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Bush, Feeling Appreciated Abroad

Busy Travel Schedule Reflects Realities,
Opportunities of Last Year in Office

By Peter Baker
Washington Post Staff Writer
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MONROVIA, Liberia, Feb. 21 -- They proclaimed [George W. Bush](#) Day in Benin, thronged streets by the tens of thousands in [Tanzania](#) and christened the George Bush Motorway in [Ghana](#). As he wrapped up his [Africa](#) trip in [Liberia](#) on Thursday, they sang about him on the radio, crooning his name and warbling, "Thank you for the peace process."

For a president in his final year in office and saddled with low poll numbers, heading overseas, especially to a generally friendly part of the world, offers affirmation not always available at home. It has been years since President Bush drew crowds in the United States comparable to those he saw in Dar es Salaam, and it's hard to find U.S. highways named after him outside [Crawford, Tex.](#) Dancing women at home rarely wear his face on their skirts or blouses.

The president plans to pack his bags often in 2008, not just for the souvenirs but because, much as with any two-term presidency heading into its twilight, he may have more opportunity to assert leadership and solidify achievements than by staying in Washington. With Congress in opposition hands and the campaign to replace him captivating the nation, Bush's attention has turned to finding peace in the [Middle East](#) and accelerating the fight against disease and poverty in Africa.

"He realizes, like many presidents come to do, that he can have a real impact on people's lives in the foreign policy arena because prescriptive legislation is not needed," said former [White House](#) counselor [Dan Bartlett](#). The more Bush traveled and met people, Bartlett said, the more it animated him. "Personal experiences often help bring passion to public policy."

That represents a dramatic change for a president who arrived in Washington with a largely empty passport, a disdain for nation-building and an aversion to his father's focus on foreign policy. "Here's a guy who came to office believing that [California](#) is foreign policy and now understands that [Kenya](#) is domestic policy," said Bob Geldof, the rock star and activist who accompanied Bush on his trip. "It's a huge intellectual curve."

The arc of the little-traveled [Texas](#) governor's evolution into foreign policy president passed through the trials of Sept. 11, 2001, [Afghanistan](#) and [Iraq](#). Critics in both parties believe he wrecked U.S. foreign policy through a reckless adventure in Iraq that alienated much of the world and will take years to repair. Despite the crowds he generates in Africa, Bush remains a deeply unpopular figure in many other parts of the globe, where he is viewed as a cowboy bent on imposing his own views.

His final-year itinerary will again take him to [Israel](#) and the Palestinian territories this year. He will attend a [NATO](#) summit in [Romania](#) in early April and a [European Union](#) summit in [Slovenia](#) in June. He will head to

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[Japan](#) in July for a [Group of Eight](#) summit and a month later to [China](#) for the Summer Olympics. And finally, he plans to go to [Peru](#) in November for an [Asia-Pacific](#) economic meeting.

The eight overseas trips on the 2008 schedule are more than in any other year of his presidency.

Few of the trips, though, will carry the emotional power of the six-day, five-nation tour of Africa that ended Thursday in this nation ravaged by a 14-year civil war. Founded by freed American slaves in 1820, Liberia has long had a special relationship with the United States. When its civil war came to a climax in 2003, Bush pressured President [Charles Taylor](#) to step down and leave the country, then sent a small contingent of [U.S. Marines](#) to help stabilize the situation.

Bush has embraced Liberia's new president, [Ellen Johnson Sirleaf](#), the first woman ever elected to lead an African nation. "I want the people of Liberia to know, Madame President, the United States stands with you," he told her before heading to lunch at the executive mansion where another Liberian president was murdered in his bedroom in 1980. "We want to help you recover from a terrible period. We want you to build lives of hope and peace."

The United States has invested \$1.5 billion in reconstruction and peacekeeping in Liberia over the past five years, and Bush announced on this trip additional money for 1 million textbooks as well as desks for 10,000 students. Yet as he reviewed Liberia's retrained troops and visited a teacher training project, Bush got a stark view of how much still must be done, passing ramshackle houses without electricity or running water, occupied by people largely without work.

Bush returned to the White House on Thursday night.

[John Prendergast](#), a former Africa adviser in the Clinton White House who co-founded Enough, a human rights group, said Bush "has been genuinely moved by the enormity of the human impacts of some of the humanitarian crises. . . . The conservative Christian groups have taken these issues on for the same reasons -- the human consequences are compelling and their faith demands action."

No matter what he does in Africa, Iraq certainly will remain at the heart of Bush's foreign policy, for good or ill. But the focus on "soft power" in Africa reflects an effort by the president over the past three years to repair ruptured relations with European allies and reach out to other countries in solving major problems, such as stopping nuclear programs in [Iran](#) and [North Korea](#).

"Certainly he has grown and learned -- generally speaking, the hard way," said David J. Rothkopf, author of "Running the World," a history of the [National Security Council](#). Bush at first trusted ideologues, accepted shoddy plans and embraced unilateralism, a "particularly poisonous" combination, he said. But lately, "there has been a renewed effort to reach out to allies, to place more emphasis on communication and multilateral mechanisms, and perhaps above all, there has been a growing awareness of the limitations on American power."

And the limitations on a president's remaining time.

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