

# Helen C. Epstein & “Another Fine Mess”

SEASON 1  
episode two

---

Nicholas Lemann

Hi, I'm Nicholas Lemann, and welcome to Underreported, the podcast from Columbia Global Reports. I'm here today with Helen C. Epstein, a visiting professor of global public health and human rights at Bard College in Annandale, New York. In 2007, her book, *The Invisible Cure: Why We're Losing the Fight Against AIDS in Africa*, was a New York Times notable book and Amazon.com's best science book of 2007. Her articles have appeared in the New York Review of Books, the New York Times Magazine, and other publications, and she's worked as a consultant for many organizations, including the World Bank, UNICEF, and Human Rights Watch.

In her latest book, *Another Fine Mess: America, Uganda, and the War on Terror*, out this month, Helen Epstein provides a vivid new account of Ugandan dictator Yoweri Museveni's 30-year reign, chronicling how Western readers' single-minded focus on the War on Terror, and their naive dealings with strongmen are at the root of much of the turmoil in eastern and central Africa, short-circuiting the power the people of this region might otherwise have over their own destiny. Is the West to blame for the agony of Uganda and its neighbors?

Helen, welcome. Let's start, before we get to the specific topic of the book, how did you start becoming a regular visitor to Africa?

Helen Epstein

That happened a long time ago. I'd always been interested in Africa, since childhood, for whatever reason. But I didn't really go there until I was in my early 30s, and I'd been working as a biochemist for many years by then. And, I went to work in an AIDS lab, actually, at Makerere University in Uganda. It was very early days.

So, I first went to Uganda in 1991, as a biochemist. It was a sort of post-doctoral situation. And I worked in an AIDS lab there, I helped set one up. One of the first AIDS labs in the country, actually. And we were trying to develop a vaccine, with results that we now know, it turned out to be extremely difficult. And I had some sense that it was going to be a very, very difficult thing to do. So, while I became kind of disenchanted with AIDS research, I became fascinated with the country and the people, and their story, and have been ever since.

Nicholas Lemann

How much time have you spent there over the years?

Helen Epstein

It's hard to say, because I've kind of gone back and forth as a consultant, and as a writer for almost 25 years. And I lived there for a couple of years. I taught at the University Makerere for a couple of years, and then came back on various consultancies.

Nicholas Lemann

Now, from the moment you started going there, Museveni was already president, right?

Helen Epstein

That's right. And as far as I knew, everything was going well, but there was a great deal that I didn't know at that time. It seemed, to many of us outsiders, like a very hopeful place.

Nicholas Lemann

What was so hopeful about it?

Helen Epstein

Well, we were told by the World Bank, for example, that the economy was in recovery. The price of coffee was going up, which is what many peasants lived on. It seemed very peaceful. It was hard to imagine that this was the country that had been sort of ravaged with violence by Idi Amin, and Uganda's other dictators. And, it was just some of the kindest people I've ever met, and some of the most interesting people I've ever met. So, I really loved it.

Nicholas Lemann

Tell us a little bit about Museveni, and where he came from, how he got elected president in the first place. Who is he?

Helen Epstein

He didn't get elected president actually [laughs].

Nicholas Lemann

Or claimed to get elected.

Helen Epstein

He came to power through an insurgency, actually. An armed insurgency. Museveni comes from western Uganda, which is a region that's very near Rwanda. And he comes from an ethnic group that's closely related to the Tutsis of Rwanda. And those are cattle people. He had a kind of fascination from an early age – as far as his teachers and contemporaries' stories go – a fascination with military things. He read military books, used to dress up like a little field marshal when he was a kid, and march around.

And his name is – Museveni even reflects that. The name Yoweri is a kind of Africanization of the name Joel. But Museveni refers to the group of Ugandan soldiers who went out and fought in the seventh regiment in the King's African Rifles, during World War II. I think his grandfather had been in this regiment, and so he was named, he was given that name Museveni.

And then he went to, he joined kind of radical student politics at Dar es Salaam University, where he studied politics. He wrote his thesis about Frantz Fanon, and how he saw the expression of his ideas of the war in Mozambique, where the rebels were beating up on Portuguese soldiers. So he witnessed that. And then he came back and, almost as soon as he got back, he joined the government's security service. Actually, he was in intelligence. But then the government was overthrown by Idi Amin almost immediately. And so he pretty much joined a rebellion after that, to try to overthrow Amin, and spent the '70s in exile.

Then he and other groups, and the Tanzanian army overthrew Idi Amin in 1980, or 1979 rather. And then another president came in through non-democratic means, an election was rigged, and Museveni then went back to the bush and started his rebellion, which was eventually successful in 1986. And he's ruled the country ever since.

Nicholas Lemann

So, it seems unlikely from a US perspective that somebody who grew up admiring Frantz Fanon would immediately be embraced by our president, Ronald Reagan. How did that happen?

Helen Epstein

This is very mysterious. But what we do know is that meetings between Museveni and the White House began quite early. So, by 1987 he was already acquainted with the Reagans, and he visited Washington again in 1988, and again in 1989, and since then he has had more high-level contact with Western leaders than any other living African president. And yet, very few people in the West have ever heard of him.

Nicholas Lemann

What does Washington see in this guy? Why do they invest so much time and attention on him, as opposed to any other African leader?

Helen Epstein

I suspect it has something to do with his military aptitude. When he went into the bush, he was a very young man, he was still in his 30s. And he commanded a group of generally educated, young, Ugandans who managed to topple a much stronger national army, I think just through his kind of cunning and strategy. And I think this really impressed the Americans, because I think it turned out that that would prove very useful in the partnership between America and Uganda.

Nicholas Lemann

So in any partnership, both sides are looking for something. In this partnership, what's each side looking for? To the extent that they're not sincerely in love with each other, and it's more practical. What's each side getting out of the partnership?

Helen Epstein

What's the real politic? Yes. Good question. Well, from the West's point of view, I think after the war in Vietnam, there was a sense that sending young Americans abroad to secure our national interests, whatever they might be, was increasingly difficult. And, even on – especially to a place like Africa, which can be quite dangerous.

And so we have increasingly in Africa, especially after 1993 and the sort of Somalia debacle, when 19 young servicemen were killed in local fighting. We've increasingly relied upon African partners to secure our interests in Africa. And even secure our interests in other places. We actually have Ugandan contractors increasingly replacing our own soldiers, for example, in Iraq.

But, particularly in Africa, we had a lot of strategic interest. For example, after we began supporting the Afghan rebellion against the Soviets in the 1980s, a lot of small arms, and weapons and so on, began kind of pouring across the Sahelian region in north Africa, and particularly into Sudan.

And there were concerns there that radical Islam, which was increasingly replacing the Soviet Union as our great source of rivalry for world power, that these would be falling into their hands, and that an increasing number of terrorist attacks against Western targets were going to be carried out there. There was a rising Islamic radical movement that eventually did come to power in 1989 in Sudan. And we were already afraid of it in the mid-80s.

And Uganda happens to be right next to Sudan, so we were hoping – and Museveni had a long-standing relationship with a rebel movement called the Sudan People's Liberation Army, SPLA, which was based in southern Sudan. And so it was thought that Museveni might be able to help us help the SPLA, which eventually happened. So, that and the SPLA would then help weaken Sudan, which is what we wanted to achieve.

Now what did Museveni get out of the deal? He got an enormous amount of foreign aid. We don't really know how much, but we do know at least 20 million has changed hands, probably more, has flowed into Uganda, and large numbers of weapons, military, training, and enormous diplomatic training, also. Museveni is always seen as sort of the good guy in the region, except that's not the case.

Nicholas Lemann

So before we get to that, if you could just sort of sketch out, to the extent that he acts as a kind of proxy military force for the United States in the region. Let's go country by country and talk about his role, not just in Uganda and Sudan, you just talked about, but also Somalia, and particularly Rwanda, if you could just describe his regional activities.

Helen Epstein

Yeah. So, when he came to power – I mentioned before that he's closely related to the Tutsis of Rwanda. Large numbers of Tutsis were refugees at that time in Uganda, because they had been chased out because of pogroms around the time of independence by the majority Hutu population, who had felt for a long, long time – centuries – that the Tutsis had lorded over them, and had oppressed them.

So suddenly the Hutus got democratic rights, and they went a bit overboard and committed many crimes against the Tutsis, who then fled to Uganda, where a new generation grew up, of sharp, often rather well educated, young men who then joined Museveni's rebel group that overthrew the government of Uganda.

And so when Museveni came to power, 25% of his men were Rwandan Tutsis actually. And many of them were appointed to high positions in his army, and they immediately began plotting to then use Uganda's help in taking over their own country. And in 1990, with weapons from Uganda, several thousand of them crossed the border into Rwanda, and eventually set up camps in the northern mountains. From which they then staged regular attacks, and the Rwandan government then fought back, and there was a sort of ongoing civil war for about three and a half years, which culminated in the genocide in 1994.

And throughout that period, Museveni was allowing weapons and personnel to cross back and forth across the border between Uganda and the RPF. So they were being continually supplied, which is a violation of the UN Charter, it's a violation of Organization of African Unity rules, it's a violation of Museveni's own promises, because he said he wouldn't do that. But he did it.

Nicholas Lemann

What's his role there now?

Helen Epstein

His role in Rwanda? Not much, I think.

Nicholas Lemann

I notice Rwanda has a very popular president who just got 99% of the vote.

Helen Epstein

[laughs] He does. He does. The man who took over, Paul Kagame, was kind of seen at one time as Museveni's protege, and the two of them – Rwanda's dictatorship is much more sort of overt than Uganda's is. Uganda is more of a sort of hidden dictatorship. But yes, Kagame has just managed to reelect himself for yet another, a third term in office, and is likely to rule for the foreseeable future over a very cowed and terrified population for the most part. That's the feeling I get when I'm there.

Relations between Museveni and Kagame have been sort of on and off, and hot and cold, and rather mysterious. They once almost went to war against each other in the early 2000s, then they became friends again. Not clear what's happening now.

Nicholas Lemann

And where else has Museveni been regionally active?

Helen Epstein

Very early on, he also became involved in the rebellion that gave rise to the toppling of Mobutu Sese Seko, who was then leader of Congo. So he was involved in essentially creating the conditions that led to the horrific civil war. Or it wasn't really a civil war, it was actually, it involved about nine countries in the region. But the terrible war that beset Congo between 1996 and that really continues to an extent today. There is still a very complex and dangerous situation there. Thousands of people are still being killed there.

So Uganda was involved in that, Uganda occupied thousands of miles of Congolese territory, extracted billions of dollars of natural resources during the 1990s. And created a sort of maelstrom that's going to be very hard for the Congolese to see their way out of, politically.

Nicholas Lemann

So let's go back to Museveni at home, and how he's become a less and less attractive figure, at least to you, and could you explain that?

Helen Epstein

I think he's certainly less and less attractive to me, that's true. I had long been aware of his un-democratic tendencies, because later on I became friends with people in the political opposition and began to realize what they were up against.

But I became particularly aware of this when I got to know a young editor journalist who had been running a newspaper in Uganda – which was at the time one of the most popular in the country – that reported on a lot of these sort of foreign military ventures on the sort of early moves in the Rwandan civil war, for example, and the war in Congo. And also, the troubles in northern Uganda, for which Museveni's army is also largely responsible.

And so I got to know him, and his story, which I tell in the book.

Nicholas Lemann

**This is Lawrence.**

Helen Epstein

This is Laurence Kiwanuka Nsereko, whose story is in the book. And when I first met him, he told me that he'd been tortured, that his newspaper had been shut down at times, that the offices of his political party had been torched, that he'd been rigged out of an election, which he'd run for to be part of a constituent assembly that was going to draft Uganda's new constitution and so on.

And I thought, that's interesting. One hears many stories, and I didn't know quite whether to believe him or not, but then I found some old Amnesty International reports which pretty much confirmed everything he was saying. And that even as I had been enjoying myself in Uganda, working in the AIDS lab in the early 1990s and marveling at how the country had been restored to peace, that this was going on. The torture chambers, and all the rest. And was actually well-known to the diplomatic community as well, which was ignoring it and covering it up.

Nicholas Lemann

Has Museveni gotten worse?

Helen Epstein

I don't think so. That's what people say. There's this sort of idea that he had been a good leader in the beginning, and that he suddenly became more and more dictatorial as time went on. I actually don't agree with that. And I think the book makes a pretty good case that right from the beginning he was a bit terrifying.

Nicholas Lemann

So he's now with Trump on his sixth US president.

Helen Epstein

**Yes.**



Nicholas Lemann

From different parties. And they all have one thing in common, which is they stick with him.

Helen Epstein

Yeah

Nicholas Lemann

Why?

Helen Epstein

We don't know where Trump is on this. Trump is AWOL when it comes to Africa, so we don't know what his policy is. But it does seem that whether we're talking about Reagan, or George H.W. Bush, or Bill Clinton, or George W. Bush, or even, sadly, Barack Obama, every president has continued to lavish enormous amounts of military and development aid on Museveni.

Because at first, he was our man in Sudan, supplying the SPLA, and then later on he sent in peacekeepers who have been kind of instrumental in trying to keep the Somalia situation under control. Of course the Somalia situation isn't really under control, but his was the only army that was willing to actually go in and fight al-Shabaab.

Nicholas Lemann

What would happen to him if the US did not support him so generously and steadfastly?

Helen Epstein

Well at the moment it's hard to know, because China is also involved in Africa heavily at the moment, and might well take over supporting him. And so that's a concern. Early on, had we not supported him early on, back in the late '80s and early '90s, that was a key time, when actually, George H.W. Bush, George W.'s father, made a very strong commitment to democracy at that time.

He said "now the Cold War is over, the day of the dictator is ending, it's time to support democracy around the world." And he actually walked the talk, in fact. He did

support democratic transitions, and really sort of forced old tyrants to democratize their countries in a number of places. In Ghana, for example, and in Zambia, and Malawi. All of those countries turned, and since then – South Africa, obviously. And since then those countries have had their problems, they're all beset with corruption, and they've got political problems as well, and so on. But the problems are nothing like as bad as Uganda. I mean, Uganda is surrounded by these bloodbaths: Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, the Joseph Kony problem, which is also of Museveni's making, and Somalia, and so on.

I mean, Uganda's really been exporting terror since the late 1980s, early '90s. Whereas, these other countries, they're sort of making progress towards becoming real countries, with a national identity, with a sense of political order, and so on. Of course, there's still problems, but nothing like the problems that you see in this kind of Horn and Great Lakes region where you just see millions of bodies, really. And huge numbers of refugees, by the way. Which is a big concern for us.

Nicholas Lemann

What would happen if – and your book makes it clear this is not likely to happen – the US, for whatever reason, said “we're not supporting this guy anymore.” What would happen to him, and what would happen to the country?

Helen Epstein

Right now?

Nicholas Lemann

Yes.

Helen Epstein

It depends on what form that lack of support takes, I think. I think unfortunately, when America tends to do things, it tends to do them unilaterally. And that tends to be a problem.

What I would prefer to see happen, and it's very hard to – this is sort of kind of touching faith in international diplomacy I guess – but is if the US and western Europe, and also the Asian countries that are involved there – Japan and China and so on – would all come together and pressure Museveni to step down somehow. It does work. It did work in South Africa, it's worked in many, many countries. And

to really sort of build a consensus around allowing the Ugandan people, whose democratic wishes have been subverted in election after election after election, if they could only be allowed to determine their own leadership and their own future, which is guaranteed to them in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, by the way. The right to choose your own representatives. And that would be wonderful. But the world is very distracted at the moment.

Nicholas Lemann

And so, if this happened, you don't think the same cycle would repeat?

Helen Epstein

No, I don't. I don't. Because, there are a number of leaders who have not only expressed a commitment to democracy, but have acted upon it. They have not taken up guns...

Nicholas Lemann

Leaders in Uganda?

Helen Epstein

Yes. Inside Uganda. Who are in the opposition right now, who have very strong followings, and have parties that function. They have their problems and so on, as every political party does. But they're organized, they have representatives all over the country, they're politicians who are loved, and practically worshipped by the people. But, you know, they don't have – unless they're willing to go to war and fight this guy, which would be very difficult anyway, and that's not the kind of transition they want in the first place – they can get nowhere. But they're real heroes. Real, unsung heroes of this story.

Nicholas Lemann

What's the lesson in this story, in terms of the US, other countries, how they operate in Africa?

Helen Epstein

I think that this is really, for me, this is the great, the last great frontier of civil and political rights. It took us a long time as a world to kind of come to grips with the fact that slavery was wrong and we needed to end it. It took longer for the United

States, for example, to figure out that everybody deserves equal rights, regardless of the color of their skin, or their gender. Although that battle, those battles are still continuing.

But we've come an awfully long way from the days of Jim Crow, even so. But we really still don't recognize that African people deserve rights too, and that they are human beings with just the same, who deserve the same respect as we do. And there's still a tendency to see, especially on the part of our leaders, that it's a country to be exploited.

And really what's at the bottom of all of this is the fact that there's about \$24 trillion worth of unexploited mineral wealth under the ground in the eastern Congo. And Museveni has been quite instrumental in ensuring that those areas are in the hands of allies of the West. And from that point of view, from the Pentagon and the National Security Council say "well then he's our man, regardless of what he does to his own people, or those in neighboring countries."

Nicholas Lemann

How old is he?

Helen Epstein

We don't know, actually. There are all sorts of rumors about that. He claims that he is about 72, I think, but in those days, it is true that birth certificates were not routinely issued to nomadic cattle herders. So we don't really know.

Nicholas Lemann

If left on his own, does he have a successor that he has in mind?

Helen Epstein

There are all sorts of rumors that he's grooming his son, who is at the moment I guess a brigadier, or a general, I think. And he's been sort of rapidly promoted through the ranks of the army, despite the fact that he's never seen combat, or as far as my military friends in the army tell me, done anything particularly heroic. And so does seem to be the one who's being groomed to take over, and that's an enormous worry.

Nicholas Lemann

What would it take, do you think, to create the kind of moral awakening in the US about this problem? I hope your book is a major contribution, by the way, and I think it is, but what would make us change our minds?

Helen Epstein

I don't know. I mean, one of the things that's kind of a silver lining, if one can say that about the Trump presidency, is it has awakened all kinds of conversations about human rights, and justice, all over the United States, and all over the world, in fact. And that it may be time to examine this question, or the time may come to examine it. And once we begin to discuss it, and when people really see what our taxes have been doing to that region of the world, and to those people who have done no harm to us, I think one could only hope that there will be such an awakening.

Nicholas Lemann

What is Lawrence doing now?

Helen Epstein

He is working upstate. He's a teacher.

Nicholas Lemann

Upstate New York.

Helen Epstein

Upstate New York, yeah. He's a teacher at Dutchess County Community College, And he also works for the state of New York with an institution for developmentally disabled people. And he works also very hard as the external liaison for Uganda's democratic party. So he's very involved in trying to raise awareness, both among the Ugandan diaspora, and anyone else who cares to listen, about the problems in the country.

Nicholas Lemann

Does he want to move back?

Helen Epstein

Of course he wants to go home. He has a wife and child there, who he's longing to see.

Nicholas Lemann

But if he went back now, it wouldn't turn out well?

Helen Epstein

No. No. Definitely not. Definitely not.

Nicholas Lemann

Okay, well, thank you for this conversation. And thank you very much for the book. This is a book, it's an angry book, with a kind of earned anger, and I think this is a step, an important step, in creating the kind of awareness that you rightly said is missing. It's impossible to read the book and say "oh, so what, it's fine." So I hope it begins what might be a protracted process of changing minds about Museveni.

Helen Epstein

I hope so too, and about the continent generally. Anyway, thank you so much for this conversation.

Nicholas Lemann

Helen Epstein's new book, *Another Fine Mess: America, Uganda, and the War on Terror*, is available now wherever you buy books. Thank you for speaking with us.