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

Reviewed Works:


Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: Daniel Byrne, Anne Foster


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27 November 2007

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President Dwight Eisenhower and his White House advisers clearly faced a major challenge in the 1950s at home and abroad with the civil rights movement and the independence movements in Africa against European colonial regimes. On the domestic scene, the NAACP had extended its challenge to segregated education culminating in the Brown decision in 1954 in which the Supreme Court ruled that state sponsored segregated education was inherently unconstitutional. In the same year Martin Luther King emerged as the spokesperson for the Montgomery Alabama boycott of segregated city buses and went on to launch an expanding challenge through the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to segregation in all public facilities and a broader challenge to discrimination against blacks in an expanding number of areas.

When Eisenhower arrived in the White House in 1952, Africa had not yet emerged as a major area of U.S. interest or concern compared with Cold War crises in Asia, the Middle East, and Berlin in Europe. By the time Ike packed up his golf clubs for retirement at the end of 1960, major challenges had emerged with Ghana gaining its independence from British control in 1957, followed by sixteen new African states joining the United Nations in 1960. The Cold War arrived most dramatically and destructively in Africa with the independence of the Congo from Belgian control in 1960 and the ensuing conflicts in the Congo that continue to this day.

George White’s study joins a growing number of books and articles on U.S. involvement with Africa that recognize and explore the interaction of both the civil rights movement with African developments and the Eisenhower administration’s simultaneous effort to manage the pace and direction of change in both areas. As more African leaders and representatives arrive in New York at the UN and in Washington at their diplomatic residencies, Eisenhower realized that he had to do something about the reality of Jim Crow segregation in the nation’s capital and surrounding neighborhoods in Virginia and Maryland. Eisenhower and his advisers definitely preferred a gradualist approach on domestic civil rights issues such as school desegregation or civil rights as addressed in legislation in 1957 and 1960. The same stance is apparent in their response to new African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana.

The reviewers have appreciated Professor White’s exploration of U.S. attitudes and policy toward Africa and raised some important questions starting with the most original dimension of his study, his use of critical race theory and whiteness to understand the view of Washington policy makers.
1.) Whiteness is defined by Professor White as the “complex of associations, assumptions, and immunities attributed to people who are identified as White,” and the author emphasizes five manifestations: “White innocence and entitlement, along with Black erasure, self-abnegation, and insatiability.” White innocence refers to the idea that “White people are inherently pious, just and law-abiding” and white entitlement refers to the idea that whites because of their sense of superiority in all things “deserve a disproportionate share of power, resources, and esteem.” On the other hand, Whites views Black people as the antithesis of Whiteness and, consequently, deny any black accomplishments, insist that Blacks themselves accept an inferior status, even as Whites believe that Blacks lack self-restraint and want too much with respect to jobs, education, rights, and independence. “Holding the Line” is Dr. White’s central thesis on the Eisenhower administration’s policy toward Africa, an effort to maintain the supremacy of Whiteness under challenge in Africa, to keep the essential economic, political, and ideological underpinnings intact at home and abroad in the Cold War even as the structure of colonialism collapsed in Africa and segregation faced mounting challenges in the U.S. (2-5, 37-39)

2.) The reviewers consider Professor White’s concept of Whiteness and thesis on the Eisenhower administration as successful in capturing the racial views of Eisenhower and his advisers and also their desire to replace European colonialism with a new relationship between the European powers and their former colonies. Dr. White’s use of the records of the Eisenhower Presidential Library and National Security Council studies support his assessments. The racial views of U.S. officials are definitely very important for understanding their responses to both domestic and foreign policy challenges. Anne Foster, for example, notes that this perspective could be broadened for comparative purposes to other relevant areas such as Asia and the U.S. involvement with independence movements before 1952 or simultaneous with Washington dealing with Africa. Seth Jacobs in America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957, for example, gives considerable weight to the impact of religious views on the Eisenhower administration’s support for Diem.

3.) More challenging is the question of when Professor White’s concept of Whiteness has an important causative impact in the four case studies that he presents: U.S. policy toward Ethiopia and Haile Selassie’s regime; U.S. efforts to work with Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana on the Volta River project; the U.S. and South Africa; and the U.S. and the Congo crisis in 1960. Dr. White refers to Whiteness as an important shaping factor on attitudes and U.S. policy in each case study but there are questions about its relative importance particularly in weighting other concerns such as economic interests with respect to strategic raw materials and economic interests in South Africa, the domestic political ramifications of Eisenhower’s position on both civil rights issues and African issues, the importance of maintaining relations with major European allies, and, most importantly, the Cold War competition which swirls into...
Africa and brings in other contested issues such as the U.S. conflict with Fidel Castro’s Cuba.

4.) With respect to the four case studies, the influence of Whiteness may have been the least with respect to Ethiopia and the greatest with respect to South Africa. As Professor White points out, Selassie supported U.S. Cold War policies despite an unwillingness on the part of Washington to provide the level of military aid requested by Selassie who finally visited Moscow in 1959 to sign two loan agreements. As Dr. White suggests, Whiteness views reinforced concerns about the impact of arms to Ethiopia on its tenuous relations with Egypt and the Somali territory. South Africa would seem to fit Dr. White’s thesis the best, although other considerations definitely influence U.S. policy. White South Africans were not leaving unlike Belgians from the Congo or the British for Ghana. They were determined to maintain a whiteness, apartheid regime, and the Eisenhower administration was unwilling to challenge South Africa in any meaningful way. The Congo is probably in between on the Whiteness scale. The Cold War was in full bloom in the Congo with Nikita Khrushchev’s desire to court the third world for Marxist-Leninism and, most specifically, to provide aid to Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent Congo in July 1960. Lumumba clearly did not follow the requirements of Whiteness for a dependent, undemanding, appreciative black leader. However, an external Cold War consideration that should be considered is the failure from Washington’s perspective of its effort to deal with Fidel Castro in Cuba, which, undoubtedly affected its views on Lumumba and efforts to get rid of him.

5.) Foster and Daniel Byrne both note that Professor White attempts to incorporate a gender analysis with his emphasis on race. They note that in each chapter in the last couple of pages Dr. White turns to the women of different African countries and notes how U.S. policies tended to reinforce the limiting impact of colonialism on the rights and opportunities of African women. Both reviewers ask for a more systematic analysis, noting that it is not clear whether U.S. officials applied gendered concepts to Africa or whether their policies had the intent of affecting the status and roles of African women. For example, Dr. White mentions that African women in general and specifically in the Congo received little education and that the Eisenhower administration emphasized the importance of a western education for African leaders. Dr. White implies that Washington endorsed the gender subordination of African women by African men just by advocating higher education for African leaders. (130-132) As the reviewers note, more analysis and primary sources are needed to support Dr. White’s gender analysis.

Participants:

**George W. White, Jr.** is an Assistant Professor of History at York College, City University of New York (CUNY). White received a JD from Harvard Law School in 1987 and, after
practicing law, returned to school and received a PhD from Temple University in 2001. White has written scholarly articles on U.S. diplomacy toward Africa in the 1950s, the development of public housing in Knoxville in the 1940s, and efforts of Black business owners to enter into contracts with government entities. He is the author of “An Overview of the Impact of Race on American Foreign Policy Toward Africa,” National Association of African American Studies Conference, NAAS Monograph 2001, and “The Impact of Race on American Foreign Policy Toward Africa,” The Society of Research on African Cultures Conference, SOARC, Journal of African Studies, 2001. During the 2001-2002 academic year, White served as the Geraldine R. Dodge Postdoctoral Fellow at the Rutgers Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience. As the Dodge Fellow, White helped conceive, plan, and stage a televised town-hall discussion of the events and aftermath of 9/11 entitled “Why Us?, Why Here?, What Now?” “Why Us” aired on New Jersey public television in March and September 2002 and was nominated for a regional Emmy award. He has a book-length manuscript under review by academic presses and is working as the editor of the papers of Rev. Robert Boston Dokes, a World War II chaplain who served in the Pacific Theater.

Daniel Byrne earned his Ph.D. at Georgetown University in United States Diplomatic History in the summer of 2003. His dissertation, entitled "Adrift in a Sea of Sand: The Search for United States Foreign Policy toward the Decolonization of Algeria, 1942-1962," developed broad themes of the United States attitudes towards African decolonization, pan-Arabism, and pan-Africanism by examining a case study of the Algerian war of independence. After two years as a visiting professor at Bradley University, Dr. Byrne became an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Evansville in the fall of 2005. He is currently working on converting his dissertation into a monograph and preparing two articles on the United States policy on Algerian independence for publication. He plans further research into United States policy towards the decolonization of French West Africa.

Review by Daniel Byrne, University of Evansville

Eisenhower Delays Desegregation and Decolonization

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.
I am not a scholar of race and U.S. foreign relations. I am not a scholar of U.S. relations with Africa. I am not a scholar of the foreign policy of the Eisenhower administration. I am not a scholar, even, of the Cold War era. I have been asking myself, since beginning to read George White’s *Holding the Line: Race, Racism, and American Foreign Policy toward Africa, 1953-1961*, how I could contribute to a roundtable about this fascinating study whose primary contributions appear so distant from my own research interests and expertise. What follows, then, are some thoughts on the questions this book raised for me, from my perspective as a scholar of foreign relations in colonial Southeast Asia during the first decades of the twentieth century. This outsider’s perspective does, I hope, illumine some of the broader importance of what Dr. White offers here, as well as what appear to me to be some of the limitations of his analysis.

Dr. White begins, as so many of us do in so many ways, with W.E.B. DuBois, and notes correctly that DuBois is often truncated. As you read the name DuBois, you are reciting in your mind, I am sure “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” But Dr. White reminds us that there is a continuation to that sentence: “...the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” (p. 1) DuBois’s language was carefully chosen: not “white” and “black”, but rather “darker” and “lighter”. And this problem of the color line is not merely a problem of Africa and Europe/America. It is a global problem. Interestingly, however, immediately after reminding us that DuBois had a broader conception of race as well as a broader understanding of the effects of race on human relations than is typically remembered, Dr. White informs us that his study will examine...
only the relations “rooted in American soil and extending to the African continent” (p. 1). Those particular race relations have a history and pathology rich and deep enough, sadly, to provide material for many scholarly works, but the focus on “black” and “white” seems at times reductionist, especially given the complexities of how race operated for Africans, black Americans of African descent, and people of primarily European descent whether in Europe, Africa, or the United States.

The category of “Black” is pretty monolithic in this book, such that Dr. White appeared to be as surprised as were the Black Americans at the time, when Emperor Haile Selassie and other Ethiopian officials were more interested in being seen as loyal allies of the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s than in providing rhetorical support, let alone leadership, for the civil rights movement in the United States. Dr. White notes the other concerns of Ethiopian officials, such as international acceptance and attention to race issues nearer to home, especially in South Africa. That Ethiopians themselves saw race, here meaning racial solidarity, as only one component, potentially subordinate to others, of their national interest, suggests that the functioning of race was complex rather than simple in the construction of foreign relations.

I leave it to those more expert in African history to discuss how African politicians viewed their relationship with the global struggle for racial equality in the 1950s. I also found it intriguing, however, that race appears, in this study, to be synonymous with “Black” and “White.” At some levels that is appropriate. For American officials, the most potent emotions about race stemmed from the legal and cultural system of segregation, primarily against African Americans, in the United States. And, so far as I know, most Africans could be said to be either “Black” or “White.” So in the particular cases examined in this book, race does primarily boil down to Black and White.

The historical moment of this book, however, is African decolonization in the context of the Cold War. That moment was the culmination, in many ways, of DuBois’s so aptly evoked “problem of the color line.” By the time Eisenhower was elected in 1952, most nations of Asia had achieved independence or were actively fighting for it. From 1945 to the independence of Malaysia in 1957, the first tidal wave of twentieth-century decolonization occurred, with the Philippines, India, Burma, Pakistan, Indonesia, Vietnam (to some degree), Korea (again to some degree), Taiwan, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia moving from colonial to independent nation status. In each of these cases, including the Philippines, U.S. officials offered criticism of a racial nature of the early rulers and governments of the new nations. Asians were, in general, deemed unready to govern themselves, because they were too decadent, too emotional, too weak, too childlike, and insufficiently educated. Japanese and Chinese formed exceptions to a degree, but also were subjected to criticism and restrictions on sovereignty which had racial components. U.S. officials then brought not only their domestic racial understandings with them as they considered how to formulate policies toward the independent nations of Africa. They also brought with them at least a decade of experience in constructing relations with nations governed by people of color, exiting colonialism, and potentially unreliable or even hostile in the zero sum game of the
Cold War.

U.S. official concern about the challenge that a Patrice Lumumba posed to the American-led order, or to the unreliability of supposed ally Kwame Nkrumah, was expressed in terms similar to that about Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno. The similarity raises questions about the source of racial imaginings by U.S. officials. It seems to me a given that U.S. foreign policy has long been shaped by the personal racism of many American officials as well as the structural legacies of systems of governance and economics built on slavery and imperialism. The assumption of White privilege, another critical component of the idea of Whiteness as discussed by Dr. White, has pervaded the US foreign policy establishment. Would anyone today, in 2007, argue that US foreign policy was, or indeed is, color blind? I doubt it. Two questions therefore occur to me. First, what do we gain in our understanding of US foreign relations by Dr. White’s particular focus on Whiteness and his use of critical race theory? The most compelling suggestion, for me, was Dr. White’s observation that the Cold War itself provided racial sanctuary to US officials, challenged as they were by demands for racial equality both at home and overseas. The Cold War allowed them both to justify (to themselves, to critics) those small steps toward equality they were willing to make, as well as to hide within Cold War necessities from any serious dedication to change in race relations or civil rights law. This observation is intriguing, even compelling, but its specific implications are too little elaborated in the book.

A second question is how we can discern when race and especially racism made a difference, and what difference it made. Although Dr. White notes at several times that the policies pursued by U.S. officials were likely to, or even did, produce the opposite result from that desired, he does not demonstrate that U.S. officials believed they were pursuing a policy likely to produce the opposite of stated policy. American officials, sadly, pursued counter-productive policies in many parts of the world. When did they do this because they were blinded by Whiteness, and when did they do so because they were blinded by a perceived need for gold or uranium (South Africa), or for cocoa and alternate sources of aluminum (Ghana), or by the greater need to befriend Egypt than Ethiopia (Ethiopia), or by the irrationality of Cold War paranoia (Congo)? Foreign policy is of course complex, but Dr. White often provides us with many economic imperatives for the particular U.S. policy pursued, and, equally often, simple Cold War imperatives for the chosen policy. Whiteness, and the consequences that flow from it, were persistently present, but too often Whiteness was invoked by Dr. White, rather than explained as a cause of U.S. action.

The racism of American officials on display in this book is often appalling. An NSC report noted an apparently common belief that some Africans had “been out of the trees for only about fifty years.” (p. 115) Evocations of the “primitive” nature of Africans were equally common. The assumption of White privilege also pervades the story told, not least in the casual assumption by US officials that Americans, with little cultural or historical knowledge of a country, knew better than the indigenous peoples what should be the structure of their government and economy. That particular hubris is apparently an American one, however, and pertains to many parts of the world, and not merely during
the Cold War. The very ubiquity of racism and white privilege, however, make it difficult, and not much attempted in this book, to discern how to rank those with other issues that also shaped U.S. foreign policy.

Two possible ways of beginning to approach this issue of how to discern when it was the Cold War, when it was economic imperatives, and when it was race that provided primary impetus to a foreign policy decision or implementation occur to me. The first would be to compare these cases to ones in which race and White privilege functioned differently, in other countries ruled by people of a different skin color (and therefore a different racial history with white Americans). I kept thinking, as noted above, about comments about Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno, but also about Charles DeGaulle and Fidel Castro, just to name some obvious candidates. All of those leaders had qualities which frustrated and confounded U.S. officials, leading them to make colorful comments reflecting their own prejudices, whether racial, gendered, cultural, or of some other source. Asking for comparison, however, when Dr. White has already provided us with four in-depth case studies from across a large continent, seems churlish. The second approach, however, would acknowledge that Americans, even Americans in official capacity from the Department of State, did not newly arrive, upon independence, in African countries. Not only Ethiopia and Liberia would have had diplomatic representation from the United States prior to the 1950s; all the important trading partners and countries in strategic locations would have had U.S. consuls during the period of colonial rule as well. These consuls provided political analysis about independence movements and leaders and relations among colonial powers, as well as conducted economic relations that, as we well know, often were indistinguishable from political relations. U.S. officials did not receive blank slates labeled “Congo” or “Ghana” in the 1950s; they received box upon box of sometimes ill-informed, sometimes little-consulted, but often rich material.

U.S. scholars of the “Third World” and its relations with the United States during the early Cold War have mostly ignored this history, although that is beginning to change. It is the case that the level of reporting, interest, and contact increased after 1945, but it is also the case that the actors and policies often showed great continuity. In Indonesia, for example, Walter Foote had been U.S. consul in the 1920s and 1930s, and returned as a key player for the United States during the Indonesian Revolution, bringing with him his pro-Dutch sentiments as well as his confidence that he understood Indonesians because he knew a few of them and spoke Malay passingly well. Foote’s reports from the interwar years shed light on the policies he pursued after World War II. Might this also have been the case for the African countries? Or, as also happened in Southeast Asia, did consuls to the French or British or Belgium countries who did well in the first decades of the twentieth century get rewarded, as it were, by a posting to Paris or London or Brussels? If so, did these career paths reinforce the pro-European tendencies of US foreign policy, or merely reflect them? Africa poses a slightly different possibility, as well, since the very small number of U.S. Foreign Service officers who were African-American in the 1920s and 1930s tended to be sent to Africa. Did those men play any role in shaping policy on the ground, or by the 1950s had they been marginalized in different ways?
Dr. White could well have incorporated this analysis into his work, which in each chapter traces the history of the country before the 1950s, focusing on indigenous efforts to rid themselves of European rule or influence. These narratives unfold without any sense that the United States had a presence during the years before 1950s. Given that he found the longer trajectory important in explaining the attitudes Africans carried into their perceptions of foreign relations in the 1950s, he might also have found a similar attention to U.S. attitudes and policies to have been helpful.

As a final note, and appropriately tacked on at the end, I was initially intrigued and even a little excited to see that Dr. White intended to consider the gender component of a set of foreign policy relations so obviously dramatically influenced by race. In each chapter, Dr. White methodically turned in the last two or three pages to the women of each country, noting that the traditions of that country apparently limited the powers and privileges of women, but that colonialism had worked also to undermine whatever rights and authority the women had had, and concluding by demonstrating ways in which the U.S. policy continued to exacerbate the declining status of women. The women often valiantly struggled to help their country gain independence, and to re-establish an honored and valued place for themselves. The tale is true enough and sad enough in each case, but the placement (at the tail end of the chapter, not integrated with the narrative that preceded), the brevity, and the near-uniformity of the history from places as diverse as Ethiopia, Ghana, Congo, and South Africa, served almost to undermine what I believe to have been an effort to demonstrate the ways in which international politics reached into the daily lives of women.
I wish to thank Thomas Maddux and the H-Diplo staff for putting together this Roundtable forum on my book Holding the Line: Race, Racism, and American Foreign Policy Toward Africa, 1953-1961. I also owe a true debt of gratitude to Dr.’s Byrne and Foster for participating in this event with such thorough, evenhanded, and thought-provoking reviews of the book. Their insight and constructive commentary are welcome and surely will help expand the dimensions of analysis on future projects, especially as I develop the follow-up works to this initial monograph.

At the outset, we must place Holding the Line in the context of post-9/11 America. As with most young scholars, I have been influenced by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath, particularly in communities of color. One thing that struck me deeply was the reflexive invocations by most Americans of principles like “democracy,” “justice,” and “civilization,” ideals that often hide social inequality and disparities in power, among other things. In fact, it seems no coincidence that the Manichean response to 9/11 completely overwhelmed alternative world-views of - and priorities for - global justice, for example those positions articulated at the United Nations' World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa just days before the attacks.

Holding the Line is more than just a historical examination of the power of race in shaping America’s Cold War diplomacy. It is an exploration of the ways in which racial ideologies limit the pursuit of justice, denude the cultivation of democracy, and call into question the idea of civilization or the identity of the “civilized.” As an African American, I come from a community – or, better yet, a collection of communities – intimately familiar with terrorist activities, the “clash of civilizations,” and the quest for justice. Terrorist acts like lynchings,
mob violence, forced removal, or massive resistance to school desegregation – and the official responses thereto – do more than negatively influence the civic behavior of the targeted groups. These acts, at the very least, force us to examine the fragile nature of democracy and the relationship between the citizen and her nation. Since relatively little has been said or written about American diplomacy and Black communities – during the 1950s or in the contemporary period – it seemed like a wonderful point of embarkation on a journey through intellectual terrain both familiar and exotic. Thus, this scholarship consciously speaks to multiple generations, acting on the admonition of another Southerner that “the past is not past.”

I owe a tremendous debt to the scholars who have blazed a trail for me, including Brenda Plummer, Cary Fraser, Piero Gleijeses, Carol Anderson, and Penny Von Eschen, among others. Accordingly, the objective with Holding the Line was to make an original contribution to supplement our evolving understanding of race and American foreign relations. As a way of continuing to investigate the power of race in the realm of foreign policy, I rejected the idea of Whiteness as normative. In keeping with scholars in Critical Race Theory and related fields – like Derrick Bell, Bell Hooks, David Roediger, and Sumi Cho – I began by seeking to answer two foundational questions: 1) how does Whiteness influence American diplomacy?; and 2) how does Whiteness survive in a period of intense crisis and critique?

Although Holding the Line argues forcefully about the impact and burdens of race and racial ideologies, Dr. Byrne is correct to note that the monograph is not monocausal. Holding the Line does not ignore other important factors in U.S.-Africa relations, like the stability of NATO or Free World access to strategic resources. Instead, the book acknowledges them but, by necessity, lays them aside precisely because scholars know them so well; in relative terms, these and other factors, like national security, have received enormous attention and focus. For instance, it seems more urgent to move beyond the question of Free World access to strategic resources and to the very premise of a “Free World.” From the perspective of Africans, the West is not simply a place of liberty, democracy, and respect for individual merit; for most Africans it is the root of slavery, forced labor, and imperialism. Does the nature of the Cold War change if we flip the notion of a “Free World” on its head? One would think so.

The case studies in Holding the Line explicitly answer the first question by exploring American diplomacy toward an ally, potential allies, and perceived antagonists. Having established the theoretical approach in the initial chapters, the book seeks to pursue consistently the line of argument through the examination of U.S. relations with Ethiopia, Ghana, the Union of South Africa, and the Congo. The case studies illuminate the connections between domestic and foreign policy and reveal precious little distinction between America’s discourse and behavior toward Black friends and enemies. As such, the Cold War in Africa seems less about competing political ideologies in the zero sum game of “West v. East” and more to do with the preservation of power. In this light, championing
“democracy” is better translated as fostering the predictability of political results and social outcomes.

With respect to the second question, the power of Whiteness survives intense scrutiny through a redemption of the racial status quo. Through the rhetoric of the Cold War, American policymakers and statesmen were able to impose a re-visioning of the West that contrasted starkly with the lived experiences of racial minorities in the U.S. and the global majority dwelling in Africa, Asia, the Arab world, and Latin America. Dr. Foster is correct that the book could have expanded upon the concept. While the issue of “sanctuary” is specifically addressed with respect to the Congo, it certainly is implied in the other case studies.

Since the book moves from the premise that race is socially constructed, the effort to address White Privilege is an attempt to be authoritative, not exhaustive. Foster is correct to note that “in the particular cases examined in this book, race does primarily boil down to Black and White.” The tight focus in *Holding the Line* is necessary but not indicative that the book is trapped by an assumption that race is a simple binary. The theoretical apparatus is intended to explain the nuances of the Black-White relationship but it should be adaptable to other racial encounters as well, even those outside the scope of the monograph.

Both Byrne and Foster offer instructive comments on the “gender analysis” in *Holding the Line*. Admittedly, this portion of the cases studies deserves greater development. Like many other young scholars, I have been moved by the call of Emily Rosenberg - and the work of Kristin Hoganson, among others - to explore the gender dimensions of American diplomacy. Consequently, there were two things that the book did attempt: 1) acknowledging the alternative masculine paradigm of African leaders as they confronted U.S. rhetoric or plans; and 2) taking seriously the lives of Black women as a meaningful part of Black communities. The latter objective is the one to which Byrne and Foster spoke. More often than not, when scholars - here, I include myself - discuss the history of Black communities, they do so by focusing on the lives, goals, or achievements of Black men. The book seeks to avoid repeating this reductionist and misogynist approach by raising the fates of women in Cold War Ethiopia, Ghana, South Africa, and the Congo. Thus, the book aimed to discuss the impact of US foreign relations on them as Black people, not as women. Certainly, their lives are worthy of more expansive contemplation and investigation.

Foster also raises the interesting question of ranking the various factors that inflected U.S. diplomacy. Foster's proposed hierarchy of influences might be a useful way to “discern when...racism made a difference and what difference it made.” Perhaps because I consider myself a Critical Race Theory scholar, I am unsure whether a ranking of influences is possible or beneficial. When considering the myriad of explanations or rationalizations for American diplomacy – economic, strategic, ideological, racial, geo-political, gendered, etc. – I am much more comfortable exploring the spaces in which these phenomena intersect. At present, I am convinced that the intersection of these phenomena - and the resultant
dynamic tension - is the most fruitful place of inquiry because all of the factors shape one another. Foster’s call to do more comparative work is significant and deserves our attention; I did not take it to be “churlish.” To that end, Foster’s work in U.S. relations toward Asian countries and Byrne’s work on Algeria are instructive. It is true that U.S. consuls did not arrive in Africa in the late 1950s nor did they arrive as blank slates. However, their gaze lingered over the contours of colonial administration, demonstrating little interest in or curiosity about indigenous activists or aspirations. To that end, Eisenhower officials seemed to know as little about Kwame Nkrumah and his rise to power in Ghana as they did about the “Negro bishop” who led the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Byrne’s statements regarding the book’s “ability to trace these racial paradigms through each case and make links between United States domestic and foreign policy” is precisely a target for which the book was aiming. By examining American foreign policy through the lens of Whiteness, it seems easier to ascertain the meaning of democracy – for example - as it applied to Americans and to Africans. The Eisenhower administration inverted the dictates of Locke and Rousseau by informing Black communities in Africa that the purpose of their new or potential nation-states was to serve the interests of the “Free World” rather than the interests of their citizens. At home, the administration imparted a similar message to African American communities – that the quest for social justice, or “freedom,” was less important than assuaging the fears of White communities and respecting the expectations of White entitlement.

Finally, Foster is insightful when she opines that American foreign policy has been shaped by the personal and structural racism of America’s past and present. However, I am less sanguine about a general scholarly or intellectual consensus on this point, as reflected in her comments: “Would anyone today...argue that U.S. foreign policy was, or indeed is, color blind? I doubt it.” I disagree with Foster here not merely because of my engagement with some members of SHAFR (the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations) or with a number of my undergraduate and graduate students, but because much of America has embraced a disingenuous ethic of color-blindness that obscures or questions the significance of race in our present and immediate past.

It is not uncommon to see television pundits exalt the supposedly new, “post-racial” epoch in America. Like you, I have no idea what that means but based on the context I interpret the slogan to mean that, at a minimum, we have moved beyond “all that race stuff.” Commentators, judges, and politicians also have used this rhetoric to recast 20th century segregationists, for instance, as traditionalists who simply invoked a First Amendment right of association to defend a time-honored custom. Just as importantly, there has been precious little discussion of race with regard to the War on Terror or the occupation of Iraq, situations in which White entitlement and innocence have been invoked clearly and repeatedly. Is there a bright line distinction between prison abuses in, say, California or Florida and those at Abu Ghraib? Is there a meaningful difference between President Bush’s refusal to talk with the leaders of certain nations and his unwillingness to talk to the NAACP?
Closer to the point, where is the dialogue about race and the prosecution of the War on Terror in Africa, with its abundant contradictions and double-talk? Could it be that most of us assume a color-blindness in that situation because the chief spokesperson for such tactics, the Secretary of State, is a Black woman? Perhaps that is the case. If so, how different is today’s deployment of Condi Rice by the Bush administration from the State Department’s deployment of the NAACP’s Edith Sampson as a propaganda weapon against the widely-reported abuses of and hardships faced by African Americans in the 1950s, the latter feat rather elegantly described by Anderson in her brilliant work “Eyes Off the Prize?”

It is for these reasons, and many others, that I take seriously both the praise and the challenges offered by the reviewers. The comparative work suggested by Foster would be very enlightening. Further, Byrne’s exhortation for scholars to continue this line of research in order to expand or complicate our understanding of African decolonization is compelling. *Holding the Line* is an important scholarly step toward those ends. In some ways, it also is a tribute to a number of my professional colleagues, to the work of my many mentors at Temple University, and to the gurus at the Rutgers Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience. As an apprenticing scholar, I hope to continue this research precisely because a great deal of work remains, a great deal of deliberate, thoughtful engagement remains necessary, and – as the young John Coltrane responded to Miles Davis’s plea to stop playing such long solos – I still have a lot to say.