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Reflections, Provocations, & Knots

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Author's Response by Ryan M. Irwin, University at Albany-SUNY

I'd like to thank Tim Borstelmann, Jeff Byrne, Andy DeRoche, Chris Lee, and Jamie Miller for their generous and thoughtful comments. Each reviewer has engaged *Gordian Knot* in a different way and I hope the diversity of their views will be taken as evidence of the book's complexity. I'm deeply honored by their praise and gratified that they grasp what I'm trying to do in *Gordian Knot*, which is to provide a history of the apartheid debate that explores African decolonization's wider impact on the international system. As these reviews suggest, the book weaves together two stories, the first of which is related to South Africa's fate in the mid-twentieth century and the second of which is tied to the decline of American soft power in the Cold War. The resulting narrative explores the unmaking of an international system that was anchored by American power and organized by a deeply paradoxical form of postcolonial sovereignty.

In part, *Gordian Knot* is designed to challenge the triumphalist narrative of the anti-apartheid movement. South Africa's 'long walk to freedom,' as Nelson Mandela termed it, has been treated often as a whiggish morality play, with historians writing the story backwards from 1994, searching for the answer to Borstelmann's question, "Why did apartheid last so long?" Finding someone to blame is one way to prevent the recrudescence of the apartheid tragedy.[1] However, as Miller observes, *Gordian Knot* begins in a different place—"How did apartheid become so controversial?"—and explores the way several protagonists interpreted and responded to the opportunities and pitfalls of the 'long' 1960s. The book tries to relate this story as truthfully and carefully as possible, which, as Borstelmann suggests, may strike some readers as "bloodless." He rightly underscores the fact that *Gordian Knot* is not about heroes, villains, landowners, or miners; it is about politicized elites who pursued legitimacy in a rapidly changing international system. Lee's reflections on this approach are particularly insightful, and I agree with him that exploring how (and where) people critiqued, defined, and judged 'separate development' enriches the way we see South Africa's past and the wider dilemma of racial prejudice.

The urgency of this approach stems from apartheid's relationship to the other nation-making projects of the twentieth century. Apartheid's architects were not irrational; they were part of a fast-moving conversation about the nature of statehood and nationhood, and their eventual isolation provides a microcosm to think about the impact of African decolonization. The stakes here are self-evident—especially as contemporary policymakers reassess the nation-state's relationship to globalization[2]—and beneath *Gordian Knot*'s exposition of the apartheid debate is a more complex narrative about sovereignty in the wake of African decolonization. Byrne and Miller provide particularly

[1] For further reflections on the historiography, see Ryan M. Irwin, "Mapping Race: Historicizing the History of the Color-Line," *History Compass* 8:9 (September 2010), 984-999.

[2] For a recent variation on this question, see Eric Schnurer, "Who Even Needs the Nation-State in the 21st Century?" *The Atlantic*, accessed on 2 June 2013.

thoughtful ruminations on this theme, and wrestle intelligently with the book's treatment of activism and order during the mid-twentieth century. The United Nations system was changed, I argue, not by apartheid but by the nation-state's triumph in the Black Atlantic, which forced a cross-section of elites to confront self-determination's conceptual relationship to state capacity, racial equality, and institutional interdependence. My narrative is about this trajectory-setting moment, and it provides, I hope, an original and nuanced explanation of how several distinct internationalisms came together during the mid-twentieth century.

Gordian Knot is also about polycentrism in the Cold War. Byrne and Miller astutely note the book's indebtedness to Matt Connelly's *A Diplomatic Revolution,*[3] and *Gordian Knot* indeed elaborates a style of diplomatic history that balances government and non-government perspectives and utilizes archival sources from several different protagonists. As I noted in *Passport's* roundtable of *Gordian Knot*, the book is designed to explore what American hegemony felt like to small actors with big expectations.[4] Viewing the Cold War in this manner, first, confirms Byrne's assessment about the asymmetrical nature of the superpower contest, and, second, suggests the utility of looking closely at the United Nations. *Gordian Knot* pushes hard against those who argue that Washington's relationship to the UN was simply a matter of partisan politics. Such a claim not only distorts the way the organization framed options in the early Cold War, but also ignores contemporary (bipartisan) writing about the UN's importance to international life.[5] Furthermore, seeing the superpower contest as a polycentric affair allows historians to avoid a misguided search for the 'origins' of the post-Cold War world, and confirms Miller's assessment that

[3] Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution : Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[4] Ryan M. Irwin, "A Different Lens," *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review* 44:1 (April 2013), 30-32.

[5] For a sampling of contemporary literature, see Adda Bozeman, *The Future of Law in a Multicultural World* (Princeton, 1971); Harlan Cleveland, *The Third Try at World Order* (New York, 1977); Clifford Geertz, ed., *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (London, 1963); David Gordon, *Self-Determination and History in the Third World* (Princeton, 1971); Thomas Hovet, *Bloc Politics in the United Nations* (Cambridge, MA, 1960); Ibid., *Africa in the United Nations* (Chicago, 1963); G. H. Jansen, *Afro-Asia and Non-Alignment* (London, 1966); Peter Lyon, *Neutralism* (Leicester, 1963); David Kay, *The New Nations in the United Nations, 1960-1967* (New York, 1970); David Kimche, *The Afro-Asian Movement: Ideology and Foreign Policy of the Third World* (Tel Aviv, 1973); Leo Kuper, ed., *Race, Science and Society* (New York, 1975); Laurence Martin, ed., *Neutralism and Nonalignment: The New States of the World* (New York, 1962); Robert Strausz-Hupe and Harry Hazard, ed., *The Idea of Colonialism* (New York, 1958); Francis Wilcox and H. Field Haviland, Jr., eds., *The United States and the United Nations* (Baltimore, 1961); Francis Wilcox and Carl Marcy, *Proposals for Changes in the United Nations* (Washington, DC,1955); Peter Willetts, *The Non-Aligned Movement: The Origins of a Third World Alliance* (New York, 1978). For a sampling of recent scholarship, see David Bosco, *Five to Rule Them All: The UN Security Council and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, 2009); Ilya Gaiduk, *Divided Together: The United States and the Soviet Union at the United Nations, 1945-1965* (Stanford, 2012); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan* (Princeton, 2011); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York, 2012); and Thomas Zeiler, *Free Trade, Free World: The Advent of GATT* (Chapel Hill, 1999).

postcolonial claim-making unfolded in different ways across and beyond Africa. The Third World's distaste for the East-West binary in no way 'displaced' the Cold War, as Miller rightly suggests. *Gordian Knot* calls instead for a thoughtful examination of political space during the twentieth century.

The reviewers accept the book's primary thesis—a relief for any author—while offering several important critiques. First, my sincere apologies to DeRoche (and Tom Zeiler) for not citing their excellent books; both have influenced my thinking and deserve wide recognition, and I look forward to reading Giacomo Macola's and Miles Larmer's books, on DeRoche's recommendation, soon. Second, while I appreciate Byrne's insights, I challenge the assertion that *Gordian Knot* is lopsided. The sections are balanced almost evenly, with about sixty pages on African diplomacy, fifty pages on American policymaking, and another fifty pages on the National Party, plus the introduction, conclusion, and several other hybrid sections. Even after *Gordian Knot*'s midpoint, the story maintains its triangular orientation. Chapter 5, for instance, is devoted almost entirely to African diplomacy at the United Nations—not bilateral relations between Washington and Pretoria, as Byrne suggests—and nearly a third of chapter 6 is about the African National Congress. That said, third, I see the merit in Byrne's suggestion that the book could be more 'old-fashioned.' *Gordian Knot* lingers on how Washington came to consider punitive action against Pretoria. This approach differs from that of Thomas Noer's excellent *Cold War and Black Liberation*,[6] which focuses on high strategy and geopolitics, by consciously eschewing the hierarchy Byrne calls for in favor of a messier examination of bureaucratic process. Exploring the headwinds and breakthroughs that faced antiapartheid policymakers is less straightforward, but it arguably deepens our appreciation of how big ideas interacted with personal conviction and institutional restraints.

Should *Gordian Knot* have been longer? This question, raised in different ways by Byrne and Miller, is fair. On the one hand, I purposefully tried to make the book as lean as possible. Byrne is right that the narrative refrains from excessive repetition and moves at a fairly steady pace through its material, which means that some relevant background information is relegated to the footnotes. I think that there is a place for tightly-written, argumentative monographs, and *Gordian Knot* is deliberately located within that genre. On the other hand, as Miller hints, there is a subtle tension between the book's conclusion, which summarizes the anti-apartheid movement *after* the 1960s, and my overall emphasis on the period surrounding African decolonization. The rationale behind this gap is fairly obvious—tied, of course, to the dramas of the early 1990s—but Miller is absolutely correct that we need archival histories of the 1970s and 1980s. I eagerly await his forthcoming project on this period and hope that someday soon it will be possible to write a rich synthesis of South African international history in the twentieth century.

Thank you again to Borstelmann, Byrne, DeRoche, Lee, and Miller for these thoughtful reflections on *Gordian Knot*. Like Lee, I hope *Gordian Knot* finds an audience among a

[6] Thomas Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948-1968* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985).

cross-section of scholars with interests in foreign relations, decolonization, international institutions, and apartheid South Africa. The book is designed to speak to people with an interest in the past of our present, and it seeks to provide a useful template to rethink a critical juncture in global history.