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Review by **Eric J. Morgan**, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

In one of his finer moments of elegance, Richard Nixon, ruminating on his administration's foreign policy towards Africa, once suggested to Henry Kissinger, "let's leave the niggers to Bill [Rogers] and we'll take care of the rest of the world."¹ While Nixon's crassness in his private conversations will surprise no one, his obnoxious statement belies the actual interest that Nixon did occasionally show towards the African continent during his first term. While Nixon and Kissinger generally concentrated their foreign policy on "the rest of the world," from the Vietnam War to détente and rapprochement to emergencies in the Middle East, several crises in Africa vaulted the continent to the center of the White House's attention, at least transiently. Yet ultimately Nixon did leave the Africans to Secretary of State William Rogers and the State Department, though the president consistently fumed over the Bureau of African Affairs' generally non-interventionist policies.

Despite a slew of recent work on Nixon and Kissinger over the past half-decade, there still exists a paucity of analysis regarding the African policies of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.² Even a recent collection of essays on Nixon's foreign policy, otherwise balanced

¹Quoted in Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 111.

²See, for example, Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007); Mario Del Pero, *The Eccentric Realist: Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005); and Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009). An exception is Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), which discusses the Angolan Civil War in some depth.

with coverage across the globe, includes none on any nation within the entire continent of Africa, though similarly peripheral areas, such as Canada, warranted exclusive essays.³ Such exclusions remain troubling for both intellectual and humanistic reasons, and they strangely mirror the general disinterest of U.S. policymakers towards the supposed less important parts of the world during the Cold War. Yet such omissions do provide a glimmer of hope for future research, which hopefully will better consider the place of Sub-Saharan Africa in U.S. foreign policy during the Nixon and Kissinger era. For while Nixon and Kissinger certainly did not make Africa a priority in their larger foreign policy aims, they did pay attention to developments on the continent, particularly to two desperate humanitarian crises adeptly chronicled in this excellent collection of documents.

This volume in the Department of State's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series collects documents on Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on the Nigerian Civil War, Burundi, the Congo, Uganda, and the Horn of Africa. Documents pertaining to the former or contemporarily white-ruled states of Southern Africa are collected in a separate volume. A significant amount of the documents in this collection pertain to the Biafra crisis, which had been raging in the southern portion of Nigeria since May of 1967, when Biafra seceded due to ethnic and political differences between the Igbo and Yoruba peoples and the Hausa-Fulani. A harsh civil war followed the secession, and thousands in the Biafra region suffered from hunger and malnutrition due to the disruptions caused by the conflict. The crisis in Biafra made a brief cameo during the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign, as Nixon spoke out several times against the persecution of the Igbo, and when his wife, Pat, staged a public call for humanitarian donations on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.⁴

There is little of great illumination in the chapters on the Congo, the Horn of Africa, or Uganda. We see the Nixon administration hoping to create strong, pro-American allies in Joseph Mobutu of the Congo (one of the most corrupt African dictators of the post-colonization era) and Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, while relations with Uganda became strained due to the increasingly erratic rule of Idi Amin. The Cold War is at center stage here, with the United States government most concerned with the maintenance of friendly regimes that were also anti-communist. Like the administration's policies towards the white-ruled states of Southern Africa, the United States' economic and geo-political interests took precedence over issues of human rights or more equitable economic and political opportunities. Reacting to Idi Amin's purges of elites in Uganda throughout 1972, Kissinger, in his standard realist appraisal, wrote to Nixon, "Our own interests in Uganda are limited to protecting our remaining citizens and maintaining a presence in Uganda, rather than giving free rein to the Soviets, assuming they are responsive to Amin."⁵ While

³Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴ See Hersh, *The Price of Power*, 141-152.

⁵Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, November 1, 1972. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 746, Country Files, Africa, Uganda, Vol. I.

Nixon and Kissinger abhorred Amin's brutality, they were simply not interested in becoming involved.

The case, however, was different elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa. Most illuminating in this collection are the chapters on the humanitarian crises of the Nigerian Civil War and the genocide in Burundi. Here we see Nixon genuinely moved by these two events, and Nixon's frustratingly compelling dual personality is well-illustrated by his emotional reactions to mass suffering and death on a continent that he had once called "hopeless."⁶The documents on the Biafra crisis also clearly underscore Nixon's disdain for the State Department and its seemingly rigid policies toward Africa, particularly its staunch adherence to Great Britain's support of Nigeria during the civil war. While the United States did not recognize Biafra as a legitimate nation and supported Nigeria in its attempts to regain control of the Biafra region, the U.S. government was committed to providing relief aid to the beleaguered Biafrans, who were dying en masse of starvation. Ultimately, though, while Nixon consistently complained about the non-interventionist policies of the State Department, he did nothing of substance to reverse or change those policies.

Likewise, the United States followed a similar policy of non-intervention in Burundi, where Tutsis were massacring Hutus from April through July of 1972. Nixon was dismayed at the lack of response by the State Department to the killings, which ultimately resulted in the deaths of between 80,000 and 200,000 people. In a hand-written note to Kissinger, Nixon expressed his outrage over the State Department's refusal to act:

This is one of the most cynical, callous reactions of a great government to a terrible human tragedy I have ever seen. When Paks try to put down a rebellion in East Pakistan, the world screams. When Indians kill a few thousand Paks, no one cares. Biafra stirs us because of Catholics; the Israeli Olympics because of Jews; the North Vietnam bombings because of Communist leanings in our establishment. But when 100,000 (one-third of all the people of a black country) are murdered, we say and do nothing because we must not make blacks look bad (except, of course, when Catholic blacks are killed).

I do not buy this double standard. Tell the weak sisters in the African Bureau of State to give a recommendation as to how we can at least show moral outrage. And let's begin by calling back our Ambassador immediately for consultation. Under no circumstances will I appoint a new Ambassador to present credentials to these butchers.⁷

It is impossible to watch through Nixon's and Kissinger's eyes as the carnage unfolded in Burundi and not think forward to the similar tragedy in neighboring Rwanda two decades

⁶Quoted in H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 53.

⁷Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, September 20, 1972, National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 735, Country Files, Africa, Burundi, Vol. I.

later. Nixon, at the least, compared to the deer-in-headlights response of the Clinton administration, acknowledged the massive deaths and wanted to elicit some sort of public outrage in the United States toward the slaughter. But, as with the Nigerian Civil War, Nixon placed the onus for condemnation squarely upon the shoulders of the State Department. Yet Nixon did attempt to tie a projected loan from the World Bank to Burundi to publicizing the genocide. Nixon wrote to Kissinger that he wanted “a strong statement by the U.S. disapproving Burundi's genocide. The statement is to be broadly publicized. Say our not objecting to the loan does not reflect approval of their policy... I consider this an opportunity to get out the horrible story of what happened there.”⁸

Ultimately these documents confirm what we already know: in the late 1960s and early 1970s, officials in the United States government, from the State Department to the White House, looked at tragedies on the African continent with some concern, but, for a variety of reasons, refused to become involved in them. Understanding more recent sins of omission—such as the unconscionable non-response of the Clinton administration and the United Nations to the 1994 Rwandan genocide—is made possible by a closer examination of similar historical precedents, as witnessed in Biafra and Burundi. As elsewhere on the supposed Dark Continent, the United States would only consider intervention when its most vital interests were threatened, which rarely occurred. These were callous policies, to be certain, but they underline the simplistic, myopic Cold War lens of the United States and its policymakers in the post-war years. The failure to understand the power of decolonization and nationalism crippled U.S. policy towards both Africa and much of the developing world. Nixon's emotional outbursts were merely anomalies, and perhaps a means for him to vent his frustrations towards a State Department and African Bureau that he did not like or trust. Despite Nixon's apparent concern, tens of thousands of Africans still died in Burundi, Nigeria, Uganda, and elsewhere across Sub-Saharan Africa during his first term as president, with the United States merely watching, if it was even paying attention at all. But that does not mean that historians should also fail to chronicle and better understand why the United States and its policymakers acted as they did during an era of both revolutionary change and great suffering throughout the African continent.

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⁸ Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, December 2, 1972, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, Box CL 296, Memoranda to the President, December 1972

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