Holding the Line:
Race, Racism, and American Foreign Policy toward Africa, 1953-1961
Roundtable Review

Reviewed Works:

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From the start, George White Jr. breaks down the Eisenhower administration’s response to Africa and its decolonization by clearly outlining the racial paradigms that shaped Eisenhower’s domestic and foreign policy. By clearly showing the links between the end of Jim Crow and the end of European empire in Africa, Professor White elucidates the powerful and subtle ways that the Eisenhower administration sought to delay both desegregation and decolonization to insure the maintenance of white supremacy on both continents. Dr. White’s analysis provides readers with important insights into the construction of United States policy as well as the immediate impact of that policy on Africans. White makes strong contributions to the developing historiography of the influence of race on foreign policy and to an expanding body of literature on decolonization. Although at times it may make for difficult reading, it is essential to understand the powerful component of racism in United States policy at home and abroad. Diplomatic historians must especially take on the challenges that George White Jr. has laid before them and continue to engage these questions in the future.

Before engaging in a historical review of Eisenhower’s policy in Africa, Dr. White addresses theoretical constructions of race that serve as a backbone for his analysis throughout the book. By examining White privilege and its concomitant manifestations, the author links earlier aspects of American history to the Cold War era under investigation. The concepts of White innocence and entitlement emerge out of this review and underline a central element of postwar American society, namely that whites hoped to maintain their privileged status while extending nominal rights to non-white citizens. According to Dr. White, “the Cold War provided the perfect environment for the preservation of Whiteness.” (p. 5) However, self-serving ideas about White innocence and entitlement merged with the negative constructions of Black erasure, self-abnegation, and instability to reinforce the White idea that Blacks were unworthy of the rights and privileges which both American and African Blacks demanded in the postwar period. In his quick review of United States policy towards Haiti since 1789 and the Eisenhower administration’s response to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision Dr. White shows how these concepts justified non-recognition of Haitian governments, interventionism in the early twentieth century, and
delayed implementation of integration in public schools. In both cases, the powerful components of White privilege emerge to shape policy and insure White supremacy. Dr. White argues that these two examples serve as the backdrop for understanding Eisenhower’s response to the Black challenge for rights and independence at home and abroad. Indeed, Dr. White shows that Eisenhower clearly sought to protect White privilege and shaded his policies with his own bigoted understandings of African-Americans. (p. 19)

Furthermore, these racialist conceptions learned in the decades before the Cold War clearly shaped Eisenhower’s limited understanding of Africa and nationalist efforts during the 1950s.

Professor White quickly moves from his discussion of racial paradigms to the issues of decolonization and African nationalism. Although focusing mainly on the Eisenhower administration, Dr. White correctly places the roots of United States policy towards decolonization in the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. Unfortunately, the author moves too quickly past the Roosevelt administration’s influence on policy and does not note that Roosevelt’s dreams of “an evolutionary approach” to decolonization set the language and pattern for nearly all of his successors. Isaiah Bowman, President of Johns Hopkins University and a delegate to the 1945 San Francisco Conference best summarized Roosevelt’s limited approach to decolonization by stating that “the United States plan for decolonization was ‘like setting a bird free, but putting a little salt on its tail.’”

Dr. White sees the impact of the Cold War as the more important influence on the Truman administration’s turn from American anti-colonialism and focus on the reconstruction of Europe. He properly explains that the United States feared revolutionary upheaval that would disturb the reconstruction programs and, therefore, pressured its allies to begin the slow paced reforms that it had carried out for the Philippines and for domestic desegregation. Dr. White shows that by 1950 the United States took a much stronger position of support of European colonial powers and cites the construction of NSC 68 with the emergence of “America’s imperial anti-colonialism.” (p. 28)

The arrival of the Eisenhower administration reinforced this attitude. Dr. White correctly argues that Eisenhower and his advisors sought to use decolonization as a tool to create the illusion of independence while maintaining the exploitative economic relationships. Indeed, in a 1953 letter to Winston Churchill, Eisenhower wrote: “If you could then say that twenty-five years from now, every last one of the colonies (excepting military bases) should have been offered a right to self-government and determination, you would electrify the world. More than this you could be certain that not a single one of them would, when the time came, take advantage of the offer of independence. Each would cling more tightly to the mother country and be a more valuable part thereof.”

Eisenhower clearly believed that the West could channel nationalist movements to benefit European and American

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interests. Equally, Dr. White shows that Eisenhower “generally frowned upon non-White nationalism.” (p. 30) Instead, the United States sought African leaders that would facilitate the evolutionary process and avoid revolutionary upheaval. Dr. White connects his earlier discussion of Black erasure, self-abnegation, and instability with the construction of United States policy towards Black nationalism by showing how the United States expected “malleable entities” rather than strident, independent nationalist leaders. (p. 38) “African subordination to White Supremacist needs” (p. 29) becomes the focus of four case studies that Dr. White provides to elucidate the racial dimensions of Eisenhower policy in Africa.

In his review of United States relations with Ethiopia, Ghana, South Africa, and Congo, Professor White attempts to use the racial paradigms that he provided early in his work to explain how these influenced the Eisenhower administration. Dr. White is most successful in showing how Eisenhower and his advisors brought their conceptions of race and White privilege into their formulations of policy. These conceptions often created significant difficulties for the Eisenhower administration because they did not meet the realities on the ground in Africa. The desires and positions of diverse leaders such as Haile Selassie, Kwame Nkrumah, and Patrice Lumumba directly confronted United States officials who hoped for and expected compliant leaders who accepted the primacy of United States’ interests. As a result, the Eisenhower administration often perceived of demands for military assistance, development aid, or political support as overreaching or unappreciative. (pp. 59 and 78) These perceptions stemmed from assumptions constructed from the racial paradigms operating in the United States and created increasing troubles for the United States throughout the 1950s. Dr. White clearly shows that demands for Black self-abnegation shaped policies in all four countries and refusal led to rejection of recalcitrant leaders who faced dethronement, detention, or death.

Refusal by Black nationalist leaders to bow to United States’ demands or mitigate their own led the Eisenhower administration to see these leaders as unstable or susceptible to communist manipulation. In either case, Dr. White shows that these suspicions quickly turned to efforts to undermine independent minded Africans. This is strikingly apparent in the case of the Volta River Project sponsored by Kwame Nkrumah. The reluctance of the United States to loan Ghana the necessary money was shaped by the Eisenhower administration’s discontent with Nkrumah’s powerful language in describing the plight of Africans and Blacks throughout the world. As a leading Pan-Africanist, Nkrumah presented a conflicting narrative of Black power and history that contradicted the racial paradigms operating in the United States. Newly emerging Black leaders in the United States took up this history and pressed for domestic transformation at the same time that Nkrumah called for African liberation. As a result, Eisenhower and his advisors had to overcome their own racial prejudices to support a project that had clear benefits for the United States. Dr. White shows that the eventual limited support for the project “was directed toward preemptive control of African resources in order to deny them to the Soviets, assisting American business penetration of African economies, and enhancing American prestige in the Third World.” (p. 87)
The operative racial paradigms affecting United States policy are even clearer in the United States’ attitudes to Black African challenges to South Africa’s apartheid and Belgian imperialist. In both cases, clearly imposed racial hierarchies ruled South Africa and Congo without criticism from the Eisenhower administration. Dr. White writes that “both South Africans and American policymakers equated Black independence with treachery or, worse yet, Communist manipulation.” (p. 97) Unwilling to see Blacks as equals, the United States accepted White minority rule and ultimately radicalized the very groups it was trying to suborn. (p. 99) In Congo, the Eisenhower administration went a step further when it actively undermined the government of Patrice Lumumba. Abandoning support for democracy, Eisenhower sought to install a more pliant strong man. The reason for this decision stemmed from Lumumba’s independence day speech that described the litany of Belgian and Western crimes committed against the Congo. Like Kwame Nkrumah and Nelson Mandela, Prime Minister Lumumba had the audacity to challenge openly the racial paradigms which underpinned the Eisenhower administrations understanding of Africa. Dr. White shows the amazing rapidity with which the Eisenhower administration moved against Lumumba. The United States’ refusal to provide military assistance to Congo forced him to pursue assistance from the Soviet Union and justified the Eisenhower decision. Ultimately, the United States expressed a “willingness to defend a White monopoly on power and violence” which would result in decades of warfare and European manipulation in the Congo. (p. 129)

By the end of Professor White’s book, the influences of race and racial paradigms on American domestic and foreign policy emerge as central, although not sole, components of the Eisenhower administration policy towards Africa. Dr. White’s overarching thesis is clear and evident. The great strength of Dr. White’s argument stems from his ability to trace these racial paradigms through each case and make links between the domestic and foreign policy of the United States. Unfortunately, his effort to incorporate gender analysis throughout his book seems forced and not fully formed. While this avenue must certainly be explored to understand both racial paradigms and the broader construction of United States policy, Dr. White’s examination does not add significantly to his more powerful argument and distracts the reader from the true strength of his work. Further research and further detailed examination will certainly remedy this problem. Ultimately, this minor flaw does not take away from the broad strokes of Dr. White’s argument.

George White offers a nuanced examination of the complex interaction of race and foreign policy. His work is strikingly not reductionist, but attempts to layer the issues which influenced policymakers. Although military and economic interests often framed the language and the arguments for Eisenhower’s policy, Dr. White shows how race and racist attitudes deeply swayed the policymakers. This analysis must now be combined with further research on decolonization and the United States’ approach to the end of empire in Africa. While several excellent new monographs by scholars such as Matthew Connelly and Piero Gleijeses have offered examinations of the intersections of Cold War politics, decolonization, and Africa, much more work is needed. The dissonance between the grand goals of a political economic system based in democratic free market capitalism and the
desires of newly emerging nations expands beyond the boundaries of the Cold War must be further investigate for historical purposes, but also in order to understand the current disposition of American foreign policy. American policy towards decolonization remains tempered by United States’ desires for interdependent development and fears of revolutionary nationalism that might trend away from free market ideals and limit the access of United States’ capital. Dr. White’s insights on how racism influences this thinking both reinforces and challenges current understanding of American foreign policy. Certainly, the heightened interest in decolonization as well as the question of race will spur historians to reexamine these issues in the context of the Cold War. These new investigations are sure to shine light on an area of history that has remained too long in the dark.