This relatively slim volume surveys the position of the US government and of pockets of US civil society on African decolonization during the last six decades of the twentieth century. Author James H. Meriwether refutes the characterization of US policy, proffered by twentieth-century US officials, as a “middle path” between strategic support—or at least tolerance—of European allies’ colonial rule over the continent, on the one hand, and, on the other, principled aid to African peoples who were seeking self-determination and independence as did the US founders. Meriwether challenges both pillars of this framing. First, he questions whether US national security depended on those European holdings. For example, top US foreign policy advisers insisted during the early 1960s that Washington needed to cozy up to the right-wing, recalcitrantly colonial government of Portugal for access to the Azores military bases, even though “suggestions were made to seek alternative bases, and contingency planning was done,” according to Meriwether (117). Second, he shows that, throughout this twentieth-century period, many Americans both inside and outside government did not trust Africans to govern themselves. Rather than following any one path, US foreign policy vacillated between tending to back colonialist allies and selectively aiding African nations when presidential administrations determined that their Cold War positioning and domestic constituencies would abide it, as Meriwether explains. He productively adopts an episodic approach rather than an encyclopedic one, beginning with the Fascist Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and ending with the election of the anti-apartheid activist and former political prisoner Nelson Mandela as South Africa’s first Black president in 1994. Meriwether’s novel primary sources from this period include official US documents and nongovernmental records from diplomatic, intelligence, presidential, and activist collections.

The book begins by examining some of the first cases of African decolonization against the intensifying backdrop of Cold War tensions. Meriwether cites a revealing CIA document from 1948 to show how the growing rivalry with the Soviet Union led US policymakers to weigh the potential benefits of attracting the sympathies of decolonizing African nations, which Communist agents also sought to do, against the benefits of US ties with the European powers who (had) ruled those peoples (53–54). The presidential administrations of Harry S Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower chose “the short-term security of continued white allies in control,” Meriwether shows, whether in Kenya, Ghana, or the Congo, where the US government worked to stymie the independence movement led by the nationalist politician Patrice Lumumba, who was killed gruesomely in early 1961 (57). This hesitant US posture toward African decolonization changed during the John F. Kennedy administration, which was led by a president who had spoken in 1957 on the Senate floor in 1

favor of Algerian independence and was staffed by three liberal foreign policymakers, “more closely attuned to African aspirations for independence” than their predecessors, in the persons of G. Mennen Williams, Chester Bowles, and Adlai Stevenson (103).2 Meriwether highlights the administration’s new willingness to deploy US soft power across the continent, namely development aid, opportunities for African students to study in the United States, and Kennedy’s signature Peace Corps, but also shows how even Kennedy sided with his NATO ally in Lisbon facing the Azores dilemma.

Building on the scholarship on Black internationalism—including Meriwether’s own, book-length contribution—and on the Cold War context of the Civil Rights Movement, he underscores the relevance of US domestic politics for foreign policy. 3 This point emerges clearly from his treatment of the administrations of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. Lobbied by Civil Rights organizations that advocated the imposition of sanctions against South African apartheid and a break with Portugal, Johnson did “not think it at all a good idea to encourage a separate Negro view of foreign policy,” according to a striking memo by National Security Council staffer Bob Komer (128). Yet the refusal in 1965 of Rhodesia’s white minority government even to discuss an eventual transition to Black majority rule placed before Johnson “a high-profile domestic litmus test” of his foreign policy, as Meriwether puts it (147). The president imposed sanctions, which created another domestic political issue because they banned chromium imports from Rhodesia, which in turn forced US firms to rely on Soviet supplies. Once in office, Nixon evaluated the possibility of exempting chromium from the sanctions and justified his signature on a law that did so in 1971 by explaining, in a characteristic turn of phrase, “You don’t gain any votes from the blacks who give a sh*t what happens to Zambia” (161). Whereas Johnson proved willing to adjust his Africa policy in the direction urged by Civil Rights advocates, Nixon moved his policy the other way in order to capitalize on growing white resentment at new Black freedoms.

The last chapters of the book trace these two, intersecting themes—of superpower rivalry and the struggle against white minority rule—across Southern Africa, which was one of the hot spots in the global Cold War and has been the subject of pioneering scholarship over the past two decades.4 The 1974 coup in Lisbon created a power struggle in the Portuguese colonial territory of Angola, where competing national liberation fronts had US, Soviet, and Cuban backing. South Africa’s apartheid regime feared that this fighting might spill over into its territory, prompting the covert development of a small nuclear arsenal and a tacit agreement in 1976 with US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to push neighboring Rhodesia toward majority rule in exchange for Washington’s silence on apartheid.5 Meriwether credits Jimmy Carter, who was elected president

2 On Kennedy’s 1957 Senate speech and the political context, see Mohieddine Hadhri, “U.S. Foreign Policy Toward North Africa During the Cold War: From Eisenhower to Kennedy (1953–1963),” The Journal of the Middle East and Africa 5, no. 2 (2014), 95-110, DOI: 10.1080/21520844.2014.928996.


later that year, for “moving U.S. policy toward greater alignment with liberation struggles” (187) by imposing an arms embargo against Pretoria, even though he would not accede to African demands for economic sanctions and military intervention. His successor, Ronald Reagan, saw the apartheid regime as a bulwark against potential Communist expansion in Southern Africa. Yet the global anti-apartheid movement only grew, including protests and divestment campaigns in the United States, and in 1986 the US Congress overrode Reagan’s veto to impose sanctions on South Africa. As the Soviet Union collapsed during the early 1990s, so too did white minority rule in Southern Africa.

Tears, Fire, and Blood will be of interest to scholars of American politics, African history, and international affairs. By focusing on African decolonization, Meriwether identifies a liberal foreign policy tradition in the Democratic Party that links Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter. All three sought to align their foreign policy with African nations’ self-determination, yet none of these presidents delivered transformative change. Meriwether demonstrates how each could have done more, but he hesitates to make Washington the main protagonist, weighing its role against the power of local actors. As Meriwether readily admits, “this book leaves ample room for further scholarship,” and his broad-based account points to at least three such opportunities (13). One requires international fieldwork, which may be possible using digital resources, to determine not only how US officials approached African decolonization but also how their allies, adversaries, and intergovernmental leaders perceived and assessed those choices. The second involves revisiting West Africa’s place in the global Cold War following the first generation of independent leaders, including Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah and Nigeria’s Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, since Meriwether’s chronological account quickly exits this region. The third will extend US archival research forward in time by gleaning the records of the George H. W. Bush and William J. Clinton administrations—a process that recent scholarship has begun—for insight into US policy toward Africa as an era of superpower competition ended.

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