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AN AFRICAN ARCHIVE

CRITICS FROM developing countries often have a valid complaint: On global affairs, the United States can have a short attention span. Crises get the spotlight, whether in Somalia, Bosnia, or Afghanistan.

The Rev. Charles Stith wants to make sure that Africa gets more than this cursory, disaster-directed glance.

The US ambassador to Tanzania under President Clinton, Stith is organizing the African Presidential Archives and Research Center at Boston University.

It's a timely idea. When it comes to news of Africa, AIDS and political crises grab the headlines. Many Americans probably missed the news that US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick just spent eight days in Kenya, South Africa, and Botswana to discuss ways to improve trade relationships between these countries and the United States. The need is vast. According to Zoellick, Africa had a 5 percent share of global trade during the 1960s but currently has less than 2 percent.

Stith's presidential center could help fill the knowledge gap and build international relationships. The center will offer a one-year residency program to former democratically elected African heads of state. Stith hopes to attract such leaders as Nelson Mandela, Senegal's former president Abdou Diouf, Ghana's former president Jerry Rawlings, and Tanzania's former president Ali Hassan Mwinyi.

Another possible candidate is Cassam Uteem, who resigned this month as president of Mauritius, the island nation off the coast of Madagascar. Uteem stepped down after fighting with Parliament over an antiterrorism bill, saying the bill "contains a number of clauses that in my opinion are contrary to our democratic life."

In addition to tapping African presidents, the center will be a real and virtual archive. Its Public Papers/Private Conversations Project will amass documents and interviews of African leaders. Initially privacy will be offered in the interviews to encourage participants to speak candidly. The goal is to release these conversations eventually to add to the historical record. Stith also hopes to publish an annual report on Africa, support research on democratization and free markets, and sponsor conferences and a lecture series.

The center just received a \$1 million grant from the Lloyd G. Balfour Foundation, creating considerable potential. It could help develop curriculums for local public schools, offer residencies to other African leaders, and possibly even establish a program for Americans to spend time in Africa.

In some ways the world grows smaller, pulled closer by cellphones, e-mail, Web pages. With work, Stith's presidential center could improve on this, giving the United States an edge in getting to know more about its African neighbors.