The New Frontier of American Diplomacy:
African Decolonization, Modernization, and the Making of a Civil Rights Narrative

by

Vivien Lavinia Chang

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2013

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(History)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

July 2016

© Vivien Lavinia Chang, 2016
Abstract

This study examines the growing importance of race to US relations with Africa in the context of decolonization, with a focus on the overseas effects of domestic racial problems and the ways in which American strategists sought to counter negative international opinion. It argues that Cold War concerns impelled American elites to craft a triumphalist narrative about the civil rights movement, which, in the course of the early 1960s, coalesced with theories of modernization to evolve into more concrete ideas about the need to repair the US image abroad. By analyzing presidential correspondence and speeches, newspaper editorials, United States Information Agency propaganda materials, and State Department reports, this paper reveals the twofold objectives of triumphalist development rhetoric, which bolstered the Kennedy administration’s modernizing ambitions in postcolonial Africa and informed the overseas representation of domestic racial developments.
Preface

This thesis is entirely the original, unpublished, and independent work of the author, Vivien Lavinia Chang.
# Table of Contents

Abstract............................................................................................................................................ii

Preface............................................................................................................................................iii

Table of Contents............................................................................................................................iv

Acknowledgements..........................................................................................................................v

Introduction......................................................................................................................................1

The Advent of Race in US Foreign Affairs......................................................................................8

Modernization and Kennedy’s Vision of Postcolonial Africa............................................................20

Reconciling Racial Progress with Modernity..................................................................................32

Civil Rights Legislation and American Triumphalism..................................................................40

Conclusion.....................................................................................................................................49

Bibliography...................................................................................................................................52
Acknowledgements

My greatest debt is to Jeffrey Byrne, who is not only the best adviser one could hope for but a wonderful mentor and role model. In the past two years, he has been exceedingly generous with his time and wisdom, and his travel stories enlivened plenty of dull afternoons. I am grateful for his and my second reader Jessica Wang’s support during this process, and to Heidi Tworek for agreeing to be my third reader at the last minute. Collectively and individually, they elevated this project in numerous and profound ways.

The History Department at the University of British Columbia provided a vibrant intellectual community and a (literal) home away from home. I owe gratitude, especially, to Michel Ducharme, Paul Krause, Bradley Miller, David Morton, and Tamara Myers, who have been valuable sources of guidance and who have, in ways big and small, enriched my historical imagination. As Brad noted during one of our first meetings, scholarly endeavors are always collaborative efforts; his observation could not have been more apt.

I am also thankful for my fellow graduate students, who have by turns inspired, challenged, and sustained me. Eriks Bredovskis, Dexter Fergie, Alexey Golubev, Carlos Halaburda, Edgar Liao, John Miller, Aaron Molnar, and Max Zeterberg commented on full, partial or multiple drafts and kept me in high spirits during the more taxing stages of this project. Others, including but not limited to David Adie, Eric Becklin, Barrie Blatchford, Tryggvi Brynjarsson, Devin Eeg, and Conor Wilkinson, provided good cheer along the way.

At my first Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations conference, I received thoughtful questions and suggestions on a later draft from historians outside of my immediate circle. Ronald Williams, as the chair of my panel, provided especially incisive comments.
I could not have completed this project without the generous financial support from the UBC Faculty of Arts and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the assistance provided by the archivists and staff at the National Archives at College Park, the Library of Congress, and the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Special thanks are due to Jack Cox, James Smith, Patrick Trimmer, and Eric Van Slander, who patiently showed me the ins and outs of archival research.

Finally, I am indebted to my brother, who engaged in countless conversations with me on the subject, and my parents—our first teachers—for sharing with us their love of history and storytelling, and for stocking our home with more books than we could ever read.
Introduction

In 1938, the Carnegie Corporation of New York commissioned Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal to conduct a study of race relations in the United States. The organization chose him over domestic scholars because of his ability to provide an outsider’s point of view, an increasingly valuable perspective American elites dared not overlook in the context of rising extremist ideologies. Indeed, the following year saw the eruption of the Second World War, a global conflict predicated on constructed racial categories and divided along ideological as well as moral fault lines. Six years later, at the height of the war, Myrdal published his seminal text, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy,* which served as the first comprehensive account of the African American condition and introduced the American public to the adverse effects of domestic racial problems on US foreign relations. In the book, he addressed the discrepancies between the promise and practice of the American creed as manifest in the nation’s segregation laws, cautioning that abiding racial inequalities came with a disastrous set of strategic consequences and urging for reforms: “The situation is actually such that any and all concessions to Negro rights in this phase of the history of the world will repay the nation many times, while any and all injustices inflicted upon them will be extremely costly.”\(^1\)

His observations proved prescient as the end of World War II gave way to another global, large-scale conflict that was more abstract, to be sure, but no less influential to the reshaping of international relations. At the heart of the Cold War was a competition between two opposing yet equally totalizing ideologies: American-style liberalism and Soviet-style socialism. Both superpowers saw their respective frameworks as being righteous in cause, universal in scope, and

capable of ushering in modernity and a new global order. As the Kremlin sought to impose Marxist-Leninism on the nations in the Eastern Bloc, the US was expanding its influence in Western Europe, creating, as historian Geir Lundestad argued, an “empire by invitation.”² Which one of these visions would constitute the “end of history”?³ This was the question that preoccupied both American and Soviet policymakers. As the process of decolonization became increasingly intertwined with the Cold War, the emerging Third World became the primary site for waging this ideological battle. Newly independent nations in the Southern Hemisphere’s alleged neutralism and underdevelopment rendered them convenient testing grounds for both the appeal of the superpowers’ competing visions and the validation of their modernization schemes. Convincing postcolonial leaders to adopt democratic capitalism as a modernizing ideology thus became a diplomatic priority for Washington.

Testament to Myrdal’s prophecy, racism in the US imperiled America’s mission in the Third World, made up predominantly of peoples of color, and civil rights incidents became foreign policy disasters in the eyes of US officials. From the Little Rock Crisis in 1957 to James Meredith’s tumultuous enrollment at the University of Mississippi in 1962, domestic racial episodes elicited deleterious overseas perceptions of American democracy. Indeed, as the US articulated support for decolonization, American racism left a bitter taste in the mouths of Third World leaders and prompted them to question the very sincerity of America’s alleged stance on European colonialism. Especially discomfiting to US policymakers was the racist treatment foreign dignitaries experienced during their visits to the United States. As more nations in the

Global South achieved independence and sought formal diplomatic relations with the US, African diplomats encountered segregation firsthand when they were refused service at restaurants and hotels, constituting, as Secretary of State Dean Rusk recounted, “a severe barrier to cordial relations with many foreign states.” In light of the structural racism pervading US society, postcolonial elites became increasingly convinced that American leaders were merely paying lip service to the anticolonial convictions they rhetorically avowed.

Racial crises in the US captured the attention of the entire developing world, but especially pertinent to American strategic goals in the 1950s and 1960s was the lens through which African elites viewed these events. The “loss of China” to Communism in 1949 and the subsequent infiltration of Communist insurgencies in the rest of Asia indicated, to American political leaders, that much of the Third World stood on the precipice of being subsumed under the Soviet sphere of influence. With Asian nations falling like “dominoes,” US elites considered Africa’s strategic importance increasingly vital to the West. Specifically, they deemed the continent’s developing oil fields and production of uranium, cobalt, and industrial diamonds among other raw materials intrinsic to the arms buildup in the nuclear age, while army installations, like Kagnew Station in Ethiopia, enhanced crucial US military communications.

Against the backdrop of a geopolitical landscape permeated by the Cold War ethos, American policymakers believed it imperative to safeguard US interests abroad. In what essentially constituted a second scramble for Africa, American fears of Communist ascendance engendered

---


a resolve to win the hearts and minds of Africans in order to keep them in the political orbit of the Free World.

Accordingly, this thesis addresses the growing importance of race to US relations with Africa, with a focus on the overseas impact of domestic racial problems and the ways in which American strategists sought to counter negative international opinion. I argue that Cold War concerns impelled American elites to craft a narrative about civil rights developments and racial progress in order to transform a foreign policy liability into a strategic asset. What I call the civil rights narrative is a familiar one for those who are acquainted with American triumphalism, which portrays the US as “a uniquely great nation...overcoming all obstacles on a triumphant march towards the perfect [fulfillment] of its founding ideals...” Its shortcomings and deficiencies are limited and temporary, the logic went, the inevitable overcoming of which demonstrates the nation’s dynamism and potential.6 Highly publicized racial episodes thus abetted—when they could be incorporated into the said narrative—the broader anticommunist crusade and modernizing mission in the Third World. In tracing its origins, motivations, and aims, three critical features stand out. First and most evidently, the civil rights discourse emerged from Cold War concerns about international opinion, assisting in the dissolution of the distinction between domestic politics and foreign policy. The second, and less perceptible, aspect to this story was its fusion of American triumphalism and associated theories of modernization. The abstract notions of exceptionalism and progress provided American strategists with the contours of their racial narrative, which, in the course of the early 1960s, coalesced with the emerging concept of modernization to evolve into more concrete ideas about the need to repair

---

America’s international image. The third and final takeaway is that it constituted in large part a reactive formulation on the part of American elites, an attempt to respond to foreign pressure and maintain power at a time of rapid global change. Its impact, as we will see, would be discounted by its dogmatic adherence to the hegemonic discourse of liberal gradualism.

Prior to the late 1980s, the US role in Africa received little scholarly attention, its influence in Cold War geopolitics eclipsed by an overwhelming focus on American activities in Asia, which involved wars of considerably greater magnitude and, as a result, yielded graver geopolitical consequences for the US. Only in recent decades have historians begun to investigate US-African relations as a crucial component of the American Cold War vision. Within this growing body of scholarship, there has been a fundamental preoccupation with the extent to which American racialism shaped policymaking toward Africa as well as US efforts to modernize the Third World in the context of decolonization. The latter focus, especially, has given rise to a debate about the legitimacy of the Kennedy administration’s New Frontier policies. Some scholars have applauded his alignment with African independence movements and disbursement of development aid, arguing that his liberal outlook marked a departure from his more pragmatic predecessors. Others, however, have contended that Kennedy was as ardent

---


as Eisenhower—if not more so—in pursuing US strategic objectives in the Southern Hemisphere and that the “global Cold War” actually escalated in the early 1960s.9

In the past few decades, the emergence of America in the world as a field of study has also engendered a new scholarly focus on internationalizing domestic race relations and civil rights developments. Within this field, one body of literature examines the degree to which Cold War international pressure forced the US to confront its domestic racial problems.10 The “Cold War imperative” posits US foreign policy interests as a critical factor in motivating the federal government’s commitment to desegregation.11 Historians have also addressed the ways in which American policymakers countered negative foreign opinion through public diplomacy and propaganda.12 In reconceptualizing and recontextualizing American race relations, these perspectives have enriched our understanding of the wider social and political climate within which the civil rights movement took place. Placing the civil rights narrative at the center of my study, however, allows us to acquire a deeper understanding of the continuities and ruptures that characterized American diplomatic strategies toward the emerging Third World during the Cold


War. Specifically, this paper contends that the Kennedy administration’s modernizing ambitions in postcolonial Africa informed the overseas representation of domestic racial developments, and the message of social uplift inherent in development rhetoric was projected inwards as well as outwards during his tenure. Yet the fundamentals of this narrative remained predictable outgrowths of the triumphalist discourse, which reconciled race with the demands of the new global order but eluded the progressive overcoming of longstanding structural constraints.
The Advent of Race in US Foreign Affairs

The story began in the mid-1950s, when two events indicated a critical shift for American priorities, presaging the rising salience of Third World perspectives and the transformation of international race relations. The Bandung Conference in April 1955 brought together twenty-nine Asian and African nations with a collective interest in nationalism and neutralism, and it heralded the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) as an appealing alternative to allying with the Western or Communist Bloc. United in their opposition to European colonialism and white rule, the freshly minted nonaligned nations articulated a set of beliefs in human rights, national sovereignty, and economic cooperation. Though ultimately more symbolic than constructive, the conglomeration of representatives from countries with a total population of 1.5 billion people signaled the rising tide of Third World nationalism as a vital force for the West to contend with.\(^\text{13}\)

The Suez crisis in late 1956 further cemented anticolonial leaders as active agents in the Cold War international arena. In retaliation for Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s decision to nationalize the Suez Canal, Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt to regain access to the waterway. The tripartite alliance had counted on US support, but President Dwight D. Eisenhower, unwilling to jeopardize American influence in the oil-rich region, exerted economic pressure on the three powers to withdraw their troops. The crisis went a long way in bolstering Nasser’s standing in the nonaligned world, and it marked a turning point in US decision-making toward Cold War Africa. Henceforth, the incident appeared to suggest, shoring up European

---

allies would not always take precedence over exploring diplomatic opportunities in the emerging
Third World.\textsuperscript{14}

The confluence of Bandung and Suez signaled to American policymakers that winning
Third World hearts and minds was crucial to prevailing in the Cold War. As historian Mary
Dudziak observed, “[rehabilitating] the moral character of American democracy would become
an important focus of Cold War diplomacy.”\textsuperscript{15} In fostering favorable overseas perceptions of the
American system of government and way of life in the developing world, Eisenhower inherited
his immediate predecessor Harry S. Truman’s approach to waging the ideological battle. The
Truman administration had posited US propaganda efforts as antithetical to the Kremlin’s smear
campaign against American democracy, with the aim not of \textit{indoctrinating} but of \textit{educating} a
foreign public. “We present the news factually and accurately,” Voice of America (VOA) official
Alfred Puhan had contended in 1951, “[we] are so convinced that truth is on our side, we know
what the facts are, we believe that presentation of these truths...will go a long way toward
destroying the vicious effort of the USSR.” By juxtaposing the presentation of truth with the
Soviet fabrication of an “upside down world” and a distorted “propaganda picture,” strategists
like Puhan insisted that the US embodied the moral high ground.\textsuperscript{16} Eisenhower harbored a
similar conviction in the moral superiority of the American system, but he also believed in “the

\textsuperscript{14} Salim Yaqub, \textit{Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine in the Middle East} (Chapel Hill: The
University of North Carolina Press, 2004.)

\textsuperscript{15} Mary Dudziak, \textit{Cold War Civil Rights}, 46.

\textsuperscript{16} “The Voice of America” by Alfred Puhan, March 1951, Folder “Special Articles & Features (VOA)—1951 on,”
Box 1, Voice of America (VOA) Historical Files, 1946-1953, State Department Central Files, RG 59, NACP.
importance of truth as a weapon in the midst of battle.”\(^{17}\) US propaganda, in this sense, had to be assertive instead of defensive, proactive rather than merely reactionary. Increased VOA broadcasts, the State Department’s “Cultural Affairs, Psychological Warfare, and Propaganda” programs, and the newly established United States Information Agency (USIA) were all part and parcel of the Eisenhower administration’s expanded ideological offensive.

In convincing newly independent states that the American system was superior to that of the Soviet Union, one paramount challenge was that the denizens of African nations were particularly “sensitive about racial segregation in America.”\(^{18}\) In December 1955, eight months after Bandung and more than 10,000 miles away from the Indonesian city, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) activist Rosa Parks was arrested by local authorities for refusing to give up her bus seat to white passengers in Montgomery, Alabama. The Montgomery bus boycott which followed inaugurated the modern civil rights movement, and the struggle for racial justice at home paralleled the far-flung challenges to colonialism in the Southern Hemisphere. As the wind of change swept the African world, the collective struggle against European colonialism and white supremacy strengthened the sense of solidarity among peoples of African descent, linking the aspirations and interests of Africans and diasporic communities. Pan-African advocates, like Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah and Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, in preaching transnational racial solidarities, captured and held in an enduring grip the imagination of black Americans and Third World actors alike, who longed—


and increasingly fought—for the ability to dictate the terms of their political destinies. Consequently, African Americans voiced their support for African decolonization, while African elites were openly critical of segregation laws, lynchings, and race riots in the US South.

In the Cold War context, American racial discrimination became a diplomatic liability, harming US relations with Africa and providing the Soviet Union with ample ammunition for their anti-American propaganda. As early as 1947, the USSR periodical Vokrug Sveta was reporting: “Lynching in the South is a picnic, a diversion. People attend lynchings with sandwiches and whiskey. No Negro in the South can sleep quietly—and perhaps in the next hour it will be [he or she] who is hanged from a tree.” This phenomenon would prove to be enduring, and Africa’s perceived strategic importance in the eyes of American policymakers rendered the situation increasingly fraught. The Soviet Daily News Bulletin, published by the Soviet Embassy in Addis Ababa, continued to discredit American democracy when its 1961 inaugural publication described the mass arrests of African American protestors in South Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Quoting directly from a New York Times article, the bulletin castigated the US government’s handling of “the Negro problem.” In criticizing racism as a way of undermining the American system, the Soviet Union hardly needed to resort to overt fabrication; mere factual reporting of racial incidents were often enough to warrant critique. As long as racial problems in the US remained unsolved, then, the Communists would continue to capitalize on this vulnerability.


As persisting segregation in the US South jeopardized the purported moral superiority of American democracy, Washington attempted to refashion race relations in the US—a foreign policy liability—into a narrative that attested to the nation’s unique ability to overcome its flaws. At US consulates and embassies in Africa, American diplomats distributed publications that sought to counter Communist depictions of domestic racial discrimination. One of the earliest and most widely disseminated among these was *The Negro in American Life*, created by the USIA in collaboration with the NAACP. First and foremost, this pamphlet urged African readers to adopt a more nuanced understanding of US race relations. “One who wishes solely to develop anti-American sentiment needs only to touch the propagandist’s Aladdin’s lamp of mob violence and race segregation,” the text reproached. For the uninformed spectator, “[a] lurid picture of a lynching or a Negro slum...becomes the ‘true’ description of the average Negro’s lot.” Notable African Americans, like “Nobel Peace Prize winner, Ralph Bunche of the United Nations, or...great artists like the singer, Marian Anderson” the booklet countered, served to destabilize this reductionist outlook.\(^21\) The averred goal of the brochure, then, was to reconstruct a fuller picture of race in the US, shrouding, in the process, the propagandist elements embedded in the text.

The pamphlet opened with a recollection of the deep historical roots of racial prejudice in America in painstaking detail: the growing need for cheap labor, the accompanying racial theories, and the moral conflict it engendered. Yet, the text contended, the institution of slavery before the 19th century was not unique to the US. Rather, “the use of...slave labor was the way of the world.” In claiming the universality of human bondage and racialism, *The Negro in American Life*, Folder “The Negro in American Life,” Box 16, Master File Copies of Pamphlets and Leaflets: 1953-1983, Records of the United States Information Agency, RG 306, NACP.

---

*Life* implied that American racial policies were simply products of their time, thereby absolving the nation from direct responsibility. And in conceding that “[t]he existence of prejudice and discrimination contradicts the very principles of American democracy,” the booklet posited racial inequality and Americanism as being essential opposites.22 Racism would certainly wither and die in US society, it implied, because of Americans’ inherent belief in egalitarianism.

More importantly, in tracing the history of the African American struggle for equal rights and a bygone world rife with racial inequality and immorality out of which American modernity emerged, the publication also fulfilled its central aim of contextualizing contemporary racial strife. Over the past fifty years, the text asserted, “the average Negro” has made progress “on every front—social, economic, educational—at a tremendous pace,” securing “more social gains, by nearly any criteria, than any other segment of the American population.” This progress, the publication argued, was driven by the collaborative efforts of African Americans and white citizens alike and supported unequivocally by the US government. Democratic capitalism, then, offered the ideal if not the sole system of government capable of “eradicating this evil from the hearts of its people.”23 American liberalism and its accompanying principles of liberty, equality, and justice were adopted in the framing of a narrative of race that came into fruition against the backdrop of the Cold War.

As the civil rights movement gained traction, however, highly publicized racial incidents unsettled the progressive trajectory outlined in publications like *The Negro in American Life*, and containing them within the civil rights discourse became increasingly untenable. The integration conflict at Little Rock Central High School in the Arkansas capital in September 1957 was a

---


23 Ibid.
particularly glaring instance of the unreality of the coherent narrative arc propagated by American elites. In defiance of federal authority and the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing segregation in the public school system, Governor Orval Faubus deployed the Arkansas National Guard to obstruct the enrollment of nine African American students. Irritated by Faubus’ recalcitrance, Eisenhower responded by dispatching federal paratroopers to protect the schoolchildren. Promoting African American constitutional rights were secondary concerns to the president, however, who was more invested in maintaining order at home and preserving the US image abroad.24 “It would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence,” he said in a televised address, lamenting that “[our] enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our nation.”25 Eisenhower begrudged Southern segregationists for casting him in a weak and defensive position; his hardline response restored a measure of control to his presidency and legitimacy to American democracy.

Eisenhower’s actions fulfilled his own predilections to come across as a decisive leader and placated, to an extent, an attentive African audience. African Americans hoping for an ally in the Oval Office, however, were disappointed by Ike’s vacillating attitude toward desegregation. Even after Jackie Robinson, the first African American baseball player to start in the Major League, urged Eisenhower to articulate “an unequivocal statement backed up by action,” the president refused to rally his support behind the struggle for racial justice.26 Instead, he emphasized the extent of recent racial progress and advised patience on Robinson’s part.

---


25 Press release containing speech on radio and television by President Eisenhower, September 24, 1957, Kevin McCann Collection of Press and Radio Conferences and Press Releases, Box 20, Eisenhower Library.

26 Letter from Jackie Robinson to President Eisenhower, May 13, 1958, Records as President, Official File, Box 614, Eisenhower Library.
“Steadily we are moving closer to the goal of fair and equal treatment of citizens without regard to race or color...” he reassured Robinson, “[this] progress, I am confident, will continue.”

The Little Rock crisis thus exposed both the possibilities and limits of foreign pressure and Cold War concerns on driving social change at home. Mindful of the international gaze, Eisenhower enforced integration but, unwilling to alienate his Southern constituents, proved reluctant to go beyond that. The deployment of federal troops, then, came more in response to foreign policy concerns than a genuine desire to expand civil rights for African Americans, and it ultimately proved more symbolic than substantive.

Washington’s increased awareness of the international repercussions of domestic racial incidents was influenced and accompanied by the expanding weight African affairs carried in US policymaking. The Eisenhower administration recognized the causal relationship between the establishment of diplomatic relations with Africa, unimpeded access to the rich natural resources of the continent, and the triumph of the Free World over Communism. As historian Melvyn Leffler has argued, the consolidation of the “industrial core” of Europe and the “underdeveloped periphery” of the Southern Hemisphere became the linchpin of US foreign policy as revolutionary nationalism reared its head in the Third World.

In March 1957, on the eve of Ghana’s independence—the first of many in Africa, as the rest of the continent followed suit—Vice President Richard M. Nixon embarked on a twenty-two day goodwill tour of eight African states. Certain that Ghana’s independence signaled the rising tide of African decolonization, Nixon expressed his conviction in the “decisive[ness]” of the African theater in the superpower

27 Letter from President Eisenhower to Jackie Robinson, June 4, 1958, Records as President, Official File, Box 614, Eisenhower Library.

contest. His trip, Nixon told reporters, demonstrated “the broad interest of the United States” in an “increasingly important continent.” Similarly, the creation of the Bureau of African Affairs within the Department of State in 1958 reflected broader American efforts in confronting the escalation of the Cold War in Africa.

Despite these efforts in cultivating US-African relations, Eisenhower proved generally hesitant in advancing the anticolonial and nation-building aspirations of Third World peoples in practice. As restrained in his approach toward African decolonization as he was toward civil rights reform, Ike sought to maintain the status quo in both spheres to avoid antagonizing his Southern supporters and European allies. In Morocco, Tunisia, and Guinea as well as in Algeria, the US failed to support ascendant nationalist groups over the crumbling French empire. Eisenhower and his aides were skeptical of the nationalist and neutralist sentiments avowed at Bandung and manifest in anticolonial struggles across Africa. Steeped as their understandings were in binary and moralistic terms, nonalignment was, in the words of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, “an obsolete,...immoral and shortsighted conception,” and nationalism a precursor to instability, potentially rendering the Third World prime breeding grounds for Communist infiltration. Naturally, the administration viewed US support for Third World revolutions as a political gamble carrying risks it was unwilling to take.

Eisenhower’s approach to revolutionary nationalism was increasingly problematic, however, for it undermined his administration’s desire to win Third World allegiances. In Algeria, the “epicenter of [the] North-South conflict,” especially, the State Department’s

31 Quoted in Borstelmann, The Cold War and the Color Line, 113.
acquiescence to French policy proved politically divisive.\textsuperscript{32} As historian Jeffrey Byrne has suggested, the \textit{Front de Libération Nationale} (FLN)’s “vanguard role” in decolonizing Africa, akin to Cuba’s in Latin America, imparted the nationalist movement with considerable international influence.\textsuperscript{33} US failure to intervene on behalf of the insurgents in the face of French atrocities and the nonaligned world’s support for FLN leaders made plain the inherently incompatible interests and visions of American and postcolonial elites. In regards to the US stance, a young Democratic senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, delivered an impassioned speech on the Senate floor in July 1957 castigating Eisenhower’s “head-in-the-sands” attitude toward the Algerian question. The lack of decisive US action, he cautioned, had already been detrimental to American leadership, discounting the nation’s anticolonial credo and abetting the Communist cause: “It has affected our standing in the eyes of the free world, our leadership in the fight to keep that world free, our prestige, and our security...as well as our moral leadership in the fight against Soviet imperialism.” Kennedy was especially concerned about its implications for US influence in newly independent African states, “who hope...to seek common paths by which that great continent can remain [aligned] with the West.” In securing the friendship of Africans, Kennedy was convinced that “the strength of our appeal...lies in our traditional and deeply felt philosophy of freedom and independence for all peoples everywhere.”\textsuperscript{34} In this sense, Kennedy understood—more than Eisenhower had—the Algerian Revolution as a global conflict with reverberations far beyond its borders. The convergence of


\textsuperscript{34} Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy in the Senate, Washington, D.C., July 2, 1957, Senate Speech files, John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers, JFKL.
the Cold War and decolonization meant that the side the US chose to ally with in regional conflicts had profound effects on emerging nations’ alignments.

Kennedy’s controversial speech garnered in equal measure disapproval and praise and proved to be the high-stakes wager the Eisenhower administration was averse to taking. In its aftermath, French Minister for Algeria Robert Lacoste suggested that Kennedy come to Algiers to inspect the on-the-ground situation so as to “stop talking like a deaf and blind man.”35 Adverse French reaction was to be expected, but even within the US foreign policy establishment, the uproar was apparent and acute. Secretary Dulles, at a news conference, dismissed Kennedy’s concern, reiterating that Algeria was France’s problem. If the junior senator was so keen on condemning “colonialism,” Dulles wryly suggested that he focus his efforts “on the Communist variety.”36 Dean Acheson, the erstwhile secretary of state, also criticized Kennedy for his “impatient snapping of the fingers.” A French retreat, Acheson argued, would only result in “chaos.”37 However, Kennedy’s speech, considered “the most comprehensive and outspoken arraignment of Western policy toward Algeria yet presented by an American in public office” by the New York Times, raised his profile significantly among Third World leaders.38 As he prepared for his presidential bid, anticolonial activists welcomed the avowed change in direction in US policy.


As rising concerns about African decolonization abounded, culminating in 1960—the Year of Africa—when seventeen African nations achieved independence, it appeared that Kennedy’s symbolic alignment with anticolonial nationalism would be rewarded after all. The year saw Africa’s dramatically increased representation and influence in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which cemented the continent’s emergence as new power brokers in the international arena. Indeed, at the Assembly’s first session in 1946, only four African states were present, comprising a mere 8% of the total membership. Conversely, by the end of the 1960 session—known as the “African Session”—Africa was represented by twenty-seven delegations, or 27% of the 100 members. This development alarmed US policymakers who were used to “automatic majorities” on East-West issues. “Those good old days are gone forever,” one State Department official lamented, speculating that African votes might well align with the Eastern Bloc on issues of race relations and economic development. The US delegation particularly agonized over African members’ “preoccupation” with colonial issues, which would place the US in an awkward position between its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies and African leaders.\footnote{39 “Introduction to Problems of Africa,” September 14, 1960, Folder “Policy—African Nations in the UN,” Box 5, Policy Files, 1959-1967, Records of the United States Information Agency, 1900-2003, RG 306, NACP.} Africa’s newfound influence in intergovernmental organizations such as the UNGA signaled to Kennedy, who was elected to the presidency the same year, that continued reticence in the face of segregation at home and colonialism abroad would prove disastrous for American interests in the long run.
Modernization and Kennedy’s Vision of Postcolonial Africa

If the Eisenhower administration viewed Africans as “children who were destined to remain children,” Kennedy saw them as “adolescents, in the process of growing up” and, thereby, vulnerable to Communist influence.40 To ensure that they remained friendly to the West, the Kennedy administration prioritized courting African states in the inchoate stages of development and steering them toward a distinctly Western-oriented version of maturity, or modernity. One month before his inauguration, the president-elect had already commissioned a task force, made up of three Democratic senators and his brother Edward Kennedy, to visit nine African countries and make recommendations about future US policymaking toward Africa. The report proposed “sweeping changes in America’s attitude towards Africa,” specifically “abandon[ing] its traditional fence-sitting...in favor of support for African nationalism.”41 In selecting his administration’s secretary of state, Kennedy also took care to find someone whose appointment would advance US interests in Africa. That he ultimately decided against his initial preference, Southern Democrat and Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright, in favor of the integrationist State Department veteran Dean Rusk attested to the importance Kennedy attributed to African perceptions of race in the US. As Kennedy’s foreign policy advisor Chester Bowles explained, Fulbright’s signing of the Southern Manifesto was “basic to him being bypassed,” as it would constitute “a great handicap” in US-Africa relations.42


But Kennedy, like his immediate predecessor, harbored little interest in racial reform beyond its foreign policy ramifications. As Harris Wofford, White House adviser on civil rights, remembered, “civil rights was not a high priority for Kennedy.” The president, instead, was more concerned about “foreign policy and peace and relations with the Soviet Union.”\(^{43}\) And Rusk, sympathetic as he was to anticolonialism, at times distrusted nonaligned leaders. Recounting his encounters with Nasser, Nkrumah, and Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella, Rusk declared that “some of these fellows were just plain rascals.”\(^{44}\) In this respect, there were considerable continuities in policy between administrations. Kennedy was, however, attuned to the anticolonial and nation-building aims of African nationalist leaders, which marked a departure from Eisenhower’s more Eurocentric outlook. As Ambassador to Guinea William Attwood reflected in retrospect, Kennedy was “sympathetic to African nationalist aspirations” and “curious about the new breed of leaders,” especially in the key states of the Congo, Ghana, Guinea, and Algeria.\(^{45}\) The president’s sentiments regarding the African world stemmed from an acute understanding of the rising centrality of race in foreign affairs and, by the same token, the negative effect civil rights at home would have on US-African relations. The need to assimilate African Americans into mainstream American society, in this sense, paralleled the broader imperative to integrate the emerging Third World into a modern twentieth century world synonymous with the West.

To meet the challenges posed by Third World nationalism and a new global order, Kennedy employed “the best and the brightest” minds to craft a “policy of engagement” with the

\(^{43}\) Quoted in Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 155.

\(^{44}\) Dean Rusk, interviewed by Richard Rusk and Thomas J. Schoenbaum, April 1986, Dean Rusk Oral History Collection, Richard B. Russell Library, University of Georgia.

postcolonial world. Their approach toward newly independent states fused scientific analysis and rational planning with idealistic rhetoric. Under ordinary circumstances, idealism and pragmatism made strange bedfellows. In the Cold War context, they proved not only compatible but complementary. What reconciled these disparate outlooks was modernization—at once theory, ideology, and strategy—which became a vital instrument in understanding historical processes like decolonization and the US role in charting their courses. The “belief that aid served political ends” prevailed in the pragmatic wing of the Kennedy administration, while the liberals among the New Frontiersmen were driven by “moral imperatives.” Both groups of advisers were convinced that they could “drive ‘stagnant’ societies through the transitional process” to “genuine modernity” exemplified by “Western, industrial, capitalist democracies.” In their eyes, the retreat of European colonialism had left an uncertain vacuum in North-South relations, made all the more precarious by the Manichean Cold War divide. Modernization, as economist-turned-political adviser Walt Whitman Rostow explained to another Kennedy adviser, would foster “a new post-colonial relationship between the northern and southern halves of the Free World,” which would be conducive to “new and most constructive relationships” and “a new partnership among free men...” Rostow’s theory of development, articulated most prominently in The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto and A Proposal: Key to an Effective Foreign Policy, advocated disbursing US aid to postcolonial states to


accelerate their path to “take-off,” or the inauguration of a modern economy. Ideally, US “material resources and moral tutelage” would speed up the process of Third World development, expand American power, and ensure that newly decolonized nations remained in the Western sphere of influence.\footnote{Walt Whitman Rostow, \textit{Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960); Max F. Millikan and W. W. Rostow, \textit{A Proposal: Key to an Effective Foreign Policy} (New York: Harper, 1957).}

In marrying notions of liberalism and exceptionalism with strategic, geopolitical concerns, modernization theory was conceived as a renewed projection of American preponderance at a time when formal colonialism was viewed as \textit{dépassé}. For American policymakers, it was a godsend. Against the Cold War backdrop, modernization permitted the US to articulate a historical template for Third World development, convincing them of the righteousness of the American civilizing mission and dissuading them from falling to the Communist camp. Development in the Global South, in this case, was closely intertwined with national security concerns. In other ways, however, modernization transcended immediate Cold War aims. For Kennedy and his New Frontiersmen, the North-South divide was the most “important” crisis of their time, even as the East-West conflict was the most “urgent.” As Wofford put it, “[if] every Communist were shot off to the moon and Russia sank into the sea, this North-South division would remain to threaten our peace...”\footnote{Latham, \textit{Modernization as Ideology}, 7.} The partitioning of the world along geographical and racial lines was unsustainable, evident in both the African struggle for independence and civil rights protests at home. The Kennedy administration was aware that

\footnote{Address at Annual Dinner of the Columbia University School of Business Alumni Association, Harris Wofford, Jr., Special Assistant to the President, January 31, 1962. White House Staff Files of Harris Wofford, JFKL.}
“[the] 1960s can be, and must be, the crucial “Decade of Development” if the US wanted to maintain the status quo as the hegemonic world power.52

Modernization theory informed the US policy of development in the postcolonial world, and it provided foreign policy elites with a set of ideas capable of rivaling Marxist discourse in their rhetorical prowess. Dialectical materialism, Kennedy had already feared in 1958, appeared “to offer a disciplined, coherent and irresistible answer to the overwhelming problems of economic mobilization and takeoff.”53 Americans, on the other hand, did not “have the overt ideological philosophy that we can tell to the natives...we do not have a positive goal which you can talk about, which you can describe how to achieve, etc.”54 In any case, Western economic development lacked the “glamour of novelty” embedded in Communism.55 The Rostovian theory of the stages of economic growth, in putting forward an alternative model of economic evolution to Marxist epochal transformations, was the “very good story” American elites had been looking for.56 In focusing on liberal gradualism, modernization rhetoric also constituted a Cold War manifestation of American triumphalism, an age-old narrative updated for Third World consumption in the superpower battle of ideologies.


Despite modernization’s potential as a Cold War weapon, Eisenhower had been wary of the tangible benefits of development aid.\(^57\) Conversely, when Kennedy assumed office in early 1961, he immediately set out to articulate a new commitment to Third World development and to reorient US strategies toward newly decolonized nations in order to curry favor with nationalist leaders. In his inaugural address, he assured his audience that

To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny...To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves...\(^58\)

The president-elect was mindful that it was not only American eyes that were on him but those of the entire world and that his speech ideally heralded not just the commencement of a new administration but a new era in American politics and, as the poet Robert Frost wrote in his dedication, a “new order of the ages.”\(^59\)

The USIA, recognizing that Kennedy’s progressive rhetoric constituted “democracy’s finest selling point” to an emerging Third World audience, made sure that it was “told in more tongues and seen in more lands” than any previous such event. Forty-eight VOA transmitters were employed to live broadcast the speech, and the inauguration itself was described in thirty-five languages ranging from Albanian to Vietnamese. As long as one had access to a shortwave radio, “[anywhere] you go in the world...you’ll be able to hear the inauguration...”\(^60\) In Africa specifically, the full text of the speech was translated into French, Arabic, Swahili, and Lingala,


among other languages, disseminated to government officials in every country, and reproduced in brochures which were then inserted in local newspapers.  

As the US foreign policy establishment had certainly hoped, Kennedy’s inauguration address was well-received in Africa. While African newspapers hesitated to praise the new president impetuously, they unanimously acknowledged that his speech signaled a “new liberal path” in US policymaking toward the developing world and inspired “real hope for...change” in its immediate aftermath. Eisenhower’s spotty record in Third World independence movements and disbursement of foreign aid with strings attached had alienated African opinion makers, who welcomed Kennedy’s comparative respect for Third World independence and neutralism. “Kennedy’s entry into [the] White House marked [the] end of [a] period of stagnation and marked [the] beginning of [a] new and creative period in US and world history,” one editorial remarked, likening the new White House to the esteemed administrations of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt.

By filling the upper rungs of his administration with racial progressives, Kennedy’s initial actions as president signaled to an optimistic African audience that his inauguration promises were not just empty rhetoric and that change, indeed, loomed on the horizon. In addition to Rusk, Kennedy’s top advisers included, most prominently, Wofford and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in the White House, Bowles and G. Mennen “Soapy” Williams in the State Department, and two members of the Kennedy clan, Robert Kennedy and Sargent Shriver, in the Justice Department.

---


and the newly established Peace Corps respectively. Kwame Nkrumah was among those who applauded Kennedy’s appointment of “advisers who...understand the fundamental problems of our continent” and who “have had personal experience of the African continent.” The roster inspired in Nkrumah “great hope and confidence for the promotion of better relations between Africa and the western powers.” As the leader of the first African nation to gain statehood, Nkrumah enjoyed an unparalleled cult of personality on the continent, and Ghana was the “cornerstone of Kennedy’s strategy for courting African nationalist leaders.” In a telling memorandum, White House aide Frederick Dutton advised the president to establish “personal rapport with [the] prominent African.” Similarly, Kennedy’s economic adviser Barbara Ward urged him to articulate “words, conviction, and form to this new post-colonial experience” in order to appeal to “people like Nkrumah.” The influential Ghanaian’s goodwill toward the new administration thus marked a propitious beginning for its diplomatic priorities.

The honeymoon phase of Kennedy’s presidency proved short-lived, however. Less than a month after he took office, news of Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba’s death was released by his Katangan captors. Lumumba had been under house arrest following a military coup organized by Colonel Joseph Mobutu in September 1960. When he attempted to rejoin his supporters in Stanleyville, he was captured by Mobutu’s loyalists and handed to secessionists led by Moise Tshombe in the Belgian-backed and resource-rich state of Katanga. Tshombe—


64 Muehlenbeck, Betting On the Africans, 73.

65 Memorandum to the President from Frederick G. Dutton, February 21, 1961, Folder “Ghana: General, 1961,” Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, President’s Office Files, JFKL.

66 Barbara Ward Jackson to Kennedy, undated letter, Folder “Ghana: General, 1961,” Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, President’s Office Files, JFKL.
Christian, anticommunist, and pro-Western—was regarded by Free World leaders as a welcome alternative to the radical socialist Lumumba. In the African world, however, Lumumba’s vision of a politically and economically independent Africa rendered him a Pan-African martyr. If Lumumba “were to be murdered by these stooges of Belgian colonialism or so ill-treated that he were to die,” Nkrumah had warned, “this would have a most serious effect upon the relations of the independent African states with the US...” Unbeknownst to him, Lumumba, along with two of his cabinet ministers, had already been executed on January 17, 1961, two days before Kennedy’s swearing-in.

After Lumumba’s death came to light, Nkrumah unleashed a series of vitriolic attacks against the West, whom he held accountable. The Congolese leader’s murder, Nkrumah asserted during a state dinner given in honor of Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, illustrated the lengths to which Western “imperialism and colonialism are prepared to go in order to attain their aims.” His virulence marked a stark contrast to his congratulatory telegram to Kennedy on the occasion of the latter’s inauguration, in which he expressed his “sincere hope that the friendly relations which so happily exist between our two countries will strengthen under [your] administration.”

The Central Intelligence Agency’s supposed role in deposing Lumumba and the UN’s failure to secure his release prompted Accra to decry Western involvement, and Ghanaian newspapers compared the Congolese leader’s brutal execution to lynchings of African


68 Telegram from US Embassy in Accra to State Department containing text of Kwame Nkrumah’s speech, February 18, 1961, Folder “Ghana: General, 1961,” Papers of John F. Kennedy, JFKL.

69 Telegram from Nkrumah to Kennedy, January 23, 1961, Folder “Ghana: General, 1961,” JFKL.
Americans in the US South. As violent clashes erupted in Montgomery, Alabama between angry white mobs and integrationist, multi-racial Freedom Riders, Washington’s perceived culpability in the developments in the Congo and persistent racial violence at home served to mutually reinforce one another in African eyes, leading one Ghanaian editorialist to label the US, at this juncture, as “the most hated [superpower] of them all.”

In the wake of the developments in the Congo, domestic resistance to desegregation not only highlighted the breakdown of American democracy in action but the potential implications of American racism for US policy in Africa. After all, how could newly independent African states consider the US a trustworthy ally if they regarded American officials as extensions of a society over which the vestiges of white supremacy still presided? US involvement in the Congo crisis further alerted Africa’s new elites to the racialist assumptions that clouded the visions of American policymakers and, accordingly, their readiness to meddle in African affairs to advance their own interests, often diametrically opposed to those of the natives. As one African editorial declared, until the US expunged “the ugly bug of discrimination from every facet of her life, her efforts to pass off as a friend...will not be entirely successful.”

Throughout his brief tenure, Kennedy was forced to reckon with sustained criticism of American racism. The African press was especially critical of the hypocrisy of US outreach to African nations in light of the disenfranchisement of black Americans. The sentiment that the

---


American government should “put [its] own house in order before condemning others” pervaded African editorials, and Africans unanimously felt that “any segregation against the Negro is simultaneously segregation against Africans.”73 The *Cameroonian Times*, for instance, published an editorial protesting that “[the Americans] cannot pretend to assist African countries in the ‘process of development’ while torturing their kith and kin...”74 Another *Ghanaian Times* editorial opined that “the man who screams friendship to the black man outside his borders only to discriminate against him in his home...is not causing a happy picture in anybody’s mind.”75 Even the *Ashanti Pioneer*, deemed “the most Western-oriented” and “responsible newspaper in Ghana” by American officials, carried an article lambasting racial discrimination in the US.76

At times, racial discrimination at home literally jeopardized US relations with Africa when African dignitaries were subject to Jim Crow laws during their visits to Washington. Such occurrences became increasingly frequent as newly independent states sought diplomatic relations with the US. In March 1961, Dr. William Fitzjohn, Sierra Leone’s diplomatic representative in the US, was refused service by a Howard Johnson restaurant in Hagerstown, Maryland. In response, the *Daily Mail* lamented that “[it] is tragic that some Governments still apparently fail to realise that warm-hearted utterances on the international level by their leaders


mean nothing as long as this kind of incident is allowed to occur.” Towards the end of Kennedy’s first year in office, a similar incident involving Nigerian diplomat Malam Alyu Bida took place near Baltimore, provoking intense reactions on the part of international media on “the continuing insults in the United States to diplomats from Africa.” In both cases, the US government promptly issued official apologies, but their effects were largely futile. “No amount of apologies will atone for the grievous harm which these all too frequent occurrences do to the reputation of the US among the darker peoples of the world,” an editorial in the Nigerian newspaper *Daily Express* warned. From the African perspective, the discrepancies between the respective treatments African dignitaries received within and outside of the bubble of United Nations or State Department functions highlighted the central paradox at the heart of the nation’s racial policies.


Reconciling Racial Progress with Modernity

In positing modernization as the bedrock of American policy in Africa, race relations in the US was both an impediment and an opportunity. It was an impediment because it was imperfect, and it put into question the US claim to “genuine modernity” and detracted from Washington’s moral and political leadership. As an editorial in the Arabic weekly newspaper *Al-Alam* observed, “the more American progress in rocket launching, the more she declines on purely humane grounds...” Racial discrimination in the US, it remarked, reflected “methods of the middle ages,” even as rapid advances in the emerging space program deployed “methods of scientific revolution for which [the] 20th century is distinguished.”

This contradiction was manifest quite literally in Brevard County, Florida, where the Kennedy Space Center drew millions of affluent visitors every year but where impoverished African American families struggled to make ends meet. Yet racial strife in the US also presented American strategists with an opportunity precisely because of its imperfection, as its potential for improvement rendered it an ideal case study in illustrating the dynamism of modernization. Modernization, in this sense, functioned not simply as a means of transforming the underdeveloped periphery but also of rationalizing American deficiencies. As one USIA official put it, “the business of democracy is always unfinished business.”

The road to racial equality in the US thus paralleled the path to development outlined in Rostow’s stage theory: both were framed as being gradual,

---


orderly, and moderate. To downplay the former and to capitalize on the latter, American elites increasingly weaved modernization rhetoric into the civil rights discourse and, by the same token, racial reform into their broader modernizing mission. At the heart of these efforts lay an attempt at reconciling scientific and technological achievement with development schemes and social progress in order to counteract negative foreign opinion.

The USIA and its overseas posts, for their part, believed that “there are many good illustrations which could be obtained that show ‘the people’ as well as ‘the government’ are pushing for racial equality,” attesting to the collaborative and cooperative nature of American society.83 Accordingly, the agency deployed additional mediums, such as exhibits, books, and broadcasts, to spread America’s message in the early 1960s. United States Information Service (USIS) posts across Africa expanded their information programs and media output.84 In Ibadan, Nigeria, for instance, the USIS hosted a series of exhibits with subjects like “Civil Rights Policy of the US Government,” “Read More, Know More About Negroes,” and “The American Negro—Man in Motion,” and purchased books by notable African American authors, including The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar and From Slavery to Freedom by John Hope Franklin. The post also employed African Americans who were able to provide “sensible and moderate” perspectives regarding recent racial clashes and demonstrations.85 Collectively, these efforts sought to demonstrate the opportunities for upward mobility afforded African Americans and to corroborate the progressive narrative of US democracy. The USIS post in Salisbury, as


84 The USIS was the overseas arm of the USIA.

well, was happy to report that its “effective exhibit on the Negro American” was viewed by more than 25,000 locals. When news of mob violence against the Freedom Riders in Alabama and Mississippi reached Rhodesia ten days later, its officers lamented that racial conflicts like these were certain to “[diminish] earlier gains” in promoting American democracy. In response, they requested “non-violent photographs” of the confrontations, especially ones of “white Americans participating in the Freedom bus,” from Washington to include in their next exhibit. By doing so, they hoped to reinforce the “honesty” and “credulity” of US propaganda efforts and to remind the local recipients that, aberrations notwithstanding, the general “direction is toward rapid progress.”

The emphasis on “rapid progress” and the suppression of developments painting a less rosy picture were replicated at the executive level. Indeed, Kennedy relied overwhelmingly on conspicuous and symbolic gestures, like the reception of African heads of state to the White House and the visibility of African Americans in Foggy Bottom. The links between Third World development and domestic racial progress were especially explicit in the Peace Corps program, Kennedy’s “special baby” and “the first offspring of the New Frontier.” For JFK, the volunteer program fulfilled both his immediate desire to win the allegiance of the emerging Third World in the Cold War ideological struggle and his long-term determination to assist and modernize developing nations. A critical feature of his campaign platform, Kennedy wasted no time in

---


87 “On the Peace Corps, Africa, Togo, and Other Points East and South,” Memorandum for the President from Harris Wofford, January 20, 1962, White House Staff Files of Harris Wofford, JFKL.
establishing the Peace Corps.\textsuperscript{88} He signed an executive order to create the new agency merely six weeks after he entered office and enlisted his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, to serve as director. The popular response did not disappoint; the next few days saw forty-five hundred letters of inquiry from interested applicants.\textsuperscript{89} By the following fall, the program boasted more than 1,000 active volunteers in Africa, over half of whom taught at schools, while the others contributed to “projects to eradicate malaria, promote personal hygiene, improve irrigation, purify water supplies, and construct low-cost housing.”\textsuperscript{90} While technical and material assistance lent credence to the possibilities of rational planning, Wofford and his colleagues believed that what would ultimately benefit developing nations the most in the long run was the transmitting of “the knowledge of how to make 20th century societies.” In this regard, Peace Corps volunteers were ideal agents of the modernizing project in the Third World, attesting to the US’s conviction in “[playing] a creative, critical part in directing this century’s development through peaceful and democratic channels.”\textsuperscript{91} Their actions, as Shriver understood it, reconciled the vast divide “between the white minority and the colored majority of the human race.”\textsuperscript{92}

By sending young men and women to modernize the Global South, the Peace Corps also facilitated constructive encounters between African locals and educated, idealistic Americans eager to help postcolonial Africa leap into the twentieth century. As Wofford wrote to Kennedy, “[these volunteers] are the kind of vigorous, intelligent and good-humored Americans we needed

\textsuperscript{88} Kennedy also established the Alliance for Peace, aimed at improving economic relations with Latin America, and expanded the Food for Peace program.

\textsuperscript{89} Latham, \textit{Modernization as Ideology}, 119.

\textsuperscript{90} Wofford to Kennedy, April 24, 1962. Latham, \textit{Modernization as Ideology}, 118.

\textsuperscript{91} Harris Wofford, Jr., Address at the Annual Dinner of the Columbia University School of Business Alumni Association.

\textsuperscript{92} Quoted in Rakove, \textit{Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World}, 142.
to send and Africans needed to see.”  

Symbolically, they represented the youthful idealism inherent in Kennedy’s brave new world, the noblesse oblige of an advanced nation, and the humanitarian impulses of democratic societies. In practice, as well, Peace Corps volunteers—emblems of a modern and post-racial society—countered negative visuals of Southern segregationists in the eyes of Africans. When the first group of volunteers touched down in Accra, for instance, Ghanaians were touched by the Americans’ hesitant rendition of the national anthem “Ten Ara Asaasa Ni” (This is Our Homeland). The performance, according to one Ghanaian associate of the Peace Corps, “signaled to Ghanaians and to the world the deep respect and concern that the very first group of volunteers had for the people of the first country it was to serve.”  

In light of seemingly intractable legislative difficulties at home, the Peace Corps allowed the Kennedy White House to enhance the US’s international prestige without a major overhaul of racial policies.

The effectiveness of Kennedy’s efforts in offsetting the negative impact of racial discrimination on US-African relations was put to the test when he encountered a more fulminant version of the Little Rock crisis in 1962. In September, James Meredith, an African American Air Force veteran, exercised his constitutional right to enroll at the University of Mississippi. Governor Ross Barnett proved as resistant as Faubus to the integration of his alma mater, and the mob of segregationists—numbering in the thousands—was more vast and dangerous than the one in Arkansas five years earlier. In the ensuing violent confrontation between federal marshals


dispatched to protect Meredith and local armed insurgents, two men, including a French
journalist, were killed, and more than 300 were injured. The bloodshed shocked Africans and
prompted them to question American leadership, as they had during the Little Rock incident. In
Ghana, Radio Accra wondered “whether [the US]...should not spend less time trying to put the
affairs of other people in order and more time in tidying up her own domestic affairs...” The
*Ethiopian Herald* also berated Barnett for “[bringing] his State as well as the whole of the United
States into great embarrassment.” But by deploying national troops, as Eisenhower had, Kennedy
created goodwill among African opinion makers, who unanimously commended his political
courage. The Nigerian *Morning Post* expressed gratitude to the American president for his “great
contribution to the cause of freedom and liberty everywhere,” while Radio Accra lauded
Kennedy for “[conducting] himself with distinction.”

Because Kennedy had been vocal in his criticism of Eisenhower’s approach to the Third
World and civil rights, he was particularly curious about how his handling of the Ole Miss riot
measured up to his predecessor’s during the Little Rock incident. In this respect, he was certainly
pleased to learn that “increased contact with [the US], publicized progress of negroes in many
fields, and liberal image of President Kennedy” had bolstered America’s standing in Africa since
1957. According to a USIA report on overseas media coverage, admiration for Kennedy’s
assertion of federal authority was the “predominant theme running through most comment and

---


96 Telegram from Dakar to USIA, October 17, 1962, Folder “Racial Reactions—Free World 1962,” Box 9, African
Reaction Files, 1956-1967, RG 306, NACP.
was given top play in most news reporting.” 97 Favorable African reaction thus validated the effectiveness of the civil rights narrative in combatting negative foreign perceptions, even as the riot itself rendered its linear structure moot. As Chester Bowles observed, the Meredith affair marked “a turning point...in our efforts to make the people of Asia, Africa and Latin America understand what we are trying to do.” 98 Yet the theatricality of the federal response, much like that during the Little Rock incident, largely overshadowed what precipitated it in the first place.

Where the civil rights narrative was most potent, therefore, was also where it fell short. On one hand, it prompted American elites to confront racial problems as a Cold War issue with implications transcending single regions or events. On the other hand, it allowed them to perform perfunctory gestures indicating progress on the international stage in lieu of genuine, lasting change at home. As historian Thomas Borstelmann noted, Kennedy approached the civil rights movement with the aim of “controlling it: moderating its tactics, channeling its demands, and limiting the social instability it stirred up...” 99 More mindful of the overseas impact of the movement than its domestic goals, he sought to frame it within the confines of the progressive narrative. Highly publicized racial incidents disrupted the president’s broader agenda: the intertwined gossamer of improving US-African relations, modernizing the Third World, and winning the Cold War. Racial discrimination, according to the president, “hampers our world leadership by contradicting at home the message we preach abroad...[and] mars the atmosphere


99 Borstelmann, The Cold War and the Color Line, 158.
of a united and classless society in which this Nation rose to greatness.” Naturally, he resented their instigators—civil rights activists and Southern segregationists alike—whose inclinations to speed up or slow down integration unsettled both the progressive trajectory of the racial narrative and his desire to facilitate the gradual reform conducive to his more grandiose aims. Ultimately, Kennedy proved as reluctant as Eisenhower in adopting a moral position on civil rights and framing the issue in stark black-and-white terms in the first two years of his presidency. That would come in 1963 when the twin escalation of the civil rights movement and African disgruntlement at the state of race relations in the US culminated in the concurrence of the Birmingham campaign and the first Organization of African Unity (OAU) conference.

---

100 President Kennedy in a special message to Congress on Civil Rights, February 28, 1963, Folder “Civil Rights (1963-),” Box 1, RG 306, NACP.
Civil Rights Legislation and American Triumphalism

By early May of 1963, thousands of African American students were taking to the streets of Birmingham to demonstrate. During what became known as the Children’s Crusade, peaceful teenage and child protestors marched to City Hall to demand an audience with the mayor and were arrested en masse by local authorities. With the city’s jails filled to capacity, Police Chief Eugene “Bull” Connor ordered the use of fire hoses, clubs, and vicious dogs on the young demonstrators. Between May 3-8, the nation and the world watched in horror as schoolchildren bore the brunt of racial violence, which rendered the situation increasingly volatile in the eyes of the Kennedy administration. As Burke Marshall, Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, remembered, “it was a matter of national and international concern at the time because of the mass of demonstrations.” If the civil rights movement represented American democracy in action, as the government advanced through the civil rights narrative, then certainly the Birmingham riots exposed US society’s ugly underbelly. Unlike the Meredith affair, which could be dramatized to exhibit federal commitment, the Birmingham crisis came with hardly any silver lining. Kennedy, who prided himself on his decisive leadership, was at a loss for action. Finally, in mid-May, he sent Marshall to Birmingham, albeit without a clear set of instructions. “The purpose of going...was to do something,” Marshall recalled.101 After a series of meetings with local business owners and civil rights leaders, Birmingham shops agreed to hire more African American workers and desegregate public facilities, generating a temporary truce between the dueling parties.

---

101 Burke Marshall, recorded interview by George C. Wallace, June 20, 1964, 97, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.
By then, however, the damage on American prestige overseas had mostly been done. Searing images of police brutality permeated the Third World consciousness and proved harmful to the US’s frequently touted reputation as the leader of the Free World. Had similar incidents occurred in the Soviet Union, a *Cameroon Times* editorial wryly observed, the Voice of America “would have spoken out their lungs.”102 Kennedy’s initial inaction in the face of racial violence against African Americans especially puzzled spectators in the Southern Hemisphere. “Why didn’t he do something?” they wondered.103 Confirming American fears, the *Ethiopian Herald* also warned that “racial segregation continued is certain to weaken [the US’s] enormous influence and prestige abroad.”104

The situation in Birmingham had barely receded from public memory when leaders of thirty-two newly independent African states gathered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia for the first Conference of African Heads of States and Governments. Between May 22-25, 1963, they engaged in lengthy discussions about the continent’s future. Like Bandung eight years earlier, the first OAU conference focused on facilitating cooperation among African nations, removing trade barriers, and achieving economic emancipation from European states. The meetings also addressed education, nuclear disarmament, and issues of health and sanitation. The conference’s crowning achievement, however, was the formation of the Organization of African Unity. The new organization, according to its first president and Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, constituted “a single African organisation through which Africa’s single voice may be heard,

---


within which Africa’s problems may be studied and resolved.” The occasion thus marked, in the
grandiose parlance of Selassie, the “transition from the Africa of Yesterday to the Africa of
Tomorrow...the past into the future.”

For Pan-African leaders like Selassie, racial discrimination against peoples of color had
no place in the “Africa of Tomorrow.” They denounced apartheid policies in South Africa and
urged the international community to impose sanctions on Pretoria. The conference participants
were also preoccupied with the racial situation in the US, which became the subject of prolonged
discussion and debate in Addis Ababa. In an open letter addressed to Kennedy from the
Ethiopian capital, Ugandan Prime Minister Milton Obote lambasted “the most inhuman
treatment” of civil rights activists during the Birmingham riots. He pointed out that “[n]othing is
more paradoxical than that these events should take place in the United States at a time when that
country is anxious to project its image before the world screen as the [archetype] of democracy
and the champion of freedom.” The view that the civil rights crusade paralleled African
liberation movements prevailed at the conference, and their common lineages and experiences of
subjugation impelled them to see their struggles as one. “We in Africa...feel that our freedom and
independence would be a mere sham,” Obote wrote, “[if] our black brethren elsewhere...in the
United States still remain in the political, social and economic bondage.”

His sentiments were echoed in the joint resolutions African representatives adopted, in which they collectively
“express the deep concern aroused in all African peoples and governments by the measures of
racial discrimination taken against communities of African origin living outside the continent and


Files, 1956-1967, RG 306, NACP.
particularly in the United States of America.” They called on the US Federal Government to “put an end to those intolerable malpractices,” the failure of which would “seriously...deteriorate relations between the African peoples and governments on the one hand and the people and Government of the United States of America on the other.”

As domestic racial discord threatened to jeopardize Kennedy’s foreign policy goals in Africa, the president decided at last to take a firm stand against segregation. Determined to perpetuate the story of racial progress and appear at the vanguard of modernity, Kennedy delivered his landmark speech on civil rights on June 11, 1963. In the televised address, the president urged Congress to enact legislation and called on the American people to support the Federal Government in providing equal treatment to all citizens. Kennedy’s civil rights bill, if passed, would outlaw segregation in public accommodations, protect voting rights, and authorize the Justice Department to enforce school integration. Civil rights, Kennedy asserted for the first time in public, was “a moral issue” and the struggle for racial equality presented the nation with “a moral crisis.” As he implored citizens to evaluate the plight of African Americans in such terms, he conceded that ongoing racial strife “cannot be quieted by token moves or talk.”

Neither the temporary deployment of federal troops to the South nor the symbolic appointment of African Americans in government posts, the president realized, were long-term solutions capable of quelling African American discontent or enhancing overseas perceptions of American democracy. Federal action—albeit limited—thus far had alleviated, to an extent, the damage done to the US image. In light of the Birmingham riots and how seriously African leaders had

---


considered a break in US-African relations in its aftermath, formal legislation spearheaded by the White House was not only important but necessary.

The international dimension of Kennedy’s civil rights bill was apparent. Indeed, his speech, along with specific instructions from the president himself, were forwarded to all American diplomatic and consular posts. He advised USIS posts in Africa to distribute copies of the speech and the proposed legislation to influential organizations and individuals in their respective capitals, including ministers, university professors, labor unions, and civil servants.109 Appearing before the Senate Commerce Committee, Secretary Rusk also stressed the vital importance of concrete legislation in renewing the credibility of the civil rights narrative: “If progress should stop, if Congress should not approve legislation designed to remove remaining discriminatory practices, questions would inevitably arise in many parts of the world as to the real convictions of the American people.”110 The progressive rhetoric embedded in Kennedy’s televised appeal—of justice and equality to be attained, of challenges to be overcome, and, ultimately, of salvation and redemption on the horizon—was an alluring one for its African recipients whose own freedom struggles were by then fresh in their minds. His proposed bill, which promised substantive advances in the civil rights arena, provided the long overdue tangible counterpart to this narrative.

Kennedy’s civil rights bill was widely applauded in Africa. Returning from West Africa on July 9, 1963, Assistant Secretary for Africa Soapy Williams related that “the leaders of the


African states I visited as well as representatives from all influential groups were enthusiastic in their praise of President Kennedy’s use of executive powers...and his initiatives...” Indeed, in the final months of his presidency, Kennedy’s personal stature in Africa reached new heights. In Lagos, the US diplomatic mission reported that, in the eyes of the Nigerians, Kennedy had “become a...hero who can do no wrong” and “a champion in the image of Lincoln who singlehandedly carries on the fight for equal rights.” Even Obote, whose May letter to Kennedy had included caustic remarks about US race relations, praised the president for his speech on civil rights and expressed optimism in the future of US-African relations. However, Williams, like Rusk, recognized the volatility of the American position in Africa, bolstered temporarily by Kennedy’s newfound alignment with the civil rights cause but just as easily weakened if Congress proved obstinate. “[The] need to realize the promise of the President’s civil rights program” was more urgent than ever, Williams cautioned. In order to “retain the patience and understanding of the leadership (in Africa),” he advised, “the momentum established by the President [must] be maintained.”

When Kennedy’s presidency came to an abrupt end on November 22, 1963, derailed by a lone assassin’s bullets, his successor Lyndon Johnson inherited the civil rights narrative and continued to rely on it to advance US foreign policy objectives in Africa. In a memorandum from the USIA headquarters in Washington to all USIS posts, the new president relayed the agency’s


113 Status Report on African Reactions to Civil Rights in the United States, JFKL.

114 Ibid.
revised priorities, the most urgent among which was to “emphasize...those aspects of American life and culture which facilitate sympathetic understanding of United States policies” in order to rectify “damaging gaps in knowledge about the United States and widely held shibboleths which adversely affect the achievement of our objectives.” The Communists, he noted, had been persistent in vilifying Americans, portraying them as racist, materialistic, and “capitalists in the evil 19th century Marxist sense.” Contrary to Soviet allegations, Johnson contended, the US system actually served as the best means for racial minorities to be “absorbed into the main stream of American life...” African Americans, he continued, “are now actively in this process of full integration.” While progress would not be easy, federal support would continue “until the process is complete.”

LBJ’s promise affirmed, for African spectators as well as civil rights activists, the new White House’s dedication to implementing the civil rights reform Kennedy had initiated in the months leading up to his assassination.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawing segregation was a fitting crescendo for the story of racial progress. Its initial poor enforcement in practice notwithstanding, the act exonerated Washington from being directly responsible for persistent racial inequality and went a long way in ameliorating international castigation. “It seems probably that we have crossed some sort of watershed in foreign judgments and perspectives on the racial issue in the US,” reported an ebullient State Department official. There had been “a change in the temper and tendency of foreign editorial comment on racial episodes and events,” and African editorialists now “see [the] issue with greater complexity and sophistication, write with greater calm and restraint, and are

less inclined to sweeping judgments and outright condemnation of the US.”116 And as Johnson
rhapsodized in his commencement speech at Howard University, “it is the glorious opportunity
of this generation to end the one huge wrong of the American Nation.”117 By promising racial
equality going forward, his comment implied that the US had once again overcome its failings
and now emerged stronger and greater than ever. The passing of the Civil Rights Act was thus a
triumphant moment for American democracy and indicated to Third World elites the viability of
Western modernity—and its emphasis on “evolution, not dramatic revolution”—in bringing forth
positive social change.118 In the Cold War context, the Federal Government hoped that formal
legislation would restore legitimacy and the moral high ground to the American system in the
eyes of the world.

The Kennedy administration, like its preceding one, had relied on symbolic gestures and
rhetoric to keep Third World antagonism toward the US racial situation at bay. Birmingham and
its overseas repercussions forced JFK to confront domestic racial inequality as a moral issue as
well as a foreign policy problem. His proposed bill and its watershed implementation, in aligning
the Federal Government with the civil rights cause, marked an inflection point in the largely
static continuum of domestic racial policies. In the course of perpetuating the triumphalist racial
discourse, then, American policymakers did manage to expand, to an extent, civil rights for
African Americans. For the truly sanguine, these developments signaled the possibilities of the
civil rights narrative in ushering in a truer, more meaningful democracy. For others, however, the

American Negro,” Box 1, Policy Files, 1959-1967, RG 306, NACP.

117 Commencement Address at Howard University: “To Fulfill These Rights,” June 4, 1965, Public Papers of the

American Negro,” Box 1, Policy Files, 1959-1967, RG 306, NACP.
tactical shift was far from adequate. Malcolm X was one of the most vocal critics of this approach, which “wasn’t designed to solve the problems” or “to remove the material that’s going to explode” but “to lessen the danger of the explosion.” \(^{119}\) To the activist and his adherents, federal support for civil rights had arrived belatedly and reluctantly, and the understanding of desegregation as an end in itself stunted, rather than animated, the national conversation on race and democracy. While Beltway elites perceived integration as a *dénouement* to their triumphalist narrative, and while this story ends here, a definitive endpoint to the struggle for racial equality remained elusive.

Conclusion

While the civil rights narrative was a brainchild of the post-World War II period, it was the early 1960s when Kennedy’s modernization goals in the Third World converged with the twin escalation of the civil rights movement and the Cold War that provided the impetus for its refinement. The American triumphalist narrative provided US strategists with the framework for a modernist transformation of Third World societies, and it equipped officials with the vocabularies necessary for the re-narrativization of the civil rights movement. The Kennedy administration transformed the story, disseminated it widely, and, along the way, redefined American race relations. Fundamentally, the forces which galvanized domestic reform and Third World development occupied two sides of the same coin. Throughout the Cold War, these dual reform impulses paralleled and enforced one another, complementing and, at times, exacerbating the other. In a world in which peoples of European descent constituted a minuscule fraction of the global population, the civil rights narrative reflected both genuine efforts to integrate peoples of color into the Western mainstream and the strategic imperative to preserve American hegemony and national security.

As the American role in Vietnam intensified, however, the sun set on domestic racial issues as the primary foreign policy concern, and improving race relations at home began to play second fiddle to winning the war in Southeast Asia. The rationalist aspirations behind modernization schemes in the Third World, which informed the American projection of civil rights developments, were also delegitimized when US involvement in Vietnam took a disastrous turn. Technocratic expertise, after all, was what landed the US in the quagmire in the first place. While the government would continue to rely on the rhetoric of benevolence and exceptionalism
in articulating their goals abroad, the trinity of political democracy, economic capitalism, and liberal values associated with a distinct American-style modernity was losing credibility in the Third World. African elites’ modernizing aspirations never quite came into fruition, and they found their nations perpetually undercut by economic and political uncertainties. Frustrated by the limits the international system—erected and dictated overwhelmingly by a small policy elite in the West—imposed on their nation-building aims, many of the second generation of postcolonial leaders had renounced the US model in favor of the Communist path to modernity by the end of the decade.120

As the jubilation accompanying the postcolonial moment waned, so, too, did the civil rights narrative as a foreign policy strategy lose its potency. The radicalization of developing states widened the gulf in North-South relations, and Johnson was comparatively less interested in courting African allegiances than his immediate predecessor had been, taking a more pragmatic approach to US policy in the Third World.121 At home, as well, the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act did not put an end to African American pathos. Modernization rhetoric had informed the American representation of domestic race relations, yet it had also defined the perimeters for the acceptable range of outcomes. In conforming to a triumphalist version of racial progress, then, the more damaging pitfall of the civil rights narrative lay in its preclusion of meaningful dialogue about both the legacy of racial injustice and the sustained demand for greater equality. Its dogged focus on order rather than justice, regional rather than structural solutions, and a linear conception of history with little consideration for its ambiguities, complexities, and vicissitudes detracted from the power of the narrative in inspiring truly radical

120 Westad, *Global Cold War*, 106.

change. Despite these visible shortcomings, American political leaders did not perceive it as being any less compelling—to the contrary. In thrall to the logic of the triumphalist storyline, they perpetuated an official racial discourse and relegated what setbacks and inconsistencies there were to a fog of amnesia. That the rhetoric of racial progress was compatible with the nation’s historical projection of power and broader strategic goals in Africa rendered it an indispensable aspect of early US Cold War diplomacy.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library
Presidential Papers and Records.

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library
National Security Files.
President’s Office Files.
Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy.
Senate Speech Files.
White House Staff Files of Harris Wofford.
Interviews from the Oral History Program: William Attwood, Chester Bowles, Philip Kaiser,
Burke Marshall, Barbara Ward.

National Archives II, College Park, Md.
Master File Copies of Pamphlets and Leaflets, 1953-1983, Records of the United States
Information Agency.
Voice of America (VOA) Historical Files, 1946-1953, State Department Central Files.

Secondary Sources

Belmonte, Laura A. Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War. Philadelphia:

Berkhofer, Robert F., Jr. Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse. Cambridge,

Borstelmann, Thomas. The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global

Brands, H. W. The Specter of Neutralism: The United States and the Emergence of the Third

Byrne, Jeffrey James. “Africa’s Cold War.” In The Cold War In the Third World, edited by Robert

———. Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order. New York:


Parker, Jason C. “Small Victory, Missed Chance: The Eisenhower Administration, the Bandung Conference and the Turning of the Cold War.” In Kathryn Statler and Andrew Johns’ The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006.


