

# Bono and US Treasury Secretary O'Neill tour Africa

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6 June 2002

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On a 10-day trip the pair visited Ghana, Uganda, South Africa and Ethiopia to see AIDS clinics, water projects, and orphanages. O'Neill announced that he was in Africa to listen and learn. Bono, and the charitable organisations that back him, hoped to persuade the treasury secretary to make more US aid money available for Africa.

It was a carefully crafted operation in which even the disparity between the two men—one a 65-year-old businessman and politician in a sober suit, the other a rock star in his wraparound shades—was milked for all the publicity it was worth.

Mimicking the hype that accompanies a rock tour, Bono distributed T-shirts printed with the motto, "The Odd Couple Tour of Africa 2002." The media lapped up this ready-made imagery.

At the final press conference O'Neill was asked what had been the most moving moment of the tour. He replied that for him that had come when, at an AIDS clinic in South Africa, a baby had been placed in his arms. Sat by the poolside in a luxury hotel, O'Neill recalled that the girl was, "in a pink sleeper. She was so sweet and trusting and her eyes were ... big and sparkling. ... If you really want to change my mind about anything, just give me a baby and talk to me about whatever it is you want! ... I'm sorry, I can't help it. They are so trusting and uncalculating."

A lack of calculation is not a character-trait that O'Neill shares. While each of the aid projects he visited is a small beacon hope for a fortunate few, they were nothing but a public relations opportunity for a man whose Republican Party faces a debacle in the November mid-term elections.

O'Neill's political career began as a systems analyst, working for the US government. There he became a friend of now Vice President Dick Cheney, who introduced him into the Bush circle. Under President Gerald Ford, he became Director of the Office of Management and Budget and effectively his chief of staff. His political advance also levered him to the top of the corporate ladder. He became vice-president of International Paper and ultimately president and then chairman of Alcoa, the huge US aluminium company.

In the business world he made a name for himself as a "maverick," with unconventional views such as advocating higher fuel taxes to encourage a more efficient US economy. He has publicly criticised the practice of making corporate political donations and when he was head of Alcoa he ended the

company's political contributions.

During the Africa trip he made much of his record at Alcoa. His proudest achievement, he said, was making it, "the safest company in the world" by allowing every employee access to a computer to report accidents. But O'Neill is no liberal reformer. His speciality was the introduction of new technology and accounting practices to transform old-style manufacturing industries and make them profitable.

As part of the Bush administration he has been a key figure in preparing tax cuts for the rich. At the same time he has championed a \$20 million cut in social security benefits for old people and wants to raise the retirement age to 70. (O'Neill is reported to have personally made \$25 million in his last year at Alcoa.) The collapse of Enron, he declared, was an example of "the genius of capitalism." "Companies come and go," O'Neill told reporters, and, showing a callous indifference to the fate of those who have lost their jobs and pensions in the collapse, insisted that it was not his role as treasury secretary to sort out the mess.

Abroad, he has been sharply critical of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for being too willing to intervene when countries face economic ruin. He called on the IMF not to intervene in Argentina, saying that the country's economic crisis was its own fault.

While preaching financial probity to other countries, O'Neill has demanded that Congress raise the debt ceiling because the US faces the prospect of an unprecedented default on its national debt as a result of the Bush administration's increased military spending. He told Congress in May, "We've already committed the resources that are going to drive us through the existing debt ceiling. It's not a question of whether we're going to do it or not, it's just a question of how close to the cliff we're going to run before we do what we know we need to do."

Despite his record O'Neill is not regarded highly by the Republican Party in Congress, who think that he is insufficiently close to Wall Street. Last December CNN and the *New York Post* predicted that he was on his way out of the administration as a result of factional struggles within the Republican Party.

In the aftermath of September 11, Congress invited Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the Federal Reserve and Robert Rubin, President Clinton's Treasury Secretary, to speak about the economy, but not O'Neill.

This snub has stimulated him to raise his profile before his

political career is cut short. The Bono trip threw him a lifeline. It gave him the kind of media coverage that no treasury secretary could normally expect, attracting attention from such unusual sources as *MTV* and *Rolling Stone* magazine.

O'Neill's Africa trip was not only a cynical exercise in self-publicity, but also an integral part of the administration's foreign policy. In March President Bush announced a Compact for Global Development, promising that the US would provide an extra \$5 billion in foreign aid between 2004 and 2006. The money is to be paid into a new Millennium Challenge Account and will be made available to countries that pass stringent political and economic test.

Treasury Secretary O'Neill said that the money would go to countries with "good governance and sound economic policies." Rather than giving to those countries in most need, O'Neill said, "We ... have an obligation to plant our resources where they will yield growth, rather than squandering precious seeds in unfertile soil."

O'Neill made it clear that the US government intended much of this money to be spent on the infrastructure of the recipient countries. No one would doubt that Africa needs investment in its infrastructure, but the projects O'Neill has in mind are intended to benefit US companies that want to exploit the natural resources and cheap labour of the continent.

With more oil and gas strikes off its Western coast, Africa has become a prime target for the oil companies—a fact that was reflected in the tour. O'Neill and Bono stopped off in Ghana, where Peter Watson, president of the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation, had been only the month before.

Other areas of Africa are beginning to attract manufacturing industries. Kenya and Uganda—another of O'Neill and Bono's destinations—are the front-runners.

It might be asked what is wrong with economic development and good governance? To answer this, we should look at who is making the offer.

O'Neill represents a government that has come to power by illegitimate and undemocratic means. It is associated with business practices, such as those at Enron, the scale of whose corruption dwarfs the petty embezzlement of the African regimes. O'Neill's definition of "good governance" is what best serves the interests of US capital concerns. And his stance on corruption is that it too should be a US monopoly.

O'Neill's eyes may genuinely fill with tears at the sight of an orphaned baby, but his government has forced thousands of families into poverty in America. They have cut welfare benefits and overseen record job losses. While widening the gulf between rich and poor at home, how can they narrow it on a global scale?

For the Bush administration, aid policy is another weapon in its attempt to dominate the world's resources. Bush's announcement of the Compact for Global Development was rushed out just before a similar announcement from Europe. Far from promising peaceful economic development for Africa, after decades of warfare associated with the Cold War, Bush's plans threaten to make Africa the scene of a new rivalry between Europe and America.

Bono's concern for the African poor is undoubted. He has a long

record of charitable work in Africa. Not only did he lend his name and time to LiveAid and to the Jubilee campaign for debt relief, he and his wife have also worked in an African orphanage.

But it is this record that makes him valuable to the Bush administration. Bono was at Bush's side when he announced the Compact for Global Development. The singer's appearance gave the announcement much more credibility than it would otherwise have had.

Bono has little to gain in commercial terms from his association with the Bush administration. It is unlikely to sell him any more records. It is probable that he has been naïve in entangling himself with the Bush administration and allowing himself to become its PR man, but his is a naiveté founded on the ability of those in power to manipulate an ego of gigantic proportions.

Bono's collaboration with the Bush White House reflects the way in which a section of liberal opinion among the richest layers of society can be drawn into the orbit of a fundamentally criminal regime, in the vainglorious belief that they can in some way modify its views and make it play a constructive role on the world stage.

Bono is probably sincere in hoping that he can utilise his celebrity to put the great and the not-so good under pressure to help the poor, whether it be George W., Britain's Tony Blair or even the Pope. Playing his chosen role of a down at heel bohemian, he rubs shoulders with the political elite of the most powerful state in the world and is hailed by the world's media as a spokesman for the oppressed.

Unfortunately, Bono simply hasn't a clue what he is talking about. An exceedingly rich man, he is socially and ideologically of the establishment rather than a threat to it. In consequence, he ends up in the role of court-jester rather than the voice of conscience he sees himself as. Despite his charitable work in Africa, his grasp of the realities of life for working people on any continent is no better than O'Neill's. Watching Ugandan workers labouring under the hot sun in the fields where they cultivate flowers for the European market, Bono enthused that this was, "globalisation at its best."



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