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## John F. Kennedy's Courting of African Nationalism

Philip E. Muehlenbeck

In July 1960, John F. Kennedy received a letter from Africa congratulating him on winning the Democratic Party's nomination for the upcoming American presidential election. A plea for help accompanied the congratulation. "Everywhere there are more and more [unintelligible word] Communists! Everywhere Western prestige has slipped. So for heaven's sake change the image of America before its too late!"<sup>1</sup> The Democratic nominee had already established a reputation across Africa as a sympathetic supporter of African nationalism, who if elected would realign Washington's priorities toward the continent. Once in office, Kennedy indeed made changing the image of America in the Third World a top priority of his administration.

John F. Kennedy was the first, perhaps only, American president to make a pointed effort to court African nationalism. He did so partly on moral grounds, but strategic considerations were far more important. JFK believed Third World nationalism would become one of the most potent political forces in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, he believed that the growth of Third World nationalism might one day tip the balance of power in the Cold War. For this reason he made it a priority of his administration to attempt to influence the nationalists of the developing world into aligning with the United States in its global contest against the Soviet Union. He used all means at his disposal - economic, cultural, personal - to appeal to the leaders of the developing world. Kennedy's focus in this effort centered on Africa, and he set out to court the nationalists of that continent.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars such as Thomas Noer, Peter Schraeder, David Dickson, and Gabriel Kolko contend that nothing substantial changed in U.S. foreign policy towards Africa during Kennedy's administration.<sup>3</sup> They maintain that Kennedy's pledge of

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<sup>1</sup> Hand written letter from Barbara Ward to John F. Kennedy, 16 July 1960. President's Office Files, Box 33 "Special Correspondence", Folder "Ward, Barbara 7/16/60-2/20/62", John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, MA (Hereafter referred to as JFKL).

<sup>2</sup> Kennedy tried to court Third World nationalists from both Latin America and Asia as well. He seems to have focused more on Africa, however, most likely because the wave of independence that continent experienced in 1960 presented both superpowers with new opportunities to curry favor in this region.

<sup>3</sup> Critics of Kennedy's African policy include: Thomas J. Noer, "New Frontiers and Old Priorities in Africa," in *Kennedy's Quest for*

support for African nationalism during the 1960 Presidential campaign was little more than a shrewd political move in an effort to appeal to liberals and blacks - two groups that were unenthusiastic about his candidacy. These detractors assert that African affairs never became more than a peripheral concern for Kennedy, due to the fact that his worldview was dominated by the importance of sustaining a cohesive NATO and winning the Cold War.<sup>4</sup>

A closer look at Kennedy's legacy shows that he changed United States foreign policy towards Africa in both rhetoric and substance. Kennedy devoted more time and effort toward relations with Africa than any other American President. His willingness to aid any African nation regardless of its political orientation clearly separates him from any other man who has occupied the Oval Office. Unlike Truman and Eisenhower, Kennedy supported rather than stunted African independence. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the later administrations of either Ford or Reagan, Kennedy was committed to arms limitation on the African continent in an attempt to keep the Cold War from getting "hot" in Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Dickson is correct when he argues that Kennedy's worldview caused him to obsess over winning the Cold War. However, Kennedy's drive to win the Cold War was in no way contradictory to his desire to support African nationalism. In fact, he believed that courting African nationalism was essential for competing in the Cold War and that both goals could be pursued simultaneously. He saw the Third World as the decisive battlefield of the Cold War, and criticized the leadership of Dwight D. Eisenhower for having ignored the "sleeping giant" of African nationalism. The new President proclaimed:

The great battleground for the defense and expansion of freedom today, is the whole southern half of the globe - Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East - the lands of the rising peoples. Their revolution is the greatest in human history. They seek an end to injustice,

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*Victory*, Thomas G. Paterson ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Peter J. Schraeder, *United States Foreign Policy Towards Africa: Incrementalism, Crisis, and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), David A. Dickson, "U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Southern and Central Africa: The Kennedy and Johnson Years," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 23:2. Spring 1993, and Gabriel Kolko, *Confronting the Third World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Dickson, p. 303.

<sup>5</sup> See Briefing Paper in Preparation for the arrival of Nigerian Prime Minister Sir Abubaker Tafawa Balewa, July 1961. General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, Office of Inter-African Affairs, Box 4 "Records of the Political-Military Advisor, 1951-1963", Folder "Nigeria - Arms", Record Group 59, National Archives II, College Park, MD (hereafter referred to as NA).

tyranny and exploitation. More than an end, they seek a beginning.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most significant differences in the manner in which Kennedy and Eisenhower fought the Cold War was that JFK perceived befriending Third World nationalism as a necessity, while Eisenhower thought it was desirable but was not willing to go out of his way to do so. This is especially true in any instance when Eisenhower believed potential U.S.-Third World relations would cause a rift in his relations with NATO allies.

Kennedy's belief that the Cold War would be won or lost in the Third World was profoundly influenced by a speech made by Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev on January 6, 1961, only days before Kennedy took the presidential oath. Khrushchev said it was the "historical mission" of world Communism to assist "wars of national liberation" in an attempt to end colonialism:

A remarkable phenomenon of our time is the awakening of the peoples of Africa...Communists are revolutionaries, and it would be unfortunate if they did not take advantage of new opportunities and did not look for new methods and forms that would best achieve the ends in view.<sup>7</sup>

Kennedy took Khrushchev's speech seriously, reading portions of it aloud during the first meeting of his National Security Council and distributing copies to his entire staff. "It was a significant event in our lives," Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara later remembered.<sup>8</sup>

The State Department later concluded that Africa was "the greatest open field of maneuver in the world-wide competition between the [Communist] Bloc and the non-Communist world."<sup>9</sup> The President was firmly convinced that Africa had surpassed Asia as the most permeable battlefield in the East-West Cold War struggle.

It is therefore impossible to separate Kennedy's desire to win the Cold War from his desire to court African nationalism. Even Peter Rodman, a well known

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<sup>6</sup> Kennedy quoted in Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), pp. 529-30.

<sup>7</sup> For a translation and State Department reaction to Khrushchev's speech see "Report on Moscow Conference of Representatives of Communist and Workers Parties," State Department translation of speech given by Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev on 6 January 1961 in Moscow. General Records of the Department of State. Box 65 "Records of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Miscellaneous Subject Files, 1961-1968", Folder "DR - Personal Papers", Record Group 59, NA.

<sup>8</sup> Robert McNamara quoted by Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1994), p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> State Department Paper, "Africa: Guidelines for Policy and Operations," March 1962. National Security Files, Box 2: "Africa", Folder "General, 3/62-4/62", JFKL.

conservative scholar of the Cold War in the Third World, concludes that it is impractical "to separate the generous program for Africa from the hope that it would appeal to the continent's peoples as a more attractive alternative to the Soviet and Chinese challenge to which Kennedy himself had so passionately called attention in the early months of 1961."<sup>10</sup>

Kennedy had first established a reputation of opposing Western colonialism and supporting African nationalist movements while representing the state of Massachusetts in the United States Senate from 1947-1960. In 1957 he gave a controversial speech on the floor of the Senate denouncing the French war in Algeria, as well as the Eisenhower administration's uncritical support of French colonialism. Kennedy charged that by ignoring the aspirations of Africans to govern their own independent nations, the Republicans were pushing the peoples of the underdeveloped world into the hands of the Communists. Kennedy declared that "the most powerful single force in the world today is neither Communism nor Capitalism, neither the H-bomb nor the guided missile - it is man's eternal desire to be free and independent."<sup>11</sup>

Kennedy hypothesized that further French attempts to silence their colonies "eternal desires" for freedom would lead to the radicalization of African nationalist movements. He feared that denying self-determination to nationalists would push Third World intellectuals towards Marxism, which would have the effect of turning nationalists into Communists. For Kennedy, the challenge of dealing with European imperialism was "the single most important test of American foreign policy today."<sup>12</sup>

The *New York Times* called the speech "the most comprehensive and outspoken arraignment of Western policy toward Algeria yet presented by an American in public office."<sup>13</sup> As a result, Kennedy became the man for African diplomats to see in Washington. Many commented on their satisfaction in reading the speech as well as the impact that it had on young African intellectuals.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rodman, p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> Theodore Sorensen, *Let the Word Go Forth: The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1988), p. 331.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*, 13 March 1957.

<sup>14</sup> Jim DiEugenio, "Dodd and Dulles vs Kennedy in Africa," *The Probe* 6 (2) (January/February 1999).

By 1958 Kennedy had become the chairman of the Senate's Foreign Relations African subcommittee and continually pressed the White House with the importance of initiating contact with African nationalist leaders. "Call it nationalism, call it anti-colonialism, call it what you will, the word is out and spreading like wildfire in nearly a thousand languages and dialects - that it is no longer necessary to remain forever in bondage."<sup>15</sup> "After all," Kennedy mused, "it was in our schools that some of the most renowned African leaders learned...the virtues of representative government, widespread education, and economic opportunity. These are the ideas and ideals that have caused a revolution."<sup>16</sup> President Eisenhower, however, showed little interest in cultivating relationships with African nationalists. While Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev shook the hands of new African heads of state at the United Nations in 1960, the American President chose instead to go on a golfing vacation.<sup>17</sup>

In order to maintain the unity of NATO, President Eisenhower allowed U.S. policy toward Africa to be determined in London, Paris, and Lisbon. His African policy was little more than an extension of the Marshall Plan, predicated upon ensuring that African resources remained accessible to Western Europe's recovery from World War II.<sup>18</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Henry Byroade warned that, "a sudden break in economic relations [between Europe and Africa] might seriously injure the European economies upon which our Atlantic system depends."<sup>19</sup> Throughout his Presidency Eisenhower remained committed to this policy despite the advice of the Chairman of the Council on Foreign Economic Policy, who observed that Africans were, "offended by this policy, and regard it as a new form of colonialism, and exploitation by the United States."<sup>20</sup>

Eisenhower, however, cared little about what Africans thought. His National Security Council concluded that Africans were unprepared for independence since, "the African is still immature and unsophisticated."<sup>21</sup> Eisenhower was openly

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy quoted in David N. Gibbs, "The United States and Sub-Saharan Africa," *International History Review*, 17 May 1995, p. 321.

<sup>16</sup> John F. Kennedy speech given at Wesleyan University, 13 October 1959, Lincoln, Nebraska. Reprinted in Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace*, p. 131.

<sup>17</sup> William Attwood, *The Reds and the Blacks* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ebere Nwaubani. *The United States and Decolonization in West Africa, 1950-1960*. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> Henry A. Byroade, "The World's Colonies and Ex-Colonies," *Department of State Bulletin* 16 November 1953, pp. 657-9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> Report "U.S. Policy Towards South of the Sahara Prior to Calendar Year 1960," 31 July 1957. Records of the National Security

hostile towards "premature independence" and referred to the 1960 arrival of independence in Africa as a "destructive hurricane."<sup>22</sup> In fact, in his memoirs a series of maps showing the evolution of African independence is titled "African Upheaval."<sup>23</sup>

Kennedy believed that Eisenhower's refusal to support neither anti-colonialism nor African neutralism was costing the United States popularity throughout the Third World - as well as the Cold War. The young Senator thought it inevitable that Africans would eventually attain freedom from European control; the question was with which Cold War bloc these newly independent states would align. Eisenhower's indifference seemed to be pushing them towards the Soviet sphere.

By 1960 it appeared to Kennedy as if the Soviet Union, fresh off winning the race to be first into outer space and bolstered by a perceived nuclear parity, was gaining ground in the hearts of the underdeveloped world. The Soviets had invested billions of dollars to fund Third World projects such as the Aswan Dam in Egypt, steel mills in India, and significant military aid to the government of Indonesia and Algerian rebels. The Cuban nationalist revolutionary, Fidel Castro, had turned to the Soviet camp as well. Moreover, while Dwight Eisenhower labeled African independence a "destructive hurricane," Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev called such national independence movements "sacred." It was becoming increasingly evident to the Third World that Moscow supported nationalism, while Washington merely supported anti-Communism.

Kennedy asked Harris Wofford to help Theodore Sorensen (Kennedy's chief aide and speechwriter) draft new foreign policy speeches incorporating the candidate's view of the importance of the Third World, and downplaying the need for Washington to view the world through the eyes of its European allies. Kennedy told Wofford:

The key thing for the country is a new foreign policy that will break out of the confines of the cold war. Then we can build a decent relationship with developing nations and begin to respond to their needs.

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Council, Box 5 "Papers Prepared by NSC Staff Members", Folder "NSC 5719", Record Group 273, NA.

<sup>22</sup> Robert A. Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 10-11.

<sup>23</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: 1956-1961* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), the map is labeled as illustration #25 in the middle of the book on an unnumbered page.

We can stop the vicious circle of the arms race and promote diversity and peaceful change within the Soviet bloc...The most likely alternatives [to Kennedy being nominated as the Democratic candidate] are [Lyndon] Johnson or [Stuart] Symington, but if either of them is nominated we might as well elect Dulles or Acheson; it would be the same cold-war foreign policy all over again.<sup>24</sup>

In 1960, for the first (and probably last) time in history, Africa figured prominently in an American presidential election. Kennedy repeatedly attacked the Eisenhower-Nixon administration's record on Africa, making 479 references to the continent during his 1960 campaign speeches.<sup>25</sup> Kennedy argued that:

We have lost ground in Africa because we have neglected and ignored the needs and the aspirations of the African people - because we failed to foresee the emergence of Africa and ally ourselves with the causes of independence...<sup>26</sup>

On the campaign trail Kennedy repeatedly stressed the low number of scholarships Washington had awarded to black Africa, as well as the low number of Foreign Service personnel stationed there (less than in West Germany alone). JFK criticized the Republican leadership for turning its back on the nationalist movements of the world who had typically been inspired by the American Revolution and its values. "There are children in Africa named Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln. There are none called Lenin or Trotsky or Stalin - or Nixon."<sup>27</sup>

Yet despite his record of support for Africa, some African leaders such as Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser, had initially hoped that Kennedy's opponent, Richard M. Nixon, would win the American presidency. Nasser's support stemmed from the fact that Nixon was Eisenhower's Vice President during the Suez Crisis, and "Egypt could feel nothing but gratitude toward both men [Nixon and Eisenhower] for the position they took in 1956."<sup>28</sup> After he watched the first televised debate between the two candidates his opinion of the two men soon changed,

<sup>24</sup> Kennedy quoted in Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys & Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), pp. 36-7.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 554.

<sup>26</sup> John F. Kennedy Campaign Speech at the National Council of Women, New York, 12 October 1960, in Sorensen, *Let the Word Go Forth*, pp. 365-9.

<sup>27</sup> Kennedy quoted in Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 183.

<sup>28</sup> Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *The Cairo Documents: The Inside Story of Nasser and His Relationships With World Leaders, Rebels, and Statesmen* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1973), p. 189.



however. Nasser was impressed with the Democratic candidate's apparent desire to understand the Third World. From that point onward Nasser decided that it was in Egypt's interest for Kennedy to win the election.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, Kennedy made a number of dramatic gestures to demonstrate his interest in Africa. When the Eisenhower administration declined to do anything to help African students who had scholarships from American universities but could not afford their travel fares to the United States, Kennedy arranged for the Joseph Kennedy Foundation to pay for their trip. When Guinea's President Sékou Touré requested a meeting with the Democratic candidate, Kennedy rented a helicopter to fly the African leader to Disneyland where the two held a well-publicized meeting.

Kennedy's campaign speeches and actions had sent a message of hope to the Third World. The Algerian *Front de Liberation Nationale* (FLN) held a vigil during the morning of November 9, 1960 to listen to the returns of the United States presidential election. There was cheering throughout the camp when John F. Kennedy had pulled ahead, but cursing when it appeared that Nixon might overtake him.<sup>30</sup> When the final results of the election began to reach the rest of Africa, they were greeted with waves of exhilaration and optimism. Kennedy's narrow victory had provided Africans with the anticipation of a better future for their continent.

President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt was filled with a renewed sense of hope that he would finally be able to come to a genuine understanding with Washington.<sup>31</sup> Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah wrote to the American President-elect expressing that he looked forward to "complete kinship" between the two heads of state.<sup>32</sup> Senator Frank Church noticed a similar response from the masses while traveling through Africa a month after the election. "Whenever our presence became known, eager crowds would gather to shout, 'Kennedy, Kennedy'...For

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<sup>29</sup> Nasser watched the September 1960 debate between Nixon and Kennedy while in New York during a trip to the United Nations. See *Ibid.*, pp. 187-190.

<sup>30</sup> Story told by Algerian Premier Ben Bella to John F. Kennedy, see Richard D. Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> Anthony Nutting, *Nasser* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), pp. 270-1.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah to President John F. Kennedy, 26 January 1961. President's Office Files, Box 117 "Countries", Folder "Ghana", JFKL.

the first time, our country was being identified, Arab and Black alike, with legitimate African aspirations."<sup>33</sup> It was clear:

(F)rom the excitement that Ted Kennedy (who accompanied Church and other congressmen on the trip), although he was not yet a member of the Senate, elicited wherever we went, because he was known to be the new president's brother. And besides, of course, he had the Kennedy appearance, and was easily identified. There was an excitement throughout Africa at the time about Kennedy and some understanding that he had shown more interest in African affairs than previous presidents.<sup>34</sup>

Kennedy became the thirty-fifth President of the United States of America during an exciting and optimistic time in Africa. The first wave of African independence had begun on March 6, 1957, when Kwame Nkrumah led Ghana away from its colonial past and to independence. By the time of Kennedy's inauguration on January 20, 1961, the dismantlement of the French colonial empire had resulted in the independence of an additional eighteen African states. Kennedy's sympathy for African nationalism, both as a Senator and on the 1960 campaign trail, had helped swell the African continent with hope that under his leadership the United States would be more responsive to its needs.

After winning the election Kennedy wasted no time in fulfilling his campaign promise to pay more attention to Africa. In December 1960, one month prior to taking office, Kennedy assigned a task force to study U.S. African policy. The task force discarded the idea that Africa was still a dependent of Europe and an area of non-interest for America. The task force report recognized African aspirations for independence, self-determination, economic development, and Cold War non-alignment - and suggested ways in which the United States could help facilitate these objectives.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, this indicated that the administration intended to take a new and serious look at Africa.

The importance of Africa to Kennedy was vividly illustrated by the fact that his first State Department appointment was G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. Williams was a long time advocate of civil rights in the United States, and shared with Kennedy a common

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<sup>33</sup> Frank Church, "Our Over Involvement in Africa," *Congressional Record*, 17 February 1965, pp. 2869-71.

<sup>34</sup> Frank Church, recorded interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, 25 February 1969, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, JFKL.

<sup>35</sup> Report to the Honorable John F. Kennedy by the Task Force on Africa, 31 December 1960. John C. Thompson Papers, Box 1, JFKL.

vision of what America's role in Africa should be. Kennedy thought highly enough of the former progressive Governor of Michigan, that before naming him to head the African Bureau he considered Williams for Secretary of State. The selection indicated a new emphasis on the importance of African policy. Kennedy described Williams' post as "a position of responsibility second to none in the new administration."<sup>36</sup> It became obvious that during the Kennedy presidency the State Department's Bureau of Western European Affairs would no longer determine U.S. policies towards Africa.

Other prominent Africanists received important positions within the administration. Former Presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson was appointed United Nations Ambassador. Chester Bowles became Undersecretary of State and later Kennedy's Ambassador-at-large to the Third World. Kennedy also made an attempt to place ambassadors in African capitals that embodied the spirit of his New Frontier. The newly elected President replaced many Foreign Service bureaucrats and political appointees with young non-career professionals.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike many of their predecessors, men like William Attwood in Guinea, John Badeau in Egypt, and Edmund Gullion in the Congo, had "been out in the world, spoke the necessary languages, were conversant with foreign affairs," and held views that they "could articulate with conviction."<sup>38</sup> Kennedy's African ambassadors understood the languages, cultures, and problems of their posts. These new ambassadors were well received by African heads of state, who respected their ability to speak the local language as well as their personal access to Kennedy.

Even more important was the fact that these men actually wanted to serve in the countries to which they were assigned. William Attwood recalled in his memoirs that prior to leaving for his assignment as the Ambassador to Guinea, a journalist jokingly told him, "You must have written some lousy speeches for Jack to be sent to that dump." In fact, Attwood had been offered a few "more

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<sup>36</sup> Kennedy quoted in Schlesinger, p. 555.

<sup>37</sup> Undersecretary of State Bowles submitted a memorandum to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, President Kennedy, and the President's "talent search" committee on 18 December 1960 advising that the administration's top ambassadorships should be filled with people "from the outside [of the foreign service] who are unhampered by past loyalties and associations," and who would "have the capacity for fresh affirmative thinking, and for dealing with the new powerful forces which are shaping events throughout the world." See Chester Bowles *Promises to Keep* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 605.

<sup>38</sup> Attwood, *The Reds and the Blacks*, p. 19.

prestigious" posts - but turned them down and specifically asked to go to Conakry.<sup>39</sup> Eisenhower's representatives to Africa, as well as the majority of ambassadors from Communist states, too often thought of Africa as an undesirable "hardship" post. Africans easily sensed this, and did not like it.<sup>40</sup> Attwood was typical of Kennedy's New Frontier ambassadors. They were men eager to accept the new and unknown challenge of fighting the Cold War in post-colonial Africa.

With his ambassadors in place and building from the recommendations of his African task force, President Kennedy implemented a four-pronged approach to court African nationalism. His policy was to oppose European colonialism, accept African non-alignment, initiate economic programs to help aid in Africa's development, and launch personal diplomacy to build a working relationship between himself and the leaders of Africa's independence movement.

The Kennedy administration made a concerted effort to disengage itself from the African policies of its European allies. Making a huge departure in U.S. foreign policy, the young President resolutely declared that America was on the side of those seeking independence in the Third World. "Their revolution is the greatest in human history. They seek an end to injustice, tyranny, and exploitation."<sup>41</sup>

Within a month of taking office, President Kennedy had met with the National Security Council to revise the operating procedures for U.S. policy toward Africa. Kennedy argued that it was imperative for Washington to discard the Eisenhower policy of deferring U.S. African policy to its European allies. On February 13 1961, Kennedy signed National Security Action Memorandum No. 16, which provided "flexibility for the United States to supplement Western support to newly-independent areas whenever such action constitutes a revision of State interest."<sup>42</sup> Writing to the President two days later, Secretary of State Dean Rusk noted that the new policy would allow the White House the elasticity to pursue its own African policy.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> William Attwood, *The Twilight Struggle: Tales of the Cold War* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), p. 225.

<sup>40</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 279 and Attwood, *The Twilight Struggle*, p. 231.

<sup>41</sup> *Public Papers of the President's of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961* (Washington D.C.: United States Governmental Printing Office, 1962), p. 397.

<sup>42</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 16, 13 February 1961. General Records of the Department of State, Box 1 "National Security Action Memo Files, 1961-1968", Record Group 59, NA.

<sup>43</sup> Memorandum from Secretary of State Dean Rusk to President John F. Kennedy, 15 February 1961., *ibid.*

Backed by Kennedy's support, administration staffers were frank in their support of decolonization. Shortly after taking office, G. Mennen Williams created a small controversy when he proclaimed "Africa for the Africans," a vision for the continent in which Africans would control their own political destiny. This statement created a furor amongst both the press and "Europeanists" within the administration and Congress. President Kennedy, however, stood by his Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, and responded in a March 1, 1961 press conference, "I do not know who else Africa should be for."<sup>44</sup>

This was not merely airy rhetoric, as early as the summer of 1961 the new administration began pressuring Portugal on self-determination for its African territories.<sup>45</sup> Responding to Portugal's suppression of a rebellion in Angola, the U.S. backed a United Nations resolution advocating Angolan self-determination. The administration further pressured the Portuguese by terminating commercial arms sales to Lisbon, reducing its military aid program to that country from \$25 million to \$3 million, and authorizing the CIA to initiate modest financial support to Angolan nationalists. Clearly the days of allowing a NATO ally a free hand in Africa had come to an end.

The second element of Kennedy's policy towards Africa was to accept African Cold War neutrality. Kennedy was opposed to the famous John Foster Dulles principle, which held that *any* neutralism was a "transitional stage to Communism." JFK feared that ostracizing Third World nationals would only provide "an open invitation to the Soviet Union to exploit discontent and hunger" throughout the developing world.<sup>46</sup> "To dismiss or denounce these men [Third World nationalists] for every foolish thing they said or did, to cut off our aid food shipments every time they aroused our displeasure,...would only play into the hands of the Communists."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> President John F. Kennedy News Conference, Q&A with Reporters, 1 March 1961. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 139.

<sup>45</sup> National Security Action Memorandum No. 60, "U.S. Actions in Relation to Portuguese Territories in Africa," From National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, 14 July 1961. See Edward B. Clafin, ed. *JFK Wants to Know: Memos from the President's Office, 1961-1963* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), pp. 78-9.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted from Kennedy's book *Strategy of Peace*, pp. 217-9, cited in Douglas Little, "JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism," *The Journal of American History*, 75, September 1988, p. 503.

<sup>47</sup> Kennedy quoted by Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 540.

Kennedy believed that "real" neutralism, which he defined as neutralism consisting of balanced criticism of both the United States and the Soviet Union, was acceptable. "We shall not always expect to find them [non-aligned countries] supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom."<sup>48</sup> Citing America's own neutralist past as an example, he stated that a policy of neutrality made good sense for newly independent and underdeveloped nations who were engrossed with their own internal troubles. "If neutrality is the result of a concentration on internal problems, raising the standard of living of the people and so forth, particularly in the underdeveloped countries, I would accept that."<sup>49</sup>

Kennedy's pre-inauguration task force concluded that the "non-alignment of African states in the Cold War is in no sense detrimental to our interests."<sup>50</sup> In fact, the task force argued that Cold War non-alignment would work in America's favor because the United States "welcomed diversity, but the Communists cannot."<sup>51</sup> The new administration theorized that the United States could win the Cold War in Africa simply by preventing its newly independent nations from going Communist.

A third aspect of Kennedy's African policy was to assist in that continent's development by raising the African standard of living through U.S. aid and trade. Kennedy was skeptical of sending military aid to Africa or demanding that African countries fight against Communism without first alleviating the continent's economic misery. The first step in aiding Africa, Kennedy proclaimed, was to "cure the social chaos in which Communism has always thrived."<sup>52</sup>

The President and his staff hypothesized that through modernization, African nations would grow into economic and political maturity. Economic stability would lead to political stability, which in turn would prevent Communist subversion. Kennedy stated the importance of U.S. aid to African development:

If African progress falters because of a lack of capital and education, if these new states and emerging peoples turn bitter in their independence, then the reason will be that the Western powers, by

<sup>48</sup> Kennedy quoted by Sorensen, *Ibid.*, p. 538.

<sup>49</sup> Kennedy quoted by Little, p. 503.

<sup>50</sup> Report to the Honorable John F. Kennedy by the Task Force on Africa, 31 December 1960. John C. Thompson Papers, Box 1, JFKL.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 529-30.

indifference or lack of imagination, have failed to see that it is their own future that is at stake.<sup>53</sup>

The Peace Corps was the cornerstone of Kennedy's Third World development plan. The logic behind the creation of the Peace Corps was two fold; it provided grass roots humanitarian aid (on African terms) while at the same time acted as a counterweight to the work of Eastern Bloc professionals - doctors, engineers, teachers - who Kennedy saw as "missionaries for international Communism."<sup>54</sup>

While the Peace Corps fell short in terms of improving African living standards, it became arguably the most successful foreign policy strategy for improving America's image in the Third World. Peace Corps monuments such as irrigation systems, water pumps, and higher crop yields won the United States respect and admiration amongst Africans and successfully won the Cold War propaganda campaign against Khrushchev's 'missionaries.'

The fourth, but ultimately most important, facet of President Kennedy's approach in dealing with Africa was his use of personal diplomacy with the leaders of that continent. When Kennedy took office in January 1961 the United Nations General Assembly was in plenary session. Leaders from across the world were in New York City and virtually all wanted to visit the new American President. Kennedy made it clear to his staff that he wanted to meet with Africans. "If African leaders want to meet me, good. Invite them down here *unofficially*."<sup>55</sup>

Many Africans came to visit Kennedy on that occasion, and they would continue to visit the White House at an unprecedented pace throughout Kennedy's tenure. Kennedy opened up his 1600 Pennsylvania mansion to receive eleven African leaders in 1961, ten in 1962, and another seven in 1963.<sup>56</sup> With his natural charm, grace, and informality he was able to put his African guests at ease by conveying to them his profound sympathy for African nationalism. He won the admiration of African leaders by attempting to see African problems not as an

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<sup>53</sup> Kennedy quoted by Attwood, *The Reds and the Blacks*, p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> Kennedy quoted by Harris Wofford in Thomas Borstelmann, "'Hedging Our Bets and Buying Time': John Kennedy and Racial Revolutions in the American South and South Africa," *Diplomatic History*, 24:3, Summer 2000, p. 448.

<sup>55</sup> Kennedy quoted by G. Mennen Williams in G. Mennen Williams, *Africa for the Africans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p. 161.

<sup>56</sup> Schlesinger, p. 558.

ally of the European colonial powers, but as the Africans themselves saw their problems.

Although Kennedy had little prior contact with either Africans or African Americans prior to assuming the presidency, American Civil Rights activist James Meredith believed that in personal terms, he was the first American president who was not a racist.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, scholar Thomas Borstelmann concludes that the generational contrast between Kennedy and Eisenhower was most pronounced in the way in which they related to individuals with darker skin.<sup>58</sup> This may account for why Kennedy was much more at ease in his personal relations with African nationalists than any of his predecessors had been. This distinction in attitude and treatment was easily noticed and appreciated by Kennedy's African guests.

Further impressing his African guests was Kennedy's remarkable knowledge of Africa. He was well-versed in African history, could refer to African personalities and issues, cite statistics and facts, and discuss in detail the various members of a leader's governmental cabinet. G. Mennen Williams remembered introducing the President to African leaders:

[A]fter the two had shaken hands and talked together a few minutes, seeing him walk to a globe in the corner of the office, twirl it, and haltingly put his finger on that leader's country. (Alternatively, I imagine that one or two African leaders or ambassadors may well have asked him with corresponding uncertainty, "Where is Massachusetts?") This unaffected, ingenuous approach impressed Africans deeply.<sup>59</sup>

This led some Africans to say after their meeting with Kennedy that the "American President knew more about their countries than they did themselves."<sup>60</sup> After each White House meeting the visiting dignitary was brought upstairs to the Kennedy family's private quarters and introduced to the President's wife and children - an action that deeply touched Kennedy's foreign visitors.<sup>61</sup> Somali Prime Minister Abdirashid Ali Shermarke later remembered that Kennedy possessed a unique ability "to make himself a friend - immediately." "I had an unlimited

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<sup>57</sup> James Meredith quoted in Thomas Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 138.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, p. 161.

<sup>60</sup> Schlesinger, p. 559.

<sup>61</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 577.



respect for the man, an unlimited respect for the man, beyond any doubt," Shermarke said of his meeting with the American President.<sup>62</sup>

The National Security Council recognized how much Africans appreciated the attention Kennedy gave them and concluded that America's most important asset in dealing with African nationalists was, "the President's status and personal relations" with African leaders, "on which we can draw heavily."<sup>63</sup> Administration staff member Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. remembered Kennedy's warm relationship with African leaders:

One after another, they left his presence with admiration for his "sensitivity", pride in what they now felt to be a special relationship, a conviction that Kennedy's America, even if it could not do everything at once, was basically with them, and, most of all, a fascination with Kennedy himself.<sup>64</sup>

Kennedy's personal diplomacy was further supplemented by the efforts of G. Mennen Williams. The head of the State Department's African Bureau made several trips to Africa meeting with Africa's leaders and serving as Kennedy's personal representative.<sup>65</sup> Williams and his wife traveled through Africa with the same vigor they showed in campaigning through Michigan. The couple:

...toured Africa as they had toured every county in Michigan. No African nation was too small or politically insignificant for them, just as no Michigan town or county had been too small for the governor to visit. During the 1960s, Africa was changing rapidly and gaining the world's attention. Mennen and Nancy made many friends there on behalf of the United States.<sup>66</sup>

Through his personal contacts with African leaders, Williams was able to "correct the views of U.S. African policy and thereby increase good will toward the U.S."<sup>67</sup>

In his first year in office Kennedy more than doubled U.S. economic aid to Africa, expanded the U.S. diplomatic presence on the continent, made a deliberate effort to meet with African dignitaries, and launched new American foreign policy

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<sup>62</sup> Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, recorded interview by E.A. Bayne, 4 August 1965, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, JFKL.

<sup>63</sup> Borstelmann, *Hedging our Bets*, p. 438.

<sup>64</sup> Schlesinger, p. 559.

<sup>65</sup> Report prepared by Samuel E. Belk of the National Security Council Staff, "Summary of Governor Williams' Trip to Africa, August 8 to September 1, 1961", 25 September 1961, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Africa, Volume XXI*, pp. 302-3. (Hereafter referred to as *Summary of Williams Trip*).

<sup>66</sup> Helen W. Berthelot, *Win Some, Lose Some: G. Mennen Williams and the New Democrats* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 215.

<sup>67</sup> See *Summary of Williams Trip*.

initiatives. All of these actions were undertaken in an attempt to court African nationalism.

Throughout his term in office Kennedy continued this policy of courting African nationalism. Prior to his inauguration the Eisenhower administration had already written off countries such as Guinea, Egypt, and Ghana as hopelessly lost to the Soviet orbit. But by late 1962 Kwame Nkrumah and Gamal Abdul Nasser felt that Kennedy was the only western leader that they could trust. Guinea's Sékou Touré referred to Kennedy as his "best friend in the outside world" and said that the, "Guinean people now regard America as their best friend."<sup>68</sup> In Algeria, a country whose independence from France Eisenhower had tried to prevent, Kennedy had attained an almost folk hero stature for the way in which he had supported Algerian self-determination. Ben Bella and the rest of the Algerian government could not help but be eternally grateful for Kennedy's 1957 stand in support of their cause. These were not isolated incidents, for such success stories were replicated all across the African continent, at great benefit to U.S. foreign policy.<sup>69</sup>

John F. Kennedy saw Africa as an arena of considerable Cold War rivalry in which vigorous American involvement was essential. The courting of Africa's nationalist leaders was one of the key foreign policy initiatives of his administration. Although the recurring intrusion of Cold War crises in such places as Berlin, Cuba, and Vietnam hampered his activism, he still managed to successfully realign American diplomacy towards Africa to accommodate the needs and aspirations of the leaders of that continent.

The arguments made by Noer and Kolko that Kennedy's African policy did not differ much from the policies of previous administrations simply do not hold true.<sup>70</sup> Such assessments ignore the numerous changes he made in U.S. policy towards Africa. Kennedy aide Theodore Sorensen wrote that Kennedy "succeeded beyond his own expectations in dispelling the notion that the United States was

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<sup>68</sup> Touré quoted by Attwood, *The Reds and the Blacks*, p. 129.

<sup>69</sup> I am currently working on my PhD dissertation at The George Washington University in which I use case studies to examine Kennedy's relations with Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Sékou Touré (Guinea), Gamal Abdul Nasser (Egypt), Ahmed Ben Bella (Algeria), William Tubman (Liberia), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), and Felix Houphouët-Boigny (Ivory Coast).

<sup>70</sup> Noer, "New Frontiers and Old Priorities in Africa," and Kolko.

unconcerned, conservative, and committed to the status quo."<sup>71</sup> During the Kennedy Presidency, the United States was for the first time viewed as being sympathetic to the aspirations of Third World nationalism. In Africa, Kennedy became well respected for his aggressive efforts to find common ground with popular Pan-Africanist leaders like Sékou Touré, Gamal Abdul Nasser, and Kwame Nkrumah. Despite the reservations of both his NATO allies and domestic political opponents, Kennedy wholeheartedly courted these 'radical' African leaders. He did so because he felt that it was not only the right thing to do, but also in his country's national interest.

Senator Frank Church proclaimed that Kennedy was "the first American president to take a personal interest in African affairs. He understood the importance of the collapse of colonialism on that continent, the emergence of the independent governments, and the need for the United States to establish good relations with these governments."<sup>72</sup> Kennedy's Ambassador to Guinea wrote:

As for African policy during the Kennedy Administration, the main changes were that we began to talk to Africans about Africa as Americans and not as junior partners of France and England. Also we became less suspicious of nonalignment. So far as Africans were concerned, these changes did add up to a new policy.<sup>73</sup>

Africans sensed a genuine sincerity in Kennedy's sympathy for their cause. For Africans it was JFK's *words* that spoke louder than his *actions*. Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor said that after Kennedy's 1957 speech on Algeria there was no doubt in Africans' minds where the future American President's sympathies lie.<sup>74</sup> Africans "considered that Mr. Kennedy's political attitudes were even more important than his efforts to aid their economies."<sup>75</sup> According to Senghor, "African chiefs of state had a feeling of great esteem, I can even say, great admiration, for President Kennedy."<sup>76</sup> Julius Nyerere, Ahmed Ben Bella, Kwame Nkrumah, and others understood that at times global Cold War considerations and the democratic nature of the American political system prevented Kennedy from

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<sup>71</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*.

<sup>72</sup> Church, oral history interview.

<sup>73</sup> William Attwood, oral history statement, 8 November 1965, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, JFKL.

<sup>74</sup> Mahoney, p. 22.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted from the journal, *West Africa*, see Schlesinger, p. 557.

<sup>76</sup> Leopold Sedar Senghor, recorded interview by Bruce Oudes, 13 June 1964, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, JFKL.

doing as much for their continent as he would have liked to. Nonetheless, Africans were touched that a Western leader would show concern for their plight, and were overcome with grief after learning of the American President's assassination.

The news of Kennedy's assassination spread rapidly through Africa - from Algiers to Dar es Salaam, Cairo to Accra, and even in the most distant and isolated villages, Africans mourned. In Nairobi, Kenya for example, six thousand people packed a cathedral for the American President's memorial service.<sup>77</sup> Kenyan leader Tom Mboya said that the news of Kennedy's death was deeply felt in his country:

[T]he shock that was registered in this country was particularly noticeable because it was the first time that the death of a foreigner, and a foreign head of State, had registered so sharply. It was as though someone very close at home had died and people reacted spontaneously in practically every little town and village in this country...I saw very clearly that President Kennedy's personality had penetrated deep in the villages quite remote from the normal political atmosphere of the country...[In Africa] President Kennedy offered much excitement and hope in the future. [Africans] saw in him a young man who understood the modern world and the problems of the younger generation... Another thing is that people saw in President Kennedy, in Africa at any rate, a very enlightened approach insofar as the Cold War was concerned...[Kennedy] gave the world that much more hope.<sup>78</sup>

Days after the tragic events that took place in Dallas, the British Ambassador to the Ivory Coast telegraphed London that Kennedy would soon join Patrice Lumumba as an African martyr. The American President, he concluded, had "captured the imagination of the Africans both because of his youth and 'dynamism' and because they regarded him as responsible for the policy of standing up to the (racism in the American) South." Her Majesty's representative in Abidjan ended his dispatch by predicting that if Lyndon Johnson continued JFK's policies towards Africa, "the President's death may be found to have given quite a boost to the American effort in this part of the world."<sup>79</sup>

Sadly Johnson did not maintain JFK's policy of courting African nationalists. Yet despite the fact that American policy makers have neglected Africa for so long following his death, Africans still fondly remember the legacy

<sup>77</sup> Attwood, *The Reds and the Blacks*, p. 146.

<sup>78</sup> Tom Mboya, recorded interview by Gordon P. Hagberg, 10 March 1965, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, JFKL.

<sup>79</sup> Telegram from British Embassy in Abidjan, Ivory Coast to R.J. Stratton, Esquire, West and Central African Department of the British Foreign Office, 25 November 1963. Reports on the "International Reaction to Death of President Kennedy, 1963." Records of the Foreign Office, 371/168407, Public Records Office, London, United Kingdom.

of John F. Kennedy. Sargent Shriver wrote how common it was for him to walk into an African village hut, after his brother-in-law's death, and find a picture of President Kennedy - torn from a newspaper and placed beside the family album or mementos.<sup>80</sup> Visiting Ethiopia, Kenya, and Ghana in the late 1980s, Harris Wofford found "that in the homes of ordinary people no other American president or world leader had joined the faded photographs of John Kennedy."<sup>81</sup>

Streets, schools, and parks all across Africa were renamed in honor of the slain American President, and his likeness soon graced African currency and stamps. Kennedy's Ambassador to Guinea wrote:

[T]he President, as I say, was very good at personal diplomacy, and I'm sure that had he had the chance, eventually, to go to Africa, he could have accomplished a great deal. I've found out, after returning to Africa since his death, that the Kennedy legend is very great, and a lot of the good will for our policies is still due to what he said and did in those two-and-a-half years...For example, there are many people in Kenya named after him. Even though he was never in Kenya, many people felt that he was the first American leader who ever really understood Africa.<sup>82</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, the American foreign policy establishment has increasingly shown less desire to court the Third World. In fact, contemporary U.S. foreign policy is very condescending towards the developing world. Washington may be making a mistake by seemingly dismissing the growing strength of anti-Americanism throughout the world. The importance of courting Third World nationalism is as important today as Kennedy believed it to have been in the early 1960s. Perhaps future American policy makers can learn a lesson from John F. Kennedy's policy of courting African nationalism. The goodwill that was created by his strategy of befriending nationalists has proven to be more effective and long lasting than trying to curry favor through the use of economic or military aid. If Third World nationalists turn bitter against the "New World Order" currently being constructed by Washington, "then the reason will be that the Western powers, by indifference or lack of imagination, have failed to see that it is their own future that is at stake."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Sargent Shriver, *Point of the Lance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 40.

<sup>81</sup> Wofford, p. 487.

<sup>82</sup> Attwood oral history statement.

<sup>83</sup> Kennedy quoted by Attwood, *The Reds and the Blacks*, p. 19.

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- Records of the National Security Council

At the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, archives used from the following boxes:

- National Security Files
- President's Office Files
- Personal Papers of John F. Kennedy
- Oral History Interviews

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- Records of Cabinet Meetings

- Records of the Colonial Office, Commonwealth and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices, Empire Marketing Board, and Related Bodies