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A land of lost opportunities for Hillary

Hillary Clinton's tour of African countries left a different message with the inhabitants than what the US might have wished, writes **Simon Barber** in Washington

IT IS the time of year known in America as spring break. That means it is a very bad time to go anywhere where there is sun and sand. You will find it occupied by the nation's high school seniors and undergraduates in a glandular frenzy of pleasure-seeking.

You will not, however, find the nation's first high school senior, Chelsea Clinton, soaking up the rays on a Florida beach. Her mother, Hillary, has taken her on an improving trip to Africa at the taxpayer's expense.

Her father, the president, had more important things do, aside, of course, from nursing the knee he popped falling down steps at Greg Norman's place a couple of weeks ago. He had a date with Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Helsinki to discuss serious issues like Nato's enlargement and arms control. Helsinki in March would not have been much fun for Chelsea, and besides, even the president's daughter cannot come back from spring break without a tan. So Africa it was, then.

Naturally, the White House takes grave umbrage at such sarcastic jabs. In fact, it worries about such jabs a good deal more than it cares about preventing genocide in Bosnia or Rwanda. It wishes the press would wax lyrical on the significance Hillary and Chelsea's trek has for US-African relations, on the important signal it sends and the great token of US concern and respect it represents. And to be sure, a big signal is be-

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ing sent. Africa is still a place to which Washington condescends.

"During my trip I hope to showcase the tremendous democratic and economic progress African countries have made in recent years," said Mrs Clinton. Not a bad objective that. A pity she and her handlers made little or no effort to attain it.

In Senegal, she and Chelsea made the hoary pilgrimage to the Isle de Goree, the infamous staging point for the African slave trade, and the holiest shrine to the cult of African-American victimhood, not to mention a monument with a very mixed message. After all, those who passed through the "Door of No Return" (or something like it — the present "door" is of relatively modern vintage) had generally been sold by their own.

No doubt it was an important part of Chelsea's education that she get to see the place while she had an opportunity to do so with someone else footing the bill. But how much better would Mrs Clinton have served her hosts, and her alleged purpose, if she had insisted on touring, with media in tow, a modern factory, thereby demonstrating that, yes, such things do exist in Africa.

Instead, having shed the ritual tear at Goree, she headed for a school in Lady Bountiful mode to highlight how the great and good University of Michigan had supplied it with desks. Ah, but for the caring white man the children would have been sitting on the floor, or so madam would, albeit unwittingly, have us conclude.

Then it was on to SA.

Reading the US Information Agency's reports and transcripts of the First Lady's SA tour, one is left wondering what the point of it all was. Did this add anything to the relationship not already added by the regular annual visitations of Vice-President Al Gore? Did anyone come away from Mrs Clinton's speech at the University of Cape Town feeling especially uplifted? Or was the thrill chiefly the speaker's? Did the symbolism of her speaking in the same forum that the late Robert Kennedy famously addressed in 1968 mean anything? Somehow one felt the natural graciousness of her SA hosts, especially Nelson Mandela, was being abused.

Perhaps the women of the Victoria Mxenge housing project — they are building their own homes with the support, the information agency stresses, of the US Agency for International Development — enjoyed her visit. She herself seemed to get thoroughly carried away. "When I see my husband," she told the women, "I will tell him that I have learnt one of the secrets of building houses here, and that is that you build better if you sing and you dance while you build. It makes the work go along better for everyone."

She concluded with a homily: "And even in a country like the US, which has been a democracy for more than 200 years — much longer than SA — the only way we keep our democracy strong is by everyone working to build this there as well. Because in a democracy the government should not do all the work. The people must do the work not only to help build the houses but to help build a strong country." She meant no harm, but the unconscious attitude underlying her remarks was one of superiority — call it contemptuous compassion — of the lady of the manor talking to peasant children, the poor dears, on the estate and feeling saintly for doing so.

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Americans like Mrs Clinton and her husband rightly think SA's transformation is a thing of wonder. Understandably they want to be and have a part of it. Yet at the same time they have some mental block that prevents them from appreciating that it happened entirely independent of themselves, and that the poor dears are in fact extremely competent people who know a thing or two about democracy and a lot else besides. Funnily enough they even knew how to vote without US government-funded "experts" coming down to train them.

Now perhaps one cannot begrudge Mrs Clinton wanting to lay a wreath on the memorial for Hector Petersen, or joining Archbishop Desmond Tutu in planting a tree at a home for the victims of torture and violence. Yet, as harsh as it may sound, neither the memory of Petersen nor the tragedy of those unhinged by the horror that accompanied what outsiders condescendingly call "the miracle" are important for SA's future.

The point that needs to be rammed into the heads of all the Mrs Clintons is that South Africans are not poor dears. They do not need aid; they do not need the self-gratifying tears of the white person; even less do they need to be used as an excuse for giving money to domestic poverty and development pimps, which is what US aid is mostly about.

What is required is that the SA majority be recognised as smart, resourceful and industrious people who can write good computer codes, build excellent cars (and, regrettably, even better weapons) and sink mines to unimaginable depths, and who also do not have to be taught about democracy.

It would have been nice if Mrs Clinton had used her trip to highlight such things. But she did not. One can only hope Chelsea had a good time.

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