Althea Edmiston’s missionary careers in colonial Congo, and Andrew Barnes’s (2017) study of Tuskegee, colonialism, and industrial education in Africa. Other scholars have examined African students’ experiences at HBCUs, including Sylvia Jacobs’s (1995) examination of Livingston College’s impact on West African students at the turn of the twentieth century, and studies from Chrystal Mwangi (2016) and Andrew Blake (2012) concerning African students’ experiences at HBCUs. Mwangi studied students at an unnamed HBCU, while Blake examined student experiences at Delaware State University. Howard University’s deep connections to Africa and African studies have been explored by a variety of scholars, including Clifford Muse, Jr. (2002), Robert Vitalis (2015), Joshua Myers (2019), Krista Johnson (2020), and Amanda Joyce Hall (2023). Muse (2002) identified imperialism and internationalism as two general topics of interest among students and faculty at Howard during the Franklin D. Roosevelt presidency. Johnson (2020) took a broader temporal approach in her exploration of Howard scholars who engaged in theorizing race and empire domestically and abroad from the 1930s through 1950s. She argued that Howard-based scholars created institutions and spaces of knowledge production “as part of a larger effort to confront the coloniality of knowledge and forge an academic and activist decolonial agenda.” She highlighted the conferences and lectures that the university hosted that aimed to broaden approaches to race relations in the US by placing them within an anti-colonial framework dominated by European colonialism in Africa and Jim Crow racism in the United States. As Robert Vitalis noted, these scholars supported “a project of liberation [which] was from its inception (and by necessity) a world-spanning political and theoretical movement in response to the theory and practice of white supremacy” (Johnson 2020, citing Vitalis 2015, 2).

The collective push against anti-blackness informed the ways in which African Americans engaged Africa far beyond Howard’s walls (see, for example,

Meriwether 2002; Horne 2009; Von Eschen 1997). Moreover, Black Americans never expressed a monolithic opinion on international affairs during the latter decades of colonialism and even resisted seeing common ground with persecuted minority populations beyond America's shores (Plummer 1996; 2003). At a contemporary moment roughly a half-century removed from African decolonization, how might we reconsider the important role HBCUs play in US-Africa affairs in light of this history? What postcolonial precedents might shed light on how HBCUs have engaged, or might have engaged, Africa and Africans based on "solidarity and respect of mutual interests"?

This article examines two of Howard University's most dramatic episodes of postcolonial Africa-focused activism: its divestments from apartheid South Africa and Sudan in the wake of the Darfur genocide. Divestment campaigns are aimed toward pushing universities to examine their endowments and portfolios and to sell any investments in governments, banks, and companies that conduct business with nations that activists deem in violation of human rights and/or international law. The activism that Howard students and faculty directed at South Africa and Sudan was not limited to divestment campaigns. Their activism included protesting at embassies, hosting visiting speakers, and devoting space in *The Hilltop*, the student newspaper, to voicing concerns with the university's position toward both countries (Asquith 2007; Hall 2023). Nevertheless, my focus on the two divestment campaigns is useful because they remain the only two instances in which Howard faculty and students employed these methods of activism in widespread response to state oppression within the borders of African nations. The fact that Howard never cut ties with European colonial powers but twice deployed divestment campaigns sheds light on Howard's approach to African rulers and ruled, its philosophy of Africa-focused engagement from colonialism to independence, and the role of financial capital in this paradigm. Focusing on the divestments also allows for a better understanding of the role that race played in Howard's attempts to exert pressure upon oppressive governments and forge solidarity with their suffering populations.

Linked together by Howard's historical concern with supporting oppressed Africans, I situate each divestment campaign within a longer genealogy of struggle and solidarity with Africans facing state-sponsored oppression. African Americans mapped the plight of Black South Africans suffering under apartheid relatively easily onto their own historical experience under Jim Crow in the US. Howard's student and faculty divestment campaign against Sudan showed their capacity to recognize and respond to state-sponsored oppression elsewhere in Africa, and in crises in which the assailants were African, rather than European. The distinction is significant. In its advocacy for the protection and well-being of Africans who were victims of African oppression, Howard University activists aligned with the university's tradition of advocating for oppressed Africans outside of the white-black, colonizer-colonized binaries that were so prevalent in the twentieth century. At a moment when those like scholar Krystal Strong (2018) are asking whether African lives matter within the Movement for Black Lives, the decision made by Howard activists to push from the university to divest from Sudan, and for the university to comply with this demand, provides

an important postapartheid case study of HBCU solidarity with Africans on the margins of state power.

### African Americans, HBCUs, and Unfree Africa

Established in 1867 in Washington, DC, Howard University was founded to meet the educational and welfare needs of the formerly enslaved in the aftermath of the American Civil War. Like other HBCUs founded during that period, Howard not only offered African Americans access to higher education at a time when segregation barred them from predominantly white universities, HBCUs also educated students from Africa and the West Indies. African students attended such schools as Pennsylvania's Lincoln University, Ohio's Wilberforce University, Alabama's Tuskegee University, and Howard (Gasman 2009; Waters 2009; Schüler 2009; Roe 2009).

Despite this dynamic new development in American education, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought immense challenges for Black people in the United States and Africa. In the US, the conclusion of Reconstruction ushered in a retrenchment of white supremacy defined by vigilante violence, political disenfranchisement, and segregation enshrined in the US Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. On the other side of the Atlantic, the 1884–85 Berlin Conference launched the “Scramble for Africa” that witnessed European powers colonize much of the continent in a roughly thirty-year period. From the atrocities of King Leopold Belgian's Congo Free State to the British bloodletting at the Battle of Omdurman, Sudan, Africa bore the full might of European colonialism. Political boundaries that still exist today were wrought in blood in that imperial takeover (Griffiths 1986).

African Americans took note of human rights abuses in Africa. The roots of the international rights system can be traced back to the 1899 Hague Peace Conference, where major world powers forged humanitarian law that sought to protect individual life and property rather than state power. The idea that citizens' interests would be demarcated from government interests was innovative. Popular opinion influenced international diplomacy, and law defined the limits of national sovereignty. While the US government supported King Leopold's mission in the Congo, African Americans at the turn of the century—such as historian George W. Williams and missionary William H. Sheppard—directed the world's attention to the monarch's state-sponsored violent atrocities. Booker T. Washington joined their efforts by lobbying President Theodore Roosevelt to pressure the Belgian government to eliminate its regime of terror in the Congo.

When Italy invaded the Kingdom of Ethiopia in 1935, it stoked a particularly strong reaction from African Americans, some of whom called for the US to take action against the Italian invaders (Normand and Zaidi 2008; Waters 2009; Dworkin 2017). Members of Howard University joined in the campaign against the Italian invaders. Students organized resistance to the Italian occupation, and Professor Charles Wesley condemned the US government's lackadaisical response. In 1936, Howard's Division of Social Sciences organized a conference with a theme “The Crises of Modern Imperialism in Africa and the Far East” (McConnell 2009; Myers 2019; Johnson 2020).

By 1944—after the Italians had been thrust from Ethiopia and the Allies inched closer to defeating the Axis Powers—Howard faculty pushed for American programs to industrialize Africa in preparation for independence. Though President Franklin Roosevelt called for self-determination, his successor, Harry Truman, was concerned about decolonization's impact on European powers who needed natural resources to help fuel postwar recovery and push against the potential sway of the emerging Communist powers. Despite Truman's stance, the tidal wave of decolonization swept through the continent. Africa's mid-century decolonization resulted in a bevy of newly sovereign states liberated from white minority colonial rule. In what is an enduring testament to the role of HBCU's in African independence, several African leaders held HBCU pedigrees. Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and his mentor, Nigeria's Nnamdi Azikiwe, both attended Lincoln University, and Malawi's Hastings Banda attended both Central State University (Ohio) and Meharry Medical College (Georgia) (Lovett 2015; Waters 2009).

As African liberation movements erupted within the broader context of the Cold War, America's approach to the continent's increasingly postcolonial environment aimed to prevent the spread of Communism (Waters 2009). To this end, African Americans occupied a complicated position. With the collapse of European hegemony in Africa and an outgrowth of powerful African anticolonial movements, as Penny Von Eschen (1997) has noted, many African American activists and intellectuals claimed a common history and shared political cause with independent African states, and posited that they would benefit from African leaders' assistance in their own struggles for citizenship in America. Whitney Young, who attended Kentucky State Industrial College when it was one of two four-year colleges open to Black students in the state and, later, served as president of the National Urban League, provided one example of this sentiment. Young was a member of the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa, an organization formed in 1962 and comprised of prominent African American leaders to lobby the US government's policies toward Africa and to advocate for increased African American presence in the US diplomatic corps. Young argued that the "decision to link the integration struggle in the United States with the fate of the sub-Saharan states would represent a new phase in the civil rights struggle" (Weiss 1989; Krenn 2003).<sup>1</sup> Though separated by an ocean, Young's statement conveyed a sense of shared struggle linking those within Africa and the United States in their collective fights for freedom.

US officials discouraged an independent Black American perspective on US policy towards Africa. According to Gaines, silencing Black leadership on African affairs was a major priority for continued US military and political assistance to white majority regimes in central and southern Africa—regions where major American investments were at stake. However, it is important to acknowledge Channing Tobias as one HBCU graduate who worked with the United Nations and US government during the Cold War and openly confronted South Africa. Tobias, whose career included a stint as a Howard University trustee, directed the Phelps-Stokes Fund, which supported the education of Africans who attended South African and US universities. As chair of the US delegation in the UN General Assembly Fourth Committee, Tobias blocked South Africa's and Britain's

first effort to prohibit the Herero, Nama, and Berg-Damara peoples from testifying about shameful conditions in southwest Africa (Gaines 2006; Theriault 2021; Anderson 2015).

Through Jim Crow and African colonialism to decolonization and the US civil rights movement, Black people on both sides of the Atlantic were well acquainted with white supremacist rule. Amid these oppressions, HBCUs like Howard played a singular role through their capacity to host African students and shine a light on conditions facing Africans. While the 1950s and 60s may have represented a type of golden age of African nationalism, the indignities of apartheid South Africa remained. As African Americans rallied in support of Black South Africans, HBCUs marshalled their might in the fight against anti-blackness in Africa.

### Howard University and the Anti-Apartheid Movement

During the Second World War, millions of colonized people suffered from state-sponsored racist repression. In 1948, the United Nations produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—an attempt to deliver a definitive international list of human rights (Nickel 1987). This list of thirty Articles included statements that asserted every person’s right to the Declaration’s freedoms regardless of race, the promotion of understanding and friendship among all racial groups, and the right for men and women to marry and make families without racial limitations.<sup>2</sup> Despite this public pronouncement that human rights transcended race, 1948 also witnessed the inauguration of a South African legal order diametrically opposed to the premise of racial equality. Following the 1948 election of South Africa’s National Party, new legislations created a clear racial hierarchy in the country and entrenched legal white-minority rule. For example, the white-minority regime removed Africans to Soweto, an exclusively Black township, from Sophiatown. The regime also sentenced Nelson Mandela to life imprisonment. In another example of state violence, in March 1960, police gunned down demonstrators protesting against the pass laws in the Sharpeville Massacre.

By 1966, the United Nations declared that apartheid represented ‘a crime against humanity’ (Clark and Worger 2016). That year, a movement began to cease US business investment in South Africa as an economic means of pressuring the country to eliminate apartheid. In 1975, an African American-led organization named the Black Forum on Foreign Policy was established. Renamed TransAfrica, it lobbied Congress to force US-based multinational corporations with operations in South Africa to treat Black employees equally (Waters 2009).

While HBCU activists joined TransAfrica in its 1970s-era anti-apartheid efforts, there were structural obstacles that they had to overcome to influence universities to divest. Amanda Joyce Hall has noted that HBCU divestment from South Africa was difficult “because the schools took donations from the same South Africa-tainted companies that they invested in” (Hall 2023, 377). With specific respect to Howard University, Regina Lightfoot reported in the school’s *Hilltop* newspaper that 20 percent of all monies that flowed through the school

could be traced back to US companies that conducted business in South Africa. In 1978, Howard's Board of Trustees responded to students' resistance to apartheid complicity by adopting the Sullivan Principles, which proposed investing guidelines permitting American corporations to remain in South Africa if their plants adhered to integration and compensation metrics—this angered Howard students who believed that they fell short (Hall 2023).

That November, Howard revised its position. It excluded any business that conducted “substantial business” in South Africa. The university sold nearly \$2 million in securities linked with South Africa, an amount tantamount to 13 percent of its endowment. Howard's divestment did not result in a financial loss to the university.<sup>3</sup> In 1983, Howard students joined with students from nearby Georgetown University, American, George Washington, the University of Maryland-College Park, and Johns Hopkins to form the D.C. Student Coalition Against Apartheid and Racism. At the time of the Coalition's founding, only Howard had hitherto divested from South Africa among those institutions. However, in a possible indication of Howard's motivating precedent, fellow universities Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, and Maryland had each divested by 1986 (Hammons 2023; Novak 2021; The Africa Fund 1988).

Following President Ronald Reagan's successful 1984 reelection campaign, Randall Robinson made a dramatic protest that ushered in a new chapter in the US anti-apartheid movement. On November 21, 1984, Robinson—who had been named executive director of TransAfrica in 1976—went with two colleagues to meet with the South African ambassador. Robinson, along with Howard faculty member Mary Frances Berry, staged a sit-in inside the embassy, and was subsequently arrested and jailed; press coverage of their protest launched the anti-apartheid sit-in movement. The movement spread to South Africa's consulates in other parts of the country and onto college campuses, where protests pressured trustees to divest from businesses with South African ties. On April 4, 1985, hundreds of Columbia University students began an on-campus sit-in demanding that the institution divest its holdings in companies doing business with South Africa. The protest lasted three weeks and inspired other divestment protests on approximately sixty other campuses (Milloy 1984; Waters 2009; Altbach and Cohen 1990). While Howard had already undertaken its divestment action in the late 1970s, other HBCUs now joined the movement to divest from South Africa. In 1985, St. Augustine's College divested its securities in companies that had distribution or franchising agreements, licensing, or ownership in South Africa. St. Augustine's was joined in its 1985 divestment by Rollins College, which partially divested to the tune of approximately \$415,000 of its holdings (The Africa Fund 1988). The following year Lincoln University divested its securities in companies with ownership in South Africa (impacting its accounts by nearly \$665,000), while Spelman College totally divested after activist work conducted by students and alumna Marian Wright Edelman. Spelman's divestment affected \$1 million of its holdings (Hall 2023).<sup>4</sup>

By the late 1980s, the writing was on the wall for the apartheid state. In July 1986 the University of California completely divested its \$3.1 billion in South Africa-linked stock and bonds. The following month the California State Senate voted to divest pension funds for its state, and later that fall General

Motors and IBM also divested. Between 1987 and 1990, students joined the campaign to free Nelson Mandela, furthered federal legislation for more crippling sanctions, and demanded that political prisoners be released. Mandela was finally released in 1991, and President F.W. de Klerk announced that the African National Congress and South African Communist Party were legalized. Due in no small part to increased isolation from US universities, apartheid collapsed (Waters 2009; Hall 2023).

It would be wrong to conclude that apartheid only mattered to African Americans because of shared histories of state-sponsored racism. However, the galvanizing potential that a sense of shared oppression can have in fostering transnational solidarity cannot be overstated. In her examination of anti-apartheid student activism, Hall notes that some activists showed South-South solidarities by linking their efforts against South Africa to the American context. “The US student anti-apartheid movement,” Hall writes, “was a successful example of a Black-led multiracial coalition, organized dually against South African apartheid and the United States’ racist customs and policies” (Hall 2023, 371). At Howard, visiting speakers piqued students’ awareness of South Africa by making connections to America. For example, US Ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young declared during Howard’s homecoming that the struggle for a liberated South Africa affected Black life in the US, and Assistant Secretary of Education Mary Frances Berry encouraged students to fight for human rights whether abuses occurred in Soweto or Wilmington, North Carolina, alluding to ten wrongfully accused Black civil rights activists convicted of arson (Hall 2023). By weaving the anti-apartheid struggle with the realities of American racism, Andrew Young and others integrated self-interest into their pleas to help Black South Africans. As their fight and fate were linked with ours (so the argument went), their Black lives should matter to us Black people. In this vein, a shared sense of struggle against anti-blackness served as fertile soil for Howard’s divestment campaign.

Would a similar level of engagement hold true for an African context whose issues did not map as well onto the American context? Would Howard University foster solidarities with other African peoples facing state-sponsored oppression and, if compelled, similarly divestment? Such questions were present in the early twentieth century, when another government in Africa became the pariah of the world.

### **A New Fight: Sudan**

From 1899 to 1956, the present-day countries of Sudan and South Sudan were ruled as a single colonial unit known as the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. Britain, the chief agent in this colonial relationship, aimed to separate the mostly Muslim and Arabic-speaking North from the multiethnic and multireligious South. While British policy effectively separated the South from the rest of the country and stymied its development, the British conversely invested in the North and improved its social, health, and educational services. Over time, Sudan was characterized by an Arab-ruled North that was in a stronger position than its



southern neighbor. In 1953 the Union Jack granted the Sudanese some self-determination, and two years later the Sudanese parliament declared independence. Sudan—with its deep regional differences—became sovereign on January 1, 1956 (Seri-Hersch 2017; Searcy 2019).

Thorny feelings that had been brewing between northern and southern Sudan erupted into armed conflict when southern troops mutinied at Torit in August 1955. Thus began the First Sudanese Civil War, which lasted until 1972. While the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement gave southern Sudan more self-governance, another war broke out in 1983. Repeated violations of the Addis Ababa Agreement led to the Second Sudanese Civil War, which lasted from 1983 to 2005. In this conflict, south Sudanese John Garang led the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) against the Sudanese government. In 1989, Brigadier-General Omar al-Bashir staged a coup and established an Islamist state. In 2002, the Sudanese government and SPLM/A signed an agreement in Kenya that provided a framework of principles as a basis for negotiating a peace agreement. On January 9, 2005, the war ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The decades-long conflict claimed an estimated two million lives and four million people were displaced. Massive famines in the North and the South claimed hundreds of thousands of lives (Searcy 2019; Ashworth and Ryan 2013; Natsios 2012).

Amid all the issues that fractured Sudan along a North-South axis, the country also faced a crisis on its western frontier in the region of Darfur. In 1987, the first of multiple rebellions in Darfur occurred between the Fur people and Arabs allied with the Sudanese government. While the rebellion ended two years later through a negotiated peace agreement, the Second Darfur Rebellion commenced in 1995 (this time between the Masalit people and Arabs allied with government). That rebellion ended in 1999 through repression and political settlement. In 2003, the Third Darfur Rebellion commenced. This time, an alliance of Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa peoples fought against the government and its Northern Darfur Arab allies. The Sudanese army's counter-insurgency campaign took 300,000 lives, displaced 1.8 million people, and destroyed nearly 3,000 villages. Calls of genocide came from an array of groups, including African American, liberal, and religious right constituencies. Those who advocated use of the term argued that, under the Genocide Convention, using the idiom would launch international intervention to stop the maelstrom. In July 2004, Congress passed a resolution that termed the violence genocide (Natsios 2012; Straus 2005).

Amal Fadlalla (2018) and Mahmood Mamdani (2009) have written on the ways that US activism concerning the Darfur crisis portrayed the conflict in an oppressor-oppressed racial binary that situated Blacks as oppressed and Arabs as oppressors. While US-based political campaigns for southern Sudan had deployed the polarizing categories of Muslims-Arabs versus Christians-Blacks, Fadlalla contends that Save Darfur depended on similar groupings. This time, however, Muslim Arabs were classified as wreaking violence upon Muslim Black Africans (Fadlalla 2018). "Simply put," writes Mamdani, "the [Save Darfur] campaign saw Darfur as just another version of southern Sudan, where perpetrators were Arabs and victims were Africans or Blacks, with the antagonism

between the two rooted in a history of precolonial slavery and defined in deeply racialized terms” (Mamdani 2009, 68).

While African American activism largely drove the US-based anti-apartheid movement, such was not the case with the Save Darfur movement, a reality suggesting that the campaign would not be deeply invested in finding similarities between Darfurian and African American life. Apartheid South Africa provided a context where Black people were deprived of citizenship at the hands of white, racist statecraft; a paradigm that African Americans could readily identify with. Conversely, Save Darfur—which, according to Hisham Aïdi (2020), “ended up being a largely white movement led by a Jewish-Christian coalition”—would have been less likely to forge a solidarity with Darfurians based on a shared experience of anti-blackness in each country. Relatedly, Black America’s evolving and increasingly diverse composition was another element distinguishing the anti-apartheid movement from the Darfur campaign. Several legislative measures enacted in the second half of the twentieth century facilitated an increase of African immigration and, with it, a dramatic demographic shift by the late twentieth century. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 made it easier for non-Western European immigrants to enter the country; the Refugee Act of 1980 increased the entrance of those fleeing conflict (including those from countries like Eritrea and Ethiopia); and the Immigration Act of 1990 both bolstered immigration from underrepresented countries and encouraged highly skilled immigrants to migrate for work. According to the Pew Research Center, the total US Black foreign-born population tripled between 1980 and 2000, from 0.8 million to 2.4 million (Lorenzi and Batalova 2022; Tamir 2022).

Simply put, what it meant to be Black in America had changed since the rise of the anti-apartheid movement, and by the turn of the twenty-first century African immigrants became more prominent voices within the African American community. Perhaps the greatest consequence of this demographic shift in Black America’s African-facing activism would mean an expansion of African issues that garnered engagement—namely those issues that did not offer parallels to the experiences of American racism that many African immigrants and their children did not share. With the late-twentieth century demise of such regimes in southern Africa, what new cause would—or could—rally African Americans with the type of fervor that drove the ultimately successful anti-apartheid movement—a movement so obviously steeped in issues of race and racism? While the atrocities in Darfur did not offer the striking parallels to the African American experience as South African apartheid had, Black Americans engaged with the Darfur situation on a massive scale, plainly illustrating that African-facing activism in the twenty-first century did not have to be tethered to a white European versus Black African framework.

Those African Americans who engaged with the crisis included the Congressional Black Caucus, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader Kweisi Mfume, African American pastors, and a young senator from Illinois named Barack Obama (Hertzke 2008). Black America’s actions were by no means monolithic, as conflicting positions were expressed concerning race’s role in the crisis. For example, prominent Black magazine *Jet* stated that refugees in Darfur were “reportedly being raped, murdered and starved by Arab

militias,”<sup>5</sup> and Stacy Gilliam offered in the NAACP’s *Crisis* that Arab militias allied with the Sudanese government “have orchestrated an ethnic cleansing in ... Darfur, leading to the deaths of at least 400,000 non-Arab, Black Africans ... activists see Sudan as a fight that can be won and a crisis more Blacks should be in arms about” (Gilliam 2006, 8). Such examples pointed to the capacity for African Americans to proliferate the type of polarizing, harmful language that framed Darfur as a stage where Arabs oppressed Black Africans.

Conversely, the historically Black Nation of Islam (NOI) rejected the simplistic binary describing murderous Arabs and suffering Black Africans. *The Final Call*, the organization’s official newspaper, was a vehicle to broadly disseminate this claim. One *Final Call* contributor blasted Save Darfur’s “deceptive propaganda [portraying] pro-government ‘Arab’ militias as terrorizing unarmed ‘Black’ civilians” and added that “The vast majority of all the people of Darfur are Muslims and all are Black ... it is more convenient to portray the struggle as one of genocidal ‘Arabs’ against defenseless ‘Africans’” (Reed 2008). The newspaper also published words that President Omar al-Bashir delivered to NOI members at the organization’s Saviour’s Day conference: “Talk of Arabs killing Blacks is a lie,” he claimed. al-Bashir added that “the government of Sudan is a government of Blacks” and that “We’re all Africans. We’re all Black” (Muhammad 2007). The organization’s decision to provide Beshir with an open platform to make this claim points to the lack of consensus within the American American community regarding the situation in Darfur. African American solidarity with Sudan at the time operated in competing ways, as some Black Americans supported Sudanese based on common faith (Christianity) and experience (enslavement) while others—most prominently the Nation of Islam—supported the Sudanese government based on shared faith (Islam) (Tounsel 2024).

Within its deep history of African engagement, what posture would Howard University take in this discursive ecosystem? How would its stance show its consistent or shifting philosophy of activism concerning human rights abuses in Africa?

### Howard and Darfur

On September 6, 2004, over two hundred protestors marched down Washington, DC’s Massachusetts Avenue demanding an end to the genocide. Organized by the Sudan Campaign, the protest aimed to shine a light on American companies continuing to do business with Sudan. As part of *The Hilltop*’s coverage on the demonstration, Kevin Harris and Robin Davis noted that “Prominent leaders in the African-American community, including ... Howard University President Patrick Swygert have joined [former congressman and civil rights leader] Fauntroy in past days” (Harris and Davis 2004, A7). In his effort to raise awareness in the Howard community, President Swygert asserted that he would lead a march of Howard students if necessary. Harris and Davis reported that many Howard students attended the September 6 march, and that one of the attendees—sophomore Alonzo Parks—said that he had decided to attend the rally after reading an earlier article in *The Hilltop*. “I now realize how important it is to be

here as a Howard student, African-American, and a human being,” Parks said (Harris and Davis 2004, A7).

On September 16, 2004, Sudanese Ambassador to the United States Khidir Haroun Ahmed was scheduled to appear at a forum entitled “Crisis on Sudan” at Howard’s Blackburn Center. Though he was to serve as a panelist alongside Salih Booker (executive director of Africa Action) and Bill Fletcher (president of TransAfrica Forum), the ambassador canceled his appearance. The panelists forged ahead with the forum and criticized the international community’s response to the crisis. Kevin Harris, whose article “Sudan Leader a No Show” appeared in the *Hilltop* (2004), reported that many HU students in attendance were concerned about what they could do to stop the catastrophe. He quoted senior management major Lafayette Gaston, who had visited Egypt earlier that year and met many Sudanese refugees. Though Gaston acknowledged that he did not know what he could do, he expressed motivation to make a change in the region (Harris 2004; “About Bill Fletcher Jr”). Despite the missed opportunity for Howard community members to discuss and debate the situation in Darfur with a representative of the Sudanese government, it nevertheless represented an example of Howard’s decision to make space for students to participate in meaningful dialogue on the issue.

Importantly, *Hilltop* itself was a space for such dialogue. Roughly a week after Ambassador Ahmed’s no-show, the newspaper published Naeesa Aziz’s article “Deciphering Darfur.” Aziz—a *Hilltop* staff writer who contributed several pieces between 2002 and 2005<sup>6</sup>—acknowledged that there was a war in Darfur which had displaced scores of people, that the government had erred in arming civilians and Janjaweed (Arab paramilitary forces) (Sharkey 2008; Salmson 2007), and that more humanitarian efforts were needed rather than sanctions. However, Aziz stated that based on information gathered while in Sudan “the recent declarations and decisions made by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell are untrue, unfounded and seem to be based on opportunistic miscalculations. In my experience,” she continued, “with what I have seen, heard and witnessed in Sudan, there is no genocide occurring in Darfur, but a convoluted crisis caused by political and strategical mistakes which will continue to grow if categorized as such.” Aziz wrote that critical examination of facts had not been performed and, apparently, were not needed for most to form their own opinions about what was happening.

If we as Africans in the Diaspora want to be effective in assisting Africans on the continent ... Lets [*sic*] begin that assistance before crises like this occur. The Sudanese conflict should signal a commitment and a wake-up call for our community ... our success, empowerment, and welfare is directly linked with that of our brothers and sisters abroad ... perhaps the African-American community should assert its position in the African Union and be a proactive force in African politics (Aziz 2004, A8).

Over the next two years (2005–06), Howard continued to foster conversation about Sudan. In early April 2005, congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee pleaded for help for people in Darfur at an event sponsored by the HU College Democrats.

Having recently returned from Sudan, congresswoman Lee developed a visual for the students and suggested that students rally against the genocide at the Sudanese embassy (Wright 2005). Later that year, the traveling artwork exhibition “The Children of Darfur: Picturing Genocide” made a multi-week stop at Howard. Sponsored by Residence Life, HU Stand, and Africa Action, the artwork consisted of drawings that Darfuri children had made about their lives. Irmise Fennell, a Howard student who helped publicize the exhibit, was quoted in *Hilltop*: “We hope to spread the word and shed some light on a situation that has been going on since the beginning of the millennium that so many people are ignoring because it is not affecting us personally as a country” (Cox 2005, 2). The paper noted that Eleanor King, a member of Howard’s Sociology Department, hoped that the exhibition would rouse the HU community to action. “Greater campus awareness of the tragedy going on in Darfur, and ... pressure put on Congress and on the President to put their money where their mouth is. After calling what was going on in Darfur ‘a genocide,’ how can we just sit back and continue to watch it happen?” (Cox 2005, A5). On April 30, 2006, Howard’s chapter of the NAACP attended an anti-genocide rally in Washington DC, [which was] organized by the NAACP and Save Darfur Coalition (Coe 2006). Later that year, *Hilltop* published provocative comments from Michael Frazier, an associate professor of political at Howard. Asked about the media’s efforts to expose the crimes in Sudan, Frazier responded with the following remarks: “The media has decided that genocide occurring in Darfur is not a priority. They’re obviously more interested in other controversies that sell more papers. When you don’t choose to invest resources into such a tragedy,” Frazier continued, “you blatantly expose your negligence.” Taylor Mason, who wrote the article, encouraged readers to raise pressure for a resolution and to get involved in any way possible to break the impasse in Darfur (Mason 2006, 1).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, by the end of 2006, Howard University had shined a light on attention to Darfur in several ways. From President Swygert’s involvement in a demonstration, Sudan coverage in the *Hilltop*, and the campus’s usage as a site for discussion and debate, there were numerous examples of public-facing engagement with circumstances in Sudan from members of the Howard community. While Howard’s Darfur engagement was part of a much longer genealogy of the institution’s Africa-facing activism, it is important to note that there were no instances of demonizing language aimed towards Arabs. Relatedly, pleas published in the *Hilltop* for readers to pay attention to and/or assist Darfurians were not framed in overt language of racial solidarity. As meaningful as Howard’s engagement may have hitherto been, it had not divested from Sudan as it had with South Africa. That changed, however, in 2007.

### Darfur Divestment

In late 2004, Harvard University’s *Crimson* reported that the university invested in companies whose work with the Sudanese government helped the regime. This reporting inaugurated the Divest Sudan campaign. In the following months, students at Stanford, Dartmouth, Yale, and other institutions investigated corporations and contacted the Central Intelligence Agency to compile lists of

companies with Sudan dealings. In time, dozens of other colleges joined in the student-inspired Divest Sudan movement. Christina Asquith (2007) reported in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* that in the case of Sudan, divestment figures typically represented less than a percentage point of a university's portfolio. However, whatever minimal financial impact induced by divestment has been miniscule compared to the publicity generated by such decisions.

In 2006, activist and DC radio host Joe Madison led a divestment push at Howard. He remarked that "HBCUs have a close relationship with countries in Africa ... They have a historical connection. They have educated post-colonial leaders. But most important of all: they're African Americans. So, they have a kinship to Africa and a moral obligation to take the lead on this" (Asquith 2007). Madison, whose work with the NAACP stretched back to the 1970s, was arguably the country's most prominent African American Sudan-focused activist. In addition to spending three months in front of the Sudanese Embassy calling for an end to the genocide in Darfur, Madison campaigned to divest \$93 billion in Sudan through state pension funds.<sup>8</sup> Madison tried to get his campus, Howard, involved. According to copies of his emails housed at Tulane University's Amistad Research Center, Madison—in his own words—had "numerous conversations with the President [Swygert] about divestment." Board of Trustee member Jack Kemp committed to divestment when he was a guest on Madison's radio program, and Swygert himself called into the program. "It is necessary for [Howard] students and alumni to do their thing," Madison wrote in a late January 2007 email.<sup>9</sup> For him, the stakes of the University's decision to divest were nothing short of epochal: "HU students and alumni should push the BoT [Board of Trustees] to be on the right side of history."<sup>10</sup> In addition to being on the "right side of history," Madison's language of "kinship" alluded to the notion that African Americans—despite being an ocean away and generations removed in history—nevertheless had familial bond with Africans that are deeply rooted in history.

By the beginning of 2007, thirty-five US colleges and universities had divested from Sudan. The list of institutions included Ivy League members like Yale and Harvard, public land-grants like the University of Washington, religiously affiliated schools like the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and private liberal arts colleges like Williams and Middlebury.<sup>11</sup> On January 27, 2007, Howard University's Board of Trustees voted to divest from Sudan. The resolution barred investment from all companies doing business in the country. *Hilltop* reported that the university would advise investment managers and consultants of their decision, request that they refrain from investing in the country, and require them to inform the school of any company doing business in Sudan by June 30, 2007. With the resolution, Howard made history by becoming the first HBCU to divest from Sudan (Asquith 2007; Costley 2007). In a press release, President Swygert noted that the situation in Sudan had been unacceptable for a long time and that divestment was an obvious course for the university to take. He added that since Howard had historically fought for oppressed people the world over, Howard had to act to stop senseless mass murder. "As an institution that has always opposed such flagrant disrespect for human rights, Howard University has to use whatever options available to pressure the government" (Costley 2007, 1).

Though the resolution was passed in late January, the vote was not made public until March 30. As such, *Hilltop's* initial coverage of the divestment did not appear until campus editor Drew Costley's reporting was published in early April 2007. Costley offered thoughts from several members of the student body. Taofeek Syinbola, president of Howard's African Students Association, said that while it was good for the university to fight in the cause of social justice for Black people, more students needed to get involved in the struggle. Mafake Kane, a junior economics major from Senegal, opined that it was good that Howard was trying to pressure the government to take action to eliminate ethnic cleansing in the country (Costley 2007). Two weeks later, *Hilltop* published an editorial entitled "Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is." While the writer acknowledged that it was "great" that Howard's administration had joined other schools in divesting from Sudan, "Howard is not excused from their late decision to join divestment efforts. The situation has been going on for the larger part of this decade." Echoing Syinbola's earlier comments, the writer argued that more students needed to show interest in global human rights issues. "If we do not step up to help Black people internationally," they added, "the administration's efforts will look like a hollow attempt to help suffering people abroad" ("Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is," 2007, 9).

Howard was not the only HBCU to divest from Sudan. In April 2007, Hampton University's President William R. Harvey announced his institution's divestment from the country as well. Hampton had initiated its process the previous July and, by March 2007, had completely divested its \$250,000 from the country. Hampton's decision was lauded along with Howard's (Keller 2007; *Hampton University News*). Noting "the atrocities that the Sudanese government is heaping on its people," Harvey shared his hope that more people and companies would be informed about the violence in Sudan "and therefore cause more entities to divest" (Walson 2007). The following month, President George W. Bush responded to the Sudanese government's complicity in the violence in Darfur by imposing new economic sanctions. These sanctions not only blocked the assets of those Sudanese citizens who were implicated in the violence but also sanctioned more companies that the Sudanese government owned or controlled (US Embassy in Sudan 2022). Within two years of Howard's decision to divest, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for Omar al-Bashir. Among the charges brought by the ICC (the first in 2009, the second in 2010) against the Sudanese leader were crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide (ICC n.d.). Importantly, HBCUs Howard and Hampton had divested from Sudan on account of the Darfur genocide before the George W. Bush administration.

## Conclusion

In the past half-century of Black America's engagements with Africa, perhaps no two episodes have garnered more attention than the anti-apartheid and Save Darfur campaigns. While both movements saw American universities deploy divestment as an economic strategy to confront the culpable regimes, Howard

was unique among HBCUs by divesting from both South Africa and Sudan. While animated in each instance by a desire to support oppressed Africans, the two regimes and their associated human rights abuses were different from one another. At a contemporary moment removed from white minority colonial rule, a comparative analysis of Howard's two divestments offers an opportunity to consider the ways that HBCUs might continue to confront state-sponsored human rights abuses in Africa in the age of Black Lives Matter.

In the wake of the 2020 racial reckoning, Iheka and Lawrance contended that there was a chance to increase curricular offerings on Africa "in order to arrest the unwarranted ignorance of the continent in Euro-America" (Iheka and Lawrance 2021, 271). This sentiment aligns with the "Howard School of Foreign Policy" put forth in the early twentieth century, where scholars focused on intellectual awareness as an instrument of liberation (Johnson 2020). While Howard's postcolonial divestments were essentially economic stratagems to liberate Africans from state-sponsored oppression, it is important to acknowledge that these actions were made alongside other ways that Howard facilitated awareness of South Africa and Sudan. Just as Howard encouraged awareness of colonial Africa in the early-mid twentieth century, it is plausible to conclude that awareness—provided in curricular and extracurricular forums—can foster activism. The more academia centers on the study of historical and contemporary Africa and its peoples, the higher the likelihood that it will be sensitive to social, political, and economic realities facing African peoples. Such academic prioritization can take several forms, including the purposeful increase of graduate students and professors of African descent, deeper financial investment in African studies degree-granting programs, and incentivizing study abroad/cultural exchange programs in Africa.

In increasing awareness of modern Africa, one of the defining lessons of Howard's Darfur-related activism rests in its ardent engagement with an issue that was not tethered to traditional white-Black, European-African binary. For one, higher education could center Africa in a global Black Lives Matter paradigm by highlighting the ways that Africans continue to struggle with the structural legacies of colonialism. For example, the recent unrest in nations formerly colonized by the French (Niger, Gabon, Burkina Faso) could provide one opportunity for HBCUs to examine the ways that systemic anti-blackness with colonial roots have contributed to recent travails facing citizens of those countries. And yet, a truly comprehensive awareness of Black life in Africa would also compel greater attention and education placed on those contexts in Africa that do not so easily map onto those racial binaries that students in US institutions may be more familiar with. How, for example, might HBCUs (and other African American organizations) raise awareness of ethnic conflicts in Africa through an ethic of concern for Black life?

Howard University's decades-long investment in African studies and African affairs provides valuable precedents that can inform the manners in which higher education can prioritize Africa at this fraught moment in history. From curricular investments that raise awareness of contemporary and historical Africa, conferences and symposia providing space to discuss modern affairs on the continent, and strategic uses of economic capital to apply pressure on



abusive regimes, Howard's divestments from South Africa and Sudan provide important context for current and future ways that American colleges and universities can engage with Africa.

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## Notes

1. For quote, Krenn cites "U.S. Negroes Link Aid to Sub-Sahara African Nations with Rights Struggle," *New York Times*, November 25, 1962, 8.
2. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *UN General Assembly* 302, no. 2 (1948): 1, 3–4, [https://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/doc/unhrights\\_1.pdf](https://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/doc/unhrights_1.pdf).
3. "Church and University Action against Apartheid: A Summary of Withdrawals and Divestment," The Africa Fund, citing Investor Responsibility Resource Center, 5/79, <https://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-F38-84-al.sff.document.af000206.pdf>.
4. "Divestment Action on South Africa by US and Canadian Colleges and Universities," The Africa Fund, August 1988, <https://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-E6E-84-AL.SFF.DOCUMENT.a.coa000194.pdf>.
5. "Aid and Action Urged For Darfur," *Jet*, May 15, 2006, 12.
6. See Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, "Digital Howard," accessed March 24, 2024, <https://dh.howard.edu/do/search/?q=%22Naeesa%20Aziz%22&start=0&context=7295386&facet=>, where one can find and read Aziz's articles. Aziz is listed as a staff writer on "S.A. Battles AIDS: Free Drugs for All Infected," *Hilltop*, November 21, 2003, A7.
7. For Frazier's departmental appointment, see Franklin and Lusane (2018).
8. NAACP Mercer (PA) County Unit, 44th Annual Freedom Fund Banquet program, October 12, 2007, Amistad Research Center, Joe Madison Papers 2008 addendum, Box 2, pp. 3–4.
9. Email correspondence, Joe Madison to Kolt Willis (with Walter Fauntroy cc'd), January 27, 2007, Amistad Research Center, Joe Madison Papers 2008 addendum, Box 5.
10. Email correspondence, Joe Madison to Kolt Willis, January 27, 2007, Amistad Research Center, Joe Madison Papers 2008 addendum, Box 5.
11. Investors Against Genocide, "Colleges and Universities that Divested from Sudan," accessed April 10, 2024, <https://www.investorsagainstgenocide.org/about/resources/colleges-and-universities-that-divested-from-sudan/>.

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