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Kennedy's Africa

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The early 1960s marked a watershed moment in global history. Between 1957 and 1967, the final remnants of British and French imperialism collapsed in the Caribbean and Africa, remaking the international community in ways that foreshadowed the arrival of a new sort of polycentric Cold War. Decolonization was hardly a novel phenomenon, but this burst of independence, which led to the creation of nearly forty new nation-states, differed from the transformations that had brought South Asia, parts of the Pacific, and the Middle East into the post-imperial world. For centuries, the black Atlantic had been a crucial part of Europe's capitalist system—first as a source of cheap labor and cash crops, and later as a resource hub of the second industrial revolution—as well as a potent discursive foil that shaped how European elites framed notions of citizenship, political order, and civilization. The sudden rise of energized African diplomats, eager to upend stereotypes and rebalance global affairs, heralded the birth of the Third World project and planted seeds for the ambiguities that would eventually define the post-Cold War era.

Philip Muehlenbeck's *Betting on the Africans* examines this moment through the lens of U.S.-African relations. His organizing question is a good one: In the midst of this tumult, did President John Kennedy care about Africa? Muehlenbeck answers with a resounding yes, and offers a portrait of the thirty-fifth president that places Africa at the center of his daily considerations. The book is a top-down foreign relations history, so the archival materials are mostly drawn from presidential libraries and the U.S. National Archives, and its argument is organized around the differences between the Kennedy and Dwight D. Eisenhower administrations. In a nutshell, the latter adopted a shortsighted and aloof stance toward the African continent, while the former actively and wisely courted nationalist leaders through personal diplomacy. Kennedy's grand strategy was motivated by his enlightened nature and Irish-Catholic heritage, according to Muehlenbeck, and it was designed to protect Africa from the cold winds of the superpower contest (235). The president's approach might have worked, had it not been for Kennedy's death and the ascendance of less-enlightened leaders such as Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

Betting on the Africans pushes simultaneously in three historiographical directions. First, Muehlenbeck challenges the view that modernization theory drove U.S. relations in the decolonized world during the early 1960s. This paradigm has been advanced by a constellation of historians recently, including Nick Cullather, Michael Latham, Amy Staples, and Odd Arne Westad.¹ For Muehlenbeck, Kennedy's understanding of the global south was neither monolithic nor social scientific. While Latin America's "military dictators (with

¹ Nick Cullather, "Miracles of Modernization: The Green Revolution and the Apotheosis of Technology", *Diplomatic History* 28:2 (2004): 227-254; Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Amy Staples, *The Birth of Development: How the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945-1965* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

whom [Kennedy] did not want to be closely identified)” pushed the president toward impersonal theories of development, Africa’s political vibrancy and democratic traditions led the White House to embrace one-to-one exchanges and high-level diplomacy (xv). Politics was about people, in other words, not just ideology, and the president used a range of techniques to engage the Third World.

This argument hints at the book’s second historiographical intervention: the claim that Kennedy was not a typical Cold Warrior. Dismissing the president’s credentials as a Europhile, *Betting on the Africans* offers an interesting reassessment of his commitment to containment doctrine. Muehlenbeck’s Kennedy saw the world not as a geopolitical chessboard but as an electoral arena, within which Africans functioned as undecided voters. Like any good politician, the president adopted a policy that balanced between shrewd outreach and bold symbolism. In Muehlenbeck’s retelling, Kennedy dismissed conservative Africans as being out of step with nationalist sentiment and focused his energies instead on charismatic figures such as Kwame Nkrumah, Sékou Touré, Julius Nyerere, and Gamal Abdel Nasser. “In the same way a politician in a close election expends energy on undecided voters, Kennedy dedicated himself to courting the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement rather than those who had already fully committed to the Western camp (xviii).” Hoping to expand his base of popular support, Kennedy worked deliberately to cultivate the goodwill of influence-makers across the continent.

The book’s third contribution elaborates on the implications of this mindset. Muehlenbeck admits that the president’s African relationships competed with other aspects of his foreign policy agenda, and acknowledges that crises in Cuba, Berlin, Vietnam, and the Congo distracted Washington from African affairs. But Kennedy never lost sight of the big picture—nationalism’s inevitable triumph in the Third World—even when his initiatives conflicted with the priorities of Western allies such as Great Britain, France, Portugal, and South Africa. For Muehlenbeck, Kennedy’s ability to stay focused on Africa’s importance defined his legacy. By November 1963, “the image of the United States in Africa had not only rebounded [from the Eisenhower years] but reached heights that have not since been matched (xvii).” *Betting on the Africans*, in this regard, is framed as a tale of tragedy. Had the president lived, Muehlenbeck suggests, U.S.-African relations may have continued along a positive trajectory, stymieing the anti-Americanism that became so widespread in the final decades of the twentieth century.

These are big claims. Muehlenbeck’s book is probably the best holistic assessment of Kennedy’s involvement with African leaders, and it fills an important gap in the literature on U.S.-Third World relations. However, this reviewer was left with a few conceptual questions. First, how did Kennedy find so much time to think about Africa? Presumably, the president was a busy person who relied on staffers and bureaucrats to help formulate and implement various objectives. Muehlenbeck’s tendency to attribute the actions of the Kennedy administration to the will of the president simultaneously blurs the distinctions between mid-level initiatives and top-level edicts and obscures the relationship between Kennedy’s convictions and the views of his various advisors. The book might benefit from a more precise explication of causality’s relationship to process. In Muehlenbeck’s retelling, an enlightened White House created and guided a multi-pronged outreach

program that determined most facets of U.S.-African relations. But is that really how large governments work? What would this story look like if told from below, specifically from the vantage point of the State Department's newly created African Bureau and its outspoken leader Mennen Williams, who harbored presidential ambitions and often complained that the president did not pay enough attention to "his" continent? Muehlenbeck praises Kennedy for possessing detailed knowledge of Africa and a willingness to meet Africa's heads of state, but Williams arranged these meetings, composed Kennedy's briefing papers, and sat next to the president as he chatted up his visitors. Did Kennedy care about Africa or create space for his political appointees to make it appear that he cared? It is a minor distinction with important implications.

Similarly, what drew the Kennedy administration to Africa? Altruism seems too simplistic, as does the argument that the president's team viewed foreign relations as an electoral game. Something is missing. By focusing so closely on Kennedy's personal relationships with specific African leaders, *Betting on the Africans* elides the sheer drama that surrounded the nation-state's arrival in the black Atlantic. Nationhood and statehood were fluid categories in the early 1960s, deployed and appropriated in dizzying ways by a cross-section of leaders with revisionist views about international order. The Kennedy administration looked to the United Nations to manage this tumult. Arguably, Africa mattered not on its own terms, but because African leaders—with twenty plus seats at the General Assembly—were "more concerned with rapid change on colonial and racial issues [than] orderly procedure." The president's one-to-one meetings were designed explicitly to "influence, by personal persuasion, [those individuals] who [spoke] on behalf of the African nations and whose behavior and style will set the tone of the Security Council hearings," explained one Kennedy official. The purpose of the entire exercise was to underscore that "while there [was] nothing sacrosanct in particular democratic procedures, or indeed in the democratic institution per se, the unique and invaluable asset of [a] democratic institution [like the United Nations was] not simply that it provide[d] a system of *order* but a system which [could] *induce change* by non-violent stages."² The president's decision to bet on the Africans stemmed from this plan to direct the Third World's demands through the mechanisms of the United Nations.

A final conceptual question: What would this story look like as an international history? The relationship between methodology and argumentation glides just under the surface of *Betting on the Africans*, and Muehlenbeck's unrelenting emphasis on top-level politics begs a set of counter-questions about timing, structure, and context. Is it fair, for instance, to lambaste Eisenhower's African policies without acknowledging that most African nation-states did not exist before the final months of 1960? More broadly, would any president—even Eisenhower—have taken an interest in the continent during the early 1960s, simply because of the exigencies of the black Atlantic's independence? Conversely, would any president—even Kennedy—have *lost* interest in Africa as the contradictions and limitations of decolonization came into sharper focus during the late 1960s? It would be

² Memo from Harlan Cleveland to Thomas Wilson, July 12 1963, Box 114, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, emphasis in original.

interesting to see Muehlenbeck's response to these questions and their implications. His book is focused primarily on the president, so it comes as no surprise that Kennedy emerges as the principal architect of U.S. behavior toward Africa. But an international history of this period, rooted in the viewpoints of multiple countries, institutions, and interests, might suggest an alternative interpretation of presidential power, which might illuminate the way superpower demands interacted with small state initiatives during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Do outcomes move in tandem with the will of powerful individuals? For scholars inclined to answer yes, *Betting on the Africans* will be welcomed as a definitive historiographical statement on U.S. relations with Africa. Others will probably view the book as a relatively small piece of a much larger puzzle.

Either way, Muehlenbeck's work deserves a wide audience.