The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War Roundtable Review

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The cover of *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War* reprints a “Box Score of the Cold War” that originally appeared in *U.S. News and World Report* in 1955. Of the eighteen, mostly Europe-centered Cold War developments assessed, a dozen are deemed clear Western victories: the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan; the Berlin blockade; communist troubles in Yugoslavia and Italy; the formation of NATO and West Germany; Soviet disarray following Stalin’s death; the Austrian Treaty; West Germany’s entry into NATO; and economic advances in the United States and Western Europe and concomitant slumps in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Lest the United States and its allies get cocky about their apparent lead in the Cold War confrontation, however, the box score lists a number of communist successes—victories in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and China; Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb; and the ongoing conflict in Indochina (it declares the Korean War a tie)—and concludes with an ominous warning that the Cold War conflict was by 1955 entering an undefined and presumably more dangerous “new phase” that might yield additional communist gains.

That new phase, of course, was the shift in Cold War tensions away from Europe and China and toward Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia—the so-called Third World. As the contributors to this rich and valuable volume make manifestly (and sometimes painfully) clear, the Eisenhower administration’s Cold War record in the Third World consists of a virtually endless string of defeats, the negative consequences of some of which endured for decades. To a degree uncommon in edited volumes, this one holds together remarkably well, and despite their divergent geographical and topical foci, all of the essays coalesce, albeit to differing degrees and in varying ways, around a number of common themes that collectively complicate—in the most positive sense of the word—the extant literature on the Eisenhower administration’s foreign relations.

As suggested above, many of the essays in this volume—almost all, in fact—argue for the Eisenhower administration’s failure in the Third World. And while this claim alone might not constitute a radical revision in the historiography, the nuanced way that the various authors deal with it does, for they skillfully dissect the administration’s policy in ways that move beyond simply claiming that a certain policy initiative did not work to actually ferreting out precisely why that was the case. To that end, the authors identify a number of overall shortcomings in the administration’s Third World policy that resulted in a colossal failure to win the allegiance of peoples in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. The end result of this failure to manage postwar change in the Third World, they intone, was a number of serious Third World crises—David Anderson calls them “earthquakes” in his informative conclusion to the volume—during the 1960s, crises that more considered policies during the 1950s might have averted. The long-term Eisenhower legacy in the Third World, therefore, is far from positive.

One serious shortcoming in the administration’s approach to the Third World that comes out in many of the volume’s essays is what might be termed a failure to reconcile deeds
Kenneth Osgood effectively argues that the administration’s efforts to win the hearts and minds of Third World peoples through lofty pronouncements touting the United States’s traditional anti-colonialism were seriously hampered if not completely derailed by the fact that such pronouncements notwithstanding, official Washington continued to support its Western European allies’ efforts to retain their colonies in the postwar period. Talking tough about independence, it seems, did not in the end translate into action to help bring it about. John Prados notes the same general failing in his useful essay on the CIA’s role in Third World decolonization. Like Osgood, he bemoans the hollowness of the administration’s public support for Third World nationalism while concurrently siding with the colonial powers in resisting the logical result of that nationalism—independent nationhood—as well as the administration’s repeated resort to covert action as a way of dealing with Third World nationalism that threatened the status quo too profoundly. Ultimately, the administration faced a serious credibility gap because its words, embodied in propagandistic endorsements of national independence, did not square with its deeds, particularly the resort to covert action to prevent that eventuality.

If Osgood and Prados issue a general indictment of the administration for failing to match its anti-colonial words with appropriate deeds, other authors drive home the point in respect to specific case studies. Jason C. Parker’s cutting-edge account of the administration’s response to the 1955 Bandung Conference laments that while the administration seemed to grasp the conference’s importance, its overriding preoccupation with the Cold War prevented it from marshaling the sort of constructive long-term response to Bandung that might have resulted in better U.S. relations with the participating countries. James H. Meriwether sees a similar pattern at work in the administration’s Africa policy, which he describes as essentially a middle-of-the-road stance that paid lip service to eventual black majority rule throughout the continent but for all intents and purposes favored continued colonial control. Fearful that premature independence would lead to instability and potential communist gains, the administration backed continued white minority rule or, at the urging of Vice President Richard M. Nixon, authoritarian yet Western-leaning strongmen who lacked concern for the best interests of the local populations.

As all four of these authors—and others in the volume as well—make abundantly clear, the Eisenhower administration failed to craft and implement policies that gave truth to its rhetoric when it came to colonial liberation and national independence. Time and again, Washington did not put its money—or its policies—where its mouth was. And the end result was dashed hopes and disillusionment throughout the Third World as nationalists came to see U.S. leaders as speaking with forked tongues on the question of anti-colonialism. Is it any wonder that anti-Americanism ran so high in much of the Third World during the 1950s—and beyond?

Related to the administration’s failure to align words and deeds is another common problem noted in many of the essays: a general misapplication of tactics or tools for the challenges the United States faced when dealing with the Third World. Prados faults the administration for utilizing covert operations tools initially developed for use against the
Soviet Union to the Third World. The long-term consequences of U.S.-led covert action from the Middle East to Latin America and Southeast Asia, he compellingly argues, were disastrous for the people on the ground and damaging to U.S. interests. He issues, in fact, one of the volume’s strongest condemnations of the administration’s apparently blatant disregard for the potential consequences of its actions in the Third World.

The essays by Robert J. McMahon and Kathryn C. Statler both provide ample evidence in this regard with specific reference to U.S. policy in Indonesia and South Vietnam, respectively. In an essay that makes excellent use of previously underutilized material, McMahon lays bare the devastating consequences of the Eisenhower administration’s reliance on covert operations to prevent a communist victory in Indonesia. Beyond being remarkably short-sighted and woefully misguided in the short run, the administration’s misplaced faith in covert action damaged U.S. relations with Indonesia for decades to come. Like Prados, McMahon is scathing in his criticism of Eisenhower’s approach to Indonesia, which he declares nothing less than “an abject failure” (p. 96). Statler issues the same sort of condemnation of the administration’s treatment of Ngo Dinh Diem’s regime in South Vietnam. Rather than working to help Diem build a strong, viable, independent state, she asserts, the administration sought instead to create a quasi-colonial puppet akin to the sort of dependent entity created by French colonial authorities. Because Washington never saw Saigon as its equal and sought to export American military, political, economic, and cultural systems to South Vietnam instead of encouraging or even recognizing indigenous institutions or norms, it never gave Diem a chance to build a real nation in the South—with devastating consequences. Ironically, Statler notes ruefully, American nation-building efforts did assist in the development of a strong (communist) Vietnamese state north of the 17th parallel.

By applying inappropriate tools to the challenges it faced in the Third World, the Eisenhower administration clearly blundered. Instead of meeting the admittedly difficult task of formulating new strategies and tactics to deal with Third World challenges, the administration adopted a one-size-fits-all mentality, applying old tools to new problems, as it were, yet reaping only hardship and suffering throughout the Third World that ultimately ran counter to long-term U.S. goals.

The question of administration goals, in fact, constitutes another common thread running through many of the essays. Just what was the Eisenhower administration seeking to accomplish through its policy toward the nations of the Third World anyway? And how did its goals for the underdeveloped world relate to its Cold War strategy? In answering these questions, the volume’s authors agree that the administration erred, oftentimes grievously, in setting goals for American policy toward the Third World that were often inappropriate or misguided.

Some note with distress that the administration lacked a real understanding of Third World nationalism and the needs of Third World nations. Michael R. Adamson makes this point in his thought-provoking essay on U.S. foreign aid policy, noting that rather than focusing on the construction of essential infrastructure and helping to modernize Third World
economies, the administration oriented its aid programs around security considerations, which meant that military aid was privileged over development assistance. An emphasis on security also meant that recipients of U.S. foreign assistance had to align themselves with the West in the Cold War, something neutralist Third World nationalists were often loath to do. Meriwether faults the administration on similar grounds, this time for failing to support legitimate nationalist drives for independence throughout Africa.

Other authors key in on what appears to be the administration’s preference for maintaining good relations with its allies in Western Europe to the detriment of Third World interests. Osgood, Prados, McMahon, Parker, and Meriwether, for example, all bemoan the way that European considerations affected policy toward the Third World. Unwilling to alienate important NATO allies, the Eisenhower administration time and again turned a blind eye toward Third World nationalism, whether in the form of oil nationalization in Iran, land reform in Guatemala, true neutralism in the Cold War confrontation as embodied in the Bandung Conference, or full political independence throughout Africa. In all these cases and many others, the end result was not at all what U.S. officials had intended. Careful consideration of the consequences of stifling Third World nationalism should have told administration policymakers that disillusionment with the United States, if not outright hostility, would likely result, yet it seems that such consideration did not occur. The depressing record of anti-American sentiment throughout much of the Third World that followed must thus rest in large part on the shoulders of the Eisenhower administration.

Still other contributors to this collection explicitly address the overriding influence of the Cold War when it came to the formulation of policy toward the Third World. Peter L. Hahn’s essay on U.S. relations with Israel during the 1950s demonstrates this point quite clearly, revealing how Washington’s preoccupation with the Soviet threat in the Middle East pushed it toward measures to protect Western access to Arab oil, such as the ill-fated Middle East Defense Organization and the Baghdad Pact. Because these measures threatened U.S. relations with Israel, however, the administration traded one policy goal for another—and demonstrated in the process the all-important role of oil in shaping U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Nathan J. Citino and James F. Siekmeier make similar cases for the way the Cold War shaped the Eisenhower administration’s relations with Iraq and Bolivia, respectively. Citino outlines how Cold War and petroleum considerations shaped U.S. policy toward “regime change” in Baghdad during the 1950s and early 1960s. In extending his story beyond the end of the Eisenhower administration, Citino is able to demonstrate the consequences of the administration’s preoccupation with both, and its tragic consequences for Iraq. Indeed, his is one of the most depressing essays in the volume for what it reveals about the origins of the contemporary morass in Iraq. As Siekmeier makes clear, the global struggle with the Soviet Union led to extensive economic assistance to Bolivia and support for the non-Communist right in that country, to the detriment of the mass of the population. In fact, the deleterious effects of the Cold War come out in some way in every essay in the volume, as the authors successfully bring to light the way the Cold War was indeed tragically globalized on Eisenhower’s watch.
This volume is without a doubt a significant contribution to the literature. The individual essays, each of which presents a valuable case study of either a crucial tactic in the U.S. Third World policy arsenal (propaganda, covert action, and foreign aid) or an important event or region where that policy was applied, are all gems that demonstrate the value of careful multi-archival research. Co-editors Kathryn C. Statler and Andrew L. Johns are to be commended for putting together the fine group of scholars whose excellent pieces make this volume so helpful, for students and scholars alike. Indeed, from my perspective, the volume’s only flaw is that it couldn’t include even more essays. That it didn’t leaves the door open to future researchers, though they will have a tough act to follow.

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