A Different Lens

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A Roundtable Discussion on Ryan M. Irwin’s *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order*

James H. Meriwether, Eric J. Morgan, Philip Muehlenbeck, Leslie Hadfield, Kate Burlingham, and Ryan M. Irwin

**Introduction**

James H. Meriwether

The wind of change is blowing through this continent, and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact,” declared British prime minister Harold Macmillan before South Africa’s Parliament on an early February morning in 1960. “We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it.” Macmillan, speaking to the decolonization sweeping through Africa in this oft-quoted passage, counseled his listeners that all “must come to terms” with this reality.

As he continued talking that day, Macmillan framed the “wind of change” in the broader Cold War context of the “struggle for the minds of men.” Bringing together, as did many at the time, two of the great forces of the mid-twentieth century, he voiced his belief that nothing less than “our way of life” was at stake. His listeners undoubtedly agreed with that sentiment. The ensuing response by the South African government to those seeking change, however, most assuredly was not what Macmillan had in mind when he sat back down that morning. Just weeks later sixty-nine South African protestors lay dead at Sharpeville, the African National Congress and Pan-Africanist Congress were banned, and black South African leaders such as Nelson Mandela were on the run.

Over the next decade the situation in South Africa became a matter of international attention—from the capitals of newly independent African states, to the corridors of power in Washington D.C., to the halls of the United Nations. This international story plays out in new and interesting ways on the pages of Ryan Irwin’s book, *Gordian Knot.* Irwin makes a case for Africa—and in this instance the international interaction with apartheid South Africa—being important to understanding the evolution of post-World War II international institutions and unfolding world history. The Cold War, colonialism and decolonization, and issues of race were central to the global system in this era, and all these merged in Africa.

Historians and other scholars are devoting more attention to just how these and other forces came together and what that conjunction of forces meant. The roundtable that follows is another step in the historical consideration of the African continent, and it shows how such interest opens more avenues for our understanding of the world of the twentieth century. In the pages of these thoughtful reviews, one sees what a few years ago might have been hard to pull together: a wealth of talented scholars wrestling with the United States and Africa in an international context. They agree that there is much to be gained by reading Irwin’s work even as they do not all agree on his interpretations. Those differences are themselves a reminder of how much there still is waiting to be explored.

**A Lost Struggle, a Lost World**

Eric J. Morgan

As I am finalizing this roundtable review of Ryan Irwin’s outstanding and groundbreaking debut book, *Gordian Knot,* I am also preparing to depart for South Africa, where I will be leading a travel course of fifteen students to Cape Town for sixteen days. My proposal for this course was so popular that, unfortunately, I had to turn away many students. I was surprised—but also delighted—with the positive response to South Africa as a potential destination of interest, particularly given several other attractive options. Yet my courses on the history of South Africa routinely garner waitlists. For some reason South Africa has always had a strong appeal for my students here in the snowy Packerland of northeastern Wisconsin. They are fascinated by it even now, nearly twenty years after Nelson Mandela’s inauguration as the nation’s first black president in 1994. Ryan Irwin is right that South Africa was and still is an enigma: its complicated past and refusal to submit to international norms fascinates us, and its history is so strikingly similar to that of the United States that we cannot help but be drawn to it.

*Gordian Knot* adeptly situates South Africa and the complex issue of apartheid within the larger global development of decolonization in the 1960s and offers readers two major arguments about the era. First, Irwin postulates that the postwar independence of various African states was one of the most significant “ruptures” of the twentieth century. What did nation, progress, development, and even race mean in this new epoch following the breakdown of the old order of the world? Second, he argues that the United States’ Cold War foreign policy of containment changed rapidly during the 1960s, and by the end of the decade, the nation—which had once been a champion of decolonization—was now an empire despised by much of the newly decolonized world. Apartheid was not the paramount issue of the 1960s, yet it created a divisive arena that brought a variety of actors
from nations and governments large and small from across
the globe into a debate over what the world should look
like.

To illustrate his two major contentions, Irwin moves
chronologically through several intriguing case studies
that provide insights into the changing world of the
1960s and the place of South Africa and apartheid in that
dynamic global landscape. His initial chapter explores
South Africa's development as a "citadel of whiteness" and
describes the rise of black African nationalism, articulated
by colorful leaders such as Anton Lembede and Robert
Sobukwe, which challenged the status quo of white rule.
The Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, in which sixty-nine black
protesters were shot and killed by police following a mass
civil disobedience campaign against the nation's restrictive
pass laws, changed South Africa's trajectory and brought
the nation and apartheid into international consciousness.

The following chapter develops the competing ideologies of African
nationalists and the ruling National Party, as each side attempted to define the debate
over apartheid in its own terms after Sharpeville. A chapter on U.S. foreign
policy, consisting of the thoughts and actions of G. Mennen Williams, then
assistant secretary of state for African Affairs, moves the story to the United States.
The book's final section examines the 1966
International Court of Justice (ICJ) case
involving South Africa's occupation of South West Africa
(modern Namibia) and then explores the United Nations'
African Group and the South African government's efforts
to capitalize on the various developments of the 1960s.

What emerges from Irwin's text is a gripping story.
The various international institutions created at the end of the Second World War—most specifically the
UN and its principal judicial body—materialize in Irwin's
narrative as the critical arena for the confrontation of apartheid, even though they were ultimately ineffective.
As the leaders of the South African liberation movements were
sent to prison or forced into exile in the early 1960s, the focus of the antiapartheid campaign moved from internal struggle to external sanctions (apart from the misguided and remarkably unsuccessful attempts at armed struggle through Umkhonto we Sizwe and Poqo). The United Front,
formed in London in 1960 as a collaboration between various liberation organizations in both South Africa and the occupied South West Africa, pushed for sanctions at the international level. The African Group, a collective of African states within the UN itself, took up the mantle of sanctions and won a critical victory when a formal declaration denouncing apartheid passed the General Assembly in
1962. The following year, the Security Council passed a
similar declaration—supported by U.S. Ambassador Adlai
Stevenson in the strongest condemnation yet by a Western
power—that included an arms embargo against South
Africa, but not the stiff economic sanctions that the African
Group had wished for. A victory to be certain, although, as
Irwin sees it, a Pyrrhic one.

At the heart of Irwin's story is the ICJ case on the
South West Africa Mandate. The African Group's litigation
against South Africa was an attempt to undo the Mandate
that entrusted South West Africa to South Africa as part of
the peace process following the end of the First World War.
As Irwin notes, however, this territory was a Mandate of
the League of Nations and not the UN. The South African
government rationalized that it was therefore no longer a
territory of the international community. The African
Group sought to prove that South Africa's occupation
was illegitimate. A decision in their favor would have far-
reaching ramifications for the principle of self-government
and eventually lead to the end goal of majority rule in
South Africa.

In a close ruling, the ICJ decided that it had no legal
right to make a decision. That finding "shattered the idea
that the Court would act as an agent of transitional justice"
(123). Humanitarian interests were extralegal in this case,
the court ruled. The ICJ judges rationalized that the battle
should proceed in the political rather than the legal arena.
In Irwin's eyes, the ICJ decision was a watershed
moment. The ICJ had been the ultimate legal arbiter of the
values of the world community and thus represented the
ideal of the liberal world order. As he notes, "the outcome
of the ICJ case reflected and reinforced" the trends of the
1960s and "became a powerful symbol, dramatizing the limitations of change in
the decolonized world and foreshadowing future directions in the struggle against
apartheid in southern Africa" (105).

As a result of the ICJ's decision, Irwin argues, the African Group's strategy
fractured. The United States subsequently moved closer to the South African
government as a supporter of apartheid in its foreign policy, particularly during
the Nixon administration. For Irwin, the failure of the United Nations and attempts
to confront apartheid successfully signaled the end of Woodrow Wilson's vision of
liberal internationalism. The African National Congress solidified its position
by the end of the 1960s as the legitimate organization of the
liberation struggle (while in exile and largely removed from
the South African people). The National Party achieved
a monolithic status of its own and continued to consolidate
its rule with scant internal opposition. The nation-state, the
dane of the world and the cause of tumultuous conflict and
suffering for most of the twentieth century, still reigned
supreme in the international order. Colonialism remained
alive and well after the rousing victories of African peoples
in the 1950s and early 1960s over their oppressors. The
world, Irwin concludes, turned postmodern, and today we
are still dealing with the consequences of the fragmenting
of the liberal world order.

Gordian Knot has few flaws. It draws on impressive and
exhaustive research from archives across three continents,
including the little-used papers of the African National
Congress. The writing is generally crisp and the stories
compelling, though occasionally the author employs too
much jargon. I also wish that Irwin had spent slightly more
time in his initial chapters developing his thoughts on
what the liberal international order actually meant to
be in the context of the postcolonial era. Additionally,
if the ICJ had ruled against South Africa's occupation
of South West Africa (a single vote would have changed
the ruling), would the decision have then reflected the triumph
of liberal internationalism? Consequently, would apartheid
have ended any sooner than it did? Would Nelson Mandela
and other political prisoners have been released from
Robben Island, and would a multiracial democracy have
been established at the end of the 1960s?

Irwin also slightly underemphasizes the role of citizen
activists in the 1960s. He argues that it was not until the
1980s that the global antiapartheid movement truly
coalesced and began to have an influence on policymakers,
corporations, and other powerful entities throughout
the world. Perhaps the antiapartheid struggle beyond the
confines of the UN actually legitimated the liberal world
order, as the people themselves—in the United States,
Great Britain, Sweden, New Zealand, and scores of nations
across the world—made the confrontation of apartheid a
priority for the world community outside of traditional
structures of governance, even when the UN and various governments would not do so.

Ultimately, *Gordian Knot* is an exemplary model of what innovative thinking, writing, and research can produce. It is an erudite and important international history that melds intellectual history, diplomacy, and a vast global tapestry of ideas, personalities, and struggle, weaving together a compelling story that situates both South Africa and the United States in the postcolonial world of the 1960s. That world offered much potential and promise at the decade’s outset but fell far short of fulfilling the hopes of those who wanted a global order based on equality and self-determination for all peoples.

**Review of Ryan M. Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order***

Philip E. Muehlenbeck

The late 1950s/early 1960s were an important time in world history. A wave of African independence saw twenty-four newly independent states admitted into the United Nations between 1960 and 1963. By 1964, the number of nation states in that international body had more than doubled, and the percentage of member states from Africa and Asia had increased from roughly 24 percent to 52 percent. These changing demographics shifted the agenda of the UN toward the issues that African and Asian states cared most about: decolonization and racism. Ryan Irwin’s *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* is a masterful study of how policymakers in the United States, South Africa, and newly independent sub-Saharan Africa responded to this new environment in the international system.

Irwin rightly pinpoints the early 1960s as the high point of African nationalism. In the late 1950s and early 1960s African states were not inconsequential players on the world stage. Riding high on the winds of change that swept away colonialism from the continent (aside from the notable exceptions in southern Africa), African leaders had more political power in the early 1960s than at any other point in modern history.

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The government of South Africa began to feel vulnerable at this time not only because of the upswing in the political influence of African nationalism, but also because of changes in the views of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union, all of which began to assert more pressure on Pretoria to abandon its apartheid policies. Irwin should be commended for writing the most nuanced account of this shift in history. South Africa adjusted to the changing environment by spending significant time and money on lobbying and public relations efforts designed to portray itself as steadfastly loyal to the West, fiercely anti-communist, and a citadel of capitalism—while painting the nationalists of sub-Saharan Africa as unpredictable, with loyalties for sale to the highest bidder in the Cold War, and as politically and economically unstable.

After detailing the changes in U.S. policies that impacted American policies toward apartheid, Irwin points to the key 1966 International Court of Justice (ICJ) case against South Africa’s occupation of South West Africa (modern day Namibia) as a turning point in the African Group’s fight against South African apartheid. He notes that South African officials feared that a ruling against them in the ICJ would lead to severe sanctions or even an armed invasion by the international community, perhaps to evict them from South West Africa or to try to overturn the apartheid system within their own borders. (In fact, some of them had feared such an invasion at least since the Bay of Pigs.) However, the ICJ ruled in Pretoria’s favor, and the African Group was forced to shift its strategy from pursuing economic sanctions in the United Nations and legal action through the ICJ against apartheid to a more broadly based propaganda effort for global human rights. Here Irwin makes a persuasive argument that this change altered the antiapartheid movement; it shifted from being rooted in opposition to racial discrimination and the sovereignty of states in the postcolonial system to being focused more on the universal human rights of the individual.

*Gordian Knot* is a well-written and well-organized book built on the foundation of an impressive collection of archival research spanning three continents (Irwin uses the underutilized records of the United Nations and a wide array of South African sources to best effect). Each theme of the book is vividly framed with effective short vignettes at the beginning of every chapter. Irwin’s scholarship is an intellectual tour de force that forces historians to contemplate new methodological and analytical questions.

Yet Irwin’s arguments often outrun his evidence, leading to exaggerated claims throughout the book. For example, early on he contends that “the fight against apartheid gave form to the political project known as the Third World” (5). But the formation of the third world owed more to opposition to the Cold War and European colonialism than opposition to apartheid, and the third world would have been little different had apartheid never existed.
Secondly, Irwin overstates how important an issue South African apartheid was for African states. While first-generation African leaders certainly opposed apartheid, it was not likely the issue they cared about most, as Irwin implies. A review of memoranda of conversations between U.S. and African officials in the late 1950s and early 1960s would show that African leaders sought to discuss the situations in the Congo, Angola, and Algeria with their American counterparts more often than they did South African apartheid. The issue that the majority of them were most concerned about was the economic development of their own nations. (Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere was a notable exception; for him, self-determination in southern Africa seemed more important than economic aid for his own state.) A litmus test for determining how important the issue of apartheid was for African nationalists is the side they took in the Cold War; few joined the Soviet camp despite Soviet opposition to, and U.S. tacit support for, apartheid South Africa.

Irwin also tends to give too much credit for U.S. African policy to Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs G. Mennen Williams. As I have argued elsewhere, African policy in the Kennedy administration, without a doubt, originated in the White House. In countless oral history interviews American officials attribute the change in U.S. policy towards Africa to the president himself. Kennedy called country desk officers at the State Department to ask specific questions about minute details on issues affecting African nations. He asked his staff to compile reports on Africa for him and then he personally reviewed them. He circulated the State Department and had direct correspondence with a number of his ambassadors to Africa. No other U.S. president has had as much personal involvement in African affairs. Kennedy not only met with more African heads of state than any other U.S. president, he also, I am sure, met with more ambassadors from African countries than any other occupant of the White House.

Moreover, let us not forget that Kennedy took an interest in Africa and became a public supporter of African nationalism before virtually any other U.S. politician, as is evidenced by his speech on Algeria in 1957. He also became the chairman of the Senate’s Foreign Relations Africa Subcommittee, through which he met with numerous African politicians even before ascending to the presidency. Williams was only in a position to make changes to U.S. African policy because Kennedy selected him for the assistant secretary position and empowered him to do so (tellingly, JFK appointed Williams to that position even before naming a secretary of state). Finally, Kennedy fully supported Williams after his “Africa for the Africans” comments (which Irwin does not discuss), when there was significant pressure (particularly from South Africans and Rhodesians) on him to replace Williams at the State Department. Williams obviously played an important role in setting the U.S. position on apartheid in the early 1960s, but he was not as much of a maverick or an originator of policy as Irwin’s account would suggest.

Irwin's central thesis—that African independence and the African Group’s fight against apartheid challenged U.S. power and control over international organizations like the United Nations, the World Bank, and the IMF more than any other variable and “not only laid the seeds of détente” but also “marked the unmaking of America’s liberal world order”—is a far-reaching and not fully persuasive claim (12). It seems to this reviewer that other factors such as globalization, the Sino-Soviet split, U.S. economic stagnation, and the rise of emerging powers like China, India, Brazil, and Japan were likely more important. Nonetheless, Gordian Knot is an impressive scholarly achievement in international history and deserves a wide audience.

Notes:
3. For more on Kennedy’s policies towards Africa see Muehlenbeck, Betting on the Africans.

African States and the Complexities of International Anti-apartheid Movements

Leslie Hadfield

In Gordian Knot, Ryan M. Irwin opens an important window into the international politics of the 1960s and casts new light on the way the apartheid state and anti-apartheid forces fit into the international arena. The decade was a crucial period in African and South African history. Decolonization swept across much of the continent, and after the Sharpeville massacre South Africa entered a new era. The state cracked down on opposition, beefed up its security establishment, and turned increasingly to extra-legal means to quell resistance, forcing liberation movements underground and into exile. The African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) both established armed organizations. South Africans and the international community were forced to choose sides.

Irwin provides us with a much-needed examination of the international side of the story that gives us a sense for the complex, non-linear history of apartheid and anti-apartheid movements. His in-depth analysis of the decisions and directions different actors took at different times in the 1960s helps explain some of the paradoxical shifts of the decade. He also demonstrates how international and domestic politics in South Africa and the United States converged at a critical juncture, while at the same time extending his analysis beyond just the engagement of the United States and the West. Yet, while he admirably brings out the important role of African forces in international politics, his portrayal of African nations and events raises further questions about the influence of African politics and actors.

Irwin’s focus on different moments in the 1960s is a testament to the value of taking a snapshot in time. Not only does he paint vivid pictures of particular incidents (e.g., the assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd or G. Mennen Williams getting hit in the jaw in Lusaka), he also examines the debates, events, and maneuvers that explain political shifts of the decade, when the outcome of the struggle against apartheid was unclear. As Irwin writes, this in-depth analysis shows that South Africa’s road to liberation was not inevitable, but “a political contest that ebbed and flowed in various directions as different doors opened and closed on international and domestic stages” (186).

Irwin considers two of these shifts that are particularly valuable to understanding paradoxical international politics of the 1960s. First is the change in American policy towards South Africa from confrontation to “constructive reinvolvelement” or support. His detailing of the work of people committed to ending racism abroad through international liberalism in the early 1960s shows that the possibility of concrete U.S. opposition did emerge in an otherwise long narrative of U.S. government support for the apartheid state. He also explains how the pendulum swung in the opposite direction for economic and domestic political reasons, despite the U.S. civil rights movement. Second, Irwin examines the way African nations moved from championing the anti-apartheid cause in the UN to offering merely support to South African liberation movements. At the same time, the South African government began “looking outward” to build relationships with neighboring
African interactions with the South African state and anti-apartheid movements are an important element of the history of South African liberation and merit in-depth exploration. The interests of activists, archivists, and writers have resulted in a skewed focus on the antiapartheid activities of American and British activists. For example, the seven-part documentary Have You Heard from Johannesburg (2006) devotes one entire episode to American activists while attempting to cover all other movements around the world with the rest. The South African Democracy and Education Trust (SADET) Road to Democracy series offers a more balanced view in its third volume focused on international solidarity. SADET’s fifth volume will focus on African solidarity, but it has yet to be published. Gordian Knot thus provides an important analysis of the crucial role of African states and actors. Moreover, Irwin’s approach links South Africa to what was happening on the rest of the continent and thus balances South Africa’s exceptionalism with its connections to continental Africa.

That said, I struggled with the tension in the book between acknowledging the influence of African nations in shaping the international debate over apartheid and its trajectory on the one hand, and holding up the United States as the major player on the international scene on the other. The emphasis on the significance of African decolonization and African groups in the UN for international politics in the introduction led me to expect more of an African focus throughout the book. Irwin does provide this focus in some of his critical chapters, such as chapter 2, where he demonstrates how African nationalists and Afrikaner nationalists defined the debate in the UN from 1960 to 1964. Yet he follows that chapter with one (titled “Africa for the Africans”) focused entirely on G. Mennen Williams and U.S. foreign policy towards apartheid in the UN. These two chapters put forth seemingly contradictory arguments. In chapter 2, it is African and Afrikaner nationalists defining the debate and reshaping international politics, while in chapter 3, the United States is an “unquestioned hegeon by the early 1960s,” shaping global politics and political possibilities. A similar contradiction is repeated in chapters 4 and 5. The contradiction left me questioning what Irwin was really arguing. Who was shaping global politics and the debate about apartheid—the United States or the African Group?

I came to the conclusion that Irwin was not contradicting himself, but that the answer is both shaped global politics in different ways. And the rest of Irwin’s book demonstrates how it was a series of actions and reactions on the part of a number of players that determined the terms of debate and the political possibilities. Yes, African decolonization and African initiatives in the UN changed the intellectual terrain and pushed others to address apartheid, but superpowers like the United States had the political power (e.g., seats on the Security Council) and economic interests to direct outcomes. Perhaps a cleaner chronology and organization of the chapters and narratives of the first part of the book would have cleared up this seeming contradiction. Irwin could also have addressed this tension more explicitly.

Irwin could also have given black Africans more of a face. Except for a few familiar names (such as Kwame Nkrumah, Zambia’s Kenneth Kaunda, and the ANC’s Oliver Tambo), most Africans appear as vague characters. We get only brief appearances by heads of states and an unnamed Nigerian ambassador (58). By contrast, Irwin examines American and South African diplomats quite closely. He does offer insightful analysis of African continental politics, especially in relation to the International Court of Justice case over South West Africa, the Kitwe conference, and the ways that liberation movements interacted with new African states throughout the 1960s. However, questions about the influence of domestic African national politics and the relations between African states remain.

I do not fault Irwin too much for this shortcoming. The book includes the politics of numerous African countries. Conducting research for all of these actors in the same way would have been a monumental task. Furthermore, the kind of rich sources Irwin drew upon for the United States and South African side of the story may not exist in some of the other cases. Yet Irwin shows us how insightful a close examination of the role of particular people can be in the chapter featuring Williams. One wonders how much more could be revealed if the same sort of research and analysis could be done for other actors. I also wondered what impact other major Cold War developments on the continent had on both U.S. and African positions and relations. For example, considering the CIA’s involvement in Patrice Lumumba’s capture and death, how did Williams perceive the Congo crisis? Did it impact his actions or the dialogue at the UN? There is much work for others to do in investigating the questions that Gordian Knot raises. Perhaps the forthcoming SADT volume on African antiapartheid movement solidarity will answer some of them. Those who tackle these questions should be alert to the problems of juxtaposing the entire diverse continent of Africa with a few individual states.

Irwin presents a more balanced portrayal of South African actors—both the apartheid state and liberation movements. Still, more attention to internal politics and developments could have strengthened his analysis. For example, his explanation of the ANC’s shift to focusing on building solidarity with non-state international groups is incisive; but other factors could have been considered in explaining ANC changes in the 1960s, such as internal tensions over the turn to violence (see recent debates sparked by Scott Cooper’s book on Albert Luthuli2) and the impact of state repression. South Africa also saw the growth of above-ground antiapartheid activity in the late 1960s that was linked to international movements beyond formal politics and the ANC. It would be useful to gauge the impact
that student networks and religious organizations like the World Council of Churches (in which South Africans played an active role) had on the ANC and international politics.

All in all, however, Gordian Knot accomplishes a great deal. It is an enlightening book that will spark fruitful debates and inspire research that will further our understanding of the apartheid state, antiapartheid movements, and the post-colonial international world order.

Notes:
2. Scott Couper, Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith (Durban, 2010).

Review of Ryan Irwin, Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order
Kate Burlingham

Africa’s involvement in global politics during the Cold War is usually described as peripheral at best. If African leaders are included in Cold War history, their presence is usually fleeting and hardly essential to the narrative. One often has to refer to more topical monographs for integration of African leaders into global political discussions and for thorough analysis of their motivations. With impressive style and analytical skill, Ryan Irwin has attempted to address this historiographical problem by adding a much-needed chapter to the historiography of Africa in the world. Using an exhaustive array of international sources and approaching the topic from a variety of vantage points, Irwin’s fascinating book, Gordian Knot, offers new insight into how African decolonization radically altered the global political climate and post-World War II international institutions.

The 1960s was one of the most crucial twentieth-century decades for the African continent. Yet the way African and global leaders interacted with each other during the early 1960s differed radically from the way they engaged each other just ten years later. Why? What occurred in such a short timespan? Gordian Knot demonstrates that this change was shaped by one battle in particular: the fight to end South African apartheid. Apartheid was African nationalists’ “real-time foil”; it embraced “racial segregation and colonial-style paternalism” at the very moment when much of the world was moving away from colonialism (10). The battle to end apartheid united third world leaders even as it challenged their contention that modernity and economic advancement could not be achieved in a bifurcated racialist system.

The battle against apartheid also offered third world leaders a way to define themselves outside the bipolarity of the Cold War. They used the United Nations and other postwar international institutions as platforms from which to wage the battle. These institutions were created after the Second World War out of a rejection of the racism and imperialism that defined the era of European colonialism. When these same institutions failed to stop and even bolstered the South African government, third world leaders had to reconsider the ways in which they participated in global society. Through his narrative, Irwin demonstrates how the apartheid debate, often relegated to the periphery of Cold War studies, in fact exemplifies many of the key debates of the day while foreshadowing important discussions of the post–Cold War era.

Using South African apartheid as its focus, Gordian Knot asks an essential question: “How did the rapid growth of small, non-European nation-states at midcentury affect the international community?” (5). Irwin’s answer forms the two primary arguments of his book. On the one hand, he seeks to expose the centrality of African decolonization to the story of twentieth-century world history. Indeed, it is through decolonization, we are told, that contemporary actors discussed important issues related to “the nature of territoriality, race, and economic progress” (9). Irwin’s secondary argument flows from the changes ushered in by African decolonization. Against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving Africa, the United States struggled to react. According to Irwin, these reactions concerned more than Africa; they marked a moment in which “Washington’s approach toward the rest of the world—its stance towards global governance—changed fundamentally” (11). As the authors of many of the postwar global institutions, United States officials did not fully calculate how a change in international order, ushered in by decolonization, might challenge their conception of the global power structure. Irwin believes that African decolonization and the “sudden emergence of almost forty non-European states” simultaneously confirmed “America’s post-imperial vision of the world” while offering “a direct threat to Washington’s continued hegemony” (12).

The United States, it turned out, could not control these new states. At a moment when American leaders were trying to ameliorate domestic race problems and fight a war for the allegiance of the world’s decolonizing peoples, African leaders put “questions of race squarely at the center of world affairs . . . [exposing] the prejudices that quietly underpinned America’s liberal world order” (12). The importance of this challenge, Irwin tells us, extends beyond Washington and marks “the moment when small, non-European states took formal control of the agenda of the international community” (12). That changeover, in turn, marked an important shift in the United States’ interaction with these international organizations, which would no longer be the “bulwark of American global powers” (12). By the end of the 1960s, the United States had decided to back away from the UN, and that decision recast its once positive international image into the world’s “New Empire” (13). Global politics would never be the same.

Irwin divides his text into two parts that revolve around a pivotal moment in the story, the 1966 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling regarding South Africa’s occupation of Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia). At stake in this case was not only South Africa’s right to remain in Southwest Africa but also, according to Irwin, the faith of African leaders in so-called “postcolonial organizations” such as the ICJ and the UN as well as their overall “faith in the nation-state as an instrument of development and freedom” (154).

Part I explores the lead-up to the ICJ crisis in three expertly crafted chapters that cover the three venues in which the debate over apartheid played out: South Africa, the UN, and the United States. In the first chapter of this section, Irwin sets up the antagonisms that defined South African politics after the Second World War. As much of the world was moving away from colonialism and racial segregation, South Africa was moving towards it. We learn, however, that rather than being a monolithic idea, the system of apartheid grew out of several competing visions. The voices opposing the developing apartheid state were equally diverse. Yet, according to Irwin, what set Afrikaner and African nationalists apart was not only their views on race but, more important, how they saw the world around them. Afrikaner nationalists framed their worldview through domestic events. African nationalists, on the other hand, “focused on the symmetry between their struggle and the fight against European exploitation elsewhere” (38). This difference between Afrikaner and African nationalists, Irwin explains, “foreshadowed the fault lines of the global apartheid debate of the subsequent decade” (39).
Irwin brings the story to the UN in chapter 2 by tracking the internationalization of the apartheid debate following the Sharpeville massacre, in which sixty-nine protesters were gunned down by South African police. Of particular interest in this chapter is Irwin’s discussion of the Afrikaner government’s shifting tactics in how it packaged apartheid for the world. For Irwin, such tactics reveal something more profound about the era: the “deep fissures [that] separate the First World politicians from the Third World ones” (44). The strength of Irwin’s discussion in this chapter lies in his observation that what ultimately divided UN representatives in the debate over apartheid was the role they believed the international body should have in the affairs of a sovereign state. Was the UN meant to complement national power or was it meant to be a “mechanism to reshape international norms”? The profundity of this question is reinforced by its continued relevance today.

Irwin’s third chapter brings the apartheid debate to South Africa’s most strategically important ally, the United States. While acknowledging that the United States “did not have a direct stake in the apartheid debate,” Irwin stresses that its international power did nonetheless shape “what was politically, possible in these years” (73). Perhaps the most significant historiographical contribution of this chapter is Irwin’s detailed analysis of the important role of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs G. Mennen Williams in crafting U.S. relations with Africa. Williams, we learn, fundamentally “shaped how American global power interacted with postcolonial questions” (providing) a consistent counterweight to those policymakers apathetic about Third World political demands” (75).

Having outlined the major players involved, Irwin begins Part II of his book with the ICJ case on which his entire story pivots. In his strongest chapter, he lays out the important questions that the ICJ and South African apartheid posed for the world, questions that would eventually have enormous significance for the future. At stake for so-called third world nationalists was their belief in the idea “that history was moving in a linear fashion toward a political order based on territorial liberation, racial equality, and economic development” (117). The applicants filing the case against South Africa asked the court to look beyond Southwest Africa and rule on the much larger question of whether “there was a single moral system for the world.” And if there was, “did the ‘international community’ truly have boundless supervisory powers over nation-states in the world-system?” (117)?

A ruling in favor of third world nationalists would have validated an “emerging ‘postcolonial’ vision of power based on universal racial equality” (118). Most observing nations, and the United States in particular, began to think about how they would react to what was seen as the inevitability of the ICJ ruling in favor of the nationalists’ claim. It came as a great surprise to many when the court upheld South Africa’s claim to Southwest Africa. The ruling “shattered the idea that the Court would act as an agent of transitional justice” and emboldened the South African government.

The final two chapters of Irwin’s text consider the fallout from the ICJ decision and how it reoriented the tactics and policies of all parties involved. Fundamental to these chapters is Irwin’s commitment to demonstrating that the ultimate end of apartheid in the 1990s was neither inevitable nor predictable but “ ebbed and flowed in various directions as different doors opened and closed on international and domestic stages” (186). The ICJ ruling was a setback for those fighting apartheid, but it forced them to reorient their battles in a way that ultimately would prove more powerful. Keenly aware of its Cold War strategic importance and emboldened by the court ruling, the South African government was able to parlay its victory into more favorable relations with the United States. Prior to the ruling, the U.S. government, influenced by the work of Mennen Williams, had been hedging its bets against the apartheid regime. Convinced that its days were numbered, both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations sought to assure third world leaders that the United States stood united against racist regimes. This stance was especially important within the context of the Cold War. With the ICJ’s decision supporting the South African government, the United States did an about-face. As a result, “by the end of 1968, Washington had accepted the status quo in South Africa and was beginning to discuss ways to curtail the influence of anti-apartheid advocates at the international level” (128).

For African nationalists, the ICJ ruling posed different problems. What in the early 1960s had been a belief in the transformative powers of the UN turned into a much more restrained assessment of the organization as a “knowledge source” and “organizing center” (143). Far from giving up their battles, however, anti-apartheid activists switched to fighting the South African government. In the aftermath of the ICJ decision, they transformed apartheid from a “regional [African] problem” into a flashpoint in a larger, integrated story of neocolonial power in the world” that was “out of step with the shared values of all the people in the world community” (144, 146). Reframing apartheid in these terms galvanized people around the world into what became a global movement to end South African apartheid. According the Irwin, the success of this new tactic combined with the failures in the UN and ICJ to reinforce the idea that “true independence” did not come “from decolonization but from the networks and identities that transcended, contested, and subverted the nation-state” (154). Irwin believes that such subverting demonstrated “the way globalization was transforming the Cold War” (155).

The strong points of Irwin’s text are also its greatest weaknesses. In seeking to remain true to the multifaceted and complex situation surrounding South African apartheid, Irwin weaves a narrative that is at times confusing. Taken individually, his chapters present strong arguments that are lessons in close reading and painstaking research. Yet when woven together, these same chapters at times feel disjointed because of the multitude of arguments they are trying to make. For example, Irwin’s analysis of international organizations such as the UN and the International Court of Justice is seamless and fascinating. His ability to home in on the larger issues at stake is impressive. However, the pairing of this conversation with a detailed analysis of U.S. foreign policy feels mismatched; the nuts and bolts of policymaking are presented alongside more profound conclusions about how the ICJ decision altered global thinking. Despite these jarring moments of overreach, Ryan Irwin’s text is a welcome addition to the global history of the post-World War II era and is a valuable source for use in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

A Different Lens

Ryan M. Irwin

A very sincere thank you to Kate Burlingham, Leslie Hadfield, Eric Morgan, and Phil Muehlenbeck, as well as James Meriwether for his introduction and Andrew Johns for this opportunity. In the past few years, I have had the privilege of working alongside Kate, Eric, and Phil at different conferences, and I have admired Leslie’s work from afar. Together they are doing some of the most important and interesting scholarship in our field, and I am deeply appreciative of the thoroughness of their comments and the thoughtfulness of their critiques.

As each of the essays suggests, Gordian Knot is an
unusual book. It is not quite a history of U.S. foreign relations—African and Afrikaner nationalism organize too much of the narrative—but it is not really an African history either, since most of the action unfolds within international organizations. The book is designed to work on two levels; it explores both the diplomatic contest that surrounded South African apartheid and the intellectual story of how people learned lessons about their sovereignty as they exercised that sovereignty in novel ways after decolonization. Gordian Knot tries to capture what American hegemony felt like in these years, especially to small actors with big expectations. The book admittedly revels in its own granularity at times—as Burlingham and Hadfield suggest—but this attention to detail is balanced by a hedgehog-like interpretation of international life in the 1960s.

Gordian Knot is the product of our historiographical moment. When Matthew Connelly called on diplomatic historians to take off the “Cold War lens” and explore the twentieth century in its full complexity, his words were a useful reminder—especially to graduate students searching for dissertation projects—that the East-West interpretative paradigm had certain conceptual limitations. That was thirteen years ago, and if you have attended a SHAFR conference recently you probably had the privilege of listening to panels on topics ranging from migration and borders to cultural theory and transnational activism. The Cold War lens is off. This turn has carried many labels and has found widespread support within SHAFR, but it has also muddled the field in fascinating and frustrating ways, and Gordian Knot is designed to tacitly raise an underexplored question: What are we talking about?

The book flirts with two different sorts of answers. First, it eschews the bilateral approach to international history. Gordian Knot attempts to move the United States to the side in a way that enhances our understanding of American power during the mid-twentieth century. Washington was a referee in the apartheid debate—not an antagonist—and treating it as such facilitates a two-part investigation of how outside actors influenced U.S. policy and how U.S. officials responded to their efforts. This approach requires juxtapositions that some readers may find unorthodox, as Burlingham indicates, but it provides useful insight into the way high politics interacted with postcolonial claim-making.

Second, the book makes a case for studying political process. The growing tendency to theorize American power has culminated in a vibrant historiography that has obscured the contingencies of international life in the mid-twentieth century. Focusing on what I call identification politics is one way to explain the development and foreclosure of different political trajectories in the recent past, and it sheds light on how tropes of empire operated within particular contact zones. Gordian Knot, in other words, invites a conversation about the way American power worked. It is not a call to study apartheid or global race relations so much as a subtle rejection of the field’s obsession with American power’s name.

Burlingham, Hadfield, Morgan, and Muehlenbeck critique this approach in different and very smart ways. Phil Muehlenbeck expresses the most skepticism about Gordian Knot’s conclusions. As his footnotes attest, he has a dog in this fight and some of these comments are as relevant to his book as mine. His first two criticisms—that I have exaggerated apartheid’s centrality both to the Third World project and to African nationalism—subtly distort my claims. Gordian Knot is about a microcosm, one that illuminated an ongoing debate about racial paternalism’s relationship to material progress and the postcolonial nation-state. My argument is not that Africans chose to care about apartheid over development or Algeria or the Congo; it is that South Africa’s policies sharpened opinions about the meaning of development and racial difference. Muehlenbeck and I are engaged in different sorts of intellectual projects. On the Third World, for instance, the sentence he quotes comes at the end of a deliberately phrased paragraph that doesn’t argue that anti-apartheid sentiment “formed” the Third World. Rather, it shows that apartheid influenced the wider discourse of anti-racism in these years, which played a crucial role in shaping the political agenda of the Afro-Asian bloc at the United Nations. Muehlenbeck fails to relate the nuances of this claim, and his suggestion that apartheid had no influence on the Third World is factually inaccurate.

Muehlenbeck raises some good points about President Kennedy. Our quarrel may have potential as an organizing debate in this subfield: What motivated America’s interest in African affairs? Muehlenbeck and I agree that the U.S. government engaged African issues in these years, but we disagree on the reasons. For Muehlenbeck this engagement stemmed from an unwritten policy that was designed by Kennedy himself and flowed from his egalitarian commitment to social justice and African people. I’m not convinced by his evidence. In chapter 3, Gordian Knot uses Mennen Williams’s story to explore the mechanics of how civil rights and liberal internationalism interacted with U.S. policymaking toward South Africa. Rather than taking the president’s words at face value, the resulting narrative lingers on the tension between rhetoric and politics and points the reader toward an alternative conclusion: the administration’s African policy was tied to the United Nations. Kennedy lobbied African leaders and adopted a symbolic stand toward apartheid because he hoped that mid-century international institutions could manage the tumult of African decolonization and enhance American prestige in the postcolonial world. By using Williams’s story as a device to explore Washington’s messiness, this argument attempts to enhance what we have already learned from Thomas Noer, Tim Borstelmann, and William Minter. The president mattered, but so too did the assumptions that connected Washington to these institutions.

Muehlenbeck also challenges the book’s central claim. In his mind, the Sino-Soviet split, globalization, and American economic stagnation, among other variables, played a more prominent role than decolonization in eroding Washington’s influence over and support for the United Nations order. There is a terrific group of young historians working on this question, including Paul Chamberlin, Chris Dietrich, Jeremy Friedman, Victor McFarland, Chris Miller, Mike Morgan, Daniel Sargent, and Sarah Snyder, and it would be exciting if this shift in the Washington–UN relationship gained traction in the historiography, since the United Nations’ importance is often downplayed in narratives about the Cold War. I stand by my interpretation. Notions of nationhood and order changed as people interacted within international arenas, and the book’s central irony—that this conflict
moved in tandem with Washington’s fleeting embrace of interactive institutions such as the United Nations and the International Court—is a useful way to think about how and why the system became unmanageable when it did. The anti-apartheid story facilitates a detailed examination of decolonization’s relationship to global governance and illuminates some of the stakes that surrounded the turn toward détente. There may be better ways to conceptualize this period—and I eagerly await the evolution of this historiography—but my argument isn’t necessarily wrong just because it’s new.

Gordian Knot is about the unmaking of a political system, the origin and afterlife of which are beyond the book’s temporal frame. The book looks the way it does for a reason, of course, but Eric Morgan is right to critique this underlying tension. He raises two interesting questions: Was there a lost moment in the 1960s, and did citizen activists buttress liberal internationalism? On both fronts, my tentative answer is no. Gordian Knot certainly invites the reader to see the ICJ case through African nationalist eyes, and it suggests that American policy thinking wasn’t preordained in the mid-1960s, but I prefer to see this moment’s implications in grayer terms.

My hope is that readers will pay as much attention to the midpoint of the ICJ case, when the African Group’s lawyers turned to the norm of nondiscrimination, as its controversial resolution. Although American liberals certainly remained internationally minded after the 1960s, a fascinating shift occurred as development and decolonization collided in these years and older assumptions about state capacity and universal modernity eroded in the face of racial equality, human rights, and non-national identity. I prefer to see the ICJ as a window into this process rather than a lost moment, which tacitly answers Morgan’s question about citizen activism. His version of liberal internationalism—focused on collaboration among citizen activists and advocacy against a common enemy—has merit, but it would arguably obscure this transition and distort the nation-state’s conceptual centrality to the mid-twentieth century. Although liberals remained internationalist after 1970, the assumptions that oriented the liberal order had fallen by the wayside.

That is a topic worthy of a long debate. Less debatable is Leslie Hadfield’s observation that African diplomats should have had a greater presence in Gordian Knot. One of the book’s main research challenges was gaining access to African diplomatic materials. I used private papers and South Africa’s liberation archive, as well as United Nations materials, but I was unable to secure access to diplomatic cables from African governments, which was a disappointment. The resulting portrait is as complex and thorough as my sources allowed. Hadfield’s lament regarding unnamed Africans is misguided, in my opinion, since Americans and South Africans are also left unnamed at different junctures, always for stylistic reasons related to narrative flow. But I accept the overall thrust of her critique. One issue that continues to absorb me is the mechanics of how African diplomats communicated with their home governments. From what I can tell, African diplomats enjoyed a unique sort of autonomy in New York, which hints at the somewhat ironic nature of postcolonial sovereignty after 1960. For small national states, the General Assembly became essential to the meaning (and location) of “independence.”

On the ANC, Hadfield’s comments are useful. Although she skims over my actual interpretation, calling it incisive without explaining its place in this literature, she is correct that Gordian Knot’s final chapter might have done more with events in black South Africa during the late 1960s. The ANC’s archives don’t indicate that the exile mission operated in the way she suggests—especially after the Rivonia Trials—but every book would benefit from more attention to local nuance.